

## CHATTERBOX EXCERPT- ALEX AND YANA MEET

Maria looked up at her, brows furrowed into a laugh. "Alex, you have a full can in your hand." Alex, who had been staring across the beach glanced down at the can in her hand and back at her now as she stood up, surprised.

"I know." she said softly, swaying a little. She was so fucking buzzed. "I want a beer though." Maria watched her, stomach flipping at the way her tongue darted out to swipe the alcohol from her lips.

"Okay. Don't be long."

Alex was already moving across the sand though, not looking back. She moved through the drunk bodies, muttering half hearted apologies as she pushed past the beach fire and up towards the cars where they all sprawled out. There was a whip of anxiety beginning to unfurl in her throat so she lifted the can to her lips and took a swig as she rounded upon the cheerleaders. Wary, she slowed. Lacey Sullivan jeered from the bonnet of the beaten up car she sat on with Yana and Faye.

"Oh my fucking god look who it is," Lacey crowed.

Yana and Faye looked up, raking their eyes over her and bursting into giggles when Lacey leaned into their ears, whispering, eyes still on her. Alex flushed and gripped the can. Some of the other cheerleaders sprawled on the sand to the left watched with mild cruel amusement. For a moment, Alex thought they looked like cats.

"You're the lesbo, right?" Yana said, eyes crinkled at the edges. Her lips twitched upwards.

Faye snickered, "That's the one that's with Maria Johnson. She's the like, fucking insane dyke that always has domestics with her in the courtyard."

Yana and Lacey snorted at that, waterbottles sloshing as they shoved Faye's shoulder.

"Faye you cant say that!" Yana whispered in mock drunken shock, eyes shimmering with it. "It's prejudiced."

"Yeah, Faye." Lacey echoed. Their voices were lilting and cruel. Alex shifted her weight uncomfortably, flustered as she came close to losing her footing in the soft sand. She tried to cover it and corrected her balance, free hand shoving into the pocket of her jeans in an attempt to ooze the nonchalance she was so good at faking.

"Yeah, yeah, thanks for the introduction." They glanced at each other, laughing, and Alex pressed on.

"Yana, can I talk to you?"

Yana eyed her, wary and embarrassed. "Say what you need to say then."

Alex watched her blankly, the alcohol rising to her face. "I meant alone."

Yana's brows shot up- Lacey laughed and grabbed Faye's arm before heading off, not without a few pointed cruel comments. She watched them leave, defensive all of a sudden, before raking her eyes over Alex. She stood there stupidly, not really knowing where to look but from the sand and back to the can in her hand.

"What do you want?"

Alex looked at her. "Is your wrist okay?"

"What?"

Alex gestured lazily at Yana's cast with the can-hand. Yana shrunk back when some liquid sloshed from it, and Alex pulled her hand back with an embarrassed apology.

Yana's brain worked to catch up. "You came over here to ask about my wrist?"

Alex shrugged, eyes downcast.

"It's fine, thanks for the concern. Is that all?" she eyed her, watching the way her mouth worked to form words. There was some struggle, and then Alex rushed out-

"I know why you fell."

"What?"

"I know what made you fall."

"You're charming. Yeah, congrats, you and the whole school saw me miss my footing and eat dirt. Thanks for the reminder." She could feel her face souring and pushed upwards to shift herself off the car. Alex watched her reproachfully.

"No, I saw it too."

"Saw what?" Yana snapped, irritated.

Alex stared at her. Yana stared back, feeling the tick of a stomachache begin softly in her gut, and then heard the next part as if it was some sort of dream.

"He - or *it*, i dont know- was standing right in the bleachers." Yana paled. Alex, voice low, continued. "You were looking right at it. And it was looking at you, too."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes you do."

Yana shot back, quick, "You've lost your fucking mind."

"Maybe."

"And you're drunk."

"Tipsy."

"I fell and ate shit. That's the end of it. Why did you come over here?"

Alex laughed, stressed. Yana watched the slight tremble in her hand as she grasped at her hair, pulling it over her face. She knew the feeling well- a tremor was beginning in the nervous bounce of her thighs against the bonnet.

"Because I know you saw what I saw. And I know because of that it's real."

