

Romantic Fiction Short Story Writing Sample

Synopsis

Jameson “Jamie” Miller and Alicia “Greenie” Verde are enforcers for the Seeker Street Gang. Their bond as colleagues has given way to deep friendship, but also mutual romantic attraction that neither of them acknowledge or act on. After a regular visit to a local business to have lunch and collect extortion money turns into a shootout with police, Alicia is wounded, and Jamie takes her to a safehouse to obtain medical care. As Alicia recovers, they confess their feelings to each other and commit to exploring their romantic feelings with each other.

Act 1

Screeching tires and gunfire echoed throughout the block as Jamie hauled Alicia along, zig-zagging between streets and alleyways. It was only a few more minutes to the gang’s nearest safehouse, but minutes could be all Alicia had left. The makeshift bandages over her shoulder and abdomen were already soaked through with crimson, staining her the waist of her jeans and the shoulder of Jamie’s jacket.

“We’re almost there, just stay with me. We’ll get you patched up, I promise.” Jamie’s tone reeked of panic and forced composure.

“I’m sure we will,” Alicia said weakly.

“Hey, hey, Greenie. Alicia! I need you to believe me.”

“I be”—She coughed, producing a dribble of blood on her bottom lip and chin—“shut up Jamie, I believe you.”

Alicia was barely walking, more just fighting to drape herself over Jamie’s right shoulder as he pulled her along. The two stumbled left around a corner to arrive at a clinic. Alicia leaned up against the window as Jamie yanked the door open, before limping inside, leaving a pale red smear on the glass.

A stout man with short dark hair in business casual attire watched in horror from the front desk as a panicked man pulled a pallid, hole-punched woman into the foyer.

“Oh my god. My apologies, miss. I need to call you back,” the man said, rising from his seat. “Thanks, you too.” He set the office landline down and raced to hold up Alicia from the other side. “What happened here?”

Jamie and the man carried Alicia past the desk onto a stretcher on the other side of the nearby door to the rest of the clinic. Alicia screamed through gritted teeth as she laid down, the bullet wound stretching in new, horrid ways. Jamie was breathless and frantic as he mumbled “We need emergency services via the Seeker Street Incorporated insurance plan.”

The man's eyes widened. "Oh Christ." He glared at Jamie, then at Alicia, then back at Jamie. "Help me bring her in."

The stretcher's wheels squealed as the two rushed down the clean, bright hall, down an elevator, and through another dimmer, quieter hallway. The man brought the cart to a halt and slammed into a section of wall between two rooms. The wall swung open, revealing a hidden passageway leading to a network of tunnels, secretly excavated by the gang. Jamie clenched Alicia's hand as it grew more and more limp. Her tank top was more red than white, as was his hand, where he had put pressure on her gunshot wounds. Panting and groaning and desperate pleas echoed down the long hallway. Fellow gangsters poked their heads out of nooks and small rooms before rushing to help.

"There was a shootout on Knight between Hawkins and Williams. Cops caught us in a trap. We need cleanup and look out topside," Jamie said with sudden composure as he kept pushing Alicia. A few gangsters ran the way they came. Jamie turned to the receptionist. "We'll take it from here. Thank you." The man nodded and headed back up too. "Where's Doctor Holiday and the boss?"

"I'm here, Mrs. Collins is attending to other business," said a slim, tan woman, popping out from around a corner, hastily removing her jewelry and dropping it in a small plastic bin being held by a nurse who was following her.

"You need to help doc, sh— she— she— she got—" Jamie's brief composure slipped out from under him instantly.

"It's okay Jamie. Breathe. Help me bring her to the back as you tell me what happened," Holiday said, as she pulled her short, dark, curly hair into a quick and dirty ponytail.

Jamie paused to collect his thoughts before saying, "Alicia Verde. Her file might be under Greenie. She got shot by the cops. Once in the shoulder— the left shoulder, and once in the gut. She lost a lot of blood. I'm O Negative, I—I can give blood if you need any."

"We have blood already, but if things are looking bad we can draw from you and use it maybe tonight or tomorrow." Holiday turned to Alicia. "Hi dear, how are you feeling?"

"Bad," Alicia groaned. "But can you tell Jamie I'll be fine?"

"I'll need to look at you first, but if you're still talking through all this blood, we have a chance."

"Feel free to lie next time," Alicia murmured, gaze drifting and words slurring.

