

An Inkling of Hope

by

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ACT ONE

We close in on the Spec Towns Track and Field.

EXT. SPEC TOWNS TRACK - DAY

ALEX, SEAN, and KYLE, 20s, stand near the starting line, Alex is stretching and preparing for the race.

SEAN

(looking at his watch)
Alright, Alex. Let's go over the strategy one more time.

KYLE

(grinning)
Yeah, because it's not like he hasn't heard it a hundred times.

ALEX

Yeah. But one more time can't hurt.

SEAN

(serious)
Okay, first lap, keep a steady pace. Don't get caught up with the front-runners. Second lap, start to pick up speed, but conserve enough energy for the final sprint. And remember, take the inside lane whenever you can. It'll save you valuable seconds.

CUT TO:

EXT. STANDS - DAY

400-meter track, spectators, watching close-up action. Alex jockeys for position amid the pack looping around the track.

SEAN

GO, ALEX! COME ON, BULLDOG! GET IT!

KYLE

YOU'VE GOT THIS! COME ON, BUD!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SEAN
(concerned)
He's off his pace!

Next to them, a bored SARA, 21, looks up from the scribbles and doodles in her notebook. She focuses on Alex intently.

BACK TO:

EXT. TRACK FIELD

Alex settles behind back-of-the-pack ALABAMA STATE RUNNER SANDERS, 24. AUBURN RUNNER OWENS, 21, gallops along. The TRACK TIMER ticking. Alex inches up. Watching intensely, Coach Jones has the schedule of events And roster crumbled in his hand.

COACH JONES
(telepathically)
Not yet.

The laps click by. Alex maintains position. Owens is hurting.

COACH JONES
(perspiring)
Wait for it.

Final lap. Owens overtakes Sanders. Alex surges past Sanders. Steadily closing in on Owens, Alex's breathing is easy and controlled.

COACH JONES
(Shouts)
Now!

Alex opens his stride, now on Owens's heels, overtakes the leader. Owens tries to fight back. Final stretch, Alex turns the screw, busting loose. Glancing, he sees the pain in Owens's face.

Alex wins. The crowd ROARS.

EXT. TRACK FIELD PODIUM - LATER

A close-up of the MEDAL hanging around Alex's neck, glinting in the sunlight.

COACH JONES
Hot damn! You did it!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ALEX
(grinning)
Did you have any doubt?

Coach Jones chuckles and slaps Alex on the back. Disabled students are behind Coach.

COACH JONES
Never doubted you for a second, but
you really outdid yourself today.
(beat.)
Hey, I'd like ya to meet friends
of mine.

With a hand on Alex's shoulder, Coach Jones turns him to the students.

COACH JONES
Alex, this is Taja, Melton,
Rebekah, and Shane.

REBEKAH
Wow, Alex! You were so fast!

ALEX
(leaning back, grinning)
Well, what can I say? When you've
got it, you've got it.

MELTON
Did you always know you'd be a
champion?

ALEX
(smugly)
Of course. I was born to win. You
know, some people are just
naturally gifted.

TAJA
(barely discernable)
Cigarette!

REBEKA
(sincere)
Can we be like you one day?

ALEX
(laughing)
Oh, I don't know about that. I
mean, not everyone can handle the
pressure of being this awesome.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

SHANE

What's your secret, Alex?

ALEX

(pretending to think)

Hmm, my secret? Well, it's a combination of raw talent, hard work, and, of course, my dazzling personality.

The students look at each other, trying to process what Alex said.

JIMMY

Dazzling personality?

ALEX

(winks)

You bet. It takes more than just muscles to be a champion. You've got to have the charm too.

One of the students, JIMMY, raises his hand eagerly.

JIMMY

Alex, do you think I can have a dazzling personality too?

ALEX

(smiling)

Sure, Jimmy, but it's not something you can just get. You've either got it or you don't.

The students nod, taking his words very seriously. Alex's smirk fades for a second, taken aback by their enthusiasm.

JIMMY

Thanks, Alex! You're the best!

ALEX

(sincerely, but still arrogant)

You're welcome. Just remember, being awesome isn't easy. But if anyone can do it, it's me.

The students cheer louder, chanting Alex's name. The students disperse - except for Jimmy. He pulls Alex to his level, his voice suddenly low.

JIMMY

Better appreciate your gift. One day, it might be gone.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

Jimmy smiles and pats Alex's shoulder.

JIMMY

Good job, good job!

(claps)

Good job, good job! G double O D J

O B! Good job, good job!

(claps)

Alex is baffled by Jimmy's comments. Then, he waves them off. Kyle and Sean pick up Alex.

SEAN

You did it! Perfect execution.

KYLE

(holding up his phone)

And I got the whole thing on video. Including my dance. You're welcome.

Sara approaches Alex, RECORDER in hand, her beautiful red curls catching the light, and her emerald-green eyes sparkling with curiosity.

SARA

Hi, Alex. Sara Mathis, Writer's Digest. Do you have a moment to talk about your win?

ALEX

Uh, sure. What do you want to know?

SARA

Everything! What motivates you to keep running, to push yourself so hard?

Alex looks thoughtful, glancing at the track. His mind drifts to a memory.

BEGIN FLASHBACKS:

EXT. TRACK FIELD - EARLY MORNING

A younger Alex is running alone on the track, the sky just starting to lighten. His breath is visible in the cool air, and his footsteps echo in the quiet morning.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ALEX (V.O.)

Running has always been my escape.
It's the one place where I feel
completely free, where nothing else
matters but the rhythm of my feet
and the beat of my heart.

EXT. CITY MARATHON - DAY

Thousands of runners surround Alex, the energy electric.
He pushes through the pain, eyes focused on the finish
line.

ALEX (V.O.)

Felt the rush of the crowd, the
unity of a common goal. It's
indescribable. But it's those
quiet, early mornings, when it's
just me and the track, that I
remember the most.

EXT. HIGH SCHOOL TRACK - DAY

Coach Jones paces the sidelines, eyes fixed on teen Alex,
who is drenched in sweat, struggling to keep up with the
drills.

CHARLES and EILEEN, both in their early 50s, watch with
concerned expressions. Charles, a tall man, typically
affable, crosses his arms tightly across his chest.
Eileen, a petite woman with kind eyes, bites her lower
lip nervously.

COACH JONES

(voice echoing)

Faster, Alex! Push yourself! You
call that effort?

Young Alex stumbles, nearly falling, but quickly regains his
balance. His face is flushed with exhaustion.

CHARLES

(muttering under his
breath)

This is too much.

Eileen places a gentle hand on Charles's arm, her eyes never
leaving their son.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

EILEEN
(softly)
He needs to learn resilience,
Charles.

CHARLES
(turning to Eileen,
frustration clear)
There's a difference between
resilience and brutality, Eileen.

COACH JONES
(approaching Young Alex)
You're better than this, Alex.
Stop holding back.

CHARLES
Hey! Stop yelling at my kid!

COACH JONES
In order to build him up, I need
to break him down. Now, mind your
own business, Pop!

Charles furiously approaches Coach Jones.

CHARLES
This is my business! You're
killing my son! Alex, stop! We're
going!

EXT. HIGH SCHOOL PARKING LOT - LATER

Young Alex exits the gym, exhausted but with a hint of pride
in his eyes. He spots his parents waiting by their car.

EILEEN
(smiling warmly)
You did great out there, Alex.

CHARLES
(frowning)
Great? That was borderline abuse.

Alex's smile fades, replaced by confusion and frustration.

YOUNG ALEX
(defensive)
Dad, it's tough, but Coach Jones
is trying to make me better.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CHARLES

There's a line, Alex. Pushing you like that isn't right.

EILEEN

Let's not do this here. Let's talk in the car.

INT. CAR - LATER

The silence is heavy as Charles starts the car and pulls out of the parking lot. The tension quickly escalates.

CHARLES

(glancing at Alex in the rearview mirror)

I don't want you going through that again. We'll talk to the principal if we have to.

YOUNG ALEX

(angry)

You can't do that! I'll look weak. Everyone goes through it, and I need to prove myself.

EILEEN

Alex, your father's just worried about you. We both are.

YOUNG ALEX

(voice rising)

Worried? You're going to ruin everything! I can handle it.

CHARLES

(raising his voice)

Handle what? Being yelled at, pushed to the brink? That's not coaching, it's abuse.

YOUNG ALEX

You want me to go to college? This is how I get there!

CHARLES

Don't you raise your voice.

EILEEN

Okay, I think we all need to be silent now.

Eileen grips Charles' arm.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

END FLASHBACKS

BACK TO PRESENT - EXT. TRACK FIELD PODIUM - LATER

Alex snaps back to the present, a wistful smile on his face. He turns to Sara, his voice steady and sincere.

ALEX

(to Sara)

Running means everything to me. It's my escape, my freedom, my way of proving to myself that I can overcome anything. Every race, every practice, it's all about pushing my limits and finding out what I'm truly capable of.

Sara's eyes soften, impressed by his passion.

SARA

That's incredible, Alex. Have you always had this drive? Was there a specific moment that sparked your passion for running?

ALEX

Well, my dad was a runner. He found running after he blew out his knee in wrestling. Of course, it was the running boom of the eighties. Everyone was into it. He pushed me in one of those little jogging strollers, but I hated it. I hate the feeling of being pushed. I would cry and scream and jump out of the jogger. Finally, he got me a pair of running shoes and said, okay, you want to run? Run.

SARA

So, even as a little boy, you were fast.

ALEX

(Laughing)

You kidding? I was slow as hell. It took years to find the spring in my step. With two left feet, that learning curve was hard. I never thought I'd get it until one day, it just clicked.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SARA

(smiling)

And what's been the most
challenging part of your journey?

ALEX

There have been many challenges,
but I think the hardest part is
maintaining the mental toughness.
There are days when you want to
give up, but you have to find
something within you to keep
going.

SARA

How do you keep that motivation
alive? Especially on the tough
days?

ALEX

I remind myself of why I started
and the feeling of crossing the
finish line.

(smiling)

It's not just about winning. It's
about the journey, the struggle,
and the moments that make it all
worthwhile.

Coach Jones looks on with pride.

ALEX

That's why I'm so great.

COACH JONES

Oh, jeez!

Coach Jones, embarrassed, palms his head.

ALEX

Now, if you want an exclusive...

SARA

Speaking of support, do you think
running has helped shape your
relationships with your friends
and family?

Alex turns uneasy.

ALEX

Look, can we not talk about my
family?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

SARA

Why? Do they not approve of your running?

ALEX

It's complicated.

SARA

What about your sisters? One of them ran cross-country, right?

ALEX

(frustrated)

Yes, but I'd rather not talk about my family.

SARA

Why?

ALEX

I just don't!

SARA

Did something happen -

Alex smacks the recorder out of Sara's hand. Coming to his sense.

ALEX

I'm sorry. I didn't mean to...
It's just... Complicated.

Sara collects the recorder. She begins walking away.

SARA

I had heard you had an attitude.
Thanks for the exclusive. I can't wait to see where you go next.

FADE TO:

INT. CAMPUS APARTMENT - LATER

Alex, Kyle, and Sean are hanging out in the living room, surrounded by empty pizza boxes and beer cans. The atmosphere is lively and filled with laughter.

KYLE

(Laughing)

Remember that time Alex tripped over his own feet when he saw that girl running?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SEAN

Yeah, classic Alex! He was pretending he could dance.

ALEX

(smirking)

Hey, it almost worked. She laughed, didn't she?

They all laugh, their friendship clear and strong.

KYLE

Hey, better get going.

ALEX

For what?

KYLE

There's a party tonight!

Kyle lets out a soft shrill.

SEAN

Please tell me it's not another one of those "epic" frat ragers.

KYLE

Now, Sean, don't be silly! It's a masquerade-themed thing. And everyone who's anybody is going!

INT. PARTY HOUSE - NIGHT

Pulsating MUSIC, COLORFUL LIGHTS FLASHING. Enter Kyle as Arlecchino, Sean as Pulcinella, and Alex wearing a plane mask. They navigate through the crowd, BEERS in hand.

LILLY, beautiful, blond, hands Kyle and Sean JELL-O SHOTS. They toast and throw them back. Lights strobe fast. Music becomes louder. Alex approaches, his ears ringing, becoming disoriented.

BEGIN MONTAGE

Shot of Alex laughing with friends:

Alex forces a smile, but his eyes betray his true feelings. Friends pat him on the back, congratulating him.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Someone takes a picture, capturing Alex with a group of friends. As the camera flashes, Alex's smile fades the moment the photo is taken.

The camera spins around Alex, overwhelmed by the noise and the crowd. The sounds of laughter and music become distant.

MONTAGE ENDS

INT. PARTY VENUE - NIGHT

The party is in full swing. Laughter and chatter fill the air. Alex, Sean, and Kyle are mingling with friends, enjoying the night.

ALEX
(to Sean and Kyle)
I'll grab us some drinks. Be right back.

Alex makes his way through the crowd toward the bar.

INT. PARTY VENUE - BAR AREA - NIGHT

Alex reaches the bar and orders drinks. As he waits, he feels a sudden wave of dizziness. He blinks a few times, trying to shake it off.

BARTENDER
Here you go, man.

Alex takes the drinks, nodding in thanks, but his vision blurs slightly. He steadies himself against the bar for a moment.

SARA
(approaching)
Hey, Alex! You okay?

ALEX
(forcing a smile)
Yeah, just a little dizzy. Must be the lights.

SARA
(concerned)
Maybe you should sit down for a bit.

ALEX
Good idea. Thanks.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

They sit at a nearby table. He breathes deep, trying to shake off the dizziness.

ALEX
Weird. Never felt like this
before.

SARA
(sitting next to him)
You sure you're alright?

ALEX
(smiling weakly)
Yeah, just need a minute. I'll be
fine.

INT. PARTY VENUE - NIGHT

Sean and Kyle, notice him sitting with Sara and come over, concern etched on their faces.

SEAN
Hey, what's up? You don't look so
good.

ALEX
(shaking it off)
I'm fine. Just felt a little dizzy
for a second. Probably need to eat
something.

KYLE
Let's get you some food then. Come
on.

They head to the food table, Alex walking a bit slower, his hand subtly gripping the back of a chair for balance. Alex Eats. Kyle and Sean drink. The strobe lights are in Alex's face.

