

Just Come Clean



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Chapter 1

ALDEN OPENED HER EYES JUST as the sun was beginning to rise. After giving herself a second, she took a good look at her surroundings and made a face. Entirely too pink. Even the dresser was a garish pink. How hadn't she noticed it last night? Then again...she'd had other things on her mind last night.

She glanced at the blonde still asleep beside her. Alicia? Or was it Allison? She couldn't remember. Her phone told her that she had two hours to be ready for work. Plenty of time. She slipped on her clothes and caught an Uber home.

A car ride, a shower, and two cups of hot water later found Alden at her desk, in her home office, and ready to start her workday. She waited until nine o'clock exactly to join the Zoom. The meeting facilitator opened the call, wishing them all a happy Friday, and Alden listened as her coworkers discussed where they were in their stories, that is, their tasks. Before long, it was her turn.

"Yesterday my PR for the audit API was finally approved, so I deployed the changes to DEV and was able to start working on UI integration. It's moving along, but I'm running into some StationDeck issues. They've got the date formats wrong in the filter placeholders, and I can't override their settings since they come from an external package. I'll have to go to StationDeck office hours, which luckily enough is today." She grimaced, though with her camera off no one saw. "Wish me luck, guys."

Everyone in the meeting laughed, knowing how annoying office hours could be.

“That’s definitely something that StationDeck needs to fix, not us,” the squad lead jumped in. StationDeck was their company’s internal operating system, and all the newer applications had to run through it. “Yes, go to office hours today to see what they say, but if they don’t have a quick fix, then it’s fine if the placeholder date takes on the old format.”

“Sweet, thanks Amanda.”

The meeting ended shortly after that, and Alden leaned back in her chair. Office hours weren’t till one in the afternoon, and this was her last story of the current two-week sprint. With the upcoming Monday being a holiday and the sprint ending on Tuesday, there would be no point starting something new before then. Unless the junior developer on her team needed her help, she was effectively free until one.

That was her favorite part of her job—all the free time it gave her.

She got up and walked to her second spare bedroom turned art studio. Three wet paintings rested on their respective easels, each taunting her for not having finished them quite yet. Two were simple landscape paintings that Alden knew exactly where she was going with—she was just taking her time. The third, however... She was trying to be creative for once, but deviating from a reference always was a struggle for her. The unfinished portrait of no one in particular stared back at her, lifeless and utterly uninspired.

Alden sighed. She wasn’t in a painting mood. Instead, she found herself driving to the supermarket. Like every year, she was hosting her friend circle’s Labor Day grill, and she had yet to pick up the hot dogs, burger patties, and bread rolls. She had planned to do that this weekend, but now was as good a time as ever.

She hummed as she pushed her cart through the grocery store. It was fairly empty, as expected for a weekday during work hours. Almost everyone she saw was old. They probably thought she was unemployed.

Alden didn’t mind one bit what others thought. Not as much as she used to, at any rate.

She got what she needed and took her time heading home. The clock read ten thirty.

She set the groceries down, refreshed her work status on Teams, and headed to the kitchen to make an early lunch. The sandwich was tasty, and she finished it entirely too quickly. With still more time to spare and no interest in sitting around, she took a nice long walk through the neighborhood. By the time she got back home, it was just about time to log back in for the StationDeck meeting.

To her frustration, she wasn't quick enough to be first in line. Just her luck. Now she would have to sit through and wait until it was her turn. More and more faceless names entered the meeting, and she stared at them with ambivalence. Most of them she didn't recognize, but that wasn't a surprise—squads from many different domains used the app. When she got bored of virtual people-watching, she picked a pencil from her stationary cup and twirled it around.

At 1:02, the StationDeck member leading the meeting awkwardly cleared her throat. "All right, let's get started. I think I saw Rebecka first. What can we do for you today?"

"Yes, hi! My team just onboarded to your app, and one of your designers mentioned that we were missing the grid toolbar. I have the Confluence link, but even with the instructions, we were having trouble installing the package."

Alden twirled the pencil a bit too hard, and it flew out of her fingers. She reached down to pick it up, set it down on her desk, and finally looked up at her screen. What she saw gave her pause.

Only a handful of videos were turned on—herself not being one of them—but even without the green outline around the woman who was speaking, Alden's eyes flew straight to her.

Damn, she's cute.

Alden moved her face closer to the screen to get a better look at the small video. The woman looked youngish, probably in her late twenties or early thirties. It wasn't clear enough to see any fine details, but she had long, curly dark hair and delicate features. Physical appearance aside, it was the eager and shy expression that really drew Alden in. Even through a screen, the woman radiated warmth.

The other developer—labeled Rebecka Nash by Zoom—went into detail about the 404 error all the members of her team were running into when trying to download the package.

It was more than likely just an access issue, Alden figured. Easily solved. She silently cheered when she heard a StationDeck member suggest as much. Did no one on Rebecka's team think of that? Were they all bozos?

Alden stared at Rebecka's video some more. *Is she single? Into women? Which office is she based out of?* Now that last question was something she could easily get the answer to. She opened up her company's directory and looked up Rebecka Nash. The result made her groan.

Rebecka Nash was based in Utah, miles and miles away from Alden's Pennsylvania office. She sighed. A real damn shame.

* * *

"So what was wrong with Mac? You guys looked like you really hit it off."

Alden rolled her eyes. The Labor Day grill was in full swing, and she and one of her best friends, Beth, were on grill duty. "I'm not interested in anything serious, but you all know that. I would ask you to stop setting me up, but it's not like you'll listen, and besides..." She wriggled her eyebrows. "Who am I to say no to good pussy?"

"Ayyyyy!" They high-fived, but then Beth put on a serious face. "Don't let Ash hear you say that. She thinks pretty highly of her and had high hopes that she would be the one for you."

Alden peeked through the window to see Ashley, Liza, and Marie engaged in conversation indoors. She shook her head. "It's like you guys don't even know me. Where are these high fucking hopes coming from? Ash did her dirty by making it seem like she had a shot for more."

Beth let out a low breath. "Was the morning after messy?"

"I didn't escape unnoticed, if that's what you're asking. And I've blocked her number."

"Look at you, leaving a trail of broken hearts behind you."

"As if you weren't the same before you met Marie."

The door slid open. "Did I hear my name?"

"Just telling Denny how much I love you, babe," Beth quipped.

“You and your silver tongue.” Marie turned to Alden. “Oh, good. You haven’t put the cheese on the patties yet. I wanted to change my burger cheese selection from American to pepper jack.”

“Sounds good, I got you.”

“Great, thanks!” Mission accomplished, Marie slipped back indoors as quickly as she had come out.

“She said that just in time,” Alden remarked. Reaching for the cheeses, she slapped them onto the almost-finished burger patties. “How’s business? Any big orders come in lately?”

The question made Beth sigh. “Kind of? A client just ordered fifty customized mugs the other day. The design they want is so fucking ugly, though. Takes all the joy out of the process.”

Alden gave Beth a sympathetic look. “And that’s why I’ll never turn my art into a business, no matter what you all say. I paint when I want and what I want. Isn’t that nice, hmm?”

“If only we all had your salary, dude.”

Alden hummed in response. She gave the burgers one last look and proclaimed them done, removing them from the grill and setting them all onto one large platter. Together, they went inside. “Food’s ready!”

“Oh goody. Thanks, Alden!” Liza said.

“What am I, chopped liver?” Beth pretended to side-eye her friend for making the comment. “I was out there in the late summer heat too!”

“Yeah, but we all know you were just standing there while Alden did all the work. She’s the more capable one out of the two of you.”

They all laughed, Beth included. Alden started putting food onto her plate, and that was the signal for the others to follow suit.

“It looks like a lot of food, but the team inhaled triple that the other day after their meet,” Marie said conversationally.

“I mean, we’re talking some fifteen middle schoolers after a basketball game, right? They’re growing kids; it makes sense that they would eat more than us.”

“Just twelve,” Marie said immediately. “The district has always capped the limit at twelve. I had a lot of angry parents asking me to raise that number, but it’s not something I have control over.”

“Are the basketball parents or the school parents worse?”

“I haven’t had many issues with either so far this year, actually! We’re not far enough into the school year yet,” she laughed. “Generally, I would say it’s the school parents, though. Always asking if I can raise their kids’ English scores just a little.” She rolled her eyes. “Your son is in seventh grade, ma’am. Grades don’t matter. But enough about the kids. I already spend too much time thinking of them without your help.”

The others hummed noncommittally.

“So, they making you go in anytime soon?” Ashley asked Alden.

Alden groaned loudly. “Are you trying to ruin my appetite before I’ve even taken my first bite?”

“Sounds like the answer is yes,” Liza chipped in. “Told you it was going to happen sooner or later. So what’s the decision?”

“No long-term plan yet. But starting next month, we’re going to have to go in at least two days a month on our assigned week. Don’t even get me started. It’s so fucking stupid! I’m the only one on my team who even works in Blue Bell, so I’d just be on Zoom all day, just like I’m already doing. I’m so upset.”

