

SUGARLAKE SERIES BOOK ONE

A romantic couple embracing on a beach at night. The woman is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt and the man is shirtless. They are standing on a dark beach with a starry night sky in the background. The title 'Beneath the Stars' is written in a large, white, cursive font across the center of the image.

Beneath
the
Stars

EMILY MCINTIRE

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Beneath the Stars is a full-length, interconnected standalone that features strong language, sexual scenes and mature situations which may be considered triggers for some.

Reader Discretion is advised.

I started this book in February 2020 and Chase and Alina's story literally poured out of me. They are real, raw and flawed characters. There will be times you may want to scream at both them and me, and that's okay. I promise I'll bring you through it.

Trust the process.

PREFACE

Alina

I was eleven when I met Chase Adams. I loved him before I knew what lovin' was.

I pulled, he pushed.

I gave, he took.

I loved... I lost.

Now he's back. All grown up and sexy as sin.

But things changed while he was gone. So, he can show those dimples and flex those muscles all he wants. It won't change a thing.

Chase Adams is nothin' but a lost memory. I'll do everything I can to keep him that way.

Chase

Growing up, there were only two women I ever loved.

Neither one of them ever really loved me back.

Until her. Alina. My Goldi.

She was everything that's good. I was the bad.

She was the brightest goddamn star. I was the black hole
shredding her to pieces.

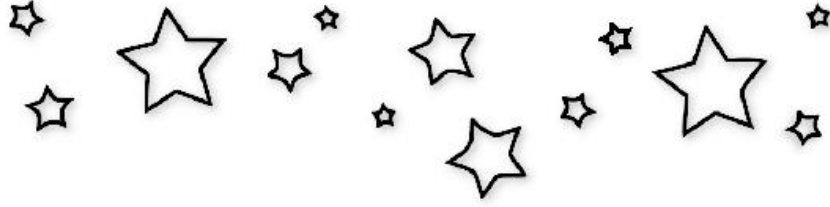
I loved her wrong, losing her to my demons.

But now I'm back. A better man.

I'll do everything I can to make her remember us, even if all
she wants is to forget.

For everyone who has loved, will love, and wants to be loved.

PROLOGUE



It's when I'm walking to the back office that I feel it. The shift in the air. It's subtle—a ghost of a chill that flickers down my spine. *What the heck?* I brush it off, straightening my shoulders and walking through the open door.

I don't see him at first, but when I do—that chill drops like an iceberg, free-falling through my body and freezing me in place.

This isn't happening.

This cannot be happening.

“Alina! I was starting to wonder if you would even show up,” my boss, Regina, says as she smiles thinly. She's annoyed, and rightly so. I should respond, but I don't. I'm not sure I physically can since my heart has stalled in my chest.

Chase Adams.

I'd love him if I didn't hate him so much.

There's a pencil behind his ear, a blueprint rolled up in his hand, and another laid out on the desk. But he isn't looking at that. He's locked on me, mouth partially open, hand frozen halfway through his silky, dark hair.

He swallows, and my traitorous eyes track the way his throat bobs. “Goldi.”

The nickname travels across the room and pierces me in the chest, snapping me out of my shock. “Don't call me that.”

He sucks in a breath, but clamps his mouth shut and nods.

“You two know each other?” Regina points between the two of us.

Chase starts to answer. “Yeah, actually we used—”

“Our folks are neighbors,” I interrupt. “We grew up together, but no. I never really *knew* him.”

I stand stoic, my gaze never straying from Regina. But I can feel him. My body hums, reminding me of the first time I saw him at eleven years old, and just like then, I have to clench my fists to keep from reaching out.



Part One

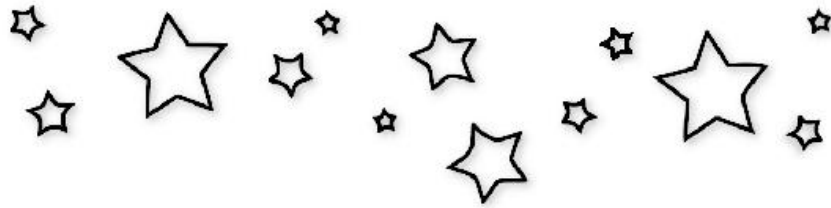
"Love is a single soul inhabiting two bodies."

-ARISTOTLE



ALINA

ELEVEN YEARS OLD



I love dancing. Always have and always will. Been in classes for every type of dancing under the sun since I was four years old. Daddy tells me I'll dance my way into the worst kind of trouble, but I think that's a load of bull. Why would I want to get in trouble? I'm eleven now, way too big to be sitting in a time-out chair. It's just that dancing is one of the only times I really feel free. My older brother Eli will tell you I've got two left feet, but don't believe him. He just gets annoyed Mama tells him to let me pick the music when she sends us outside to play.

I pick a freshly burned CD out of my case and pop it in. When Gretchen Wilson's "Red Neck Woman" blares out of the speakers, I smile big and tap my foot.

"Ugh, seriously?" my brother huffs. "Lee, could you pick worse songs to listen to? You know I can't stand country."

I turn quickly, whipping my long honey-blond hair around, tangling it behind me. Eli's shooting hoops in the driveway. I stick my tongue out at him and turn toward the house. It's nothing fancy, but it's all I've ever known as home. A three-bed, two-bath, one-story right smack in the middle of Sugarlake, Tennessee with blue shutters and the prettiest tulips you'll ever see. I love picking them when they bloom in the spring, but Mama gets mad when I do because tulips are "a labor of love," so instead I just come out front and stare at them every chance I get.

Eli dribbles the basketball and groans, bringing my attention back to him. "Seriously, you always get to pick the

music and it fuckin' sucks, Lee. Put on some OutKast or somethin'. I can't practice my free throws to this shit."

I roll my eyes at his potty mouth. He thinks he's so big and bad because he's fourteen now, and he loves to curse every chance he gets.

"Don't let Mama hear you talk like that or she'll wash your mouth out with soap again." I stick my finger in my mouth, making a loud gagging noise. I've never had soap in my mouth, but watching Eli go through it is enough to make me never want to speak a bad word in my life.

He stops dribbling and runs his hand through his hair, shaking his head. "You're such a goody-two-shoes. Why don't you leave me alone? Go on and introduce yourself to the new neighbors or somethin'. I saw a girl runnin' around their front yard, and I bet you'd get along great. She looks almost as annoyin' as you." He smirks, pointing down the street.

I put my hands on my hips. The house is three doors down. There's a big moving truck in the driveway and lots of men in dark blue uniforms unloading furniture and boxes. I strain my eyes trying to find the girl, and finally, see her in the front yard. She's smaller than me and hula hooping away without a care in the world, her dark brown hair swishing behind her in a high ponytail. She looks friendly enough, and since my best friend Becca is out of town for the summer at church camp, I really have nothing better to do than make a new friend.

"Okay, I will. But *not* 'cause you told me to, Eli. I'm doin' it 'cause she looks nice." I'm pointing my finger at him because it's important he knows this.

I march down the street. I'm almost to her house when a boy walks out of the front door and slams it behind him. I stop in my tracks and watch with wide eyes as he turns and flips off the closed door with both middle fingers, sitting down on the front steps and lighting up a cigarette. He doesn't look that much older than me, definitely not old enough to buy cigarettes. He leans on his arms and blows out a puff of smoke. I watch, mesmerized as it swirls up into the air.

Is he the new girl's brother?

He has the same brown-black hair, although his is cut so short I can almost see his scalp. He isn't as small as her, but he is skinny and kind of gangly looking. He turns his head and looks straight at me. It's only then I realize I'm standing in the middle of our street staring like a weirdo. I feel my cheeks heat and I'm sure they're bright red, so I quickly look down and start walking again. No sense in turning back now, that would be even weirder.

The girl sees me as I get to the edge of their front yard, and she lets the hula hoop fall down her body. A huge smile takes over her face as she runs to meet me. I watch her bound over.

Dang, this girl is bouncy.

“Hi! I'm Lily! Do you live on this street? I'm so excited that you came over. I've been so worried about not making any friends, but then here *you* are, and oh! Your eyes are so pretty! They must be the bluest things I've ever seen.”

She stands on her tiptoes and gets super close to my face. I stuff my hands in the pockets of my jean shorts and stare back at this girl who I think might be a little crazy. *I'm fixin' to kill Eli for suggestin' I come over here.* I look behind her to where the boy is watching us, stone-faced. Eli calls expressions like that “resting asshole face.” I don't know if this boy is an asshole, but he sure doesn't seem happy to see me. I decide to ignore him and shift my focus back to Lily.

“How do you talk like that? You know... just goin' and goin' for so long without havin' to breathe?” I ask, taking a step away.

Immediately, I want to take my words back. Daddy says I have no filter, but I've always thought saying what's on my mind is the most honest thing you can do, and if I'm nothing else I always want to be honest. I hate liars.

I'm worried I hurt her feelings, but she just laughs and I'm so relieved that I join her. She links her arm in mine and pulls me further into the yard. For such a small thing, she's awful strong.

“You’ll get used to me.” She pats my arm. “My mom used to tell me I had enough energy to light up all of Chicago.”

“I think I believe her.” My eyes are wide as I smile. “Well, I’m Alina May Carson but my friends call me Lee. I live three houses down that way.” I point to where Eli is shooting free throws. “That’s my brother, Eli.” I glance at the boy on the steps again. “Does he like basketball? Eli never lets me play, he says basketball’s not meant for girls, but he’d probably let another boy play.”

She waves her hand in the general direction of the steps. “Oh, that’s my brother, Chase. He doesn’t like much of anything really unless it involves making our foster parents mad.”

“Oh.” I’m not sure what a foster parent is, but I don’t want to seem stupid, so I nod my head like I get it.

“Chase!” she yells. “Come here and meet Alina. She lives down the street!”

The bees buzz around in my stomach as he slowly puts his cigarette out on the ground, crushing it beneath his worn black boot. He doesn’t stop until he’s right in front of me, my eyes level with his chin. When he’s this close, I see the scar running through his left eyebrow. I clench my fists, fighting the urge to reach up and trace it. There’s something about this boy. He hasn’t said a word yet, and I’m already dying to know him.

“Smokin’ kills, you know.” Once again, I have no filter.

His hazel eyes look down at me and the left side of his mouth rises slightly higher than his right. “Is that right?”

“Yep.” I pop the P. “I’m a big believer in lettin’ people know how I feel about things. You might as well get used to it since we’re neighbors and all.”

He runs his tongue over his teeth. “Yeah? And how are you feeling right now?”

“A little too hot, if I’m honest.” I fan my face so he knows just how serious I am. It *is* warm just standing here under the summer sun.

He chuckles, shaking his head. “You’re a strange girl. How old are you anyway, Goldilocks?”

I scrunch up my nose at the nickname. “I’m eleven and my name is Alina, not Goldilocks. Ah-lee-nuh. But if you start being a little nicer, you can call me Lee.”

He tugs on a strand of my hair, then brushes past me.

“You’re the same age as me!” Lily squeals. “This is so cool. I can’t believe that we’ll be in the same grade. Have you lived here your whole life?”

“Born and raised.” I bob my head.

“I think it’s the prettiest place I’ve ever seen,” she sighs. I smile at her, but I look past her, hoping to catch another glimpse of her brother walking down the street.

Lily rolls her eyes. “Don’t worry about Mr. Grumpy Pants. He’s thirteen, so he’ll be in middle school. We won’t have to worry about him raining on our parade! You wanna come inside?”

I nod, following her into the house. I look back one more time in Chase’s direction. He has sad eyes and I feel like maybe he needs someone to make him smile.

I can be that someone.

Happy with my decision, I dance my way through the front door and into Lily and Chase’s life.

Daddy did always tell me I would dance straight into trouble.



SUMMER TURNS INTO FALL, bleeding into winter, and before I know it, the springtime flowers are blooming. Becca, Lily, and I hang out nearly every day. The two of them got along instantly, bonding over their love of fashion, and their heartbreak over NSYNC being on a “temporary hiatus” but never getting back together. It doesn’t hurt that Lily gushed over Becca’s curly red hair and emerald green eyes. I saw

Becca's eyes light up in approval when they first met. She soaks up attention like grass soaks up the morning dew.

It's Wednesday after school, the only day Becca can't play with us because her mama makes her go to church. Lily and I lay in the grass eating cherry popsicles, letting the spring sun soak into our skin. If I try hard enough, I can almost pretend it's summer. A shadow comes over me and I shield my eyes to see who it is.

"Hey Goldi, looking a little pink right... here." Chase pushes his index finger into my cheek.

I smile back at him, even though he's *still* calling me Goldi. I've tried for months to get him to open up, but he's built up a brick wall and nothing but a wrecking ball is gonna get through. Still, whenever he's near, my body starts to hum and I crave his attention in the worst way.

"Want a popsicle?" I hold out mine to showcase how delicious they look, the ice-cold goodness dripping down the stick and onto my hand.

"Nope, I came to get Lily. Sam and Anna want us to come home, say they have something important to talk about." He rolls his eyes like he's annoyed.

"What do you mean?" Lily pushes her bright-pink sunglasses off her face. "Something important? You don't think they're going to make us leave, do you? We just got here!" She pouts, gnawing on her lower lip.

"No, Lil, I don't think it's anything bad. They seem pretty excited, so it must be good news." Chase smiles, but to me, he looks a little nervous. Lily dashes inside my house, saying she'll be ready to go in just a second.

I don't know much about the homes they've been in before, but I don't like to bring it up. There are not many times Lily shuts up, but you ask about her past and she clams up and looks about as lost as last year's Easter egg.

Chase lies down beside me, sighing like he's got the weight of the world on his shoulders.

“How you feeling today, Goldi?” He says this every time he sees me.

“This popsicle is makin’ my mouth too cold,” I complain, throwing it on the grass.

He smiles at my answer and then gets quiet.

“You know,” I say in a whisper, “if you need someone to talk to, I’m always here.”

He scoffs. “You’re a kid, Goldi. I’m not gonna complain to you about my issues. You just keep being a good friend to my sister. Promise to never leave us, and I’ll take care of you both. How’s that?”

“Hey!” I push his arm. “You can act as grown as you want, but you’re a kid, too. Plus, Daddy always tells me I’m an old soul.” I puff my chest out in pride. “And ‘sides... you two are the best thing to happen around here, other than Becca. Where would I go?” I raise my arms and look around. “I’m your friend, too, not just Lily’s. Don’t forget that.”

“Yeah, okay. I hear you. But I’m good, I promise.”

I lean closer, placing my fingertip to his chest. “You can try to fool the world sad boy, but you can’t fool me. I see you.”

He opens his mouth like he’s about to say something, but before he can Lily comes rushing out with her book bag hanging from one hand and a Coke in the other.

“Okay! I’m ready.” She swipes the hair out of her face, smiling as she looks between the two of us. “See ya later, Lee!” She waves.

Chase hops up, and just like that they both disappear down the street.

Later that night, I’m lying in bed and just about to fall asleep when I hear my window slide open. I had no idea it wasn’t locked, and I’m so terrified someone is breaking into our house that I can’t move. I don’t usually pray when Mama makes me go to church on Sundays, but now I squeeze my eyes tight and pray to God Almighty that whoever is in my room decides to leave.

“Goldi.”

I feel the bed dip next to me, and the comforter pulls back before a warm body slides down next to mine.

“Goldi, you awake?” It’s a whisper but I hear it loud and clear. My whole body relaxes and I turn around, looking at Chase, in shock. I don’t say anything. My heart is still recovering from thinking we were being robbed, so I just continue to stare at him.

He squeezes his eyes shut. “I couldn’t sleep and I needed someone to talk to. Your offer still good?”

“Yeah, of course,” I whisper. I don’t say anything else. I’m super nervous he’s here in the first place. Daddy would kill me for having a boy in my room, but there’s no way in heck I’m telling him to leave.

We lay in silence for a long time, both of us staring at the glow ‘n stick stars covering my ceiling.

“Do you ever look up at the stars and feel small, Goldi?”

“What, the ones on my ceilin’?”

“No, the real ones, high in the sky.”

I chew my lip as I think about what he’s asking. “I’ve never really thought about it. But sometimes, I like to stare at the mountains, and think about how small I am next to ‘em. Is that what you mean?”

“Yeah, kinda. I just... sometimes I look at the stars and think about how none of this shit really matters, you know?”

I *don’t* know, so I stay quiet.

“I think maybe that’s why my mom could leave me so easily,” he continues.

“Because you’re smaller than the stars?”

“Because to her, I didn’t really matter.”

I reach my hand across the bed to grab his. I don’t say anything right away. I just try to imagine what it would be like to not have a mama who loves you like it’s the most important

thing she'll ever do. I decide right then that I hate her, wherever she is, for making him feel anything less than what he deserves to be.

“You matter to me,” I whisper.

I hear him swallow, the sound thick. “You matter to me, too. Promise you'll never leave?”

“Cross my heart and hope to die.”

I squeeze his hand tight and he intertwines our fingers.

When I wake up in the morning, he's gone, but that night I make sure to leave my window unlocked, just in case.

CHASE

THIRTEEN YEARS OLD



I fucking hate small towns. Over the past five years, I've been bounced from one pathetic small town to the next, and at the end of the day, they're all the same. Boring streets and boring people with pity in their eyes and force behind their fists. Life with my mom wasn't sunshine and roses, but it sure beats having to put up with the scumbags that pretend to care about kids in the system.

If I only had myself to worry about, I would have made the jump to a street kid before the first foster home—but it's not just me. I have a little sister to protect, and the thought of leaving her to the wolves makes me sick to my stomach. So, I've taken the insults and the beatings for both of us with a smile on my face, knowing I'm protecting her the best way I know how.

The last piece of shit “foster parent” begged our caseworker to take us back after I caught him trying to sneak into Lily's room. I guess he didn't take too kindly to a thirteen-year-old holding a knife to his dick. He liked it even less when I threatened to cut it off and shove it down his throat if he so much as looked at her again. I asked Lily if he ever did anything, but she swears up and down nothing happened. I take her at face value because the alternative means I have to kill a motherfucker, and I'm too pretty for jail.

So, here we are with Sam and Anna. They're a couple who just moved us from Nashville to Sugarlake, Tennessee. Population three-thousand. Well three-thousand plus four, I guess. They're different than other foster parents we've had.

Nice even, but I still don't want them. Like any kid, I just want my mom. But she packed up our life in Chicago, trekked us seven hours down to Nashville, and got high, forgetting us at a gas station. I'm angry at her. So, so angry. But, no matter how pissed off I am, it doesn't stop the dreams at night of her coming back. I hate those dreams because when I wake up I feel that hole she put inside me fester and rip open all over again.

We're driving through the one main road in this town, and I'm looking out the window to see if there's anything different about this place than the other ones. The main street is actually called *Main Street*. I scoff at the predictability.

"Tennessee is so pretty. I bet it's the prettiest state in the whole universe," Lily exclaims.

I smirk at her. "That's just because you don't remember living anywhere else."

"Whatever, doesn't matter. I'm sure it wasn't like this." She points toward the mountain range through the window.

She's not wrong. It is a beautiful state. But how beautiful can something be if it's filled with the ugliness of your past?

"I've always loved Tennessee, too, Lily." Anna smiles at her from the front seat. "I think you'll really like it in Sugarlake. You know, that's where I grew up as a little girl. I've always dreamed of comin' back one day and raisin' a family here."

She shares a heavy look with Sam. He places a hand on her knee as she tears up. "I'm so happy you two are here with us to experience it."

I roll my eyes. Give it a month or two and she'll be singing the same songs as all the other ones. If it's not them being the fuck-ups, they quickly realize it's me. "*He's too angry. He curses too much. He doesn't act his age.*" I'm about to tell Anna exactly what I think of her empty words, but I glance at Lily who has the biggest smile on her face and decide to keep my mouth shut. She deserves a little bit of happiness, even if it doesn't last.



WE'VE BEEN LIVING HERE for seven months now, and I'm sitting at the dining room table watching Lily cry tears of happiness. They just dropped the bomb that they want to officially adopt us. I'm not sure how I feel. I guess I never really thought it was a possibility. I should be happy, ecstatic even. We're finally getting a family. New last names. Chase and Lily Adams.

Sam and Anna are good people and they treat us well, even with the bullshit I put them through. I'm not an easy person to love—my mom made sure I knew it.

I think back to our first day here. Sam and Anna said they hoped this place would be good for me. That I could relax and “just be a kid.” I laughed in their faces, stole a cigarette from Sam's stash, and flipped them off through the front door. If you haven't gone through what I have then you don't get a fucking say, as far as I'm concerned.

“Chase, isn't this the best news?” Lily throws her arms around my neck. I shake myself out of my stupor and loosely wrap my arms to hug her back.

“Yeah, Lil. The best.” I try to smile, but it feels more like a grimace. Sam puts his hand on my shoulder, squeezing. I don't think I'm fooling him. It makes me feel guilty because he's been nothing but the father figure I always wished for. I'll try harder to be a better son for them. That's what I am now, I guess.

A son.

Again.

Hopefully, it goes better the second time around.

At night, when my mind won't shut the fuck up, I slide out of the bedroom window. It's surprisingly easy for me to sneak out of the house. So I do it, often. Usually, I just walk down the street to the open field, where I lay down and stare at the

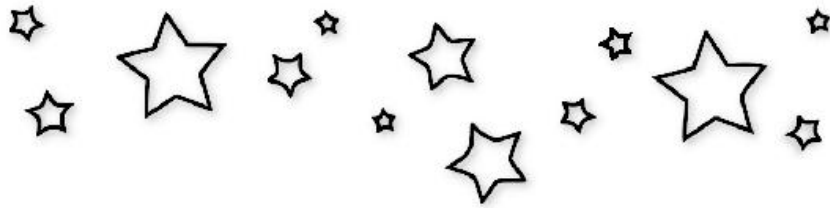
stars. Tonight, there's something that makes me stop short in front of the house with blue shutters.

I war with myself over whether or not I should keep walking. Goldi is everything good in the world, and I do my best to keep my distance. She doesn't need someone like me coming around and dirtying up her life. But fuck, if staying away isn't the hardest thing I've ever tried to do. I've never had anyone look at me the way she does—like she sees straight into my soul. I can tell she wants my friendship, but I don't think I need another person in my life to disappoint. Especially an eleven-year-old girl who's never had anything hurt her worse than a scraped knee.

But even as I repeat to myself that I can't be her friend, my feet move toward her bedroom window, where I slip inside.

ALINA

FOURTEEN YEARS OLD



A new boy moved into the house behind us. I haven't seen him much, but there's a small hole in the fence that separates our back yards, and I'm not proud to admit that sometimes I go out there and sneak a peek. He's got shaggy blond hair, and he's always hunkering underneath the hood of a car. Today, Mama caught me looking, and told me to stop being a peeping Tammy or she'd tan my hide. Then, she plopped her famous banana bread in my hands and shooed me on over to introduce myself, telling me it's the neighborly thing to do. I figure it's as good an idea as any, seeing as how we'll be going to school together at Sugarlake High this year.

I don't want to go alone, but Chase and Lily are on vacation in Florida, so here I am walking onto his porch. I raise my fist to knock, but it swings open before my knuckles hit, and out he walks. He leans against the front porch ledge, taking up an air of nonchalance.

I'm stunned a little stupid when I get a good look at him. I've never seen a guy with hair long enough to be pulled in a bun, but somehow it looks better on him than it ever has on me. His hair isn't what keeps my attention, though. It's that gaze of his. The strangest green, like God couldn't decide what shade to pick, so instead, he swirled around all the colors of the forest and placed them in his eyes.

"Hi there. I'm Alina May." I force the banana bread into his hands, stepping back, plastering a smile on my face. "I'm your back yard neighbor, and figured it's well past time for introductions, so here I am... you know, introducin' myself."

He tips his head down. “What’s this?” He lifts it to his nose, taking a sniff.

“That right there is the best chocolate chip banana bread this side of the Mason Dixon line,” I say it proudly because it’s true. No one can out bake my mama, I dare them to try.

“Oh yeah?” He smiles and it draws my eyes to his perfectly straight, white as snow, teeth.

“Are those your real teeth?” I spout off before I can stop myself.

His smile widens. “You think I have fake teeth?”

“I mean... maybe?” I shrug my shoulders.

He doesn’t say anything, just stands there with banana bread in his hands, and a grin on his face.

“Gah, forget I asked that.” I run my hands through my hair, cheeks flushing. “What’s your name, anyway?”

He breathes out a chuckle. “Man, are all the girls as cute as you around here?”

“Matter of perspective, I guess.” I shrug again, waiting for him to tell me his name. He doesn’t. “You know, some say it’s mighty rude to not return the favor when a person introduces themselves.”

“Some say, huh?” He places the banana bread on the ground, stepping over to me. My head is level to his chest, and he’s close enough that I have to crane my neck to maintain eye contact.

“My apologies, Alina May.” He picks up my left hand. “My name’s Jackson Rhoades, and believe me when I say it is my absolute *pleasure* to make your acquaintance.”

I expect him to shake my hand, but instead, he brings it to his mouth, lightly brushing his lips across my knuckles in a whisper of a kiss.

I jerk my hand back, laughing with disbelief. “I think you may be what the old biddies in this town call a shameless flirt, Jackson.”

I take a few steps back, regaining my personal space. “That may work on girls wherever you come from, but you really shouldn’t waste your time on me. I don’t fall for empty words and pretty smiles.”

He nods, rocking back on his heels. “Noted.”

“But if you’re lookin’ for a friend, I can be that all day long. I don’t mean to brag, but I’m pretty great at the whole friendship thing, so I recommend you take me up on my offer.”

“In that case, how can I refuse?” He smirks.

I widen my eyes. “Well, I don’t think you can. And since we’re friends now, I suppose you can call me Lee.”

“Alright, Lee. Then I suppose you can call me Jax.”

“Jax.” I test the nickname out loud, nodding my head in satisfaction.

“Do you always make friends like you’re doing a business transaction?”

“A what?”

He chuckles. “Never mind. You in high school yet?”

“I’ll be a freshman when the semester starts. How about you?”

“Supposed to be a junior, but got held back last year when my dad got sick.” He plays with a chain around his neck, his eyes flashing with grief.

“Is he better now?” I watch as the chain rolls between his fingers.

Both his face and his voice flatline. “He’s dead.”

“Oh,” I whisper. “I’m so sorry.” I cringe as the words leave my mouth. I don’t think he appreciates the apology, but it’s all I can think to give him.

“It is what it is.” He shrugs. “Anyway, thanks for the banana bread, I’m sure my mom will love it.” We both stand there, the air filling with awkward tension. I wish I could

rewind time and bring back the Jackson from five minutes earlier.

“I’d introduce you to my brother, but he’s always tied up with basketball.” I roll my eyes. “But, one of my best friends, Chase, lives around here. I’ll send him over to say hi, although I don’t think your charm will work on him,” I tease.

He clears his throat. “Sure. Listen, as much as I’d like to stand around and chat all day, I really have better things to do, so if you’re done with the twenty questions...” He turns his face to the side.

I inhale sharply, dizzy from the complete one-eighty of his personality.

“Alright then.” I squint my eyes, pursing my lips. “Look... Jax, I’m sorry if I upset you. I didn’t mean nothin’ by it.”

He doesn’t give me any indication he heard what I said, but he doesn’t need to. I know when I’ve overstayed my welcome.

My shoulders hunch. “I guess I’ll see you around.”

I book it off his porch, each step allowing me to stew in my rising mortification. *How the heck was I supposed to know about his daddy?* I take deep breaths, trying to calm my nerves before I walk in my house. It doesn’t work, and Mama sees them plain as day on my face.

“What in the world happened to make you so flustered?” She places her novel down on the side table.

“I think I messed things up with the new boy. Everything was goin’ fine ‘til we started talkin’ about his dead daddy.” I chew on my bottom lip. “Then he got plain mean, and now I think he hates me when he was the one who brought him up in the first place!” My voice rises with indignation. I can’t stand when people think bad about me.

Mama walks over and smooths my hair. “Oh baby, we have no clue what that boy must be goin’ through. The best thing you can do is be there for him and forgive his faults.”

“Fat chance of that. See if I’ll be his friend now,” I mutter, crossing my arms over my chest.

She kisses the top of my head. “Forgiveness is divine, Alina May.” She sits back down, picks up her book, and continues reading.



I’VE BEEN STARING in my room’s full-length mirror for the past ten minutes. I have on the new two-piece I bought last week, but I’m not sure I can pull it off. It looked great on the mannequin, so when Becca begged me to get it, I gave in to peer pressure. The problem is, no matter how I try to adjust the top, the dang thing is still like a bright red polka-dotted sign advertising my newly acquired cleavage. I swear, I went to bed one night and woke up the next morning with two giant melons on my chest.

I cup them in my hands and marvel at the weight. Who knew they would be so heavy?

“What are you doing?” The voice comes out of nowhere. I jump in shock, spinning toward it.

“Good Lord, Chase. Knock much?” I complain, my heart racing underneath the palm of my hand. “I didn’t think you were back in town.”

He looks me over slowly from tip to toe. I see the amusement drain from his eyes, and when he’s done with his leisurely perusal, his stare is heavy.

“Goddamn Goldi, the hell are you wearing?” His tongue peeks out and sweeps across his bottom lip, drawing my attention to the wetness left behind.

My breath hitches.

In moments like this, where the air is thick with unspoken emotion, I can almost convince myself he feels it, too. Whatever *this* is. Over the past three years, the vines of our friendship have grown and twisted, wrapping tightly around every single piece of me until I don’t know how to get

untangled. It's big and scary and I don't know how to handle it, so I pretend things are the same as they've always been.

But they're not.

I move my gaze from his lips, drinking him in. Gone is the gangly preteen with too short hair. In his place is a full-grown teenager that sparks a fire low in my belly. Sculpted muscles ripple under his shirt, his hair mussed from fingers that always find a home in the strands. His hazel eyes are so deep, I'm surprised anyone can find their way back again. I force my eyes away, moving to grab the robe that's thrown haphazardly on the back of my desk chair.

"Don't you worry your pretty little head over what I'm wearin'." I wrap the robe around my body, looking up. His dimples are on full show, a rare occurrence in the world of Chase Adams.

"How you feeling today, Goldi?"

I pout. "A little too big, if I'm honest."

He cocks his head, eyebrows drawing in. The last thing I want is to talk about my struggle with puberty, so I change the subject. "How was your vacation?"

He shrugs. "Sandy."

I giggle at his answer. A conversationalist, Chase is not, that's for dang sure.

"Well, there's been a whole bunch goin' on around here. Eli got offered a scholarship for basketball in Ohio, so naturally, Mama has lost her mind cryin' every day. She's dead set on tryin' to convince him to pick a local school, instead."

I roll my eyes. Eli's always talked about getting out of our small town and making something of himself. No way he'll stay local. He's got big dreams of making it all the way to the NBA and I've half a mind to believe he will.

"No shit? Good for him."

I nod. "Oh, and there's a new guy that moved into the neighborhood last week. I went over and met him today. Took him some of Mama's banana bread and everything. I'm sure

Becca will be thrilled to have fresh meat to chew up and spit out before school starts,” I laugh.

“Why do you say that?” Chase asks.

“Well, you know how Becca is with boys, and this one’s a looker.” I remember how he was weaving magic with his words the second we met. “I’m also pretty sure he could charm the knickers off a nun.”

Chase’s demeanor shifts, his jaw clenching. “Are you saying this new guy *charmed* you?”

I smile. “I definitely give him an A for effort, that’s for sure.”

He scoffs. “Is he even your age? What kind of a guy flirts with a girl he just met?”

“I imagine most of them, Chase.” My forehead crinkles as I answer him.

“Well, he sounds like a douche.”

“Okay...” This conversation took a turn I did *not* see coming. “Anyway, I told him I’d do my neighborly duty, and send you on over to introduce yourself.” I give him the same look I get from Mama when she means business.

“Fuck. That.” He crosses his arms over his chest.

“Oh, come on,” I laugh. “You don’t even know him! Just go say hi. I’ll go with you if it’ll make it easier. I know how much you dislike conversatin’ like normal folk.”

“No,” he barks. “In fact, you need to stay away from this guy. I mean, he’s my age, but he’s flirting with you?”

My smile drops. I step closer, anger swirling inside me. I don’t stop until the tips of my toes touch the front of his boots. I poke him in the chest to punctuate my words. “I’m fourteen, Chase, not ten. I’m not such a little girl anymore, whether you wanna admit it or not.”

He doesn’t move an inch, but his fists clench, his eyes traveling down my body. “Believe me, Goldi, I know.” The muscle in his jaw tics and he takes a step back, squeezing his

eyes shut and climbing out of my window without another word.

He doesn't come back.

Every night since, I've laid in bed, listening for the slide of the window and the whisper of his voice, but the only sounds are the cicadas chirping and the silence of his avoidance. It's been a week since I've seen him.

It's also been a week since I've seen Lily. I keep expecting her to drop by and regale me with tales of Florida, but she hasn't given me so much as a phone call—which is why I'm so surprised to see her standing on my porch.

"Well, hi there, stranger." I lean my shoulder against the doorframe.

"Hey, girl!" She walks straight into me, grabbing me around the waist and squeezing tight. "I feel like I haven't seen you in forever."

"Probably 'cause you *haven't* seen me in forever." I pull back, looking in her eyes, but she's got those giant sunglasses on that make her resemble a bug, and I can't see anything other than the bright-pink smile she has painted on her face.

"Ugh, I know, and I'm awful for it, but I have so much to tell you! I met this guy. He lives a few towns over in Sweetwater. I totally gave him my V-card *and* stayed at his house for the past few days." She brushes by me, ignoring my slack jaw, and walks into my living room, lying down on the couch.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Back up. You met a guy?" I repeat, my words slow.

"Yeah," she sighs.

"In the week since you've been back..."

"Yep."

"... and you had *sex* with him?"

"Sure did," she nods.

"... at his house. Where you stayed for multiple nights."

“I know, right? It sounds crazy.” She laughs, throwing an arm over her face.

“You can say that again,” I mumble. “How on earth did you get your folks to okay this?”

She drops her arm by her side and gets a sheepish look on her face. “I may have told them I’ve been with you and Becca.”

I stare at her in disbelief. This is out of character for Lily, to say the least. She’s always been a fly by the seat of your pants kind of girl, but never reckless.

“Don’t be mad, Lee!” She sits up, putting her hands together like she’s praying. “I know it wasn’t right to use you and Becca that way, and I’m sorry... but they never would have been okay with me going over there.”

“Were his parents gone or somethin’?”

“No, he doesn’t live with his parents.” There’s an edge of defensiveness to her tone.

“He doesn’t live with his parents,” I repeat her words back to her again. “Who even is this guy? And how old is he if he has his own house?”

“His name is Darryl and he’s older...”

“How old, Lily?”

She cringes. “Twenty.”

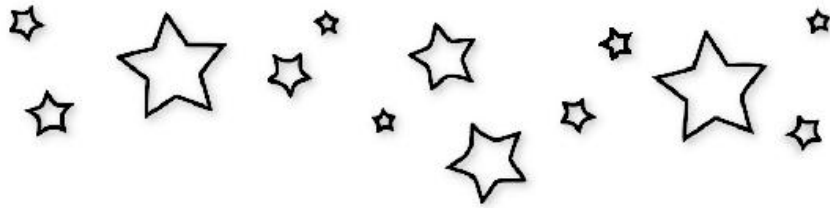
My stomach bottoms out. I feel sick. I don’t know much about people in their twenties, but I *do* know nothing good can come from one who wants to mess around with a fourteen-year-old girl. I collapse onto the couch, too shocked to process how I’m feeling. I’m angry at her for bringing me into her lies. I’m sad because I think there’s more going on than she wants to tell. I’m worried because I don’t think she knows what she’s getting herself into. I close my eyes and lean my head against the back of the couch.

“Does your brother know?” I whisper.

She stays quiet, but it doesn't matter. I already know the answer.

CHASE

SIXTEEN YEARS OLD



I get the feeling Anna wishes I would call her “Mom.” Lily had no problem, taking up the moniker as soon as the ink was dry on the adoption papers, but I just can’t bring myself to. Honest to God, I start every day with the intention of getting over my shit and just doing it. I can give this to her. She deserves the title after everything she’s done for Lily and me. But then I think of my real mom, and even though I try like hell to erase her, she’s still the biggest part to the ugliest sides of me.

I keep Anna firmly in her place, but Sam is another story. I connect with him on a level that has me swallowing back the word “Dad” daily, and I’ll be damned if I know why. Maybe because I don’t have a real dad to compare him to? All I know is he doesn’t push. He just takes me to Sugarlake Construction and lets me disappear into the work. I shocked the hell out of myself when I realized how much I enjoyed it. There’s something peaceful about the methodology in building something from nothing. There’s no room for error, no guesswork. Everything is exact. Precise. Controlled.

Two years ago when Sam bought the construction company, he sat me down and laid out his plans of eventually passing it down. I’ll never tell him, but that was one of the best days of my life. I’ve never had someone believe in me, and while the feeling is intoxicating, mainly I’m just terrified of disappointing him.

I’ve been dying to talk to somebody about it, but the only one who I’d want to listen is Goldi, and it’s been ten days

since I've seen her. That hasn't been an accident. She has this way of making everything around me disappear until all I see is her, and that's not good for either of us.

I thought with some space I'd be able to get my shit together, maybe gain some perspective. Instead, she invades my mind to the point of insanity. My thoughts are far from platonic.

It's not right.

Fuck, I know this.

She's my little sister's best friend. Hell, she's my best friend, and even worse she's only fourteen. A fucking freshman. She's just learning about what it means to become a woman, and here I am jerking off to thoughts of how perfect her lips are, and imagining what it would feel like to slide my cock between her tits.

It doesn't matter though—I'd rather torture myself into eternity before I give in. Our late-night talks mean too much for me to ruin it by losing my self-restraint. If that means I have to put some space between us and fuck all the other girls in town to get her out of my system, then that's what I'll do. I'd rather have her in my life from a distance than not have her at all.

I am, however, going to introduce myself to that prick who moved in behind her house. What's that saying? Keep your friends close and your enemies closer? Yeah. *Guess who's about to be your new best friend, buddy.*

The front door slams.

I look up from my breakfast as Lily walks into the kitchen, makeup smudged under her eyes from the night before, and a sour look on her face.

“What the hell happened to you?” There's only been a handful of times where Lily hasn't been one-hundred percent put together, and it usually coincides with sickness or “Aunt Flow.”

She plops down in the chair across from me and groans, grabbing my bowl of cereal.

“Nothing, dude. I just had a rough night. I’m trying to recover.”

“A rough night?” My brows furrow. “Didn’t you spend it with Goldi and Becca?”

She’s shoveling cereal into her mouth, but pauses and points her spoon at me. “She hates it when you call her that, you know.”

“She doesn’t.” I shake my head. “Answer the question.”

“God, what are you, my father?” she snaps.

I lean back and raise both my eyebrows, because what the *fuck*.

“Yes, okay?” she continues, rolling her eyes. “I was at Becca’s with Lee last night. We stole some wine coolers from her mom’s hidden stash, and my head is pounding, so just lay off a little.”

She’s avoiding my stare, her eyes bouncing around the room like she can’t decide where to focus.

I lean forward, resting my elbows on the table. “You’re lying.”

Her body stills. “I’m not.”

“You’re telling me if I walk over to Goldi’s right now, and ask her about last night, she’ll have the same story?”

“Obviously.”

I rub my chin. “And they both were drinking, too?”

“Mmhm.” She nods. “You gonna go over there and give them the third degree, too?”

I’m pretty sure she’s full of shit, but I won’t push her anymore. I reassure myself that if something serious was going on, she would confide in me. We’ve been one another’s source of support our entire lives, no way that will change.

Sighing, I stand up. “Whatever you say, Lil.”

I leave Lily to wallow in her self-imposed misery and grab my keys, heading to the house behind Goldi’s. Time to

introduce myself.

It's a few days later when I realize I might have been a bit preemptive in my assumption that Jackson was a prick. We've been hanging out, mainly at his place while he works on restoring the '67 Mustang Fastback his dad left him. His mom isn't around much due to the fact she works twelve-hour days, three times a week as a nurse, and picks up shifts as a bartender at Mac's Dive here in town.

"How come your mom works so much?" I ask. It's a hot August afternoon, and we're sitting on his back deck, sipping beer he charmed one of the housewives in town to buy us.

"So we can live like kings, man." He spreads his arms wide, looking around, a carefree smile on his face.

"Clearly."

"She won't be. Not for much longer. As soon as I convince them to hire me as a mechanic at the shop in town, I'll do enough to support us both." His fingers tighten around his beer bottle. "Our healthcare system is fucked, you know? When my dad got sick, it was... aggressive. We spent every dollar to our name doing whatever we could, just to give us one more day." He shakes his head and drains his beer, grabbing at the chain underneath his shirt. "But cancer's a business in this country, just like everything else."

Our conversation is interrupted by loud laughter and a slamming door. I glance toward the noise, my heart beating faster because I just know that's Goldi out there. I can feel it. I focus on the condensation from my beer bottle dripping onto my fingers to keep myself from doing something insanely stupid, like jumping the fence, apologizing for ignoring her, and shoving my tongue down her throat. I look back up and Jax is watching me, a knowing glint in his eyes.

"What?" I snap, setting my beer on the table.

"Nothing, man." He raises his hands up in surrender like he wasn't just staring a hole through me. "It's just interesting, you know? I could have sworn Miss Alina May said you were her best friend when she pranced her cute little ass over here

bringing me baked goods, but you haven't mentioned her once."