ALEX
I've got to get some air.

SEAN
Is everything okay?

ALEX
I'm just going out.

Sean nods. Alex hastily pushes through the crowd, heading for the door.

EXT. PARTY HOUSE - NIGHT

Alex removes his mask.

ALEX
Stupid mask. Stupid party.

He throws the mask. He is not alone.

SARA
Having a good time?

ALEX
Well, well, well. If it isn't Miss
Red & Black. Are you doing a thing
on the repercussions of frat
parties?

SARA
No. My friend dragged me here. The
tantalizing question is why has
the famous Alex Murray here among
us mortals?

ALEX
Pretty much the same scenario...
Your friend wouldn't happen to be
blond, would she?

SARA
Yeah. You've seen her?

Alex gestures to the frat house. They look in as their
friends are in the midst of an alcohol-drinking-kissing
game. They turn around, disgusted.

ALEX
A lotta future regrets going on in
there.

Alex joins Sara in star-gazing.

ALEX
At least it's a nice night. It
reminds me of when my dad took my
sisters and me camping.

SARA
Huh. You don't strike me as the
outdoorsy type.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ALEX

Family thing - a bonding thing. Sleeping under the stars, walking through the wilderness, connecting with nature and each other. And, as if that wasn't enough, the four of us slept in one tent. When my dad said it would bring us closer, I didn't think he meant *literally*.

SARA

I take it the bonding failed.

ALEX

No. My dad wanted to motivate us. It motivated me the whole 85.8 miles to get a good education.

Sara chuckles.

SARA

Well, my brother and I took a week to hike The Appalachian Trail. It was great until I fell over a tree. My brother tried to downplay it.

Alex tries to conceal a grin.

ALEX

That's interesting. How do you fall over a tree?

SARA

Well, it was uprooted from a storm. And we were on a steep downhill and... I just didn't see it. I'm a little A-D-D, if you couldn't tell. Among my many flaws.

ALEX

Well, if you have flaws, you hide them well.

Both are smitten. Completely drunk Sean and Kyle disrupt the moment.

SEAN

Alex! Remember Katheryn -

KATIE (O.S.)

Katelyn.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

SEAN

Katelyn fro... poli-sci? She wants to meet you in the bedroom - whoa! Wait! Who's this?

ALEX

Guys this is Sara. She's a reporter for the Red & Black. We were talking before you disrupted -

Sean whistles.

SEAN

Well, hel-lo!

Sarah acknowledges, disenchanted.

ALEX

Can you guys give us a moment?

SEAN

Katie wants to see your... Medal.

SARA

Unbelievable.

ALEX

Why don't you show her your *trophy*? It's bigger.

SEAN

Snooze, you lose. Ugh! I don't feel good. I think I -

Sean vomits. Kyle begins wretching.

KYLE

Why did you have to - oh shit!

Kyle vomits, projecting onto Sara. Sara is stunned.

ALEX

God! Okay, guys, just go into the bathroom. Do what you need to do. Get water or whatever. Then, we're going.

(To Sara)

I'm so sorry. Come here.

Alex takes Sara to the bathroom.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

INT. BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

Alex runs napkins under the water. He helps Sara wash up.

ALEX

How do you like being a student
journalist?

SARA

It's fun when you're not being
vomited on.

ALEX

(Smiling)
What's your beat?

SARA

Sports. Pretty much anything UGA
teams are in.

ALEX

I bet you meet a lot of guys. You
must be popular.

SARA

Yeah... They either want to kill me
or fuck me. It's tiring. I just
want an interview and they want a
date. I don't even send off the
signals.

ALEX

Kick them in the nuts. That will
send a signal clear and simple.
I've got two older sisters. Every
time they brought a boy over, I
intimidated the shit out of them.

SARA

How? You don't seem intimidating to
me.

ALEX

I wrestled in high school. I was a
lightweight, but I knew some moves.
And, they wanted to test me. So, I
humored them. It wasn't long before
they got the message.

SARA

(Chuckles) I wouldn't mind having
someone like you around back then.
My family... it was chaos. My Becky
has a chemical imbalance, bipolar.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (4)

SARA (CONT'D)

One minute she'd be baking cookies, the next she'd be screaming at the top of her lungs. My dad did his best, but he worked two jobs to keep us afloat.

ALEX

That sounds rough. How'd you handle it?

SARA

(Sighs) I buried myself in school and sports. Anything to be out of the house. Being on the sidelines, covering games, it was an escape. I felt like I was part of something normal.

ALEX

I get that. Sometimes you just need a way out.

SARA

Exactly. I love my Becky, but the unpredictability... it was too much. That's why I'm so focused on my career. I need stability, something I can control.

ALEX

(Musing) Makes sense. Guess we both found our ways to cope.

Suddenly, a small crowd overflows the small balcony. EVAN BATCHEL, 24, lumbers over, red solo cup in hand. He runs his other hand over Sara's back.

EVAN

Hey, babe.

SARA

(hesitant)

Hey Evan.

EVAN

Been lookin' for ya everywhere!

SARA

(annoyed)

I was just talking with Alex.

ALEX

(Putting out a hand)

Evan.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (5)

EVAN

Hey.

(to Sara)

I thought you were with Jess.

SARA

No. I don't know where she went.

EVAN

(grabbing Sara's
hand)

Well, help me find her. C'mon!

Pen in hand, Sara scribbles on Alex's palm.

ALEX

Is that really your number?

SARA

Call it and find out.

Evan accidentally shoves Alex away, towing Sara into the frat house. They exchange a final, lingering glance before the crowd swallows them both up.

INT. CAR - LATE NIGHT

Alex drives, Sean in the passenger seat, Kyle in the back seat. Kyle holds up a CELL PHONE.

KYLE

How about *I* call her.

ALEX

Kyle, stop being an ass. Sean, take that away from him.

Sean clumsily reaches back. They start play wrestling.

ALEX

Guys, knock it off!

Alex looks in the REARVIEW MIRROR. Alex loses control.

INT. HOSPITAL SURGERY - NIGHT

BEGIN MONTAGE

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CLOSE-UP:

Surgical instruments being laid out meticulously on a sterile table.

WIDE SHOT:

The operating room, buzzing with focused activity. Nurses and surgical assistants move swiftly, ensuring everything is ready.

MEDIUM SHOT:

Alex, lying face down on the operating table, breathing steadily under anesthesia.

CLOSE-UP:

Dr. HENDERSON's gloved hands making a precise incision along Alex's spine.

FADE TO:

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - LATER

Alex in a HOSPITAL bed when a doctor comes in.

DOCTOR HENDERSON

Do you remember what happened?
Why you are here?

ALEX

I.... I remember driving. But not
much else. Why are my legs numb?
shit! What's wrong with me.

DOCTOR HENDERSON

You are paralyzed from the waist
down. You were in a real violent
crash.

ALEX

What about my friends? Kyle Glazer
and Sean Koewwaliski? They were in
the car with me -

VOICE

Two code blues! Two code blues!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Dr. Henderson bolts out of the room, joining a group of staff hustling a gurney With an unresponsive patient down the aisle, peeling a guy's clothes off. Kyle's bloody shirt falls to the floor. Alex is overwhelmed by emotion. Alex suddenly pulls his hand away. Sara's Number faded.

FADE TO:

INT. HOME OFFICE - ONE YEAR LATER - DAY

TYPING. The room is filled with pictures of his old self. With friends and family. At track meets. Riding bikes. Alex glances from computer to phone uncomfortably.

BEGIN FLASHBACK

INT. ALEX'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

The room is dimly lit, with only a bedside lamp casting a soft glow. Alex sits in his wheelchair by the window, staring out at the night sky. His face is a mixture of frustration and sadness. The room is filled with various medical equipment and physical therapy tools, a constant reminder of his condition.

ALEX'S POV:

The moonlight glistens off the distant lake, a serene scene that contrasts sharply with his inner turmoil.

CUT TO:

A close-up of Alex's hands gripping the wheels of his chair tightly, his knuckles white with tension.

CUT TO:

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

Alex lies in a hospital bed, surrounded by beeping machines and concerned faces. The DOCTOR delivers the news.

DOCTOR

Your back was broken. We implemented rods to stabilize your spine. You'll likely be paralyzed from the waist down.

Alex tears up.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DOCTOR

I wish there was more we could.?

Alex violently throws a BEDPAN.

END FLASHBACK

CUT TO:

INT. HOME OFFICE - DAY

Alex absent-mindedly stares through the blinds. It's a beautiful day. Walkers and runners pass, painfully reminding Alex of what he lost. He closes the blinds. He turns on his PHONE.

ALEX

Shit.

After listening to multiple messages, he calls EILEEN, 60s, Alex's mother.

ALEX

Hey Becky. Sorry I didn't pick up -

EILEEN (O.S.)

Thank God! I was wondering.

ALEX

I was working.

EILEEN (O.S.)

Soooo, that's why your phone was off? Jesus, Alex! You know the rules.

ALEX

(Put off)

How can I help you, Mother?

EILEEN (O.S.)

I just wanted to confirm that you'll be here for Thanksgiving. You know it's that time of year, right?

An alert appears on the phone: Meeting with LAURA.

ALEX

Shit!

EILEEN

Excuse me?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ALEX

Listen, Becky, I've got a meeting with the editor.

EILEEN

Oh! Okey-dokey, hon. I'll let you go. Send me you flight information when you can. Love you!

ALEX

Yup, love you too.

Hanging up, Alex logs into ZOOM. His editor, LAURA, 50'S, smiles thinly.

LAURA

Well, well. If it isn't the invisible author.

ALEX

(playfully)

You know me, Laura—master of stealth and prose.

LAURA

You're bang on about the stealth. The prose, however...

ALEX

Prose, schmoze. Who needs it?

LAURA

(raising an eyebrow)

Anyone who wants to get paid.

ALEX

(mock serious)

Details, details. I distinctly remember the contract saying—

Alex pulls up the document on his computer.

ALEX

It says... upon delivery of the...
Shit!

LAURA

Look, Alex. We're a traditional publishing company following traditional publishing rules. You don't like it, you can go somewhere else. But I seriously doubt others will tolerate your procrastination.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

ALEX

(lying)

What if I have something else? It's just an idea, but I'll need some time.

LAURA

(leaning back)

Oh, let me guess. Another brilliant idea that's currently existing only in your head?

ALEX

(grinning)

It's a fertile ground for genius, I swear.

Laura sighs heavily, clearly not buying it.

LAURA

Good, because the contract ends on the 30th.

ALEX

(blinks, taken aback)

What?

LAURA

It's good for one year

Alex's face flushes with frustration. He rubs his temples, then rakes his fingers through his hair, his movements agitated.

ALEX

(exasperated)

You've got to be kidding me. That's in-

LAURA

(interrupting, calm)

Two weeks. Yes, I know.

ALEX

How am I supposed to finish it in two weeks? I... I need more time!

LAURA

(leaning forward,
stern)

You've had a year, Alex. Two weeks is all you get.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

ALEX
 (frustrated,
 desperate)
 Come on, Laura. Be reasonable.

LAURA
 (unmoved)
 I am. Two weeks, Alex. I want to
 see words on paper, not just your
 charming excuses.

Alex slumps in his wheelchair, running his hands over his
 face. Deep breath.

ALEX
 Okay. Fourteen days. Words on
 paper. Got it.

Laura smirks and shakes her head as she turns off. Alex
 returns to the blank document.

Thinking, Alex types in a search engine "stereotyping
 disabilities."

ALEX
 Ah.

MONTAGE BEGINS:

Shot of Alex typing furiously:

The screen shows: "The Inspirational Hero: Always
 overcomes everything with a smile." Alex shakes his head.

ALEX
 Too cliché.

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN - MORNING

Alex's character, TREY SIMAO, 13, rolls in with his over-
 the-top electric wheelchair. Becky, MAYA, 45, gets cereal
 for him.

MAYA
 Good morning, my sweet cherub! Are
 you ready for your first day at
 your new big boy?!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ALEX (V.O.)

JJ looked at his mother distantly,
hiding the butterflies in his
stomach.

TREY

(with a speech
impediment)

I guess so.

ALEX (V.O.)

The delay in her physically
challenged, mentally son was worse
than normal. It was enough to call
her concern. As Maya placed a
comforting hand on Trey's
shoulder, she asked -

MAYA

Hey, buuudddy, what's wrong?

ALEX (V.O.)

Trey looked up with dismay.

TREY

The ov-er kids ahhr gonna make fun
of me.

MAYA

Ohhhh, sweetie, no they won't. You
might be a little.... Different.
But if you keep that big, big
heart and that big, big mind of
yours open, I'm sure they will
love you as much as I do.

ALEX (V.O.)

Just about that time, Spencer,
Trey's bossy big brother raced
into the room with a backpack
slung over his shoulder. He
hurriedly popped to frozen waffles
in the toaster and groaned.

SPENCER

Grrrrrr! I gotta hurry. Dad will
be here any -

ALEX (O.S.)

A car horn in the drive way honked
impatiently.

SPENCER

He's here! I gotta go!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

MAYA

Oh. Okay. Love -

ALEX (V.O.)

The door to their dilapidated home slammed, causing the paper-thin walls of their home to shutter.

TREY

Sounds like funder!

ALEX (V.O.)

A smile played on Maya's lips.

MAYA

No, baby. Don't be scared.

BACK TO:

INT. HOME OFFICE - DAY

Alex continues writing.

ALEX

Maya's heart skipped a beat, watching Trey *wheels* on the bus lift. He smiled, spreading his arms as if he was flying. Both Maya and the bus driver operating the lift laughed. "Park it, Turbo!" the old man kids. As the short yellow bus drives away, Maya sheds a happy tear.

(Beat)

Chapter one, done!

FADE TO:

EXT. TRAILHEAD - DAY

Alex wheels himself up to the trailhead where a group of cyclists are getting ready. The sound of chirping birds and the rustling of leaves fill the air. He pauses, taking in the sight of the winding trail ahead.

COACH JONES

(off-screen)

You ready for this, Alex?

Alex turns to see Coach Jones approaching with a supportive but challenging look.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ALEX

(sighs)

I don't know, Coach. I've never done this before.

COACH JONES

That's exactly why you're here. Remember, it's not about winning. It's about trying.