The stretcher caravan pushed through a curtain into a makeshift operating room. Harsh overhead lights lit crude mismatched beddings and haphazardly sorted storage containers holding medical supplies and surgical tools. Holiday split off to toss her cardigan onto a coat rack, and took off her glasses to switch to a pair of contacts on the counter top of a large

stainless steel utility sink.

"Alright, I'll be set from here. Jamie, you get cleaned up, but stick around in case we need you for anything," Holiday said, washing her hands aggressively.

Jamie slipped into a catatonic stare, locked on to Alicia, who was writhing in pain on the bed. Between pained, heaving breaths, Alicia pulled her head up to look back at Jamie. She'd seen the look on his face a thousand times. He'd been nervous and scared before. He'd been in shootouts before. They'd had to kill before. They'd had to run and hide before. He'd never looked at her like this before though, with all this anguish and fear and grief. Nothing about it was new, but it made her stomach turn and her chest tighten. They were the sort of friends that gave each other shit over anything, all this doting and concern was something she never imagined him being capable of.

"Jamie," she said, lifting her hand and reaching out towards him. "I'm fine. I'll still be here. I promise." Her cheeks were almost rosy for a moment, despite the severe blood loss. Jamie took her hand and squeezed it tight.

"Okay. I'll be here. We're not leaving until you're back on your feet," said Jamie, between long, pained pauses.

"Okay. We'll stay." Alicia released her grip as she closed her eyes and breathed deeply through the pain. Jamie lingered for a few more seconds until he saw the nurse and Dr. Holiday gloving up in the corner of his eye. He walked out before he could see things get drastic.

Act 2

The showers got the blood and sweat off, but not the shame or fear. The rest of the day all blurred together. Jamie wasn't keeping count. He paced every inch of the safehouse. He drained his private liquor stash, wandered in a haze until he threw up and sobered up to a savage headache. Every now and then, he'd wander over to Dr. Holiday and Alicia, staying out of view, but certainly not out of earshot, with all his shuffling about and tripping over his own feet. Holiday would offer an uncertain update about Alicia being "stable but critical" and requiring "regular monitoring for the time being," and Jamie would go back to his quiet crisis and politely dodging questions from the few gangsters that weren't tying up loose ends after the shootout.

The halls rang with the dull, frantic clicking of Jamie's sneakers on cold concrete, the white rubber soles still splotched with dry blood. It was a few hours before Jamie saw that blood. He was reclining on an old sofa, checking his phone and police reports on the gunfight. No suspects meant the cleanup crew was doing their job well enough to buy them a few more days in place. A speck of good news amidst a trainwreck of a day was a nice five minutes of distraction. He saw the red on white and forgot everything, left only with early today – the lazy calm of lunch and collection at the local deli, supplanted by yelling and roaring gunpowder. One moment, he and Alicia were hidden behind a table, sending a volley of bullets across the room towards some off duty cops they had had some run-ins with before. The next, he was ripping apart his shirt to tie the bands of fabric over Alicia's arm and waist, and using cover fire from nearby gangsters to pull her out the back door.

Barefoot, he sped to the nearest bathroom, rubbing the blood out of his shoes furiously. Long after his shoes were soaked and the red became pink, and then white, he was still scrubbing, turning his fingers and palms raw and bright red. After his frenzy, Jamie pulled himself up from his ravenous, hungover hunch over the sink, and composed himself clumsily, splashing water on his face, but also all over his neck, chest, and shoulders, incidentally. He grabbed his dripping wet sneakers and stumbled out of the bathroom. Leaning against the wall, staring right at Jamie was a tall middle-aged woman in a dark suit with tired blue eyes, though still sharp and wary. He must have missed her in his haste. Jamie immediately sobered up even further, straightening his posture.

"Boss. Ma'am."

"Jamie. You and Ms. Verde had a day."

"Yes we have Mrs. Collins. I'm sure we've caused a lot of chaos."

"You have, but it was ultimately a freak accident, and we were lucky. Others were in the area and we were able to clean up and disappear before any more police showed."

"Thank God. Is there anything I can do?"

"Just lay low. Be here for Alicia."

"I— Yeah, yes. I can do that."

"You got a problem being ordered to do nothing?"

"No. It's just," Jamie trailed off, his gaze falling to his own shoes. "I don't know if I'm the best person to be here for Alicia."

"How so? You were the one who brought her here."

"Yeah, but I was the one that got her into this mess." Jamie curled in on himself slightly, biting hard on his lip to keep his eyes from watering.

"Hell, this all got you rattled?" Collins cocked her head and stood up from leaning on the wall. "Walk with me."

