



A Reason to Live

by Alessa

Chapter 1

It was October. Late, rainy October. Another freezing night closing in before one could get any use out of the day; all the stores full of orange foil candy wrappers and paper skeletons. She was waiting outside a bar. Wouldn't dignify the squalid hole in the wall by calling it a strip bar—it was more like a gutter bar. The kind of place where men who don't like their wives want to take it out on someone else and find a few minutes' relief, mostly in the form of teen junkies who don't like themselves and are in need of a quick fix, sunk in guilt or possessed of vicious kinks.

But sometimes they want to take it out on someone like Taylin.

Here she is at fourteen, face like skim milk and body like a twig, charcoal hair a little too long to be practical and a little too messy to be attractive, saucer-huge mould-green eyes just beginning to develop a thousand-yard stare. Voice barely a whisper to conceal still childish intonation. Pretty as a picture and mean as a snake—a broken doll.

Naturally, that's not how Taylin saw herself. She thought being a whore made her hard. She liked to use the word whore, liked to see the way people reacted to it. A lot of them flinched. Some of them took it as an aphrodisiac.

Taylin didn't really need a trick that night; she still had fifteen bucks and no drug habit to vacuum her pocket. But she liked to get it out of the way when she was already feeling miserable, so she could forget about it for a few days after that.

She was pretty sure she had one lined up. There was a guy who kept coming out to look up and down the street like he was waiting for a cab, and talked to her a little every time, trying to be subtle about finding out if she was for sale. Big, huge, fat guy. She had decided if he was one of the fondlers or wanted oral either way, or—if this was her lucky break—the kind who just wanted her to watch him jack off and be impressed, she'd be cool with that. But nobody that big was bending her over the trunk of his car. She'd smother.

Taylin was planning about that, mentally preparing herself for it. The risk, more than the actual act. Of course, she was damn well aware that runaways vanish. Setting her courage for another round of Russian Roulette. That's the state she was in when she saw *her*.

Smaller than Taylin and probably younger too, but not by much; hunched over, freezing in a blue t-shirt, no coat. Blond hair cut just below the jaw line, straight and smooth as silk, so fine and clean that it even tangled gracefully when the cold wind blew it about her pensive face. Cherry-blossom skin, big

blue eyes, incredibly long eyelashes—Taylin really did notice her eyelashes when she was walking down the sidewalk in the kaleidoscope of city lights. She noticed everything about her—her pretty round ears, chipped nail polish, her slender neck, her thin hands and narrow waist, the way her collarbone showed through the T-shirt when the wind pushed it against her.

She also noticed the cut-up bruise on the girl's cheekbone and another one just above her eyelid. Brand-new jeans with dirty knees. Soft mouth pressed tight, trying not to cry. She had a stunned look on her face, staring blankly at Taylin as she came down the sidewalk, too far gone from cold that she'd lost the city dweller's nervousness about eye contact.

For maybe half a minute, Taylin watched her walk towards her, and in that time, she somehow came to believe that the girl was there for her alone. That she was walking down that particular sidewalk because Taylin was there. That she was being given to her, like an unwanted kitten—if you don't keep it, we'll drown it, kind of thing.

Taylin didn't examine the feeling. Runaway kids didn't survive nights on the city streets by examining their feelings.

Watching her, watching her eyes, Taylin stepped out in front of the girl when she was close, already shrugging out of her jacket. She had long sleeves under, but she wouldn't have hesitated even if that jacket had been her only clothing. The girl lost the rhythm of her trudging and let Taylin come up and put the jacket around her shoulders. Grasping at the warmth of it, she opened her mouth a little as if to speak, but clamped it shut again right away and blinked a bunch of times.

"Do you have anywhere to go?" Taylin asked her.

Mute, the girl shook her head.

"Come on," Taylin said, picked up her backpack and led her off down the sidewalk.

When Taylin went into the pancake place, the girl looked confused, as if she'd expected them to go somewhere else. Taylin ordered one of those Halloween deals that came with tacky plastic skull toys. They sat down by the heat vent under the window. She gave herself three and the girl three, and wrapped up the other four pancakes for later.

The silent girl drowned her pancakes in syrup and made them vanish, then looked ashamed, as if wolfing down her food was something she didn't normally do. Taylin always made hers vanish in about three seconds; pancakes, tacos, fried rice, and pizza out of the dumpster behind Wendy's were just kibbles to her; she didn't taste that stuff anymore. Then the way the girl wiped her fingers on a napkin instead of licking them or using her knees made Taylin suddenly self-conscious. She wiped hers on her pants like usual, but she blushed when she did it.

Taylin went back and got a monster-size coffee, put a tonne of sugar in it, and brought it to the girl. They passed the coffee back and forth until they were warmed up. Trying not to stare too hard, she noticed the girl was falling asleep, but after a while, the sugar hit, and she woke up again. All this time, they didn't say a word. Taylin had decided she probably didn't speak English. She looked foreign,

although she couldn't exactly place her anywhere on the map. What she was certain of, though, was that the girl possessed unearthly beauty. All the time they ate and drank their coffee and then sat there being warm, Taylin kept thinking about how beautiful she was. About how she could be happy for the rest of her life just watching her drink coffee.

It wasn't that she thought the rest of her life was represented by many years to come. As far as her actual planning went, the rest of her life was a week, maybe two. But the sense of this girl being *hers* in some important way kept growing. They watched each other's eyes, not even trying to make it look normal.

Finally, the coffee was gone, and Taylin could see the girl behind the counter nerving herself up to throw them out. She said quietly, "My name is Taylin."

The mute girl's sapphire eyes widened a little, as if this impressed her in some way. She finally spoke, "Mine's Anya. Anya Katinova. Thank you." Soft voice, made even softer by an unbearably cute accent, Taylin guessed as Russian. Anya pronounced the 'A' as a sort of 'ae' sound, as if she'd tried to anglicise her name but didn't quite have a handle on the phonemes.

Taylin desperately wanted to hear her talk again. "What happened to you?"

"Some asshole in the park took my jacket," she frowned delicately, more disapproving than angry. Hearing her say 'asshole' made Anya seem a bit less otherworldly. Far from being disappointed, it made Taylin hopeful and more aware that this tiny wonder sitting before her was simply a girl like herself, not some heavenly winged spirit who would slip away if she broke her magic rules.

"How long have you been here?"

The disapproving look deepened. "You think I fell off the back of a truck? I live here."

"You said you don't have anywhere to go. I figured you're from out of town. I been here two months."

"Oh." Dropping her eyes, Anya looked away. "Sorry. It's true. I got nowhere to go. They kicked me out."

"Your parents?"

"Uh-huh."

"That sucks."

"Uh-huh."

"How long ago?"

A pause while she swallowed hard, her blonde brows pulling together for a moment. "About three this afternoon."

"Jesus." Taylin tried to think of what to say about that. When she'd run away, it had been with a sense of determination; it had been exhilarating. Anya looked betrayed. She *was* betrayed. In the end, Taylin just tried to be practical. "So you planning on going to a shelter?"

