Alice Nills looked up; the ancient sounds of the air conditioner kicking on disturbed her concentration, pulling her away from the computer screen in front of her. She frowned at the interruption before returning to her own personal project. If someone had told her the A/C unit was as old as the building she would believe it. From the stains on the ceiling tiles to the sometimes cracked tiles on the floor, even the smells, all of it spoke of a building that had been built before Alice was born. Why the Bureau still hadn't abandoned the building was beyond her.

A glance at the bottom corner of her monitor made Alice realize that it was later than she thought. Somehow she had gotten lost again in her own private project. Alice looked around the office finding it mostly empty now. Nearing midnight on a Friday she was not surprised at all to see that most of the office had gone home for their long weekend. Some were probably out celebrating what they had accomplished.

The three arrests today would save the lives of hundreds of children. For months the team worked on every angle to find these three men. They were only part of one of the largest sex trafficking rings in the world. Their next job would be to find the rest now that they had uncovered the first few. This was what the division of the FBI she worked in did, saving children from men like them. Alice had been drawn to the work at a young age after her own experiences growing up. Thing that still gnawed at her even thirteen years after they had happened with no real answer or resolution.

That's why Alice sat at her desk, eyes straining, as she scrolled through the old archives of missing children. She was trying to find those answers now that she had the resources. To her left on her personal tablet she had typed names and address from five missing children cases. She was going through a transcript from another one of the cold cases when Conner Westand the head of the task force walked by, "Don't forget to get some sleep Nills."

Alice looked up from her monitor as he stopped by her desk. Conner was older, with graying hair at the temples, but having a pair of broad shoulders. He was easily the tallest person in most rooms, but despite his height there was a simple kindness to him as well. She had learned over the past two years since joining this task force that his wife kept him on quite the regimen to stay fit and healthy. She was also the reason why he often told the members of his task force that family was just as important as the job.

Alice turned back to the computer screen, “I won’t Sir. We’ve got the whole weekend don’t we?” Conner only gave a small grunt as if to say the weekend was far too short. He tossed his suit jacket over his shoulder without another word before walking from the room. There wasn’t really anyway he could make her go home. With Stephen out of the state again for his work Alice wasn’t feeling particularly interested in going back to her apartment anyway. Since the current case was wrapped up involving the entire team she could focus on her own things.

Alice stretched once as the old chair she was sitting in creaked. She grabbed her coffee cup that said “Stay Awake Juice” on the side of it, which she still chuckled at even now. Stephen had gotten it for her a few months ago as part of her twenty-sixth birthday celebration. At her age Alice was considered new by the Bureau, but she had passion. Which had gotten her assigned as a junior agent to the missing and exploited children task force. There was one other agent still working at their desk, she noticed, as she walked towards the coffee machine in the corner. Henry Vance was the one who had been lead on the bust that they had just finished.

He looked up at her once as she passed, “Good work on figuring out that last bit of information for us Alice.” She just gave a nod, aware that like more than a few men Henry was admiring her. Alice grabbed the coffee pot pouring a cup as she thought about how she was used to the look that some men gave her. Four years ago it had been Stephen on a beach in Morocco. Alice had been there on vacation with her mother and step-father. That had turned out pretty well honestly, he treated her good, if not how she had always imagined. He was stable, wanted a family with her two things that she had always thought a husband would be. Alice supposed would make a good if at times absent father. Alice wasn’t sure if she really loved him enough, but she was willing to build a family with him.

Alice knew it wasn’t her height or slender figure that drew men’s eyes. She was average in height for an adult woman at just five and a half feet. It was her face that drew men in, had been since she she was a teenager if not earlier. They would admire her beauty, then coupled with her slender figure she drove that part of men that wanted a small woman in their arms. Alice knew that was what had first drawn Stephen to her, just like her two boyfriends in college.

She had been called beautiful more than once. While she didn’t have a large bust or even much of an hourglass figure, her willowy frame was stunning in its own simple way. It was always her face though combined with that body which made her

beautiful. More than once a man had used the pick up line: you could be a model. She had heard it all especially in college most of it had washed over her as quickly as it was spoken, until Stephen.

She knew that men took a second look every time she passed by them. That her sandy brown hair flowed down in gentle straight lines over her shoulders making her small heart-shaped face look even smaller than it really was. Her eyes appeared larger with how small her face was, along with just the right amount of makeup applied. A simple trick she had learned in middle school when she had started wearing the small amount of makeup she did. She had a small upturned nose and just full lush lips that added to the perfect youthful beauty of her face.

She knew that some famous actresses would look at her and ask why she wasn't in movies. Hell that had been Stephen's pick up line: aren't you in a movie? It had been corny, but that was part of what had drawn her to him. It had reminded her just briefly of someone from her past, someone she still at times achingly missed. Sadly Stephen's likeness of him had quickly faded the more she had gotten to know the man. He was serious and calculating, nothing like how that part deep inside of her had imagined a husband being. That though had long ago stopped being a possibility. That dream had died thirteen years ago.

With cup of coffee in hand Alice walked back over to her desk sitting down with a sigh. Looking at these old cases always brought her to darker thoughts. She picked up her tablet going through the list she had made. There was a message on her cellphone from Stephen: Hey I'll be back in the city in six days now instead of four. How did the job go? Stephen worked as an international lawyer for a large oil company that was why he had been in Morocco when they had met four years ago. She typed back: It went okay. I'll be waiting I got something new for you. She smiled slightly to herself as she recalled the teddy that she had gotten to draw his eyes to her slender figure in the bedroom.

The sex with Stephen was good, even if she wasn't really 'in love' like how she had always imagined it being when you found the one to marry. It was better with him though with any of the other guys she had been with in high school and college. Thinking back on it as she looked at the computer before her again, she could remember all four times she had slept with a guy. The first had been Jake Sanders, he had been a junior in high school when she was a sophomore it had been horrible for her. He had bragged to his friends, and she had dumped his ass a week later.

The second had been during her senior year of high school, a college kid at the school she was going to attend. Alan Wain had been better, but not great.

The third had been Nathan Newslyn another college student when she had been a student there. She barely remembered it honestly. Then lastly Stephen who was good at attending to her needs even in bed, even if the rest felt hollow. Sometimes she felt like he only heard what he wanted to when she talked about things. The future he wanted was one that she did as well, a family with all the things that came with it. She just wished that she felt something deeper. Of course she was sure she'd never feel something deeper no matter how long she looked, not now.

Looking at the computer, Alice clicked off of the file as she sent its information to her tablet. The picture of the boy now rested on her tablet along with his information. This was for her own project that she worked on outside of the tasks assigned by the Bureau. These were what they termed cold cases. They had never been solved and all the leads had lead nowhere. Sometimes new agents like her would get an itch to try and solve them, and of course there was a whole division working on cold cases. The ones that she was looking at though were different than most of the others. The parents or guardians always claimed the child had just disappeared. They were all from the same month thirteen years ago. All the boys were even the same age down to the day, which was what was important to her.

Alice pressed the home button on her iPad after looking at the picture of the boy again. He was quite cute for twelve, had that boyish look about him that boys lost when they went through puberty. With the file closed she pulled up another one on her iPad, the one and only one that she looked at two or three times a week as if some new answer would come to her. Alice studied the picture on the left corner of the file first, unchanged as it always was.

The boys dark brown hair was in need of a cut, but he had hated going to the barber. In the picture it fell before his left eye. The picture was in color, it had been taken in the spring of 2010 about six months before he was due to turn thirteen. His eyes were a light hazel color as you could clearly see in the picture, on a slightly oval shaped face, which gave more charm to his still very boyish looks. As did the thin framed glasses he wore making his hazel eyes pop more.

He had been small for his age, actually well below average. The picture was in profile of his face only, but Alice knew just from the color of the collar what shirt he was wearing as it had been one of his favorites. The same shirt he had been wearing the night he disappeared forever. She moved away from the photo feeling a pang of loss and slight grief while looking at him. Next to it was the information about the boy. Things that she had known even before opening the file were all at the top:

Name: Branden Alexander Leston,

DOB: August 12, 1997

Day of Disappearance: May 3, 2010.

Age at time of Disappearance: 12.

Parents: Kevin Leston (Deceased: 2014), Barbara Leston (Deceased: 2018).

Underneath all of that was a list of all the notes and other things collected during the month that Branden disappeared. Information about the parents who were the first suspects. Information about two men that were suspects at one time. Even information about Alice and her mom along with some other neighbors on the street. There was even a transcript a few pages down of the interview that the police did with her which was shortly after he had disappeared.

She closed the file as she felt her memories well back up. That interview had been just a few days after their first kiss. Which was also the night that Branden never got home. He had sneaked over to her house for their first kiss then ran home, but never made it. Alice pushed her coffee cup away as she grabbed the tablet slipping it into her bag, feeling the need to be doing something. When she walked by his desk a moment later Henry said, “Goodnight, see you next week.”

Alice replied perhaps a little too curtly, “Yeah, have a good one.” Once she was on the elevator Alice leaned back against the wall watching the numbers count down again her memories flooding into her. Memories of the police asking her when she last saw Branden which was when he had climbed out of her window on the night of May 3rd to sneak back to his house. Nothing odd about that they had often sneaked

into each others bedrooms. They had been best friends since they were kindergartners after all, nearly inseparable despite how different they were.

That had been the night where they had sat on her bed looking at one another nervously the night after they had both admitted they had feelings more than friendship for each other. The memory of them sitting on her decidedly still little girl like Hello Kitty comforter. Of her heart racing a thousand beats a minute as Branden leaned over to press his lips to her as clumsy as anything. It had been the most magical and wonderful first kiss followed by the worst month of her life. Though she imagined for his parents it had been even worse being blamed for their sons disappearance for months on end.

The elevator opened snapping her out of her thoughts. Alice stepped out into the buildings lobby, walking out the front doors a moment later her mind still awash with memories that she often slipped back into. It wasn't like Branden had been some first love. A flame that would have flickered and gone away when she learned all about his selfish side or how nerdy he was. No he had been her everything back then, and had been since they had first met when her parents moved in two houses down.

He had been standing there by his mom holding her hand while she talked to Alice's mom. Alice had gone up to him thinking if her mom was friends with his mom then she should be friends with him. She had always been bigger than him, even back then because Bran had been small for his age. He had been born eight weeks premature, and his body had never caught up like other kids. He was smart though, and about the nerdiest boy that you could imagine. He collected comics, games, and toys (especially Lego's) that other kids had started to grow out of when they reached sixth grade.

Alice hadn't even known it was love until near the end of sixth grade. She had thought that he just saw her as a friend. Of course Branden had thought the same thing about her as well, that she was too pretty to want a nerdy tiny boy like him. By then she had already been five feet tall and he had still been five inches shorter than her. That didn't matter to Alice, none of that really had.

After all Branden had been there through her parents divorce which in turn drove her mom to drinking. Its like that whole saying about meeting that person that you know the moment you meet them that they're going to be in your life forever. That was

what she felt for Branden, he was just a part of her. When she reached eleven and started going through puberty those feelings became more complex.

Stephen couldn't compete with a memory of perfection. How could he? Yeah it had been one kiss, but it had been a lifetime of friendship and caring for one another before that. Even disagreements as kids had with one another. The kiss had been a promise of the start of something new. That promise that Branden would be her first everything, instead someone had ripped that away from her. Ripped the boy that had made his parents life matter too. Before Branden they had struggled to have children with multiple miscarriages. He had been their world as much as Alice's. She knew from talking with Helen, Bran's mom, shortly before her death from cancer that his disappearance had shattered and broken her and his father.

In her car Alice pulled out her cellphone scrolling through things until she rested on the pictures that Branden's mom had sent her before her passing. There were pictures and videos of his life back on her computer at home too things that she rarely looked at, but kept because it kept him alive just like his mom had done. Nearly all the pictures pictures and videos had her in them as well. They had been constant companions. A relationship that had formed fast and never grown old. If anything their differences had made them more compatible somehow.

Looking back at how she looked in elementary school she could see why Branden had figured she wasn't interested in him. Or why he figured she wouldn't be, because even back then she had been very pretty. Alice had never really gone through that awkward state as a teen, she had always known she was good looking. Yet she had only ever been interested in one boy caring what she looked like, and when he had gone she had found ways to focus on herself to forget the pain. His mom had told her shortly before she passed just how much Branden had loved her. Alice had admitted how often she still missed him, as if a part of her wasn't complete.

She let the memories fade as she found the photo that was the same as the one in the file only this one was complete. Branden's favorite shirt at twelve, the one that he had disappeared in was red with Charmander on the front of it. It was faded a little around the edges, being washed one too many times. She smiled at the picture then closed it down feeling the pangs of memories returning. The nervousness at that first kiss, she with braces on her teeth afraid that she was going to do something stupid like cut his lips. The taste of bubble gum because Branden had been nervous too chewing it to not have bad breath.

Alice let out a sigh as she pulled up to a stop light trying to not let her memories overtake her again. Then she'd need to curl up on her bed holding that stupid stuffed Charmander and cry. It was the last thing of Branden's that she owned. Something his mother had given Alice in 2018 before she passed. Alice instead at the next stop light pulled up the file that she had been looking at before opening up old pains. She pulled into a Denny's slipping out of the car as she headed inside knowing that sleep would elude her tonight. After she was sitting at a table with a cup of coffee in front of her and a plate of mozzarella sticks she opened the file she had taken.

The picture to the left was similar to Branden's only this boy had light blonde hair, but his eyes were the same hazel color. He was cute in that way that boys just entering puberty can be. The files information was familiar to Alice other than the name of course:

Name: Scott David Alvers.

DOB: August 12, 1997.

Day of Disappearance: May 6, 2010

Age at the time: 12.

Parents: George Alvers (Deceased 2016) Mary Alvers (Alive)

His father was deceased, but his mother was still alive which was rare with these cases. Alice had found five of them so far, but with the amount of child disappearances and even adult disappearances she wasn't surprised they hadn't connected the dots like she had. Hell on the day in question there were more than a dozen deaths, kidnappings, disappearances, and other things dealing with kids across the nation. Yet quite a lot of them were solved cases. Sadly most of the time with it being parents doing horrible things to their children.

The thing that drew her to the five cases that all mostly matched Branden's were the two factors: date of birth and day of disappearance. Scott had disappeared 3 days after Branden, and been born on the same day as him as well. The other four all had

the same birth date as well, also the days they disappeared were all within the same time frame. Sadly kids disappeared all the time. Sometimes they were runaways, sometimes they were harmed by a stranger, sometimes parents did unspeakable things. The FBI didn't see a connection to these five kids disappearing. To them it was just a strange coincidence that they all had the same birthday. That was literally what Conner had told her when she asked him about it.

This was also the first time since she had started looking at Branden's disappearance from another angle that she had found a parent that was still alive. The other four boys parents had all passed on sometime after the disappearance or in the case of one of the boys a few years before. She was still sipping on another cup of coffee when the sun was starting to come up through the windows outside. Alice put the file away of Scott Alvers and left some money on the counter for the waitress including a nice tip.

In her car instead of going back to the apartment she put the current address of Mary Alvers into the GPS on her phone and started driving. The fact that the woman lived in the same state and city that Alice currently worked in was just luck she supposed. She had grown up back in Texas, and sometimes missed her home, but the FBI had placed her in Los Angeles. The house she pulled up in front of had been the same house that the Alvers had owned the day that their boy had disappeared.

The front yard looked like it had seen better days, the grass was a little over grown, there was an old bird feeder on the left side of the front lawn that was in bad need of repairs, the tree's roots were tearing up the sidewalk. Alice stepped up to the front porch ringing the bell once while she waited. Like Branden and the other four boys Scott was an only child. So no doubt his parents had been hit hard by the disappearance. The woman that opened the door looked older and worn down than her fifty years would have usually done. Her hair was silver and not well kept on her head. She was shorter than Alice by a few inches, and wore a simple dress that hid her slightly plump like figure. "Yes?"

Alice didn't hold up her badge not yet, "Ms. Alvers?"

The woman said, "I'm not buying and I'm not interested in god."

Alice smiled, “No, I’m Alice Nills I work for the FBI.”

The woman gave a grunt, “Come to accuse me of my husbands death somehow?”

Alice shook her head, “No Ma’am.” She knew that this woman had been put through the ringer thirteen years ago just like Branden’s parents. “I’m here to talk about Scott, just talk not accuse you of anything. I wanted to ask you some questions that aren’t in the file.”

She grunted again then opened the door. The house inside was much more well kept than the outside. Right away she could see what amounted to a shrine to the missing boy. Pictures from his years of school on the shelves and stands around the living room. Ms. Alvers walking into the room with Alice following her said, “I don’t know what you could ask me that hasn’t already been asked before.” She turned looking at Alice as she sat down. “After the police and the FBI determined that George and I had nothing to do with Scott disappearing we hired our own investigators to try and find our boy.”

Here the woman grabbed a photo that was close by holding it as Alice said, “Yes that’s in the notes as well Ms. Alvers.”

She looked up from the photo. “You know George and I spent nearly ten years trying to conceive. Scott was a miracle that the doctor still doesn’t quite know how it happened. I never could get pregnant again after that. Had to have a hysterectomy shortly after he was born.”

Alice pulled up the file again going over to her notepad to pull up her questions. She had already known about the fertility issues that had been in the file, along with the files for the four other parents. All of the mothers had struggled to get pregnant. “Did anyone ever talk with you Ms. Alvers about any of these other cases? Eric Stuckey, Marcus Peers, Robert Farmington, Allen Green, or Branden Leston?”

Ms. Alvers put the photo down as she said, “No I’ve never heard any of those names. Were they boys around here taken by someone that you’ve arrested who talked?” She could see the thoughts of horror already circulating in the woman’s

head. The clear fear that her boy had been murdered and found at last. Alice had seen it before since she started working on the task force watching Conner or Henry interview parents or tell them bad news.

She shook her head, “No Ms. Alvers, all of these boys were taken from different cities. I’m not really here in the capacity of working on your son’s case for the FBI.”

The woman studied Alice for a moment, “I see so you’re just what working on a hobby? I think you should leave.”

When she started to stand up Alice said, “Branden disappeared on May 3nd the same week that your son disappeared. He was my best friend in the entire world.”

Ms. Alvers sat back down on the couch across from Alice, “So you’re looking for answers too?”

Alice pushed memories that threatened as she said, “His parents never stopped looking for them, but they’ve both passed away now. Someone had to take it up...” She looked at Mrs. Alvers, “I knew Branden for almost all of his life. We lived on the same street just one house between us. We used to sneak into each others rooms. We’d have secret sleepovers during school weeks when we were really young. Our parents were never surprised to find one of us in the others bedroom the next morning.” She shrugged then said, “Sorry that’s not important.”

Mrs. Alvers disagreed, “I think it is. Its clear that the boy was as important to you as he was to his parents.”

Alice gave a small nod, “Our families were very close.” She cleared her throat then said, “That’s not what led me to you though Mrs. Alvers..”

“Please its Mary, and what did lead you to me?”

Alice opened up her tablet and brought up Branden's file handing it over, "This did."

It only took the woman a minute or two to see the connection, "Branden was born on the same day as Scotty?"

Alice took the tablet back as the woman looked at the boy one more time before handing it to her, "Yes, and so were the other boys. All born the same day, within a few hours of one another, all disappeared in 2010 within a few days of each other as well."

Mary studied the picture of her son as she said, "What does that mean?"

Alice shook her head, "I don't know, but I also know that you're the only parent still alive."

She looked up at Alice from the picture, "All the others are dead?"

Alice gave a nod, "The mothers all from ovarian cancer. The husbands died in accidents, other than one who took his own life after his wife refused to believe him." She continued, "You're the only parent I've found still alive. Did you receive fertility help to convince Mary?"

Mary chuckled dryly, "I did and more than that. George and I started trying right after we got married in our twenties. It was a real struggle for years. We saw more than a few doctors and experts. Then shortly before I turned thirty-six I ended up pregnant with Scott. You know he was born eight weeks early?"

Alice shook her head, "I did not, but I know that Branden was as well. Barbra his mom struggled with miscarriages for years. She went to a clinic that helped with a new procedure. Then she finally carried him to near term before having him eight weeks early."

Mary held the photo of her son still, “He was smarter than average to, and the only thing he lacked was a really close friend.” She chuckled, “He was shy and gifted, but he couldn’t maintain friendships. I guess that’s not the same.”

Alice smiled, “It is very similar. Branden didn't have many friends, just me and a couple others who were like him. We really weren’t very similar to each other. I mean we liked the same shows and could hang out for hours with each other because well we felt like we were family I suppose.”

Mary nodded, “Like siblings you mean, such close friends that you become like brother and sister. Nancy was like that with me when we were growing up.”

Alice agreed, “Sort of yes, but not really…”

Mary’s eyes met her then she smiled sadly, “You loved him.”

Alice swallowed, “Yes, but we were kids neither of us saw it that way until right before he disappeared.”

Mary reached over resting a hand on her knee gently, “I remember when I met George my first year of high school. I knew without a doubt that he was going to be my husband. I’m guessing Branden was who you imagined you’d be with forever even before you realized it was that kind of love?”

Alice agreed, “Yes, and our parents knew it too. Strangely even though our moms knew they never stopped us from sneaking into each others rooms or cared that they’d find us in my bed or on his bunk beds.” She shook her head then said, “But I think they would have stopped it when they realized how our feelings had changed. Bran was always a step ahead of other kids too, sometimes he’d just see something once and remember it with absolute clarity. He grasped math faster than the teachers, and was reading before he was three.” She chuckled, “He was the biggest nerd I’d ever met, but he knew how to make me laugh.”

Mary smiled, “He sounds like my Scotty honestly.”

Alice said, “That’s what I’ve noticed from looking into these other boys.” Then she changed the topic away from Branden directly, “The fertility issues aren’t new to me. All five of you had different problems, but all led to being infertile. Branden’s mother had five miscarriages before she got Branden to thirty-two weeks. I wasn’t aware that the other mothers might have had the same issues. The preterm birth is new also. Its not in the records for any of the boys so you’re giving me something else to look at.”

Mary looking at her said, “What do you think happened to the boys? I mean when you said their names I thought you had found dead bodies… but the birth days being the same… its strange.”

Alice agreed, “It is, and I have no idea what happened to them Mary. The night Branden disappeared it was after he sneaked out of my bedroom window. He should have been back in his bedroom within minutes of leaving mine, but the following morning his parents found his room empty. I told them he had come over to my house, but had left at nine because we had school the next morning. The over night sleepovers on weekdays had stopped when we entered sixth grade because we were both nervous about new feelings developing that we didn’t know how to process.”

Mary said, “They weren’t new, just a new way of looking at your relationship dear.”

Alice smiled, “That’s what my mom said too. We had already been in love… anyway his parents were accused for months and his dad was nearly arrested for threatening the cops once. It all cooled off within a year. No new leads, I had no idea about any of it other than feeling lost without my anchor. I had no idea how long the cops looked for evidence that his parents had done something with him. How they looked into the local predators and found nothing. Eventually it became like so many other missing persons cases, cold. Technically just like Scott’s case its still an open case, but its so cold that no one’s touched it.”

Mary sighed sadly, “Yes, I still call about Scott’s case twice a year, but I know there’s no new answers and now you come here…” She shook her head, “What happened to Branden’s parents?”

“His dad died in a car accident, drunk driver, four years ago ovarian cancer took his mom just like the other four moms. She gave me everything she had left from when Branden was, well with us.” She shook her head, “I wish I had answers for you Mary, that I had come here to tell you that he had been found even if it was that he was gone. I know from my job that the parents who lost a child just want answers…”

Mary nodded, “I do, but I don’t know if any of them would ever satisfy me. I imagine in your job you see the ugly side of parents too… I saw them once, and I saw why the FBI pushed and probed George and I so much. There’s a lot of ugly in this world, but it never occurred to me how harmful parents could be to their own children. All I ever wanted was to be a mother, and the thought that I would harm… well it hurt me and George to the core. Eventually they saw that, but it had been a little too late by then.”

Alice said, “I’ve learned why we do it the way we do, but I still don’t like it anymore than you do Mary. When a child dies though the odds are so high that its a relative that did it… and when they disappear well that usually means they’re dead.”

Mary picked up Scott’s picture, “If you find answers Alice, even if its the darkest of answers, I’d like to know. I need the closure for my own sanity.”

Alice softly held the woman’s hand as she stood up to go, “I will Mary. I don’t plan to stop looking for the answers. I want to know why someone took Bran from me as much as you want to know who took your son.” Outside a few minutes later Alice looked at the house once more time as Mary Alvers walked back into it looking sadly at her one last time. It had almost felt better to talk about Branden to someone, but she still had no answers.

The premature birth thing though intrigued her for some reason. She had to log into the FBI database through her tablet looking through a few things before finding the information she needed. All six had been born six to eight weeks premature according to their hospital records. Another wrinkle that explained nothing. Just like how five of the six mothers had died of ovarian cancer, of course Mary had no ovaries to get cancer. Alice shook her head closing the tablet down as she started the car pulling away from the house. It was strange to realize that there was so much

similar between Scott and Branden. She wondered if she could find out something about the other boys, but she had a feeling they'd all be slightly similar…

XXXXX

It was one of those dreams where you were falling forever till you hit the ground violently, and jostled awake suddenly. Alice was pulled out of the dream forcibly by the sound of her cellphone ringing. She groaned while reaching across the nightstand by her bed to grab the offending object not even sure what time of day it was. After her talk with Mary she had felt this great need for sleep. By then she had been up for nearly eighteen hours. Alice had crashed the moment she hit her bed ten minutes after getting home. She swiped across the screen as she fell back onto the bed speaking while still half awake, "This had better be good."

On the other end was Stephen, "When you didn't answer my texts I started to get worried."

Alice inwardly sighed remembering that he was a good man even if he wasn't what she had always imagined. That she should love him more, but it didn't feel like she belonged with him. She knew it was stupid, ridiculous even, there was no one person for everyone that was just some bullshit to sale things to people. Hell she knew that Branden hadn't been perfect either. That odds were they probably would have broken up or gone their own ways with age. Yet inside she compared even Stephen to the boy that could have been. "Sorry I was sleeping. After the case I just couldn't unwind. I drove around, went to Denny's, did some reading. Eventually I just crashed." She wouldn't bring up the visit with Mary, that would only piss Stephen off. He thought she should stop obsessing over something old and forgotten. That it just hurt her more than it helped.

"Well that's good, I hope when I get back into town you're still feeling that sense of accomplishment so we can go out and celebrate?"

Alice smiled, "Yeah I will be." She could picture Stephen right now probably sitting in a chair in a hotel somewhere. His six foot, two inch frame sprawled out on it with his shoes tossed off somewhere. Probably shirtless in just his slacks. His slight six pack on fully display. His dark brown hair cut very short, but just long enough for fingers to go through it. He was a little messy at times, but that was kind of endearing honestly. Another woman might have even loved him more for that trait. "Five more days huh?"

Stephen sighed, “Yeah sorry about that, but they want me to take care of some matter out in Florida. Speaking of which I’ve got to make a few calls before I get in the shower. Talk to you tomorrow?”

Alice stretched once agreeing, “Yeah that sounds good.”

“Perfect, we’ll have a longer conversation. Love you.”

“You too.” She hung up a moment after him looking at her phone surprised to see that it was already five in the afternoon. She really had been exhausted. Gently she squeezed the Charmander stuffed animal once her mind going to Branden again. She slipped from the bed feeling the pangs of hunger calling her, as she walked into her small apartment kitchen. Stephen kept insisting that they should move in together, but until she gave a hint she was ready to accept a proposal she felt it was better this way. It wasn’t just because she was old fashioned or something like that. Honestly it was that he was always gone, and she’d feel even more lonely in that three bedroom town home he had than she did here.

She was grabbing some leftover pasta from the fridge when her phone began ringing and dancing across the kitchen counter. Alice grabbed it on the third ring, it was not a number she knew, but it was possible that it was someone at the bureau calling her. The number wasn’t a local LA one, but the area code was familiar to her. That didn’t always matter as most of the FBI agents came from other parts of the country. It wasn’t strange to get calls from numbers with different area codes. Members on the task force came from all over the country. “Agent Alice Nills?”

“Yeah, this is her.” She said as she popped the pasta into the microwave. “Whose this?”

The man cleared his throat, “Ma’am this is Sergeant Wilmrose with the Harris County Sheriff's department out here in Houston.”

There was only one person that Alice knew that still lived in Houston. Feeling dread she said, “Did something happen to my dad?”

The sergeant said, “No Ma’am, Agent Nills. This is in regards to another issue.” He paused for a moment like he was trying to figure out how to begin. “Well you see we didn’t know who else to contact. You were the only one listed on the file that isn’t deceased.”

The microwave beeped as she held the phone tighter to her ear forgetting about the food. There was only one file that they would have pulled that she would be the main contact on. The same file she had been looking at this morning before talking with Mary. Dread filled her even more than it had in that brief moment it was her dad they were calling out, “W-what d-did you find?”

The sergeant seemed hesitant, “Uh well that’s the issue ma’am, we’d really like you to come out here and try and help us figure this out. To talk with the person in question.”

The microwave beeped again to remind her that food was in it. Alice ignored it as she paced around her small living area. “Talk to the person? Someone claiming to be Branden? Or that they know where he is?”

The man cleared his throat, “Well ma’am see that’s the problem, this person looks exactly like the boy in question, down to height, weight and everything else. We’re confounded how. Didn’t know who else to call. He keeps asking to see his parents, or you. Well his parents have passed according to the file, and ma’am you’re the only point of contact.”

Alice stared at the word Done blinking on the microwave, “I’ll get a flight out, can you send me a picture of the boy in question?”

“Of course Agent Nills, but you have to be aware that its not possible its him. Someone’s pushing a scam of some kind fishing for money if I had to bet. We had a case similar to it a few years ago. Boy claimed to be a rich families missing kid so he and his mom could take the money and run. Course in that case the kid had only

been missing for a year, not thirteen, and this guy looks like he's a boy, but it could be some small woman, we had a transgender last month who…"

She interrupted him, "Thanks officer, I appreciate the words of caution and I'll take it into account. Please send the picture and your location as well. I'll call you back once I have a flight so that you can know when to expect me."

He cleared his throat clearly not liking that he was interrupted, "Of course, I'll send it right away. We look forward to seeing you soon Agent Nills." The phone went dead as she sighed to herself. She knew as well that it wasn't possible, but at the same time listening to some deep south conservative cop talk about transgenders wasn't something she was interested in. Her philosophy was just to let people be, if they weren't harming anyone else. She'd seen too much ugly already to worry about boys wanting to be girls, or girls wanting to be boys. Her phone dinged with a message that was the photo, and also the precincts address. It was very close to where she had grown up as a kid.

Alice sat down heavily on one of her bar stools as she took in the photo. It was a clear recent photo, not one from 2009. The hair was the same, dark brown, falling before one of his eyes. He wore the same thin glasses she could remember from the photo, and also that same faded Charmander shirt that he had gone missing wearing. His eyes were more green than she remembered, but hazel had that trick with the camera where they could go from green to brown. He looked so small and afraid in the picture as well. She felt her heart beat increasing. Thirteen years and it didn't look like he had aged a single day. She would know the face anywhere, it was engraved in her memories even without a picture to compare it to. This was her Branden.

She closed the photo, trying not to think about how someone could disappear for thirteen years then come back and look exactly like they had the moment they disappeared. She pulled up airplane itinerary eating while looking for a plane. Alice found a flight in two hours that would get her to Houston with a stop over. She booked it while sending the information of when she should be there to the officer, as she hurriedly got dressed while stuffing other things into a bag. She was slinging the bag over her shoulder to head out when it occurred to her that she needed to let her boss know. She was scheduled to return to work in less than twenty-four hours.

She grabbed her phone from the counter sending a quick text: not sure if you're busy or not sir, but I've got to fly out to Houston, family emergency. If he wanted more he'd ask. It wasn't until she was on the freeway that a return message popped up on her car display: Let me know what days you need off Nills. I'll work around it. Family is priority without it we're nothing. The case load is pretty light right now anyway. Maybe I could find you something out there if you have to stay an extended amount of time. Alice smiled with a chuckle, that was about what she expected from Conner. The man was a family man through and through. She voice texted back: I'll let you know sir thanks.

The plane ride was too long, sitting there on the flight her mind was racked with all the possibilities of how Branden had come back. How he hadn't aged a day, that was like something out of a science fiction show. Only this was real life, not The X-Files or something like that. It wasn't possible that this boy was actually Branden. Someone was pulling something for their own gain though she had no idea what they could be hoping to accomplish honestly.

What did you get out of claiming that a boy hadn't aged at all for thirteen years? Was he somehow Branden's kid? Or something like a clone? Alice shook her head no sure how that would even be possible. Why would someone kidnapped Branden to make him have a kid with someone else? Or even try to clone him out of all the kids in the world? It was absurd, then again so was the idea that the boy hadn't aged a day since he disappeared. Her mind was filled with all the possibilities on the fight unable to relax at all.

When the plane landed it was already dark out so she got an Uber to a hotel. All she wanted was to think, but Uber driver was far too talkative asking her about what she was doing in Houston. When he learned that she had been born here he opened up even more because he had been too. It was almost to much, and she felt relieved when they pulled up in front of the hotel where she had rented a room while on the flight. After getting into the room, and dropping her bag onto the bed Alice finally texted Stephen: Had to fly out to Houston, was the only one available for a case. She hated lying to Stephen, but if she told him the truth he'd tell her that she was chasing waterfalls again.

He just replied with a: Be safe, love you. She fell onto the bed feeling exhausted by all of this. The sergeant had told her that they'd meet with her tomorrow morning as it was far too late tonight. She hated the idea that if it really was Branden it meant that

he was stuck in some tiny room by himself. Surrounded by strangers wondering where all the people he loved were. Absolutely hated that it was even possible that she couldn't just go right now to talk to him, but it was nearly eleven. It made sense to wait till tomorrow morning. Sergeant Wilmrose had said the boy was sleeping soundly on a couch in a very nice room in the station, not in a holding cell. That he was being watched by an officer that had kids.

Alice fell asleep but it wasn't restful, how any of this was possible was beyond her. How it was even happening was beyond her. There was just no way that someone could disappear for thirteen years then come back, and be the same age they were when they vanished. The earth kept rotating no matter what that was how it worked. People aged, they got older, they grew up, and if Branden had been alive these past thirteen years he would have grown up too. The only explanation was that someone had done something really bad. That this boy was pretending to be Branden to cover up something truly sinister. Either that or she had suddenly woken up in a science fiction movie.

*

Alice woke at seven to the sound of her phone alarm going off. In the hotel lobby she found coffee that she took with her out to where she waited for a new Uber. This driver was thankfully quiet as she sipped on her coffee, while scrolling through a few things on her phone trying to find answers to the questions she had. There were theories out there of course about stopping aging, or even slowing it, but all of it dealt with adults and their fear of dying. Nothing about a kid not aging for thirteen years. After a few minutes of reading things on her phone, she instead turned to look out at the city. Since going to college in Virginia, then the FBI academy after she hadn't been back to the city. Most of it still looked the same, but she was surprised to see that they had finally finished some of the bigger interchanges.

The Uber pulled in front of the police station about fifteen minutes later. It was an older one on the northern side of the city only about twenty minutes from where she had grown up. As she slipped out of the car she made sure to give the guy five stars along with a good tip. For not bothering her he deserved it. Walking into the station she checked the pocket of her slacks to make sure she had her badge just to be on the safe side. The woman at the front desk looked up from where she was typing on a keyboard, "Yes ma'am how can we help you?"

Nothing like southern Texas hospitality. She missed that in LA, things were more curt there, “I’m here to see Sargent Wilmrose, Agent Alice Nills.”

The woman studied her for a moment perhaps taking in the fact that Alice looked really young before saying, “Third floor, missing persons department, he’s expecting you agent.” Then she slid over a visitors badge that Alice clipped onto her blouse before taking the elevator. She could feel her nervousness increasing as she headed up in the elevator. What would it be like to talk with this boy that was claiming he was Branden? She was pretty sure it was going to be unsettling. The doors opened a few eternities later onto the third floor. There was a hallway that was divided into rooms for three different detective divisions.

She found the missing persons division as she walked down the hall. Alice opened the door walking into the room. It was set up like a large square with a few desks arranged in rows. There was a small table in one corner with a box of donuts on it and an old coffee pot next to it. When she stepped in there was only one man in the room. He was sitting at a desk doing work on his computer. The sound of her entering the room made him look up. When he stood Alice saw he was roughly about the height of Stephen, if not a few inches shorter. The sergeant’s skin was darker than Stephen’s though. Sergeant Wilmrose was clearly an African American. “Agent Nills?”

Alice took his hand when he put it out, “Sergeant Wilmrose?”

“Yes ma’am. If you’ll come with me. The boy woke up just a little bit ago. He’s calmer now than yesterday. I did let him know that you were coming to see him, that seemed to help. One thing though he still doesn’t believe me that he’s been gone for thirteen years. We showed him some things, but he can’t believe its real.” Alice nodded that made sense she wouldn’t believe it either if she was suddenly thirteen years in the future. If that was even possible, which she was confident that it wasn’t.

Of course at the door to the room, when she saw him sitting on a couch that had served as a bed last night, all of those thoughts went out the window. He was looking at something on a television against the far wall when she walked into the room. The boy was also eating a do-nut with a small bottle of chocolate milk on the table next to the couch. When they walked in he turned to look at both of them. In that moment Alice had no idea what to expect to happen. She had been positive until seeing him

that someone was pulling a scam of some kind, and made a mistake about there being no money so they just dumped the kid.

Now, looking at him, seeing his eyes widen, his jaw drop, his utter disbelief she was less certain at all what was going on. He was exactly as she remembered him, down to the almost impossible to see brown birthmark on his neck just below the jawline. The old faded Charmander tee-shirt looked a little too large on him like it always had. He looked not a day... no not a second older than he had the last time she had seen him. Her memory of him at that age coming into clarity as she took him in. At the same time the look of wonder, shock, and sadness on Branden's face left her feeling a sudden need to comfort the boy.

Branden still holding the half finished do-nut said, "I-its really been thirteen years?" If there was one thing that Alice remembered about Branden even back then when they were kids was his practicality when given the facts. The fact that she stood before him as a woman in her mid-twenties who still in a lot of ways resembled the barely teenage girl he had known, was enough to tell him it was the truth. Time had passed, but he hadn't aged a single day during those years.

Alice didn't know what to do looking at this boy that was clearly Branden. Her Branden. The officer said, "Now see here this scam's gone far enough boy just tell the truth there's no way that you could know who she is. She would have been a kid same as you, not an adult."

Alice wanted to say something to the man, but Branden spoke first, "She's still got the same eyes and that little scar on the left side of her forehead where she cut it and needed stitches. That was the summer when we kept climbing over that barbed wired fence remember?" Alice touched the scar that she had almost forgotten about. That had been one fun summer.

They had both been nine at the time, and this new convenience store had been built at the end of a field with a fence around it. One of the many times they had climbed over it hadn't gone very well with her cutting her forehead on a piece of barbed wire. She had freaked out about the blood, but Branden had used his shirt to hold it to the cut till it mostly stopped bleeding. She had still ended up needing four stitches though. It had left a small scar just above her left eyebrow.

The officer said, “Now you look here son…”

Alice just gently rested a hand on the mans arm, “Its okay, let me talk with him please?” Sergeant Wilmrose grunted, but didn’t argue as Alice moved to sit down on the coffee table in front of the couch.

The way that Branden observed her should have left her feeling a little uncomfortable. It was like the boy was admiring her for the adult she had become. Instead she could tell that he was taking in all the changes from what he remembered when they were kids. “You got older…”

Alice nodded, “Yeah that’s typically what happens in thirteen years. Where have you been Branden?”

He eyed her for a moment suspicious, “Now you sound like a cop.”

Alice slipped her badge out of her pocked handing it to him, “I am a cop.”

He scanned it quickly then said, “Holy shit, you’re FBI like for real?” Alice almost smiled at his inflection it sounded so much like her Branden. Was this really him, how? “You really did it huh?” Back then she had wanted to join the FBI to be like Agent Scully on the X-Files which had been one of her and Branden’s favorite shows after his dad had shown it to them. “That’s pretty cool…” He looked at the badge again then with a sigh, “And somehow I missed all of it.” He looked up at her, “Alice, where are my parents? They wouldn’t tell me.” Alice was quiet for a long while, too long she realized when he said, “I see…”

Alice reached out then to touch his arm making his eyes met hers again. There were tears welling at the corners of them, and any doubt that this was some random person trying to exploit something went right out the window. She had seen those tears before, witnessed them first hand when at ten Natty, his cat, had died of old age. She wanted to pull him in closer, but didn’t know if that would shock him even more. Instead she said, “Do you know where you’ve been?”

Branden was quiet this time for more than a few heartbeats his forehead scrunching slightly while he thought, then he said, “I haven’t been anywhere. At least not anywhere I remember being. Last thing I really remember was going home from your house, feeling so happy.” He stopped for a moment a small flush on his cheeks appearing which made Alice smile as the memory came back for her too just for a second. It had been the best night of her life still, even with all the things she had accomplished. “Then a second later I was standing in my front yard right by where the oak tree was that we used to use to climb to get up to my bedroom on the second story. Only the tree was gone and some strangers were living in my house. I feel like I’m missing something, but w-when I try to think of it… m-my head gets all cloudy.”

Sergeant Wilmrose said, “That sounds like a bunch of bullshit if I’ve ever heard it.”

Alice didn’t listen to him instead she said, “You really don’t remember anything at all after you disappeared?”

Branden shook his head, “I didn’t disappear to me. I mean to the world I guess I did, but it was like I blinked my eyes and everything was different.”

Alice nodded and squeezed his arm comfortingly, as an adult would to a boy who was lost and confused. Branden’s eyes met hers with trust inside of them, “We’ll figure out what happened Bran. I don’t know how its possible…”

“Maybe it was aliens.”

The officer grunted, “My ass. Are you playing along with this prank Agent? Did the FBI want to come out here to test us or something?”

Alice smiled at Branden again then stood up looking at the officer, “I am not, and we did not. There is something going on here Sergeant but its not aliens.” She looked back at Branden, “Sorry but its not.” Branden shrugged which was so much like him, it was his way of saying he knew it wasn’t. Just that he thought it was a funny idea. “What we need to do is take Branden over to a hospital, and perform some tests to see if we can find anything else out. Can I do that officer?”

The sergeant looked back at Branden then at her and said, “Legally I can’t stop you, I have no reason to hold the boy. If you want to take responsibility for him then that’s up to you and the FBI. I’d rather wash my hands of the entire affair. Like I said last month I dealt with something just as silly some stupid transge-”

Alice interrupted him, “Please officer I really don’t want to hear about it. I’ll take full responsibility, and sign any forms to take Branden into my custody.” Last thing she needed was to hear some guy go on and on about cases that she didn’t care about.

The sergeant just gave another curt nod. She could tell that he hated being interrupted. Probably thought that she was some ultra liberal now too. All she cared about was finding out what happened to Branden, not anything else. “I’ll go prepare things.” He turned to walk from the room.

Alice turned back to look at Branden then sat down again on the table in front of him, “We really do need to run some tests… you do realize that this shouldn't be possible right?”

Branden softly said, “Yeah.” He paused for a moment his hazel eyes meeting her own again, “Mom and dad are really dead?” Alice gave a small nod and that was enough to break through his barriers, show just how vulnerable and afraid he was. His bottom lip trembled when he said, “T-they p-probably went through hell…”

Alice gently pulled him into her arms then as he started to cry resting his head on her shoulder. Despite the years that had passed since then when she held Branden he felt the same in her arms. She could remember how that day Natty died how he had clung to her as she clung back. He felt the same now as back then. Memories of the moment filling her mind again, reminding her how sensitive Branden was at times. She stroked the back of his head as he sobbed about his parents being dead, having thought they had lost him. How broken they must have been during the last few years of their lives. Inside Alice wept too unsure what to think about all of this or even how it was possible.

After a few minutes Branden pulled back as she said, “You okay?”

He wiped one of his eyes looking away from her, “S-sorry I…”

Alice touched his arm once making him look up at her, “Don’t be. I’m here for you Branden. If you need to cry again I’ll be here. I want to go by the hospital and have them check you out.”

Branden looked up as she stood a brief moment of sadness in his eyes, “You’re still taller than me.”

Alice smiled just once, “You sure you’re okay?”

Branden shrugged, “I’m not, but I also am. I don’t know what happened to me, but I’m still me.”

Alice squeezed his arm one more time. “I’ll be right back I need to make a phone call and get an appointment set up.”

Branden as she started for the door said, “You mean call someone from your work and tell them that something x-files like is going on?”

Alice looked back at him, “Something like that. You trust me to figure this out right?”

Branden earnestly said, “I trust you Alice, I always trust you.” She felt her heart break just a little. To him it had been less than a day since they had kissed, to her it was thirteen years. The gulf of differences, the age that she had grown to seemed a bridge too far to cross. That relationship was gone, but her caring for Branden wouldn’t go with it. She could see it in his eyes too, he knew what this meant. The path of what could have been closed between them swiftly with the obvious gulf of their ages. Out in the hallway she let out a long breath, and almost broke into tears of both joy and sadness. It was like someone was giving her what she wanted only to laugh at her and make it as complicated as possible.

She didn’t walk far from the door almost afraid that if she did Branden would just disappear again. She picked her bosses number on her list of contacts. He answered on the third ring. “Alice wasn’t expecting you to call so soon. Everything okay with your family?”

Alice cleared her throat pushing back the tears, “Fine sir, actually that’s what I’m calling about. Remember my side project?”

Conner grunted, “The missing kid thing dealing with your childhood friend?”

“Yes sir, well that’s what this is about-”

He interrupted her with a sigh, “Nills I told you that we cannot use our time with the agency for side projects, you need to come back to the home office if its not family.”

She sighed, “Sir that’s the thing it is or as close as it can be. I got a call regarding Branden, he’s here at the police station showed up out of the blue thirteen years after he disappeared. I need time to prove that he’s really who he is, then we can talk about it. I might need your help on this one or someone who knows something about something like this. First though I need to know that he’s really who he is claiming to be…”

The director was quiet for a moment then cleared his throat, “I think I understand, but shouldn’t his family be taking care of this matter?”

Alice softly said, “I’m the only family he has left sir. His mom entrusted me with this. That if he was ever found alive or dead that I’d be the one to take care of it. I was put in charge of his estate and listed as the emergency contact on all of his information, that’s why they called me.”

Conner sighed, “Okay very well Nills, take care of what you need to, but I want a report on all of it when you get a chance. You can use FBI resources if you need to.

Be sure that you're not going overboard just because someone claims to be someone trying to seek an estate."

Alice agreed, "I won't sir, but there is no estate, his mother died of a long battle with cancer. It pretty much ate up all of her life savings." He only told her the same thing again then got off the phone. Alice looking down at the phone sighed before searching for the nearest children's hospital on the web. The closet one was familiar to her. It was where she had gone to visit when Branden had his tonsils removed. Also where her broken arm had been put in a cast at fifteen. Alice let out another long breath, then she walked back into the room where Branden was still sitting. He was idly scrolling through the channels on the television. "Come on lets go."

Branden hit the power button standing up, "You didn't tell your boss that I was still the same age I was thirteen years ago."

Alice dryly chuckled, of course he had been listening in, this was Branden. Science fiction had been one of his favorite past times. "Of course I didn't, he would have either freaked out about it or called me crazy. Then Probably send some stranger to deal with things, or he would have laughed me out of the job."

Branden said, "I guess the FBI isn't like X-Files after all."

Alice smiled, "No shit."

Branden smiled back, "See I told you it wasn't last Chri- uh.. well the Christmas before...." They both stopped smiling with him struggling with the date. Again that gulf opening up around them of the past thirteen years. A simple reminder that to Branden it had been less than a day, while for her it had been thirteen years. Alice touched his shoulder once leading him in front of her, not letting go until they were on the elevator. They stood side by side not speaking the entire time. When his hand brushed hers Alice got the signal that he needed something. She gently took the boys smaller hand holding it, reminding herself that he was a kid who needed the only stability he had. Even if she was an adult now she was still someone he knew. She still cared deeply for him as well.

The walk through the precinct and during the check out at the front desk was all quiet. While they waited out front for the Uber to show up Branden took a look at her cellphone studying how it showed the car coming towards them, “That’s pretty fucking cool, so someone just comes and picks you up, then takes you wherever you want to go?”

Alice took the phone back as she said, “Yeah, they even have a service now where you can order food from any place you want and have it delivered to you.”

Branden looking up at her said, “Ha I told you so!”

“What you never told me…” She stopped in the middle of the sentence getting caught up in the argument for a moment. Her memory returning to moments from her past. Then she finished, “You said that they’d have driving or flying machines that delivered to you not people.”

Branden shrugged, “That could still happen.” When she looked at him when he said that a smile hit his still cute face, “They’re testing it out aren’t they?” Alice sighed as he said, “They are aren’t they?”

Alice groaned, “You are insufferable, you were at twelve and you still are now.”

Branden’s smile broadened, “Well I love you too.” he moved to lean against her, and Alice let him. Gently she rested her arm around his shoulders as she looked down at him. It was strange to realize that even though they had a gulf of age between them the fact was that this was still Branden. Well the Branden that she remembered. Even back then you could see what kind of an adult he was going to be. At twelve Branden had dreamed of being a science fiction writer just like Alice had wanted to join the FBI and solve mysterious cases. Maybe not as mysterious as Mulder and Scully, but still mysterious. Like why a boy shows up thirteen years later and still looks exactly like he did when he disappeared.

When they Uber pulled up they got into the car with Branden looking around while they drove. He was watching the city as they passed along the streets. As they were

getting onto the freeway Branden said, “So I guess if its been thirteen years… am I twenty-six? Or still twelve?”

Alice looked up at the man sitting in the front seat then back at Branden, “No idea. I’d rather wait to let a medical professional decide that one.”

Branden nodded then said, “I still feel twelve.” A few minutes went by then he said, “Fuck… that means I never gave Eric his copy of Transformers back.”

The man up front gave a chuckle probably at a preteen boy using a curse word and his ‘mom’ or whatever she was not correcting him. “I’m sure that Eric survived.”

Branden sighed as he said under his breath, “It was a shitty movie anyway. That whole Fallen plot line was stupid.”

Alice couldn’t help but chuckle herself as she said, “Yeah no shit, but you’re the one who kept watching it. All Spring break! I told you it was garbage.” The longer she talked with him the more she felt like she was that twelve almost thirteen-year-old girl that had hung out with Branden everyday watching movies, riding bikes, going up to the corner store, getting candy and sodas. While quietly waiting and hoping that he’d kiss her like she wanted him to. Unable to fathom that he thought she was too pretty to be interested in a nerd like him cause she was popular and a cheerleader.

Branden leaning back in the car sighed again, “I still feel like its just there…” He looked over at her, in this moment his light hazel eyes were more brown than green, “You know Alice? Like I can… almost… feel it just buried below the surface. When I try to think though about missing time it gets cloudy, like its something I’ve forgotten.”

Alice reached over gently taking his hand a she squeezed it, “We will figure this out Bran I promise. Whatever happened to you has an explanation.”

He leaned over then to rest his head on her shoulder. “I’m glad its you that’s here for me Alice. If this was happening and you weren’t here… I don’t know if I could handle

it.” Alice kissed the top of his head rubbing his shoulder once as she put her arm around him. Silence filled the car as they got ever closer to the hospital. She just hoped that the questions really did have answers, that they weren’t going to be left wondering how this had happened. Then after they had their answers then they could figure out the rest of it. Where it left things, how it complicated her life didn’t really matter. Alice would take care of Branden, keep him safe, and above all be there for him like she always had been.

XXXXX

About twenty minutes later they arrived at Memorial Children’s hospital which was where Branden’s records had been stored. This was also where in 2006 he had come to have his tonsils removed, and where his pediatrician had his office. Alice remembered going up to visit Branden feeling nervous about seeing him in a hospital. Then eating ice cream in his room all afternoon long while hanging out. Even getting up on his bed with him when they watched cartoons. He had needed to whisper when he talked. Every time he did his mom would tell him not to. Alice hadn’t minded at all that he was mostly quiet the whole time. She was just happy she got to hang out with her best friend while eating ice cream all afternoon long. It was strange being back here with him again, only she was an adult now and he was still a kid. Even though she knew he wasn’t exactly a kid anymore either.

As they walked up to the hospital Branden said, “What kind of tests are they going to run on me? You think I’ll be put in the MRI machine? That always looks so cool when they do it on TV.”

Alice shrugged, “I don’t know Bran, I think so yes, but I’m not sure. All I did was call in for your records to compare DNA samples, but I imagine that a doctor is going to want to take a look at you too.” Inside they were directed to the second floor where Doctor Norris still had his office. She had spoken with one of the pediatric nurses about the records on the ride over. The nurse was the one who told her that Doctor Norris was still available, and that they’d pull the records as well. At the reception desk on the second floor, Alice told them that she was there to talk with Doctor Norris about Branden’s records.

The nurse got on a phone then after putting it down said, “Doctor Norris will see you right now.” She gestured down the hall, “Room six.” Alice walked with Branden by her side down to room six. It was right next to a door that said Doctor Norris on it. Inside she sat down on one of the chairs while Branden walked around the room clearly trying to work through his anxiety about of all of this.

Alice watched him walking around taking in the ways that her memories of him didn't perfectly line up with who he really was. There was a disconnect of imperfection. Not that the boy had been perfect, just that thirteen years had made him more perfect, as she only remembered the emotionally important moments between them. She was starting to remember that he was as flawed as anyone else. For example if he had been perfect he would have kissed her six months earlier than he did.

Just having him here again reminded her that boys were still boys after all. For example he picked up a model that represented some part of the human body. As he twisted it around it promptly fell apart. Then he started to try and put it together Alice with a sigh said, "Really?"

Branden looked at her before sticking his tongue out, "Please like you didn't think about taking it apart too." Alice only groaned, and didn't get on him because he was partly right. A part of her did miss just being able to grab something you were curious about and play with it.

Just as he finished putting the model back together the door opened. Doctor Norris stepped into the room while writing something on a notepad. Alice had vague memories of the man from more than thirteen years ago. He tickled at her memories in other ways, but she wasn't sure why. He had been Branden's doctor most of his life. She didn't remember the gray beard but apparently Branden did as he said, "Hi Doctor Norris."

Doctor Norris looked up from the notepad that he was writing on to respond with something. Instead shock registered on his face. The look was similar tot he one that had graced Alice's face only a few hours earlier. His eyes widened, his jaw almost dropped just like the pen he had been using did. The sound of it bouncing on the tiled floor a few times was the only noise in the room. After all it wasn't every day that the boy you treated for thirteen years came back having not aged a single day.

The agent who had handled the case at one point had talked with the doctor about how his parents treated the boy. Like all the other visits and interviews that had been done thirteen years ago it was in Branden's file. She was not surprised at all really that Doctor Norris remembered Branden. In his interview he had stated that the boy was unique and not easy to forget. Along with telling the agent just how much

Branden’s parents clearly loved their boy. For nearly a minute the room was filled with shocked silence. Alice could tell that Doctor Norris was still trying to work through his shock.

It was Alice who finally broke the silence walking over to him, “Doctor Norris I’m Alice Nills, I spoke with the nurse about visiting you regarding Branden’s files? This is Branden. I can imagine what you’re thinking...”

Doctor Norris looking at her cleared his throat then went back to looking at Branden again, “Nills, that sounds familiar as well…”

Alice just nodded, “I came in once when I was fourteen, broken wrist… but that’s not important.”

Branden said, “You broke your wrist?”

Alice groaned, “Again not important. We can discuss what I broke at a later date.” Branden stuck is tongue out and Alice almost gave in doing the same to him. Instead she continued, “We are here discuss Branden, and the little issue we’ve run into.”

Doctor Norris said, “That issue having to be that Branden looks the same as he did when I last saw him in the spring of 2010 when he came in for his yearly checkup and physical?”

Alice gave a small nod as Branden said, “I was walking home from Alice’s and then it was thirteen years later.”

For his part the doctor didn’t miss a beat as he said, “And you want to run some tests to see if there’s any answers?” Alice gave a small nod as he said, “Well here young man change and we’ll get started.” He handed Branden a light blue hospital gown. The boy groaned but didn’t argue about changing. Walking across the room he gave Alice one simple look, “Don’t peek!” Then walked around the screen at the back of the room to change.

As he walked behind the screen Alice said, “How did you remember Branden, its been thirteen years?”

Doctor Norris looked at her then said, “When we go to my office later you’ll understand. I remember most of my kids, especially the unique ones. Or the ones that I loose suddenly and unexpectedly.” He gave a small sigh then said, “But mainly I remember Branden because he was unique, smart for his age, curious about things. Always asked me a million questions about why I was doing what I was doing. I could imagine some parents getting aggravated with it, but his never did. You could see how much they had hungered for a child, Agent Nills.” He looked at the screen where Branden had gone to change, “This one though, this one is one for the books. He hasn’t aged a single day as far as I can tell. I can only imagine what’s going on in his head.”

Alice breathed in deeply, that was the part she was not looking forward to. “I think that’ll be my job to figure out. How long will the tests take?”

Branden came out then dressed in the simple hospital gown holding it closed behind him. It made the boys skinny legs look even smaller than they were combined with his mid calf high socks as well. His arms were really skinny too. Had he always been this skinny? At thirteen he had looked just slightly smaller than her, now thirteen years later he looked far younger than most middle school kids. Alice wondered why she had never noticed before.

He jumped up onto the exam table as the doctor said, “The blood tests will take a few days to run a comparison on the DNA, but I think you know as much as I do Agent Nills…” Alice nodded in agreement, this was Branden she knew it deep within her soul. She was going to have to find the answers to where he went for thirteen years.

Doctor Norris quickly drew Branden’s blood then he did a few other checks including looking down his throat seeing that his tonsils were indeed still gone. He checked Branden’s reflexes as well then he said, “Okay let me see if I can get us in on the MRI machine so we can take a look at the brain. Other than that I see no signs of anything odd, Branden is a totally healthy boy. A little small for his age, but well within standards. I’ll be right back.”

After he stepped out Alice grabbed her phone checking the text messages on it that had come in. She read the two from Stephen: I know you're working but I wanted to check up on you. Hey when you get a chance let me know how its going. She started typing a message back as Branden curiously asked, "Who are you texting to?"

Alice debated as she sent the message not telling him, but she couldn't lie to Branden. It wasn't his fault that he had disappeared for thirteen years. Any more than it was her fault that she had gone on with her life. "Stephen."

Branden nodded, "Oh… husband?"

Alice shook her head, "Boyfriend, he's a lawyer for an oil company."

"Older?" Alice just gave one simple nod before Branden said, "Job sounds boring, but I bet he's not."

Alice moved to sit down on the chair across from the exam table, "Why do you bet that?"

Branden shrugged, "Cause I don't think you'd date someone boring."

Alice smiled, "I was going to date you." The look in his eyes was painful, she looked away quickly, "Sorry. I shouldn't have…" She sighed then looked back up at him, "He's not boring, but… I don't know if I love him." She chuckled, "How easy that is to tell you when I can't eve tell my mom that I don't love him as much as she does."

Branden moved on the exam table once that gown moving with him reminding her just how small the boy was. Again she asked herself if he had really been this small at twelve nearly thirteen. She knew he had been, but she had also been five inches shorter than now and less developed, not that she had developed all that much. Her perspective on size had changed as she grew up. Kids just looked so small compared to adults. Maybe that's why parents were so protective because of how small they looked. "Its cause you don't know me."

Alice said, “I know you Bran. I’ve known you most of your life.”

He shrugged, “But not most of yours anymore. I’m twelve or well I guess thirteen since its past August 12th, not six. I’m not stupid I know what it means that you’ve spent thirteen years living while I was wherever I was. Lost in a vortex, sucked into a time warp, abducted by aliens, who knows.” He shrugged his shoulders as he said that part, it looked adorable she decided. It was one of those gestures he used to do all the time. “Every guy at Johnson wanted to date you. So of course you moved on.”

Alice looked away from him then softly said, “Only I didn’t move on.” She looked back at him her darker blue eyes meeting his hazel, “I mean I did eventually in high school, but only because I felt I had to. Your parents moved away, they’d given up it seemed to me. So I thought I had to move on too even though I never stopped missing you, just like they didn’t. That moment when they moved though was when it was like you had really died.”

Silence, then after a few minutes Branden said, “I can’t stop thinking about my parents.”

Alice rested a hand on his shoulder, “I know we’ll talk about it later.” Branden gave a small simple nod as the door opened to the exam room with Doctor Norris walking back into the room.

He said, “They have the MRI machine free now so we can go down to do a quick scan. See if there’s anything strange going on.” Branden hopped off of the exam table, and for one brief moment before he pulled the gown down she saw a pair of blue briefs cupping a boys bottom. She shook her head of the thoughts that suddenly went in there with memories of how a few times she had wondered at twelve what kind of underwear Branden wore.

The two of them walked behind Doctor Norris who led them to the elevator. As they were walking Alice decided to distract Branden’s thoughts with other things. “You know they’ve made three Star Wars movies, and a few television shows since you’ve been gone.”

Branden whispered his reply so that the doctor couldn't hear him cuss which she found cute, and a little funny, "No fucking way George Lucas made more?"

Alice shook her head, "Nah he sold all of it to Disney in twenty-twelve. They kinda fucked it up at first too, are getting better now."

Branden said, "That's insane. Can I watch them?"

Alice when they got onto the elevator said, "I don't see why not. I'll have to show you the Marvel Cinematic Universe as well I suppose."

Branden confusedly said, "What the hell is that?"

Doctor Norris who had been polite to point out that he could hear all of their words including Branden's whispered cussing said, "Its comic books come to life. Crazy how one part of Disney manged to make a whole interconnected universe," he turned looking at both of them with a smile, "And the other half managed to fuck their own up." He chuckled at the look on Branden's face along with Alice the look of surprise that Alice had as well. She knew she was an adult, but Doctor Norris was a real adult, he was well into his sixties she wasn't even thirty yet.

They stepped out of the elevator going down another long hallway before coming to the room for the MRI machine. When they stepped into the room a young man dressed in scrubs was waiting. He wore a badge on his top that said his name was Jason. "Good afternoon Doctor Norris, and you must be our patient?" Branden gave a small nod, "Good, do you have anything metal on you?"

Branden patted his front for a moment like he did then said, "Uh do filings in my teeth count?"

The technician shook his head with a chuckle, "No they don't. So you're ready?"

Branden looked up at her then looked back at the young handsome man, “I suppose as ready as I’ll ever be to get into a metal tube.” Alice shook her head, the technician actually laughed as he led Branden into the room. She followed them while Doctor Norris stayed in the other room. Alice was honestly afraid that if she looked away he’d disappear on her again.

As they walked up to where the MRI machine was the technician continued, “Now its important that you stay still, no sudden big movements or anything like that. It’ll take about forty or so minutes to get a full scan. Think you can handle that?”

Branden shrugged, “Can’t be as boring as that Transformers movie.” The technician looked at him confused for a second then just took that as a yes. “Uh can someone stay in the room with me?” His eyes met Alice’s, the simple look in them was enough for her to know that he was actually scared of being alone.

Alice said, “If its okay I’d like to stay in the room with Bran.” The look of relief in his eyes was enough for her to know she had made the right decision.

The technician looked at her then said, “Got anything metal on you?” Alice took off her earrings with Branden watching the entire time. Then she removed her two rings and also put her cellphone into the container that the technician had with him. Looking back at Branden he said, “Okay climb on in.” Once they got Branden situated into the machine the technician got a chair from the corner for Alice to sit in.

Branden as the man went back into the room said, “This officially sucks Alice.”

Alice leaned back in the chair, “Yeah well maybe next time you won’t disappear for thirteen years on me.”

Branden said, “you can’t see it but I’m sticking my tongue out at you.”

The technician spoke from the other room, “Please stop moving so we can get a clean picture.”

Branden only sighed once then said, “Got it. Uh can I talk?”

Again he responded, “Absolutely, just don’t move. We might have to ask you some questions while doing a few things.”

Branden after a moment of silence as the machine started scanning said, “So like did Wolverine join up with Iron Man?”

Alice chuckled, “No, Marvel didn’t get Wolverine back from Fox until Disney bought them two years ago.”

Branden said, “You are messing with me now aren’t you? What does Disney own everything?”

Alice was going to answer but the technician said, “Not yet but in a few years they’ll probably own Apple and then they’ll own everything.”

Branden again went silent as the exam continued the technician started asking him to do some things within the machine so they could get other pictures. The forty minutes actually went by pretty quickly once he started asking Branden a lot of questions. Then as the results were being processed he came in to let Branden out. Again for another brief second she saw his underwear and realized that he was wearing blue briefs with red poke balls on them. She didn’t mention it as they walked back into the outer room.

As they walked into the room Branden asked Doctor Norris, “So is my brain all strange and creepy looking?”

Alice sighed as Doctor Norris chuckled, “No it looks like the brain of any young boy your age. Jason here has been a technician for nearly ten years now. He’s watched a lot of these scans. There doesn’t appear to be any strange anomalies or any other

signs of trauma at all. Sorry to disappoint you Branden but your brain looks totally normal."

Branden sighed and Alice said, "You sure Doctor? I'm pretty sure its not a normal brain." Which prompted Branden to stick his tongue out at her and Doctor Norris to chuckle, "What I'm positive they're missing something. Like its made out of candy or its twice as small as most brains."

Branden for a second looked like he wanted to pounce her instead he said, "They should examine your brain its probably fruit loop shaped." Alice smiled as he stepped closer grabbing her hand once again.

"Come on we'll go back to my office." As they walked through the hallways of the hospital Branden kept his hand in hers the entire way. When they got onto the elevator Doctor Norris said, "You know I remember when you came to get your tonsils out. I distinctly remember the following day one of the nurses saying that they had to bring you what was it? Four bowls of ice cream?"

Branden said, "Yeah Alice kept eating all of it before I could get any bites."

"I did not! I'd look down and the bowl would be gone!" Again the boy stuck his tongue out, and this time with Doctor Norris ahead of them Alice turned and stuck her tongue out right back at him. She really did feel like the little girl she had been all over again when she was with Branden. The thing was she knew he could be mature if he wanted to. He had always enjoyed messing with her as much as she enjoyed messing with him.

Doctor Norris chuckled, "I also recall that a certain someone didn't want someone else to go home. That two moms had to be very delicate about getting their children to agree it was time for one of them to go home." Branden looked up at Alice, his cheeks heating just slightly as she squeezed his hand. Looking back on it now with age she could see that even at ten they had already been in love with each other. They just didn't see it as they were too close to one another to realize it was something different than friendship. It took the eye opener that puberty can be at times to make them realize that they were more than friends.

