Dear Alessa –

I'm lost.

I realized at some point that you were my light. My true north. And I had no idea how to handle it. I hurt you and I don't blame you for not taking my calls or responding to my texts.

I need to get it all out, baby, whether you ever read a word of this or not.

I had just moved to yet another school district. My mom thought most jobs were beneath her, so to say we struggled financially would be an understatement. I never knew my dad or had a dad-figure in my life, so it wasn't like I had at least a one income family.

Anyway, she dated a lot.

I remember one time when she picked me up from school. I was probably seven or eight years old. She drove us to the biggest house I had ever seen. I can still remember wanting to run in the grass of the huge front yard. It looked so soft and I just wanted to touch it. My mom yelled at me to behave and not touch anything. She squeezed my hand really really hard to make her point. I winced but I didn't make a sound. She didn't like when I sounded whiney.

The steps were so big. I looked at them like an adventure and had to hold onto the railing while I stretched my legs to keep up with my mom going up. Then this man opens the door. I swear I thought he was Santa and I wanted to say something about maybe him coming to my house one Christmas Eve, but when I got another squeeze from my mom's hand, I just looked down and stayed quiet.

Anyway, they went upstairs after leaving me in one of the big rooms downstairs. A big piano sat in the middle of the room and stared at me the whole time. I was little and my mom

wasn't looking, so I went and sat on the bench. Then, I lifted the lid and was mesmerized by the keys. I have no idea what came over me other than my youth kicking in, and I started to press the keys. I loved the sounds they made. Like, I truly felt my heart warm and expand and it was the best feeling in the world.

I hadn't realized that they had come back downstairs until I heard clapping behind me. I turned so fast, I almost slipped off the bench. But then the man was clapping and smiling and my mom was smiling and it was like the sun was shining down just on me.

That started my musical journey.

Seeing you as an adult was like seeing that house and that beautiful piano as a child. And like all beautiful things, I should not touch them because I would always ruin how perfect they were.

Everything. Every single thing about touching you was a privilege.

You are my sunshine,

Troy

Dear Alessa –

Are you sleeping well? I've been struggling with it.

Remember when I told you about the guy who looked like Santa? His name was actually Benjamin and he was a very accomplished pianist. I was so excited to get picked up from school everyday and go back to his house. My mom kept telling me what a good boy I was and she started to smile a lot.

We slept over Ben's a bunch and he'd get up early with me and make me pancakes and then teach me how to properly play the piano and how to read music. The treble clef was so fancy to me and made me feel like it was designed just for me. Silly, I know, but I was little and overwhelmed by something good and happy in my life.

It's funny how I'm smiling even now thinking about how comfortable the bed was in his house. My mattress at home was thin and didn't have sheets on it and barely fit on the floor of my bedroom. I had no idea something so comfortable and soft even existed.

I slept well, ate well, and learned from a genuinely good man who was a musical genius.

He died when I was eleven, the week before we supposed to go meet some people he knew who were also accomplished in music. The day before he died he told me he was proud of me. I can't put into words the joy I felt from hearing those words while he squeezed my shoulder and smiled at me like I was his own son.

Then he was gone and his children made us leave the house. Mom cried all the time for a long while. And then she drank and was mad for even longer. I promised her I'd work hard and music would save us again.

If I could go back, I would make you so proud of me.

Sleep well, beautiful.

Troy

Dear Alessa –

It's raining here today. How is the weather where you are?

I hope it's better than this. But you're there, so wherever there is better is definitely a better place to be.

I started at our high school a rainy day. I was a little older for only being a sophomore because of all the moving around, so I was behind on credits. Anyway, it was rainy and muggy, and gross out. There were worms all over the ground and it was like I could smell them. I broke out in more of a sweat trying not to walk on them while simultaneously trying not to be noticed.

Did I ever tell you I hate worms? Probably not because I didn't tell you the really important stuff, so why would you know this?

I was soaking wet and my hair was a mess. I tried to blend in with the crowd and act like I knew where I was going when I was trying to enter the school but I had the unfortunate timing of entering with (who I found out later) seniors who were wearing their varsity jackets. They elbowed me and some others out of the way so they could go in first. It knocked me down a few steps, causing the sole of my Converse to come loose and soak my foot inside.

