

Alexandra

Ashley Zirkle

You have too many feelings for that boy still,” her mom said. “It’s been a year.”
Eight months, Alex thought. She sighed into the phone. “Yeah, okay. Look, I have to go. Say hi to Dad for me, will ya?” Hanging up the phone, Alex rubbed her forehead. Her mom was right, she was obsessed. Her gray tabby rubbed itself against her legs, purring because it knew it was loved. Alex missed having that kind of confidence. She picked up the cat and held it close, losing her thoughts in the rumbling of purrs. The doorbell rang and the cat leapt out of her arms, racing for cover. Alex sighed once more, brushed the cat hairs off her arms, and opened the door.

Two soldiers looked in at her, distinguishable from one another only because one held a clipboard and the other nothing. They were both tall and tan, with navy blue uniforms stretched tight over what could have been either fat or muscle. Like twin robots made in the army factory. The one with the clipboard looked down at it then back at her. “Alexandra Slovinski?”

“Yes.”

“We’re here for a routine check. Where’s your phone?” The one carrying nothing pushed past Alex into the room. Alex turned and walked toward the kitchen, not waiting to see if Clipboard closed the door. She pointed to the phone, and Empty Hands examined it carefully.

“No sign of tampering,” he said. “Tracking and listening devices intact.” He looked at Alex. “This is your only phone?”

“Of course.” She didn’t look at him, but rather at her cat hiding beneath the table. It must be wonderful to be a cat.

“Very well then,” Clipboard said. “We just need to check the rest of your place, and we’ll be gone.” The two men headed toward her bedroom. Alex didn’t bother to follow. She stood by the kitchen window, wondering if anyone had been caught today. She saw two soldiers just like the ones in her apartment carrying a computer between them to a car, black and shiny, with tinted windows. The one in front tripped and nearly fell. He turned bright red as his companion cursed him out in the middle of the street. Alex smiled. Hearing footsteps, she turned around to see Clipboard making notes while Empty Hands looked suspiciously around the room. Clipboard finished his notes and held them out to her. “Just need you to sign this, says you passed inspection.”

Alex signed the paper without reading it and passed it back. The soldiers left without another word, banging the door shut behind them. She could hear the doorbell ring next door. The cat came out from under the table and looked at Alex questioningly. “Come on,” she said. “Let’s get you something to eat.”

Alex passed the university, the gates shut and the windows boarded up. She took a moment in her thoughts to mourn the loss of learning, while keeping her pace steady. A patriotic song hovered in the air, and she left it there, refusing to bring it down to earth by acknowledging it. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the musician’s foot, and she stopped, startled. A scuffed-up Converse sneaker, the kind that had been pulled off the market before they could be banned. It matched her own. She looked at the musician, a skinny boy with shaggy hair and faded clothes. His guitar was the only part of him that appeared as though he looked after it. He saw her looking and winked, singing the praises of the nation.

Alex smiled to herself and stepped closer to the boy. He was about her age, she figured. He finished his song and bowed his head toward her. “Any requests, milady?”

Alex tilted her head back, looking at him closely. "That depends on what sort of songs I have to choose from. I prefer something a little more old-fashioned, myself."

The boy grinned. "Whatever the lady wishes, I shall play." He began to strum a simple tune, one that had been popular several years before. He looked at Alex and winked again, and began to sing, changing the lyrics to parody those of the patriotic song he had just finished. Alex laughed, and the boy joined in her laughter as he sang. A flood of blue blocked him from her view, and it took Alex a moment to realize that he was suddenly surrounded by soldiers.

One of the soldiers grabbed the guitar from the boy's hands and threw it on the ground. It protested, the strings crying out in a discordant yell. Alex stared at it, not seeing the other soldiers handcuff the boy and drag him into a shiny black car. The soldier that threw the guitar grabbed her arm. "Get out of here, girl." Alex turned and ran, the sound of the strings clashing with the boy's laughter in her mind.

Alex sat on her couch with a blanket, her cat curled up asleep on her lap. She closed her eyes and tried to think of nothing. She listened to the sounds around her – the contented purring of the cat, the calls of the soldiers outside doing curfew rounds. With gentle taps on her window, rain announced its arrival. The rhythmic pattering brought her mind back to the simple rhythm of the song from earlier. Alex stirred uncomfortably, and the cat jumped off her lap, annoyed. That boy had reminded her of another shaggy-haired boy she used to know, one who held a trumpet instead of a guitar. She felt her eyes begin to well up and she closed them to stop the tears. Opening them again, she looked at the raindrops sliding down her window and wondered if God and His angels ever cried.