Jamie trailed Collins to a room that was slightly bigger and nicer than the others in the hideout. A desk with piles of papers sat in the middle of the room, surrounded by mismatched desk chairs, cabinets, a coffee table, and a couch and shag rug—stolen for the gang by Jamie and Alicia some years ago. Jamie sank into the couch while Mrs. Collins spun one office chair around to face him. She shed her stoic, calculated demeanor in favor of looking like a normal person for once. Jamie had only seen this side of her whenever someone in the gang died.

"Have you talked with Dr. Holiday? Greenie's not dead, is she?" Jamie hated speaking the notion as he forced the words out of his mouth.

"I've checked in, but not as much as you have, according to her. She said Ms. Verde's been improving slowly over the past couple hours," Mrs. Collins said, pulling some glasses out of a set of cabinets behind the desk. "Would you like a drink?"

"I've been drinking plenty. I'd love some water, though. Maybe something with electrolytes."

"Thank God, I'd feel guilty about giving you anything but water after seeing you shamble past me barefoot." Collins pulled a thin packet and bottled water out of the cabinet. "Here."

"Thank you." Jamie opened the bottle and packet, pouring a pale red powder into the bottle before closing it and shaking the bottle. Collins sat and reclined in the desk chair, one leg crossed over the other, swirling a glass of red wine.

"We've never seen you act like this."

"Who? Like what?"

"All of us, and being so worried. Not worried. Terrified."

"I mean, we had a close call." Jamie shifted around in his seat anxiously, but forced a solemn expression, doing anything to keep from sitting still or looking at Mrs. Collins.

"Yes, you did. But we're surrounded by death, and you're good at being stoic."

"I mean, it's never been me, or anyone I was that close to. Death is a different thing when it's that..." Jamie sipped on his water to buy time to find the words. "...immediate."

"You're upset with yourself that you let Alicia get hurt."

"Yeah, yes. I care about everyone in Seeker Street."

"But does everyone in Seeker Street mean as much to you as Alicia? She burns brightly. Brighter than anyone else here."

"She's loud and fun, but I don't think it's all that much."

"She's more than loud and fun for you. She's the drop of sun in your bucket of brooding."

"That's too poetic for me, boss."

Mrs. Collins chuckled politely. "Only when you're together have I ever seen you smile.."

"Is that true? I'll be damned. Her blabbering really got to me. Guess I'm getting complacent." Jamie said through a reluctant smirk. His brows still hung low and heavy over sad eyes.

Collins let silence hang in the air, waiting for Jamie to open up. She sighed and put on an inquisitive stare. "What is bothering you?" She took a swig of her wine and leaned forward. "The only time you've ever been like this, because, as you said, it's someone you're close to. Before today I thought you were unflappable. I only see this sort of panic from new blood."

"I don't know what it is. Am I in trouble or something?"

"No, but this is the sort of thing that I don't want becoming a regular thing from you. Let alone it being bad for business, I'd hate to think of Alicia holding you as you bleed out." Jamie stared at the half-empty water bottle. The pink powder had mixed into a deep, ominous, familiar dark red, making his stomach turn. Not the thought of his death though – the thought that if things had gone differently, Alicia wouldn't have been immune from feeling the sort of anguish he was feeling. "Listen very carefully to my next question." Jamie's attention snapped back to his boss. "I know you're made for this line of work. You're good at this. You turn your brain off and don't think about all the fucked up shit we do. Today, though? You left your brain on and a part of yourself you didn't know about got exposed, and you need to wrap your head around it. You're close with other people and seeing them get hurt doesn't scare you. What does Alicia mean to you that you're drinking and– damn near crying yourself to sleep?"

Jamie kept opening his mouth to answer, and found nothing to say. After the longest minute of his life, he started with, "What does Alicia mean to me? How do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. I don't know what the answer is though—actually, I do know

what the answer is, but you need to find the answer for yourself, because whatever this fear of yours is, it's a fact of life for you now, and you should wrap your head around it and deal with it before you get into any bloodshed again. You don't have to tell me, but you need an answer, because she clearly means something different to you. Preferably, before she wakes up, so you can think about what you actually want to say to her when you're done being miserable."

"...Is there anything else?"

"Rest. And shower. And change into some new goddamn clothes. You smell like sweat and blood and vomit." Jamie nodded, taking his water bottle and quietly exiting. Mrs. Collins examined the half-drunk wine glass, muttering to herself. "Such a silly boy."

