

## The Cocoon

The air conditioner hissed beside me, blowing out chilly drafts of air. I had offered to switch seats with my brother, William, when he had complained about the cold, but now my teeth chattered, and I shivered under my flimsy blue sweater. My mom, dad, William and I were seated in a booth in Lucy's Diner the weekend before midterms. I sighed and glanced over at William, who was absentmindedly picking at his napkin with a fork and swinging his feet against the table. I gave him a nudge on the shoulder and a weak smile. He grinned back, forming dimples –the left slightly bigger than the right – in his pudgy cheeks. I motioned with my head towards the seats on our side of the table, and began to trace patterns onto the red velvet plush, the red transforming into a rosy pink when brushed in the opposite direction. William's eyes lit up, and he followed suit, also sketching patterns into the smooth fabric. I was absentmindedly outlining a heart when my mom's voice broke my concentration.

"Alexa? How has your studying been going? Do you think you've studied enough for your math exam?"

I rubbed my hand over my seat, erasing the heart, and looked up at my mom. There were dark bags under her eyes that she hadn't bothered to cover with makeup.

I shrugged.

"You *know* how important this math test is," she said. "You need to make sure your average stays at least an A- for this semester."

I remained mute. Rolling my eyes, I turned my head away from my mom and peered outside the glass window. I saw a breeze rustle the leaves of a tree. Its gnarled roots had burst through the gum-spotted sidewalk, cracking it into grey shards.

"Alexa, don't ignore me," she hissed.

"I've studied enough," I muttered without turning my head towards her.

"No, you haven't. You have been spending way too much time outside with your friends recently. This isn't something you can pull off at the last second," she warned, her voice rising. "Look at me when I speak to you."

I finally turned towards her, looking into her tired, red-rimmed eyes.

"So far in this semester, you've gotten two A's, three A-'s, and one B. Alexa, you can't be getting B's in high school."

“You know you can’t keep doing this,” my dad interjected, looking up from his Blackberry and joining the conversation.

“I just said that, Greg,” my mom snapped.

“Okay, okay, I get it,” I muttered, and my parents paused, expecting me to concede their point. In the brief silence, all I could hear were William’s feet kicking the table as he swung them. *Thud thud thud*. I glanced over at him and saw that he was still absentmindedly tracing shapes into the seat.

“William, stop kicking your feet!” my dad barked. Will’s head popped up, eyes wide.

“I wonder where he picked up that habit,” my mom groaned, scowling at my dad.

“Hey,” I quickly exclaimed, “speaking of kicking feet, aren’t you guys excited for Will’s soccer match this afternoon? It’s the last one of the season. Apparently, it’s against one of the hardest teams in the city, but Will’s team has a good chance of beating them!”

My dad grunted. My mom sighed and said, “I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to go, Alexa. You’re right in the middle of exam week.”

“I expect you to study at least four hours a day over the next week,” my dad added.

“Wait, I can’t go?” I blurted out. “Please, I really wanna go. I promise I’ll study twice as much the next day.” I looked to my mom with pleading eyes, but she shook her head. I then glanced at my dad, but he simply scowled, and the deep wrinkles in his forehead frowned with him. I stared at them in disbelief.

Finally, I gave up. Letting out a shuddering breath, I leaned one side of my head against the window and observed the warm puff of air condensing into a filmy steam on the glass. I imagined punching the window, the glass shattering into sparkling silver shards, and running out into the frigid winter breeze.

\*\*\*\*\*

My parent’s voices seeped into my room, staccato shouts behind closed doors. I tried to focus on the quadratic equations in front of me as I sat at my desk, but instead I found myself attempting to decipher the muted yells emanating from my parents’ bedroom. Suddenly, my door creaked open and I heard light footsteps padding along the wooden floor.

“Alexa?” I heard William whisper. I turned my head to see Will peeking his head through the doorway. “Can you tuck me in?”

“Yeah, of course,” I cooed. My dad usually tucked Will in at night.

I followed him to his room. While I lowered the lights, he hopped into bed. I pulled the comforter up around him, enfolding him in a blue, fluffy cocoon. I smiled and crawled into bed next to him.

“Are you gonna sleep here?” he asked me.

“Nah, but I’ll stay for a bit,” I replied, as I started to absentmindedly twirl my index finger in his hair. He sighed contentedly and nestled close, his body heat warming me. When I was younger, I used to jokingly call him my “heated teddy bear.” I still secretly thought it. I gazed down at him, the amber glow of the ceiling light casting shadows across his pudgy face and creating gold highlights in his black hair.

“I’m really sorry I couldn’t come to your game today,” I said.

“It’s okay. I know that they didn’t let you,” He whispered. “Can I tell you something?”

“Yeah, anything.”

