He gave me three flowers today.

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“Each color represents our adventures,” he says, gently bringing my hands together. He kisses my fingertips then slides a violet lily, a white rose, and an orange daisy in my open palms.

I hold my breath and swallow, focusing on my hands to avoid his dark brown eyes. The lily rests against my thumb. I stroke the petals. They are so frail.

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Violet.

I remember that night – enchanting, I think I called it – though it started earlier than that. The sun blazed between the oak trees. It was midday. I had already pointed out how stupid an idea it was to hike at midday. But by then it was too late, we were “half-way” there – according to him.

I leaned against a boulder to catch my breath and peeled a strand of brown hair from my cheek. He stopped immediately, shocking me. It was as though we had an invisible line connecting us, never letting us apart.

He peered over the shoulder strap of his backpack. “We can’t stop now, Em. We’re almost there.”

I heaved a dramatic sigh, but his gaze didn’t falter. I was too exhausted for another complaint or sarcastic remark, so I stood and followed. Stepping up rocks, bending under drooping branches, I tripped once, but he took my hand before I fell. And he didn’t let go. I slid my fingers in between his.

“What are you blushing about?”

Eyes wide, I jerked my head toward his smirking face, then composed myself. Nonchalantly, I brushed past him on the narrow trail, pretending I didn’t just scratch myself on a branch, and took the lead.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

He stopped, sliding his glasses up his nose, and pointed to a clearing near the tips of the trees where a huge boulder poked out over the valley.

“There.”

I scoffed. “The cliff?”

“Yup.” Taking me by the shoulders, he turned me about in a circle. He was in front again.

I groaned. He trudged on ahead, leaving me.

“Okay, okay.” I caught up to him and held my palms out. “Considering your legs are twice the length of mine, can you at least slow down?” I looked him in the eye and raised my eyebrows. “Please?”

Something flashed in his eyes. Something humorous. A smirk slipped across his lips.

“Okay, okay.” I caught up to him and held my palms out. “Considering your legs are twice the length of mine, can you at least slow down?” I looked him in the eye and raised my eyebrows. “Please?”

My eyebrows came down. “What’s so funny?”

He cocked his head, a dreamy look floating into his eyes. He smoothed my cheek with his index finger. “I love how your cheeks go rosy.”

I scoffed. “You’ve made me run up and down this crazy trail. What did you expect?”
Straightening, he smiled, slightly at first, then it grew. Shoving his hands in his pockets, his eyes sparkled. “The real trail’s over there,” he said, nodding toward something behind me.

I turned. On cue, a family of four, all wearing cut jean shorts and T-shirts, passed and waved to us, then disappeared behind the trees.

That’s when I hit him. I forced back a smile. I couldn’t believe he made me break a sweat just because he thought it was attractive. I hit him again.

Laughing, he wrapped his arms around my waist, pulled me in, and kissed my forehead. “Come on,” he said, taking my hand. “I know the real shortcut.”

Walking to the cliff’s edge, I breathed in wonder. The valley below was filled to the brim with the fluffy tops of trees. Ravens burst from a branch and cut through the sky. Something about this place made me want to fly alongside them.

As I watched, he crouched over his backpack. Yanking out the quilt, he spread it across the boulder, reached in again, and offered a granny apple. “Hungry?”

I didn’t notice the day fly by. It was as though I fell into his eyes, losing myself in the rhythm of his voice and the way he would lightly brush against me. When I returned to reality, the moon was full, shining high above us.

We walked to the cliff’s edge. He sat, gently taking my hand to pull me in front of him and slid back, his legs on either side of me. He was wrapping his arms around my waist when he stopped and rubbed my arms. “You’re cold, Em.”

I leaned into him. “Just a little.”

Stretching back, he reached for the quilt and wrapped us in it. “I’ll keep you warm,” he whispered in my ear, “forever and always.”

The wind rustled through the branches as we gazed at the moon and soaked in its light. I breathed in the night’s energy and exhaled. It was me in his arms, the way it was meant to be.

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“White,” he says, lightly touching the rose, “for our snow excursion.”

I stare at it, forcing a smile.

***

“This looks like a good spot,” he said, turning his back toward a pile of snow. He fell into it, sinking deeply, and swooped his long limbs out and in.

I smiled, shaking my head, and crunched a few steps away to flop into my own angel, only pausing to watch his attempt to stand without ruining the form. He stumbled forward and caught his balance.