My body coils tighter with each word he says.

"Honestly, I got the idea in my head that maybe there was something between the two of you. I mean, what sixteen-year-old guy can hang out with a girl like *that* and not want to get it in, you know?"

Nope, I was right the first time. He's a fucking prick.

"But I'm happy she's still up for grabs," he continues, oblivious to the wrath building inside me. "I'm gonna snatch that up before some other guy has the chance."

I'm imagining my fist meeting his face in vivid detail. Maybe breaking his legs so he can't go anywhere near her when he throws his head back and laughs. "You should see the look on your face."

I grimace, unclenching my hands from where they had a bruising grip on the arms of my chair. They tingle as the blood rushes back into them, and I take deep breaths to calm back down.

"I should fuck you up," I say, running a hand through my hair.

He's still laughing when he stands, pausing by my chair and clapping a hand on my shoulder. "I'm just messing with you, bro. But you should figure your shit out and either lock that down or move the hell on because believe me when I say, a girl like that? She won't stay single for long. You want another beer?"

I nod stiffly, his words running through my mind on a loop. He's not wrong. It's unrealistic to think there won't be a guy. I groan, throwing my head back. The thought of having to watch someone else touch her makes me sick to my stomach. But I'm no good. I'll hold on too tight and suffocate her with my need to stay close. To never leave.

She deserves more than that—more than me. She *deserves* the soft and sweet kind of love. So, even though it fucking kills me, I'll stand back and let someone be that for her.

I drain the rest of my beer, the jealousy rising up my throat like acid.



I'VE BEEN STAYING STRONG, keeping away from Goldi. For three weeks, anytime I've seen her, I turn and walk the other way. But it doesn't stop my heart from reaching out for hers, trying to match its rhythm.

Tonight though, I'm too weak to resist. It's been a shit day with shit memories, and I'm suffocating without her.

As I open her window and climb inside, I tell myself that tomorrow I'll throw my feelings in a box and lock it up tight.

Tomorrow, I'll be strong.

It's dark other than the glow 'n stick stars on her ceiling. I made her promise never to take them down. She hasn't asked why, but if she did, I'd tell her it's because they light the path straight to her. *Fucking pathetic.* Still, my chest warms knowing that even without me here, she's kept them up.

She's sleeping when I reach her bed, and I lean down to brush the strands of hair off her face. My eyes drink her in, gliding over her features, and memorizing every inch.

She's so fucking beautiful.

She stirs as I trace my index finger down her cheek.

"Chase?" She blinks.

"Yeah, Goldi. It's me."

She stretches her arms, her tank top lifting and revealing her midriff. I swallow hard and look away. I feel her stare, though. She's the only person in my life that looks through all the bullshit and dives straight into my soul. The only person I'd ever want to.

"What's the matter, Chase?"

I crawl over her and slip under the covers. "Nothing's wrong, I just wanted to see you."

She turns to face me, sinking down on her side. “I thought you’d gone and wrote me off. Then here you are crawlin’ back in my window like you haven’t ignored me for the past three weeks.”

I cringe. “I know. I’m an asshole.”

“Is that your version of an apology?”

“It’s me saying I fucked-up and I know it. You make me feel... *so* much, Goldi. I don’t know how to handle it, sometimes.”

She reaches over, grabbing my hand and interlocking our fingers. “Apology accepted.”

Guilt slithers up my spine knowing I’m not planning on changing my ways. “I’ll probably fuck up again, you know.”

She yawns. “Yeah, probably.”

My throat is tight, clogged from all the things I want to tell her. “How you feeling today, Goldi?”

She doesn’t answer, already drifting back to sleep. I lay in the silence, content to just be in her presence, my thumb stroking lazily over the back of her hand.

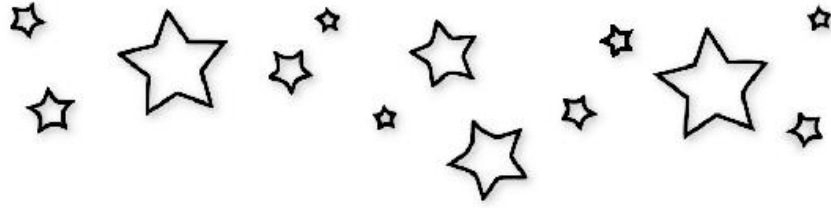
“... you make me feel too, Chase.” I’m not even sure she’s awake when she says it.

It’s been a hard day, but like always, being around her lifts the heaviness from my chest, and for the first time in three weeks I can breathe again.

Tomorrow, I’ll be strong.

ALINA

FIFTEEN YEARS OLD



There's a bonfire tonight down at the lake. It's a tradition. A last hurrah for the end of summer. I'd rather stay home, and curl up with a good book instead.

"I think I'm gonna skip out on this one," I tell Lily as she rampages my closet.

"Nope. I don't accept that. Here, try this." She thrusts a pink silk camisole in my face.

"Ugh, Lily, I literally cannot think of anything I wanna do less than sit in front of a fire in this heat."

She points her finger at me. "You didn't let me throw you a birthday party this year, this can be your apology."

"I thought lettin' you dress me up like a Barbie *was* the apology."

"Nope, that's just you making good choices." She winks as she hands me a jean skirt.

I smile big and wide. It's so good to have her here. She's been gone a lot lately. Hanging out with a new group of people, and even when she is around, she's off. After I went mother hen on her over that creep Darryl, she started pulling away. She swears up and down he's out of the picture, but it's hard to keep the faith when she disappears for days at a time.

I push back my worry and don't bring him up. I've missed my best friend.

Becca busts through the door, a bottle of vodka in her hand I'm sure she stole from her mama's secret stash. "Alright

bitches, they don't get me back 'til Sunday. What are we gettin' into?"

"Convincing Lee to come to the End of Summer Bonfire." Lily glares at me, hands on her hips.

Becca laughs, placing the vodka on my desk. "Oh, Lee, it's adorable how you think you have a choice."

I sigh. "Who all's gonna be there?"

Lily rolls her eyes. "Everyone. There's only like twenty people in this town as it is, with nothing to do. Where else would they go?"

Becca grabs Lily's phone as it chimes on the desk, and stares at the screen.

"Uhh... Lily, there's someone named 'Big D' in your phone tellin' you to be a good girl, and maybe he'll re-up your stash."

Lily rips the phone from her hand. "Jesus, Becca, mind your fucking business."

Becca cocks an eyebrow. "Excuse me, Miss Priss? Seems like you need me to *make* it my business."

Lily's body is coiled tight. "Oh, please. Just because your dad's the preacher of this Podunk town doesn't mean you have the right to invade people's lives whenever you please."

I'm too busy processing the fact Lily needs a "stash" to be offended by her words about the town I've lived in my whole life. My eyebrows draw together. "Lil, what the heck is goin' on with you? You can talk to us, you know?"

She ignores me, fingers flying over the keyboard, and breathing heavy like she just ran a marathon. Her phone rings and she mutters something about privacy as she scurries out of the room.

My mouth is hanging as I meet Becca's eyes. She raises her arms out to the side mouthing, "*What the fuck?*"

I shake my head in disbelief.

A few hours later, we make it to the lake. It's a balmy night, and everyone who's anyone is here. People cluster in groups along the bank. There are a few Adirondack chairs around the fire, and my booty is sitting comfortably in one for the duration. I'm nursing a warm, stale beer in a red Solo cup, pretending to listen to Ricky Walker tell me all about his daddy's fishing store. But my eyes are on Chase. That ratchet girl Suzy Abbott has her breasts pressed up so tight to his side, I'm surprised she can breathe.

When she leans up to whisper in his ear, my stomach burns with jealousy.

When her hand slips into his jeans, my jealousy turns to anger.

I'm not naive—I know he sleeps around. I've smelled the perfume lingering on his clothes as he lays in my bed and tells me he's no good. But to see it right in front of me? It makes me sick. I *know* he feels something. I wish he would get over his issues and just let me love him. But if he wants to spend his time being too afraid, that's his choice. His stupid, terrible, idiotic choice.

I turn sharply toward Ricky, looking him up and down. His blond spiky hair and dull brown eyes aren't really my thing, but he'll do.

Is he still talkin'? I cut him off. "Yeah, great. Listen. You wanna get out of here?"

His eyes widen. "Uh... yeah. Yes." He clears his throat. "Like, now?"

"Yup." I spring up, letting my cup fall to the sand as I grab his hand, pulling him from his seat.

I march down the bank toward the parking lot, on a mission to find Ricky's truck. I don't bother looking back.



I THOUGHT it would feel different. Losing my virginity. But lying here in my bed, feeling the breeze from my open

window, I feel the same as I have every other night. I reach down and cup myself, thinking I should feel something. Sore or I don't know—some sign of entry?

Dang, that sounds stupid.

I thought it would make me feel like more of a woman, I guess. Honestly, it was nothing to write home about. Can't say I regret it, though. I've built up how my first time was going to go for years, always trying to picture the perfect way Chase would take it from me.

What a joke.

The pressure of it living up to my expectations is gone now, at least.

“Goldi.”

Great. Out of all the nights for him to show back up in my life, it had to be tonight. I close my eyes. I'm afraid it will hurt to look at him.

“Goldi.”

His voice is closer now. I crack my eyes open and take a peek. He's peering down at me, his dimples showing his amusement. *Dang.* I'm a sucker for the dimples.

I open my eyes fully and sigh. “Hi, Chase.”

“Where'd you disappear to tonight?” He's leaning against my nightstand, hands in his pockets.

“Oh, you knew I was there?” I ask, eyebrows raised.

He looks down, shoulders slumping.

“Remember when we used to be best friends, Chase?”

“You're still my best friend, Goldi.” He speaks slowly, the words rolling off his tongue like molasses.

I laugh. “Well, you must be the worst one I've ever had.”

“Don't say that. Fuck!” The sound of his foot kicking the bottom of my nightstand is jarring.

“Quiet! You wanna wake Eli, or worse, my daddy?”

He winces, reaching up to grip his hair. “I just... I’m so fucking twisted up. I see you and it’s like all my shit gets thrown in the air, and I have no control over where it will land.”

“You can’t control everything, Chase. That’s not real life.”

He huffs. “What do you know about real life, Goldi? You’re fifteen.”

“Don’t you patronize me!” My voice is sharp but quiet. “I know enough about life to know that never takin’ a risk is never really livin’. Mama says just to make sure the juice is worth the squeeze, that’s all. I think *you’re* worth the squeeze.” My palm tries to rub away the ache in my chest. “I can’t breathe sometimes with how much I wish you would think the same of me.”

He approaches, knees hitting the edge of the bed as he leans down. His calloused fingers trail down my jaw and he cups my face. His Adam’s apple bobs with the motion of his swallow, and he gazes in my eyes, searching for... who knows what?

“Sometimes, I think I must love you, Goldi. That’s the only explanation for why my chest feels like it’s gonna explode whenever you’re around. But the last woman who I loved more than the world? She decided I wasn’t worth it, and left me with nothing but broken pieces and a baby sister to take care of.”

Love. My heart thumps faster even as I’m lost in his sorrow, wishing I could take away his pain. His thumb brushes over my bottom lip. “I ruin people’s love. I don’t want to ruin you, too.”

My fingers circle his wrist, feeling his pulse pound beneath my thumb. “Why don’t you let me worry about that?”

He closes his eyes, resting his forehead against mine, rolling it back and forth.

A door opens down the hall, wood slats creaking as someone walks over them. Chase’s eyes snap open.

He bolts to the window, not looking back until he's got one leg out, his body straddling the ledge. The muscle in his jaw tics from so many things left unsaid in the air around us. Then he slips away into the night.

Just like that, he's gone again.

ALINA

SIXTEEN YEARS OLD



“**R**eed Stanton asked me on a date.” I’m nonchalant, sitting on my bedroom floor.

Becca’s laying on the bed with a *Cosmo* magazine. She drops it to the side, rolling over to give me her full attention. “And?”

“And... I said yes.” I shrug my shoulders like it isn’t a big deal, but we both know it is.

“I’m sorry, what?” She cups her hand over an ear.

“You heard me.”

“I did, I just wanted to hear it again. I never thought I’d see the day you’d go on a date with someone who’s not Chase.”

“Is that really so hard to believe?”

“Yeah, it really is. It’s about time, though. You’re sixteen and still so twisted up in him when he doesn’t even see you.”

“He sees me.”

“You mean when he sneaks in your room once every few months to use you as his emotional trash can?” She taps her chin. “Or maybe it’s when he ignores you at school, too busy payin’ attention to the tits and ass all over him.”

My heart squeezes as I defend him. “Chase is complicated. You wouldn’t understand.”

“I understand he’s a dick.”

“Why are we talkin’ about Chase, again? I thought I was tellin’ you about my date with Reed.” I need to get the subject back on track.

Becca sits up, smacking her hands on her thighs. “Yes! Reed ‘*Lick Him Like A Lollipop*’ Stanton! Damn, that boy is finer than frog hair. Watchin’ him throw the football in those tight pants is the only reason I fake school spirit.”

I giggle at her theatrics.

She falls backward on the bed, laughing. “How’d he get you to say yes, anyway?”

“He cornered me at my locker. Said the only thing better than winnin’ the game on Friday night will be when he gets to take me out on Saturday.”

Her jaw drops. “He just said it to you like that? Didn’t even ask?”

I shake my head, smirking at the memory.

“Damn, I bet he fucks like a porn star.”

“You are so crass, Rebecca Jean!”

“Best way to live, honey.” She grins, tossing her wild red hair over her shoulder. “Does Lily know yet? I bet she can’t wait to dress you up.”

My smile dims. “I haven’t seen her goin’ on three days now. She missed classes on Thursday and Friday.” Worry bubbles in my gut over who she’s spending her time with. “She hasn’t even been comin’ to dance practice.”

Becca makes a face. “I have half a mind to go over there and stick my foot up her ass. In fact, there’s no time like the present.”

“You wanna go over there? Like, right now?” My teeth bite down on my lower lip at the thought of seeing Chase.

“Why not? She can’t hide from us forever.” She jumps up from the bed, marching out of the room. “Let’s go.”

Chase opens the door. He’s got sleepy eyes and nothing on but basketball shorts. My eyes track his chiseled abs, up his

defined chest, and over the corded muscles in his arms. *Construction work does a body good.*

Leaning against the door frame, he glances at Becca before locking his stormy hazel eyes on me. I feel like an ant under a magnifying glass with the way he's burning me up. Lust and hurt mix together, seeping from my pores, and flooding the space between us.

Becca cuts the tension. "Hey, asshole, your sister home?"

"Nope. Thought she was with you two."

Dang it, Lily. I can't believe she's still using Becca and me as her scapegoats. I stay silent, even though my mind is screaming.

"Well, you thought wrong," Becca says. "Mind if we hang around a while and see if she comes home? We need her fashion expertise. My girl has a date tonight with the quarterback and I'm tryin' to guarantee some action, if you know what I mean." She nudges my arm, winking obnoxiously.

I watch closely for his reaction, searching for a sign that he feels something, *anything*. But he's stoic. A statue of perfection that remains unchanged.

"Sure, come on in." He opens the door wider.

Becca rushes by, taking residence on the living room couch. I start to follow but get held back by a strong grip around my wrist. My heart stutters as he closes the space between us, tugging my back to his front. Lips brush my ear, his breath prickling my skin with goose bumps. I squeeze my eyes shut, ignoring the way my body sings.

"If he touches you, I'll kill him," he whispers.

The thread holding my anger inside snaps, unable to take any more of this twisted push-and-pull game he's been playing. I turn around, ripping my wrist from his grasp in the process. "You're not my brother, and you're sure as hell not my daddy. You don't get to come and go from my life as you please, then think you get a say."

He rears back.

I don't let him go far, stepping into him and speaking low. "As a matter of fact, when you go out tonight, and do whatever it is you do, with whatever girl you do it with... I want you to close your eyes, and imagine Reed doin' the exact same thing to me."

His nostrils flare, but that's the only sign he's heard what I said. It doesn't matter. I'm done playing this game with him.

Becca's staring, unashamed, as I walk to the couch and sit. Her hand shoots up for a high five.

"Don't." I smack her hand away before grabbing the remote and flipping through the channels. I try to ignore the feel of Chase's stare and relax. Hopefully, Lily comes back soon to serve as a distraction.

We wait for what feels like hours, but she never shows up.



REED STANTON IS SUGARLAKE ROYALTY. There's not much that has the power to unite small towns quite like football, and he's an all-American quarterback that's given our high school the best record in the past two decades. My daddy is an avid football fan, which is the only reason Mama got him to agree to this date.

Right now, Daddy's sipping whiskey in his recliner, his short dirty-blond hair mussed, and his blue eyes alert. He's trying to pretend he's not waiting for the doorbell to ring. "What's this boy's name again?"

"Daddy, you know Reed. You were just singin' his praises last week when you were talkin' about him takin' us all the way to state."

He grunts. "That was before he went and got eyes for my baby girl."

"You started datin' Mama when she was younger than me," I point out.

“That was different, I was a gentleman who only wanted to hold her hand. Didn’t even kiss ‘til we were married. Kids these days act too grown.”

“Don’t you listen to that nonsense, Alina May. Your daddy was a hound,” Mama teases, smacking him on the back of the head. “What time is Reed comin’ to pick you up, baby?”

The doorbell rings.

I’m halfway off the couch, when Daddy pops up, speed walking to the door. I huff out a laugh. I *knew* he was waiting.

Wiping my clammy hands on the skirt of my yellow sundress, I follow behind. Other than the rash decision of letting Ricky Walker pop my cherry in the back of his pickup truck, I don’t have much experience with guys. I’m a little nervous.

I see Reed’s head nodding to whatever Daddy’s saying, his silky brown hair just a little too long to be clean-cut, bobbing with the motion.

“Hi,” I interrupt.

He shifts his focus over to me. “Wow. Hi, you look stunnin’.”

“Thank you. Ready to go?” I side-eye Daddy as his gaze volleys between us, terrified he’s about to embarrass me. He never acted like this with any of Eli’s dates.

“Have a good time, baby girl.” He kisses the top of my head and levels Reed with a glare. “Have her back by ten, and no funny business. You hear me?”

“Yessir.” Reed breaks into a smile so perfect, it’s worthy of any parents’ trust. My chest warms at the sight.

We walk toward the car. “I hope it’s okay we’re goin’ to the lake. I brought some food and a blanket to lay out.”

“Like a picnic?”

“Yeah, just like that.” He grins.

“Sounds perfect.” I link my arm through his.

The lake is quiet for a Saturday night, just a few people having a bonfire down the way. Reed spreads out his checkered blanket and we settle in. He opens up a basket, pulling out various meats and cheeses, a baguette, and some grapes. My eyes widen as I realize how much effort he put into this.

“I was plannin’ on an actual meal, but was told this would be better to woo you with.” He hands me a cup of sparkling cider.

“You were told, huh?”

“That’s right.” He grins. “By a very wise woman, so I thought it was best if I took her advice to heart.”

I hide my smile behind the lip of my cup. “Reed Stanton, did you ask your mama for help with this date?”

“I figured it was worth the risk.”

“What’s the risk of goin’ to your mama?”

“Well, there’s one of two possibilities. The first is that come Monday, you’ll be tellin’ the whole school how much of a Mama’s Boy I am.” He pops a grape in his mouth, chewing slowly.

“And the second?”

“The second is you’ll be tellin’ them you’re mine.”

My stomach jolts with butterflies.

He leans in closer. “Now, I may be biased, but I’m hopin’ for number two.”

Heat rises to my cheeks as I open my mouth to respond, but he puts a finger over my lips. “I know you wanna profess your love now, but I need you to keep me on my toes. I thrive under pressure.”

He moves his finger, the corner of his eyes crinkling as he watches me throw my head back and laugh. “Lord, you’re cocky.”

He chuckles. “Always confident, never cocky. How do you think I win us all those games?”

Before long the sun dips below the water, the moon rising to take its place. I drain the last of my cider and lie back on the blanket.

“Gorgeous out here, isn’t it?” Reed settles in next to me, reaching for my hand. He laces our fingers together and it feels... nice. “I always love comin’ out here when it gets dark. There’s just somethin’ about how bright the stars shine, you know?”

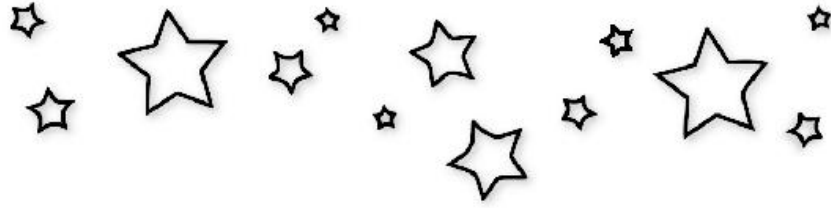
I hum my agreement, staring up at the sky. It’s been the perfect date. Thoughts of being Reed Stanton’s girl should be the only thing in my head.

But they’re not.

Instead, my mind is filled with all the nights I held another boy’s hand, under a glow ‘n stick sky, telling him he was bigger than the stars.

CHASE

EIGHTEEN YEARS OLD



For as long as I can remember, I've been the picture of self-control. Since finding out Goldi's going on a date, I'm starting to understand people who let emotions rule their life. I guess when it comes to her, I've always been weak.

I knew it was a dick move earlier. I could see the confusion in her eyes as my words promised things that my actions contradict. Swear to God, I tried to stay away tonight. I attempted to drown out the thoughts with the sound of hammers and drills, but nothing worked. So here I am, waiting in her room, leg bouncing and gut burning.

The ticking of the clock on her wall is the only sign the night is getting shorter, and the date is getting longer. The silence leaves me space to ruminate in thoughts of where they are—what they're doing.

I'm such a fucking idiot.

I've been torturing myself for years. Creating boundaries. Keeping her placed firmly as "little sister's best friend," refusing to let myself have her because it will hurt too bad when she leaves.

Everybody always leaves.

But I didn't realize it would be like this. Like my world is breaking apart at the thought of someone else getting to touch her, feel her, *love* her.

A car door slams. My feet move before I can stop them, taking me to the window. Reed helps her out of the car and I

watch as they walk up to the porch, my stomach sinking as I see her beaming smile aimed at him.

Fuck.

He's looking down at her, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. I grip the window pane, physically restraining myself from jumping through the glass and breaking all his fingers. My chest grows tight, body trembling as a sheen of sweat breaks across my brow. *Don't kiss him, Goldi.*

She does.

I'm in a special kind of hell. Must be karmic retribution from when I sat across from Goldi while Suzy Albott had her hand down my pants, whispering in my ear how she wanted my cum on her tongue. I ignored Goldi on purpose that night, pissed off she was cozied up to Ricky Walker. But I saw her watching. I saw her stand up and drag Ricky away, disappointment and hurt marring her perfect fucking face.

I'm brought out of my regrets when I see her break the kiss. *Finally.*

Reed whispers something that makes her smile, and I imagine the blush that's blooming on her cheeks for him. My arms strain, fighting the urge to reach out and steal the color for myself.

She walks inside, and I glare at him until he's back in the car. I watch until taillights disappear down the street. *That's right, fucker. Go home and don't come back.*

"Chase, what the heck are you doin' here?"

I spin around, my chest squeezing at the sound of her voice. She has no idea how much she affects me. "Hey. Thought I'd stop by... see how your date went."

She makes a sound of disbelief. "Really?"

A thousand words are on the tip of my tongue, dying to break free. *He fucking kissed you. Did you like it? Did you think of me at all?*

I lay down on her bed, propping my arms behind my head, hoping she can hear my questions through the silence. I'm not

sure I'd even want the answers.

She glances toward her door before walking over to the stereo and turning on music. I smirk. Her room is on the other side of the house, but she's always afraid her parents will hear.

"Well, it went great, if you must know."

"Where'd he take you?"

"Down to the lake. We had a picnic."

"Original."

"It was romantic."

The sting of teeth biting through my cheek is the only thing that keeps me from losing my shit. "Are you planning on seeing him again?"

A halo of hair whirls around her as she spins to face me. *Damn, she's pretty.*

"What's it to you? You know, this overprotective big brother act is gettin' old, Chase. You might want to spend more time worryin' about your real sister, instead of who's dippin' into my panties."

I should ask what the hell she means about Lily, but the visual of someone getting anywhere near her panties pumps rage through my blood until I can't think straight.

I jump up, stalking toward her. "Did you let that motherfucker *touch* you?"

"That's none of your business." Her voice is a whisper now, bravado singed away by the flames of my jealousy.

"*Everything* about you is my business, don't you know that? Don't you get it yet?"

"What is there for me to 'get', Chase?" She throws her hands up. "I can't do this anymore. You don't want me in the daytime, and I don't wanna be your dirty little secret at night."

Fear of losing her chokes me, even as I remind myself it's what's best. "I'm not the right kind of person for you, Goldi. Believe me, I try every day to become something better.

Something more.” The thump of my fist smacking my chest makes her flinch. “Whether I want to be around you has nothing to do with it.”

“You only *want* to be around me when it’s beneficial for you.”

My eyebrows raise. “Do you think it’s easy for me to stay away from you?”

“Yes! I think it’s easy!” she explodes, bringing her hands up to push me. “I think it’s *easy* for you to climb in my window, as long as no one sees.”

She pushes me again. “I think it’s *easy* to drop my friendship and then pick it up when it suits you.”

She pushes a third time. “I think it’s *easy* for you to mess with any girl that has a pulse, and not care how it cuts me up inside.”

This time, I grab her hands before they hit, jerking her body until she’s flush against me. She whooshes out a breath.

I can taste it on my lips.

The thread holding my restraint frays and snaps.

My hand grasps the nape of her neck at the same time she surges up, our teeth clacking together as we fumble to get closer, to taste deeper. My tongue licks the saltiness of tears from her lips, and I swallow her moan.

She’s climbing my body. I hoist her up, legs wrapping around my waist, her ass fitting fucking perfectly in my hands. We move until I hit the edge of her bed and fall back, the hem of her dress bunching up as she straddles my thighs. Her hips rotate, grinding down. I groan, my eyes rolling at the friction.

Gripping her hips tightly, I help her find a rhythm.

Goddamn.

I’m not even inside her and I could come from how good she’s working me. My hand slides up her thigh and under her dress, teasing the edge of her cotton panties. She whimpers and shifts, and the tips of my fingers brush against her. She’s

fucking *soaked*. My cock pulses, pre-cum dripping out and sliding down the length.

I glide my other hand along her spine, tangling it in her hair, wrapping the strands around my fist. She gasps as I pull her head back firmly, exposing her throat.

I rest my thumb against her fabric-covered clit. “Did he touch you here?”

“What?” She’s breathless, pushing her cunt into my hand, greedy as hell for what she knows I can give her.

“Did. He. Touch. You. Here?” I press down, teasing her.

She moans, and I trail a line of kisses up her throat, unable to keep my lips from her skin now that I’ve had a taste. My grip on her hair tightens. “Answer me.”

“No,” she breathes.

The relief is sharp.

Pulling her panties to the side, I drag my fingers through her wetness. My mouth waters as I imagine tasting it on my tongue.

Her hand circles my wrist, bringing my fingertips to her mouth, sucking. She groans at the taste.

Holy shit.

I’m so hard it hurts, but I ignore the ache.

My fingers dip back down, circling her swollen clit then moving lower. Two of them slip inside easily because of how wet she is for me.

I tilt forward, nipping her lips with my teeth. “I want you to ride my fingers until you come all over them. Show me how good it feels, baby.”

She throws her head back, gasping as she rocks her hips faster. She’s close. Her breathing stutters and she moans my name, her juices gushing out to the pulsing of her orgasm.

She’s stunning.

Her hair is still fisted in my hand and I lean up, sucking on her neck, making sure to leave a mark.

Mine.

My abs contort under my shirt as her hand sneaks down my torso, palming me through my jeans. Her touch feels so damn good, but if she doesn't quit massaging my cock, I'm going to throw her down and fuck her so hard she'll break. The music muffles our sounds, but her parents would *definitely* hear that. Reluctantly, I release her hair and reach down to stop her.

"Please," she whispers. "I want to."

I shake my head. "I don't want your first time to be like this. You deserve soft and sweet, Goldi, and that's not me. You *know* that's not me. But I'm gonna try like hell to give it to you."

She freezes, teeth indenting her lower lip. "You... I..." She runs her fingers through her tangled hair. "Chase, I'm not a virgin."

My body jerks off the bed. Goldi falls to the side from the sudden movement. "Who the *fuck* with?"

She rolls onto her back, her hands smacking down on the mattress. "No! You don't get to ask me that! I'm not over here askin' for your list of a thousand hussies."

My teeth grind so hard they'll turn to dust any moment. I breathe deep, attempting to calm the beast inside. It's true. I have no right. But I feel fucking ill. I was too much of a pussy to take what should have been mine, and she gave it away to someone else.

I tug my hair, sighing. "You're right."

She props up on her elbows, fighting the smile that's curling her mouth. "That's usually the case."

I bend down, leaning over the bed until my arms are on either side of her head. "Let's talk about more important things, like how sexy you look when you come."

She giggles, reaching up, and sweeping a kiss across my lips. It's just a peck, but my chest cracks wide open, flooding with happiness I'll never deserve.

I can't offer her anything, can't give her the world. But I can't let her go either, so I'll lay my bruised soul at her feet, and hope she tends to the wounds.

It's always been hers, anyway.

ALINA

SIXTEEN YEARS OLD



I'm Chase Adams's girl.

Those are four words I never thought I'd say.

I can't stop smiling. Last night, after the high wore off, I was terrified of him running again. After all, it's what he's programmed me to expect. Instead, he admitted how tired he was of fighting what's between us. Said I was his and he was mine, and that's all there is to it. Maybe it makes me a sucker, but I believe him. Chase is a lot of things, but he's never been a liar.

"So, let me get this straight, Alina May." Becca squints while she sits on the brown leather couch in my living room. "You went out and had an amazin' date with Reed. Gorgeous, charmin', totally fuckable, Reed. Am I right so far?"

"Yep."

"He wooed, you swooned. He was a perfect gentleman, not even sneakin' a titty grab all night and then... *Bam!*" She smacks her hands together. "The King of Assholes waltzes in, only *after* someone else shows interest, by the way, and you just jump in his arms and run off to live happily-ever-after?" Her voice is pinched, eyebrows raised so high they blend into her fiery hairline.

I sigh. "Becca, it's not like that."

"Then what's it like?"

"Listen, I like Reed. I truly do, and in a perfect world where my head rules my heart and not the other way around,

he'd be the best choice for me. But Chase is my *person*, Becca. If he's willin' to give us a chance, I have to see where it leads. I'll regret it for the rest of my life, otherwise."

"Look, all I'm sayin' is this thing with Chase—it has heartbreak written all over it, sister. I've watched you pine for years while he tore you up, and I'm supposed to, what? Just forget all that, and suddenly be okay with this? No," she shakes her head, "I don't think I can."

"I'm not askin' you to. Honestly, Becca, it's not your choice. I've wanted Chase to be mine for as long as I can remember. I don't think I'll ever feel for anyone a fraction of the way I feel for him. He's it for me."

"He has issues, Alina."

"Who doesn't?"

She rolls her eyes and I snap. "Rebecca Jean, you're my best friend, but I swear to all that's holy if you don't get off your high horse, and at least pretend to be supportive, I'll kick your butt straight out that door." I point toward the front entry, disappointment coloring my insides because she can't see how happy I am. "I'm not gonna sit here and justify my actions to you. Just 'cause you have issues with commitment, doesn't mean everyone else has to."

She scoffs. "I don't have issues with commitment. I just don't *do* commitment. There's a difference, honey. The church has me trapped enough." She wrinkles her nose, placing a hand on my arm. "Look, I'm sorry, Lee. I just worry. But if you're happy, I'm happy."

I blow out a breath, "Thank you."

"So... what was it like? And *don't* leave out the details." She wiggles her eyebrows. "I'll just pretend when you talk about Chase's dick that it's Brad Pitt's."

I grab a throw pillow from beside me and toss it at her, laughing.

The doorbell rings. I get up to answer. Becca follows, saying she needs to get going before her folks send out a

search party. I open the door and find Chase, one arm raised along the frame, his body towering over mine.

“Hey.” His grin is wide, those dang dimples on full display.

“Hi.” My stomach flutters, lips curling.

He doesn't move to step inside, and I don't move to let him. We just stand in the doorway, smiling wide, locked in the others' gaze.

Becca chuckles. “Good God Almighty, y'all make me sick.”

We ignore her.

“Okay, okay, I can take a hint. Lee, call me later, babe.” She squeezes past Chase, waving her hand behind her as she walks down the drive.

I mumble a goodbye, my eyes never straying from Chase.

He finally moves, his hand reaching out to lightly push my stomach, walking me back until I'm pressed against the wall. My heart dances so wild in my chest I'm afraid I'll pass out. He wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me into his body, my breasts grazing his chest. My nipples harden at the contact, and a pulse of arousal shoots through me. He leans down and takes my lips in a kiss, different from the ones last night—sweeter. Still, when his tongue teases my mouth, my body vibrates with want.

He pulls away before coming back for a quick peck. Once... twice. “I've been thinking of your lips all damn day,” he growls, leaning in like he can't stay away.

I think I might burst from happiness.

My arms wrap around his neck, pulling him down so I can deepen the kiss. He groans, his arm tightening around my waist as he lifts me. His hips push into mine, and I feel the outline of him through his jeans, hard and thick. I moan into his mouth, the ache sharpening between my legs. I think I might die if he doesn't get inside me, but my head stops me

from losing myself completely. I'm not ready for that. Not yet. Not until I know he won't push me away again.

I pull back, his lips following mine in protest.

"Chase, we gotta stop. I don't wanna be here when Mama and Daddy come home."

He grips his hair, stepping back. "Shit, okay. We can go to my place to chill. Sam took Anna to work with him today, they'll be gone awhile."

"What about Lily?" My stomach knots thinking of what her reaction will be to Chase and me. Like everyone else, she assumes we grew apart as we got older, not realizing her brother was busy tangling up my soul with his.

He shrugs. "What about her?"

"I mean... is she home?"

"Probably. Who knows with her these days?" His jaw clenches, sadness sweeping over his features. "I'm trying not to be so overbearing. Let her live her life."

Guilt stabs me for not voicing my worries. I promise myself that after we handle her finding out about us, I'll bring it up. *One thing at a time, Alina.*

"Do you, ya know, wanna tell her about us?" I break eye contact, peering down at my pink-sparkled toes. I guess the rips he caused on my insides are a little deeper than I thought because part of me is terrified he'll want to keep me a secret.

He tilts my chin up with his index finger. "I plan to tell *everyone* about us. I told you last night, I'm done fighting this. It's us, now. Always."

My body releases the tension, relief flooding my veins.

He pecks my lips again, trailing his hands down my arms until our fingers lace together. "How you feeling today, Goldi?"

I smile up at him. "Just right."

He smirks, grabbing my hand and leading me out the door, making our way to his house.

Lily is home, and she does *not* take the news well.

I'm not sure what I expected, but it wasn't this. I watch her pace the living room, feet moving so fast I'm not sure how the rest of her body keeps up. She looks tired today, a raggedness to her features I'm not used to seeing her wear. Her dark brown hair hangs limp and stringy, no makeup on her face. The antithesis of what Lily Adams usually represents.

"Lil, come on," Chase pleads, standing in front of her.

She stops pacing. "Don't you 'come on' me, Chase. What am I supposed to do with this? I was having an okay day. Then in walks my brother, the one person I could always count on to put me first, and I find out my *whore* of a best friend has been stealing him out from under me all this time?"

My heart drops through my stomach. Did she just call me a whore?

Chase cuts his hand through the air sharply. "Put you first? Lil, you haven't *let* me put you first in a while. Every time I try, you call me overbearing, so don't play that card with me. And don't call her that. You don't get to act like you're a victim, here. This has nothing to do with you, Lil."

"This has everything to do with me!" Her voice grates my eardrums, making me flinch. "She's supposed to be my best friend! And you... you are supposed to be my brother. Didn't you care at all about how this would make me feel?"

Tears stream down her face, and while I can understand where she's coming from, this reaction is extreme, to say the least.

Chase breathes out, his shoulders falling as he walks toward her and takes her hands in his. "I'll always be your brother. All I've ever wanted was to see you happy. Don't you want the same for me? She makes me *happy*, Lil."

Lily sniffs, staring hard at the ground like she wishes it would open up and swallow her whole. Her words are a whisper, so soft I have to strain to hear them. "She's going to take you from me. I can't lose you, Chase. You're the only thing that keeps me safe."

I feel awkward, standing behind them, watching as Lily's scars from years I wasn't a part of rip open and bleed out on the floor.

Chase pulls her to him harshly, the muscles in his arms tensing as he hugs her tight. "You'll never lose me, Lil. It's you and me against the world. That's never going to change, okay?"

She nods against his chest.

My body relaxes, tension I didn't even realize I was holding melting away.

Chase and Lily separate. He wipes the tears from her eyes before turning to wink at me. "You want something to drink?"

I shake my head, still feeling off-kilter from Lily's reaction. I'm looking at Chase but can feel the weight of her stare. When Chase goes toward the kitchen, I pivot.

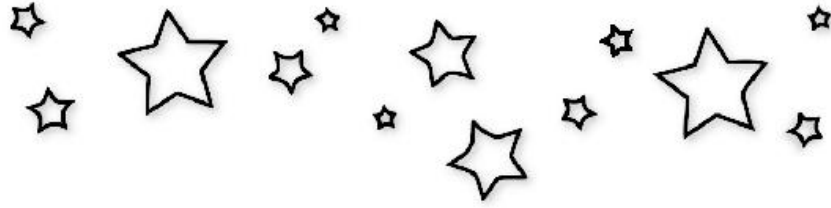
"Lily, I—"

"Don't," she cuts me off, a look of disgust creeping over her face. "I thought I knew who you were. But looking at you now? I just see bumpkin trash."

Each word is a visceral pain making my stomach squeeze so tight I feel like I might throw up. She moves forward until she's right in front of me, glaring. I try to focus on her words but my brain is too busy taking in her eyes. *Have her pupils always been big like that?* By the time I snap out of it, she's done talking, looking at me like she's waiting on a response. I have no idea what she just said. She rolls her eyes, knocking into my shoulder hard as she pushes past me, storming out the front door.

CHASE

EIGHTEEN YEARS OLD



I stare at the letter in shock, paper crinkling as it sticks to my sweaty palms.

Dear Chase,

Congratulations! It is with great pleasure that I offer you admission to Eastern Tennessee University.

Accepted? I can't believe it. When Sam and Anna asked what my plans were for the future, I was adamant about staying local and working at Sugarlake Construction. There's no better way to learn a business than to be hands-on, and college was never even a whisper of a thought. They convinced me to apply, saying the company would always be waiting, and a degree in something like business management would strengthen my skills.

I listened. Partly because I can't stand the thought of disappointing them, and partly because at the time there wasn't much—other than Lily—holding me here. But I never thought I would actually get in. How the fuck am I supposed to leave now that I finally have Goldi?

“What's that?” Jax peers over my shoulder, being a nosy fucker like usual.

I ball it up quickly and push him back. “Jesus, get off my dick.”

His eyes twinkle with mirth. “You're right. I think that's Alina's job now, anyway.” He puts his hand over his heart.

“Let me be the first to tell you how happy I am to finally give up the title.”

My mouth tilts up. “Isn’t there some car that needs lubed or whatever the hell it is you do down at that shop?”

He smirks. “Know a lot about lube jobs, do you?”

“Why the fuck do I hang out with you?”

He shrugs in response, reclining on the couch and spreading his arms over the back.

I glance at the balled-up paper in my fist. *It’s not a big deal.*

There’s a knock on the wooden frame of the house. I look up to see Goldi opening the screen door, and damn, she looks good. I haven’t slept with her. Fuck if I know why—because I’m a moron who clearly loves to torture himself? I get the sense she’s afraid of taking that final step. So, I’ll wait. I’ll prove to her I’m not going anywhere. It’s not about her body anyway—it’s her soul that holds my interest.

“Hey, I thought you would be with Lil today.” I give her a kiss, shoving the acceptance letter under the stack of mail before pulling her to sit on my lap.

She gives Jax a small wave and turns her upper body to face me. Her hair brushes my neck, sending that vanilla shit she wears straight up my nose, making me grow hard underneath her. Clearly, even though my mind is on board with waiting, my body disagrees.

“What?” Her eyebrows raise at me in surprise. “Why would I be with Lily?”

“Because she’s your best friend? She told me she was going to Chattanooga with Becca, I just assumed you would be with them.”

“Uhh... nope.”

Moving the strands of her hair to the side, I kiss the base of her neck lightly. “What’s wrong?” My lips brush her skin with the question.

She sighs. “Chase, Lily hasn’t had anything to do with me since she found out about us, and if I’m honest, she was rarely around before that.”

I laugh because she has to be fucking with me. “What are you talking about? She’s always with you.”

She shakes her head slowly. “No, Chase. She’s not. You knew she was lyin’ that day we showed up on your front door. You really thought that was a one-time thing?”

I was so twisted up in Goldi’s date, I guess I glossed over that fact. My eyebrows draw in. “If she isn’t with you, then who the hell *is* she with?”

Goldi’s hands wring together, her teeth chewing on that puffy bottom lip of hers. She mumbles something, but I don’t hear it.