Alex nods anxiety in his eyes. Coach Jones helps him transfer from his wheelchair to the handcycle. The other cyclists watch with curiosity.

COACH JONES

(Whispers)

Don't worry about them. Just get use to the bike. Remember, go easy until you get the hang of it.

ALEX

It feels weird.

COACH JONES

It's literally riding a bike.

ALEX

Yeah, there's a reason why I picked track. Never got the hang of being on two wheels. Never saw the point.

COACH JONES

Well, luckily it's got three.

ALEX

Ever heard the saying "the third wheel"? People don't like three. They like two. The Tour De France was never ridden by a guy on a trike!

COACH JONES

Those guys crash all the time. But you know what they do? They get back on their bikes and finish the race no matter how banged up they are. Lance Armstrong would never have won all those races if he didn't get back on his bike.

ALEX

No, he wouldn't have won if he hadn't have taken EPO.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

Beat.

COACH JONES

I had to get the trailer out for this. It took two hours. I woke up 4 A.M.! But, if you're not ready we can -

ALEX

No, no! Damnit.

(Sighs)

Let's do this. Before anyone sees me.

EXT. TRAIL - LATER

Alex is on the handcycle, wearing a helmet. He struggles to find a rhythm as he pedals with his hands, the uneven terrain making it even more challenging.

ALEX

(grunting)

This is harder than it looks.

COACH JONES

(from the trailhead)

One stroke at a time, Alex. Focus on the next stroke.

Alex takes a deep breath and starts pedaling. His movements are awkward and uncoordinated, but he pushes forward.

EXT. TRAIL - MIDWAY

Alex is now halfway along the trail. His strokes become more rhythmic, though he's clearly exhausted. He catches sight of Sara, who's arrived and is cheering him on from a vantage point.

SARA

You got this, Alex! Keep going!

Alex's determination reignites. He pushes himself harder, each stroke a testament to his resolve.

EXT. TRAIL - NEAR THE END

Alex reaches a steep incline. He pauses, looking up at the daunting slope.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

COACH JONES
 You've got this, Alex! Keep
 pushing! One stroke at a time!

Alex grits his teeth, the challenge ahead seeming
 insurmountable. The strain visible on his face.

EXT. TRAIL - END

Alex reaches the top of the hill, sweat pouring down his
 face. A small crowd, including Coach Jones and Sara, erupts
 in applause.

COACH JONES
 (smiling)
 Well done, Alex. Well done.

Alex looks up, a mixture of exhaustion and pride on his
 face. With Coach Jones' help, Alex settles back into his
 wheelchair.

ALEX
 (breathless)
 Was that Sara back there?

COACH JONES
 I don't know.... Maybe. how do you
 like the bike? Pretty fast on the
 down hill, eh?

Beat.

COACH JONES
 Alex?

ALEX
 Yeah, no, it's good....

COACH JONES
 So, you want me to take it to your
 place, or what?

Alex pushes his wheelchair to the edge of the trail,
 peering through the trees.

COACH JONES
 Alex? Alex? Earth to Alex?

Alex checks his watch.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ALEX

Alright, can you take it back to my apartment please? I'm going to wait for a minute.

COACH JONES

It's getting dark, Alex.

ALEX

(distantly)

Yeah-huh. You have a good one too.

Coach Jones shakes his head, laughing.

COACH JONES

Alright, well I guess I should go ahead and sign you up for the marathon next weekend!

ALEX

(Distant)

Sounds good. Have a good one too, Coach.

Coach Jones heads off with the bikes.

EXT. TRAILHEAD - LATER

Alex checks his watch. He sees Sara emerge from the woods with a mix of elation and nerves.

ALEX

There she is!

SARA

You weren't waiting on me, were you?

ALEX

Well.... we just got done with the ride. I was wondering if you would be interested in getting something at Chipotle.

SARA

(tentatively)

Alex, I... I'm really flattered. And I care about you a lot, but...

Alex's smile fades slightly, a hint of disappointment in his eyes.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ALEX
(trying to stay upbeat)
But?

Sara steps closer, her expression earnest and caring.

SARA
I think we need to take things
slow. You've been through so much,
and I want to make sure we're both
ready for this.

Alex nods, understanding but still feeling the sting of rejection.

INT. CHIPOTLE RESTAURANT - EVENING

Alex and Sara place their orders, moving down the line.

ALEX
A chicken bowl for me.

SARA
And, I'll have a sofrita.

ALEX
(Teasingly)
Huh. Thought you would have gone
just a delicious bowl of black
beans, as a proud vegan.

SARA
I'm technically plant-based - not
vegan. And, Vegans are trying to
save the world.

ALEX
Captain Planet would be really
proud.

They take their orders to a table. Alex steals a sample from Sara's bowl.

ALEX
That's actually not half bad. It
needs a different name though.

Sara studies Alex.

SARA
I can't believe you're here.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ALEX

I didn't know you were in New York.

SARA

I just moved in, actually. I just did my internship at New York Presbyterian.

ALEX

For some reason, I thought were a journalist.

SARA

I was. For medical journals. But, there were so many tragic stories and people in pain, I decided I could better serve by being on the front lines. I... I saw you.... you know, when you were in the hospital.

A moment of strained silence passes.

SARA

So, what brought you to New York?

Beat.

ALEX

I needed to get out of Georgia. Every time I went past Sean's and Kyle's homes, I just... couldn't take it. Their memories. Their funerals. Spreading dirt on their coffins.... I couldn't help but feel like I put them there.

SARA

(sympathetically)
Alex...

Alex looks up, his eyes filled with pain.

ALEX

(voice shaking)
We were supposed to be a team, you know? We were supposed to have each other's backs. But I wasn't there when they needed me the most.

Sara squeezes his hand, her eyes soft with understanding.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

SARA
(tenderly)
It wasn't your fault, Alex.
Sometimes... things happen that
are beyond our control.

ALEX
(sighs)
I know, but it doesn't make it any
easier.

SARA
Well then, maybe writing about it
would help.

ALEX
(scoffs)
I'm not that kind of writer.
Anyway, enough about that. How's
your medical career going?

Sara brightens at the shift in topic, though a hint of
stress remains in her eyes.

SARA
I'm doing my rotations. It's been
intense. But I love it. The long
hours, the constant learning...
it's exhausting but rewarding.

ALEX
That's great! I knew you would be
amazing at it.

SARA
Thanks, Alex. And what about you?
How is the writing going?

ALEX
Rocking and rolling. But, I think
I had a breakthrough the other
day.

SARA
(interested)
I'd love to read it someday.

ALEX
(playfully)
Maybe when it's finished. Right
now, it's a mess of thoughts and
emotions. You heard of, ah, ethos,
pathos, and logos?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

SARA
Ethical, logical, pathetic?

ALEX
Yeah. Well, in its current state,
my manuscript is very, very
pathetic.

Sara laughs.

ALEX
(Grinning)
I'm not kidding. It needs a lot of
work.

SARA
(Serious)
I got an invitation to Kyle and
Sean's memorial. I can't believe
it's been a year. Are you going?

Beat.

ALEX
I don't know. God! I haven't
spoken to their parents or anyone
since.

Alex stares into Sara's eyes, then looks away.

SARA
Come with me.

INT. CHURCH - DAY

The church is filled with mourners dressed in black, a somber atmosphere settling over the congregation. Sunlight streams through stained glass windows, casting colorful patterns on the floor. A large photo of SEAN and KYLE, both smiling, is placed at the front near the altar.

ALEX, in his wheelchair, and SARA enter the church. Heads turn as they make their way down the aisle. Whispered conversations ripple through the crowd.

INT. CHURCH - BACK ROW - DAY

Alex and Sara sit quietly. Alex anxiously looks around. Sara holds Alex's hand, offering silent support. Across the aisle, SEAN'S PARENTS, visibly grief-stricken, exchange tense glances upon seeing Alex. MRS. HAWKINS leans over to her husband, MR. HAWKINS.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

MRS. HAWKINS
 (whispering, but
 audible)
 What is he doing here?

MR. HAWKINS
 (grimacing)
 Not now, dear.

Alex and Sara overhear, but Alex remains stoic, eyes fixed ahead.

The MINISTER steps up to the pulpit and begins the service.

MINISTER
 Thank you all for coming to honor Sean and Kyle. They were taken from us far too soon, but their memories live on in our hearts.

As the minister continues, Sara notices the growing tension between Alex and Sean's parents. She squeezes Alex's hand tighter.

EXT. CHURCH - AFTER THE SERVICE - DAY

Mourners offering condolences to Sean's parents. Alex and Sara wait patiently to pay their respects.

MRS. HAWKINS
 (coldly, to Alex)
 I can't believe you had the nerve to show up here.

Alex remains calm, but there's a hint of pain in his eyes.

ALEX
 I'm here to pay my respects to my friends.

MRS. HAWKINS
 (fury rising)
 Friends? They wouldn't be dead if it wasn't for you!

SARA
 (defensively)
 With all due respect, Alex is suffering too.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

MR. HAWKINS

(stepping in)

Please, let's not do this here.

Mrs. Hawkins glares at Alex, tears welling up in her eyes.

MRS. HAWKINS

(to Alex)

It's not fair! It's not fair that you survived. You're here right now, today, and my son is six feet in the ground! You remind me of him. You remind me of the pain I have to endure waking up every day, knowing I'm never gonna be able to talk to my boy. I'm never gonna be able to talk to him, to touch him, to hug him again!

Alex lowers his head, unable to respond. Sara steps forward, standing protectively by his side.

SARA

We're all grieving. Blaming Alex won't bring them back.

Mrs. Hawkins turns away, unable to look at them any longer. Mr. Hawkins nods curtly and guides her towards their car.

Sara puts a comforting hand on Alex's shoulder, her eyes filled with concern.

SARA

Are you okay?

Alex takes a deep breath, his voice shaky.

ALEX

I'll never be okay. But I won't let their memories be tainted by anger.

Sara wraps her arms around him in a comforting embrace.

SARA

We'll get through this together.

They sit in silence, the weight of the loss heavy but shared.

INT. CAR - DAY

Sara is driving, the car moving steadily down a quiet, tree-lined road. Alex sits in the passenger seat, staring out the window, his face a mix of pain and contemplation. His wheelchair in the back. The hum of the engine and the occasional sound of passing cars fill the silence.

SARA
(softly)
You were really brave back there.

Alex doesn't respond, his eyes still fixed on the passing scenery.

SARA
(turning to glance at him)
Alex?

ALEX
(quietly)
They're right, you know. If it weren't for me...

SARA
(interrupting)
Alex, stop. It wasn't your fault.

ALEX
(voice breaking)
I was the one driving, Sara. I should have... I should have done something.

Sara pulls the car to the side of the road and stops. She turns to face him, her eyes filled with concern and determination.

SARA
Alex, listen to me. What happened was a tragedy, but blaming yourself won't change anything. Sean and Kyle wouldn't want you to carry this guilt.

Alex's eyes well up with tears, and he clenches his fists in frustration.

ALEX
I replay that night over and over in my head. Every second, every decision. I should have done something different. Anything.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

END OF ACT ONE

ACT 2

INT.CAR - CONTINUOUS

Sara reaches out and gently places her hand on his.

SARA

You did everything you could. You survived, Alex. And you're still here. They would want you to live, to find some kind of peace.

Alex's shoulders start to shake as he finally lets the tears fall. Sara leans over and hugs him, holding him tightly.

SARA

It's okay to cry. It's okay to feel. You don't have to be strong all the time.

Alex buries his face in her shoulder, his sobs coming in waves. Sara strokes his back, offering silent comfort.

ALEX

(through tears)
I miss them so much.

SARA

(whispering)
I know you do. But they'll always be with you.

INT. HOUSE - DAY

Eileen puts the phone down as CHARLES, 60s, walks by. Eileen seems concerned and distant.

CHARLES

What is it?

EILEEN

That was the physician's assistant... Dr. Buteficsh wants to talk about my mammogram.

CHARLES

When?

EILEEN

Soon.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CHARLES

Then, check if you can get in tomorrow -

EILEEN

No.

(Beat.)

Everyone will be here. They don't need to know about it.

CHARLES

Eileen, I don't care about the others. But, Jen, Claire, and Alex need to know. Maybe if you just went in for a blood test, it would make you feel better.

EILEEN

No. It'll start with a blood test. Then, it's CT scans, bone scans, MRIs, PET scans, ultrasound, X-ray. Christ, before shake a turkey leg, I'll be undergoing surgery. It can wait.

Beat.

CHARLES

Fine. I'm gonna go. Alex's flight lands in an hour.

EILEEN

No. Let Claire and Zach get him.

INT. GUEST BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Zach is in a deep sleep. Claire is meditating. Candles everywhere - a meditative peace hangs. Eileen barges in.

EILEEN

Claire!

Zach startles, burning his hand on a candle.

ZACH

Ah! Fire!

Claire breathes deeply.

CLAIRE

Yes, Becky?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

EILEEN

Your brother needs to be picked up at the airport. Can you and Zach get him?

CLAIRE

Sure. You okay?

EILEEN

I'm just tired.

INT. AIRPORT BAGGAGE CLAIM - DAY

Alex goes to get his handcycle. The luggage concierge retrieves the box. Alex notices a fracture in the box.

LUGGAGE CONCIERGE

That will be seventy-five dollars.

ALEX

Hang on. The box is all battered.

LUGGAGE CONCIERGE

Yes, sir. Seems like you had some turbulence.

ALEX

I want to just check my handbike.

LUGGAGE CONCIERGE

Please sir, you're holding up the line.

ALEX

I just want to know that my bike is okay!

LUGGAGE CONCIERGE

Sir, you can check it out when you're outside. Now, please -

ALEX

Just one goddamn minute!

A big TSA OFFICER is attracted to the commotion.

LUGGAGE CONCIERGE

Sir, you can not open that here.

ALEX

I got it.

Alex opens the box. Bike parts spill.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CLAIRE

It's fine. If we break it, we'll replace it. Promise.

ALEX

(Sarcastic)

Yeah, it's just a \$2,000-dollar piece of durable medical equipment. You can find it at Walmart.

Zach slams the rear door.

I/E. VAN - EVENING

A mix of anticipation and tension. Alex rides shotgun while Claire drives. Alex tries writing in his notebook, but gives up, getting car sick. A few beats of silence. Sharp left-right-left.