I can almost feel it now remembering how cramped my foot and calf got because I tried so hard to walk and keep it from flopping. I also can still feel the ghost of my sore throat and my burning eyes from trying so hard not to cry.

I loved those damn Converse sneakers. I had scrounged just enough change to go to Goodwill and buy them before school started. Unfortunately, what happened to them was par for the course for me.

I went to the main office and then to the guidance office for my schedule. The counselor was great and walked me to my first class. She offered to walk me to all my classes so I could navigate the building better on my own the next day but I didn't want that kind of attention. She smiled in understanding and took a map of the building out for me, and I was so grateful that she knew and prepared for my answer. I was already almost six feet tall, so it wasn't easy to hide or go unseen as much as I wanted to.

That guidance counselor has come into Notes a few times and I've seen her in the grocery store. It makes me a coward not to at least go up to her and thank her for being so good to me back then. She deserved the compliment and acknowledgement. I guess it's just another example of how selfish I am.

So, each class was more painful than the next. Then there was lunch, the worst of them all. No surprise that my mom hadn't filled out the paperwork for free lunch, so holding up the line and then leaving my lunch tray was mortifying. The lunch lady was not kind or quiet about it either. I tried to haul ass out of there but forgot about the sole of my sneaker being loose and it caused me to stumble. I bent to grab the fully torn sole and hid in the first empty classroom I could find.

That was the first time I met Theo. I had ended up in the art room. It was dark with just a little dull light coming in from a small bit of a window that wasn't covered by heavy drapes, so he scared the shit out of me when he said, "Hey, new kid." Then he turned on a small lamp next

to where he was working and got up. My first instinct was to run but something made me stay. With a simple, “Use this,” to me, he handed me some super glue stuff and went back to his painting while I put my sneaker back together. I put the glue back and mumbled a quick “thanks,” before heading to the door. That’s when he said, “Theo,” and I said, “Daniel,” and our friendship began.

I’m desperate, baby, so damn desperate to find the glue to put us back together. I swear the glue is the love I have for you, but like my Converse, I waited until something I needed truly broke before I tried to fix it. It’s not an excuse. Nothing is. But I am fixing myself so I can be a better man. Better for me. But mostly, so I can be better for you.

It’s silly, but when I got older and started working, I’d buy a brand new pair of Converse every year before school starts around here. I kept boxes and boxes of them in a storage closet in the bar that no one else has a key to but me. After you healed and went back to work, I donated all of them to Goodwill because I felt it down to my bones that it was the right time. When I gave them, I also added a few hundred bucks donation with the request that, if they see kids looking at them and know someone needs them and is struggling, just to give them the sneakers.

Thank you for freeing me while gluing that broken piece of me back together.

I love all of your pieces, baby. I promise to always protect them if you give me that chance.

Wholly yours,

Troy

Dear Alessa,

You were walking down the hallway the first time I saw you.

I was headed into the music room at the very end of that same hallway you were walking. I was coming from the small hallway on the side from the cafeteria. Usually, my head was down or focused solely on where I was going but that day something made me look up.

That something was you.

I never believed in feeling energy other than from music until that very moment. Do you believe in that kind of energy?

Alessa, you were so fucking beautiful it almost hurt to look at you. I watched as you looked at the shorter boy with pimples on his face and you smiled at him. He said something and you both laughed. You were this hot girl laughing with him, not at him, and I saw his face redden with happiness and most certainly, a crush.

Your laughter made me stumble and then come to a full stop to watch you walk the rest of the way to wherever you were going. I was still staring after you went into one of those science classes.

The kid you were walking with was a freshman and in my music class, so I waited until he was in the classroom so I could ask him who you were. His cheeks were still a little red and I swear he looked at me with heart eyes along with his goofy smile when he said, “That’s Alessa Crawford. She’s so nice.” His words made my heart race even more than it already was.

As soon as the bell rang, I bolted from class, something I never did, especially from music class. I wanted to try and catch you in the hallway.