Anya shrugged, still not looking up. "I guess. I don't know where to find one. I dunno if they make you go home. Cuz my dad says he ever sees my face again, he's gonna kill me. He'll do it too."

"Is he the one who beat you up?"

"What do you think?" She growled, then, after a short pause, "Of course he is. I can't go back, and I don't want the shelter to call the cops on me."

"Nah, they don't call the cops on you. I know, my foster parents would chain me in the basement with a Bible and a crucifix. I ain't going back there either."

Startled, Anya looked at Taylin's face again, laughing a little. "A Bible and a crucifix?"

For about one second, Taylin debated whether to tell her. People in the city weren't as uniformly bigoted, but that just made it more of a gamble. She needed to know if Anya was going to have a problem with it, though, so she could get her safe to a shelter and wash her hands of the kid before she fell any farther.

Because, oh god, was she falling. She could feel it happening, almost taste it. She was weightless.

"Yeah, they figured, they acted obnoxious enough about it, I'd turn straight just to shut 'em up. In the end, I left instead. You don't quit being queer just cuz a buncha damn Baptists want you to roast for it. You're born that way. I read it in, like, Science News or something."

Anya Katinova blinked at her for a little while, exhausted with fatigue, taking her time to process what Taylin had told her. At last, she said mildly, "I'm Catholic." Then, after a pause, "I'm not a very *good* Catholic, though." When Taylin didn't answer, she asked, "Where do *you* sleep?"

Suddenly, Taylin's heart was beating way too fast. She did her best to sound calm, though. "There's a squat. No gas or power, but the water still runs. I have a closet there. If you light some candles, it warms up pretty quickly. Um... It'll totally sound like a pickup after what I said, but... you can come with me if you want."

"Well, *is* it a pickup?"

"N—no," Taylin blushed suddenly, against her will. "Or—I mean—I guess not. You're all beat up. But later—I mean, when you're feeling better—I won't kick you out if you say no, though. I mean, that would be a shitty thing to do. I'll take you to a shelter instead if you want, but you have to deal with some really freaky people there. Not that I'm not kind of a freak, but I'm not, you know, *crazy*." She finally managed to get the emergency talking brake to hold, and clamped her mouth shut.

"Okay," Anya said.

They were silent on the way to the squat house. Taylin knew she'd make a moron of herself if she talked, and Anya didn't seem to mind quiet. She was reeling tired. If it had been more than four blocks, Taylin might have had to carry her in her arms.

At the abandoned warehouse, she showed the girl where to pry off the plywood on the back door, being careful of broken glass, and how to climb through the hole and pull the wood closed after herself. It was pitch black inside. Silent.

Anya whispered, "I can't see."

"You don't have to whisper. There's no one here." But Taylin's voice was quiet too. She dug a lighter out of her pocket and found a single candle on the soggy masonite shelf by the door. She lit it and looked at Anya in its glow. Candlelight suited her. Taylin was suddenly afraid she was going to kiss her, and she'd said she wouldn't do such a thing until Anya was feeling better, so she filled the air with words on the way up the stairs. "Candles are easy to steal. I'll show you how. There used to be some punks who lived here, but they moved out. I wanted to go with them, but they said no; there wasn't room in the car. Which was totally bullshit; they didn't want to get caught with an underage girl. I guess I understand, though. But it gets stupid cold here in the winter. Worse than Antarctica."

Taylin chuckled nervously at the joke, which wasn't even hers and obviously made no sense to Anya, who was too tired for jokes anyway. They were on the second floor in the main hall, rotten floor boards underfoot, mildewed drapes hanging in front of the plywood-covered windows. The storage door was padlocked, just as Taylin left it.

"How come you lock it up?" Anya asked her when Taylin produced the tiny padlock key on the linked rubber bands that attached it to her wallet chain.

"So nobody messes with my stuff." Click, and the lock opened. Taylin locked it to the wallet chain next to the key. Normally, she locked the door on the inside when she was in there, but she didn't think Anya would like being locked in.

"You said there was nobody here."

"Not like I get notice before people move in." She lit more candles, those cheap tealight candles that can be found at the supermarket, until the storage room the size of a walk-in closet was bright enough to read small print. The candles were all along a shelf above the hanger rod thing, bouncing their light off the white ceiling and tan walls.

Taylin's other stuff was all there—the stuff that wasn't in her backpack. She kept the essentials in the bag—the things she cared most about or might need while she was out. What she kept in her hideout was comfort. Sleeping bag and pile of thrift-store blankets; a yellowed pillow; stacks of stolen paperbacks. She sat down on a squalid, old mattress, taking off her shoes, and saw her breath vaporise in the cold air. It was always strange seeing her own breath in an enclosed space. It feels like such an outdoor experience.

Her new friend was still standing in the doorway, looking weary of her new surroundings.

"If you don't shut the door, it won't get warm," she told her. Anya came in and shut the door.

Anya followed Taylin's lead and took her little boots off, then sat down cross-legged on the sleeping bag, looking even smaller than before. Taylin was digging in the backpack until she got out what she

called her field surgeon's kit. It was just a plastic first aid kit, the kind they keep behind the counter at convenience stores, which she kept stocked with any supplies she could steal or find for free. Band-aids, antiseptic, needle and thread, ace bandage. A little pack of Kleenex and some of those alcohol-soaked sterile wipes. Aspirin, Ibuprofen, and a few tabs of Percodan she'd lifted off a 'client' who'd claimed to be a pharmacist.

And about a million condoms, the kind they give away at the free clinic. She made her tricks wear them by saying, "You don't know where I've been." Which reminded them that they actually had a pretty good idea where she'd been, and they didn't want to be a part of it.

Taylin unwrapped a sterile wipe and reached for Anya's face with it, expecting her to flinch. Instead, Anya leaned towards her, as if the sting of the alcohol on her bruised cheek were the gentlest caress. Taylin cleaned the cut and then did her best to clean the rest of her face. When the side of her thumb touched Anya's lower lip, she twitched and did a little brain reboot, like she'd stuck a fork in a power outlet. It made her miss whether Anya had reacted to her touch. She then took the wipe and scrubbed her hands while she got out some ointment. When she dabbed it along the bruise, Anya closed her eyes halfway, letting herself drift away.

Sticking the bandages on, Taylin said, "I'd like to kill that asshole. Some people are just blind to beauty. I don't think it'll show for too long, but still. Anyone who can bring himself to hit your face doesn't deserve to keep his eyes." Once it was out of her mouth, it sounded idiotic—affected instead of poetic, laughable adolescent posturing instead of what she wanted it to be—an offer of shelter.

She made putting the first-aid kit away take a long time. Finally, there was no more plausible fidgeting, and she turned back to Anya. The band-aid on her pink, round cheek was just unbearably cute. She was such a precious thing. Taylin wanted to strangle the stupid bastards who would throw out this jewel with the trash. She couldn't think of a single thing to say. Anya was watching her again, calmly, more tired than afraid, with a weird, tiny smile tugging at the corner of her lips.

She put her hands on Taylin's knees. Resting her slight weight on them, she leaned forward and kissed her softly and inexpertly with a closed mouth. Then she sat back, waiting for an answer to her action.