The harsh ringing of the phone woke Alex. She sat up, disoriented. She had fallen asleep on the couch listening to the rain. Groggily, she answered the phone, wincing at her mother's loud, bright voice. "There's a concert at the park tonight, and I want you to go to it with me."

Alex rubbed her eyes. "I'd rather not."

"You don't even know who's playing!"

"Yeah I do." Alex twisted the phone cord around her finger. "It's a bunch of kids from school. They asked me to be in it, remember?"

"And you wouldn't do it."

"Nope." Alex looked out the window. It had stopped raining.

"Alexandra, you've got to stop letting that boy determine your life. He hasn't done a thing to you, it's time to move on."

"Kay." Birds flocked around the puddles in the street. A shiny black car raced through, scattering the birds into the sky.

"I'll see you at seven. Don't think you can get out of it."

Mother and daughter sat in the middle of a sea of brown metal folding chairs, the inhabitants of which made inconsequential talk with their neighbors. Alex creased her program, folding and unfolding it. She wondered how many times it would take for it to rip. Her mother read the entirety of her program, as though eager to soak up whatever inane knowledge it might contain. She turned toward her daughter. "Looks like a good selection."

Alex succeeded in ripping her program, and began to turn it into a crane. "Looks like a lot of crap about how great our government is to me," she said.

"Alex!" Her mother glanced at the soldiers lined up in front of the stage. "That's no way to speak."

Alex shrugged and threw her crane at the stage, wishing she had learned to fold it so that the wings flapped. It landed in the muddy aisle and was promptly trampled on by a little boy hugging a teddy bear.

A soldier came onstage then to announce the orchestra, met by loud applause from the audience. Alex wondered if anyone would have clapped if the man had not been wearing a uniform.

The musicians came onstage then. It was a small group, about twenty or so. They were the only ones from the university's eighty piece orchestra to agree to do the concert. Alex found herself judging them for this, and realized she missed making music. It was a shame the only music allowed now was the music she would never bring herself to play.

Alex scanned the members of the orchestra as they warmed up. There was only one clarinetist. She would be playing the solos that would otherwise be Alex's. Alex vowed to hate that girl's playing. She looked at the trumpets. There he was, sitting next to that other girl. The one he chose over Alex. His hair was short now, and Alex was glad to see that he didn't look good with short hair. She was glad that the new girl was stuck with an ugly version of him.

Her mom touched her arm. "Look, there's Jake." She looked at Alex, waiting for a reaction. "Yep."

"And who's that he's sitting by? I don't recognize her."

Alex turned her head and stared at the trees lining the seating area. The gallows, used each morning, were just barely visible. "That would be his girlfriend."

The concert began. The orchestra sounded good despite its size, and Alex found herself almost enjoying the music. She nearly laughed aloud when the clarinetist missed a solo so badly that the orchestra just started playing loudly to cover her up. The orchestra played their final piece, and Alex joined the audience in applauding them with feeling. She didn't like the music they had played, but she could appreciate a display of talent regardless.

Her mother stood up. "I'm going to go congratulate Jake. You want to come?"

Alex looked at her. "No. I'll wait for you."

"Suit yourself." Her mother walked in the direction of the other well-wishers.

Alex walked in the opposite direction, toward a swing set. She sat on a low-hanging swing, her hands on the rusty chains holding it up. She pushed her feet against the ground and rocked back and forth. Alex thought about the boy with the guitar, and how much better Jake had looked with longer hair. She dug her feet into the ground to stop the swing and stayed there, swaying side to side. The needles of the pine tree forest surrounding the park whispered in the wind, and she felt herself relaxing in their lullaby. Hearing footsteps, Alex tensed instinctively. She turned around slowly, causing the rusty chains to cross each other and screech in protest. She looked at the tall boy standing there in surprise. "If you sneak up on people like that, they'll think you're a soldier."

"Do you hate me that much?" Jake didn't look offended, just curious.

Alex shrugged. "Nice music. Good to see you're not compromising your morals or anything to stand up for what you believe in."

Now Jake looked hurt. "Alex, it's not like that. You know music is the most important thing to me —"

"Sure it is. Music and that girl."

"Alex."

"What? We both know it's true. I should have known you'd support them. Going to be a soldier some day too?"

Jake closed his eyes. "Alex. Listen to me. I don't support them. I play their music because it's all I'm allowed to play, and it's better than playing nothing at all."

