

Deleted Scene – Caz's birthday

[originally in Chapter Eleven]

“So this is where you disappear off to during lunch, huh?”

We step onto the roof and the sun hits my face, soaks through my body, providing some momentary relief from the late autumn chill.

“Yeah. This is the spot,” I say lamely, gesturing around me while Caz takes everything in. The rows of bamboos. The swings. I’m not sure if I’ll regret it later, bringing him up here, but right now I don’t actually mind his company.

“Why?” he asks as he sits down on the swings, kicking his legs out like a little kid. I move to join him, the cake balanced on my lap.

“Why what?”

“Why don’t you ever hang out in the cafeteria with the rest of us?”

I look away from him. Grab onto the seat, the wood cool to the touch. “I don’t know. It’s nicer up here, I guess.”

There's a pause. He kicks out again, and we swing back, higher, the wind buoying up our feet. If I closed my eyes I could imagine myself flying. "Then who do you usually hang out with?"

The question brings me crashing down to solid ground again.

"I ..." My tongue feels glued to my mouth. I don't like where this conversation is going. Because it'll be humiliating if I tell him the truth, which is that I still hang out with nobody, but it'll be even more humiliating if I have to make a friend up. Before, I could've at least offered up a half-answer by talking about Zoe, but that's not true anymore. We haven't spoken since our last call. I'm scared we'll never speak again.

"I don't know," I repeat.

"But you must—"

"Look, can we stop talking about this? Seriously." The words sound casual enough in my head but they come out like knives. When I turn around, the wound is visible all over Caz's expression.

Then his jaw hardens. The swinging stops.

"You never tell me anything about yourself," he says quietly.

My insides turn to dust. I've ruined it. This was meant to be such a nice, simple conversation and we were meant to share his birthday cake—it's *his birthday*—and I ruined it all within minutes. God. What is wrong with me.

Before I can try and fix things, I feel his weight shift, the swings creaking once, softly. He rises to his feet, eyes ahead.

"Where—where are you going?"

"The cafeteria," he says, already walking further and further away from me, to the rooftop door. It opens. Shuts with a horrible click of finality.

And then it's just me sitting alone on the swings.

I close my eyes and think to myself, *it's fine*.

It's fine.

Except it's not.

This is why I always leave first. Because I'd rather be the one to do it than to watch someone else leave.

The minutes scrape by. I should probably eat but my stomach feels like sloshing acid and it's not as if I could eat the cake anyways. Caz is mad at me. Or maybe he just wants nothing to do with me anymore, and that's the natural pattern of things but even after all this time, that still doesn't take away the sting—

Then: footsteps.

I almost leap off the swings, and the hope that courses through my body is ridiculous, dangerous, there's so much of it. It would kill me if it wasn't Caz who came back, but this time I'm lucky.

"What's wrong?" Caz makes his way over, hands stuffed in pockets, like everything's totally normal. The abrupt change makes my head spin.

I stare. "You ... You left."

He stares back at me. "Yeah, uh. To get some forks from the cafeteria?" At first I think he's lying, but then he really does pull out a napkin and two plastic forks from his pocket.

"Oh." My cheeks warm. *I'm an idiot*. I am literally such an idiot.

"Eliza," he says, sitting back down beside me, and there's something in his voice that makes me feel understood in a way I don't want to be. "Did you

think I'd stormed off on you or something? What, just because of the *slightest* disagreement?"

"Of course not." But I say it too fast.

He shakes his head, looks like he doesn't know whether or not to laugh, but the tone he settles on is serious. "I would never just leave over something so—so small, you know? You don't have to worry about that."

People have left me because of less.

I consider telling him this but I like things where they are now, so I chew the inside of my cheek and nod, *okay, I believe you*. And I think I really do.

"Here."

He hands me one of the forks and reaches for the cake and everything's okay. I didn't end up ruining it.

We prise open the old takeout box together. The cake is squashed at the corners and when I try to divide it, some of the melted icing lands *splat* on my face. Slides down my nose.

Caz laughs at me.

I shove him and he laughs harder, shoves me back, and then we're throwing bits of icing at each other with our forks. There's sugar in my hair, dissolving on my tongue, everywhere, so sweet it makes my lashes flutter.

Then, in a flash of stunning clarity, I see myself as if from a distant, third-person perspective: pink-cheeked and grinning, white icing smeared over my chin, sitting together with Caz Song on the swings. The pristine blue sky opening up above us, dappled sunlight splashing the flowers at our feet. All of it like something from a movie, a poetic story—and all of this somehow happening to me.

It's so strange to think that months or even days ago, I had been eating up here alone, content with my alone-ness, my anonymity. Now I'm unsure if I was really *content*, or simply used to it. Too scared to entertain the possibility of anything else.

Not that I'm not scared anymore. I am. Even as Caz turns and smiles at me, the sun glinting off his dark, wind-mussed hair, I can too easily picture the fallout once we call our deal off: the sharp stab of pain I'll feel every time I look over at his empty spot, the way the peace of the rooftop gardens will transform into a different kind of quiet, the oppressive kind, like in those moments when I thought Caz had walked away for good. How this place will never truly feel like mine again.

But then I watch Caz shovel a piece of the hideous cake into his mouth like it's the best thing in the world and all bleak thoughts of the future fade. Not dissolve completely, never that, but they fall into the backseat of my mind.

Screw it, I think, and take a bite of the cake myself. Then almost gag. "This—this tastes awful."

"It does," Caz agrees, still eating.

I snort and raise my fork in the air like a glass of wine. "Well, happy birthday."

He clinks his fork against mine. "Thank you." The way he says it is so warm and sincere that I have to look away to keep from blushing.

And despite all my established rules and fears and accumulated shards of wisdom, that night, for the first time in what feels like forever, I go to sleep hopeful.