Jamie promptly went back to the room where Jamie and Alicia each kept duffel bags with clothes, linens, and toiletries. He took a long cold shower, pulling himself through the motions as his mind raced. He stumbled through the halls, checking in on Alicia, fast asleep. A clock hanging on the wall read "10:23 PM". Jamie stared at Alicia with heavy pain, then continued wandering until he found an unoccupied cot and promptly collapsed for the night, exhaustion finally outweighing dread.

Act 3

The operation was, miraculously, successful. The shot to Alicia's shoulder avoided damaging any bones, causing less damage than expected. The shot to the abdomen managed to avoid hitting anywhere that would cause probable infection, and Dr. Holiday was able to stop the bleeding quick enough for Alicia to get by on blood transfusions. Dr. Holiday did not have the luxury of full access to anesthesia, but Alicia was already dazed enough from blood loss that what she had on hand kept her asleep all the same. By the time she woke up, maybe three hours had passed since she and Jamie got to the safehouse. Her old, bloodied clothes were folded neatly piled on top of a plastic storage box in the corner, replaced by a baby blue medical gown. Her arms and torso had been cleaned of blood, and the wounds were bandaged underneath the gown. She had moved from the stretcher to a twin-sized mattress with white sheets, with a brown nightstand to her right, holding her phone and other valuables. The dull aches and inflammation roused Alicia from sleep, but the sharp pain of her first twitches from consciousness pulled her to consciousness properly.

"Ow, fuck," were the first words she managed to utter after she was done wincing and moaning.

"Good morning, Ms. Verdes." Holiday had gotten comfortable sometime after the surgery was complete, while Alicia was still asleep. Her earrings and bracelets were all back on, her hair was down again, and she had swapped back to glasses. "How are you feeling?"

"Wow. I'm still alive. Unless we both died?"

"I'm quite sure I'm still alive. I'd also be confused if you're dead after all the work I put in on you. You've been in and out of consciousness for a few hours, but stable, so I'm glad to see you're awake. Water?"

"I'd love coffee. Or a vodka cranberry."

Dr. Holiday scoffed with amusement. "You chose two of the worst options for post-operation. You're getting water."

"For real? No coffee? Not even decaf? I drink a lot of coffee."

"Maybe tea tomorrow. Are you allergic to chamomile or turmeric?"

"Are those... magic spells?"

Holiday stared blankly, maintaining eye contact as she pulled a filtered water pitcher out from a refrigerator, pouring water into a regular pitcher she pulled from a tall white cabinet next to the fridge. "Do you know anything about tea?"

"Nothing at all. Actually, I know that it's leaf soup," Alicia said, investigating the medical gown that had replaced her bloodied street wear.

"I see. Technically, yours will be a stem and flower soup. I hope that it does not

disappoint.” Holiday rummaged through a lower level of the white cabinet, pulling out two tea bags, and hung them over the rim of the pitcher, before putting the pitcher back into the fridge. “Anyways, yes, I’m glad to say you’re past the worst of it. I’ll need to continue monitoring you for at least a week, especially to ensure that the wound to your abdomen doesn’t develop an infection. However, you’re one of the luckiest cases I’ve ever stumbled upon, given the state you were in when you arrived.”

“Really that bad?”

“Yes. I didn’t mean to worry you or Jamie, but his panic was not unwarranted.”

“Ugh, don’t tell him that. I didn’t know he had that much care in him.”

“He was very worried, but it seemed... kind. He must be a good boyfriend.”

“He’s not”—Alicia sat up at the notion, sending pain spiking out from her core and shoulder—“we’re not like that,” she responded, through a heavy groan and laying back down.

“Jesus, don’t move! You’re going to undo everything I just did.” Holiday rushed forward to reexamine Alicia’s wounds. After studying the wounds intently, she sighed and sat on a nearby stool. “Anyways, you’re really not dating?”

“No, we’re just friends.”

“Hmm. Shame.”

“What do you mean, shame?”

“I suppose you two seem like you’d be good as more than friends.”

Alicia sighed deeply and buried her face in her right hand, muffling her words. “That’s real presumptuous of you, doc.”

“I’m not just talking about today. Whenever you two come through, your energy is different. No one really has fun in the way that you two do.”

“What are—I mean, come on, we’re not really that different from anyone else here.”

“I contest that. People gawk when you two come in here.”

“Ugh, God. Don’t tell me we’re walking around like some sort of freak show.”

“Unfortunately, you are. You laugh at each other like , but you talk about how someone begged when you interrogated them, or about how the recoil of a shotgun feels different after you saw the barrels shorter. When I say fun, I mean fun for you. It’s horrifying for everyone else.”