She didn’t doubt that their parents had known it long before they had. How different things would have turned out if he hadn’t disappeared. Yet now how complicated it all was. Inside she was a turmoil of emotions because she realized she still found Branden attractive. His hand felt like it belonged in hers still even now. Looking at him a part of Alice had an overwhelming urge to just lean over and kiss the boy. To give him a proper grownup kiss, but she knew that’d be wrong. The moment had passed, he was still a boy and she was a grown woman. It wouldn’t be right. Yet her mind wouldn’t stop thinking about the fact that this was Branden. Her Branden.

Instead of going back into the exam room they followed Doctor Norris into a room with his name on the door. The doctors office was small, a simple desk in one corner with two chairs on one side and one on the other. The walls though were what impressed her. There were photos of all the kids that he had treated over the years. As she looked around she got the sense then of why he remembered Branden, there were a few photos of the boy on one of the walls that she quickly realized were photos of kids that had passed on or in Bran’s case disappeared.

When he saw her eyes go to the photos Doctor Norris said, “I guess I’ll be needing to move Branden back over to the other sections. I haven’t lost a lot of kids during the years doing this job. Kids are a lot more reliant than adults, bouncing back from things that might kill an adult far faster. Still, you loose some…” He sighed once then said, “You know Branden, when you were six months old your parents brought you to me for the first time. From then on I was your doctor, they trusted me because I knew what was wrong with you when the other doctor didn’t.”

Branden looked away from the photos as he said, “What was wrong with me? I don’t ever remember getting sick.”

Doctor Norris nodded, “Well every baby is different, but I’d seen a kid allergic to breast milk before. Its one of the reasons why some parents chose to use formula. For you though that wasn’t needed. Your mom just needed to change her diet. I had seen it before and was able to diagnose why you broke out into a rash after a feeding. Turned out you were allergic to something your mom was eating all the time that was supposed to help make her produce better milk. After that they knew I was the right doctor to take care of you. Although other than your tonsils I can’t remember a time that you ever needed a doctor after that. Every check up you were always as healthy as any boy that plays rough can be.”

Alice smiled fondly remembering all the times she'd gotten sick when he hadn't, "Yeah he never got any of my colds despite how often we shared sodas, or how often he'd stay with me when I was sick watching shows all day long."

Doctor Norris chuckled, "Ah yes when he pretended to be sick to stay home from school. You know your mom knew that you were pretending right?"

Branden's eyes got wide, "No way! She knew?"

"Indeed, I told her it was something you'd grow out of eventually. She thought it was cute how you wanted to be sick like your friend even though you never got her colds." He smiled, "Its usually the opposite with premature babies. They get sick easier." He picked up a picture from the wall of a very small baby handing it to Branden, "That was you at six months. You know you were born eight weeks early?"

Branden gave a nod, "Yeah. I know mom and dad spent a long time trying to have me." There was a hint of sadness in his voice at the loss of his parents.

Doctor Norris said, "Well that first day your mom told me that you were home two weeks after you were born. Most premature babies that are born as early as you were are stuck in the hospital for months. Your lungs were already fully formed and functioning within days. Then within a week you had all the motor responses of a full term baby. By the time you hit two weeks you were already responding to things that most premature babies don't for a couple of months. The doctors had never seen anything like it. When they realized you were really small, but fully healthy they let you go home. At six months you were about half the size of other six month old babies, but you were just as healthy and aware as any other six month old."

Branden said, "Yeah mom told me once that I started talking at eight months. I started reading when I was a little over one. I remember the first time I went to the bathroom without needing a diaper…" He shrugged trailing off as he handed the photo back.

Alice while Doctor Norris put it back up on his wall said, “I didn’t know that! I don’t think I remember my own potty training at all.”

Branden said, “Its not like really clear, just that I remember how proud mom was of me, but also a little sad that I was growing up so fast. My real first clear memory is of the day we met when we were five.”

Alice softly said, “Mine too.” She chuckled looking over at him, “You were so shy. Holding onto your mom’s leg looking at me with those big hazel eyes. I had to pull you away to play like twice!”

Branden flushed, “Well you were bigger than me. Plus you were really pretty and that scared me too!”

Alice smiled at him, then squeezed his hand as he moved closer to her. Then she said to Doctor Norris, “Are there any other tests that we need to run?”

Doctor Norris shook his head, “I don’t think so. I’ve got the blood drawn, and the MRI will be looked at by an expert. The only thing that still confounds me is how its all possible, but I don’t think tests are going to be the answer. You really have no memories of any time after you disappeared?”

Branden shook his head, “No, if I try to think about it all of it gets kind of cloudy and I can’t push into it.”

The doctor thought for a moment, “Hypnotic regression might be an option.” He looked at both of them, “It’s something to consider. I’ve seen it work before on patients, helps them recall things that they’ve forgotten.” His eyes rested on Branden, “Now through that door is the exam room Bran if you want to get changed back into your clothes?” Branden looked at her then gave a small nod as he started for the door.

The boy held the gown closed from behind, but Alice still got a slight peek of his cute round bottom in those Pokemon themed briefs. He really did have a nice bottom, even if it was small. It was just perfectly round, Alice realized again that a part of her wanted to touch all of Branden still. To hold him in a much more intimate way than motherly. How at thirteen she had wanted to see him in just his underwear, to know what he wore, but also to let him see her in just hers too. He closed the door behind him a moment later letting her thoughts return to the present.

Alice watching him leave said, “So what happens now?”

Doctor Norris said, “Well Alice, if I had to guess you take him home. I don’t know what the government procedures are to get someone reinstated that’s been missing for thirteen years into society. I imagine that you do?”

Alice gave a small nod as she said, “Yeah but usually they get found and are thirteen years older…”

He rested a hand on her shoulder, “I’m not an expert on strange occurrences, or finding disappeared kids. I am an expert on kids themselves though. Right now what Branden needs is a friend. Someone that he trusts. If his parents are gone then I think that falls to you Ms. Nills. You and he were close?”

Alice studied the bathroom door wondering how she was going to handle taking care of him, “Very close, almost like siblings but more complicated.”

Doctor Norris gave a small squeeze of her shoulder before moving his hand off, “Then I think you’re what he needs the most Alice. I would just caution you of two things. First he’s still the same boy he was when he disappeared. That means that he didn’t have those thirteen years you had to grow up and become a young adult. Even if he has memories locked away, he never aged physically, so he may never have aged mentally either. He didn’t see the changes that the world went through, including the pandemic. He’s the same boy that you knew when you were in junior high school Alice. While your feelings for him have changed after the loss, his are exactly the same. Kids his age are very emotionally fragile. Inside he’s probably breaking knowing what little you’ve told him about your life and his parents as well.”

Alice swallowed, “So I shouldn’t tell him about all the changes?”

Doctor Norris shook his head as the door opened and Branden emerged, “No you should talk with him about all of it. Don’t tell him, actually have a conversation let him discover what he wants to know. Help him experience it as best you can. It’ll lesson his pain believe me, I’ve been taking care of kids of all ages for a long time and I know kids like Branden, he’ll want the truth.”

Branden opened the door to the office again carrying his sneakers in his hand. He sat down on the other chair to slip them on. They were the same sneakers that he had disappeared in just like the rest of his clothes. When he stood up Alice said, “Ready to go?” Branden gave a small nod standing up as well after he finished with his shoes. She said to Doctor Norris, “I’ll give it a try doctor. Thanks.”

Doctor Norris gave her a nod the said to Branden, “Don’t try to catch up on thirteen years of history in one night young man.”

Branden gave a small smile, “I’ll try not to uh thanks for everything Doctor Norris.” Then he reached out and it felt right that Alice take his hand as they walked out of the exam room. On the elevator as they were going down Branden said, “So if there’s a Marvel universe who’d they get to play Captain America?”

Alice said, “Is that what you want to talk about?”

Branden looked up at her, “I’d rather talk about that than the stuff right now, its too sad. I know I should ask about my parents, but I don’t want to yet.”

Alice squeezed his fingers in her hand, “Okay, I understand, there is no rush Bran.” When his fingers squeezed back she went back to his question, “So they got Chris Evans to play Captain America.”

Branden was confused, “Uh didn’t he play the human torch?”

Alice chuckled, “He sure did but those movies were Fox and they didn’t make a third one.”

Branden sighed, “That’s kinda lame. I mean those movies sucked.” Alice smiled remembering his disappointment in the first Fantastic four movie. Branden had been an active collector of comic books, and even at eight he had formed some real opinions about how some of those movies had been made. “So what about Star Wars?”

Alice shrugged as they stepped off the elevator into the hospital lobby, “Well Palpatine came back, and um Leia and Han’s son turned bad.”

Branden sighed, “Saw it coming.” Alice just chuckled as they walked out to where the Uber waited. When they got into the car she pulled out her phone responding to a text from Stephen again saying that she was okay it was just a lot to deal with at work right now. Not like he didn’t have a lot sometimes on his plate too. The Uber driver dropped them off at an Enterprise where she used the company card to rent a car. It was just easier if they were going to visit a lot of places. Not having to call an Uber every ten or twenty minutes would be nice.

When they were in the car heading back to the hotel Alice returned to his lost thirteen years, “You really don’t remember anything from the last thirteen years still?”

Branden shook his head, “nada, zip, zilch, zero…”

“Okay I-”

“Nothin’, not one iota, not even a…”

“-Think I understand...”

“...Second, or millisecond, not even a half of a milia-”

Alice groaned, “oh my fucking god Branden shut up!”

Branden looked up at her and a small smile appeared on his lips which matched the one that Alice knew she could feel on her own. It was literally like she was a twelve-year-old girl again her best friend messing with her as much as she messed with him. “I’m going to tell your mom that you cussed at me.”

Alice sighed, “I’m an adult now I can say fuck as much as I want to.”

Branden smiled, “Can I say it as much as I want to?”

Alice shrugged, “Sure why not, I’m not your parent.”

As they pulled into the parking lot of the hotel he looked at her again, “What are you then?”

Alice reached over gently resting her hand on his shoulder squeezing it, “I’m your best friend Bran. I’m going to find out what happened to you and take care of you too I promise.”

He softly said, “I know you will…” there was some sadness there, and again Alice was reminded of what could have been. What she had missed out on, what Branden had missed out on as well. They walked into the hotel where she stopped at the front desk to see if they had any rooms with two beds that she could switch to. It took about ten minutes to get her switched to another room that was on the same floor just a few doors down. The lady behind the counter even told her that she could get her stuff from the other room then call the front desk so they could deactivate the old card.

As they rode the elevator up to the fourth floor Branden said, “We coulda shared the bed.”

Alice looked over at him, “And have you kick me or roll all over me? Its been thirteen years Branden, but I didn’t become stupid.”

Branden smiled, “I might kick, but you snore.”

She had on idea why she did it, but that was when she did it. She stuck her tongue out at him as she threatened him, “There are three spots on your body Branden Alexander Leston that are ticklish. I know all of them.”

Branden just retorted with, “I know your spots too.” Alice sighed and when she took his hand he gripped it a little too tightly. She got her bag from the one bedroom then in the other room with the two beds she tossed it on one of them while Branden went to look out the window.

She studied him for a moment then said, “We’re going to need to do some shopping and get some food.”

Branden turned back to look at her, “Shopping?”

Alice gestured at him, “You have no clothes. You can’t wear those all the time. We’ll start with a few pairs of clothes first. Then we’ll get something to eat and bring it back here.”

Branden said, “I was hoping we’d have someone deliver it to us I want to see how that works.”

Alice shrugged, “Okay we’ll go clothes shopping then we’ll have someone deliver food here how does that sound?”

Branden sighed, “The first part sounds boring the second part sounds cool, but I’ll do the boring part too because I know you’re right about the clothes. I’d rather you don’t

see me in my undies or naked.” His cheeks went red just slightly then he turned to look away from her. Alice didn’t know what to say at all as they started out of the hotel room. On the elevator as they were going down again Branden said, “Alice, I’m all confused inside.”

Alice touched his shoulder then when he looked up at her she said, “I know. We’ll figure it out Bran, together okay?” She couldn’t let him know how confused she was as well. How that moment when he had commented on his underwear or being naked a part of her had desired to see both. The part that was still that seventh grade girl falling in love for the first time. The part that had dreamed about seeing the boy she was in love with naked.

Right now though it was better to push such thoughts away. To focus on what needed to be done. That way she didn’t loose all of herself. Later she could break down once she had figured out how to take care of Branden and all of his needs. She could worry about her feelings for him at a later date. He was still a kid, she was an adult that was just one line that she knew she couldn’t cross...

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When they got into the car Alice got the idea to take care of something else first. Alice figured that this would be the best way to make sure that if something did happen she’d have a way to reach Branden. She typed the location to a different store into the GPS on her cellphone. When they pulled in front of the Verizon store a few minutes later Branden looked up at the red and white neon sign, “What are we doing here?”

Alice turned the car off, “Getting you a cellphone on my account. I’ll feel better if we’re separated or something if you have a phone.”

Branden said, “cool, I’ve never had a smartphone can it be a smartphone?” Alice nodded yes, “Mom always said when I reached high school I could have one.”

Alice agreed, “Yeah so did mine. Remember when Carly Benton came into class with her new iPhone bragging that her parents loved her more than ours did?”

Branden gave a grunt of annoyance, “Fuck Carly Benton.”

“You wanted to!”

Branden flushed just slightly, “I do not! She’s so stuck up! Uh er she was so so stuck up. What happened to her?”

Alice chuckled, “She got knocked up at sixteen from Dale Venton.”

Branden’s eyes widened as he said, “No way? Carly hates..er hated Dale.” He sighed, “Its hard to remember that all this happened years ago…”

Alice rested a hand on his arm then said, “Its okay Bran. If you talk about it in present tense I’ll know what you’re talking about. Anyway, she did hate Dale until he went from fat to fit before freshman year. Then that fall he got on the school football team. She swooned so hard, then a year later he knocked her up. I think they got married, then divorced not really sure.”

Branden shook his head, “That’s so strange. Dale and Carly… well he always did like her uh well you know…” Alice chuckled knowing exactly what he meant. Unlike her Carly had bloomed early. All the boys had admired that, some of the girl had teased her about it.

When they walked into the store all the sales reps were busy so they looked around. There was a wall of android phones that Branden went to first. While looking at them he said, “So what kind of phone can I get?”

Alice said, “Whatever you want I guess. I’d prefer if you got an iPhone so we can message easier, but its up to you Bran I’m not your mom.”

Branden looked at her, “No your worse.” She almost stuck her tongue out at him, but stopped herself from acting like a little kid again.

Instead she probed to find out what he meant, “How am I worse?”

Branden shrugged, “Cause mom always makes up my mind for me when I took too long. You would force me to make it up for myself.”

She shook her head, “I don’t see how that’s worse.”

Branden studied her for a moment as a sales rep started walking over to where they were, “Because sometimes I just wanted someone else to decide for me it was easier that way. I liked that you made me though.”

Alice chuckled, “You just said that you didn’t like when I did that!”

Branden smiled, “Well see that’s because, its still a lot of fun to mess with you even now.”

Alice sighed as she said, “Why did I want to be your girlfriend exactly?”

Branden reached out and took her hand as he said, “cause you messed with me as much as I messed with you.” Alice didn’t know about that answer, but she didn’t press the matter as the woman approached. The thing was that he wasn’t wrong. Their feelings for each other were very complex. They had known one another for so long up to that point thirteen years ago when they had first kissed. It was almost like they were siblings sometimes, and their parents even said so. It had been her mom commenting that either she’d be the aunt to Bran’s children, or the mother, that had started the awakening of her feelings. The thought back then that someone else would have Branden’s kids had physically hurt. She hadn’t even known why until she looked inside herself to discover where her feelings really lay.

The young woman that approached them had a name tag that said; Veronica. Her reddish brown hair was pulled back though the curls were impossible to miss even with her hair up like that. The shirt she wore was black and a little tight. Alice noticed that Branden’s eyes seemed to slip to the young woman’s breasts for a moment. It

was a reminder that he was a boy, it was something she could vaguely remember him doing even before the seventh grade. He had liked breasts, even her very small ones at that time. She could remember making a comment about it after their first kiss before he went home. That one day she'd let him see them if he really wanted to. Which had made him flush furiously before one final small kiss at her window.

With the woman's help she got her account up and they went through the plans for her to add a line. Branden looked at the different iPhones while they went over plans. When he saw the prices on the recent models his eyes widened. Alice convinced him to get the latest that matched her own from when she had gotten a few months earlier. When the woman wen to go get the phone while they sat at a table he said, "uh Alice that phone was over a thousand dollars!"

Alice chuckled, "Yeah welcome to 2023. its okay though it goes on a plan and I pay monthly for the phones. I make enough money."

Branden sighed, "Doesn't feel right, I mean you paying for my stuff Alice. You're my g-uh-well friend, not my parent." The look in his eyes at his slip combined with the feeling in her own heart at the slip physically hurt. For Branden she had to remind herself their relationship had been on the cusp of becoming something far more interesting. For her it had ended two years after he disappeared when it became clear he wasn't coming back. He knew what she knew, he was still thirteen and she was twenty-six. That relationship was over wasn't it? Looking at him confused her, he was still Branden. For most of seventh grade she had thought about marrying him. How she'd never let him go once he was hers.

Alice squeezed his arm, "I know that too Bran, but this is what needs to happen for now. The reality is that you're thirteen still, and you can't pay for things on your own. I don't mind taking care of you, never did. I think you get that too huh?"

Branden nodded, "Yeah I do." He paused for a second, "I'm glad its you taking care of me. If my parents can't do it, then it should be you."

Alice smiled as the woman came back. They set Branden's phone up going through the process of getting him an iCloud account that she linked to her own for purchases. Making sure that Find My Phone was turned on as well. A few minutes

later when he got into the app store, the excitement in his eyes was enough to make Alice smile. He was scrolling through all the apps taking in just how much things had changed. Every now and then while Veronica finished up setting the account up Branden would make comments like: Cool, or Badass as he clicked on an app to download it. Veronica with a chuckle at one point said, “I guess he’s never had a smartphone before or messed around on yours?”

Alice only said, “Something like that.”

When she was paying for the phone Branden tugged her arm and when she looked down he said, “There’s an app where you can film videos and upload them instantly?” Alice gave a simple nod with a sigh, she had a feeling he was going to be an absolute monster with his phone. When they were in the car Branden said, “I think that lady thought I was strange not knowing anything.” He was still fiddling around on the phone as he talked, “How do I.. oh! Aha found it!” He pointed the phone at her before Alice could stop him and took a picture, “Nice new background acquired!”

Alice sighed, “I swear do boys ever not like new toys?”

Branden shrugged, “Maybe when they grow up?”

Alice chuckled, “Yeah right.” Branden smiled then she said, “Okay now to the store for clothes then back to the hotel.” As she pulled out of the parking lot a thought occurred to her about how easy it was to find things on cellphones. It tickled a memory from the summer before sixth grade, “I don’t know what to do.”

Branden put his phone down on the console in the center next to where hers was as he seemed to sense her change in attitude, “What to do about me?”

Alice as they pulled into the parking lot of the Gap across from the Verizon sighed, “Yes. Not about you being back.. about well certain things. Am I supposed to be a parental figure? A friend?”

Branden had always been smart for his age, and she could see that he had been thinking about the same situation as well. “I don’t know Alice. What feels right to you? You’re an adult, I’m not.”

Alice groaned and sighed again, “I don’t know what feels right. A part of me is saying to take your phone and block all mature content. Yet another part of me remembers what you looked at on your computer that summer before sixth grade…”

Branden’s entire face went red as he said, “You knew about that?”

Alice chuckled, “Yeah! I knew about that! Your mom and dad had a very serious conversation about it. They didn’t know I was in the other room listening. I only heard them because I was waiting for you to finish in the bathroom.”

Branden sighed, “Mom took my computer away for a week. That sucked. All I had been doing was looking at uh well…” He shifted in his seat, “Stuff. Not even the more hardcore stuff.”

Alice chuckled then picked up his phone handing it to him, “I’m not going to restrict what you look at. I’m not your parent. I’m your best friend helping you deal with thirteen years of life missed.”

Branden slipped the phone into his jean pocket, “But you’re also an adult so if you think its something we need to do I’ll listen Alice, because I trust you. I know that you’ll take care of me cause you always did just like my mom and dad.”

“That’s because you took care of me too Bran. Remember when I was nine and got stung by that bee…”

“I was terrified.”

“But you still pushed the Epipen into me without hesitation.” She was deathly allergic to bee stings as her mom had learned when she was four. Ever since then there was always an Epipen in the both of the bathrooms at the house during bee season. Besides the first time it happened that was the only time she had gotten stung by a bee.

“Well I didn’t want you to die.” Alice squeezed his hand once and they climbed out of the car. He held her hand the entire way into the Gap. Of course he also messed around on his phone in the other hand while doing so. There was already about a dozen apps on his home screen Alice noticed. Some looked like games, others things like Instagram and Tiktok. When they walked into the clothing store Bran slipped his phone into his pocket.

They walked over to the boys section where she started walking to the back. Alice went first to the underwear section. Branden seeing where they were going flushed as he said, “Uh I’ll pick this stuff out…” Alice gave a nod. He turned to look up at her when she just stood there, “Um can I do it alone?” Alice chuckled then almost ruffled his hair, but she remembered how much she had annoyed him with doing that when they were kids.

“I’ll leave you to it, just get enough for seven days.” She went over looking at some of the options for boys clothes. There were a lot of cute shirts, but she gravitated towards the video game and Marvel stuff. Alice picked out a few shirts that she thought would look cute on Branden. She realized as she was grabbing the third shirt that she wanted to see him wearing these clothes. She even got him a button up really nice shirt and some slacks. Was she acting on motherly instinct?

Alice realized as he came back over carrying two packages of boxer-briefs that what she was feeling was definitely not motherly. The idea of seeing Branden in just his underwear hit her again, how at thirteen she had fantasized about what a boy would look like in just their undies. Specifically how a then nearly thirteen Branden would look. He hid the packages quickly under the other stuff that she handed him. Those feelings from thirteen years ago were suddenly almost too much to contain. This was her Branden, down to how shy he was about her seeing his underwear.

That brought up another memory of when they were eleven, and she had gone into his dresser to get him a shirt to put on. His mom had let her into the bedroom where

he was still sleeping one summer morning. She had woken him up with a brief thought of how cute he looked when just awake. Then she went into his dresser to get him a shirt to wear. When she had started to open the drawer with his underwear Branden moved faster than she'd ever seen. He pushed it closed quickly with a flush on his cheeks saying he didn't want her to see his unmentionables.

Alice could remember trying to get it open with him keeping it closed until they had ended up on his bed ticking each other while wrestling. That had been right around the first time that she had started to realize her feelings for Branden, but she hadn't pushed deeper till the start of seventh. That was when she had started acting strange around him, and he had started acting strange around her too. Both of them dealing with realization that they liked the other one as more than friends.

Branden as they walked out of the Gap with his new clothes said, "What are you thinking about so hard over there Alice?"

Alice chuckled, even back then Bran had been able to tell when she was thinking about something. "Just remembering how against me seeing your underwear you always were."

Branden said, "Its not something you're supposed to see!"

Alice pointed out, "You do realize that you used to run around in just your briefs when we were five and six!"

Branden pointed back, "Yeah and you used to run around in just your panties!" His cheeks flushed and Alice had a sudden feeling that he was thinking about what she might look like in just panties now. "I-it was different when I reached sixth grade. I dunno why." There was a flush on his cheeks, and Alice was pretty sure she knew why as much as he did. At eleven Branden had been dealing with new strange feelings as much as Alice had been.

At five and six you're not thinking about other kids bodies like that, but at eleven when puberty starts to hit it changes. That was what she realized now, back then she had been curious to see his underwear. Branden had been terrified of showing a girl,

even his best friend his underwear. Probably nervous about her seeing him in just his underwear. It was the effect of a changing body, yet the desire to see others was stronger than ever at those ages. Alice had memories of how badly back then she thought about seeing Branden in just his underwear, or even nothing at all. If those thoughts were on her mind back then. Then there was now way they hadn't been on his too.

Alice put the memories away again. When she started the car she said, "I always thought your undies were cute. I was always stuck with hearts and stars and princes things.."

Branden flushed just slightly, "Yeah, that girly stuff never did fit you. I don't get why your mom always got it for you."

Alice pulled out of the parking lot, "No idea. I still don't get it all these years later. She just always felt that girls should wear girly clothes. All I wanted to do was play outside, climb trees, chase you..."

Branden smiled, "Well without you I'd never have gone outside. I heard my mom say more than once that she was thankful that your parents moved in next door."

Alice looked over at him for a second, "I'm glad that we did too. Without you I'd never have watched X-Files. Never figured out I wanted to do this job." A few minutes later they arrived at the hotel then as they were heading back up to to the hotel room she said, "So I'll let you pick where we order from if you want."

Back in the hotel room Branden picked a local Tex-Mex place that was close by. After he ordered what he wanted Branden gave Alice back her phone, "I gotta use the bathroom." Alice nodded as he headed off into the bathroom. Right around when she finished ordering he came back out into the hotel room. There was a different feeling in the air as he sat down next to her on one of the two beds. He leaned over to rest his head gently on her shoulder. He was finally ready to know, "How did my parents die?"

Alice moved to slip her arm around his shoulder, kissing the top of his head once gently, “Your dad died in an accident back in 2014, and your mom from ovarian cancer in 2018. She fought for a really long time. Even at the end she believed that you were still out there, still alive.” She paused for a moment then said, “Before she went we had a long talk about things. I swore I’d never give up trying to find you. She gave me control of the family estate, not that there’s a lot left, but I got all of her stuff of you. Also I was made the primary contact if you ever reappeared.”

Bran was quiet for a long while before he finally said, “I can’t imagine how much they suffered when I just disappeared. I mean inside I knew that I was so important to them, but they were just always there for me. I never thought they’d just be gone one day…” He sniffed slightly as Alice squeezed his shoulder holding him to her side. “Mom always told me that I amazed her, I knew that she wished I wouldn’t grow up so fast. She and Dad both loved answering my questions, liked how curious I was about things… its so… with them gone it just feels… I don’t know Alice… just not right.”

Alice rested her head on top of his head as he cried against her shoulder. She stroked his back gently while she held him, not letting go even when his tears quieted a few minutes later. He rested against her with Alice gently stroking his back still while resting her head in his hair. She hadn’t even realized how much she had missed this. How often they had comforted each other when someone got hurt.

Softly after his tears had stopped she turned his face up to meet hers, “I don’t have the answers Branden. I know that we can try to find them together. There has to be something to explain what happened. We’ll figure it out then figure out how to handle all of it together.” That was when there was a knock at the hotel room. She gently kissed his forehead, then hugged Branden one more time before getting up to answer the door.

Alice opened the hotel door, as she requested in the app the delivery driver had left the food in front of the hotel room door. She picked up the bag carrying it into the hotel room. She put the bag down on the table opening it up to pull out the food they had both ordered. Branden had gotten fajitas for one which did not surprise her, while Alice had gotten two tacos with some rice. She tried not to think about how even this unfamiliar moment was familiar somehow. Sitting across from Branden she felt like she was thirteen again. The look in his eyes, that small half smile he always managed for her when her eyes met him. Alice tried to deny the sexual tension that

she felt, but this was Branden and all of her thoughts from thirteen years ago flooded back to her as they started to eat.

He looked as he had thirteen years ago, and she had been deeply attracted to this boy back then. He was still him, and she was still her even if she was thirteen years older and he wasn't. It was confusing and Alice had no idea how to process the feelings. She wasn't supposed to be attracted to a child, she had never been attracted to one from the moment she wasn't one herself anymore. She would never be interested in a child, but this was Branden. Her Branden.

That made it complicated. Alice knew though that he saw all of that differently, he didn't have the thirteen years of experiences in heartbreak, dating mistakes, or sexual growth. He had only stumbled through one very awkward kiss followed by a better one minutes later. Still deep inside if she was honest every other kiss since had been compared to those two. Even Stephen who at thirty-six knew exactly how to kiss a woman.

None had ever matched up or come anywhere near those first two awkward kisses. The promise of them, that both she and Bran would get better at them the longer they did them together. Nothing could compare honestly, because it had been Branden to give her those first kisses. She had by then imagined a future already where they did more than just kiss. A future where he was her first and last everything. Back then in her mind having Branden was it, no other boy would ever have mattered. That Alice would never have kissed another boy. Never have had her heartbroken, Branden would have been her first and last boyfriend. Deep inside she knew it, and now it was impossible.

Alice cleared her thoughts while they ate, trying to not focus on the stuff that she knew Branden wasn't even thinking about. To him she was two different people, the girl he had known all of his life, and this strange woman who was suddenly thirteen years older than him. She didn't need to complicate things with her feelings when he was already working through his own. Their moment together like that had passed with the setting sun, hadn't it?

She watched as Branden meticulously folded his tortilla to make his first fajita. When she had been younger she had always found it strange that he was that way, or that he liked onions and peppers in it as well. Most kids that age even Alice hadn't liked

either items. Branden though was unique in this like so many other things. He'd roll the tortilla two or three times sometimes to make it correct. That was what he was doing tonight same as always.

He saw her looking, "Its important that its folded correctly. Its a science." When she gave him another look he said, "Don't judge me!" She sighed again memories of the times that she had given the same look when they were younger, while out with his parents at a Mexican place. After eating her second taco she pushed the paper plate away that had come with the meal watching as Branden finished his third of what would clearly be four fajitas.

"Where does it all go?" She and his mom had played that game more than once with Branden starting around his tenth birthday when his appetite had seemed to increase but his body mass did not.

Branden rolled his eyes, "My stomach I imagine, mom."

A part of her wanted to lean over and pinch his side like she had done so many times before when she was younger. The small half smile on his lips gave her the urge, the way that he just kept eating while ignoring her made her almost give in. Hell the fact that his mom or her mom would have encouraged her and not found it annoying almost made her do it. The truth was she didn't do it because it was an uncomfortable reminder that Branden was still thirteen and she was an adult. Doing something like that… it felt like she might cross a boundary that she was pretty sure she shouldn't.

After dinner she gathered it all up into the plastic bag that it had come in as Branden said, "Can I put something on the television?"

Alice sealed the bag to put out in front of the hotel room where the room service people would pick it up, "Yeah, I'm going to get a shower." Branden nodded while grabbing the remote. He sat down on one of the beds to start flipping through the channels. For a moment Alice watched him, remembering without a doubt that he was a kid. A part of her wanted to tell him he needed a shower too, but she didn't know how this power dynamic would play out. She was still afraid of flipping into parental mode somehow.

She grabbed her pajamas from her bag then headed into the bathroom. Quickly Alice undressed while the shower warmed up. Looking in the mirror she could still somewhat see the girl that she had been. That awkward middle school girl who had been starting puberty when she got her first kiss from the most wonderful, even if he was annoying at times, boy in the world. She stepped into the shower letting the warm water wash over her entire body. Letting the long day finally wash off of her. She grabbed a small bottle of body wash from beside the shower.

As she started to lather all of her thoughts hit her suddenly. That was when she finally broke down. From the first moment she had woken this morning finding answers then taking care of Branden had been her only focus. Now as the warm water washed over her Alice finally let her own fears and doubt creep in. She leaned her head against the shower wall feeling a wet tear slide down one of her cheeks. Alice wiped it away, but knew others were going to follow. A flood just below the surface she wasn't going to be able to stop. She had to be strong for him out there, because she knew how afraid he was. In here though she could let it all out...

At first Alice wasn't sure why the tears had started, wasn't sure why it was right now that she broke down. All day she had held herself together, but now her memories of those first few days after he disappeared came flooding back to her in crystal clarity. Her feelings of it being her fault for convincing him to sneak out to her house that night for their first kiss. Her mom and Bran's both telling her not to blame herself. The mystery of how there was no trace of where he had gone at all. Of how he just vanished and never came back. How distraught his parents had been over the sudden loss of their only child. Getting questioned by cops about how they treated Branden, other people that might have taken him. All of it had been so confusing back then. All she had wanted was Branden to come back home.

She had walked around school in a daze for the last few weeks of the year. Hadn't even felt like herself the following school year. She was like that till her sophomore year of high school when finally she found some measure of recovery. Though she never fully was able to be who she felt she should be. It was like a part of her had been closed off forever, but she learned how to function without it that year and the ones following it.

It was like a part of her had been ripped away and the only solution had been to put all that remained into school and focus only on that. He had been there for every

single important moment in her life up until the day he disappeared. Branden had even helped her deal with her first period, and never been squeamish when she talked about it. Even though she could tell that he didn't want her to he still let her, because that was who he was. He had sat with her and let her cry on his shoulder when her parents divorced shortly after her eighth birthday.

Kept her entertained a whole two weeks when they were nine while her mom was in detox to get off of alcohol for good. She could still remember the birthday gifts he had given her each year from the time she was ten up till she was thirteen. Alice still had the poke ball from when she was ten that he had gotten her in her jewelry box. The zodiac sign he had gotten her for her thirteenth still hung on the rear view mirror in her car. She cherished what he had given her, because for so long now that was all she had to remember him by.

Branden Alexander Leston had been instrumental in forming who she was as a person up until the day that he was ripped away from her as suddenly as he was ripped from his parents. It wasn't fair that it had happened. Wasn't fair that he had come back like he had either. Alice cried for those lost years again. Just like she had cried the day they found he had disappeared.

She cried because she had lost him and he was back. Cried because he was still a boy of thirteen, and she was an adult now who couldn't have what she had lost. She cried for Branden too, for his loss of his parents and his loss of thirteen years, but also ultimately his loss of her. They'd never be what they might have been now. A gulf of years separated them, and she knew she'd have to help him find where he belonged. That she'd have to watch him grow up, find someone else that wasn't her, and maybe like her feel forever incomplete.

She wiped her eyes then balled a hand into a fist hitting the side of the shower once. Her anger was at whoever did this to them. Whoever took Branden and kept him for thirteen years, or pulled him out of time only to dump him back at the same place only too far into the future. As she reached to turn the shower off she said softly into the water, "I'm going to find you whoever you are and make you pay for what you did." By the time she had dried off, put on a pair of flannel pajama pants and a tee-shirt she felt more composed outwardly, but not any better on the inside.

Alice stepped out into the hotel room from the bathroom a few minutes later after brushing her teeth. The television was still on showing old reruns of Futurama on adult swim. That had been one of Branden's favorite shows when they were growing up. She looked over at the bed where he had been sitting earlier. At some point while she was in the bathroom Branden went ahead and changed into his new pajamas.

Pokemon had always been one of his favorite games so she had known he would like the pajamas. All he wore was the pants though, not that it should have surprised Alice. When she had been a kid that was how he always fell asleep. Looking at him sleeping peaceful a dull ache flowed though her. There was a part of her that wanted to lean over and kiss him awake. To use her thirteen years of experience on him. To gently hold him, and touch every inch of his body as she had wanted to at thirteen. Even if back then she hadn't been fully aware of how badly she wanted to until he was gone. Instead she just stood there watching him for a moment.

He was fast asleep no doubt exhausted from their long day. His head resting on a pillow, but he was still above the covers. Alice studied him taking in how vulnerable and young he looked. There was this blend of both starting to mature features and that boyish look that so many middle school boys have. He looked delicate, yet tough, soft, yet hard, vulnerable, yet strong. Alice walked across the room leaning down to gently rub his shoulder after she removed his glasses, "Bran, lets get you under the covers."

He mumbled, "Okay mom." Which made her smile slightly. That was not him mistaking her for his mom, or wanting her to be that kind of figure. That was something he had said many times when she made him do something like his mom would make him. Alice had always been the rule follower, maybe it was why she made a good FBI agent. Branden had always been the one to test both his parents, and hers patience with how he did things. Alice had liked how he pushed and challenged the rules sometimes. More than once he had gotten her to go along with him against their parents.

She pulled the covers back on the bed getting him to move before he slipped under them. She pulled the covers up around him as he mumbled again, "I'm so tired." Alice smiled kissing his cheek once wishing she had the courage to just give in and kiss his lips. She couldn't walk over that line, she just couldn't take. She was an adult now, he was still a child.

He snuggled into the pillow one arm above his head showing off an armpit that she had tickled more than once when they wrestled each other back when she had been a kid. Seeing that bare armpit two things struck her, one how badly she wanted to tickle him, two how badly she wanted to rub a finger down the length of it to feel the smooth skin. Alice sighed walking away as he snuggled more into his bed.

Alice turned off the lights in the room, then she texted Stephen telling him that this case was going to take her a lot longer to solve than she thought. That she'd talk to him tomorrow at some point. Then she turned off the television and got into her own bed. Laying there she looked over at Branden on the other bed and wondered what she was going to do again. These feelings she had for him weren't right, and they definitely were not healthy.

He saw the adult that had replaced his Alice, and she saw the child that was literally the best friend that had been he first boyfriend come back. This was all kind of fucked up, but there was a part of her that wanted to continue where they had left off despite the age gap. That part worried her because it was getting harder to resist the longer it was just the two of them. She drifted into a restless sleep because of it.

*

It took Alice a few minutes to realize what had woken her up sometime around one in the morning. The sound was one that she had heard before, but it took her foggy sleepy mind a moment to process it. She looked over at the other bed where

Branden lay. The way that his shoulders moved combined with the sounds of sobs sent a primal instinct in her into motion. Alice slipped from the bed going over to his bed. She slipped in so that she was laying behind Branden where she gently shook his shoulder. Within second he twisted around with his head buried in her chest while he sobbed even more. Alice was sure that it was a dream that had woken him, but she didn't ask about it. She just held and comforted him. The feeling of his small body in her arms reminding her that he was just a kid that needed to be taken care of.

When the sobs tampered off Branden said, "S-sorry that I woke you up…"

Alice still holding him said, "Its okay, you don't ever have to be sorry Bran. Was it a dream?"

She felt him nod slightly against her, "Yeah, I think so." He shifted out of her arms so that he was looking at her while laying on his side next to her. Alice reached out and pushed that strand of hair that fell in front of his eyes back as he said, "I don't remember the dream Alice. I feel like I should remember it, but its… just gone." His voice still had that high hadn't dropped yet quality to it that Alice remembered as he whispered this close to her. It was another reminder that he hadn't aged a day in thirteen years, but Alice was finding it harder to remember that he was just a boy the more time they were together.

"Nothing at all?" She asked softly while still stroking his cheek.

Branden rested his hand on top of hers stopping the stroking, "Nothing, but I know it was really bad that's what woke me up."

"Then you started crying?"

Branden shook his head, "N-no, I was crying in my sleep that was what woke me up. I couldn't stop till you hugged me."

Alice wanted to just lean over and press her lips to his, comfort him in more than one way. A part of her wanted use thirteen years of knowledge just then. To go beyond that stumbling first kiss they had experienced the night he disappeared. It was a stupid absolutely horrible idea that popped into her head for the second or third time tonight. She was grateful that her mind worked the way it did, so she didn't act on it. "Do you think it was about your parents?"

Bran didn't seem certain, "I don't think so… I," his hazel eyes met hers again, "I think it was about what happened when I was gone. I just…" he sighed in frustration rolling onto his back, "I feel like its been locked away or blocked. Like the memories are there, but I can't… if I push at them it all gets cloudy still." He trailed off not sure how to continue and Alice could see the distress on his face.

She softly stroked his cheek again then she leaned over to kiss his forehead once, "Better?" He gave a small nod, "How about if I stay with you for a little bit till you're ready to go to sleep again?"

Branden smiled, "I'd like that."

Looking into his eyes Alice could remember countless moments when they were young. Or more correctly when she was young and Bran was who he still was. She shifted so that she was laying on her back as Bran moved closer so he was right next to her their shoulders touching. After a few minutes of silence she was struck by how familiar this almost was. "Hey remember that night that we stayed up watching all those old cheesy Godzilla movies that your dad had?"

Branden laughed, a sweet soft laugh that conjured about a thousand memories of hearing it more than she could count. "Yeah whoever stayed up the longest got to pull a prank on the other one. That was the night my dad scared the shit out of us too…"

Alice smiled her hand finding his under the covers, fingers slowly entwining. Again a reminder that he was a boy still, before their hands had been roughly the same size, now hers were clearly bigger. Although it wasn't by all that much. "I'd forgotten that. We were both half asleep by then. It was like four or five in the morning. Your dad

came out to see if we had survived," Alice chuckled, "he had seen us half asleep then roared so loud that we were both jolted awake on the air mattress."

Branden laughed again, "I think you almost peed your pajamas!"

"Me, you're the one who ran to the bathroom like the Flash."

Silence then Branden said, "Well I really had to pee, and I was afraid you'd see something embarrassing if I walked…"

It took Alice all of three seconds to realize what he meant, "Bran, we were ten!"

Branden was clearly flushing as he said, "I-it happens. It was your fault anyway!"

"My fault you had a boner? I didn't even think boys that age… well…wait why was it my fault!"

Branden sighed heavily, "Cause you kept pressing up to me, and cuddling. You were so soft and warm and… well…. it just happens sometimes. That's what my dad told me when I was nine."

Alice looked over at him, his eyes met hers then he looked away as she said, "You liked me a long time before I liked you."

Branden gave a small sigh then softly said, "I never thought you'd like me the same way. I was too afraid to tell you cause I didn't want to stop being your friend. In fifth grade when Devin Farstan asked you to be his valentine I almost died inside. I was so happy when you said no way."

Alice softly admitted her own truth in that moment, “I didn’t know then, but I’m pretty sure I already had feelings for you like that. You were the only person that got me. Anyway Devin Farstan was a moron no way would I date a moron.”

Again a comforting silence filled the hotel room. Alice could feel herself drifting to sleep next to him like she had countless other times when they were growing up. Branden squeezed her hand as he said softly, “Remember when we were seven and my dad got all those fireworks. When we got those sprinklers and made all kinds of funny shapes with them?”

“I remember.”

Branden said, “That was our first real kiss.”

“No it wasn’t! That doesn’t count as a kiss!”

Branden groaned, “It so does! You kissed me right on the lips!”

“I was trying to kiss your nose dummy!”

“My nose was a little more north and it was plenty bright outside! You did it on purpose!”

Alice chuckled just as Branden started laughing too. Both the young woman and boy looking up at the ceiling lost in memories. “I think I always liked you, I just didn’t know what it meant until seventh grade.”

Branden said, “I didn’t really get it either till then. Now its… different.”

Alice squeezed his fingers, “We’ll figure all of it out Bran. Find out what happened to you first then we’ll figure the rest of it out somehow.”

He agreed, “I know you will Alice, you were always really good at figuring things out. I always hated a mystery...” There was just a hint of sadness in his voice that she knew matched what she was feeling inside. “Would you stay with me till I fall asleep again?”

Alice agreed as they twisted to face each other again, “Yeah of course I will Bran.”

He smiled at her softly as he closed his eyes, “I was right by the way.”

“Right about what?” She was curious what he meant.

“How ‘hot’ you were going to be when you grew up.” Alice sighed then socked his shoulder once which made him smile which she returned before they both closed their eyes again. She wasn’t sure when she drifted off to sleep exactly, but she didn’t get up and go back to her own bed. There was this sense of Branden next to her in the bed while she slept. Some how that comforted her like all those sleep overs where they ended up falling asleep together while talking or watching movies. She slept better than she had in years.

It was a few hours later when she woke again. The sensation was not unpleasant at all that she woke up to. Again it was familiar. It took her a moment to realize that Branden was basically in her arms, his head resting against one of her small breasts, one of his hands tossed over her side. It took her a moment after that to realize what the strange thing was that was poking at her thigh with how they were laying. The moment she realized that she could feel the barely thirteen-year-old boys erection she started to think that he was awake. Then she realized that it was probably one of those things boys got in their sleep. Somehow he had ended up in her arms which was not an unheard of occurrence when they fell asleep together in the past.

What was new to her was the fact that she knew what the feel of a boner was, and that clearly Branden had one. He shifted slightly in his sleep rolling onto his back with a mumbled something. That was when she saw what she had felt for those brief few minutes. The covers that had been over them were behind Branden, at some

point either he had gotten too hot or she had and someone had pushed them off. In the boys new pajama pants a clear tent was present.

It wasn’t big, but it was impossible to miss. Alice felt her throat go dry as she tried to tear her eyes away, but couldn’t. That little boner fascinated her in a way that no other one ever had. She studied the sleeping boy, his chest, stomach, arms, even the one armpit with his hand above his head were all devoid of hair reminding her instantly that this was a boy, not a man. Sure she could see the man that Bran would become one day etched in the boy, but he wasn’t there yet. He was only on the cusp of puberty as far as Alice could tell.

Her heart beat faster as she looked at the boys pajama pants again. Size was impossible to tell for sure. Maybe three inches? It was definitely nowhere near the size of an adults. Her memory went back to being thirteen, and how she had thought about such things even back then. How deep inside back then a desire to see what Branden’s boner looked like. Other boys too, but mainly his. Since fifth grade sex ed she had been fascinated with the fact that boys got boners. How excited she had been at the prospect of seeing the boy naked and maybe even letting him see her naked.

She hadn’t thought of it in sexual terms at all, more curiosity as to what boys looked like naked as drawings and text books were no help at all. Of course she hadn't learned till high school what a boy looked like naked, but if Branden hadn’t disappeared she probably would have learned over the summer before eighth grade. She knew he had been just as curious too from the things that his mom had found on his computer. That now she could look back and realize he had been checking her out. That he had probably really enjoyed their ‘wrestling’ for totally different reasons in seventh grade then he did in say fifth grade.

Alice pushed the thoughts away as she covered the still sleeping Branden before slipping from the bed. She paused briefly looking down at his sleeping face for a moment, a sudden desire to kiss him awake washing over her same as last night. How in the months leading up to them admitting their feelings for one another she had seen him sleeping a few times and had similar thoughts. It was hard seeing the same boy now thirteen years later all of her memories were rushing back the more time she spent with him. Things that had been too painful to remember that she buried away in her subconscious were starting to re-emerge the more she spent time with him.

She was walking over to the window that was closed when her phone rang. She grabbed it on the second ring surprised to see that it was her boss calling and not Stephen. A sense of dread filled her as she took the call while stepping out into the hallway. “Nills, I was looking into this issue that you’re dealing with, the cold case.”

She swallowed, “The Leston case sir?”

“Yes, your missing friend. What’s going on over there. The officer that handled the case told me that you had the ‘boy’ with you? What boy is he talking about agent? You took some kid into custody on an active cold case without telling anyone?”

Alice breathed in once then said, “Its easier to show you than explain it over the phone sir. I was going to contact you today about this. I’ve hit a wall without any answers. Its complicated, but before she passed Branden’s mom gave me power of the estate including dealing with anything pertaining to Branden if he was ever found. As such this issue is mine to deal with. I’d rather not talk about it over the phone sir. Its a sensitive matter. I’m planning on getting us on a plane later today if I can get approval to bypass checking him in at the airport.”

Conner sighed, “Okay I’ll approve an undocumented passenger with an agent being transported in the air. When you get me the flight information I’ll send what you need back over to you. Then you check in with Homeland at the airport. You’ll be able to fly an undocumented person with you. This explanation had better be good Nills.”

“I think it’s going to leave you wondering exactly what’s going on as much as me sir.” A moment later she hung up before walking back into the hotel room. Branden was sitting up on the bed rubbing one of his eyes. The boys dark brown hair was a mess on his head that he ran a hand through as she felt her breath catch just slightly. At thirteen she had known that she liked Branden, had known that she found him attractive. With adult eyes though she could see exactly why the younger her had found him attractive. The boy went to grab his glasses having no idea just how handsome his boyish looks were. No idea that he was good looking, only seeing himself as average or less. Yet he had taken young Alice’s breath away more than once when he walked around shirtless. That cute slightly rounded face, that small button nose, those large hazel eyes, full lips. He was so startling beautiful, and had

no idea. Now adult Alice was remembering one of those times very clearly just a few days before they had kissed for the first time.. really kissed.

Feeling those complicated desires she cleared her throat trying to not look at the boy as he stretched one arm above his head showing off a still hairless armpit. She had a thought that middle school Alice would never have had, the thought of licking that armpit. She shook off such thoughts as she said, “Want to get some breakfast?”

Branden running a hand through his hair said, “Uh yeah.. can I take a shower first?”

Alice nodded while walking over to her bag to pull out some clothes to change into. She could hear Branden getting off of the bed. Alice didn’t turn to look because she didn’t want him to be embarrassed if he still had that little problem she had noticed moments ago. “Probably a good idea. I mean its been thirteen years since you had one.”

Branden from the bathroom door said, “Yeah, very funny.” Then he closed it. When she heard the water running Alice pulled off her pajamas slipping on a tee-shirt along with a pair of jeans that hugged to her slender legs and nearly flat hips. She hadn’t ever obtained her mothers more hourglass figure, but she hadn’t really had many men complain about what she did have. Dressed she picked up her phone then started booking two seats on a plane back to Los Angeles. When she had the flight number, and the seats in first class she sent the information over to Conner who sent back the form she needed that he also sent over to the airport.

She was working on packing all of Branden’s things into the bag with her own when he emerged from the bathroom in just a pair of jeans without a tee-shirt. She handed him one of the new tee-shirts after tearing off the purchase tags and the boy slipped it on. He looked down at the Avengers Assemble tee-shirt and said, “I can’t believe that they actually made four avengers films! Four!”

Alice smiled, “Yeah, but only three were any good.”

Branden said, “You’ve seen them all?”

Alice shrugged, “Yeah, this guy I used to know loved superheroes. It kind of rubbed off on me.” Branden smiled back as she said, “Get your shoes on so we can get going. I got us a flight for one.”

“Flight?” He asked while he started to put on his sneakers.

“Yeah back to LA, I don’t live here Bran, and I need to get with my boss to see what we can do about this situation.”

He looked up at her, “A-are they going to make me go live with someone else?”

Alice moved to sit down next to him as she rested a hand on his shoulder to squeeze it, “I don’t see why they would. You’ve got no living relatives, and your mom put me in charge of all of your estate. The fact hat you came back thirteen years later, and still are just barely thirteen if we’re going by birth months means I’m your legal guardian.”

Branden said, “I won’t go if they make me.”

Alice smiled, then hugged him, “I won’t let anyone take you Bran I promise. I trust my boss though he’s a good man.” Branden nodded as they both stood up. He still looked a little loss and afraid, but Alice was glad she was seeing who he had been coming back into full bloom.

When they got on the elevator going down Branden said, “Can I ask you something private Alice?”

Alice looked at him, “You can ask me anything you want to Branden. I might not answer.”

He nodded the said, “w-when did you um… well I mean… when did you loose your virginity?”

Alice almost laughed at the question, but she realized it was important to Branden. She had a feeling that even at twelve he had planned on loosing his with her eventually. Just like secretly she had as well. Who better than Branden to be her first? “When I was fifteen, in tenth grade. It was not the best experience in the world. Wasn’t as bad as some other girls, but it wasn’t what I had always imagined either.” The elevator opened on the lobby letting them out. Alice handed in the key card to the front desk for them to check out then they headed to where she had parked the car.

Branden was quiet the entire time until they were in the car, “I-uh-always thought that I’d lose it to you…” She looked over at him again as she started the car. The boys cheeks were flushed as he looked down at his sneakers, “I mean n-not right away, but some day,” he looked over at her, “Y-you know when we were both ready?”

Alice squeezed his hand, “I know what you meant Bran. I think it would have been sooner than fifteen if it had been what I dreamed about.”

He didn’t ask about that, it was clear that she meant with him, and neither of them wanted to go into that right now. Instead he said, “Did you keep cheering in high school?”

“I did for awhile, but in my junior year I quit because I wanted to take college courses. To focus fully on my studies. I knew by then I wanted to join the FBI, and there was a lot I had to do to get accepted by them after college.”

Again silence seemed to creep in as they got onto the freeway. Branden after a few minutes of it said, “I’m going to have to go back to school in the fall aren’t I?”

Alice agreed, “We’ll figure it out Bran. We’ve got a few weeks still and if you end up going in a little late we’ll work with that as well.”

Branden sighed, “Well at least I got a thirteen year vacation even if I don’t remember it.”

Alice chuckled, “That’s the way to look at it, on the positive side.” The rental place was their first stop where she left the car then got an Uber to take them to the airport. That ride was quiet as well with Branden looking at things on his phone trying to catch up on thirteen years of movie and other bits of pop-culture history. She texted with Stephen for a few minutes letting him know that she was heading back to LA, but the case still wasn’t resolved. He let her know that he would be back in LA tomorrow and they could talk then.

For now Alice was going to focus on Branden not anything else. It was all way too complex to think about. Alice had no idea what was going to happen once Stephen was involved. She looked over at Branden. She didn’t love Stephen, not really, but he was what she had needed. The stability and opportunity to have a family some day. As a strand of hair fell down the side of his face and Branden pushed his glasses back up on his nose she realized that she was still in love with the boy. Her feelings for him had only lain dormant for the past thirteen years not gone away.

Branden had been her everything from the age of five till thirteen, he had been there through some of the hardest moments of her life. Then he had been ripped away and that had ended up being the hardest moment of them all. You couldn’t just turn off those feelings when the person who gave them to you came back into your life. She had a feeling that she wasn’t alone. That Branden was feeling the same confusion because she was thirteen years older and he wasn’t. The only question was what to do about it...

XXXXX

The airport wasn’t that crowded this early in the morning on a weekday. As they walked through the concourse to the security check point Alice felt conflicted. Even now hours later she found herself struggling with these complicated feelings. Branden held her hand while he carried the bag with all of their clothes and other items in it. When she had offered to carry it he had shaken his head being who he was Alice wasn’t surprised by that. She was reminded of one time when they were in fourth grade. It had been a rainy afternoon when they got off of the bus, Bran had grabbed her backpack with his running down the street so she didn’t have to carry her own backpack in the rain. It was just who he was.

Alice squeezed his hand when they arrived at the security check in. There were more than a dozen people in line waiting to go through a check point. Alice though shifted over to priority check-in. Priority Check-In was for those that paid extra, they got pre-screened before even coming to the airport. In reality it was just a way for Homeland and the airlines to make more money. She pulled out her cellphone as they approached. Tickets, itinerary, even special privilege was all there just one scan away. She also pulled out her badge so that when the agent scanned the information they would see that it all matched.

They had to wait in line behind two business men who were clearly used to these kinds of flights. When she got to the front she showed them her badge. The agent got on their system checking with someone else then they scanned the information from her phone before getting clearance from the higher ups that they were speaking to. The agent handed her back her badge, “Safe flight Agent Nills.”

Still holding Branden’s hand she said, “Thanks. I hope your day is uneventful.” The man nodded as they walked through.

Branden of course once they were through commented as she knew he would, “We just got through without even taking our shoes off! Or going through a metal detector!”

Alice said, “well I am an FBI agent and my superiors did send word ahead.”

Branden said, “Yeah I know but still what if you just called on the phone and pretended or something…”

Alice chuckled as she looked over at him, “Wouldn’t work, my boss had to send over documents that were then approved by Homeland showing that I am an agent of the FBI. That I was flying with an undocumented person. You can’t fake our badge, and you can’t fake the calls or information from my boss to the higher ups in Homeland.” She looked around the concourse beyond the checkpoints, “How about some breakfast before our flight?” Branden gave a nod yes, no doubt he was hungry. All they had grabbed before getting to the airport was two muffins down in the hotel dinning hall. They picked the Chick-fil-A that was located close by getting some breakfast chicken sandwiches.

She got them both chicken biscuit meals with orange juice. As they sat down across from one another she found herself watching Branden eat. He took bites like he was a man starving and this was his last meal. Memories from the past came hurtling back to her again. Times of his mom telling him to slow down that his food wasn't going anywhere. Memories of her saying the boy was an endless pit since hitting fifth grade. Branden finishing his chicken biscuit saw her looking at him, "What? Something on my face?"

Alice shook her head as she answered with a smile, "No, here if you need another one." She handed him her Visa card which Branden looked at in surprise.

"I can get it myself?" Alice nodded once as Branden held the card like it was magic. He jumped up quickly almost running to get into line behind some people. Alice chuckled to herself watching him go, enjoying his excitement. Again when he stood in line Alice found herself admiring him. It was more than just past memories now. They were blending together with present moments, these feelings couldn't be healthy. She couldn't stop the feelings though, this was Branden after all. How he nervously ran a hand through his dark brown hair as he fidgeted a bit waiting in line. How his clothes were just a little too big on the boys lanky barely teenage body. How despite being thirteen he was roughly the height of a ten-year-old still. How he had always been small for his age, but it had only added to his strength somehow. Watching him walk back over with a tray made her smile as he sat down across from her.

When he started to unwrap the chicken muffin sandwich she said, "Get enough stuff there?"

Branden held out a small container shaking it, "I got some fruit so its not all bad." Alice chuckled as he ate the sandwich. She stole a few pieces of his potato rounds until he eyed her which made her chuckle even more. He was sipping his orange juice a few minutes later when he said, "I promise I won't be uh trouble or bad. And um I'll do all my chores, and uh anything else you need me to do…"

Alice smiled as she saw what he was trying to do. "I know you will Branden, and I know that at times you'll be a boy of thirteen because that's what you are."

He smiled back, “Yeah, but I’ll try really hard Alice because its you.” He looked down at the fruit cup he had gotten picking out some blue berries, “I wish that things could be different, but I know they can’t be.” He looked back up at her his hazel eyes filled with touch of sadness, “So, I won’t bother you either if you go on dates with that Stephen guy or any other guy…”

Alice almost felt like just pulling him into her arms right there and sobbing while she held him as tightly as she could. He had no idea what he had just done of course he couldn’t have any idea. She could see the hurt in his eyes, the pain he was feeling over saying something like that. She could tell even despite the fact that she was no longer his ‘Alice’ he still had the same feelings for her. Of course he hadn’t aged a day in thirteen years so that wasn’t a surprise. He was as much at war with his feelings as she was, and it hurt Alice to see him suffering so.

Instead she fought back her urges combined with her feelings and desires as she said, “We’ll worry about that in the future Branden. Right now all I am concerned with is finding out who did this to you and how they did it.” Branden nodded as he held out the nearly empty fruit cup to her. Inside Branden had left only slices of strawberries. They had always been her favorite fruit, and he knew it so of course he saved them for her. That was just who Branden was. Again Alice almost broke down at the simple gesture. She was pretty sure that Stephen wouldn’t even know that it was her favorite fruit. “Thanks.” Branden smiled as she took a couple of the slices before giving the last one to Branden.

As they walked to the terminal after throwing away the food wrappers again her hand found his holding it. If thirteen years hadn’t been torn away from them Alice had a deep internal feeling that right now she and Branden would be trying to figure out what kind of preschool to put their kid into. Something told her inside that those early years, that first kiss, all of it had not been some kind of fluke. They were supposed to have been together and someone had ripped that chance away from them forever.

When they sat down to wait for the plane Branden pulled out his phone to watch videos. Alice moved to sit next to him. Branden didn’t move away when she invaded his personal space instead he rested his head on her shoulder. Alice rested her head on top of his own feeling his dark brown hair against her cheek. She watched with him just enjoying being close to Branden again not worrying about her mixed up feelings for a few minutes. He had found a collection online of old cartoons from when she was a kid. Cartoons that were far more recent for him than they were for

her. Maybe it had all been ripped away, but maybe there was a way to get it all back too.

They boarded the plane first with their first class tickets taking seats in the third row. She gave Branden the seat by the window as he said, “You know I’ve only been on a plane one time.”

Alice squeezed his hand, “Yeah I know when your grandmother died and you had to fly out to Florida for the funeral.”

Branden looking out the window as people kept walking onto the plane said, “Yeah, I was nine. I think the hardest part was not seeing you for a whole week.”

Alice admitted a bit of truth, “Then imagine what that would be like for thirteen years.”

Branden turned to look at her, “I don’t know where I was or what happened, but I’m pretty sure no matter what I missed you every day too Alice.”

She smiled, and this time she did ruffle his hair which made him groan as she said, “You’re damn right you did.” He smiled back before going back to looking out the window. The awkwardness of her feelings returning. Alice could hear people walking by, but as Branden looked out the window she admired him feeling all those conflicts rising to the surface again. The truth was that a part of Alice wanted to just lean over. Turn his face around to meet hers, stroke her fingers down the side of his cheek. Then show him what thirteen years of experience had taught her especially in the department of kissing.

That scared her honestly, he was still a boy who should stumble through all of that with a girl his age. But Dammit she was supposed to have been that girl! That awkward first time should have been with Branden not with that asshole she had dated in tenth grade. It might have been awkward, but it would have been incredible too because it was Branden. Those thoughts hurt her so much that she finally had to find a way to push them away.

The plane was in the air about ten minutes later. When Branden turned away from the window with a sigh Alice pulled out her tablet as she said, “I downloaded some history that you missed these last thirteen years.” She pulled out her airpods as well as she said, “I thought maybe we could watch one of those movies together while the plane flies.”

Branden nodded as she let him go through the Marvel films that she had downloaded last night. He stopped on Guardians of the Galaxy, “No way… they made a Guardians movie?”

Alice smiled knowing that he’d like that. The first time she had seen the movie she had almost walked out of the theater in tears. Memories overtaking her even with friends in the theater next to her. Branden had two favorite comic book properties: X-men and Guardians of The Galaxy. X-men because of all the mutants with their cool powers. Though his favorite wasn’t Wolverine, but Henry McCoy. Guardians because they had lots of strange characters, and were out in space all the time protecting the galaxy not just earth. Branden had wanted to be Star Lord a human exploring the galaxy with strange alien friends. He loaded up the movie, as it started the two of them sat together watching with their heads touching.

When he laughed at certain scenes she found herself smiling too and enjoying how much he was enjoying the movie. There was something really amazing about sharing it with Branden. Seeing it in high school with her senior boyfriend, his friends, and hers had been difficult. The girls had been indifferent, the jocks had all thought the movie was kind of lame. None of them had really appreciated how the movie had nailed the characters that Branden had loved. When it was over Branden said, “Okay I want to watch that again… wait...there’s a sequel!”

Alice chuckled as a woman walking by said, “You and your son are simply adorable reminds me of my daughter and her oldest...” Alice looked over at the older woman who smiled once then went walking back up to her seat.

Branden softly said, “Uh Alice you don’t look old enough to be my mom.”

Alice smiled, “Thanks…” she eyed him, “how old do I look?”

The flush on his cheeks shocked her as much as the words, “Like the most beautiful version of you… I knew you’d be beautiful even as an adult.”

She kissed the side of his head then as she said, “You are a strange boy Branden.” He only flushed again as he shifted in his seat before looking back down at the tablet. Alice wondered if she had caused a reaction, one that at thirteen she had been curious about.

“Not half as strange as you.” She almost pinched his arm when he said that, but the smile on his face was too cute. A second later the announcement came that they were landing so she put the tablet away and they buckled back up.

After landing as they were walking through the airport Branden saw a sign and said, “I forgot you live close to Disney Land….”

Alice looked at the sign that had caught his attention, “Yeah I do, and they have a pretty cool Star Wars section now too. Maybe we’ll go sometime.”

“Maybe?”

Alice sighed, “Okay fine we’ll go but only because you’re twisting my arm.”

Branden chuckled, “That wasn’t a lot of twisting.” Alice smiled and again squeezed his hand before walking with him out of the airport. When they got into her car something caught Branden’s eyes right away as he buckled his seat belt. He reached out to touch the Aries zodiac symbol that hung from her mirror on a chain, “Hey I remember that!” He dropped it as he sat back in his seat, “I got you this for your twelfth birthday!”

Alice smiled, “Yeah you did.”

“You used to wear it as a necklace every day.” He sighed deeply, “I remember hoping that when I gave it to you that’d you’d kiss me, but you only kissed my cheek.”

Alice looked over at him, “You’re kidding me right?” Branden shook his head and she sighed this time, “You are such a dense boy Branden Alexander.”

Branden looked at her confused, “I am?”

“Yeah, a real dummy. I wanted you to kiss me… a girl shouldn’t have to take the first kiss! So you what had to work up the courage for a whole year?”

Branden flushed and leaned back in his seat grumbling, “Its your own fault you were too pretty, and I was positive you were way outta my league.”

Alice smiled, “You have no clue… you really don’t.”

As she started to pull out of the parking lot Branden said, “Clue about what?”

She sighed once and then chuckled, “How good looking you are.”

Branden grunted, “Am not. I wear these things!” He pointed at his glasses, “I’ve got zero muscles despite always doing things to try and get them! I’m skinny and short for my age too! You can’t lie to me like that its not nice.”

Alice looked over at him then said, “I think I get it now, years of being able to look back. So you thought I was this amazingly hot girl? I knew I was good looking, but when I looked at my self compared to other girls I thought I was lacking. No hips, no breasts, still wearing those damn braces...”

Branden said, “No way! You were perfect. Even when you got that zit on your chin after spring break…” he trailed off as he shifted on his seat then said, “And anyway you’re still perfect now too…” his sigh was clearly one of frustration. Alice could only

imagine what was going on in his head. How confusing it had to be for him based on how confused she was too.

As she got onto the freeway her phone rang seeing that it was her boss Conner she answered it through the car's blue-tooth system, "Nills, I see you're back in LA based on the flight itinerary?"

"Yes sir, on my way to my apartment."

"Good, I'll meet you there so we can talk about this situation. I spoke with the doctor that you sent with the information. This is all a little strange, beyond anything I've ever seen. It might be above my pay grade if I'm honest."

She looked over at Branden who seemed concerned, "I'm going to figure it out sir. Branden is my responsibility now. I hope that you and the agency will help, but I'll understand if you can't." That was her way of saying she'd quit if she had to in order to protect Branden and keep searching for answers.

He cleared his throat, "Yes we'll talk about that when we meet at your apartment in a little bit."

Then the line went dead and Branden said, "doesn't sound all that different from Director Skinner."

Alice chuckled, "You mean the whole I can't approve of what you're doing but I won't stop you either attitude? The way that he helped, but only secretly?" He nodded yes as she chuckled, "Yeah that's a pretty good way to describe Conner. He's going to help at least in regards to making sure that you stay with me. As for the rest, he might or might not." Branden still looked worried about that as they got off the freeway going to her apartment complex. She pulled in front of the apartment then grabbed the bag out from the trunk.

Branden followed her up the stairs to the second story apartment where she unlocked the door leading inside. Alice hit the lights by the front door so that they weren't in darkness. It was a very simple one bedroom apartment, from the front door you could see all of it. "Its only a one bedroom, so for now I'll have you bunking on the couch if that's okay?"

Branden shrugged, "Yeah sure, are you going to get a bigger place?"

Alice walking towards her bedroom said, "I don't know yet Bran, lets figure out all this other stuff then we'll figure that out."