“What’s that?” My tone is sharp. I’m not trying to be a dick, but I need her to get over whatever her issue is. *Spit it the fuck out.*

“I said, I’m not sure, alright? A couple years back, she started seein’ this guy. He was no good.” She’s still shaking her head at me, her eyes glassy with unshed tears.

What? How could I not know this?

“I never met him, but he was older—too old for her. She swore she stopped seein’ him, but all those weekends she said she was with us...” Her voice trails off, and my grip around her hips becomes tight. She squeaks, smacking my hands off her.

“Fuck, I’m sorry, baby.” I brush my thumbs over the pink marks.

She hums and leans back, running her fingers through my hair. Her touch is normally calming, but right now I feel like a live wire ready to explode. “Why didn’t you ever tell me about this?”

She huffs. “You weren’t exactly by my side much these past few years. What was I gonna do, yell it across the neighborhood? I figured you already knew.”

Jax clears his throat and my eyes snap over. I forgot he was even here. “Not to intrude on what is obviously a personal moment between you two, but I did see Lily with some loser the other day down by the shop.”

“What the fuck, man?” My eyebrows rise. *Does nobody tell me anything around here?*

He nods, leaning forward, his elbows resting on his knees. “Yeah, bro. I was busy dealing with a customer, so I didn’t pay much attention, but now that I think about it, shit looked kind of sketchy.” He grimaces and rubs his hand on the back of his neck.

“I think she may be on drugs,” Goldi blurts. Her eyes are wide, hands covering her mouth like she didn’t mean to say it.

I chuckle, although this situation is the furthest thing from funny. “And how long have you been thinking this?”

“I was fixin’ to tell you, I swear. It just never seemed like the right time.”

I squeeze her thigh, tempering my agitation. “Lil would never do drugs, Goldi.”

She nods. “I’m sure you’d like to believe that. But, Chase, I’m tellin’ you. Somethin’ is not right.”

“I’ll talk to her, but I really think you guys are overreacting.” No way Lily’s doing drugs. She knows what they do to people, what they did to us.

I could, however, see her dating some dickbag and not wanting to tell me, afraid of how I’d react. I’m not exactly known for my understanding and patience.

I push down the dread creeping up my throat and reassure myself. There’s no fucking way she would get into shit like that. If she was having a hard time, she would come to me. It’s always been us against the world.

I brush off their concern. They just don’t know Lily like I do.

Jax hangs for a while longer before his mom calls him home. I figure now is as good a time as any to bring up ETU

with Goldi. It's not like I'm planning on going, but I don't want to keep this from her.

"No way, Chase. Not on my watch." Goldi stares me down, hands on her hips, a serious expression on her face.

"Baby, it's not a big deal. I was never planning to go anyway. You're out of your mind if you think I'm going to leave town now that I finally have you."

She rolls her eyes. "Good Lord, get over yourself. It's not across the country. It's ETU—a little over two hours away."

"Two hours isn't three houses down, Goldi. I don't want to be that far from you. What if you decide you can't handle the long-distance? What if something happens? I need to be *here*."

Her eyes soften as she puts her arms around my waist, kissing my chest through the fabric of my shirt. "That won't happen. You can come down on weekends, I can come up. I won't let you throw away college 'cause of me."

I blow out a breath, resting my chin on the top of her head. Anxiety is twitching in my stomach, but I ignore it. I want to be a better man for her, someone she can be proud to have by her side. Maybe college *is* the right choice.

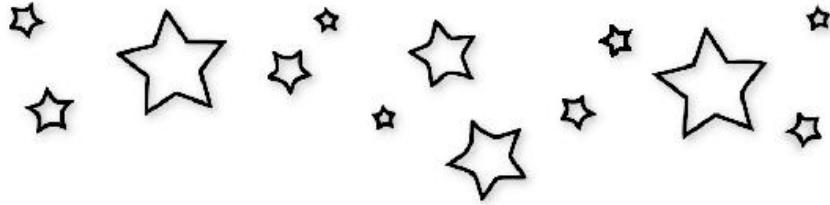
I run my tongue over my teeth, leaning back to meet her eyes. "I'll think about it."

A smile lights up her face as she raises up to kiss me chastely. "I'm really proud of you."

My heart pounds, a strange sensation filling me up. Nobody has ever told me that before. I like the way it feels.

ALINA

SEVENTEEN YEARS OLD



It's been six months since Chase left for ETU. I'm crazy proud of him, but it would be a lie to say it isn't hard. When he was leaving, he swore he would be back every single weekend, but I don't think either of us realized how unrealistic that is. Between him working to pay for his apartment, and me teaching dance to toddlers at the local rec on the weekends, time—and gas money—has been difficult to come by.

I was planning to hop in my little Kia and drive up there at least once a month, but my folks said no way, no how, could I go without a chaperone. That's where Jax comes in, I guess. I don't know what he said to Mama, but she melted like butter and convinced Daddy that if Jax came along, it was okay to go. I about keeled over and died right there when they told me. *Jax? A chaperone?* I can't believe it, but I'm not about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Jax and I don't know each other all that well. After our first disastrous meeting when I was a fresh-faced fourteen-year-old, we didn't talk. He became Chase's best friend, and since Chase was set on ignoring my existence, we ran in different circles. We're friends now, but it's purely superficial. It's strange being in a car with him without a buffer.

Jax has one hand on the wood-rimmed steering wheel, and the other on the gearshift. He's relaxed. Totally in his element, and I can see why he says cars are his calling.

"What are you thinking about so hard over there, Alina May?"

“What kind of car is this?” I look around the interior. It sure is pretty. When it comes to cars, I’m as dumb as a doornail, but I can feel the labor of love pouring out of these details.

He caresses the dash with his hand, the sun glinting off the blond hair on his knuckles. “This is a ‘67 Mustang Fastback. She was my dad’s.”

“Oh.” I get quiet, nervous to venture into this topic with him. Last time, it didn’t go so well.

He peeks over at me, smirking. “Don’t worry, Alina. I’m not the same boy you met three years ago. It’s okay to bring up my dad, I’ve had time to work through my anger.”

“Oh, good. That’s... good.” I nod my head, still unsure what to say.

The conversation subsides, falling into a comfortable silence. My head rests against the window, staring at the billboards cruising by, Tim McGraw serenading us through the speakers.

Jax turns the radio down, glancing over. “Let’s play twenty questions.”

I lift my head off the glass, angling my body toward his. “Okay, I’ll bite. Who goes first?”

“Ladies first, of course.” He tips his head.

I tap my finger on my chin, pursing my lips. “What’s that necklace you’re always messin’ with?”

He grabs the chain around his neck and pulls, two pieces of metal clanking together as they fall on top of his shirt. “Dad’s dog tags. He was a Marine.”

“Oh, wow. That’s amazin’. Do you always wear ‘em?” I lean over, getting a closer look.

“Never take them off. It makes me feel like a piece of him is still with me. Guiding me, you know?” He shakes his head, his shaggy hair falling from where it was tucked behind his ears. “Shit, that probably sounds stupid.”

I have the dog tags in my hand now, thumb brushing over the raised lettering of his daddy's name.

RHOADES,
JAMES A.

“No, not stupid. I think it sounds real, and real is beautiful, Jax.”

Emotion swirls in his eyes as he peers down at me.

I drop the tags, leaning back to my side of the car. “Okay, next question. What's your favorite food?”

His eyebrow quirks. “Isn't it my turn? This is your third question in a row. That's cheating.”

“You took too long, which means you forfeit your turn.”

He barks out a laugh. “You didn't even give me a chance, woman!”

I lift my shoulders. “That sounds like a personal problem.”

He's grinning, his eyes on the road ahead. “Whatever you say. My favorite food? Crab Rangoon. All. Day. Long.” His tongue peeks out to lick his lips, and he moans like he's in the throes of passion.

My nose scrunches. “What's that?”

“Don't tell me you've never had Crab Rangoon, Alina.”

“Okay, I won't tell you that.”

“That is entirely unacceptable,” he tsks. “We were just becoming friends, too. It's really a shame.”

I laugh. “Well, I don't know what you expect me to do about it right now.”

“Next Chinese restaurant I see, we're stopping. No matter the time or place. I'll give your mouth the best experience of its life.”

“Please, it can't be *that* good.”

“Oh, Alina... sweetheart, you just wait and see.”

His happiness is infectious, and I face forward in my seat, trying to suppress my smile. I think I quite like being around Jackson Rhoades.

We drive for another hour. There's a giddiness in my chest as we arrive at Chase's place. Other than the few and far between pictures he posts on Facebook, this is the first time I've seen where he lives. I reach in the back seat to grab my jacket. It's too dang cold in February.

Jax walks around to open my car door, ever the gentleman. He puts out his arm, winking when I take it. "You ready to go see your man, sweetheart?"

We don't get further than the front sidewalk before Chase's door opens. A blonde girl steps out, pausing to speak with someone just inside the door. I stop in my tracks, pulling on Jax's arm, confused. *Do we have the wrong place?*

She's pretty. Tall and skinny with long blonde hair. Chase follows her out, and she throws her arms around his neck, pulling him into a hug. *Okay, not the wrong place.* Flashes of our past play behind my eyes. Jealousy I haven't felt in so long simmers beneath the surface.

Chase doesn't wrap his arms around her, just lightly pats her on the back. His lack of response to her touch calms me. He looks up and spots us, a smile that's only ever just for me lighting up his face. Stepping back from the blonde, he briskly approaches us. Excitement bounces around inside me, making it hard to stand still.

"Goldi," he breathes, wrapping me in a hug, lifting me up and spinning me around. The jealousy recedes, replaced by the familiar warmth of being in Chase's arms.

Jax waves his hand in front of our faces. "Oh hey, Chase. Nice to see you. Missed you, bro. Remember me? Jax. Chopped liver. Whatever name you prefer, really."

Chase laughs, setting me down, keeping me tucked into his side as he gives Jax a chin nod.

The blonde girl appears beside us, her light-brown eyes focused on me. "Chase, these your friends from back home?"

“Yeah. This is my girlfriend, Alina, and my best friend, Jax. Guys, this is Lindsay. She’s in my Business and Professional Communications class. We have a study group that gets together once a week. She was just dropping off some notes.”

Lindsay plasters a smile on her face—a little too wide to be genuine, and puts out her long manicured fingers to shake my hand. “Nice to meet you. I didn’t know Chase had a girlfriend.”

My spine stiffens as my grip on her hand tightens.

Jax must sense my irritation, because he chuckles, attempting to lighten the mood. “Typical Chase, keeping the best parts of his life all to himself. The greedy bastard.”

Chase pulls me closer into his side. “The best and biggest part of my life.” He drops a kiss on my forehead. “I’ve talked about Goldi. I mentioned last week she’d be coming up to stay the weekend.”

Lindsay puts a hand up to her forehead. “Oh, that’s right. It must’ve slipped my mind. We talk about so much, it’s hard to remember all the details.”

I smirk at her. I know girls like this and can see her game from a mile away. I’m not above marking my territory. I cup Chase’s face, his stubble scratching my fingers as I pull him down to meet my lips. I linger, teasing the tip of his tongue with mine before pulling back.

“You’re the best and biggest part of me, too,” I whisper against his mouth.

He buries his face in my neck, his cold nose sending shivers down my back. “Goddamn, I’ve missed you.”

“Alright, lovebirds. What’s on the agenda for today?” Jax glances over to Lindsay. “You coming with us on the Nashville tour? Not really the best weather for it, but hey, ‘When in Rome,’ am I right?”

“No, no. I have things to do today. Like Chase said, I was just stopping by to give him a copy of my notes since he’s missing tonight’s study group.”

“Your study group meets on Friday nights?” Jax is incredulous, his face a picture of disbelief. “What the hell kind of college experience are you living, Chase? To say I’m disappointed would be a gross understatement.”

Chase lifts his head from my neck. “I’m not here to party, dumbass. I’m here to get a degree. As fast as fucking possible so I can come home to what matters.” His hands creep down low on my back, fingertips slipping under the waistband of my jeans.

The air of confidence from Lindsay’s posture deflates. *That’s right hussy, you can’t touch us.*

“Alright, well, I’ll see you later, Chase,” she mutters.

Chase barely glances at her, mumbling a goodbye. His hand tangles with mine as he leads us up the sidewalk and to his apartment.

By the end of the weekend, she’s already forgotten. Lost in the sights and sounds of Nashville, and the happiness that wraps my heart, making it beat out the rhythm of a love song.

“I don’t want you to go back,” Chase whispers into my hair. I’m lying on top of him, our limbs entwined on the couch, reveling in the peace that comes with his embrace. Jax is passed out in Chase’s bedroom, and this is the first time all weekend we’ve been alone. We managed to sneak in a few make-out sessions, but even though I told Chase I was ready to take that last step, he didn’t want to do it when Jax was in the other room. Said he wanted it to be special. Wanted to take his time.

“Bein’ away from you is harder than I expected,” I pout.

His arms tighten around me. “You aren’t second-guessing things, are you?”

“No way. You’re stuck with me for good, mister. I just miss you so much. We don’t get to see each other as often as I imagined.”

His fingers trail up and down my back, and he sighs. “It’s hard for me, too. Not being able to see you whenever I want is fucking torture.”

It *is* torture, but nothing compared to the torture of knowing he wasn't mine. This is child's play, in comparison.

"Have you talked to Lily lately?" he asks.

My heart sinks. "Chase, she won't even look at me when she passes me in the halls at school, and she dropped out of dance to avoid me."

I've tried to talk to Lily a thousand different times. I thought after some space, she would have cooled off enough to hear my side of things. But there's only so much verbal abuse a girl can take. Eventually, I stopped trying.

"She's not answering my calls. Probably still pissed at me for leaving. Can you try to get through to her again, for me? I need to know she's okay, and I'll feel better knowing you're with her."

I love Chase with every part of me, and that's the only reason I agree. For some reason, he's blind when it comes to Lily—too scared to see what's right in front of him. He's not willing to admit she treats me like trash, let alone that she's off the rails and needs help. I just hope he doesn't look back one day and regret how he's handling things.

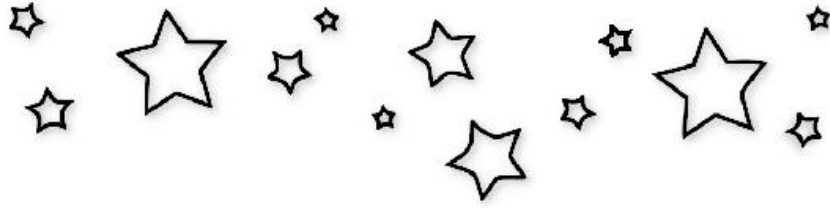
"Yeah, I'll see about her when I get back home. But don't get your hopes up, Chase. She can't stand the sight of me."

"Thank you, baby."

I kiss him, committing his touch to memory. Who knows how long it will be until I get to feel it again.

CHASE

NINETEEN YEARS OLD



Goldi and Jax made the trip again at the end of March, Jax taking his “chaperone” role way too seriously, and not giving us a moment of privacy. Not like I’d fuck her with him eavesdropping anyway. I want us to be alone for that, but who knows when we’ll get the time. Three weeks after they left, the ache in my chest from not being with her was too much to take. So, I requested off work, filled up my gas tank, and took the trip home. Coincidentally, it’s also Anna’s birthday this weekend. I’m happy I’ll get to be here to celebrate.

Goldi and I are at my house marathoning old horror flicks on TV, but I’m not paying attention. I’m too busy watching her. I didn’t know it was possible to feel this. Like my world is spinning around her, surviving off her glow. That makes me sound like a pussy, but I don’t give a fuck. It’s the truth.

Almost everything in my life is finally going right. I’ve got the parents. I’ve got the girl. I’m getting the education. The only thing I’d change is the deteriorating relationship with my sister. Lily’s the one thing I can’t keep a hold of, and it fucking kills me. I never imagined she would shut me out the way she has. I admit I didn’t want to see it. I didn’t want to believe what everyone has been trying to tell me. I brushed it off like a fucking idiot, reassuring myself everything was fine. All so I wouldn’t have to face the fact that my sister is fucked-up, and I haven’t done shit about it. But I can’t ignore it anymore.

The movie ends, credits rolling across the screen. My fingers trail up and down Goldi’s arm as she lies in front of me.

“I love havin’ you home,” Goldi sighs.

“I love being home.”

She pushes her ass into me, and I bite my lip at the feeling. With all the time apart, we haven’t had too many opportunities to be with each other like this. The nineteen-year-old hormonal boy is raging inside of me for some contact.

She reaches back and cups me. Her fingers slide up and down my length through my basketball shorts, making the blood rush straight to my cock. She looks back and smiles deviously. “How long ‘til your folks get home?”

“Who fucking cares?” I growl, lust overtaking rational thought. I grind into her hand, letting her feel how much she affects me. It’s been a year of foreplay, and I’m losing my fucking mind wanting to get inside her.

She moves suddenly. The hand that was working me so expertly, disappears. Before I can open my mouth in protest, she drops to her knees, her face level with my hard-on. Her hand glides slowly up my thigh and over my erection. I twitch underneath her palm, eager for more contact.

She goes to remove my shorts and I lift my hips, anticipation racing through me as my cock pops out. I’m stiff as hell, aching to be in her mouth.

I watch, transfixed, as she wraps her hand around me. A drop of cum leaks out of my tip, dripping over her fingers. She fucking moans, moving her hand up and squeezing. Another drop oozes out. This time she leans forward and her tongue peeks out to sweep across the head. It’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen. I grow harder in her hand.

“Does that feel good?” she asks, trailing kisses down the length of my shaft.

“Fuck. Yes.”

Her hand twists, moving toward the tip, her mouth continuing down until her tongue swirls around my balls.

I throw my head back and bite my cheek to avoid coming.

She's steadily pumping me. I can't help it and thrust into her hand, wishing like hell it was her tight pussy. The image has me groaning and speeding up my hips.

Her tongue leaves my balls, tracing the vein on the underside of my cock, licking from base to tip. She blows on the head, setting my body on fire.

I slide inside her mouth, her lips parting wide. My hands grab fistfuls of her hair. The urge to push her down on my cock is strong. But there's no need. She lowers her head, sucking in her cheeks, and flattening her tongue as she takes me all. The. Way. Down.

I hit the back of her throat and my balls tighten. *Shit.*

She rises up, her hand following the path of her mouth, before bobbing her head back down and deep-throating me. Her nose touches my groin and my hips jerk up, my hands holding her head in place.

She hums and I throb in her mouth.

She swallows, her throat muscles milking me, and I lose it. My balls draw up, and my vision goes white as I pulse streams of cum down her throat. She moans like it's the best thing she's ever tasted, and fuck if that isn't the hottest thing she's ever done.

I collapse back on the couch, softening in her mouth as she cleans my cock with her tongue. The sensation is too much to handle after she just blew my world apart.

She releases me with a pop, smiling before crawling back onto the couch, and resting her head on my chest.

At this moment, I'm the happiest I've ever been.

Goldi goes home an hour later, and I help Sam cook for Anna's birthday. When Lily doesn't show up for the celebration dinner, I blurt out my concerns. They aren't surprised when I tell them—they've been having worries of their own. We should have had this talk a long time ago.

"Dinner's getting cold. We might as well just eat." I look at the spread on the table.

Anna sighs. “I guess you’re right. Do you have any idea where she is?”

Guilt stabs my heart because I *should* have paid attention to where she’s been for a lot longer than just tonight. But still, her question makes irritation simmer in my gut.

My head cocks to the side, eyebrows rising. “Do *I* know where she is? I’m not the one living under the same roof as her, Anna. Maybe you should pay closer attention to the girl you decided to play mother with.”

“Watch your mouth,” Sam intervenes. “We’re all concerned, and I get that emotions are running high. But disrespect will not be tolerated. Am I clear?”

I tug my hair. “I didn’t mean that. I’m just worried.”

Anna smiles softly, reaching across the table to cover my hand with hers. “It’s okay, Chase. The truth is, we’ve been worried about her for some time. I’ve been treadin’ lightly, scared to push her away even more. That might make me a ‘bad mom,’ I don’t know. But there’s no guidebook on how to handle this.”

Sam rubs Anna’s back, his brows drawn. “Let’s have dinner and see if she shows up. She could just be running late.”

I eat as much as I can stand. The food tastes bland, overshadowed by the anxiety rolling in my gut.

Where is she?

I throw my utensils on my plate, feeling like I’m going to fucking explode. Something’s wrong. I can feel it. “I’m gonna go look for her around town. Drag her ass back home once I find her.”

Sam nods. Anna stays silent, a somber expression on her face as she stares at her dinner plate.

I drive around for the next few hours. I call Becca on the off chance she’s with her, but unsurprisingly she hasn’t heard from her in days.

I'm stopped in a random parking lot, desperation creeping through my bones, when my phone rings.

"Hey, Sam. She home?"

"No, but I remembered something. We had her turn on the 'find my phone' feature on her iPhone. I should be able to track her down that way."

Why the fuck is he just now telling me about this? I could have been to her hours ago. My leg bounces while I hold the phone to my ear. After what feels like a goddamn century, he gives me a location.

Half an hour later, I pull up to a single-story house in Sweetwater. It's a small, run-down place, chain-link fence around the yard, and a square window on either side of the front door. The grass is overgrown, covering the sidewalk. If it wasn't for the street lamp that's flickering outside letting me see cars in the driveway, I would think it was abandoned.

Anxiety tightens my stomach as I walk to the front door. I knock, but no one answers. I move over to the windows, peering inside, but the shades are drawn so I can't see much. I'm about to take out my phone and call Sam when I hear mumbling from behind the door. I rush back over. A man stands in the doorway, eyes barely open, a cigarette dangling from his mouth.

My jaw tics as I take him in. He's skinny as fuck, short brown hair that's tipped with blond, pockmarks scattered on his face. He's wearing a white undershirt stained with something brown, chains dangling from his neck. *Good*. Easier to strangle the life out of him if he's so much as touched my sister.

"Yeah?" he asks, scratching his stomach.

"I'm looking for Lily. Is she here?"

His eyes open a bit more, scanning me. "Who's askin'?"

"Her brother."

His posture straightens, a smirk covering his face as he moves to the side, and waves his arm inviting me inside.

“She’s around here somewhere. Flyin’ high in the sky.” He takes the cigarette from his mouth, chuckling like it’s a joke.

My fists clench. *I will fuck this guy up.* I move past him, keeping the lid on my rage and focus on what’s important—finding Lily.

I walk into the house and scan my surroundings. The living room is trashed. A few random people lounge around in mismatched chairs and bean bags. There are lines of white on the coffee table and my heart sinks.

I should have listened.

I move down a hallway, checking rooms as I go. Finally, I get to the last room on the right. Before I even open the door, the smell of burning plastic assaults my nostrils. Memories of a past I try to forget flash through my mind. I close my eyes and breathe deep, fighting the urge to throw up my dinner.

I turn the handle but pause before taking a step, trying to calm my nerves at what I already know I’ll find. I walk into the room and my heart fucking stops.

Lily is laid out on a bare mattress. Burned foil litters the floor around her, a lighter and straw next to her hand. The lighting is low. Just a lamp in the corner of the room casting an eerie glow over this completely fucked-up situation.

“Lil,” I gasp, rushing to her side. She doesn’t stir. I drop, foil crunching under my knees, and grab her shoulders. “Lily, fuck. Wake up.” I shake her, but she doesn’t fucking move.

This isn’t happening.

I slide my arms underneath her, picking her up, her body limp in my arms. The only thing keeping me together is watching her chest move with her breaths. It’s slow, but it’s there. I focus on getting her the fuck out of this shithole and to a hospital.

The guy who opened the door is slumped on the couch when I get to the living room.

“Call an ambulance,” I snap at him.

His cloudy gaze sweeps over Lily in my arms, but he shakes his head. “No can do, my man. If she dies, it ain’t gonna be on my property.”

Black rage surges through me, blinding my vision. If I wasn’t terrified that every second wasted was a second closer to losing Lily, I would tear this motherfucker apart. Instead, I shake it off, rushing out the door.

I’m dialing 911 as soon as I get Lily in my backseat. I’m panicking and have no clue where the fuck to go. The operator calms me down, letting me know I’m less than five minutes from a hospital. Somehow I get us there in one piece.

There’s a group of people in scrubs waiting for us outside the hospital doors. I throw my car in park, jumping out as they move forward to take Lily from the back. I try to pay attention to what they’re saying, but the adrenaline pumping through me makes it hard to focus. Before I know what’s happening, they whisk her away. I drop onto the asphalt, my breaths coming quick, fear crippling my insides.

It’s a few hours later and Lily’s stable. That’s the only thing that has provided me any relief since the moment I found her unconscious on the mattress.

How could I have let this happen?

The whisper of Sam soothing Anna while she cries makes me ache for Goldi. But I don’t call her. I don’t deserve any solace. Words of rehabilitation are mentioned, pamphlets are exchanged, and just like that the hospital wipes their hands of Lily, preparing to discharge her within a few hours.

Sam, Anna, and I go down to the cafeteria after Lily asks for a minute to rest. They’re both talking to me, but I don’t pay attention. I’m too busy sinking into the depths of my self-loathing. This is my fault. If I had just paid more attention. Not gotten so caught up in my own life... in Goldi.

Eventually, we make it back to Lily’s room, preparing for the tough conversations ahead. But when we walk in, the room’s empty.

She’s gone.

Everybody always leaves.

CHASE

TWENTY YEARS OLD



“Chase, are you even listening to me?”

I look at Lindsay, her bleached-blond hair covering half of her face as she leans over her textbook. She sniffs like she has a cold. We aren't in a class together anymore, but we still meet once a week to study.

“Yeah, I'm listening.”

I'm not.

Lindsay sniffs again, looking at me through her lashes, a smirk on her face. “What did I say, then?”

I don't answer. I'm too busy wondering why I even bother with this charade of school anymore. After Lily made her great escape, I was firm in the decision of staying home and helping Sam and Anna try to find her. They fought me, convinced I should continue to “live my life.”

What a fucking joke.

They've been searching for a year now, and no luck. They hang on to their hope, but I know better. No love is greater than a love affair with drugs.

In all honesty, I'm still at ETU to keep some distance between Goldi and me. Like usual, whenever we're together, everything disappears until all I see is her. But sometimes looking at her hurts. Thoughts whisper that if I hadn't given in to the pull between us, my sister might be healthy. Happy. Here.

I should have saved her from this. I *could* have saved her.

I see the pain I cause Goldi when I play hot and cold whenever she visits. I hear it in her voice every time she asks if she did something wrong. I want to scream that it's not her, it's me.

It's always me.

I should let her go, I know this. But I love her. So fucking much. So, I'm selfish. I keep her on my rope, knowing I'm slowly hanging us both.

Lindsay sniffs again.

I quirk my brow. "Are you getting sick?"

She rubs under her nose and looks up, her pen creating a steady *tap tap tap* from her twitching hand. "What? No. I'm fine."

I lean forward, looking at her closely. She's antsy. She keeps rubbing her nose, and as she meets my gaze, I notice her pupils are the size of quarters.

"Are you fucking *high*?" I hiss.

She taps her nose. "Just a little pick me up, Chase. Nothing to freak out about."

"There's no such thing as a 'little pick me up,' Lindsay. What the fuck is wrong with you?"

She shifts in her chair. "Jesus, calm down."

"Don't tell me to calm down. I don't want you to be high when you're around me." I point my pencil at her, gripping it so tight I'm surprised it doesn't snap in half.

She raises her hands in surrender. "Okay, fine."

"I'm serious, Lindsay. Never again."

My phone vibrates on the table, Goldi's name flashing across the screen. We haven't spoken in days, and I'm dying to hear her voice, but getting to the bottom of Lindsay's habit is more important right now. Goldi will understand.

I silence the phone, slipping it in my pocket.

Now that I know Lindsay's been using, I'm worried, so I invite her over, sit her down and tell her I want to help. *I need to help*. She breaks down, admitting it's out of control, and she's scared of it taking over her life.

From then on, whenever I'm not working or in class, I'm with Lindsay. I don't particularly enjoy her company, but I don't want to give her the chance to shove more poison up her nose. Besides, it gives me something to do other than sit at my apartment and be alone with my thoughts. Sometimes, I look at her and I swear it's Lily I'm seeing—not that they look anything alike.

Maybe it's my penance. Maybe if God exists, he's giving me a chance to right the wrongs of my past. Hell, I don't know. All I know is I couldn't save my mom or Lily. I'll be damned if I can't save her.

Right now, we're sitting in my living room, *The Real World* on TV. Jax and Goldi are driving up for the weekend, and I told Lindsay she could hang. To say I'm anxious is an understatement. Normally, I wouldn't worry about Goldi being insecure, but our relationship has been rocky, thanks to me and my revolving door of fucking issues.

Lindsay begged me not to tell them about her problem. Said she didn't want two of the most important people in my life to look down on her. I tried to reassure her they weren't like that, but she's adamant, and it's not my story to tell. Because of that, I don't really know what to say to Goldi about her. I don't want to lie, so I've missed more than a few of our phone calls.

The doorbell rings and I jump. My nervous energy makes my motions feel jerky opening the door.

A swirl of vanilla and blonde rushes into me, long legs wrapping around my waist. I bury my head in her hair, gripping under the curve of her ass, holding her tightly to me. Immediately, the heaviness disappears from my shoulders, and the thoughts quiet in my brain. The way they always do when she's around. It's so fucking good to have her in my arms.

She peppers my face with kisses and I chuckle, squeezing her ass in my palms. “Good to see you too, baby.”

She giggles, sliding down my body and backing up. “Dang, I missed you somethin’ fierce.”

Jax is still in the doorway, his eyes on Goldi. I clear my throat to get his attention, wondering why the fuck he’s staring at her like that. He moves his gaze to me, adopting a carefree attitude. “Hey bro, good to see you.”

I raise my chin in acknowledgment, still watching him. He has his hands in the pockets of his jeans, and he’s looking around the apartment like he’s never seen it before. The moment he spots Lindsay, a saccharine smile spreads over his face. “Well, well, well. What do we have here?”

Lindsay grins, walking over to stand beside me. “Hi, you must be Jax. We’ve met once before, but I doubt you remember. Chase has told me so much about you!”

His eyebrows jump. “Has he, now? That’s interesting, I don’t think he’s said a single thing about you. Trust me, I’d remember.” He looks her up and down, giving her a wink. But then he glances over at Goldi, and I watch as what looks like concern fills his features.

Goldi’s staring in Lindsay’s direction. I reach out to search for her hand, lacing our fingers together, and rubbing the back of it with my thumb. Guilt for not giving her warning about Lindsay crawls up my throat. “Yeah, Lindsay and I have been chilling recently. I told her she could kick it this weekend, get to know you guys.”

“You two have been *chillin’* recently?” Goldi’s voice is tight, her hand rigid in mine.

I look at her, unease prickling at my skin.

Lindsay jumps in before I respond. “Goldi, right?”

Goldi’s eyes narrow. “It’s Alina.”

Shit.

“Oh.” Lindsay smiles, nervously. “I’m sorry, I just assumed. I’ve been looking forward to seeing you so I could

thank you for sharing Chase. I can't tell you how much his friendship has come to mean to me." She rests her hand on my arm at the same time Goldi rips hers away, stepping closer to Jax, and bouncing her gaze between us.

Irritation nags at my back. *Why the hell would she say that?*

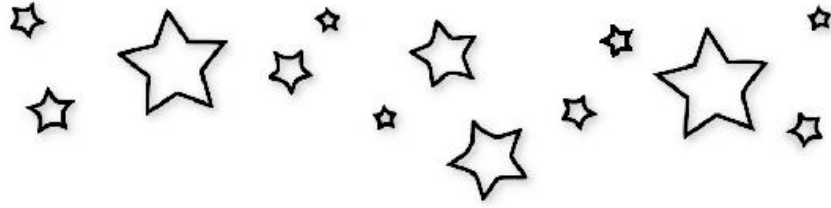
Jax pipes in, calming the tension in that way only he can do. "Where's *my* thank you, Lindsay? He was mine first, you know."

My eyes don't leave Goldi. "Naw, man. I've always been Goldi's. She's had me since I was thirteen."

Goldi's features soften, her love pouring into the air between us. I revel in the warmth, knowing I don't deserve the comfort.

ALINA

EIGHTEEN YEARS OLD



Things are different since Lily ran away. I can only imagine what losing her does to Chase's psyche. I try so hard to get him to open up, but just like when we were kids, he won't let me in. That brick wall I spent years smashing down resurrected seemingly overnight. But I'm not a quitter. So, I'll stand at his back and sharpen his swords, hoping he slays his demons.

That doesn't mean I'm not hurting with every missed phone call, or excuse as to why he can't make the trip down. I don't push him because I'm terrified he'll snap our connection in half. In the back of my mind, the red flags wave from the way he uses our distance as a shield.

We're at a restaurant in Nashville, a live band performing on the stage. Chase sits next to me, an arm thrown lazily over the back of my chair. His fingers toy with the ends of my hair. Lindsay won't stop waxing poetic about their "amazing friendship." With every word out of her mouth, the urge to slap her silly grows.

Jax sends worried glances my way. He's become one of my closest friends. He knows how hard I've had to try with Chase lately. Our car rides together are like therapy, letting me vent my fears and frustrations. Relieving me of carrying the burden alone. It's a comfort to share the weight.

Chase leans over, running kisses down my hairline. I melt into him, the sting of jealousy ebbing away. He's mine, after all.

Lindsay's eyes glint, watching us. "Chase, tell them about the spider fiasco at my place."

Chase's body tenses, his lips leaving my skin as he straightens in his chair. "They don't want to hear stupid shit like that."

I cock my head at him. "I'd like to hear it."

He sucks his teeth, looking at me. "There was a spider at her place. She was scared of it, and it was hiding in her bathroom. I found the fucker and killed it." He shrugs.

Lindsay laughs. "Oh, don't be so modest." She turns her eyes on me. "It was a giant wolf spider! The thing was hanging out in my bathroom, and I was too terrified to even go in there. I called Chase, and like usual, he came right over."

She smiles at him. "By the time he got there, the spider was nowhere to be found. I was a panicked mess. But Chase stayed with me all weekend until he finally was able to find the damn thing and kill it." She puts her hands over her heart. "My hero."

My stomach drops. I slowly nod my head at her story. "All weekend, huh? And when was this?"

"Oh, about three weeks ago, right Chase?"

Chase shifts, clearly uncomfortable, and a forgotten gash reopens across my heart. My body throbs at the pain. Three weeks ago, the toddler dance class I teach had a recital. It was the first one I choreographed, and I was so excited for everyone to see all the hard work I'd put into their routine. I begged Chase to come home for it. But he didn't, saying he wasn't able to get off work. Nausea swirls in my stomach at the knowledge he was with her.

Did he lie to me?

Jax is staring slack-jawed from across the table.

Chase moves his arm, reaching down to my thigh and squeezing. I push his hand off me, unable to stand the thought of his touch. Tears burn behind my eyes, and I push my chair back, excusing myself to use the restroom. Jax—not Chase—

is the one who stands, trying to follow. I put my hand up to stop him. I just need a moment.

I lock myself in a stall, leaning my head against the cold metal. Breathing deeply, I try to calm my racing heart. I'm sure there's a perfectly reasonable explanation for this. I don't think Chase would cheat on me, but him putting Lindsay before me hurts almost as bad. With a couple more breaths, I pull myself together and open the stall.

Lindsay is at the row of sinks, leaning against the counter, her arms crossed. She scans me up and down. "You know, I really don't get it."

I keep my eyes straight ahead as I wash my hands. "Mmm."

I don't ask her to clarify. I may be small town, but I'm not stupid. I know vindictiveness when I see it. This girl is itching to start something.

"Yeah, I mean... when I found out Chase had a girlfriend, I was pretty torn up. I had my sights set on him from the jump." She laughs, tilting her head to the side. "And then I saw you, and I realized maybe he's not so far out of reach, after all."

I meet her eyes in the mirror. Usually, words don't affect me. Chase's avoidance, coupled with the knowledge he's been with her all those times he could've been with me, grates my confidence until there's nothing left.

I reach for a paper towel, slowly wiping my hands. "Lindsay, I don't know what game you're tryin' to play. But whatever it is, you're wastin' your time. Chase and I have belonged to each other since the moment we met. There's no comin' between us."

"Oh you silly, stupid, girl." She throws her head back and laughs. "I already have." She steps closer, her tall frame casting a shadow over me. "Every time you call and he doesn't pick up? I'm right next to him, watching as he silences the phone." Another step closer. "When you beg for him to come home? All it takes is one word from me, and he drops

everything to be by my side.” Her finger taps her chin. “Now, I wonder why that is?” A smile spreads slowly across her face before she spins on her heel and walks out.

My fingernails dig into my palms so hard I’m sure I’m breaking skin. I trust Chase.

I *love* Chase.

But I can’t stand the way this feels.



WE’RE BACK at the apartment, and Lindsay’s leaving. *Finally*. Chase walks her to the door, speaking low, close to her ear. I analyze every single moment between them, unable to tear my eyes away. Her earlier words have soaked into my skin. They’ve mixed into my bloodstream and reached my heart, causing fissures with every beat.

I feel the couch dip beside me. Jax’s arm settles around my shoulders. “Sweetheart, you stare any harder, and you’ll burn a hole straight through her.”

The sting of my eyes makes me blink, but I don’t turn away.

“Just talk to him, Alina. Don’t drive yourself crazy with the ‘what-ifs.’” He pulls me closer, dropping a kiss on the side of my head.

The front door closes. Chase walks back over, stopping short when he sees Jax and me on the couch. “You two look cozy.”

My breath whooshes out at his audacity.

Jax laughs. “Yeah, well... someone had to make sure your girl was taken care of while you were busy with the local trash.”

I stifle a smile, my mood warming at Jax’s show of loyalty.

Chase’s jaw tics, like it always does when he’s holding back what he wants to say. “What the fuck is that supposed to

mean?”

Jax levels him with his stare. “Which part?”

The silence is deafening.

“Anyway, I’m beat, bro. I’ll see you two in the morning.” Jax stands up and stretches, walking down the hallway, leaving Chase and me alone.

Chase sidles up to me on the couch, his arms winding around me. I don’t return the embrace.

“Baby,” he whispers. “Come on, Goldi, don’t be like this.”

I bristle. “Were you ever gonna tell me, Chase?”

“Tell you what?”

I run my hand through my hair, my foot tapping. “Oh, I don’t know. How about we start with the fact you’ve been tellin’ me you’re workin’ when you’re really spendin’ your nights in another girl’s apartment.”

He releases me, sitting back. He sighs, looking down at his hands. “I did work that weekend.”

“That’s not the point!”

“Goldi, you have to know Lindsay’s just a friend. You *do* know that, don’t you?” He scoots closer, reaching for my hand.

I jerk it out of the way. “She doesn’t want to *just* be your friend.”

“She’s in a fucked-up place right now and needs someone to lean on. That’s all.”

“Oh, really? What’s wrong with her?” The mocking in my tone doesn’t go unnoticed.

He tugs his hair as he stands, pacing the floor. “She asked me not to say.”

I scoff, rolling my eyes. “Predictable.”

He walks toward me. “Goldi, listen to me. I don’t fucking want her. I want you. I *love* you.”

The dam bursts on my emotions. His words stab my insecurities, making them gape open and bleed. Tears trickle down, and I don't bother to wipe them away. "You have a real funny way of showin' it lately, Chase."

He sinks to his knees, pushing his body between my legs. "Don't cry," he whispers, brushing the tears from my face.

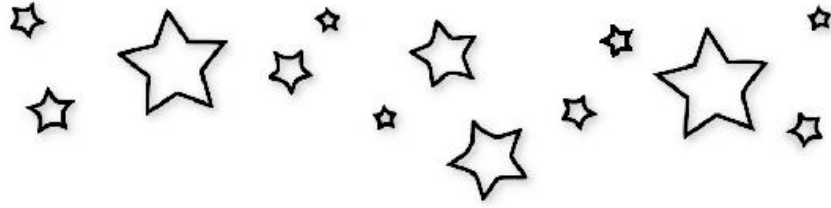
I turn my head into his palm, squeezing my eyes shut. "I need you to choose me, Chase."

"I *do* choose you." His grip on my jaw tightens, forcing me to look in his eyes. "I've been fucked-up after Lily. I know that. I'll do better. Just... just don't give up on me. Please."

The lovesick girl inside of me grasps his words, hanging on for dear life.

ALINA

EIGHTEEN YEARS OLD



My toddler group's second recital is this weekend. When it comes to two and three-year-olds, "choreograph" is a loose term. That doesn't stop everyone I love from showing up like my routine's on Broadway. I appreciate their support. I never realized how much I would fall in love with teaching dance. Now I can't imagine doing anything else with my life.

There's a studio about twenty minutes away in downtown Chattanooga that's offered me an internship. At first, I wasn't sure if I would accept because it would mean skipping college. But Jax encouraged me, saying college will always be waiting. He may be biased though, considering he chose to stay in Sugarlake as a mechanic, instead of furthering his education. His late daddy always dreamed of having his car restorations in the movies, and Jax is set on seeing that dream through.

I haven't told Chase about the internship yet, but I'm planning to this weekend. He was hoping I would apply to ETU, but I know if I don't take advantage of this opportunity, I'll regret it.

"Hey, sweetheart." Jax grins, shutting the sliding door to my backyard.

"Hiya, Teeth." I smile.

He rolls his eyes. "Stop calling me that. These babies are one-hundred percent au naturale." He runs his tongue over his pearly whites. "You ready for the big night?"

"I'm more than ready. Nervous, but my girls are gonna steal the show, you just wait and see."