Taylin's brain fried in the moment that Anya's lips were on hers. All circuits fused. The pure, innocent confidence of the girl burned Taylin clean of cynicism, and she had a glimpse of what it must be like to be a normal teenager falling in love for the first time. So painfully sweet. So naïvely pure. It seemed to take her an hour just to reach out and touch Anya's hair.

But then a terrible idea came to her—what if Anya thought that was the price of her help? Had she said anything that might give that impression?

"You—you don't have to," Taylin told her, shaking her head from side to side.

"Good," Anya came back in the same manner and gave Taylin the same kiss again, and this time she wasn't too surprised to kiss her back.

She was still a little kid, had no idea how to kiss. Didn't know to open her mouth, had forgotten that she might want to put her arms around Taylin. Holding her around the shoulders, Taylin nervously tested Anya's lips with the tip of her tongue, trying to get her to relax a bit, then drew back to look at her, afraid she was mad, or scared, or disgusted, but found her instead flushed, sleepy-eyed, and amazed. Anya climbed onto Taylin's legs, so she was straddling her thighs, her hands on Taylin's arms, and then her arms around Taylin's neck. Taylin pushed her hand into Anya's smooth, soap-scented hair, cradling the back of her head.

That last, apparently, was the key, because all at once Anya pressed herself to Taylin and opened her mouth, whimpering faintly, hips hitching as if she wanted to grind against her but wasn't sure if she was allowed. Taylin's heart gave one off-rhythm beat so hard she thought she'd die from it, then settled to merely hammer in her chest like a drum. She was shaking, or Anya was, or they both were. Sitting up became uncomfortable, and somehow they managed to lie down without breaking the kiss for even a moment. Taylin didn't dare do anything more than kiss her; she didn't even dare put her hand up the back of Anya's shirt to feel the warmth of her skin, lest it scare her into stopping this incredible feeling from taking over her. It was at least half an hour before she released Anya's lips again.

They looked at each other for a while, her bright blue eyes studying Taylin's face while she smoothed Anya's light hair back, strand by strand.

"Those were my first three kisses," Anya eventually said.

Taylin considered her answer for a long time. "Those were my *best* three kisses," she said at last.

Anya wrinkled her nose. "Come on, two of 'em hardly even counted. They *can't* be the best."

"But they are." Taylin added, and then, as if to herself, "You're so adorable."

That baffled her. "What?" she demanded.

"You are. You're just so pretty, it's killing me. But I don't get it—I mean, are you just playing? Or curious? Or, because—do you want to be my girlfriend? I'll take care of you, I promise. I will, even if you say no; I'll protect you. I won't let you end up like me, Anya." It sounded so stupid saying it out loud, and Taylin was sure she was going to laugh at her.

Instead, Anya gradually went crumple-faced. When Taylin's expression began to echo the distress in hers, Anya hid her eyes against Taylin's arm, and softly she started crying.

"I'm sorry," Taylin said desperately. "Whatever I said wrong, I take it back. Don't cry."

Anya rolled her head back and forth a bit, saying no, but didn't answer with anything but sobs. In desperation, Taylin petted her hair awkwardly while Anya cried harder and harder. One of the candles drowned in its wax, and Taylin thought of how if she didn't get up to rescue the wick, it would be nearly impossible to ever light it again, but she didn't get up. Instead, she continued to rub her hand around on Anya's back in circles, hoping for the girl to calm down.

Slowly, Taylin bent her head to rest her cheek against the blond hair. "Don't cry," she kept saying, meaningless reassurance over and over. "It'll be okay. Don't worry. Everything's going to be okay. Anya, don't cry..."

But she cried. For ages. Cried herself sick. When she finally let Taylin look at her face, her eyes were bloodshot and her nose was red. She could've asked for Taylin's life just then, and she would've died for her—this lost little girl she'd known for an hour and a half.

"Do you think—" Anya said, "Do you think when they kicked me out... You think if they knew they were sending me to find a girlfriend, you think they'd care? They hate what I am, so they throw me out where you found me—it's just funny."

"Irony," Taylin supplied, touching her tear-stained cheek below the bandage with the backs of her fingers.

"This is gonna sound crazy," Anya said hoarsely. "I made a deal with God. I prayed, 'If my Dad is right, and I'm a dirty person and going to hell, then please kill me quick, because I can't change. But if it's not wrong, if You made me how I am, please, please help me, because I can't live on my own and I can't go home.' My dad beat me up, and then the guy in the park stole my jacket. I thought that was my answer." She was tearing up again, and her words were getting Taylin choked up too. "But it was just so you'd notice me. So you'd put your jacket on me. It was so... so warm..."

That set her off crying again, and now Taylin couldn't keep from joining in. They clung together in the cold, dump room with only the candles to reflect against their tears. Maybe after what Anya said, it should've been the happy kind of crying, like people do at weddings, staggered by change. But it wasn't. Because if this really were the sort of world where her deal had effects, she shouldn't have had to make that deal in the first place. Because they had both needed kindness so badly that when it finally arrived, it hurt like warmth on frostbitten skin. Because Taylin finally had the chance to do something right and was sure she'd screw it up somehow.

Because they were lost children, and finding each other didn't make them safe once again.

They lay there, overwhelmed and tear-soaked, until Anya fell asleep. She was still wearing Taylin's jacket. Her breath stirred the fleece of its collar, and seeing that made Taylin's chest ache. She got up to blow out the remaining candles, then curled up beside the smaller girl, pulling blankets around them, making a nest. In absolute darkness, she found Anya's hand and held it close to herself.

Taylin reflected as she drifted off that, though she hadn't been afraid when bad things happened to her, now that something good was happening, she was terrified.

Chapter 2

When Taylin woke from dreamless oblivion, she decided it had been a gift, her reward for taking in the stray child the universe had asked her to shelter. In retrospect, it probably had more to do with her being warm for the first time in weeks.

She didn't want to move too much; Anya was curled up against her back with her hands wrapped around Taylin's waist. It was perfectly dark. Even though the traffic sounds coming through the wall were daytime sounds, no light penetrated their little hideout. She groped across the floor until she found a candle, teased her lighter out of her pocket without elbowing Anya in the head, and winced at the rasping of the flint when she lit the wick.

Grabbing a book at random from her piles of shoplifted paperbacks, Taylin tried to get into reading. Her body had things to say to her concerning a bathroom, and then a beautiful girl in her bed, and possibly some food at some point. But she wasn't listening. She was determined not to move until the sleeping beauty beside her woke on her own.

Anya started stirring after half an hour or so. She'd make a little sound, like a kitten begging for milk, move a little, and then be still again. This repeated for some time. Once she said something in Russian, but when Taylin asked "What?", she didn't answer. She wriggled against Taylin's back, burrowing closer and pulling her borrowed jacket around her ears, determined to keep out the morning cold. At last, she sat up, looked down at Taylin with a confused frown on her little face, and said, "Oh."

"Morning, sunshine," Taylin greeted.

"What time's it?"

"Dunno."

"Um. Where's... is there a bathroom?"