I wanted to walk with you.

I wanted to make you laugh.

For the first time in what felt like forever, I wanted to get close to someone. You were the warmth of the sun even from far away and I had this overwhelming need to get closer to you. Closer to that warmth.

But then Jarod came barreling down the hall with those twin assholes. The twins knocked everyone out of their way, including me. I looked up just in time to see Jarod throw his arm around your shoulders and to hear you yell at the twins for hitting into people.

We made eye contact and you mouthed, “I’m sorry.”

I had never been so happy to be hit. And I had taken a lot of hits by that age. But I was so fucking glad for it because you looked at me. I felt your apology and it knocked around in my chest. Some of your sunshine and warmth penetrated and filled a cold part of me. I knew you were sincere with your apology and I knew you *saw* me.

You gave me a small smile and I know I gave you one back.

I wish that memory had come back to me when I had you. I knew you were good back then. And I fought that I knew you are still good now. I’m sorry I longed for my anger more than your warmth.

Every second of every day is cold without you.

All my love,

Troy

Dear Alessa-

Thinking about this letter had my stomach in knots.

I knew as soon as I started the first letter to you today that I wanted to write this one. I think I kind of needed to.

The only break I took was before writing this one. My goal was to get some fresh air but instead I ended up walking around and seeing the ghost of you everywhere.

Everything in me hurts, Alessa. And I know, as you should, that it is completely my burden to bear.

It's actually a welcomed feeling, all this hurt. Without it, I would feel too far away from you.

So, in my attempt to take a break, every place I went I found you.

In the bathroom, I reached for that feeling of having my body wrapped around yours in the bathtub. That peaceful place we found with skin on skin. When I turned from the tub and glanced at the shower, a bit of joy pierced through my profound sadness remembering how shocked and excited you were by all the shower heads.

I don't know if I should even say it but I cannot sleep in our bed without you. You may never read this, so what the hell, right?

I walked the kitchen, seeing that too through your eyes, and I barely got up or down the stairs leading to this place without almost feeling like we are back on them, and how beautiful

and wicked your face was when you looked at me from over your shoulder and threw down that challenge.

I won't go near the vault. I'm afraid if I do, I will blow it up or burn it to ashes.

But that isn't what this letter is really about.

I woke up that morning for school feeling hopeful. That should have been the first red flag but I didn't want to question that maybe the universe was finally turning in my favor.

The night before I had found out I was accepted into an elite summer music program and that same night, Benjamin's friend called my house. He said he had been looking for me and he was eager to tell me that, because of Ben's status within the musical and academic community, Julliard was in my future and he was going to keep his promise to his friend and make that happen.

I freaking loved hearing Ben's name again. It took a minute to get the shaking out of my voice but I was standing in a place listening to words that were literally lifting the clouds from around me. My mom bought me ice cream that night and I knew she cried with happiness and probably relief. She hugged me, Alessa. She hadn't touched me in anything other than anger for so long that I barely knew how to hold her when she did it.

My head wasn't down when I walked into school. I went straight to the music room and told my teacher. I got another hug and more clouds lifted. Alexandria was there and was excited for me, hugging me. It's funny how in writing this I now remember her saying she was going to apply, too, so we could be great together. I didn't pay it much mind because I was in such a euphoric place I couldn't concentrate on anyone else.

Anyone else but you when I saw you the next period.

You had lots of girls around your locker and a few guys. You smiled at them all. But when it was only Dee left, it looked like the conversation turned more serious. You looked around and then closed your eyes. I recognized the kind of deep breath you took. I'd taken plenty of them to try and find some calm. Or to not react to whatever defeat was being delivered my way.

You weren't my business but I was almost desperate to know what happened. I saw you twice more that day. You went into your science class as I stood outside the music room door. You were still in that sort of somber mood.

Alexandria had been practically glued to me by then and she made some snide remark about perfect you having a bad day you probably deserved. She wasn't a good person then and I knew it but I didn't have a need to challenge her or rock the boat. I wanted to get through high school and move on with my life. High school bullshit was not for me.