He clicks his tongue. “I don’t know. I heard the eight-year-olds have some killer moves this time. I’m not sure your toddlers can keep up.”

I smack his chest. “You shut your mouth with that kind of talk, Jackson Rhoades. I’ll have you know my kids can out-dance those eight-year-olds all day long.”

“Oh yeah? And why’s that?”

“Because they have me, of course.”

“Now *that* I believe.”

My cheeks flush at the compliment, the air shifting as he loses his grin.

He clears his throat. “Anyway, I just stopped by to see if you needed help with anything.”

I clap my hands together. “Yes! I’m in charge of refreshments for the recital, but I haven’t had time to pick anything up. I’d love you forever if you’d do it for me.”

“Is that a promise?”

“Would that make you say yes?”

His green eyes sparkle, and a lightness fills me. Things are so easy with him. I’m sad we weren’t friends sooner.

He ties his hair into a bun and throws his hands up. “Okay, I’ll do it. Cookies for the kids and veggie trays for the old people. I’ll be back soon.” He winks, spinning his key ring around his finger as he walks out the door.

My phone rings a while later, Chase’s name flashing. My stomach flutters with excitement knowing that in a few short hours I’ll see him. He promised he’d make it home this time.

“Hi, Chase.”

“Hey. How you feeling today, Goldi?”

“Excited. Nervous. Mostly, I just can’t wait to see you, though.” I lean against the kitchen counter.

“I can’t wait to see you, either. Think I can steal you away after the show? I want to get us a hotel. I thought we could

have some long overdue alone time. Would you like that?” His voice quiets, whispering low and raspy in my ear. “I need to fucking be inside you, baby. I can’t wait anymore.”

Arousal shoots through me.

My grip on the phone tightens as I squeeze my thighs, trying to ease the ache. “Yes,” I say on an exhale. I don’t know how I’ll explain it to Mama and Daddy, but I’ll think of something later.

“Thank fucking God... hey, hang on a second.”

He’s talking, his voice muffled like he’s covered the phone with his hand. A girl’s voice is in the background. Jealousy washes over me.

“I’m back. I’m gonna get off here though, run some errands and take a nap before I leave. Recital’s at five, right? I’ll be at your place by three-thirty. Damn, I can’t wait to see you.”

“Is Lindsay there?” The words are out before I can stop them.

“Uhh... yeah. She just showed up.”

“Oh.” All the anticipation I was feeling disappears. I can’t stand her and he knows it. But still, he keeps her in his life.

He chooses her when he should be choosing me.

Jax bursts through the door, hands filled with platters of cookies. “Just call me Sugar Daddy, sweetheart, because I’ve got all the sugar you need.” His eyebrows wag, and I snort out a giggle.

“Is that Jax?” Chase’s voice cuts through the line.

“Yeah, of course it is. He just got back with the refreshments for tonight.”

“How nice that you have him to help,” he says, dryly.

Irritation slams into me. “Yep. You have Lindsay, and I have Jax. Havin’ *friends* is the best, ain’t it?”

“That’s not fair.”

“What’s not fair is you bein’ glued to a girl that I’ve told you repeatedly makes me uncomfortable.”

“And I’ve told you there’s nothing for you to worry about.”

“You haven’t told me anything, other than she’s in a bad place and ‘needs’ you.”

“She does.”

“Well, so do I, Chase.” I rub my forehead. I’m so tired of having this same conversation. “Listen, I don’t wanna fight. I’ll just see you when you get here. I’m really lookin’ forward to our night together.”

“I don’t want to fight either, baby. All I want is to show you all the ways I can love you. And I do, you know? I fucking love you.”

I try to trust in what he says, but it’s no consolation. His words are just that. Words.

I push away my irritation and finish getting ready. Chase is supposed to meet me at my house so we can ride to the rec hall together. But when three-thirty comes and goes with no Chase in sight, I give up and hitch a ride with Jax.

I’m backstage with the director and my girls, trying to pump them up. It’s fifteen minutes until showtime, and still no word from Chase. I peek around the curtains and see Jax in the front row. I give him a small wave before scanning the empty seats around him. Still nothing. The disappointment settles into my bones. I don’t see my folks either, which is strange. I slip my phone out of my pocket one more time, checking for a call, a text, *something*. It rings in my hand.

Unknown.

I excuse myself from backstage quickly, hoping it’s Chase.

“Hello?”

“Hi. Is this Alina Carson?”

“Yes. Who’s this?”

“Ms. Carson, my name is Judy Davis. I’m a nurse at CHI Memorial Hospital in Chattanooga.”

A foreboding tingle creeps up my spine, making me stand up straight. “Okay... how can I help you?”

“A Craig and Gail Carson were brought to us about an hour ago after being involved in a collision.”

“What?” I suck in a breath. “Those are my folks. Are they okay?”

“Mr. Carson escaped with minor injuries. Mrs. Carson suffered severe cranial trauma and was airlifted to our facility. I’m sorry to be blunt, but the sooner you can get here, the better.”

My vision goes blurry. The phone drops from my hand and clatters to the floor as I try to steady myself on the wall.

I can't breathe.

“Alina?” I hear my name, but it’s distant, muddled.

Why can't I breathe?

Jax’s face appears in front of me. “Sweetheart? What’s the matter? Your director sent me to find you. They’re ready to start.”

I look up at him. I’m trying to find the words, but I can’t talk because *I. Can't. Breathe.*

My hands claw at my blouse, the silky fabric suddenly choking me. If I can just get it off maybe it will relieve the pressure pushing down on my chest.

“Whoa, Alina.” I feel hands grab mine, pulling them from my body. “Alina.” His voice is sharp and authoritative. It cuts through the fog and helps me focus. Worried forest-green eyes stare into mine.

“Mama... hospital... please,” I rasp out. It’s barely coherent, but it’s the best I can do. I collapse into Jax’s arms, tears staining his shirt.

His torso pushes against my cheek with his abrupt intake of breath. “Your mom’s in the hospital?”

I nod against him.

“Which hospital, sweetheart? I need you to tell me where to take you.”

I rack my brain, trying to remember what the lady on the phone said. “CHI Medical.”

We make it to the car. Jax holds my hand while he shifts gears. It helps, but what I really need, *who* I really need, is Chase. I try to call him. Over and over and over.

Please, Chase. Pick up. Can't you feel me breakin'?

No answer. Eventually, it goes straight to voicemail.

I can't breathe.

The ride to the hospital is a blur, but we make it. Daddy's pacing in the waiting room with a white bandage on his arm and tears on his face. I rush into his arms and the pressure in my chest starts to ease.

“Daddy, what happened?” I cry. “Are you okay? Where's Mama? Have you talked to Eli?”

He brushes my hair with his hand, shushing me. His voice cracks as he tells me everything will be alright. He says God has a plan, and all we have to do is pray.

So that's what we do.

We sit in small plastic chairs and we pray.

A couple hours later and my panic has calmed. Jax's solid grip on my hand and Daddy being alive and well has helped me fight through the shock. But I'm scared. Mama is still in surgery, and nobody has told us anything.

Jax curses beside me.

“What's wrong?”

He's on his phone, but as soon as I ask, he puts it away. “Nothing for you to worry about, sweetheart.”

His smile irritates me. “Jax, don't treat me with kid gloves. I could use the distraction. Tell me what you were lookin' at.”

I'm being nosy and I know it, but I don't care. Anything to escape this purgatory.

"I was just scrolling Facebook. Dumb stuff to pass the time." He won't meet my eyes. The tingling at the base of my spine has me apprehensive. *What else could make this day any worse?*

"Jax. Please." I put my hand out. "Just let me see."

He purses his lips as he stares at me. Finally, he heaves a sigh and hands his phone over, his screen lit up.

When I see the picture of a smiling Lindsay next to a sleeping Chase, wearing his shirt and in his bed, my heart shatters into pieces.

When Mama dies two hours later, those pieces turn to dust.

CHASE

TWENTY YEARS OLD



An arm on my chest is what wakes me. I run my hands down my face, groaning. I reach over to pull Goldi further into me, but instead of soft curves, I grasp sharp angles.

The fuck?

I look down and see bleached blonde hair, not the honey-blonde I was expecting. *Lindsay? What the hell?* Throwing her arm off me, I scoot back.

She stirs, blinking groggily. “Chase?”

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I see my phone on the desk, and I jump out of bed to grab it.

My forehead wrinkles as I realize it’s turned off.

I look around, trying to get my bearings. The sun is streaming through my blinds, which means I’m officially fucked because my window faces east. That means it’s morning. I slept through Goldi’s recital.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

“Chase, what’s wrong?” Lindsay pushes back the covers, sitting up in my bed, stretching her arms above her head. Shock filters through me as I notice she’s wearing nothing but my shirt.

Mistaking my wide eyes for something it isn’t, she smirks. “Looks good on me, doesn’t it?” She sweeps her hands down her body.

“What the fuck, Lindsay?”

My phone vibrates in my hand as it powers on, diverting my attention.

25 Missed Calls. 10 New Voicemails. 7 Text Messages.

My stomach knots.

Lindsay stands, coming close to peer over my shoulder. “Your phone wouldn’t stop ringing yesterday afternoon, so I turned it off. Thought you could use the rest instead. I know how tired you’ve been from school and work.” She rubs my arm.

I remember her leaving yesterday afternoon. Obviously, once I fell asleep, she decided to show back up. I am seriously regretting leaving my front door unlocked.

I shrug her off, my teeth grinding. “That’s just great, Lindsay. I had an alarm set. You knew I was supposed to be going home. Do you have any idea how hard you’ve made things for me?”

She scoffs. “Please, Alina will forgive you. She always does. You obviously needed sleep.”

Her words are a punch to the gut. Self-loathing beats my insides with the fact that even she realizes how shitty I’ve been to Goldi. “Care to explain why you’re even fucking here? Or why you took it upon yourself to put on my clothes and sleep in my bed?”

“I was tired, too.” She lifts her shoulders. “I didn’t have anything to wear that was comfortable. I didn’t think you would mind.”

“Of course I fucking mind,” I snap, pinching the bridge of my nose. “I don’t have time to deal with you right now. Make yourself useful and go start some coffee.”

I look down at my phone, pulling up Goldi’s name and pressing call. I just need to explain. She’ll understand.

She has to understand.

The phone rings, but her voicemail picks up. I try Jax next. No answer.

Shit.

I open up my text messages.

Goldi: I'm sorry about earlier, It's just hard with you being gone.

Jax: Hey, bro. Excited for you to be back! Whoop! Let's chill tomorrow after you get your Alina time.

Goldi: Are you almost here? We need to leave soon for the rec hall.

Goldi: Chase. Answer your phone!

Goldi: I'm having Jax take me. If I wait any longer, I'll be late.

Jax: Dude. Where the fuck are you?

Goldi: I'm done.

This is bad. This is really fucking bad.

I go to my call log next. Most of them are from Goldi. My eyebrows furrow as I realize there's a string of them during the time of the recital. I keep scrolling.

Jax.

Jax.

Jax.

Becca.

I stop short, my thumb hovering over the screen. *Why the fuck did Becca call?*

I go to my voicemail and skip to the one from her, pressing play.

“You know, I've met a lot of assholes in my life, but you really take the cake. You better stay gone, Chase Adams. Do you hear me? I don't want to *ever* see your face around here again.”

Becca's always been a bitch, but her reaction to a missed recital is alarming. I move on to the most recent message from Jax.

"I tried, Chase. I really tried to give you the benefit of the doubt. I watched as you made fucked-up choice after fucked-up choice, and I always stood back. But this... you better call me back, bro."

I'm definitely missing something.

I try Alina again as I pull on the first pair of jeans I find, and a black tee. She doesn't answer, so I pull up Facebook, desperate to find some clue as to why everyone's freaking the fuck out. Lindsay sashays back into my room, two mugs of coffee in her hands. I don't look up. My eyes are too busy staring at the photo on my timeline. My stomach bottoms out so fast it makes me dizzy. I collapse onto the bed.

"Here's your coffee, Chase." Lindsay sets the mug on the nightstand. I grab her wrist, holding her in place.

She tries to wrench it from my grasp, but I tighten my grip. "Lindsay, what have you done?"

She peeks at my phone screen, a smirk taking over her face. "We look good in your bed, don't we? Honestly, Chase, I was tired of waiting for you to man up and make a move. I figured a little push in the right direction was needed. Get that lapdog of a girlfriend out of the way so you wouldn't have to pretend anymore."

My mouth parts in shock. "You posted this so Goldi would see?"

She smirks. "A girl can hope."

"Are you out of your goddamn mind?"

"Look, It's *tiring* having to play the damsel in distress all the time to get your attention, Chase. What happened to you, anyway? You have a serious hero complex."

Bile rises up my throat. Has she been manipulating me this entire time? My phone vibrates in my hand.

Jax.

I point my phone at Lindsay. “Get the fuck out of my sight.”

Her face turns down, lips puffing out like she expects me to take back my words. I watch as she grabs her things and leaves before I answer the call. “Jax. Thank fucking God, dude. Listen, I can explain.”

The line stays silent. I pull the phone away from my ear, looking down to make sure it’s connected. “Jax? You there?”

“I’m here.” His voice is flat.

“Look, I know this seems bad, man. Do you know why Goldi isn’t answering her phone? Are you with her?” Usually, the resentment would rear its ugly head when I think of them together. But right now, I welcome the thought.

“Yeah. I’m with her. No, you can’t talk to her.”

“Jax, come on, man. This is all just a big misunderstanding.”

He laughs, the sound hollow. “A *misunderstanding*? Seems to be a lot of that with you, lately.”

My temper flares. “Put Goldi on the fucking phone, Jax. I need to talk to her.”

“You are one selfish son of a bitch. You know that? Not everything is about *you*.”

My fingers rip at my hair in frustration as I pace a hole through my floor. “I never said it was.”

“You didn’t have to. Alina’s mom was dying in the hospital last night, and instead of being here with the girl you claim to love, you were with that snake Lindsay. Again.”

I stop pacing. My heart bangs violently against my ribs, like it knows if it stays with me it’s bound to break. I roll his words around in my head. “What did you just say?”

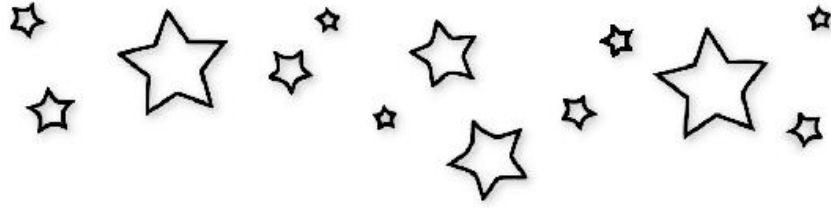
He exhales heavily. “Look. Alina needed you last night, but she doesn’t need you now. Don’t come back here. I won’t let you get near her. I’m done letting you rip her to pieces.” He hangs up.

The icy tendrils of dread creep up my back and wrap around my chest, squeezing the air from my lungs.

Jax is right. I'm a selfish son of a bitch.

ALINA

EIGHTEEN YEARS OLD



I've decided I hate sound. Sound reminds me the world is somehow still spinning. People are still living. Time is still moving. Like nothing has changed. Like Heaven didn't just steal a piece of my soul.

I hate sound.

So today, I pick silence.

Lying in the middle of Mama's bed, the pillow that still smells of her catching my tears—I choose to be still. At least here, I can freeze time. Just for a little bit.

I pretend I don't hear when the door creaks open, the tap of shoes walking across the wood floor. I close my eyes when Jax's warm body sinks down behind me, cradling me in his arms. He's silent. He knows what it's like to hate the noise.

It's impossible to explain this feeling. No words to express the pain of losing the one person who loved you most in the world. No way to describe the devastation in knowing no one will ever love you that way again.

If you've never lost a parent, you won't understand. But Jax does. Because Jax *has*. I stay strong in the face of everyone else, but for him, I can break. And I do. Over and over, I break.

My tongue darts out to moisten my lips and catches on the rough, chapped edges. I swallow down tears, the burn from my scratchy throat making me flinch. A physical reminder that I can, in fact, still feel.

“Alina,” Jax whispers. “We have to go soon, do you need help getting ready?”

I shake my head, but I don’t move from my spot. I don’t open my eyes. Once I do, time will start again. I’ll have to wear my black dress and wave my white flag of surrender. Pretend to give a damn when people cry crocodile tears over Mama’s casket. If I open my eyes, I’ll have to watch them bury Mama six feet underground. I’ll have to hear the strongest man I know sob because half of him is gone forever. I’ll have to taste the bitterness knowing it took Mama’s death to bring my brother Eli back to town.

So, I think I’ll just keep them closed.



THE SERVICE IS BEAUTIFUL. Yellow Chrysanthemums and pink tulips line the pews. White stargazer lilies surround her casket. Bouquets and baskets sit on the floor in front of her picture. Altogether, it’s a moving image.

I’m numb.

While Becca’s daddy preaches about the restoration of innocence for the departed and God’s love, I sit in the front row with my head down. My hands wring my handkerchief so tight my knuckles turn white. Jax is on one side, his hand on my knee. Becca is on the other with her palm on my back. Pillars of support holding me up while my family crumbles beneath my feet. I feel their touch.

Still, I’m numb.

The service ends, and I stand between Daddy and Eli, lost in thoughts of who the masochist was that thought up the idea of a receiving line. My sweaty palms grasp a hundred different hands as they whisper their condolences. I keep my head bowed as I mumble my thanks. But then a different hand grasps mine, a flicker of static running through my fingertips. I don’t look up right away. But eventually, I do.

Chase's face is relieved. Like being in front of me is all he needed to feel whole again. Lucky for him—how that's still a possibility. His hair is a knotted mess, the strands fighting over which direction to lay. Yet, he's nearly perfect, of course. He always is. But his beauty doesn't move me.

“Goldi.”

I blink.

“Goldi, I am so...” His voice cracks with emotion, lower lip trembling as he wipes his hand over his mouth. “Your mom. I can't even—”

“So, don't.” The words come across as flat as they feel rolling off my tongue.

He swallows harshly. His eyes bounce to Eli, then Daddy, until they land back on me. He takes a deep breath, his free hand sliding through his dark, silky hair. “Maybe I shouldn't have come. But, fuck... I just want you to know I'm here. Take all the time you need, but baby, I'll be here.”

Laughter bubbles up inside of me, and as inappropriate as it is to laugh in the middle of a receiving line, I can't stop it from spilling out. It's brash. The sound echoes off the walls, reverberating, mocking me with its tone.

“I don't really give a *fuck* where you'll be, Chase.”

His eyes grow wide at my curse.

I drop his hand. “Are we done here?”

Daddy doesn't even look at us, too busy taking sips from his flask of whiskey. Not that I blame him.

Chase stands still as I walk away. His hand rubbing his chest and his eyes glassy. I should probably feel somethin' after leavin' him there that way. But I don't.

I feel nothing.

I drive aimlessly around town for what feels like hours. Until the sun disappears and darkness blankets the ground. Eventually, I find my way home. Tonight is the first night I'm sleeping at my own house. Ten days of avoidance, not wanting

to surround myself with the memories, choosing to hide in Jax's shadow instead.

I go straight to my room and lay in bed, staring up at the glow 'n stick stars on my ceiling. They make me think of Chase. Anger licks at my insides making me gasp. I've found comfort in the numbness. The rush of fiery emotion is a jolt to my system.

How dare he come to Mama's funeral.

I grab on to the rage, marveling at how it grows inside me. Jumping out of bed, I pull my desk chair to the middle of the room. My shin hits the leg as I clumsily climb to stand on the seat. I reach up and rip a star off the ceiling, watching as it falls to the floor.

I repeat the action. Fingernails tearing as I dig deep into the plaster. Again and again.

Rip. Watch. Repeat.

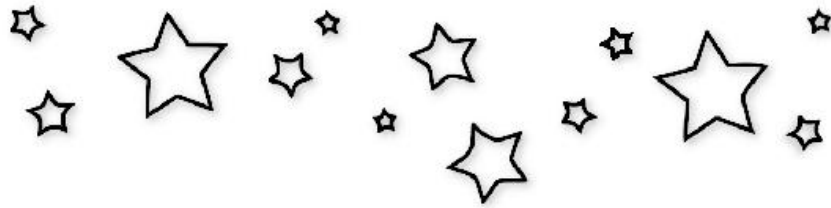
Breathing heavily from exertion, I collapse onto the ground. A graveyard of stars surrounds me.

I smile.

Heartbreak is easier to hide in the dark.

CHASE

TWENTY-TWO YEARS OLD



I have this nasty habit I'm trying to break. I dissect every part of my past until the pieces are so skewed, I can't put them back together. Countless hours are spent trying to fit square pegs into round holes—deciding who I'm going to hold liable for my failings. I'm the fucking poster boy for the blame game.

When I lost my mom, I raged.

When I lost Lily, I grieved.

When I lost Goldi, I did both of those things.

I went to her mom's funeral with the stupid idea she would need me. Not realizing I had taught her how to *not* need me long before then. I held her limp hand and stared into her vacant eyes, searching for the love she had always given. The love I didn't deserve. How fucking selfish of me. Now, I realize the love I offered in return was twisted and warped, bathed in my insecurities and modeled after the dysfunction I was born into.

I didn't go to her again. I stayed that night at Sam and Anna's, knowing I wouldn't return, and drove back to Nashville in the morning. Desolate and defeated, hating myself for how heartbroken I felt. I knew deep down I had no right.

I'm a taker. A controller. These are flaws that exist within me. They always will.

But I'm ready to heal.

So here I am lying on a fucking couch, staring at a popcorn ceiling, wishing like hell I hadn't made the decision to see a shrink.

"Chase. Why don't you tell me a little bit about why you've decided to come here today."

He's an older man, late fifties with dark wavy hair graying at the temples. Round glasses sit on his crooked nose. His ankle is highlighted by orange and blue argyle socks and is crossed over the opposite knee.

I steeple my hands on top of my stomach. "Well, Doc. I'm fucked-up. I chase away all the good things in my life."

"Hmm... do you feel like you hold on to the bad?"

"I *am* the bad."

The room grows quiet when I don't continue. There's a small gold clock sitting on his desk, ticking away. It reminds me that I'm paying for these minutes. Apparently, paying to sit in silence. *People actually need degrees for this shit?*

I shift uncomfortably on his couch, the leather groaning underneath my weight. I expected him to lead me with life lessons or, fuck, I don't know, maybe pass out a multiple-choice questionnaire? I'm low-key nervous, and I don't have any clue how this works.

I side-eye him. He has a legal pad in his lap, ready to take notes on all the ways I'm fucked-up. *He's gonna need more paper.*

Finally, he speaks again. "What is it that makes you feel that way?"

I turn my head toward him and quirk an eyebrow. "You want me to give like... examples?"

"That's up to you."

I groan, grabbing the back of my neck and pulling my hair. "Fuck, we'll be here for-fucking-ever."

He chuckles. "Why don't you start at the beginning, then. Your first memory of feeling like you were 'the bad.'"

Huh.

I close my eyes as I search through memories until I get to the earliest hurt. I was a little kid, around four at the time. Desperate for my mom's attention. I open my mouth to speak, but nothing comes out. Anxiety crawls up my throat instead of the words.

This therapy thing is harder than I thought.

It doesn't get any easier as I leave my session and stop at the store. I'm standing in an aisle filled with pads and loose-leaf paper, feeling like a dumbass as I stare at the different options. Doc's "homework" was to get a notebook and start journaling.

Fucking journaling.

I scoffed at the idea. I told him I was a twenty-two-year-old man, not a thirteen-year-old girl. But he assured me I would be surprised. Said it would help me work through things I couldn't voice. I'm not convinced. But here I am anyway, picking out a damn diary.

I take my time perusing, finding one that really speaks to me. If I'm going to slice open my insides and bleed out on the pages, I might as well do it in a book that I don't hate looking at.



EVERY FEW WEEKS, Sam and Anna drive up. While it's mainly to see me, we usually just grab dinner before they venture out to explore the city. Tonight though, it's only Sam.

"How have things been at Jackson & Co.?" He shakes the rocks glass in his hand, the ice clinking against the sides as the liquid sloshes.

Here we go.

I knew his excuse of "father-son bonding" was really something else. He's dying to have me come back home and help him run Sugarlake Construction. *No chance in hell.*

“Things are great. Busy.”

I’ve been with Jackson & Co. Construction since freshman year. When I graduated with a degree in Architectural Engineering, specializing in Construction Management, Sam thought I’d resign from my position and run back home. Just like we’d always planned. But the map of my life changed course the second I lost Goldi.

He nods his head. “Good, good. Listen, I’ve been thinking. I know you’re apprehensive about coming home.”

I chuckle, sipping from my IPA. *Apprehensive* isn’t the word I’d use.

“But I really think it could be good for you. I’m planning to do a major overhaul, expand into neighboring towns. I need you home for that, Chase. Let’s build a legacy. Together.”

Fuck. He really knows how to make it hard on a guy.

I set down my beer and sit forward, my elbows resting on the table. “Look, the last thing I want is to disappoint you. And if I thought Sugarlake was the place for me, please believe I’d be there in a second. But it’s not. I’ve made a life here.”

He leans back in his chair, sighing. “Are you happy, son?”

“I’m working on it.”

I watch the hope fade from his eyes, the familiar sting of being a let-down prodding at my back. I owe Sam for everything good in my life. I wish I could be the son he wants me to be. But I can’t.

There’s nothing left for me in Sugarlake. Not anymore.



JOURNAL ENTRY #1

This is fucking stupid.

ALINA

TWENTY-ONE YEARS OLD



If you had asked me when I was eleven where I'd be at twenty-one, I'd tell you dancing on Broadway, and still the apple of my daddy's eye. If you had asked me when I was sixteen, I'd say a college graduate, teaching dance in my spare time, with Chase at my side. At eighteen, I'd have been positive I'd be an instructor at the premiere dance studio in Chattanooga. Planning the wedding of my dreams to the boy who's always owned my soul.

But life likes to throw curveballs. The changeup so extreme it spins you around and knocks you off home plate.

I reminisce on the notions of that young, naive, *stupid* girl. Wondering what she'd think of the way her life turned out. I'm still living at home, taking care of the only parent I have left. One who can't stand the sight of me because I'm the spitting image of my mama.

My weeks are filled with teaching dance at the rec hall and waitressing down at Patty's Diner on Main Street to make ends meet. Someone has to make sure the lights stay on around here. If it were up to Daddy, we'd be destitute by now.

There are moments. Glimpses of the strong man who raised me. The man who told me I could do anything. *Be* anything. But those moments are stretched few and far between. Lost in a sea of amber liquid and glass bottles.

It has a name, this affliction of his. But I never speak it out loud. If I do, I'll have to face the truth that another person in my life has failed to live up to my expectations. One more

time I've been left on the outside looking in. They're all too lost in their personal demons to care about mine.

Maybe I'm the problem.

There's a new normal in the Carson family home. The "normal" of starting the day with forced optimism. *Today will be the day things turn around.* But more often than not, it ends with a phone call from Johnny, down at The Watering Hole in Sweetwater, telling me Daddy is "causing a ruckus, again."

This morning—like every morning—Daddy looks haggard and worn. His skin is sallow. Whiskey and heartbreak oozing from his pores. I plate his breakfast of scrambled eggs and bacon, placing it in front of him at the kitchen table. I pick up my steaming mug and take a sip, the aroma of the coffee waking up my senses.

"Daddy, when are you gonna stop this?"

He twirls his fork slowly, never looking up from his plate. Never responding. I'm used to his silence.

The first year after losing Mama was a blur.

Eli was drafted to play basketball in New York, shortly after Mama's funeral. His new superstar life got too big for his small-town family. But then, he tore his ACL, ending his career before it ever really began. The selfish part of me was hoping he would come back home. But three years later, Sugarlake hasn't seen hide nor hair of Elliot Carson. Just a monthly phone call to "check-in."

Last time we talked, he was flying down to Florida. Some big interview for Assistant Coach at Florida Coast University. He was excited, talking about the possibility of being one of the youngest coaches in the division. I can't find it in me to care and haven't checked in since to see if he got the job.

In a curious twist of fate, Becca attends FCU. She left yesterday for her senior year. I can't imagine she spends much time in the athletic department, so I haven't bothered to tell her about the possibility of Eli being there, too. Still, it makes me smile to think of her giving him a strong tongue lashing and a kick in the butt.

Jax is still around. He's steady working on his daddy's dream and doing a heck of a job. He makes enough money restoring classic cars that he up and quit the shop. I'm not complaining, I like all the free time he has now to keep me company. But it doesn't ebb the loneliness that slithers around the deepest parts of my soul.

Right now, we're sitting at Mac's Dive, like we do every week on my only night off.

"You know, I hear that's a sign of sexual frustration." Jax points his beer bottle at the shredded, soggy pieces I've torn apart on the table.

They're all that's left from the label of my bottle. I hadn't even realized I was doing it. I give him a half-smile, too worn out from the late night of wrangling Daddy back home to fake the energy for more. I haven't told Jax about how bad Daddy's getting. He'd rush in and take over, just to keep the burden from landing solely on my shoulders. He's a dang saint. The best friend I've ever had. But I need to carry the weight of this one alone.

"You okay, sweetheart? You've been quiet all night."

I squint my eyes. "You just think it's quiet 'cause we don't have Becca's loud mouth runnin' nonstop."

He throws his head back and laughs. I swear half the women turn toward the sound, breasts heaving, hoping to be his conquest of the night.

Jax is what you would call a player. It's truly fascinating to watch. He only has to smile their way, and you can hear the panties fall to the floor. Between him and Becca, I feel like a dang nun in a monastery.

I've thought about it, of course—giving in to the chemistry between us. It would be so easy. Things always are with Jax. But the last thing I want to do is ruin our friendship. He's the only one on Earth who has seen the darkest, ugliest moments of my life and held them as if they were precious. I can't lose that. So at the end of our night, when he has a girl on his arm and asks if it's okay that he leaves, I nod my head and

encourage him to walk out the door. Even though I can see in his eyes he's dying for me to say no.



I'VE ALWAYS BEEN FREAKED out by walking on the grass at cemeteries. Something about stepping over the bones of the deceased just seems downright disrespectful. But since there's no other way to get to Mama's grave, I grit my teeth and bear it.

I visit her once a week, and I always bring fresh tulips. They were her favorite, and I like to think she appreciates her remains being surrounded by things she enjoyed.

I crouch down, laying the bouquet in front of the marble slab. Reaching out, I trace her name, mouthing the words as my finger caresses the letters.

Gail Elizabeth Carson

Your life was a blessing, Your memory a treasure. You are loved beyond words, Missed without measure.

I lie down on the grass, staring up at the sky and pretend she's next to me. If I strain my ears, I can almost hear her whispering secrets of how to navigate this thing called life. She was always good at that.

"Hi, Mama," I breathe.

The breeze caresses my face and I smile.

"I miss you... so much. I'd give anything to have you here. You know, there's still this hole inside me from the piece you took when you left. I don't think there's anything on this Earth that can fill it back up again."

A knot forms in my throat and I close my eyes, tears seeping out of the corners. No matter how much time passes, the pain never fades. You just learn how to live with it inside you. Careful not to pick the scab.

"I don't know if you've got any pull up there, but if you do... could you try and get Eli to come home every once in a

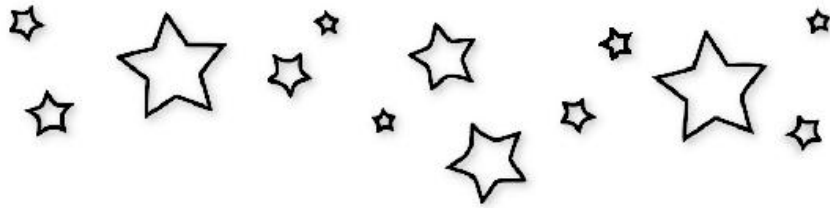
while? We could really use him 'round here. I'm sure you know Daddy isn't doin' so well since you've been gone." I shake my head, chuckling. "I bet you're sick of hearin' me say the same things week after week. I'm just hopin' one of these times you'll give me a solution."

I pause, listening to the silence. Waiting with bated breath for a miracle.

But just like every other time I visit, a miracle never comes.

CHASE

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OLD



“I have a date tonight.”

Doc hums in his chair. It used to annoy me, but now the rumble is comforting. I don't need long responses, and he doesn't push me to verbalize things that are easier to write down. Yeah, he was right about the journaling. Fuck me, you know?

“Are you nervous?” he asks.

“I feel like I should be, right? I'm twenty-five and I've never gone on an actual date.” The guilt knocks, trying to work its way inside as I realize I never even took Goldi on a fucking date.

I shake off the feeling. “I'm not nervous. I don't really feel anything, to be honest. Her name's Marissa, by the way. Not that you asked, Doc. You never do. But your method seems to work, so what do I know? You're the professional here, not me.” I'm rambling, every word out of my mouth costing another twenty cents, but I can't stop.

“I mean, do *you* think I should be nervous?” I'm sitting on the couch, elbows resting on my knees. I gave up the whole lying down thing. Made me feel a little too *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

“I think it's normal to feel nervous. Or excited. But all of your feelings are valid, Chase. No matter what they are.”

I click my tongue, analyzing him. “See, Doc, that's why I pay you the big bucks. You always know the right things to

say.”

I’ve been coming to Doc for three years now, and some days, I feel like he’s my best friend. *How fucking pathetic is that?*

There’s a group of guys from work I grab beers with, but it’s all surface level. Especially once I was promoted to Construction Engineering Project Manager. The pay is nice, but I found out quickly people treat you differently when you’re above them in management. That’s how I met Marissa, though. She’s a designer for one of our industrial complexes.

I’ve picked up a lot of girls in the past five years, always for a quick thrill and a release of tension. A nice, warm hole for my cock to disappear in for a while. But I’ve never given them the time of day beyond that. Not until Marissa. I’m not sure what it was that made me ask her out. Maybe it was the conversation. She’s the first woman to hold my interest long enough to look into her head instead of staring at her tits. Or, maybe it’s the fact that with her jet-black hair, big brown eyes and legs for days, she’s the exact opposite of the girl my heart still beats for—no matter how many times I try to change its cadence.



JOURNAL ENTRY # 156

I fucked a woman tonight. It felt good. I mean, obviously. It was fucking sex. And this ~~girl~~-fuck, woman. She sucked my cock like a Hoover.

I really thought this one would be different, you know? We had things in common. Liked the same movies and shit like that. And I swear, I tried so hard to be invested. But every time she laughed, I compared it to the sound of Goldi’s. Every time she touched me, I waited for the sizzle to burn through my veins, but was left feeling cold. And when I came inside her, I had to close my eyes and imagine it was Goldi’s tight pussy. FUUUUCK. It’s like I can’t even function normally for a damn day. Maybe I’m destined to hate myself

forever because my brain couldn't stop being a little bitch for two seconds and ended up losing the other half of my soul.

Jesus, I hope nobody ever finds this notebook.

Doc thinks my problem is I was never shown healthy love during my "formative years." Whatever the fuck that means. But Doc is usually right.

I think there's only one time ever where my mom even said the words. I wanted to tell him about it. So he would know that my mom DID love me, at least once. But like usual, my throat closed up and my chest started to cave in, so the words stayed buried.

So here goes, notebook. I'm gonna tell you.

I can't remember how old I was, I think maybe four or five. Lily was still in diapers, I know that much. It was a good day, though. My birthday. My mom was in a happy mood, which was fucking rare. I didn't know about drugs back then, only that she needed medicine and got sick a lot when she didn't have it. But that day she was glowing. I remember her laugh the most. It lit me up inside and made me want to tell the whole world she had made that noise just for me.

She woke me up that morning and said we were gonna go out for ice cream. "A birthday treat for a birthday boy." We didn't have money, so luxuries like birthday presents weren't a thing. I was excited, naturally. I had never had a birthday treat before.

I picked vanilla and she let me load it up with all the toppings I wanted. It was the happiest I'd ever been. Funny how something so small can have such a huge impact.

We sat at the tiny metal table in the corner of the shop, the stools uneven and wobbly. It was there she told me how much she loved me. Made me promise to always look after Lily. "You're a good brother. I can rest easy knowing Lily will always have you to take care of her." Her words filled me up like a balloon, and I swear to god I was floating all the way home. My whole life I tried everything to get her

love, and finally, I had it. I never wanted to lose it again. Never wanted to do anything to make her love me any less.

I really thought she was better. She hadn't been sick all day. Hope filled me that things were going to be different.

We got home and she put Lily down for a nap. Said I should take one too, that she was gonna run to the corner store since we didn't have any food for dinner.

Jesus. I've never thought until this moment how irresponsible she was leaving a fucking child and a toddler alone in the apartment.

But back then, it was a normal way of life.

I woke up to the sound of Lily crying. It wasn't an unusual alarm clock for me. I got up with her a lot, especially in the night when my mom was locked in her room or busy making sure every speck of dust was gone from our apartment. She didn't like for us to bother her when she got in one of those moods, so I'd always rush in to keep Lily quiet.

Tonight though, it was still early. Before dinner, for sure. My stomach was growling, the ice cream and remnants of my mom's words the only things sloshing around in my belly.

I went into the kitchen, knowing Lily probably wanted milk and I was relieved because Mom had already gone to the store.

But when I got to the fridge, it was empty. All I could find was a sleeve of opened crackers in the cabinet.

Mom was awake. I could hear her pacing the living room, ignoring Lily's cries. My stomach sank as I watched her, peeking around the corner from the kitchen. She was in another one of her moods. "A side effect" of her medicine, she called it.

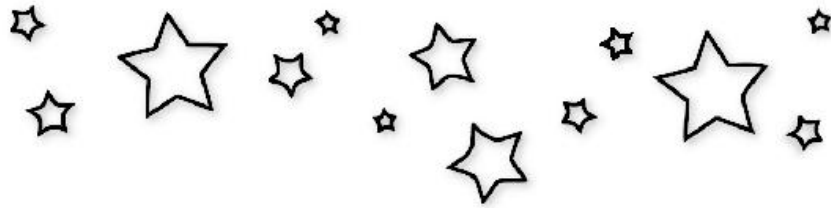
I remember thinking that she must have been feeling sick and needed the grocery money for herself. But I knew if she used it on that, we wouldn't be getting anything in our bellies that night.

I crept back down the hallway, careful not to disturb her. She had a temper, and it had been such a good day. I didn't want to ruin it.

So I filled up a cup with water and hoped it would be enough for Lily to get through the night. I stayed in her room and cuddled her up, nothing but tap water and stale crackers to keep us from going hungry. I held on to the words my mom had told me earlier. She loved me and I was a good brother. The best.

I convinced myself that it was enough.

ALINA



“Hey, I think you dropped this.”

I’m rushing out the door of the rec center, digging through my bag, trying to find my keys. I have to get to my shift at the diner before Patty yells at me *again* for running late. I can’t afford to tick her off.

“Excuse me, miss! Wait up.”

I spin around, realizing the deep southern voice is trying to get my attention. Logan Baxter stands in front of me. I’ve turned so quickly my hands have landed on his chest to balance myself. I’m basically fondling his extremely defined pecs. My face flushes as I rip them away and take a few steps back.

I know him, of course. Well, I know of him. We went to school together, and by “together,” I mean he was a senior when I was a freshman. Where Reed Stanton was the star quarterback, Logan Baxter was the shining wide receiver. A few months after our date, Reed went on to play college ball before declaring for the draft—going first overall. *No surprise there*. Logan, on the other hand, kept himself right here in good ‘ol Sugarlake.

Logan grins. A crooked smile that pulls up a pinch more on the right. He reaches out, placing the missing keys in my hand.

“You dropped these.” He trails his cerulean eyes from my plain ballet flats up to my flushed face. “Alina, right?”

“Uhh... yeah. Yep. And you’re Logan.” I stumble over my words.

“That’s the rumor.”

His laid back personality reminds me of Jax, instantly putting me at ease. “Well, thanks for my keys. I woulda been up the creek without a paddle if it weren’t for you.”

“No problem, just happy I was behind you.” He smiles, a glint lighting up his eyes.

His words send a tingle rushing through me. His short blond hair is damp, and when he runs his thick fingers through it, that tingle shoots straight to my core. I can’t help it. It’s been a *seriously* long time since I’ve had any sexual contact.

I shift on my feet. “Were you here workin’ out?”

He shakes his head. “I’m a personal trainer. This is where I meet my clients.”

“Well, shoot. I can’t believe I’ve never run into you before. I’ve been teachin’ dance here for years.”

“I know.”

“Oh, okay then.” I look off to the side, biting the inside of my cheek. I really need to get my butt in gear—Patty will be fit to be tied and ready to rake me over the coals. It’s hard though when Logan keeps looking at me like I’m his next meal. Although my heart doesn’t react to his perusal, my body sure does. So, I give him my number and make plans to meet up that night. Sometimes a girl’s just gotta get a little relief.

A few days later, I’m with Becca for our Saturday brunch. It’s nice having her back in town. After she graduated from FCU, she came home, accepting a social work position at Sugarlake High. She spent all her life complaining about feeling trapped. Swore up and down she would never step foot in Sugarlake again, but here she is. I think facing the big, bad world scares her more. Better the devil you know.

She and Jax started forcing these “friend dates” on me when they were fed up with my self-imposed solitude. Normally Jax would be meeting us, but he’s in California

working with some fancy producer who wants his cars for a new indie production. I'm so proud of him. It's what he's been working toward since I've known him. But I can't help feeling like everyone's life is growing and changing while mine moves backward.