He walked with her into the bedroom as he said, "So how come you don't live with this Stephen guy?"

Alice starting to unpack the dirty clothes from her bag said, "That's complicated, and I don't know if I'm ready to discuss that at this moment."

Branden said, "Oh… okay." He picked up something that belonged to him on her bed, "Hey this is my stuffed Charmander."

Alice chuckled, "Yeah it is. Your mom had it in with all of the stuff of yours that she saved."

Branden held it tightly sniffing it as he said, "It smells like you."

Alice said, "And you know that how?"

Branden shrugged, "Just do, you're older, more mature looking, but you still smell the same and feel the same." He started to walk out of the room still holding the stuffed animal, "Can I put on something on your TV?"

"Knock yourself out." Branden gave her a thumbs up as he walked out of the bedroom clearly not wanting to watch her unpack her unmentionables. She stared at

him for a moment, those conflicting feelings again rising inside of her. He was hers, things felt right when he was there with her. Things that hadn't felt right in all the years since he had disappeared. Yeah he was still a kid, but deep inside most adults were just kids too trying to understand the world thrust upon them.

It was her theory as to way so many rich and powerful adults didn't give back to the world. Why they horded as much as they could for themselves because they were just selfish little kids who never learned how to play with others. Still the world had rules and laws, and kids did see it differently than adults. Branden was still a boy in love with a girl who didn't exist anymore because she had grown into a woman. A woman who wanted to be with him, and was starting to hate herself for the thoughts she was having about a boy.

After she had everything in the hamper she walked out into the living room again. Branden was sitting on the couch going through things on Netflix, "There's thousands of things to just stream online?" Alice nodded, "that's crazy! There's so many new shows and things I haven't seen!"

"Well start slowly, just pick something small." She was starting to head towards the kitchen when the sound of his voice in the next second made her stop turning back to look at him.

Branden turned off the television as he said with a tremor in his voice, "Its too much Alice." She moved faster than she realized she could. She knew that tremor, knew that inflection in his words. Knew that he was seconds away from being truly overwhelmed. Before she could really comprehend how she was holding him while he tried to get a grip on the overwhelming realization of what it meant to miss thirteen years. He didn't really cry, he just held onto her while he tried to calm his mind down.

When it passed Branden moved back from her arms looking up at her. His hazel eyes looked more brown in the moment behind his glasses, his cheeks slightly flushed, his lips parted just a bit. When he started to lean up more Alice felt her heart skip a beat. She felt like she was falling into his eyes. Now that his lips were just inches from touching hers. The world seemed to stop, she was going to let him take this kiss if he wanted it. She felt one of his hands rest on her cheek. The look of something more profound in his eyes.

The loud sound of knocking form the front door shocked Alice making her push back from Branden. At the same instance he jumped looking at her with a rising flush on his cheeks. Alice swallowed taking a deep breath, probably the first one she'd taken in a minute or more. Her eyes met his again, then there was another knock to the door. Alice let out her breath before getting up to get the door. Inside she was still confused, he had been about to take a kiss, and he hadn't seemed uncertain even if she had been.

Alice opened the door after looking through the peephole to see who it was. She undid the lock on the door opening it then gestured for her boss to come in. Conner Westand was dressed in a simple suit of dark colors like he usually wore, his thinning graying hair was combed neatly. He stepped into the apartment looking around. She knew how he looked, taller than average, broad, but slightly worn as he was nearing retirement age now. His eyes stopped immediately on Branden, "So it is true Nills?"

Branden looked at her then at Conner as she said, "You read the report from the officer and the doctor I imagine by now. Branden came back, but he hasn't aged a day."

Conner walked with her over to where Branden was standing, "And you remember everything up till you disappeared?"

Branden stuttered slightly, "Y-yes sir.. uh j-just that nothing from when I was missing. O-or how I still haven't aged when everyone else has…"

Conner nodded sitting down as he said, "And the other boys?"

Branden looked confused as Alice said, "Other boys sir?"

"I saw the files you checked out, all the research you've been doing is quite extensive. The moment after I spoke to the doctor I looked at what you'd been doing. I know that your missing friend was your biggest priority when you were in off hours."

Alice nodded, “Five other boys all born the same day all went missing within the same two weeks? Strange… and now one of them comes back looking like he hasn’t aged a day...” He shook his head as he stopped talking.

Alice sat down next to Branden putting her arm around him almost protectively, “Its true though sir. I need to find out what happened. We need to know if someone did something to him or the other boys. Where they went, why he came back? Why he didn’t age a day while he was gone? Where the other boys that went missing are? The only one that I know I’d hear about right away is Scott Alvers as he’s the only boy with living parents still. His mom would call me immediately.”

Conner sighed, “Indeed. I talked with Mrs. Alvers earlier today. Such a sad woman, loosing both a son and husband within a few years of each other.” He studied Branden again, “Legally there is no precedence for this situation. No one comes back after missing for thirteen years without aging also. I will push through the paperwork though to get his social security number reinstated as a missing person returned. That way at least he’s no longer pronounced dead on government records. It’ll take a few months, then we’ll have to figure out the age thing. I don’t want to assign a task force to looking into this. Its too risky right now, would put too many eyes on the strangeness of it.”

Alice said, “I understand sir, but I have to find out what happened.”

He held up his hand, “I know you do Nills, and I want you to keep looking. If I assigned a whole task force into it then whoever had the boy might find out sooner that we’re looking for them.” He chuckled, “I don’t mean to get all x-files on you, but the truth is that whatever this is it smells like something top secret. Maybe something another branch of our government was experimenting with. If while trying to figure this out you feel in danger let me know and I will get a couple of agents to help you.”

Alice nodded, “I understand sir. Do you know of anyone that can help with memory regression hypnosis?”

He looked at Branden again, “That’s not a bad idea, if the memories are really there then they might just be locked away. The agency has used a few psychiatrists before for such things. Usually on cases where some kind of recent trauma has caused a

kid to forget something. Or even an adult recall things about a crime scene in better detail. I'll get you the contact for one of the best, I've used her a few time. Hopefully she can help."

Branden said, "I'd like to know even if it doesn't work I'd like to try Alice." Alice looked at him, seeing the hope in his eyes.

She smiled, "Okay we'll try that first."

Conner stood then so Alice stood with him, "I'll give you a few weeks off from active cases. Let you work on this. I want reports though and updates. Not through the typical channels just to be on the safe side. Send them to me only, use private email with coded wording. We'll say you're on vacation with your mom. Try and make your emails reflect that as much as possible."

She stepped outside with Conner closing the apartment door so they could talk alone, "Thank you sir for protecting this. I know its not how we normally do things. I know it might be dangerous, but I have to take care of Branden no matter what."

Her director looked back at the closed door, "I don't know what it must have been like for you Agent Nills to loose your best friend in the world so suddenly. Nor what its like to suddenly have him back with him not having aged a day. I do know one thing for sure though, he needs you. You're the only thing that remains of his life even if you're older you're still that anchor. Don't forget that." He nodded once then started down the stairs, "And keep me informed of any developments in the case."

Alice turned back to the apartment then breathed once before stepping back inside. When she opened the door Alice almost jumped out of her shoes. Branden was standing right in front of it looking at her, "Your boss is kind of nice."

Alice sighed holding a hand to her heart, "Fuck Branden why were you standing there?"

He smiled, "Exactly for that reason." His eyes met hers then he did the most Branden thing ever, "So what's for dinner?" Alice groaned as she closed the apartment door

behind her. She had to remind herself that she wasn't supposed to want to kill the boy. No she still wanted to kiss him very badly even with the jump scare, and his simple reminder that he needed to be fed. In fact those two things made her want to kiss him even more.

Yet she knew that moment had passed for now, but it wasn't gone. During dinner the tension was still there, but it was impossible to say if Branden felt it as much as she did. After dinner he got into his pajamas while she arranged blankets on the couch for him. Unlike last night Branden didn't wake up or start sobbing in his sleep. She left the door open though just to be on the safe side for both that or if he needed to use the restroom. Alice was a light sleeper so she knew if he woke she'd hear it. He slept soundly, and that eventually led to Alice sleeping soundly as well.

*

The feeling of someone watching her was slightly unsettling when Alice woke up the following morning. She hadn't had such a feeling in a long time, but it didn't go away when she opened her eyes looking over at her bedroom doorway. Branden jumped slightly when he saw her eyes met his, but he didn't move from where he was. His hair was an absolute mess on his head, and at some point he had removed his pajama shirt so he was only in his bottoms. He looked vulnerable, cute, and even if it was okay to feel that way about him, sexy.

When his eyes met hers he said, "I-I really had to use the bathroom… I tried to wait till you were awake… but…" The nervous look on his face made Alice wonder how long he had been standing there. Or what kind of thoughts were going on in his head. She wore just a simple night shirt that was dark blue with shoulder straps. It wasn't revealing really, but it had ridden up enough to show off her stomach wit her laying on her back.

Sitting up she said, “Its okay Bran. That’s why I left the door open in the first place.” She stood aware that his eyes were still on her in her pajamas. She had put on simple shorts to go with the shirt. Alice knew that they showed off most of her slender legs. As kids she had always worn pants just like Bran. Despite the fact that she was only five and a half feet tall she was roughly a foot taller than Branden, but most of it did come from her legs. Stephen had always admired how long and slender her legs were. She could tell that Branden was as well. She found it didn’t bother her in the least that he was admiring her body. “You want some breakfast?”

Branden shook his head as she walked past him squeezing his shoulder once. “I already got cereal while you were still sleeping.” Walking past him she was again reminded just how short four feet and six inches was compared to even her modest height. Yet also how she desired to do more than just squeeze his shoulder. How she wanted to run a hand down his chest, trail her fingers along his flesh, feel the warmth of his skin. At thirteen the thought of running a hand down his chest probably wouldn’t have occurred to her, as she had seen desires differently then.

Things had been new and unexplored. Now she knew that she liked resting a hand on the middle of a man’s chest and running it down his front. Only Bran wasn’t a man, he was a boy who had never been touched intimately by a girl. He had missed all of those years of Alice learning what she liked and didn’t like.

Alice walking to the kitchen to start a cup of coffee said, “I had cereal?”

Branden following her said, “Yeah, Cheerios. They were really close to expiring, but I risked it.”

Alice smiled looking over at him after she popped the K-cup into the coffee machine, “I see, well we’ll go shopping today get you all your favorites.”

When she went to the fridge grabbing the coffee creamer Branden said, “When did you start drinking coffee?”

“College, I had to in order to survive.” She poured some of the creamer into the cup once it finished brewing, “There were so many days where I was working on half fumes that I found it helped.”

Branden watched as she sipped the coffee then said, “Cause you were out partying all the time?”

Alice chuckled, “No I was not. Was I ever the party type?”

Branden shrugged, “No, but you also,” She felt his eyes roam over her body again, but it wasn’t uncomfortable feeling at all. “uh d-didn’t wear um so little… to bed.” He flushed as he shook his head before sitting down at the kitchen table, “Sorry.”

Alice could tell that he was embarrassed as she sat down across from him stirring the coffee some more, “Should I wear something else?” Branden shook his head, “Change before leaving my bedroom in the mornings?” Again he shook his head then she said, “Well then what?”

Branden shrugged, “Nothing… I just… I’m really confused Alice.”

She sighed, “You’re confused? You’re not the only one.” She smiled even so while sipping on her coffee looking across the table at him.

Branden looked down at the table his light hazel eyes not wanting to stay fixed on her green any longer as he said, “W-when I saw you still sleeping after I had breakfast… a part of me wanted to… well…”

He trailed off and the look on his face made Alice say, “Just tell me Branden.”

“I wanted to just climb into bed with you and go back to sleep. Like how…” he sighed looking down, “How we used to when we were the same age. Remember we’d sit up in my bed or yours. We’d watch movies till we fell asleep? Or we’d play a game on my Wii till we couldn’t keep our eyes open…”

Alice moved her chair around the table so she was sitting next to him. Gently she took his hand holding it. She didn't speak until his eyes met hers, "You're not the only one confused by all of this Branden. I want that too, not a single minute since you came back have I been able to stop thinking about how much I want all of those years back. How much I still…" she paused for a second then touched his cheek, "How much I still love you. How I never, for one second stopped loving you, even though I found a way to move on with my life."

The pregnant pause that hung in the air between them after she said that was so quiet that all you heard was the hum of the fridge. Branden might have only been a kid, by all the standards of what the world considered a kid to be. That didn't mean that he wasn't incapable of having these kinds of feelings or understanding them. Alice was an adult, a woman who had been with boys when she was a teenager and men when she was in college. Yet even though she had only kissed him twice, she compared every man she met to Branden, even an adult in his thirties like Stephen. She had never thought anyone kissed as good as Branden, or understood who she was as easily as he did.

Branden didn't push the issue though, instead he did the most Branden thing he could do, "So I guess you're okay with me going to the bathroom even if you're sleeping then?"

Alice chuckled as he smiled, somehow the tension in the room seemed to seep out as her eyes met his, "Well I figure I have two choices in that matter. Either I let you pee your pants or I let you use the bathroom. So yes Branden you can use the bathroom whenever you need to." Her phone buzzed with a message from Stephen: Hey can we get together tonight for dinner, I made it back into town and I've been missing you. Alice studied the message for a moment then cursed to herself but not quietly enough.

Branden said, "Something wrong?"

Alice looked at him for a second then said, "I have no idea what I'm going to tell Stephen tonight, but I've got to talk with him." She texted him back: Can't how about if you come over to my apartment though so we can talk.

Branden said, “I’ll uh stay in the apartment and not go anywhere I swear.”

Alice shook her head, “I trust you Branden, but I’m not leaving you alone until I know who had you. I told Stephen to come over here so we can talk.”

“Did you really tell him that you had to talk?”

Alice shrugged, “Yeah, its the truth.”

Branden winced, “Ouch!”

Alice sighed, “What?”

“When a girl says we’ve got to talk its never good news… its splitsville population Stephen.”

Alice flicked his forehead with her finger once which made Branden rub it as she walked past him to put her cup in the sink, “and its shower time population Branden. Director Westand got back to me in an email. We have an appointment with a psychologist at one to see if they can help you figure out what’s wrong with your brain.”

Branden still rubbing his forehead as he stood up said, “You sure you’re an adult, I don’t think adults can go around flicking kids on the forehead.”

Alice smiled, “They can when they look like you.”

Branden said, “If you say something stupid can I flick your forehead too?”

Alice shrugged, “Sure if you can reach it shorty.”

He just looked up at her then said, “Maybe I don’t love you after all!” Then he started to walk past her to go to the bathroom. Alice reached out pulling him to her. It only took one second for Branden to return the hug just as deeply. His head rested at about her breasts maybe even right between them as he leaned into her. Alice stroked his back before running one hand through his hair once then kissed the top of his head. Branden held tighter when she did that, the two of them not speaking for more than a few minutes.

After a moment he said softly, “I love you Alice.” Then he headed off to his shower. Alice watched him go not sure at all what she was going to do with the feelings that were reawakening inside of her. While Branden took his shower she went about cleaning the kitchen keeping herself distracted. He sure did take awhile in the shower which made her wonder what he was doing in there. Which in turn sent her thoughts down a path about how his mom once commented to her mom. The comment had been about the increased amount of time her son spent in the shower since sixth grade. Alice knew what she had been implying even back then.

Why did she want to see what he did in the shower so badly in that moment? When he came out of the bedroom about twenty minutes later she knew why. Even though he was dressed like any other boy of thirteen in a simple Spider-man tee-shirt and some jeans Alice knew what she was feeling. Again she pushed the thoughts away before going into her bedroom. She took a much quicker shower knowing that they needed to get a move on.

Stepping out of the bathroom a few minutes later she could hear the television in the living room. She dressed in a simple blouse and faded jeans before doing her hair and the light bit of make up that she wore. She checked the outfit realizing that while it was simple she had picked something that looked good on her figure. The jeans were tight showing off every curve of her slender legs along with the thigh gap between them. The blouse tight enough to show off hints of her breasts perfectly. She hadn’t worn this outfit to impress Stephen tonight she realized.

She had worn it because if there was even a chance that she could get Branden to admire her she would take it. What the hell was wrong with her? He was just thirteen, a boy still! She shouldn’t be trying to draw the eyes of a boy. Even if thirteen

years ago she had dressed in a similar fashion to draw his eyes. This wasn't thirteen years ago, she wasn't a girl in middle school, she was an adult. Branden was still a boy of thirteen. She couldn't be having these thoughts or desires. Yet she did. Right now she wanted nothing more than to walk out there and kiss Branden. To show him thirteen years of experiences. To be his first everything.

When she was dressed she headed out into the living room where Branden was watching something on Netflix. He turned off the television when she walked out. Once more Alice could feel Branden's eyes admiring her. He was actually really horrible at admiring she realized, most adult men knew how to give a glance then move on. Branden stumbled through the moving on part which reminded her that again he hadn't had thirteen years of getting used to seeing girls, and he was just entering puberty. She didn't find it uncomfortable though, in fact she found herself wanting it to continue for years.

She said, "Lets get going." Branden got up off of the couch not arguing as they headed out of the apartment. Alice's phone dinged with a text as they were heading to the car. She read it once: Sorry about the delayed response, dinner at your place sound wonderful. I hope you were able to resolve that case? Alice typed back: its complicated but we can talk about it tonight say around seven? He agreed and she looked over at Branden once as he walked over to his side of the car.

It was ridiculous what she was even considering in that moment. The idea of waiting for Branden was just far too difficult. She knew that eventually he'd want to seek someone his own age. When he was around kids again in junior high he'd realize that what he was feeling for her isn't what he thinks anymore. Yet, if there was even a small chance that she could somehow still have Branden… Stephen wasn't a bad guy, he was a decent one all said and done, but he wasn't Branden.

In the car after they had buckled up and she checked her mirrors Branden said, "Remember when we went to that go-kart racing place the summer before fourth grade." He chuckled at the memory, "When you couldn't stay on the track any time you turned the kart?" Alice gave a small nod, "I can't believe they let you drive…."

Alice punched his shoulder just hard enough to make him rub it, "Shut up short stuff, I was nine!"

Branden smiled, “Yeah, back then you blamed it on your helmet…”

Pulling out of the parking lot she said, “After the shrink makes your head even smaller we’ll see if anyone wants to adopt a nearsighted dummy.” When he stuck his tongue out Alice found herself doing the same thing which made Branden giggle. Which in turn made Alice feel like a little girl again when she giggled too. It wasn’t just his age that was affecting her like this, it was Branden. She knew the limits of teasing she could get away with, just like he did without hurting each others feelings. This was too complex, yet so simple too. If she could just figure out the sexual part. Why did she desire him even though she was an adult who had never once found a kid desirable before?

Alice pushed the thoughts away. Right now it was more important to try and figure out what was going on in Branden’s head. If they could find his missing memories. How it was possible that he hadn’t aged thirteen years then maybe after that they could figure out how they would work. Could she wait five years till he was an adult both legally and mentally? How different would adult Bran even be compared to Bran at thirteen. How different was she? She had gone through some life changing moments, been in relationships, taken on a job and the responsibilities of being an adult. Yet deep inside how different was she from that girl that had lost the one person that made her life interesting?

She could wait, be the mature adult that knew the difference between giving and taking. She could wait till Branden was ready for an adult relationship. Wait till he knew what he really wanted even if that meant watching him date other girls his own age. Even if it meant that she might at the end of the day loose him, or be in her thirties before he was ready to settle down with her. She could wait till he eventually got his height, grew up, became an adult. Five years wasn’t so long for another kiss or more was it?

XXXXX

The car ride to the psychiatrists office was a mostly quiet one. For Alice that was a good thing, she was using the quiet to not only think about having Branden back in her life, but also what she was going to do about Stephen. Looking at the cold hard truth was sometimes difficult to do, but deep inside Alice knew that what she felt for Stephen was simple companionship, not passion, or love. With Branden she felt that it was possible she could have all three. She had known before Branden returned what her true feelings were, but she had been comfortable. Because of that Alice

had seen no reason to break things off with Stephen. She could picture how the relationship would turn out every step of the way. She had managed to hold it back from the final steps for nearly a year and a half, because a part of her deep inside knew she she wasn't really happy.

Every time she got the feeling that Stephen was about to ask her the big questions beyond just moving in together she pulled back. Her mom had more than once expressed how much she loved Stephen. That she felt that he would make a wonderful husband and father. It did help that he made six figures a year. Her mother saw that as stability for any future grandchildren, but stability wasn't love or a way to make a family last. Yes a part of her would probably be happy with what Stephen gave her. She wanted a family, it just wasn't how she had always pictured. It wasn't love though, it didn't feel special, it felt more like the only way she could have at least some of the things she dreamed of. Until that phone call from the police in Houston reignited another path Alice thought she'd lost forever.

As she pulled up to a stop light before the turn down another street to get to the office building Alice looked over at Branden. He was watching the first Guardians of the Galaxy movie again with his airpods in his ears to not bother her. Looking at him she was struck with how handsome the boy was, that blend of youth with the start of puberty mixed together. When he felt her looking his hazel eyes met hers for a moment as he smiled.

Alice felt her heart start to beat faster, the first sure sign of attraction. Branden looked back down at his phone as Alice pulled up to the next stop sign just a few intersections down the street. Despite missing thirteen years he had caught on pretty quickly to the new technology of the day. He was so young though, the boy still retained that look of youthfulness that boys just on the cusp of puberty had. She had seen it in a few cases as most of the boys taken and returned to their families were right around Branden's age.

He was what you'd call a late bloomer, having just reached one inch above four and a half feet. Easily the smallest seventh grader by far at their middle school back then. Of course Bran had always been small for his age, to Alice that was just part of who he was. She had always been stronger physically, but he had always been able to see things before she did.

Their wrestling mixed with tickles during play growing up had always ended the same way, but Alice always had the feeling that Branden liked how it ended. He always managed to get a few good jabs in, but ultimately she always pinned him in the end. Branden would lay there in defeat under her sticking his tongue out complaining that it wasn't fair because she was bigger than him. Yet he never really made her stop either. The car behind her honked making Alice realize she had stayed at the stop sign for way too long lost in thoughts. She pulled through the intersection turning down another street getting closer to the office building.

Reminding herself that he was just a boy who needed to experience things with other kids around his own age for the next six or so years was getting harder to do. There was a part of her that wanted to push him down on his seat while she bent down over him. Then draw his face to hers eyes meeting as she kissed him with all the passion she felt. She wanted to show him how to kiss in ways that weren't clumsy or uncertain. She was almost positive that he wanted her to as well. The way that he looked at her earlier this morning when she mentioned Stephen had left her wanting to admit the turmoil growing inside. She could tell that he was hurting because she was with someone else, but he knew the truth also. That he was still a kid while Alice was now an adult. Laws existed, rules put in place to protect kids like him. Her job was all about rescuing kids who were abused regardless of those laws. She knew that she couldn't overstep the boundaries that society put up no matter how inside the desire to do was growing beyond her ability to control it.

She parked in one of the spots in front of the two story medical complex. Doctor Sherry Jackson was according to her boss one of the best in helping kids, and adults find out things they had forgotten through regression hypnosis. They stepped out of the car together, somehow when Branden stood next to her his hand found hers again. Alice held it knowing that he needed comforting and support from her in this moment. As they walked into the building he said, "Do you really think that I have memories of the last thirteen years?"

Alice said, "I don't know, but its a real possibility."

"What if I don't"

Alice shrugged, "Then you don't, and we'll figure out another way to find out what happened to you these past thirteen years." Inside there was a simple security desk

that no one was currently sitting at. Close by it was a wall with a list of all the different doctors and diagnosticians that worked in the building. Alice scanned it for Doctor Jackson then pressed the elevator button.

Branden sighed, “I just wish I could know why it happened at all already. I hate a mystery…”

Alice squeezed his hand as they got onto the elevator. “I know you do.” Alice had always been partial to watching murder mystery or mystery shows of all kinds growing up. Including X-Files which had been her favorite since Branden’s dad introduced the two of them to it. Branden had liked the show, but he hated all the mysteries that didn’t come with answers. Same for another show that had sucked her in, Lost. He wanted answers to mysteries, and both shows had been less than forthcoming in their answers. Or when they finally gave them they hadn’t satisfied him.

They stepped out onto the second floor going down the hallway to the last room on the left. Alice opened the door stepping with Branden into a small reception room. A woman sat behind the desk typing on a computer when they stepped in. She was somewhere in her mid-thirties if Alice had to guess her age, with dark brown hair and a busty profile. Hearing someone come in she looked up from the computer screen, “Yes can I help you?”

Alice said, “Agent Alice Nills, my superior made an appointment with Doctor Jackson?”

The woman looked down at something on her desk then said, “Yes I see it here Agent Nills. Doctor Jackson often works with the FBI on cases. She’s with a client right now it shouldn’t be much longer if you want to take a seat?” Alice nodded walking with Branden over to one of the two couches in the room.

When they sat down Branden said, “A-Alice, um are you going to be in there with me?”

Alice put her arm around his shoulders feeling how nervous he was, “Yeah if you want me to.”

“I do. I can’t imagine not having you in there.” Alice rubbed his shoulder once as the inner door to the doctors office opened and a woman stepped out with a young man. Doctor Sherry Jackson looked to be somewhere in her early forties. Her dark brown hair was pulled back into a bun showing off a slender neck on a slender figure. She was a good looking older woman. When she smiled the warmth seemed to add to her beauty. Her eyes rested on Alice and Branden with that smile still which was strangely comforting. Alice felt like she could trust this woman almost immediately, and she could tell that Branden was already calmer as well.

“Agent Nills?” Alice gave a nod as she stood up with Branden, “And this must be Branden? Well its nice to meet you young man.”

Branden smiled, “T-thanks Doctor Jackson.”

She led them back into her private office. In one corner was a desk that had a few photo frames on it. Clearly pictures of the doctor and her family. On either side of the room were shelves, some with books, some with pictures and other items. There were a few chairs to sit in and a couch to sit or lay down on as well. When they walked in Doctor Jackson said, “So all that Director Westand would tell me is that we have a unique situation regarding some missing time when you were taken Branden?”

Branden gave a nod and Alice said, “Did the director tell you anything else about the situation’s uniqueness?”

Doctor Jackson gave a small nod, “You mean that he’s been gone for thirteen years and apparently hasn’t aged a day?” Alice felt relieved that she wouldn’t have to explain it, but also a little worried that Conner let it out so easily. Doctor Jackson must have sensed that worry because she said, “Don’t worry I won’t tell anyone whatever we uncover. This is between the three of us. It will never leave this room. The only other thing that he told me was that you two were childhood friends?”

Alice said, “Yes, best friends. We grew up together which is why… well its why I want to know how this is even possible. Time doesn’t stand still even if we do. I’ve been thinking about it for a few days now. Even if Branden had been in a coma for thirteen years he still would have aged thirteen years. He hasn’t aged a day.”

Branden agreed, “Yeah.. its like I stopped and the rest of the world went on without me for thirteen years.”

Doctor Jackson nodded, “I can understand how strange that must be. Director Westand sent me the file, and you are correct Branden you have not aged a single day at least as far as I can tell from the photo. So how about if we get started. Usually I spend a few weeks getting to know a client, but you came here for a specific reason. Us talking about the rest of your life isn’t going to uncover something that’s been hidden away by something other than repression.”

Branden clearly confused asked, “Uh what does that mean?

Alice said, “I think she means that whatever happened to you was done recently by someone not years ago. You can’t remember anything because someone used technology or other means to wipe your memories or lock them away.”

Doctor Jackson agreed, “Indeed, so Mr. Leston why don’t you lay down on the couch then we’ll get started.”

Branden looked up at her once and Alice squeezed his hand, “I’m not going anywhere Bran I promise.”

Branden smiled with a nod before going to the couch, “Just uh if I say something embarrassing ignore it…” Alice had no idea what he was talking about, but she gave a nod of agreement. She took one of the chairs close to the couch as Doctor Jackson got something off of her desk. She came back with a pendulum that she put down on a small table that she brought over to set beside her own chair. Branden seeing this said, “Do I uh stare into it or something?”

Doctor Jackson laughed, “No, I want you to close your eyes. Then I want you to listen to the sound of the pendulum. Just hear its rhythmic beating try to match your breathing to it. Then when I begin to speak listen to my words.” Branden closed his eyes after one last look at Alice. He breathed in a few times then silence filled the room other than the sound of the pendulum going back and forth on its stand. After a few minutes Doctor Jackson spoke softly matching the pendulum somehow with her voice, “I want you to go back for me Branden, back to that day in May when you disappeared. We’ll start simple, I want you to recall for me if it was a school day or not?”

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May 3rd 2010

It was a struggle that morning like it usually was on a Monday. Why did the weekends always have to end? Why were they so short! It wasn’t that I hated school, but I didn’t get why seventh grade had to start so early in the morning. I always felt like I could use two or three more hours of sleep. I know that my mom was right I stayed up too late in my bedroom playing games or texting back and forth with Alice about things. I know it wasn’t the smart thing to do, but I was nearly a teenager now. I wanted to do what I wanted to do not what my mom always wanted me to do. You know? Actually I felt like one honestly with all these strange feelings going on inside of me. Feelings that I wasn’t sure how to express or let out.

My mom woke me up like she always did, that morning as I looked at her I was caught by how beautiful she was even though she was older. Her hair was graying a little, but it was vibrant and plush on her heart shaped face, she had the same hazel eyes as me. I swear that her smile was a little sad that morning, but that might just be my imagination now. I really want to hug her right then, but that wasn’t what I had done thirteen years ago. No I just groaned then rolled over when she said, “Breakfast is ready I expect you downstairs in ten minutes mister.”

Then she left my room and I suddenly can feel the loss of her not being there. I knew how hard my mom and dad had struggled to have me. They didn't know that I had overheard them once talking with Alice's mom about how hard it had been to conceive me. About how afraid they were I was going to die when I came eight weeks early. I loved my mom and dad both even when they sometimes annoyed me, but that's what parents do right? So I got up out of bed glad that my mom had left me alone because as a boy who was nearly twelve the last thing I needed was my mom to see my morning… well…uh difficulties. Dad had told me once that most boys, even men wake up with them, but I hadn't really recalled having them until around my tenth birthday.

A-anyway um that's not important… so after I got dressed for school I was feeling a little more awake when I sat down for breakfast. Like usual on a Monday it was my favorite cinnamon toast with eggs and bacon. My mom didn't work, she was pretty much a stay at home mom since I was born. Though she did run a side job on Pintrest that made her some extra money, which she often spent on things for me or Alice. Is Pintrest still a thing? Oh yeah sorry I got distracted by the thought… so...

One time uh a few years ago… well um when I was ten, my mom and Alice's mom were talking about things. I overheard them though they didn't realize that I was listening. Anyway my mom said that Alice was like a daughter to her, and her mom said that she felt the same way about me. Um not that I was a daughter to her, but a son. You know cause I'm a boy not a girl. Anyway, I think that's when things sort of changed for me, I mean… well like later in the conversation Alice's mom said that she could see us married one day and it was like something happened.

It wasn't right away, but in the year that followed… well what I mean is in sixth grade is when it really started. Or maybe the summer before sixth was when I really realized how I felt about Alice. No I think it was fifth grade when Alice got that valentine from another boy. Or around then. That's way off track… you're right sorry…

So um anyway I got done with breakfast and my mom kissed me on the temple once wishing me a good day at school. I'd like to linger on that kiss, that hug make it last so much longer than it did. I think its the last hug my mom gave me ever… Sorry I was quiet for so long I was just remembering all the times my mother hugged me like that…

As I walked outside that morning I could feel a blend of nervousness and excitement. I was about to see her again. I mean I saw and talked with Alice every day, but my excitement at seeing her never seemed to lesson. Even now when I look at her I really just want to hug Alice to feel her holding me… Its not right that things are so different, it feels wrong, but I guess that's how life is sometimes… um sorry off track..

Okay anyway, when I get down to the sidewalk that morning the first thing I see is her. Alice always wears the best clothes, it always reminds me that she's so much more beautiful than any other girl ever. All the boys at our school that like girls know it to. Its why I know I don't stand as chance when someone like James Carner has eyes for her. Every day he keeps sitting across from her at lunch talking and acting all cool. He's a football player so he's got that going for him too, all the girls want to date tough guys like that not wimpy nerds like me. I know that he's angling to ask her out. I'd over heard a couple of girls on the cheer squad talking about it.

Her dark brown hair was hanging down her shoulders this morning and I loved how it framed her face. Somehow her green eyes were even larger just by her applying this slight bit of makeup. I've noticed even now when that she's an adult Alice doesn't overdo the makeup, which is good. Anyway she was wearing a simple top today that was almost sleeveless, but not really. You could see one of the straps of her bra. It wasn't really a bra, I mean it was, but it was one of those things she complained about not liking wearing to me. I think she called it a trainer… anyway she had on a pleated skirt as well that was deep blue, and somehow it helped to bring out the green of her eyes.

Like I said Alice knew how to dress even if she didn't know how it affected me. I figured other boys probably got affected the same way as me. But well it hurt me that Alice just saw me as her best friend when I wanted to marry her one day. I was too afraid to tell her that I felt that way though, so I just kept being the best friend possible. Out front when she saw me she pushed my glasses up on my face as she said, "Well there he is old four-eyes himself."

I groaned, "Oh so funny, that's about as original as calling you a string bean!" My dad had this tendency to call Alice string bean, and me his four eyed son. Somehow the two 'insults' stuck to the point that we had started teasing each other with them when we were in first or second grade. I really can't remember which, but we often bantered with one another. More than a few kids at our junior high when we started

there at first thought we were brother and sister. I've known Alice forever though so it kind of is like she's a sister, or at least that was what I thought until last summer. Or I guess the summer of 2009 more correctly since its not 2010 anymore.

I never really saw her as sister, just as a friend. It all started to shift around then, but it wasn't just her starting to, um, develop that made me see her differently. I think I had seen her as more than a friend way before sixth grade, but I hadn't known what those feelings were because I was so close to Alice it didn't feel any different. It wasn't till I started to… see things differently… that I… well anyway that's kind of private, and I don't know if I want to talk about it like this… I feel strange with Alice in the room right here listening, but I don't want her to go either.

So after we bantered some with each other we got onto the school bus sitting down in the back where Alice pulled out her cellphone. She had one of those Nokia's with the full keyboard. My mom didn't see a reason to get me a phone with a full keyboard. Smartphones were still really new so there was no way she was getting me one of those no matter how I begged. So I was stuck with a little flip phone from Motorola. Those things were such a pain to type on compared to today's phones!

Anyway she sent a text to another girl on her cheer squad while she asked me if I ever finished my homework. Which, uh, well I didn't. I'm in all these advanced classes in seventh grade, but I'm still really bad at homework even though I'm good at school. I just hate doing it, I'd rather play games on my Wii or be outside with Alice. I don't imagine my teacher was too happy with that, but that was forever ago so I'm sure its forgiven by now.

Alice was on the cheer squad, another reason why I felt like she was way out of my league if I ever tried to be something more than her friend. She was super popular despite having me as a friend. I wanted to just tell her all about these new feelings I had for her. Feelings that I had been feeling for nearly a year now or more, but I was too scared to. I didn't want her to stop being my friend because without Alice as my best friend the world would be kinda empty honestly. I had other friends, but none of them were Alice. It was more important to me that she stay my friend, my other feelings were just going to have be something I lived with. I'd hate seeing her kiss other boys, but I'd hate not having her in my life more.

School was pretty much normal up until lunch time. That was when everything in my life changed. After it all went down I felt like I might throw up at any moment from being so nervous. Either that or I was so happy that I was going to go up to the top of the school and scream for hours. I mean its the only way to describe how I felt. I don't know if Alice remembers it like I do, but that afternoon at lunch was when it happened. You see it started with James, like I said he had been angling for a few months now to get Alice to be his girlfriend.

James was a quarterback at our junior high, and as such he was one of the stars of the team. He was also a seventh grader so he was a lot bigger than me. Although most everyone is bigger than me at our Junior High. I'm what my mom and Doctor Norris both called a late bloomer? Uh anyway... Because of how popular Alice was as a cheerleader and how pretty she was it made sense that James would not only ask her out, but also that she'd be interested in him. I mean the athletic strong guys always seemed to get the really pretty popular girls.

I was not very popular at all at the school. I was a real uh, I guess geek is the word? I mean all of my friends other than Alice played D&D, and uh, well video games and the such. Alice played games, but only with me on the weekends when she wasn't doing cheer stuff. Anyway that afternoon we were at lunch. I remember that I was sitting with my friend Eric. I don't know if you remember Eric or not Alice, but he was kind of overweight, and he liked playing the game Magic. He was who I borrowed movies from all the time. His dad bought him everything he wanted. I was playing with him because he always brought extra Magic decks with him.

We were sitting at the table across from the one where all the cheerleaders and jocks sat. I noticed it when James sat down next to you. I don't know what he said or what he did, but you shook your head no. I saw it because I was sitting at the other table. I figured that was him making his move, but you were rejecting it for some reason. Which made me really happy. I didn't think James was good for you at all.

After a minute he leaned over to whisper something to you, and I could tell that his hand wasn't on the table anymore. You looked really uncomfortable as you pushed away from him, but he leaned in again to say something else. That was when inside I got really mad because I could see how uncomfortable you were. I don't know why I did what I did next, but well hmm maybe I do know why I did it. It wasn't because I wanted to be your boyfriend or that I liked you like that. It was that James was clearly

trying to make you uncomfortable. He wasn't taking no for an answer. Wasn't treating you like a person.

So I went over there leaving Eric looking confused as I moved to push James away from you. When I tried to push him off of his seat he just laughed. Then said something like, "What are going to do shorty slap me like a girl?"

All I really knew was that he had been making Alice uncomfortable, so I pushed him again, "Leave Alice alone." He chuckled then stood up faster than my mind could really process it. He pushed me then. I didn't see it coming at all, but when he pushed me down to the ground a few seconds later my butt sure did feel the floor. A teacher came over then stopping it before it became a fight that I would have died from. James gave me one last look like he was going to kill me later, but he moved off not wanting to get in trouble. After all he had football games to play, and you're not allowed to do that if you're suspended for fighting.

That was when I saw Alice again looking at me while biting her bottom lip in worry. I don't know if you know you do that Alice, but you do. A lot of times you bite your bottom lip when you're worried about something or someone. After James moved off you bent down taking my hand to help me stand up as you said, "What do you think you were doing?"

I just commented with a shrug, "I didn't like how he was treating you. No one should treat you like that."

Alice looked at me for a long time like she was trying to figure something out. Then that was when she said, "And how should someone treat me?"

I'm really smart, but my mom says that I'm also kind of dense about certain things. So I had no idea that Alice was asking a question that she had been trying to figure out how to ask for months, "Really special because you are."

"I are what?" That was how she said it which made me smile as she smiled too.

“Special.. t-to me… I should get back to my game..”

I remember starting to go feeling really nervous, I had just admitted how I felt without actually saying the words: I want to be your boyfriend. Alice though grabbed me by the arm not letting me go. When I finally stopped trying to get away she said, “You’re not getting away that easy Branden Alexander Leston.” She always used my full name just like my mom when I was in trouble for something. “What you just did was foolish, James is twice your size he could have really hurt you…”

I looked up at her, she was four inches taller than me roughly. Alice had always been taller than me even in kindergarten when we had first met. A few days after her family had moved in her mom and mine got to talking. Alice had walked up to me pulling me away from my mom. Somehow she made me her friend in a matter of minutes. I guess even back then I thought she was the prettiest girl ever. Even right now in that moment when she was being motherly to me in the middle of the school lunch room.

Alice does that a lot. I mean we’ll play rough all the time, wrestle and tickle each other. Run around outside, get dirty, ride our bikes till we’re both sweaty. At the same time she always like… well takes care of me. I always figured it was cause I was smaller than her, so she thought I was a little brother. Now I realize that it wasn’t that at all. Alice took care of me because of how she felt about me, and she was just as confused as I was by our feelings for each other. Probably for just as long too, but I didn’t know it until that day.

Anyway when she pushed my glasses back on my face I said, “I don’t care. I’d rather he hurt me than you. D-did he ask you out?”

Alice said, “He tried to and when I said no he tried again in an uncomfortable way.”

I remember getting angry but also saying, “Why did you say no?”

Alice just sighed with a groan, and my whole world became nervousness when she spoke next. Followed by a sudden fear of throwing up because I was so nervous, “Because I like you dummy! Not him!” When she said it I think she realized what she

had said because her eyes got bigger and she stammered, “u-uh y-you know if.. you like me too..”

I felt so alive, but also super awkward. I mean Alice was telling me she liked me, but I had no idea how to process that. It wasn’t only because I was nearly thirteen or any of that. It wasn’t just because the feelings were new either. It was because… well because it was Alice. I had this feeling that if we both had the same feelings for each other that it might mean the world wasn’t such a bad place after all. Anyway I remember I said, “Only if you like me too!” A couple of girls on the cheer squad actually snickered when I said that they were so close by.

To which Alice after glaring at them said, “I just said that to you!” We both kind of flushed then and of course that was when the school bell rang making us go back to class. The rest of school was kind of strange as was the bus ride home. I sat with Alice like I always did, but neither of us talked. When my hand brushed hers I started to pull it away, but she grabbed it holding it tightly. I liked how it felt having her hand entwined with mine.

Even now when she holds it lately to give me support cause I’m so scared about all of this stuff that’s happened. How I lost thirteen years somehow. When does it I can feel how much she loves me. Even if its different now that she’s older and I’m not. Or don’t feel like I am cause someone took thirteen years from me.

Anyway I thought after I got off the bus that I’d be able to go over to Alice’s house or hang out with her like we usually did, but I had a doctors appointment for my eyes. Then after mom and dad wanted to go out for dinner. I did get to text with Alice on my phone while I was at dinner. That was such a pain, because I had one of those flip phones with numbers. Pushing four buttons three times to get to one letter sucked! Anyway we agreed that I would sneak over to her house that night after I got back.

I had done that more than once, and the opposite as well with Alice coming over to my house. To the point that my mom was never surprised to find Alice in the bottom bunk of my bed. Alice’s mom was the same way if she found me on Alice’s large bed on one side with her on the other some weekend mornings. Even though we weren’t supposed to sneak into each others rooms anymore, but ask our parents if we could

sleepover we did it anyway on the weekends sometimes. Like I said it felt right just having Alice close by.

Most of the time when she sneaked over to my house she'd fall asleep holding my stuffed Charmadner. The days following it'd smell like her though I had no idea why I liked that back then. Just that being able to smell her when I held it at night comforted me. Usually at her house if we fell asleep on her bed at some point she'd wake me up to get me under the covers because we'd both be cold with the fan going. Till like fifth grade we'd sometimes fall asleep snuggled together for warmth, but with my uh… difficulties starting in fifth grade I was afraid to snuggle with Alice too much because she might have felt… well it would have been embarrassing!

Anyway my bedroom sat right in front of this huge oak tree that I could climb onto from the window, or that Alice could climb up to in order to sneak in to my room. Our parents thought it was cute until fifth grade. Then one afternoon her mom and my mom sat us down to talk about things. How we were about to be sixth graders. How that meant we were growing up. That we couldn't go sneaking into each others rooms anymore.

I think honestly that both of them saw what happened at lunch way before we did. They could tell that Alice and I were developing deeper feelings, or that we had always had them but just weren't aware of them. So I didn't tell my mom, but Alice really wanted to talk so I knew I was going to sneak over when we got home. I waited till about ten that night when I was sure my parents were up in their bedroom, and not down in the living room still. I jumped out onto the tree, climbed down it as quickly as possible, then ran down past the Marsden house to Alice's.

Alice lived in a one story so I had to sneak around to the back side. Then knock on her bedroom window. She opened it almost immediately looking at me nervously. I had stayed in my clothes because climbing in pajamas was a pain. I was in the same Charmander shirt and jeans that I showed back up in the other day. Alice was in her pajamas, a simple tee-shirt with I think Harry Potter on it if I remember correctly and a pair of flannel pajama pants. Honestly all I really remember clearly was what happened next. I remember that I felt really nervous all over again. I could tell that Alice did as well.

When I was fully in the room standing before her she said, “You have to ask me Bran.”

I gulped because I knew exactly what she meant I had to ask her. I felt nervous again. I mean what if she really was just messing with me? Well that was stupid, this was Alice.. my Alice. I could tell when she was messing with me like when she called me four eyes. Or yesterday when she got annoyed at me for annoying her which I know how to do because I’ve known her for so long. SO I spat it out, “W-will you be my girlfriend Alice?”

Alice actually stared at me for a moment then she said the words that I was dying to hear… oh wait no she messed with me first because that’s what we do, “UGH! No way! Not in a million years!” I started to get a hurt look feeling confused. I knew this because Alice grabbed me by the shoulders pulling me closer to her as she said, “I’ve been hoping you’d ask me to be your girlfriend for months now dummy.” I felt my cheeks flush, but I was too nervous for other things to happen. Although looking into Alice’s large green eyes seeing just how pretty she was, smelling that soft scent of the soap she used to take showers, it was almost too much for me.

After that we sat down on her bed just looking at each other with our legs crossed knees touching and all. I felt so nervous like I might throw up kind of nervous, but I didn’t. I could hear her television in the background. That was the only sound other than Alice’s fan twirling overhead. After a long moment of staring into her eyes I finally worked up my courage.

I asked her, “C-can I kiss you?”

Alice was as nervous as me I could tell, “Y-yeah I’d like that.” I don’t think Alice knew that I counted her as my first kiss already. Back a few years earlier we had kissed on accident when she was going for my nose to mess with me. Well she got my lips instead. Anyway this time it was a real kiss and my heart almost exploded when her lips touched mine. It was brief too, because we were so nervous. My heart raced a thousand beats a second as our lips touched at the same time. I was clumsy having never done it before, but it felt right when my lips touched Alice’s. It only lasted for less than a minute, but those seconds were the most amazing seconds of my life up to that point.

Her lips were bigger than mine just slightly. So when we touched it was like her bottom just below mine and her top one pressing to mine. I could smell her soap, feel her hands stroking my shoulders. I stopped breathing as the kiss lingered for those seconds. I could feel her breath on my top lip with how close we were, smell her toothpaste. It felt like the whole world was finally right! I was so happy that I almost threw up. Of course that was also when other things happened.

When we pulled back from the kiss her hands were still on my shoulders stroking them. Alice's cheeks were flushed, and I could feel how flushed my own were too. I wanted to just kiss her for hours upon hours. Like maybe sitting on the couch when our parents were out just looking at each other while we kissed. Laying on a bed kissing, just kissing I wanted to do as many times as I could with Alice. I remember saying, "Can we hold hands at school tomorrow?"

Alice with a flush on her cheeks said, "Yeah tomorrow and every day after till the end of the school year. Next school year too."

I was still looking into her eyes feeling so amazing like I was on top of the world and no one could spoil it. I said, "Cool. Y-you don't care if all your friends make fun of you for dating a geek?"

Alice squeezed my shoulders then, "Bran, I don't care what anyone thinks other than you. You're my best friend in the world."

I smiled, "Yeah mine too… I-I should go before your mom comes in or something I saw she was still awake."

Alice nodded as we started for the window. When I had climbed through it she leaned out grabbing my hand one more time to pull me back to her. This time when we kissed it wasn't as clumsy. I felt even more confident that we could learn how to kiss together. The way that her hands held my shoulders, how her soft lips pressed to my own sent shivers through my body. I wanted to pull her into my arms and lay with her on a bed just kissing for hours. I had a feeling right then that we'd try that over the summer. It made one part of me feel painfully sore at the thought, but in a good way. I couldn't wait for summer!

After the kiss I said goodnight to Alice who watched me go until I was down the street beyond her view. I was so happy, so very happy that I couldn't believe Alice liked me as much as I liked her. We had always been friends, but we were so much more now and it was so exciting. I had no idea how it had happened, but I was so glad that it had. I was climbing the oak tree to go back into my bedroom when I suddenly was sitting on a grassy ground looking up at a house that looked like mine, but there was no tree in the yard and the trim was a different color.

Then things sort of took all kinds of strange twists and turns. The people in the house called the cops on me when I kept asking where my mom and dad were. The cops came and tried to calm me down, taking me to the police station when I kept asking to see my parents. Then they were all confused for a long while as they kept saying that there was something strange about me.

The following morning I still didn't believe them that it was thirteen years later. It wasn't possible as for me all I had done was blink my eyes and I was thirteen years in the future. I knew it was real though when the door opened that morning and Alice walked into the room. Alice was still so…

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Alice sat there listening, feeling painfully aware of how hard all of this was to hear. Listening to Branden recall their last day together made things come into clarity for her in a way that they hadn't in so long. To hear how deep his feelings for her had run for months if not years shocked her, but she realized that hers were the same. To hear his heartbreak when he talked about why he didn't want to tell her he liked her that way. How afraid he was of loosing his best friend. How afraid she had been too of loosing him by telling him she liked him that way too. Then his clear heartbreak when he trailed off about seeing her for the first time in what had been thirteen years for her, but just a night for him.

“Alice was still so beautiful. I don’t think I could ever find her not to be, no matter how old she gets. Anyway the rest you know…”

Doctor Jackson was quiet for a long while, her eyes meeting Alice’s once then looking back at Branden laying on the couch. “Branden, I want you to go back to that moment climbing the tree. Try and think did someone grab you? Did someone pull you out of the tree? Do you remember anything about that?”

Branden scrunched his forehead head as he tried to think then he said, “No sorry doctor I don’t remember anything… I feel like… like I should. It feels like its there, but I can’t… find it.”

Doctor Jackson wrote something down then said, “Okay Branden, when I count back from five you will wake up feeling refreshed. You will also remember all of this session. 5,4,3,2,1” Branden opened his eyes sitting up slowly on the couch. When he looked at Alice he flushed looking away as Doctor Jackson said, “I feared that this might take more than one session. There’s something blocking a part of your memory. You have perfect clarity up till the moment you leave the bedroom, then everything else is just kind of vague. I want you to come back next week, give the brain a chance to work through things. Often with blocks like this pulling at it opens it up. Someone doesn’t want you to remember what they did to you. We can figure it out though.”

Branden gave a small nod, “T-thanks Doctor…”

Doctor Jackson smiled, “Its what I do young man. I’ve helped both adults and kids with blocks bigger than yours. Most of them from deep abusive trauma. Yours does not seem abusive, its seems like it was placed there by someone who knows something about memories. Someone who doesn’t want you to remember what happened in the times following when you were taken. If we tug at it hard enough it’ll come loose.” She then said, “Why don’t you go get a cup of water from out in the waiting room, you were talking for almost two hours.”

Branden nodded looking at Alice once as she squeezed his shoulder to tell him it was going to be okay. He was smart enough to know that the doctor wanted to talk

with Alice alone. Alice watched him leave. When the door was closed she said, “For him all that was just a few days ago, for me it was… thirteen years.”

Doctor Jackson sighed, “In time he will realize as you have already that those years change feelings. Just give him time and raise him as best as you can. Be his friend, show him that he can try again.” Alice gave a brief nod of agreement. Her mind though was not going in the same direction as the doctors at all. “I can find the truth Agent Nills, just give me a few more sessions. We will break through the block.”

Alice said, “Thanks doctor. I will, we’ll be back a week from today if that works?”

“Yes a week is enough time for him to work through all of what he revealed today. The way blocks like this work is that the comforting events around them are stronger more clear. It reinforces those moments to make the missing time feel not as important.”

Alice paused looking back at the doctor, “Are you saying that to make what he said about his feelings for me back then more comforting?” She only gave Alice a soft sad smile which told Alice all she needed to know. Those memories were real and as deep as possible. Branden felt them still even now, and looking at him as she stepped out of the office Alice realized that she felt them as well. Hearing him talk about her in such detail made her realize that she was still in love with him as much as she had been back then. He was Branden, if he had stayed she knew what the future would have been. Whoever pulled him away from it would pay, but maybe it wasn’t too late for that to be their future still. She had a feeling he was still seeing the girl of thirteen when he looked at her, even as he saw the adult before him.

Alice smiled once at him as Doctor Jackson said to Branden, “ Branden try and think about that moment in the tree, focus on it above all. Really think about it more than anything else. If you pull at the moment where time skips it’ll eventually come free. If not we’ll try a deeper regression next week.”

Branden gave a small nod as Alice said, “Thanks again Doctor.” She smiled once at both of them before going back into her office. Alice said, “Lets head back to the apartment.” Branden gave a nod throwing the little paper cup away in the trashcan. As they stepped out of the office Alice found his hand again entwining her fingers

with it. Inside she was a growing mess of confusion and desire. After hearing him talk about that final day in such clarity left her feeling pangs of need to feel those moments again with him.

Alice wanted to turn right there in the elevator, rest a hand on his chin turning his eyes up to meet hers. Then she wanted to lean down to press her lips to his in the same way she had that night thirteen years ago. She wanted to do far more than that. Instead she held his hand, feeling comforted by having Branden so close to her. His feelings were the same as they had been thirteen years ago, but so were hers. She was still in love with this boy, and Alice was willing to wait till he was older if she had to. Yet she knew if at some point today he took a kiss things wouldn't just stop there, she no longer cared about the laws. Today had broken that final barrier, this was Branden. He was that one person that really got her, and if he wanted to explore this she'd let him.

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The only sound in the car as the two of them drove back to the apartment was the thumping of the wheels on pavement. Alice didn't know what to say, and Branden was still clearly processing things while staring out the window. The moments in the psychiatrist office still lingered between them unspoken with tension so thick that you could cut it with a knife. What he had said was what he still felt for her. When she looked at him Alice could feel a thousand confusing thoughts that made no sense to her. She was an adult, a woman who had been through thirteen years of life that had changed her. The moment of his disappearance, the things that came after it were all a part of who she had become.

Branden was literally that same boy, nothing more than a few days had passed for him since the night of their first clumsy kiss and the promise of hand holding. Hand holding was a stark reminder of how a seventh grader saw a relationship compared to how a twenty-six-year-old woman saw one. It wasn't fair that they had lost those years. There was no way to know if they would have worked out, but there was a deep feeling of knowing life with Branden was better than life without him. Even though she had found a way to get over him eventually things had been different after he was gone. The world a less exciting place, even when she had met Stephen it hadn't felt right.

When she pulled into the parking space at the apartment Branden got out of the car not speaking still. Alice walked with him quietly into the apartment closing the door behind her. She watched him walk over to the couch sitting down on it looking almost

lost and lonely. She dropped her keys in the small bowl on the kitchen counter by the front door before walking over to where Branden was. Alice sat down next to him on the couch kicking her sneakers off. Once they were off she kicked them under the coffee table then put her feet up on it. Branden did the same thing putting his next to hers a moment later.

His feet were a few sizes smaller than hers, and his legs were smaller clearly. There was still no hair on his legs, which Alice found she liked. Although it was also a stark reminder that the boy was just barely entering puberty. He was a late bloomer, probably because he had been born premature. Although that hadn't affected his brain at all. In school Branden never struggled, was always in the advanced classes. Never even failed when he didn't do his homework or study all that often. His brain was kind of like a sponge.

A few minutes passed then she moved to rest one of her feet between his. Branden a moment later moved to lay his head on her shoulder. She rested her head on top of his a second later. This just felt right in a way that it never had with anyone else. Like they were both thirteen again maybe even younger, just hanging out together like they always did. Alice started flipping through the movies on the Disney Plus application for her television. When she picked the Pixar movie Incredibles, Branden just gave a nod on her shoulder without speaking a word. Alice gently kissed the top of his head feeling comforted by having him against her like this.

Again as The Incredibles started playing Alice thought about how right now if life had been fair that they'd be sitting on a couch like this in some house somewhere. They'd be watching this movie with a kid who was roughly three or four years old showing him or her this film for the first time. Thoughts of how Branden would have asked her to the prom during their senior year entered her mind. How her mom and his parents would have gushed over pictures of the two of them together.

How gentle and attentive he would have been when they slept together for the first time. She imagined it would have happened sometime during eighth grade, maybe ninth at the latest. It might not have been perfect because it was a first time. It would have still been everything she imagined a first time should be, because it would have been with him. Not some looser asshole that cheated on her a week later.

Those years were lost to the ether of time. It didn't matter anymore. This was what was important. These were the moments they had now. Branden's words from earlier, his memories on full display of their first kiss left Alice unable to stop thinking about how things could have been. How they could still be if she was just willing to take the risk. No one had compared to what she had built up in her mind after he disappeared. For so long now Alice thought she had made him more perfect for her than he really was.

The reality was that she hadn't. All of those memories of the years with Branden weren't flawed or skewed because he disappeared. Branden did have flaws, he wasn't a perfect person, but he was her perfect person. When the movie was at the halfway point she made a decision to move forward, "Remember when your mom took us to see this in the theater?"

Branden answered, "Yeah, it was so cool. I mean Incredibles is the best Fantastic Four movie ever made. Just sitting in the theater with you was so cool too. We snuggled just like this the entire time laughing together. It was amazing, until you stole my last M&M."

Alice defended herself, "I didn't steal it you offered it to me."

"If I'd known it was the last one I wouldn't have! It was peanut! You should have known better."

Alice chuckled, "Whatever nerd. You drank the last of the soda!"

Branden grunted, "That's cause you ate the last M&M, its called pay back candy thief!"

Alice turned slightly resting her head in his hair for a moment, memories flooding back of a lifetime spent with the scent of Branden close by. Softly barely above a whisper, "I still love you too Branden."

Branden moved to look up at her as he said, “I know you’re my best friend so of course you do.”

Alice touched his cheek then softly stroking it. Thirteen years ago she’d have been a nervous wreck trying to touch the boys cheek, but now she knew how to be intimate with someone else. She felt horrible for that, because shouldn’t Branden get the chance to discover what he liked and how to intimate with someone his own age. Yet she couldn’t stop the flood of emotions that were taking over her. Alice could feel herself getting lost in the depths of his light hazel eyes. His words from earlier came flooding back to her. This moment was the reason why she had started talking during the movie. She could see all of his emotions just buried in his beautiful eyes. How clearly he still thought she was the most beautiful girl in a room even though she was thirteen years older than him. How his desire to be with her was as strong as ever. He still wanted her as his girlfriend just as much now as he had back then. Despite the confusion of coming back with thirteen years missing, his love was the same. Alice realized now that hers was just as powerful now as it had been thirteen years ago. This was Branden after all.

She stopped stroking his cheek, “That’s not what I mean Branden…”

She saw him swallow, “I… y-you d-don’t think I’m… I mean I… I’m still only twelve.. er I guess thirteen now...”

“What would you do right now if you could Branden?”

Branden’s expression was a mix of desire and nervousness. Alice thought about taking the first move. Just leaning down to press her lips to his smaller ones and once more feel that connection she had missed these past thirteen years. She didn’t though, no she waited a few heartbeats for Branden to work up the courage. It had to be this way, he had to be the one to take it instinct and desire both told her to let him. He leaned up to press his lips to hers, and it was like she had never left that bedroom the night he disappeared. His lips were soft, gentle, and warm pressed to her own.

It was like that first one, clumsy and full of nervousness. Alice though had years of understanding how nervous a first kiss could make you. She returned the pressure

gently, her hand moving to hold the back of his head as she felt Branden rest his hands on her shoulders. She could taste him, that uniqueness that was him below their lunch. She could feel his hands holding her shoulders tighter as the kiss lingered. He was a child, a boy barely of thirteen years. She was a woman grown, but in this moment she was Alice and he was Branden. Everything in the world felt right. The kiss was like going home after being away for an eternity. Tasting him on her lips, feeling his one hand moving to touch her cheek while she ran fingers through his soft hair. It felt like… well it felt so familiar that her whole body ached with the desire to never let go again.

Alice pulled back from the kiss, catching her breath as she felt Branden's hand slide off of her cheek. The young boy opened his eyes slowly, his cheeks flushed still. Alice felt flushed as well, her entire body awash in emotions she hadn't felt since that first night thirteen years ago. "T-that was better than the first time…"

Alice looking at him took his hand from her cheek holding it in her own, "I… shouldn't have let you do that…"

Branden softly said, "But you wanted to as much as I did. You said you still loved me… I still love you too Alice. I don't care if you're older, you're still… you're still everything to me. I'll spend the next five years proving it if I have to."

Alice was about to lean over and kiss him again when there was a knock to her apartment door. She turned to look at the door, once again something else preventing her from exploring whatever was happening here. She knew who it was before she opened the door, the universe was laughing at her perhaps, or sending a message. Stephen stood there his light brown hair neatly combed, he was tall and handsome.

He was the type of man that any woman would have probably fallen for just by a look he gave them. His eyes were an almost gray color, not quite blue, but close to it. He had been handsome as a kid as well, she had seen more than a few pictures over the past few years. She knew that even when Bran did get taller he'd never reach the stature of six-foot and three inches that Stephen was. He would probably be close to Alice in height. Stephen wore a simple button up shirt and slacks that added to his handsomeness.

He looked totally unconcerned about anything. In his right hand he held a bottle of wine casually. The man oozed both confidence and sexual magnetism. The way he stood there made him look more cocksure than he usually did as well. He was proud about something, and judging by the label on the bottle of wine Alice had a feeling she knew what it was. He wasn't even going to remember that she was working on a case right now. Or that they were supposed to celebrate her working her first full case. After taking in the entire ensemble she said, "You're early."

Stephen said, "I figured we'd celebrate I mean clearly you decided it was time to talk, and I've got some big news..." He stopped as Branden came to the door behind her looking up at Stephen. "Whose the kid? Part of your case? When you said you needed to talk I thought… well never mind."

Alice looked over at Branden. The look on his face was clearly one of him trying to figure out why she was with this man. He just touched her hand with his own once before saying, "I'll be in your bedroom Alice. I-I'll let you talk." He studied Stephen again almost like he was sizing up the competition, but there was no competition in her mind. She just had no idea what she was going to do or say to Stephen.

"Thanks Bran." He gave a simple nod before grabbing his cellphone on his way to the bedroom. When she turned back to Stephen she said, "We need to talk."

"Who is the kid?"

"I told you I was involved in a case, well its not… its not that simple" She gestured for him to come into the kitchen where Stephen put the bottle of wine down as she said, "I can't really talk about it right now, but needless to say it involves the thing that happened when I was a kid. You know when my friend disappeared."

Stephen nodded, "Yeah I remember, the boy that lived next door, name started with a D or B something lie that. I told you that chasing after that stuff would just depress you. What does this kid have to do with that?" The fact that Stephen didn't know or remember Branden's name did not surprise her. It was one of those things about him, how he half listened when she talked, never fully listened. Yet he had been the best out of all the boys and men she had dated. He would have made some very beautiful children that her mother would have adored. Well Bran could make some

very beautiful children as well, it'd just be a little longer… if she could ever figure out how all that was going to work exactly with him being thirteen years younger.

Maybe it wouldn't work out, maybe he'd go back to middle school in the fall. Find out that he wanted to be with girls his own age not with a woman in her thirties by the time he was twenty. She pushed those thoughts away, this was Branden she had to trust that he was feeling exactly what she felt. Finally she answered Stephen as best as she could without giving the truth, "He's related to one of the boys that went missing. He kind of just appeared in the middle of nowhere, and his DNA matches that of one of the boys so we're trying to figure out what happened."

Stephen looking at her rested a hand on her arm, "And why is he staying with you?"

She again skirted the truth, "Because I'm his guardian currently. We feel it would be safer till we can find out what happened. That's not important though. Its not why we needed to talk."

Stephen leaned back studying her, "You're not telling me the whole truth, but you're not going to tell me either are you?"

Alice hated herself just a little for not doing this sooner, for denying what her heart had told her a year ago. Her head though hadn't let her break it off because of what she desired. "I'm not, and not just because I can't. Its… all of this that's going on made me realize something… I'm not happy."

Stephen leaned over to touch her arm again, "Its your job Alice. You want a family and something more relaxing than what you do."

Alice pulled her arm back as she said, "Its not my job Stephen. Do you even listen to me? Ever?"

Stephen sighed deeply, "Of course I do Alice, I'm listening to you right now. I'm telling you that you don't see it, but I do. That you're not letting yourself see how

wrapped up you get in this kind of stuff. How drained it leaves you. It doesn't have to be that way. You don't have to leave the FBI, but you could take an easier job. Find the time so we can have kids, be a family."

Alice shook her head, "I told you the first month when we started dating four years ago what my job meant to me. It was the same back then, hell six months in you were already working to get me out of this job. Do you even love me? Or respect me?"

Stephen grunted, "Of course I do. I wouldn't be with you if I didn't Alice. I just see how your job wears on you."

"Like yours doesn't? Like any job doesn't come with some kind of amount of stress? I'm helping kids get back to their families or get away from horrible parents who hurt them. Yeah sometimes I see some really horrible things, but I know I'm doing something to make those kids lives better. That I'm making the world a little less horrible for them. You really don't get why I do my job do you?"

She sighed standing up handing him the bottle of wine, "I'm not happy because of my job Stephen. I'm not happy because I'm not in love with you. I wanted you because you were the safe correct option. My mom loved you, my dad respected you. They both saw a chance for grandchildren with their only child. The truth is you were safe, but I didn't ever, and I still don't love you."

Stephen put the bottle down on the table, he was quiet for a moment then he said, "I know you don't." She looked up at him feeling surprised, "I've known for a long while that you don't. When you turned down moving in together. I knew it then." He sighed and touched her shoulder, "I'm not lying Alice, I love you. Maybe not enough to make up the difference in our relationship. I always kept hoping that you'd come around to see my side of things. I won't fight you on this anymore Alice. I'm thirty-six and I'm tired of waiting for you to decide that you're ready to grow up." She started to say she was plenty grown up, but he interrupted her, "Trust me you think you are, but you're still caught in what you lost. The best relationships, the ones that last are the ones like what we had, respect with just the right amount of love. We could have grown old together, comfortable with one another. I would have given you all of that. We don't need passion, it just fades with time, its the respect and care that stays."

He started for the door as Alice said, “You’re right, passion does change with time. You don’t respect me or even listen to me half the time, don’t even try to deny it. Knowing the other persons interests, history, what drives them is important too. In our first few months together I told you all about my previous boyfriends, do you even remember when I lost my virginity? I could tell you when you lost yours. Could tell you why you decided to go into corporate law when you were in college. Could you tell me before today why I wanted to go into the field I chose at the FBI?”

Stephen stopped with his hand on the door gripping it once. Then he opened it with a chuckle, “Goodbye Alice, I hope you find what you’re looking for. I just wish I had gotten the courage to end this a year ago when I knew that you weren’t ever going to let me propose to you.” He looked back at her one more time, “I was too invested in what we could have made together to just quit though, and so were you. Something changed…”

Alice didn’t argue with that, “Yes it did, this case has made me realize that I might still be able to find what I’ve been missing all these years.”