“Boo hoo. Cry me a river. Some of us have real jobs. Maybe you should work more, if you’re so upset at having to work a job that pays you half a million every year.” Beth shook her head with an amused grin, clearly not sympathetic to Alden’s plight.

“Fuck off,” Alden ribbed back good-naturedly. “After taxes and my 401k contribution it’s nowhere near that. And I literally can’t work more. I do all the stories assigned to me and then they ask me to stop so that the juniors can have some work left. It’s not my fault I’m good.”

“Modest as always.”

Alden rolled her eyes. “Thanks, Beth.”

“Wasn’t a compliment.”

“I know.”

“Don’t be so dramatic.” Beth laughed. “It’s literally two days a month. If you’re so concerned about losing painting time, then you should spend less time fucking all those women.”

Ashley pretended to gasp. Liza burst into laughter. Marie made a disapproving face.

Alden chuckled lightly at their reactions, then shook her head. “Would never work. I don’t paint at night. The light’s not right.”

Beth rolled her eyes. “Excuses. So get one of those natural light lamps.”

“No, thank you.”

“So you’d rather wallow and complain.”

“That’s what friends are for, right?” Alden gave them a cheeky grin.

The conversation moved on to something other than Alden and her reluctance to return to in-person work. She put it out of her mind.

* * *

Two months later, Alden sulked all the way to the office just as she’d done the month before.

The fact that the cheesy welcome-back music and the balloons were *still* at the front door despite this being the second month of the hybrid policy made her scoff even harder than she had the first time she’d seen them. At least the free food was still being offered, and she unashamedly piled up a paper plate with probably more fruit than was socially acceptable.

Just like last time, her assigned zone was utterly dead. Alden had expected that few people would choose Monday as one of their two in-person days, and she was right. Robotically, she set up her workstation and logged in. She wished she were at home and in her comfy shorts and tee instead of the nice ensemble she was currently sporting.

Both in-person days last month, Alden had left by 2 p.m. They only required her to go to the office, not to stay the whole time. She debated heading out even earlier today, in time for lunch at home, but in the end, she decided it couldn’t hurt to spend another hour in the cafeteria first.

Alden took a seat at her usual secluded booth. She glanced around the large dining hall and did a double take.

The dark, curly hair made the woman immediately recognizable, even if Alden had seen her just once and only through a computer

screen nearly two months ago. *Rebecka Nash*, her mind supplied for her.

After finding out that the woman was based out of Utah, Alden had put her out of her mind. Now, though, if her eyes weren't deceiving her, then maybe her sources were wrong. She averted her eyes, not wanting to be seen staring.

Rebecka was sitting at a full table. Alden didn't recognize any of the people around her. She itched to go over to the table and strike up a conversation, but the people surrounding Rebecka, as well as the fact that she was at work, stopped her short. Usually, she did an amazing job separating her work and personal life.

Scratch that, she *always* did an amazing job separating her work and personal life.

At work, she was Alden Breslin, *Director, Software Engineering*. She was an ideal employee and leader, getting all her work done way ahead of schedule while reserving ample time to mentor younger developers, and she kept work firmly at work. In fact, she was sure her coworkers would be shocked to hear about how she was in private. It even surprised herself how she could code-switch from vulgar Alden to professional Alden so seamlessly.

Therefore, she was scratching her head at the thoughts and impulses that this Rebecka Nash person was giving her. Man, if it were a bar she was at now...

She looked Rebecka's way again. The sweet-faced woman was taking a bite out of a sandwich. Alden's eyes zeroed in on her suspiciously long fingernails with dismay, but she didn't rule anything out. Not yet.

Someone beside Rebecka said something, and she dissolved into peals of laughter, hurrying to swallow her food so she could make a comment of her own. When someone else at that table looked in Alden's direction, Alden quickly averted her gaze.

If Rebecka was here, in the Blue Bell office, then that could mean one of three things: she was still based in Utah and just doing a coworker meetup; or she was based here but coming in on a non-assigned week; or the best outcome: she was based here *and* coming in on an assigned week.

Alden's mind raced. If today was her assigned week, then that meant they had the same rotation. That meant, every day that Alden was here in the office, there was a chance that Rebecka would also be there.

Alden straightened her back. Maybe, just maybe, going into the office wouldn't be so horrible.

* * *

Alden didn't manage to be in the cafeteria at the same time as Rebecka the next day. She was thoroughly disappointed.

The day after that, she admonished herself the whole drive to the office for going in when she'd already done the required two days. *It'll be worth it, it'll be worth it*, she tried to convince herself.

And worth it, it was. Purposely picking the busiest time to go to lunch turned out to be the right decision, because she spotted Rebecka in the café looking at the food options. It was Alden's first look at Rebecka unhindered—the other times had been through a screen and in a group around a distant table—and she liked what she saw. Rebecka was taller than she'd imagined, and the green lapel button-up dress flowing past her knees really accentuated her long and wiry frame. The heeled sandals helped, too. Alden instinctively glanced at her own shoes—a nice, comfortable pair of sneakers—and shook her head in amusement. She wouldn't be caught dead in heels herself, but she appreciated them on other women.

Alden started heading toward Rebecka, only to hesitate. She was at work, so obviously she couldn't do this the way she was used to. A racy pickup line would definitely count as workplace harassment.

Rebecka drifted toward the salad bar, and Alden found her feet following. It set all her nerves on fire, being so close to Rebecka and not doing anything about it. Silently, the two filled their plates with lettuce and various salad ingredients.

"They have the best grape tomatoes here," Alden blurted out.

Rebecka, for her part, seemed surprised to be spoken to. "What? Oh, yeah, the tomatoes are pretty good."

They continued moving down the salad bar. Rebecka didn't continue the conversation, and Alden kept her mouth shut. *Grape tomatoes*, she thought. *Where the fuck is your game?*

Just as Rebecka was finishing up at the salad bar, Alden turned to her again. "I love your dress." *How fucking horrible would it be if I added, I would love it more on my bedroom floor?* She chuckled in her mind. "It looks great on you."

A small blush appeared on Rebecka's cheeks. "Thanks." She smiled shyly, tipped her head, and then went to the checkout line. This time, Alden didn't follow even though she was ready to get rung up as well. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched as Rebecka paid and then took her seat with the same group as the other day.

After a few minutes of dawdling, Alden paid for her lunch and took her usual seat by the doors, far from everyone else.

She missed the curious green eyes on her.

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On the *fourth* day of her in-person week, Alden had a new plan. It was called, 'only go in for lunch'. Her two real days at the office were long taken care of, so it wasn't like she was obligated in any way to spend more time there in person. It made her feel stupid and silly, because Rebecka had already done her two required days of the week, but employees were encouraged to do more than two—and what if Rebecka was one of those types who actually enjoyed going in?

So Alden had to try.

That was how she found herself rolling into the parking lot at 11:30. If she was dressed in a slightly nicer outfit, well, it definitely *wasn't* for a certain dark-haired stranger she'd only spoken a few words to.

Instead of heading toward her assigned zone, she made a beeline for the cafeteria and set her laptop at her usual spot, logging into work from there.

At 11:58, Rebecka strolled in. Due to Alden's proximity to the door, Rebecka's back was to her, so Alden unashamedly admired her retreating figure. She was in pants today, pants that clung snugly to

her skin up top, and Alden swallowed at the thought of prying those long legs apart.

I need to get laid, she thought. Bar. Tonight.

Locking her laptop, she headed toward the food area, trying not to seem too eager. She scanned all the stations and easily spotted Rebecka hovering by the sushi center. As if sensing that she was being watched, Rebecka turned, and their eyes met. It happened for just a second, but Alden didn't miss the way Rebecka's eyes tracked up and down her body.

Rebecka dipped her head in recognition. Alden took that as her sign to approach.

“What a coincidence! I'm also getting sushi today.”

Rebecka smiled, though she looked a bit unsure. Alden supposed that it was weird to talk to strangers after all, especially at the work cafeteria. “Do you always talk to whoever's in line with you?” She gestured vaguely, but Alden got the point; everyone else was minding their own business, and the only conversations were from people ordering.

“Only if they're pretty,” she said, the words coming out of her mouth before her brain allowed it. The whispered *fuck* right afterwards was also not brain-approved.

The same blush appeared on Rebecka's cheeks again, but this time, it was accompanied by a light grin. “You're sweet.” The sushi maker called out *eel avocado*, and Rebecka tilted her head. “That's me.” She picked up the container, gave Alden a little wave, and walked away.

* * *

Satisfied with the interaction, Alden ended up taking her lunch home and not staying in the office a minute longer. Work was extra light, so she found herself wandering into her art studio instead of sitting at her desk. Her three unfinished paintings stared at her once again, but it was the creative portrait that she zeroed in on. The blonde hair suddenly didn't look right anymore. Alden reached for her darker-colored paints and began mixing.

The result, an hour later, had her smiling with satisfaction.

