“Welcome home Chase.” There was too much enthusiasm in Allie’s voice when she greeted him at the door.

She tried to take his bag but he moved it out of her reach. Her hand fell back to her side like a balloon deflating from a hundred tiny puncture wounds. She pushed her blonde curls out of her face. His miniscule rejection had prodded at the festering wound in her chest that was their relationship. She tried to keep her face clear of any evidence of her agony. She wanted those light green eyes on her face. She knew it would be okay if he would only look at her.

She needed this to be the time that he would actually be happy to come home to her. She stepped up behind him and wrapped her arms around his middle. “How was your flight?”

“Fine,” there was something just below nothing Chase’s voice.

No inflection, no emotion. He couldn’t even muster any iciness for the brush off. He walked to the bedroom and put his bag in the closet and shut the door. He grabbed a towel from the shelf by the bathroom door and turned on the shower.

She soldiered on, following him; getting him some clean clothes from his dresser, but he wouldn’t take them from her so she held them to her chest and sat on the counter while he climbed into the claw footed tub.

“So, I talked to Kent,” she said to the shower curtain. “He said you have a job whenever you want one. You know,” she hurried on because of the silence on the other side, “just in case you decided you didn’t want to re-up.”

He just stood for a few minutes and let the water fall over him, taking everything in. Finally, he spoke. “Can’t I even take a shower, Allie?”

Her eyes closed for a number of seconds before she answered, “I’m sorry.”

He turned off the water and pushed aside the curtain. He looked at her and shook his head, “Never mind. You don’t get it.”

“Then break it down for me.” She tried to control her breathing but it was already sporadic.

“This is bad for us, for me to be here.” He wrapped the towel around his waist and walked past her into their bedroom.

Her temper flared. She slid off the counter and followed him. “Then why do you come back?”

“Because I had to.” Chase took the clothes she still had hugged to her and tossed them on the bed.

Allie snatched them from the bed and walked to the dresser to put them away. She refused to face him as she said, “I don’t want you here because of honor or obligation. It’s not fair to either of us if you really don’t want me.” Even as she said the words, she knew no matter how mad she was she didn’t mean them. She would have him here no matter what his motivation was.

“You’re right,” his voice dropped and it broke. “I should leave because I
don’t want you,” he said, “but I do need you.” He said it like a fact, something he read out of a book somewhere or heard on the news.

Her only reply was the stiffening of her back, so he continued, and as he did, some hint of emotion crept back into his voice like a fog rolling slowly over the ocean. “It’s like a drug. I can’t fully function without you. It would be so much easier for both of us if I didn’t feel like this, you know. It would hurt, but eventually you would be able to move on. And I—well I could at least be who I am. But now we’re both here.”

“We don’t have to be. I won’t make you stay if you don’t want to.”

“I know. I wish things were different, but this is what it is.”

“It is what it is,” Allie echoed.

“I’m being selfish. We both know you’re the only reason I come back at all. But then I miss work too much. I can’t make you happy if only part of me is here.”

“Why am I not enough?”

“Why aren’t I? You could come with me just as easily as I can stay.”

“You know what that would mean for us.”

“Oh right, I forgot. We hate the idea of getting married.”

That finally got Allie to turn around. “That’s not fair; I’m still not allowed to be with you when you get deployed. And you know I can’t leave my kids besides.”

“Exactly. Why am I the bad guy for doing what I love when you do the same thing?”

“But it’s not the same and you know it. My job isn’t like yours. You could be done if you wanted, but I can’t pick up and leave those kids.”

“Says who?”

“They depend on me. For some of them, I’m all they have.”

“We can’t keep circling the truth. This isn’t a real life.”

“I can’t help that I love you Chase, it doesn’t work that way.”

“I know, but both of us love things that keep us apart. You know I don’t love you like you deserve. I see the way you look at me when I leave, like you blame me. And you should, but you don’t know how much that look kills me. Every day I’m gone, I can’t wait to be with you again.”

“Then when does that change into resenting me for wanting you to stay home and be safe with me?”

“When I’m here, and you’re busy, all I think about is when I can work again. What kind of life is that? You and my work are all I know. If I don’t have work, what’s left?”

“Me.” She couldn’t bring herself to lift her eyes to meet his, though she could feel him watching her, searching for what she didn’t know.

“Yes, and no matter how much I love you, I need there to be more to my life than just that.”

“Just that,” she said under her breath. Her shoulders sagged under the pressure of her pain and this conversation. She knew this newest one would supply her with endless hours of torturing herself by analyzing every word and gesture.

Chase mussed his chestnut hair in agitation, mad at himself for not having the right words. He walked around the bed to stand in front of her but didn’t touch her. “I know how bad that sounds but think about it. What would I do while you’re at the center? Flip burgers? Push a broom around the high school? I can’t work with Kent. I would go crazy. You know that’s not me.” When he saw her eyes start to shine from unshed tears, he reached out and wrapped his hand
around the back of her neck and leaned his forehead against hers. He squeezed his eyes shut. “I’m sorry.”