"Just a sec." Taylin picked up the candle and shoved her feet into her shoes, then waited until Anya put her boots on too before opening the door.

There were thin stripes of light coming in around the boarded-up window, and steam from their breath curled in it. Taylin led Anya down the hall to the bathroom. Its floor was deep in rotting wallpaper, but the toilet still flushed.

"Weird," Anya said.

"Guess they never got around to turning the water off. Cool, huh?"

"Can I take a shower? No wait, it's cold, right?"

"Yeah. I took a shower in here once. Took me like all night to get warm again. You could get sick."

"How do you wash, then?"

"Mostly at the shelter, but sometimes I bring a bucket of water in my closet and let it warm up for a while. Use a rag; don't get all undressed at once. Still chilly, though." It was true that she'd done that sometimes, but just then she was pretty clean for a homeless kid because a trick had let her use his shower—insisted on it, in fact—two days ago, and she didn't sweat much in the cold anyway.

Anya picked up the bucket that was by the sink and started filling it. Taylin thought she wasn't nearly dirty enough to need a wash, but she liked the idea of her getting naked, so she just shrugged and went to pee. When it was Anya's turn, she told her, with a pout on her face, not to look. Taylin promised not to, but she couldn't decide if that was cute or just Anya being overly shy.

"What do we do now?" Anya asked when they were back in the room.

"Whatever," Taylin shrugged. "I have a few bucks. We could go eat."

"But—" Anya pointed at the bucket.

"If you want, I'll take you to the shelter. There's hot water in the bathroom, and the door locks."

"Okay," she looked taken aback. "Will you go with me?"

Taylin chuckled. "Of course. Are you afraid?"

Instead of answering that, Anya tried to give her jacket back, but Taylin wouldn't let her. She said she could keep it because it was too small for her. It wasn't quite true, but it still fit Anya better. Instead, she bravely put on all three of her shirts.

From the look of the grey sky and rushing traffic outside, Taylin guessed it was about noon. They went to Goodwill first, where she picked up an oil-stained army jacket for two bucks. It wasn't quite as warm as the sheepskin coat she'd given to Anya, but it was meaner-looking, which she liked. Then they caught a bus to the western suburbs, and the only establishment Taylin knew would let them stay as long as they wanted, however grubby and cheap they were.

The Black Cat Café is a kind of landmark. It's been there, under various names, since the dawn of time. Hippies, punks, junkies, crackheads, drunkards, students, and tourists all shared its wobbly iron-cast tables and mismatched chairs without trying to kill or rob each other *too* frequently.

They ordered a large coffee to share and an assortment of day-old pastries. The guy behind the counter was the mean one with the tattooed face, so that was all they got. Sometimes the nice girl with the pink hair was there, and she always slipped Taylin some broken cookies or something. But she guessed she'd used up her luck for the time being, having pretty Anya beside her.

When they'd secured the little window-corner space, half-hidden behind a sickly potted tree, Anya said, "I guess I'm gonna be drinking coffee a lot. You like coffee."

"It's cheap and hot and makes me alert," Taylin explained. "You put enough sugar in it; it's okay." She didn't comment on the implication that Anya planned to stay with her, but she certainly thought about it. She didn't realise how broadly she was smiling until Anya commented.

"You should smile more. It looks good on you." She looked away shyly, but her eyes were back on Taylin's face a second later.

Taylin reached for Anya's hand on the table. It felt soft and small, a hand made to be held by another girl. She let her hold it for a moment, then pulled away, embarrassed or afraid that someone would see them and get hostile.

"Tell me about you," Anya first broke the silence.

"Um... Like what?"

"Anything. What music you like. What books, what sports. What school you went to."

Taylin's eyes widened, surprised at the thought.

"I'm missing school. I guess I dropped out, huh?" Anya said this with a restrained panic in her voice.

"I guess," Taylin shrugged. She didn't really see the point of school. She'd never met a teacher smart enough to keep up with her, let alone teach her. "I guess you could just educate yourself, like at the library or whatever, and you can get your school certificate. I think they let you test for it at 16." Taylin had just pulled that number out of the air; she had no idea what the law said about the subject.

"But I don't think I have my library card." Anya went on a frantic search through her pockets and turned up a bunch of coins, candy wrappers, and—to her evident relief—a library card. "I forgot I had some money. I should get the next thing."

"How much?"

Anya counted. "Uh- Four."

"I still have more than that."

"How do you get money?" Anya looked afraid of the answer.

Suddenly, Taylin knew she couldn't tell her. Not only that, but she couldn't *do* it anymore either. It would be cheating on her. Anya would hate her. She'd leave, and someone else would pick her up—someone who didn't care enough—and then terrible things would happen to her.

"Mostly panhandling and freeloading," she lied.

Taylin had actually tried that, sparing for change on street corners, but her personality didn't much incline people to help her. She was determined to become better at it from now on.

"I like basketball," Anya told her out of the blue, with the first smile in a while lightening up her face. "But I'm way too short to be good at it."

They talked about school for a while, movies, and food. The conversation didn't mean anything. It was just a carrier wave for the looks passing between them, the smiles, the warmth of their voices. Taylin was in heaven and astonished to be there. It was starting to look like the universe wasn't a malicious rat-bastard after all. When Anya glanced around to make sure no one was looking and then fed her the

last bit of lemon Danish with her fingers, she actually sent up a prayer of thanks. Not to anyone in particular; just to anything and everything.

After they drank all the coffee, Anya went into the bathroom to try washing, and came back with dripping hands and a wet face to tell Taylin there were no paper towels, and there was a hole in the door where the lock went in, so she wasn't going to get naked in there. Plus, it wasn't very clean. "Some of the graffiti's funny, though."

"We should get going if we wanna pan in the city during rush hour."

"Is that a good way to do it?"

Taylin shrugged. "I guess."

"Okay," scared, Anya nodded.

Back on the grimy city streets, Anya stared around with big eyes, seeing her home turf from an outsider's perspective. Taylin had guessed from her speech and manner that she hadn't grown up rich, was probably the daughter of hard-working immigrants who demanded that their children be good citizens; her attitude now confirmed it. She had a very hard time asking anyone for anything. Taylin didn't mind asking strangers for money, though she didn't expect them to give it to her, and they mostly didn't. Anya, however, was a shy, inaudible little girl. Finally, Taylin told her to just sit there and look pitiful, and did all the talking herself.

"Can you help us out? 'Scuse me. Spare any change? Can you help us out at all? Got any change? 'Scuse me."

Of course, almost everyone ignored them. They didn't have the time or the cash to notice two thin and hungry beggar girls who called to them. They weren't the only ones in the area, either, or the most needy-looking. Taylin knew that, but it still pissed her off. Who needed their money more, some vet in a wheelchair who had social security and a guaranteed shelter bed, or a couple of children too scared to play foster care roulette? It made her even angrier when it occurred to her that the people she called to probably saw it the other way around, probably would rather help a crippled old man than a young, healthy girl, and that their logic made sense too. Eventually, she just got angrier and angrier.