Alicia stared into space, evaluating her desensitization to the violence of her daily life. “Huh. You figure that’s a problem?”

"It's worth some reflection, likely. For one thing, about how flippant you come off about nearly dying."

"I try not to dwell on life and death and all that. Doesn't seem fun."

"I agree, but you should consider it. I know your boyf—I'd recommend the same for Jamie, frankly."

Alicia narrowed her eyes at the second mention of a boyfriend. "You a shrink too? Dive this deep into everyone's personal life?"

"I'm not a psychologist, I just have excellent bedside manner. This is mainly to distract you from the immense pain you're likely in," Holiday said, checking her nails flippantly. "But also, I'm just curious. A big part of Jamie's persona is stoicism and solemnity. You, though? He shows emotions for you. Very curious, frankly."

Alicia's face darkened and reddened, squeezing into a pout. "No, we're not—I don't think he..." Her words were slow and unsteady, stumbling to find any legitimate response to Dr. Holiday's claims. "I need to talk about literally anything else." Alicia chuckled uncomfortably.

"Okay, where does Greenie come from?"

Alicia scoffed and grimaced, as though admitting defeat. "Jamie gave me that name. He had been in the gang only six months longer than me, but he held it over me for a while, and since my last name is Verde, which—you know, green, also means inexperienced, so he called me Greenie since I was the new recruit, he thought of it maybe, three or four months in."

"Wow. Charming."

"Yeah. At least I'm around four years along now, so it's just a name at this point."

"There's worse nicknames to get from hardened criminals." Dr. Holiday got up from the stool and pulled two earthenware mugs from the cabinet. Alicia watched patiently, rubbing the fabric of the medical gown between her fingers like a worrystone.

"So... does Jamie give anyone else nicknames?"

Dr. Holiday's brows raised as she faltered in her retrieval of coffee cups for a brief moment. "Um, I don't believe so. I'm quite surprised he gave you one. Why do you ask? I thought we were done talking about you and him."

"I thought we were, too. If we're gonna talk about thinking about death or whatever, I guess I try and blow it off 'cause I don't wanna think about how it's gonna feel when I lose people."

"That's understandable. You're afraid of losing the people you care about. Very human of you. Does that mean you also try to keep people at a distance, or you try to keep them from caring too much about you?"

"I don't— no, not really. Or like, I don't think I do."

"Because earlier, you were asking me to calm down Jamie, with whether or not you'd be fine. I've never seen a person tell someone else not to worry about them being on death's door. It seems a lonely life to live, being insistent on protecting yourself by pushing people away, even in such a time as your death."

"You figure I should stop that?" Alicia stared into her own hands, checking every nook and cranny of her palms and fingers for dried blood.

"In my professional opinion, there's no good in running from the people that matter to us. You should think about not running, and instead just appreciating what you have in life. You already cheated death once. You might not be so lucky next time." Alicia stared up at the ceiling absently. Holiday poured water from the filtered pitcher into two gray-green stoneware mugs, and placed one on the bedside table, before walking off to attend to some other matter.

Alicia sat up softly and took the cup into her hand. She took a long sip as she pondered Holiday's advice. Under her breath, she muttered to herself, "Fuck me. I can't believe I have to think about my feelings." She finished her water and caught a glance at the clock on the wall. 9:30 PM. She and Jamie had taken long hours and night shifts before, but her fresh wounds demanded rest. She laid back down, letting sleep come over her when her mind was done wondering if Jamie truly treated her differently.

Act 4

Jamie and Alicia woke up to the slow creep of electronic lights, as other gangsters taking refuge in the clinic's safehouse began their days. Jamie was fortunate enough to dodge a hangover by being hungover yesterday evening. He pulled himself out of bed and to the bathroom to freshen up. Alicia's surgical wounds ached in, throbbing waves. They had grown stiff overnight, which Alicia resented as she gently stretched her way back to a normal range of motion as Dr. Holiday checked up on her and inserted an IV into her arm. Jamie brought two to-go cups of cheap coffee from a coffee pot in a kitchenette and hung around the corner from Dr. Holiday's makeshift hospital room. He lingered behind the wall as Alicia and Holiday chatted about pain and treatment plans, scrambling to put words together in a meaningful manner. In the midst of his spiral, Dr. Holiday stepped out from the room, surprised at Jamie's presence.