She couldn’t think when she was touching him, so she leaned away from him and let her eyes roam around their bedroom where they were surrounded by all the things that told them there wasn’t anyone else on the earth good enough for either of them. “No, you’re right. We both need purpose. One of the things I love most about you. I can’t ask you to be something you’re not.”

They stood in silence for a length of time that felt so much longer than it actually was. Allie shook her head and tried to give Chase what was suppose to be a reassuring smile, but it was more of a grimace. She hoped they were done with this at least for now. She could only handle so much at once.

“So should I…” he motioned toward the door.

“No, of course not. It’s late and you had a long trip home. You should have the bed.”

“Allie, it’s okay. I’ll sleep on the couch.”

“No, really.”

“Allie.”

She looked up at him and despite everything they had said to one another, it felt good to have him look at her like that. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah it’s no problem.”

Her shoulders sank minutely and she walked into the living room. “Okay, well I’ll help you make it up.”

He caught her disappointment and it affected him in ways that made his stomach clench and his throat dry up like the desert he had just come from. He quickly dressed and followed her into the living room. He stopped behind her and tried to act like his entire body wasn’t thrumming simply because of their nearness.

She went back into the hallway and opened the closet to pull out a set of sheets. She handed them to him, hesitated for a second, bit her lower lip the way she did when she was trying not to cry and then disappeared back into their bedroom. His eyes followed her and she closed the door behind her. After she didn’t come back right away, he started to spread the sheets across the cushions.

When a minute or so passed she reappeared, hugging his pillow to her chest. Her eyes were red rimmed and glistening in the lamplight. She handed him the pillow that smelled like the two of them together. He took it from her and laid it down. She backed away and leaned against the entry to the hallway.

“Thank you.”

She nodded and watched him. As he was getting ready to lie down, he heard her voice softly echo across the chasm between them.

“It wouldn’t matter, you know.”

“What?”

“If you came to bed. Either way, you’re there. You’re always there.”

Without waiting for him to answer, she walked silently down the hall and closed the door so quietly, he wasn’t sure at first whether or not she had at all.

The thought of sleeping that night was laughable to him. He tossed for hours. The sheets became tangled and wound around his legs. He couldn’t get her words out of his head. You’re always there...

Am I doing the right thing leaving?
Of course I am. The pillow smells more like her than me. I know what she means. She’s always there too; with me wherever I am. It’s so cold in this house. I need to stop thinking about this so I
can sleep. Yeah right, like that’s gonna happen. Has this couch always been this small? Why does this stupid pillow smell exactly like her? She’s in everything. It’s more intense in this house but no, that’s not the only reason. She just naturally bleeds into every part of life, all my senses, like a shadow over everything else. Am I supposed to choose her? Is that the right thing to do? This is like choosing which arm to lose or which parent. I was too mean to her. Making her cry makes me sick. The kitchen light’s still on. I’m thirsty. Is it getting colder or is that in my head? I miss us.

Before he was fully aware of what he was doing, he reached back and flung the pillow across the room at the picture of them at the beach two summers before. He stared up at the ceiling for a few minutes and then gave up his struggle. He kicked off the sheets and swung his feet over the edge of the couch.

One or two steadying breaths later, and he was silently making his way down the hall until he was turning the doorknob of their bedroom door. He watched her for a moment from the doorway.

Only a few minutes and then back to the couch.

The moonlight from the bay window painted the room in soothing blues and violent purples. But she lay in their queen sized bed, keeping to one side like there was a real body next to her. He wondered if she slept like this all the time or if it was just because he was in the house.

The sheets were just as tangled around her as they had been around him. He could tell she wasn’t sleeping well if at all because she was lying on her back. She always slept on her stomach or her side, but never her back. As if to punctuate his thought, she rustled the covers and tossed from side to side, throwing her arm over her eyes.

He watched as the moonlight played in her hair, making it shimmer in the pale glow. It lay haphazardly across the pillow that probably smelled even more like her than his had, if that was even possible. She reached out toward the other side of the bed, searching and when she found no purchase, she seemed to recoil.

He couldn’t hold back any longer. He hadn’t meant to let it go any further but he was already halfway to the bed before he thought about any consequences to what he was doing. But there was no helping it. He needed the feel of her hands on him. He needed her hair and her lips and her skin and her voice and her god-forsaken smell. He needed it all and there was no thought of tomorrow.

How could there be when she was all he could see? He could tell she was only half awake when he lay beside her. This time he reached out for her and folded her into his arms. Her body seemed to react even half asleep; she burrowed closer to his chest and pressed her lips against the pounding of his heart.

“I wish this changed things,” when she spoke she sounded completely coherent, which cut him even deeper than the words themselves.

He refused to think about the morning, but the thoughts progressed from bee stings to charging rhinos.

“So do I,” he answered as he pulled her closer and kissed her hair and her forehead and the hollow below her collarbone and finally, her full lips; already waiting for his.