"Can you help us out here? 'Scuse me. Yeah, keep walking! That's great. 'Scuse me, spare any change? Okay, bye! Go get in your car and turn the heater on; we'll still be freezing here!"

Anya tugged on Taylin's sleeve. She whispered her name fearfully, and when Taylin turned to her, she flinched a little.

"Sorry," she said, forcing a smile. Anya patted her arm and smoothed her sleeve down where Taylin had touched it.

Taylin offered her fake smile to the next businessman stomping down the sidewalk in a suit and warm coat.

"Sir, can you spare some change?"

The man turned on her with a furious glare, as if she'd said something obscene. "I work hard for my money, and you want me to just give it to you. You're what's wrong with this country, lazy little shits like you, why don't you get a fucking job, or even better, go back to school?"

Paralysed with fury, Taylin stared. Not waiting for an answer, the man kept walking. And then she watched herself start to shriek at him. "A *job*? Fuck you! Do you know how old I am? I *have* a job! You know what my job is? *I suck cock in parking lots*, you fat smug motherfucker, thirty bucks a blow, you want some? You have kids? How old are your kids? You think your kids would be any good at *my* fucking job?"

In the middle of her tirade, the man glanced back once and then hurried away, almost but not quite running. Anya was hauling back on Taylin's arm, or she would've chased him down and kicked the shit out of him, or die trying. She was breathing hard, her blood humming with the urge to do harm. But when Anya said her name again and *please*, sounding scared, she stopped and stood still.

After a while, Anya said, "Tay, we should go."

"Yeah." She was shaking. She let Anya haul her away.

A short distance away, they passed a group of punks standing around looking bored, and one of them said, "Right on. That rocked."

Taylin stared stupidly. "Huh?"

The punk clapped her on the shoulder, making her stagger. "That fucker yelled at me too. That was great. 'You want a blow?' Did you see his face?"

She hadn't, but she grinned anyway. "Bet he goes home a different route from now on."

"No fuckin' doubt," he grinned at her and nodded, making his green liberty spikes bob up and down.

Liberty Spikes was big and pink-skinned, with a lot of metal in his face. His two friends looked a bit more like goths. There was a pretty girl in a plaid skirt and tall boots, and a skinny, freckled boy in a holey sweater. They all smiled at Taylin and Anya. The girl said, "Wanna come party with us?"

Taylin wasn't sure what they meant by party. While she warily considered their offer, Anya piped up with, "Sure!" so she shrugged and echoed it. "Sure. Panning's a bust today."

"No shit," said the freckled boy drily. "You look like one of those who're gonna get themselves arrested."

Taylin shrugged again. Beside her, Anya nodded in silent agreement.

The punks led them through the filthy side streets that were like studio backlots behind the movie-prop façade of Uptown. Where the railroad ran behind a supermarket, they showed them a gap in the fence, and they all skidded down the slope. On the concrete slab between the pillars of an overpass, half a dozen punks were already working on four cases of beer.

"You bring cash?" someone greeted them.

Liberty Spikes explained, "Two bucks to drink."

"They're just little kids," the goth girl protested. "I got ice tea; they can have that."

"Let them decide for themselves, Astrid," said Liberty Spikes, and took Taylin's two bucks.

Anya chirped meekly, "I like ice tea."

Taylin settled down cross-legged beside the nearest case, took a bottle, and introduced herself. Within five minutes, they were all laughing at her jokes. Anya clutched her bottle of iced tea in both hands like a squirrel with a nut and added only a laugh or two. Taylin could tell she wasn't quite comfortable, and it made her feel a tiny bit guilty on that account. This was the first time she'd found any of her kind of people since before her stint in Juvie.

No, the kids in the Juvenile Detention Facility were not her kind of people. They were all either victims or vandals, either terrified or determined to wreck anything and everything they could get their hands on. None of them had been willing to grab life with both hands and hang on.

But these punks drinking under the bridge by the tracks, they were having fun; they didn't require that life be kind before they could enjoy it. Taylin felt she could learn from them. And she was determined to get her two bucks' worth, too.

In no time, one of the guys who'd been here when they arrived started telling a long, rambling story about his adventures as a junkie. The way he talked about it, his drug habit appeared to be the best thing since sliced bread. Bemused, Taylin listened to him talk, and he mistook her amazement at his idiocy for fascination, so she became his main audience. The others started wandering off or ignoring him altogether. Anya went with Astrid, though only far enough off that they didn't have to listen to the junkie's self-inflated blathering.

As Taylin kept on listening, he began offering her some of his stash. He made remarks about how she would liberate herself from the herd and how badass that would be. Living on the streets, Taylin had seen what heroin did to kids and was determined not to go down that road. She didn't oblige him, but she kept on listening in morbid fascination. His bluff just went on and on without ending. The sky started to get dark.

Anya came back and knelt to whisper in her ear. "Can we go pretty soon?"

"If you want," she told her, and put her arm around her waist. She tried to kiss her cheek but got the corner of her eye instead. Anya squirmed out of her grasp.

"I'll wait up above, okay?"

"Okay." Taylin watched her go, then turned back to say her goodbyes. She found the soliloquist staring at her in disbelieving disgust.

"The fuck was that?" he demanded briskly.

"I gotta go." She reached to put her bottle back in the case but realised there was still a little in it, so she kept it.

"No, what the fuck was that? You some kinda fucking queer or something?"

Taylin stood up, and still abuzz from Anya's recent cuddle, was feeling good enough to forgive him that. "Don't even start that shit. I'm going."

But he wouldn't let it go. "That's disgusting, you fucking dyke. That's some sick shit right there, you know what I'm saying? That ain't right."

Taylin was still pretty calm while she thought of her answer. "Almost an hour I sit here listening to you pushing dope on me like it's something you take for a headache, and now cuz I'm in love with a girl, *I'm* the disgusting one? Sure, dumbshit, whatever."

"That ain't about love, you hear me? A woman can't be in love with a woman; it don't happen that way."

"Whatever, expert."

"Where you going? I'm talking to you! You fucking that little slut all day and night ain't love. You gonna get diseases!"

And Taylin still thought she was calm, so she was a little surprised when she traced a breaking glass sound to her own hand, which had knocked the bottle against the concrete pillar of the overpass. She looked from the splintered glass knife she'd just made to the bigoted asshole who'd inspired it and nodded slightly. "You're so stupid, the gene pool's lucky you'll never get any of that fucking you think we do all day and night. I know I love Anya. I'd die for her, and I'll kill anyone who talks shit about her. Which you just did."

"Whoa, settle down, kid," he forced a chuckle, hands up in front of his chest. "You don't wanna get in trouble, do ya? We're just having a little debate, right? Just expressing an opinion, y'know?"

Before Taylin could answer his cowardice with the bottle, she heard Anya call her name. She stepped back, well out of grabbing range, before turning to look. Anya had a shocked look on her face. Taylin took a deep breath and threw the bottleneck down.

"Let's go," Anya said.

"Yeah. It smells like bigot around here." After a last defiant glare, she draped her arm around Anya's shoulders and walked away with her.