ZACH

Damn, Claire.

CLAIRE

Sorry.

Silence.

ALEX

A woman shoots her husband. Then she holds him underwater for over 5 minutes. Finally, she hangs him. But 5 minutes later they both go out together and enjoy a wonderful dinner together. How can this be?

CLAIRE

Uhhhh....

ZACH

That's a little dark.

ALEX

Got an answer?

CLAIRE

I don't know.

ALEX

The woman was a photographer. She shot a picture of her husband, developed it, and hung it up to dry.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Zach laughs. Claire appreciates it far less.

ALEX
Horrible, right?

CLAIRE
Real bummer.

ZACH
I thought it was pretty good. Is that what your new story is gonna be about, Alex? a woman who is believed to have killed her husband when she just took a picture of him?

Eye roll.

ALEX
No Zach. I'd like my story lines to be a bit more complex than that.

CLAIRE
So, what is your next book about?

ALEX
I haven't finished it.

CLAIRE
So you are writing a book, but you don't know what it's about?

ALEX
Bingo.

CLAIRE
Ugh! You creatives are so eccentric!

ALEX
I want to be eccentric. Eccentric means crazy and rich. I'm just crazy.

Claire takes out a CBD gummy.

ALEX
Do those have THC in them? The stuff that gets you high?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

CLAIRE

These ones? No. But, I do have those. Really good shit. You can try 'em.

ALEX

No, thank you.

CLAIRE

Come on!

ALEX

I'm good.

CLAIRE

They might help -

ALEX

I don't want your fucking hippie gummies!

CLAIRE

Okay! Jeez! Sorry I brought it up.

Beat.

ALEX

I'm sorry.

CLAIRE

It's okay. You're tired.

ALEX

Yes -

CLAIRE

This stimulation is overwhelming your sensitive spirit.

ALEX

I'm not *sensitive*. I'm just tired.

Alex looks out the window.

ALEX

Let me ask you guys a question. Do I look... disabled?

ZACH

(smirking)

Well, yeah, you're in a wheelchair, buddy.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

ALEX

(rolling his eyes)

No shit, Zach. What I mean is...
do I fit the stereotype?

Claire and Zach exchange a look, trying to gauge the best way to respond.

CLAIRE

Alex, I don't think there's a single stereotype for someone in a wheelchair. You're still you. Just... with some extra equipment.

ZACH

Yeah, man. I mean, if you're asking if people will notice, sure, they will. But fitting a stereotype? I don't think so. You've never been one to fit into any mold.

ALEX

But when people with disabilities are portrayed in shows and books, they come across incapable. Yet, everyone sings their website praises because that show is the so-called groundbreaking show that has a cripple. And, it's totally smothered by idiotic secondary characters who dim-wittedly push the guy in the wheelchair into stupid peril, but then rescue him in the nick of time. I mean, they are all stupid like that, but at least in other shows, the character figures out how to fucking get out of the situation instead of a one-dimensional side character saving the day! Jesus Christ, what the hell is wrong with executive producers and writers?! Are their heads really far up their asses? Maybe - just maybe - the crip in the wheelchair knows what the hell he's doing!

Beat.

CLAIRE

So, Becky and I will bake apple and pumpkin pies. Jen too.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (4)

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

Maybe you can show Louis and Bruce your handcycle thingy.

ZACH

You're right, Alex. Just go and run over those guys with your chair. Better yet, Besides, I got a video game we can play. You can pretend the bad guys are those asshole executive producers.

ALEX

Zach, that's an offensive stereotype. That's perfect!

Alex fiercely scribbles in his notebook.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT 2

INT. CHILDHOOD HOME- NIGHT

Dogs - WESLEY, BUTTERCUP, HANK and BUDDY bark. Alex flicks on the lights. UNCLE STU AND AUNT LINDA, 75, MAX, JENNIFER, raise their hands.

EVERYONE

Surprise!

EILEEN

Your father and I thought getting everyone together for your birthday would be fun.

ALEX

(Stunned)

Yay! Please tell me I got a tent.

EILEEN

Uh. No.

ALEX

That's okay, Dad. I think I'll just sleep out in the backyard. You guys still have the tent, right?

EILEEN

Don't be silly Alex. We got rid of that old thing long ago.

CHARLES

I'll put your luggage in your room and then get you a drink.

ALEX

You know what? I think I can book a room at the Marriott down the street since everyone else is settled.

EILEEN

There's plenty of room! You don't want to share walls with you strangers doing God knows what, do you?

ALEX

I'm here, aren't I?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (6)

CHARLES

Beer?

ALEX

You don't have anything stronger?

CHARLES

Wine.

ALEX

Right. Beer it is.

Alex pets all wagging-tail dogs.

ALEX

Glad you guys like each other.

Buddy and Hank exchange growls. AUNT LINDA, 70s, appears stuck in the 1960s hippie-era. Flowing white-haired, deaf in one ear. Glasses on a lanyard hang over her shoulder as she pulls Alex into a tight hug. Her accent is screechy, New York.

AUNT LINDA

Quit!

(Beat.)

Alex! It's been forever! Look at you! You're so tall and lanky.

ALEX

I know! And, the best part is- I can eat whatever I want!

The joke is lost on Aunt Linda.

AUNT LINDA

HUH? SORRY, DEAR. I LOST MY HEARING AIDS. YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO TALK SLOWLY SO I CAN READ YOUR LIPS.

ALEX

I said I'm glad you're here!

AUNT LINDA

Ah! Yes! I'm glad to see you too! I love surprises!

UNCLE STU, 70s, bald, fat, scrappy hair on the sides, shouts from across the room in a heavy New York accent.

UNCLE STU

Linda! They need you in the kitchen.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (7)

AUNT LINDA
What? What'd you say?

EILEEN (O.S.)
*Linda?! Please come into the
kitchen! I need your help!*

AUNT LINDA
Oh, okeydokey.

Aunt Linda shuffles into the kitchen. Charles comes back with Alex's beer. Alex takes a pull.

UNCLE STU
Helluva surprise, eh? Haha - you shoulda seen your face!

ALEX
Surprised? Trust me, Uncle Stu, if I fell into the clutches of Pennywise the Clown, I wouldn't be as half stunned as I am now.
(Beat.)
I was under the impression that you guys were coming in late tomorrow.

Forced smile. Another pull.

UNCLE STU
Well, we were, but then Eileen told us your birthday was today, so we decided to move our flight up. We got lucky there.

Uncle Stu laughs. He claps Alex on the shoulder.

ALEX
Terrific. So, what's new? How's retirement?

UNCLE STU
Meh. It's okay. Don't know if that was the best decision. But, ya live and learn.

ALEX
Well, got any new hobbies?

UNCLE STU
Have ya ever heard of 'binge-watching'?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (8)

ALEX
(Sarcastic)
I think I have.

UNCLE STU
Binged the entire first season of
Blue Bloods! It's awesome! Without
those damn commercials, it's so
much easier to follow.

ALEX
Ahhh! The perks of streaming.

UNCLE STU
I just gotta remember which remote
controls the Roku-y thing. I
started coloring the remotes. TV
is pink, the DVD is black, the
Roku is purple. Better than a
universal remote. Those things are
just a ploy to get you to buy more
shit.

ALEX
Helluva system you got.

UNCLE STU
Yeah! I see your dad fell victim
to capitalistic expansion.

Uncle Stu gestures to the UNIVERSAL REMOTE.

UNCLE STU
Your Becky told us you're still
trying to be a writer.

ALEX
I *am* a writer. I'm writing a
manuscript right now.

UNCLE STU
Incredible! What's it about?

ALEX
About three hundred pages.

Uncle Stu laughs. Another pull.

UNCLE STU
Good answer.

ALEX
You guys still living in North
Carolina?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (9)

Aunt Linda returns.

AUNT LINDA
Huh? What? What'd you say?

UNCLE STU
He asked if we are still in North Carolina.

AUNT LINDA
We are for now. We're considering moving to LA for Eric and Rebecca.

ALEX
Nice. They doing good?

AUNT LINDA
They're OK. Rebecca is pregnant.

ALEX
Oh... That's great.

Alex reflects on his nonexistent personal life.

AUNT LINDA
(Beaming)
Isn't it? Our first grandchild! We're over the moon! And, Shane and Vicky are engaged. I'm helping them plan their wedding.

Alex forces a smile. Another pull. He's getting low.

AUNT LINDA
You could be a part of it. They're still in Lindenhurst. You're on Long Island, right?

ALEX
Massapequa.

AUNT LINDA
Massapequa? That's what? Fifteen minutes?

ALEX
Ten.

AUNT LINDA
Ten minutes! Even better! They need an usher.

ALEX
I really don't know how to usher.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (10)

AUNT LINDA

You just walk a person down the aisle. You can walk me!

Alex shakes the empty bottle.

ALEX

Yeah... I'll think about it.

(Beat.)

I'm gonna get another. Can I get you anything?

LINDA

Huh?

UNCLE STU

We're good, Alex.

INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Alex grabs a cold one from the fridge. Jennifer approaches, hugging Alex.

JENNIFER

Happy birthday, baby brother!

ALEX

Thanks. This is a rough one for me. But, hey, we all shed tears on our birthdays right?

JENNIFER

I don't know about that. It looked like you were cornered in there. I thought you'd never escape.

ALEX

The art of pivoting is one to master.

JENNIFER

Are you okay?

ALEX

No.

LOUIS, 4, and BRUCE, 2, run past, screaming. Max tries to contain them.

MAX

Ugh! Inside voices! Inside voice!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (11)

JENNIFER

Lou! Bruce! Stop! Come here and say "hi" to your Uncle Alex.

Pretend smile on Alex. Bruce quietly picks his nose.

ALEX

Hey pal.

Beat.

JENNIFER

Bruce?

BRUCE

Hi.

Screaming Louis runs behind Alex and rocks Alex's wheelchair.

LOUIS

BAHAHAHAHAHA....

ALEX

Whoa there!

JENNIFER

Louis, remember our bubble space. We don't touch Uncle Alex's wheelchair.

LOUIS

But it's funny!

ALEX

Louie, you're making me seasick.

JENNIFER

Okay. That's enough. Bedtime!

Louis relents and darts off.

JENNIFER

(To Max)

Honey, please put the kids to bed.

MAX

(Chasing Louis)

Right.

The boys run under the table. Max smacks his head reaching for them. Jennifer comes up with both, one under each arm.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (12)

JENNIFER

Bedtime.

Max takes the screaming kids to their shared downstairs bedroom.

ALEX

(to himself)

Wow.

Charles steps behind Alex.

CHARLES

You good?

ALEX

I don't know. Were we that...
Unbearable as kids?

CHARLES

No.

ALEX

You like being a grandfather?

CHARLES

No. It's not as glamorous as
being a writer.

ALEX

Glamorous. My little glamorous
life.

CHARLES

What's up?

ALEX

I'm under the gun. I need to
finish this novel. I'm gonna need
to duck out. Write in my room.

CHARLES

I understand. I can play defense.

A commotion goes on upstairs.

JENNIFER (O.S.)

What - Not the dresser, Louis!
Drawers aren't steps! Get down!

MAX (O.S.)

Jen, just breathe.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (13)

JENNIFER

Stop telling me what to do and help me! Bruce, stop it or no bedtime story. Max!

MAX (O.S.)

Ice cream tomorrow for the first one under the covers.

LOUIS

I'm first!

BRUCE

No! Me!

There's crying.

JENNIFER

(crass)

Nice idea, Max!

CHARLES

(Raising his bottle)

To you.

They tap bottles. Alex takes a long pull. Max bolts downstairs.

MAX

Charles, do you have any ice cream?

EILEEN

Freezer.

MAX

Thanks, Charles.

Charles rolls his eyes.

INT. MAX'S AND JENNIFER'S BEDROOM - LATER

Across the room, Max sits on a chair, calmly drawing in his sketch pad.

JENNIFER

I told you to put the kids to bed.

Max looks up, momentarily annoyed by the interruption.

JENNIFER

This is embarrassing. We're at my parents' house.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Louis and Bruce start giggling and tossing blocks around, further agitating Jennifer. Max finally puts his sketch pad down.

MAX

Look I was just trying to contain them. Bribery works well.

JENNIFER

We can't do that here. Bribing our kids reveals that we don't know what we're doing.

MAX

But, we don't.

JENNIFER

The point is, we need to act like we've got it together - like we're a well-behaved family. Understand? *Claire* and *Zach* will be here. *Claire* all chilled with her hippy vibe. Ugh! I'm sure she'll hit it off with my mother and aunt! I need to win my *Becky's* approval.

"DREAM SEQUENCE"

EXT. TRACK FIELD - DAY

Sara, 21, red curly hair, green eyes, approaches Alex - who is smitten. Sara is holding a recorder.

SARA

Got a minute, champ?

ALEX

Sure.

Alex plays cool.

SARA

(Turns on recorder)

Alex Murray has just won the National Track and Field 10,000-meter race. Alex, how are you feeling?

ALEX

Like a million bucks, as usual. You know, being awesome takes its toll, but someone's gotta do it.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SARA

Right. Did I hear you're filling in for your teammate?

ALEX

Yeah, Tim Owens. I'm sorta the pinch hitter.

SARA

So it's true what they say about track and field guys - they're the guys who can't make the football team.

ALEX

Not true. We just don't like to hit. Football players are diots - and get dumber the more they play. You know, because of all the concussions.

SARA

Let's get back to your performance.

Alex reveals a cocky smile.

ALEX

Sure, but just to clarify, what exactly is your background in sports? I assume you've done extensive research on concussion protocols and athletic career longevity? Maybe we can discuss the empirical data on cognitive outcomes for different sports next time.

SARA

You know what, I'm going to go interview Turbo. Get his thoughts on how he feels an asshole like you steals his victory!

ALEX

Sara, I'm sorry. Sara, wait!

END SEQUENCE

Alex awakes. Outside, rain falls. He can't fall back asleep.

FADE TO:

INT. SARA'S ROOM - DAY

Medical textbooks, notes, and flashcards are spread across the table. Sara sits at the desk, her face a mix of determination and exhaustion. Flashcard in hand -

SARA
Endocrine system...The hypothalamus regulates the pituitary gland... which in turn affects the thyroid...