I'm filling Becca in on my newfound "friendship" with Logan when my phone rings. Eli's name flashes. *Dang*. I forgot today was our monthly call. I chew on my bottom lip, deliberating whether to answer or to ignore him and just order another mimosa. The mimosa wins.

"Who was that?" Becca asks with a mouthful of food.

"Eli."

She fidgets. "Oh. How is your brother, anyway?"

I shrug. "He's good as far as I know. Not that he tells me much. He won't stop sendin' money even though I tell him I don't want it."

Truthfully, every time we talk it turns into an argument. He refuses to stop writing checks every month, and I refuse to let Daddy pour every dime of it down his throat.

"You should just take the money, Lee. He's clearly tryin' to help."

"He could help by comin' home," I snap.

"Have you even asked him why he won't?"

My eyes narrow, irritation tightening my throat. It almost sounds like she's defending him.

She throws her hands up. "I'm just sayin'. You don't seem to know much about how things have been for him. Maybe you should take the time to ask."

I huff out a breath, crossing my arms. "Please. He's pretty serious with some girl down there. Seems happy. What else is there to know?"

The sound of Becca's fork clattering onto her plate is jarring. She recovers fast, clearing her throat and picking it

back up. Before I can ask what's wrong, she's on to the next subject like nothing ever happened.

I spend the rest of brunch listening to her telling stories of her college friends. My heart squeezes at the thought I won't ever experience the kind of life she's lived. Even if I wanted to, I can't leave Daddy. I'm all he's got.

Daddy's what I like to call a cycler. Some days he's quiet. Ignoring me, but normal. As normal as he can be with a gallon of whiskey in his belly. Other times he gets downright mean, taking out his anger with God on everyone around him. Once the dust settles—the lacerations barely healed from his cutting words, he's back to the sullen and distant man I've come to know. Those are the days I ache for his words. I pray to hear that he doesn't mean it when he says he wishes I'd disappear like Eli. Or that it's my fault Mama's dead.

I know it's the drink talking, not him. I have to hold on to the belief my real daddy is still in there somewhere. But, *dang*, it's exhausting. He's got cement shoes dragging him under, and I'm the only one left to hold his hand, desperately trying to keep his head above water.



“HEY, MAMA.”

There's no breeze today, the Tennessee heat sweltering on my face as I lay in the summer sun.

“I met a guy. He's nice, I think you'd like him. We're not datin' or anything. I'm not interested in that. But he serves a purpose, and makes me feel a little less lonely when we're together.”

I sit up, throwing my hair into a ponytail, the wispiest sticking to the sweat on the back of my neck. “I'm sure you're turnin' over in your grave with that information. But it is what it is. I'd like to think if it were a different world, I could open up and let him in. But...” I sigh, looking down at the grass, picking a blade and twisting it between my fingers. “The truth

is, my heart's still taken by that broody boy with the scar through his eyebrow and the dimples in his cheeks.”

It's the first time I've admitted it out loud. The fact that Chase still has a hold on me after all these years. I hate him for what he's done to me. But I'd be a liar if I said my heart still didn't beat for every piece of his damaged soul.


“Anyway. I'm not sure if you have any pull up there, but if you do...”



Part Two

"Love takes off masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within."

-JAMES BALDWIN



CHASE

TWENTY-EIGHT YEARS OLD



“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.”

The voices repeat the phrase in unison, echoing off the walls in the basement of the church. I let the silence linger for a few moments, allowing the words to resonate before I speak. “Thanks, everyone for coming tonight. Whether you shared or just listened. See you next week, same time.”

I’m not a big proponent for God, but Nar-Anon’s message is more of surrendering control to whatever higher power you choose to believe in. It’s a crucial part of recovery, and while I’m not sure what that higher power is, I do believe there is one. *I have to believe there is one.*

Two years ago, I finally opened up more to Doc, letting him read my journal entries. It’s been a lot of inner work, but I’ve recognized how the drug addictions of my mom and sister were the biggest factors of shaping how I handle relationships. Of shaping how I handle life.

I had never heard of Nar/Al-Anon groups, but Doc gave me pamphlets and explained how they were support groups similar to Alcoholics Anonymous, but for family members affected by addiction.

It took me two months to get the courage to go to a meeting. It took me six months to stand up and tell my story. Once I did, there was no turning back. For the first time in my life, I didn’t feel so alone. Other people stood up and shared,

flaying themselves open to showcase the pain from the addiction that cost them their loved ones. If they could be vulnerable, I figured *fuck it*. I could try. And so began the biggest strides in my healing.

Four months ago, the founder of our local chapter moved to Georgia, leaving a spot open for someone new to lead the group. I have no fucking idea how it happened, but that someone became me.

I'm twenty-eight-years-old and it's the first time I can say I'm content with myself. It's amazing how different things become when you aren't harboring a lifetime's worth of self-hatred. I've worked through the loathing of my culpability in Lily's downward spiral. I've struggled with it. But I've accepted that she was battling her own demons, ones that had nothing to do with me. It's a regret I'll live with the rest of my life, knowing I chose to be blind to her pain.

Accept the things I cannot change.

I've tried to do the same work within myself over how I treated Goldi. Our "relationship" spanned seven years, and I can only remember *one* where she seemed genuinely happy. Guilt isn't a strong enough word for the emotion that drowns my body when I think of how badly I treated her.

So I write about her in my journals. Let Doc ask about her in my sessions. Opened up about the pain of losing her in group. People tell me first love is always susceptible to damage. It's fiery, intense, and usually burns out quickly. They say to forgive myself and move on. They don't understand. It's not my forgiveness that is needed.

I think about her all the fucking time, allowing myself to delve into soft honey-blonde hair and the comforting scent of vanilla. I torture myself, remembering how every cell in my body reached out to fuse with hers. I'm convinced my memory exaggerates how strong our connection was. But I revel in it, all the same. I'm sure she's long gone from Sugarlake by now. On to bigger and better things.

Wherever she is, I hope she's happy.



I WATCH Marissa zip her black pencil skirt and bend to slip on her high heels. She stands and turns, hands on her hips.

“See something you like?” she purrs, walking over to give me a kiss.

“Just admiring the view.” I smirk.

Marissa surprised me last night, saying she had something “special” to give me. I was a little annoyed she showed up unannounced, but who am I to turn down a gorgeous woman if she wants to give me the gift of anal. I’m a mere mortal man.

“You know, if you gave me a key, then I could have been waiting in your bed... *naked*.” She peers from under her lashes.

I sigh, leaning against my headboard, the sheets pooling around my waist. We’ve been together for the past three years, but I’ve been honest with her from the get-go about keeping things casual. I’m not interested in a serious relationship. I care about her, but it wouldn’t be fair to promise something I’m not sure I can give.

She agreed at first, but I suppose it’s natural that after a certain amount of time, she’d start to want more. Maybe if I hadn’t met my soul mate when I was thirteen, and lost her when I was twenty, I would be able to feel for Marissa the way I suspect she’s starting to feel for me. But, I don’t. And it isn’t fair to Marissa for me to pretend otherwise. I’ve tried to let her loose, urged her to meet someone who can give her everything she wants. But she sticks around, showing up and putting her pussy on a platter. So for now, I’ll give her the parts of me I can.

Marissa sits at the edge of the bed, frowning. “Look, Chase, I’m not asking for a ring. Hell, I’m not even asking for us to move in together. Which if I was, after three years, could you really blame me? All I’m asking for is a level of trust. For you to show me that you want me in your life.”

I run my fingers through my hair, blowing out a breath. *Fuck it.* “Okay. I’ll get you a key made. But, Marissa, I’ve been honest with you from the beginning. I’m trying here, I am. Slow is what I need. I enjoy your company and I care about you. Please don’t push me for more than I’m ready to give.”

A smile lights up her face. “I think you’re worth the wait.” She pecks my lips. “Your parents are in town tonight, right? What time are you meeting them?”

“Six. Do you want to come?” I ask. Sometimes she tags along, but I’m hoping she says no.

“I’d love to, but I need to lay out these designs for the McKenzie project. I’ll be locked in my cave for the rest of the night.”

I shrug. “No loss. I’m sure Anna will be disappointed you’re not there, but it’ll be the same shit, different day. Catching up on what’s happening in our lives.”

“You mean *your* life.”

“What?” I look at her, my eyebrows drawing together.

“Well, I mean... you don’t really bring up your hometown, and neither do they. But their entire life is there, Chase. You had to have realized the conversation always centers around you.”

I let her words sink in, marinating in my brain. *Is that true?* Sam and Anna both know all things Sugarlake is a sore spot for me. I run through our past few dinners, realizing they’ve never once steered the conversation toward themselves. *Fuck my life.* All these years later, I’m still acting like a selfish prick.

I tell myself while I drive to the restaurant that I’ll make an effort. Ask about them for a change.

They’re already there when I arrive, and there’s a tension in the air surrounding the three of us that I haven’t felt in years. It has me on edge.

I sip my beer, Marissa's words from earlier at the forefront of my mind, the guilt billowing inside me. "So, what's been going on with you two?"

Sam and Anna share a look. She places her hand on his arm, almost to soothe him. Maybe they're surprised I asked?

Sam rubs his forehead. "Well, there's actually been some recent developments we need to talk to you about... with my health."

My beer goes down the wrong pipe, causing me to cough and sputter.

"Shit, that came out wrong. Don't worry," he rushes out. "It's nothing life-threatening, just a repetitive strain injury with my back. It's really not a big deal—"

Anna cuts him off with a sharp look. "It *is* a big deal." She looks over to me. "He's been strongly advised by his doctor to go into retirement 'cause of this musculoskeletal disorder. If he continues to work, it'll only get worse."

Sam grimaces. "I'm fine, truly. Just a twinge in the back that makes it hard for me to be in the trenches with the guys on-site."

Well, shit. MSD is pretty common in construction. It's not unusual for workers to get strains on their ligaments and joints, causing restricted movement and severe pain, making it almost impossible for them to continue working. I've seen it before, but I never thought it would happen to Sam.

I swallow. "So, what's the plan?"

Sam's cheeks puff out with his breath. "Well, you know what they say. 'Happy wife, happy life.' Anna wants me to go into early retirement. Bring on someone else to run the company."

Anna nods, rubbing his forearm and gazing at him lovingly. "It's time to step back and enjoy the benefits of ownin' a company without the risks of workin'."

Sam smiles softly, giving her a quick kiss before leveling me with his stare. "Listen, I know we've already talked about

this a million times. And I *know* that more than likely, you're going to turn it down again." He hangs his head, staring at the table. "But before I go through the process of figuring out who I'll bring in—of figuring out who I trust enough to run everything I've spent years building, I have to try one more time." He raises his head, his eyes pinning me to my chair. "There's no one I'd want to run my company more than you."

I lean back in my chair and close my eyes, blowing out a breath. Anxiety scratches at my insides. So does the desire to bark out a "no," but I tamp it down and try to think logically. I've built a life here. I have a career I enjoy, respect from my peers, a girlfriend, a support system. In Sugarlake, there's nothing but painful memories and a group of people who made it very clear I wasn't welcome. On the other hand, wasn't I just thinking about how I would be less selfish when it comes to Sam and Anna? Everything I am, the man I've become is all thanks to the two of them. If they need me, then I owe it to them to get over my shit and show the fuck up.

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.



JOURNAL ENTRY #312

I've been able to talk to Doc about a lot over the past years, open up and vomit out the words so they don't keep rotting me from the inside out. But this one is a memory I'd prefer to forget. So hopefully, purging it onto the pages will make it feel a little less heavy in my heart.

I was eight when mom decided she wanted a new life. I remember how she ran into my room bright and early, picking me up out of bed and swinging me around while she sang in my ear. I always craved her touch, so I laid my head on her shoulder and breathed in deep. Memorizing the smell and feel of her. I never knew when the next time we'd be this close was.

*She sat me and Lily down, dreaming out loud about a magical city called Nashville. She had watched the movie *This Thing Called Love* and decided it was where we belonged. Mom was always getting fancy ideas when she was manic, but deciding to up and move us was extreme even for her.*

But I was still a young boy, eager to believe in fairy tales. So I nodded my head along as she spoke, my belly filled with butterflies over the thought of going somewhere that our lives could change. Somewhere mom would be happier.

So, we went. That fucking day. Packed up what little belongings we had, piled in our beat-up Honda, and started driving. I don't know how long the trip lasted, but every once in a while Mom would pull over at a gas station and take her "medicine" before we got back on the road. I wasn't a fucking idiot—young, but not naive to the ugly truths. But what the fuck was I supposed to do? My main priority was looking out for Lily, not trying to dig my mom out of a hole she fell in before I even existed.

I remember her mood shifting hours into the drive. She started cursing and looking at the map. She told us she got lost and needed to stop and ask directions. She found some gas station in the middle of fucking nowhere, Tennessee. Said we were going to rest awhile and told me to take Lily over to the grassy area around the side of the building. Let us stretch our legs. Told us she'd be back in a bit after she figured out how to get to where we were going.

So I did. And we waited. And fucking waited. Eventually, I took Lily and went inside the gas station to find her. But like a ghost, she was gone.

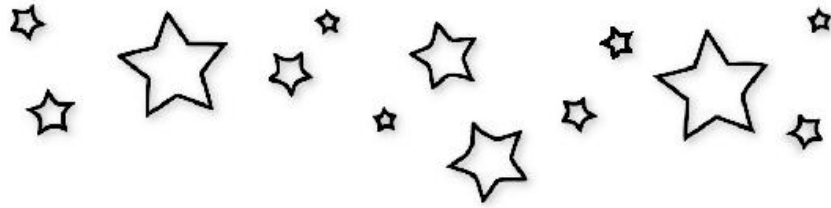
It wasn't the first time she forgot us. She'd always show back up.

I sat with Lily on the sidewalk in front of the gas station, watching random people filter in and out, the sun dipping beneath the horizon and the chill of the night seeping into my bones. With every moment, the fear grew inside me, but I hid it. I didn't want Lily to realize something was wrong.

That was a defining fucking moment of my life. The moment I realized she wasn't coming back. That's when I learned you can never trust anybody, but you can always trust them to be who they are.

And my mom was a junkie.

CHASE



“**W**hat do you mean you’re moving?”

Marissa sits across from me, her olive skin glowing in the candlelight. I took her out to dinner at her favorite restaurant, hoping that bringing her here would soften the blow. Maybe give her less inclination to cause a scene.

“I mean, my family needs me. It’s not a decision I take lightly. I know what I’ll be giving up here.”

“And what exactly is that?” She crosses her arms.

“My career for starters.”

Her lips pinch as she looks down at the table, and I feel like an asshole for springing this on her. I didn’t give Sam an answer right away, even though my knee-jerk reaction was to scream “no” from the rooftops. I owed it to him to think on it, talk to my shrink about it. Internally panic and then calm myself down a million times before finally coming to a decision.

So what if I’d have to give up my current career? It was my original plan to take over the company from Sam, anyway. I didn’t have to stop seeing Doc or running my Nar-Anon meetings. Nashville is only a two-hour drive, not unmanageable once a week. And Marissa...

I grab her hand across the table. “Listen, Sugarlake’s two hours away, not across the country. If you still want to see each other, I’m open to that. But I’ll be honest, Marissa. I won’t have a lot of time. My days are gonna be filled with

learning the ropes of Sam's company, bonding with the employees, working with them."

She nods. "I understand that. I guess I'm just a little shocked. I thought you hated your hometown, and now all of a sudden you're just picking up and leaving to go back? I don't get it."

I'm not surprised she thinks that. Talking about Sugarlake is a hard limit for me. I shake my head. "I don't *hate* it. There are just memories I'd rather leave in the past there."

"What kind of memories?"

"The painful kind." I sip my drink, needing the burn of bourbon to chase away the bitter taste of Goldi. And Jax. And Lily.

I haven't opened up to Marissa about my past. Fucking has always been the focal point of our relationship. Nothing other than scratching the itch, and abating the loneliness. We've enjoyed each other's company, and there's no reason to take it deeper. Until recently, she seemed on board with that.

She peers at me from over her wine glass. Her ruby-red lips part, giving me a glimpse of her blinding-white smile. "You're right. Two hours isn't much. Barely counts as long distance. I wish you'd ask me to go with you, but I understand your need to do this on your own."

Her statement surprises the fuck out of me. *She wishes I'd ask her to go with me?* I rack my brain trying to think of when I gave her the inclination I'd be open to that. It's hard enough to keep myself convinced to go—let alone take along the woman I've been holding at arm's length for three years.

She pushes her glossy black hair behind her shoulder. "Besides, it could be fun. I'll visit on weekends and get to know your roots."

I clear my throat, uncomfortable at the turn in our conversation. "Yeah, sure."

"Do you still have friends that live there?" She asks, cocking her head to the side.

Her question is a lead weight dropping in my stomach. “Uhh... I’m not sure. I didn’t exactly leave on good terms.” *See, Doc? This is why avoidance works so well. So I don’t have to feel this.*

“Hmm...” She takes another sip of wine. I follow suit, swallowing down more bourbon.

“Any high school sweethearts?”

My jaw clenches as my fingers tighten around my glass. My heart tries to beat out of my fucking chest at the mere thought of Goldi still being there. The idea of seeing her again has my stomach in knots and a balloon of hope expanding inside me. I’m not naive enough to assume I could get her back. I met her at the wrong time in my life and fucked it up before I could love her the way she deserved. Besides, I’m not the same person I was back then—not sure our connection would even exist with who we are now. But the urge to see her is strong.

I lift my shoulders. “Maybe, but I’m not sure she’s still around.”

Marissa straightens, tension evident in her posture. “She? So just one, then.”

Another gulp of bourbon. “Yep. Just the one.”

“How long were you two together?”

“What is this, twenty fucking questions?” I snap. Marissa’s eyes widen and she deflates, leaning back in her chair.

“Jesus, Chase. I’m just curious. You never bring up your past. Forgive me for trying to get to know the man I’m with a little better.”

“Shit, I’m sorry. I just... talking about the past is hard for me.”

She gives me a soft smile, but I see the questions in her eyes. “It’s okay, I shouldn’t have pushed. I know it’s a sensitive subject for you. Just promise me once you move back, you won’t shut me out. Promise you’ll let me experience this new stage of your life with you.”

I'm sick with the thoughts this conversation brings, so I nod at her. Her grin widens as she changes the conversation.

Thank fucking God.



SUGARLAKE IS THRIVING. I drive down Main Street, flashbacks of the first time I saw it going through my mind. Back then, there were only five or six shops scattered along the street, but now there's an entire strip of local businesses. It's nice knowing the town flourished even when my world was falling apart.

I turn onto my old street and park in the driveway of what was once my home. I guess it technically still is, at least until I find a place. I sit in my car, taking it in. Surrendering to the storm whirling inside me that being back has caused. My knee hits the bottom of the steering wheel as I nervously bounce my leg. I run my fingers through my hair once, and then again.

Man the fuck up, Chase.

Exhaling a deep breath, I repeat the serenity prayer, opening the car door to step into the shining Tennessee sun. The air feels different than in Nashville. I've gotten so used to the hustle and bustle of the city, I had forgotten how nice it is to be surrounded by the calm of a small town.

I twirl my key ring around my finger and stare at the only childhood home I've ever really known. *Inhale, exhale.* As I walk up to the front door, I can't help myself and glance at the house three doors down. I don't expect to see her, of course. But my heart races anyway.

The door in front of me swings open.

"Chase!" Sam has a wide smile and open arms, bringing me in for a hug. "It's so good to have you home." He pats my shoulder, stepping back. "I've been waiting for this day a long time."

The emotion in his voice makes me swallow, a sudden knot in my throat. "It's good to be back."

“We’ll give you the day to get settled, and then tomorrow bright and early we’ll go into the office. Hit the ground running. Sound good to you?”

“Yeah, I’m ready to work. Let’s dive right in.”

His eyes sparkle. “Good, good.”

He pulls me inside. I walk to the living room, hugging Anna and plopping down on the couch. That’s where I spend the rest of the day.

That night, in my childhood bedroom, I dream of honey-blond hair and vanilla. It’s the best sleep I’ve had in years.

I wake up bright and early, eager to jump into the nitty-gritty foundation of Sugarlake Construction. Walking into the kitchen, I see Anna pouring a cup of coffee, still in her baby-blue robe and slippers. Her strawberry-blond hair flows down her back. She turns when she hears me and beams.

“Good mornin’!” She’s chipper as she takes down another mug for me. “Still take it black?”

“Like my soul.” I grin.

She giggles. “So morbid.”

I chuckle, enjoying the lightness that being around Anna always provides. It’s surprisingly good to be back.

Sam walks in, wrapping an arm around Anna’s waist, kissing her on the temple as he pulls down a mug with his free hand. What the two of them share is something special. He cherishes her, and she gives it back in spades. A pang smacks the center of my chest. Watching their moment makes me wish I had spent less time lost in my shit, and more time modeling myself after them.

“Are you two off to the office this mornin’?” Anna asks.

Sam nods, sipping from his coffee. “Yep, time to show Chase the lay of the land.” His gaze moves to me. “A lot’s changed since you’ve worked there. We’ve expanded, do a lot of work in the neighboring towns. In fact, we just landed a new contract. It’ll be the perfect project to get your feet wet.

Those city folks do it differently than we do around here. We've gotta ease you in." He winks.

Jackson & Co. was a great opportunity, and I gained a lot of experience in my time there, but I missed being able to actually work with my hands during a project. This will be a nice change.

"What's the project?"

"A renovation to a dance studio in Sweetwater. They want the main area gutted and redone. Shouldn't be too much of a hassle, other than the owner being a bit of a control freak." He makes a face. "But you won't need to deal with her much. One of their office managers will be working with you on the details."

I grimace at the thought of someone who knows nothing about construction being involved in the details.

I just hope they aren't a distraction.



JOURNAL ENTRY #315

It's easier being back in Sugarlake than I expected. Not gonna lie, part of me thought I'd be greeted with pitchforks and an angry mob. Fucking ridiculous. Nobody even knows I'm here. THEY probably aren't even here anymore.

I was nervous as shit when I stepped into Sugarlake Construction for the first time in eight years. I kept looking around for Goldi's dad, Mr. Carson, but I didn't see him. I'm surprised he would have retired but I can't bring myself to ask Sam about him. They used to be close and he hasn't brought him up, so neither do I.

Marissa called, already wanting to come down, but I made an excuse. It'd be nice to get some relief by sinking into her pussy for a while, but I'm not ready to bring her here. Not sure I ever will be. I'll process that clusterfuck later.

The past week has been filled with getting acclimated and I can't lie - I'm fucking impressed as hell with what Sam's done. I see the passion and pride in everything he shows me. I hope I don't let him down.

I start at the new job site on Monday. It's in the preliminary stages right now, just designs and shit like that. I'm meeting the person who will be my main point of contact and I hope they aren't a nuisance.

As long as they stay out of my way and let me do my job, things will be just fine.

ALINA



“That’s basically it.”

I nod my head along with Regina, the owner of Tiny Dancers studio—and officially my new boss as of ten minutes ago. I’m not teaching dance, as much as I wish it were the case, but being the office manager is a foot in the door. The pay is great. I’ll be able to quit my job at the diner, and Tiny Dancers is one of the best children’s dance studios in all of East Tennessee. I’ll fetch coffee and Xerox copies ‘til my fingers bleed as long as I get to be part of something. *Feel* like I’m on the way to something bigger.

“... so enjoy your weekend, and be here bright and early on Monday morning, ready to go.”

Shoot. I zoned out and missed half of what she said.

“Great!” I smile wide, hoping she doesn’t realize I ignored her.

“Oh, before I forget. You’ll be the ‘go-to’ for the incoming contractor. I’ve outsourced the renovation to a company that’s about twenty minutes away from town. They’re aware that I’d like us to be very involved in the process.”

“You want *me* to be the ‘go-to?’” I look around the massive studio. “Don’t you think it should be somebody, you know, who’s worked here for more than a day?”

She laughs. “Oh honey, you’ll do just fine. I would do it myself if I had the time, but I don’t. That’s why I hired you in the first place. You’ll be busy in the office straightening up my

lack of organization from the past ten years. All I need you to do is be a glorified babysitter.” She waves her hand around the space. “You know how construction workers are. Milking the clock and trying to make an extra dollar from their clients wherever they can.”

I grit my teeth to stop the sass that’s dying to escape. *Lord, give me strength.* I’m offended on behalf of construction workers everywhere.

“So, you want me to hang out while they’re workin’? Won’t I be in their way?”

She gives me a pointed look. “Just keep an eye on them, keep them in line. Be professional and make sure they stay that way, too.”

I nod. “Got it. Professional.”

We wrap up our conversation and I walk outside to breathe in the fresh Tennessee air. It’s a beautiful day, and I finally feel like things are starting to look up. Sure, my boss is a bit of a megalomaniac, and a teensy-bit overbearing—but I already missed out on one opportunity to further my dreams, so I’m holding on to this one with everything in me.

About a year ago, I came across a quote by one of my favorite authors, C.S. Lewis, and it changed my life.

“You can’t go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending.”

Those words dug deep inside of me and pulled up the little bit of self-worth I had left. I was tired of waiting on a miracle, and I wasn’t taking any steps to change my own future. So, I mustered up the courage to move out of Daddy’s and into a place of my own. It’s been hard. I feel like I’ve abandoned him. Every day’s a struggle, I won’t lie. But he was sucking me down, and I realized that in order to help him, I had to help myself first.

So here I am in my little four-hundred square foot studio apartment, right above the bakery on Main Street. It’s not

much, but it's mine and I love it. I'm far away enough from Daddy where I get some peace, and close enough to be there when he needs me. Now all I have to do is get him to admit he needs help. I still get the middle of the night phone calls—Johnny from The Watering Hole now has my personal cell number. I'm half-convinced they keep it on speed dial. Whenever Daddy drinks too much to drive, they call me.

There's never a time where Daddy *doesn't* drink too much.

I'm just getting cozy on my couch with a good book when my phone chimes with a text.

Jax: Hey sweetheart. On a scale of 1-10, how much are you missing me?

I roll my eyes, grinning.

Jax is away more than he's home, these days. His work is in high demand, and that demand is out in California. *Where dreams are made*. Movies need fancy cars, and fancy cars need someone who knows how to keep them pretty.

Me: Like a hole in the head. Seriously, how long are you gone?

Jax: I'm not sure, but this producer is a pain in the ass. I'm ready to be home yesterday.

Before I can respond, another text comes through.

Jax: He already hates me. And even worse, his kid daughter is driving me CRAZY!

I smile thinking about a little girl with a crush on Jax.

Me: Oh, come on. It can't be that bad!

Jax: It is. I miss you. Come save me?

I laugh, taking my phone and sitting outside on the Juliet balcony. This is my favorite time of day. Right before the sun meets the horizon when the sky is stuck in twilight. The smells are crisp, the air is dewy, and the cicadas start their song. I close my eyes and relax, a genuine smile taking over my face for the first time in what feels like forever.

The smile is still on my face the next day when I show up at Logan's. It's been a week since we've met up and I've gotten used to the type of relief he provides. Our time together quiets the voices that beat down on my soul. It's a nice reprieve. One I'm taking full advantage of.

"Dang, my ears are numb." I giggle, rolling over in Logan's bed, high from the orgasm he just gave me.

He's standing by his dresser and smirks at my comment. "Your *ears* are numb?"

"Yeah, that never happens to you?"

He laughs, shaking his head. "I can't say it does."

He crawls onto the bed, leaning down to bite my neck. It's nice what we have. No emotions, no strings. No exclusivity. It's the perfect arrangement, and I dread the day some girl sweeps him off his feet, and he ends our tryst.

"I've gotta go." He stands up, grabbing his jeans and pulling them on. "You can chill here if you want, just lock up on your way out."

I decide to take my time, going to his kitchen to brew some coffee while I peruse the magazines on his counter. *Who still has magazines?*

"Sugar Pie Honey Bunch" blares through the living room and I groan in frustration. Only Jax would set his ringtone to something so obnoxious. I take my time answering.

"Hey, Teeth."

"Sweetheart. So good to hear your voice. What are you doing right now?"

"Right now?" I look around Logan's living room and cringe. Jax doesn't approve of my relationship with Logan—which is rich considering he's the king of sex with no strings. "I'm havin' some coffee at Logan's, thinkin' of all the ways to strangle you for messin' with my ringtone, *again*."

He groans. "When are you gonna cut that guy loose, Alina? He's only using you for one thing."

“I sure hope so.”

“I just don’t want you to get hurt,” he sighs into the phone.

“Oh please, Jackson. I swear, I can’t with you. Actin’ like a man can get his jollies anytime, and a woman needs to wait for some big love.”

He’s silent. I know what this is really about, even if I don’t want to admit it. Jax wants things to go further with the two of us, but I’ve been clear it won’t happen. I wouldn’t be able to love him right. And if anyone deserves the ‘can’t eat, can’t sleep, can’t breathe’ kind of love—it’s Jackson Rhoades.

I change the subject, not wanting to argue. “How are things on set?”

“Ugh. I can’t stand the people out here. I’ve worked with some pricks, but this guy, Donahue, thinks he shits out gold. To tell you the truth, I think he actually might.” He exhales before speaking softer. “He’s a giant in this industry. My dad’s dream is so close I can taste it, Lee.”

“Then you’ve just gotta keep pushin’ through it, Jax. Your work will speak for itself. Your daddy would be so proud of you.”

“You think so?”

“I do.”

He’s quiet for a moment. “Did I tell you he has this kid? She’s annoying as hell, and always in my ear asking a thousand questions about the cars I’m shaking down. I don’t know why he lets her on set.”

“I thought you loved kids.”

“I love *little* kids. Not nineteen-year-old brats who aren’t used to hearing the word no.”

My eyes widen. “Nineteen isn’t exactly a kid, Jax.”

“Tell me about it,” he says, more to himself than me.

I hear a faint knock through the line and know he’s about to be stolen away.

“Shit, sweetheart. I’ve gotta go. I expect a phone call Monday night so you can regale me with stories of how you kicked ass at your new job.”

“You got it, Teeth.”

I hang up the phone, melancholy infusing the air around me. I’m so proud of him for all his accomplishments. But I miss my friend.

I spend the rest of the weekend wallowing in loneliness. Jax is gone and Becca is busy doing her daddy’s bidding at the church. Before I know it, it’s Monday morning.

I wake up before my alarm. *Dang, Lee. You’re killin’ this new job game.* It’s not until I’m in the kitchen I realize I didn’t, in fact, wake up before the alarm, I slept through it.

Shoot.

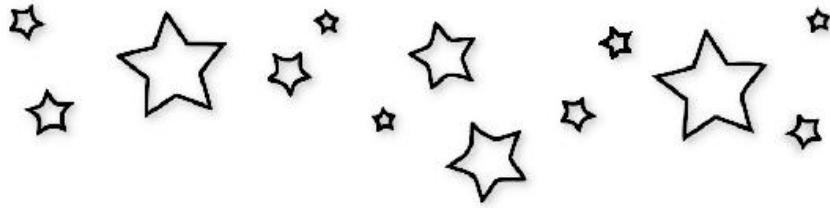
I rush around the house. Sniff my armpits because a shower’s out the window, brush my teeth and try to tame my tangled hair. My only saving grace is that I laid out my outfit last night. I throw on the black pencil skirt and cream silk blouse I borrowed from Becca. It’s a little tight around my curves, but until I get my first paycheck this is as good as it’s going to get.

I pull into Tiny Dancers five minutes late. There are two other vehicles in the lot and the lights are all turned on inside. The contractor must be here already. *Great.* Even though I don’t have the time, I take a deep breath to calm my nerves, wiping my sweaty hands on the seat’s upholstery.

It doesn’t matter that I’m a few minutes late. I’ll kick butt today, wow this contractor so he’ll sing my praises to Regina. Then I’ll go home, open my celebratory bottle of wine, and call Jax to tell him how amazing I am.

With a nod of affirmation, I get out of my car, straighten my skirt and walk inside.

ALINA



It's when I'm walking to the back office that I feel it. The shift in the air. It's subtle—a ghost of a chill that flickers down my spine. *What the heck?* I brush it off, straightening my shoulders and walking through the open door.

I don't see him at first, but when I do—that chill drops like an iceberg, free-falling through my body and freezing me in place.

This isn't happening.

This cannot be happening.

“Alina! I was starting to wonder if you would even show up,” Regina says, smiling thinly. She's annoyed, and rightly so. I should respond, but I don't. I'm not sure I physically can since my heart has stalled in my chest.

Chase Adams.

I'd love him if I didn't hate him so much.

There's a pencil behind his ear, a blueprint rolled up in his hand, and another laid out on the desk. But he isn't looking at that. He's locked on me, mouth partially open, hand frozen halfway through his silky, dark hair.

He swallows, and my traitorous eyes track the way his throat bobs. “Goldi.”

The nickname travels across the room and pierces me in the chest, snapping me out of my shock. “Don't call me that.”

He sucks in a breath, but clamps his mouth shut and nods.

“You two know each other?” Regina points between the two of us.

Chase starts to answer. “Yeah, actually we used—”

“Our folks are neighbors,” I interrupt. “We grew up together, but no. I never really *knew* him.”

I stand stoic, my gaze never straying from Regina. But I can feel him. My body hums, reminding me of the first time I saw him at eleven-years-old, and just like then, I have to clench my fists to keep from reaching out. *Pathetic.*

He clears his throat. “Right.”

Regina stands up and grabs her purse. *Is she leavin’?*

“Well, that makes things easier then, considering the two of you will be spending lots of time together.”

Chase goes rigid. “She’s my point of contact?”

Regina looks at him, arching a brow. “Is that a problem?”

“No, I just—I was under the impression I’d be dealing with an office manager.”

“She *is* the office manager.”

He glances my way. “Not an instructor?”

I stay quiet, but the beat of my heart drowns the room with how hard it’s slamming against my chest. All of my energy goes toward keeping it together. *Just a few hours and you can go home and fall apart in private.*

Regina laughs, a slight blush gracing her cheeks when she glances at Chase. *Oh, honey. Don’t waste your time.* “Instructor? I don’t need any instructors, I need someone who can file papers and show up on time. After this morning, I’m not even convinced she’s capable of that.”

Embarrassment rises to my cheeks, and I literally have to bite my tongue to stop the retort. She has no idea what I’m capable of.

I peek over at Chase, the blueprint in his fist gripped so tight it’s crumpling.

Regina continues, “Anyway, since no introductions are needed, I’m off. You two have a lot to talk about, I’m sure. Chase, if you could just lay out for Alina what you did for me, that would be great. I’ll check in later this week.” She turns toward me. “Alina, I left a list of things for you to complete before the end of the day. Menial tasks, but my cell number is written at the bottom in case you have any questions. Let’s try to be on time tomorrow, hmm?” And with that, she’s out the door.

The room is jarring with its silence. I keep my gaze locked on the desk, unwilling to be the first to break. Because I was *always* the first to break. I need him to see I’m not the same girl he once knew.

“Goldi, I—”

“I told you not to call me that. My name is Alina.” I bring my hand up to rub my pulsing forehead. “Can you just show me what you’ve got, so we can get this over with?”

“Yeah, yes. Sure.” He shuffles his feet and attempts to smooth out the wrinkles on the blueprint he smashed.

I cross my arms as I watch him. I thought he was grown in college, but clearly, God wasn’t done sculpting his masterpiece. His style hasn’t changed, still casual in a black t-shirt and dark blue jeans. But the veins that line his forearms and the way the cotton stretches around his shoulders has my mouth dry and my panties damp.

I work my way up, drinking him in. It’s like I’m dehydrated, from going so long without seeing him. I get to his face and my eyes meet his. I gasp, my heart jumping from being caught. His gaze burns into me, and my stomach clenches. The threads of our connection come to life. They sizzle and pop, elated at our close proximity.

“You look good, Alina.” His voice is husky.

His words make me want to preen, but I catch myself—sickened by my reaction to him after all this time. After what he’s done.

“And you look like my biggest regret.” The words are out before I can stop them. He winces. Guilt tries to slither its way through me, but I slap it back down.

He wasn't there when I needed him most. *Cheated* on me while my mom was dying in the hospital. He doesn't deserve my remorse.

He sighs and leans back, gripping the edge of the desk. “Look, I had no clue you worked here, and I won't lie, I'm excited about this project. But I don't want to make things harder for you, so if this...” he waves his hand back and forth between us, “will be an issue, I'll tell Sam to put someone else on the project.”

Sam?

“What?” I whoosh out. “Are... are you back home?”

His mouth lifts slightly. “Don't sound so excited.”

“I'm not anything when it comes to you.” I shrug.

I really want to tell him that yes, I do want someone else on the project. But, the last thing I need is for Regina to think I threw a tantrum, especially when I'm on thin ice. “You're already here so you might as well stay, but let's get one thing straight. We are not friends. We are not acquaintances. We are nothin'. In fact, we're less than nothin'. Let's just agree to make this process as quick and painless as possible.”

He lowers his head and nods. The muscle in his jaw tics, and his fingers tighten around the edge of the desk. “Whatever you want, Go-Alina.”

I let out the breath I was holding. “Good, now show me what you've got.”



SOMEHOW, I've made it through the day. I'm sitting at my kitchen table staring at the bottle of wine I've been saving for a special occasion. For *this* special occasion. The celebration

of my new job. The start to the rest of my life. Only, I don't feel much like celebrating now.

I never in a thousand years expected Chase to come barreling into my life again, and I'm left off-kilter and nauseous from the way he's spun me around. Even after all this time, the effect he has on me is heady.

I tap my fingernails on the table, eyes bouncing from the empty wine glass, to the bottle, to my phone. Jax and Becca are both expecting my call. I grab the bottle ready to pour an ample glass, but before I get the chance my phone screen lights up.

The Watering Hole.

Of course. The perfect ending to a perfect day. I set the bottle back down, eyeing it longingly as I accept the call.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Lee."

I sigh, "Hi, Johnny. Daddy need a ride?"

"Yeah. He uhh... isn't takin' too kindly to being cut off. It's not a good night."

I bang my forehead on the table, praying that I'll wake up and this day will have been a nightmare. "Okay, I'm on my way."

Daddy's sitting in his usual spot at the bar when I arrive. He's hunched around a glass of water, glaring at Johnny who's at the other end, pouring drinks.

"Daddy."

His head lolls over and he gazes at me through hazy eyes. "Gail?"

Bad night, indeed.

"No Daddy, it's me. Alina." I reach out to put my hand on his back, but he shrugs me off.

He snarls. "They're always callin' you out here, like a... a goddamned babysitter. Go home, I'm just fine." His words are

slurred, but years of practice have tuned my ears to understand the garble.

“You’re not fine, and you’re lucky Johnny hasn’t banned you from this place. Let’s just get you home where you can get a good night’s rest.” I reach out again, looping my arm through his to support his weight as I pull him from the stool.

He complains but doesn’t resist. I mouth “thank you” at Johnny while I walk Daddy out. It isn’t until we’re in my car that I feel like I can breathe again.

After I get him settled at the house, I head straight to the cemetery to visit Mama. When Daddy’s at his worst, being next to her, if only in spirit, is the only balm that soothes my soul.

“Hey, Mama.”

My back’s against her headstone, and I finger the wilting flowers next to me. “Sorry I didn’t bring any tulips, this wasn’t exactly a planned visit. I just needed someone to talk to, I guess.”

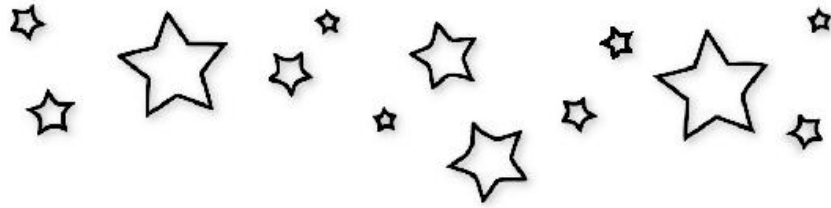
I lean my head back, staring at the stars. “You know what’s funny, Mama? There hasn’t been a single night in the past eight years where I’ve been able to see stars and not think of Chase. Not once. In eight freakin’ years. But then last night, I sat on my patio and counted as many stars as I could find without him ever crossin’ my mind.” I huff out a laugh. “Joke’s on me, huh?”

I don’t say anything else, just close my eyes and try to find some peace. Hoping she can calm the storm that’s swirling inside me. I kiss my palm and press it against the engraving of her name. “I love you, Mama. I won’t ask if you’ve got any pull up there... not tonight. I’ll save that for our usual visit. Give you some time to come up with a different answer.” I smile softly, even though I feel the pain of loss sneaking through the cracks of my heart.

Jax calls on the way home. Complaining about that producer and his daughter again. I don’t want to make his mood worse by bringing up Chase. So I don’t.

There's always tomorrow.

CHASE



“**W**hat’s wrong?” Marissa asks, frowning through the screen of my phone.

“Nothing’s wrong. Just tired, it was a long day.”

“How was your first day on that new project?”

Shit. Why’d I have to answer when she FaceTimed? The last thing I want to talk about with Marissa is how my day went. How the fuck am I supposed to tell my girlfriend that my entire world was upended when Goldi came crashing back into it?

I lay on the bed and spew out random words, hoping they sound convincing. “It was good. I think it will be pretty easy, the owner’s already got all the classes shut down. It’s just an empty building, waiting for the reno.”

“That’s nice. Do they have a designer you’re working with? Or should I offer my services?” She giggles. I know she’s joking, but the thought of her being in the same place as Goldi has me feeling sick. “So listen,” she continues, “I got an invitation in the mail today for Sam’s retirement party. Were you ever going to tell me about it?”