At the top of the slope, Anya shrugged off Taylin's arm. Hurt, she didn't try to put it back, and they walked in silence. A little while later, Anya said, "I heard you."

Taylin knew what she meant. She asked anyway. "Heard what?"

Anya didn't answer.

Stomach in knots, she let her pull ahead a little. She watched the back of Anya's head with a sick pain of longing all the way back to the squat, certain she'd ruined everything.

In their cold, dusty room, Anya stood in her pink socks while Taylin lit the candles. She made no motion to sit down. Miserable and embarrassed, Taylin told her, "Just say it. Whatever you're gonna say."

"What you told—when we were sparing for change—what you told that guy. That you... in parking lots. That wasn't true, was it?"

Half tired, half hurt, worried, and high on anxiety, Taylin couldn't possibly think up a plausible lie. "It's true."

"You suck at panhandling. I figured that much. But I hoped maybe—like, I dunno. You steal bikes or something."

"No."

Anya nodded unhappily. "I hope you don't think I'm gonna do that."

"No! No, never! I'm never gonna do it again, either. I'll find a different way. I'll... I'll... rob banks if I have to."

A bit less unhappy, Anya smirked, "That's silly."

"I totally will."

Anya paused doubtfully, then lowering her eyes, carefully whispered, "If you ever hit me, I—I'm leaving."

Baffled by the subject change, Taylin blurted, "What? I would never do that! Did you think I would?"

"Tay, you... you get angry."

"But I'd never hurt you!"

"Twice today I saw you about to start it up with somebody bigger than both of us put together. How come you're still alive if you keep doing that? You have a mean temper, and if you ever turn it on me, I'm leaving."

"I swear to God, Anya. I'll never ever."

"I've heard that before."

"Not from me, Anya." She was able to meet her eyes steadily now. This was true; she meant it through and through. "I promise. If I break that promise, don't just leave; kill me before you go."

A little smile curled Anya's lips, amused by Taylin's melodrama. She shook her head. "Okay, I believe you." Then she turned solemn again. "I heard you when you were yelling at that guy. When you had the bottle."

"I'm sorry," Taylin apologised on principle.

"No, I mean... you said you're in love with me."

"Um... Yeah."

"Is it true?"

Miserable and blushing on top of everything, she just knew Anya was going to be mad. She was going to scare her off. But it was too late for denial. "Yes."

"You don't even know me, Tay. It's like, not even 24 hours, and..."

"It doesn't matter. It's true."

Anya considered this answer for several seconds. Then she put her hands on Taylin's shoulders and pushed her against the wall. She pinned her there before rising on tiptoes and kissing her clumsily, mashing their lips together.

It felt like somebody had pulled the pins from Taylin's knee joints, but Anya's body and the wall kept her from falling. She hugged Anya's bony back so tight she gasped, and Anya wrapped her arms in turn around Taylin's neck and rubbed her cheek against hers like a kitten.

"I don't... I don't know how to tell," Anya whispered, "but I think I love you too."

Taylin didn't reply out loud. She was sure it would be the wrong thing to say, but she thought it all the same: *'Mine. Forever.'*

She didn't know hope well enough to recognise it, but it lifted her nonetheless, turned tomorrow's clouds into sunshine and its streets into gold.

Chapter 3

The day it snowed, they were in the library. Anya was reading a cheesy romance novel, laughingly repeating scraps of sappy, amorous dialogue under her breath. Taylin was watching her read, imagining them somewhere else, somewhere in a better life, in a better place than this hellhole, imagining all the things they would do together when Anya finally let her. It was late November, Taylin had just turned fifteen, and they still hadn't done anything more than an occasional kiss.

Seems implausible, doesn't it? That two teenagers in love could spend every moment of every day together, watch each other strip down to wash, sleep nestled together each night for nearly a month, proclaim love for each other, and still not venture further than a shy kiss and a hug before bedtime. But they hadn't. Anya wasn't okay with it for some reason.

Taylin couldn't tell if it was some trauma that made her like that, or if she just wasn't ready. Anya never elaborated on her reluctance, although she told Taylin over and over that she loved her, called her pet names, cuddled with her for hours on end. She wasn't afraid that doing it would make her gayness real; she wasn't in denial. But even when they kissed and Anya was gasping and shaking, with blown pupils and blushing cheeks, if Taylin even so much as put her hand on the soft patch of skin peeking under the

folds of Anya's shirt, she would push her away and tell her "Don't". Frustrating, confusing, and a bit hard on Taylin's ego.

But Taylin knew Anya would cave sooner or later. So she waited, and she tried not to push her too hard or beg too annoyingly. Taylin wasn't very good at self-control and moderation, but she did try for one simple reason—that she truly loved Anya and cared about her more than her own desires. And when Anya got her too excited, she'd withdraw into the freezing bathroom of their squat house and submerge her face in cold water.

Compared to Anya's salty, moonlight skin and kitten-like whimpers echoing through Taylin's fantasies, the first snow was no big news. She'd noticed it a while back but hadn't thought of mentioning it. When Anya looked up from her book and saw it coming down outside the window, though, her face lit up.

"How long's it been snowing?"

"Like half an hour," Taylin told her.

"Think it'll stay?"

"It's cold enough."

"Snowball fight!" Anya jumped up, then hesitated, looking at her book, obviously torn between the idea of a snowball fight and the stack of books they were going to check out on her card, which would be wrecked if they got snow on them.

"It won't be deep enough for a while," Taylin said.

"Let's take these home and then go out again."

They checked out the books, getting a sweet, pitying smile from the oldest librarian. She knew they weren't in school, and was embarrassingly pleased that they were reading anyway. She knew they used the library as a place to keep warm and did her best to keep the other librarians from kicking them out, even though the rest of the patrons were made nervous by their tattered, dirty, giggling presence. Today she learned Taylin and Anya were a couple, too.

"You look happy," she said.

"I *am* happy," Anya beamed. "It's snowing! And I have books! And I have the best girlfriend in the world. She's going to buy me a double mocha and a brownie. Right?"

"I—ah," Taylin blinked at her. "Sure."

The librarian hesitated a little but kept smiling. "That sounds lovely. You girls should be careful walking now. People will be driving funny."

"We will, thanks!" Anya took Taylin's arm and towed her out, past the line of middle-class mothers supplying research material for their kids' school projects. Taylin could see them all thanking their fortune that Anya and her weren't their kids.

When they were finally outside, Taylin took the books from Anya's hands so she could catch the falling snowflakes. "Why'd you do that?"

"What?"

"Tell her."

Anya watched a snowflake melt on her palm, then gave Taylin a worried look. "You think she didn't know?"

Taylin had, in fact, but now she has rethought that. "She could pretend she didn't. Now she can't."

"Anybody can see we're together. There's like, little hearts in your eyes when you look at me. Like in a cartoon," she grinned.

"It's cuz whenever I do, the background goes all flowery. Like in manga," she added quickly to Anya's look of confusion. "When somebody sees the person she's in love with, the background turns into flowers. Or, like, bubbles or something."

"Bubbles?" Anya wrinkled her nose adorably.