"I fell. I don't underst--"

A scream from further down the sand, kids around the firepit jumping over the flames. Yana looked past Alex's shoulder and met the hardened gaze of Maria Johnson, half collapsed on the shore way over the beach and clutching a can like Alex's. Yana looked away, watched Alex take a sip before trying a laugh and continuing.

"Is that everything?"

Their eyes met, and Yana had to fight to hold it.

Alex took a breath. "I know you saw him. How have the nightmares been?"

The world lurched under Yana's feet with abandon. For a wild moment, she felt as if she was falling from grace, tilting through the air for the second time that day, and had to hold a palm to the car bonnet to steady herself. The air felt like it had been sucked from her chest with a blunt *whoosh* and she glanced to where Faye and Lacey were stalking down the beach with some fright. Alex stepped forward as if to steady her, then stopped herself. Yana could not look at her. All of her boar bristle

defence was falling away, and she had to watch the crash and fizz of the shore before she mustered up a response. When she spoke, it was low and terse.

“You- How do you- What? The nightmares?”

“Yeah. You got em?”

“Do you?” Yana looked at her now, half frightened and childish. Alex was looking elsewhere, awkward.

“Yeah.” she turned to her now, crooked smile grim on her face. “Lots of chasing. Had them for a while now.” And then a pause, then- “So you...?”

Yana nodded slow. Alex let out a breath they’d both been holding. The waves crashed in the distance, party roaring some feet away.

“Right so you see this guy I supposedly saw. What did he look like?”

Alex shrugged, waved her hands lazily. “Weird posture, head spins weird... uh, i dont fucking know, scary lookin’. Fat fucking eyebrows.”

That *was* the guy, *goddamit*, she was right. She steadied herself against the car, beginning to feel a little sick.

“Sure. What’s that got to do with me?”

“What?” Alex frowned.

Yana straightened herself up, took a sip of the vodka and coke she’d been nursing. “You come over here talking about someone in the crowd at the game and the nightmares. Everyone has nightmares. What’s it to you?”

“If you’ve been having the same nightmares as me then you of all people should know he- it, sorry, *fuck, i dont know*- wasn’t meant to be in that crowd.”

It. Yana didn’t like the sound of an *it*.

“Alright. Yeah, fine, I saw it. So did probably everyone there,” she replied.

Alex gave her a pitiful look. Yana shot it down with a glare. She didn’t need pity, she needed this conversation to be over.

“Yana, I don’t think they did.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I don’t think they did see it.”

“And who made you the fuckin boss of who sees what?” Yana’s patience was wearing thin. Alex laughed, shaking her head. She sounded so, so tired.

“I’m not. I just thought it was worth asking. I don’t know- sorry, I feel like I’m going...” she trailed off. Her shoulders slumped, face twisted in embarrassment.

“Yeah. Maybe you are,” Yana said.

Alex nodded, took another swig and then muttered an “Alright. Sorry about your wrist.”

Yana watched her leave, mouth twisted. And then her eyes snagged on Finn Walker, watching her from behind the licking flames of the firepit. She frowned, looking away. He’d been laughing, bent over like a fool a few minutes before. Weed must be hitting everyone fast tonight.

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The rest of the night was a little bit of a doozy for Alex Martinez. She’d earned a nasty glare from Maria when she had returned, beerless and breathless. Maria had seen that shine in her eye when Alex

had turned to face the waves and she hadn't liked it one bit. What a girl like Alex had to do with Yana Rutherford was something she would never know, and didn't want to. For the sake of it though, she'd shelved the jealousy and unease settling thick in her stomach for the night and traded it for curling into her side. There was this sudden horrid feeling like she wouldn't have much time left with her, for whatever reason- something was afoot and she couldn't place her finger on the shift in Alex's posture.

Alex had smoked a little more, drank some. She hadn't craned her neck further to see how Yana was taking the news. Could hear her though, crooning something boring with the cheerleaders. She'd considered rolling up the fabric of her shirt to show Yana the branding there, irritated and sunken into her stomach but hadn't wanted to scare her. Yana had already waved her off enough but Alex could bet her whole stash of weed there would have been a similar mess of sliced flesh underneath Yana's cast. The waves had rolled in and out, licked higher up the beach. Shortly after midnight, Alex had scooped Maria up into her side and walked her home, kissing her goodnight sweet and soft at her door. When she finally returned to her own bed, she could feel the sand biting her all over.