“What do you mean, tell you about it? I’ve only been back home for three days, Marissa. The party isn’t until next month.”

“I know. But... Well, do you want me to come?”

Not really. “If you want to,” I sigh. “Listen, can we talk about this later? I’m beat.”

“Okay. I’ll start planning to take that weekend off so I can come down and stay. It will be fun! I’m excited to see where you grew up.”

Nausea fights through the tightness in my throat. I should feel good about my girlfriend coming to visit. I’ve been trying to convince myself that it’s time to really make a go of things with Marissa. She’s been wanting more, and there’s no reason why I shouldn’t try to find happiness. It will be a good thing, having her here. Allow me to make new memories so I can focus on the future. Not fixate on feelings from the past.

I hang up the phone and stare at the ceiling. I hadn’t even thought about Sam’s retirement party. Anna only told me about it yesterday. I had no idea she sent out invitations already. I wonder if Goldi will be there. It’s a small town, and my family has always been close to hers.

To say I was stunned when she walked into the office is putting it mildly. If I ever had any doubt about the strength of our connection, it was put to bed after seeing her again. One look was all it took for my soul to light on fucking fire, and my skin to prickle with the need to feel her against me.

I walk over to the en suite, ridding myself of my clothes. I feel dirty and tired. I’m hoping a shower will help me get some rest. The water runs in rivulets down my chest, and I soap up my body, trying to wash away the desperation that clings to my skin from being around Goldi all damn day.

Fuck, stop thinking about her.

I push her out of my mind, focusing on tomorrow’s to-do list. It works for a minute. Until I realize that tomorrow will *also* be spent next to her. I picture how she looked today. Cheeks flushed, eyes wide—her tight as fuck clothes showcasing how well she’s grown into her curves. Blood rushes straight to my cock, making it throb painfully. I groan, trying to ignore it.

I will not jerk myself off to thoughts of her.

My hand is already moving south as I think the words, wrapping around my shaft, sliding up and down once...

twice... a third time. Slowly stroking. Teasing myself, as I close my eyes and let Goldi overtake my mind completely.

Fuck, that feels good.

My cock thickens. I start to thrust into my fist, picturing myself ripping the buttons off that cream blouse she was wearing. Feeling the weight of her breasts in my hands. My hips jerk as I think of her body, every inch of her delicious curves pressed up against me. Her vanilla scent invading my senses as I put my leg between hers, feeling her heat as she grinds on my thigh. I imagine her whimpers, eyes half-mast as she gets lost in the pleasure, my name on her lips—and that's all it takes for me to explode. Euphoria spreads through my body as cum shoots out of my tip, my head thrown back from the force of my orgasm.

I lean my head against the wall, the cool tile calming my racing heart, as I pant from the exertion. *Holy fuck.* I haven't come that hard in years.

As the haze lifts, guilt weaves its way through my body. She would fucking hate me—more than she already does—if she knew I was getting off to her in the shower like a fucking pervert. But that doesn't stop me from doing it all over again in the morning.

I stop at the coffee shop on my way into work. I'm standing in line when a voice interrupts my perusal of the menu.

“I know my eyes must be deceivin' me, 'cause there is no way on God's green Earth that Chase Adams is standin' here in Sugarlake.”

Fucking, perfect. I spin around. “Hi, Becca. Long time.”

“Not long enough,” she responds, a smile as sweet as candy painting her face.

“Goldi didn't tell you I was back?”

Becca's eyes widen before she schools her features, and I realize I may have just fucked-up and thrown Goldi under the bus.

“What Lee and I talk about is none of your concern. Actually, nothin’ to do with Lee is your concern.” She eyes me critically. “Are you back for good?”

I nod, giving her a smirk. “Afraid so. Sorry to disappoint.”

Her eyes ice over. “You think this is a *joke*?” Her finger pokes at my solar plexus, digging in just enough to hurt. “You better stay the hell away from Lee, Chase. I’m not kiddin’. You have no business sniffin’ around her after what you did.”

I’ve moved up in line and order my coffee from the barista. Once I pay, I move to the side, waiting until Becca’s done with her order before I speak. “Listen, not that I owe you any explanations, but I was a kid when I was with Goldi, and yeah, I screwed up. I wish I could take it back, but I can’t. I would apologize, but the only person who deserves the words is Goldi, and she isn’t exactly open to hearing them. And that’s okay, I’ve come to terms with how things are. But I’m here. I’m not leaving. My family needs me, and that’s my only concern. I don’t want to cause any problems.”

Becca squints, her head angling as she taps her high-heeled foot. “You’re different.”

My mouth quirks. “Yeah, well, growing up can do that to a person.”

“Whatever. Just remember what I said. Stay away from her, Chase. Live your life and let her live hers. She’s moved on and she doesn’t need you messin’ with her head.”

The barista calls my name, handing over my coffee, but I’ve lost the taste for it.

I think about Becca’s words all the way to Sweetwater.

Jack, the head of my demolition crew, is waiting for me in the parking lot when I arrive. Today we’re doing a standard walk-through of the property. Laying out what needs to be done, and checking for hazardous conditions. If all goes smoothly, we’ll be able to start the demolition of the main area in the next couple of weeks.

“Hey, Jack.”

“Chase, good to see you, man. Is it just us today?”

“Yep. You and me, buddy. Well, almost. The owner’s a little suffocating, to say the least. She put her office manager on us like a guard dog.”

I look around the lot, checking for Goldi’s car. She’s still driving that same shitty Kia she had eight-years ago. I wonder if she’s holding on to it for sentimental value, or if she hasn’t had the money to get a new one. I’m surprised as hell the thing even runs. I guess if she’s still friends with Jax that probably explains it. Becca’s parting words filter through my mind. *Is she with Jax now?* My stomach curdles at the thought, and envy that I have no right to feel spreads through my veins.

Jack pats me on the shoulder before heading inside. I steal another glance at Goldi’s car, mentally preparing myself for another day in her presence. *I’m gonna get my money’s worth this month with Doc, that’s for sure.*

I don’t see her at all while we conduct the walk-through, and I’m grateful for it. She’s the worst kind of distraction, and I need to focus on the task at hand. It’s not until a few hours later that I finally have to suck it up and find her. She needs to know about the progress we’ve made, and some of the issues we’ve found.

I knock on the office door.

“Come in.”

Her voice makes my stomach flip. *Get a fucking grip.* She’s sitting behind the desk, her hands on the computer keyboard.

“Hey, G—Alina.” I grimace as I correct myself. It’s hard not to slip up and call her Goldi. It’s all I’ve ever known her as, and the name Alina feels like sandpaper on my tongue.

She continues typing on the computer, her jaw tightening.

I shift on my feet, uncomfortable with the way she’s ignoring me. “So, we just finished the walk-through for the areas being renovated.” Still no response. “Unfortunately, there are some issues.”

Her fingers pause on the keys, the desk chair creaking as she leans back. “What do you mean, issues?”

“Well, there are some areas, especially in the front room, that are concerning. Possibly asbestos. My demo leader, Jack, is taking samples now to be sent to the lab for analysis.”

“How long will that take?”

“It usually takes at least a week for the results. We’ll have them rushed, but there isn’t much we can do in the meantime.”

“What do you mean there’s not much you can do? Can’t you just work around the areas?”

I chuckle but stop when she glares at me. “Asbestos is harmless unless it becomes airborne. If there’s a problem here and it gets disturbed, that’s when it will become an issue.”

“I thought asbestos was regulated.”

“Not when this was built, it wasn’t. I was hopeful going in this morning, but I knew it was a risk. We won’t be able to start work until we get the results back from the lab.”

She groans. “Have you told Regina this?”

“Nope. You’re my point of contact, not her.”

“So you expect *me* to deliver the bad news?” She covers her face with her hands. “You’re just itchin’ to get me fired, aren’t you?”

“I don’t mind calling her if you’re that worried about it.” It’s not really something I want to do. Regina is aggressive, to say the least. She’s been chomping at the bit to get my cock inside her since the second we met.

Goldi peeks at me from between her fingers. “You don’t?”

I shake my head. “Nope. Not if it makes your day easier.”

She leans forward, her elbows coming down on the desk. “Okay, yeah. Okay. Well... wait a minute. If you call, she’ll probably think I put you up to it. That I’m incapable of deliverin’ a message. Maybe I should just call her?” She nods. “Yeah, I’ll just call her and hope for the best.”

I stifle my smile. She continues to ramble as she reaches to grab the phone. My hand shoots out to cover hers before I can stop it. She gasps and blinks up at me. Electricity pulses through my fingers and up my arm, shocking my heart into a faster rhythm.

Her tongue peeks out, teeth following as she bites down. My nostrils flare, my eyes tracking the movement, jealous as fuck that her tongue gets to taste those perfect lips.

“Don’t,” I manage to rasp out. “Let me do this. I’ll tell her I wanted to be the one to deliver the news.”

“Okay,” she whispers. My fingers tighten around hers and she breaks our gaze to stare at where we’re connected.

Her hand jerks out from under mine. “Is that all?”

I’m still rooted in place, my mind working to catch up. “What?”

“Is that all you have to tell me? If so, you can show yourself out.” She angles her head toward the door, avoiding my eyes.

I step back, rubbing my chin and exhaling as I try to regain my equilibrium. “Yeah, that’s it. We’ll be here for a while longer finishing the samples and then we’ll be out of your hair.”

She nods, effectively dismissing me.



JOURNAL ENTRY # 316

I had a dream last night that Lily came home. I woke up with tears on my face and a hollowness in my chest when I realized that’s all it was... a fucking dream. It’s been almost a decade since I’ve seen her. Hell, I don’t even know if she’s still alive. But I believe she is. I don’t have faith in much, but I have to trust in that belief.

Here’s one for ya, Doc. You know what I’ve been feeling recently when it comes to Lily? Anger. Fucking anger. And I

don't even know if it's justified but it's there either way.

My whole life was spent protecting her. I found comfort in knowing she appreciated all I did for her. But maybe she never really knew. Or maybe selfishness is a family trait and she never really cared.

The first foster home wasn't sunshine and roses. It's where I learned a lot of people are in it for the money, not for their love of children. I was still naive, believing Mom would come back and "save" us from the state she dumped us in. Lily was just scared. Too young to understand what was really going on. She always had this one raggedy stuffed bunny rabbit she held on to. Never let it out of her sight since she was old enough to grab things. It had threads all over it from where I clumsily stitched it up every time it ripped, and it was in desperate need of a wash. But it comforted her, and for that I was grateful.

Our caseworker took us to our first home, said there would be other kids to play with. It was a normal-looking house in a normal-looking suburb outside of Nashville, a married couple with two other foster kids and a thirteen-year-old son of their own. They were nice enough, if not a little distant. Left us to our own devices most of the time.

But their son was a fucking prick. He loved to prey on the vulnerable, and he saw it in Lily from the jump. Linda said we needed to be on our best behavior, and I thought she meant if we were, maybe mom would come back sooner, so I really tried to ignore this kid. But one afternoon I heard Lily cry and went outside to see he had ripped her bunny out of her hands and shredded it in front of her. My fist was in his face before he knew what hit him. Punk ass bitch.

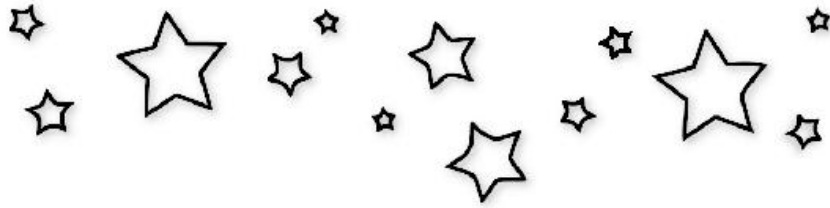
I guess his dad didn't think much of an eight-year-old who could beat his teenage son's ass and decided to teach me a lesson. Busted me up so good I still have the scar through my eyebrow.

We were with that family for a little over a year, and he taught me a lot of "lessons" during that time. But the only thing I learned was bullies hit harder when you cry. They get

off on the pain. So I taught myself how to lock it up tight and took the beatings with a smile on my face, knowing that as long as his attention was on me, it wasn't on Lily.

On the plus side, he never bothered her again.

ALINA



“**Y**our brother’s comin’ home.”

I blink across the table at Daddy. He says it so casually, like Eli visits all the time. My fork is halfway to my mouth, but I place it back down without indulging. “I’m sorry?”

“Elliot’s comin’ home. Popped the question to that girlfriend of his. She wants to meet the family, see where he grew up. Look at a couple places to get hitched.”

My mouth is gaping. Did I fall asleep and wake up in some alternate universe? I would swear Daddy’s three sheets to the wind already, but he’s not slurring yet, so I know that isn’t the case. “Eli’s gettin’ *married*?”

Daddy nods, shoveling forkfuls of dinner into his mouth.

“Here?”

“Yes, here. Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe ‘cause he hasn’t been home to see us since Mama died?” The words rush out, and I curse my lack of filter. *Dang it.*

Daddy’s eyes darken. I flinch from the sound of his fork clattering to the plate. His chair scrapes back as he walks to the cupboard next to the sink, taking out his trusty friend Jack and refilling his glass. His third since dinner started.

“Daddy, don’t you think you’ve had enough?”

“Enough of what? Speak plain words, girl. I don’t have time for your riddles.”

“You know what. Mama wouldn’t want this for you.”

He spins around, leaning his back against the counter as he brings the tumbler to his lips and takes a big gulp. “I try to share the good news that Elliot’s comin’ back around, and all you wanna talk about is your mama? Well, guess what, Alina, she’s dead. She ain’t comin’ back. We were drivin’ to *your* recital when we lost her forever. You better find it in you to forgive your brother. You can’t blame him for not wantin’ to be around when you’re the reason his mama is gone.”

I focus on my breathing. In and out. *He doesn’t mean it. It’s not your fault.*

I blink back the tears and murmur, “I just worry about you.”

He grunts, his nose already back in his glass, taunting me with his disregard.

And so it goes.

I don’t know how I’m supposed to feel about Eli coming home. I’m mad he told Daddy first and didn’t think to include me. I stomp outside, pulling up his name on my phone, pressing send before I can second guess myself.

“Hey, Lee.”

“Married, Eli? Really?”

I hear his heavy breath on the line. “Pops told you?”

“Yes, Daddy told me. What the heck, you can’t call and tell me yourself? Gotta send the town drunk to do your dirty work?”

“Don’t call him things like that.”

“Well, it’s the truth, Eli. Not that you’d know about it.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Don’t get me started on what’s fair.” Pure, hot anger blazes at his careless words. Must be nice out in Florida, with his fancy girl, and his fancy life. “You gonna tell me about your girl? Sarah, right?”

“Yeah, Sarah. And there’s not much to tell.”

I snort. “Not much to tell? You sure do sound real crazy over her.”

He sighs. “Crazy’s the last thing I’d want to feel. You’ll meet her soon, we’ll be down there in three weeks.”

“Three *weeks*?”

“Pops didn’t tell you that part?”

“Daddy doesn’t tell me much these days, Eli.”

I lean against the wall and temper the rage, telling myself it will be nice to have him back in town.



ONCE I GET HOME, I draw a bath, my knotted muscles whining for relief. Dipping in the water is instant relaxation, and I lean back, submerging in the water. My fingers brush against my breast, making me suck in a breath at how sensitive they feel. I repeat the motion and my nipples tighten. A spike of pleasure shoots straight to my core as I lightly tease my areola. It feels good.

I continue the soft touch, closing my eyes as I remember the feel of Chase’s touch from the other day. I imagine his calloused fingers replacing mine to brush against my delicate flesh. A moan slips out as another burst of pleasure runs through me at the thought. My hand leaves my chest, sliding down, tickling my skin as I slip under the water and between my folds.

I ghost my middle finger over my clit and suck in a breath. I swipe over it again, pressing down lightly, biting my lip at the sensation. I pretend it’s Chase’s thick finger rubbing. Teasing. Sliding inside.

My core clenches, the muscles fluttering.

I press my palm down, rotating it, water sloshing as my hips push forward for more friction.

My breathing picks up as I picture Chase behind me, his hard chest against my back, his corded muscles wrapped around my waist while he holds me in place and plays me with his fingers. Whispers dirty words in my ear. I want his hands all over me. His arms surrounding me, his tongue tasting me. His thickness inside me.

“Come for me baby, show me how good it feels.”

My back arches at the memory of his voice, and I lose my breath. The wave of my climax washes over my body, my center pulsing as white-hot bliss surges through my veins.

I lay still, hand between my legs, chest heaving, and my ears numb. Reason slowly filters back to me. I just masturbated to thoughts of Chase.

I think I might be sick.

My bath is ruined from my complete lack of self-control, so I drain it and slip into my coziest pajamas, curling under the blankets. I set my alarm so I don't miss brunch with Becca in the morning and send up a quick prayer that Chase won't be in my dreams.

God doesn't listen.

The next morning, I pull into the parking lot of the diner. I haven't talked to Becca since last week's Saturday brunch, even though she's been blowing up my phone. Avoidance—I've realized—is my go-to when it comes to telling my friends about Chase. But she'd kill me if I didn't show up today, and I don't think I can keep it in anymore. I'm no good with secrets.

She texts me as soon as I park.

Becca: Hello, is anybody there? Should I even bother waiting for you today? You've gone radio silent... wonder why that is?

Me: Parking now! Just been busy.

I rush inside. Becca's glaring down at her phone, sitting at our usual spot in the back corner. I slide in the booth across from her, a smile plastered on my face.

“Hey, girl.”

She purses her lips as she gives me the once-over. “She lives.”

I wave her off. “I’m sorry, Becca. You know it’s been crazy with the new job and all.”

“Mmhm.” She sips from a mimosa and eyes me over the rim. “How *is* the new job?”

“It’s alright. My boss is kind of a ballbuster, but it’s nothin’ I can’t handle. I was lookin’ forward to all the cute little kids in their leotards, but she’s havin’ renovations done, so there’s nobody there except for me most days.”

“Mmmm. Sounds thrillin’. An introvert’s paradise.”

I giggle. “I don’t mind it.”

The conversations from the tables around us fill up the silence. I fidget, taking a deep breath and vomiting out the words. “Chase is back.”

She raises a brow. “I know.”

I groan, throwing my head into my hands. “Dang it. How’d you know about that already?”

“Ran into him the other day. He let it slip you knew he was back.”

Guilt crawls around in my chest. “I just didn’t know how to bring it up.”

She watches me for a few seconds, her eyes growing hazy before she snaps back into focus. “I get it, I guess. We all have secrets. How’d you find out he was back anyway?”

“Ugh, that’s the worst part. He’s the contractor doin’ the reno at the studio. Caught me totally off guard when I walked in on my first day, and he was just standin’ there.”

“What?” She laughs. “That’s some twisted sort of luck. I bet Jax lost his shit when you told him.”

My head drops. The napkin I’m tearing apart becomes the most interesting thing in the world.

“Alina... tell me you’ve told Jax.”

“I swear, I’m gonna call him tonight.”

“Girl, you better.”

“Oh, and you’ll never guess what else.”

“Does it have to do with you, Logan, and a bottle of lube?”
She grins.

I roll my eyes. “No, you deviant. Eli’s comin’ home.”

She jerks. “What?”

“You heard me. Daddy dropped the bomb on me last night at dinner.”

“What?”

I nod and make a face. “I know. Get this, he’s gettin’ married.”

“What?”

“Are you broken?” I joke. “Is that all you can say?”

Her arm wraps around her stomach, the color draining from her face.

My brows furrow. “Hey, are you okay?”

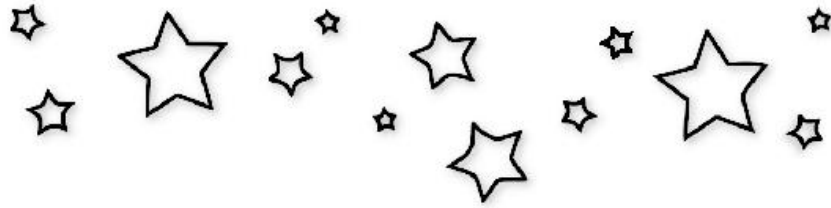
She shakes her head, her fiery curls whipping around her face. “Yeah, I’m fine. Just suddenly don’t feel too well. Those damn mimosas.” She musters up a hint of a smile. “I’ll be okay, nothin’ good food and some water won’t fix.”

“If you’re sure.”

She winks, taking a chunk of bread from the basket in the center of our table and starts rambling about her high schoolers. I relax, knowing the Chase conversation is tabled, for now.

When I call Jax later that night, he doesn’t answer.

CHASE



It's Monday and the results finally came back from the lab. Luckily, asbestos is not a problem. *Thank fuck.* I'm more than ready to get the ball rolling with this project. Anxious to prove to the guys on my team I'm more than just Sam's son. That I actually know what the hell I'm doing. It's already past four p.m., but I tell Jack I'm planning to head over and work through the evening. I want to catch up on lost time. He decides to join me and manages to grab a couple of other guys willing to put in some extra hours.

By the end of the night, we've made some nice progress, so I tell the guys to stop at the local bar on the way back for a round, on me. The bar's a little outdated, dark, and dingy with sticky tables, but for a group of guys who are coming off a job site, a cold beer and a few apps are all we need to be happy.

We're shooting the shit, winding down from the day when one of the younger kids on the crew, Matt, leans back and groans. "Man, there are *no* girls in this place. I was hopin' I'd be able to find one and show her a good time before I head back home. Guess I'll have to call one of my weekend ladies, see if she's down for a Monday night special." He wiggles his brows.

Jack chuckles. "Son, who you tryin' to impress? No one at this table gives a damn about your made-up girlfriends. Save the imagination for later when you're entertainin' your hand."

I grin into my beer. Jack is the oldest one here—around Sam's age. There's a good dynamic he has going with his

crew. It makes me confident in my decision to uproot my life and come back to run this company.

“Oh, shit. Look at this guy.” Matt laughs, gesturing toward the bar. My gaze follows where he’s pointing. The bartender is leaned over the bar top, jaw set, and hands tensed. The man he’s talking to has his back to us, but it’s clear to see he’s smashed. He sways in place on his stool, stumbling as he moves to stand.

“I bet that guy’s in here every night embarrassin’ himself,” Matt sneers. “Why the hell do people let themselves get sloppy like that? It’s pathetic.”

My head whips in his direction. “Shut the fuck up.”

Poking fun at a possible drinking problem is not the way to stay on my good side. I’ve seen what addictions can do—felt the judgment from people who don’t understand. I won’t sit back and let ignorant comments slide.

Raised voices bring my attention back to the altercation at the bar. “I don’t give a shit! I’m a goddamn... I’m a payin’ customer and I’m *payin’* for another... I want a damn drink.” The man flails as he reaches into his pocket and pulls out his wallet, slapping it on the bar top. His back is still toward us, but something about him pulls my stomach, jostling the contents and making me feel a little ill. He seems familiar.

The bartender throws his hands up and walks away, picking up the phone.

I scan the area, wondering if anyone else is paying attention. There are a few scattered people along the bar who spare him a glance, almost like they’re used to his outbursts. At the tables surrounding the bar though, people are gawking. Some have their hands over their mouths, stifling laughter—mocking the man who clearly can’t handle his drink. Others glance over with disgust. My temper flares. Just like Matt, they judge him. Profiling him as a disgrace. An embarrassment. Too busy on their pedestals to take a fucking second and see the despair pouring out of him. Too good to walk a mile in his shoes.

My eyes swing back toward him as he quiets and tries to sit down. He loses his balance and falls, the smack of his body making me wince as it hits the concrete floor. *Shit*. Laughter filters through the air as he lays still, sprawled out on the ground. I jump from my seat to help him. He attempts to roll over and stand but struggles to regain his balance. I'm only a few feet away when he looks up. My stomach cannonballs and my steps falter.

Mr. Carson? What the fuck?

I hurry to him and squat down, reaching out my hand. He grabs it, hoisting himself into a sitting position. When he stands up, I stay close. He's rocking in place, and I'm not sure if he's going to fall again. Finally, he manages to sit on his barstool.

I sit next to him, exhaling heavily as I take him in. He looks haggard. His skin is pallid. Dark circles mar his eyes, and blood vessels highlight the deep frown lines taking over his face. This is not the man I once knew.

I clear my throat, searching through my shock to find something to say. Maybe I should offer to take him home? He's in no condition to be here.

"Mr. Carson?"

He grumbles, his head bobbing, nothing but an empty glass in front of him.

"Mr. Carson," I repeat.

His head snaps up as he searches for my voice, his eyes glassy and unfocused as they settle on me. "What's it to ya?"

"Remember me? It's Chase. I'm Sam's son."

"I know... who you are, boy." His words are so slurred it's hard to understand what he's saying.

The bartender walks over and places a glass of water down. "Craig, drink this, and for the love of God stay calm, okay? I don't wanna throw you out, but there's only so much I can let slide."

The bartender seems familiar with him. *What's he doing all the way in Sweetwater?*

I lean toward him. “Do you need a ride, Mr. Carson? I came with a couple of guys from work, but I don’t mind leaving early.”

He ignores me, but the bartender’s eyes glance my way. “He’s got a ride. I’ve just called ‘em. But if you two know each other, I’m sure he could use the company. Somethin’ to keep him occupied.” He shoots me a pleading look, and I jerk my chin. I don’t mind distracting him until his ride shows up.

Mr. Carson fumbles toward the water glass, lifting it up to take a sip and scoffing when it’s not the liquor he wants.

“How ya been, Mr. Carson? It’s been a long time.”

He looks at me, his frown lines deepening. “You back... you come here for my Alina?”

I force a chuckle through the sudden tightness of my throat. “No, sir. I’m pretty confident your daughter wants nothing to do with me.”

He mumbles. I’m not sure, but it sounds like he says I can have her. As if she’s his to give. *Like he doesn’t want her.* But that’s fucking crazy because if there’s a man who cherishes his daughter more than Mr. Carson, I’ve yet to find him.

“Daddy.”

My heart beats double time in my chest. *Of course, she’s his ride.*

Goldi’s voice comes closer as she repeats herself. My gut pinches knowing she’ll hate that I’m here for this. But it’s too late, she’s already next to him, staring at me with wide eyes.

“Chase?” she gasps.

I attempt a smile. “Hey, Alina. I was just keeping your old man company for a bit. Catching up.”

She looks back and forth between us as she chews on her lip, color flushing high on her cheeks. She puts her hand on his arm. “Daddy, come on. Let’s go home.”

He twists in his seat, smacking her away. She stumbles back.

I grasp the edge of the bar to keep myself from reacting.

“I’m not goin’ ‘til I’m good and... ‘til I’m ready. And I sure as hell ain’t goin’ with you. Johnny!” He slurs across the bar. “How many times do I gotta tell you I don’t need no... damn babysitter.”

“Daddy, stop it.” Her voice cracks as she reaches out again, and again he smacks her off him. I blow out a breath and stand up. I’ve officially had enough. I’m about to intervene when I glance at Goldi. Her shoulders are tight and her face is stone—mask firmly in place. I’ve seen that mask before. Hell, I’ve worn it. I know the suffocation of trying to breathe underneath.

Johnny walks up, slinging a towel over his shoulder. “Hey, Lee.”

She sighs, throwing up a half-hearted wave. “Hi, Johnny. Thanks for callin’.”

“No problem.” He pauses like he doesn’t want to say what he’s about to. “Listen, Lee... I can’t keep lettin’ this happen. It’s no good for business and to be frank, it’s irresponsible on my part to keep servin’ someone who clearly doesn’t need the drink.”

“I get it.” She nods. “But, what am I supposed to do?” Her voice is a whisper and her eyes are glassy. I’m sure she’s trying to keep me from hearing. She turns toward her father. “Did you hear that, Daddy? You’ve gone and lost your favorite bar with the way you been actin’.”

Mr. Carson doesn’t react. He’s gone from mildly coherent to passed out on the bar top. *Jesus*. Goldi shakes his shoulder and gets nothing more than a grunt. She peeks over, her body rigid, obviously uncomfortable with me witnessing her vulnerability. Doesn’t she know I’m the last person who would judge her for this?

“Daddy, come on.” She shakes his shoulder again.

I make a split-second decision and lightly put my hands on her hips, ignoring the way the contact sings my fingertips as I move her to the side. I put her dad's arm around my shoulder and hoist him up. She protests but I silence her with a look. "I've got him, Alina. Please, just let me help."

She sucks in a breath, analyzing the way I let her father's weight rest against my side. She closes her eyes and dips her head. "Yeah, okay. I'm parked right out front."

I half-walk, half-carry Mr. Carson outside, and get him settled in before I close the door and turn to face her. She stands behind me, keys in her hand, chin high. Her eyes steeled like she's preparing for battle. Whether it's against me or her father, I don't know.

"You good?" I ask.

"Yep."

"I'm staying at Sam and Anna's if you need anything, okay?"

She runs her fingers through her hair. "Look, we've been fine since you've been gone. Actually, since before you were gone. You can't just show back up years later and think I'll be waitin' around for you to come save me. I'm not."

"I know you're not." I shrug. "But I know how hard it can be." I gesture toward her passed out dad in the car.

She stiffens. "You don't know *anything*."

My heart turns to lead, sinking inside me at the strength of her resentment. "Fair enough."

I stuff my hands in my pockets and watch as she rounds the car. It's only when she's long gone that I finally move back inside.

A few hours later I'm back home, surfing channels. There's nothing on, but I settle on *Hoarders: Buried Alive*. I need something to take my mind off the ache my soul feels knowing Goldi would rather suffer in silence than accept my help.

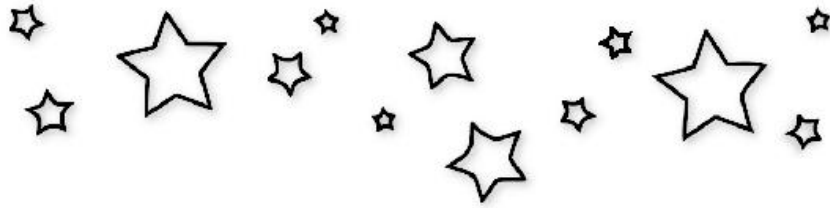
I'm about to grab a drink when there's a knock on the door. I glance up the stairs, hoping the noise doesn't wake Sam and Anna. *Who the fuck would be here this late?*

I'm stunned into silence when I see who it is.

"Hey." Goldi looks up at me through her lashes, and I swear my fucking heart skips a beat. *She's so goddamn beautiful.*

"Can we talk?"

ALINA



My palms won't stop sweating. I don't know why I'm here, standing in the middle of Chase's living room. When I was driving Daddy home, the night kept playing on a loop in my mind. Getting the call from Johnny. The way my chest caved in when I saw Chase. Me, selfishly letting my emotions get in the way of him helping.

So, here I am. Attempting to swallow down my pride long enough to apologize. *Just say what you came here to say.* "I was unfair to you earlier tonight."

His brows lift, but that's the only response I get. I grind my teeth as my anxiety rises. The shame over what he saw threatening to drown me. "I should have told you I'm grateful for your help. With Daddy, that is."

He's silent. Still just staring at me from across the room.

"Say somethin'!" I smack my thighs.

"What do you want me to say?"

"I don't know, call me a bitch or... or tell me it's okay. That you forgive me."

He sighs, wiping his hand across his mouth. "Out of the two of us, Alina, you're not the one who needs absolution."

His words surprise me. They roll around in my head, and I'd like to pretend I feel nothing. But the twinge in my chest lets me know that's not quite true. Regardless, I'm not here to talk about the sins of our past. "I don't wanna talk about any of that. I just—I got Daddy home and then I realized I never

even thanked you. So, thank you, I guess. You didn't have to do what you did."

I shuffle my feet, my hands going to my back pockets. His eyes are searing, leaving me raw and exposed. It's uncomfortable. Finally, after a few torturous moments, he breaks his gaze, grabbing his keys off the rack on the wall. "Will you come with me somewhere?"

"What?" I breathe. I came over here to apologize, not to torment myself by spending hours in his presence. I don't know if I can be around him and pretend the scars I wear weren't made by him.

"Just... come with me somewhere. I'd like to continue our conversation, but I don't want to wake Sam and Anna. Please."

I should leave. I should turn around and march back out that door. I came here to say what I needed to say. The guilt has abated. But instead, I stand here like an idiot.

Say no. "Okay."

A grin overtakes his face and those dang dimples knock the breath from my lungs.

I follow him outside and down the driveway into his shiny, blacked-out Ford F250. We drive in silence. He seems calm like this whole situation isn't absolutely insane. We turn into familiar territory and I realize he's taken us to the lake. He bypasses the lot, driving us right onto the sand, backing up so the bed of his truck faces the water. I've never been to the lake in the middle of the night. *Why did he bring me here?*

He turns off the engine and hops out. I suppose I should follow him, but I'm twisted around in my seat, looking back and admiring the water. Marveling at the stillness of its inky black surface—wishing I could take some of its serenity for myself. I jump in my seat when the passenger door opens. Chase is standing there, a boyish grin on his face as he holds out his hand. "Not much point of being here if we don't get out and enjoy the view."

I peer down at his outstretched palm. The memory of what I imagined those hands doing makes heat coil low in my gut. *Probably shouldn't touch him.* I maneuver around him and slide off the seat onto the ground, taking in my surroundings. It's deserted. I guess midnight on a Monday isn't a peak time for lake goers.

Chase moves and I expect him to start walking toward the water, but instead, he goes around to the back of his truck. He drops the tailgate and hoists himself up, turning to look down at me with his hands on his hips. "Come on, Alina May. Let's stay awhile."

I walk around the side and peer into the bed, watching as he spreads out a large, thick green blanket. *Does he just keep that back here?* "Do this a lot, do you?"

"You know the motto. Always be prepared." He smirks.

I can't help the laugh that escapes. "Now I know you're full of it. You were a lot of things growin' up, but a Boy Scout? *That*, you've never been."

"Yeah, well there were a lot of things I should have been. Guess I was just a little late in learning the lessons." He comes to the edge of the truck bed, reaching down to help me up.

This time, I do take his hand.

We settle in, lying on the afghan as we stare at the sky. It's clear tonight. Peaceful. The stars shine down, tormenting me with their sparkle. The space between us is charged like it always is when we're around each other.

His voice pierces the silence. "Do you want to talk about it?... Your dad."

Yes. "Not really."

He nods. "I figured as much. Sometimes talking fucking sucks."

"You can say that again."

"You know, I used to come out here all the time. Usually after leaving you in the middle of the night." He glances my way. "I'd lay down just like we are now and think about all the

ways I wasn't good enough. All the ways I had failed the people in my life." His voice is heavy. "All the ways I was scared of failing *you*."

I close my eyes, willing the burn away. "I thought you said talkin' sucks."

"I did. And it does. But I've learned it also helps."

"*You* talkin'?" The corner of my mouth lifts. "I don't believe it."

He chuckles. "Is that really so surprising?"

"Uhh... yeah. It is, actually."

He hums, his hands linking over his stomach. "Yeah, I guess it would be."

"He wasn't always this bad, you know?" I blurt.

Chase's head turns toward me, his hazel eyes piercing. "Your dad?"

I nod, sucking my teeth. "Yeah. At first, it was just a way for him to cope. Losin' Mama was hard on him, you know? He hasn't been able to learn how to live without her. By the time I realized it was out of control, he was already gone. Lost at the bottom of a bottle."

Chase doesn't say anything, and I'm grateful for it. I don't need someone telling me how to feel or trying to justify Daddy's actions. But it's cathartic, speaking my truths out loud.

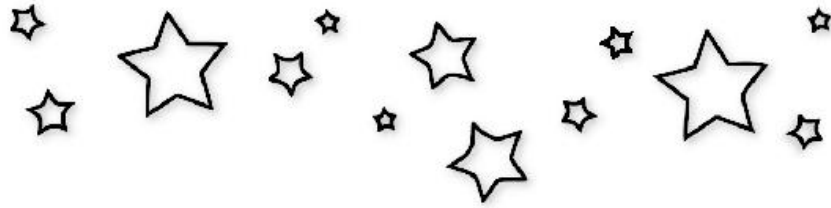
"Stupid me, huh?" I huff out a laugh. "I just thought..." I shake my head, not able to speak around the lump in my throat.

"You thought you'd be enough?" he whispers.

"Yeah." My voice cracks, a tear slipping down the side of my face. "I thought I'd be enough."

He reaches over, hesitating before he links our hands. Warmth spreads through me, comforting all of my broken pieces. And at least for tonight, that's enough.

CHASE



Today, I woke up feeling hopeful. It's not an emotion I'm used to having, but it's there, so I'm holding on tight. If someone had told me a few months back I'd have Goldi in my life again, I would have laughed in disbelief, and tried to ignore the throb in my chest hearing her name caused. But now I'm here, and so is she. And while I don't have any grandiose ideas about where our relationship can go, I can't help but feel like maybe there's a reason beyond Sam's retirement that I'm back.

I'm a little surprised Sam hasn't told me about Mr. Carson's drinking. It makes me wonder if he knows—if anyone around here really knows, or if Goldi has been carrying the weight of her father's problems all on her own.

This is what was on my mind when I went to sleep. This is what's still on my mind as I walk into work. It's our first official day back on the Tiny Dancers project. Demo day. I *love* demo days. And I'm fucking giddy knowing I'll see Goldi again. Life is brighter with her in it. Colors more vibrant, birds fucking sing and all that shit. I had forgotten what it was like to live a technicolor life.

I stopped by the coffee shop and picked up some caffeine for the crew. Impulsively, I got some for Goldi, too. I walk to the back office with her coffee in hand. The office door is propped, so I nudge it open and peer inside. Goldi's standing in the far corner, bent over what looks like a laptop bag, digging around for something in one of the pockets. My eyes become greedy as they take in the round of her hips and the

curve of her ass in that spectacularly tight skirt she's wearing. I know I should look away, but *damn*. I don't think I can. I start to grow hard, which is a problem since I don't have a free hand to adjust myself.

I try to think of anything other than how fucking edible she is. The inside of my cheek stings from where I'm biting it, but I need the pain to keep myself from going over and demanding she sit on my face. I shift on my feet, clearing my throat to get her attention.

She stands straight and looks over her shoulder. "Oh! Chase, hi." She gives a hint of a smile and brushes a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

"Hey, Go-Alina. I heard a rumor you were up late last night. Thought you might need some coffee." I wink, then mentally bitch-slap myself for doing it. *A wink, you fucking douchebag?*

She looks down for a second, running the palms of her hands over her outfit, straightening the wrinkles. It's an innocent gesture, but fuck if it doesn't make me think of how I'd like to glide my hands all over her body.

"Oh... um, yeah. Thanks." She walks over and takes the coffee. Our fingertips brush. The contact lasts for less than a second, but a jolt shoots through me, catapulting my heart into my throat. She backs away quickly, taking the coffee with her as she rounds the desk and sits. I lean back against the opposite wall, taking sips from my cup as I watch her. She's stacking piles of paper and moving around folders, fingers fumbling.

She pauses, her head snapping up. "Do you need somethin' else?"

My gut tenses as I feel the shift in her demeanor. "Is this how it's gonna be, Alina? Hot and cold all the time?"

She looks to the ceiling before heaving a sigh. "Listen. I don't—I don't know what you're expectin' from me. But I can't do this." She points back and forth between us.

My chest pinches. The lightness I felt this morning disappearing with the weight of her words. “What do you mean by *this*?”

“This! Us! You can’t just bring me coffee, and—and be all sweet and charmin’. That’s not you. That’s not the Chase I remember.”

“People can change, Alina. Maybe you should get to know the new me.”

“I don’t wanna get to know you. Last night was a mistake. I should never have gone with you.” She shakes her head.

Fuck, that hurts.

The balloon of hope that was floating around inside me pops, and I crash back down to earth.

My soul is raging against her words, beating against my insides and trying to tear out of my skin to get to her. To remind her. I grip my hair, the sting of the roots keeping me grounded. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

My hand drops to my side and I swallow down my want—my fucking *need*—to beg for her forgiveness. To let me atone for my mistakes. “Okay. I get it. I do. I thought maybe we could move forward. Be friends. Fuck, you have no idea how badly I want us to be there. But if you need me to stay away, I’ll do that. I’ll keep my distance... but can you do me a favor?” I walk over, ripping a corner off a piece of paper, and grab a pen from the cup holder. I write down my number and slide it to her.

She picks it up. “What’s this?”

“That’s my number. Put it in your purse, or better yet, program it in your phone. Just... I want you to have it. In case you need it.”

She juts out her chin. “I won’t.”

“And that’s fine. But if you change your mind, I’m here.”

She sneers. “I’ve heard that before.”

Fire sparks in my veins. The need for her to see me for who I am now making my tongue sharp. “You heard that from a dumbass kid who took for granted everything that mattered. A kid who didn’t know how to hold on to the best fucking thing in his life.” I lean forward, my knuckles pressing down on the desk, my eyes begging her to see the truth in my words. “Believe me when I tell you, that kid is gone.”

She sucks in a breath, her baby-blue gaze searching.

I point to the piece of paper in her fist. “Keep it. Just in case.”

I spin, walking out the door, blood pumping in my ears, and my heart beating with fervor.

It’s not until the end of the day when I feel her eyes on me again. I’m a sweaty mess. All the other guys have left, but I stuck around, taking my frustration from our earlier conversation out on the walls. *Who needs Doc when you’ve got a sledgehammer?*

I drop the hammer to the ground, my torso twisting as I look at her.