Taylin shrugged. "It's true. You want that coffee?"

"And a brownie."

"Okay." They set off for the nearest coffee shop. Taylin had six bucks in her pocket, so she was feeling generous. Anya's new panhandling technique had paid off.

She'd noticed early on how badly Taylin's personality lent itself to begging. Being denied made her mad, and being ignored made her madder, and there's a lot of both in panhandling. Their success was slightly better if Anya did the talking; she was too timid to catch people's attention, but the ones who did notice her small, waiflike figure and an upturned hand, tended to take pity on her. Still, Taylin couldn't help but be worried someone would hurt her, and her glaring presence scared people off. Finally, Anya had hit on the solution of composing a clever line and sticking to it, like a script.

Their best to date was, "Can you spare five bucks for a copy of *Hamlet* to continue my interrupted education?" Taylin experimented with different titles. People seemed to like to hear titles they knew; something like Lucretius didn't work well. Folks would inevitably smile if they mentioned a book they'd read themselves and produce a fat handful of pocket change. Ironically, someone had once given them a fiver for *Les Misérables*.

The coffee shop was stiflingly warm and smelled wonderful. The guy behind the counter watched them suspiciously as they picked a table and settled into it. There's a certain aura of grime and hunger one picks up being homeless, and people notice it. The stack of books bought them a bit of slack, though. Taylin left Anya arranging them on the table and went to get her the promised chocolate overload. For herself, she got a large black coffee, as usual, and put so much sugar in it that the level of liquid in the cup went visibly up. She had half a cheese sandwich in her pocket, wrapped in a napkin, so she couldn't

justify a donut or anything else. She needed to have something left to live on tomorrow if it snowed so much that there was no foot traffic.

"You're thinking way too hard," Anya told her when she returned. She flashed her chocolate a grin that made her look like a three-year-old and started unwrapping the brownie, then looked back at Taylin, grinless. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"You have a line. Right there." Anya reached out to poke the middle of Taylin's forehead. "It's cute. Oh, there, it's gone. Want some?"

Taylin consented to one bite of the brownie. Anya took a bigger bite, rolling her big blue eyes in bliss. Then she scooped up some whipped cream from her mocha and sucked it off her fingers. Taylin's face flashed hot, and her heart turned over, but she was used to that happening by now.

When Anya had finished devouring her brownie—and licking her fingers clean—she turned to the window and put her chin in her hand. She watched the snow, and Taylin watched her watching it.

"I love snow. It's so clean."

"Anya, you're beautiful," Taylin said quietly.

Anya glanced at her with a slight smile playing on her lips, then turned away. "Coming from you..."

"What do you mean?"

"Coming from you, that's funny."

This was a new one. "I don't get it."

"Well, I mean, you could totally be a model. You're, like, perfect. You always look so gorgeous, even when you're freaking out, when you're sleeping, or—or when you have dirt on your chin," she reached out to rub at the smudge in question.

"I... I'm so not," Taylin stammered under her breath. "You just think so cuz you like me."

"Nuh-uh. When I first saw you? I thought, I'm so close to death, I'm seeing angels."

"No way," Taylin scoffed.

"Really."

Taylin gave an uncomfortable laugh. "I'm pretty far from angelic."

"Not true! Maybe you get mad kinda easy, but only when people are being assholes. You're so good to me, Tay—I mean really good—you take care of me, you're so... you do nice things, and you're always gentle, and, and—"

This didn't sound like the kind of conversation for a public place. "Anya, it's okay."

"But... you're still so nice to me, even though I don't give anything back."

Taylin blinked at her in disbelief. "You think it's a *trade*?"

"There's, you know, give and take. Right?"

"You think there's a *trade imbalance* in our relationship?" Taylin was incredulous, not angry, but it still made her flinch a bit, so she brought her voice down almost to a whisper. "Anya, I'm happy just to be with you. There's no trade because I love you."

"I still feel bad. I don't give you anything."

"That's not true."

"But still."

"Anya, you give me something to live for. Without you, I'm not sure if I'd still be around."

Anya stared silently at her hands. After a while, she drank some of her drink. She wiped off her whipped cream moustache and licked her fingers, and this time, as she did it, she watched Taylin's face. Examining the effect she was having on her—the first baby steps of seduction. Taylin actually saw the room get brighter as her pupils dilated.

Scooping up another gob of cream, she offered it to her. There could've been a mean gay bashing team with baseball bats standing right behind Taylin, and she would still have leaned forward and opened her mouth. She sucked the sweet cream off Anya's fingers, eyes locked with hers, and for that short moment in time, the rest of the world simply ceased to exist. Taylin's face flushed cherry-pink under the milk-white skin of her cheeks. The fingers that had been in her mouth, she touched to her lips.

Abashed, Anya looked behind Taylin's shoulder, hunched her own back, and turned away in obvious embarrassment.

Taylin twisted in her chair to see what had made Anya do that. There was a sleek, artsy middle-aged couple looking at them, smiling indulgently. She blinked at them. One of them gave a small wave.

Taylin suddenly had an idea.

"Wait for me," she told Anya, jumping up. She went over to the couple and said, "Hi."

They looked puzzled, but the man who'd waved said, "Hello."

"Can you bum me a couple bucks? I really, really, really need to buy my girlfriend flowers."

The woman chuckled. She arched an eyebrow and said, "It looks as if you're well past the flowers and dinner stage."

"There wasn't any dinner," Taylin blurted. "I wish. I wish I could give her diamonds, and cars, and airplanes, and, like, the moon. A flower I can almost afford."

"You're adorable. Buy her a dozen," the man pressed a bill into Taylin's hand. She looked at it in astonishment; it was a twenty.

Taylin beamed at them. "Thanks!"

"Go, go. Don't keep her waiting."

Backing out the door, she waved to Anya, who had her head tilted like a puzzled puppy. Outside, Taylin ran. Dodged pedestrians, nearly collided with a light pole and skidded into a florist's just as they were about to close. The woman paused while pulling the gate down, looking at Taylin's excited face and the twenty clutched in her hand.

"You'll have to be quick," the woman said.

Up until she said that, Taylin was meant to be. She was going to grab a dozen red roses, like any other love-smitten girl on earth. But just then, an idea jumped through her head and out of her mouth: "Do you know the language of flowers?"

The woman did a double-take. "Well. There's quite a bit of it. I know a few things."

"I know red roses are for love. Is there anything stronger than that?"

"Well..." Looking Taylin up and down, the woman smiled slightly and beckoned her to the flower cooler. "Forget-me-not means true love."

Taylin thought Anya would love those and nodded. "Yes! Those."

"And may I suggest they'd look lovely with white lilies, which stand for purity?"

Vehement nodding on Taylin's part. "How much true love and purity will twenty bucks buy?"

Taylin came back into the coffee shop with the bouquet behind her back to find Anya sitting with the middle-aged couple, fidgeting with her empty cup, and nodding at something they'd said. All three of them watched her approach.

"Um," Taylin said, with no idea how one presents flowers to a girl, so she just brought them out awkwardly and thrust them at Anya. "H- Here."