Alex shook her head. "No," she said softly. "It's not."

Jake sat down on the swing next to hers. "Look. I know you hate me. And I'm sorry about that. But I'm not sorry about anything I've done." He reached for her swing as Alex pushed against the ground to get up. "Alex, look at me."

Alex considered just leaving, but decided he deserved to see how he had hurt her. She turned toward him, not trying to conceal the tears flowing down her cheeks. "Why are you talking to me, then?"

Jake looked into her eyes, and not at the water coming out of them. "Your mom told me you're unhappy. I think I can help."

Alex kicked the ground, sending dirt and pebbles scurrying for cover into the nearby grass.

Why did she tell him that? "I doubt it."

"Come to my place tomorrow night, eight o'clock. Some friends of mine are coming over, and I think you'd enjoy the games we play."

Alex hesitated outside the second-story apartment door. She had made it inside by telling herself the soldiers would wonder why she stood nervously outside the building, and she went up the stairs when she realized she could still be seen from the street through the windows. There was no excuse to ring the doorbell, so Alex stayed where she was, staring at the peeling brown paint and the crack near the bottom. She wondered if her feet were visible through the crack from the other side, and realized that being caught there would be even worse than going in. Alex looked at the peephole, the eye of the door glaring down at her, and she rang the doorbell.

The other girl answered it. She looked at Alex for a moment as though unsure of whom she was, then turned and called for Jake. Alex stared at her turned back, wondering what that girl had that was better. She was skinnier than Alex, and taller. Prettier? Probably. Jake came to the door then, smiling from one girl to the other. Alex looked down at her dirty shoes, feeling inadequate. Jake ushered her in with a grin, saying, "Good, you're here. There's some people I want you to meet."

The door to Jake's apartment led into his living room. His two mismatched couches were covered in sprawling people, carrying over to the coffee table in the middle of the room. Alex glanced at the window. It was completely dark, covered with a thick black cloth. She stepped around a pair of shoes with tattered laces and stood in the corner, unsure of where to go. Jake walked to the middle of the room, holding the other girl's hand. "Hey guys," he called out. "This is Alex."

A mumble of greetings enveloped Alex, and she was flooded with too many names to look at the faces they belonged to. Friendly hands reached out to her, and she found herself seated, without being quite sure how, on the edge of one of the couches. A curly-haired girl was to her right, and a dark haired boy was lying on the floor at her feet. Alex looked for Jake and saw him sitting on the coffee table, feet swinging in the air like a child's. He grinned at her, obviously glad that she had been so welcomed. Alex looked back, unsure of how she felt about the situation. Jake kept smiling, and that smile made her want to cry.

Jake explained then that the people there were a group dedicated to resisting the government. There were eleven of them in total, twelve counting Alex. "Lucky number twelve," he said. Alex picked at the seam on her jeans and said nothing. Jake went on to describe in detail the injustices of the system and the cruelty of the soldiers. The other girl sat down next to him and put her head on his shoulder while he talked. Alex looked away, feeling sick. Jake never noticed he had lost his audience – he had reached a sort of indignant frenzy, almost yelling in his excitement. The other members of the group caught his enthusiasm and joined in. Only the girl on Jake's shoulder seemed indifferent to the cause.

Alex waited for the proclamations of injustice to end, then asked quietly, "Just what do you plan to do about it, Jake?" She had turned to look at him again, and he faced her, surprised.

"I'm sorry, I thought I had made it clear. We're fighting against their greatest weapon – ignorance." A chorus of agreement sounded throughout the room.

Alex continued to look at him.

Jake sighed, clearly impatient that she did not yet understand. "News, Alex. We give the people news. We print off pamphlets of what is really happening and distribute them throughout the city."

Alex raised her eyebrows. "You have the means to do this? Computers are banned, Jake."

Jake grinned. "Not computers, typewriters. Here, you'll see." He motioned for the people on Alex's couch to stand up. They jumped up, smiling knowingly. Alex rose from her perch slowly, suspicious. Jake hopped between Alex and the curly-haired girl and pulled the cushions off the couch, then removed the underside of the couch. "Look!" He sounded proud. The other girl yawned.