Stephen nodded once more, “Keep the wine, a parting gift.” Then he closed the front door gently not loudly. He wasn’t the kind of man that got angry, he just accepted and moved on. Alice leaned against the wall by the door letting out a long sigh as she tried to come to grips with what had just happened. Four years gone in a snap of fingers, all for something that would probably crumble the moment the boy was around other kids his age.

She was still thinking that when Branden said, “That was kind of… intense.” She jumped just slightly at the sound of his voice. Alice looked over at where he had come out of the bedroom, “I tried not to listen I swear.”

Alice shook her head standing up from where she was leaning on the wall, “Its okay Bran. I don’t care if you heard.”

Branden walked over to the wine bottle picking it up as he said, “1957 that’s got to be expensive.” Alice took it from him taking a look at it for a second then tossed it in the garbage, “Don’t like the vintage?”

Alice closed the top of the can as she chuckled, “What a fucking asshole.”

“Uh I am not!”

Alice shook her head, “Not you nerd.” He stuck his tongue out at her which made her chuckle before she told him, “Okay so I met Stephen in Morocco when I went on vacation with my mom and Henry.”

“Whose Henry?”

“My mom’s new husband, she married him when I was sixteen. He’s a really nice guy loves video games, so I think you’d get along with him pretty well. Anyway on our third night in Morocco I met Stephen.” Alice walked over to the couch sitting down on it as Branden came over to sit down next to her listening.

“He came in and swooped you off your feet?”

Alice chuckled, “No one swooped. He used some cheesy pick up line about me being in a movie. It was kind of sweet, reminded me of something that you would probably have said.” She paused as she leaned back on the couch with a sigh. “Anyway when we sat down for dinner he ordered this wine. Said it was the best vintage they had there. That he had four bottles of it at home that he bought years earlier when he first visited.”

Branden said, “Well so he brought the bottle to celebrate that first night to propose with it... right? No…” the way he looked at her face told her that he could read her emotions, “That’s not right huh?”

Alice gave another dry chuckle, “Not in a million years. He brought the bottle the same reason why he brought it last year too. To celebrate him getting another huge account closed for his company. Probably made them a few hundred million dollars or more. When he did it last year I reminded him casually about our first date in

Morocco. How he told me about the four bottles. He just said that kind of stuff wasn't important it was the intent of what we could build together that was."

Branden said, "What an asshole."

Alice sighed before putting her arm around his shoulders before saying, "Yeah no kidding. Now Imagine that he's the best thing I've dated since I started dating."

"Even better than me?" There was a soft sadness in his voice.

Alice kissed his cheek, "Bran we never got to date remember?"

"Yeah… and now we can't either… not for another four years."

"Four years?"

Branden shrugged, "Legal age of consent in… oh we're not in Texas… we're in California." He reached for his phone then typed in something before groaning, "Five years."

Alice took his phone looking at it before putting it down on the table, "In five years I'll be in my thirties and officially old."

Branden moved to put his smaller arm around her shoulders as he rested his head next to hers, "You'll never be old to me Alice. You're Alice…"

She chuckled, "And what about when you go back to school and see all those hot middle school girls that find you simply adorable…"

Branden shrugged, “They can look all they want, but I’ll still want to be with you. It felt right when we kissed… like that gulf of the years that are between us disappeared. I know we can’t… be more… that its not legal. That doesn’t mean that we can’t try the rest of it.”

She put her feet back up on the coffee table with Branden’s joining hers again as she said, “The rest of it?”

“The dating and such. I was thinking I saw that they’re showing that new Batman movie in the theaters. That we could go see it this weekend if we’re not too busy with figuring out where I went…” When she didn’t speak for a moment he said, “If it a stupid idea I’m sorry I brought it up.”

Alice rested her head against his again, “Its not a stupid idea. Its just, Bran I just got out of a relationship…”

“Yeah, but it was with an asshole who probably didn’t even remember that your birthday is March twenty-fourth. Or that your favorite flower isn’t a rose but a daisy. Or that your favorite movie is Groundhog Day because you love romantic comedies… unless its not anymore…”

When he trailed off waiting for conformation Alice said, “It still is. You remember all of that huh?”

Branden shrugged, “You’re important to me, when you talk with me about something I listen. I’d never make you quit a job you like doing either.”

Alice kissed the top of his head, feeling his hand squeeze her shoulder once, “So a date on Saturday seems like a good idea to me. You and me, a bucket of popcorn, two sodas.”

Branden said, “One soda, we can share i-if you want to.”

Alice chuckled, “Okay one soda, but I get to pick what kind.”

“Okay, Can we get some peanut M&M’s also?”

“Yes and I promise I won’t steal your last one this time.”

Branden put his foot in-between both of hers as he said, “I don’t mind Alice. I’d give you my last anything.” Alice turned to look at him as he looked up at her and she felt lost again in the boys hazel eyes. Five years seemed like such a long time to wait. Did she dare explore something more with him now? What if she broke him, or rush him to these moments because of her own selfish desires? Made it all something he regretted along with giving his love to an adult woman?

What if she let him explore at his own pace. Guide him, but let him decide for himself how fast they went, then there would be no regrets. This was Branden she could wait till he was older, but she could also let him explore whenever he was ready even if the law said he couldn’t. Legally he wasn’t thirteen anyway his birth year was 1997 not 2010. Gently she kissed his lips once more and felt her entire world open up in new ways that she had never expected. She felt like she had found what had been missing at long last when she was kissing Branden. This boy was what all the other boys and men had been a pale imitation of. She wasn’t going to make him wait for five years either.

When Alice pulled back from their lips being pressed together she said, “How about if we order some dinner and watch a movie?”

Branden said, “S-sure, can we do pizza?” Alice smiled grabbing her phone. They spent a few minutes going over toppings and other things before settling on a pizza that was half and half. After that Branden got up, “I gotta go to the bathroom, and um I-I’m gonna take a shower too...” Alice smiled watching him leave, admiring his skinny yet familiar frame. A few seconds after he left she felt her heart beat quicken. She realized with years of experience now behind her the reason why Branden was taking a shower without her gently telling him that maybe he should. The thought that the boy was masturbating made her feel hot inside.

She went back to the other morning when she had felt him on her leg, nowhere near as big as an adult man, but not small either somewhere perhaps in the middle? He hadn't really gotten past the first stage of puberty, but it hadn't been tiny from what she could remember. The thought of seeing him, touching him… Alice shook her head she didn't want to do things with a child. This wasn't a child though, this was Branden.

If he hadn't been pulled away she would have done all kinds of things with him before eighth grade. She had been curious about him, about boys in general, but especially about Bran. Was it wrong that she was still curious? That she still desired to be with him even though he was just barely a teenager? Even though he still looked like a boy of ten or eleven at the most?

Alice struggled till Branden came out of the bathroom just before the pizza guy showed up. He came out in that Charmander tee-shirt and his pajama pants looking as adorable as possible. No it wasn't wrong she decided, especially if she let him set the pace of their moments together. He went with her to get the pizza taking it into the kitchen while she signed for it since she had forgotten to select no contact. When she walked into the kitchen Branden was sitting at the table with a slice in his hand already. "Some of your ham got on my sausage side…"

Alice said, "Well it looks like some of your sausage is on my ham side!" She smiled at him as he smiled back before eating his piece of pizza. Sitting down to get her own slice she said, "I'm going to start looking for a small house in a nice neighborhood out here so that you can have some privacy. With your own bedroom and bathroom."

Branden's cheeks just slightly flushed as he said, "Yeah your couch isn't all that comfortable."

Alice nodded, "I know, I'll let you have the bed tonight and I'll sleep on the couch."

Branden finished his piece of pizza as he said, "We could just both sleep in the bed. Like each have our own side and such. We used to do it at your house…"

Alice saw just a small flush on his cheeks as she debated on doing that. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea Bran. We were just little kids then, and well I think our moms were probably right that we were too old for sleepovers like that in middle school. Add on the fact that I’m and adult now, its just too…” She didn’t want to say what thoughts were shooting through her head about it.

Branden’s small flush though told her all that she needed to know about his thoughts. “I guess you’re right, but I trust you Alice. Plus the bed is more comfortable.”

Alice sighed, “This has to be the strangest thing that has ever happened to someone ever.”

Branden agreed, “Yeah skipping thirteen years in the blink of an eye is strange.”

Alice smiled, “That too. We’ll try it one night see how it goes. I’m still going to fast track finding a house near by.” Branden gave a small nod then went back to eating. After they finished the pizza Alice went to brush her teeth then get into her pajamas. Tonight she picked pajama pants and a tee-shirt. As she started to pull the pants up she realized what she was doing, trying to not give Branden something to look at. She was trying to look as plain and uninteresting as she could. Alice had a feeling it wouldn’t work, he’d still find her attractive no matter what. These returning feelings she had for him were just too complicated though.

She had those thirteen years on Branden, and that made her want to be more affectionate than just a kiss. She saw her desire differently than she had when she was a kid. It made her want to go further with a man she cared about. Step over boundaries that she couldn’t with a kid. The kiss was already one step too far, but she wasn’t going to stop kissing Branden now. It felt right when she kissed him, as right as it felt when they snuggled together on the couch. A part of her ached for and wished that he was an adult, but another part was curious about him at his current age.

In the living room she sat down on the couch with Branden, arms around each other as they watched another Marvel movie that he had missed out on. It felt good having him next to her, feeling him laugh when a funny scene happened. When the movie

was over she could feel how exhausted the day had left her. She could even tell just how close to sleep Branden was. Suddenly nervousness set in, but she was willing to give this a try if Branden was. When she turned off the television she said, “Come on lets go to bed.” Branden yawned as Alice stood up to head for the bedroom. When he didn’t follow right away she said, “Coming?”

Branden with a second yawn said, “Yeah in a second.” Alice was pulling the covers on the bed back feeling nervous and a little strange about all of it. For years she and Branden had fallen asleep together, sometimes even at his house they’d fallen asleep on the bottom bunk together. Yet it felt strange now the idea of sleeping with the boy. Not just because it had been thirteen years, but because those feelings from seventh grade were still there.

She was about to slip into the bed when Branden came into the room making straight for the bathroom. She smiled when she heard him brushing his teeth. When he came out a moment later it was to quickly get into the bed on the other side. When they were both laying on the bed looking up at the ceiling in the dark Branden said, “Alice c-can I ask you something?”

“Anything Branden.”

She thought maybe he had fallen asleep when he was quiet for nearly two minutes, “H-how many guys have you um been with?”

“Hmm, well there was Stephen of course, the first time was Jake Sanders…”

“That was when you were in high school right, the guy that took your virginity?”

Alice smiled to herself, his recall of their conversations always surprised her. How much he paid attention to things even when she had been a kid, “Yes, he was the first, then there was Alan and Nathan when I was in college.”

“So just four?” He said behind another yawn.

Alice replied, “Yes just the four.”

When she felt his hand touch hers Alice opened her palm letting his fingers entwine with hers as he said, “I-if I hadn’t um gone away would you have been with any of them?”

Alice felt the silence linger for a few heartbeats before she said, “No Branden I don’t think I would have even met any of them. Well other than Jake because even if I was dating you I still would have joined the high school cheer team. He was on the football team so I would have had to turn him down when he asked me out.”

“D-did you like Jake?”

Alice looked over at him, “Why do you want to know this stuff Bran? Doesn’t it make you sad or uncomfortable?”

Branden turned to look at her, “It makes me sad a little that I missed all of it, but I still want to know what you went through while I was disappeared.”

Alice twisted onto her side resting a hand on his chest where she could feel his heart beating. When she felt the beat increase just slightly she had a feeling that she knew where blood was rushing to in his body. The thought that just her touch could give the boy such a reaction excited her. She pushed the thought away and answered his question instead, “I liked Jake enough to agree to date him for a few months. Or at least I liked the idea of someone wanting to date me. Inside I was still kind of a mess, but I felt it was something I had to do to try and get beyond what was gone…”

Branden twisted so that he was facing her now too, “I get it Alice. I mean if you had disappeared or something like that on me it would have been years till I got over it too, if ever.”

Alice smiled, “I never did Branden, I just found a way to keep going. Anyway Jake isn’t anything I want to talk about. It wasn’t like how I had imagined it would be. All he wanted was to get laid.”

Branden rested his smaller hand on her cheek, “I’m sorry Alice.” She took it holding it in her own again as he said, “Uh was um this Stephen guy good?”

Alice sighed, “Branden why are we talking about my sex life? There is no way that this is good or comfortable for you.”

He rolled onto his back as he said, “I guess I want to know what I missed. But I also think about sex a lot.”

Alice chuckled, “I’m not surprised you’re at the age where it starts to become fascinating. You know I did too right?”

He looked over at her, “Y-you did?”

Alice shrugged, “Sure, I think most kids in our junior high thought about it. I know some were even having it.”

“Like who?” The curiosity in his voice was obvious.

Alice chuckled again as she thought about who she knew for sure had been having sex, “Well Amanda Peters was definitely having sex.”

“She’s the girl that tossed you during cheer right?”

“Yeah.” She was going to have to remember that for him all of that was just yesterday, for her it was thirteen years.

“How do you know she was having sex, did she brag about it?”

Alice shook her head, “No, that fall she came back to eighth grade with a uh… well she got pregnant over the summer. So she had a baby bump.”

Branden looked over at her with wide eyes, “No fucking way.”

“Yes fucking way.” Alice smiled as he smiled then she said, “Anyway what you’re trying to tell me is that you’re curious about my sex life because you’re curious about sex.”

Branden swallowed then said, “I wanted to do a lot more than just kiss you its why I was so nervous when we kissed the first time. I mean I would have been nervous no matter what… but sometimes I start to think and I can’t stop thinking about certain things…”

“Certain things?”

Branden was clearly flushing even though she couldn’t see it in the darkened bedroom his voice was a dead give away, “L-like what you’d look like naked. I-I wanted to see you naked… I-I s-still want to… and I know I can’t till I’m eighteen… b-but s-sometimes l-like earlier I can’t stop thinking about it… I-I’ve never wanted to see another girl naked…”

Alice could feel her heart beating like crazy, but she still called him out on that last part, “That’s some real bullshit Branden Alexander.”

Branden sighed with a groan, “Okay fine I wanted to see lots of girls naked, e-even um o-one of our teachers, but I would have been happy just seeing you and never anyone else.”

“Which teacher?” She had a feeling she knew, but she wanted Branden to tell her.

“Ms. Wilkes.” Ms. Wilkes had been a woman in her mid-twenties at the time, tall and slender, most of the boys had preferred Mrs. Saylers who was more endowed.

“Not Mrs. Saylers?”

Branden shook his head, “No, she was pretty too, but she was married and um well I just thought Ms. Wilkes was better looking. Eric always said that the other girls on your cheer team were more pretty than you were, but he just wanted big tits on girls. I just wanted you…”

Alice chuckled as she said, “I don’t know what to say to all of that Branden. I know if you hadn’t disappeared that my first time would have been better, and probably earlier too.”

“How early?” She socked his shoulder then as he rubbed it he said, “Sorry!”

Alice chuckled again at his reaction to the light shoulder tap, “Probably eighth grade. You know you’re not the only one that wanted to see someone naked.”

Branden looked over at her, “Y-you wanted to see me naked? W-why?”

She rolled her eyes, “Because Branden Alexander Leston boys aren’t the only ones that are curious as to what the opposite sex looks like naked.”

Branden seemed shocked, “Really?” Alice gave a nod, “I would have shown you if you wanted to see.”

Alice smiled, “I would have too Branden. I think that summer would have been a lot different than the ones before it.”

The quiet returned then Branden said softly, “I-I still want to see you naked… b-but I know… you don’t want to see me naked c-cause I’m still a kid.”

Alice didn’t know what to say. Her heartbeat increased again as she turned to look at him. She rested a hand on his chest as she said, “You’re pushing me into dangerous territory Branden. I shouldn’t…” she sighed before admitting the truth, “I want to Branden. I want to see you naked even right now, to know what I missed seeing and discovering with you. I can’t though, its not fair to you because you already missed out on seeing me when I was just starting to bud like you are…”

Branden said, “I-I don’t care about that… I mean wish I could have, but its okay that I didn’t get to… anyway like I said you wouldn’t like seeing me naked…”

“And why not?”

He shrugged, “Cause you’ve seen adult men naked and they’re bigger than me. Its okay I can wait till I’m older.”

Alice leaned over then to gently kiss his lips once then she moved to lay down on her back beside him again this time with their shoulders touching, “I can’t promise you where things go Branden. Or how quickly we get there, or even if we should. I don’t want to make you feel like you have to be with me because of our feelings in the past. Or even in the present. You might find that interacting with kids your own age makes this different, or weird when you go back to school in the fall. So I don’t want to rush things, and I hate the idea of making you uncomfortable when you’re older about doing something so illegal that it has to be kept secret. That said, you have a lot to learn about girls, and what they desire or don’t desire to see.”

Branden was quiet again for along while when she finished speaking. For a moment Alice thought maybe she had said too much. Or that she had confused him instead when he spoke it was the usual Branden, “So you do want to see me naked still even though I’m not an adult?”

Alice took his hand in hers again, “I do, I want to recapture all those moments that I missed with you Branden. But I don’t want to make you uncomfortable about doing things with an older woman.”

Branden said, “I wish you’d stop saying that. You’re not really older than me.”

“I’m twenty-six Branden, you’re thirteen. Face it I am older.”

He sighed, “No you’re not. I mean physically you look older, and you have thirteen years of experiences out here so you’re older in that sense too. Literally I’m four months younger than you. Just because I stopped growing physically doesn’t mean that the world stopped spinning. Wherever I was during that time. How ever I didn’t age physically or had all of my experiences locked away doesn’t take away the fact that I kept aging as the world kept spinning.”

Alice chuckled, “Are you trying to justify my desires to see you naked?”

Branden shook his head, “No. I’m trying to find a way to see you naked without you being weird about it!”

Alice softly said, “Pervert.”

Branden said, “You’re the one who wants to see a thirteen year old boy naked!”

Alice groaned, “You just said you weren’t thirteen!”

“Well I am and I’m not! Perv!”

“I hate you Branden Alexander Leston.”

“Well feeling’s mutual Alice Irene Nills.” Her fingers squeezed his again as his head touched hers while they both looked up at the ceiling. After a few minutes as her eyes closed Branden said, “You’re the best thing that ever happened to me Alice…”

Alice squeezed his fingers tightly, “Yeah I know. I love you just as much.” Sleep found them then, and Alice knew that inside she’d fight with those two parts of her that worried she would ruin Branden, but also wanted to be with him. She knew though that if Branden pushed the issue that she’d give in, because she knew in her heart of hearts that he would never regret a moment with her. Never regret the strangeness of how this happened. They had belonged together from the moment they met, and even thirteen years in age difference couldn’t keep them apart. It would be like a first time all over again, watching Branden figure out what he wanted, what he liked, showing him what she liked. She had a feeling it would happen sooner than she thought as well...

XXXXX

The first thing that Alice’s mind became consciously aware of was the feeling of a head on her shoulder along with a hand on her stomach that were both not hers. She was on her back when she woke the following morning. Branden was on his side snuggled up against her. It was a position she could remember them ending up in many times when she was younger.

Alice could feel the soft breath of a boy on her neck as she became more aware of things around her. When her hand touched the back of his head Branden rolled onto his back next to her with a mumbled set of unintelligible words. Then he went back to sleep pinning her arm under him. Alice extracted the arm without the boy waking before she slipped from the bed. Her mind was still filled with thoughts about how she was going to handle this situation.

Her mind replayed their conversations from last night while she headed into the bathroom. Along with the amazing kiss that had left her feeling a desire to explore even more. Finished in the bathroom Alice walked back into the bedroom taking in the sight of Branden still asleep. The Charmander tee-shirt he wore had ridden up just enough that she could see the boys belly button. The sheets were off to the side, where she had left them when she slipped out of the bed. Alice tried not to go lower, but when her eyes rested on his middle she felt a slight tinge of desire to touch every inch of his body. Especially when she realized the boy clearly had an erection in his pajamas.

Alice shook her head, trying not to think about what it would be like to see that part of him. To actually wrap her hand around it while she stroked him until Branden had an orgasm. To put her mouth on him, or put him inside of her. Partly it would be recapturing moments that she had missed in her youth because he had disappeared. Part of it was that the underlining desire to be with Branden was still stronger than any other desire in her past life. Alice walked from the bedroom after grabbing her phone only taking one more simple glance at the sleeping boy. Three inches? Maybe four?

It was hard to tell with a tent, and thickness was impossible to tell. The thoughts of what it would be like to touch him now, of seeing it, feeling it in her hands, mouth, and other places passed through her mind again. She couldn't stop thinking about pleasuring Branden. Strangely Alice did not finding the disturbing or sickening. She knew if it was any other random boy of thirteen that she'd feel nothing but the desire to protect them. This was Branden though, it was different with him. She was… well she was in love.

A few minutes later she was brewing a cup of coffee while looking through a Realtor app at houses that were near by. She had briefly flirted with looking at houses for her and Stephen earlier in the year. She had been very close to telling him she was ready to try living together. Now she was looking for something that she could afford on a single salary, but was also in a decent neighborhood for Branden to go back to school in a few weeks. She finished bookmarking four houses to get in contact about when Branden stumbled into the kitchen looking half awake.

He sat down at the table across from her as Alice smiled, "Breakfast?"

Branden as he put his head down on the table said, "In a moment, I can get it myself. Y-you're not my mom."

Alice squeezed his hand gently, as she stood up going over to the fridge, "I am not your mom. I don't want to be, but that doesn't mean that I can't make you breakfast. I'm going to take a guess that you still like them scrambled with cheese?" She pulled out a carton of eggs then went to get a pan.

Bran from the table said, "You sure you're not going to burn them?"

Alice turned looking at him, “Are you implying that I don’t know how to cook?”

Branden shrugged, “I dunno just remembering that time that you burnt that grilled cheese.”

Alice sighed, “That was one time! I’d made like thirty of those things before then!” He smiled that little half smile he did. Alice almost threw an egg at the boy, but instead she cracked it in the bowl to start scrambling them. Branden got up as she was scrambling the eggs to come over and help. He put his arm around her waist once hugging her with his head against her shoulder which made her hug him too. She went to kiss the top of his head instead her lips banged into his nose as he tried to lean up to kiss her lips. They both laughed then did one simple kiss.

It was about then that Alice realized what she felt against her hip, but she didn’t comment on. The truth was though that she could feel Branden’s erection against her with how he was hugging her from the side while they kissed. It was still hard to guess, but she was pretty confident he was less than four inches. Alice had of course felt erections before, but feeling Branden’s mad her curious. She also didn’t want to embarrass him so Alice didn’t mention what she could feel. Instead she said, “here why don’t you add the cheese to the eggs when they’re cooking in the pan?” Branden nodded with a simple flush as he stood next to her.

While the the eggs were cooking she got some English muffins out of the pantry. Alice put them in the toaster. Then she went to the fridge to get some butter and jelly while Branden grabbed some plates from the cabinet. When everything was done they sat down at the small kitchen table to eat. Branden after taking a bite of the eggs said, “What are we doing today to figure out where I was for thirteen years?”

Alice was honest, “I don’t even know where to look Bran. I think the only solution is to keep pushing at the block that Doctor Jackson says is in your brain. Focusing on other things right now is probably the best solution. I was thinking that today we’d go look at a few houses in the area. See which one we like the best. Something close, but also in a really nice location since you’ll need to go to school eventually.”

Branden took a sip of his orange juice, “Okay. We don’t have to get a house right away though Alice. I don’t mind living here…” His cheeks heated just a little when he finished talking. There was a part of Alice that didn’t want to change things around either. Sleeping with Branden last night hadn’t bothered her in the least. In fact honestly it had been amazing waking up with him in her arms, but he was still a boy. He was mature for his age sure, but still a boy. He needed some privacy, not just being thrust into a serious relationship.

“Yeah we do, you need your own personal space, and so do I.” She reached across the table resting her hand on top of his, “We had literally just kissed for the first time when you disappeared Branden. I don’t think we should just be sleeping together all the time. Or sharing this small of a space with each other. Even though we’re going to see what we feel, the truth is you’re still…”

He interrupted her, “I’m still a kid and you’re an adult. I know. I also know that a year, five yeas, ten years isn’t going to change how I feel. I-I’m sorry I’ll still do boy things if I do, but I’ll grow out of it eventually…”

Alice chuckled when she picked up his empty plate along with hers, “No you won’t. I don’t expect you to stop being a boy even ten years from now. The difference Branden is that in ten years you’ll see the world differently than you do now, but that doesn’t mean you have to give up being a boy.” She turned back to look at him, “I wouldn’t want you to especially if we do work out because that part of you would make a really good father.”

The look on his face almost made Alice think she had said too much, pushed too quickly then Branden said, “I’d like that too… I mean one day. N-not right now…”

Alice smiled, “No pressure Bran. Lets juts take it every day one day at a time. See if we don’t annoy one another by the time the year is over. You might find out that I’m not the Alice you remember.”

Branden disagreed wit her, “You’re still who you were.. or are… You’re older, but that just made you more uh you.” The way the boys eyes lingered Alice almost want to pinch his side and tell him to stop giving her those kinds of looks. Had he done that when they were in seventh grade when he was keeping his attraction a secret?

Looking back on it she was pretty sure he had. Alice back then hadn't noticed because she was too confused with her own thoughts and feelings to realize that he was going through the same thing.

Instead she just chuckled, "You really think so huh?" Branden gave a nod, "Well that might be the nicest compliment a boy has ever given me." She leaned over to kiss his lips once lightly then said, "Why don't you go get ready first. We'll head out in a little bit I just need to make a few appointments, and then I'll get ready after you."

Branden got up from the table, "Okay… I'm going to take a shower first…" Alice just gave a nod with a smile as he left the kitchen in a hurry. He was most definitely a middle school boy. Alice chuckled to herself as the thought of what that must be like entered her mind. She had gotten a very healthy feeling to explore herself around that age as well. Thoughts of exploring Branden had crept into her mind more than once even before that afternoon in the cafeteria, and that evening with their first kiss. Ah to be a fly on that wall…

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When Branden stepped out into the living room about twenty minutes later Alice said, "I really hope you left some warm water for me." His cheeks flushed in a delightful way that almost made her pull him into her arms and kiss him. Back thirteen years ago if she made a comment about long showers. Or asked him about that part of him Branden would have responded the same way as he did now. It wasn't because she was an older woman now. He was a boy who was embarrassed by the fact that his body was going through hormonal changes, and needs that he hadn't had before. Alice just kissed his cheek to show she was joking as she went into the bedroom. "I'll be out in a few then we'll head out."

Branden nodded sitting down on the couch, she turned back to look at him once seeing him shift on the couch and felt her heart beat faster. It wasn't only because

she knew he was probably shifting from their kiss, but because he looked so handsome in that moment. Branden was just trying to relax on the couch without flushing. Even though it was clear that he was admiring her as she walked into the bedroom. Hell she wasn't even in revealing clothing and Branden was admiring her.

Alice knew that Branden had gotten erections before middle school. She had once heard his mom talking with her mom about how lucky she was having a girl. How often the boy woke up with "wood" as she called it, or idly played with it until she finally told him not to do it in public places even his own living room. That of course had been when Branden was younger, strange how idle conversations came back to you sometimes. She hadn't even understood really what they were talking about when she was eight or nine. Just that boys woke up with wood or that they sometimes played with it.

In the bathroom she chuckled when she saw that Branden had drawn a heart in the steam on the mirror. She had a feeling that he had known she'd probably take a shower too. Alice pulled her pajamas off as she started the shower. She paused a second later when she went to throw them into the open hamper. The other part of living with a boy became very clear to her as at the top of the pile of Branden's clothes was a pair of boxer-briefs. He had gotten boxer-briefs that were comic movie themed. Alice could just imagine how they'd look with his erection pressing them outwards. She picked up the pair examining them, they were just a size or two smaller than her own panties. She dropped them along with her pajamas into the hamper before getting into the shower.

Alice tried not to focus on the complex feelings she was feeling for Branden. It wasn't about the sexual side. Yes she was interested in being intimate with the boy when he was ready for it. As she washed she realized that while the idea of seeing him naked fascinated her. What was more important to her was that they formed a real relationship. She knew that most people would think that she was stupid for thinking a boy Branden's age was capable of an adult one. That she would be forcing him to grow up too fast. Well those people didn't know Branden. Even back in middle school Branden had been an oddly mature boy. It was one of those things about him that Alice adored.

More than that she knew herself, she wasn't looking for him to be mature about everything. She knew that he was still just barely thirteen. That he was in middle school not even high school. That he'd have some ideas about how things worked

that weren't mature adult ways. At the same time she knew that she'd be patient through all of it. That she could weather the storm of his teenage years with him, if he wanted to stay with her. She finished her shower, while drying off then getting dressed she let her thoughts linger on the strangeness of this whole situation.

It was possible that he did go back to school and find that girls the same age as him were more appealing. It was possible that her heart got shattered by him falling in love with someone his own 'age'. It was also possible that Branden was telling the truth, and no one would ever be able to replace her in his heart. Just like she knew she would never love anyone the way she did Branden. Something told her deep inside that he wasn't going anywhere, that he'd never stop wanting to be with her.

That moment thirteen years ago when she told him how she felt the same way came back to her. How clear it was that Branden only had eyes for her. How by then he probably had already dreamed up a whole scenario of them getting married then going on a honeymoon more than once. It was just the kind of person that Branden was.

After she got dressed Alice headed out into the living room where Branden was watching the Guardians movie again clearly. When she stepped out she saw his eyes do that scanning of her that she had seen him do even when she was younger. It wasn't like a lingering unsettling I'm undressing you look in his eyes, but more admiration. The fact that he liked her in just plain jeans and a tee-shirt with her hair up in a ponytail didn't surprise Alice. She walked over to the couch sitting down next to him as she said, "So where would we have gone?"

Branden said, "Uh what do you mean where would we have gone?"

"For our honeymoon."

Branden looked over at her then his cheeks heated as he said, "I don't know that!"

Alice chuckled, "Yeah you do!"

“Fine… Disney World.” He shrugged, “That’s where I would have taken you. Unless we went earlier somehow.”

Alice reached over taking the controller to turn the television off as she said, “You spent all afternoon after I said I wanted to be your girlfriend thinking about that I bet.”

Branden flushed, “Yeah, but I had dreamed about it before.” Quietly he said, “And I even thought about going to the school dances with you, and um what it’d be like to kiss you in the pool or hold you…”

Alice kissed his cheek as she stood up, “Well two of these houses have pools so that’s not out of the question either. Come on lets head out.”

Branden stood up as well as he said, “I wish I could get those years back Alice… I mean the time with you not the years themselves.”

Alice touched his cheek, “I do to sweetie I do too…”

He flushed, “Sweetie? So can I call you babe?”

She eyed him, “If you do I’ll remind you that I know all of your weak spots.”

Branden gave that half smile that meant trouble, “How about baby-cakes?”

“You’re dead!” When she moved towards him Branden jumped up onto the coffee table going across it to get to the other side of the small living room. Alice was tempted to ignore him, but she was already committed. She went for Branden, chasing him around the living room back towards the bedroom. She caught up to him at the bed pulling the boy down onto it as she straddled him leaning over to dig her fingers into his arm pits through his tee-shirt. The sound of Branden’s laughter filling her ears reminded her of all the times she had done this when they were younger.

When he squirmed under her she felt his hands trying to make their way to her ribs as well at her sides. Alice stopped tickling him as she grabbed both hands pinning them down on either side of his head, “no way buster you’re not getting near my ticklish spots.” Branden stuck his tongue out as she chuckled sticking her own out back in turn.

“You always were stronger than me.”

Alice moved her hands up to entwine with his. Then she squeezed his fingers with her own once before leaning down to gently kiss his lips, “I think you liked that…”

Branden shifted under her as his cheeks heated with a flush, “I like everything about you…” Alice felt something then pressing to her crotch through her jeans. It took her a moment to realize where she was resting and what she was feeling. Branden’s cheeks heated even more as he shifted again, “Sorry.” She figured that her eyes must have widened just slightly.

Alice slipped off of him sitting down on the edge of the bed. Branden sat up a moment later to scoot so he was sitting next to her. Alice had to admit she was curious, “Did you used to… well get that reaction every time I did that?”

Branden softly answered after a moment, “Yeah… sure… y-you never felt it before?”

“When I was thirteen, or before that?”

He shrugged, “I dunno.. s-since I was about nine it would happen sometimes when we wrestled and tickled each other… y-you always felt soft in all the right places. I liked how it felt when you’d pin me down. Something about you straddling me like that even back then... y-you never felt it?Really?”

Alice thought hard for a moment or two then said, “I probably did, but I didn’t know what it was. Or it didn’t register because I didn’t think about things that way back then.”

“Things or me?”

Alice looked over at him, pushing his glasses up on his nose, “Sex things. Not you, I didn’t know I was in love with you till middle school Bran, but I was always in love with you. Just like you were with me. I would have noticed it if we had gotten to wrestle after our first kiss, because by then I was aware of certain things that before then I just kind of didn’t think about.”

It was clear he was curious about that, “What kind of things do you mean?”

“I think you now Bran. You’re going through the same thing all boys go through. They just kind of pop up now for no reason at all when before it took something to make it happen…” The look on his face was enough to make her laugh just a little, “Its natural for boys, for girls too, but we can hide it better during puberty because we don’t have sticks.”

He sighed, “Yeah true… but you’re not wrong either although I u-used to just sometimes play with it even before sixth grade cause I felt good…”

Alice smiled at him as she admitted a truth she had never told another soul, “Yeah, well you’re not alone. I used to as well. Why do you think that Mr. Snuffles was my favorite stuffed animal…”

When she looked right at Branden as she admitted to him what she had never told anyone his entire face went red again and his jaw dropped, “Y-you used to.. with Mr. S-snuffles? B-but h-how?”

Alice shrugged, “I rubbed against him, its just something girls learn to do, just like boys learn to rub their boners. It wasn’t something I told you, because I didn’t see it as something to share. It wasn’t really sexual just… calming. It became sexual when I started hitting puberty. By then I wanted it to be you not Mr. Snuffles…” She felt her heart beat increase again and her own face flush just like a teenage girl as she admitted the truth.

Branden said, “wow… poor Mr. Snuffles… used and abused…”

Alice hit his shoulder, “I should hurt you within an inch of your life.”

Branden rubbed his shoulder, “I just… it never occurred to me that girls.. well that they.. I don’t know how it works I guess…”

Alice put her arm around his shoulder, “I promise you Bran when you’re ready to know how it all works I’ll show you. The deal is that we go at a slow pace though. I Don’t think its a good idea for me to just thrust all of my knowledge upon you. We’ll figure it out and work together to see how far we should go. Right now I think we’re at the right place just cuddling and kissing what do you think?”

Branden looked up slightly at her, “yeah, I do like the kissing. It feels amazing every time we do it. Like the first time only better because I’m not as nervous.”

Alice leaned over then to kiss his lips. This time as their lips connected she pulled Branden down onto the bed beside her. They lay on their sides facing each other as Alice lightly touched his lips with her tongue, “Is this okay?” Branden gave a small nod inviting Alice to bring her tongue in-between his lips. He tasted of toothpaste she realized as her tongue touched the tip of his. Inside Alice could feel thousands of little butterflies dancing around in her body. She was kissing Branden, actually kissing him.

Her one hand rested on his side rubbing along the length of it softly as she felt his tongue hesitate to press back to her own. Softly Alice whispered, “just relax, don’t rush it, let your hand explore upwards if you want. You have my permission.” Branden’s cheeks went a little more red as Alice leaned in to kiss him again. This time her tongue pressed the boy smaller one back into his mouth she could taste Branden as his tongue pressed to her own.

His one hand resting on her side moved up a bit more until it brushed along the outer curve of her small breast. When he did that Branden’s breathing stopped for a

moment. Alice let instinct driver as she pulled Branden more into her arms until they were laying on the bed with the younger boy on top of her. She could feel his skinny frame pressing to her now, feel the clear sign that he was erect pressing to her lower stomach.

His hazel eyes were so easy to get lost into as she leaned up to kiss him again. Branden's hesitance at the new feeling of kissing seemed to be disappearing quickly. His tongue pressed to hers this time as Alice felt him also press his middle to her stomach. He was trying to rub his erection against her Alice realized. She ran a hand down his back as their tongues danced exchanging saliva. Alice slipped a hand under his tee-shirt, rubbing along the soft smooth skin of his back. Not a single hair graced the boys back, not even fine ones that some kids his age had.

When he pushed against her stomach again while his tongue tangled with hers Alice ran one of her hands down his back to gently squeezed the boys round bottom through his shorts when he did that a small surprised gasp escaped from Branden's mouth. Alice pulled back from their kiss looking at him. He face was slightly smaller than hers, just like his entire body was. It looked incredible though all flushed with desire for her. Branden's smaller hand stroked one of her cheeks as he said, "this feels nice."

Alice smiled, "Yeah I can feel how nice it feels." Branden in shocked realization started to bury his head in her shoulder. Alice though pulled him to her, "Sweetie a girl likes to know that her boyfriend likes making out."

Branden smiled back, "Yeah?" Alice gave a small nod as he leaned back down to kiss her lips again. It felt like Alice was back at the age of thirteen again. Like she was getting that summer of making out on the bed back to her. Of slowly exploring the other person's body and getting to know each other. She had only wanted Branden back then, and now even though things had somewhat changed she realized that she still only wanted him.

She was about to pull his tee-shirt over his head when there was a loud knock to the front door. They broke the kiss the look of surprise on Branden's face clearly matching her own. Alice sighed just a little, "I swear to god if that's some kid or some evangelical trying to get me to convert to their god I'm going to kill them."

Branden sighed to as he slipped off of her just when a second knock came to the door. Alice saw him shift his shorts once before he followed her out to the living room. She was pretty sure that Conner wouldn't be coming back here. Pretty sure that if he had gotten control of the case that he hadn't let any of it out to other departments. They were safe, or as safe as they could be when dealing with something mysterious like a disappeared boy reappearing while having not aged a day.

Alice looked over at Branden once when they got to the front door. She had a strange feeling that once again their life was about to be turned upside down. That they were not going to be waiting for the block in Branden's head to break open. Whoever was behind this door had answers to the questions that they were asking.

Alice looked through the peep-hole as she put a hand on Branden's shoulder pulling him to her side so that he was behind the door when she opened it. A man stood outside looking nervously at the apartment door. His hair was mostly gone, he just had some on the sides of his otherwise bald head. If Alice had to guess he was just a few inches above five feet in height. By all appearances he looked like he was somewhere in his fifties or sixties. He kept playing with a baseball cap that he kept in one of his hands looking around nervously as if he might have gotten the wrong place, or was being followed.

He knocked again and Alice said softly to Branden, "He doesn't look dangerous but stay behind the door just to be safe." Branden nodded looking up at her nervously with some fear in his eyes too. Alice tried her best to not look worried as she squeezed his shoulder once before opening the door. The man looked up at her in surprise jumping at how quickly she opened the door, "Can I help you?" Maybe he was knocking on the wrong door.

"Agent Nills right?" Well that theory went out the window, "The boy is here, safe with you still?" Alice looked to the side where Branden was before turning back to look at the man. "Its not safe for me to stand out here for very long can I come in? They think I'm visiting a relative. If they knew what I did a few days ago they wouldn't have let me leave the base."

Alice didn't think the man looked like a threat, but she wasn't sure. The way he looked around outside though with quick shifty glances let her know that he was

probably not here to hurt her or Branden. She gestured for him to come inside. She closed the door behind him after one look outside again. As the strange man walked in she turned to look at Branden to see if he knew the man. He shook his head not sure if the man looked familiar or not. As she closed the door Alice said, “Who are you and how did you know where to find me?”

He turned looking at her, the mans movements were a little squirrely that was the best way to describe them. He looked afraid about being in the apartment honestly. Maybe afraid of everything or everywhere for all she knew. “The agency is tied into all databases of the government which meant all I had to do was type in your name to find where you were. Thankfully no one has figured out that I let the boy out so they aren’t looking for him.” His eyes rested on Branden for a moment, “Hello again Branden, I’m glad to see that you’re well.”

Branden swallowed, “I-I don’t know you…”

The man nodded, “Yes of course not. The wipe worked nearly flawlessly. I’m Doctor Vissen one of the scientist that monitored you. I took care of you for a long while, before they shuttered the project.”

Alice and Branden’s eyes met as she said, “You know Branden? You know why he hasn’t aged… what happened to him?”

The sound of a car horn going off made Doctor Vissen jump as he said, “Y-yes I do, but I can’t talk here. I’m positive that General Pearson has men following me since I left the base. No one knows yet what I’ve done, but they’re suspicious of why I wanted to visit that base after all this time. Sergeant Daleson agreed to keep them off my trail as long as possible, but I've already noticed a few men following me. The General thinks that I’m visiting family. That I’m dealing with my sister’s estate after she passed away. He doesn’t trust me though so I know he sent them.”

Alice sighed, “and you came here?”

“I couldn’t walk up to you in a public place, you’d probably have freaked out. Look, meet me at The Grove, its large and public. If they catch up to me I can evade them

easily, and they won't even stop you." He looked at Branden again then before going for the door said, "I'm glad that I was right, this was the right decision. The other boys… they… well I'll talk about it when we meet again… the food court, get something to eat and join me at the table." He opened the door as he looked back, "If you don't come I'll understand there may be other ways for you to uncover what happened during those years, but you won't be safe here for long if they find out what I've done. They will come for Branden." Then he walked out the door quickly.

Alice when the door closed turned to look at Branden, "No memory at all?" Branden shook his head as if to say that there was nothing. Alice knew the signs, the man was clearly terrified of what he knew. Yet somehow he had gotten Branden out of the place that he had been in for the past thirteen years without others knowing. Which explained why no one had come looking for Branden. "What do you think?"

Branden swallowed, "Y-you're asking me to decide?"

Alice rested a hand on his shoulder, "Bran, its your choice. Its your memories and years that were stolen not mine."

He nodded looking up at her then said, "W-what if its… what if its horrible?"

"I'll be there with you. No matter what." She squeezed both of his shoulders reassuringly.

"Okay, I want to know then… I need to know." Alice smiled pulling him into her arms hugging him as he hugged her too. They looked at each other then she leaned down to kiss his lips. Branden when they pulled back from the kiss said, "I can't wait till I'm taller so you don't have to bend down to kiss me."

Alice smiled as she pushed his glasses back up on his nose, "I don't mind Bran. All that matters is that I have you back…" He flushed as she admitted how deep her feelings for him were. They got their shoes on then headed down to the car. "I just wish he hadn't picked The Grove its on the other side of town." She sighed as she started the car.

Branden said, “And it ruined our chance to go house hunting. Do you think if we do get a house that we could have a game room? With a really big television?”

Alice sighed with a chuckle, “Boys… Yes Branden we’ll look into all of that I promise.”

He leaned back in his seat, “We don’t have to, I know its your money not mine…”

Alice took his hand holding it, “I want to give you the things you missed out on Branden. We’ll figure it all out I promise.” That was all that the both of them needed in the moment. On the drive to the mall Alice put on some music that they both had liked as kids the two of them singing along to songs that for Branden weren’t that old, but that she still loved as well. The other reason why she didn’t want to go to The Grove became obvious as they pulled into the very crowded parking lot. It was a Saturday so of course people were out in throngs.

They walked through the mall before getting to the food court area where she let Branden pick what they were going to eat before they found Doctor Vissen sitting at one of the outdoor tables around the area. The man still looked nervous as they sat down with food that she had a feeling was barely going to get touched, though Branden was already doing a good job on his fries. When the doctor looked around again one more time Alice said, “Your nervousness is going to draw people faster doctor.”

He nodded then said, “Yes.. yes… true, but I don’t have a lot of time. I can’t tell you everything, but I can tell you that there is a way for Branden to remember what he has forgotten.”

Branden looked over at the doctor, “I-I have thirteen years of memories?”

Doctor Vissen shook his head, “Not really thirteen years no… its… you weren’t exactly conscious for most of the years… at least not how we perceive it.” He pulled a small jump drive out of his pants pocket. “I want to give you this, it might help

Branden remember things. There was a lot that happened far in the past. Some things that the government would rather the public never know now that they shuttered the project. Some things that we did to you and the other boys that they'd rather no one ever find out about."

Alice slipping it into her jean pocket suddenly thought of Mrs. Alvers, "Other boys?"

Doctor Vissen looked around again then cleared his throat, "Its all there, that's my own private journal including notes I made for myself only regarding what I think it all means. Things I observed for years, things the government doesn't want revealed ever. Especially not now after Project Integration has been successful. In here is all of the data I collected on the boys, but also some pictures and videos of the Artifact. You'll see."

He looked around again then said, "I have to go. There are three men following me. I-if one of them approaches you tell them that you're my niece they won't know any better right now. They don't know who you are, but that doesn't mean they won't question you. I used my sister's death as an excuse to visit family. My fear is that General Pearson thinks I'm going to the media with my information now that they're shutting down the project for good. After you know everything I think you'll know what needs to be done Agent Nills. I'm trusting you."

He paused for a second looking back at them as he stood, "D-don't stay in your apartment, get what you need and leave… after they break me they will realize the truth. Don't look at the files on a computer with internet access turned on either. Inside my notes is the location of a contact who knows where Mr. Leston was kept for most of these past thirteen years. If you wants answers that's where you should go. Time is short, they plan to kill the entire project within six days if not sooner."

He leaned over to hug Alice as he finished talking, "I will keep them off of your trail for as long a possible." He paused looking at Branden as he said, "I-I'm sorry for what we did to you son… t-those stolen years it wasn't right. I wish I had known what I know now... before it cost those other boys their lives…" He looked around once more then much louder he said, "It was good seeing you again Rachel. I'm sorry about your mom. I wish I could have been at the funeral." Then putting a hat on his mostly bald head the doctor walked away from the table.

Alice turned to look over at Branden who was still looking at the man retreating. When they both stood up to go about five minutes later a man in a dark black suit approached them. There were two other men dressed the same coming into the area looking around at either end. She noticed that when they didn't see the doctor they began to move around the mall again looking for him. For a moment Alice thought he might be pulling a gun or getting ready to take them into custody. Instead he seemed to study her for a moment then said, "Ma'am did the man you were talking with tell you where he was going?"

"M-my uncle? No he just… he seemed really worried about something…" Alice worked quickly to cover for her and Branden, "When he told me he was in town I thought it was to settle my mom's estate. The things she left him. Instead he just kept going on about how he wished he could have been at the funeral… is something wrong?"

The man nodded, "No Ma'am. We allowed Doctor Vissen out to visit with family, but he's.. well ma'am he's not well. Please if you see him again detain him for us. We've been looking for him for a few days now. He keeps managing to get away just as we track him down."

Alice put a hand on Branden's shoulder squeezing it as she said, "We'll be sure to…" He handed her a card before moving on. She studied the card, there was no name on it just a phone number and the acronym: USAF on the card. She took Branden's hand, "Come on lets go back to the apartment and pack a few things, then we'll get a hotel for a few days." Branden squeezed her hand back tightly as she could sense his fear.

Their drive back to the apartment was mostly a quiet one, though Alice could feel a growing sense of fear and dread from Branden that probably matched her own. When they got off the freeway heading back towards the apartment Branden said, "You think he's telling the truth?"

Alice looking over at him as the gate to the complex opened said, "I have on idea, but my gut and training from the FBI tell me that he's definitely hiding something. Its also clear that he knew you which tells me all I need to know." She touched the jump drive that was in her left pocket once before pulling into one of the apartment parking spaces. "I think we'll feel better about it all after we see what's on this jump drive."

When Branden looked at her Alice could feel his nervousness. “I… what if it was something really bad? He said something happened that made them stop… what if… I don’t want to remember Alice? What if I’m better off not knowing what they did to me for the past thirteen years?”

Alice reached over, gently taking his hand as she said, “Its up to you Branden. I will protect you no matter what. I will do everything in my power I swear. That said, if they did something to you and the other boys. Experimented on you for their own gain, or worse just because they could. Revealing it, getting it into the hands of as many people as possible could be the only way that we protect you.”

Branden squeezed her hand back then said, “I know you’re right. N-no matter what you’ll still be there with me right?”

Alice leaned over then lightly kissing his lips as she stroked his cheek, “I will always be with you Branden.” They slipped from the car then going up into the apartment. “We’ll take a few days worth of clothes, go to a hotel that takes cash, stay off of my credit cards just to be on the safe side.” She pulled out her phone sending an email to Conner that was encoded with words about how she was going with her mom to visit a relative. The way that she worded it was to make sure her boss knew what she was actually doing. After they had finished packing all of the things they’d need she got an email response back from her boss. It was a simple response telling her to be safe, that he hoped she had a good vacation.

Alice went to grab the suitcase that they were taking, but Branden got it first saying, “I got it.” Alice smiled, he wasn’t a little kid, he could handle a suitcase. They headed out of the apartment then down the stairs. The sound of the wheels on the suitcase hitting the stairs from behind them as Branden dragged it made her smile. A memory from when she was ten and went to spend a week with her dad for the summer came back to her. Branden hadn’t wanted her to go, but when she finally got him to stop being depressed about it he had helped her get ready. A similar thing of him pulling her suitcase down the stairs behind him insisting that he could do it without her help. Both of their mom’s laughing about it making Alice giggle too.

In the car after the suitcase was stored Branden said, “If he got me out and there were other boys why didn’t he get them out too?”

Alice rested her hand on top of his, “Maybe he couldn’t risk getting all of you out together.”

“Where did all my memories go though? If something happened to me after I disappeared why can’t I remember it?”

Alice shook her head, “I don’t know Branden, but if I had to guess he had a reason for suppressing your memories. Its not that they’re not there, its that they’ve been hidden from you. Maybe to buy us time.” She started to pull out of the parking lot. “If he had just dropped you on my doorstep with all of your memories intact then things would have played out a lot differently than the did. The fact that you reappeared where you disappeared. How the police department contacted me. The fact that it was so strange that you hadn’t aged a day. My boss suppressed all of that so it hasn’t gone beyond him. If you had come back with all your memories they would have found you already because we would have reported things totally differently. The fact that its a mystery as to what happened to you left my boss no choice but to keep it all swept under the table. Its standard operating procedure.”

Branden leaned back in his seat as he said, “On top of that these guys have no idea I’m even out here. Its just so strange Alice… I want to know what happened, but I’m also afraid of what happened to me.” He sighed, “I hate mysteries. I’d rather have my memories.”

Alice squeezed his hand, “I know sweetie, but at the same time I know I’m right. The fact that we were contacted because of your reappearance in such a strange way is the only reason why no one has caught onto the fact that you’re missing yet. It was actually very smart of him to do it this way, you not knowing anything is what has kept you safe. Combined with the fact that police don’t contact military but the FBI in missing person cases like yours. For now we’re safer because you don’t know, but after this… we’ll just have to stay off the radar for as long as possible.” Branden sighed, but she knew it was a sigh of agreeing with her. For now they’d go to a hotel, stay safe, off the grid as much as possible. Whatever it took to keep Branden from harm.

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The hotel was one of those type that don’t ask a lot of questions, took cash, and sat off of an interstate close to one of the smaller towns outside of LA. It was around four

in the afternoon when they arrived and the place looked dead. Alice got them a room on the first floor though the person behind the desk seeing her with a boy let her know that it was a room with a single queen sized bed. Explaining that they only had double bed rooms on the second and third floors. Alice made up some line about not liking heights. That she preferred to stay on the ground floor even if it meant sharing a bed for the night with her kid. The guy behind the desk eventually just shrugged while taking the cash for the room.

In the bedroom Branden dropped the suitcase on the bed, while Alice dropped her backpack onto the dresser. The hotel was old and showed signs of not being all that well maintained. Branden sat down on the bed as it creaked making him jump on it a few times. Alice looked over at him catching her eye he smiled as he said, “You know you want to!” Alice chuckled as she sat down next to him and the two of them made the bed bounce a few times. It reminded her of being eight when her family and Branden’s had gone on vacation together. The two of them had jumped on one of the old beds in one of the rooms making it creak just like this one.

When Branden stood up to jump more on the bed Alice grabbed him running her hands over his ribs making the boy giggle as she pulled him down onto the bed. The springs made that horrible bouncing noise that filled the whole room combined with Branden’s giggles. Like this leaning over him she could see his face flush with the giggles while she tickled his ribs. She stopped after a few rubs up and down his ribs, then gave into her own desire. Gently Alice kissed his lips as Branden began to return the kiss she felt one of his hands touch her cheek.

Alice broke the kiss leaning over him, looking into his hazel eyes. He was such a beautiful boy, suddenly she was imagining what in a few years their kids might look like. Branden perhaps saw something in her eyes, “You okay Alice?”

Alice smiled coming back into the present not thinking about where her future might go, “Yeah I’m okay. Just thinking about how much I missed you.” She sat up slipping off of him as she remembered why they were here. There would be time later for kissing and exploring. She headed over to the dresser grabbing her backpack where she had left it. Alice pulled out her laptop setting it down on the small desk by the dresser. She had to drag one of the chairs over to sit down at the desk.

Branden sat up from where he had been laying on the bed watching her. She found the jump drive that the doctor had given her, as she loaded her computer up. Alice turned off the WiFi and blue-tooth even though it wasn't connected to anything just to make sure that someone with a device of some kind couldn't sneak in somehow. Then she put he jump drive into one of the USB slots on the computer as she said, "You ready to see what all this is?"

Branden on the bed gave a small nod with a swallow as he said, "I'm a little nervous about it. Like what if s-something really horrible was done to me that I don't want to remember."

He came to stand beside where she was sitting, she reached over taking his hand as she said, "If so I'm here." She scooted the chair to the side as Branden went over to the small table by the window to pull the other chair over. When he had it next to hers Alice went to the jump drive on the computers file explorer. It wasn't locked so they were presented with a series of file folders and a word document that was titled: READ ME FIRST, in all capital letters. Alice clicked on that and began to read what was written along with Branden. She could hear him softly speaking the words as he read them which made her smile, that had been something he had always done even when they were small.

Branden, Alice,

By now I know you're with someone safe. I debated hard on which one of the remaining three of you to free. I selected you because of Alice. I know I shouldn't trust one branch of the United States government more than another. That said I knew I had to trust someone, and who better than an FBI Agent that was your best friend when she was growing up? So I put my faith in her because I know from you how much you trusted Alice. It is my hope that all of this will come to light. What we did wasn't wrong, how we went about it was.

First I want to tell you, Scott, and Eric that I'm sorry for what part I played in what was done to you. And to the other boys that didn't survive… My only hope is that all of the secret documents I took, pictures, videos, even my own notes since the start can somehow help. That you can forgive me in time even though I will never forgive myself.

I don't know you Alice, but I feel like I do just from the way that Branden spoke about you when he first came to us. I didn't know until a few months in that the boys had been kidnapped from their families. I like my colleagues at NASA was lead to believe that the parents were aware of their children being taken. Like Branden and the other boys we have been virtually isolated for the past thirteen years. I only learned the truth when one of my colleagues never came back after he threatened to reveal everything to the media.

I was only allowed out when they dismantled the entire project, but I am being watched constantly. I doubt that I will be free for much longer as General Pearson does not trust me. The men they will send after me don't know Branden, and they have no idea who you are Alice. My only hope is that I have given you enough time to uncover this mess.

There is a file in my journals that has the information of one of my contacts I still trust. He can lead you to the other boys. Please save them before they're terminated just like the project has been. For the past few years the Air Force has been working with NASA and independent contractors on another secret project. They don't need the boys anymore, they only complicate matters. I hope you are successful.

Alice read the last bit of the letter twice then she read the first part again with the part about the boys. She pulled out her tablet going to her private files on it. Alice opened up the files on the missing boys matching the names knowing for certain now that it was all related. "Well son of a bitch…"

Branden said, "What?"

Alice handed him her tablet, “This is Scott Alvers, notice something about him?”

Branden read the file for a moment. He only stopped on the date of birth, “He was born the same day as me.”

Alice nodded, “A few hours apart, but yes. Your mom, Scott’s mom, and four others all had boys on the same day. They also all conceived with the help of a fertility clinic that opened its doors about six months before you were born. All the public records on the doctor running the place makes it seem like he had a huge and very successful rate of helping women have kids. Yet if you look closer most of those documents appear to be falsified. Your mom and these other moms were even paid to fly out there for their treatments. Then it just suddenly shuttered its doors about six months after you were all born.”

Branden handing her the tablet back said, “What does it all mean?”

Alice shook her head, “No idea, should we try to find out?” Branden gave a small nod his hand finding hers again as she used her other one to click into the first file folder called: Test Subject Analysis, which was filled with videos labeled with dates. She clicked on the first one: May 4th 2010.

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- May 4th 2010 -

The room through the camera appeared to be square in shape, there was a wooden table at the center of the room with two chairs. The camera was sat up at a side angle so that it could show both chairs and the table between them. The sound of a door opening along with someone walking into the room with another person came across clearly on the microphone that had been set up at the center of the table. A moment later Branden is seated at one of those chairs looking more scared than Alice had ever seen him in her life. The person who pushed him into the chair was a large man with broad shoulders, wearing a uniform of the United States Air Force.

Another man that Alice knew came onto camera to sit down across from Branden. He wasn't exactly the same, thirteen years had aged Doctor Vissen a little faster than it did most people apparently. His hair was still full on his head and his eyes had a youthful excitement to them. The man appeared to be in his fifties easily. He had a stack of flashcards that he pulled out of a brief case as he sat down. The military man said, "I'll leave it to you Doctor Vissen."

The doctor nodded once pulling out a manila folder and opening it. He also pulled out a pen from his pocket as the folder looked like it was filled with papers. The doctor wrote something at the top of one of the papers. When the sound of a door closing was heard the doctor looked across the table at Branden putting his pen down on top of the papers. Alice watching the video could still tell that Branden was scared as the doctor spoke, "Branden Alexander Leston correct?"

Branden gave a small nod, "W-where am I?"

The doctor wrote something as he said, "You're in a government facility. You are a part of Project Artifact. After we've finished you will go back to your parents safely."

She saw Branden relax a little as he said, "M-my parents know where I am?"

The doctor gave a nod, "Of course, why wouldn't they? Before you were born they signed an agreement that you would be a part of the project when you reached a certain age. Today we're going to start with something simple Branden. I am going to show you a series of flash cards. I want you to tell me what is on each flash card. Then I am going to shuffle them together in a random order. Then you are going to tell me which one is going to come out first and so on…"

Branden said, “uh if you shuffle them how would I know that?”

The doctor smiled, “If you follow the cards you will be able to. When you see how I shuffle them you will understand how to follow them. The other boys caught on quickly, so I know you will as well. There are twenty cards here, and four different shapes, so there are five of each card. Do you understand?” Branden gave a small nod. The man flipped over four cards, each one was a dark black picture. There was one of a bird, a dog, a cat, and last a ball. He did this till all twenty cards were in four different stacks of five each. “Now I am going to shuffle them while you watch.” Alice wondered how him watching would make him know which cards were were until she saw how the man shuffled.

He didn’t shuffle by combining together like you would a deck of cards. Instead he placed a ball behind the four stacks. Then he added a dog on top of it, followed by a bird, and a cat last. Next he took a dog from one of the four piles placing it on top of the cat, again followed by a bird, then a cat, then a ball. He repeated this until the four stacks had become one large stack of twenty cards. After he had all the cards shuffled like this he made four more stacks of five cards each by splitting the deck into fours. All the while Branden watched and waited. By the time he finished shuffling in this manner for a fourth time slowly and carefully with the cards upside down Alice was lost. Doctor Vissen with the deck before him picked up the first card, “What is it?” Alice had no idea, but this test hadn’t been designed for her.

The Branden in the video and the Branden sitting next to her watching both said, “A dog.” Alice looked at Branden next to her as the scientist put the card of the dog down in front of him. She wanted to ask how he knew. When Doctor Vissen picked up the next card both of the boys said, “A ball,” which was what it was, that was followed by, “a bird, a ball, a cat, a dog, a bird…” And so fourth until all twenty cards were in a pile again and neither Branden had missed a single one.

Alice paused the video looking over at Branden, “How did… I got lost on the second round.”

Branden shrugged, “Its not that hard if you follow each movement. He did it pretty slowly I think I could have still followed at two or three times the speed.” Alice shook her head as he said, “I don’t remember doing this though…”

Alice pushed play on the video and was not surprised at all when Doctor Vissen arranged the cards into four piles again and said, “This time we’ll go faster.” She could tell that the Branden on the video was into what they were doing now. He had always had one of those kinds of minds so it wasn’t too much of a surprise. Again even though the shuffling was done faster Branden got all of the cards in the right position. After the third time of this Doctor Vissen put the cards away as he said, “Your mind seems fully where we expected it to be at your age. In a moment someone will come to take you to the room with the other boys. I think you’ll find that they’re all like family.” The video went to black a moment after that.

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Alice sat back in her chair looking at the finished video not sure how to take what they had just seen. Somehow these scientists had expected Branden’s mind to be a logical puzzle solver. Which mean that they also expected him to be amazing at things like math or science as well. Branden next to her said, “What is project Artifact?”

Alice shook her head, “No idea but I doubt we’d find anything about it on a google search. Clearly it was a deeply secret government military funded project that was shut down. It has something to do with the six of you and that fertility clinic. Lets get something to drink before we watch the next video…” Alice wanted to give Branden a chance to process what they had just watched, but also she was a little afraid herself of what they were going to find when they went deeper in the files. There was a coke vending machine at the end of the hallway on the first floor where they both got Dr Peppers before heading back to the hotel room. When they were walking back Alice said, “Did the video spark any kind of memory?”

Branden undoing the cap on his soda said, “No, not really. It felt kind of familiar in a fuzzy way like um remembering a test I took once…”

Alice rested a hand on his shoulder squeezing gently before they headed back into the room. Inside once they were seated in their chairs again she clicked back from the videos and went over to the picture section just a little curious as to what kind of pictures were in there. The first six pictures were individual pictures of each boy dressed in what looked like an Air Force dark gray jumpsuit that was of a smaller size. Like the ones she'd see pilots wearing. Only these were missing those wings on the one side, the boys last names were all on the left side.

There was one final picture of all six together and Alice looking at them had to admit that despite all having different parents there was something similar about all of them. It took her a moment to realize what it was, but when she clicked to zoom the picture in Branden said, "What are you looking at?"

She zoomed it in again, "You all have that same strange little brown freckle on your neck just at the jaw line… and the same hazel eyes…. And your noses all have the same tiny lilt to them" She moved to look at their eyes, three of the six wore glasses, the rest didn't, but they all had a similar look to them. She closed the photo pulling up another set of photos that were all skeletal pictures of the boys showing similarities. They were all almost the exact same height as well, which was kind of strange when you consider how widely different boys of that age grew. She clicked back out of the pictures going back to the videos.

The second video was similar to the first only Branden was in the jumpsuit now. He asked about when he could see his parents and Alice, but Doctor Vissen didn't give him an answer to the question. The video was from a week later, and this time there was six piles of four being mixed together. She went to another video, this one was of Scott Alvers sitting at the same table in a jumpsuit as well. He wasn't doing the cards though, instead he was working on Sudoku puzzles that kept getting bigger in grids. He was solving them faster than Alice ever would have been able to.

She scrolled through more videos, there were some of the other boys too. There was one that they watched for a couple of minutes where Robert and Marcus were both sitting at the table together answering question that Doctor Vissen gave them in regards to math and science both. It reminded her that Branden when she was a kid had always been in advanced classes. That more than once the school had suggested moving him up a grade or two. Branden though didn't like the idea because it would move him away from her and his friends. His parents had agreed

with him, not letting the school advance him in grades even if he was excelling beyond other students.

Alice closed down the sixth video which was of Branden and Eric doing the same math questions as Robert and Marcus. Based on the dates it looked like they had spent weeks testing the six boys minds. Alice scanned through the videos scrolling through them trying to figure out where to go next. Branden sitting next to her pointed at an August one, “Lets pick one later in the year, like that one marked in August.” Alice scrolled over the video looking at the date: August 12th 2010. It was the day that all six boys had been born on. Her eyes met Branden’s once then with a simple nod she clicked on the video.

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- August 12 2010 -

The video was different than the ones before it when it started to play. The camera was clearly in a much larger room, from the way things looked in the background Alice figured it was some kind of a hanger. It was set to focus on a table in one of the corners of the hanger, so you could only see part of the larger room. There was a cake on the table that declared Happy Birthday on it in bright blue letters. All six boys were there standing around the table clearly talking with each other though the camera mostly didn’t pick up their words. Right away Alice could tell that Branden and the other boys were all enjoying each others company. There was something about the way they talked with one another that just spoke of a deep friendship. Clearly they had spent most of the past few months together and they also all had similar personalities.

Watching as the party went on she saw that Doctor Vissen was there. With him were a few other older men who were all in lab coats like his were standing around watching as well. They were congratulating the boys on turning thirteen. You could tell just how close they had gotten as the video went on. Just by how they interacted with one another though the conversations were mostly muted affairs. You could tell though that their eyes were filled with worry. That underneath they were afraid of someone or something. They were ‘faking’ it for the camera as they stood there. Every now and then one of them would look off to the side at something that was out of the camera’s view.

At one point she caught one of the boys saying, “I bet Alice will get you a really awesome present when we get home Bran. Right? I mean we should be home soon according to Doctor Vissen.” Branden shrugged in the video looking over at where the scientist were all standing. She could feel his distrust of them just from his eyes. It was clear that the boys had not had any contact with the outside world at all for nearly four months now. All of them were trying their best to not be worried or afraid about the situation they were in.

She heard Branden though say to the other boy, “What if we can’t do what they want?” Seeing him now as they talked she could tell that it was Robert Farmington that had talked with Branden. He was slightly taller than Branden, his hair more of a darker brown, his face slightly more straight. That said he still looked smaller than average for a boy of thirteen.

Robert’s eyes went to where the scientists were too then he said, “We’ll be fine. They’re not going to kill us. They’ll probably just mind wipe us or something if we fail.” Though his words said one thing the boys eyes didn’t look so confident. Alice had this urge to just pull all six boys away from that room suddenly. One of the other boys moved off camera to get something. A second later he hit the camera on his way back into frame. This sent the camera twisting on its stand to reveal more of the hanger. Alice’s eyes grew as wide as possible when she saw what came into view.

Off to the side in the larger hanger was an object that she could only describe as otherworldly. It was silver in color as if someone had poured pure silver into a mold. It was shaped like a almond with lines running along its length on both the top and the bottom. Roughly, just based on the few seconds she saw in the video, it was about the size one of the retired space shuttles. She’d guess about a hundred feet long. Though with its curves and such it was probably a little bigger along the top

and bottoms. She moved the slider back after pausing the video to rest it on the strange thing. It rested on some kind of platform in the center of the hanger with stairs leading up to it. Looking at it though she couldn't see anything underneath it that was keeping it floating. It appeared as if the craft defied gravity somehow.