“Graceful.” I laughed, propping myself up with my elbows.

He turned to see the angel and made a face.

“What’s wrong? Don’t like it?”

“Come see.” He offered a hand.

I sat up to slide my glove in his and was pulled effortlessly to my heels. He brought me close. But he didn’t step back for me to gain my balance. Teetering, I quickly gripped his arm and looked at him. A soft smile slid onto his mouth, and his eyes dilated, sending an array of flutters through my stomach. I smiled shyly then looked away. He grinned. Stepping back to let me stand, his eyes instantly widened, and his foot shot up, knocking my feet out from underneath me, and he flew backwards with a shout.
We groaned, me for falling on him, him for having been fallen on. Lifting my head, I looked in his eyes for a quiet moment, him staring back, and smiled slightly. He smirked then began to chuckle. I giggled. My giggling grew to laughter, and he dropped his head back and laughed.

Feeling the warmth of his breath on my ear, my eyes widened.

“Sorry,” I mumbled, scrambling off his chest to my knees, and stood.

He laughed and stood, brushing snow from his wet jeans, then started kicking the ground to uncover the rock that had tripped him. With his back turned, I grabbed something and quickly hid it behind my back before he faced me again. Content with finding the rock, he turned and smiled at me. “So what do you want to do now?”

Innocent, I shrugged. He smirked, looking at me dubiously. Jig was up. Before it was too late, I threw it but didn’t stick around to watch it explode against his chest. I was running.

He yelled after me how I was going to pay, but I laughed manically, unfazed, and even went as far as to scream. “You can’t catch me!”

Something touched my side, and I was instantly flung into an icy hug. Snow spilled into the side of my jacket. I shivered, his arms wrapping tighter around me as we lay facing each other.

“I got you,” he whispered, smirking.

I laughed, snuggling into him. “Yes you did,” I whispered back.

He smiled.

That day, we etched our names in the tree: E + A.

“Forever and always,” he said, tenderly placing his palm against the heart that bordered our names.

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Taking the orange daisy from my hand, he tucks it behind my ear.

“Remember the sunset?”

I nodded, a lump forming in my throat.

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Eyes closed, I inhaled and twirled around to face him, kicking up sand with my bare feet. “Don’t you love the smell of the ocean?” I yelled over the sound of the wind and crashing waves.

He squinted. “You’re getting dirt in my eyes.”

Grabbing his hands, I intertwined my fingers in his. “I’ll be your eyes,” I said, pulling him to walk with me. He wouldn’t budge.

I threw my head back, placing a hand on my hip and giving him my best you’re-being-boring look. Here I was in a spontaneous, romantic mood, and he was ruining it.

He closed his eyes, reaching for my waist, and pulled me in close. With one arm wrapped around, holding me, he blindly traced my face with his fingertips. Forehead. Cheekbone. Nose. Lips. Then held my chin and looked into my eyes. “I love you.”

“I smiled. “I love you too.”

“Forever?” He asked, stroking my cheek.

“And always,” I replied.

***

I watch the first drop splatter across the rose until my eyes are blurred.

“Emily,” Alexander whispers, taking my free hand. He pulls me until I’m sitting on the edge of his sterilized bed. But I still can’t look at him. I stare at the checkered tile and try to swallow. A sob escapes.

His thin arms slowly wrap around me, and I whip around, hiding my head
in his shoulder. My body begins to shudder. I was supposed to be strong. But it’s so hard.

Gulping, I force myself to sit up, tears streaming down my face. His blue nightgown is soaked with my tears.

“Come here,” he says softly, lightly tugging my arm.

He keeps an arm around me as I gently push his IVs away and lie down next to him. I wish I could stop crying.

“Hey, it’s okay,” he says, turning toward me and stroking my wet cheek with the back of a taped hand.

I close my eyes tight and nod.

“I still love you.”


He gently touches the daisy in my hair. “The flowers will remind you of me.”

My tears begin to flow again. I shake my head. I don’t want to be reminded.

Lightly kissing my trembling lips, he smiles slightly. “I’ve always wondered what it would be like to sleep with you in my arms.” He pauses and looks down.

“Will you remember me, my love?”

I wipe my eyes. “Of course I will. Forever,” my voice begins to quiver. I swallow, “and always.”

“Forever and always,” he echoes.

With a soft sigh, my dear Alexander slips away.