"Oh! Good morning Jamie." Dr. Holiday turned her head back in Alicia's general direction. "Alicia, you have a visitor," she said, walking off aloofly. Jamie and Alicia's eyes both went wide. Alicia's right hand smoothed out her bed head as Jamie drew in deep breaths to steady himself. Jamie walked in tensely as Alicia put on a face of fake composure as she turned her head toward Jamie while laying down.

"Hey. How are you feeling?"

"Like shit."

"Damn. Straight out the gate?"

"Yeah. If I knew it was going to hurt this bad I might have chosen death."

"Come on, don't joke like that."

"Like what?"

"Like dying's not a big deal."

Alicia smirked with annoyance. "Fine, I'd wish I'd fallen into a magical coma until I woke up, fully healed."

Jamie stared with disdain. "Better." He placed one coffee cup on the nightstand and grabbed a stool to sit on. "I grabbed you coffee."

"Apparently I'm not allowed to have caffeine."

"Huh. Why?"

"Just like, everything about coffee, I guess. The caffeine, peeing more, acidity. It's like, one of the worst things I could have."

"Wow, tragic. What a time to quit coffee cold turkey."

"I know! I'm screwed."

"Maybe you'll finally have a respectable sleep schedule. Or maybe your breath will smell like anything other than coffee."

Alicia sat up a little, facing Jamie more. "What if my breath actually smells awful without coffee though? Would you let me know?"

"No, I'd let you embarrass yourself. Maybe you could be the first person ever to kill someone with bad breath."

"Ugh, you dick. I'm going to always breathe on you now and pray for your downfall." Alicia and Jamie burst out into soft, brief laughter.

"So, how long are you gonna be on bedrest for?"

"At least a week. Doc Holiday was saying that it would be quicker for a lot of reasons, like if she wasn't working in a makeshift room, or if I was only shot once."

"What are you gonna do with all that time?"

"Go crazy. If not from the boredom, from the goddamn pain."

"What?" Jamie scoffed. "Never been shot before?"

"What, you been shot before? I could shoot you right now, call it even." Alicia closed her left eye and shaped her right hand like a finger gun, pointing it at Jamie with an arrogant smirk.

"I'll pass."

"That's what I thought." Alicia blew on the "barrel" of the finger gun and put it into an imaginary holster. "This forever means I'm tougher than you."

"Oh please. You're about as tough as two wet loaves of bread."

"You're just jealous that I have a 'survived death' story. My street cred is skyrocketing in real time. I'm gonna keep the bullets and turn them into jewelry or something."

"Street cred? Please, this isn't the 90's. Are you coming straight outta Compton? Am I about to witness the strength of street knowledge?"

"Ew please, I don't even know what you're referencing, but I know it's old as hell."

"Ugh. I forgot you have no culture. I should have just dumped you here and gone home." The two burst into soft chuckles.

"Thank you for staying with me, though." Alicia stared across the room softly, nearly whispering. "I was in too much pain yesterday to really feel emotions about the whole thing, but um...yeah, it was scary."

"Yeah. Of course. I got you into this mess."

"No you didn't. I don't even remember what all happened, but I know you saved me."

Jamie strained his whole face trying to understand what she meant. "What?"

"I was deep in my sandwich when you saw those off duty cops. They would have filled me with holes if I was alone. You pulled me into cover before the first volley came in. I would have died on the spot if those hit me. Also, Holiday thinks the only way I survived is because the bullets that hit me went through the table first. I'd be dead without you."

Jamie stared at the floor, smirking, tongue-in-cheek. "Yeah well, I guess I'd be sad. If you died. I'm glad you're still here."

"I'm glad I'm still here, too." Alicia rubbed her thumb and index finger, chuckling "But for you to say it? Legitimate compassion? Maybe I should have gotten shot sooner."

Jamie's eyes twitched as his heart started pounding combatively. "Dude, can you cut that shit out? You are way too excited to get shot again."

"What," said Alicia, as she rolled her eyes. "You're worried about me?"

"Yeah, what if I am?" Jamie's voice rumbled, filling the room, even at a soft volume. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees as he massaged his temples. "I'm trying to be chill, but this is serious. It's still really serious. You might not be back out there for months."

Alicia broke eye contact and hung her head. "I know it's serious. I just,"—her whole face went warm as she choked on her words—"I just don't want things to be different. I just want to be me, or us, or whatever. Are you gonna treat me different now? Like I'm fragile?" Under the blanket, Alicia was rubbing her thumb along the side of her thumb compulsively, trying to vent her nerves away from her words.