She’s in the middle of the room, gawking at the destruction. I smile at her. “Not what you expected?”

She looks around the room. “No. Not really. It’s a mess in here.” She narrows her eyes. “This is what we’re payin’ y’all to do?”

I chuckle as I take off my eyewear, setting it on my head. I lift my shirt to wipe the sweat from my brow. Her eyes sear into me, mouth parting as she stares at my stomach, watching as the fabric falls back down. *Fuck*, I love the burn of her gaze. “Do you wanna try?”

Her mouth snaps shut, her eyes widening. “What? No, I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve never even held one of those things before. Daddy never let me near ‘em when I was a kid.” She points to the sledgehammer on the ground. “I wouldn’t know what to do.”

“Not much to it.” I shrug. “Come here, I’ll show you.”

She backs up. “I’m really okay.”

“It will make you feel better.”

“Who says I don’t feel good?”

My brows lift as I cock my head, staring at her.

“Ugh, fine. Just hand me the stupid thing.” She marches past me to pick it up, and I grab her around the waist without thinking. She freezes, her breaths heavy. I know I should let go, but she feels so fucking good. I lean in, my lips brushing her ear. “Not so fast.”

I grab the eyewear on my head, using my arm around her waist to spin her until she’s facing me. We’re close. Our energy weaves together, buzzing between us, attracting like magnets. I try to ignore the way my heart thumps in my chest as I slip the goggles over her eyes.

My fingertips slide along the curve of her ear and down until they rest on her neck. Her breaths become heavy and my eyes move to her lips. It would be *so* easy to lean in and taste her. I know she’d let me. I can feel how much she wants me to. But I know she’d regret it. So even though it’s the last thing I want, I drop my hands and step back.

“Go ahead, pick it up.” I gesture toward the sledgehammer. She’s still standing there, chest heaving as she blinks at me. *Fuck, Goldi. Don’t look at me like that.*

She shakes her head slightly, turning to grab it. She looks at me over her shoulder. “What do I do?”

I stick my hands in my pockets, trying to calm my racing heart. Trying to keep myself from grabbing her back into my arms. “Think of whatever’s pissing you off and swing.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

She turns toward the wall, raises the hammer above her head, and brings it down. Not technically the proper way to do it, but she’ll be alright. By the third attempt, she’s got it down.

I can tell the moment she really lets go, her anger breaking free with every swing. She's a goddess in her turmoil. My heart fucking beats for her.

I was foolish to think it had ever stopped.



JOURNAL ENTRY #320

I was in first grade the first time a teacher noticed something wasn't right at home. Mrs. Grady was her name. She'd always pull me aside and ask me questions about my life. I was so starved for attention I ate it up like candy, thinking she just liked me enough to want to know.

The day CPS knocked on our door also happened to be the day I brought home my first official "report card." All A's. Mrs. Grady told me how proud she was of me and I thought surely if she was proud, how could mom not be? I raced off the bus, excited to show her, but when I walked into the house there were strange people there. Mom had a big smile plastered on her face and she ushered me in, hands on my shoulders as she introduced me to them. I don't remember their names, only their eyes as they cataloged me from my worn shoes all the way up to the buzzed hair on my head. They made me uncomfortable and I leaned into my mom for support. She squeezed my shoulders, the grip bruising.

Once they left, the smile dropped and her eyes lost all their warmth. Told me how embarrassed I made her. That it was my fault she was like this in the first place. How if I wasn't around she wouldn't need to medicate so much, and how dare I try to paint her as the problem. That maybe if I was a better son, I'd work a little harder at lightening her load.

For a fucking six-year-old, that shit hits you deep. Forms scars you carry with you for the rest of your life. I cried in my room that night, lying in bed with my report card on my pillow catching my tears.

It took... a long fucking time to realize the way she was wasn't my fault. So many relationships ruined and so much time lost from believing her lies. From carrying responsibility that was never meant to be mine.

Parent's words become their children's inner voice.

It's a hell of a thing, learning to ignore it.

ALINA



“Lunchtime!” I say, walking into the studio. I raise my arms, showcasing the bags of Chipotle. It’s Friday, and Jack asked if I’d be willing to pick up something for the crew. I was content hiding out in the office, but he said my lunch would be covered, and I couldn’t say no to a burrito bowl. Besides, I can’t avoid Chase forever.

He has me so twisted up that I can’t tell my head from my toes. Our invisible tether vibrates to life whenever I’m around him, and this time he isn’t the one trying to snap it in half. I’m not sure how to handle a Chase that isn’t pushing me away. It’s confusing. One minute I’ll want to strangle him—hurt him as bad as he’s hurt me. Then the next, I’m convincing myself that maybe we can be friends.

I set up the food on a clean table along the wall, grabbing my burrito bowl and sitting down in a fold-out chair in the corner. It’s been a long time since I’ve been on a construction site, and I had forgotten what the process looked like. It reminds me of Daddy, but those memories hurt because that man doesn’t exist anymore, so I’ve tried to steer clear. Now, after literally smashing down walls, I find myself wanting to sit in the middle of it, breathe it all in.

My stomach jumps when Chase enters the room. I tell myself to stop watching him, but my eyes are stalkers and I can’t look away. He takes in the room and all the food. Our gazes lock. I’m mid-chew and I just sit there, food forgotten in my mouth, staring at him. I can’t help it. For the thousandth time since he’s been back, my brain and heart war with each

other. It's hard being around him. But there are also flashes where I don't think about the past, and when that happens, being with him is as easy as breathing. He quiets the doubts—the voices. But I can't let myself go through this again. I know what's at the end of the rainbow isn't a pot of gold—it's Chase Adams.

A couple of younger guys come in, and Chase's eyes crinkle as he throws his head back. His throaty laugh causes me to cross my legs against the sudden ache flaring up between them.

I look down at my watch, checking the time. I'm leaving early today to pick up Jax from the airport. He's coming home for the next two weeks before he has to hightail it back to California. He's been hard to get ahold of—just a random text here and there—so I haven't had the chance to warn him about Chase.

Regina was surprisingly understanding about me needing to take a half-day. After my abysmal first impression, things improved once she realized I wasn't completely inept. She still doesn't trust the crew on their own, so she's insisting I wait until she gets here to “keep an eye on things.”

She waltzes through the door right as I check the time again, giving me a passing glance on her way to the office. *Okay, I guess that's my cue.* When I throw my trash away, I catch Chase leaning against the wall, watching me. Fire blooms on my cheeks. I hate the way he looks at me. I can't wait until this renovation is over and I can get some space. Right now, I can hardly breathe.



“SWEETHEART.”

“Teeth!” I yell, running around my car to jump in his arms. “You’ve been gone for way too long this time.”

He smiles wide, setting me down and cupping my face in his big palms. “Seems like you survived without me.”

“Barely.” I beam.

Once we settle into the car, he chuckles and pats the dash of my Kia. “I can’t believe this thing’s still running.”

“Hey, you watch your mouth. She’s a labor of love, is all. You’ve done her proud and I ride her gently.” I wink. “So how’s the big time, Mr. Hollywood?”

He sighs, tucking his shaggy blond hair behind his ears. All these years and he’s never changed it. “It’s different than I expected.”

“How so?”

“It’s a bunch of bullshit and red tape. I mean, it takes a lot to rile me up, you know that... but the guy pulling all the strings, James Donahue, is a dick.”

“So you’ve said, a thousand times. Why are you workin’ with him then?”

He grins. “Because he’s the biggest dick in all the land. All I want is to see my cars on the big screen, and he’s the way to make it happen.”

I nod along to his words. “Makes sense. His daughter still followin’ you around like a lost puppy?”

“Yeah.” His smile grows. “She’s not so bad once you get used to her.”

I widen my eyes. “That’s quite the attitude change after spendin’ countless hours and texts complainin’ about her.”

“Yeah, well...” He shrugs. “What’s been going on around here? My mom told me Sam’s having some retirement party? I didn’t even know he was retiring.”

Nerves make my hands grip the steering wheel tight. This is my moment to bring up Chase. “Yep. Life’s full of surprises.”

He raises his brows, his arm resting on his propped knee. “Is it now?”

“Mmhm.”

“What’s up, Lee?”

“Why would you assume somethin’ was up?” My fingers tap on the wheel.

“You’re acting fidgety.”

I make a face. “Fidgety?”

He gives my fingers a pointed glance. “Fidgety.”

I keep my eyes on the road, my bottom lip rubbed raw from how hard I’m biting into it. “Chase is back.”

“What’d you say, sweetheart?”

I glance at him. “I think you heard me.”

“Oh, I did. But I need you to repeat it because I swear you just told me Chase was back.”

“Yep, you heard me alright.”

I peek another look at him, gauging his reaction. Losing Chase was hard on him, too. I’ve always felt a massive amount of guilt over the way that friendship ended. After all, Chase didn’t do *him* wrong.

His face is serious, frown lines marring his otherwise perfect features. “Has he been bothering you?”

I force out a laugh. “What? No.”

“So, you haven’t seen him?”

“I have,” I say slowly.

“Sweetheart, I’m really trying to keep my patience here, but you’re not making it very easy with your cryptic answers.”

I swallow down the rest of my nerves, feeling them settle in the bottom of my belly. “You know how I told you Tiny Dancers is havin’ a reno done? Well... she hired Sam’s construction company and Chase is the lead on it.”

“He’s working with you?”

I cringe. “Not *with* me. Just... around me.”

“Big damn difference, Lee.” His arms cross over his chest.

“Look. I didn’t ask for this, alright? But it’s fine. He’s different than he used to be.” Our night at the lake drops in my mind unbidden. I smother the grin that wants to break free when I think about it. The peace I felt. The comfort he gave. *Dang it.* I don’t want to smile when I think of Chase.

Jax’s eyes are wide, his gaze seeing right through me. “Alina. Tell me you’re not falling for that.”

“Fallin’ for what?”

“For his shit.”

“There’s nothin’ to fall for.”

“Alina.”

“Jax.”

He blows out a breath, rubbing a hand over his face. “I want to talk to him.”

I flip the blinker and focus on turning the wheel. “That’s your prerogative.”

“It is.” He nods. “It’s also my prerogative to kick his ass.”

I snort. “Oh, please. What happened with him was a long time ago. It’s fine. *I’m* fine.”

“I didn’t say you weren’t.” He watches me, his forest-green gaze noticing my every twitch. “Just promise me you’ll stay away from him.”

My heart stalls. I can’t promise him that, and even worse, I don’t know if I want to. “Hard to do that unless you’re expectin’ me to quit my job.”

“You know what I mean, Lee. I don’t want to see you get hurt again.”

Staying away from Chase *should* be a no-brainer. But my feelings muddle and twist until they’re so complicated I can’t tell whether it’s my head or my heart making the decisions. So I don’t promise. I don’t want to be a liar.

Jax comes back to my place and we spend the evening hanging out with Becca. He regales us with tales from

California. The soreness in my belly from laughing is a nice respite from the hollowness that's usually there. There's a different energy around Jax than before. Or maybe it's just the way it feels between him and me. He isn't clinging so tight, and I'm not sure what to do with the shift. All night I obsess over what's changed and while I can't pinpoint it, I realize maybe I depend on him a little more than what's healthy or normal. After Mama's death, he wrapped himself around me and I never let him take his arms back.

I kick them out a few hours later, ready to relax and soak in my tub with a good book. Not ten minutes after drawing a bath, my phone rings. I look down at the display, already knowing in my gut who it is. The Watering Hole. *Of course.* For the first time in a long time, I've had a good day. It's only natural something would come along and screw it all up.

Johnny begrudgingly informs me he'll be forced to call the police if Daddy doesn't leave. He made a scene again, and it's the final straw. Johnny says he's not allowed on their premises anymore, and he isn't listening when they ask him to stay gone. *How did this become my life?* I should just let him get arrested, but I know I won't. The part of me that believes when he says all of this is my fault forces my hand.

He wouldn't be the way he is if Mama were here. And she *would* be if they hadn't been coming to my toddlers' recital.

I grab my keys, lamenting the fact I'm dealing with this again. What would I have done if Jax and Becca had still been at the house? *What you've always done. Make an excuse and get 'em to leave.*

Once I reach my car, I realize the interior light is on. "Come on, come on, come on. Work with me," I mutter, turning the key and watching the lights on my dash flicker. I hear clicks, but no engine. *Shoot.*

I should call Jax, but if I do, he'll ask where I'm going, and I'm not ready for him to know about Daddy. I'm not ready for anyone to know about him. I lean my head against the headrest, closing my eyes.

"Keep it. Just in case."

My eyes snap open as the words filter through my head, and I dig in my purse to grab the piece of paper with Chase's number. Every bone in my body is telling me this is a bad idea, but unless I want to air out my family's dirty laundry, I don't have a choice.

With shaky fingers, I dial his number.

"Goldi?"

My stomach clenches at hearing the nickname, but I don't correct him. "How'd you know it was me?"

"You've had the same number since high school. It's burned into my memory. Is everything okay?" he asks.

I lean my forehead against my steering wheel. "My car won't start."

"Oh. Do you need me to come look at it?"

"No. Daddy's causin' trouble down at The Watering Hole and I need to go pick him up. I just... I didn't have anyone else to call." I lift my head, raising my eyes and willing the tears to stay at bay.

It's silent on the line and I pull the phone away from my ear to make sure it's still connected. I hear rustling on the other end and a female voice in the background mumbling. My stomach bottoms out. *Is he with someone right now?* "Oh, you're busy. I shouldn't have called."

"No," he barks. "No, I'm not busy. You can *always* call. Just tell me where you're at and I'll be there."

My chest warms with relief, and something else I refuse to identify. I ramble off where I live. He offers to go pick up Daddy on his own, but I can't burden him more than I already am.

I wait in my car until I see headlights coming down the street. It's probably stupid, but I don't want him in my apartment. It's the one place in town that doesn't remind me of him, and I'd like to keep it that way.

He pulls in behind where I'm parked, and I'm out the door and over to his truck before he can turn off his engine.

“Hi,” I say, strapping my seatbelt on.

He smiles. “Hey.”

His hair is mussed like he just got out of bed. Like fingers have been tugging on it. Something that feels a lot like jealousy crawls up my throat, squeezing as I remember the woman’s voice on the phone. “Thanks for this. I’m sorry to interrupt whatever you were doin’.”

He glances at me. “You didn’t interrupt anything.”

“Oh, I just heard a woman on the phone and assumed...”

His features tense, but he stays silent. *Guess that answers that.* I shouldn’t want to know anyway. It’s not my business.

He runs his hand through his hair. “You left work early today?”

“Yeah. I’m surprised you noticed with how busy y’all were.”

“I always notice you.”

My rebellious heart skips.

“So where’d you go? Or can I not ask that?”

“You can.” I side-eye him. “I picked up Jax from the airport.”

“Oh. You didn’t want him to come look at your car?”

“No, I... he was tired from travelin’. I didn’t want to bother him.” I stare at my hands, heat rushing to my face.

“Hmm.”

It’s quiet for the rest of the drive and I’m thankful. When we get to The Watering Hole, I see Daddy slouched against the wall outside. Chase sighs as he pulls up to the curb. “Let me go grab him. You just stay here, okay?”

I start to take off my seatbelt. “No, I—”

“Alina. Trust me, stay here.” His hand covers mine, preventing me from unbuckling myself. I shouldn’t trust him. I know this. But I lean back and nod my head anyway.

Surprisingly, he gets Daddy into the back with no fuss. It occurs to me that if I had gotten out, Daddy may have caused a scene. Maybe Chase knew that, too.

I wait until we're on the road again before twisting in my seat. Daddy doesn't seem too gone, yet. Probably because they wouldn't serve him. "Daddy, you alright?"

He ignores me and looks to Chase. "I thought... you said you weren't back for her."

An invisible fist lodges in my gut. *He said that?* I sit forward, looking out the windshield. I can't pay attention to their conversation—I'm too busy wondering why it hurts so much to hear it.

Chase looks in his rearview mirror. "Surprised you remember that, sir. But it's still true, I'm not."

My chest pinches, making me lose my breath.

Daddy grunts and then finally acknowledges me. "I should have... have known Johnny would be callin' you out here."

"You should be thankful they called me, Daddy. If it wasn't me, it would be the cops. Then where would you be? This way you can go home, sleep it off."

Chase is silent. Maybe I should feel embarrassed for hashing it out with Daddy right in front of him, but I can't find it in me to care.

"You know you can't keep showin' up, right? They don't want you in there, Daddy."

He waves me off. "They always say that. It's fine. I'm their best... their best damn customer."

"Why don't you come hang with me instead of goin' to a bar? You can finally come see my place."

I turn around again, watching for his reaction. His eyes are ice. "I already gotta look at you enough."

No matter how often I take his jabs, they still leave a bruise. Chase's fingers tighten around the steering wheel. My eyes flutter closed as I will my heart back into my chest. "I'm

just sayin', maybe you should try not goin' to a bar for a while."

"Don't you lecture me, girl. I'm the one... the parent here, not you."

I huff out a laugh. "Coulda fooled me."

He leans forward, his whiskey-soaked breath hot against my face. "Yeah? Well... I'm the only one you got. You can thank yourself for that."

My already weathered and beaten soul is crippled further by his words.

"That's enough." Chase's voice is sharp, his eyes glacial as he looks at Daddy in the rearview mirror.

I put my hand on Chase's forearm to keep him calm. I don't know how his temper is these days, but the Chase I knew had a short fuse. His muscles tense under my fingertips when I squeeze lightly. "It's okay, Chase. Daddy didn't mean it."

"I don't give a fuck. I won't let that shit fly, Alina." The car rolls to a red light and it gives Chase the perfect opportunity to focus on Daddy. "Do you hear me, Mr. Carson? I want to get you home, but if you disrespect your daughter again, we're gonna have problems."

"I ain't sayin' nothin' she don't already know."

The shame burns my cheeks. Chase's mouth opens but I squeeze his arm tighter. "Please... leave it." My voice is a whisper.

Chase stares at me, his shoulders tense and his jaw twitching before he nods sharply and puts his eyes back on the road. We get Daddy home in one piece. I told Chase to wait in the car, but he wouldn't hear about it. He helps Daddy inside, setting him up in his recliner with a glass of water and ibuprofen.

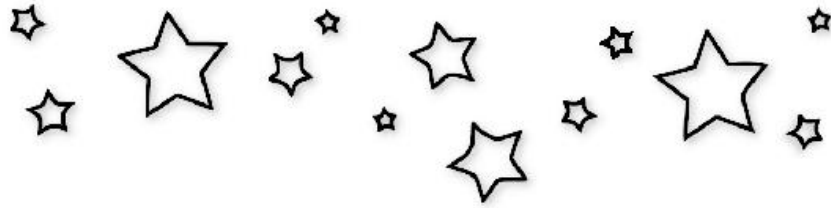
I'm relieved once we're back in his truck. The boulder of Daddy's problems and my shame for causing them sits heavy. I'm ready to wallow in misery alone.

Chase sits with both hands on the steering wheel, but he doesn't turn the engine on. "Wanna go for a drive?"

I grip the handle of the passenger door. Part of me is screaming to open it and run away from him. But the bigger part of me wants to give in. So I say yes.

Before I know it, we're back at the lake, lying beneath the stars.

CHASE



Marissa surprised me with a weekend visit. I should be thrilled the woman I'm in a relationship with is here. As it is, I'm annoyed. It's my first weekend at my new place, and I was planning on enjoying the solitude. But I'm not a complete asshole so I let her in with a smile on my face. What am I supposed to do, tell her to leave?

"I'm so excited to see where you grew up," she says, making herself comfortable on my couch.

"Mmm." I sit down next to her.

"What's wrong? Are you upset that I came?"

"Not upset, just... I wish you would have called first."

"I thought it would be a nice surprise. You've been tense whenever we've talked on the phone. I thought I'd be a good *stress* reliever." She has a wicked smile as she reaches down and palms my lap. I've been half-hard all week from thoughts of Goldi, so it doesn't take long for my body to react, my cock stiffening under her touch.

I haven't really been stressed like Marissa thinks, just distracted with thoughts of Goldi. How she's dealing with her father. How fucking badly I want to take away the sadness from her soul. It's not my place. She has Becca. *Jax*.

Envy slithers up my spine when I think of them together. He was always half in love with her, I'm sure the feelings have only grown. But it doesn't matter. I have Marissa. A gorgeous, successful woman who wants to give me the world. What the fuck am I doing wasting thoughts on someone who I've

already lost? Goldi wants nothing to do with me. It's time I accept it.

Marissa still has her hand in my lap, and I reach down, gripping her wrist. I run my hand up her arm, around the nape of her neck, tangling my fingers in her hair and bringing her mouth to mine. If she wants to be my stress relief, I'll let her.

All my pent-up energy goes into fucking Marissa. Hard. But I feel dirty. Like I cheated on *Goldi*. Which is truly an extra level of some fucked-up shit. I should feel the opposite, since it was the image of honey-blond locks and lush curves that made me come, not the woman who was underneath me.

I brush my hand through my hair as I look at Marissa who's lazing in bed next to me, still naked. She sees me staring and rolls toward me, throwing her leg over my hip as her fingers play with the hair on my chest. "Mmm... I could get used to this."

I absentmindedly rub her back as I ponder whether this is something *I* could get used to. Could I see myself with her, here? It's not unpleasant, having her warm my bed. A nice pussy to feast on and an intelligent mind to talk with. There are worse things to come home to.

My phone vibrates on the end table, bringing me out of my thoughts. Marissa pokes her head up to look at the screen. It's a random number she wouldn't recognize. But I do. My heart speeds up, and I push Marissa off me as I sit up to answer.

"Goldi."

She says she needs me and I'm out of bed in seconds, holding the phone between my ear and shoulder as I throw on my clothes.

"What are you doing?" Marissa asks, leaning on her elbows.

I hold up my finger so she knows I'll answer her in a second. I'm sure she's wondering who's on the phone, but my mind is only worried about Goldi. Complete tunnel vision. I repeatedly fucked-up when she needed me before, no chance

in hell I'm going to let that shit happen again. I'm so damn happy I gave her my number.

I hang up the phone after getting her address.

Hands creep around my waist as I grab my wallet and keys. *Shit. How did I forget Marissa was here?*

"Are you going somewhere?"

"Yeah. A friend needs some help. Car trouble."

She gives me an incredulous look. "At ten p.m.?"

"Seems so."

"Well, hold on a second. I'll come with you." She steps back, picking up her dress from the floor.

Panic chokes me. "No, no. You hang out here. I'm not sure how long this will take."

Her dress hangs limply in her hand. "Are you sure?"

Fuck yes, I'm sure. Having the woman who wants my heart around the reason she'll never get it? Hard pass.

Her eyes narrow. "Who's the friend?"

"What's that?"

"I asked who the friend was that you're going to help. Someone from work?"

"Oh. No, it's..." I debate how the fuck to handle this situation. Why is it even a question? I'm not doing anything wrong, and I have no reason to lie. "It's a friend from when I used to live here. Alina."

Her eyes spark. "Alina. That's a pretty name." She slinks over to me, running her hand down the front of her naked body. Confidence is not something Marissa lacks, and if it were any other time, she'd have my full attention. "Doesn't she have someone else she can call? Another friend, a boyfriend of her own?"

I shrug, but her words invade my brain. *Does she have a boyfriend?* God, I'm fucking pathetic. I'm wondering about Goldi while the woman I'm in a relationship with is standing

right in front of me. “I don’t know, but I’m not gonna be a dick and ignore her when she needs me.”

Marissa huffs, dropping her hands from where they were teasing her breasts. “Fine. I’ll just be here, waiting for you to get back.”

I feel like an asshole, but not enough to make me stay.

“How long will you be gone?”

“I’m not sure. However long it takes, I guess. Order some food if you get hungry, I don’t have much here.”

“Okay.” She goes up on her toes and leaves a lingering kiss on my lips.



WHEN I ASKED if Goldi wanted to go for a drive, I didn’t plan to end up at the lake, but here we are. I have so many things I want to say. But I’m silent because I know it’s not what she needs to hear.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. I ignore it. I’m sure it’s Marissa asking where I am for the tenth time, even though I’ve already told her. I feel like a shit boyfriend for not responding, but when I look at Goldi, it’s hard to care. For the first time tonight, she looks relaxed. Leaned back on her elbows as she stares at the water. I love seeing her like this.

“Do you remember that date you went on with that fucker Reed? He brought you here to the lake.”

A soft smile grows on her face. “Yep. It was a great date.”

I scoff, decades-old jealousy creeping from my memory into my bones. “You mean it was great *after* the date.”

She laughs. “I see time hasn’t lessened your ego.”

“I was so fucking jealous. The thought of him touching you drove me crazy. It was all I could think about. And when I found out he brought you out here...” I shake my head, chuckling. “I thought I’d go insane with how much I wanted to

take his place. He was doing things with you I wanted to do. Things I wouldn't let myself do." My voice quiets as I get lost in memories. *I was such an idiot.* "Even after we were together, I never really let myself. I didn't have the balls to be what you needed."

She turns her head, resting against the afghan and watching me with sad eyes.

I suck my teeth. "I guess it doesn't matter now."

"Why do you bring me here?" she asks.

"Because life gets noisy. And when I was a kid... when I was in your room, under your makeshift sky with those tacky neon stickers, the world would get quiet. I thought maybe this could do the same for you." I wave my arm at the Tennessee starlight.

She stares at me, and I watch the delicate slope of her neck as she swallows. "Sometimes... sometimes I look at you and I wanna punch you in the face."

Laughter bursts from me. "Don't sugarcoat it, damn."

She smiles. "It's the truth."

Her smile fades. "But then... then there are other times, like now. Where I'm happy you're back. And that makes me feel crazy 'cause I should know better than to let you into my life."

I try to tamp down the emotions her words cause. The happiness swirls around, mixing with the devastation in knowing she thinks I'm just another bad decision. "Alina, I messed up with you. I know that. I didn't put you first. I wasn't there for you the way you've always, *always* been there for me. I'll live the rest of my life with that regret. I'd love to have a conversation where I tell you all the ways I know I've fucked-up, but I know that's not what you need from me. Not right now."

"I may never be ready for that, Chase."

I drop my head, hoping she can't hear my heart splinter. "And I respect that, but let me say one thing."

“Chase, I—”

I reach over and put my finger on her lips. Her perfect fucking lips. My eyes are heavy with the weight of the words I’m about to say, and I know she can feel my finger trembling. “I’m sorry, Alina. I’m so fucking sorry. I know they’re just words and they don’t make up for shit. I know they’re eight years too late. But there they are.”

I watch as my words sink into her. Feel her lips under the pad of my finger as they part to take a breath. Desperation claws at me. There’s nothing more I want than for her to forgive my sins. But I won’t ask that. Forgiveness isn’t mine to demand, it’s hers to give.

She pulls away from my hand and faces the sky. I follow suit, lying against the blanket, my apology lingering in the space between us.

“Thank you,” she speaks into the silence. “For the apology... and for bringin’ me here. It helps.”

I was hoping it would. Her dad has a serious problem, and he talks to her like an asshole. Blames her for things he has no fucking business laying on her shoulders. I know what that can do to someone’s psyche.

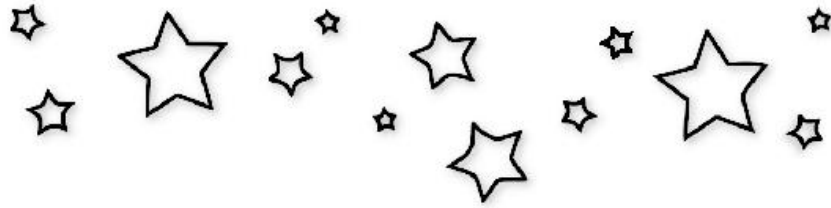
I chew on the inside of my cheek, peeking at her from the corner of my eye. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not really.”

I nod. There are a million things I want to say. *You’re beautiful. I still love you. Your mom’s death is not your fault.* I bite my tongue. Instead, I reach out and grasp her hand, blood pumping as I wait to see if she clasps mine back.

She does.

CHASE



It's Sunday morning and I'm driving back to Nashville. This weekend has been eye opening, to say the least. I have an appointment with Doc and then Nar-Anon group this evening. Marissa stayed all weekend. She was pissed when I came home on Friday night, but not pissed enough to leave. Instead, she stayed busy ordering furniture for my house. I spent the whole time feeling awkward as fuck because she kept trying to get me into bed and I... couldn't. I've been trying to feel a sliver of the way I do for Goldi, but for Marissa instead. It hasn't happened. Marissa's a good woman. She's just not the woman for me. Now, I just have to figure out the best way to tell her.

Courage to change the things I can. I repeat the serenity prayer before parking behind her and following her into her house.

I'm surprised she's been dropping hints about moving to Sugarlake when she has such a nice setup here. My stomach rolls when I think of how invested she must be in our relationship to feel that way.

"Do you want anything to drink?" Marissa walks to the fridge.

I lean against her kitchen island and shake my head. "No, I can't stay long. But can we talk for a sec?"

Her hand pauses mid-air, halfway to the cabinet of glasses. "Talk about what?"

"About what we're doing here. With this. With us."

“With *us*?” She looks over her shoulder at me. “I thought we were excelling in that department, so I’m not sure what we need to talk about.”

“Do you really feel that way? You can honestly stand there and tell me you’re one-hundred percent happy with how things are?”

“Yes. We’re very compatible.” Her voice deepens.

Damn. She’s not gonna make this easy. “The past few years have been fun, you’ve been a great friend and yeah, the sex is great.”

She saunters around the island and steps into me. “Then why do I get the feeling you’re trying to ruin it?”

I pull on the ends of my hair. “You deserve better than me.”

“I don’t want better.”

“I want better *for* you.”

“I’m a big girl, Chase. I can decide for myself what and who I want.”

My stomach’s tight, my anxiety threatening to choke me. I don’t want another woman’s hurt on my conscience, but she’s not getting the picture. “Marissa, be serious. You’re pushing me for things I’ve told you time and time again I’m not ready to give.”

“You *are* giving me what I need.” She rests her hand on my chest. “I know you feel what’s between us, Chase.”

My jaw clenches to keep the harsh truth from spilling out. I *don’t* feel it. Maybe in another life—if Goldi didn’t exist, then the comfortable warmth Marissa provides would be enough. But it’s hard to appreciate warmth when you’ve been consumed by fire.

I grab her hand off my chest. “I care about you. But you deserve someone who’s able to give you everything. That man’s not me.”

“That man’s not you.” She repeats my words, her eyes shuttering. “Is this about that girl?”

My heart pounds. *Fuck*. “What girl?”

“That Leah girl you ditched me for this weekend.”

“Alina.” My response is automatic. I cringe, knowing I just made things worse.

She laughs, backing up a step. “Unbelievable. I tried to look past it when you left for hours and then didn’t want to touch me. I forgave you when you came home at one in the morning with a look on your face you’ve never given me.”

It’s a struggle not to show the guilt on my face. She really knows how to paint the picture of an asshole.

“Did you fuck her?”

“Excuse me?”

“Did. You. Fuck. Her?”

“No.” *But I wanted to.*

“I don’t believe you.” She crosses her arms over her chest.

“I may be an asshole, but I’m not a cheat... and this isn’t about her. It’s about me not being able to give you what you want.”

She explodes. “All I want is you!”

I blow out a breath. “I’m trying not to hurt you.”

“Well, you’re doing a shit job.”

“What would you have me do, Marissa? Continue to play house with you? Let you uproot your life and move in with me when I know damn well I won’t ever love you?” The words barrel out of me.

She freezes in place. *Shit*. I didn’t mean to say that last part out loud. Her eyes become glossy and she stiffens her shoulders. “Get out.”

I sigh. “You’ll see this is what’s best in the long run, Marissa.”

“Get. Out!” she screams. She takes off her shoe and throws it, narrowly missing me as it crashes against the door.
Jesus.

I want to convince her this is what’s best for both of us, but it’s clear she doesn’t want to hear any more of my words. So I leave. I hope in time she realizes this is what needed to happen. I’m not sad over the end of our relationship. All I can feel is relief.

I head straight to my therapy appointment with Doc, pulling him in for a hug he doesn’t return. *Stingy fucker.* “Damn, Doc. It’s good to see you.” I pull back, smirking at him before making myself comfortable on his couch.

“Chase. How are you?”

“Good, real good.” I lean forward and rest my elbows on my knees.

“You seem to be in good spirits.”

I can’t help the smile that overtakes my face. “You’ll never guess who works at the job site I’m on.”

He raises a heavy brow.

“Goldi.”

“Hmm. And how is that?”

“It’s... amazing. And frustrating. And torturous.” I pause, looking up. “Are you married, Doc?”

He nods.

“Do you love your wife?”

“Very much.”

“Can you imagine being around her and knowing she hates you? What it would feel like to not be able to touch her... to kiss her?”

He’s silent.

“I know you won’t actually answer that. It’s a rhetorical question, I guess. But fuck me, Doc. I forgot what it felt like, you know? I can’t fucking breathe with how bad I want to

touch her. Make her smile.” I shake my head. “But, I know it won’t happen. We’re kind of, sort of... friends now, I guess?” I think about this weird limbo I’ve been in with her. “I don’t know if you can really call it that. There are some things she’s going through and I just—I see the same haunted look in her eyes I’ve spent my life trying to hide. I want to be there for her. I ache to take all her hurt away.”

“Does she allow you to be there the way you want?”

“Sometimes.” I shrug.

He writes on his notepad.

“I broke up with Marissa.”

His pen pauses as he looks at me from over his glasses. “Oh?”

“Yeah.” I run my hand over my head. “We should never have been anything more than friends. She wanted so much from me, and I didn’t want to give it to her. I never even told her I was adopted. How could I make a life with her?”

“You never spoke of your past with Marissa?” Doc sounds surprised.

“Fuck no. Marissa isn’t the type of person I’d want to share stories with. That’s why she was great. She never pushed. It was purely physical, and that’s how I liked it.” I frown. “At least at first.”

“Hmm... let’s change course for a moment. Is being back in Sugarlake bringing up any feelings for your sister?”

Ice races through my veins and my mouth clamps shut. Lily is still hard for me to verbalize. The cuts from her abandonment run deep. It’s hard. I miss her, and I’m extremely fucking pissed at her. Maybe one day I’ll be able to talk about her, but today is not that day.

“I don’t want to talk about that.”

“Then I hope you’ll consider writing about it.”



JOURNAL ENTRY #327

Being back home makes sleep harder to come by. Lily surges forward in my dreams, choking me with her memory. But I've accepted the reality there's nothing I could have done to save her from herself. People are in charge of their own happiness. It's unfair to put that responsibility on others.

But it doesn't stop the nightmares.

Some days I wake up in a cold sweat not knowing where I am, thinking I'm back in that last foster home before we were adopted. That pudgy motherfucker who thought he could sneak into her room and nobody would notice. But I noticed. It replays in my subconscious whenever I'm asleep. Except the dreams are different than how I remember reality. They twist and get muddled until I'm not sure what was real and what wasn't.

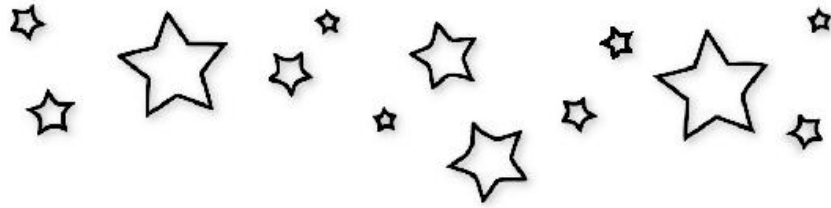
She was still young. We were there for a little over a year. She promised me nothing ever happened. But in my dreams, she's crying, asking why I didn't save her sooner.

Sometimes, on the really fucked-up nights, she'll shift into a vision of my mom, telling me what a shit brother I am. I think I hate them both for making me love them so much. But the hatred doesn't take away the urge to find them.

Maybe I didn't pay close enough attention. I still have no fucking clue why Lily felt like she needed to resort to drugs and bad people to escape her reality. A reality she convinced everyone she was happy with for so many years. I don't fucking know, man. Maybe I'll never find the answers, and that's hard for me to accept.

I hope that wherever she is, she's safe.

ALINA



It's only Wednesday and I'm dragging. Between Logan's, working, and rushing straight to Daddy's to make sure he stays home for the night, I'm drained. Not just physically, but emotionally. Daddy knows just how to slice, his barbs cutting deep, and I wonder how I survived living under the same roof as him for so long.

Regina and Chase are having a meeting, so I've been relegated to the office couch. Regina is nothing if not a control freak, so this has been happening since Monday. Chase keeps giving me glances, probably because I can't stop yawning. Finally, they wrap up, Regina giving me some tasks to do before she's out the door. She never stays—just comes and goes when she's needed. It must be nice to be an owner. One day, maybe I'll get there, too.

Chase hangs back, leaning against the desk while I sit in the office chair. He quirks a brow.

“What?” I ask.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, why wouldn't I be?”

His shoulders lift. “You seem tired.”

My instinct is to get defensive and hide the truth—and the truth is that making sure Daddy doesn't end up in jail is a hard job. I'm about to keel over from either exhaustion or stress. I'm not sure which one will get me first. I open my mouth to brush off his concern, but then I remember Chase already knows about Daddy. There's no reason to hide it from him.

I rest my head on my hand and sigh. “I am tired. I’ve been headin’ straight to Daddy’s every night to make sure he doesn’t get himself in trouble. I can’t stop the drinkin’, but I can at least try to keep him home and safe. If he goes back to Johnny’s bar, they’ll throw him in jail.”

Chase crosses his arms, his lips pursing. “He putting up a fight?”

I roll my eyes. “Daddy lives and breathes to fight with me. So yeah, it’s not easy. But I can’t just do *nothin’*.”

A pinch in my neck has me reaching back to rub out the kink. “I don’t think I ever realized how uncomfortable the guest bed was, though.”

His brows raise. “You’ve been sleeping there?”

“Sleepin’ is a stretch. I lay in the guest room and spend all night worryin’ he’s gonna get alcohol poisonin’ or wake up and try to leave.” I laugh and stare up at the ceiling. “When did I become the parent?”

“Why don’t you just stay in your room?”

“Daddy moved all his stuff in there and turned my room into a ‘man cave’ as soon as I moved out.” I wave off my statement like it doesn’t bother me. “Anyway, I can’t wait ‘til Eli gets in town. They’re gonna stay with Daddy at the house. I just have to keep it together ‘til then.” I attempt a smile but it feels more like a grimace.

“Hmm.” He hums, that dang stare of his penetrating through to my bones. I’m not hiding anything, but it unnerves me either way.

I don’t mention that my extracurricular activities are also tiring me out. I’ve been going to the rec center and having quickies with Logan on my lunch break. Normally I wouldn’t be so desperate for an orgasm, but Chase being back has me all twisted up and I need some relief. Frequently.

My phone dings with a text and it’s the perfect excuse to break this weird stare off with Chase. I look down and like I thought him into existence—there’s a text from Logan.

Logan: Any surprise visits from you today? I'll be at the rec until 3.

I grin, unlocking the screen to respond.

Me: I can stop by on my lunch break at 12:30?? It will have to be quick.

Logan: Must be my lucky day. I don't have a client until 1:30. Feel like sneaking into the men's locker room?

I bite my lip. I can't deny the thrill that spikes through me. I never thought I'd be into public places, but I've found out this past week it turns me on somethin' fierce. I hear a throat clear and I look up. Chase is standing in front of the desk, staring at me. His body is tense like he knows what I was texting about. *That's impossible.*

I give him a sheepish smile, my cheeks heating. "Sorry, just makin' lunch plans. What were we talkin' about?"

I haven't really forgotten, but I'm hoping he drops the subject. I'm tired enough from having to live my life, I don't really want to keep talking about it, too.

"Nothing important. I gotta get back to work." He taps his knuckles on the top of the desk. "Try to get some rest, yeah?" He grins, but it doesn't reach his eyes.

I don't see him again, and I don't look for him as I leave to head to the rec.

The quickie with Logan is just what I need to take the edge off. Easy. No strings, no hurt. Just what the doctor ordered.

The high from our tryst lasts through the rest of my workday. It isn't until I'm walking through the grocery store, it starts to wear off. I dread having to stay up all night worrying about Daddy sneaking out. I cannot *wait* for Eli to get to town. I'm not sure how much longer I can keep this up. Daddy needs help and I'm not fit to be giving it to him. I'm trying to get my life together, but for some reason, I keep slamming myself against the walls of his animosity.

I decide on burgers for dinner, hoping he isn't already three sheets to the wind. Maybe I can convince him to man the

grill—remind him there’s something he’s capable of doing other than drinking himself into oblivion.

By the time I pull into the driveway, I’m completely drained and wishing for my bed. I pinch my cheeks as I stare in the rearview mirror, trying to get some color back in my face. *This is as good as it’s gonna get.* There’s nothing I can do to hide the dark circles that line my eyes, or the exhaustion seeping from my pores.

I load the groceries into my arms before heading to the front door. I realize I’ll have to ring the bell since I don’t have a free hand to turn the handle, and I send up a prayer that Daddy is still coherent enough to answer. *Let it be a good night. Let it be a good night.* I shift on my feet, trying to ignore the weight of the bags. When the door opens, my mind goes blank.

It isn’t Daddy who answers, it’s Chase.

He grins. “Hi.”

“Hi. What are you doin’ here?”