She clicks the "Start Exam" button, and the first question appears on the screen.

SARA (CONT'D)
(reading quietly)
A 45-year-old man presents with fatigue and weight loss...

She reads through the question, her eyes scanning the multiple-choice options. Her brow furrows in concentration.

SARA (CONT'D)
(muttering)
Okay, differential diagnosis... B or C?

She clicks on an answer and moves on to the next question.

BEGIN MONTAGE

Split Screen: Half shows Sara's face, focused and serious. Overlay: Text of medical terms and options flash on the screen.

Close-up: Sara's hand taps the desk nervously. She sips her coffee without taking her eyes off the screen.

Medium Shot: She selects an answer, her face showing uncertainty.

Time Lapse: The clock shows time rapidly passing. Sara's posture shifts from confident to tense.

Close-up: Her brow furrows, and she bites her lip, deep in thought.

POV Shot: Sara blinks and rubs her eyes. Medium Shot: She shakes her head, refocusing, and quickly selects an answer.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Wide Shot: The cluttered desk with textbooks, notes, and flashcards.

Close-up: Sara's fingers drum on the desk, then hover over the mouse, clicking decisively.

Insert Shot: A flashcard on the desk reads "Parathyroid Hormone - PTH."

Medium Shot: Sara glances at it briefly, then back to the screen, answering confidently.

Split Screen: Shows Sara's face looking tired but determined. The other half shows a question about the hypothalamus.

Overlay: Medical diagrams and terminology flash briefly.

Close-up: Sara's face relaxes slightly as she reads the last question.

Medium Shot: She clicks the final answer and hits "Submit."

Screen: "Exam Complete. Calculating Results..."

Close-up: Sara watches the screen anxiously.

Close up: Screen: "Congratulations! You Passed."

Medium Shot: Sara's face lights up with relief and pride.

END MONTAGE

Sara scrolls through photos from saved articles on her phone. She stops when she sees Alex's podium finish. A smile plays on her lips.

INT. ALEX'S ROOM - NIGHT

Alex turns on a lamp. He stares at his computer thoughtfully. He looks at the pictures of him before his accident. But too long hurts. A spark of energy ignites within him. His fingers dance.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Eileen sits in a dark living room, watching old home movies. A box of tissues by her side, she dabs at her eyes while an old home video plays. The sound of children laughing and playful banter fills the room.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ON THE TV:

Young Alex, Kyle, and Sean run around a backyard, play tag, and then bounce on a trampoline. An inflatable ball bounces into the picture. It hits Alex in the face. Kyle and Sean laugh. Young Alex throws it at them, laughing. Trampoline Dodgeball commences.

YOUNG SEAN
Gotcha, Alex!

YOUNG KYLE
Ooooh!

YOUNG ALEX
(aiming for Sean's
head)
Gotcha back!

The screen shows a close-up of their joyful faces, carefree and full of life. Young Alex blows out the candles on his birthday cake.

BACK TO SCENE:

Alex hesitantly enters when he sees what's on the TV. He looks down at his wheelchair, his face a mix of sorrow and nostalgia. Eileen is reclined on the sofa, pillow supporting her back. Alex hopes she won't notice his welling eyes.

ALEX
I can't believe you kept these.

EILEEN
Your father found them under the
eves.
(Dabs at her eyes)
You were so happy back then.

ALEX
We were all great, little, naive,
happy kids.

On the screen, Young Alex is on his bike, sprinting downhill.

EILEEN
Oh, look! You were fearless!

ALEX
(Stares at the TV,
voice low)
(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

ALEX (CONT'D)

Stupid is more like it. Look, I'm riding without a helmet.

EILEEN

(Eyes Alex, smiling softly)

Even when I scolded you, you still never wore one. You said that you would still fall, so what's the difference? Fearless. You've always been. You've never let anyone tell you what to do.

Alex smiles tightly, fiddling with his fingers, until he looks back at the TV.

ALEX

(Sighs, voice strained)

I'm not anymore. Night, Becky.

Alex starts heading back to his room.

EILEEN

Alex?

ALEX

(Pausing, not turning)

Yeah?

EILEEN

It's okay to be afraid. But, it's not okay to be angry. If something was wrong, you would tell us, right?

ALEX

(Swallowing, voice low)

Of course.

The video continues to play, showing the boys lying on the grass, staring up at the sky, dreaming of the future.

INT. ALEX'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Alex stares in the mirror, trying to remember his younger self. His watch vibrates with Sara's text.

INT. ALEX'S ROOM - DAY

Alex's fingers hover over the keyboard. The manuscript is complete, but Alex is having second thoughts. There is a knock on the door.

ALEX

One minute!

Alex sends the manuscript to Laura. Another light knock on the door.

ALEX

Coming!

Alex opens the door. It's Sara.

SARA

Figure you needed a break.

ALEX

Oh, cool. Yes, I do.

SARA

Want to get out of here?

ALEX

(smiling)

You read my mind.

BEGIN MONTAGE: THE BOOK PRINTING PROCESS

INT. PUBLISHING OFFICE - DAY

Laura and her team are gathered around a conference table, reviewing Alex's manuscript. The room is filled with lively discussion and marked-up pages.

INT. ALEX'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Alex is on a video call with a sensitivity reader. They nod and make notes, discussing changes. Alex looks relieved.

INT. GRAPHIC DESIGNER'S OFFICE - DAY

A designer is at their computer, working on the book cover. Various drafts flash on the screen: different fonts, images, and colors. Finally, they settle on a striking design.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

INT. PRINTING PRESS - DAY

Massive rolls of paper are fed into the printing press. Ink jets spray words onto the pages in rapid succession.

CLOSE-UP: PRINTING MACHINERY

Mechanical arms lift sheets of freshly printed pages, aligning them perfectly before binding. The hum of the machines fills the air.

INT. BINDING ROOM - DAY

Stacks of printed pages are fed into a binding machine. The machine clamps down, securing the pages together with a strong spine.

INT. COVER DEPARTMENT - DAY

The completed covers are placed onto the bound pages. Another machine presses them firmly together. A worker inspects each book for quality.

INT. PACKAGING AREA - DAY

Finished books are stacked high on pallets. Workers carefully wrap them in protective plastic before placing them into boxes.

INT. DISTRIBUTION CENTER - DAY

Boxes of books are loaded onto trucks. The camera follows one truck as it drives away from the center, heading to bookstores and warehouses.

EXT. BOOKSTORE - DAY

A delivery truck pulls up to a bookstore. Workers unload boxes of Alex's book and carry them inside.

INT. BOOKSTORE - DAY

A bookseller opens a box, revealing the crisp new books. They place the books on a prominent display, arranging them neatly.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

INT. ALEX'S ROOM - NIGHT

Alex receives an email notification: "Your book is now available in stores."

MONTAGE ENDS

INT. ALEX'S ROOM - NIGHT

Sara enters, holding two mugs of hot cocoa. Her warm smile lights up the room, her red curls framing her face beautifully.

SARA

Hey. Got your text.

ALEX

Perfect timing, as always.

Sara hands him a mug and takes a seat on the edge of the bed, close but not too close. They sit in comfortable silence for a moment, sipping their drinks. The warmth of the cocoa and the faint sounds of laughter outside fill the air.

SARA

So, did you do it?

ALEX

Yeah. I just sent it. It's done.

SARA

That's exciting, Alex. I'm so proud of you.

The silence thick with unspoken words and emotions. Alex's fingers drum lightly on the mug, his heart swelling with a mix of relief and gratitude. Sara's hand briefly touches his shoulder, a silent gesture of support.

SARA

(Softly)

You know, I've missed this. Us. Talking, being together.

ALEX

I've missed it too. I'm sorry for pushing you away. I was... I was scared. Scared of being a burden.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SARA

(Gently)

You're not a burden, Alex. You're a fighter. And I want to be there with you, every step of the way.

Alex reaches out and takes Sara's hand, their fingers intertwining. It's a small gesture, but it speaks volumes.

ALEX

I want that too. I want us to be together. I know I don't look like much, but whatever I am, I really want to be with you. I want to be us again. I am trying to be me again. That is my offer. Is that enough?

Sara closes in and gives Alex a small kiss.

SARA

We will. One step at a time.

They sit in companionable silence, their connection rekindling with each passing moment.

SARA

(Smiling)

So, what's next for the great Alex Murray?

ALEX

(Grinning)

First, I wait to hear back from the publisher. Then... who knows? Maybe another book, maybe something completely different. But whatever it is, I want you by my side.

Sara leans in and kisses Alex gently on the cheek, a promise of more to come.

SARA

Always.

INT. KITCHEN - MORNING

Alex enters the kitchen, looking haggard with dark circles under his eyes. The morning light filters through the windows, and the smell of freshly brewed coffee fills the air. Zach and Jennifer are already seated, enjoying their coffee.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

JENNIFER
Good morning, Alex!

ZACH
(raising an eyebrow)
Who was that last night?

ALEX
(Plugging his ears,
yawning)
Coffee?

JENNIFER
(with a knowing
smile)
Help yourself. It was Sara, wasn't
it?

ALEX
(Pouring himself a
cup, trying to sound
nonchalant)
As a matter of fact, it was.

ZACH
(Looking intrigued)
Who is this Sara person?

JENNIFER
(Smirking)
She and Alex went to college
together. She had an interest in
him when he won the state
championship in track. He gave her
quite an exclusive!

ALEX
(sipping his coffee)
All ancient history.

ZACH
Well, sounds like there's more to
it than that.

JENNIFER
History rediscovered.

Alex smiles faintly, shaking his head as he takes another
sip of coffee.

ALEX
You two love your gossip.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

JENNIFER

(Laughing)

Oh, come on, Alex. We're just curious.

ZACH

(still grinning)

Yeah, man. Can't blame us for wanting to know more.

Alex pours a cup. Jennifer approaches the high chair.

JENNIFER

Now Bruce, you know Granddad and Grandmom need help.

ALEX

Help? With what?

JENNIFER

(hesitantly)

You know, just last-minute stuff.

ALEX

Well, I can help. What do they need?

LOUIS

But, Mommy! You said we play!

BRUCE

Yeah!

JENNIFER

Mommy can't. Not today. Maybe tomorrow. Okay?

LOUIS

No!

No!

BRUCE

JENNIFER

Ugh, Max, help me here.

MAX

Fellas, relax! Let's channel our inner Picassos with some peaceful coloring.

LOUIS

No!

No!

BRUCE

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

MAX

Come on, guys. Artists make cool stuff that lasts for centuries! Don't you guys wanna make your mark in history?

Louis and Bruce make fart sounds. Max turns to Jennifer, disgusted.

MAX

I tried.

LOUIS

We want to go somewhere fun with Mommy!

BRUCE

Yeah!

JENNIFER

No, Mommy has to take Grandmom to the doctor's.

ALEX

(with newfound confidence)
I've got this.

He wheels himself closer to his nephews, Louis and Bruce, who look up at him with curiosity.

ALEX

Guys, I've got an idea. Why don't we go to the fun, mysterious, adventurous... corn maze?

Louis and Bruce's eyes light up with excitement. Alex looks back at his sisters, a hint of a smile on his face.

CLAIRE

Isn't that sweet?

JENNIFER

(still frustrated but grateful to Alex)
Thanks, Alex. Let's go, boys.

Claire watches them for a moment, her expression conflicted, before turning away.

INT. SARA'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Sara and younger brother JASON, 16, are sitting on the couch, studying.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Jason frustratedly writes, erases, then rewrites the solution to a math problem. Their grandmother, PEGGY (70s), is in the kitchen, slowly making breakfast.

JASON
(frustrated)
Sara, I don't get this math problem. Can you help me?

SARA
(glancing up from her notes)
Sure, Jason. Let me see.

Sara walks over to Jason, looks at the math problem, and explains it quickly but clearly.

SARA
Got it now?

JASON
Yeah, thanks!

Sara smiles and ruffles his hair. Jason pulls away, annoyed.

JASON
Gah! Stop!

Sara chuckles then concentrates on her notes. Grandma Peggy calls from the kitchen.

PEGGY (O.S.)
Sara, can you help me with the stove? This burner won't light.

SARA
(sighing)
Coming, Grandma.

Sara returns to her textbooks, trying to focus.

BECKY
(off-screen)
Sara, do you have a minute?

Sara sighs, closing her eyes for a brief moment to gather patience.

SARA
Mom, I'm studying. What is it?

Becky opens the door, holding a basket of laundry.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

BECKY

I just need you to help me sort these. It'll only take a minute.

SARA

Mom, I really can't right now. This test is really important.

BECKY

I know, honey. I'll leave these here for later, then.

Becky leaves the basket in the corner of the room and exits. Sara turns back to her laptop, trying to regain focus.

SARA

(to herself)

Alright, question number 42...

She barely reads the first line when her younger brother, JASON (13), bursts in holding a video game controller.

JASON

Sara, I need your help with this level. It's impossible!

SARA

Jason, I'm studying for the USMLE. Can you ask Mom?

JASON

But Mom's terrible at this game.

SARA

Then, ask Dad.

JASON

Dad's no fun either. You're the best!

SARA

Jason, please. I need to concentrate.

JASON

Fine, fine. Good luck with your doctor stuff.

Jason leaves, sulking. Sara rubs her temples, then turns back to her laptop. She takes a deep breath and starts reading again.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

SARA
(determined)
Question number 42...

Suddenly, her phone rings. She glances at it and sees it's her older sister, EMILY, 30. With a frustrated groan, she answers.

SARA
Emily, this better be important.
I'm studying.

EMILY
I know, I know. But I just needed
to ask if you can babysit tonight.
I have a last-minute work meeting.

SARA
Emily, I can't. I'm studying for
one of the biggest exams of my
life.

EMILY
It's just for a couple of hours.
Please, Sara?

SARA
Emily, I need to focus. Can you
ask Becky?

EMILY
She's busy. But fine, I'll figure
something out. Good luck, sis.

Sara hangs up, feeling the pressure mounting. She takes another deep breath, centering herself.

SARA
(to herself,
resolutely)
You've got this. Focus.

As she resumes studying, her dad, JOHN, knocks and pokes his head in.

JOHN
Hey, kiddo. Want some tea? It
might help you relax.