"I know you're not fragile. You're terrifying, frankly." Jamie offered a fake, wry chuckle. It failed to lift the mood. He breathed deeply, trembling as he pulled his head back up from his hand to face Alicia. "We can't act like this didn't happen. I'm assuming you're massaging your hands under the blanket. You know this isn't the sort of thing you brush off."

"Well what am I supposed to do, Jamie? I got shot, boo hoo, next time I'll make sure to enjoy my Reuben less." Jamie stared at Alicia with a knowing scowl. "Okay fine. I'm sorry."

"I forgive you for being facetious."

"Facetious?"

"Yeah, it means being stupid like you're doing right now. Why are you even afraid of things changing?"

"Why are you doting on me like I can't protect myself?"

"Hold on, I asked my question first."

"Yeah, but I'm the girl who just defied death."

"Don't tell me you're going to this to gain special treatment."

"I'm not sure, but I've been told I need to take this whole thing more seriously. Which reminds me, I'm feeling woozy, and I feel like the only way to fix it is for you to answer your question first."

Jamie rolled his eyes and lingered on the floor as he worked up a little nerve. "I had a chat with Mrs. Collins. She called me out for being all shaken up and shit, so congrats, everyone else agrees. She says I need to figure out for myself why I'm like this."

"Figured it out yet?"

"No," he said, whispering unsteadily. "What about you?"

"I had a chat with Dr. Holiday. She said it's off putting how unaffected I am by death, and she said I push people away. She thinks I run away from my feelings."

"Damn. You got clocked."

"Excuse me? You did too. And at least I have feelings, you stony bitch."

"Well, we both have homework, I guess." Jamie took a deep swig of his coffee, while Alicia gently felt the area around her shoulder wound. "Do you think you're afraid though? I'm not asking to judge, I'm really wondering."

"I don't *feel* afraid. It's not like I'm going to live my life chained to the wall. I don't really feel like I push people away either."

"I felt like I was being pushed away when I was worried about you yesterday."

"Yeah, I guess I did. But why were you so worried? We've been in deep shit before and you've never been like that."

"I'm not sure," Jamie said dryly.

"Oh bullshit. You spend too much time brooding not to know why you're like this."

"I'm not lying. This just happened."

"Okay, but I know you have theories."

Jamie stared into his to-go cup, eyes tense like something was going to rise out from the coffee at any moment. "I don't know if you'll like my current theory." Alicia slowly turned toward Jamie with confusion and concern. She studied him deeply, trying to understand his hesitation.

"Tell me."

Jamie set his coffee cup on the nightstand, before crossing his arms and taking a deep breath. "We're friends, obviously, but I suppose you're...more important to me than I thought, if I was this scared that you wouldn't make it."

Alicia gulped as her eyes widened. Her mouth twisted into the shapes of the words she was still searching for, before clenching her jaw and furrowing her brow. "What do you mean by 'more important'?"

"I don't know. I don't talk about my feelings, I don't know what any of this means."

"Are you in love with me?" Jamie and Alicia stared at each other, Jamie slack-jawed and Alicia's eyes frantic. Alicia's breath hitched, and then revved up. Her lip started to quiver as she muttered, "Are— Are you in love with me Jamie?" Jamie said nothing. "I said, are you in love with me?" Alicia's tone rose, mixing agitation and concern. "Jamie, say something, please."

Jamie buried his face in his hands, massaging his temples. "How do you want me to answer that?" Jamie's face drooped with exhaustion and resignation. "I— we have a good thing going. Never mind. Forget this. But you're still not allowed to die, okay?" When Jamie lifted his face, Alicia's eyes were welling up with tears, and her lips were scrunched into a tense frown.

Alicia's voice was quiet and fragile as she said, "Why didn't you tell me you felt that way? You should have told me you had feelings for me."

"Woah, wait, where is this coming from?" Jamie lurched forward, pulling the stool to sit at the side of the bed. "I just— I don't even know how I'm feeling, I'm just thinking out loud." Alicia sniffled as she wiped her eyes furiously.

"No, you're right, we shouldn't, it would just get in the way." Alicia finished drying her eyes and put on a face of composure. Jamie stared intently, investigating Alicia, expecting her to start rambling. "If you're in love with me, you can just say it," she followed. "I know I'm great, so honestly, took your blind ass long enough to notice. Doctor Holiday thought we were a couple."

"She did?"

"Yeah. She was surprised we're just friends."

"What is it that you want?" Jamie looked at Alicia, sorrowful and lost.