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Alice stared at the object on the screen, she still couldn't place it as any kind of modern designed ship. Not even any of the rockets or shuttles that got people off of earth looked anything like it. As she had thought before it was otherworldly. It did not appear as if it belonged on earth or came from any earth manufacturer. Branden sitting next to her said, "uh Alice… I um t-think it might be aliens after all…"

Alice closed the video not knowing what to believe. She looked at Branden who swallowed once. Alice reached over putting her arm around his shoulders, drawing him closer to her, "We can stop now if you want to?" Branden shook his head once then moved in closer to look at the paused video again. His eyes roamed the ship a few times. Alice swore there was a slight sense of knowing in them as he took in the strange craft. She squeezed his hand once giving all the comfort she could, "I'm going to take a look to see if we can find out what that is."

Alice went back to the main folders and selected the folder where all the journals and documents of Doctor Vissen were. Under this folder there were also folders with each of the kids names on them. Alice clicked on the one with Branden's name. The document opened up with a series of pictures of Branden. Pictures from when he was a baby up till he was twelve. There were even videos of him outside playing, sometimes she was in the videos with him. Most of them were videos clearly taken from cameras that were observing him at a distance.

There were series of medical records from his pediatrician, showing his vaccinations, and the amount of times that he had visited the doctor for other reasons. Branden

had almost never gotten sick as a child, in fact Alice could barely remember any time that he had ever actually been sick. He had pretended to be sick to stay home with her a few times when she got sick, but he had never actually been sick those times. Documents about his aptitude in tests, especially in both math and science. There were documents about his mother and father. There was a document about his mothers death that she clicked on because it was much more detailed than the one she had seen. There was a note from one of the other scientists that she found very interesting:

It appears as if Barbra Leston just like the four other mothers before her died of a new form of cancer related to what was altered when she became pregnant with the hybrid. Of the forty women that we attempted impregnation thirty have died from the same type of cancer. The rest Doctor Vissen have not for one simple reason: they had their ovaries removed. I am recommending to you, the head of research, that if we are going to proceed with a second attempt to make sure that the mothers ovaries are removed after the hybrid is birthed, or even if it results in miscarriage. It appears that almost all of the miscarriages were female babies as well for some reason. I will look into this further as you requested, perhaps there is another way to prevent the mothers death.

Alice went looking through the other files in Branden's folder with a quick scan as he sat there sipping his Dr Pepper nervously and said, "A-Alice what's a hybrid?"

"I have no idea, I imagine that its here in the files somewhere." Alice moved back to the main folder and scrolled down till she saw a folder that said: Project Passenger on it.

She clicked on that folder opening it to find more folders within. Alice felt a growing unease as she read the names of the folders: Study of the Artifact, Study of the Passengers, Study of Passenger DNA, The Passenger/Hybrid Alpha Program. Branden after putting his soda down next to hers on the desk said, "I-I can't be…" He stood up clearly disturbed. Branden moved to the other side of the room sitting down

on the bed. Alice put the lid on the laptop down taking a look at him. She could see just how afraid he was with how he sat on the bed. She wasn't sure what the right way was to handle this. She moved over to where he was looking down as he looked up at her.

She sat down next to him putting her arm around his shoulders as she said, "It would explain why you're such a weirdo…"

Branden softly with a tremor in his voice said, "D-don't make a joke p-please…"

Alice wanted to hit herself for trying to make him laugh in this moment. She could hear the fear in his voice. Alice slipped off of the bed in one quick motion. She bent down in front of him resting her hands on his legs looking up at him, "I'm sorry Bran. I didn't mean to… I was just trying to make you not be scared." He nodded biting his bottom lip as she said, "It doesn't change who you are. You're still you, no matter how you were conceived you're still a part of your mom and dad. You're still the boy they loved. The boy I love." Branden moved then to slip into her arms in one quick motion. She held him tightly there on the floor. She could feel it when he started to sob while she stroked his back and kissed the top of his head. She let him cry in her arms as she gave him all the strength and love she had for him as well.

When he finally calmed down they sat on the floor together leaning against the bed looking at the desk across the way from them. Alice reached up to grab their sodas handing Branden his. They both tried to ignore the laptop as they sipped on their sodas. After a moment with his head resting on her shoulder Branden said, "They killed my mom…"

Alice moved to rest her head with his, "I don't think the scientists knew they would do that Branden. All those women died within the same few months of one another, at least the five that I've looked into. I'm willing to bet the others did as well."

Branden sipped on his drink, "I know, but it doesn't make it right."

“I bet Doctor Vissen would agree with you. I think he regrets his role as the lead in all of this.” She sighed, “The question is what happened to you.. why don’t you have thirteen years of memory? Why didn’t you grow up in the past thirteen years?”

“Why is there a floating silver almond in the middle of a hanger.”

Alice chuckled, “That too.”

Branden looked at the closed laptop, “Its all on there, the answers I mean. I don’t know if I want to know…”

Alice rested her hand on his leg, “We can stop for now if you want.”

He put his on top of hers, “No we can’t. We have to know. Doesn’t mean I want to…”

Alice moved her hand to rest with his squeezing it as she said, “Whatever happened Branden. Whatever they did to you, or whatever it means for the future, I will always be here for you. I will help you figure it all out.” They were both quiet for awhile longer then she said, “I’ll always love you too no matter what.”

Branden said, “Even if I’m stuck looking like this for the rest of my life?”

Alice kissed the top of his head before standing up, “Branden, its not how you look that makes me love you. It never was.” She looked down at him, “Don’t get me wrong you’re a very handsome boy, young man even, but I don’t love you because you’re good looking… If that’s the only reason you love me…”

Branden flushed, “Its not… you know its not Alice.”

She ruffled his hair, “Got you.”

Branden groaned, “You’re so evil!”

“And you’re a big nerd!” She smiled as he stood up to defend himself which made her lean down the short distance between them to kiss his lips again, “But you’re my big nerd.” She felt his lips smile against her own. “Ready for some more answers?” Branden gave a nod as his hand found hers again while they walked back over to where the computer was. Alice had a feeling that neither of them were going to like most of the answers they were about to find out…

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Alice went back to the folder that said Project Artifact. There were a few folders inside regarding the silver almond. She clicked on Study of the Artifact inside were a set of pictures, some videos, and some typed documents. She clicked on one of the videos when it started to play she took note of the date in the top corner of the camera: July 2, 1984. The camera quality was a little grainy clearly from before HD cameras were the norm. Someone was holding it while walking as they approached the strange almond shaped silver ship. It was floating in the middle of a larger room that looked different than the hanger the boys had been in for the birthday celebration. There was a set of stairs that went up to the center of the ship that the man in the video referred to as the Artifact.

The voice was familiar, though it took her a moment to realize that it was Doctor Vissen speaking, “The Artifact appears to float on its own, defying the gravity of earth without the need of propulsion, though we have yet to determine how it does so. The underside and one of its sides look as if they have taken severe damage over the course of whatever happened that caused them to drift into our orbit.” He moved in

front of the camera making it clear that someone else was operating it. Doctor Vissen was much younger in this video, perhaps in his thirties? He walked up the stairs on the platform that was in front of ship with the camera following him. There was an opening in the side of the ship that looked like a door had been opened from the inside. “It took us nearly a year to figure out how to open the door to the inside of the Artifact.”

They stepped inside, and it was like nothing that Alice would have imagined an alien ship to be like. The inside was more human like than she would have ever believed. There were no windows to look out of, instead there were huge monitors on the walls at the front that appeared to be turned off. There were six chairs arranged around the monitors. The two at the front had more monitors in front of them along with what appeared to be ways to operate the ship. There were small monitors by each of the four chairs behind the front two as well. Honestly other than how smooth it all looked most of it could be compared to how modern earth technology looked. When the camera panned around there was a door at the other end.

Doctor Vissen moved up to where the seats were. Now looking at it she could see a huge size difference between him and rest of the ship. The chairs were smaller than human ones would be. They were more sized for a child around Branden’s age or the age that Alice had been when he disappeared. Not the size of a child, but a young preteen on the cusp of adolescences. It was clear that the ship had been designed for something much smaller than a human. A man that was over five feet tall would not fit all that comfortably in one of these chairs. Whereas a boy around Branden’s age would fit comfortably.

Doctor Vissen talked then, “We have tried to turn the Artifact on, but so far have had no luck to get it to power up. The technology is similar to ours, but what is required to operate it is not something that we are capable of understanding yet. We believe that the Passengers connected to the Artifact in a unique way. Something to deal with the strange devices we found on their wrists. We have attempted to replicate the devices in the past year, but have not had any luck. The original ones will not connect to our skin like they apparently did to the Passengers. Only one of them was still alive when we opened the Artifact, but barely. He died moments after we got to him. At the same time that strange wristband fell off as well. They appear to be coded to their unique DNA, but also require the passenger to be alive to connect to them. Perhaps it is to keep the technology from the hands of others.”

He rested his hands on one of the chairs then as he said, “We will find the answers, that is what we are here for.” The video ended there as Alice and Branden stared at it for a moment. She moved back and clicked on the folder for The Passengers. She was a little afraid of what they might see, how alien they might be.

As she opened the video Branden said, “I bet they’re little gray men like X-Files.” He was wrong, and it shocked her and Branden both when they saw them. They were alien, yet there was something so familiar about them when you looked at them despite the differences they were almost like distant cousins. Like how an ape was compared to a man.

The video had a time date that was a day later than the first video. The graininess of the camera was still clear as it moved through a hallway with them stopping at a door where Doctor Vissen slid a card, “We want to show you the Passengers themselves. We’re working now with advanced techniques to figure out their DNA and how different from us they are.” They walked into a room that looked sort of like a morgue with a set of doors on a wall that were all marked with numbers. “There were four of them in the seats at the front. We found two more in damaged sleeping pods who were also expired in the back of the artifact. We believe that something happened to their ship damaging it. Somehow they managed to put the ship into orbit around our planet before the last one died. Was it just random luck the picked our world? Or were they coming here for a purpose?”

“Let me show you what the Passengers look like. We are still studying them, but they appear to have two sexes just like us.” He moved over to the one of the doors opening it. Then Doctor Vissen pulled out a slab with a blanket covering something. He pulled back the blanket and Alice felt Branden grip her hand as they stared at the figure before them. He or she was roughly the size of Branden, the face was almost human in appearance other than the fact that they had four eyes as opposed to two. Two of the eyes were just slightly bigger than human eyes, and at the center of the face with a nose between them.

There were two more smaller eyes a little above them, and to the sides almost at the temple. So they could look out of the at the sides of their face without having to turn their necks. They had sharp pointed ears almost like an elf. Their skin was a pale white making white flesh look dark, and their bodies were very slender childlike in appearance. Other than the eyes if you saw one out in public dressed you’d think they were children not small adults. The ‘passenger’ had dark black hair that was cut

very short on top of their head as well. If Alice had to put a human age to them it would be around eleven or twelve as they were too tall to be small children.

Doctor Vissen spoke again as he said, “If not for the ears and eyes they could almost pass for a very pale human child. Even their teeth and tongues are similar to our own.” He opened the mouth showing off teeth and a pale tongue as well. “The males appear to be slightly bigger than the females just like our own species. Though of the six only one is just shy of five feet tall, the other five are all between four feet four inches and four feet eight inches. This is why all of their devices and other things on the ship we found are sized for them. We do not believe that these are children, they are the adults of their species.”

He moved over to another drawer pulling out a second slab where he pulled the cover back. The fact that this was a female was plainly obvious when the sheet was pulled back. She had longer hair that was the same dark color first. Also she had two small breasts on her chest that were even smaller than Alice’s tiny bust. She looked like a human female that had just entered puberty if Alice was being honest about how seeing her reminded Alice of how she had looked going through puberty. “We believe from looking at their reproductive organs that if they were on earth they would be classified as mammals. They have similar things to us, but different as well. It will take us years to study exactly how their biology functions. We are confident that we can find the answers and maybe with that find the answers to operate their technology.”

The video went dark after that. Alice went back to the main files then clicked on the folder: Study of Passenger DNA inside were numerous files detailing all the work that had been done on the aliens from 1984 up till 1994. There were a lot of notes and countless pictures. She studied all of it with Branden next to her reading along. The Passengers had four fingers as opposed to the human five, their toes were on average longer as if they could use them to grip things in a fashion that humans usually did not. There was residual signs that they had once had tails just like humans. According to the notes they would have never grown taller than five feet, so on average most human adults would be well above their average height.

Their reproductive organs were similar, the males had a penis like organ, and the females a vagina like one. They were virtually hairless beings though compared to humans. The estimation was that they were just as delicate as humans, and their life span was roughly on par as well based upon DNA decay. It was impossible to tell

what their reproductive process was like, how long they carried young, or how many at a time. The females appeared to have four ovaries as opposed to the human two, but that was only if they actually were all ovaries. The males appeared to have sperm of some type that was very similar to human. There was a note that the DNA, sperm, and ovaries of one of the males and one of the females had been persevered.

Alice closed the file down and was about to look at another one when she heard Branden's stomach growl next to her making her smile. Apparently her boyfriend was hungry, but hadn't wanted to tell her. She reached for her phone as she said, "I think we should take a break and order some dinner what do you think?" Branden agreed. They ordered from a place close by as they were sitting down to eat about twenty minutes later she looked over at Branden studying him.

He looked up from the Lo Mien he was eating, "What? Do I have something on my face?"

Alice shook her head, "Nope trying to see if you're going to sprout two more eyes…"

Branden stuck his tongue out at her. "I'm not!" After a moment of silence filled with just them both eating he said, "A-are you… bothered that I'm uh n-not fully human?"

Alice reached over to stroke his cheek once, "No fucking way sweetie. You're my Branden I could care less how you were made." He smiled with a flush on his cheeks, "I love you."

Branden said, "I love you too Alice." They both went back to eating stealing looks at one another every few minutes while doing so. She felt like the closer they got to the answers that Branden would find his memories somewhere. She had a feeling that he had memories of some kind regarding the past thirteen years. Something about how Doctor Vissen had put it though still bugged her. The whole part where he had said that Branden didn't have thirteen years of memories, because he hadn't been awake for thirteen years.

She was pretty sure that his memories though had been sealed for a reason. Her guess was that Doctor Vissen had done it so that Branden wouldn't seem like a crazy person when he was found. In the hopes that the military wouldn't find him as quickly, or realize that he had been freed.

When they finished eating the two of them sat back down in front of the computer where she clicked on: The Passenger Hybrid Alpha Program. She pulled up the first file and opened it. There was a document from Doctor Vissen at the beginning:

With the ability to now fully understand the role that DNA plays in human life, and how to sequence it along with other animals as well we can take what other scientist have been working on and apply it to the Passengers. We have sequenced their DNA finding it to be remarkably similar to our own. It does not have any of the markings that come from being a species on the planet earth. For example there is no markings showing signs of mass extinctions of our past, but there is evidence of their own history on their own home world. Wherever in the cosmos it happens to be.

Even so their DNA is so similar that its clear we're all made of Stardust, and as such most life in the universe probably does indeed follow the same paths when it happens. This does not rule out squid looking intelligent species, in fact I would argue it makes it very possible that they exist along with all kinds of strange beings. Yet their DNA would still be similar. I believe that other than their size and the issues it would cause with a pregnancy that we could even reproduce with these passengers. That we could have inter-species children.

As such we have been commissioned to start a new project. After ten years of trying to get the Artifact to work a new approach has been found more viable. It is clear that the ship requires a certain type of DNA to function. That its missing two ingredients, a living passenger, and that passenger's DNA encoded on the strange device that we found on their wrists. The device appears to register their unique DNA and connect to them which in turns connects them to the ship. We have tried to replicate this with devices we created, but it has not worked. The Artifact is looking for Passenger DNA encoding not Human DNA encoding. As such the Artifact will not turn on until such time as they visit earth. Unless we find another way and we believe that we have.

Currently our superiors are recruiting women who wish to have children but are struggling for various reasons. We will begin by planting a unique egg harvested from volunteers that has been infused with Passenger encoding. It will become fertilized by a human male, and create a hybrid that will be 85% human and 15% Passenger. We believe after much studying that this is all that is needed for the human child to operate the Artifact. It will also let them look fully human up until they reach puberty when their growth will significantly stop. We estimate that they will go through puberty between the ages of 10 and 12. At such time we will bring them into the facility where we have stored the Artifact. Then we will begin testing to see if they can operate it. We anticipate anywhere from fifteen to twenty children will be conceived successfully for this project.

Alice closed the file after they finished reading it then opened the one detailing the forty mothers selected. According to the file they were all brought into a “fertility clinic” that was set up after they were all approved. Each was injected with what was called an experimental fertility drug, but was in fact human/passenger hybrid DNA eggs to be fertilized by the human fathers, either through IVF or sex. Of the forty mothers thirty became pregnant with the procedure. The ten that did not more than likely considered the egg foreign and ejected it. It also became clear right away that most of them were not going to carry to term. Ten carried to month two or three all with female children that miscarried with deformities that did not allow the fetus to keep growing.

Most of the rest that got pregnant miscarried even earlier. Only six carried till week 32 or 34 respectively, all six children born were male. Though they were premature for human standards in size all six had none of the premature baby problems. Their lungs were fully developed for example. There were more studies of the years that followed, about the development of the six boys. Each grasped concepts faster than other children their age. They all suffered from bad eyesight that had to be corrected with glasses (three of the boys used contacts). Their DNA when sequenced appeared to be almost all human, but the markers of the passengers were still there as well. The scientist were confident when the boys came of age that they could activate the technology on the Artifact. There were notes from Doctor Vissen that five of the boys had no real friends, only one of them had made a lasting friendship that could be problematic in the future.

Alice reading that looked over at Branden who said, “I guess he’s talking about us.” Alice nodded as she closed that file down as well. Back in the main folders she went back to the videos. There were a few at the bottom that drew her to them more than the others. Branden said, “Those are all dated around Christmas of the year I disappeared huh?”

Alice nodded, “This is where the videos stop too, so whatever happened to make them stop the project happened then.”

Branden looking at them said, “I-I’m afraid to watch them, but I think we should.” Alice agreed about both things. She took his hand squeezing it as she did he said, “I have a feeling that watching these is going to make me remember, like a key opening a locked door…”

Alice looked over at him again and leaned down to softly kiss his lips once, “I’ll be here with you Bran. Ready?” He gave a nod and Alice clicked on the first video and as they watched she felt the enormous weight of what Branden had been through building with each second as she held his hand tightly….

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- December 2010 -

The sound of Eric snoring on the bunk above his was what greeted Branden when he woke up that morning. Other than that soft noise the room that he slept in was totally quiet. He wasn’t sure what had woken him, as the other boys all still slept. On top of that Branden had a feeling that it was before the sunrise. He had been dreaming though, perhaps that dream was what woke him up, he wasn’t really sure. The dream had been about Alice, most of his dreams usually were since coming here. He missed his mom and dad, missed going to school even, but most of all he missed Alice. Life wasn’t the same without seeing her every day. That was why he had gone the entire school year before finally admitting his feelings for her that day he told James Carner to leave her alone.

Branden lay there looking up at the top of the bunk above his thinking about Alice again. He figured that he had probably been in love with Alice for a very long time, maybe all his life. He just hadn't realized it until shortly after his tenth birthday. It wasn’t like he thought about having sex with her all the time, though sometimes he did think about what it would be like. Just like he had thought about what it would be like to kiss her before they did just that. It wasn’t the thing that he cared about

though, if they never had sex he'd still want to just be close to Alice. If she wanted to wait till they finished school he'd be fine with that too. Not that it mattered since he hadn't seen her since May, and she had probably already fallen out of love with the boy who abandoned her after one kiss. He hoped his mom and dad had explained the situation to her.

Branden rolled onto his side, he felt like crying honestly with how heart hurt he was. He knew Alice, knew that she'd still be his friend when he came back, but she'd be way over being in love with him. Yet for Branden, well, he'd never be over being in love with Alice. There was no girl more perfect period ever for him. Right now he wished he could just see her again even for a second. To see how much she'd grown or changed in the past seven months since he had last seen her. She was probably even more taller than him now. In the past seven months Branden was positive he hadn't grown an inch. Neither had the other boys that were in this strange room with him.

They had been sat in front of scientists for days on end, prodded with needles, been looked at while naked. Been asked all kinds of personal things, and tested on all kinds of things from math to recognition and memory. A few days ago they had been taken into one of the small square rooms with a table at the center of it. There Doctor Vissen handed them each a strange device had been put on their wrists. When it had snapped closed Branden had felt something sting and found he couldn't remove the bracelet like device until he pressed a button at its center. After removing it the device left a tiny mark on his wrist. When he had asked Doctor Vissen only said that they would find out in a few days what it was for.

The sound of someone else moving made Branden turn to see Robert sitting up on the edge of his bunk. Robert was the tallest of the six of them, just two inches short of five feet, while the other boys were between four and a half feet and four feet eight inches. They were all weighed and height checked once a week. So far none of them had grown an inch despite the fact that all of them were now thirteen. Branden's doctor had always put it up to him being born premature, now he wasn't so sure. Not after spending all this time around these scientists who seemed to think that their size was correct.

Robert like Branden was very fair skinned, and had the same startling green eyes as him. His hair was a light blonde though compared to Branden's own darker brown. Like Branden he was only in his underwear at the moment. At first that had been

strange, the boys all had sort of giggled about seeing each other's morning wood when they had it. Other than Scott who always got really uncomfortable about most anything involving sex. It wasn't like it was something you could control. Bran's dad had explained that to him shortly before his tenth birthday. For some reason around the age of nine he had found out that playing with it in the shower or on his bed felt nice. When he had done it on the couch once his mom had yelled at him to do that in private. Then later his dad had given him the 'talk'. It mainly was about privacy, and where to do certain activities.

All of the boys had the same hazel eyes, and fair skin too, well other than Marcus who said that his dad was African and his mom was European. He even had a really amazing English accent that Branden thought made him sound smarter than all the rest of them, but he was really just at the same level. Robert perhaps sensing that someone else was awake too looked over at Branden. Out of all of them Robert and Eric were the only ones with siblings. Robert's was an older brother who had been from his dad's first marriage. Eric's was a younger sister who his parents adopted when he was three. Robert stretched standing up, and since it was so normal now Branden didn't even comment on the boys morning wood as he walked into the bathroom.

By the time Robert came out the other boys were all starting to get up as well, all of them stretching and running hands through hair before each one taking a turn at the bathroom. When they were all done the door to the room opened. Doctor Vissen stepped into the room followed by Doctor Mckon, "Good morning boys. Today is the day, your devices should be synced to your bodies fully. Its time to run the first test with the Artifact."

For months now Doctor Vissen talked about how they had all been brought here because they were different than other kids. The more that these test were done the more Branden felt like he was in an episode of Alice's favorite show X-Files. When they were about nine his dad had shown both of them a few episodes and Alice had fallen in love with Agent Scully. To the point that for Halloween that year she had gone as the woman and convinced Branden to go as Agent Mulder. Not that convincing him was hard to do as she was his best friend.

Doctor Mckon holding a clipboard said, "We will be running the tests in groups of three. Robert, Allen, Marcus will be test group A, Scott, Eric, and Branden will be test group B. When you've got your jumpsuits on meet us in the cafeteria." The two

scientists walked from the room closing the door behind them. This gave the boys who were all still in briefs and nothing else (well other than Scott who always slept with a shirt on) time to get dressed. They each grabbed their own jumpsuit with their last name on one side zipping it on quietly then pulled on their shoes as well.

Branden wanted nothing more than to see his parents and Alice again. The other five boys were tired of hearing him talk about Alice, but they never made him stop. The six of them were like a family now, and after they left here Branden knew he'd want to keep in contact with them all. Talking with the other five boys Branden often felt like he was talking to his own brothers. They all were so similar in their experiences, other than one big difference that Branden had over the others. His new friends all said more than once that they had never had a girlfriend, or boyfriend, or even a really amazing best friend. Of course Alice had kind of forced her friendship onto Branden when her family moved in one house down from his own.

Well that made it seem like a bad thing he realized as he walked with the other boys down the corridor to the cafeteria. It had not been a bad thing, or even a bad way. His mom and dad had been talking with her parents as they just moved in two houses down. Alice's parents were a lot younger than his parents which a young Branden had found a little strange. That first afternoon Alice had seen him hanging onto his mom's skirt holding a Lego ship in his hands.

She had grabbed his arm pulling him away from his mom's skirts, saying that if her parents were going to be friends with his that she'd be his friend too. Newly turned five-year-old Branden had never had a real friend before so he had accepted right away. That summer had been the start of an amazing six summers of fun with Alice. Plus kindergarten through sixth grades had been even better because Alice was in the same school, usually some of the same classes too!

It felt so lonely without her, more than without his parents even honestly. It wasn't fair that he didn't get to see Alice at all. He really hoped that these tests were actually almost over like Doctor Vissen said that they were. That he'd be able to return home to his parents, his stuff, and Alice. Even if she didn't want to be his girlfriend anymore after so long away he knew that she'd want to be his friend. Especially after he told her how often he had missed her.

In the cafeteria they were each given cereal and toast for breakfast then they followed Doctor Vissen and Mckon down another corridor. They had to take an elevator up a few floors to where the Artifact was. As they rode on the elevator Doctor Vissen said, “After today if we’re successful boys then all of this testing and work to figure out how to calibrate the devices to you will not be in vain. We’ll be able to set the course for the future of the human race once we can start to unlock all of the secrets.” He sounded excited as the elevator doors opened onto a small room.

Doctor Vissen rested his palm on a pad by the door then it opened into another room where a bunch of men in military outfits were all sitting around monitors and computers. One of them was General Pearson who was the head of the project. When the General looked at Branden it always made him uncomfortable. Like the man was studying a tool to be used not a living person. The General along with four Air Force guards led the doctors and six boys into another room.

Branden felt his eyes widen again as they rested on the craft in the center of the large hanger. The silver color looked almost unnatural because there was so much of it, and somehow it floated in the center of the room defying gravity. This was the device that the scientists referred to as the Artifact. He had only seen it once before in this very room a few months back when they celebrated the boys thirteenth birthday. The scientist had wanted to show the boys what they were here to do. Make them realize the importance of what they were doing.

The strange looking silver craft was roughly the size of one of the space shuttles. Honestly it did look impressive, but it didn’t change Branden’s desire to go home one bit. He’d rather be in school with Alice than here learning about how to use an alien craft. Out there he could have been learning how to kiss Alice better. Maybe even actually gotten to see what those little buds on her chest looked like or felt like! He pushed that thought away, it wasn’t a good thought to have about a girl he loved. It shouldn’t be about seeing her body, but just being with her which usually it was. Sometimes those new urges were really powerful.

Right now though as they approached the side of the giant ship those thoughts faded away. There was a set of stairs on a ramp that led up to the middle of the craft. The stairs were part of a platform that went around the floating ship. Doctor Vissen led them all up there touching some panel on the side of the ship that made the door open. The room that they stepped into was large enough for nine people to fit

comfortably. Well if you weren't six feet tall like Doctor Mckon or General Pearson who both had to hunch over when they stepped into the ship.

Doctor Vissen who was only a few inches taller than Robert moved up to the front of the ship as the six boys took it in. Honestly the ship didn't look alien at all, more like how human ships were described in science fiction stories, or shown off in movies. There were monitors, buttons, switches, clearly steering wheels to turn the craft, and chairs to sit in for six people. The chairs though were smaller, like they had been made for a body like his own. Not for someone even as short for an adult man as Doctor Vissen.

The scientist said, "Okay group A, Robert, Marcus and Allen up front." The three boys moved to the front with Doctor Vissen as he directed them all to take a seat with both Robert and Marcus at the front and Allen in the seat at the middle. There were a total of six chairs, two at the front one just behind them at the middle. There was a strange strange console in front of the middle chair that looked like it would light up when on. Then three more chairs behind it arranged in a circle around that strange middle chair. These three chairs had no consoles or controls in front of them.

Doctor Vissen said, "We imagine that the Passengers rotated on who was running the Artifact in pairs. There were only six of them inside so we figure that they must have had a reason for this. Perhaps they traveled for very long times, and had to switch out who was driving."

General Pearson said, "We'll be monitoring things in the control room doctor. I'll give you the go ahead to begin the test when we're ready."

Doctor Vissen gave a small absent minded nod, "Yes, very good." Then as the general left the ship he turned to look at the three boys sitting down. "Now I believe that where Robert is seated was the pilot chair, the one next was for the secondary kind of like on our very shuttles, and the last spot was for the navigator. All three of you will notice on the left side armrest of your chair is a small indent that is where you rest the wristband to activate the console. I believe that in order to turn the ship on that Robert as the pilot needs to do something once his band is connected."

Robert looking at the console in front of him said nervously, “W-what if something goes wrong?”

Doctor Vissen said, “Doubtful son. We’ve tested what we can of these systems, and believe that they are fully safe. They’re a blend of organic and mechanical, very unlike our own systems. Though they do share some similarities.” Looking at him Branden got the feeling that the man was lying, but he knew if he said something that Doctor Vissen would point out that they were children. Just like he had before about why they couldn’t contact their parents. Because the adults according to him including their parents had deemed it safer this way.

Doctor Mckon wearing a headset said, “They’re ready to begin sir.”

Doctor Vissen nodded then turned to Robert, “Go ahead Robert, put your wrist device into the slot.” Robert hesitated looking at it then at the doctor who only gave a reassuring nod. He slipped it into the slot with a clinking sound of it connecting filling the room. At first nothing happened making Doctor Vissen look disappointed as he studied Robert.

He looked like he was about to say something when Robert spoke, “I can feel… something. T-this is kind of strange, something is speaking to me i-in my head… I-I can’t… understand it…”

Doctor Vissen getting excited said, “Marcus, Allen put your wrists in your console as well, this is more than likely the start up sequence.” The other two boys followed Robert’s example slipping their wrists into the strange indent on the side of the consoles before them.

When they did so a second later the two monitors at the front of the ship came on. The strange console with a screen in front of Marcus came on as well showing what appeared to be a map of some kind. Branden thought perhaps it was of this part of the galaxy, but it was hard to tell from where he was standing at the back of the room. One of the two monitors at the front of the ship looked like only half of it was working. Both showed a vision of the large white room before them.

Marcus who was sitting at the ‘navigator chair’ chair said, “I can hear the voice too, it almost sounds like its… its… trying to say something…”

From the chair next to Robert, Allen said, “This is glowing Doctor Vissen should I push it?” There was a strange glowing green button near the corner of Allen’s set of buttons and other things. Doctor Vissen was excited, you could see it in his eyes when he gave the okay for Allen to do so. Right after he pressed the button was when everything went nuts. At first it wasn’t too bad, the navigator console began to beep with a strange resonating sound that filled the entire room. There was a glowing bulb in the center of the map of stars which Branden figured was probably their Sun. A red light began to blink on the center console in front of Robert. A strange hum was slowly getting louder as well.

Branden even though he wasn’t connected to the consoles swore that he could hear the voice speaking in his head not out loud. The wristband he wore had dots on it at he center that looked like they could light up. One of them lit up then glowing a deep red. The voice in his head spoke in a strange clipped language that almost sounded Asian, but far more alien too. It kept repeating the same words over and over again though that much Branden was certain of.

Then on the one monitor with the broken side a strange set of red symbols appeared. Asian looking words flashed below the set of symbols. In the ‘pilot’ seat Robert said, “S-something it hurts… It really hurts…” He was trying to pull the wrist band out of the console slot but it wouldn’t come. Then he screamed gripping at his head as he said, “Something… My brain feels like its going to… I can’t… all I can… the voice is… its not… something’s wrong! I can’t get my arm out! Doc-” Then he screamed again before falling forward in his seat.

A second later Allen was trying to pull his wrist out as well as he said, “Doctor Vissen… something's wrong…” He was about to say something else when blood began falling out of his nose. More blood began to join it when he touched the area above his lip. It was to much blood. He touched his nose trying to stop it, “I feel… its trying to tell me s-something… I feel… strange”

He turned looking back at Branden, Scott, and Eric trying to say something. Branden started to move towards Allen to help him when the boy slumped over his console as well. You could see blood sliding down the console. Marcus screamed then, and

Doctor Vissen was trying to pull him off of the other console with Doctor Mckon helping him. The boy suddenly violently thrashed around trying to push the two scientists away making Branden, Scott, and Eric all run out of the door that led off of the ship.

Eric running down the stairs ahead of them said, “I think I’m going to be sick!” He hurled right there onto the white ground by the stairs. Scott joined him resting a hand on his back stroking it as Branden in a daze sat down on the stairs close to the bottom. He could still hear the other boys screams though they had all died away long ago. When he felt feet coming down the stairs he didn’t look up. A few seconds later military men were in the room escorting the three of them from there back into their prison. Branden was in too much of a daze to even think about what had just happened, but he knew that Marcus, Allen, and Robert were all dead. He also knew that his parents had no idea where he was.

- February 2011 -

The new room they had been in for the past month was smaller, the space far less which meant that things were a little more intimate. Often Branden, Eric, and Scott would sit together on one bed sort of holding each other talking quietly. It was becoming clearly obvious that the scientists and military men were lying to them. Their parents had no idea that the three of them were missing or what was going on with them.

Branden also figured that they had to have been selected for a reason, to which Eric had suggested they were probably somehow related to the Passengers. Again reminding Branden of Alice’s favorite show, how in the later years of X-Files there had been human/alien hybrids. It all felt like it was something out of a science fiction show, but Branden knew it wasn’t this was real life and three of his friends were dead.

When they asked Doctors Vissen or Mckon if they were going to go home soon the scientists both seemed more subdued in their answer of soon, more afraid as well. Not of Branden and the other two boys, but of the military. Branden almost felt bad for the two of them as it was clear that they had just been studying this entire thing. More than likely they hadn't been aware of how the military lied to the parents. Clearly the military wanted the answers to what the ship did for their own reasons. Now though since that day no one was talking about going back to the Artifact. In fact they had taken those strange wrist bands away from all three of them saying that the first stage of the experiment was over.

Honestly the reasons why didn't matter anymore. The other reason why they would sit together to give comfort was that since the three other boys had died they all started having the same strange dream. Not a dream of the boys death, but one filled with a strange soft voice speaking a different language urgently in the dream. It felt like someone was trying to contact him, that was the only way that Branden could describe it when Doctor Vissen asked about the dreams. When the connection had been made with Robert, Marcus, and Allen it had woken something within the other three boys as well.

Sometimes Branden swore he could feel the ship calling to him, sense that it was below him. He had asked Doctor Vissen if it was and the man had gotten this terrified look on his face. There was a yearning to seek the ship out, but Branden didn't know how to do so. It was getting closer and closer to a year having passed since that first amazing kiss with Alice. When his thoughts weren't focused on how scared he was they always went back to Alice. All of his dreams when they weren't about the voice were about her.

Scott jumped when the door to their room opened, two men with guns dressed in Air Force uniforms stepped into the room looking at them. Branden didn't feel afraid anymore, it was clear that they weren't going to kill them. Both of the young Air Force men looked uncertain about what they were doing as Doctor Vissen stepped into the room behind them. He studied all three of the boys then his eyes rested on Branden. "Mr. Leston you will come with me." Branden turned to look at Scott and Eric once both of them swallowed. Branden wondered if this was it, were they going to try again? A few days ago they had heard Doctor Vissen and the General arguing about the direction of the project. Apparently they had come to a decision.

Branden followed the scientist out of the room as the two guards closed the door walking behind them. “W-where are we going sir?” Branden asked not sure he wanted an answer.

Doctor Vissen said, “A decision was made yesterday. We’re going to tackle this a different way. I promise you Mr. Leston this is perfectly safe.”

Branden said, “As safe as what happened last time you mean…”

The man sighed deeply as he stepped onto an elevator with Branden and the two guards, “I know that this doesn’t help or bring them back, but we believe what happened to them is what happened to the original Passengers. They must have been trying to stop whatever it was that happened, but were not successful. Something went wrong with their systems when the ship was damaged, or maybe it was infected with something. We’re not really sure, but we know that the ship is partly organic so that’s the running theory..”

When the door opened and they started down a corridor Branden said, “S-so where am I going then?”

Doctor Vissen gave a small sigh, looking over at him once, “You’re being put to sleep Mr. Leston. I had to choose one of you to be the first for the procedure to see if it works or not. Like the ship this is technology that only responds to you because of your unique DNA.” They stepped into the white room again. It sort of resembled a hanger, though the only thing in the room was the alien craft. They walked up to it, but this time when they went inside they turned to the door that led to another part of the craft.

They walked down a corridor coming to another room. Inside the next room were six pods that were roughly five and a half feet long. Three of the pods looked like they were damaged. One of the pods was open. When they stepped in Doctor Vissen said, “There were a total of six Passengers on this ship. Four of them were upfront working on the ship, two were in these pods. One died in a damaged pod, The fifth one emerged from the pod that I’m about to put you in. From what we can gather before he died he was the one that put the ship into orbit around our planet.”

Branden looked at the pod as Doctor Vissen pulled out the strange bracelet. He stepped back bumping into one of the guards who pushed him back to the center of the room. “I don’t want to… I don’t want to!”

Doctor Vissen sighed, “I’m sorry Branden, really I am. I know that you and the other boys want to return to your families, but we cannot allow that to happen. You are too valuable. We need more time to find the answers. This was my only choice, the General made that very clear to me on multiple occasions.” He held out the wrist bracelet and Branden took it trembling.

He slipped it on and then Doctor Vissen said, “Go ahead and climb into the pod.” Trembling the entire way Branden slipped into the pod. “Rest your wrist into the slot beside you.” Branden again wanted to say no, when he started to get up the guard with the darker skin held out his gun. The man looked doubtful about his role in all of this. It was clear that he would follow orders though if Branden disobeyed. There were two choices both unspoken, do as the doctor wanted or don’t leave this room alive.

The look of fear in Doctor Vissen's eyes made Branden realize that the man had made this compromise with the General. It was becoming clear to Branden that this was the better option to death. He put his wrist down on the small indent next to his waist then watched as the pod closed on its own. For a second he was terrified when a strange device shot out of the side of the pod sticking his neck like a needle would. He watched as Doctor Vissen stood over the pod looking at him, trying to figure out what the man was doing. When he spoke to the guards Branden couldn’t hear him. He felt sleepy now as he closed his eyes. He felt like he could drift away forever as he succumbed fully to sleep.

For a moment there was nothing then a strange voice spoke to him. Though he understood none of what the soft gentle voice was saying it did sooth him. The soft voice faded and within a few minutes Branden found himself sitting on a bed that he knew so very well. This was his bed, only it wasn’t because it didn’t feel real. He heard a bit of laughter turning to see her, and suddenly his entire heart warmed as he again saw Alice. Only it wasn’t the Alice he last remembered, no this Alice was a lot smaller. Branden realized that he was smaller too, and Alice was saying, “I hope we get Mr. Stewart together!” That had been the name of his first grade math teacher! He was a six-year-old again.

Branden looked over at Alice and was lost for a moment in how pretty she was. Six-year-old him had known she was prettier than all the other girls. Now with the wisdom of his attraction somehow in this strange dream he could appreciate how she had always been the prettiest girl to him. Even at six he realized now he had been in love with Alice, just back then it had been a different kind of love. Similar he supposed, as even six-year-old Branden had wanted to spend every day with Alice. When he said, “Why would I want to sit next to your stinky butt!” With a giggle it made Alice go for him, tickling him as they wrestled. It never had occurred to six-year-old Branden, but the older boy taking a ride through his own memories realized now that he had done things like that because he liked wrestling with Alice.

It was clear watching that she liked it too. The way she giggled and jabbed back at him as being the stinky one. It was clear that she was wrestling him to play with him out of love not out of anger. Had she always kissed his cheek like that after they wrestled? Branden was pretty sure she had. Even though she was as skinny as him back then she had always been stronger, it was just how it was.

The memories went on, somehow he was riding a wave of them going from moments to moments always with Alice in them. There were so many of them too, like thousands that he’d kind of forgotten about. The one where she held him when he sobbed after Frisky the cat had died when he was ten. Frisky had been around all of Branden’s life, with his parents even before the boy was born. Losing him had been hard on Branden. His mom comforting him had not been enough, he hadn’t really calmed down till Alice hugged him deeply.

The moment though that he kept linger on over and over again was that moment in her bedroom the night after he had finally told Alice how he felt about her. Admitting the way he felt for two years by then, but just hadn’t known exactly what it meant. Watching it he could see how nervous he was sitting in front of her on her bed both with cross legged looking at each other. How nervous he was when he leaned over and kissed her.

Yet the promise of so many more kisses was just there out of reach. He wanted to do more with Alice than just kiss of course, but the kisses were the most important part. The second kiss at her window, a promise that they could hold hands tomorrow at school. A promise that Branden had not been able to keep. Those dreams faded

away, a voice began speaking to him in a language that he did not understand. The second time the voice came around it was different.

This time it began showing him strange symbols in his mind followed by pictures of things. There were pictures of mountains for example followed by a set of symbols. Branden caught on immediately, the system was trying to teach him its language. He wasn't sure how long it went on for, how many times it showed him different things. Some of it was super strange, like out of this world strange, but familiar too. When the dream ended a third time he realized that he could read the words popping up on the screen. More words followed, the system taught him a story about a strange bee that was lonely hopping from flower to flower until it found another bee that was lonely too. He realized that this was a kid story, a way for the system to teach him more complex language terms. The fourth time it went deeper in words, began to show math problems that Branden solved quickly showing the system how capable he was. ON the fifth time he had grasped the alien language almost perfectly, it was kind of like Japanese. At least that was how Branden's mind thought of it from all of those old Godzilla movies of his dads.

The sixth time it spoke to him, warning of an attack, of a virus in the system. A warning that a sanctuary world was under great threat. It was confusing to Branden, he didn't understand what the voice wanted him to do. The seventh time it began to teach him how to operate parts of the ship. The voice said that it had determined he would be an ideal candidate. That the systems were nearly purged by the voice. That all he had to do was wake up on the tenth cycle and the system would be ready for him. Then the dreams started over again, relaxing him, calming him, and then suddenly they were over as he gasped sitting up in a darkened room.

There was only one light in the room that he sat up in, and a familiar man sat at a desk in the room. It took Branden a moment to recognize him as he looked so much older. When he saw Branden sitting up he said, "I was afraid you might not wake. That we left the three of you in those pods for too long for you to ever wake. Yet I have a feeling the Passengers slept for much longer than that."

Branden swallowed his throat felt so very dry. "W-where am I?" His voice sounded hoarse as well.

Doctor Vissen stood up with a strange device in his hand that was roughly the shape and size of a pen. “You’re safe, we’re no longer on the base. In a few hours you’re going to be going home, but you’re not going to remember any of the things that happened to you at that Air Force base. I need to buy you and your friend some time to figure a way out of this mess. In order to do that you need to forget everything that happened since the moment you were taken from your house. That way when Agent Nills collects you the two of you can be protected somewhat.”

Branden took the glass of water that the man handed him as he drank it once he said, “A-agent Nills? T-that’s Alice’s last name…”

Doctor Vissen nodded a little sadly, “It is, I’m sorry Branden. I tried for years to get you and the other two boys out. When we failed General Pearson and Doctor McKon went a different route. I was left in the dark till about a year ago. They began to dismantle the ship itself looking for ways to use its technology to build better ships for us to travel the stars. America had taken on other priorities by then. A strange craft that killed people when they connected to it was not important to them anymore. Nor was finding a way to contact the other Passengers out in space.”

“Wh-waht about Scott and Eric?”

Doctor Vissen sat down next to him, “They’re still sleeping. We’ve got a week maybe a little more till Pearson terminates the entire project. With the help of someone from within I got you out of that base. You’re going to see Alice again soon, but she won’t be the Alice that you remember. The world won’t be the world you remember either, but I think she’ll take care of you.”

He stood then as Branden said, “W-what happens then?”

“Then I find a way to get you the information to finish what I started. I think I managed to figure out what happened to the other boys that died.” He turned at the sound of someone knocking on the door softly, “Its time to go here put this on.” He handed Branden a tee-shirt and shorts that he had worn more times than he could count. After he had put the clothes on Doctor Vissen led him from the room down a long hallway. They had to climb down a set of stairs then they stepped outside into the night. It was warm outside, and the moon shone brightly in the sky. When they

were in a car Doctor Vissen said, “I truly am sorry Branden. For what we did to you and the other boys. If I had known that the military… well they lied to me as much as they lied to all of you.”

Branden doubted that, but he didn’t know what else to do other than get into the car with Doctor Vissen. Once they were in the car he told Doctor Vissen, “When I was in that chamber… a voice spoke to me. It was teaching me, telling me about a purge of the systems. Something about a tenth cycle...”

Doctor Vissen looked over at him then said, “I figured that they had some way to communicate with the sleepers. Some kind of very advanced AI I imagine. In a few days I’ll meet with you and give you and Agent Nills a file. On that file will be pictures and videos with the passenger’s language on them. They should reawaken your memories when you see them. Now I’m afraid comes the unpleasant part. For your own safety you need to forget everything up to the moment you disappeared.” He reached over before Branden could comprehended and stuck that strange pen device into his neck. He grunted then Doctor Vissen started speaking again. “You just left your friends house, you’re heading home Branden, you got a little lost but you’re almost home remember… almost home…” Everything faded again….

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Alice sat there as the video ended with Doctor Vissen screaming at the other scientist Mckon to turn the camera off. That he needed the mans help. The camera feed didn’t end exactly right there, the camera itself fell to the ground at a sideways angle where you could see feet moving in front of it. Then a moment later she heard hear Doctor Mckon say, “He’s dead Vissen. Yes General they’re all dead. We’re going to need a clean up crew in here.” That was clearly Mckon talking to someone else not Vissen probably on a headset. The video cut out then as Alice heard Branden next to her gulp deeply and start breathing heavily. She knew the signs of someone getting flooded with unexpected information suddenly. All of them were displayed on the boys face as she turned to look at him.

Alice was faster than Branden, but only by a heartbeat. She had him in her arms before he could fully break down into sobs again. It was clear that the video had torn open all of his dormant memories. As they came flooding back to him Alice held Branden tightly in her arms, “Its okay…” She let him cry against her then after when it passed they sat side by side with her arm around his shoulder and his head on hers while he told her about what had happened. Not just the scene she had just seen, but all of it.

Softly as he reached the end he said, “It was after Robert, Allen, and Marcus all died that I realized mom and dad had no idea where I was. They never approved of it, never wanted me to go. Then they just put us in those chambers and washed their hands of all of it as if it didn’t matter.” He sniffed as Alice rubbed his shoulder once, “I don’t think I slept in the chamber though. I mean I dreamed, but I don’t think it was really sleeping…. Not all of it anyway.”

Alice moving to grab one of the sodas handed it to him for Branden to sip on. The look on his face it was clear that he was wondering how she knew he was thirsty, but he didn’t question as he sipped. After a few sips she said, “What do you mean?”

“Well sometimes I’d be having these dreams, but they weren’t really dreams. They were…” He looked at her with a small flush on his cheeks before he said, “Well like reliving parts of my life, but only the parts that really mattered. Some memories of my mom and dad, but mostly… well mostly it was memories of doing things with you. Then other times a voice was speaking to me, but not really speaking more like…” he stopped to think for a moment then said, “More like it was feeding me information. Teaching me things that it determined I should know but didn’t. I think maybe that’s how the aliens learned… or something…”

Alice said, “Do you think it was teaching you how to read its language?”

Branden gave a small nod, “Among other things. I don’t know what though, its all kind of jumbled in my head now that I can remember it. Like its there, but not clear… Maybe whatever Doctor Vissen did made it get messed up. All of it is kind of fuzzy, anything from the moment I was taken till the moment you found me in that police station.”

Alice could tell that he was still processing all the memories that were suddenly flooding his mind. “It’ll probably take time for your brain to work though all of it. Should we look at the last bit of notes from Doctor Vissen? There were two more in there that looked interesting to me.” Branden gave a small nod as she reached over to take his hand, “If its too much you let me know Branden. We’ll just lay down, and I’ll let you cry or talk or whatever else you need.”

Branden said softly, “Thanks. I’m glad it was you here for me Alice.”

She moved back to the computer after kissing his lips once, a kiss that part of her wanted to let linger. She sat down pulling up the last folder in the main section. The first thing in the folder was a text document from Doctor Vissen again like the first text one this one was filled with apologies, but also answers.

After the Incident on the Artifact there were months of discussions about what to do. The boys were put in a smaller room further away from the ship. General Pearson was suddenly terrified that they would activate it even if they weren’t near it. Apparently to the people outside when the ship had come on a strange humming sound could be heard that started to get louder the longer the ship was on. One of the two guards close to the ship actually had a burst eardrum because of it. Because of this and the reaction to the boys I believe that this was not a defensive reaction. General Pearson and his bosses don’t want to hear my theories anymore. I have come to the conclusion that they also lied to me.

When I came onto this project it was with the clear understanding that any discoveries we made would be made public once the time came. More than that when I found a way to activate the Artifact I was told that the parents of those future children were fully notified of what their kids were. That they had signed an agreement that Pearson and I had both drafted for the parents to sign. Now that I have had years to study what happened after the Incident I know that these parents were lied to as much as I was lied to. The mothers have almost all died from cancer, only ones who had ovaries removed for other reasons actually still live. I had forgotten to what lengths the united states government will go to keep its secrets. Especially one like this that could change everything we know about existence.

My only solution to keep the boys alive was to put them in the strange chambers on the Artifact. The fact that three of the six are still intact and connected to a system that is separate from the front of the ship as far as I can tell gives me hope that the same thing won’t happen to them. The other option is to let the military have the boys fully. Their plan is clear to scrap this project and proceed with a different avenue. I fully believe that they will kill the boys, so putting them in the chambers is the better solution. If the first of the three dies from being put in a chamber then we

will not proceed with the other two boys. I believe that I am right though that these chambers will keep the boys in suspended animation for years.

Alice closed the document looking over at Branden who just gave a small nod as she opened the next one. This one was clearly coordinates to where the base with the other boys was. A set of longitude and latitude numbers along with a physical address that appeared to be a small town in Nebraska called Arcadia. She didn't see any notes about a base anywhere close to the town. The only thing that came up in a google search about Air Force bases in Nebraska was an old training facility close to Loup City. There was also a note with the name of a contact at the address in Arcadia that appeared to be a house. The last document was something again addressed to both her and Branden.

Agent Nills, Mr. Leston,

I am sorry for what the Air Force and NASA did. Sorry for what they plan to do to you now that Project Integration has gained favor. I am also sorry for the part I played in all of it. When the Artifact was discovered floating in space I believed that it was the dawning of a new age for mankind. Finding that the otherworldly beings within were all dead saddened me, but I kept going trying to find answers. I believe Mr. Leston that the answers are locked in your head, and that of the other two boys as well. I was allowed to visit you while you slept during those years to monitor you. All three of you had active brainwaves for the past thirteen years, you were doing more than dreaming. I am sorry I locked those memories away. When they come back they will be fuzzy and unclear, but I believe you will recover them. The other boys should have much better recall when they wake.

There were three times that the project was almost reactivated by various Generals in the Air Force. Then someone showed them those videos of what the ship did to the boys. In the end they decided dismantling it was a better option. Some of the Artifacts technology made its way to human hands regardless over the years. Most of how it works is so similar to our own that I am not surprised they found a way to

remove the less dangerous parts to examine and re-purpose. Five years ago they figured out how the engines worked and began dismantling them. The room the boys sleep in is the only one that still functions, but when they remove the last power cells they will wake as Branden did.

Two weeks ago Homeland got put in charge of the base where the boys reside. Pearson's bosses have decided to close the project permanently. Their plan is to exterminate the boys then destroy what remains of the ship. After all NASA along with outside sources have learned how the ship flies. The government feels there is no reason to keep the dangerous Artifact active. When I learned of this from my contact still at the base I convinced him to help me get you out. I chose Branden to get out, as I knew that you would seek answers Agent Nills. I hope you do not fail.

Doctor Gregory Vissen

Alice closed the document down leaning back in her chair as Branden said, "So now we just get on this base and do what?"

Alice shook her head, "No idea Bran, but no matter what we're saving those other two boys. I want to return Scott to his mom. Never thought I'd be visiting Nebraska willingly." Branden smiled when she chuckled, before reaching over to open the last file which was a bunch of pictures, "What are you looking at?"

Branden pulled up one of the pictures of one of the monitors that had been taken when the ship was active for those few minutes in the video. "It says Danger: Living Virus Detected, Purging Systems, Activate Distress Signal." Then he clicked on another one, "This one says that the system is being purged, to disconnect immediately. It came in right before Robert… well… right before it happened. I remember it really well, the sound of the voice filled my head even though I wasn't connected to the system. It was warning us about something but also telling us to disconnect from the system while it was purged."

Alice studied the picture for a moment then said, "Are you remembering?"

Branden gave a small nod as he closed the picture, “The fuzzy corners are still there, but the voice that was speaking to me in the chamber. It… I know their language it taught it to me. Its very similar to Japanese, symbols instead of letters, but when they speak its… similar. I feel like there was something more important than that. But, I can’t quite recall what else it told me yet…”

Alice closed the laptop looking over at Branden, “You’ll get it, I think right now what we need is some sleep then tomorrow we start driving to Arcadia. Even if we decide we don’t want to go onto that base we should at least talk with Doctor Vissen’s contact. See what he knows.” Branden agreed as she said, “I’m going to go get changed for bed and brush my teeth, then its your turn.” When she stepped out of the bathroom about ten minutes later Branden was already in his pajamas. Which as usual was just a pair pajama pants and no tee-shirt. She could remember all through the years of them growing up that he had usually gone to bed like that, without a shirt on.

There was something on Branden’s mind, Alice could tell as he walked into the bathroom closing the door behind him. She wasn’t sure what it was that was bothering him, but she knew the look his face. She could read him like a book they had been together for so long. He had gotten it even back when they were young. Every time that his mother had seen it she wouldn’t let him go until he told her what was bothering him. Branden hadn’t even been aware of how his mom knew he was thinking about something. Well, until at ten Alice had let him know that he made what she called his thinking face.

There was something honestly adorable about it to her. Although it was obvious that he was still heavily disturbed by what they had uncovered. It was also clear to Alice that his thoughts were not about the secret military base or the Artifact either. A few minutes later when Branden emerged from the bathroom he walked over to the bed hesitantly. Alice pulled the covers back as she slipped in turning off one of the lights, but leaving the other one on. Branden slipped in on his side as well laying on his back looking up at the ceiling. Alice moved till she was close to him as her hand brushed his she said, “What are you thinking about over there?”

Branden turned onto his side to look at her, “W-what happens after its all over?”

“All over?”

He shrugged, “After we expose the secret or whatever to the world. Or they make us keep it a secret, but let us live on or something.”

Alice twisted as well so that she was laying on her side facing him too, “Well then I imagine that we go back to what we know. We’ll get a house, you’ll finish school, and I’ll keep working at the FBI. It’ll be totally normal.”

Branden hesitated, “But what about us…”

Alice knew that he was struggling with this as much as she was. That he found her attractive, but Branden knew just like she did that a gulf of thirteen years separated them. He had been asleep for those years while she had lived them. Grown up, had experiences with boys and men that dwarfed what a boy who was barely thirteen knew. “Well we figure that out along the way I suppose. I’ll take care of you no matter what Branden.”

He nodded, but there was a bit of sadness in his eyes, “But you won’t want to… I mean…” he sighed rolling onto his back again, “Why would you, I still look like a little kid, and I probably always will!”

Alice could feel the pain in his voice as she moved to rest a hand on his chest, “You know love isn’t about sex right Branden? I mean they get caught up in each other when you love someone that you want to make a life with, but sex isn’t love.”

Branden sighed again, “I know that…” he looked over at her, “B-but I want to have sex with you.” His cheeks reddened as he said, “I used to think about what it would be like. I know how it works, have an idea of how its done. And stuff from shows and our sex education class in fifth grade showed me things I wanted to try with you…”

He trailed off as Alice smiled softly, “I had similar thoughts Branden. In fact if you hadn’t been taken I am pretty sure that things would have gone a lot different than they did.”

Branden softly said, “But now its not going to happen that way or any way…”

Alice moved then to lean over him halfway so that her face was even with his, “I never said it wouldn’t ever happen Branden. Why do you still assume that I’m not attracted to you physically?”

Branden flushed again, “Because I’m a boy…”

Alice touched his cheek then with her fingers, remembering how he felt thirteen years ago. She wanted so badly to give into those desires that thirteen-year-old Alice had. Wanted to show this boy just how much she wanted him. “You are? I hadn’t noticed…”

Branden sighed, “Yeah you have!”

Alice smiled then as she said, “Okay I have, but you’re my boy Branden. I’m not going to lie to you. I want to be with you. I find you sexually appealing to me because you’re my Branden. When I look at you I feel like that girl of thirteen who had never been kissed. That girl who wanted you to kiss her for so long. So I do want to be with you. I just don’t want to make you uncomfortable. Doing something for the first time with your girlfriend when you’re both in the seventh grade is one thing. Doing something with an adult women when you’re a boy of thirteen is something else entirely.”

Branden as she moved to lay on her side beside him again twisted to face her once more, “Y-you really want to s-show me stuff?”

Alice took his hand as she said, “Do you want me to? There’s no unlearning if I show you. Maybe you’d rather go back to seventh or eighth grade first? Flirt with girls your

own age, then come be mine after you've been through all the things that I went through."

Branden shook his head, "I don't want that though Alice. If I hadn't… we wouldn't have ever broken up. I don't care that you've been with other guys, but I don't want to date other girls. You thought I was dead or gone forever so you went on like I guess I would if you died or something too. So I want to learn what you like, and l-let you e-explore me too…" Here his cheeks went as red as Alice had ever seen them.

She felt flushed herself at the thoughts of teaching Branden. Of showing him where he could touch her, how to touch her, how to enter her. His size didn't matter, if he never grew another inch she'd still want to be with him. Legally he wasn't thirteen either, but an adult just like her even though he hadn't really lived the past thirteen years. "Here, we'll start simple." Still holding his hand she guided it to one of her breasts through the tee-shirt she wore. The feeling of his hand touching her there even through the shirt sent a bolt of electricity through her body.

Branden was touching her, Branden! Not some other boy or man that she kind of desired for various reasons. No it was Branden touching her! His hand squeezed as his eyes got wider. Branden licked his lips while shifting on the bed, "i-its so soft…" When he squeezed again she could feel about a thousand more bolts sliding through her body. His touch like their first kiss was clumsy, filled with hormonal boy impulses, but that only fed the fire more. It was like she was a girl of thirteen again as he squeezed her breast.

Alice chuckled, "Is it now?"

Branden squeezed again, "Y-yeah… i-is that your nipple?"

Alice softly smiled enjoying his exploration, "Here, why don't we try this…" She took his hand guiding it under the shirt. When his fingers touched the soft skin of her stomach she felt more waves of excitement sliding through her body. It had nothing to do with his age. Sure that was part of it because it was bringing her back to those moments she had missed. That though wasn't the real reason why she was so turned on, it was her love and desire for Branden himself. No other boy his age

would do it for her, just like no man she had met since becoming an adult could match Branden. He was what she had dreamed her husband would be like.

She guided his hand up under the shirt until it was cupping the small mound. Alice wasn't well endowed, her breasts had really stopped filling out in ninth grade. Just two small mounds that fit comfortably in the same style of a-cup bra she had been wearing since then. Yet the look in Branden's eyes, the way that his hand squeezed, she had a feeling that the boy of her dreams was experiencing the best moment of his life just like she was. This didn't feel wrong she realized as she looked into his eyes. Yes he was smaller than her, and might always look like he was ten or eleven, but he was Branden.

She leaned over to kiss his lips then. This time though she didn't just press her lips to his, she slipped her tongue out touching his lips, tracing along them. For a moment Branden's breathing increased. She could feel each exhale on her upper lip, but she didn't press. Slowly his lips parted letting her tongue slip inside. Alice could taste his toothpaste as her tongue touched his. This sent another bolt of desire through her body. Honestly Alice couldn't remember a time in her life when she had been turned on. The only times that came close were when she had imagined back in middle school what it would be like to do these things with Branden.

She moved so that she was leaning over Branden pushing him flat onto his back under her. She pulled back from their kiss feeling a little breathless as she said, "Put your other hand on my other breast." Branden flushed, but moved his other hand up under her tee-shirt to squeeze on her second breast. The boy was getting better at squeezing and rubbing the longer he played with them. Not doing it too roughly either, as she leaned down to kiss him again. The look in his hazel eyes made her wonder what Branden was feeling. She didn't lay down on top of him though, or start to move one of her hands down between his legs. She knew how boys his age were about that stuff. Too much too fast, and he'd get all nervous or confused.

Instead she just continued to kiss his lips, her tongue playing with his while his fingers massaged her breasts. When she felt breathless from all their kissing she slowly slipped off of Branden falling onto the bed beside him. The boy lay there catching his own breath, and she saw his one hand slip under the covers resting at his middle. Softly he said, "My jaw hurts."

Alice laughed, “Yeah… you tasted nice though.”

“S-so did you…”

She looked over at him, “How are you feeling?”

Branden softly said, “Good… I-I’d rather not discuss it though…”

Alice turned on her side as she said, “Your boner you mean?”

Branden flushed, “y-yeah, its uh well… okay” he breathed in once then said, “sometimes at school or uh when we were just hanging out alone I’d um get them.” He looked over at her, “O-other girls sometimes would make me get them, but never, well, uh, never like how I get them when I’d hug you. Or um we’d bump into each other or something on accident. Or when we’d wrestle to see who could tickle who first…”

Alice rested a hand on his chest again loving the feeling of his bare soft skin under her fingers. She could still feel his heart beating quickly too, “Its a natural reaction, but that’s not what you mean is it?”

Branden twisted on his side now so that he was facing her, “I-it felt, uh, well when I get them from dreams or random thoughts or uh seeing a pretty girl it felt nice. But when I get them because you smile at me, or hug me, or wrestle with me it feels right that I get them. I-I know from talking with my dad that eventually boys stop getting them all the time at random thoughts, but I’d like to be a hundred and still get them for you… especially when you kiss me like before…” By the time he finished his cheeks were flushed red again.

Alice laughed again before leaning over to kiss his lips once, “I like that you get them Branden, and I promise if you want to when you’re ready we’re going to explore what it means. We're not going to stop at you feeling my tits and us kissing. We’re going to go all the way. I want to show you all of it and let you explore at your pace. When I’m

with you I feel like I’m that girl again. I want to grow with you all over again. I love you Branden, and you’re not wrong about how things would have turned out. If you hadn't’ disappeared there would have never been other boys, because I don’t need another boy when I’ve found my perfect someone… even if he’s a shrimp.”

Branden stuck his tongue out as he said, “Well at least I’m not a giant!”

Alice sighed pulling his glasses off of his face to set on the nightstand, “That’s your comeback?”

Branden said, “Well I was going to call you smelly, but that only worked when you played outside all day… I don’t have a good comeback for shrimp anymore cause you always smell so nice..”

Alice chuckled as she turned off the other light then pulled him into her arms. They nestled together facing one another. When his hand touched her cheek she said, “I’ll try not to insult you too much sweetie.”

Branden leaned in to kiss her lips then after the kiss said nervously, “S-so one day I’ll get to see you naked?”

She chuckled, “Yes Branden, but I’m all old now…”

He said, “No you’re not Alice, you’re perfect to me. I thought you were beautiful at thirteen but I still think you’re just as beautiful now. I’ll still think it when you’re forty too.” She had no doubt that he would, love had blinded him as much as it had her to their difference in age. Branden fell asleep first clearly exhausted by their day. Alice just lay there watching him until she succumbed as well. Even though there was a darkness in what had happened the world felt right now that he was back. She felt like she’d get all the things she had always dreamed of with the boy that she had always wanted to have them with even before she had known she wanted them…

XXXXX

The sound of a shower going woke Alice up the following morning. Her head was fuzzy with dreams of Branden, and also dreams trying to work out what had been revealed to them. She smiled softly at the sound of the shower, as she sat on the bed stretching once. No doubt Branden had woken up needing to pee, then had decided to take a shower. She was pretty sure he had fallen asleep last night still stiff. Probably woken up that way too in need of some release. Alice hoped soon that if he needed release he'd be confident enough to just wake her with light touches.

When she started to slip out of the bed she felt something sticky on the pajama pants she was wearing around the upper thigh. It had mostly dried, but it was still kind of sticky and there was some on one of the bed sheets too she realized. When she touched the sticky spot on the sheets she brought it up to her nose to sniff and chuckled. The smell of semen was unmistakable to her. The musky scent of it was blended with a sweetness that had to be unique to Branden.

Branden had clearly gotten up to take a shower because he had woken up after a wet dream. Alice felt her entire body flush at the thoughts that entered her mind. The idea that she had made the boy spurt in his sleep while he rested in her arms excited her. She knew that teenage Alice would have been both repulsed and excited by the idea of Branden cumming. Excited because even at thirteen she would have known that it meant he really liked her. Repulsed because back then she would have thought it was kind of disgusting that he did it all over her sheets.

She could understand how it happened though. She had fallen asleep wet from their kiss, and the feeling of his hands on her breasts still lingered even now in the morning. The eagerness in his green eyes as he had stroked them last night filled her mind suddenly. Alice realized that she was getting wet again. She had gotten beyond the fact that he was thirteen still, it didn't matter in the grand scheme of things.

Branden was right, if he hadn't disappeared he would have been her first in everything. Now she would be his first, just more experienced than him so she could help guide her future husband through the waters. She didn't doubt that Branden was right, he would never want someone else. Just like Alice knew she never would either.

As she was checking her message on her phone Branden stepped out of the bathroom. The boys hair was still a mess of dark brown locks on his head in a bad need of a comb. His cheeks flushed delightfully when he saw her sitting on the edge of the bed. He was dressed in just a pair of jeans that hugged a little loosely on his hips showing off just a hint of the top of his underwear. Underwear that she had seen him pick out a few days ago, and she knew had Rocket Raccoon on them.

The thought of undoing his jeans, rubbing his erection through those boxer-briefs entered her mind for a moment before she cleared the thoughts. He looked good though without a shirt on, his skinny upper body really didn't have much definition, and Alice had a feeling that he'd never put on muscle mass. It was possible he never got any taller either, that he always looked like a boy of eleven or twelve. She had a feeling that he had already finished puberty just based on what they had seen of the aliens.