SARA
(forcing a smile)
Thanks, Dad. That'd be great. Can
you just leave it outside the door?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (4)

JOHN

Sure thing. Hang in there, kiddo.

He closes the door. Sara finally finds a moment of peace. She closes her eyes, breathes deeply, and then opens them with a steely determination.

SARA

(to herself)

Question number 42...

She finally focuses completely on the screen, shutting out all distractions.

Sara's phone buzzes again -

SARA

Ugh!

- this time with a message from Alex: "Want to meet at a corn maze?" Sara glances at the time, thinking. Then, a smile appears on her face.

INT. JENNIFER'S CAR - DAY

Jennifer is driving. Charles looks out the window, while Eileen checks a list of questions for the doctor. Jennifer glances in the rearview mirror at her parents, chatting softly.

CHARLES

Make sure to ask about the new medication. I want to avoid going to the hospital at all costs.

EILEEN

I've got it on my list, dear.

Jennifer smiles to herself, feeling the weight of responsibility but also the warmth of family

INT. SITTING ROOM - DAY

Alex sets up his phone on a holder, on an ottoman near a love sofa. He positions a copy of his new book, "Crip", in front of him and starts recording a video.

ALEX

(speaking to the camera)

Hey everyone, I'm thrilled to share my new book with you.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ALEX (CONT'D)

It's been a journey, and I can't wait for you all to read it.

He smiles confidently.

INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Zach, Claire, and Aunt Linda sit down at the table, enjoying their homemade spaghetti. They laugh and share stories, using both spoken words and sign language.

CLAIRE

(signing and speaking)

This is delicious, Aunt Linda. We did good!

AUNT LINDA

Huh?! What are you doing with your hands?!

Claire gives a thumbs up, chewing a noodle. Linda beams with pride.

INT. JENNIFER'S CAR - LATER

Jennifer drives her parents back home, the doctor's visit complete. Charles and Eileen seem relieved and more at ease.

JENNIFER

(smiling)

See? Nothing to worry about.

Charles and Eileen nod, feeling cared for and supported by their daughter.

EXT. HOUSE - LATE AFTERNOON

Bruce and Louis are bouncing around the room like two hyperactive kangaroos. Jennifer b, Eileen, and Charles exchange worried glances. Claire hands Alex a bag.

CLAIRE

I put in snacks in case you guys get hungry.

ALEX

Thanks.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

BRUCE
(cheerfully)
Corn maze! Corn maze!

LOUIS
(yelling)
I'm gonna be the first to the
middle!

ALEX
(grinning)
Alright, guys, calm down. We
haven't even left the house yet.

JENNIFER
Alex, are you sure about this? I
mean, two toddlers and a corn
maze...

CLAIRE
Relax, Jen. He's got this.

JENNIFER
(sighing)
I just don't want you to overdo it,
Alex.

ALEX
(mocking her)
Oh no, the corn! It's too much!
Jen, I'll be fine. I've got the
map, snacks, water, and my phone.
We're set.

Bruce climbs onto Alex's lap, pretending to steer the
wheelchair.

BRUCE
Vroom vroom! I'm driving!

ALEX
(laughing)
Hey, easy there, buddy. No driving
without a license.

Louis runs up with a toy sword, poking the air.

LOUIS
I'll protect us from the corn
monsters!

CHARLES
(confused)
Corn monsters?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

EILEEN

He means scarecrows, dear.

Jennifer's torn.

JENNIFER

Maybe I should just come with you...

ALEX

(teasing)

And miss out on keeping Mom and Dad company? Come on, Jen. We'll be fine. Worst case, Claire can always rescue us.

CLAIRE

(smirking)

Like always.

JENNIFER

(still hesitant)

I just...

ALEX

(serious)

Jen, I appreciate it, really. But the boys are counting on me. I promised them.

Bruce gives Jennifer his best puppy-dog eyes.

BRUCE

I wanna go with Uncle Alex.

JENNIFER

(defeated sigh)

Alright, alright. But you call me if you need anything.

ALEX

(smiling)

Yes, ma'am.

Alex gives a mock salute. Claire hands Alex the packed bag. Louis clambers onto Alex's lap.

LOUIS

To the maze!

EILEEN

Should we be worried?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

CHARLES

(smiling)

Nah. They'll be back before the
corn knows what hit it.

END OF ACT 2

ACT THREE

Alex wheels out, Bruce and Louis chattering excitedly. Jennifer watches them.

JENNIFER

Well, at least I can give you a lift.

ALEX

Nah, I called a handicap accessible Uber. Should be here any minute.

UBER VAN pulls up fast, screeching to a halt. The DRIVER hops out, smoking a funny cigarette.

UBER DRIVER

Juber at your service!

ALEX

What?

UBER DRIVER

Juber. J Uber. You know, like Jason Bourne Uber. No matter where I'll get you there like your life counted on it!

Alex is baffled.

ALEX

On second thought, cancel that. My sister will take us.

UBER DRIVER

You sure? I've got toys. They make the kids docile.

ALEX

Uh... We are good. Here.
(Handing the driver
money)

For the trouble. Keep the change.

UBER DRIVER

You don't know what you're missing!

The driver gets back in his jalopy and peels away.

CONTINUED:

ALEX

It's what we cool guys do. It's like saying we got each other without actually saying it. Come on, let's try it. Make a fist and stick it out.

They bump.

ALEX

Ka-poof!

Bruce laughs. Louis laughs. Alex's WATCH vibrates with a text message.

CLOSE UP: PHONE SCREEN

The message reads: "Almost there - Sara."

Alex's face lights up with a mixture of relief and excitement. He types his response.

ALEX

Hey guys I have a surprise -

Louis and Bruce have vanished.

ALEX

Fuck.

INT. EILEEN'S HOUSE - DINING ROOM - DAY

The dining room is warmly decorated for Thanksgiving. Eileen, Claire, Max, and Jennifer are digging in spaghetti and meatballs. Laughter and conversation fill the air, but an underlying tension is evident in Eileen's demeanor.

CLAIRE

(passing the spaghetti)

Becky, this is delicious. You've outdone yourself this year.

ZACH

I've never had spaghetti before Thanksgiving. This is great.

EILEEN

Well, you can thank your Aunt Linda for that.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

AUNT LINDA (O.S.)
What was that, dear?

UNCLE STU (O.S.)
THEY LIKE THE PASTA!

AUNT LINDA
Oh, goodie! Stu, are you still in
the bathroom?! What the hell are
you doing in there?!

UNCLE STU (O.S.)
I'LL BE OUT IN A MINUTE, DARLING!

Eileen smiles weakly, her eyes reflecting a deep sadness.

EILEEN
It's wonderful having everyone
here.

Zach notices Eileen's subdued mood and gives her a concerned
look.

ZACH
Eileen, are you okay? You seem a
bit... off.

Eileen takes a deep breath, glancing at Claire and Zach.

EILEEN
There's something I need to tell
you all. I wanted to wait for the
right moment, but...

AUNT LINDA
Huh?

Claire and Zach exchange worried glances, their attention
fully on Eileen.

CLAIRE
Becky, what is it?

EILEEN
I've been to the doctor recently.
They found something... I have
Meningioma.

Shocked silence stifles the kitchen.

CLAIRE
Oh my God, Becky. When did you
find out?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

EILEEN

(teary-eyed)

The results came in on Monday just before everyone arrived .

ZACH

So, you've been keeping it from everyone?

Charles enters from the garage door, overhearing everything. He keeps quiet.

EILEEN

I didn't want to worry anyone. Especially Alex. He's been through more than plenty over the past couple years.

Claire hugs Eileen tightly, tears streaming down her face. Uncle Stu and Aunt Linda put a comforting hand on Eileen's shoulder.

CLAIRE

We love you, Becky. We'll be with you every step of the way. I can help with your appointments. Jennifer will take you to therapy. And, Alex will keep up with -

EILEEN

Alex doesn't know. I don't want him to know. I still need to be there for him.

Surprised, Uncle Stu and Aunt Linda look at Charles.

END OF ACT 2

ACT THREE

EXT. CORN MAZE - LATER

The sun hangs low in the sky, casting long shadows over the towering corn stalks. The rustling of leaves fills the air. Alex, disheveled, calls out.

ALEX

Louis! Bruce! Louis! Come on,
guys! Bruce!

The distant giggles stop Alex in his tracks. Alex listens, then scoots down another path.

CLOSE UP OF ALEX'S WATCH

Text from Sara: "I'm here."

ALEX

Shit!

His desperation growing. He turns a corner and nearly bumps into Sara. She sees he is in a panicked state.

SARA

(concerned)

Alex! What's going on?

ALEX

(relieved, but frantic)

Sara! You gotta help me. My nephews - Louis and Bruce - ran off while I was on the phone. I can't find them anywhere. Jen's gonna kill me!

SARA

Relax. Everything is going to be fine. We'll find them.

ALEX

(nods)

Thank you.

SARA

Let's split up. You go that way, I'll take this path. We'll meet back here in five minutes.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ALEX
Sara, it's literally a maze! I
don't want to lose you too!

SARA
What are their names?

ALEX
Louis and Bruce. They're toddlers.
Brown hair, brown eyes. They're
wearing

SARA
Alright, let's just keep going.
They couldn't have gotten that
far.

They continue to call out the boys' names. The sound of
rustling corn and distant giggles grows louder.

ALEX
(Firm, but relieved)
Louis! Bruce! There you are! What
did I say about sticking together?

LOUIS
(sheepishly)
Sorry, Uncle Alex... we just
wanted to play hide and seek.

BRUCE
(climbing on Alex and
hugging him)
We sorry.

ALEX
It's okay. Are you guys okay?

The toddlers nod. Alex checks his watch.

ALEX
Let's go home.

LOUIS
Awwwwwe!

BRUCE
Awwwwwe!

ALEX
Awe. I know. Tomorrow is another
day. But, since all Uncle Alex's
work is done, he can take you guys
to the aquarium that is inside and
contained.

(CONTINUED)

INT. ATLANTA BOTANICAL GARDENS - DAY

The Atlanta Botanical Gardens dazzle under the afternoon sun. Lush greenery and vibrant flowers create a serene atmosphere. Alex and Sara meander down winding paths, their steps slow and contemplative.

SARA

You know, most people wouldn't think of this as a perfect date spot, but it's incredible.

ALEX

I figured you would appreciate it.

They stop near a serene pond adorned with water lilies. Alex gazes at the flowers, lost in thought.

ALEX

I used to come here with my Becky.

SARA

That's sweet. What a wonderful son.

ALEX

(Smirking with a hint of sadness)
Wonderful.... That's not what I call myself now.

SARA

(Concerned)
What? Why?

ALEX

I haven't spoken to either of my parents much. In fact, after the accident and rehab....I wasn't myself.

SARA

After what you went through, I don't think anyone would feel like themselves.

A BUTTERFLY flutters around them and lands gently on Alex's shoulder. Both Alex and Sara notice, the mood lightening slightly.

SARA

(Softly with awe)
Look at that!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ALEX

(Grinning)

Yeah. I didn't know butterflies
were attracted to the scent of Old
Spice.

Sara playfully hits Alex's arm, laughing.

SARA

It's not your Old Spice.
Butterflies find things or people
in need of hope.

Sara pulls out her phone and snaps a picture of Alex and
the butterfly, capturing the moment. Just then, a MAN
approaches, his expression stern.

MAN

Excuse me, miss. I don't think you
can take pictures in the
sanctuary.

SARA

(Embarrassed,
lowering her phone)

Oh, okay. Sorry.

The man steps away, leaving Alex and Sara in a slightly
awkward silence.

ALEX

You made us get in trouble.

SARA

(shrugs, smiling)

I didn't see any signs.

ALEX

Yeah, me either. Wanna get out of
here?

SARA

Yeah.

They walk away, their bond subtly strengthened by their
shared moments of vulnerability and humor.

INT. HOME DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Alex and Sara enter. A FOAM FOOTBALL spirals toward
Sara's head. With lightning-fast reflexes, Alex catches
it.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

JENNIFER (O.S.)
Louis, not so hard!

Louis giggles. Jennifer enters the kitchen.

JENNIFER
Oh! Hello.

SARA
Hey.

Alex nods at the set table.

ALEX
Did you eat without us?

JENNIFER
We were just sitting down.

ALEX
Great.

Alex tosses the football back to Louis.

INT. KITCHEN TABLE - CONTINUOUS

The family, Alex, Sara, are seated around the table. The PASTA LADLE is passed around. Sara pokes at the pasta, uninterested.

EILEEN
Sara, it's lovely to have you over!

SARA
Thank you. It's wonderful to be here. It's so good to meet all of you finally!

ALEX
Don't speak too soon.

AUNT LINDA
Sorry?

UNCLE STU
So, Sara, what do you do?

SARA
I'm a med student at Emory.

CHARLES
Oh? And, how is that going?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

SARA

Oh! It's really tough. But, it's very fulfilling. I've always wanted to help people.

CHARLES

But, why did you get into medicine?

SARA

Actually, it was because of Alex. I realized that there are so many people with disabilities. And, there's not enough being done to make their lives better. And, that's what the medical community is all about. To help people get better.

AUNT LINDA

Whadda say?!

Jennifer smirks.

JENNIFER

(Under breath)

Yeah. Wait until you have to pay those loans.

CLAIRE

Sara, have you given thought to alternative medicine?

SARA

Sorry?

ALEX

Claire.

CLAIRE

Alex, this is important. If she's going to be a doctor, she should know.

SARA

Know what?

ALEX

Ugh! Here we go.

CLAIRE

Never been a fan of hospitals. I don't believe in modern pharmaceuticals.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

Big pharma is really in it for the money. Sara, have you ever given a thought to alternative medicine?

SARA

Ahhh... What do you mean?

CLAIRE

You know - whole medical systems. Mind-body techniques. Biologically based practices. Manipulative and body-based therapies. Energy therapies. All that modern medicine is just an excuse for big pharmaceutical companies to make a profit.

SARA

Well, I wouldn't know about that. But, I think there's more to be researched on nature-based remedies. The problem is that there's really no evidence to prove -

CLAIRE

Well, Sara, when I came down with the flu, you know what I used? elderberry syrup, garlic. In 24 hours, it was gone!

SARA

Interesting. And you didn't take any Dayquill or anything?