Alex looked into the cavern created by the couch frame. Three typewriters, grim and ancient,

looked up at her. A rope was just visible beneath them. Alex nodded, unsure of what to say. Jake took that as acceptance and grabbed one of the machines. Two others followed suit. A pudgy boy in a striped shirt pulled out a notebook and began to read. "Yesterday around noon five soldiers looted and then burned Mr. Johanson's shop on Third Street. Last night screams were heard from the woods behind Lucy Carlton's place. Two boys were sentenced to be hanged for conspiracy against the government. Word is they were arrested after refusing to give some soldiers their pocket change. Mr. Owens never came home after work..."

Alex watched as people took turns typing the news the pudgy boy read onto thin paper. She listened to the gruesome and unfair stories he read, stories that were supposed to be kept secret but were a part of everyday life. Alex remembered the boy with the guitar, and wanted someone to know what had happened to him. "I have a story," she said when he was done reading.

Everyone turned and looked at her, even the typists. "Go on," said the pudgy boy.

So she told them, these faces without names, what had happened to a boy with shaggy hair and scuffed up shoes, who had laughed with her. Alex felt Jake's eyes on her as she told her tale, and she stared at the frayed carpet beneath the coffee table. When she finished, the typists typed all that she had told and pulled the papers out of their typewriters. They handed the papers to Jake, who stepped on top of the table and held them out with a flourish.

"Done, my friends! Done with another day's work. Who has distribution duty tonight?" Loud conversation ensued over that, and Jake jumped down beside Alex. He looked at her, his eyes serious. "So, do you still think I'm a horrible person?"

Alex rolled her eyes. "No. I never really did, you know."

The left corner of Jake's lip lifted, just barely. "Good. You'd better get going – it's almost curfew and you don't know any of the hiding spots yet." As he walked her to the door, Alex saw the other girl standing in the corner, staring at her resentfully.

Alex paced the length of her kitchen. Something bumped into her leg, and she leapt backward, cutting off a scream as she banged into the counter. A flash of gray caught her eye as it exited the room. Alex forced herself to breathe, taking deep gulps of air. She pulled back a corner of the curtain over the window she had hung moments before and looked out into the street. There were no shiny black cars to be seen, but that meant only that she could not see any. Surely they knew what she had just taken part in – they knew everything. And no one in the group had seemed at all worried – they laughed and chattered as though they were teenagers at a party, not revolutionaries at a treasonous meeting. They were kids against an army of adults. Alex shivered. She grabbed her blanket and turned off all the lights, spending the remainder of the night on the couch, wide-eyed in the dark.

Alex woke up sometime the next morning, surprised to find she had been sleeping. She looked at her closely covered window, streaks of sunlight sneaking in around the edges of the curtain. Her cat lay on the floor near the window, the light making strange patterns on its fur. Alex stood up and moved carefully to the window to look out. A shiny black car slithered past, and Alex pressed her body against the wall, her pulse racing. The cat cracked its eyes open, saw Alex, and stretched awake. Alex looked at it and wondered what the soldiers would do to a traitorous cat.

She had been planning on telling Jake no when he asked her to come again, but she couldn't resist his voice on the phone. "I had fun hanging out with you the other night," he said, sounding as though he meant it. "Let's do that again sometime, how's Saturday?" Alex said yes, pretending for a moment that he was really asking her out and not just speaking in a manner that wouldn't give them away. She remembered when they had first started dating, and Jake had been too afraid to call her. Had been terrified of rejection. It seemed almost ironic to Alex that he had ended up being the one to reject her.

Hearing footsteps, Alex slipped into the shadows of an apartment building. Her companions

did the same, each just feet from each other. The passing soldier failed to notice the pamphlets of thin paper partly concealed beneath each door. After a few minutes, nervous laughter came from the pale faces in the shadows, and they moved on to the next building. Alex walked with them through the darkness, breathing deeply to stay calm. She jumped when the pudgy boy touched her arm, and he stared at her for a moment before handing her a stack of pamphlets. Alex took them, looking around at the still-grinning faces of her companions. She saw nothing to laugh about.

Alex was feeding the cat when her mom called. "Find yourself a boy yet?"

Alex smiled. "Well, I've been on a couple of dates."

"With who?" Her mother sounded delighted.

"Jake."

For a moment there was only static to be heard. Then, "Alexandra..."

"I'm kidding, Mom. We've been hanging out a lot, that's all."

"Is he still with that girl?" Disapproving now.

Alex made a face at the dust particles floating through the air. The cat tried to catch one.

"Yes."

"Stay away from that boy and find yourself a man that can stick to one woman. Alexandra, are you listening to me?"