Later that night, the Uber dropped Alden off outside the bar, and she strode purposefully in, taking her seat at the bar. The bartender greeted her with a wave and had her usual in front of her within seconds.

“Thought I lost ya, it’s been, what, a whole five days?”

“Long enough for me to lose my fucking sanity,” Alden only half-joked. She accepted the drink and gave it a swirl. “Miss me, George?”

“You wish, Breslin.” He grinned. “Got a target yet?”

“Woah, I just fucking got here. Give a gal some time to survey the arena.” She pretended to shoo him away, and he laughed, shaking his head and leaving her alone.

Sipping on her drink, Alden turned around to see what she was working with. Hot blonde at nine o’clock, legs-for-days at twelve, curvy babe at one... There were options. She continued to scan the room, and in the end, it was a nervous, dark-haired woman that caught her eye. She looked slightly uncomfortable being there, and though Alden almost always went for women who reeked of confidence, she felt a different urge today.

Slipping off her stool, she confidently walked over to the brunette, waiting until she had her attention. “You look like you could use some de-stressing. Can I get you a drink?” With amusement, she noted that the still-unnamed woman looked slightly panicked to be addressed.

“Um, yeah, sure...”

Alden led them to the bar.

“You’re not in college, right?”

That got the woman’s attention. “What? I haven’t been in college for years. Do I look that young?!”

“Just had to make sure,” Alden quipped easily. “I’ve definitely got a few years on you. Name?”

“Jessie.”

“Well, Jessie...can I get you anything?”

“Anything’s fine.”

“In that case...” She called her bartender friend over and asked him to surprise her. “What’s a pretty girl like you doing here?” Man,

it felt freeing to be able to speak freely without the confines of work professionalism.

Jessie seemed to steel herself before leaning forward. “The same thing as you, I’d imagine.”

“Oh? Looking for a good *fuck*? Is that what you’re here for too, *Jessie*?”

Even under the dim lights of the bar, Alden was able to catch the strong blush on the other woman’s face, and it made her wonder if Rebecka Nash would react the same way, were she to be the one sitting opposite her.

The confidence deflated from Jessie’s bones, and big brown eyes squeezed shut in embarrassment. “Sorry, I don’t know what I’m doing here. I’ve never done this before—meeting someone like this, not being with a woman, I mean—and you’re, well, you’re...”

Alden smiled wider. “I’m what?”

“You’re so confident!”

The drink arrived, and Alden silently pushed it forward. If she blinked hard enough, she could almost imagine that it was the mysterious Rebecka Nash that she was sitting with.

“Well,” Alden began, her voice strong and bold, “Let’s work on that. Unless you have any objections, I’d like to—what do they call it nowadays?—show you a good time. Tonight.” She leaned forward and brushed a stray dark curl behind Jessie’s ear. “Is that acceptable?”

“Why me?”

Alden wasn’t about to say *you remind me of someone else*. “You’re attractive,” she answered truthfully. “And I want you to know it.”

“Oh.”

“Yes, oh. So?”

“Yes,” Jessie breathed.

* * *

When Alden woke the next morning, she felt delightfully spent and relaxed. It made her realize just how tightly wound up she’d been before.

How tightly wound up she’d allowed Rebecka Nash to make her.

Her most recent lay was still asleep—good—and she quietly extricated herself from the covers and threw on her clothes.

Downstairs, after calling an Uber, she did her usual look-around of her surroundings. It was a tidy and well-organized place. She walked over to the fridge to see if there was anything pinned. It usually gave her more info, not that she ever planned to see the people she slept with again.

Other than some travel magnets and coupons, the only thing there was a rec soccer schedule.

Her phone dinged; the Uber was close. Without a second look, Alden left the house and went outside.

Chapter 2

“I JUST WANT TO KNOW her name!”

Rebecka had her phone on the counter leaning against the wall, camera pointed to herself as she chopped veggies for lunch. On the screen, her best friend and former teammate Lovisa watched.

“Just ask her, you doofus.” Lovisa looked amused. “About time you reentered the dating scene.”

Rebecka made a face. “But that’s so awkward! *What’s your name, by the way?*” she tried. “I’m not going to say that.”

“It’s okay to be intimidated,” Lovisa said softly. “After all, you haven’t done anything like this for, what, five years?”

“Almost seven,” Rebecka said immediately. “I thought Linnea and I were it.”

Lovisa hummed. “No use thinking about her. Besides, I’m interested in hearing more about your new workplace hottie. Brown hair and brown eyes, you said? Sounds boring.”

“Don’t be so shallow,” Rebecka chastised. “She had a very natural look. No bleach or color in her hair and a completely fresh, makeupless face. It looked good on her. I bet she gets out of bed like that. No fair.”

Lovisa scoffed. “You’re one to talk.”

“Yeah, right.” Rebecka shook her head. “You’ve seen my morning hair, stop lying.”

“Volume to die for? Yeah, I’m familiar with it.”

Rebecka rolled her eyes and got back on track. “She had the prettiest side profile, and it was so adorable, the way she mumbled *fuck* after she said I was pretty.”

“I’m so here for you finally even looking at other women again.” Lovisa laughed. “Other than the fact that she has no name and looks good, you haven’t told me much else. ‘Side profile’? You’re so silly! Go on, keep talking!”

“Hold on, let me get these into the oven so I can relax on the couch for this conversation.”

Lovisa snickered. “Oh, you’ve got it bad, haven’t you?”

“What? Our grand total of two interactions put together is still under a minute. She’s probably just one of those friendly, chipper types.”

“And yet...”

Rebecka ducked her head in embarrassment. “I don’t even know the first thing about her, but I want... I want to know everything there is.”

“Wow, I guess appearances do matter,” Lovisa quipped. “Since that’s all you’re going on.”

“That’s not true! I like her confidence. And I feel like she’s probably funny.”

“She’s probably funny,” Lovisa repeated. “What, are you imagining her personality now? Why don’t you buy her a coffee or something? You literally work for the same company—bring it to her desk.”

“Can’t, I don’t know where she sits. It’s a large office.”

“Well, which squad is she in? That’s the word you guys use, right? Squad?”

“Lovisa... I literally don’t even know her name, how would I know which squad she’s in? For all I know, she’s just a contractor and I’m never seeing her again. Or maybe she was some senior department head that was just doing an office visit my week. I have no way of knowing.”

“But she approached you, right?”

“I’m not sure,” Rebecka sighed. “She just happened to be getting food at the same time as me, and she was conversational.” She took a large swig of her wine. “Maybe I’m just horny.”

On the other end, Lovisa burst into giggles. “Hold on, this moment needs to be shared.”

Rebecka smiled to herself as she heard a shout of, “Sara! Stop washing dishes for a minute and get your ass over here!”

When Lovisa’s partner appeared on the screen, complete with her sleeves rolled up and her hands still dripping water, Rebecka couldn’t help but smile wider. She’d missed them both. “Why are you always washing dishes?” she asked with a laugh. “Does Lovisa never do her share?”

Lovisa waved it aside. “You know she just doesn’t trust me around the breakables. Plus, she actually enjoys cleaning. Psychopath. Anyway, Becks here just admitted that she’s...horny.” She snickered.

“Oi! That was said in confidence!” It was not, and they all knew it, based on the way Rebecka was laughing along. “God, I miss you two.”

“Yeah, what are you doing in America of all places? I don’t care that you lived there for the first twenty years of your life. If you get shot, I swear I’m going to go to your grave and say I told you so.”

Rebecka rolled her eyes. “I’ll try not to.”

“But we’re getting off topic!” Lovisa drummed on the table to reset the conversation. “Rebecka Nash here, Miss Goes-to-Bed-at-Nine, Miss Clubs-Are-Scary, Miss—”

“Vanilla,” Sara coughed.

“Yes, thank you, babe. Miss No-Sex-Drive-Ever-Since-Linnea-Killed-it-All—”

“I get the point, you know.”

“...As I was saying, Miss All-of-the-Above might be changing her tune, now that she’s landed in *America*.”

“We make hot women here in Sweden too,” Sara pointed out. “You didn’t have to go so far to look.” There was a pause as a thought suddenly struck her. “Wait, could this person you’ve been talking about with Lo be Swedish?”

Rebecka couldn’t help it. She burst into laughter. “You wish.”

* * *

Catching up with her friends left her feeling both contented and aching as the reality that a large ocean separated them continued to

ring true. Blue Bell was completely foreign to her—as far away as possible from the West Coast, where she'd grown up—but her only sibling lived here, and Rebecka supposed she'd been properly influenced by the way her sister described her town with such charm.

Even with Eva living here, it just felt easier to talk to her friends.

Still, she took advantage of the newfound proximity to Eva. Rebecka hadn't been back in the country for a full year yet, but she already saw her sister more than she'd had for the past decade. She also found herself getting to know Eva's wife and daughter better. That was nice. The topic of her office crush, however, never came up.

Rebecka dearly wished she had more power in that situation. As it stood, she had literally nothing to work with. The only thing she could do was wait for next month's mandatory in-person week and hope that something would come out of it.