Alice put her phone down, walking over to where he was. The way that his eyes seemed to take in all of her, not just her breasts, though they did linger there longer than the rest, told her that he wanted her. She rested a hand on his chin turning his eyes up to meet her, when she leaned down to kiss him it was with barely restrained passion. She knew though that Branden needed to work into their first time.

Not to just spring it all on the young boy. He was new to all of this, she was his teacher in it, but also his lover for life. Also if Alice was honest with herself there was something exciting about taking it slowly with Branden, letting him work at his own pace. When her lips pulled back Branden shifted slightly where he stood his cheeks a lovely rosy red. "Just so you know you got my pajamas sticky."

Branden's eyes got wide in horror as he said, "I-I-I thought it only happened, um, in my uh, um, underwear…" He looked sheepish as if he was in trouble.

Alice kissed his forehead, "Its okay sweetie I don't mind, I know you're a boy."

He swallowed, "It was because of last night… it all felt so good. Then I had a dream about s-seeing you naked. T-that's what woke me up when I felt it all wet…" He sighed deeply, "Its embarrassing telling you this!"

Alice looking down at him said, “I imagine so, but it wasn’t like you did it on purpose Bran. I know about boys your age and how hard it is to control stuff like that. Hell I’ve even heard of adult men who sometimes wake up after having them when not having sex for a long while. This is all new and exciting to you.”

Branden agreed with that, “Yeah plus its you… all you have to do is smile at me Alice and everything goes a little wonky…”

Alice smiled then touched his cheek again before telling him, “You’re not alone there Bran. Just seeing you makes me feel all warm inside. I’m going to get changed then we can head out.” As she walked past him Branden grabbed her hand holding it till she turned back to look at him. He pulled her down to him this time wanting to kiss her again. This time as the kiss lingered she felt his hands resting at her sides move up till they were rubbing at the sides of her breasts. Alice broke the kiss, “If you’re going to do it at all Bran you might as well as do it properly…”

His cheeks went red again, “S-sorry I just um, I don’t want to just do it without permission.”

Alice smiled, “You have my permission to feel my breasts.” When she leaned back down to kiss him again his hands slipped around to the front of her shirt squeezing on her breasts once which made her laugh against his lips breaking their kiss.

Branden said, “What? Did I do it wrong?”

Alice just shook her head in amusement resting her hands on his taking them away from her breasts, “It felt like you were about to go ‘honk honk’ against my lips.” Branden’s mouth broke into a wide grin, and then he started chuckling too the two of them laughing like small children. Which in that moment she felt like one.

Branden when they stopped giggling like school girls said, “I’m thirteen not six. That’s something I woulda done at six.”

Alice pet his cheek once, “Oh yeah?”

He nodded, “I thought back then it was what you did. I think it was in some movie or something…”

“Well why did you do it just now?”

He flushed, “Its really hard to rub your breasts when you’re leaning over to kiss me and we’re both standing. It was a lot easier when we were on the bed…”

Alice kissed his cheek, “Well then tonight maybe we should have a repeat of that huh?” Branden agreed with a nod, then as if on cue his stomach growled which made Alice chuckle, “I’d better feed you before you die of starvation.” Branden just flushed with a sigh which made her ruffle his already messy hair. She grabbed a brush from her bag in the bathroom walking back out to hand it to him, “For that mop.”

Branden said, “You don’t like my Anime hair?”

Alice put the brush down on the table, “You can go out in public with whatever kind of hair you want to, but that doesn’t mean I’ll sit with you.”

Branden sighed picking up the brush, “You know Alice, you’re thirteen years older, but you’re still the same.” She smiled once before going back into the bathroom to change. She knew what he meant of course, she had done the same thing before when they were in sixth grade. He had stayed over when his parents went on their first vacation without him. Every morning when he had come down with his hair everywhere Alice had told him she’d never go out in public with him if he didn’t do something about it. Had she always been taking care of Branden like that? Had their relationship always been kind of like this? It wasn’t that he was immature, but he was a boy and boys were… well boys, and even as men they didn’t really fully grow out of being a boy at times.

Her mom had once said that boys became men, but some never tried to actually be men even when they were grown up. Alice could see the difference and what her

mom meant now. Some men like Stephen had lost their childhood. They'd never look back on it and say they missed it because they were too focused on their own personal fulfillment. He wouldn't have made a good father in fact in a lot of ways he was a lot like her own father. He would have been absent at best and eventually it would lead to unhappiness, bitterness, and divorce. For her dad it had led to cheating constantly on her mom until she had enough.

Other men never lost the boy that they were, they were adults with responsibilities, but they remembered how to have fun and be a kid again. They would spend time with their kids and never see it as burden because they got to be a kid again when they were with them. Also someone like that, someone like Branden (even though he was still technically a kid right now) would treat the woman they loved with respect, but also goof off with them. Stephen's idea of goofing off had been to order ice cream for dessert.

Branden would grow up, but he'd never 'grow up' both physically, and that part of him that would still be a kid even when he was in his fifties or sixties. Alice realized that was why she wanted to hold onto him so badly. Even back at thirteen she had known that he'd be there for her no matter what. That he'd make life fun and interesting even when he was being a goofball. That he'd have a job and all of that, but he'd never let it stop him from being there for her or their children. She had lost him once, and she'd be damned if anyone was going to take him from her again.

Alice stepped back out into the hotel room a few minutes later dressed and ready to go when she saw that Branden was packing all of their stuff away. She leaned in the bathroom doorway amused when he picked up a pair of her panties, with a flush on his cheeks before quickly pushing them back into the suitcase. Just as he did Alice cleared her throat, "Ready to go?" Branden had put on a shirt that was dark blue with some blacks on it, but otherwise plain. He looked really good, kind of sweet and innocent mixed with a slight maturity as well.

He jumped just slightly as he closed the suitcase, "Uh-yeah I was just putting all our stuff in the suitcase…"

Alice smiled, "I know you were. Here, don't forget the stuff from the bathroom." She handed him their tooth brushes and toothpaste. When Branden had it all stowed away they headed out of the room. Alice helped him get the suitcase into the car

then she put their destination into the GPS. “Twenty hours, so we should get there in roughly three days if we stop every night to sleep.”

Branden had always been pretty quick with math, “That’s about eight hours of driving a day, that’s a lot of driving Alice. Especially for just you to do all by yourself.”

She agreed, “That’s why we’ll be stopping for midday meals and at rest stops. As far as anyone at the FBI knows I’m on vacation visiting with my family. Its the cover that my director is using.”

Branden said, “If you told him it was aliens he’d probably make you drop the case… turn me over to someone or something.”

Alice squeezed his hand reassuringly, “No one is turning you over to anyone no matter what. After we figure this out you’ll be safe. Then we can figure out how our relationship is going to work.”

She pulled into a McDonald’s drive-thru a few minutes later where they both ordered. Then as they were driving away with food to get onto the freeway leading east towards Nebraska of all places Branden said, “I think I know how our relationship is going to work.”

Alice eating a hash brown said, “Oh do you now?”

He shrugged, “Sure you’ll tell me what to do, but not in a mean or demanding way. Just that way that makes me know I should do it. You’ve been doing it all my life pretty much.”

Alice looked over at him for a second then back at the road, “So you’re saying I’m bossy and controlling?”

Branden shook his head, “No. At least not to me you’re not. You don’t tell me I have to do something, you just suggest it. If I know its right I’ll do it because I know you’re right. Then there’s the other side of things. You know where I figure out how we

manage all of our stuff so we can have a comfortable life. After I finish school and get a really good job. Then make you stop working…"

Alice eyed him, "Make me stop working?"

Branden smiled, "Yeah you gotta stay home and make me dinner and such!" He laughed at the look she gave him, "Come on Alice I'm just joking with you!"

She sighed, "You do realize that I am both taller and bigger than you right?"

Branden shrugged, "Sure, you always have been, but I like that too. I… think I like it even more now than before…" His cheeks went crimson, and Alice felt a fire flow through her body as she realized that she kind of did too.

"You do huh?"

He smiled, "It makes wrestling more fun.. i-if we get to keep doing that. D-do married couples wrestle?"

Alice laughed, "I suppose that they do in bed…" She looked over at him once and Branden cleared his throat looking out of the window while eating his Egg McMuffin. Clearly her mention of them wrestling in bed had made him stiffen again. Alice realized the thought of it had made her all hot inside. He looked like a boy, at times acted like a boy, but there was this underlining maturity to all of it as well. The fact that she desired a boy who was also not a boy based upon the rotation of the earth was strange. Yet the truth was she wanted Branden now, and would want him a hundred years from now as well if the lived that long.

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The afternoon sun beat down on the car as they pulled off of Interstate 15 close to a rest stop. It was the tail end of summer so Alice wasn't surprised to see a few families that were still out driving on the road. Since the pandemic had officially ended a year ago families had started traveling in huge records. Wanting to get out of their little bubbles as much as possible. People had returned to normal far faster than most had predicted they would.

Alice parked the car in front of the small cafe that was across from the rest stop. They had left a town about two hours back where she had thought about stopping for lunch. Instead she had pushed on since neither of them were really that hungry yet. Now though Alice could feel the need to eat, and she knew Branden was starving. That was why when she had seen this place on the GPS Alice had gotten off the interstate. She figured hat they could make it to the next small town around sundown if they stopped to eat now.

Alice could tell that Branden was worried about how much driving she was doing. He kept trying to entertain her with conversations about things that were only from a few years ago, but also asking her questions about the things that she had done during the years that he was gone. When they sat down to eat Alice handed Branden her phone where she showed him a picture of her and James Delson at the senior prom. She could see Branden's eyes on her in the dark blue dress she wore, "Why does it have so many ruffles?"

Alice chuckled, "Because its a prom dress, that's just how they are."

Branden handed her back the phone as the waitress came to take their order, she was not surprised at all when he ordered one of the bigger burgers. When the waitress left he said, "So what was it like?"

Alice wasn't sure why he wanted to know, "Prom? It was okay, the music was a little loud and James had no idea how to dance."

He seemed a little nervous as he said, “He wasn’t the first boy that you had sex with though. I mean we already talked about that. Uh he wasn’t one of the four either… right?”

Alice sighed, “No he wasn’t. We didn’t sleep together. He wanted to I’m sure, but I didn’t want to. I sort of left halfway through prom. Heard he hooked up with another girl after I left. I only went because he asked, and my mom clearly wanted me to go. You really want to know this kind of stuff?”

Branden shrugged, “I know adults have sex when they’re in relationships. I know that high school kids have sex from movies and television shows. You told me already that you did, but you didn’t really tell me what it was like. You don’t have to though...”

Alice understood where he was coming from now. He was trying to figure out what it was like for her, how it might have been if he hadn’t disappeared. “My first time wasn’t all that good Branden. It was rushed, one afternoon in a strange bedroom with a boy I had only been dating for a few weeks. I just sort of…. Gave in when he suggested it after about the sixth time. Shortly after I broke up with him because he was cheating on me. It wasn’t at all how I imagined it would be.”

“Want me to go beat him up?” Alice chuckled as Branden flushed slightly. Branden went quiet when the waitress came to put their food down before them. His burger was nearly the size of his head, but Alice knew he’d finish it, he had always had a very healthy appetite despite his small size. “D-did you used to think about… us doing that?”

Alice smiled, “That’s what I meant by imagining it. I don’t think I thought we’d go all the way that summer. Its hard to say when we would have…” She shrugged as she trailed off.

Branden softly said, “I-I’m a little scared about doing it…”

Alice said, “Because I’m an adult now?” He shook his head no, “Because I’m more experienced than you now?” Again another shake of his head, “Then why?”

He shrugged, “I was really scared about kissing you after I said I liked you cause I knew that it meant that we’d… well that one day you’d s-see me naked…”

Alice pointed out, “Well you’d see me naked one day too you know?”

Branden flushed, “I know!”

Alice softly leaned over as she said, “I wanted to see you naked. I was very curious what you looked like.”

Branden shook his head, “No you weren’t! G-girls don’t want to see boys um well… they don’t do they?”

Alice laughed, “You think boys are the only one that’s curious as to what the opposite sex looks like naked?” He flushed then she said, “I want to see you naked even now.”

“B-but you’ve seen… um well.. older guys naked… I don’t know if… I mean I’m not…” He went red again clearly flustered as he trialed off.

Alice rested her hand on top of one of his until he looked up at her his cheeks still red, “I want to see you naked Branden. Only when you’re ready for me to though. There’s no rush at all.”

He swallowed clearly trying to work through his nervousness, “B-but you’ve seen bigger… I mean I know adult men have bigger ones than boys my age.”

Alice agreed, “They do, but Bran, they aren’t you. It could be this small,” she held up a fry that was cut in half so it was less than two inches long. “and I’d still want to see it because its a part of you. I think you’re handsome Branden. I always did, even with those big dorky glasses.”

He touched his glasses, “I guess I could start wearing contacts…’

Alice said, “If you want to I won’t stop you, but I like you in your dorky glasses. They make you look even more handsome to me.” He flushed even redder again as she smiled eating another fry from his plate. After they finished and she paid the bill with cash they got back on the road again heading ever closer to Nebraska. Alice had a feeling that tonight they were going to get a little further along in Bran’s explorations. She’d let Branden decide how far they were going to go, or how quickly. Although she’d work at making sure that he didn’t rush into all of it just to catch up with her experience.

When they were back on the interstate Branden said, “What about college? Did you um ever party at all? Movies always make it out like its some kind of party…”

Alice chuckled, “Maybe it is, it wasn’t for me though. I spent most of college learning because I wanted to get accepted into the FBI academy. They require a certain GPA along with other requirements in school.”

Branden nodded, “I could see that. So was it just because Stephen kind of reminded you of me that you started dating him?” He really was jumping all over her life clearly trying to get a picture of what she had been through.

“You really want to know this stuff Bran?”

He shrugged, “I want to know what I missed.”

“But you wouldn’t have missed any of it, a lot of it wouldn’t have even happened if…” She trialed off looking over at him then. She sighed once, “Okay if you really want to know. My mom and Henry took me to Morocco for summer vacation the year that I got accepted into the academy to become an agent. They have some really amazing beaches there. During the week I often would just lay out on one getting a tan. That was how I met Stephen.”

Branden said, “Sounds nice…”

Alice chuckled, “You’re thinking of seeing me in a swimsuit aren’t you?” The small flush on his cheeks was all she needed to know. She smiled, “Well we can take a trip to the beach after this is all over.” Then she continued to talk about Morocco, “At the hotel one evening I was sunbathing while reading a book. Stephen saved me from a ball to the face as I was a little too close to the volleyball court. He made that corny joke about how he swore I was I the movies. It sounded like something you’d say, so I found it cute. We got to talking, and well he was a lot sweeter than either of the assholes I dated in college. So we started seeing each other.”

Branden was quiet for a moment, she thought that maybe he was lost in thoughts or not as interested as he appeared to be. Then he said softly, “You were going to marry him, but you didn’t love him?”

Alice sighed looking over at him, “No I didn’t love him. I haven’t…” She turned back to the road then finished her thought, “loved anyone since you disappeared. Hell I didn’t even know it was love until you disappeared. I just thought it was…”

He said when she trialed off, “The start of something that would be love?”

Alice shook her head, “I thought it was attraction because you were so good to me always, even when we were insulting each other or mad at each other.” She looked over at him briefly, “I wasn’t afraid to fall in love anymore by the time I met Stephen. I figured the worst that could happen was that my heart was broken. Even so I couldn’t…fully give myself to him. The more I got to know him the more I realized that at best he was a pale comparison to what I had lost. He wasn’t you Branden, but he was close enough that I figured I could make a life and have a family.”

Branden when she finished said, “I want a family.”

Alice looked over at him, “What do you mean?”

He shrugged, “I’ve been thinking about it while we were driving earlier. I don’t mean right away, but if its possible… one day with you I’d like to have a family.”

Alice smiled looking again at the road ahead of them, “I think you’d make an amazing father Bran, but there’s no rush. What matters more is that we’re together again.” It was strange to realize that being around Branden made her feel like a kid again, but also not. Even stranger was that while he had slept for the past thirteen years or so, he didn’t feel like he was the same boy that she had known from when she was a kid. Even if he wasn’t aware of it during those lost times Branden had matured some as well. Oh he was still the boy he had been, but then again he probably always would have some of that in him. Thinking about how his dad had always been with them made her realize that. Unlike her dad who the more she thought of it the more Stephen reminded her of him.

At seven she pulled off at the edge of a small town feeling both exhausted and starving. They rented a hotel room. Then went to the cafe across the street and got food to go. As they were sitting down in the hotel room at the small table to eat Branden said, “I was thinking some more about what happened with the other boys. Doctor Vissen said something once about how the wrist band worked. They only connected to us because we had enough alien in us that they could read us as one of them. I think the virus infected them so easily because they all came from the same source.”

Alice eating a green bean said, “What do you mean same source?”

Branden said, “That file about the hybrid program. We all came from the genetic make up of one of the aliens. If its a virus maybe it could jump easily around because all three of them had the same genetic make up so it knew exactly how to attack them.”

“You want to try and connect with the system again don’t you?”

Branden shook his head, “I-I don’t know. I just know that there has to be a solution to the problem. The fact that they can be infected with a virus of some kind that starts on the ship means that they must have a way to combat it. Though whatever measures they use didn’t work this time. Maybe it was a new variant they had never seen before? Somehow their systems failed to stop the virus.”

“Maybe they died because they had too much human in them and the system rejected them.”

Branden shook his head, “No way, the pods didn’t reject us, if anything from what I can remember the system within encouraged me to learn what I know. It’s becoming less fuzzy the more that I sit with it. The AI clearly wanted me to learn how to operate the ship, but it also wanted me to stay asleep. Not just to learn, but to protect me too. Maybe it knew that I wasn’t one of its natural crew members, but it takes whatever it can get. I think I might be able to speak their language if I had to…”

Alice took his hand from across the small table squeezing it, “We’ll figure it all out when we get to the contact.” She rested a hand on her mouth as she yawned, “What I do know is that I need a shower then some sleep.”

Branden yawned too, “Yeah… c-can I take my shower tomorrow morning?”

Alice squeezed his hand, “Sure, you are your own boss Branden, not me. I’m your girlfriend.”

He smiled, “I know, but…” He shrugged, “I like having you take care of me.” She smiled at that, “Don’t get me wrong I want to take care you too, but knowing that you want to take care of me… is nice…”

Alice leaned down to kiss his lips once lightly, “I know what you mean Bran. In the future though just say you’re going to take your shower in the morning. I’m fine with however you want to bathe yourself.”

He flushed at a thought, “Uh m-maybe one day we can take showers together…” quickly when she gave him a look, “What! It saves on water!”

Alice laughed and ruffled his hair as she started for the shower, “Well then I’d have to see you naked for that.”

Branden still flushed said, “I think I’d be okay with that, i-if we work up to it. I just still doubt I’m, um well all that interesting to look at.”

Alice knew that would probably keep worrying him, but she knew reassuring him was what she needed to do, “Stop worrying about that, It’ll be exactly what I want Branden trust me.” Then she walked into the bathroom after grabbing her pajamas. As she undressed Alice could feel her heart racing. The fact that she wanted to see Branden naked had not left her mind at all.

She knew that he was a boy of thirteen, physically. That he was somewhere between a boy and a man mentally. That he’d probably never fully lose those things that made him so appealing to her even with more maturity. She also knew that while he would still age he’d probably never grow anymore than he already had. After all Branden was clearly done with puberty. She was curious if he could even make children, and had a feeling that he could.

The thought of carrying a child from Branden filled her with surprise longing. She had wanted kids for a little bit now, but this was like her entire imagination from thirteen had come back to life. She could have the whole thing. Be fully happy and fulfilled because the boy that had been her everything growing up had come back into her life.

After the shower Alice slipped into a small tee-shirt and her pajama shorts, not the pants she wouldn’t wear those again unless all the shorts were dirty. She realized as she brushed her hair and teeth that she wanted Branden to look at her. It actually excited her that the boy would be admiring her. She didn’t have the same tiny body that he had first found beautiful, but even so her slender adult figure wasn’t all that endowed compared to most other women her age.

She knew though as she stepped out into the small hotel room that Branden would find her desirable no matter what. That saying that love blinded you was true for him, and for her as well. She knew that he was just barely thirteen. That he hadn’t aged a day in the past thirteen years even if he had sort of learned while sleeping. She knew as well that it was possible he never got over five feet in height, that he looked like a twelve-year-old boy for the rest of his life. Well she was blind to all of that, as to her he looked perfect just the way he was.

In fact stepping out and seeing him in just his pajama pants with Guardians of the Galaxy all over them was more than adorable to her. His skinny figure looked perfect to her. Yes seeing him without a shirt, those two small pink nipples erect in the cool air of the hotel room, his flat stomach with its little indent of a belly button all made her feel like she was thirteen again. Like she was looking back in time to a place where she had been thirteen and in love for the first time. In love with the most perfect boy ever. The bangs of his dark brown hair almost falling into his eyes, the glasses he wore that made his eyes look even bigger than they were. He was beautiful, a part of her longed to just walk over to where he was, grab him, and kiss him deeply.

Tonight Alice gave into that part of her, it felt right to do so. She had finally had enough of denying that she wanted to be with Branden. She could feel his eyes on her, not just her face but her body as well. Any strange man or boy looking at her with such open admiration and lust would have been a slight turn off. With Branden it was anything but that. She reached him in a few steps, her eyes on him the entire time. She touched his chin aware that his eyes hadn't lingered on her breasts as much as they had on her thighs. The boy was a leg man apparently, and Alice knew that she had very nice legs.

When his eyes met hers the small flush on his cheeks drove away any doubts that might have lingered. She was thirteen again when she leaned down to kiss his lips. Not a single moment of time had passed as she felt his tongue meet hers, while her fingers ran through the boys hair. Her five and a half foot frame compared to his four and eight inches was not an issue in the least. She took his hands pulling him towards the hotel bed, the two of them falling with the boy on top of her. She could feel his flat chest pressing to her small bust, pushing them down. Then she felt something against her lower stomach just above her pubic region realizing that it had to be Branden's penis.

Breathless she pulled back from their kiss, her hand running through the boys hair. She could feel his warm breath on her neck when he rested fully on top of her. When his lips touched her neck Alice said, "That feels nice…"

Branden softly said, "I love you so much Alice."

Alice said, "I know I can feel just how much you love me…."

Branden's eyes met hers as he said, "What do you me-" He stopped in the middle of his words then slipped off of her quickly rolling onto his back beside her grabbing at the beds sheets to cover himself as he said, "S-sorry!"

Alice laughed as she twisted on her side to look at him. He was as red as she had ever seen him, of course he hadn't realized that she could feel his erection. He'd been too busy focused on how nice it all felt to be on top of her. "You know I've felt more than a few in my time right?"

Branden still flushed stumbled through his words, "Yeah b-but its… you know… I've never…. No one's ever seen it or felt it other than me… its… like I want to show you, but I'm also nervous about all of it too. I don't want to be nervous, but I start thinking about the fact that you've done all the stuff that I think about with other guys. I don't want to… make it bad or do it wrong or something like that."

Alice touched his cheek once, "Sweetie trust me you cannot mess it up. I expect to have to teach you. The thought of teaching you all of this kind of excites me. I know that you've never done the stuff, but I hope that if you let me that you'll like doing it with me."

Branden swallowed, "I will Alice.. I want to do everything with you."

Alice smiled, "Good, so do we just cuddle tonight or do we try something simple first?"

"Simple?"

Alice rested a hand on the sheets where his stomach was but not any lower, "Well I was thinking that I could take a look at it, just see it in your pajamas not out of them yet. What do you think?"

Branden looked into her eyes for a moment, those beautiful hazel eyes filled with nervousness mixed with desire. “Okay.” Then he pulled the blanket back so that she could see him in just his pajama pants again. Alice found her eyes roaming over his chest and stomach, memories coming back to her again. Many times over the school year when she had seen Branden without a shirt she had thought about what it would be like to just run her hand over his bare chest. He had no hair anywhere, and she was surprised to realize that she liked that. Part of what had attracted her to Stephen was that he hadn’t been hairy either, she didn’t like hairy guys.

Her eyes roamed down though to the boys pajama pants where she finally saw what he had been hiding. She couldn’t really tell the thickness because it was buried behind clothing, but she could tell the length pretty well. The little tent that his erection made was clear as day, pressing at those pajama pants. If Alice measured with her eyes she figured he was less than four inches, but more than three. There was something hot about seeing his erection straining like it was in the underwear. Branden after a moment said, “I-it feels weird that you’re looking at my boner…”

Alice smiled, “Weird as in because I’m an adult now?”

He shook his head, “no way… weird because n-no ones ever looked at it before.. i-if you want I could.. just for a second… s-show you it…”

Alice loved how red his cheeks went as he suggested this, and more than that her desire to actually see it shocked her. “Sure lets say a five seconds?” Branden gave a nod then put a hand on the waistband of his pajama pants. Alice became aware right away why she could see his boner so clearly, he only wore the pajama pants not any underwear. He lifted it up just enough that she could see first his pubic region which was as devoid of hair as his chest and stomach. Then she saw his penis, it was thicker than a pencil, but not by much. There was a bit of foreskin covering the head in an almost straining manner, as she could make out the bulb of his glans clearly under the foreskin. It looked incredibly stiff within the boys pajama pants. After five seconds Branden dropped the pajama pants.

Alice felt her heart beating a little quicker, and her desire for Branden bringing her back to being all of thirteen again. How at thirteen she had been so curious as to what a boy that age looked like naked. Especially Branden. When she didn’t speak Branden clearly got nervous, “S-see its not as big as um adults…”

Alice touched his chest once, “Nope but its perfect I think. You know when I was thirteen I wanted to see it really badly…”

Branden swallowed, “No way! I thought girls didn’t want to see boys um boners?”

Alice laughed, “They did to, we’re just as curious as boys you know? Its just… well I only wanted to see yours.” She sat up on the bed, “Okay my turn, five seconds. You get to choose breasts or vagina?”

Branden’s eyes got wide as he said, “B-both?”

Alice smiled, “Okay three seconds of each how about that?” Branden nodded once, Alice could see the eagerness in his eyes. She chuckled boys were boys after all, “Breasts first?” Branden nodded again so Alice put her hands on her shirt pulling it up to the top of her chest just below her neck. The look on Branden’s face made her smile, the clear devotion and desire was turning her on. She wasn’t ever going to be well endowed. That clearly didn’t matter at all. To Branden they were the most amazing breasts ever.

When the three second passed she dropped the shirt as Branden said, “W-wow… they’re… b-bigger than I thought…”

Alice leaned over to kiss his lips, “You’re not disappointed that they’re not even bigger?”

Branden shook his head, “I like them like that. Any bigger and how would I um, squeeze them?”

Alice chuckled then moved to grip her pajama shorts, “Ready for the other part?” Branden gave another small nod again she could tell that he was eager. She honestly felt like she was thirteen again in this moment. Showing her body off for the first time to her new boyfriend. She had never been with someone for whom the

female body was still a mystery. Even the boy she had slept with in high school for her first time had known what a girl looked like naked. She felt nervous about this part she realized. Breasts were easy all boys even men were fascinated with them, but the vagina…

She decided to just pull her pajama shorts down along with her panties to show off her lower region. In one swift motion she was naked. Once again Branden's eyes about shot out of his face, and his penis actually twitched in his pajamas. She smiled at that, maybe some boys really did want to see this part too.

She wasn't shaved, but then again shes had barely a dusting of hair on the plump mature lips of her pussy. She kept it very trimmed and light because she didn't like it to be thick. Naturally it didn't go over most of her pubic region, she had never gotten a lot of hairs. Like the hair on her head it was a sandy blonde so the outer lips were still clearly visible. Maybe she would shave it though to have a pubic region that matched Branden's fully. That actually might look nice.

After the three seconds she let it go on for a few more seconds before she pulled the shorts back up. Branden a little breathless said, "You're so pretty Alice.." His hand rested on his boner as he said this which drew her eyes to it. He pulled the hand off as he said, "It kind of h-hurts a little bit…"

Alice moved to lay down on her side next to him, "Painful? Is something wrong?"

Branden flushed, "N-no its just really like as stiff as it gets. Usually when its like that I um go to the shower and um, well you know…"

Alice laughed, only it was more of a girlish giggle, "You jerk it?" Branden nodded yes. Alice suddenly had a naughty thought, "I'd like to see that sometime."

"See me…stroke it?" Alice gave a nod, Branden flushed again a simple reminder that beside kissing and touching her breasts the boy had never done anything sex related at all. "R-right now?"

Alice kissed his cheek as she rested a hand on his stomach softly stroking him there. His skin was incredibly soft and warm. Had it been this incredible to her when she was a kid? She was pretty sure it had been, but her focus had been on her own nervous new feelings not on how wonderful Branden felt. “Only if you want to Bran. I do not want to make you do something you don’t want to do.”

“Uh, d-did um Stephen ever uh you know um jerk it for you?”

Alice laughed, “No way. No guys ever done that for me. The truth is Branden I’ve never wanted a guy to, not until you.”

“W-why though?”

Alice admitted the truth, “Well part of it is that those guys were all already experienced so they didn’t have this whole sense of it all being new like you do. The other part Branden is that I think I’m reliving my thirteenth year as much as you are. I’m positive that at some point that summer I would have asked to see something like this if not the exact same thing. The moment I learned that boys, well as you so lovely put it, jerked it I wanted to see what it was like…” She shrugged admitting how curious she had been made her entire body flush with desire.

Branden taking in all of her words said, “Wow… I really didn’t know that girls thought about stuff like that. I mean I always figured that it was just boys who thought about sex.”

Alice chuckled, “Oh sweetie no. I was probably every bit as curious as you are.”

Branden said, “O-okay if I… um jerk it for you can I uh see your breasts while I do it?”

Alice smiled, “I think that’s fair.” She sat up again to pull her tee-shirt off then she sat with her legs crosses as she said, “Why don’t you sit up too to show me…”

Branden sat up his eyes still going to her breasts. Stephen along with the other men she had been with in college hadn't ever complained that her breasts were too small or something. Though they had never really stared at them like Branden. Part of it she knew was that they were new to him, his first time seeing breasts in the real world.

Another part though had this feeling that he'd always like looking at her chest, just like she'd always like looking at his body too. Branden put his hands on his pajama pants lifting his bottom once as he pulled them down off of his legs before sitting up. His little penis stood straight up between his legs. In the dim light of the hotel room with nothing sort of creating shadows she got an even better look.

She had been right about the size, it wasn't quite four inches, but longer than three. The thickness was just right for a boy his size. She could tell that if he was inside of her she'd feel every second of it. He wasn't too thin, but still nowhere near adult thickness. It was more than adorable though how stiff he was. The head rested against his stomach almost pressing to it just below his belly button. Strange how sitting up made three or so inches look longer than it was. Underneath was a small sack with two clearly defined balls in it about the size of small almonds. She was surprised with how big they were, but then again Branden was producing semen.

When he was sitting cross legged in front of her Branden said, "S-should I do it now?" Alice gave a nod with the flush to his cheeks. He circled one of his hands around the shaft at he middle. The entire stiffy got buried in his hand. Then he started stroking it in front of her, Branden's cheeks flushed with embarrassment, but also excitement. She could see his eyes resting on her breasts more than once while he increased the pace. Alice watched amazed feeling like she was thirteen again seeing her boyfriend for the first time.

"Can you use just a few fingers so I can see how you do it?" Branden flushed again, but moved his hand off instead just using two of his fingers to stroke at about the middle. When he did this Alice felt drawn to the boys little shaft. When the head popped out with the foreskin sliding back she felt her entire body flush with desire. It had to be the most perfect little dick that she had ever had the privilege of seeing. The glans was a small bulb on top of the shaft, with an opening that was bigger than she had expected with how small it was. She watched fascinated as Branden kept stroking using just the two fingers. After a few more strokes Alice asked, "Can I try it?"

Branden flushed red again stopping his stroking as he moved his hand off of his pole, “Yeah…” She could tell that he was close, that her touching him was probably going to send the boy over the edge. That excited her even more. She realized she wanted to see the stuff that had made her pajamas sticky earlier this morning

Suddenly Alice was reliving thirteen all over again, she was about to touch her preteen boyfriend in the summer before they started eighth grade, right before he turned thirteen. Alice licked her lips once as she reached over to touch him. She had touched a penis before, had sex before with more than one partner. She had never touched a penis to jerk a boy off, only to bring it to her mouth to suck, or move it into position inside of her.

The first thing she noticed as she circled her hand around him was that she could feel the entire shaft within the palm of her hand. It was far stiffer than a bigger penis, but still malleable, she could pull it down or to the left and right like a joystick. It was warm as well giving off its own heat as she felt his penis twitch in her palm once. She moved to just use two fingers to stroke him, this felt more natural. Alice realized that while he was thicker than a pencil he still wasn’t all that thick compared to an adult. Looking closer she could just make out the blue veins under the skin as the entire shaft was so hard. She stroked once feeling the tight skin moving down with her pulling at it until the head became exposed again.

Branden said, “A-Alice its going to.. h-happen really soon.” She knew what was going to happen, Alice had plenty of experience with that. Usually though the guys were able to hold off longer, but this was a boy just barely thirteen who was still having his first experience. She kept stroking wanting to see it happen, wanting to feel it happen she realized.

Branden gave a little gasping moan as she felt his penis push up in her fingers, and then she felt it grow slightly in size as it surged. The first spurt shot straight up into the air, almost even with the top of Branden’s head. It came back down landing on her hand while Alice kept stroking him. The ones that followed weren’t quite as powerful, but altogether Branden had six full spurts of seed shoot out onto her hand while she kept stroking him till he finished.

When the last tiny spurt sort of rolled down over the head she moved her hand off of him feeling a desire to taste Branden. She had swallowed Stephen's a couple of times, but usually she had just used her mouth to get things started with him. Mostly college boys and high school boys were obsessed with blowjobs not adult men. She smelled it, expecting something musky instead smelling something almost sweet. She dipped her tongue in tasting, salty, slightly bitter, but with an underlining sweetness to it too. Alice grabbed her tee-shirt and used it to wipe the rest off of her hand as Branden said, "You tasted it…"

Alice shrugged, "I was curious. Now my shirt is wet, guess I'll have to sleep without a shirt tonight." Branden started to say something with his mouth open then he closed it when he realized what he was about to say was stupid. She could tell that he wanted to sleep with her not wearing a shirt which made her smile. She slipped off of the bed pulling the covers back with a yawn. "I think we should get some sleep now."

Branden agreed, "Yeah…" When he didn't go for his pajama bottoms Alice smiled to herself apparently she had a little nudist boyfriend on her hands. He slipped under the covers still naked as Alice slipped in beside him naked from the top up. When they were facing one another Branden said, "Oh!" He jumped up running into the bathroom. When she heard him brushing his teeth Alice giggled to herself. Then when she heard him peeing she smiled. He came back into the room jumping into the bed quickly. Branden's little boner bouncing between his legs as he ran into the room then slipped under the covers was so cute she decided.

She giggled again when he was in the bed facing her, "You looked so cute!" Branden flushed, then she kissed his lips, "I love you Bran." Alice pulled his glasses off putting them on the nightstand behind her.

When she turned back to him, Branden leaned over to kiss her lips longer than before, "I love you too!" She could feel her eyes getting heavy, but she didn't want to stop looking at Branden. He was inches away from her. His hazel eyes staring into her own, mirroring the same love and desire. After a moment he spoke into the silence, "I was thinking when we get a house, I don't have to have my own bedroom do I?"

Alice touched his cheek once, "No Bran, you can sleep with me every night if you want to. I'd love to share a bed with you. Even if you get the sheets dirty…"

He flushed, “I-I’ll try not to!” Alice laughed kissing him again, feeling one of his hands go to one of her breasts. When she pulled back from the kiss looking at where his hand was he started to pull it away, “S-so-” She interrupted him by pushing it back onto her breast as she kissed his lips again. Branden got the picture then, his fingers gently massaging her breast.

When the kiss ended Alice said, “I’m yours to touch and explore in the privacy of our bedroom Branden. If I don’t want to do something I’ll tell you. Otherwise if you start kissing and touching me and I don’t stop you it means that I want you to. The same goes for you. If I do something that you don’t want… tell me and we stop.” Branden nodded in agreement as they moved in closer together holding each other. There was no need to talk, and sleep was not very far behind, it had been an exhausting day on the road.

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The feeling of a hand resting on one of her breasts was the first thing that Alice became aware of the following morning. She could also feel the warmth of Branden’s breath on her lower neck where it met the shoulder. Somehow in the night they had both drifted until Branden was on his side pressed up to Alice on her back. She realized that she could feel a barely teenage boy boner pressing to her leg with Branden pressed tightly to her like this. Alice didn’t want to move from this heavenly spot ever. Even the soft feeling of Branden’s breath on her neck was relaxing. The few times she had slept nearly naked in bed with Stephen had not been this incredible ever. When Branden shifted on the bed it was for him to roll onto his stomach next to her. Like this his hand almost hit her face, she deftly avoided it with a chuckle as she moved.

Alice lifted the bed covers once he shifted curious about something. Her eyes rested on Branden’s bottom, two perfectly round globes of flesh. A very funny but also naughty thought entered her mind. Alice was unable to shake it as she felt a smile widening on her lips. She slipped from the bed grabbing her phone from the dresser checking the time, before snapping a shot of her sleeping future husband. Then she pulled the covers back just slightly to reach over to pinch his bottom.

Branden groaned on the bed, “Five more minuets mom!” He said as he grabbed the pillow pulling it over his head. He tried to grab at the covers as well to protect his body from her assault. Alice giggled like a school girl when she grabbed the covers from him pulling them off. Then she climbed on top of Branden straddling him. She

sat right on his legs just below that wonderful bottom. Then she reached out to tickle his sides getting the lower ribs first. Branden's groan was replaced with giggles as she mercilessly attacked his ribs. He tired to squirm out from under her, but Alice was bigger even more so than she had been when they were both kids. He found it hard to do more than twist around until he was on his back looking up at her.

She tickled high up on his ribs before reaching up to get his arm pits as his giggles continued with him squirming, "ALICE!" He said trying to get out from under her. When he pressed up to get her off she felt something press against one of her thighs. With how she was straddling him she realized right away what it had to be. Alice stopped tickling him then looking down between them. When she did Branden's eyes went there as well. Branden's morning wood was pressed to his stomach between them. With how she was straddling him Alice realized she could feel it pressing to her own body through her pajama shorts.

The flush on Branden's cheeks made Alice smile as she saw his eyes roaming up over her body. Resting just briefly on her breasts more than her stomach, but going up to her face where they stayed. Alice leaned down to bring her lips to his. Their kiss was a simple one, just two sets of lips pressing together for a few moments. The desire underneath the kiss was obvious, "Good morning, should I take care of your little issue?" She pressed her crotch down onto his boner almost grinding it.

Branden still looking flushed said, "Take care of it?"

Alice was feeling both excited and horny this morning. More than she usually did, it was like she was a teenage girl all over again. Finally getting to be intimate with her boyfriend. Last night had been an eye opener for her. Being with Branden didn't feel wrong in the least. It didn't feel like she was taking advantage of a young boy. No it felt like she was picking up right where they had left off thirteen years ago. Only her experience meant that they'd probably get to the finish line faster than if they were both thirteen still. "If you want me to?" Branden gave a small nod of yes. He watched curiously as Alice went to work.

Alice studied how he was laying underneath her then she shifted to lean down kissing his lips once more before moving lower. Her lips kissed his neck, then down lower she went kissing his chest, feeling the boys heart beat increasing, as she moved down ever lower. Branden's skin was nearly silky smooth. Every inch that she

kissed on her way to her goal was soft and warm against her lips. She could see his erection poking up as her lips kissed the soft skin of his stomach. When her tongue traced around his belly button Branden giggled which made his boner twitch delightfully. Up close she could admire the perfection of Branden's penis. Alice had admired Stephen's never really found it ugly, but this one was beautiful to her. It wasn't only about the size, but who it was connected to.

The head was just hidden behind the tight foreskin that she used two fingers to slowly pull back until it popped out fully. Alice looked up at Branden, feeling his eyes on her watching every movement. She had never really enjoyed doing this, but when her tongue swiped across the exposed head of Branden's penis she found herself enjoying the feeling far more than she ever had before. There was just a hint of the boys visit to the bathroom last night, but that disappeared as quickly as Alice ran her tongue over it again. The feeling of her tongue sliding across the sensitive head made Branden say, "A-Alice…"

She looked up at him, "You okay?" Branden gave a small nod of yes, his eyes wide, his desire clearly painted on his face. She ran her tongue along the length of the boys penis. His boner was as stiff as a board under her tongue. The skin warm and as delicately soft as the skin on the rest of his body. Alice ran her tongue back up over the exposed glans, enjoying the way that made his boner twitch. Then she ran her tongue back down again sliding along the center of his three inches until she reached where it met his sack.

She studied his balls within the sack, they were bigger than she had thought a boy his age would have. Though they weren't anywhere near as large as an adult male. She brought her lips down to them, sucking on one of the balls gently as Branden's little stick twitched at the feeling. Alice loved how smooth the skin was, not a single hair graced the sack or the area around his erection. She kept her own pubic region very trimmed, but now she was wondering if she should shave before they actually went all the way.

When she let the ball slip out of her mouth it was only so she could take his nearly four inches into her mouth. Alice had never taken a full penis into her mouth in one complete thrust, but it was very easy to do with Branden's. The boy gave a small gasp as she sucked on him, feeling his hips respond by pressing up to meet her mouth. She felt a hand on her head making her look up at Branden as she slipped her mouth off of his penis to again just lick at the head. "I-I'm really close Alice."

“Good.” She smiled before pushing her mouth back down on the boys morning boner. The feeling of all four inches in her mouth amazed Alice. Before Branden she had only done a blow job as a precursor to sex. Here she wanted to make this boy hers completely. Alice wanted to feel it when his little dick surged in her mouth. Feel every moment of him pressing up into her as his instinct took over. She ran her tongue over the he head when she pulled him nearly out of her mouth. Like this she could suck on the first inch or so while also licking the head. With an adult man Alice could never have done such a service. Branden gasped again pressing up into her mouth as hard as he could. Alice could feel the unmistakable surge in size of his penis when his orgasm arrived.

The first load of his spend shot out like a jet stream hitting the back of her throat just as she was sucking him fully back into her mouth. The next ones followed it into her mouth as she continued to suck on him with each spasm. She could feel him jerking in her mouth, releasing load after load of young boy seed that she swallowed. The taste was salty, and a little bitter, but there was some sweet mixed in there somehow. She had never felt a desire to do this for any man before, but with Branden it was effortless. When he finished, Alice slipped her mouth off of his erection swiping across the head one last time. Branden still catching his breath apologized for cumming in her mouth, “S-sorry!”

Alice looked up at him then rubbed a finger along the length of the boy still erect penis as she kissed his cheek, “Nothing to be sorry about, I wanted to do that.”

Branden as she moved to slip off of the bed said, “Well that would have been my preferred wake up method. Not pinching my bottom then tickling me.”

Alice gave him a simple look that she knew he knew really well, “Someone called me mom when I did that so I had to tickle them.”

Branden sat up putting his feet down on the edge of the bed. Alice couldn’t help but notice how this made his little boner press against his stomach. He rubbed one eye then ran a hand through the mess that was his morning hair, “Well someone shouldn’t wake someone else by pinching their bottom.”

As she started for the bathroom to brush her teeth, “Well someone shouldn’t have such a pinchable bottom then they wouldn’t be woken by it getting pinched.”

Branden with a groan of frustration got up following her into the bathroom. Alice had to admit that watching how his little penis moved as he walked fascinated her. It seemed to bounce as he walked. His hand rested on it once making her realize that he was clearly aware he had a boner still. Grabbing his own toothbrush as he stood beside her Branden said, “You used that same excuse last- uh well- the summer before we went into seventh grade.”

Alice smiled as she started brushing her teeth, “It was true then and is still true now too. If you don’t want your bottom pinched then I don’t know get a new bottom I guess.”

Branden flushed briefly. Alice could tell that his eyes were studying her breasts in the bathroom mirror. He seemed fascinated with how they moved while she brushed her teeth. In the mirror she could see his hand resting on his boner, stroking it gently. When he saw her eyes in the mirror looking at what his hand was doing he stopped stroking his boner. Around his toothbrush Branden said, “You’re so beautiful Alice.”

Alice spat out her toothpaste then kissed the top of his head, “And you’re very handsome Branden. I’ll let you take a shower while I get dressed.” Branden smiled looking up at her which made Alice leaned down to kiss his lips once before leaving the bathroom. There was a part of her that hungered to do more, to go back down on him again. To pleasure every inch of Branden’s body once more. To give the boy another blow job. To let him explore her body as well, but they’d get there in time. For now she walked back into the hotel room to find something to wear. She was just finishing with her shoes when Branden stepped out of the shower with a flush on his cheeks in just a pair of Pokemon themed boxer-briefs.

Alice paused in the middle of tying one of her shoes as she took in his slender figure. She had never found a preteen boy attractive, yet she found Branden more desirable than any man she had been with including Stephen. Something about the way she admired him must have been noticed by Branden, because within his boxer-briefs she noticed an obvious growing situation. She watched amazed as the boxer-briefs stretched out with the growing shape of Branden’s boner. It pressed at the cotton in the most adorable way. Alice pretended though not to see it as she stood up walking

over to where he was. She leaned down to kiss Branden's lips once before gently pushing him towards the dresser where the suitcase full of their clothes was. "Lets get a move on."

Branden with a small sigh nodded as he walked over to grab something to wear. When he started to pull on his jeans Branden said, "I'm sorry about… that."

The way he said it made Alice smile as she leaned over to kiss the top of his head, "I'm not, I like knowing how you react to me. I just hope twenty years from now you still react the same way."

Branden looked up at her, "Its you, won't you still want to be with me twenty years from now too?"

Alice pulling his hand into hers said, "Yes Branden. I want to spend the rest of my life loving you. Its good to know that you feel the same way." They loaded the car back up with their bags then Alice pulled out of the hotel parking lot. On the road as she got up onto the freeway Branden began scrolling through things on his cellphone. At first he was watching some videos on TikTok, then going through what looked like lists of movies and games he had missed out on.

He was going through a set of videos on YouTube about an hour into their drive with his airpods in, while she was listening to some music in the car. Branden reached over turning the music down suddenly as he took out his airpod and said, "You've got to listen to this."

He pushed play on a video that she couldn't see because she was driving. It was clear though that she didn't need to see the person talking. "This is the first of many of the new tests we'll be doing on the Type-C Shuttle. It can fly further, faster, and take off with half the consumption of previous space crafts. In conjunction with Envision-Tech and the United States Air Force we were able to complete this new type of propulsion after only ten years of testing."

Alice as it ended said, “That sounds interesting, I mean Envision-Tech has been doing things with NASA for a long time now. They launch astronauts into space since the shuttle program was retired.”

Branden held up his phone showing her a picture of the new shuttle. Alice looked at it for only a second, but saw the design right away. It was nearly the same almond shape design as the Artifact. Though unlike the silver craft in the videos it had windows on the front of it for people to look out of. It was also white in color like the old space shuttles. There were also little wings on the sides that the silver craft did not have. “Look familiar?”

Alice said, “It does kind of look familiar yes, what other information do they have on it?”

Branden went to Chrome on his phone typing in something then pulled up a page, “Envision-Tech has a whole set of things about the future of space travel. Here there’s one about going to mars? Colonizing the moon? Hmm, one about tourism in space. Ah Type-C.” He scrolled then started reading, “The Type-C shuttle is a decades worth of work. A joint project between Envision-Tech, NASA, and The United States Air Force. We’re working on advanced technology that up until now had only been available for military use. The shuttle is a one of its kind designed to take man to the stars. Type-C has an all new never before seen propulsion system that combines fusion with anti-matter fission to provide a clean and pollution free solution to sending humans to space.” He stopped reading for a moment saying words to himself before reading out loud again, “The Type-C Shuttle is unique and only the beginning, we are currently looking into ways to reach the stars as we believe mankind should.” He shrugged closing the web page, “Seems like a lot of uh what’s it called…”

Alice smiled, “PR bullshit.” Branden smiled too then she said, “They couldn’t make the Artifact work so they tore it to pieces. Studied it for the past ten years to figure out how to make their own.”

Branden leaning back in his chair agreed, “Sounds like it to me. Though the power cells on the Artifact most definitely do not use ‘fusion mixed with anti-matter fission’ to work. I think before I was woken the AI was teaching me how the power cells actually worked… its still fuzzy.” He sighed leaning back in his chair.

Alice squeezed his hand once reassuring him that his memories would return eventually. Then she turned off of the freeway feeling hungry and seeing a decent looking place to eat. “How long till it takes off for its first test flight?”

Branden typed in that on his phone, “Let me see, Saturday. You think something’s going to go wrong?”

Alice shook her head, “No idea, but I can’t help but have a feeling that we’re going some place looking for answers and they’re not going to be there.”

Branden as she pulled into the parking lot said, “Well something has to be there still. Even if its just Scott and Eric in tanks like I was in that’s something.”

Alice squeezed his hand once, “I hope we find them too Bran. Hungry?” She gestured up at the restaurant. Branden of course nodded that he was, they had skipped breakfast this morning after all other than the breakfast bars he had gotten at the gas station earlier.

When they were sitting down at a table in the restaurant Branden said, “I think I’m remembering even more as my head clears. Something about the way the Artifact looked when I woke up was different. It was almost like parts of it were missing. I think I remember that it wasn’t floating like it had been when we first stepped onto it. Like maybe they had removed too many things so it could no longer function anymore.”

“Well its possible that they took most of the technology they’re claiming they made from the Artifact. Repurposed it for their own uses. Its not like the government hasn’t done that before. Maybe all that was left were the chambers the three of you were in. Maybe you weren’t the only one woken up that day. If they finished tearing the ship apart then it might have finally cut off the power to your sleeping chambers. The question is what does the government plan to do with the three of you? They had a reason for keeping you in those chambers for thirteen years.”

Branden playing with his water glass said, “I just want two things Alice, for Scott and Eric to be okay, and for them to just leave us alone.”

She gently took his hand squeezing it, “We’ll figure it out Branden I promise.” Until a few days ago when he had reappeared in her life the idea of growing old with Branden had disappeared along with him. Now that he was back Alice knew that she’d do everything in her power to make sure that no one took him away from her. Then maybe they could figure out what it all meant, settle down, Branden finish school, then maybe also start a family.

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The car bounced over the speed bump as they pulled into the gas station off of the major interstate. Alice really wanted to know who thought it was a good idea to put speed bumps on this road that led to the gas station. There was nothing off of the path other than the gas station at the end of it. She shook her head as she looked over at Branden, he had conked out at some point while watching videos on his phone. Alice decided as she stopped at the pump that he looked absolutely adorable asleep. Her mind drifted for a moment, back to when she was twelve and starting to realize she was in love with Branden. How more than once she had seen him asleep thinking the same thoughts about how cute he looked sleeping.

When she turned the engine off Branden woke sitting up on his seat stretching once as he said, “Where are we?”

Alice looked at her phone, “Roughly a little more than half a day away from Arcadia. I needed gas. There’s a hotel about two miles up the road in a small town so that’s where we are staying tonight. I thought we might eat here.” She pointed at the McDonald’s that was attached to the gas station. “What do you think?”

Branden nodded, “Sure, sounds good to me.” When she climbed out of the car he got out too stretching, “They do still have Big Macs right?”

Alice laughed, “Of course they do Bran. You think Mickey D’s would get rid of their staple burger?”

He shrugged, “I dunno, Taco Bell apparently got rid of a whole lot of things.”

“Please the only thing you ever ate there was the bean burrito, and they haven’t gotten rid of that. That would be the same as McDonald’s getting rid of their Big Mac.” Branden just went back to looking at his phone while leaning against the car not wanting to admit that she just won. Once the car was filled she drove over to the McDonald’s that was attached to the gas station. Inside they ordered then took a seat waiting for their number to be called.

When the number was called Branden got up to get their food coming back with the tray setting it down. Looking over their selection of food Branden said, “You still get the chicken nuggets, and that hot mustard sauce too.”

Alice peeling open the sauce said, “You know the last time I had McDonald’s was probably in college.” She dipped one of the nuggets in, “Its not really something I do a lot as an adult. I mainly cook at home.”

Branden dipping a fry in ketchup casually said, “So when this is all over I’ll be expecting my meals at seven promptly.”

Alice tossed the balled up wrapper from one of the straws right at him making it hit his nose. “You’ll eat when I feed you!” Branden picked up the small ball tossing it back at her as he stuck his tongue out before going to eat another fry. Alice chuckled once again feeling like a young girl that was arguing with her best friend. It brought up a memory, “Hey you remember that summer when we were ten? When our moms left the two of us at home alone in your house with clear instructions to not leave, and to please not burn the house down?”

Branden nodded with a smile, “Yeah those pizza rolls were so brown!” He laughed, “It took mom hours to get that burnt pizza roll smell out of the kitchen!”

Alice smiled to giggling as she stared at Branden from across the table. Again she was feeling that sense of wonder, that need to explore what was going on here. She knew that her being an adult for real meant that she was more experienced. That Branden still saw things differently even if he wasn't exactly a kid anymore either. She knew that made her see things when it came to relationships that he maybe didn't see yet. What mattered was that even if he didn't know how all of it worked yet Branden wanted to explore what it all meant with her. If they had both still been thirteen they would have found themselves exploring this over the course of months. Now there was a sense of needing to know that was far stronger than it would have been thirteen years ago.

Branden as he finished his Big Mac said, "Hey remember when we were in second grade. When we made that mud puddle in your back yard because we thought we'd get a pool that way?" Alice smiled with a chuckle. "I think your mom was more mad that we ruined the grass than she was that we got mud all over the kitchen floor."

Alice said, "No she was mad about both, remember who had to pick up the mud in the kitchen?"

Branden groaned, "Yeah! We did! She said you, made it you clean it! We never did get that pool either." Alice laughed when he did both of them looking at each other. There was this tension that was building the more they talked. "Uh if we get a house…"

"You don't have to ask Branden, if you want a pool its partly your decision too. Plus I think a pool would be nice, its good exercise. So yeah we'll get one." Branden smiled then as he sipped on his soda. "You ready to go up to the hotel?" Branden nodded gathering their food wrappers onto the tray to throw it all away. As they walked out to the car she took his hand squeezing it gently. Alice wasn't sure what was going to happen tonight, but she knew they were getting a room with a single bed. Done eating they went over to the gas station to get something to drink. Branden wanted a Kit Kat bar that he ended up giving her a piece of as they got into the car.

After she got the hotel room they drove down to where it was. Like most of these hotels off of an interstate that sat just at the edge of a small town it was old and worn down. Though she was surprised to see a modern television in the room. The person

at the counter hadn't even asked for a credit card to put money down. It was obvious right away as well when they walked into the clearly not well taken care of room. There was no mini-bar of any kind, the bathroom looked like it was not well taken care of. Surprisingly the bed looked brand new, but the rooms walls were in dire need of painting. It was almost like the hotel was in the middle of some kind of renovation, but still renting out rooms anyway. Branden studied the room sniffing a little as he said, "Smells like someone's been smoking in here."

Alice tossing her bag onto the counter at the end of the room said, "Probably so, this place looks like it was built in the seventies. Its just for a night. I'd say lets avoid the shower, and if we can the whole bathroom." Branden went to take a sip of his cherry coke. That had always been his favorite soda when they were little. Alice watching him started to undo the buttons on her blouse.

When she got the second button undone Branden put the soda down on the dresser, "W-what are you doing Alice?"

Alice shrugged, "Undressing unless you'd rather I do it somewhere else?"

He swallowed as she saw him pull at the waistband of his jeans once, "No…"

Alice smiled stopping on the last button, "Or would you rather undress me yourself?" Branden stepped closer to her clearly wanting to. When he was in front of her Alice took his hands guiding them to the blouse, "If this is too much for you Bran, we can go slower. I've spent thirteen years waiting for you so I can wait till you're ready. I do want to explore this with you though if you are ready."

Branden played slightly with the sides of her blouse, "I want to Alice, it feels right that you know more than me and are more experienced. You always were."

Alice chuckled as she touched his cheek once, "Take it off then Bran, let me guide you in this part of me." Branden pulled the blouse back having to reach up slightly to get it off of her shoulders since she was taller. She turned around when it was off as she said, "There's a clasp right there in the middle of the back, just undo it to get the bra off." Branden's fingers were clumsy at best as they found the clasp and undid it.

He had to work at it a few times, but he didn't stop or ask for help. She could feel the determination in him as he got the bra undone at last.

Alice pulled the bra down from her shoulders as she turned back around to face Branden. Again like last night the look in his eyes when he took in her chest left little doubt in Alice's mind how Branden felt about her. She reached over to pull his tee-shirt over his head, when he lifted his arms she felt her heartbeat increase again at the sight of him. Her desire for Branden shocked her, again she had never been attracted to a boy before, yet this one took her breath away. Alice figured it had to be because this was Branden, the one that had nearly gotten away. The boy that at thirteen she had wanted to be her everything. Now again he could be.

His shirt joined her blouse and bra on the hotel room floor. Slowly she slipped onto her knees before Branden admiring how beautiful the boy looked naked. She rested a hand on his stomach loving the feeling of his smooth warm skin under her palm. Slowly she let her hand slip down to the top of his jeans. Alice undid the button followed by the zipper before she pulled the jeans down to his ankles in one swift motion. Alice's eyes lingered on Branden's boxer-briefs, the superhero underwear was stretched with the very obvious boner that was begging to be let out of its tight confines. Alice ran a finger along the length before she stood up to take his hands to her shorts.

Branden again hesitated, not because he didn't want to, it was clear to Alice now that he did. More that he had never actually undressed someone else. His fingers took a second to find the button then undo it. When he pulled the zipper down Alice saw his penis twitch in the boxer-briefs a clear sign that Branden was being over stimulated by what they were doing. He pulled the shorts down her legs bending down to get them off of each foot as she lifted them. When he stood again she saw Branden's eyes go right to her panties. "Can I take them off and t-touch you?"

Alice took both of his hands in hers, guiding them to the light simple white cotton panties, "I told you yesterday Bran, I'm yours to explore as much as you want."

He flushed, "I know, but I still want to ask. I feel like I should till we're both uh used to it."

Alice smiled as she rested a hand on his cheek, “I understand.” His fingers played with the hem of the panties then slowly he dragged them down her legs until they were at her ankles. She saw his eyes taking in her vagina again. This simple look of adoration and fascination on his face. Branden’s eyes roamed over the shape of her mound for more than a few moments. She noticed his boner seemed to strain within his boxer-briefs.

Alice gently said, “Here just touch like this.” She ran her fingers lightly over the outer lips with their slight dusting of hairs. Branden swallowed once then his fingers reached out to touch the same area. He slipped down from her shaved pubic region to where the light dirty blonde hairs barely covered the outer labia. The feeling of his fingers sliding through those hairs sent a shiver up Alice’s spine.

One of Branden’s fingers slipped along the cleft at the center of the plump lips as he said, “Is that where my penis goes?”

Alice moved to sit down on the bed, “Take a closer look if you want.” She wanted Branden to understand, to see how she worked. In her memories of being thirteen she had thought more than once of letting Branden see this part of her. She could remember studying herself back at thirteen with a mirror. Learning what part gave her the most pleasure. Stephen just like the college boys before him had touched her down here. They had never really asked what she wanted though, or how she felt the most pleasure. Alice had a feeling that she would never have this problem with Branden. He wanted to make her feel good. He moved slipping down onto his knees in front of her so that he could get a clear view. His eyes widened as he took in what was before him, studying every fold of her pussy no doubt. Taking in how with her legs spread open he could see the inner areas that were usually hidden.

“Wow…” his hands rested on her inner thighs rubbing them gently as he leaned in closer to study. She moved to rest two fingers on the outer lips, slowly spreading them open wider. Branden’s eyes got wider, “There’s more…”

Alice got an idea, “Do you want to watch me masturbate like I watched you?” He looked up at her. The priceless look with the flushed face, and beautifully bright green eyes was all that Alice needed to know. It was so clear that Branden desired just that. Alice moved to rest a finger on her clit at the top of the inner folds, “You see this?” Branden nodded, “Watch.” She was surprised by how wet she already was as

she rubbed her finger through the inner folds. Slowly she rubbed at her clit with the finger not even having to get it wet this time. The pleasure she was feeling wasn't just from rubbing her clit she realized. It was also from seeing how fascinated Branden was by all of this. Slowly she moved her finger down from the clit, sliding it into the inner folds. When her finger slipped into the opening of her pussy she felt a small rise of pleasure flow through her whole body.

Branden's eyes grew wider as he took in how her finger slipped inside, "That's where my…" He trialed off not able to finish his thought. She saw his hand resting on his erection through the boys boxer-briefs which made Alice know that watching her was turning him on.

She moved her finger out as she said, "Here you want to try and touch me?" Branden swallowed once nervously, but gave a small nod. Alice moved her hand out of the way, leaning back on the bed to watch him. His fingers were hesitant at first when they touched the outer lips, she loved how it felt though. The light touches of them sliding along the lips sent a shiver up her spine. She had let guys touch her before of course, but those guys weren't Branden. When he figured out how to spread the lips open more she saw this look of sheer joy on his face.

When his one finger rubbed her clit Branden said, "Its uh stiffer like a bulb or something… and its all wet too…"

Alice from where she was leaning back said, "That's because I'm turned on. The wetness helps with getting inside." Branden flushed as he looked in closer, his finger rubbing over the clit again before he pressed it through the folds to find her opening. When his finger slipped in she felt another wave of deep pleasure wash over her entire body. This was different than when say Stephen had done something similar, it wasn't only because it was all new to Branden. There was so much more to it, memories of her masturbating wishing that it was Branden touching her flooded into Alice's mind. The way that he looked at even this part of her with wonder made her desire Branden all the more. Which in turn made her pussy respond to that desire.

When he pulled his finger out a second later Branden said, "You're...uh it was squeezing on my finger…"

Alice smiled, “Yeah, that’s what it does.” She saw that his other hand was resting on his erection, “It feels nice huh?”

Branden gave a small nod of yes as he studied the wet finger. He sniffed it his eyes getting wide as he said, “That’s strong…”

Alice chuckled, “yeah it is, you don’t have to taste it though if you don’t want to.”

He studied the finger again, then he licked, “You tasted my stuff only seems fair. I know for a fact that my stuff is smelly too.” Alice laughed as he looked at her vagina again. “Can I make you feel like how you made me feel this morning?”

Alice got what he meant right away, “If you want to Bran, there’s no pressure I know this is all new for you.”

Branden shrugged his shoulders slightly, “I want to try, I’m just trying to figure out how it all works. You um remember Dave Peters?”

Alice thought for a moment trying to remember kids from thirteen years ago that weren’t Branden, “Evan’s older brother?”

Branden nodded, “Yeah he said that older boys kissed girls vaginas, well he called it a pussy. Eric and I both thought it was… disgusting, but then um… I thought about how I’d kiss any part of you if you wanted me to. That was how in love with you I was… am… P-plus you did it to me.”

Alice smiled as she touched his cheek, “I love you too Bran. Just don’t feel like you have to. If you don’t like it just stop.” Then she leaned back again on the bed, “If you want to try though, lets start simple, try rubbing your tongue against my clit like how your finger did earlier.” Branden studied her vagina again for a moment then he leaned in to run his tongue across the nub that was her clit. Alice breathed in deeply with the surprise feeling of it.

His smaller tongue compared to an adults was nice she decided. The next second when he decided to press it around the clit sent another wave of pleasure. “Try going in a circle with it.” Branden did just that making a small surprised moan escape her lips as she said, “I-if you want, try pushing your finger inside while you do that again.” Branden looked up at her, then he moved in position slightly to press his finger into the opening. The feeling of it sliding in while the boy also licked her clit sent a wave of pleasure up through her body. “Push in deeper Bran.” He pushed in more with his finger as Alice said, “T-try sucking on it like how I sucked on you.”

Alice could tell when his tongue made contact with her clit again that Branden was becoming eager to do this. His finger pushed deeper into her pussy while his tongue flicked over her clit. Alice leaned back fully on her elbows now watching him on his knees between her legs. When his lips made contact with her clit a second later Alice let out a long sigh as she leaned back on the bed even further. He was so inexperienced, but that just made every touch feel even more amazing. “What now?”

When he asked that from Between her legs Alice said, “Move your finger in and out and keep sucking if you can with each thrust.” Branden went back to it, his tongue sliding along the clit again before his lips made contact, then his finger was pushing into her tunnel again. She could feel it when his entire finger was moving inside of her while his lips sucked on her clit.

From between her legs still on his knees Branden said, “like this?” her eyes met his for a second before his tongue again found her clit while his finger pushed into her inner folds. Alice moved to rest her legs on his small shoulders pulling him in even closer to her pussy as she almost lost her ability to stay up on the bed watching him.

“A little faster Bran…” Branden did as she wanted, his finger sliding in and out at a quicker pace. Alice fell back onto the bed fully feeling her orgasm building as the boy’s tongue began to play with her clit again. No one had ever actually brought her orgasm with their mouth and fingers. Stephen had always stopped before it happened to enter her instead.

Branden though was determined. Alice sat up slightly again so she could see him at work, his mouth pressed to her pussy as her legs rested on his shoulders. All Alice could see was the top of his head with that messy mop of hair that made him look even more adorable. His eyes met hers though as he pressed his tongue to her clit

again. The look in them combined with the feelings of Branden touching her was enough. Alice came, she could feel it intensely as the orgasm rocked her entire body. His little tongue still darting around the clit as his finger pushed into her again. Alice could feel his finger still pushing into her as she squeezed on it. Thoughts of how incredible his penis would feel buried in her entering her mind. This wasn't the type of place to take someone's virginity though.

When her orgasm passed Alice felt Branden's tongue slid along her clit again another smaller wave sliding through her entire body, "T-that's enough Bran.." She sat up shakily pulling her legs off of his shoulders. Then she grabbed Branden by his upper arms pulling him to her. They fell onto the bed with Branden fully on top of her now. She brought his lips to hers within a heartbeat. Her tongue pried his lips open slipping in where she could still taste her own juices. Alice pulled back from the kiss feeling breathless as she said, "My turn."

Branden's cheeks heated, but he let Alice twist so that he was laying on his back underneath her again. She leaned over him to kiss his lips once while her hand slipped down to his briefs. The boys penis still strained to be released while she teased it with her fingers. She had never realized just how hard boys his age got. Again she wished she had gotten the chance at thirteen to figure it out. Alice broke their kiss sliding down the middle of Branden's chest and stomach with simple kisses of her own. Then she pulled the boys briefs down his skinny legs taking in the stiff pole between them.