The cat made an especially high jump, flipped over in mid-air, and fell on its head. "Yeah, I'm listening." The cat cried and ran away from the sound of its fall. Alex laughed.

Alex thought about why she was a part of this. It wasn't because she thought they were really helping anyone – the soldiers continued to act the same regardless of who knew what they did. She stapled another pile of thin sheets and looked to her left, where Jake was busy typing. His hair doesn't look that bad short, Alex thought. It just takes some getting used to. He caught her looking and smiled. Alex smiled back, the papers in her hand shaking slightly. The other girl came from across the room to put her arm around Jake protectively. He turned to kiss her, and Alex dropped the papers and closed her eyes. She felt someone touch her shoulder. The curly-haired girl whose name Alex still did not know was sitting next to her, face full of sympathy. Alex mustered a smile and received one in return. The girl stood up, taking the pamphlets Alex had stapled. She put them in a cardboard box on the other side of the room, where the other inhabitant of the room, a boy, stood with a list of addresses. There were only five of them there so far, the room not yet claustrophobic with over-loud voices. Alex shut her eyes and hugged her knees to her chest, hoping to squeeze every ounce of emotion out of her body. It didn't work. She stood up and stretched, then walked over to the window. It was covered the same way it had been at her first meeting. Is it strange that the soldiers are never suspicious of the curtains? She pulled back one edge and peered outside. It was beginning to snow, thick fluffy flakes floating through the air on their way to mingle with their already fallen companions. A woman in a stained gray coat walked alone on the sidewalk, her pace slow and sad.

Alex started to step away from the window when she saw a splash of black intrude upon the world that was already turning white. The woman in gray sped up as the car parked in front of the building and two men in navy stepped out. Alex held her breath, waiting to see where the men would go. One of them looked at a clipboard, then pointed toward the window she stood at. The other one nodded and rubbed his hands, eager to get out of the cold.

She turned around. The room was full of people, all of whom were either typing at one of the three typewriters or organizing the pamphlets to be handed out that night. Jake looked at her. "What's wrong, Alex? You look terrified."

"Soldiers." One word was all it took to turn the room to chaos. Jake ran to the window and looked out.

"Only two of them... Okay guys, listen." The babble of voices died down as he began to speak. "We can make it out of the window – remember the plan? Let's go." One of the boys reached into the couch and pulled out the rope. Alex could see now that it was actually a rope ladder,

twisted and coiled. Jake ran to his bedroom, where he tore the curtain down from that window and pushed up the bottom of the glass to open it. A gust of cold air rushed in. The boy fastened the rope to two hooks on the bottom of the window frame that had been concealed by the curtain. Jake pushed out the screen, and the boy tossed the ladder outside.

The doorbell rang. The group of people rushed to climb out of the window and down the ladder. Alex didn't move. The doorbell rang again. Only Jake and Alex were left now. The other girl cried out as she lost her footing on the ladder. The soldiers began banging on the door.

"Go," Alex said. "She needs you." Jake stayed where he was, looking at her. The banging intensified, and muffled yells were heard. The other girl cried out again. Jake turned and stepped out onto the ladder. He paused there, watching Alex.

Alex looked at him, shaking. She leaned out the window as Jake began to descend and kissed him brusquely on the lips. Alex moved away quickly, not catching Jake's eyes as his mouth dropped open. Alex slid the rope from the hooks and threw it outside. She barely registered the thumps and gasps from below as she slammed the window shut. She turned just in time to see the two soldiers, quite red in the face, coming at her.

Alex stood on the platform, looking out into the sea of faces. Her parents were there, tears streaming down her mother's face. Jake and the other girl were there too. He had his arm around her, and Alex looked away. It was still snowing. She watched a flake dance in front of her face, oblivious to the humans it shared the world with. Alex shivered. They had not allowed her a coat. A dirty man with a scruffy beard shoved the rope around her neck roughly, chaffing her skin. Alex swallowed. The rope moved with the bulge in her throat. A soldier stepped in front of her. Alex imagined she could see the swing set through the trees behind him. "Alexandra Slovinski, you have been found guilty of treason and conspiracy against the government. Do you still refuse to name an accomplice? This is your only chance."

She looked again at Jake. Even from this distance she could see that his eyes were wet, and that he was holding the other girl to him tightly. A tear rolled down her cheek. "No. There is no one else. I act alone."

"Very well then." The soldier walked off the platform, and the dirty man stepped back up. Alex looked up at the swirling infinity of snowflakes, and then the world fell out from under her feet.