She said I was pretty and I just smiled and walked away, she groaned. *I'm so out of practice.*

She didn't dwell on it too much as work kept her fairly busy. She felt generally positive about her new and unexpected career as an associate software developer at Seaster—it wasn't like she needed the money—not yet at least, and it was a welcome change of pace. It kept her occupied from nine to five, and the mostly remote aspect was nice, because it gave her more than just the weekends to keep up with her sponsorships. Retiring from soccer hadn't diminished her popularity in Sweden, and brands had been very clear that they still wished to keep their partnerships with her going. Who was she to say no to easy money?

Though all the events leading up to her sudden retirement last year still left a sour taste in her mouth, Rebecka could finally say that she was in a better place now.

* * *

After extensive testing in first DEV and then SIT, Alden's squad had just deployed their application into UAT so that the business users could begin testing the application as well. However, they noticed right away that one of the new functionalities dependent on a

StationDeck commons package was not working, so here she was, clicking on the Zoom link to join the StationDeck office hours again.

She was the first developer to join the call, so she didn't have to wait before diving into her questions for the other team. The talk wasn't as productive as she'd hoped, though—it would still be a while before the newer functionality was available in the upper environments, outside of DEV and SIT. Her mind already racing as she pictured workarounds her squad could use in the meantime, Alden almost didn't notice that Rebecka had also joined the meeting.

There, clear as day, was Rebecka Nash, also sitting in the Zoom meeting. Alden's finger on the mouse, about to click on the red *leave* button, faltered. Instead, she moved the mouse away. She leaned back into her chair and relaxed, closing her eyes and letting the meeting sounds wash over her.

It wasn't Rebecka's turn for another fifteen minutes, but when it finally was, Alden leaned forward and willed herself to focus again. She paid close attention to the back and forth conversation between Rebecka and the meeting organizer offering support.

"Hi team, I'm wondering if the commons package provides support for pagination? I saw a guide in Seaster's standardized user interface library, but I was wondering if this behavior was something that already existed in one of the StationDeck libraries before I started trying to implement it from scratch."

Pagination? Alden's ears perked up. Her squad, namely herself, had already spent sprints and sprints on that, and now they had a very robust algorithm going. More significantly, she already knew the answer to Rebecka's question, and it was a resounding *no*. Hence why she was so familiar with the process; because she and the squad had had to do it all themselves.

"First things first, which kind of pagination are you thinking of?"

"Um, the kind where you can click back and forth through pages of results? Was there another kind?"

"Yes. The other kind is infinite scrolling, which is the standard for any apps onboarded to StationDeck. Not, as you mentioned, the kind where you click back and forth. And I assume you wanted server-side?"

Rebecka looked a bit lost, and for any other developer, Alden would have been annoyed at the lack of knowledge of a basic topic. For Rebecka, however, she let it slide as she continued observing.

“Uh, server-side? Never mind, I can look that up later. So, is this something you guys currently support?”

“We don’t, unfortunately. Not yet, but it’s something we plan to support in the future. I know some other squads have been experimenting with it, though, so I could connect you with someone?”

“Sure, that would be nice. Thanks.”

Alden cleared her throat and then hit the unmute button. “Hi, so, Rebecka? My squad actually implemented SSRM infinite scroll with working sorting and filtering pretty recently, and I’m very familiar with it. I’d be happy to connect with you outside of this meeting to help.”

Her camera was still off like always, and she briefly debated turning it on to see if Rebecka’s eyes would flash in recognition. She decided against it.

“Oh, thanks. I’d really appreciate that.”

“Nice!” said the StationDeck organizer. “I’ll let you two work on that, then. Who’s next?”

Rebecka left the meeting, Alden noticed, so she herself left too.

Five minutes later, she got a Teams message.

[Rebecka Nash, 2:29 PM] *Hi Alden, thanks for offering to help! When are you free?*

Alden stared at the words indicating the beginning of her message history with Rebecka and pumped a fist in the air. She was getting somewhere.

* * *

That was nice of her to offer to help. Rebecka reread the message she just sent and winced. She hated reaching out to new people.

A response popped onto her screen.

[Alden Breslin, 2:31 PM] *I'm free all afternoon, including now. Feel free to send a meeting link over whenever you're ready, or if now's not a good time, just drop something on my calendar.*

Now?! Rebecka was indeed free, but...she wasn't sure if she was ready yet. But no time like the present. She sent over a link and sat in the meeting room, waiting for this Alden person to join.

Ten seconds later, Rebecka was no longer the only person in the Zoom meeting. She watched as Alden's audio started to connect. The check mark signified success, and the video remained off.

"Hi there," Rebecka said awkwardly. "Thanks again for this. I feel like I should've prepared, so forgive me if I have a lot of gaps in knowledge. I just started this story."

"No worries," said Alden. "Why don't you show me what you have?"

"Oh, um...okay. I don't have much, but..." Rebecka started sharing her screen, pulling her Notepad++ with notes up. "Literally. I have a lot of analysis notes, but the meeting today rendered all that moot, because my notes are for page by page clicking and not infinite scroll, which my squad had no idea was the standard. So...sorry, this is embarrassing. I should've scheduled the meeting for later, when I actually had something to work with."

"Hey, don't worry about it. Would it help if I ran through how my squad did it at a high level? I can explain some of the concepts, and then later when you have actual code to work with, I can help you again."

"Yeah, I think that would help. Thanks again."

"Cool, let me just get set up."

Set up? Rebecka wasn't sure what that meant, but she didn't ask. A moment later, the camera turned on, and she felt all the air leave her lungs.

"You!"

"Who, me?" Alden grinned. Rebecka continued to stare at the video in surprise, and the view shifted to point to a large whiteboard. "Hope you'll be able to read my handwriting."

All the while, Rebecka continued to stare speechlessly. She had a name! Alden Breslin. Unusual first name, but okay. Never in a million years did she think she was inviting *her* to a Zoom meeting when she sent the link. “So you’re a developer too, then?”

“Hm? Oh, yeah.”

I didn’t have to ask, Rebecka realized, mentally slapping herself on the forehead. She moused over Alden’s name on Teams and saw that her title was *Director, Software Engineering*. Oh. A *very* senior developer, then. Three whole levels higher than her. Above the title was Alden’s company photo, and Rebecka couldn’t help but chuckle at the image. It had clearly been taken years ago. Alden looked a whole decade younger, and though her hair was the same shade of light brown, it was much longer in the photo, unlike current-Alden, who wore her hair just slightly past her shoulders.

On the screen, Alden finally appeared back in view, this time standing in front of the whiteboard. She was dressed in a large white shirt and gray shorts, and the sight made Rebecka smile to herself. Work from home was a whole vibe. Usually, the shorts part was something below the camera’s view, but because Alden was standing a distance from the camera, nearly the whole length of her was visible. How was it possible for her to look just as good in this casual outfit as she did in her professional blazer?

“You must be the real deal, having an actual whiteboard in your office,” Rebecka remarked.

“Oh, it makes solving problems much easier,” Alden responded, her back to Rebecka as she started to write on the board. “I used to do it on paper, but there’s way less space that way, and I also already leave a ton of other things on my desk, so it would clutter things up even more. The board helped.” She took a step back to double-check what she had written. “First things first. Do you understand the concept of infinite scrolling?”

“Yes, the grid automatically loads more data when the user scrolls to the bottom, otherwise it doesn’t. Right?”

“Right. Earlier, you expressed confusion when they mentioned server-side. That’s in contrast to client-side. Do either of those mean anything to you?”

“Sorry, no.” Rebecka felt the imposter syndrome kick in, especially with the new knowledge that the person talking to her was a director. “I’ve been doing this for less than a year,” she felt the need to say.

That made Alden stop writing and turn around in surprise. “Really? I did think you looked young, but...I definitely didn’t realize you were just out of college. You look very mature for your age.”

“I never said that. College was like a decade ago for me.”

“That’s a relief,” Alden muttered. “Sorry, we got off track. Let me just explain client versus server side.” She drew a box split into parts and labeled it. “In essence, client-side means that the action takes place on your, aka the client’s, machine. Server-side means that the action takes place on a web server, or in your case, on the database that the API is fetching records from. I’m going to refer to this as SSRM from now on, which stands for server-side row model. It’s easier to explain in the context of sorting and filtering. Let’s go with sorting. I assume that your API paginates?”

“Yeah.”

Rebecka did her best to focus on the subject matter and not the person as Alden went into detail on the two models, making sure to pause and confirm her comprehension regularly. It was a little bit awkward, effectively being *taught* by the woman she had her eyes on, and Rebecka mentally berated herself for the flutter she felt in her chest when Alden, with a big smile on her face, praised her for one of her answers. She grinned back into the camera, hoping to convey that she was being *so normal* about this whole thing. It definitely didn’t seem like Alden noticed anything, because she was continuing her lesson without skipping a beat.