Anya's eyes went perfectly round. She squeaked like a mouse, making Taylin's heart glow like a furnace. The woman said, "Oh, those are lovely. Stuart, when did you last give me flowers?"

"Your birthday last year," the man replied absently. Then he chuckled because Anya was still staring goggle-eyed at the flowers, and Taylin was still staring at Anya with her face burning. "I envy you girls. This is a good time for you. Never hide what you feel."

Ignoring his fatuous advice, Taylin touched the petals of a lily. "These are for purity. And the blue ones are for true love."

Anya blinked. Her lashes were wet. "But I don't *get* it." Her voice cracked. "I said I don't give you enough, and so you... you give me *more*."

"Because I like to, and If not you, who else am I going to give it to?"

Anya hugged the flowers and said something in Russian. The only word Taylin caught was *milaya*, because that was one of Anya's pet names for her.

"Just love me," Taylin pleaded. "Just stay with me."

Eyes squinched shut against the tears that were beading at their corners, Anya nodded and muffled a sob, "I do, Tay. I will." She bent to hide her face in the bouquet.

When Taylin just stood there staring at her after reaching a sudden pinnacle of her romantic prowess, the man gave her a little shove. "Now take her home."

Taylin was annoyed at their meddling but couldn't show it because they'd given her money for the flowers. And Anya gave them a watery smile as she got up, so Taylin told them, "Thank you. It's—I really—thanks." She quickly gathered the books, snatched Anya's hand, and fled with her in tow before she could embarrass herself even more before the two strangers.

As they left, Taylin overheard the couple talking: "They couldn't have been more than fourteen. If that. Poor things."

Maybe their meddling had affected Taylin after all, because she couldn't let go of Anya's hand even though they were right in the middle of uptown where everyone could see them. She was a bit surprised at how little attention it drew. The few looks they did gather were benevolent—little smiles for young love, pity for urchins, pleasure at the bright flowers—and at their beauty, Taylin realised as she watched them walk by in shop windows. Against the lowering sky and whitened air, her hair looked as black as ink, and the cold put colour in her pale face. Anya stood out like a shimmering gold flake against that gloom; the colour of her skin echoed in the city street lights, her eyes shining iridescent blue like polished moonstones.

Taylin found herself wondering what they'd look like when they were older. How tall they'd be. Whether they'd grow up to be beautiful women, whether they'd be graceful and confident, whether they'd be witty and successful, and comfortable with each other, as the couple in the coffee shop had been.

"It's kind of stupid," she finally said, "talking about forever. It's kinda... abstract."

"I guess," Anya agreed uncertainly.

"But still, I want to see what you'll be like when you're old."

Anya put her face in the flowers again and let Taylin steer her along.

In their cold, dark room, Anya put the flowers in the water bucket. While Taylin lit candles to warm up the place, she said slowly, "I asked those two about something."

"About what?" Taylin asked warily.

"About. You know. Not wanting to be this way. I told them I could tell it bothers you, but you stop when I tell you. I told them I was scared you'd get tired of that and ditch me."

Taylin didn't like that she'd told them anything so personal; she kept her back turned so Anya wouldn't see her disappointment.

She took her time messing with a wick that didn't want to light. "I won't get tired of you, Anya. Ever."

"The guy said to go at my own pace and not to push it. But the woman said..." A pause to remember it. "She said, 'You'll never again love as intensely as you do now. I regret not making more mistakes when I was your age.'"

"But—"

"So I started thinking, if it would be a mistake, what would go wrong? And I guess I'm afraid once we do that, you won't... want me anymore."

Slowly, Taylin turned to face her. "Anya..."

"You say you won't. But then, you would say that."

"But... Anya."

"Then I realised it doesn't matter. I'm yours, Tay. I don't get to decide. I'm all yours, all of me, all the time. If you stop wanting me, I'm yours to throw away."

Taylin set the candle carefully on the shelf, then just as carefully gathered the smaller girl into her arms. "That won't happen. I mean it."

"There's one way to be sure."

Taylin knew she ought to look at Anya's face to find out whether she was serious. But letting go wasn't much of an option at the moment. After a while, Anya turned her face to kiss Taylin's neck. Her hands held tightly to Taylin's back, pulling her closer. Taylin bit her lip against a groan, begging silently that it wasn't just an empty dream.

"I don't know what to do," Anya whispered against her neck. "Please... show me."

Taylin answered with a desperate kiss, her hands gently scrambling at Anya's clothes. Anya pulled her down on the sleeping bag by the hem of Taylin's shirt, then pushed it up, hands hot on the skin of Taylin's stomach. It took a long time to get through all the layers of their tattered clothes. Taylin found herself naked first, being less afraid of it somehow. Making a surrender of it, she let Anya look at her as long as she wanted, and though she was already freezing, she let Anya touch the safe parts of her and resisted the urge to pull her closer in embrace and warm herself up with their shared body heat.

Finally, Anya met her eyes, frightened and wanting, and took off her underwear herself. Taylin wrapped them in the bedding, and Anya flinched when Taylin pulled her closer, towards herself, then suddenly melted against the older girl and clung there, shivering.

"Don't be scared," Taylin whispered. "I love you, Anya. I won't hurt you, don't worry."

"I'm not. I'm cold," she said with a breathless laugh, and bit Taylin's shoulder so hard she yelped. Taylin retaliated, but not quite as hard. Then she kissed her gently and slowly, no longer quite so desperate now that they were really going to do this.

Taylin had wanted this for so long, but as their kisses grew more urgent, Anya began to rub against her a bit, and that felt so wonderful that Taylin lost sight of her plan. She'd expected to blow Anya's mind; she hadn't expected to be amazed herself, but she was. She'd never been with another girl, never made love, but she instinctively knew this wasn't just something to get off and get done, but to get as close as she could to this amazing girl. This was definitely making love, however clumsy and adolescent it looked.

And however short—because once Anya started squirming half-rhythmically against Taylin and breathing fast into her mouth, Taylin lasted about thirty seconds. Anya made it for maybe another ten before she lost it too.

When their gasping breath had slowed a bit, Anya began to roll off her, but stopped at the gooeyness between them and giggled. "Sticky," she said.

Taylin cleaned them up with a paper tissue. They pulled the covers over their heads and lay together in the warm darkness. Eventually Taylin said, "I'm still here."

"Thank you," Anya breathed. "For everything."

The smell of her hair, the shape of her shoulder under Taylin's cheek, the way they fit together—Taylin knew this wasn't what 'home' meant, but it was the closest to home that she ever had.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah." Anya settled her head against Taylin's arm, and she felt the movement of Anya's face when she kissed her cheek. "Let's do that about a million more times."

"That'll take forever." Taylin grinned.

"Then you'll have to stay with me forever," Anya said softly.

And at that moment in time, Taylin wanted nothing more than to be with her forever, because Anya was hers and she was Anya's, and there was nothing separating them or pulling them apart. They could be together for the rest of their lives, together for as long as they both lived.

Taylin smiled at Anya, who was already drifting off to sleep. They were nothing more than two abandoned, homeless kids, but they had finally found a reason to live.

The End