CLAIRE

Nope.

Beat.

ZACH

I did slip her some Nyquil.

ALEX

Ah! See?

CLAIRE

What?! How could you?!

MAX

You know, I had a bad ulcer. You know what helped that? Unicorn tears!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (4)

CLAIRE

Max, you constantly take ibuprofen. You eat it like candy. Of course you're going to get ulcers!

MAX

Well, I would rather take a proven drug than some hippie sludge home remedy!

Claire stands up and begins shouting. Max sips his wine. Eileen, Jennifer, Uncle Stu step in. Alex turns to Sara.

ALEX

Jee! Look at the time! I'll walk you out.

The wheels get stuck on the tablecloth. Everything tumbles. Dogs lap up the pasta.

EXT. DRIVEWAY - NIGHT

Alex walks Sara to her car. Sara plays with her keys.

ALEX

On behalf of my entire dysfunctional family, I apologize for what happened in there. My sisters are...

SARA

Quite opinionated?

ALEX

Umm... Let's go with that.

SARA

But, they're nice. They mean well. It was really good seeing your Becky and dad again. I had a nice time.

Back in the house, Louis and Bruce are watching them, peering through the blinds of Alex's bedroom window. Alex spots the boys' silhouettes looming.

SARA

Maybe next time you should come over to my house. Meet my family.

ALEX

Yeah. Definitely.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (5)

SARA
I'll call. Okay?

Alex smiles. Sara backs out of the driveway and waves.

ALEX
Okay.

EXT. BACKYARD - DAY

A tranquil backyard, illuminated by the soft hues of the sun. Alex eagerly tosses a FOOTBALL to his nephews. Nephews are wearing big smiles. Alex looks at the time.

ALEX
Alright, this is gonna have to be a short game. Uncle Alex needs to get back to work so he can pay next month's rent.

LOUIS
(looking worried)
Uncle Alex, how can you play catch from a wheelchair?

ALEX
Well, I'll show ya!

Louis nods and throws the football gingerly toward Alex. Alex snatches it out of the air. Louis and Bruce break into cheers, their faces light up with delight. Alex gently tosses it back.

ALEX
See? Now, who wants to play offense?

BRUCE
Me!

ALEX
Yeah? Do you wanna play quarterback or receiver?

BRUCE
Quarterback!

ALEX
How about you, Louis? Wanna play linebacker?

LOUIS
What's a linebacker?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ALEX

He's like the defense's
quarterback. But, instead of
coming up with ways to score, he
tries to come up with ways to take
the ball away from the
quarterback. Got it?

Cool!

LOUIS

Cool!

BRUCE

ALEX

I take it you both want to be
linebackers?

LOUIS

I'm linebacker! I'm bigger!

Bruce starts crying.

ALEX

Hang on! Who am I gonna throw it
to? I can't play quarterback *and*
be the offense's most valuable
player. The wide receiver!

BRUCE

(grinning)

I can play weciever!

ALEX

You can?! Same goes for you,
Louis, when it's your turn. Okay?

LOUIS

Okay.

EXT. BACKYARD - CONTINUOUS

BEGIN MONTAGE

Alex throws the foam football to Bruce.

Louis competitively tags Bruce.

Alex gives Bruce the count who hikes the football to
Alex.

Bruce runs down the yard and catches the ball near the
fence - "The Touchdown" area. They celebrate.

Louis hikes the football and goes long. He catches the TD
pass. The dogs start to play with them.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

END MONTAGE

Fart noise. Kids laugh harder. The back door bangs open. Max steps out, sketchpad in hand.

MAX

Ugh. Sports.

LOUIS

Dad! Wanna play?

MAX

Not now. You guys have fun.

LOUIS

Awwwwwe!

ALEX

Party-pooper.

LOUIS

Party pooper! Pooper!
Pooper!

BRUCE

Party pooper! Pooper!
Pooper!

The boys dart around the yard, giggling and squealing with delight, while Alex tosses the ball to them. Zach comes outside and joins in.

ZACH

Hey, what's all the ruckus?

LOUIS

We're playing football with Uncle Alex!

BRUCE

Yeah!

ZACH

Sounds fun! Can I play? I'll give you all a run for your money. You know, I played quarterback in college.

ALEX

Oh, cool!

MAX

Oh, here we go. Are you going down memory lane again? Highlights of time past, reliving yesteryear.

ZACH

At least I've got some highlights.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

MAX

Yes! Highlights! Wispy
brushstrokes of yesteryear!

ALEX

Oh my god! Let's just play.

EXT. BACKYARD - CONTINUOUS

Alex motions for Max to run out, he throws a perfect spiral. Max makes the catch.

LOUIS

Yay, daddy!

BRUCE

Yay, yay!

Max does a celebration dance. Zach throws another, caught again. Louis and Bruce lose interest and start playing "bowling" with an OVERSIZED BALL.

CLAIRE

Alex!

Claire waves him in.

INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Copies of Alex's new book, "Crip." With a mandolin slicer, Eileen vigorously scallops potatoes. Aunt Linda is stuffing the turkey. Everyone - except Aunt Linda - turns to Alex, disappointment evident in their faces.

JENNIFER

(voice trembling)

How could you, Alex? How could you
write those things about us?

CLAIRE

(accusingly)

You turned us into dysfunctional
idiots. Do you really think we're
that awful?

EILEEN

(sadly)

I never thought you saw us that
way, Alex. I never thought you saw
yourself like this.

Alex clenches his fists, his knuckles turning white. His jaw tightens, and his eyes flicker with a mixture of hurt and anger. He takes a deep breath, but it comes out shaky.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ALEX
(struggling to remain
calm)
You don't understand...

Jennifer steps closer, her voice rising.

JENNIFER
We don't understand? Alex, you've
humiliated us!

ALEX
I didn't write it to hurt you. I
wrote it because... it's how I
felt. It's how I've been feeling.

Jennifer takes another step.

JENNIFER
But, your mocking them, Alex!
You're mocking us! You don't get
to pull the disabled card here!
Don't you understand?! You
blatantly crossed a line you
should never!

Alex's frustration bubbles over. He slams his fist on the
table, startling everyone.

ALEX
(angrily)
You think it's easy for me?
Writing was the only way I could
deal with everything! I needed to
make sense of it all. I don't get
to pull the disabled card?! I have
every goddamn right to! After the
accident, I was the one who felt
isolated. I was the one that
couldn't walk! I'm the one who
gets up every fucking day and go
in fear that I'm not accepted, I
am not able to go out with
friends! I'm not able to use my
body and do yoga or help injured
patients! I *am* the injured
patient! And, there are many, many
more like me out there who need to
be able to laugh, who need a
voice, who need acceptance. They
need to be able to look themselves
in the mirror and have the
confidence to say, I am a cripple,
so what? I still need my day!

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

ALEX (CONT'D)

Of course, none of you understood what I was going through.

EILEEN

At what cost, Alex?!

Eileen slams her hand on the slicer.

EILEEN

Shit!

Blood spews forth. Eileen quickly runs her finger under cold water, grabbing for paper towels. She wraps it gently and holds her arm up.

ALEX

Dad! We need help!

EXT. HOSPITAL - LATER

The family rushes into the emergency room, Alex trailing behind in his wheelchair. It feels surreal.

INT. HOSPITAL WAITING ROOM - NIGHT

Alex is with his family. Their glances occasionally, uncomfortably, dart his way. The double doors swing open, and a NURSE approaches.

NURSE HATHAWAY

She's going to be fine. Eileen suffered a small heart attack. She has hypertension, so we are going to put her on beta blockers for now. She can go home.

ALEX

Anything we can do to help her feel comfortable?

NURSE HATHAWAY

Just make sure she gets rest and takes her prescription. She should come back in a couple of weeks for a follow up. Then, we'll get some blood and do an EKG to see how she's doing.

ALEX

Okay. Thank you.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

The family sighs collectively.

INT. ALEX'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

The moonlight seeps through the blinds. Alex sits in his wheelchair, staring blankly at the wall, his mind replaying the evening's events.

He wheels himself over to his desk, where "Crip" stares back at him, his heart heavy with regret.

He throws the manuscript onto the floor, pages scattering everywhere. He wheels himself to the window.

ALEX
(to the night)
Is this who I am now?

He looks down at the scattered pages, each one a testament to his pain and anger, overwhelmed by guilt. The weight of his actions crashing down on him.

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Alex finds the home video still in the player. He turns it on.

CUT TO:

ON THE TV:

Young Alex, Young Jennifer, Young Claire are playing in the backyard. Eileen is laughing. Suddenly, Young Alex jumps into Eileen's arms. Eileen picks him up, running with him, pretending he's Superman.

BACK TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Alex wheels himself into the living room, the house eerily quiet. He looks around at the family photos on the walls, each one a reminder of better times.

He goes to the bookshelf, pulling out photo albums and flipping through them. Pictures of family vacations, birthdays, and holidays fill the pages. He pauses on a photo of himself and Eileen, both smiling, carefree.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ALEX
(speaking to the photo)
I'm so sorry.

He closes the album with an empty feeling. He's hit rock bottom, feeling utterly hopeless.

INT. BATHROOM - LATER

Alex looks at himself in the mirror, seeing a man he barely recognizes. He splashes water on his face, but the pain remains.

ALEX
(softly)
I need help.

He wheels himself out of the bathroom.

INT. LIVING ROOM - EARLY MORNING

The first light of dawn creeps through the windows. Alex sits in his wheelchair, the manuscript gathered neatly on the coffee table. He picks up his phone and dials a number.

ALEX
(on the phone)
Hi, Dr. Thompson. It's Alex. I
need to schedule an appointment...

INT. HOSPITAL - WAITING ROOM - DAY

Alex, anxious and lost, holds a small bouquet. Sara enters the sterilized room, her presence immediately calming. Alex constantly glances at his watch.

SARA
(concerned)
Hey, how are you holding up?

ALEX
(nervously)
It's been hours. I've got a bad
feeling.

Sara places a comforting hand on his shoulder, her touch grounding him.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SARA

(softly)

I know it's hard, but your mom is in good hands. You've done everything you can. Now, you have to trust the doctors.

ALEX

(sighing)

I just feel so helpless. I want to do something, anything.

(Beat)

She saw my novel. I don't think she liked it.

SARA

What do you mean?

ALEX

I mean.... The publisher sent over copies. My mom started reading it. And here we are!

Looking at his phone, his watch vibrating with messages.

ALEX

Great! My PR guy sent it to the AJC. They wanna do an interview..... Ugh!.... So does 11Alive! Great! I didn't expect this when I wrote that nonsense. I just wanted the publisher off my back! I did the wrong thing for the wrong reason. Classic Alex Murray! When am I going to stop? When am I going to stop running?! I was never there when it mattered. Where do I start to make it right?

Sara smiles gently, her eyes filled with understanding.

SARA

You're doing it right now. Being here, waiting for your mom, ready to support her when she needs you the most. That's what matters.

ALEX

(studying Sara)

How do you always know the right thing to say?

Sara looks thoughtful, her own journey reflected in her eyes.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

SARA

I've learned a lot from you - seeing you with Louis and Bruce and Jen. It's not about fixing everything; it's about being there, no matter what.

Alex reflects on this for a moment.

ALEX

This entire trip, I've been questioning myself. Thinking about what I've lost. Thinking I'm not Alex they knew. And, I'm not. I could never reconcile the accident, what it turned me into. Why Sean and Kyle died, and I lived. I don't think I could've gotten through this without you.

SARA

(blushing slightly)

I was afraid when I saw you at the trail. I didn't know how to approach you. It had been so long... I wasn't sure how I would feel when I saw you like this. But, at that coffee shop, I realized you were the same old Alex. Despite your wheelchair. It's made me realize how important it is to be there for the people we care about.

ALEX

(reaching for her hand)

I'm not that Alex anymore. I'm better. We're all in this together.

Sara squeezes his hand, her expression warm.

SARA

And we're going to get through it, one step at a time.

INT. ALEX'S ROOM - LATE AFTERNOON

RATTLING KEYS. Alex stops. A tiny reflection in the window. He pivots and sees Bruce standing in the doorway with a teddy bear.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

ALEX

Hey there, Bruce. Getting ready for bedtime?

BRUCE

Read me a story.

ALEX

Come on. Let's find your dad.

EXT. BACK PORCH - CONTINUOUS

Alex sees Max comatose in the hammock.

ALEX

Alright. Come on, buddy. Uncle Alex will read it to you.

BRUCE

Yay!

INT. BRUCE'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Alex picks a children's book.

ALEX

This the one?

Bruce nods.

ALEX

Alrighty then. The... End. Huh! That was short.

BRUCE

Uncle Alex! That's the end! You're s'posed to start at the beginning!

ALEX

(Feigning ignorance)
Oooohhhh!

Bruce's laughter is infectious. Alex flips to the beginning.

ALEX

"In the great, green room
There was a telephone and a
picture of - "

Alex flips the page.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (4)

ALEX

"a red balloon."

(Flip page)

"And there were three little bears
sitting on chairs..."

(Flip page)

"And two little kittens and
mittens...""And a comb and a brush and a bowl
full of mush."

Alex smiles as Bruce's eyes close. Alex watches a peaceful sleeping Bruce, contemplating.

ALEX

(Whispers)

Love you, kiddo.

Alex's watch vibrates. Another text - this one from Laura.

LAURA

(in text)

Big news! Writer's Digest wants to highlight you! Went ahead and scheduled an interview via Zoom tomorrow! They are ECSTATIC!!

INT. ALEX'S HOME OFFICE - DAY

The room is neatly organized, with a bookshelf filled with various books and a few framed photos. A desk lamp casts a warm glow. Alex sits in front of his laptop, dressed smartly in a shirt and blazer. The Zoom interface is open on his screen, showing the name "JANE DOE - WRITER'S DIGEST" on a video call.

ALEX

(almost to himself)

Alright, let's do this.

He clicks to join the meeting. The screen shows JANE DOE, a professional-looking interviewer, 30s, with a friendly smile.

JANE

Hi Alex! Thanks for taking the time to chat with Writer's Digest today.

ALEX

Hi Jane, it's my pleasure. Thanks for having me.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

JANE

First of all, congratulations on the release of your new book, "Crip." It's been receiving fantastic reviews. Can you tell us a bit about what inspired you to write it?

