

Twilight Town

Even up there, the sun and the city painted the air a whispering shade of not-quite sunset that couldn't help but seem inviting, in a way. It was thick enough to fall and pool on the streets and roofs and tint them slightly, as it always did at this time of the afternoon.

Alex sat on *his clock tower* and watched the color fall. His lips were even and thin and his eyes were soft and easy and loose in a way that only *the clock tower* could allay out of him. He was too tense anywhere else, too many things to do and too many people to take care of. Each of his hands pressed gently into the stone just enough to feel its smooth surface and the slight imperfections of little rocks accumulated over years of him and his friends finding their place on it. Hanging his legs over the edge, like his hands holding *the clock tower's* stone, was the right thing to do. Having its help to say goodbye to everything wasn't right if the effort wasn't scored by the same little habits he'd developed over their time together.

Alex wasn't saying goodbye like everyone else though, he'd still be here and so would *the clock tower* because it always had been. He'd still come up here and sit with it and watch the sun roll down the sky. He'd still leave before the hour so *the clock tower's* clock wouldn't muffle his hearing for the day. Thinking about it made him smile, though.

Wind blew into his face and a second's hesitation led to an accepting tilt-up of his head. Alex closed his eyes and let his hair ruffle as the wind kissed him and left more of the orange-sun shade on his skin. It was soothing him, he knew. It was like *the clock tower* to do that, to know and to care and to want him to feel better. His eyes opened again and gazed down to the market street where kids his age with backpacks and a skateboard or two were buying food and drinks or just sitting on a bench with friends, where they traded stories about the jobs they were quitting or the places they'd go now that things were finished. Maybe those stories had mixed with the sun's shade to paint the town. Maybe that's what happened every day, now that Alex thought about it.

He'd been a part of that mixing too. It was probably his friends that had helped paint the town sun-shade yesterday when they offered their stories of finding jobs away from the city in places too far to drive in a day and too costly for Alex to fly to. He'd been sitting on his spot of the edge, not saying a word but watching them talk about it all. Maybe they knew, had understood it before walking up *the clock tower* that day. Alex wasn't going anywhere like they were, he was staying here to find his way and start his life. But it seemed wrong, somehow, like he was breaking a code that had been kept secret until now. When he decided to stay, he'd called his mom then drove to his dad's and they both seemed fine with it too, but that didn't mean much to him, frankly. That probably meant something. He didn't really want to think about it.

And here he was again, alone this time. Alex let the buzz in his backpack vibrate itself out and just stayed up there. This was easier, right now. One big good-bye to everything that would be gone and maybe a few smaller ones to whoever he thought would want it. A quiet set of footsteps had Alex turn his head to see Sam taking a seat next to him.

They didn't exchange greetings at first, even though Alex's gaze stayed on Sam for a few moments. He felt guilty, then. Caught doing something he shouldn't have by a friend who deserved better.

"You didn't let anyone know you were coming up here." Sam's voice was smooth and solid like the edge but sweet in a way that *the clock tower* never quite could be. It sent a few goosebumps along Alex's arm.

"I, um." Alex looked back to their painted town with a slight frown and a sheepish twitch in his cheek. "Sorry."

"You seemed off yesterday too." His friends knew, apparently. "Penny for your thoughts?"

"Just, taking in the view, I guess."

"Right. Just taking in the view at the usual spot, on your own, without telling anybody you're here."

"I guess."

Sam moved a bit closer to Alex.

"Hey. I need you to talk to me about whatever it is that had you come up here. On your own. Without telling anybody."

It made Alex's cheeks a bit red to think about how much Sam cared. "How did you know I was up here?"

"You might be surprised to hear this, but it's pretty easy to see someone sitting in front of the giant clock on a town-gazing clock tower."

Duh. "I wasn't trying to hide." Lie.

"Right." Sam's point was thick and sharp, and a passing breeze brought Alex back to where he was, reminded him who he was talking to. All at once he re-recognized the town, and *the clock tower*, and Sam, and the edge they were sitting on.

"I-" No. "It's-" Why? "I'm sorry."

Sam's features eased. "About what?"

"It's just, hard, I think. This is hard." Alex paused and glanced to Sam. "Everyone always says that letting go is just a part of life but doesn't that mean we give up anything we used to care about? Shouldn't we hold onto things, even just a bit?"

Sam's smile was small, but it was there. Alex's cheeks reddened more. "Maybe the expression is flawed, sure. But maybe it's just a matter of only letting go of *some* things?"

Holding onto the memories, like photographs. That way you can use them to laugh when you need to, or learn when you see something new.” Sam’s gaze turned away from Alex and to the paint-pooled town. “Something like that.”

Alex was looking out at the town, too. Still painted that same color, like it always was at this time of the afternoon. The edge of his lips quirked slightly upwards, even more so when Sam’s hand gently rested on top of his. Things stayed like that a while, silent and comfortable. The wind kissed them both again right as Sam spoke. “Looks like we’re almost at the hour. Probably time to head down.”

Alex nodded, stood up, grabbed his bag, and was surprised when Sam’s hand was gently holding his. Sam started towards the stairs, arm stretched as if to lead Alex away. But before they left, Alex turned back and gazed one last time at the painted air and the sun-kissed town. He felt a strong breeze push him and his footing slipped for a moment, but even this close to the edge, Alex knew he’d be okay, because the clock tower **knew him like the people in his town knew him. He knew that if he fell, the clock tower would watch him carefully as he sifted through the air, cutting through shades of wistful sun. He’d probably think about Sam, his friends, his family, and his town and the fact that he wasn’t going to leave. Right before he’d close his eyes for the last time on his way down, though, he knew the clock tower would catch him, and it’d bring him back up to the edge, push him towards the stairs, and he’d walk back down.

Sam’s hand felt warm and comforting.