Alice observed as she had before that there was something really beautiful about his erection. She ran a finger along the length of it once before she sucked his balls into her mouth. The skin of his scrotum was so smooth and the little balls within moved as she used her tongue to play with them. The taste was a little salty she realized as no doubt the boy had probably sweated some in his briefs today. She sucked though applying more pressure to the little nuggets. Her fingers rested on his shaft gently pulling at the skin until the head popped out. Branden said her name, "A-Alice," filled with passion as she slipped his balls out of her mouth to run her tongue along the length of his erection.

Alice had done this for men before, mainly Stephen as a precursor to him entering her. She had never actually let a man cum in her mouth until Branden, and now she was about to let him again. She ran her tongue over the head before pressing her lips to it, then opening her mouth drawing all of his hard boner inside. Branden

moaned again saying her name as he pressed up to meet her mouth. Alice sucked harder on the nearly four inches while she used a couple of her fingers to tease his balls. Her other hand rubbing the smooth flesh of his stomach.

The boy rested a hand on her head as he thrust up into her mouth, that was the moment that it happened. It was strange to feel the surge, his stick grew in size slightly as the seed rushed from the base of it up to the head before shooting out. Alice swallowed the first salty yet sweet load as quickly as the second one followed it. She had no idea if boys his age actually could come this much usually, but she knew that Branden wasn't like other boys his age.

When the last spurt shot out as just a small drop on her tongue Alice slipped the head out of her mouth. He was still erect, twitching slightly as she admired the job she had done while running kisses up over his stomach and chest. She kissed his lips once lightly then fell down onto the bed next to Branden. A moment later as they were both staring up at the ceiling still catching their breath Branden said, "Do you think that looks like an elephant?"

His finger was pointing at a stain on the ceiling. Alice eyed it for a moment, "Yeah kind of. You feeling okay?"

"I'm nervous about tomorrow."

Alice looked over at him, "I meant about what we just did."

Branden twisted on his side so that he could look right at her. She saw his eyes linger on her breasts they were still visible though not as obvious now that she was on her back, "Why wouldn't I feel okay about that. I was a little surprised when you uh got wetter while I was sucking on your clit. But it felt incredible when you were squeezing on my finger." Alice smiled moving onto her side so that they were facing each other fully, "And what you did after well that was super amazing."

Alice chuckled, "Yeah I figured as much, but I mean its not all kind of weird?"

Branden shook his head moving to put his hand on her side, “No, the only weird thing about it is that we’re doing it in a smelly old hotel with elephants on the ceiling.”

Alice pulled him in closer to her as she stroked his side like how he was doing hers, “I love you Bran, never stopped even though I thought I did…”

Branden smiled with a flush, “I love you too Alice.” They got under the covers then, at least they smelled and looked clean. Alice watched as Branden closed his eyes one of his hands resting on one of her breasts. She rested her hand on his back drawing him in closer as she kissed his lips lightly. He snuggled with her until his head was just below hers, but that hand was still possessively holding her breast which made her smile as she drifted off into sleep.

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The feeling of something missing was unmistakable when she woke up the following morning. For a brief moment when she sat up in bed realizing that Branden was gone, Alice thought she had been in some kind of fever dream for days on end. Then she saw him sitting at the small table by the window that looked out onto the interstate. He was scrolling through something on his cellphone while drinking from a soda bottle. There was just a hint of the sun rising through the window, but clouds mostly obscured it this morning.

The sound of her moving on the bed made Branden turn to look at her. He put his cellphone down on the table as he said, “Morning.” Alice didn’t really feel any shame about being naked when she sat up on the bed. The way that his eyes roamed over the small swells on her chest then back up to her face was nice. How he clearly admired not just her body, but all of her when he shifted on the seat he was in then smiled at her.

Alice after a few heartbeats though did reach down to grab her nightshirt. The chill of the hotel room this early in the morning was too much for her. “Where did you get the soda?”

“There’s a machine down at the end by the office. You can have some if you want.” Alice tried to fight that urge inside that told her not to let him out of her sight. She knew it was from all those years he had been gone. It would be wrong of her though to demand that he always stay with her. Eventually he’d have to go back to school of

some kind. Eventually she'd have to go back to work, both would require that they be separated from one another. She had to let Branden be who he was, and that included letting him go get his own soda.

Alice sighed slipping off of the bed, again aware of Bran's eyes taking in her body. A part of her wanted him to just walk over and touch her all over again. To feel his hands on her, his mouth between her legs, his little stiff pole in her own mouth. It didn't feel wrong at all, in fact it felt more right than any other time she had been with a man before. People would argue that Branden was a boy not a man, but if he was a boy then she was a girl because that was how she felt around him. Like she was that silly thirteen-year-old falling in love for the first time.

Alice grabbed her own cellphone checking it for messages, there was one email from her boss Conner asking for a status update. She sent it telling him that they should be arriving in Arcadia today, that she'd let him know more when she knew it. Alice was pretty sure now that the only way to keep Branden from disappearing again was to blow this whole thing open. Either that or convince the government officials that they would unless they were left alone.

After slipping on a pair of panties Alice grabbed her laptop. Branden seeing her take it out said, "What are you doing?"

Alice sat down at the small table across from him. "I'm creating some backups of the files that Doctor Vissen gave us on the flash drive. I'm sending one copy to my boss, and another to my own personal online drive. Then before we leave this town we're going to the post office. I'm mailing the flash drive to Scott's mom. That way someone else has it, with instructions for her to go to the FBI with it in ten days if I don't come to get it personally."

Branden moved to sit next to her in his chair, "That's a good idea Alice. Make sure that people can't make us disappear. Can I have a copy too?"

Alice nodded with agreement as she went to work. "Yeah let me have your phone."

Branden sat next to her the entire time sipping on his soda. When she finished by closing the laptop Branden said, “uh Alice… you’re um… uh s-sexy when you’re working.”

Alice looked over at him then, “Oh is it because I’m in practically nothing?”

Branden’s cheeks flushed adorably, “Uh well that’s part of it…”

Alice leaned over to kiss his lips delicately. When the kiss became more passionate Alice let her hand slip down to Branden’s leg. As their tongues tangled she moved her hand upwards on his leg sliding along until she reached his middle. Within his pajama pants she could feel his erection. Gently Alice rubbed it as she said, “Someone’s hard I see.”

Branden said, “Well that’s what happens… um w-when I see you naked.”

“Only when you see me naked?” She asked questioning him as her fingers stroked his boyhood through the pajamas.

“N-no… just about any time I see you.”

Alice said, “Should I make it go away?”

Branden’s lips widened with a smile, “Only if you want to!”

Alice sighed making it like it was a big deal, “I don’t know we’ve got a long drive ahead of us. Although all that pent up young boy need. Hmm I think I’d better huh?”

Branden shrugged, “It would be nice, but you don’t have to.”

Alice rested a finger on the tip of his erection through the pajamas, “Oh but Bran I want to.” She slipped off of her chair going to her knees before him in the other chair. Alice rested both of her hands on Branden’s legs before she reached up with one hand using it to pull the boys pajama pants down until his stiff roughly three inches popped out pointing up at his chin. She leaned over to run her tongue over the foreskin at the tip, the little pole twitching once from the feeling. Alice knew size wise it was smaller than adult men. That she shouldn’t desire to suck on it as much as she did. Something about how perfectly stiff it looked just standing up there between his legs drove her. The fact that it was Branden she was servicing made her want him no matter the size. She used her lips to suck on the foreskin, tasting a bit of dried pee, then nothing but skin as she worked to peel the foreskin back.

When the head popped out Alice ran her tongue along the helmet loving the feel of the little pee hole. She teased it with the tip of her tongue making Branden’s penis twitch. Alice loved how he responded to her. She had no doubt based on the amount of semen that he produced that Bran could get her pregnant. The idea filled her with excitement she realized. This was the man that she wanted to have kids with. She wanted to raise Bran’s kids, watch him play silly games with them, and never really grow up even when he had responsibility. She wanted to be able to have that secrete language that they spoke with each other last a lifetime.

Her tongue ran along the length of his shaft before she plunged the entire three or so inches back into her mouth. Alice felt Branden’s hands rest on her head as she began to suck on his erection sending those familiar feelings through the boys body. He gasped suddenly when her fingers found his balls rubbing them gently. “Alice…!” while she felt that familiar surge of growth as the boys first load shot out into her mouth. Again she noticed that his seed was just that right blend of salty and sweet, when she swallowed it down almost hungrily. The last bit came out in just one small spurt on her tongue before Alice slipped her mouth off.

Alice gently tucked his penis away inside the boys pajama pants. She was not surprised to see that it was still stiff as she stood on slightly shaky legs. Sucking him off had actually gotten her half way to on orgasm she realized. Branden’s eyes went to her panties as he said, “You’ve got a wet spot on your panties, Alice.”

Alice looked down then pulled them down in one swift motion, “yeah… you want to help with that?” She couldn't believe she was talking so dirty to a boy who was only thirteen. Yet it didn’t feel wrong at all. Maybe because while Branden was thirteen he

was also more than thirteen. The look in his eyes when she pulled down her panties in one swift motion was enough to show Alice how much he desire to touch her body too. It might all be a little confusing for her, but she'd work it out eventually.

For Branden though apparently it wasn't confusing at all. He swallowed then said, "uh huh!" In that way that he sometimes did when he was too excited about something to speak. Alice sat down on the edge of the bed opening her legs as Bran went down on his knees before her. In less than two seconds his mouth was where it had been last night. His little tongue darting over the inner folds of her pussy, finding her clit in a matter of seconds. It felt incredible when he sucked on it a moment later while his fingers pushed into her vagina. His other hand rested on her thigh squeezing it as he began working his fingers into her pussy. She gasped with the feeling resting a hand on Bran's head, as he brought her to a sudden full climax with his tongue and fingers. Alice fell back onto the bed looking up at that horrible ceiling wishing that they were in some fancy resort somewhere or their own private house. This wasn't the most ideal place to have your young boyfriend and future husband eat your pussy.

When it passed she felt someone laying next to her on the bed. "I still think it looks like an elephant."

Alice chuckled, "Yeah, you know what you just did was incredible right?"

Branden leaned over to look her in the eyes, "I guess, I just like making you feel good Alice. I didn't know about the whole, um you know what I just did before, but if you had asked me to try it back then when we were both seventh graders I would have."

Alice pulled him fully to her as she kissed his lips once deeply, "I love you Branden."

He replied, "Me too." Then his stomach rumbled, "But my stomach loves food."

Alice chuckled as she tickled one of his ribs making him giggle, "Then we'd better find you some food before you starve to death." They slipped off of the bed together picking out clothes to wear. This morning she undressed then dressed in front of

Branden letting him watch her put on her bra and new panties. Then a blouse and a pair of women's slacks. If they were going to meet with someone official today she wanted to look good. Branden actually put on a button up shirt and a pair of pants as well so that he looked more adult despite still looking every bit as boyish as he always did especially when he added his glasses a moment later. He was adorable and he was all hers.

As the started for the hotel door Bran said, "Now you kind of look like Agent Scully only your hair is more blonde than hers."

"And you look like a miniature Agent Mulder. Come on lets get you some breakfast."

Stepping outside Branden said, "Oh can we do IHOP there's one a few miles up the road!"

Alice smiled, "Of course, that sounds amazing." As they got into the car she realized that her stomach did indeed think IHOP sounded amazing.

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The rest of the ride into the small town of Arcadia, Nebraska was pretty much uneventful. Branden spent most of it scrolling through things on his phone. Trying to look more into the project that had clearly been inspired by what the government had learned about the alien craft. There wasn't a lot really about how the shuttle worked he told her, only that it was experimental. There was hardly any mention about the Air Force in any of the articles, only NASA.

There was an article with an interview with Victor McKon who was the head of research and development for Envision-Tech. Branden said, "That's the scientist that worked with Doctor Vissen on our project." In the article he talked about his time at NASA and how it had led to a job in the private sector. How he had discovered the fusion/fission reaction after years of tireless research. It all sounded like a lot of bullshit that they both knew was hiding the truth.

Alice had to admit she didn't feel right about the Type-C Shuttle, something about it just screamed warning bells. Branden said there were more than a few articles about how testing had gone smoothly, all of it sounded like propaganda again. The launch would tell the truth when it happened tomorrow. Hopefully it was enough of a distraction that their informant could help them get in to see this place that Branden had been rescued from. The question was what would it take to keep her and Branden safe now that was all that really mattered. It was why she had made the backups scheduling one to go to her boss in five days if she didn't stop it, and the physical device going to Scott's mom.

The sign saying that they had arrived at Arcadia was gone in a flash as they drove down Route 70 into the small town. It was probably one of the smallest towns that Alice had ever seen in person. There was really nothing here. A lot of it looked older than even her parents. There was this feeling of a small town that had once been thriving, but was now a shell of what it had been. The people that lived here stayed because it was all they knew. Of course it wasn't off of a major interstate, which

meant like so many small towns it was slowly fading into nothingness as more and more people moved away. They drove past a few houses turning down a road before arriving at an older looking brick house that stood on the end of one of the streets.

Looking up at it Branden said, “You sure this is the place?”

Alice turning the car off after pulling into the driveway that was in need of repair said, “Yeah this is it. I’m guessing our informant isn’t in the military anymore. Lets see whats going on.” Branden gave a small nod before slipping out of the car with her. Walking up the path from the driveway you could see where it had once been solid, but was now cracked and ruined. There was a tree in the front yard that hung over everything providing a lot of shade though it left the ground covered in leaves and overgrowth. Stepping up onto the old porch Alice felt like she was going to see some older woman who probably had a dozen or more cats open the door.

Instead when she knocked on the screen door it was opened by a man who was probably in his mid to late forties. His head was shaven though it was obvious from the lines that he’d have a full head of hair if he let it grow out. His skin was light in color, and there were a few wrinkle lines around his eyes. His shoulders were broad, his arms and chest both looking fit, though relaxed. He had the look and feel of someone who had been in the military, but he didn’t wear the uniform anymore. The man had a few tattoos on his forearms including one that was a snake coiled around the top half of it hidden by the sleeve of his shirt. “Yes?”

Alice saw his eyes flick to Bran once then back to her again, “Uh, I’m Agent Nills,” When his eyes rested on Branden beside her she squeezed his shoulder, “I think you know Branden. Doctor Vissen told us to come see you about Project Artifact.”

The man looked around then opened the screen door letting them into the house. Stepping in she expected to see an old woman’s house just like what she had imagined from the outside. Instead the inside had a modern look and feel to it. You could see the age of the house, but the things within were all relatively new. There was a shelf on one side of the living room they stepped into with numerous pictures including one of the same man in military dress. “I knew eventually that they’d send you to me.” He sighed looking over at Branden, “I don’t know if you remember me or not son, but I was there during the incident. What a cluster fuck that was and the years that followed too. Do you know how Vissen got you out?”

Alice said, “I thought you helped him, he said you were his informant.”

The man chuckled, “Well I was his informant for a time until they reassigned me. I used to let Vissen know how the boys were doing in their chambers. When they closed down the project they needed people who knew about it to monitor the chambers. I was selected along with another guard that used to watch you. We kept Doctor Vissen apprised of how you boys were doing. Even helped him with some experiment to determine if you were aware while inside the chamber. Freaked me the fuck out to see your brainwaves at times being as active as a person who was awake. Other times they appeared to be in what Vissen called a dream state.”

Branden looking at the man said, “I remember you now. You’re one of the guards that took us back to our room the day that everything went wrong.”

He gave a soft sad nod, “That was my first real assignment after making Senior Airman. When they dismantled the program they gave most of us promotions. Of course we weren’t allowed to talk about what we knew. When I retired from the Air Force a few years ago it was with the understanding that I’d never talk about what I knew. I came home to take care of my dying mom, it gave me a long time to regret what I had helped in. Led me to talking with an old friend who was still at the base they were keeping you at. I told him if he ever needed my help well I’d help...” His eyes rested on Branden for a moment then he continued, “When I retired I let Doctor Vissen know who was in charge of the project now. Even told him that they were thinking about shutting down the entire thing now that Integration was working so well for them.”

Alice hearing this said, “So there’s no base here in Arcadia?”

He shook his head, “There was a secret facility north of here, not really a base. They built it to house some aircraft that never worked. So when they got the Artifact they put it there for years. Then the boys came, and all that stuff happened...” He chuckled then sighed, “When I got my assignment at a secret base only a hop away from where I grew up I thought it’d be nice to come home every now and then and see my mom. She was never the healthiest woman, always had problems, so to me it was a blessing.”

“Then all that,” He gestured with a sigh, “Shit happened with the boys. Suddenly I didn’t think it was all that great. Didn’t much like the Air Force that much anymore either. The truth is when the project failed the higher ups got cold feet. General Pearson wanted to keep the project alive, even Vissen thought it shouldn’t be fully abandoned. The higher ups didn’t see it the same way. They wanted to go a different way instead. Doctor McKon went behind Vissen’s back, went to a higher ranked General than Pearson even. Convinced them that he could replicate the ship without the need for the boys.”

Branden said, “That’s what they did, that’s what the Type C shuttle project is isn’t it?”

The man shrugged, “No idea kid. The person to ask would be Commander Cal Daleson if someone helped Vissen get you out it’d be him. He’s in charge of the base where you and the other boys were being kept. About a week ago he told me that Vissen might be coming to see me. That was who I was expecting to show up honestly. Not you… until Vissen sent me that strange message that a woman traveling with a familiar face might come visit me. Cal told me a few months ago that the higher ups wanted to fully bury the project, which means terminating the three of you. I’m positive that’s why he and Doctor Vissen broke you out.”

Alice looked at Branden once then back to the man, “Airman…”

“Its Stanley.”

“Alice.”

He gave a smile, “You know more than a few times Branden used to talk about a girl he missed back home with the same name.” Branden flushed just slightly as Stanley chuckled, “Now things are making more sense to me. Why Vissen wanted to break one of the boys out, why he sent me that message...”

Alice smiled too, “Stanley, you can get us in contact with Commander Daleson?” He gave a nod, “Why would he have helped Doctor Vissen break us out? Why would Vissen lead us to you and not him?”

Stanley walked across the room then going over to one of the cabinets in the table underneath his television. He pulled out a binder as he flipped through it he said, “Cal Daleson and I came up together in the Air Force. We were the same rank when we worked at the Artifact Project, and we were both promoted after. Cal chose to stay at the training facility we moved the boys to after the accident. He stayed on as one of its leads all these years because he felt partly responsible for what we did to the boys. He had a son of his own just a few years younger than them.” He pulled out a picture showing a younger version of himself standing with a young African-American man. There was a young boy standing in front of them that was probably seven or eight years old. “If Cal wanted to get you out he had his reasons. If he sent Vissen to me he knew that I was the one person that wouldn’t ever talk. I’m his son’s godfather after all.”

Alice studied the picture once then said, “I think I understand now. This was Vissen’s way of covering his tracks when he left the base. You were both very close to the doctor?”

Cal closed the binder as he said, “When he came to me the night that General Pearson told him the project was being terminated, it was because he knew just like I did that meant killing the boys. That they were going to erase the entire project make it like it never existed. He was broken Alice, he had three kids of his own just a few years older than them. I can’t say that Doctor Vissen didn’t make mistakes, he did, but he didn’t intend for any of the boys to ever get harmed. It was the one guarantee he had about the project. That even if it failed they’d be allowed to live.”

Branden said, “That’s why he went to Pearson with the idea of putting us in the chambers. He said that in his letter, it was his only chance to keep us alive.”

Stanley nodded as he put the binder away, “Both Cal and I helped him convince the general that you were worth more alive than dead. That if we could make the chambers work you would just sleep till we knew all the answers. The general took a lot of convincing, but he finally gave in after talking to his superiors.” He paused

picking up his cellphone. “I don’t know what you’ll find at the base, but if Cal got you out he had a reason and I’m willing to bet he’ll want to talk with you.”

Alice looked at Branden, he gave a small nod. “Okay make the call Stanley.”

Stanley gave a simple nod before hitting dial on his phone. On the third ring he said, “Cal, the chicken has come back to roost.” There was a pause then, “Okay, got it.” He hung up a moment later then said, “Cal’s been waiting, he said that he and Vissen worked it out. He’s got a room waiting for you at the Victorian House Bed and Breakfast in Loup City its about twenty minutes from here. Just tell them you’re a guest of Commander Daleson.”

Alice took his hand shaking it, “Thank you Stanley.”

She started for the door knowing that it was time to go as Branden said, “You were the one who gave us those candy bars all the time weren’t you?” Stanley gave a small nod, “Thanks. I know you were just doing your job but from my memories you and your friend were always the friendliest of the ones that watched us.”

Stanley softly said, “I wish that what happened to those boys hadn’t happened. I think it was the most terrifying thing I have ever seen in my life or ever will.”

Branden swallowed once fighting back memories clearly, “Yeah me too, they were my family.” He reached out taking Alice’s hand which she squeezed once before they walked out of the house. Bran was quiet in the car as Alice put in the address for Victorian House seeing that it was a simple yet cozy looking bed and breakfast. When she started to pull out of the house’s driveway Branden said, “I hope that Eric and Scott are okay.”

Alice reached across the console in the middle to take his hand gently squeezing it. “Me too, and I know someone who would be really happy to see Scott. Just like I was when I saw you.”

Branden said, “One of his parents is still alive?”

Alice gave a small nod, “Yeah, his mom.” They were quiet again for the entire drive from Arcadia to Loup City. It wasn’t an uncomfortable silence, but there was an underlining tension within the silence. This morning and last night both came back to Alice as they drove, the feeling of Branden in her arms, of exploring his body as much as he explored hers. The fear that she was messing him up was gone, while Bran was still a kid he wasn’t like other kids his age. None of this was going to leave him with problems. If anything she had a feeling that if he was allowed to he’d ask her to marry him tomorrow. While he had slept for thirteen years he had been learning things while also dreaming. The fact that most of his dreams included her didn’t surprise Alice, most of her dreams included him even years after he had been gone.

As she pulled in front of the large two story Victorian style house a few minutes later she was surprised to see how nice it looked. There was a sign at the front swinging that said The Victorian House Bed and Breakfast. All of it gave that sense of old America back during the colonial days though she doubted the house had been built that far back. It had a real history though, a place that had stood here within Loup City for a long while. Getting out of the car her hand found Branden’s almost right away, the two of them walking together up to the house.

Stepping in there was a simple check in counter with a woman who had to be somewhere in her sixties behind sitting at a chair watching a television. She looked up at the sound of the bell going off when they stepped in. “Yes can I help you?”

Alice cleared her throat once feeling nervous and uncertain. “I was told to let you know that we were guests of Commander Daleson.”

The woman nodded standing up to pull a sign in sheet over as she said, “Yes Calvin told me that you were both coming. I always told him when he my granddaughter settled here that they shouldn’t, that this was a slowly dying city, but he’s good people. I’ve never met anyone in his extended family all these years.” She smiled kindly, “When he said his cousin and her boy were visiting I never once pegged that you’d be so young. Well I hope you enjoy your stay, here is the key to the room its on the second floor. I’m sorry there’s only one bed, the two bed room is being rented already.”

Alice taking the key said, “Its not a problem. We’ve had to rough it at a few hotels. He doesn’t kick much.”

Branden stuck his tongue out as the woman chuckled, “Well that’s good.” Alice walked quietly with Branden back out to the car to get their bags then up the stairs. The room that they went into was a modest one, there was a small bathroom that looked well maintained, the bedroom had a window that looked out onto Loup City though there were trees blocking most of the view. It all brought back feelings of being a place that was lived in. It wasn’t like that hotel the other night, this was a place that was well taken care of.

The small room with its dresser and single bed was cozy looking she decided. The perfect place to make love to your boyfriend and future husband. Branden after putting his bag down on one of the chairs fell back onto the bed with a sigh looking up at the ceiling. “This bed is amazing Alice, like a thousand times better than the last two.”

Alice chuckled dropping her bag next to his as she moved to climb up onto the bed until she was leaning over him on her hands and knees. “Oh is it now?” Branden gave a nod, then a small flush rose to his cheeks when one of his hands reached up to touch her cheek. Alice knew the signal as she leaned down to press her lips to his. There are moments where you make a decision, and this moment the decision was easy. As her tongue slowly began to play with Branden’s, Alice rested a hand on his shirt, when her fingers tickled one of his ribs he giggled against her lips his own fingers siding up to find her ribs and tickle just below the bra she wore.

Branden’s hazel eyes looked more green right now as the sunlight hit them just right. Alice kissed his lips once as her hand found the buttons on his shirt. “I love you Alice.”

Alice smiled, “I know, want to show me how much you love me?”

Branden’s face went red as he swallowed then softly said, “C-can we?”

“If you want to.” She knew what he was asking, what she wanted as she continued to unbutton the shirt he wore. When she got the shirt off her eyes went to his naked upper body, a stark reminder of how skinny and small he was compared to her. He’d never get the bulk or broad shoulders of an adult male. He had already gone through puberty already. The part of him that was alien had stopped his growth so that he resembled one of the passengers in size. Despite that her desire for him was all encompassing. She loved this boy who was also a young man.

Branden seeing something in her eyes said, “You okay Alice?”

Alice smiled as she rested her hands on the sides of his chest, “Yeah… I just realized how much I loved looking at you… and also this…” She slipped her hands up a little more finding his armpits which she tickled as Branden’s giggles escaped him. He reached for her blouse while he squirmed trying to get his hands underneath it to find her spots as well. Nearly ten years of tickling and wrestling each other coming back to Alice as she felt his fingers reach for her ribs just below the bra she wore. “You keep those hands away mister!”

Branden giggling as she used her fingers to tickle is pits said, “No way! You’re going down!” His fingers found her ribs then sliding along them expertly as she felt her own laughter escaping her mouth. Then his hands moved slightly more until they were gripping her breasts which stopped Alice as well. The feeling of his hands softly squeezing them through the bra made Alice leaned down to kiss his lips again. She sat up a second later to pull the blouse over her head before leaning down to bring her lips to Branden’s again.

Then she kissed his chin just below his lips, “No more tickles tonight I promise.” Branden smiled in agreement as her lips went lower. Alice felt that same compelling desire to make Branden feel good building inside of her. It as so strange, even with Stephen she hadn’t really enjoyed just going down on him. Yet she’d do it a thousand times with Branden. It wasn’t because of how he looked, she had never found a boy his age attractive before. It was because this was Branden, her Branden. The boy that should have been hers. If he had never disappeared, but had still stopped growing she would have still loved and wanted to be with him.

Her tongue made contact with one of his nipples, softly twisting around the shape of the hardened little digit as Branden let out a little sigh of satisfaction. Then she was

on the second one while her hand slipped down between them to undo his slacks. She hated to admit it, but she loved the feeling of his smaller body compared to her own. Even at thirteen he had been smaller than her, and roughly four inches shorter too. Now he was a foot shorter, but she was finding she liked that even more. Her lips went to his second nipple as her fingers pulled the zipper down on his shorts.

Branden let out a small sigh as her lips went lower to kiss the top of his stomach just below his rib cage. His skin was softer than any other man she had ever been with, warmer too somehow. As she kissed lower on his stomach one of her fingers traced along the shape of his boyhood, the roughly three inches twitched as she heard another small sigh escape Branden's lips followed by, "That feels so nice Alice." She smiled up at him as she kissed lower on his stomach. Each kiss was followed by her finger stroking the length of his pole.

When she reached the top of his boxer-briefs Alice used her hands to pull his slacks down to his ankles. She pulled his sneakers off as well, dropping both to the floor as her hands ran back up over his soft skinny legs. Here again she was reminded that he was about half the size of an adult man, but he wasn't all that much smaller than her since she was a willowy woman. She kissed the area of his stomach just above his belly button before dipping into the tiny indent making him giggle as her tongue slipped around it.

Her eyes went lower to his boxer-briefs, he wore those same Guardians of the Galaxy ones that she had seen the other day. Within she could make out his boyhood straining at the cloth as she kissed on his stomach just above the elastic band of the underwear. Branden let out another sigh as she used her fingers to stroke the boys erection before pulling the boxer-briefs down as well. When his little penis popped out into full glory Alice felt this sense of amazement blended with desire. She was again just like the other times a girl of thirteen looking at the boy she loved naked.

His penis pointed up at his chin, the slender three or so inches looked painfully hard as she studied it. The shape of the head just underneath the foreskin was obvious with how stretched it was. Down at the base not a single hair graced the boys pubic region, and it was possible that none ever did. His balls were small, but clearly visible, two nuggets almost the size of almonds in his bald sack. She kissed lower on his stomach, sliding her lips down over his pubic region before pressing them to the

boys nuts. The skin here was a little salty probably from a day of sweating, as even boys sweated down here apparently.

Although Alice wondered if he was really a boy, but to her he'd always be her boy even when they were in their sixties. As she gently sucked one of the boys nuts into her mouth she used two fingers to stroke his pole, pulling the foreskin back until the head popped out. Her eyes looked up at it as she slipped her mouth off of his balls. When her tongue licked along the roughly three and a half inches Branden said, "A-Alice…" Then she ran her tongue over the exposed glans, sliding along the entire helmet before she pulled it into her mouth.

The feeling of Branden's hands on her head was all she needed to know he was enjoying this. The sigh of pleasure when she devoured all three or so inches was enough to make her smile around his boner. She loved the feeling of him in her mouth, and it wasn't only because he was smaller than other guys. No it was because this was her Branden. The boy that she wanted to make cum a thousand times. She sucked while her fingers also played with his balls. Branden began to thrust his hips gently to meet her mouth as she applied more pressure until he let out a gasp with one huge push up into her mouth. The feeling of his small penis surging in size as the first load shot out made her smile even more. His spend tasted glorious, not too salty, but not too sweet either. She savored each spurt taking a moment before swallowing before another one shot out into her mouth. How much he had amazed Alice, not even Stephen had produced this much.

Alice was not surprised to see that he was still stiff when she slipped her mouth off of his erection to lean over him again. Her lips met his, and this hunger seemed to light up his eyes as his hands found her breasts again. Alice with her lips inches from his said, "The clasp is on the back…" Branden flushed but went to work his hands sliding along her back until they managed to undo the bra. She felt them go around to her shoulders then sliding the straps down until she felt the bra falling down over her arms. She helped Branden pull it off before they twisted so that she was on her back with Branden now on top of her.

One of her hands rested on his back rubbing along it while his lips made contact with hers again. She could feel his small flat chest pressing to her own squishing her breasts down even further. His erection was digging into her lower stomach with soft little thrusts as his tongue greedily played with hers. Branden had picked up kissing really quickly and was easily the best she had ever had. After a moment though he

moved lower on her, his lips following what she had done earlier. When he flicked his tongue over her nipple Branden asked, “L-like this?”

Alice smiled, running a hand through his hair, “Yeah Bran just like that. Try sucking on it.” He brought his lips to her nipple then applying pressure as his hand squeezed the other breast. It felt incredible to her having this boy that she loved more than anyone else touch her in such an intimate way. Then he as going lower, his lips kissing her stomach as his hands found her jeans undoing them. Alice helped him get her jeans and panties off almost at the same time. Again the look on his face as he took in her vagina was pure desire.

“Can I do like last night?” Alice nodded yes as Branden went between her legs with his mouth. There was some hesitance, but this time Alice didn’t tell him what to do. His tongue slipped over the outer lips, then dipped between them into the cleft of her pussy. She felt it when his tongue met her clit, sending rippling waves of pleasure through her body. Alice gave off a small moan as Branden’s lips sucked on her most sensitive of spots. Then he was looking up from between her legs, “Alice I want to try putting it inside…”

Alice smiled, touching his cheek, “Me too Bran…” He sat up looking down between the two of them, “Just take hold of it and guide it between the lips you’ll find your home...” Branden nodded his fingers going to his erection, holding onto it as his eyes looked at the target. A moment later when she felt the head press between the plump lips of her pussy Alice felt pleasure wash over her like she had rarely felt before. The feeling of Branden’s penis pressing up between the lips sliding along the inner folds before he corrected made her entire body ignite on fire.

Then it happened, the head of his penis pressed into her opening, and he wasn’t too small at all. No he was perfect honestly, better than she could have ever imagined. Alice could feel the entire boyhood as it sunk into her warm wet depths. Branden’s eyes went wide as he moved his hand away while slipping full inside with one full thrust. He rested his hands on either side of her up by her arm pits as he sunk all three and a half inches into her tunnel. Alice could feel him inside. Even feel his little balls resting against that bit of skin below her entrance. When her eyes met his there was a hunger in the boys that she’d never seen before, “T-this feels… Alice…. It feel so…. Amazing…’

Alice smiled leaning up to pull his face to hers kissing his lips, “Yeah now you’ve got to move sweetie… trust me its about to feel even better...”

“Move?” Alice rested her hands on his hips, showing him once how to move inside of her. His instinct when she moved was to thrust back inside which sent a wave of desire up through her body. This was Branden inside of her! Branden was making love to her and it was the most incredible feeling in the world! They began slowly, a rhythm of sorts that she helped guide as he asked, “L-like this?”

Alice said, “Yeah.. here go a little more like this… fully push in each time..” She helped him slip almost all the way out then dive back in. For some reason each time that he thrust all three or so inches into her another wave of pleasure would wash through her whole body. She could feel each inch slipping in every time that it happened. Feel him eagerly pressing his pubic region to her own, rubbing that smooth soft skin against her clit every single time with how she was spread open for him. “A little faster…”

Branden moved slightly as her hands ran down his back to cup his round bottom squeezing as he said, “Like this?” Alice managed a yes as he started to thrust into her faster. Each complete thrust sent another wave through her body. She could feel it building as her slick tunnel squeezed on the boys erection. Feel each moment that he pushed fully back into her. Again faster, building speed with each full thrust. Her eyes met his, this look of wonder and desire that filled them made her love the boy that was hers all the more.

By now a thin sheen of sweat had built up on their bodies, she could feel it along his back as her hand ran up and down it. Every building thrust now made a small groan escape from Branden. Alice could tell that he wasn’t going to last much longer, she was so close to the edge herself now. She squeezed his bottom as Branden said, “It feels so good inside Alice… its like… like… oh its so good…. I’m going to… when you squeeze me like that… its going to.. .Alice!!” He said her name as a small moan escaped his lips.

Alice felt it happen then, that slight surge like when he was in her mouth, only this time it was inside of her pussy. It sent a wave of pleasure through her as the first load shot out in a thick spurt. Alice swore she could feel the warmth of it filling her, as more loads followed. Her entire body responded in a way that it never had for any

other man. She squeezed Branden's bottom tightly with one hand while the other one pulled him down to her holding him on top of her as he emptied his balls inside of her.

Soon all that remained was the sounds of the two of them catching their breath. She could feel Branden's slightly smaller body resting on top of her own. Even feel him still buried inside of her when she became aware of the world again. She ran a hand through his slightly wet hair when he shivered on top of her. The drying sweat on his back, no doubt making him cold. She could feel Branden's warm breath on her chest just above where her breasts were. Feel his chest pressing to them as she felt him also still buried within. Softly Branden said, "That was so amazing."

Alice kissed the top of his head, "Yeah…"

He turned to look at her, "I mean it Alice… it feels so good inside…"

Alice smiled, "I know it does. It was the best for me too Bran…"

Branden rested his head on her chest again, "I could stay like this forever."

Alice chuckled, "I think we still need to eat, and drink, and use the bathroom."

Branden sighed regretfully that life got in the way of pleasure, "Yeah… we can do it again though right?"

Alice pinched one of his sides making him laugh, "Yeah we can do it again Bran. We can do it again lots of times."

He yawned, making her yawn too, "Good cause I really want to." Those were the last words he said as she felt him drift to sleep on top of her. Alice would have with any other man been pissed just a little, but this was Branden she couldn't be pissed when he had just made her feel incredible.

Instead she gently moved which woke him for a moment, “Hey lets get under the covers.” Branden’s eyes met hers looking confused, but when he realized what she was trying to do he helped her. For a brief moment he almost slipped out, but she managed to keep his still stiff pole inside. Then under the covers they once more snuggled. She could feel Branden’s warm breath on her chest just above the rise of one of her breasts. Feel his hair just under her chin as her hands gently stroked his back. She heard him mumbled I love you as he drifted back into sleep. Alice softly kissed the top of his head as she said, “I love you too.” Then running her hands gently up and down his back she slowly drifted off into an exhausted sleep as well. Alice slept better than she had in ages in that comfortable bed with her lover and future husband buried in her arms tightly.

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The feeling of a hand on her face was the first thing Alice became aware of the following morning when the sounds of birds chirping out the window woke her. There was a head just below her own in the crook of her neck as well. Alice knew this because she could feel his warm breath as Branden still slumbered on top of her. She reached up pushing his hand off of her face as she sighed. Same Branden, he refused to stay in one spot when he slept. Becoming more aware though of him on top of her Alice’s mind went back to last night. She rested a hand on his back gently rubbing down the length of it until her fingers slipped over the curve that was his bottom.

Alice tried to resist, but it was so perfect an opportunity she couldn’t stop herself. When she lightly pinched it Branden mumbled something incoherently before rolling off of her onto his back like he was trying to escape. She chuckled while also admiring him. Inside Alice felt a wave of need coupled with love when she took in his naked body. Again her eyes roamed over his skinny figure, knowing now that this was what Branden would look like even ten years from now. His face looked so delicate with his eyes closed and his glasses missing. She couldn’t even remember if he had taken them off, or if she had removed them.

Her eyes went lower, sliding down over his smooth soft stomach, resting finally between his legs. The ache looking at him produced shocked her. Memories of last night flooding her every thought as she reached out to lightly run a finger along the boys stiff pole. She hadn’t minded how other men looked, but she found this part just like the rest of him to be perfect to her compared to any others. She reached the top where the head was unexposed with the foreskin pressed up around it still. When

she rubbed over the ridge at the base of it the little pole twitched. Alice smiled watching it move as she ran her hand down to lightly touch the boys small sack.

Alice moved leaning over the still sleeping Branden feeling a need to explore him again. He had shifted slightly on the bed one of his arms resting along side his head now. Her lips gently kissed the hollow of his neck. Her fingers slid along the boys skinny arm one of them sliding along his arm pit which made him squirm and push his arm down in clear protest while still sleeping. Alice giggled to herself as she kissed lower, her lips resting in the hollow right where his neck met his collar. His skin was soft and other than a few fine hairs on his lower arms and around his ankles hairless.

Her lips went down lower, exploring and tasting. When her tongue flicked against one of his erect nipples Branden let out a little sigh with the word, “Alice.” She looked up to see if he was awake, but his eyes were still shut. She smiled wondering what he was dreaming about. Lower she went with her kisses, lightly touching the middle of his chest, feeling where his rib cage met the boys stomach. Every inch as she went lower was delightful to taste and feel. She would never have desired to do this to any other man or boy, to know them as intimately as she did him.

Alice swiped her tongue across the small indent that was his belly button as she did Branden squirmed just slightly in his sleep. Just how much torture could she give before he’d wake up? Lower Alice went, her lips touching the part of his stomach where it met his pubic region. Delicately she kissed him there, loving the feeling of his naturally bald skin. Every inch was so warm under her lips. When she licked his pubic region with her tongue Branden squirmed again, but still did not wake. Alice skirted around his pole, eyeing the three or so inches with a building desire. She used her hands to open his thighs, running kisses along the soft inner parts of both before she brought her mouth to his sack.

When Alice ran her tongue over the bald sack it retracted just slightly making the two balls within a little more obvious. Alice gently used her tongue to play with one as she heard Branden mumble again. The boy really could sleep through anything couldn’t he? She chuckled to herself before running a string of kisses along the length of his erection. The stiff tube felt incredible under her lips. At the tip she swiped her tongue into the small opening that the foreskin produced, this cause Branden's penis to twitch at the feeling.

When his hand rested on her head Alice turned to look up at him while her tongue played with the boys foreskin. His beautiful hazel eyes were open, filled with desire mixed with love. Alice smiled, “Morning.”

Branden’s penis twitched, “M-morning…”

She pulled the foreskin back then revealing the small reddish head after her tongue swiped across it Alice said, “I was wondering what would wake you up. Tickling didn’t work so I thought maybe this would.”

Branden softly responded, “That feels incredible Alice.”

She smiled, “Yeah? How about this?” Alice sucked the head of his erect pole into her mouth no doubt sending a wave of pleasure through the boys body. Branden let off a small moan as she sucked while also using her tongue to tease at the small opening in the boys erection. Hard to believe that so much spend could come out of such a small nozzle. Alice slipped down slower, taking the entire three or so inches of length fully into her mouth. He’d never get any bigger, but that was fine with her ever inch of Branden was perfect just as it was.

When she sucked all of him in Alice felt Branden’s hand rest on top of her head the fingers sliding through her hair as she pleasured him. After a few seconds of lovingly sucking she slipped her mouth off moving up so she could slide him between her legs. Again like last night the feeling of him penetrating her sent shivers up Alice’s spine. She looked down at Branden underneath her as more of his penis slipped fully within her. She could feel each inch pressing up until all three and a half were buried fully within.

Branden’s eyes were wide, his slightly smaller body underneath hers as she slowly began to ride him. “T-that feels’ a-amazing Alice.” His cheeks flushed as she took his hands guiding them up to her breasts.

“It does, doesn’t it?” As he stroked her breasts Alice began moving on top of Bran with a growing urgency. The thought of feeling him once more empty inside of her was like a hunger that she didn’t know how to contain. Last night had not been

enough, she needed to have him again. When his hands squeezed her breasts Alice leaned over Branden resting her hands on his small shoulders, “Push up into me faster sweetie…”

Branden flushed as he said, “O-okay.” His eyes wide with surprise at how amazing it all felt. When she leaned down more it was to bring one of her breasts to his face. Somehow Branden got the message, his lips greedily circling around the nipple to suck on it while she pressed her pubic region to his own driving that wonderful stick of his fully up into her once more as her orgasm arrived. The feeling of her gushing around him was enough to send Branden over the edge as well, “Alice..” As he said her name she felt the arrival. Her insides warmed as the first of his loads shot up into her. Thoughts of carrying the boys children filled her mind driving her to a second orgasm on the rise of more of his seed emptying into her.

Alice collapsed beside Branden on the bed breathing heavily after the final load had emptied within her. A very thin sheen of sweat covered her body, and she still felt warm all over as she lay there recovering. Branden moved to rest his hands up behind his head as he said, “That was incredible. You think you could wake me up like that every morning.”

Alice twisted on her side to look at him, the smug little smirk he had was enough for her. “No, but I can wake you up like this every morning.” With his hands up under his head and his elbows bent his armpits were perfectly on display. She attacked both of them at the same time his giggles soon filling the entire room as Branden tried to escape from under her. When she felt his hands going for her ribs just below her breasts, Alice grabbed bot of them, “No way mister.” She held his hands at the wrists pushing them down so they were above his body on either side of his head with her restraining him while straddling him.

Branden pinned under her said, “I’ll get my revenge when you least suspect!”

Alice smiled, “Oh yeah?” He nodded and she felt herself laugh, “I’d like to see you try four eyes.”

“You won’t see it cause I’m gonna do it when you can’t see it string bean!” He giggled as he said that, but he didn’t try to squirm and get away.

Alice leaned down so that her dark green eyes met his hazel dead on, “Maybe I’ll just never let you touch me again…”

Branden smiled, “Maybe I don’t love you anymore.”

Alice ran a hand down one of his arms, “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah!” He said with that cocked half grin once more.

She ran a finger against his armpit making the boy giggle, “Well maybe I don’t love you anymore either.”

Branden still giggling leaned up to press his lips to hers, when his tongue shot Alice felt that same wave of desire building within her. She returned the tongue, sliding hers along his twisting with it as they twisted till Branden was on top. This time when he penetrated her it was while the were kissing. She moaned against his lips as all of Branden slipped back within her warmth. It felt incredible, every tiny thrust that he made sent shivers through her body. Rather it was on accident or the boy’s own instincts she wasn’t sure, but he knew what he was doing.

Alice ran a hand down his back, relishing the feeling of his soft skin under her fingers, loving that nothing but almost too fine to feel hairs graced his skin anywhere. When her hand ran over the smooth rounded slope of his bottom Branden pressed harder inside of her. She could feel his flat chest pressing to her breasts as he broke their kiss, “I love you Alice.”

Alice squeezed his bottom as he emptied inside of her again, sending her over that final crest once more. “I love you too Bran…” He finished by collapsing on top of her, his warm breath on her neck again. His hands entwined with hers at their sides close to where her head was. She could feel his slightly smaller body between her legs, his penis still buried fully within her. Alice felt like she was finally complete. While recovering her hand stroked up and down the middle of his back along Branden’s spine. When he shivered once she said, “Cold?”

Branden said, “A little, but I don’t want to move.”

Alice chuckled, “Me either. We’ve got to though. We’re meeting with Major Daleson in a few hours, and I need a shower.”

Branden moved to slip off of her, again that loss of not having him in her arms surprised her. “Can I go first?”

Alice smiled, “Knock yourself out, just leave me a little hot water please.”

Branden stopped at the door to the bathroom looking back at her, “Uh Alice… we could always take a shower together…”

Alice chuckled, “We will I promise, but not today.” He nodded before going into the bathroom. She heard the sound of someone peeing a second later, and smiled before reaching for her cellphone. Conner had sent another email that she responded to. Letting him know through careful wording that she was close to answers, but not there yet. About ten minutes later when Branden stepped out of the bathroom she felt what was quickly becoming a familiar flush of desire. He wore only a pair of boxer-briefs. These ones with the Avengers on them. They were tight enough that when she sat up on the bed Alice could see the return of Branden’s desire. His eyes resting on how her breasts moved as she stood up. Then sliding down to the area between her legs though they did rest a while on her stomach too. Seeing him she chuckled, “My boyfriend is a pervert.”

Branden with flushed cheeks pressed at the elastic band of his boxer-briefs making her look down. “So is my girlfriend!” He smiled up at her, “You can touch it again if you want to Alice.”

She sighed, “I made a monster.”

Branden grabbed for her hand, “You know you want to!”

Alice laughed reaching over to tickle one of his ribs, “Maybe tonight after we blow this conspiracy wide open.”

Branden smiled as she walked past him to the bathroom after grabbing her new underwear, “You promise Alice?”

“I Promise Bran. When its all over we’ll spend a week cuddled in bed together if you want.”

When her eyes met his again Branden flushed, “Well, um only if you want to too.”

Alice took two steps back to where he was, she leaned down that short distance in height between them and kissed his lips once deeply, “It sounds like heaven.” Then she headed into the bathroom.

As she started to close the door Branden said, “Can’t wait babe!”

Alice turned looking back at him, “You call me that one more time and you shall pay! Maybe not right now, but you will pay!”

Branden giggled, “I’d like to see you try baby-cakes!”

Alice pointed a finger at him, “Tonight mister. You’re going to regret that!”

Branden smiled, “You don’t scare me!” Alice chuckled before closing the door. From outside of it Branden said, “I love you!”

Alice sighed to herself then opened the door, “I love you too nerd.”

“Hurry up and take your shower string bean so we can go get some breakfast.”

“Put on your glasses four eyes.” She closed the door then with a chuckle when she heard him laughing too. It felt like how she had always pictured being with a boy would be like. You didn’t have to be an adult all the time, you could mess around. Seriousness had its place, but with Branden the ability to just mess with each other like they were both kids again was priceless. Alice realized as she got into the shower that for the first time in a very long time she felt like she was home.

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After they were both dressed the two of them headed downstairs. The bed and breakfast had a simple morning breakfast spread that they had put out in its small dinning room. As they stepped into the room Alice’s eyes rested on an African man sitting at one of the tables. At first she wasn’t sure why her eyes rested on him, until she remembered the picture from yesterday that Stanley had shown her. He wasn’t dressed in military attire, but he had the look of a man that had served for a long time. He was sitting at one of the tables drinking a cup of what looked like coffee. Branden walking in beside her stopped as well when he saw the man.

The feeling from his hand squeezing her was all that Alice needed to know that Bran’s half remembered memories were playing with him again. Alice got a cup of coffee as she said, “Get something to eat then join us.” Branden gave a nod his hand slipping out of hers as she walked over to the table. Alice felt nervous, this was either a trap or answers. Either one was preferable to no answers at all. If it was a trap there was no stopping what came next. She grabbed a couple of sugars from the container at the center of the table as Branden sat down next to her with a plate that had a waffle and a stack of bacon on it.

Commander Daleson said, “I see your taste in food hasn’t really changed all that much Mr. Leston.” Branden gave a little nod as he grabbed the syrup on the table to

pour it over the waffle. Daleson turned to look at Alice instead, “Its nice to meet you formally Agent Nills.”

Alice gave a simple nod, “Is this a safe place?”

Daleson sipped his coffee, “As safe as any place is in today’s world. Big brother isn’t as capable as television or fiction makes them out to be. Half the time we can barely track our own troops when deployed correctly. I can’t discount that someone might be following me, but I don’t believe they are. I come here two or three times a week for breakfast or brunch. Melinda the owner is my grandmother-in-law and a good friend.” His eyes rested on Branden who was eating bacon though Alice knew that he was paying attention as well. “When I first got assigned to the base I stayed here for nearly two weeks. I met Rebecca her granddaughter one weekend. We were both roughly the same age, one thing led to another and now I’m the father to two wonderful kids. I trust Melinda, and I wouldn’t bring danger to her. That’s why I asked you to stay here for the evening.”

Alice nodded sipping her coffee, “You can really let us into the base?”

“I can show you where the boys are being kept if that’s your intent. Even help you take them from the base before Pearson arrives if that is your intent. They have officially closed the project, the ship is mostly dismantled now. Parts used for other things. It looks so much not like a ship now that for the past six months its been sitting in a mostly unguarded hanger.” He grunted then continued, “They handed a large portion of the technology over to NASA who in turn outsourced it to the private sectors. Envision-Tech was the most successful with incorporating the technology. That’s why they won the bid for the Type-C shuttle, even after all of their public failures. When the Type-C is unveiled and launched later this afternoon the word is that mankind will enter a new era of the space age.”

Branden finishing his bacon said, “They shouldn’t launch it. If they have even one aspect of the fuel systems wrong it’ll explode. The power cells that the Passengers used to fuel their ships were precisely calculated by an advanced AI system that was housed on the ship. There was one Passenger on the ship who was trained in working with the AI to apply the mix into the fuel cells that power the ship. They also worked with the ships AI to monitor the cells as they could be unstable and have to be removed at any moment to be remixed correctly. It is a painstakingly slow

process which is why the ship had so many in the first place all locked into their own part of the ship.”

Alice stared at Branden shocked as did Commander Daleson. Softly the man said, “How do you know all that?”

“The AI taught me when I was sleeping.” He shrugged taking a bite of his waffle. Alice was honestly as shocked as Daleson. When he felt her eyes on him he said, “That’s what’s been bothering me about this launch. I’ve been trying to figure out how they got their own fuel cells to work if they’re really using the same propulsion systems that the Passengers used. Sorry, Alice I should have told you sooner.”

Alice chuckled, “Its fine. What else did this AI teach you?”

Branden shook his head, “Not much else. Well other than their language I mean. It just hit me sitting here thinking about it that I could repair, monitor, and even mostly build the engines that power the Artifact.” He took another bite of syrupy waffle, “The AI was starting to teach me all of it but was interrupted when I was woken up. ”

Commander Daleson said, “Wait… you were conscious while in the tube?”

“No, not really. I dreamed a lot.” Here his cheeks flushed as Alice knew that he had dreamed of her more than once. “But at the same time in-between the dreams a very sophisticated AI taught me after it determined what I would be good at. The longer I’m awake the more I remember things that were hidden away by Doctor Vissen’s memory wipe. Like all of the engine stuff, it just hit me that I could build their propulsion system.” He looked over at Alice, “It feels like the information is incomplete though, like the AI just shut off in the middle of teaching me more.”

Daleson cleared his throat as Alice met the mans eyes again, “That might be because the pulled all the computer systems out of the Artifact. Well other than the strange power cell that was running the tubes you three were in.” He pushed his cup away, “If you want to save the other boys its better that we do it now as soon as possible. The training facility that they’re being kept at in secret is being shut down and all personnel moved to other bases. The outer shell of the Artifact is going to be

melted down since there's nothing left of it. Then General Pearson wants the boys terminated. That is why I went to Vissen through Stanley, it was to get all three of the boys out before Pearson came to collect them. Word is he's coming after the successful launch of the Type-C Shuttle so we only have a few hours."

Alice found Branden's hand as she said, "I sent back ups of all the things that Vissen gave me to my boss and Scott's mother."

Commander Daleson smiled, "Back up to protect the two of you? That was really good idea. That's why I told Vissen to get the files to you when he got out. The more hands his files and journals are in the better. You ready?"

Alice gave a nod as Branden squeezed her hand before saying, "Yeah." The commander nodded then stood up dropping a napkin on his plate.

"You'll follow behind me then park in the visitor parking. The base was converted a few years ago into a training facility for the Air Force. No one has any idea what is hanger J-10. Its all kept locked up and secured in an old fallout shelter that is below the hanger." They started out the front door of the bed and breakfast. Commander Daleson had parked his truck next to her car as they walked he continued speaking, "Pearson decided terminating the boys was easier than moving them. He says that the entire project was a mistake from the beginning now. I'm not a fan, they're living people same as anyone else."

Alice rested a hand on the mans arm, "Thank you for doing this." Daleson gave a small nod, "I know how dangerous it is for you."

He sighed, "If I had been braver or more willing to take risks I would have done it a lot sooner than now. I was afraid to act until Doctor Vissen came to me with his proposed plan." He paused for a second before opening his truck door, "After McKon took over the project things were different. Vissen was isolated to a degree, but he couldn't abandon the boys so that's how it was. McKon won in the end, after all today his project takes off for space. I guess after thirteen years of arguing behind the scenes Pearson finally gave into McKon's demands that the boys should be terminated."

Branden said, “W-why didn’t he give into McKon sooner?”

Commander Daleson shook his head, “Not sure son other than he had kids of his own so maybe he couldn’t do it. That was why he jumped at Doctor Vissen’s idea ‘bout the tubes. He figured if it didn’t work you’d die, but if it did they could keep the three of you out of McKon’s hands for a few years. Ready?” Alice gave a nod as she got into the driver seat of her car. Branden slipped into the passenger seat buckling.

When she pulled out of the parking lot for the bed and breakfast Branden said, “I feel strange Alice.”

“Like you’re going to be sick?” She looked over at him concerned.

Branden shook his head, “No. Like… I’m missing something that’s obvious but I don’t know what it is.”

“Something to do with Commander Daleson?”

He shook his head again, “No. I mean not directly, but something he said, its like um, when you can’t remember a word or phrase?”

Alice said, “Like something is tickling at the back of your brain?”

“Yeah, like that.” He sat back in his seat, “something about McKon, every time that the commander mentioned him it was like this little buzzing in my head that wouldn’t stop.” He pulled his phone out of his pocket typing in something on it. As the car bounced along the road heading for the base behind Daleson's truck Branden scrolled through things on his phone. When they turned down a road leading out of Loup City proper and heading slightly north west he said, “I got it.”

“Got what?”

“Doctor Victor McKon, is the head of research and development for Envision-Tech. He’s been the lead developer of the Type-C Shuttle program, including the new prototype engine for the past ten years.” Branden looked up from his phone as he said, “I read that the other day when I read the first part out loud to you. He’s also helping NASA with the planned mission to mars.” He scrolled then as they turned down a third road Branden read from something: “I had my first realization about combining fusion with fission to create a new type of engine propulsion for space travel in college, but I didn’t know how to make it reality. Then one day…” Branden stopped reading out loud then a moment later said, “This guy is full of a lot of shit Alice.”

Alice chuckled, “You mean because he’s taking credit for developing something that he stole from aliens?”

Branden said, “Yeah that and also, see if this sounds familiar or not: Then one day I hit my head when I was getting up from dropping something in the bathroom, and it just occurred to me how I could push the two together. It was right there as if it had just popped into my brain and I drew the schematics that day. I never did finish hanging the clock.”

Alice as they turned into the base visitor parking lot said, “No fucking way.”

Branden said, “Yes fucking way. He almost directly quoted Back to the Future.”

Alice sighed, “And no one caught it?”

Branden reading the article said, “Nope, the guy interviewing him didn’t even say anything. Although there’s this thread on Reddit about how similar it sounds. A conspiracy thread.” He held up his phone showing her the Reddit discussion thread. “People saying that he’s a regular Doc Brown, or some saying aliens probably gave him the information or the government. Or that he’s taking credit for what someone else did.”

Alice chuckled, “Well he is taking credit for something he stole clearly.” Looking at Commander Daleson getting out of his truck she took off her seat belt while turning

off the car, “You ready to do this?” Branden gave a nod as they both climbed out of the car. Alice had no idea what was going to happen inside the base, but in exactly five hours if she didn’t contact her boss he’d open the file she sent him. In exactly one day Mary would open an envelop with a thumb drive and a simple letter. Alice felt positive that she, Branden, and the other two boys were going to be safe.

Commander Daleson waited for them at the front of the building that was next to the guard house. Beyond you could see the base which was a bunch of hangers along with a few other buildings that were all a few stories tall. As they walked into the four story building by the gate and guard house Commander Daleson said, “This wasn’t where Project Artifact was originally kept. Back then when I was just an Airman it was in a facility a few hours away. After the incident with the first three boys they moved everything here when they decided to shut it down. Put most of it down in an old fall out bunker then built a hanger on top of it.” He led them past the reception desk after picking up two visitor badges.

Alice snapping hers on while walking with Branden’s hand in her own said, “This place feels abandoned.”

Commander Daleseon nodded, “It mostly is. There’s roughly about a dozen personnel on the base at this time. We used to train over two hundred soldiers, but most of them have been funneled off to new better training facilities.” He led them through a set of doors after putting in a code, down a hallway then out a back door to the large lot. You could see where soldiers had probably once trained just based on the way the asphalt was set up. Two buildings to the left looked like barracks for the troops. There were ten hangers in the distance as well.

Next to the back door was an older looking golf cart that Daleson took a seat in gesturing. As they climbed in with Alice next to him and Branden in the back Bran said, “With something like project artifact you’d think there would be more security.”

Daleson grunted, “Son, sometimes the best way to keep something secret is to make it look so inconspicuous that no one suspects its something. When I first got to the project twenty-five years ago we didn’t hide it away in some crazy secret military base like they do on shows or movies. There was no Area-51 or some shit like that. It was a well documented Air Force military base. Just a few areas of it were off limits to the general public. Like most bases. The hanger and two floors that we housed

the project on were all locked off to general access. You know how many people asked to see what was behind those doors in the years that it was there?”

Branden said, “Everyone?”

Daleson chuckled, “not a single fucking person. You know how many asked me a man in the Air Force not the army about Area-51 in all that time?” Branden shook his head as Daleson said, “Every fucking one of them. The truth is the military wanted people asking about Area-51 and other top secret places like it. They want people focused on secrets and conspiracies while they just toll away in regular places like this. Like I said the best way to keep it secret is make it look like its just normal operating procedure. No one went hunting for Project Artifact because no one suspected it was there.”

Branden leaning back said, “So what does the army do in Area-51.”

Daleson laughed again, “They test experimental weapons and aircraft. It has nothing to do with Project Artifact at all. Hell I don’t think the army even knows that we have the damn thing. It didn’t crash on earth. NASA found it in space, we helped them recover it. Its been a joint effort between NASA scientists and Air Force personnel ever since then.” As he finished saying that they pulled in front of Hanger J. Daleson drove around the hanger to the side where there the entrance was.

They climbed out of the golf cart as he went up to the door unlocking it with a code plus a finger print scanner. They stepped into a small room with a few computers and some desks. Most of the small room looked unused though one of the computers was on. There were some monitors for a security system but they were currently off. There were two other doors besides the one they stepped in through. He led them to the door next to the security monitors. After opening it they were led into a staircase that went down to another door. Commander Daleson as the walked down the stairs said, “Hanger J was originally built as a bomb shelter back in the seventies. We built the hanger on top of it sometime in the early 2000’s. The shelter by then hadn’t been used in a long while so we had to refurbish it before putting the shell of the Artifact in the hanger.

“Then after a few years they figured out how to remove parts of the ship. They moved the part with the boys down into the shelter along with another part. About a year go McKon came for that part which was probably the AI system. It was this huge circular ball that was connected to the entire ship at one point through cables that were removed when it was taken down here with the boys.”

At the bottom of the staircase after going down a few twists they came to a solid metal door. Daleson again had to use his fingerprint to open the door. When it clicked he pulled the handle. Alice took hold of Branden’s hand then holding it tightly. They were far enough away from everything now that someone could easily just do them in. She knew that this could all be a trap, but when he gave a small nod she walked with him into the room.

The abandoned bomb shelter was a huge rectangular room probably about the size of the hanger above it. There was light from six different dim lights around the sides of the room. In the center was a room with glass windows all around it. Inside that room were two boys dressed in all white sitting at a table playing what appeared to be a game of cards. Alice said, “I thought they were asleep like Branden was…”

Daleson shook his head, “They were until a few days ago. All three woke up together when the last power cell was removed from the section of the ship down here. McKon kept needing more of them for his experiments. Now he’s out I suppose since that was the last one. The boys know a lot of things, but they’re not exactly trusting of even me though I’ve tried to talk to them.”

Alice squeezed Branden’s hand then as he said, “Can I talk to them?” Commander Daleson gave a nod as they walked further into the room. Scott and Eric had clearly seen them as they put the cards down. When Scott saw Branden he stood up coming to the glass door that led out of the room. Branden stood before it as he said, “Hey.”

Scott said, “Hey, they wouldn’t tell us where you went.”

Branden looked back over at Commander Daleson then at Alice. “I was out there, um we came to take you home.” Alice moved to stand behind Branden resting a

hand on his shoulder as he swallowed once then said, “Did they tell you how long its been?”

A look passed between Scott and Eric then Scott said, “No, but I know its been awhile.”

Eric said, “We tried to tell them that we know what’s wrong with the Artifact, but they weren’t interested. They tore the ship apart can you believe that? How stupid.” He flicked his eyes over to Commander Daleson.

Branden gave a nod looking up at Alice then said, “That’s not important right now right Alice?” She gave a nod as he said her name though both Eric and Scott looked at each other then Branden continued, “This is Alice, remember I told you guys about her?”

Scott just gave a small sigh showing Alice just how often Branden talked about her in the boys response, “Yeah, uh we remember.”

Alice squeezed Branden’s shoulder trying to give him the courage to continue as he said, “Well when I woke up I went back home, but its not home anymore. We were asleep for thirteen years.”

A look passed between the other two boys again then Scott shrugged, “We figured it was a lot of time, but not that long. No one would tell us, but some of the people looked familiar but older.” His eyes rested on Commander Daleson.

Eric said, “And Doctor Vissen looked a lot older. Sad too, like he was resigned to the fact that he had failed or something I guess..”

Alice said, “After we get the two of you to safety then we’ll talk about the past few years, the changes and where you’ll be going.” She looked at Commander Daleson who gave a simple nod before he undid the lock on the door. The two boys were roughly the same height as Branden, though Scott was a couple of inches taller. Alice noticed right away that all three boys had a similar look to their face despite having both different mothers and fathers. The mothers eggs had been altered, but

they had still had her genetic material. So each boy had his own hair color, and his own way of holding himself, but there was something similar about them anyway besides just the hazel eyes.

Daleson said, “I have some clothes that should fit the boys up in the hanger.” Alice walking with him could hear Branden behind her talking with Scott and Eric.

Branden asked them, “Did the AI teach you things too while you were sleeping?”

Eric said, “It taught me their language, then it told me that there was a virus in the system that it had isolated within the core. That I couldn’t connect to the main navigation system till it was fully purged. It did teach me though about Navigation and how to use the systems so that the ship wouldn’t jump into a black hole or get swallowed by a star.”

Scott said, “It didn’t tell me any of that stuff. The AI taught me about space itself, how to map for living systems. How to protect against what it called Remnants which I guess is what that strange virus was that infected the ship. It even taught me how to build computer systems like how I used to build my own home computer. I guess it knew how much I liked building things so it was starting to teach me how to build a whole AI system like it.”

Alice looked back at the three boys with Branden in the middle. The troubled look on his face matched her own she knew. Scott’s mom was still alive still so he could go live with her. Both of Eric’s parents were dead, but his sister was still alive. She couldn’t imagine taking care of both of them along with exploring what was going on between her and Branden. The closeness of the three boys was clear with how they held hands together while talking about their time asleep in the tubes.

Stepping into the room they had left earlier with Commander Daleson Alice quickly moved behind him to protect the three boys coming up the stairs behind her. She pulled her gun as quickly as she stood in the doorway. The sound of the boys chattering died, perhaps because Branden saw her pull her gun. Commander Daleson just a step ahead of her said, “General, what are you doing here? I was told you’d be coming after the launch. I was just preparing the-”

Alice assessed the situation. She had only seen General Pearson in a couple of those videos, he looked older now but not any less intimidating. He was over six feet in height, broader of shoulder than even Stephen or Commander Daleson. He carried a gun in his hand, but was pointing it at Daleson almost casually. He talked over the commander, “Doctor Vissen broke finally. Imagine my surprise to learn what the two of you were planing on doing. Then learning that the boy was already in the hands of the FBI.”

Daleson said, “We’ve already got fail safes in place if you try to hurt the boys.”

Pearson’s eyes met hers then they went to the three boys just behind her, “Agent Nill’s fail safes have all been neutralized. Director Westand was more than cooperative when we threatened what would happen to him and his family. Not to mention his career. The boys are coming with me and my men. I want to thank both of you for making my job significantly easier for me.”

Command Daleson stepped in front of Alice as if he was protecting her and the boys both, “They’re just kids General. You can’t do this.”

“They are far more than that Commander. They are the last thing that remains of Project Hybrid as such they need to be exterminated. Just like that shell of the ship needs to be melted down. Project Integration is a success which means that the rest can be scrapped. Its better for all of us if the general public doesn’t know where the new dawn of space exploration for the United States came from.”

Alice stepped up next to Daleseon as she said, “You just don’t want the world to know that you experimented on kids. Took them from their families with no explanation, let their mothers die from preventable cancer, and used them for your own goals.”

General Pearson turned looking at her then his eyes went back behind her. She felt the boys move up further, felt it when Branden’s hand touched her own as he moved to stand close to her. He just gave a small smile, “Its our job as the military of the United States to protect her interests. We’re the ones who found the alien craft.

We’re the ones who figured to how it worked. Every president Agent Nills, every single one of them, the moment they learned about this project they signed off on it to keep it going. In all of its different forms even after the failure of Vissen’s Hybrid idea.”