“Now, server-side is just as the name suggests—we let the API sort first, and then we populate that presorted data into our results grid. This is of course harder, because we have to send over sort and filter params to the API, which needs its SQL queries to be modified so it can grab the right data in the right order from the database. Does that make sense?”

“I think so,” Rebecka said slowly, trying to sound like she was mulling over it. In all actuality, that last bit had gone right over her head. She straightened, reminding herself once more to be profes-

sional. “I haven’t worked much with APIs since joining—my squad is primarily front-end, so I don’t fully understand everything you’re saying. But I get most of it.”

“That’s fine. I’ll focus on the UI part only, then.”

The explanation was clear and simple, but Rebecka struggled to follow because of how distracted she was by the situation she found herself in. She nodded and hummed in all the right places, hoping that her brain retained at least part of it so that she wouldn’t have to start over again when she was left alone. If she had known she was going to get a whole lesson, she would’ve asked to record the meeting. It was too late now.

“Well, short of giving you my exact code...do you have any specific questions? Do you want to regroup later, like you suggested earlier?”

“Just a quick question,” Rebecka said, her heart suddenly racing as an idea came into her head. “Would it be correct to say that you prefer giving whiteboard demos over screenshare demos?”

To her surprise, Alden shook her head in the negative. “Nah. Why would I prefer having to go on camera and putting all that extra effort in when I could stay in my chair and just talk through my code?” She put the cap on the marker and went back to her desk, adjusting the camera back to its original position. “Why do you ask?”

“Oh, I...” There went that plan. “Then why...?”

“Why did I just do that? Because I could.” Alden smirked, one side of her lip turning up further than the other. “Maybe I selectively decide when to put in extra effort.”

“Well then...” Rebecka leaned forward and took a deep breath. Now or never. “Can you selectively decide to put in extra effort again when we regroup later?”

“For you? Consider it done.”

“No, I mean...” Rebecka licked her lips nervously. “I know it’s not either of our in-person weeks for another three weeks, but would it be okay if we met up in one of the conference rooms before then? And used one of their large whiteboards? It was kind of hard to see everything on your board through the camera, and I imagine there’ll be more code involved next time.” That wasn’t true; she could see everything on the board perfectly fine, but Alden didn’t need to know

that. Rebecka crossed her fingers under her desk. *Lovisa, this is me shooting my shot. Be proud.*

If she hadn't been watching Alden so intently, she would've missed the quick smirk that appeared on her face. "Now you're just asking for it."

"Asking for what?" Rebecka challenged, meeting Alden's eyes.

"You tell me."

How was it possible to go from zero to a hundred so quickly? From a dry but informative demo to whatever this was? Rebecka was glad there was a screen between them to protect herself from any impulsive behavior on her part.

Realizing that Alden was waiting for a response and remembering where in the conversation they were, she put on an innocent face. "Asking for you to help me with pagination in person," she said. "That won't be too hard, right?"

"No," Alden relented. "That won't be too hard. Just put some time on my calendar when you're ready, and I'll meet you in the office."

"Will do. Thanks for the help, Alden."

The moment the meeting ended, Rebecka broke into a silly grin. *Alden Breslin*, she murmured aloud, leaning back into her chair and resting her head on her hands. *Alden.*

Chapter 3

ALDEN DID HER BEST NOT to think about Rebecka Nash.

Her best was lacking.

Every time her phone notified her of a work message or a new e-mail, she hurried to check it. It left her disappointed every time. By Friday, she was so worked up that she logged off early and drove over to Ashley's tattoo shop to bother her.

Luckily, Ashley wasn't currently working on any clients. She looked up from where she was sketching out designs and gave Alden a surprised smile.

"Finally come to take me up on that offer?"

Alden rolled her eyes. "Nah, I'm good. Needles are still icky after all this time. So no." She took a seat on the couch nearby. "Whatcha workin' on?"

"Got a client wanting a shaded skull. Nothing too hard, just coming up with different versions of it so that she has options to choose from." She glanced at Alden. "And what are you doing here? The last time you dropped in, it was to complain about that one woman who wouldn't leave you alone. I say 'that one', but it's happened too many times to count. Got lady troubles again? Who did you fuck and abandon this time?" Ashley set down her pen and raised an eyebrow.

"Come on, is that really all I complain about?"

"Yes," she deadpanned. "Okay fine, that and having to work in-person sometimes."

"Yeah, about that..."

“Yes?”

“Fuck, this is embarrassing. But like, there’s this woman at work and holy shit is she driving me crazy.”

“As in, she’s annoying you? Why’s that embarrassing?”

“No, you’re not getting it. There’s a *woman*.” Alden gave her friend a significant look.

Immediately, Ashley snorted. “Great. So what you’re saying is, you’re having trouble keeping it in your pants at work? What’s the issue? Is she straight? Married? Never stopped you before.”

“I don’t actually know.” Alden thought aloud. “I wondered when I first saw her, but I haven’t thought about it since.”

Ashley rolled her eyes. Pulling out her phone, she opened up her Instagram app. “What’s her name? Just because *you* don’t use social media and live your life largely offline doesn’t mean the rest of us are the same. I’ll look her up for you.”

“Rebecka Nash,” Alden supplied. “Spelled with C-K-A at the end. Shit, why didn’t I think of that?” She leaned over Ashley’s shoulder, but her friend playfully pushed her away.

“Let me stalk your next victim in peace.” Ashley typed the name in and searched. What she saw had her raising her eyebrows. “So, the top result is some Swedish soccer player with eighty-two thousand followers. I’m guessing that’s not it.”

Alden shook her head. “Swedish? Huh. I guess she could be, but even if she was, she’s a developer like me, not a soccer player.”

“Thought so. Well, all the other results are fan accounts for her.” Ashley continued scrolling. “Oh, here’s an account with the name Rebecka N. Is this her?” She thrust the phone in Alden’s face.

Alden eagerly looked, but the blonde that greeted her was definitely not Rebecka. “No, that’s not her.”

Ashley went through Facebook next, but the results were the same. She frowned. “Either my stealth skills are lacking, or your girl is just as social media averse as you are.”

“All right, pulling out the big guns here. Can you google *Rebecka Nash -soccer -football -sweden*? That should get rid of any associations with the athlete.”

“Good idea.” Ashley typed it in and hit enter. “Nope. I get links to various posts that the same person has posted on Instagram and Twitter that happen to not mention soccer.” She kept scrolling. “There’s some interviews, a magazine feature, some YouTube videos... Aha. Looks like she’s gay. There’s a fan video called REBECKA NASH AND LINNEA ANDERSSON and the thumbnail is a super blurry picture of two women kissing. Gotta love women’s soccer.” She closed the browser and put her phone away. “Guess you’ll have to find out for yourself if she’s available or not. Anyway, what’s going on? I thought you kept work and play separate.”

“Well yeah, but she’s a total babe. I can’t get a solid read on her, but I think she’s at least a little bit into me. I just... I’ve done enough mandatory trainings to know what workplace harassment is.”

“Are you her superior? You didn’t know her before, so you don’t work with her, right?”

“Yeah. We’re in completely different domains even though we’re both on the tech side of the company. I traced her org chart and it didn’t intersect with mine until way high up in the chain. Besides, I’m a director, not a manager, so I might literally be levels higher, but I’m no one’s superior.”

“Right, you chose not to go that route, I remember.” Ashley gave it some more thought and then smirked. “You don’t give two shits about your job. So what if you get fired? You don’t need the money, and even if you did, you’re so good at what you do that you could easily get another one in a heartbeat.”

“I’m not going to lose my job over a woman, Ash.” Alden laughed. “I’m at least a little bit fond of it. Getting a new one would be a hassle. But you’re right, it wouldn’t be the end of the world.”

“So what’s the issue? Ask her out or something.”

“I don’t want to *date* her,” Alden retorted, giving her friend a look that said she was crazy for the mere suggestion.

“You know I didn’t mean that.” Ashley rolled her eyes. “I’m sure you can spend time with her without having to make it official.”

“Spend time?”

Ashley clucked and shook her head. “You know, putting in a little effort won’t kill you. I know you like your independence, but sometimes—”

The bell on the front door jingled. They both looked up to see a stranger entering the small parlor.

“Oh, are you busy? I saw online that walk-ins were welcome, at least for consults.”

“I’m plenty free, this is just my bothersome best friend.” Ashley gave the newcomer a winning smile. “Denny, feel free to hang out in my office, but otherwise, I gotta go.”

“Cheers, I’ll head out.” Alden rose and grinned at Ashley’s potential client. “She’s the best, by the way. You’ve come to the right place.”

* * *

Ever since being hired as a software engineer, Rebecka had been taking it easy. She learned at a natural pace, and she felt no need to go above and beyond. She’d treated the position as something fun from the beginning, something possibly temporary, and she saw no need to become a slave to the job like she noticed some of her coworkers were.

That was before Alden Breslin was involved, however.

The past week, she had put her all into setting up a server-side row model with infinite scroll and an in-theory ability to sort and filter successfully. The API hadn’t been adjusted to support sorting and filtering yet, so the best she could do was configure the UI to send the correct request over. She was getting there, but it wasn’t perfect. A lot of googling had been involved.