ALEX

(smiling)

Thank you! The inspiration came from my own experiences, actually. I wanted to explore themes of resilience and finding strength in adversity, and writing this book was a way to share that journey with others.

JANE

That's wonderful. In the book, your protagonist faces many challenges similar to your own. How much of your personal experience is reflected in the story?

ALEX

There's a lot of me in the protagonist, for sure. I drew from my experiences of dealing with unexpected life changes and learning to adapt. But I also wanted to create a universal story that anyone facing their own struggles could relate to.

JANE

It certainly comes across as very authentic. How did you find the writing process? Was it cathartic or challenging?

ALEX

It was a bit of both, honestly. Writing can be incredibly therapeutic, but -

RINGING.

JANE

Whoop! Looks like we have a fan here on the line!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

ALEX
(pleasantly)

Oh!

JANE
You're on the line, caller!

JIMMY (O.S.)
Hi! I just wanted to say that, Alex, you've got some fucking nerve! Who the hell do you think you are?! Making fun of people with special needs! Instead of writing a 300-page slop show you call art, you could have just said people with disabilities are stupid, helpless suckers, sucking on society's teat!

ALEX
Hang on, there, Jimmy. I think you missed the point. See, JJ was discovering himself. And, in his journey, he realized how his cognitive and physical conditions were hurdles, and -

JIMMY (O.S.)
Yeah, bullshit! You just had to get off on mocking people with disabilities! You fucking ableist asshole!

ALEX
Jimmy, I am not an ableist! I'm a paraplegic myself. The novel was written from an ironic standpoint because that stereotype you mentioned is blatantly everywhere in entertainment. If anything, it's a satire about the portrayal of the disabled - not a direct mockery!

JIMMY (O.S.)
Yeah whatever. Put piss in a jar and you can call it grandma's apple sider! Your book is -

JANE
Look at that! We're out of time. Thanks, Jimmy for calling. Alex, great having you on the channel.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

ALEX
(a little stunned)
Thank you, Jane. It's been a
pleasure.

JANE
(to audience)
Okay YouTubers, well, that was
interesting. Stay tuned for....

Alex shuts down his computer as crushing embarrassment
falls upon him.

INT. ALEX'S HOME OFFICE - DAY

Alex shuts down his computer, his face reflecting a mix
of frustration and embarrassment. He takes a deep breath,
trying to shake off the negative encounter.

CUT TO:

INT. REHABILITATION CENTER - PHYSICAL THERAPY ROOM - DAY

Alex is in the middle of a physical therapy session. He's
drenched in sweat. Sara enters quietly, observing him.

ALEX (V.O.)
At first, it was just pain.
Physical, emotional. But then... it
was fear. Fear of losing everything
I worked for. Fear of being
forgotten.

SARA (V.O.)
And what kept you going?

ALEX (V.O.)
Hope. The hope that maybe, just
maybe, I could find a new path. And
people like you... who didn't give
up on me.

The air is thick with unspoken emotions. Sara leaves.

FADE TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM - EARLY MORNING

Alex hangs up the phone, feeling a small sense of relief
for reaching out.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

As he sits in the quiet room, his eyes catch a glimpse of a dusty old VHS tape on the shelf labeled "Alex's Races." He hesitates for a moment, then wheels himself over and takes the tape.

INT. LIVING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Alex inserts the tape into the VCR and turns on the TV. The screen flickers to life, showing grainy footage of Alex in his prime, running marathons and crossing finish lines with a beaming smile. The sound of cheering crowds and the sight of his younger, determined self brings a bittersweet smile to his face.

ON THE TV:

The camera captures Alex pushing himself to the limit, sweat pouring down his face, his eyes filled with fierce determination. The fire that had been extinguished begins to flicker back to life.

BACK TO:

Alex rewinds the tape and watches the races again, absorbing the energy and passion from his past self.

INT. ALEX'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Alex sits at his desk, writing a heartfelt letter to his family. He pours out his feelings.

ALEX (V.O.)

I know I've hurt you, and I'm deeply sorry. Writing was my way of coping, but it shouldn't have come at your expense. I'm going to make things right, starting with myself

The letter is sealed and placed on the coffee table.

CUT TO:

INT. AIRPLANE - EARLY MORNING

Alex looks up from his laptop at the sun, knowing how to mend his broken family relationship.

FADE TO:

INT. LOEWS HOTEL - DAY

Alex looks at the crowd of readers - their expressions a mix of smiles and puzzling looks. Laura taps Alex's shoulder.

LAURA

This is exciting, isn't?

ALEX

It's definitely something.

LAURA

You've never been to California before, have you? I love it here. Don't you?

ALEX

(hesitantly)

It's my first time. It's nice. Real nice.

LAURA

Haha. Well, think about moving. I need you back in New York, cranking out those spectacular manuscripts!

ALEX

Wait, the contract was just for this one book.

LAURA

Don't worry. I've got others with me you need to sign. But, we'll take care of them after. This is your moment in the sun! Enjoy it! Soak it in! Soak it all in! I presume you have a speech prepared?

ALEX

Yes.

LAURA

I'm sure it's brilliant!

ALEX

Trust me, if you liked the book, my remarks will leave you speechless.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

LAURA

Wonderful! I'm going to be in the front row.

ALEX

Perfect.

The bookstore manager, KAREN, 30s, approaches Alex.

KAREN

How are we doing?

ALEX

Fine. Just fine.

KAREN

Can we start? I'll introduce you and then you can take it from there. If you don't mind, limit the speech to five minutes. I have other writers coming in soon.

ALEX

No problem.

(Glancing at Laura)

I'm actually ready now.

KAREN

Okey-dokey. Let me introduce you then.

Karen approaches a MIC.

KAREN

Alright, ladies and gentlemen. We have the pleasure of hearing from Alex Murray, author of *Crip*, which has been nominated for Voices of the Future. This honor is meant to celebrate captivating stories told by diverse voices. Though *Crip* is funny, fascinating and thought-provoking, the man who came up with its inception is ever more intriguing and has his own coming-of-age tale. One year, Alex lost his ability to walk in a car accident that killed his friends. It left Alex paralyzed from the waist down, and was seemingly the end. However, with an inkling of hope, and a creative mind, Alex never gave up on his dreams of being a writer.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

KAREN (CONT'D)

Inspired by the tragedy, and his own disability, Alex wheeled up to his desk and put pen to paper, forging ahead with his heart and mind, crafting a literary adventure, pouring his own brave soul into a richly endearing mentally handicapped protagonist who experiences his own ambition, love, and pain. Without further ado, Alex Murray!

It's all Alex can do not to roll his eyes. Smiling politely, Alex wheels up to Karen. Shaking hands, they trade places - Karen lowering the mic. The lights shine brightly in his eyes, but Alex suddenly spots Jennifer, Claire, and Sara amid the crowded auditorium.

Alex nods to Karen as she walks off stage, clapping, smiling.

ALEX

Thank you, Karen.
(to the applauding crowd)
I'm not that great at speeches,
that's why I became a writer.

The crowd laughs.

ALEX

So, I'll make this brief.

Alex glances from Laura to Jennifer to Sara.

ALEX

I didn't know what to do after my accident. I was a pretty good track runner who got a scholarship to UGA, where I met the most beautiful woman in the world. I had the whole world at my fingertips, I had my friends, and I was hellbent on becoming a writer. I knew who I was. Then, I thought I had lost everything when that car crash happened. I lost my friends, I lost my identity, I lost everything.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

CLOSE UP

The crowd is captivated. Sara listens intently. Jennifer and Claire breathe deeply.

BACK TO ALEX

Alex swallows, thoughtfully studying the framed certificate - his reflection staring back. Then, the words flowed.

ALEX

For a very long time, I didn't feel like myself. I didn't recognize my reflection in the mirror. I hid behind my words. I wrote out of spite. I wrote out of fear of what I had become. I wrote with my emotions rather than my knowledge or experiences, recklessly pandering to the wrongful stereotype of disabled individuals.

(beat)

Stereotypes are an easy reference. That's why we like them. Too often, they are digested and shit out by assholes who think they're doing the disabled community justice. The very thought that there is representation of people with disabilities in art is used for justification for such mockery.

There's a curious rumble through the crowd.

LAURA

(To herself)

Where the hell is he going with this?

ALEX

I held in my hands the key to fame and fortune, but it came at a hefty price. Even though it went against my values, my beliefs, my personal value, I created this monstrous, humiliating portrait that doesn't deserve an inkling of recognition - except the declaration that it is wrong and immoral.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (4)

ALEX (CONT'D)

(beat) Someone called me out on it on a live webcast. Rightfully so. Called me an ableist - among other things. While I believe that we should all have our freedom to speak, to pursue dreams, to create, it shouldn't belittle others - as this novel does. Out of desperation, I threw out all my integrity, prudence, and care as a writer - all for this drivel. My publisher said it was brilliant. I trusted the one person who was close to me, took her advice. In the end, after squeezing me for this book, she fed me to the wolves. She is my publisher - or excuse me, former publisher -

LAURA

Oh fuck!

ALEX

Laura Gaucho. Come on out here, Laura! Everyone, let's give her a great, big round of applause!

Laura ducks into an aisle. The spotlight finds her. She freezes.

ALEX

There you are! You can run, but you can't hide!

JENNIFER

You extorted my brother!

The crowd boos. Photographers snap pictures. Alex wheels into the hall.

INT. INNER AREA - CONTINUOUS

Panicking, Laura slams the door.

ALEX

This is what happens when you mock people with disabilities.

LAURA

I just requested you finish the obligations of the contract.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

LAURA (CONT'D)

I never told you to write a book that mocks people with disabilities.

ALEX

You hammered me for months. You dangled my career in front of me! You kicked me when I was down!

LAURA

You knew your career depended on this book. Your contract, your future projects with us...

ALEX

There won't be any more projects! Laura, it's over. I wanted to be a writer to write stories that challenge the status quo, that bring light to our shared humanity. Not stories that degrade and mock.

LAURA

(staring at him,
frustrated)

So what are you going to do?

ALEX

(calmly)

I'll write the story I believe in. And if you can't support that, then maybe it's time I find a publisher who will.

Laura stares at Alex, realizing she's not going to win this argument.

LAURA

(resigned)

Fine. But you'd better hope your next idea is something we can market.

ALEX

We? There is no we, Laura.

LAURA

What are you talking about? I was the only one who accepted your drivel. Look at yourself. You have no prospects. No future. You're just another cripple rolling down a track toward wellfare!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

ALEX

Enough! I may be in a wheelchair,
but I'm not powerless. And I'm
certainly not a failure. Maybe
it's time I remind myself of that.

Laura is taken aback by Alex's sudden outburst, silence hanging between them.

LAURA

Alex, I didn't mean to imply -

ALEX

Of course you did.

He wheels himself away, leaving Laura standing alone, conflicted and regretful. Alex slips through the door. Murmurs of the crowd outside filter into the room as the door swings shut behind Alex.

INT. HOME OFFICE - DAY

Alex submits a revised version of his new book to his new editor.

ALEX (V.O.)

It doesn't matter where you begin,
so long as you just begin.

Alex smiles. His watch alerts him of the time.

FADE TO:

NT. VETERINARY CLINIC - DAY

The clinic is bustling with activity. Jennifer, in her white coat, moves efficiently from one patient to another, exuding confidence and expertise. She finishes examining a golden retriever, patting its head gently.

INT. FAMILY HOME - EVENING

Jennifer enters the home quietly. Eileen is sitting in the living room, a soft blanket over her lap. She looks up and smiles weakly as Jennifer walks in.

EILEEN

Jennifer, you're home. How was
work?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

JENNIFER

(smiling)

Busy, as usual. How are you feeling today, Mom?

ALEX (V.O.)

It may be overwhelming at times, however, life doesn't stop for anyone. You must keep pushing. But, you can't do it on your own all the time.

Jennifer sets her bag down and sits beside Eileen, gently taking her hand.

ALEX

Hey, thought I'd join the party.

JENNIFER

(Smiling)

Hey, Alex. Mom and I were just catching up.

ALEX

How's she doing?

JENNIFER

Good days and bad days. Today's a good one.

Alex moves closer, placing a comforting hand on Jennifer's shoulder.

ALEX (V.O.)

We are struck by time, collisions, and actions unfolding in real-time. But, what counts is the way we respond. When we are blindsided, we have a choice. Do we lie helpless and broken, hoping someone will find us or do we seek help?

INT. HOME OFFICE - DAY

Alex calls Sara - he gets her answering machine.

ALEX (V.O.)

Sometimes, it just doesn't pan out, but we have to be okay with it.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Alex throws the phone against the wall.

FADE TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Alex helps Charles put up the Christmas tree.

CHARLES

Alright, time for the lights.

ALEX (V.O.)

But, we cling to an inkling of hope that everything works out in the end.

Charles pulls out the lights.

JENNIFER

Hey, I have an idea! How about this year we go to midnight mass.

ALEX

What?

JENNIFER

We haven't been to church since your last communion.

EILEEN

I would love that!

INT. HOLY FAMILY CATHOLIC CHURCH - NIGHT

Alex is next to a sleeping Eileen. The congregation is gathered, singing "Silent Night" softly.

ALEX

(whispers)

You gotta be kidding.

The priest approaches the pulpit, beginning a heartfelt sermon about love, forgiveness, and new beginnings.

PRIEST

...and as we reflect on this holy night, let us remember that love is the greatest gift we can give and receive. It's never too late for forgiveness, for hope, for a new start.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Sara turns to Alex, her eyes glistening with unshed tears.

SARA

Alex, I've been thinking a lot about us. About everything we've been through.

Alex quietly listens.

SARA

(Taking his hand)

I care about you, Alex. I always have. But we need to be honest with each other. About what we want, about our future.

ALEX

Yeah. I think we owe it to ourselves to figure that out. Together, if that's what we both want.

SARA

(Smiling through)

I want that. But, as I told you, I'm not ready for a long-term relationship.

Alex thinks for a moment.

ALEX

Then, what do you want?

It's now Sara's turn to ponder.

SARA

I want us to be in each other's lives, support each other, and grow together. But I also need some space to figure out who I am and what I want from life.

Alex thinks it over, then smiles bittersweetly. They turn back, listening to the chorus.

FADE OUT.