"Ugh, I don't know!" Alicia dropped her head into her palms and groaned. "Fucking, goddamnit." Jamie scratched his arm, looking for other fidgets to perform as Alicia composed herself. "Christ, Jamie, say anything, just piss me off or something." Jamie smugly searched his soul for something that would irritate Alicia.

"I talked about my shit, now it's your turn. Why do you think you push people away?"

Alicia parted her fingers to glare at Jamie. "Are you serious?" said Alicia, trading her anguish for exasperation. "I can't believe that worked, asshole."

"You pissed at me?"

“Shockingly, no, which makes me more pissed.”

Jamie scoffed wryly. “Go me. I almost understand how you work. You gonna answer?”

Alicia bit her lip while thinking. “Probably so I don’t have to grieve too hard if I lose people. Like if they die.”

“Or...” Jamie’s eyes fell to the floor, thinking and leaving a long period of silence before he continued, “...if they don’t like you back.”

Alicia’s face turned bright red. “Yeah. That too. I guess that’s possible too.” Alicia ran her fingers through her hair and scratched her scalp compulsively.

“So are you in love with me, then?”

Alicia looked blankly at Jamie and took a deep breath. “Yeah. I might be.” Alicia turned away from Jamie and buried her hands under legs so Jamie couldn’t see her eyes water or her hands tremble. “I hope hearing that doesn’t fry your brain. And yeah. We don’t have to do anything, or be anything different.”

Jamie leaned over to confirm Alicia was hiding tears from him. “How long have you felt that way? A while?”

“Yeah, a while. I can’t really name a moment, but maybe for a year and a half.”

“Hmph. What was it about me?”

Alicia looked back at Jamie, wiping her eyes with her arm. “You’re really interrogating me?” Jamie pursed his lips and nodded patiently.

“The cat’s out of the bag. No putting it back in.”

“Yeah, it is. This blows. Anyways, I like to think I’m good at reading people. I’ve also known plenty of guys that try to act tough, so I usually can see what they’re like deep down. You’re genuinely kind underneath the bluster. I can’t imagine another reason why you enjoy being around someone as loud as me. There are other hardasses that wouldn’t blink if I died, no matter how close I was with them. You’re better than that. I know I can always rely on you.”

“Well, damn. That was earnest. I commend you.”

“Yeah, well it was transactional, because it’s your turn.”

Jamie crossed his arms and stared incredulously. Alicia stared, waiting intently. “You choose to be upbeat despite what we go through on this job. You’re not afraid to get dirty, but you always lead with restraint and mercy. You’re strangely principled in that way. It’s a show of strength to live covered in blood and still choosing to see the good in people, including me. It keeps me grounded and sane to be around you.”

Alicia shifted uncomfortably. “Shucks, Jamie. Laying on thick.”

"You asked for it. And we still have a choice to make. Things were going to be different no matter what. Whether or not we decided to be honest with each other, you still got shot."

"And you were still a sobbing mess."

"Excuse you, we're having a serious moment."

Alicia scoffed. "Fine. Yes. Things...will be different now."

"They can be different on our terms, though."

"They can, yeah. Are you okay with different?"

"I can try something new. Don't expect me to be warm and fuzzy, though."

"Oh, if I wanted warm and fuzzy I would choose a cold rock over you. No, I guess I like your tough, brooding act. When you're not trying to look like an emo dickhead, you're very smart and thoughtful." Alicia reached out and punched Jamie in the shoulder. "Now say something nice about me," she said, putting on an insincere pout and puppy-dog eyes.

"Even if it evidently means you're a coward"—Alicia scowled—"your commitment to being brash and fearless is admirable, and inspiring." Jamie punched her back in her good shoulder.

Alicia's expression flattened into almost calm. "That's the best I'm gonna get, aren't I?"

"Yes. You're still going to be a thorn in my side?"

"Yes, but now I'm your special thorn." Jamie groaned, and faked retching. Alicia laughed heavily, stopping when she felt pain start to grow from her stomach wound. "Can I just have a hug?"

"Fine." Jamie stood up and knelt over the bed, leaning over to hug Alicia.

"Ow, watch the shoulder."

"Sorry." Jamie loosened his grip, intending to release from the hug, but Alicia kept her right arm wrapped tightly around him. The two stayed in the position for a short while, taking in the touch and the warmth, sharing a brief moment of relief. When the hug was done, Jamie sat back down in the stool and Alicia .

"Well, where do you want to go to dinner when I'm back on my feet again?"

"Not the deli, right?"

Alicia chuckled. "Definitely not."