During halftime at her Saturday rec game, she found herself troubleshooting through one of the latest bugs in her head. When a potential solution came to her, she sucked in a breath, running through the scenario again. Hoping no one would see, she hurried to the lockers to pull out her phone and typed a quick note for herself so she wouldn’t forget.

There wasn’t a no-phone policy—this rec league was just for fun—but she was so used to not even thinking about her phone until the game was over.

Ab, shoot. Someone did see.

One of her teammates-turned-friend, Jessie, was looking at her with amusement. “Your head’s not really in the game today,” she remarked, tilting her head toward the phone in Rebecka’s hand. “Something, or should I say someone, new?”

“No, actually.” Rebecka blushed. “You’re going to think I’m such a nerd. I think I just came up with a solution to one of my bugs.” From their conversations, she knew Jessie was a mechanical engineer, so she assumed her teammate would know what that meant.

“Bug?” It took her a second. “Oh! That’s part of Agile, right? Bugfixes and spikes and sprints and whatnot?”

“Yeah. Sorry, I thought most engineering careers were fairly similar and used the same project management approaches.” She put her phone away. “Let’s go rejoin the others. We probably only have a few minutes before the second half kicks off.”

“Spoken like someone who’s played soccer most of her life and only recently gotten into STEM.” Jessie laughed. Immediately after, she covered her mouth. “Oops. Wasn’t supposed to let you know I knew.”

Rebecka wasn’t actively trying to hide it, so it didn’t bother her. “Nah, it’s cool. Do the others all know too?” They started walking back to the field.

“I don’t think so. I mean, you’ve seen them. They don’t strike me as huge soccer fans.”

“And you are?” Rebecka teased.

“But of course! Best sport in the world.”

Rebecka beamed. “I appreciate your enthusiasm. Let’s go kill it.”

They walked onto the pitch, and she spotted her niece and sister sitting in the bleachers. Her niece pointed her out to Eva and waved. Rebecka waved back.

It was a nice, familiar feeling, playing again.

* * *

Rebecka’s moment of inspiration over the weekend had indeed solved her problem, and by late Tuesday, everything finally worked together. She pushed all the code onto her feature branch, complete

with a gleeful commit message, and then sat back to admire the fruit of her labors.

She didn't really need Alden's help anymore, come to think of it. She'd been working so hard so that she'd be prepared during their help session, and now... No, that wouldn't do. She was definitely going to set up that meeting.

She pulled up Alden's calendar on Outlook and compared it to hers. It was too late to schedule anything for today, and quite honestly even tomorrow seemed a bit short notice considering the meeting would be in-person. So Rebecka picked a time for Thursday. She set it for eleven, hoping that the hour meant that they could get lunch together afterwards, and sent a meeting request.

Five minutes later, she got a response. *Tentative.*

Rebecka frowned. Tentative? She opened up the e-mail to see if there was an added message. There was.

I'll accept the invite if you accept this from me: would you care to come over for dinner later that day?

Come over? To her home? Rebecka stared at the words in surprise. That seemed awfully forward. Other than whatever that was toward the end of their last meeting, Alden had made no further advance or indication of, well, anything.

Was this how people initiated dates nowadays? Inviting them directly to their homes?

Working in a corporation was new for her, but still she had the feeling that this wasn't a typical thing. She shrugged. Saved her the effort of figuring out how to initiate, she supposed.

I'm actually not free for dinner on Thursday, she typed. *Will Friday do?*

Rebecka had rec soccer on Thursday evenings, and she didn't want to have to work around that. She adjusted the meeting invite for Friday and hit send.

Almost immediately, the acceptance e-mail dropped into her inbox.

* * *

Alden was an absolute tornado after she hit the green checkmark of the invite on Tuesday afternoon. Like a child on Christmas morning, she zipped down the stairs and plopped down on one of her couches. She'd never put in this much effort for a woman before, and she still had almost nothing to show for it, but it was exhilarating.

Then the doubts crept in. *You invited her here?!* There was a reason she liked to go to other women's homes instead of the other way around. She preferred to step into their spaces rather than allow them into hers. It also made slipping out the next morning much easier.

The uncontrollable tapping of her own foot annoyed her, and she pressed down hard on her knee to try and stop it. *Need to focus, need to focus...* It was the end of the workday, and she was in no mood to get knee-deep into code again, as much as that always kept her grounded and focused. Instead, she walked back up the stairs to her studio.

She pulled the windows open and breathed it all in, enjoying the sensation of the cold November air as it swirled up her nose and into her chest. Hints of the scent of musky oil paint were present too. Outside, her neighbor's oak tree was just about done shedding its leaves, and the kids had raked together a large pile and were taking turns jumping into it. Alden smiled unconsciously at the scene and began squeezing colors onto her palette.

An hour later, with the sun just about completely set, she set her paintbrush down. The kids had gone in some thirty minutes ago, but Alden had seen enough of them to be able to translate the scene onto canvas. It was a small but simple painting. Provided she didn't grow attached to it in the next month, Alden felt it would be a great Christmas present for the Nilssons next door.

Sufficiently in the zone now and feeling much more relaxed, she began planning. Part of the reason she'd impulsively asked Rebecka to come over for dinner, rather than set a spot elsewhere, was because she genuinely liked cooking and was proud of her kitchen skills. With

impress Rebecka in mind, she put on a coat and set off for the grocery store.

* * *

On Friday, Rebecka made sure to get to the conference room with time to spare. She figured five minutes would be plenty to get set up, but to her dismay, the HDMI wasn't working. After a few minutes of frustration, she used the last bit of prep time she had to try and work the nervousness out of her system.

Alden arrived perfectly on time, and Rebecka immediately stood and smiled shyly. Somewhat belatedly, she stuck out her hand. It technically wasn't the first time they'd met in person, but it also kind of was, since the two cafeteria interactions didn't really count. It didn't help her nerves when Alden clearly smirked at her outstretched hand before taking it with confidence. Alden's hand was warm, and Rebecka cringed internally at how cold her own hand must have felt in comparison.

"Nice to meet you," Alden drawled, breaking the silence. "I'm Alden, but you already knew that."

"I did," Rebecka managed. She bit her lip and scrambled to think of more words to say. Nothing came to mind, so she went straight to business. "Well, thanks again for helping with this. Your explanations were really helpful and I think I'm mostly good now, actually. I did want to run through it though, just to get a second opinion on the methods I'm using."

If Alden was disappointed by how Rebecka went directly into work mode, she didn't show it. "That's good. Show me what you got."

"Do you know how to turn the big screen on? I'm plugged in, and I've been connected to HDMI since before you got here, but it's just not showing up."

"Let me see." Alden got out of her seat and fiddled with the buttons, but other than a weird sparking noise at one point, she got nothing. She shrugged. "It's not coming up."

"We could relocate to a different room?"

"You just wanted to share your screen, right? I have no problem looking over your shoulder."

“Oh. All right then.” Rebecka unplugged the cord so that she could move her laptop around freely. Alden took a seat next to her instead of returning to her original seat that was further away.

“Ready when you are.”

“Okay, from the beginning then. I had to isolate my page status variable into an initial API status checker, so to speak, because with the inner return function over here I wasn’t able to access it. That first call only needs to check for the status, so I’m only requesting one record, on page one. I make the actual call after that.” She glanced at Alden, who was looking at her code quite intently. “Do you follow?”

Alden held up a hand, eyebrows furrowed as she observed the code for a few more seconds before answering. “I do, but... I’m trying to understand why this status checker is necessary. Isn’t it built in? I understood your reasoning, but I’m wondering if it was avoidable. Carry on.”

“Okay. If my status is successful, then I proceed. Over here, I set the dataSource. There’s an added complication of an overflow, because we display the records on the grid at a different level than they’re brought back from the API. Because of that, I have to keep track of any records over the count, so that when another page is requested, I start fetching from that overflow rather than a new page of API data.” She chanced a glance at Alden, who was shaking her head. “What?”

“No way your architect would approve this. Why the hell is it so complicated? A page is a page. Either change the way you’re displaying it on the grid via grouping or change the API so that it paginates at the same level that you want on the UI. This is madness.”

“My...architect?” Rebecka’s shoulders sagged, but then she sat up straighter. “Look, it works, and I already put in the extra effort to make it work despite the difficult circumstances I was given.”

“Your architect is the person who oversees your structures. Don’t tell me you’re not in regular contact with them? The moment they see this, they’re going to ask you, or whoever owns the API, to make changes. I know it works, but it’s going to get harder and harder to manage as the code grows.” Alden looked Rebecka in the eye and shrugged. “Just letting you know. Can I get a demo?”

The confidence in Alden was astounding to Rebecka, especially considering she had absolutely nothing to do with this project. It must have been her experience speaking. Wordlessly, Rebecka switched her tab to the server she already had up and running. There was a basic grid customized with StationDeck defaults. Beside her, Alden immediately leaned forward to pay close attention again.