“In the car, on the way home from the game, I heard Mommy telling Daddy that she- that she couldn’t,” he hiccupped, his eyes starting to water. “That she couldn’t trust him a-anymore.” A single tear ran down the plump of his cheek, and I felt a pang shoot through my chest. I tenderly wrapped my arm around his shoulders, pulling him into a hug, and he started to cry even harder. He snuggled closer to me, resting his face in the soft hollow above my collarbone, his tears forming damp splotches along my flannel pajama shirt. I gave him a kiss on the cheek, with an over exaggerated smooching sound, and he giggled. After sharing a laugh, I rhythmically patted his back and told him, “Don’t worry, Will. It’s okay. Mommy and Daddy just need to figure some things out. It’s gonna be okay. It’s gonna be okay.”

And as I gazed at his tear-stained cheeks and the fluffy cocoon of blankets enfolding him and the train track of snot running from his nose, I realized: *It has to be okay.*

\*\*\*\*\*

The next morning, I walked into a silent kitchen. I scanned my parents’ faces. My dad was sitting on a kitchen stool, watching the news on the rickety television above the microwave. He heaved a sigh, and ran his hand through his black hair littered with strands of grey. My mom was placing bacon strips into pan, the snaps and pops of sizzling oil occasionally breaking the silence. She stared straight at the pan with her usual red-rimmed eyes, and she was dressed in her old cotton pajamas. The crinkles at the corner of her eyes were moist with leftover tears, and I

could see a beige sunspot above her right cheekbone due to her lack of makeup. They wouldn't even look at each other.

I took a seat next to my dad at the kitchen counter, and began planning. I started my calculations on a blue sticky note. *What is the lowest score I can get on this math exam, and still pull off an A- for the semester?* I'd gotten two 98%'s, two 93%'s, one 92%, and an 85%. Therefore, the lowest grade I could get was a 71%.

I looked up from my work when I heard footsteps entering the kitchen. I saw William, his eyes slightly bloated from crying the night before. I walked over to him and ruffled his hair.

"Good morning," I greeted him, plastering a smile onto my face.

"G'morning," he yawned. "What's for breakfast?"

"Bacon and eggs, your fave."

"Yes!" he exclaimed.

I grabbed a plate from the cupboard. "How many slices?"

\*\*\*\*

My heart beat erratically as I walked into the math classroom. *Exactly fourteen out of twenty question right*, I repeated to myself, *fourteen out of twenty*. I sat down at a desk, and my clammy fingers fiddled with my mechanical pencil. The classroom was frigid, but I was still sweating and my cheeks were burning, hot and cold at the same time.

\*\*\*\*

#### One week later

As I walked home, the excitement about revealing the 72% that I had received on my math test made me jumpy. I had received a 72%! I had done it.

I let the door slam behind me and shrugged my backpack off of my shoulders, and it thudded onto the ground.

"Alexa? Is that you?" my mom called.

"Yeah, it's me." I took a deep breath and walked to the living room. I found my mom lounging on the couch, wearing terrycloth yoga pants and an oversized Gap t-shirt. She hadn't brushed her hair, and there were dark bags under her eyes that she hadn't bothered to blot with concealer.

"How was your day?" I asked, trying to mask my excitement with a nonchalant air. I let myself collapse onto the couch next to her.

“It was fine,” she said. “How was school today?”

“Nothing special,” I responded. I heaved a sigh, woefully gazing at the ground. “I got my math test back today.”

She gazed at me, her eyes narrowing as she studied my expression. “Did you not do well?” she finally asked.

“Yeah, I didn’t do very well.”

“Alexa! You knew you had to study more this time!”

“I got a seventy-two.”

She paused, and looked at me strangely. “You got a seventy-two?” she repeated, surprise etched in the creases on her face.

I rapidly blinked my eyes, forcing tears to fall as I plastered a melancholy frown across my face. “Yeah, well it was hard to focus with all the yelling in the background.”

And that was when I saw something break in my mom’s expression, like the tree’s roots bursting through the sidewalk or the glass window shattering into silver shards. This was what I had wanted, wasn’t it? At least now my parents had something to agree on. At least now they saw that they were affecting the one thing they cared about most. But still I shivered, as though I had experienced my first true winter wind, the kind that penetrates whatever coat or sweater you’re wearing and chills you to your core.

\*\*\*\*

“Alexa, can you tuck me in?” William asked, peeking his head through the doorway, as he had done every night for the past month.

“Of course, buddy.” I followed him to his room, pulled the comforter around him, and climbed in bed.

“Good night, Will.”

“Good night, Alexa. Love you.”

I snuggled close to him and pecked the crown of his head. That night, I fell asleep listening to the soft snores of my little brother, instead of yelling voices. But even next to my heated teddy bear, I still felt the winter chill permeate the covers around me, my skin prickling with goose bumps. At least William was warm for now.