Alice said, “I don’t care who signed off on it. You’re talking about killing kids General.”

his eyes again went to the three boys, “I’ll kill anyone to protect the secrets that I am told to protect Agent Nills. Them, you, even other members of the military. Project Hybrid failed just as I told Vissen it would. Now its time to wipe it off of the board in its entirety.” He gestured to the boys, “You think we can let them go back out into society? They’re already fully grown adults Agent Nills. None of them are going to gain another inch in height. Look at them, you think no one will question why they look like preteen boys when they’re in their forties or fifties? According to all of Vissen and McKon’s studies they’ve already finished puberty.”

Alice holding Bran’s hand tighter said, “They’re still living people General, they can still have lives in society.”

He chuckled, “No agent they cannot because I have a job to do.” His eyes went to her gun, then to Daleson's drawn weapon as well before he said, “I think you should both put your weapons down, I’ve got fifteen armed men outside this hanger, if you think you’re getting out with the boys you’re mistaken. Let me do my job then maybe we’ll let you live Agent Nills.”

Alice felt utterly powerless as she stood there slowly realizing the man was right. It was when Branden squeezed her hand one more time then let go while stepping forward with Eric and Scott that she finally dropped her gun. Inside she could feel her whole world again shattering as she felt the gun drop to the floor beside her. Branden stopped for a moment turning back to look at her once, “At least I got to see you again…” The emotions in his eyes was enough to finally break her. She wasn’t even aware that she had fallen to her knees until three men walked into the room dressed in military uniforms each one grabbing one of the boys pulling them out in a hurried fashion.

The entire time as he was dragged out of the room, Branden's beautiful hazel eyes filled with tears, stayed on hers. There was so much pain and sadness on his face, but here was resolve as well. Almost like Branden had known it probably would end this way. Pearson only said, "You made the right choice today." For a moment Alice had thought she had done everything to insure that Branden would be safe. That they could come out of this rescuing the other boys, then go about living their own life together. Make the family that she had dreamed about having. In the end that just wasn't how the world worked. Branden and the other boys were too much of a risk, a liability for a government wanted to make its own narrative on how they achieved a new era in space technology.

The feeling of a hand on her shoulder squeezing it a moment later made Alice realize that she had tears running down her cheeks that she wiped away stubbornly. Softly Commander Daleson said, "I'm sorry Agent Nills…" Alice stood slowly as she wiped her eyes again after picking up her gun. She slipped the gun into her holster under her shirt then heard her cellphone ding once. Alice slipped it out of her other pocket: I love you. I trust you. It was one simple message along with the start of a very large file transfer. Alice smiled down at the phone, the simple words in the message combined with the transfer. That was what he had been doing this morning while she was showering, "Commander, do you still want this to all come out?" It wasn't over yet, Branden's Find My Phone was still pinging showing her where they were going..

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Colonel Daleson hit the button on the key ring as they ran towards his truck about ten minutes later. Alice didn't have time to be sad or angry or any of that in this moment. All she had time to do was think about getting to Branden as quickly as possible. They were going to choose the ending they wanted, not the United States Military. Her phone still beeped with the Find My iPhone application tracking where General Person was taking Branden and the other boys. They were clearly in a vehicle of some kind that was moving towards the east at a quick pace.

Running past her government issued car she wasn't surprised at all to see that the passenger window had been broken. The backpack that held her backpack was the only item missing, which made sense. They knew that she would have made a backup of the files that Doctor Vissen had given to her a few days ago. Well Alice wasn't stupid, she was well aware that while they might have gotten to her boss they hadn't gotten to Mary. At least not yet, they'd wait till she tired to go to the media with what Alice sent her. It was also very clear that Branden wasn't dumb either based on the 20% bar in her notifications indicating a file transfer from his phone to hers.

Alice jumped into the passenger seat as she said, “Where do you think they’re going to take the boys?”

Daleson starting the truck said, “Probably Lincoln so they can get them out of the state faster. There’s a small private Airport just out side of the city that we’ve used for military transport before. From there they’ll probably taking them to a base where they can cover up the bodies after they kill them.”

Alice as they pulled out of the base parking lot said, “They’re not going to kill the boys.”

“I don’t think the General was bluffing Agent Nills.”

“It’s Alice, and of course he was. Think about it. That base was virtually abandoned, they could have easily just taken the boys out to the front and shot them. Then afterwards burned the bodies if they wanted to.” She shook her head. “No they’re going to put them somewhere heavily guarded in a tiny room for the next forty years just to be on the safe side.”

“Safe side?” He said looking over at her as he took the truck off road to try and catch up to the convey that was heading towards Interstate 80.

Alice looked down at her phone, the transfer was nearly at 50% now. “If the General or his superiors were totally confident that their new project was going to work they would have pulled the plug on the boys a long time ago. They don’t trust McKon to fully deliver, or for there to not be other problems they can’t foresee. The boys are insurance.”

Daleson as the truck bounced over the dirt paths said, “So Vissen thought when they said they were terminating the project he meant the boys. In reality they were just going to move them.”

Alice gave a nod, 54% did this damn thing have to go so slow?! “Exactly. The moment they woke up someone realized they had to move them so there was no risk of someone like Vissen doing what he did. They were too late though because you went to Vissen when the boys were woken up. Then he pulled Branden out to try and get us to go to the world with what they had done.”

Daleson turned the truck as they swerved onto a road bouncing a few times. He looked over at her taking in how anxiously she was looking at her phone. Daleson gunned the truck even more as they bounced along a road that wasn’t really a road at all. Alice swiped over to the tracking app to see that they were still about thirty minutes behind the convoy. “What are you doing over there?”

Alice went back to the transfer. “Branden is very smart Colonel Daleson. Either yesterday or the day before he loaded all the files from the jump drive onto his phone. I’m pretty sure he thought that the chances were high of them taking him again. He’s transferring all of the files to me right now. Once I have them I’m going to release them somewhere online.”

Colonel Daleson as he slowed for a second to take turn down another street getting ever closer to the interstate said, “Its Cal, Alice. That’s brilliant, but how does it help?”

She smiled once at the older man then continued, “You can’t keep a project secret if the whole world knows about it. Do you know how detailed the stuff is that Vissen gave me?” Cal shook his head, “Its like how Mulder kept getting closer and closer to the truth only to have it snatched away at the end of every episode. Only this time he finally got the proof he needed and now he’s going to let thee world know.”

Cal shook his head clearly confused by her analogy, “I don’t get it.”

Alice chuckled, “Never seen X-Files?”

“Not the TV watching type. So where are you going to release it?”

“I don’t know yet. Somewhere where information gets out to people fast.” The file now said it was at 80%. Alice willed it to go faster, she had to have it all out there before the convoy reached Lincoln. She checked the tracking app again seeing that it was still going strong. Branden no doubt had his phone hidden in his back pocket. Roughly about five seconds after his message was when the file transfer started coming through. Already it was nearly done, but then came finding out where to put it all. Seeing the file transfer had reminded Alice that Find My Phone was enabled on Branden’s phone. That was why she and Cal were able to follow the phone. The idea of getting Branden a smartphone was really paying off it seemed. Her only goal had been to use it to help him get caught up on the past thirteen years, but this was an even better use.

Cal said, “Facebook?”

Alice shook her head, “No not just there, everywhere I can think of. I’ll start on Reddit, then from there I’ll post on Twitter, then Facebook after that. Really anywhere that I can get a lot of information out. First I’ve got to the get file download then uploaded to a file storage system on the internet.”

Cal as they got up onto I-80 said, “You should post the link then once its posted search for Dark Channel. Its one of those government conspiracy sites, they’ve got hundreds of YouTube videos. The guy running the site does a live show once a week. I’ve called in a few times you know to tell him that aliens are real. That the government is keeping it a secret, but the military has seen them more than once.”

Alice looked over at him, “You’ve given this guy information?”

Cal chuckled, “Not anything real, not anything you haven’t heard a thousand times before. It was my own rebellion against the men who would rather keep this all a secret. You should send it to him, he’s been trying to uncover military secrets for years now. Use my fake name in the email: InnerShadow. Its what he refers to me when I call in. I don’t think most of his listeners believe that I’m a real member of the military, but they will after this.”

Alice gave a nod then went back to look at the file transfer. She let out a small satisfied sigh as she saw it was finally finished. Alice went over to Mega Drive where

she had created an account while the phone was downloading. There she began the process of uploading the files onto the Mega Drive account. Watching it load the files up was almost as painful as watching the files download in the first place. While it uploaded she turned to look at Cal, “You know this could mean the end of your military career?”

“I don’t care, those boys are innocent Alice. They’re just kids who have barely gotten to live their lives. Being a father I couldn’t imagine taking my kids lives away from them. I wish I had spoken up back then, done something before Vissen put them in those chambers. Well I can’t change the past, but I can make up for my mistakes just like Vissen is trying to. Saving them is more important to me than anything else.” Cal drove faster as he finished speaking. Alice rested a hand on the black mans arm once giving him a reassuring look. He nodded before turning his focus back onto the road. She went back to her phone going onto Reddit first where she created an account.

The question was where to post. In the end she picked six different public sections of the site. Then she started typing out the post that she was going to put up in each spot. The post she wrote was simple and to the point:

The US Military is trying to hide the truth about alien visitors. You’ve heard it all before, but I have actual proof that the Air Force and NASA have had an alien craft in their possession since the 1980’s. It never crashed on earth like we all believe, it was found floating in space. They experimented on it, experimented with the dead aliens they found inside. Even created human hybrids all in an attempt to use the technology. This is a link to my Mega Drive it has all the information from years of research. Get it out to the people. The military is trying to hid it all. They’re trying to take the freedom of the three surviving boys so they can experiment on them even more. The more people that know the better.

Alice wasn’t sure if it was the right message or not, but it was the best she could do in the current circumstances. The mega drive finished uploading the files. Alice scrolled through them all then selected two links besides the main one to post with the Reddit post. The first one was the video of the six boys at their birthday in 2010. The second link was the detailed information from Doctor Vissen about the Hybrid program itself. She hit post on the first of the six, then moved to the next forum doing the same.

The truck continued to bounce along route 80 as she posted the third one. When Cal asked she swiped back over to the tracker, “We’re pulling in a little closer, they’re getting off of I-80 though, going down a smaller road.”

Cal looking at the tracker for a second before going back to the road said, “They’re going to that small airfield I told you about. Like I figured they’ve probably got a military helicopter there waiting for them. Probably plan on taking the boys to a bigger base somewhere close by.” Alice went back to the Reddit App loading up another post before finally switching over to Twitter. She sent a smaller message there directing Twitter to the Reddit post with the hashtags: GovernmentCoverup, AliensareReal, NeverBeForseenFootage among others.

Then Alice went to the site that Cal had recommended where she posted the link in the discussion forum then also sent an email to Harmon Vincent the man that hosted the channel. Just as she sent the last link Cal turned down a road where in the distance you could see the small private airport. Alice saw the two military jeeps that had taken the boys first pointing them out to Cal who turned that way heading towards one of the hangers. There was a military helicopter close to where the two jeeps were. That was where Cal turned his truck that way gunning the gas pedal as he sped towards them.

Alice’s phone dinged with the sound of Branden’s phone being near by as it also dinged from people responding on Reddit already. When Cal stopped the truck it was because three men in military fatigues stepped in front of them with guns drawn. Behind the three men Alice could see two other men with guns directing the boys to get into the helicopter. In the distance there was a small blue single engine plane that had two men standing in front of it. A guard was on that side of the helicopter looking at those men as well though they hadn’t drawn their guns.

Alice looked over at Cal once then back at the three men with guns pointed at their jeep. She slipped out of her seat holding her cellphone in her hands as she started towards General Pearson. The military men all pointed their guns at her. For a moment she looked at them, then she stepped past them, one of them turned to follow her, but he didn’t open fire. No one wanted a messy murder on their hands with people clearly watching. There was another set of people that had joined the two men by the blue plane. All of them were watching even though they were too far away to see or hear any words being spoken.

General Pearson stood by the helicopter where the three boys had all been loaded inside and restrained. He directed for one of the guards to point a gun at the boys, resting it on Branden not the other two. As she stepped closer the General tossed something at her, “Smart move giving the boy a phone.” Alice caught it seeing Branden’s background briefly on display before she slipped it into her pocket. The background was that same surprise picture from the first day she gave him the phone. She looked horrible in the picture, but she wasn’t surprised Branden had used it as his background. That was just the kind of person that he was. To him she always looked good so even a surprise shot was probably both funny while also being nice to look. “It Doesn’t matter that you followed us here Agent Nills.”

Alice looking at the guard holding his gun at her said, “You’re not going to shoot me in public General.” He gestured for the guard dropped his gun, but the man didn’t stop standing close by watching her. “Just like you’re intent was never to kill the boys, but keep them safely locked away just to be sure you didn’t need them.”

“You’re pretty smart Agent Nills, really though we only need one of the boys alive. I think you’re friend isn’t worth the trouble honestly.”

Alice smiled feeling like she had the cards in this little game. General Pearson was unaware of what Branden had done before hiding his phone. He had no idea that Alice had released all of the files on the internet where everyone could see them. “You’re not going to kill anyone General. Actually what you’re going to do is let the boys go with me and Colonel Daleson so we can take them home to their families.”

General Pearson chuckled, “You hold no powers here Agent Nills. You aren’t even going to be an FBI agent after all of this is over. We hold the power, and we will do what needs to be done to protect our country. Do the right thing, let us take care of this. The people couldn’t handle half the things we know. We keep them safe that’s our job.”

When Alice went to remove her cellphone the guard put his gun up again, but General Pearson just waved his hand. The guard put the gun down again as she said, “You know General, cellphones have a lot of useful features. Other than just tracking apps. Did you know for example that I can literally upload anything in just a matter of minutes with how fast the internet is today? Transfer files from one device

to another over great distances just from the two devices being connected to each other?”

Pearson looked back over at where the three boys were in the helicopter. “What did you do…” he said as his eyes went back to hers.

Alice pulled up the Dark Channel website where the forum was then clicked on what she had uploaded. “You see,” She turned her phone to the General still holding it in her hands, “I took all that information that Doctor Vissen gave me and uploaded it to the internet. I gave it to multiple sources not just my boss or one of the boys mother this time. Its all over the web now General Pearson. Your secret is exposed to millions the world over” She scrolled back up to the top of the website where it showed that Harmon Vincent was doing a YouTube Live broadcast right now. She clicked on the link loading up the YouTube video immediately:

The host was an older man somewhere in his forties or fifties, graying hair, dark eyes. He wore a shirt that proclaimed: The Truth is Out There with a UFO on it. The shirt reminded her of all those years watching X-Files. The mans voice was soft sounding. He was in the middle of talking when she loaded up the live broadcast, “...Knowing that the truth has been hidden from us for so long. Seeing the proof there is no denying what lengths some of our government and scientists will go to in order to keep secrets for themselves. What we’ve been seeking for these past ten years is all finally lain bare here before us. I’m going to show you a video ladies and gentlemen. One of many that the United States government doesn’t want the world to see, because as you’ll see they experimented on children…”

Alice put her phone down, “You see General. I hold the cards because Branden is smarter than you. I think you’d better check your phone, or call your superiors. Those boys are going home with me. They’re not going to put in some secret government base for the next forty years so you can experiment on them. Or so you can use them for their abilities and brains as virtual slaves. Or just hold onto them for insurance once McKon’s project doesn’t work or worse explodes killing hundreds. They’re going to live out here with the rest of us, grow up, maybe start families.” Here her eyes lingered on Branden for a moment as he smiled at her. “They’re going to have real lives. You know I’m right.”

General Pearson's eyes went back to the three boys then he chuckled, "This is the real world Agent Nills." He started for the helicopter turning back as he started to climb onto it, "Let them know the truth, doesn't change a thing. I've got a job to do. Part of that job entails following orders. Half the people you released that stuff to won't ever believe its true. The other half are conspiracy nuts who think they already know the truth. When they see its not little green men or grays they're going to scoff and write it off as science fiction. The amount of things Hollywood can create now is quite mind boggling isn't it? That's what people are going to say." He gestured to the pilot as he took his seat across from the boys. "Sorry Agent. Nills you don't get the ending you want. We're the United States Government, we decide the ending."

Alice's eyes met Branden's again as the General gestured for the helicopter to start its take off procedure. The pilot didn't move towards the controls making General Pearson turn to him and say, "Get the bird into the sky Airman."

The pilot shook his head, "No Sir, I've been ordered to stay on the ground."

"By whom? I'm your superior officer. Now start this damn thing we've got a schedule to keep."

The copilot sitting in the other seat said, "We can't sir, General Ernheart told us to wait for his arrival."

Pearson's eyes went to her for a moment then he rested on the boys. For a second Alice thought he was going to pull his gun, instead he chuckled again. Then he said something under his voice before gesturing at the guards that had strapped the boys into their seats. When they started to undo the straps he turned to Alice, "You bleeding hearts are what's wrong with this country. Its why we're not number one anymore."

Branden rubbing one of his wrists while standing up said, "Maybe it shouldn't be about countries being number one general." Then he stepped down from the helicopter. Alice didn't hesitate this time, she didn't care what others would say or think. How it would all be viewed by anyone watching. Branden wasn't a kid anymore in her eyes, he was Branden. She felt tears just below the surface as she pulled

Branden back into her arms. He hugged her back just as tightly, his light hazel eyes meeting hers.

Alice leaned down then and pressed her lips to Branden's. She was beyond caring what others would think. Pearson and Cal both knew that Branden wasn't really a boy. The guards were the least of her concern. All that existed in the world was Branden in this moment. The feeling of his lips pressed to hers, his hands holding her shoulders while she rested hers on his back pulling him more into her embrace. She pulled back from the kiss looking into his eyes, feeling herself getting lost. "I love you." Branden flushed, but didn't respond other than to hug her again.

She held Branden in her arms for another moment. Looking past him her eyes rested on Eric and Scott. She opened her arms and the two boys only hesitated for a second before letting her pull them into the hug with Branden. All three of them hugged her then the hugged each other before stepping back. Alice found Branden's hand almost immediately as the other two boys stepped back trying to figure out what they were going to do next.

Cal when they pulled back said, "Come on boys we'll go wait by the truck I think I've got some playing cards if you want." Eric and Scott moved off with Daleson as Alice holding Branden's hand moved off to the other side.

As they walked away from the helicopter he said, "I knew sending you the files was the right thing to do."

Alice handed him his cellphone, "When we get done with all of this you're getting a proper background, I look absolutely horrible in that picture."

Branden smiled, "I think its perfect." She sighed, of course he did. A second after getting the phone back Branden unlocked it. "The Type-C Shuttle was supposed to take off right around now." He opened YouTube going to the live channels. The top two currently were Dark Channel and the AP News Feed. Branden clicked on that live stream of the launch of the shuttle. At the bottom of the news feed it said: Type-C Shuttle launch today. Did it really come from alien technology? The shuttle launched just as Branden put it on the feed. "Well, at least they knew how to use the fuel cells correctly."

Alice squeezed his shoulder, “You didn’t really want it to blow up did you? There are people on there.”

Branden said, “Of course I didn’t, but they got lucky. If they put those cells in wrong or used too many of them that ship would have blown up. Its a real risk, only someone who knows how to use them correctly should be using them.”

Alice looked up from Branden’s phone at the sound of a second Helicopter making its approach towards the small airstrip that they were currently on. Her eyes met his once then they started over that way meeting Colonel Daleson and the other two boys halfway. General Ernheart was a three star general judging by the stars on his uniform, compared to Pearson who was only a two star. She was surprised to see that he looked younger than Pearson. If she had to guess he was somewhere in his mid to late forties compared to Pearson who was probably nearly sixty now. Clearly he had risen through the ranks faster than the older man. His head was shaved, though you could tell that his hair would be a dark brown if he had any. His eyes were a light blue that spoke of kindness Alice noticed as he approached them a moment after the helicopter touched down.

Alice stood with the boys and Cal her hands resting on Branden’s shoulders while he stood in front of her. They waited just beyond where General Pearson stepped up to meet with the other General. Both men looked fully military, but Alice got the sense that they were totally different just from the way that Ernheart carried himself. Pearson saluted his superior as he said, “Sir, I think we should still retain the boys in a government facility.”

General Ernheart’s eyes went to Alice then the boys. Her hand resting on Branden’s shoulder squeezing it as the general said, “The time to hide things is in the past Pearson.” Pearson saluted him again as Ernheart passed the man coming to stand before her, Cal, and the boys. “Doctor Vissen speculates that the three of you were learning while you slept? Something about an Artificial Intelligence that kept going until the fuel cell that operated the computer system was removed. After speaking with the man I might not understand what it all means, but I have to believe he knows what he’s talking about.”

Branden looking up at the man nervously said, “We did, yes Sir. That doesn’t matter though, we shouldn’t have ever been put in those chambers. No one asked us what we wanted, they just did what they wanted. We just want to go home.”

The General gave a small nod then said, “You just told the world that you existed. You’re not going to find much peace out there. We can protect you.”

Scott said, “We don’t care, we want to go home. We should have the right to if we want to, we’re people too.”

Ernheart looked at the other two boys then back at Branden who stood just in front of them then he gave a small nod, “Very well you can go home. Just know that we can’t protect you, we’re not going to try if you’re out in the world. It’s your choice, we offer protection if you want to stay and live in a government facility.”

Branden stepping back to take Alice’s hand said, “No thank you, we can protect ourselves.” The general nodded once then started to turn away before Branden said, “General?” he turned back, “Did NASA use the existing fuel cells to make the Type-C Shuttle fly?”

The general’s eyes went to Branden’s then the other two boys again before saying, “Yes son I believe they did. Most of that shuttle was built from re-purposing existing materials on the alien craft. Doctor McKon spent years from what I’ve seen in the files trying to make his own fuel cells. They always exploded. In the end from what I’ve read in the reports he just stole the ones that were already on the alien craft. Then he integrated them into the shuttle his team built.”

Branden looked up at Alice, she nodded once squeezing his shoulder, “Those fuel cells will run out. We can help you build more of them. If that’s what you intend to do.”

Scott said, “We know how their technology works.”

General Ernheart nodded, “That’s why we wanted to keep you in a safe facility. Let you work on this problem for us.”

Eric said, “You wanted to make us prisoners sir. We’re citizens. I think even you know that you’re not supposed to do that.”

Ernheart again gave a nod, “You’re right son, but sometimes we have to do things-”

Alice cut him off, “Please, don’t say for the good of our country General. You’ll sound as bad as him.” She pointed over at Pearson who looked like he was ready to say something instead she continued before he could, “There’s other ways to have them help you. All three are going to need jobs after they get college educations. Why not offer them a job? Pay them to work for you instead of forcing them into it? Let them live with the rest of society, grow up, hell have families if they want some day.” Her hand rested on Branden’s shoulder then pulling him in closer to her.

Pearson grunted but Ernheart only sighed, “I’m afraid I can’t do that Agent Nills. Its not my purview to offer jobs. If my superiors or members of NASA want to offer jobs then they will, but if you’re denying our protection you can of course deny their job offers too. We’ll let you decide if you want to work for us or for yourself. You’re free to be who you want to be, for better or worse.” He gave one small smile then turned towards the helicopter. Before climbing back in and signaling for it to start he said, “Your agency is already getting all the information it needs. We expect you to return Scott to his mother, and Eric to his sister. They’re waiting Agent Nills, and I don’t imagine you want to make them wait too long.”

He gestured to Pearson who climbed onto the helicopter with him the two men talking very animatedly as it took off back into the sky. It was clear to Alice that whoever Ernheart was he had not been aware of Project Hybrid until recently. No doubt he knew a lot of things that regular people didn’t, but if he hadn’t been on the project he wouldn’t have been told about it. No doubt it all coming out into the light by her uploading those files had left him with very little choice. Pearson was probably still arguing for taking the boys into custody.

Alice kissed the top of Branden’s head as Cal said, “Come on boys lets get you home.” The other military men were already heading back for the jeeps to take back to whatever base they came from as the second helicopter took off as well.

Alice squeezed Branden's shoulder once before taking his hand to follow Cal back to the truck. "Lets go home Bran."

Branden said, "Uh Alice we don't have a home yet."

Alice sighed, "Smart-ass."

"String-bean." She chuckled as he did, her hand squeezing his as he said, "I love you."

Alice smiled looking at the other two boys talking with Cal excitedly about seeing their families. Later they'd cry about the lost parents, like Branden had, but for now just the prospect of going home filled both boys with excitement. Seeing what they had missed for thirteen years as well she imagined. Softly Alice replied back, "I love you too Bran, from now until forever." Looked like she was getting that happily ever after after all.

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The airport in Lincoln, Nebraska was smaller than the one in Los Angeles, but the destinations were still anywhere in the United States you needed to go. The drive out to the airport with the three boys all in the back had mostly been quiet. Branden, Scott, and Eric all were still recovering from the moments in the army jeeps followed by the moment on the helicopter. Alice knew that both Scott and Eric were still suffering from a sensory overload from their missing thirteen years. The world had changed, just how different cellphones were as they both looked on at the things Branden showed them was enough for them to understand this. Alice though had a feeling that Scott and Eric would adjust as well as Branden had.

During the drive back to the airport her director Conner Westand sent over all the documents to her regarding the three boys. The Air Force true to General Ernheart's

word had reinstated the boys as alive. That meant that their social security numbers were once more active as well. They could fly with Alice since she had gotten special clearance from the FBI. Eric's sister who thirteen years ago had been ten was flying out to LA to meet them when they landed. Ms. Alvers, Scott's mom was already with Alice's boss. After all this time at least these two boys got to go home. The only real solace that Alice could take from all of this was that the three that had passed on also had no living relatives.

Walking through the airport to security check in Branden said, "Hey Alice, what about your car and all our stuff in it?"

Alice shrugged, "Its a company car. They're already working on getting a tow truck to take it back to LA. Let them deal with it, we'll get our stuff out when it gets back home."

Branden's hand hadn't left hers the entire time that they walked through the airport. Scott and Eric walked just ahead of them with Alice directing them which ways to go. If she had it her way she'd never again let go of Branden's hand. The question was, what came next? The three boys had formed a lasting friendship so they would want to keep in contact with each other. They'd need to go back and finish school, get college educations. Though she doubted that any of them would fit in at a middle school anywhere in the country. Just from her past week of interacting with Branden she could feel that he was too bright for those grades, maybe even too advanced for most of high school.

At the security check in she talked with the officer for a moment, going over the documents that her office had sent. Then they were cleared to get into the main concourse. As they were walking to the terminal for the plane that would take them back to Los Angeles Eric said, "Hey Bran, Scott they're talking about us." He pointed at one of the televisions on the wall in a small cafe close to the terminal.

Alice along with the boys moved up to look at the television. It was a show on CNN an anchor was talking to General Ernheart. "So General we're just supposed to accept that Aliens are real. That we stole their technology for our own purposes? What about project Hybrid, what do we make of these government experiments on children?"

General Ernheart leaned back, “Well, Project Hybrid was an unsanctioned project during a time when we had a lot of black projects. Back when we had a less firm hand, some of our Generals did things that in today’s military would never get past the planning stages. These former men are no longer members of the Air Force since I have started uncovering this unsanctioned project. That’s why we let all of this leak out, because we’re trying to make things right Mrs. Lee. We’re trying to clean up the mess that other men in my position made. I hope the people will let us. ”

“Ah I see, and what do you plan to do with these three surviving boys now that they’ve been revealed?”

Ernheart just gave a small smile, “We’ve returned them to their families. They’re free to be whoever they want to be. Free to live whatever life they want to. They are after all Mrs. Lee citizens of the United States. I can’t fix what my predecessors did to them, but I can do my best to make sure that it never happens again.”

Alice studied the man as he continued to answer questions. It was of course a cover up of its own but at least the boys were going home, “Come on boys we’ve got a plane to catch.”

They all turned away from the monitor as Scott said, “What a bunch of baloney.”

Eric just nodded as Branden said, “You mean bullshit.”

Alice just sighed, “We really need to figure out your mouth.”

He looked up at her, “What’s wrong with my mouth?” He touched it which made Alice groan as he smiled. Eric and Scott both seemed confused until he said, “She thinks I’ve got a potty mouth.”

Eric looking from Alice to Branden confused said, “Cause you said Bullshit?”

Alice sighed again, “Boys I swear to god, if I could kill them all I would.”

A woman somewhere in her forties walking by chuckled, “Amen!” Which made Alice smile before directing the three of them towards the terminal to board on the plane. She could already tell that this was going to be a long flight back to Lose Angeles. It literally was like watching three brothers who hadn’t seen each other in awhile playing around together. Their size, the obvious way that they all looked like puberty hadn’t even touched them would make you think that they were little boys. While they were giggle as they talked about things you could also see the underlining maturity that comes with getting older. There was also a sense of nervousness from Eric and Scott because they were returning home.

On the plane Branden sat in-between Scott and Eric showing them things on his cellphone while Alice sat in the seat across the aisle for the three of them. Every now an then he would look over at her while the other two boys were watching something. Alice would smile, but gesture for him to go be with them. There would be time later for the two of them. The plane touched down in LA late in the evening, but as they stepped off time didn’t seem to matter at all anymore.

The moment Scott saw his mom, even though she looked a little older, he was running to her getting pulled into her arms as she wept. Alice held Branden’s hand as they watched the moment. Mary as she held him said, “Scotty, you’re really okay.” Alice didn’t listen in on the rest of the conversation wanting to give Mary and her son privacy. The woman held the boy tightly as he hugged her just as tightly back clearly crying too while telling his mom that he really was okay.

Not that far away a young woman with brown hair who was just barely over five feet stood examining Eric, shock on her face. Eric examined her back trying to come to grips of his own with the fact that his adopted sister was now a young woman with a family. She had grown up, and Eric still looked like the older brother she had known when she was ten. A man who was significantly taller stood behind her, holding onto a little girl who looked to be about three years old. Eric finally coming to grips with the fact that this was in fact his sister finally stepped towards her. In a matter of seconds the woman held her brother in her arms hugging him while talking with him softly.

Alice smiled as her eyes met her bosses. Conner stood between the two reunions, she directed Branden to walk with her towards him. When they approached he said, “Good job Agent Nills, Mr. Leston.”

Branden squeezed her hand as she said, “Thank you sir. If you don’t mind I’d like to take a week off find a place with more space to live. Maybe really take a vacation this time.”

Conner chuckled, his eyes going to Branden for a second then he said, “Absolutely I can swing that.”

Branden said, “Uh Sir? What happens next to Eric, Scott and I? I mean our ages, what we’re allowed to do?”

Conner nodded, his eyes examining their entwined fingers briefly before meeting Branden’s eyes, “I don’t know Mr. Leston. Legally all three of you are twenty-six. Your birth certificates show your year of birth as 1997. We could maybe change that, but it wouldn’t be easy.” Again his eyes rested on her then back to Branden, “I have a feeling that you wouldn’t want us to make some precedence that you’re not an adult either.”

Branden agreed, “I want to be twenty-six even if I don’t feel like I am. I know I’m not really an adult, but I’m also not a kid. Its kind of like I’m somewhere in the middle at the moment.”

Conner chuckled again, “Ah welcome to adulthood I think that’s how most of us feel till we reach our forties or so. Go out there, make some mistakes, get dirty.” He paused for a moment his eyes resting on their hands, “Have a family if you want. You’re both adults I can’t tell you what you can or can’t do.” Then he put a hand on her shoulder, “One week from Monday Agent Nills, I expect you back on the job then.”

He squeezed her shoulder once then as she said, “Absolutely sir. I know it doesn’t stop just because aliens really do exist.”

Conner smiled, “Absolutely not. There’s still thousands of kids out there that need our help. Have a good vacation.”

He walked over to where Eric was talking with his sister, perhaps to talk with them for a moment about what was going to happen next. Mary walked up with Scott still holding onto her tightly. She wiped one of her eyes as she moved to hug Alice then as tightly as she could, “T-thank you Alice for bringing him home to me.”

Alice hugged her back, “You’re welcome Mary. I just wish none of this had ever happened to us.”

Mary sniffed a few times while using a tissue to wipe her eyes. Holding Scott’s hand she said, “Somehow we’ll all figure it out. You’re welcome to visit anytime. I know that Scott would love to hang out with Branden.” Scott let go of her hand then as he walked with Branden over to where Eric was. Pretty soon the two of them were meeting Eric’s sister, her husband, and daughter. “He’s not the same boy… he’s different.”

Alice smiled, “He’s your son Mary, but you’re right he’s grown up. He doesn’t look like it, but he’s not a little boy anymore. None of them really are. They’ll have to figure out where they belong in the world over the next few years. Figure out how to be who they are, hopefully the world can accept them and realize that they’re not boys, but young men somehow.”

Mary softly said, “He’ll always be my boy Alice, I just hope that when he gets out there he finds a woman or man who can love him for how unique he is. That he can find what you and Branden have.” She smiled once at Alice. “He’s your special someone like my Henry was for me.”

Alice’s eyes rested on Branden. He laughed at something that Eric’s niece said just as Eric and Scott both laughed too. It really was like watching three brothers who hadn’t seen each other for awhile get back together. Somehow Branden felt her watching him, his eyes meeting hers across the short distance. The bright hazel looked more green today, but the love and affection for her was as strong as ever.

He smiled said something to Scott and Eric, hugging both of them once then walked over to where she was. She hugged Mary one more time, “Go get to know your son again Mary. I think you’ll find that he’s not the stranger you think he might be.” Then her hand found Branden’s as she said, “Ready to go home?”

Branden when they started to walk from the terminal said, “Remember, we don’t have a home yet.”

Alice sighed, “You know what I mean nerd.” He really was impossible sometimes!

His fingers squeezed hers, “We should get a place with at least four bedrooms.”

“Four?” Branden gave a simple nod, “Why four?”

He looked up at her, those hazel eyes filled with desire but also so much more, “Didn’t you hear your boss? He said we should make a family.”

Alice groaned, “Some day Branden, he said some day. Not right away!”

Branden gave a small smirk, “Too late.”

Alice stopped walking as he said that. When he got the message by his hand sticking out behind him he turned to look at her. That was when Alice said, “What do you mean too late?”

Branden shrugged, “You’re already pregnant.”

Alice chuckled then started walking again, “You can’t tell this soon after a first time Bran, its only been a day since we first made love.”

“We’ll see. If I’m right we’re getting a PlayStation 5 for my downstairs game room.”

Alice squeezed his hand, “If you’re right you’re changing the first dirty diaper. I was planning on waiting at least another three years before starting a family.”

Branden said, “Probably shouldn’t have slept with a thirteen-year-old then.”

“I thought you were twenty-six just like me.”

“Twenty-six, thirteen, doesn’t matter you’re still knocked up pervert.”

“Nerd!” Branden just squeezed her hand tighter before they started walking through the terminal again. He really was impossible sometimes, but in all the right ways. She could see her life with him every step of the way. The only question that remained was finding a place to live that would also be a good place to raise a family. Maybe Branden was right, maybe she already was pregnant. That didn’t change much, they still needed to figure it all out together.

As they stepped out into the LA sunlight Branden said, “Hey Alice, you think we can still catch that movie?”

Alice chuckled, “We’ll have to see. First I need a shower and some sleep.”

She pulled up the app to get them an Uber as Branden said, “I think we should take a shower together, it saves on water.”

Alice leaned down to kiss the top of his head then softly whispered, “That sounds like a wonderful idea sweetie.”

“Then after we can make sure that I’m right and you really are pregnant.”

Alice felt her heart beat faster as Branden shifted once where he stood. She smiled, “I think that could be arranged Mr. Leston…” He smiled back as the car pulled up for them to get in. It turned out that their adventure was only just beginning. Getting Branden back, finding out the mystery of where he went was just the start of something far more amazing. A journey that Alice was ready to take now that she had the person back she wanted to take it with… A new adventure that they’d take together.

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Chapter Seventeen

- Six Weeks later -

Agent Alice Nills sat at her desk trying to concentrate on the computer screen in front of her. She could still taste her lunch from about twenty-minutes ago in the burp that had just come up before taking a long drink of water. Alice scrunched her eyes rubbing at the middle of her nose up between them feeling certain that she had a sinus heading building at her temples. She willed herself to examine the report before her, feeling her stomach roll once though she wasn’t sure if it was bad food, or the report before her on the computer. Maybe eating lunch before reading the reports from the corner and hospital had been a mistake.

Two girls, both under the age of five found dead from what appeared to be a simple case of neglect from their parents. Another six kids both boy sand girls between the ages of six and twelve with multiple signs of malnutrition. Along with scars from places where they had been abused by sharp objects, belts, or hot pokers. Alice turned away from the screen not wanting to look at the report anymore. She walked over to the water dispenser grabbing one of the paper cups that she filled with water taking a deep sip.

Agent Davis who was at the desk closest to hers looked up from where he was working on his own reports. “Pretty gruesome shit huh?” Alice finishing the cup filled it again as he continued, “Worst I’ve seen I think in a long time.” Agent Davis was in his mid-thirties, with dark brown hair and dark eyes. Alice knew that he was recently divorced and looking to date. In the past three weeks since they had started working on this case as part of the same task force he had laid hints of liking her down more

than a few times. He seemed like a decent enough guy, but even though she didn't have a ring on her finger Alice was already taken.

"How do some parents do things like that to their own children?" She gave a small shudder throwing the paper cup into the recycle trash can next to the water dispenser. "I can't ever say I'll really understand kidnappers or people that sale children and exploit them. It's disgusting, but this." She gestured at his computer where Davis was working on the parents files. "I don't get this at all, they're the kids parents. Worse than that they just kept acting normal about the whole thing."

Agent Davis leaned back in his chair, "Its the kind of shit that keeps you up at night." He looked back at the file, "You know according to the file she's twelve weeks pregnant with their thirteenth kid."

Alice shook her head as she said, "Well at least that one won't go through the shit the first twelve did." She started back for her desk feeling a little better, but still nausea when she sat back down at her desk. Was it just the files that were disturbing her? The pictures were horrible, you could see most of the kids ribs, the bruises were horrendous especially on the oldest son who had been treated the worst as far as she could tell. It was just pictures though, during training she had seen even worse things.

It had been even worse two weeks ago when they had pulled the kids out of the house. She hadn't been able to function for hours after that, the only thing that had comforted her was going home and being held by Branden while she held him too. Sometimes she wanted to just leave this job behind, but she couldn't not when there was any chance that she could do something about how horrible some adults were. It was true that Alice had started this job to find answers to where her best friend had disappeared to when she was thirteen. That though wasn't what kept her on the job, seeing the kids, rescuing them from the horrors that they were subjected to then hopefully giving them a better life was why she kept doing the job now.

If the pictures weren't giving her stomach the twists and turns it was having then there was only one or two options left to her. She looked at the half finished steak and cheese sandwich on the corner of her desk. It was her favorite from Merv's Deli down on the corner just a few blocks away from their office building. Merv's had

been open for forty years, his son now ran the place. Alice doubted that they would serve bad food consciously though she supposed it was possible.

She sighed running a hand through her sandy brown hair before going back to work on the file before her. There were signs that the oldest daughter who was sixteen had gotten pregnant at least twice, but lost the babies. She marked that down in the reports, the forensic team was still working on the house and the back yard. They had found two graves so far one of them had been of a dead newborn that appeared to have died a week or two after birth roughly six years ago. Odds were as they looked through the backyard they would find more such bodies. The father did not appear to have ever sexually abused the daughters or sons, but that didn't matter. The abuse that he and his wife had inflicted on the children was far worse than any she had ever seen.

Alice closed down the file after submitting her report on the details from the doctors. They had learned about the house totally by accident when a land contractor had gone out there seeking to buy some of the family land to build a shopping center. He had already gotten an agreement from two other houses that sat on either side of theirs. Alice being back from what was pretty much a two week vacation had been one of the three agents assigned the case when it became too much for the local police to handle.

The amount of time pregnancy and babies were mentioned in the reports sent her mind down the other possible path. If it wasn't the food from Merv's, and it wasn't the reports that she had been reading for the past hour that left just one more possible option. Alice chuckled dryly as she said under her breath, "He's a dead boy if that's what this is." Her mind went to the whirlwind that had been the last six weeks when she wasn't at work.

First the need for a space bigger than a one bedroom apartment had been addressed with them getting a four bedroom two story home. The house sat in a nice modern subdivision just about twenty minutes from her office. Then had come the testing that needed to be done to determine where to put Branden in regards to schooling. He was currently enrolled in an online professor led course to get him through four years of high school along with Eric and Scott. It was a unique program that the government in an effort to make up how they were treated had set up for them.

Branden shortly after he had started taking the classes told her that it was clear the government was trying to get them to forgive and forget. That basically they were going to need the boys especially since all three of them knew things about the Artifact that they had been asleep on for roughly thirteen years. According to Branden there was some kind of highly adaptable AI system on the Artifact that had taught them how to use its systems. He said that Eric could probably even write out the schematics for a ship that was just like the alien craft down to how it floated without propulsion.

She told Branden, Eric, and Scott all to hold out till the government came with big pay days. They were owed that much for how they had been treated. During these past six weeks Alice and Branden had grown even closer together. Not a night went by when they didn't join together in some way to be intimate with one another. She loved the feeling of his smaller body pressed to hers, holding him in her arms after they finished as Branden snuggled on top of her. Every time it was as good as the first one.

They had spent most of that first week on vacation in bed together. When not making love, unable to keep their hands off of each other they had been hunting for the house. Then for the past few weeks they had worked together to get the house furnished, including Bran's pride and joy, the media room that wast just off of the living room. After the house was fully furnished they had made love in almost every room in the house as a way of breaking it in.

Alice smiled at the memories, it often felt like she was making up for the last thirteen years of not having him in her life. Things had felt incomplete without Branden, and now the whole world was a brighter more amazing place again. The only person she worried about now was her mom. She had tired a few times over the past few week to explain to her mom about Branden's 'condition' but she wasn't sure if she really got it. At first her mom had been under the impression that he was still a boy of thirteen, but she kind of understood now.

Branden wasn't thirteen, but then again he wasn't really twenty-six either. The test results from Doctor Norris a few days after the incident in Lincoln Nebraska had told the tale clearly. Exactly what Doctor Vissen had theorized in his notes was the truth. By all accounts Branden, Eric, and Scott had all gone through puberty starting at the age of ten and ending before their twelfth birthday. Branden would never take on more adult features, never get taller than his four feet and six inches. He would

always resemble a ten or eleven-year-old boy until he started to get wrinkles, if that even happened.

He could literally walk into any sixth grade class, and you wouldn't be able to tell the difference between Branden and a real boy of twelve. It was a real problem that they didn't have a solution to. True there were only three of them and they were all celebrities of a sort now that the truth was out there, but not everyone knew. If they went to a public place like a restaurant or stores people always thought he was her little brother or son. The first few times Alice had found it cute, and Branden annoying. Now they had just kind of accepted it.

Director Conner Westand stepped off of the elevator onto their third floor of the old FBI offices looking just a little irked as he did so. Conner was a good man as far as Alice was concerned probably one of the best. He hadn't questioned her during the entire incident with Branden, even helped keep it a secret. He was a taller man, well over six feet with graying hair at the temples and a fit figure showing how he kept in shape even when he worked sixty hours a week sometimes. He wore a simple gray suit with a red tie today.

When he saw that she was still at her desk Conner made a turn that way. The look on his face was one that didn't comfort Alice. She could tell that he was coming directly for her, not because he wanted to, but because he had to. She wondered if he had hoped she was already gone for the day so he could deal with it on Monday. Well Alice had stayed late because Branden was taking his first series of finals today so he could move onto his high school courses that he planned to finish before the end of the current school year. The last thing he needed was her to come home and disturb him until he was done around six.

"Nills," Conner said with a sigh as he arrived at her desk, "We need to talk. My office." He gestured to his office at the end of the room.

Alice checked her work to make sure that it was saved before standing up to follow him out of the room. Davis looked at her once from his desk before going back to his own reports. Conner's office was tastefully done, nothing too extravagant inside of it. He had a desk, three chairs, a table in one corner with pictures of his wife and kids on it. A book shelf that had numerous books of law and criminal studies. He gestured for her to take a seat as he walked around to stand at the small window that looked

out of his office. Alice said, “I should have the Greenson’s Case files ready by Monday.”

Conner twisted the blinds once closing them as he said, “I’ll make sure that Davis hands them all in.”

Alice felt a bit of surprise as she said, “This isn’t about the Greenson case?”

Conner grunted then took a seat at his desk. The look on his face was of someone who didn’t want to do something, but had been told he needed to. “The FBI in its infinite wisdom had ruled on your recent acts.”

“The ones that you helped me cover up?”

Conner nodded, “Yes, when everything came out publicly I had to hand over what I knew since it was one of our agents. You understand?” Alice felt her palms go dry a little, “Our bosses feel that we handled the incident wrongly. Going public brings a stain on the government as a whole. People already don’t trust us. Its all bullshit of course, but its what they’re saying because they don’t want an agent who goes around looking into things that they have no right to look into.”

Alice leaned back in her chair slightly, “I don’t get it. I thought our job was to protect our citizens from harm?”

Conner sighed, “Of course it is, but that’s not what you were doing in their view. Or what I was doing by not bringing it to my superior immediately.”

“So they’re going to do what? Fire me?”

Conner shook his head briefly, “No, they’re suspending you without pay indefinitely until they make a determination on rather or not you violated government projects by revealing them to the public.”

Alice felt that slight nausea in her stomach again as she said, “And what am I supposed to do in that time? Go work at Seven-Eleven?”

Conner chuckled, “I guess if you want to you can, or you can live off of the settlement.”

“What settlement?”

Conner rested the folder that he had carried with him into the office on the desk, “The United States is paying reparations to the three surviving families in the amount of thirty million split between the three of you.”

Alice took the folder that he put on the desk opening it. She quickly scanned over it then said, “This here says that the boys will be allowed to only reveal their knowledge of how the alien technology works to the US government, specifically NASA.”

Conner nodded, “It also states that none of them will try to sue the government for more money or claim that they were ever harmed by the government in any way. Alvers and Stucky have already signed. Its up to Branden if he wants to, but I would if I was you and him. As for what you can do, if you want to keep working go into the private sector. A lot of retired FBI agents do that.”

Alice studied the paperwork, it was definitely all there spelled out in black and white. She closed the folder looking up at Conner, “What about you?”

A soft smile hit his lips, “I’m retiring. They’re calling it early retirement I was due to anyway in another five years. In reality they’re just trying to please the Air Force who wants to make sure anyone involved in revealing their dirty laundry doesn’t have a government job anymore. Technically the FBI isn’t firing you Nills, they’re just suspending you without pay so you can’t take another government job. At the same time if you sign that paper you and Branden will be taken care of. Ten million dollars

is nothing to scoff at, and he was already going to work for the government anyway wasn't he?"

Alice gave a simple nod, they had already talked about that. Branden, Scott, and Eric all agreed that they didn't want the government to kill more people with their stupid mistakes. That meant that they had to work with them to make sure that the technology was rebuilt correctly. Borrowing wasn't good enough. The power cells that ran the alien craft were finite, eventually they would run out. Branden could build more, just like Scott could build the systems that were powered by them, and Eric could use those systems to navigate the stars.

Alice rested a hand on the folder, "I'll bring it to Branden tonight. Who do I give it to if we sign?"

Conner with a soft sad smile said, "I'll come by the house tomorrow to pick it up if you do agree to sign it. They want me to take your badge and gun today. I am sorry Alice. I've been fighting them on this one for the last four weeks since that Air Force general came to talk with them about the whole situation."

Alice stood up with him, "Ernheart?" Conner gave a small nod, "I kind of figured that he wasn't done with them. He claimed that they were free, but they're really not."

Conner touched her shoulder once, "None of us is really free Alice. We've all got someone to answer to. Be grateful that they're giving you all some measure of choice. You don't have to sign the paper, you can try to fight all of it if you want to." He held out his hand for her badge as she pulled it off of her skirt belt, "But ask yourself if you really want to. If its worth it. Branden is more than likely going to work for them anyway. This way you get the ability to have what you want without anyone bothering you. That form gives you and Branden some measure of both control of your destiny and a measure of protection as well."

Alice said, "I imagine it does, but Sir I like what I do."

He nodded, “Then keep doing it. Become a private investigator, or a consultant. I know someone, another former agent who could help you if that’s where you want to go. There are a lot of other ways you can help with missing children.”

Alice smiled, “That’s true.”

“Your gun?”

“At my desk, thank you Conner for protecting Branden and I when you didn’t have to.”

Conner shook his head holding his hand out as he said, “Don’t thank me for doing my job Alice. I will never for a moment doubt that we did the right thing. You shouldn’t either. If you and Branden do agree to sign that form, take some time off. You are both young, I remember what its like to be young and in love.” Alice smiled once more shaking his hand while thanking him before walking from the office. At her desk she gathered the few personal effects she had, Alice wasn’t one of those people that liked to have a whole lot of things on her office desk or even in it.

In the elevator she leaned against the wall letting out a long sigh before hitting the side of it once with her fist. It was a bunch of bullshit, but it wasn’t like she was without options on other jobs. Down in the lobby she smiled at Frank one of the security guards as she walked out carrying her box of things. At her car she tossed it into the back leaning against it. She sighed once more then slipped inside starting the engine.

On her drive home Alice pulled off at the Walgreens close to the house. Going inside she walked down the aisle coming to the one with birth control and other items. She grabbed two home pregnancy tests figuring that this was the more obvious reason why her lunch hadn’t been agreeing with her the past few days. Then she walked over to the cold section grabbing a cherry coke, an iced tea, and two pints of different Ben and Jerry flavors. The lady at the check out counter ringing it all up said, “Rough day?”

Alice chuckled, “All in all not horrible.” Then she stepped out with the bag. When she stepped into the house it was quiet other than some sounds coming from the media room at the back beyond the living room. The front door led straight into the living room to the right of it, and the den and dinning room to the left with the kitchen behind them. The media room sat behind the living room with a set of glass doors separating the two of them. Both the media room and kitchen had doors that led to the backyard.

Alice closed the front door a little loudly walking past the den and dinning rooms into the kitchen. It was pretty spacious, with a center island, a large breakfast table in front of a set of windows that looked out onto the backyard. This house would be a good place to raise kids, that was what had attracted her and Branden to the house. Alice pulled out the pints of ice cream to put in the freezer as she was closing the door Branden stepped into the kitchen. Her breath slightly caught in her throat at seeing him. Honestly Alice hoped she never tired of the little thrill of excitement she got upon seeing Bran. He wore a tee-shirt that said: Eat. Sleep. Game. Repeat. In dark red letters and a controller in the center of it. Along with a pair of pajama pants that were various shapes of game controllers.

His hazel eyes glinted with excitement when he saw her. There was something in them beyond just the excitement though. His gaming headset was around his shoulders at the base of his neck. She still thought his dark brown hair needed a cut as it was getting a little too long. Branden might have been more mature than most boys of thirteen, since he wasn’t really thirteen, but somewhere not quite adult yet either. That didn’t change the fact that he hated hair cuts. Alice upon seeing him tossed Branden the cherry coke. He caught it unscrewing the cap as he said, “How was work?”

Alice slipped over the folder that she had carried in, “Take a look at this and tell me what you think about it.” Branden jumped up onto one of the bar stools to sit while opening the folder. Sometimes Alice honestly forgot that he wasn’t five feet tall, or even near it. To her after six weeks of living with him this had become normal. She knew that other men were taller, broader, more mature looking. To her though Branden was perfect even if he was nearly a foot shorter than her and wouldn’t ever get taller. If he had looked like a small person no one would have even questioned them being together. The fact that he looked like a boy of ten or eleven was the problem, but not in Alice’s eyes anymore.

Branden flipped through the pages sipping on his soda bottle while she drank from the bottle of green tea. It was one of the few things that seemed to settle her stomach when it was acting like this. When he finished the last page he said, “Ten million dollars? Did Eric and Scott already sign?” Alice gave a simple nod. “I would basically be a NASA consultant once I get my college degree. It even says I can negotiate my own contract which would lead to even more money. What’s the catch?”

Alice smiled, Branden might not be an adult fully, but he also wasn’t a dummy. “The first catch is that I’m being forced into mandatory indefinite suspension. The second is that we can’t talk with anyone in the general public about anything that happened in the past. Or probably anything you do in the future for NASA until they make it public knowledge. Lastly, you’ve got to work for the very assholes that kept you in suspended animation for thirteen years.”

Branden looked down at the papers, “If I don’t sign they’ll just pull us into the supreme court and get a gag order. Throw us in jail if we don’t keep quiet. If I do sign we’re free.”

Alice leaned over to squeeze his hand, “This is up to you sweetie. Whatever you want to do.”

Branden’s eyes rested on hers for a moment then he said, “What would you do?”

Alice smiled, “Sign the piece of shit and find another way to make them pay for what they did.”

Branden’s smile mirrored her own, “I was thinking the same thing.” Alice opened one of the drawers on the center island handing him a pen from it. He signed the last page before handing it over to her. Alice signed next to his name before closing the folder. Branden sipped his soda once then said, “So what else is in the bag?”

Alice picked up the discarded bag, “Well I think we should find out if you’re changing a dirty diaper in about thirty weeks.” She pulled out the two home pregnancy tests holding them out to him.

Branden took one of them reading it his eyes meeting hers, “I told you that you were!”

Alice just sighed going around to turn his face up to hers. “Yeah well if I am you’re changing the first diaper mister.” Branden smiled leaning over to kiss her lips then. Alice let the kiss linger long enough that she felt his tongue touch her lips. When she opened them it was to draw his tongue closer to hers tangling with it as she felt one of his hands reach out to grab at her breast through her blouse. Alice pulled back from the kiss, “Should we see if you’re going to be a daddy?”

Branden’s cheeks flushed, “I-if you are um are we going to stop….”

Alice interrupted him by resting a hand on his thigh rubbing it over the soft cotton of his pajama pants until her fingers rubbed over his boner. “We’re not going to stop Bran. I love feeling this little guy inside of me.”

Branden smiled, “Well he likes being inside of you.”

Alice chuckled, “Come on lets go see if we are parents or not.” When Branden jumped off of the stool to follow her Alice caught one quick glance at what was clearly the tent that had formed in his pajama pants. “Did you even get dressed today or shower?”

Branden carrying his soda said, “Yeah I showered, but why should I get dressed? You said we were staying home for the weekend. I thought I’d get an early jump on pajama weekend.”

Alice chuckled pulling him closer to her. “You’re such a nerd!”

“You’re a string bean!”

“If I’m pregnant I won’t be for long, I’ll be a swollen bean.”

Branden softly said, “Yeah…”

Alice turned to look at him, seeing that his cheeks were flushed, “What are you thinking about over there?”

Branden tried to look innocent, “Nothing.”

Alice sighed, “I’m going to be fat!”

Branden’s smile widened, “No you’re going to be pregnant. With my baby..” She saw the tent in his pajama pants twitch and Alice knew it then. Branden wanted to see her pregnant.

“Pervert.”

Branden of course disagreed, “I’m not the one getting knocked up by thirteen-year-old boys!”

Alice pinched his nose, “If you don’t shut up Branden Alexander Leston you might not get laid tonight or all weekend.”

Branden smiled, “Like you could say no…” Alice groaned he was literally impossible. He grabbed her hand then pulling her towards the bathroom. Alice just sighed walking with him inside. He wasn't wrong, she wanted him again right now. Seeing that little tent in his pajama pants, knowing that he was turned on by how she looked, but also the idea that she might be having his baby was enough to turn Alice on too. She pulled out one of the tests opening the box checking the instructions. This was it, time to find out if she was carrying her best friends baby.

Alice reached under the skirt she wore to pull her panties down before sitting on the toilet. Branden stood to the side by the sink trying his best not to look at Alice when the sound of her going pee started. When she finished Alice sat the test down on the counter saying, “It says that it takes two minutes for the results.”

Branden’s eyes went to the test as Alice washed her hands before resting one on Branden’s shoulder softly squeezing it as he said, “I hope its yes. I don’t think a month ago I would have wanted it to be yes really, but now I do.”

Alice kissed the top of his head, “You’re sure that you’re ready for this?”

Branden turned so that he was looking up at her instead of down at the counter. His hazel eyes met hers, “Yeah I’m sure. I think this could be more important than the other stuff that I’m going to be doing in a few years.”

Alice chuckled, “More important than shaping the future of humanity?”

Branden shrugged, “Eventually we die, but our kids live on beyond us. So the things I do will make them able to do things that I can’t even imagine yet. That’s why our parents had us too. I do worry though that it’s all happening too fast.”

“Us having a family?”

Branden shook his head, “No, the other stuff, how quickly we’re advancing out into space before we’re ready for it as a society.”

Alice smiled this was a reminder of just how smart Branden was. “Well think about it this way, maybe this was how it was supposed to happen. Those aliens could have blown their ship up when they realized that they were somewhere they shouldn’t be. Maybe all of this happened for a reason. Just like my parents moving into that house when I was five, and I met the most amazing boy ever.” She touched his cheek then reached behind him with her other hand grabbing the pregnancy test, “Who ended up knocking me up before I turned twenty-seven.”

Branden took the test taking a look at it as he said, “Oh wow…” his eyes met hers a smirk on his lips, “You really are going to get fat.”

Alice groaned, “You do realize that I have you trapped between me and this counter right?”

Branden’s smirk got wider, “Who says I don’t want to be trapped…”

Alice felt it then against her left thigh the clear sign of Branden’s erection. She stroked his cheek while she pressed him more to the counter, “I swear you like being pinned by me far too much.”

Branden’s smile got even wider, “And you’re a pervert sleeping with a little boy that everyone thinks is your son.”

Alice said, “You’re going to be a dead little boy in about ten minutes…”

Branden squirmed slipping out from the side, “You gotta catch me first!” He giggled then took off out of the bathroom.

“When I catch you you’re dead Branden Alexander!” She took off after him out into the living room. Branden relaxed on the arm rest of the couch looking at her when she stepped out. The way he leaned back against it she could make out the clear sign of the tent that his erection was making in the boys pajama pants. Right now she didn’t care at all that he hadn’t bothered to get dressed all day long.

“So since I won our bet... you gotta get me that PS5 now!”

Alice chuckled, “Why would I have to get you a PS5 you’re going to be dead in a few minutes for calling me both fat and a pervert.”

Branden's cheeks heated, his eyes going to her stomach for just a moment. Alice knew what he was thinking clearly. She lunged for him though he saw it and moved to run around the couch. Alice gave chase, running around the couch, through the kitchen, then back into the living room. She circled around the other way this time, just as Branden tried to jump over the couch to get away from her. Alice grabbed him by the back of his shirt pulling the boy down off of the couch.

He fell back into her then she pushed him down onto the couch in the living room until she was on top straddling his smaller body her hand on his arms holding them at the wrist up above his head. Her other hand went right for his stomach where she tickled him, "You think you can get away from me?" Branden pressed up trying to fight her grip in his wrists while he giggled from her tickles. He managed to get one of his arms free. Before Alice saw it he managed to tickle her side making Alice grab that hand with her other one holding it above his head too.

She felt Branden move underneath her while she still straddled him. The look in his eyes was a blend of merriment and desire. When he pressed up to her with how Alice was sitting she could feel his wonderfully stiff pole against he side of one of her legs. "You're gonna get a fat tummy Alice."

Alice leaned in closer until his smaller face was even with hers, "I swear you like this far too much Branden…"

"Like what?" He squirmed again trying to press his erection this time to her thigh clearly.

"Me straddling you, pinning you to this couch…"

Branden smiled, "Yeah, well I'd like it even more if you took my pants off…" His face flushed deeply red as he said this clearly indicating how badly he wanted inside of her again.

Alice groaned with a chuckle, "Why do I love such a perverted and sexually crazed little man?"

Branden matter-of-factually said, “Because you do. And I love you too even if you want to have sex with a thirteen-year-old.”

“You’re no more thirteen than I am.” Branden just shrugged then Alice leaned down to kiss his lips, “Were you eating chocolate earlier?” Branden didn’t respond, he just leaned up to press his lips to hers again. This time Alice let her passionate desire to have Branden again take over. Their tongues tangled as she let go of his wrists sliding her hands down his arms. She broke their kiss a moment later to sit up while she pulled his tee-shirt off. Branden’s hands were on her blouse then undoing the buttons before pulling it back off of her shoulder with the practice of a boy who had been doing this for nearly every day for the past six weeks now.

He found the clasp of her bra as Alice leaned over to kiss his lips again. Their tongues played as Alice felt him pulling her bra off. She broke their kiss just long enough for Branden to get it off fully before her lips were on his again. Branden’s hands were on her breasts almost instantly, squeezing on them. Then they were sliding down to her waist as she realized that he was going for her skirt. When his hands rested on her waist Alice said, “The zipper is on the side…” Branden didn’t need another word so again her mouth met his.

She heard the zipper, felt the skirt become looser around her waist as Branden tugged at it while his tongue pressed up into her mouth. Alice lifted off of Branden just enough so that he could pull the skirt down before she used her her own foot to get it down the rest of the way. She broke their kiss to run her hands down over his chest and stomach. Coming to his pajama pants she ran a finger along the length of his nearly four inches feeling it twitch under her finger when she reached the head. Then Alice pulled his pajama pants down revealing the boys stiff pole in all of its wonderful glory.

Alice hungered as she always did to feel him inside of her again. She moved to once more straddle Branden taking hold of his erection in her fingers she guided it between her legs. The feeling of Branden sinking inside of her warmth sent a wave of pleasure up through Alice’s body. This was the boy that belonged inside of her. His first thrust made her groan as she felt his hands go to her breasts squeezing the small mounds roughly.

Alice was pretty sure she liked all their postilions, but this was her favorite with her on top of Branden feeling each thrust of his nearly four inches as it pushed up into her pussy. She leaned over Branden, her lips meeting his. Breathlessly she said, “You’re going to be a daddy in nine months…”

Branden groaned pressing up inside of her, “I can’t wait Alice…” he started moving faster as Alice began responding back to him. The boys small hands went to her bottom holding tightly onto it as he said, “You’re going to look so sexy pregnant with our baby…”

Alice didn’t argue with him, she wanted to feel Branden’s kid growing inside of her. To feel him pushing into her during the next thirty or so weeks while their baby grew. When he squeezed her bottom she felt his stiff pole surge inside of her as she said, “Give it to me Bran, cum inside of me.” He did then, the familiar feeling of his first load spurting into her depths brought Alice over the edge. She continued to ride him feeling his smaller body pressed up to her own as the boys seed kept unloading inside of her with each thrust.

She collapsed on top of Branden feeling exhausted from her orgasm. She could feel his breath on her neck, feel his hands sliding along her sides. She could even feel his boner pressing to her pubic region as it had slipped out of her pussy. Branden though wasn’t done, he rarely was after one time. Which was nice for Alice, she loved feeling him inside of her. When he moved a hand down between them she felt him positing his erect boyhood right at her pussy again. When the head penetrated her Alice gasped then pulled Branden with her.

They fell onto the rug at the base of the couch that covered the hardwood flooring between the it and the coffee table. This time Branden was on top of her, driving that little stick back deep within her depths. Alice ran her hands down his back, loving the feeling of his smaller body pressed to her own. Anyone who saw them would think that some adult woman was taking advantage of a preteen boys sexual awakening. Instead it was a boy who was not as he appeared and a woman who loved that boy more than anyone else ever.

She met him as he started moving within her faster. The look in his eyes was one of desperate need as his pubic region pressed to her own with each full thrust of his boyhood diving back into her pussy. Alice could feel that building moment again

already as Branden said her name filled with his love and lust both, “Alice!” He pushed in fully with one final thrust once more exploding inside of her. Honestly there was no doubt in Alice’s mind as to why she was already pregnant. Since rescuing him they hadn’t gone a single day without making love.

Finished Branden fell on top of her the two of them a messy pile of limbs and connected bodies all covered in a thin sheen of sweat. She ran a hand through his hair as she felt his warm breath on her chest. “When my stomach’s the size of a basketball we won’t be able to do it like that.”

Branden turned so that his eyes met hers while he rested his chin on her chest, “We’ll still be able to have sex though right?”

Alice pinched his side making him jump which also made his erection press back fully into her tunnel in a delightful way. “Is that all you think about?”

Branden smiled, “No, but I like making love to you Alice, it feels incredible.”

Alice just stroked his back form the top down to his pert little bottom. When she squeezed his bottom again all nearly four inches slipped fully back into her pussy. “It does doesn’t it?” Branden nodded, “How about one more time sweetie, then dinner?”

Branden moved inside of her again, “Then after dinner we can snuggle in our bed and maybe do it one more time?”

Alice chuckled, “Someone’s feeling extra horny today I see…”

Branden flushed, “Its cause I keep thinking about you being pregnant with our baby.”

Alice just ruffled his hair, “It’s going to change our lives...”

Branden smiled, “I’m ready, I love you Alice.”

She smiled back, “Show me just how much you love me Branden.” This time it was slower, their bodies joined together in a moment of desire, but also love. The rise came, but only after long minutes of slow thrusts. Moments of stolen kisses, lips pressed together tightly, small hands squeezing her breasts while she stroked her own up and down Branden’s back. Then they twisted on the floor till Alice was on top again, this time riding Branden as slowly as he had ridden her. The climax building as his hands roamed over her sides up over her small breasts squeezing on them as Alice pressed down to meet his final up thrust that sent another wave of pleasure through her body as Branden emptied his cum inside of her again.

After they lay on the floor together with Branden in hers facing her, a blanket from the couch over them with one of the couch pillows under their heads. She felt Branden touching her stomach just above the pubic region as her lips kissed the top of his head, “Do you think it’s going to be a boy or a girl?”

Alice said, “A boy, but if its a girl that’ll be just fine as well.”

Branden turned to look at her his eyes meeting hers, “What are you doing to do?”

“Be a mom.”

Branden sighed, “Not that, I mean about a job. You love what you do. I don’t want you to stop doing it just because I sign a piece of paper, or because we’re having a family.”

Alice stroked his cheek, “I’ll figure it out Bran. Probably go into the private sector. Conner said that he knows someone who can help me with that. Last year we used two private investigators to help find missing kids. That can be a job that is just as rewarding as the one I had. The important thing though is that we’re together. With you here Branden it doesn't’ matter what my job is, or even what yours is. What matters is the job that we do together…”

“You mean raising our kids?” Alice nodded as he leaned in to kiss her lips, “That’s the only job I really want to do anyway.” Alice smiled against his lips as he softly said, “I love you Alice.”

She stroked his cheek, “I love you too Branden.” Then she kissed him again for a moment it was just the two of them. The world outside would be there, but for now all that existed was her and Branden. This was the life they were making together, this was what she had wanted before she had even known she wanted it. This was the boy… no man really… who she had wanted to be her lover, husband, and father to her children. Alice finally had what she wanted, the rest of the world and what they thought about her and Branden didn’t matter to her. Their adventure wasn’t over, it was just beginning…

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