“As you can see, we start with a loading spinner, and then upon success, the first page will load. Then when I scroll to the bottom...” She waited for the page to load before continuing. “There. It loads more. When I get to the end of all the results, it knows we’re there and stops on its own.” She loaded four more pages to demonstrate. “On top of that, it doesn’t visibly sort or filter yet, but I’ve prepared the sort and filter params.” She triggered a sort and expanded the log that showed the contents of the request.

“Good, good,” Alden murmured, still observing. “Once the API work to accept these parameters starts, you might have to make slight changes. But you don’t have to worry about that now.” She leaned in closer, and their shoulders were nearly touching. “Do you mind if I play around with this?”

“Have at it.” Rebecka slid her laptop over. Alden shifted her upper body again to be closer to the screen, and Rebecka immediately mourned the loss of proximity, but then she felt it—Alden’s leg had moved so that it was touching hers. She swallowed, chancing a glance at the other woman, but Alden appeared utterly focused as she scrolled around and checked various network settings.

“Aha! There. As I suspected. Look at this.” Alden scrolled up, and the spinner appeared, again and again, duplicating and causing the scrollbar to get smaller and smaller.

Rebecka stared in dismay. “What? What did you do?”

“I just scrolled up.”

“Why would that cause this?”

Alden reloaded the screen so that the infinite loop would go away. She then opened up Rebecka’s code and started combing through it. Rebecka felt inadequate for all of a second until she reminded herself that she was new to this and doing very well for someone who had only been developing for less than a year. “There,” Alden said, bring-

ing Rebecka out of her thoughts. “You’re making the assumption that a new page request is a *later* page, which, yeah, is usually the case, but not always. That’s an edge case you need to be aware of. You’re running into this issue because you’re manually calculating the page instead of grabbing it from the request.”

“The request gives me the wrong page though, because of that overflow thing.”

“I’m aware. That’s why I’m saying this needs to be fixed at an architectural level.”

“I still don’t get it. If the user scrolls up, wouldn’t that just be records that are already loaded? Why is a new request being triggered?” Rebecka huffed in frustration. All that work, and it was still buggy after all.

“Here, let me show you.” Alden dragged the scrollbar all the way to the bottom, as quickly as she could, and repeated that twice. “Users can skip loading blocks when scrolling to an advanced position, and the grid won’t request all the data in between the start and end position, because why would it? Waste of resources.” She scrolled up, and the infinite loop of loading spinners appeared again as expected. “If I had scrolled down earlier at a slower pace, then all the records would indeed be already loaded as you said. It only triggers a new request if it needs to load something that hasn’t already been loaded.”

“Wow, you really know your stuff.” Rebecka grimaced. “I thought I took care of all the bugs, but of course a more experienced developer would find something right away. At least I know I still have more work to do.” Embarrassed, she reached for her laptop lid, intending to push it closed, but Alden’s hand on hers stopped her.

“Was that really all?”

Rebecka stared at their touching hands. She’d already inferred it from the forward invitation to Alden’s home, but from the way the other woman kept her hand there... Rebecka felt a rush of heat settling low in her stomach. So she wasn’t just one of those chipper types—she really *was* interested. And bold enough to show it.

Raising her eyebrows at Alden, she gently extricated her hand and closed the laptop with no resistance this time. “Yes, that’s all. Do you

want to get lunch together? It's not our week, so none of my coworkers are there for me to sit with."

"You don't have to convince me," Alden smiled. But..." She gestured to the board. "You sure you don't want me to clarify anything? I thought that was the whole reason we were meeting here. That was hardly any time."

Rebecka couldn't tell if Alden was serious or just teasing her. Then she spotted the glint in Alden's eyes, and she stepped up to the plate. "Actually, yes. If you're offering, I'll sit pretty and listen."

A grin stretched across Alden's face. "Oh, but you've been sitting pretty this whole time." Before Rebecka could respond, or think of a response, Alden shot out of her seat and approached the board. "Since you didn't seem to understand how inefficient and illogical your overflow algorithm was, let me just explain to you the differences between what you currently have and how a robust system should work."

Rebecka's phone buzzed, and she glanced at it. There was a text message was from Lovisa:

How is your "meeting" going? ;)

She shook her head in amusement. Alden was drawing on the board, back to her, and Rebecka took the opportunity to open up the message thread she had with Lovisa and sneak a photo of Alden at the board in response.

Unfortunately, Alden looked back at that exact moment, and Rebecka felt like she was going to die of embarrassment.

The smirk that appeared on Alden's face was absolutely predatory. "Why, if you wanted a photo, you only had to ask."

"Sorry, my friend was asking..." Rebecka faltered.

"I'll even pose for you, *facing* you." Alden held up two thumbs up, and her smile stretched from ear to ear.

"Wipe that grin off your face," Rebecka grumbled, her cheeks still warm.

"Last chance to take a photo."

“Fine, fine.” She made a face, pretending that taking the photo was a huge sacrifice, when in reality she was thrilled to be given the opportunity. “Now, I believe you were about to fall into lecture mode?”

For the next fifteen minutes, Rebecka did her best to pay attention to the technical content of Alden’s words, but it was difficult. It was so easy to focus on the timbre of Alden’s voice as she spoke, on the dexterity of her fingers, on the way she held the marker and easily wrote on the board, even on the way she brushed her hair behind her ear every few minutes...

“So you see,” Alden concluded, “it really doesn’t make sense to continue with this overflow nonsense. Doing it the right way will also fix that debounce block loading bug we found.”

“All right.”

“Just all right? No fight?”

“I really don’t care that much.” Rebecka laughed. “Are you good for lunch? I’m starving.”

“Oh, I could definitely *eat* something.”

The exaggerated emphasis on that one particular word left no question as to what Alden was referring to, and the forwardness of the other woman once again surprised Rebecka, stopping her in her tracks.

“Well...” She mulled over the words in her mind, then decided to just go for it. “You strike me as a picky eater, so you’re going to have to wait till dinner to get non-cafeteria food.”

“Is that so?” Alden’s eyes darkened.

Rebecka instinctively licked her lips. “I mean, since you invited me to yours for dinner, rather than to an...esteemed establishment, I would hope that you know a thing or two.”

“Oh, I know a fair bit.”

Rebecka picked up her laptop and started for the door. “Who knew? A talented developer and chef. That is what I was referring to, by the way. Knowing a thing or two around the *kitchen*.” She smirked at Alden, one foot already out the door. “I’m just going to put my laptop back at my desk first. Meet me in the caf?”

* * *

Alden went straight to the cafeteria, so it was Rebecka who found her there this time. Without the need to steal a quick interaction, she relaxed and acted as she would normally. She waited for Rebecka to be ready, though, so that they could go through the checkout line together. After grabbing their desired utensils, they selected a small table by the window.

For Alden, it was surreal to be seated with Rebecka at the same lunch table. How many times had she observed her from afar, wishing to be in this position? Rebecka had her head down and was busy mixing her salad together. Every few seconds she would look up and smile awkwardly, and Alden found it totally endearing.

“Did you know you share your name with a famous Swedish soccer player?”

Rebecka looked up in surprise. “What?” A look of amusement settled on her face. “Oh, that. Yes, I was made aware of that at some point. You googled me?”

Alden didn’t look the slightest bit ashamed. “Needed to know whether you were unattached.”

“So you know everything now?”

“Not at all,” Alden said easily, apparently unbothered by the fact. “Rebecka Nash the soccer player dominated all the results, but it’s whatever—I have you here now. You can just tell me.”

“What would you like to hear?”

There was a playfulness in Rebecka’s eyes that hadn’t been there before, and Alden wondered what brought it on. She *tsked*. “I can’t give you all the answers, now, can I? You’re going to have to answer that on your own.”

“What was the exact question again?”

Alden took a large gulp of her water. Ashley’s words echoed in her head. *You don’t give two shits about your job. So what if you get fired?* She drummed her fingers on the edge of the table slightly nervously, telling herself that even though she was at work, it was fine. Everything was fine. When she spotted Rebecka’s gaze dropping to her fingers, she quickly stopped and put both hands firmly on her lap, out of view.

“The question was...would you or anyone else have any reason to be violently opposed if I...” She leaned in to whisper in Rebecka’s ear.

“...*fucked* you? Tonight?” Immediately, she regretted her word choice. This wasn’t the bar; this was a professional setting with a professional woman, and she’d been too crass. Outwardly, however, she kept her composure as she observed the other woman’s reaction closely.

Rebecka’s face had gone from mischievous to unreadable, and she visibly swallowed. “Oh my. I confess I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Really?” Alden wondered again if she’d taken a step too far, but she made no move to apologize. Not yet, at least.

“At least not said like that. It clashes with the image you’ve painted of yourself so far.”

“You’ll find that I’m quite different outside these walls.” Alden smiled innocently, feeling relief rush through her when Rebecka did the same, meeting her eyes for a second before looking away shyly.

“I think I’m starting to see that.”

“And so, the answer to the question?” Alden prodded.