I wish I could go back and say something to her, anything to just get her to realize I wasn't on board with her nastiness.

The day wound down and I was back in the music room after the last bell. Alexandria had told me she'd be right back and I had just started to play something I was composing when the hair on my neck stood up. I always dimmed the lights, kind of like Theo did when he was working alone. You flew through the door and closed it behind you. Your back pressed against it and you were breathing hard with your head lifted and your eyes closed.

My eyes traced every inch of you, not in a sexual way but in a way where I felt pain radiating off you. My fingers paused and you whispered, “Keep playing. Please just keep playing.”

I did as you asked, my fingers creating more music that I didn’t care to stop and write down. I knew I’d never forget that piece of music. I couldn’t, not while I watched you and felt the energy and warmth of you in my space as it poured it from my fingertips.

You pushed yourself off the door. Somewhere in the distance I heard a noise and a rustle. A shadow passed through the window behind you. But your energy kept me focused on you.

Alessa, I have never before or since seen and felt beauty like yours. You are the only one. The only damn one I can see. It’s never changed since my sophomore year. You were mine then and I was wholly yours.

I stopped playing and stood and when you didn’t ask me to get back to it, I walked toward you, meeting you halfway. Your chin lifted higher and higher as I got closer and closer. Our deep breaths made our chest touch with each inhale and I knew you could feel me shaking.

I don’t need to close my eyes to remember fisting my hands so I didn’t touch you until you asked. If you asked at all. But then your hands cupped my cheeks and you pulled me down to you. Our lips met and I swear to fuck bright lights exploded behind my eyes and I let myself go.

I touched you and pulled you harder to me. I couldn't get close enough. Your fingers slid behind my neck and into my hair and you grasped and pulled at it. I remember thinking that if I died right after that kiss, I'd die happy. But I didn't want to die. Or disappear. I wanted *more.*

Loud voices from the hallway stopped us, pulling our mouths apart but our eyes stayed locked.

You didn't call me a mistake.

You didn't apologize.

You were going to come back to me.

The last thing I did was run my thumb along your bottom lip and kiss you softly before you left.

All of a sudden, Alexandria was back in the room, coming in from behind me and telling me she had to leave.

When the room was empty, I sat back down on the bench, my thoughts consumed by that kiss. I guess it's why I didn't hear them come in. One had me in a chokehold from behind and the other slammed the keylid down on my right hand that had been resting on the keys. I was already losing consciousness from the grip around my neck but that crunching of bones had me screaming as much as I could and made me instantly nauseas.

I don't remember much more. Their faces are more like flashes on top of me as they punched or kicked me. They stomped on my hand over and over and over. I tasted and smelled blood. I never even got to throw a punch.

Before it all went black, they leaned into me, speaking directly into my ear. They told me that I shouldn't touch things that don't belong to me. That if it was my music you were hot for, they'd make sure I didn't have it to use. They kept asking me how you tasted and I still don't know if I thought it or ended up saying it out loud. Either way, when "heaven" slipped into my head, I took their final blow and blacked out.

I woke up in the hospital to my mom screaming. As soon as the fog lifted I knew why.

Dr. Frank was the last hand specialist I saw who confirmed I wouldn't be able to make any of the music programs I was accepted into. Not for a long time, if ever. But he stayed in touch and eventually I did some counseling sessions with Kristen. They became my family along with Theo and Gram ALO.

Dr. Frank gave me the idea to write these letters. I don't know why I wanted you to know that.

You're still my music, Alessa. I love you so much that it doesn't even seem possible that someone can love as much as I love you. No one has your beauty or your heart. I love your kindness and your humor. I miss your laugh and your smell and your chicken pot pie. I miss just being with you in the quiet of a room and sipping whiskey with you.

I thought my anger and revenge would bring me peace.

Revenge was my choice and my downfall.

You have always been and will always be my peace.

I want to play you the song from that day. I've never played it since. I want you to hear how I feel about you. How I felt about you even back then. It will never be about what happened after you left the room that day. It will always be about how you made me feel.

I will love you forever and then in whatever comes after that.

Please take me back some day, Alessa.

Troy