Rebecka clearly struggled for words before finally coming up with a response. “Neither I nor anyone else would be violently opposed, no.” A hand flew to her face, and only then did Alden notice how red her cheeks were.

“Glad we’re on the same page.” She took a slow bite of her burrito, and her eyes remained on Rebecka the whole time. The other woman was obviously shy about this—something Alden wasn’t very used to—so she decided to cut her some slack and change the subject to something easier. “Are you from around here?”

“I grew up in San Diego, so no, I’m definitely not from around here. I’m from very far away.” She let out a tiny laugh, though Alden was unsure what was so funny about that. “What about you?”

“I’m originally from Carlisle, so not too far from here, at least compared to you. That’s middle-of-nowhere PA, by the way. I went to Penn, and then I got this job, or rather *a* job here, straight out of college. I’ve been here ever since.”

“Penn State?”

“No!” She gave Rebecka the biggest frown. “Penn refers to UPenn.” She crossed her arms. “I only mentioned it because Penn is sort of nearby, if you count Philly as nearby. Penn State, on the other hand, is a solid three hours away.”

“Sorry, East Coast geography means nothing to me. Not from around here, remember?”

“Right. Moved here from California.”

“Something like that,” Rebecka mumbled. “Do you hit on coworkers a lot, by the way? Should I be asking around to get a better idea of what to expect tonight?”

“You’re still thinking of that, aren’t you? And here I was trying to get to know you better. Dirty, dirty.”

“You’re calling *me* dirty?” Rebecka shook her head. “Sorry, I’m going to need you to repeat that to my friends first chance you get so that they can stop making fun of me and calling me Miss Vanilla.”

“*Are* you Miss Vanilla?”

Rebecka flushed and shrugged. “I don’t think so? I mean, how would they know, right?” She chuckled awkwardly.

“Exactly, how would they know? I’d rather find out firsthand.” Alden grinned with amusement but let her off the hook. “And to answer your question, no, I don’t hit on coworkers often, or ever, actually. You, babe, are an exception.”

“There you go again. You know, if you were a man I would be finding you quite repulsive.”

The words had Alden breaking into another relief-tinged smile. “Glad to hear that you don’t find me repulsive.” She pulled out her phone and started typing a Teams message to Rebecka. “This is my address, by the way. I’m going home right after this. It’s Friday, so I hope you are too. Logging off, I mean. I know I said dinner, but you can come through whenever you want. I’m just going to be cooking, so I might not be the best company, but I could offer you a drink and some casual conversation while I’m busting around.”

The offer surprised Alden herself, but it was too late to take it back after the words were already out of her mouth. She started to imagine how the house would feel with Rebecka in it, perhaps sipping on a glass of wine and leaning against the counter while she was putting something in the oven. Or maybe they were chatting about something, hopefully not code, and...oh, Rebecka was speaking. “Sorry, I missed that.”

“I just said that I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Sweet.” There was a charged silence as both silently studied the other. Alden struck first. “So, how’s a woman like you still single?”

“You don’t even know the first thing about me. I could have a ton of issues.”

“Do you?”

“I hope not.”

“Thought so. So?” Alden tilted her head.

“Ah, you wanted an actual answer. Well then...Me being single is a somewhat recent development. I was with my ex for six years before we broke up just over a year ago.”

“Six years! That’s a whole ass lifetime. Oops. Let me put my work filter back on.” Alden grinned sheepishly. “What happened?”

Rebecka shrugged. “Nothing happened, per se. We grew apart, and then she, uh, got a new job in DC, and distance didn’t help things.”

“Must’ve been some job for her to be willing to leave you.”

“I thought it was a downgrade,” Rebecka retorted, her nose twitching in distaste. “I mean, it paid a lot better, but there are some... companies that I’d never work for.”

Alden nodded in understanding. “Thielper, right? Yeah, fuck them and their unethical technology.” So maybe the work filter hadn’t been properly put back on. She didn’t apologize for it this time, though. She preferred to interact with Rebecka as her usual self rather than her professional self.

“What about you? You’re a catch. Why are you un-ensnared?”

“Me?” Alden laughed out loud. “I’m happy with the way things are. My independence is everything to me, not to mention my drama-free life.”

“Oh.” Rebecka’s brows furrowed. “So when you said—never mind.” She shrugged. “Have you always been like that?”

“Kind of?” Alden thought back to her college years and then her early twenties, where she’d focused first on her studies and then on establishing her career. There were a few notable relationships in that time span, but they weren’t anything to write home about. She certainly didn’t miss having a partner. “I like the freedom to be my own person. I get to watch the shows I want to watch, listen to the music I want to listen to, *not* listen to music when I don’t want to, try new

things whenever I feel like it, be as antisocial or social as I feel like... And that's just naming a few. I answer to no one but myself."

Rebecka hummed but didn't say anything.

It made Alden feel the need to keep explaining. "I just don't think I'd be the best partner, you know? Especially now. I've gotten used to my freedom, and I don't think I'd be good at giving it up."

"Huh," Rebecka said. "Okay."

Alden made a noncommittal sound and changed the subject, having had enough of that talk. "Why did the directory say you were based in Utah? Did you switch offices?"

"Oh, that." Clearly, Rebecka knew what she was referring to. "I joined the company through the career reentry program, and that traditionally starts with a training program in the Utah office. I'm glad we were fully remote last year though, so I didn't have to go. Anyway, I finished the program a while back, and my profile should say that I'm here in Blue Bell. I've asked them to update it, but I guess HR is slow."

"Career reentry?"

"Well, strictly speaking, 'just entry' would be the right term for me. I told you I was new to this, remember? I was doing something else before. Not everyone has been coding since they were in diapers."

"Seven, actually. I started when I was seven."

"See? Diapers." Rebecka paused, her expression becoming incredulous. "How does a seven-year-old even get exposed to that?"

Alden laughed aloud. "My parents enrolled me in this day camp called Engineering for Kids. They had Legos, K'NEX, stomp rockets...I already had Legos and K'NEX at home that I built the shit out of. So what really got me going was Scratch. They finally, finally found something that could keep me still for longer than a few minutes. Have you heard of Scratch?"

"No." Rebecka shook her head, clearly unfamiliar with it.

"It's a programming language for kids."

"Cool."

"I'm going to go refill my hot water," Alden said suddenly, rising from her seat. "Do you want anything from there? Coffee, tea, water, milk? Lemon slices?"

Rebecka declined, and Alden went to the tea and coffee station alone. As she filled her cup, she turned around to glance back at their table. Rebecka was furiously typing away on her phone, looking first exasperated and then amused by whatever she saw. She was so captivated by it that she jumped in surprise when Alden returned, hastily shoving her phone back into her pocket. Alden sent her an amused, questioning look.

“Just my best friend being a menace to society,” Rebecka muttered.

“The same one that wanted a picture of me?”

“The one and only.” Rebecka shook her head. “I didn’t realize you were just drinking hot water, by the way.” She tilted her head toward the steaming cup in front of Alden. “Is there a reason, like you can’t handle caffeine, or do you just like it light? Why not cold water?”

“Can’t a woman like hot water?” Alden used one of the coffee sticks to stir her drink to cool it down a little. “And to answer your first two questions, both. Caffeine speeds up my heart and makes me feel horrible. It’s very unpleasant.” She blew on the water, then took a sip. “Of course, there’s decaf coffee and tea, but...water’s just better.”

“Yeah, I get that sometimes.” Rebecka paused to take a sip of her own drink. “Also, why do you sit alone at lunch? You seem pretty social to me.”

“Been watching me?” Alden teased.

“I tend to notice attractive women,” Rebecka mumbled. Louder, and with more confidence, she added, “especially after they call me pretty.”

“That’s what I was hoping for.” Alden winked. “And me, social? Perish the thought.” Outside of her established friend group and women she was trying to pick up, Alden was *not* a fan of interaction. “Luckily for me, everyone else in my squad is based in other cities, so I have no coworkers to sit with.” That was probably why she was able to remain professional at work. Because she had a screen to protect her.

“They haven’t made you relocate to be with the rest of your team?”

“Oh, they’ve tried.” Alden smirked. “But they need me too much to make demands of me. No, I’m happy where I am.”

“Nice. So what do you primarily work on?”

Alden tilted her head and looked curiously at Rebecka. Did she truly want to talk more about *work*? That was boring. Still, it wasn't like Alden was dying to share more details about her personal life, so maybe talking about work was a good idea after all. It was easy enough.

As she dove into a high-level description of what she did, she kept a keen eye on Rebecka to make sure she wasn't just speaking into the void. The other woman seemed a little bit distracted, but the questions she asked demonstrated that she was following.

Alden couldn't help but think that this was a conversation she definitely wouldn't have been able to keep alive if she was chatting up a stranger at the bar. Even though it was an unfair comparison, as she never gave strangers at the bar a chance to talk about their careers, she couldn't help but compare Rebecka to some of her recent encounters and feel impressed.

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Just Come Clean

BY RIA WYLAND

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