He opens the screen door and takes the groceries from my arms. I’m too stunned by his presence to argue. He turns around, loaded up with my groceries, and walks down the hallway. I follow him, mouth gaping. *Is he just gonna ignore my question?*

“Chase, what are you doin’ here?” I repeat once we make it to the kitchen. He sets the bags down on the counter and spins to face me.

“Thought I’d drop by, keep your dad company.” He says it so casually, like the words coming out of his mouth are completely normal.

I twist around, searching for Daddy. “Where is he?”

“We’re hanging out on the back patio.”

“You’re just... hangin’ out?”

“Yep.”

Daddy walks in through the back door and I turn my attention to him. “Hi, Daddy.”

He makes eye contact and I don’t miss the fact that his eyes aren’t glassy yet.

“What’s for dinner?” he asks. I get no greeting, but that doesn’t surprise me. I ignore the sting the gruffness of his voice causes. I miss the sweet timbre he used to get whenever he saw me.

“I thought we could make burgers. You up for some grillin’?” I smile wide, hoping he’s in an amicable mood.

He’s already shaking his head, but before he can say anything Chase cuts in.

“Hell yeah. I hope there’s enough for me, too.” He smirks. “Think you can teach me a thing or two, old man?”

To my shock, I see a grin pull at Daddy’s lips. *What in the world?*

“There’s an art to grillin’, boy. Not sure you’re cut out for it.” He looks him up and down.

“Lucky I know you, then.” Chase glances at me and winks. “Unless you’re not up for the challenge.”

My eyes spring back and forth between them. Daddy mutters something about checking the propane and disappears out the back again. I’m standing in the middle of the kitchen, gobsmacked. What the *heck* is going on?

“I hope it’s okay I’m here.” Chase moves toward me, angling his head down to look in my eyes.

“Uhh... yeah. Yes, it’s—it’s fine. What—how...”

His eyes twinkle with amusement as I stumble over my words.

“I was at Sam and Anna’s, figured I’d walk over. Keep your dad company, give you a break.”

My heart trills. “You’re here for me?”

He puts his hands in his jean pockets, briefly lifting his shoulders. “You need rest.” He says it like it’s no big deal—like he’d do this for anybody. Maybe he would. I’m realizing I truly don’t know this Chase, at all.

“That’s...” Gratefulness surges out of nowhere and I have to choke it back down. “Thank you,” I manage to whisper.

Chase stays. He mans the grill next to Daddy, who I hear laugh. Honest to God, he’s *laughing*. My heart soars at the sound.

Daddy drinks himself into a stupor and starts slurring during dinner. But at least for tonight, he stayed home. He had a good night. He didn’t act like he hates the sight of me. I stare at Chase across the table, my body tingling as I look at him. The gratitude vibrates through my bones. He didn’t have to spend his time like this. But he’s here. For me—and maybe a little bit for Daddy, too.

I’m the first to stand from the table, picking up the dirty plates and taking them to the sink. Daddy stumbles out to sit in his recliner and watch TV. I can feel as Chase moves behind me, the static buzzing from how close our hands are. He reaches out, uncurling my fingers slowly as he places the car keys in my palm.

My eyebrows furrow. “What are you doin’?”

“Go home, Alina. Get some sleep. I’ll clean up. I’m gonna stay here and make sure your dad stays put. Try out that guest bed,” he teases.

“What?” I gasp. “No, no, you don’t need to do that. You’ve done more than enough.” A strand of my hair falls forward, tickling my cheek. He brushes it behind my ear, his fingers lingering. Butterflies erupt in my stomach as his palm cups my jaw. My mouth parts, the inhale sharp against my teeth.

“Let someone take care of *you* for once, Goldi.” His eyes glaze over as his thumb swipes across my mouth. I bite my tongue to keep it from slipping out. I want to taste his touch on my lips. I clench the keys in my hand so tight I’m afraid I’ll break skin. I need to keep my grip on reality.

I step back. His hand stays in the air for just a moment before he comes back to himself and drops it down. He gestures toward the front door. “Go home. I’ve got it under control.”

I shouldn’t accept his offer. I’ve trusted him before and look where it got me. The beat of my stitched-up heart remembers how he shattered it. But I’m so tired. So I swallow down all my doubts and nod my head. “Okay. But call me if anything, *anything* goes wrong. And if you decide you wanna go home you can call too, just let me know and I can drive back over here. It doesn’t matter if it’s—”

“Alina.” He chuckles. “It’s fine.”

“Right.” I blow out a breath and start backing up toward the hallway, my eyes never leaving Chase’s. “Thank you.”

He smiles and those *dang* dimples make me smile back. I’m a sucker for them every time.

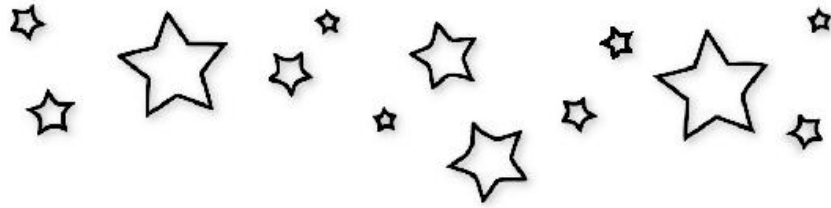
When I get home, I’m out as soon as my head hits the pillow. I sleep soundly for the first time in years, and I wake up refreshed. I don’t talk to Chase at work, but I feel his eyes on me. It shouldn’t excite me the way it does.

When I get to Daddy’s house that night, Chase is there again. Cooking dinner and then pushing me out the door.

On Friday, while I watch Chase slip Daddy a Dr. Pepper instead of a whiskey, I let myself imagine what it would be like if he were mine.

I don’t hate it as much as I should.

ALINA



“Want to catch a movie tonight?” Jax asks.

I look over at Becca, sipping on her second mimosa and shoveling pancakes in her mouth. She shakes her head. “Can’t. Have a date.”

“*You?* Have a date?” I point at her, narrowing my eyes. Becca loves men, but she isn’t the dating type. Growing up, she was a firm believer that commitment of any kind was a waste of time. Now that she’s an adult and still living under her daddy’s—aka the church’s—thumb, that lack of commitment has only grown. I don’t know that I’ve ever seen her go on an actual date in my life.

“Yep.” She looks up, realizing we’re both staring at her. “What?” she mumbles around a mouthful of pancake.

Jax laughs. “You can’t just say something like that and not expect us to need more information. Who’s the date with?”

She swallows, looking down at her plate. “You don’t know him, he’s from Chattanooga.”

I squint my eyes. “What’s his name? How’d you meet him? Come on girl, you know you can’t just leave us hangin’ after droppin’ that bomb.”

She runs her fingers through her curly hair. “His name’s John and I met him online.”

Jax is still chuckling, but his face drops when he sees the glare Becca is sending his way. “Tell me you’re joking.”

“Nope. Not jokin’. I like him, he’s nice.”

“He’s *nice*?” I exclaim, sharing another look with Jax. “Who are you and what have you done with my best friend?”

“I’m still here.” She throws her arms up. “I just—don’t you think it’s time I start takin’ life more seriously? Try to settle down? We’re gettin’ old as shit, y’all.”

My face scrunches. “Are you feeling okay? What happened to the ‘I don’t do commitment’ Becca?”

“She grew up, I guess.” She grabs her mimosa, downing it before looking around for the server.

“Okaaaay...” Jax says. “So that’s a no from Becca who’s busy getting busy with a man named John.” He swings his eyes toward me. “That leaves you and me, sweetheart. Wanna get crazy tonight?” He grins, leaning his elbows on the table. “Maybe dinner *and* a movie?”

I smile, but my stomach flops while I try to think of an excuse for why I’m saying no. One that doesn’t involve babysitting my drunk daddy and letting Chase cook me meals. “I can’t. I’m havin’ dinner with Daddy and helpin’ him prepare the guest room for Eli.”

Jax sticks out his bottom lip. “Fine, ladies. Leave me all by myself. A lone cowboy riding into the night.”

Becca snorts. “I’m sure you won’t have any trouble findin’ a replacement for the night. One that will be all too willin’ to give you a *ride*.”

Jax grips his heart. “That hurts, truly, Beccs. I’m more than my gigantic cock.”

“Oh? You a catcher, too?” She raises an eyebrow.

“I don’t speak of private activities.” Jax smiles, winking. “You’ve never been curious?”

“Uhm... no.”

“Never wanted a one-way ticket on the Jackson express?” He wiggles his brows.

Becca gags. “Darlin’, I’d break the train down.”

I giggle into my sweet tea and take another sip.

“Anyway,” Jax shifts his attention to me. “When’s Eli getting here, sweetheart?”

“A little less than a week. That reminds me, Becca, you think your daddy can sit down with them and talk about havin’ their weddin’ at the church?”

Becca’s eyes grow wide. “He wants *my* old man to marry them?”

“Why not? Eli asked me about it the other day. I’m just the messenger.”

“What’dya want me to do about it?”

My forehead scrunches. *What’s the big deal?* “Haven’t you been helpin’ around the church since summer break started? I mentioned it and he said to ask.”

Her eyes light on fire, her cheeks going as red as her hair. “So, Eli knows I’d be helpin’ and he still had you ask?” She slams her body against the back of the chair.

“Okay, that’s it, psycho. What happened between you and Eli? You never used to have a problem with him, but anytime I bring him up, you get weird.”

She rolls her eyes, tangling her hair in her fingers. “I don’t get weird. I just think your brother’s a jerk. I never thought he’d come back here, let alone bring a little hussy of a girl wantin’ to parade their love through the town.”

“That’s a little harsh,” I chide. “We don’t even know her.”

She throws her hands up. “Ugh. You know what? I have to go. I need to get ready for my date.”

“With John. The ‘Becca tamer,’” Jax pipes in.

He is *so* not helping.

Becca sends him a glare and throws her napkin down on the table. “Just for that, you can pay for brunch. I’ll see y’all later.”

We both watch with big eyes as she leaves the restaurant.

“What the hell was that about?” Jax asks.

“Beats me. She’s been weird, lately. I think maybe her and Eli got into it or somethin’ when they were both in Florida.”

“She’s never said anything?”

I shrug. “Nope. The only thing I know about Florida is she was plannin’ on livin’ there indefinitely, and ended up comin’ home. Other than that, she doesn’t talk about it.”

“Hmm. Who knows.” He takes a bite of his food. “You sure you can’t come tonight? You’re really gonna leave me all alone?”

“You’re a big boy, Jax. I’m sure you’ll find somethin’ to do.”

“I suppose I’ll have to,” he pouts.

I try to pay attention to Jax for the rest of brunch, but my mind is busy replaying Becca’s actions. She’s always been as stubborn as the day is long, so when she doesn’t want to talk about something there’s no changing her mind. But I wish she’d tell me about Florida. I thought she only saw Eli a handful of times, but her reaction makes it seem like more. I make a mental note to ask Eli next time I talk to him.

Enchiladas are on the menu for Saturday night dinner, courtesy of Chase. I haven’t cooked a single thing all week, and I’ve gotten a solid eight hours of sleep each night, so I’m feeling better than I have in a while. Still, this weird family dynamic with Chase and Daddy should have alarm bells sounding in my head. Maybe this fuzzy feeling of comfort is making my ears numb to the ringing.

I’ve just taken my first bite of enchilada when the doorbell rings. I look over at Daddy, furrowing my eyebrows. “You expectin’ someone, Daddy?”

“Who would I be expectin’, Alina?” he barks.

The bell rings again. Chase stands before I can, putting his hand on my shoulder to keep me in place. I sit back down, keeping my ears strained so I can hear who it is.

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

Shoot. I know that voice. My fork drops to the plate and I close my eyes. I should have known this would happen. Before I can think about going to defuse the situation, footsteps come stomping through the hallway and a raging Jax enters the kitchen.

“Can I speak to you for a moment?” he hisses through clenched teeth.

“Sure.” I scoot my chair back, laying my napkin on the table. Chase is standing behind Jax, his fists clenched and hazel eyes stormy as they bounce between the two of us.

Jax knocks into his shoulder as he walks by. I cringe, expecting Chase to react, but he doesn’t. He stands stoic, only the twitching of his jaw letting me know he’s holding himself back. I follow Jax to the front porch where he spins around and faces me with a glare.

“*This* is why you couldn’t hang out with me tonight?”

“I told you I was gonna be here with Daddy.” My voice is weak. I’ve never seen Jax upset like this.

“And you didn’t think to mention you were playing house with Chase?”

“I’m not *playin’ house* with him. He’s just been showin’ up. Helpin’ out. It’s not like I invited him over.”

“But you didn’t tell him to leave.”

I look down, the guilt chiseling away at my insides. “No.”

He lets out a disbelieving laugh, his hands on the top of his head. “I can’t believe this, Lee. I mean, what the *fuck*?”

Guilt morphs into indignation at his tone. I get that he’s upset about Chase, but it isn’t his decision. It isn’t his life. “Listen, you don’t get to be mad at me, Jax. I didn’t tell you because it’s none of your business.”

He rears back. “None of my *business*? Was it my business when you used my shoulder to cry on every time we’d go visit him?”

“Jax—”

“No.” He cuts his hand through the air. “Let me ask you something, Lee. When he fucked around on you the same night your mom died... who was it that held you? Because it sure as shit wasn’t him. Was it my *business*, then?”

Tears well in my eyes, the words dying on my tongue. “Jax...” I whisper.

His cheeks are rosy with his anger and he steps in close to me, lowering his voice. “Is it really that easy?”

“Is what that easy?”

“To forgive him? To take him back like nothing happened?”

“I’m not with him, Jax. It’s not like that, I swear. We’ve just been friends and—”

“I’ve waited years for you to give me a chance, Alina. Hoping that he’d loosen his grip on your heart enough to just let you fucking *see* me.” He beats his chest. “He treated you like shit, and somehow you still choose him over me. Every time. Less than a month he’s been back, and you just open your arms to him.” He raises his face to the sky. “You’ve never even given me your hand.”

I feel like I might throw up. I swallow around the knot in my throat, searching for words to make this okay. To stop from breaking his heart. “Jax, I... you know I love you.”

He blows out a breath, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Just not as much as you love him, right?”

My clammy hands wring together. “Don’t do that. It’s different.”

His fingers tease the chain around his neck as he hangs his head, shaking it slightly. “I’m gonna go.”

He stomps by me and I reach out, grabbing the back of his shirt, trying to anchor him to me. “You’re my best friend.”

“I don’t *want* to just be your friend.”

I close my eyes, the truth of his words stabbing me. I’ve known it, and I should have put a stop to his feelings long

before now. “Do you hate me?” I hiccup.

He spins, reaching up and wiping under my eyes. “I could never hate you, sweetheart. That’s the problem.” With a sigh, he kisses my forehead and walks down the steps of the front porch. I watch helplessly as he peels out of the driveway. It’s not until he’s gone that I collapse on the ground, covering my mouth to keep the sobs at bay.

This hurts.

I’m not sure how much time passes with me sitting outside, staring at the empty spot where Jax was. But I’m snapped out of my stupor when I hear the screen door open.

Chase sits next to me, his knees to his chest and his eyes straight ahead. “Do you want me to go?”

I shake my head.

“Are you okay?”

I shake my head again. Tears I thought I already cried track down my face. Chase wraps his thick arm around me, pulling me into his side. I lean into him, knowing I shouldn’t accept his embrace, but basking in the solace, nonetheless.

Eventually, we go back inside and finish dinner. Daddy’s already incoherent, and as I watch him, I can’t help but feel relieved Jax didn’t stick around. Things would have been much worse if he realized I kept Daddy’s issues from him. The fissure in my stomach gapes wider and threatens to swallow me whole.

I don’t feel happiness when I leave tonight.

I don’t sleep soundly in my own bed.

Instead, I lay in my tears and try to keep from drowning in my failures.



LIKE EVERY OTHER SUNDAY, I visit Mama’s grave. There’s nothing I wish more than to have her hold me and tell me

everything will be alright. I'll settle for spewing my broken heart all over her memory to help ease the ache.

By the time I get to Daddy's for the night, I'm feeling a bit more put together. Chase isn't coming for dinner, he has some business over in Nashville on Sundays. It's a good thing he isn't here. After the blowout with Jax, I need some breathing room. I'm getting lost in my feelings and forgetting how hard it was to find my way back last time.

But I guess my self-control is weak because I only make it through dinner before I give in to the urge to text him.

Me: I think Daddy misses you.

I press send and lay my head on the table, groaning. *Why did I do that?* My phone vibrates and my arm shoots out, scrambling to pick it up.

Chase: Just him?

My stomach flutters.

Me: Yep, just him. He's pouting in his recliner as we speak. He's gotten used to having you here and it doesn't feel the same when you're not.

I see the three dots appear and disappear over and over. *Stupid, Lee. You're stupid.*

Chase: I miss you, too.

The butterflies jump into my throat. I wish he was here and that's a dangerous thing for me to want. My mind goes back to the woman's voice I heard at his place. *Is he in a relationship? Is that why he went back?*

Me: What's in Nashville? Visiting friends?

I chew on my lip and spend the next ten minutes burning a hole through my phone with my eyes. He doesn't respond and I start to curse my nosiness. *Is he with her right now?* Jealousy bubbles through my veins at the thought of some other woman getting all of his attention. Feeling his touch.

Me: Sorry, forget I asked. Not my business. Hope you have a good weekend.

I force myself to put my phone away. It's not until that night when I'm lying in the guest room, trying to find Chase's scent on the pillows, that I pull it back out to check.

Chase: You can ask me whatever you want. Have an early morning meeting with my therapist and then a group thing tomorrow night. Lots of that bullshit talking stuff you don't like.

Relief floods my veins. *A therapist. Does he talk about me?* I shake my head at the thought. Why would he? We're ancient history, and he definitely had a woman in his place last week. Heck, he moved on before we were even apart.

The thought's a dagger to the heart.

Asshole.

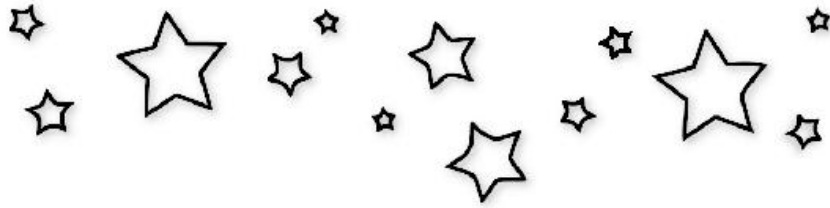
Just like that, the anger I've been missing rears its head. The more I focus on our past, the more I realize how naive I've been. Jax is right. I've been so stupid, letting him play me like he hasn't already broken all my strings.

I exit out of our text message and pull up Jax's instead.

Me: Can we talk?

I wait all night, but there's no reply.

CHASE



This past weekend was a bit surreal. I've fallen into a new normal with Goldi and her dad. I went over there the first time because I could see the strain on Goldi's face. Could sense it in the slump of her shoulders and the circles under her eyes. I just wanted to give her the night off, let her get some rest. I *keep* going because I can't fucking help myself. I look forward to our conversations—even the ones with Mr. Carson. When he's not sloshed beyond recognition, there are still hints of the real man underneath. Goldi's still everything to me, and even though being around her is a bittersweet torture, I can't help myself. I'm thrilled she's been letting me help lighten her load.

When I answered the door on Friday and Jax was on the other side, it was a rainbow of emotion. I've missed my best friend, but my anger and jealousy knowing he has Goldi burns the sadness away. I don't know what was said between them when they went out front, but inside, it was easy to hear the raised voices, muffled through the walls. *Did she not tell him about me?* The thought makes me feel dirty. Like a damn secret. For the first time, I think I may understand what Goldi felt like all those years ago when I kept our relationship hidden in the dark.

Needless to say, I'm more than fucking ready to see Doc. I have a thousand things to unload and even more for him to read from my journal. Hopefully, he can give me some guidance. Especially on the Marissa front. I've been getting messages from her since last Thursday. They started out innocent, asking how I was doing, wondering whether or not

we could still be friends. I responded because I didn't want to hurt her more than I already have. I figured if we could be friends, maybe it would lessen the sting of the breakup. I quickly realized my mistake when the messages started to escalate. I was in my hotel room getting ready to see Doc the first time she sent a picture of her pussy. What the fuck am I supposed to do with that? I erased the image and didn't reply. More came in through the day, like clockwork—every hour on the hour—until I finally told her to knock it the fuck off.

I've been eager all weekend to get back to Sugarlake. Back to Goldi. Now that it's Monday, I'm tempted to go straight to the studio where the guys are already working, but I need to stop at the office and do a few things first.

I'm rushing around, fumbling through the papers on my desk when Sam walks in. He makes himself comfortable on my office couch, crossing his ankle on his knee.

I give a wave. "Hey."

"Hey, son. Just checking in. How are things going with Tiny Dancers?"

"Great. We're ahead of schedule."

"I saw that. I knew you'd knock it out of the park. The owner giving you any flack?"

"Naw, I don't really see her too often." I narrow my eyes at him. *Does he know about Goldi working there?* "You'll never guess who the office manager is."

"Who?"

"Alina."

He sits forward, uncrossing his legs. "Craig's daughter, Alina?"

I can feel the happiness on my face as I think about her. *Damn, I can't wait to see her.*

Sam watches me, his jaw pinching more with every moment. "Be careful, Chase."

"What do you mean 'be careful?'"

“I mean... last time things went south with Alina, you disappeared for eight years. We just got you back. It would break Anna’s heart if you were to leave again.”

My smile drops along with my stomach. I thought it was beyond obvious the downfall of our relationship was on me. The fact he’s insinuating otherwise is fucking crazy. “Are you blaming *Alina*?”

He watches me carefully. “I blame the circumstances. Anna still has a hard time accepting that Alina ran you out of town.”

“She didn’t run me out of town. With all due respect, Sam, you and Anna have no clue what you’re talking about.”

“Because you’ve never told us,” he points out. “Forgive me for being wary, we were left to make our own assumptions. The heartbreak was written all over your face, Chase.”

I’m sure it was. I remember what it felt like—can’t imagine how it came across to others.

Sam’s eyes soften. “I’ve always loved Alina, you know that. I’m just saying maybe the two of you are better apart than together. Don’t put everything you’ve worked for in jeopardy because of some feelings from back when you were a kid.”

My mind is in a whirlwind. I’m shocked this is even a conversation.

“A lot of things happened, and I know I never opened up to you or Anna. But I’ll say this, and I’ll say it to Anna too... and please, listen close because I really don’t want to have the conversation again. Alina was not the problem. She was damn near perfect. It was all me. *I* was the fuck-up. So if you’re gonna place blame somewhere, make sure it’s in the right direction.”

Sam rubs the back of his neck as he nods.

“Speaking of Alina, how come you didn’t tell me about Mr. Carson?”

Sam’s face pinches. “What do you mean?”

I need to be cautious in my approach here. I probably shouldn't have said anything because I have a feeling he doesn't know, but I can't help but want to pry a bit.

My chin raises and I squint my eyes. "What do you think I mean?"

"I have no damn clue," Sam laughs. "The truth is, after you left it was hard for us to stay close with Craig. He was grieving, and being around Alina was hard for us. Especially for Anna. Can't really look at the girl and not feel the loss of both you and Lily."

My heart weighs heavy with his words, stomach sinking at the realization of how much my actions affected the way they are with Mr. Carson. *With Goldi*. "But you still saw Mr. Carson here at work, didn't you?"

Sam's head shakes and he purses his lips. "He took personal time after Gail's funeral and never came back. I've thought a million times about reaching out over the years, but I never know what to say. Other than a wave here and there when I see him in the neighborhood, we haven't really talked."

I'm surprised as hell they didn't try harder with Mr. Carson. Honestly, I'm a little disappointed. But this does answer my question.

Sam doesn't know about his drinking.



GOLDI'S AVOIDING ME. Instead of the shy smiles and eye contact that heats my veins, we're back to cold shoulders and turned heads. I'm willing to bet it's because of Jax. Once again, I feel like her dirty little secret and the feeling fucking sucks. I don't want to come between her and Jax, even though the thought of them together makes me fucking crazy. *Okay, that's a lie*. I'd love to come between them—make her realize it's *us* who are meant to be, but I'm not going to do that. If he makes her happy, I'll suffer through her friendship for the rest of my life and find a way to be content.

Work is busy, so I don't push a conversation with Goldi. If she wants to pretend we're back to being strangers, I'll let her be. But if she thinks I'm not showing up to her dad's tonight, she's in for a shock. As long as I can help, I will.

There isn't much conversation during dinner. Mr. Carson's in one of his moods and has learned quickly if he has nothing nice to say to Alina, he needs to keep his fucking mouth shut—at least when I'm around. There's a tension that had all but disappeared between Goldi and me. Now it's back, beaming like a beacon and letting me know things are not okay with us. I'm wracking my brain to figure out what the hell it is I did to make this sudden one-eighty shift.

I set her dad up in his recliner after we eat and hang out with him for a bit to shoot the shit. He starts to doze off and I head back to the kitchen to check in on Goldi. She's at the sink, soapsuds up to her arms as she slowly washes the dishes. It looks like she's in a trance, staring out the window, lost in her thoughts.

I walk up beside her, wedging myself between the corner of the fridge and the counter, watching her rub the wet sponge over the surface of a red plate.

“How you feeling, Goldi?” Every time I use her nickname, I hold my breath, waiting to see if she gets upset. I've slipped up a few times and she hasn't called me on it, so I use it now to test the waters.

Her arms pause and her jaw tightens, but she doesn't correct me. She just looks back down to the plate and resumes washing it.

I cross my arms, leaning against the fridge. “Are we back to this, again? Did I do something to upset you?”

She peeks over at me but bites her lip to keep from saying anything.

I chuckle. “Now I *know* something's up. It's not like you to hold back. Did you finally learn how to hone that filter?” I go for teasing, but it misses the mark as she drops the plate and sponge in the water, twisting her head to stare me down. Even

with the rage that swirls around her irises, she's fucking beautiful.

"Don't act cute," she hisses, pointing a soapy finger at me.

I raise my brows and point at myself. "Me? What am I doing?"

"You know exactly what you're doin'. Comin' in here, takin' care of me and Daddy like you have any right. Tryin' to weave your way back into my good graces. Make me forget about the past. Well, I'm done playin' your games, Chase."

"Whoa... that is *not* what I'm trying to do. There isn't some ulterior motive here, Goldi."

She slams her hands on the edge of the sink. "*Stop* callin' me that! You don't get to call me that anymore. It's confusin'. Makes me feel like we're still..."

"Still what?" I ask, moving closer to her.

She exhales. "Still us."

My insides burn at her words, and I move in next to her. "We'll always be us, Goldi."

Her head jerks. "I don't accept that."

"You don't have to." I shrug. "Doesn't change the fact."

She huffs. "Facts, huh? Here's a fact. You were sleepin' with someone else while my mama was *dyin'*." She inhales a shaky breath. "So you can't just come back here and expect things to magically be okay."

My stomach drops to my feet. *What? Does she think...* I cover my mouth, the realization she's spent the last eight years thinking I cheated on her making bile burn my throat. *What the fuck.*

My hands grip her hips, turning her body to face me. Her soapy hands soak through my shirt as she tries to push me away, but I glide my palms up her sides until I'm firmly gripping her shoulders, anchoring her in place. I need to keep her here. Make sure she hears what I'm about to say. This is important.

“Baby...” The endearment makes her stop fighting. “I’ve done a lot of things I regret when it comes to you. To *us*. Got lost in my head and let you slip through my fingers, instead of treating you like the fucking queen you are. I know I’m guilty of that.”

She looks to the side. I put my fingers under her chin and turn her face back. I want her eyes on me for this. “I have *never* cheated on you. There isn’t anything in this world that would make me pick a quick thrill over what we had. What we still have.”

“I don’t believe you,” she whispers.

My gut tightens, but I’m not surprised by her words. “That picture on Facebook looked bad. Missing your recital was bad. Being blind to Lindsay manipulating me—allowing her to come between us was beyond bad. But that’s all it was, Alina. Lindsay’s manipulations and my fucked-up brain thinking she was my penance. A way to right my wrongs with Lily and my mom.”

Tears well in her eyes. I’m desperate to get it all out while I have her attention. “I passed out that day. Do you remember me saying I was about to take a nap?” She nods. “Lindsay was there, which I admit, was fucking stupid. I’m not justifying my actions. She turned off my phone and slipped into my bed. But baby, I was *asleep*. You have to know—” My voice breaks, and I swallow around the lump in my throat. “Lindsay was a horrible mistake, but she wasn’t that kind of mistake. You have to know I would never do that to you.”

She gazes at me, searching for the truth. “Do I? I don’t know anything about you. Not anymore.”

The side of my mouth lifts. “You know that’s not true. When it comes to us, Goldi, we’ll always know each other.” My hand moves from under her chin, dipping down to her neck, her pulse jumping underneath my fingertips. “We could go our entire lives without speaking, and still, I’d know you in the next one.”

She exhales, and I rest my forehead against hers. Her hands are still on my chest and I grab one, moving it until her

palm is resting on my heart. “Do you feel that?” I whisper. “Feel how fast my heart is racing? Feel what you do to me?”

She nods against me.

“My heart fucking beats for you, Goldi. So please, don’t pretend we don’t know each other. The sole reason for my existence is to know you. In this life, in the next. It doesn’t matter.”

Her fingers tighten, bunching the fabric of my shirt.

“I’m not asking you to forgive me. I’m not even asking for us to be together, although, if that’s something you decide you want, I’ll grab on and never let go.” I grip her hand tighter, pushing it against me. “But it doesn’t matter. Call it kismet, call it fate, call it whatever the fuck you want. It doesn’t change the fact that your soul is meant for mine. *Knowing* you is the only thing I’m sure of.” My heart slams against my chest, trying to break through my skin to lay itself in her hands.

She leans back. “You really didn’t sleep with Lindsay?”

“That’s what you got out of all that?” I move my hand that was on her neck up to her cheek and cup it in my palm. She turns into it, and fuck, I’d spend every night for the rest of my life with just this touch, and I swear it would be enough. “No. I never slept with her. The only person I’ve ever wanted is you.”

The air thickens, weaving around us and tightening until I’m sure I’ll burst if I don’t get closer. My grip strengthens, pulling her against me. Her hands clench my shirt tighter as she rises up on her toes, rubbing her hand against the stubble on my jaw.

“Chase—” she breathes.

My eyes are locked on her mouth, desperate for just a fucking taste of her. I lean my head down, lightly grazing my lips across hers. The touch shoots a tingle through my body. *Tell me this is okay, Goldi.*

Her hand moves from my face to the back of my neck, fingers tangling in the ends of my hair. My stomach

somersaults with anticipation.

Slam.

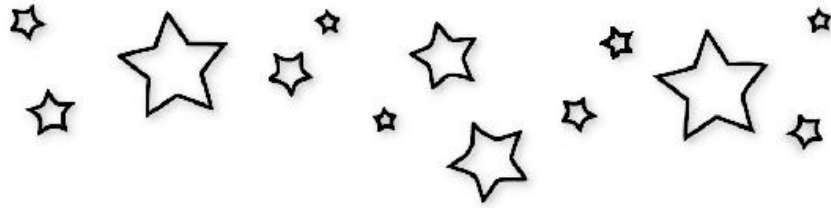
The sound of a crash in the living room breaks us apart. Goldi's eyes widen as she stares at me, her hand touching her lips. She turns and runs into the living room, and I follow.

Her dad's fallen out of his recliner, passed out on the floor. She sighs and walks over to him.

"Daddy," she says. But we both know once he's out, he's out.

I want to go back to a few seconds ago, but instead of pulling her into my arms, it's Mr. Carson I go for. By the time I get him settled in bed and head back to the living room, she's already gone.

ALINA



Knowing Chase didn't sleep with Lindsay is a balm to the wounds of my heart. Maybe I shouldn't believe him. After all, it's easy for someone's words to be just that. Words. I should know, I've been a sucker for Chase's a million times. But it's exhausting trying to hold on to the anger after all these years, especially when all I'm really searching for is peace. Plus, he's not the same boy I once knew. He's changed, grown. Probably more than I have, to be honest. He's seeing a *therapist*. That's more than I've ever done, and Lord knows I could use one.

I called in sick to work on Tuesday, unable to face Chase after our almost-kiss. I *did* send him a text asking him not to come to Daddy's that night, and even though I wasn't sure he would listen, he did. The real kicker is that I missed him when he wasn't there. I guess it serves me right for avoiding him. Somehow, he's wormed his way back into every single piece of me, and I don't want to fight it anymore.

I've decided I'm not going to.

Work isn't the best place to air all of our dirty laundry, so I'm hoping he'll come back over to Daddy's tonight and we can talk after dinner. I haven't even thought about how I'm going to tell Jax or Becca. Seeing as how Jax still isn't talking to me, I figure that's something I'll worry about later. I'm a little nervous about their reaction, but it doesn't really make a difference either way. Chase makes me happy. He did back when we were kids—before things went to crap, and I know deep in my bones he'd make me happy for the rest of my life

if I would only let him. It's like he said—we're meant to know each other.

The butterflies flop around in my belly as I pull into Tiny Dancers and see Chase's truck. I search for him when I get inside, but I know he isn't in the front area. The pull in the air whenever he's near is missing.

Walking in the office, I stop short. Chase sits in the desk chair, leaned back with his feet up and ankles crossed, dark hair mussed and looking like he doesn't have a care in the world. My heart skips at the sight of him, and so does my stomach when I think about what I'm going to tell him. That I want him. That I forgive him.

“Hi.” My nervous energy shows itself on my cheeks.

“We missed you here yesterday.” His eyes laser into me as he walks around the desk. “Missed you last night, too.”

He's close. My heart speeds up, beating so hard it's bound to burst out of my chest any second. “I just needed some time to think.”

I don't have to be looking at him to feel the way he's taking inventory of my body. I took extra time getting ready this morning. I hope he notices.

“You planning on keeping me away again tonight?” His voice is low. Sexy.

I raise my face to his as I shake my head no. He steps in closer, the tips of his shoes brushing against the closed toes of my pumps, his chest grazing against me with every inhale.

“So you've had enough time to *think*?” he rasps.

My mouth dries as the energy crackles between us. My insides are on fire, the heat between my legs threatening to consume me, and I'm tempted to climb him like a tree right here in this office. Anything to alleviate this ache.

There's a knock on the door and we jump apart. *Dang. What is it with people interruptin' us?*

“It's open,” I holler.

Jack opens the door and peeks his head in. “Boss? You got a minute? We could use an extra set of hands, Matt just went home sick for the day.”

Chase clears his throat. “Yep, I’ll be right out. Just finishing up with Alina.”

Jack nods and leaves the door open as he walks away.

Chase is undeterred, stepping back into me as soon as Jack’s gone.

My hands fly to his chest, fingers caressing the defined muscles before I can stop myself. “Can we talk tonight?”

“We can do anything you want, baby.”

Baby. My heart dances inside my chest, and I can’t stop the way my lips curl up. “Good. I’ll see you tonight, then.”

His dimples come out to play as he gives me a blinding smile. His rough hand reaches up and cups my cheek causing a shiver to race down my spine. A kiss brushes against my skin, so close to my lips I can taste him. Heat flares from my cheeks down to my toes.

“I’ll see you tonight,” he whispers.

He doesn’t wait for a response, just brushes by me and closes the door on his way out.

I’m nervous the rest of the day. Like, hands sweating, knees knocking, body buzzing, nervous. I feel like I’m a teenager again, about to leap into something I know nobody will approve of. Chase and I still have some things to work through—I know that. Hurts like what he caused don’t go away overnight. But I can’t keep holding the sins of a boy against the soul of the man.

He beat me to Daddy’s, like usual. I see his truck as I pull in behind it. Laughter filters through the front door and I smile, happiness spreading through my veins at the thought that Daddy has someone to talk to. It just further cements the fact that moving forward with Chase is the right choice. I want him here. With us. With *me*.

I walk into the kitchen and stumble over my feet when I realize the laugh didn't come from Chase.

It came from Eli.

I'm frozen in the doorway taking in the scene. Chase is at the stove, sautéing something in a pan while Eli and Daddy sit at the kitchen table. There's a beer in front of both of them and a pretty strawberry-blond thing sitting next to Eli. They haven't realized I'm here, and I take the moment to soak in my long-lost brother. It's been a long time.

He's always been a fit guy—basketball keeps you in peak physical condition, but the last time I saw him was eight years ago. He's grown up. There's a twist in my heart knowing I didn't get to experience his transition into adulthood.

He looks relaxed. His legs are stretched out in front of him, so long they touch the other side of the table. His hair—the same honey-blond shade as mine—is longer than he used to keep it. If it wasn't for his slicked-back city style, I imagine pieces would be flopping on his forehead.

Eli's eyes are still crinkled from laughter when he sees me in the doorway. “Baby sis! About time you got here. Pops and I were about to start in on all of your embarrassing stories.”

“Eli.” I glance over at Chase. His back is to me since he's at the stove, but he twists around and winks. Clearly, he's the one cooking dinner. For *all* of us. This is... strange.

I fall into the closest chair at the table. “I thought y'all weren't gettin' here until Friday.”

“We decided to come early. Not excited to see me?” Eli chuckles. Like it's *funny* he just showed up. Like it's no big deal he's able to sit down and laugh with Daddy like nothing's changed. My nails dig into the tops of my thighs as the resentment builds.

“Just surprised is all.” I nod my head toward who I'm assuming is his fiancée. “Big city life make you forget your manners, Eli? You plannin' on makin' any introductions?”

Eli's smile drops. The blonde reaches across him, sticking her hand out. “I've heard a lot about you, Alina. I'm Sarah,

this big guy's woman." She jerks her elbow into his chest with her words.

I take her hand, smiling at her easy-going nature. *She seems nice.* "Pleasure's all mine, Sarah. It's nice to finally put a face to the name. Welcome to Sugarlake."

Her sky-blue eyes twinkle as she tucks her long, glossy, straight hair behind her ear. "I'm so excited to be here! It's totally my fault we're here two days early. I wanted to have time to sightsee before we start nailing down wedding details."

I stifle the smirk that's creeping on my face and look over to see Chase's shoulders shaking. The fact she thinks she can "sightsee" Sugarlake only shows how little Eli has talked about his hometown.

"Well, I'm sure you'll have plenty of time to see everything we have to offer." I grin as I lock eyes with Eli. "Speakin' of weddin' details, I'm just gonna give y'all Becca's number so you can call her yourself."

Eli's shoulders stiffen. "What? I don't want to do that, why can't you just talk to her for me like I asked you to?"

His tone grates on my nerves. "For one thing, Eli, I'm not your dang slave. For another, I *did* ask her and she wasn't exactly responsive." I think back to how weird she got when I brought it up. "What happened with you two, anyway?"

Eli rests his hand on Sarah's thigh, his eyes hardening. "Nothing important."

I laugh. His accent is barely noticeable after years of being away. "Well, she gets psycho whenever I bring you up. Acted like I was the Devil himself for askin' her to help. I'm not in the business of tickin' off my best friend, so like I said... I'll give you her number."

Eli's nostrils flare as he clenches his lips. Sarah pats the hand on her thigh and smiles at me. "That'd be great, Alina. I have no problem giving her a call and setting something up."

I grin back at her but watch Eli grimace from the corner of my eye.

I let it go, for now, not wanting to delve into that conversation with an audience. “How’d y’all get here, anyway?”

“Pops picked us up a couple hours ago,” Eli says.

My head turns sharply toward Daddy. “You *drove* to the airport to get them?”

“Why wouldn’t I? He’s my boy, if he needs me then I’ll be there.”

My teeth grind. Of course, he’d be there for Eli. Even though *I’m* the only one who’s been here for him. “So you knew they were comin’ in today and didn’t tell me?”

He shrugs and necks his beer. I wonder how many he had before he left to pick them up. Too many to be on the road, that’s for sure.

I glance at my lap, trying to stem the tears that want to bubble up. Eli’s eyes bounce between us, the wrinkle between his brows deepening.

Daddy doesn’t put his best foot forward for company. Try as he might, the drink always wins the battle. By the time we’re having coffee and dessert, he’s switched to whiskey and is well on his way past coherent.

“You want to come with us tomorrow, Lee? Help me show Sarah the town?” Eli asks.

I choke on my coffee, surprised he’s inviting me. Irritated he thinks we can just hang out like no time has passed.

“I can’t. I have to work.”

He smacks his forehead. “Right. It’s so strange to see you grown. Sometimes I forget.”

“Maybe it wouldn’t be so strange if you’d been around for all the years in between.” My face muscles burn from the effort of keeping my smile in place.

“Alina. Mind your manners. We got... we got company.” Daddy’s voice is loud but slurred. The whiskey makes his tongue thick and his mind sluggish.

I scoff, crossing my arms over my chest. “I’m just speakin’ truth, Daddy.”

Eli speaks through clenched teeth. “You don’t know what you’re talking about, Alina.”

My eyebrows raise. “Oh no? Why don’t you enlighten me then, big brother?”

“I would have, if you had ever taken the time to ask,” he snaps.

My mouth parts, surprise rendering me speechless at his words. *I ask... Don’t I?*

“Your mama. She would be... disappointed in you, girl.” Daddy points his finger at me, the usual sneer on his face.

The table falls silent. Chase’s chair scratches against the floor as he comes around to stand behind me, squeezing my shoulders. “Mr. Carson, with all due respect, it’s not Alina that Mrs. Carson would be disappointed in right now.”

Daddy’s eyes flare and he slams his coffee cup on the table. “You think you can speak to me that way just ‘cause I been lettin’ you...you’ve been... playin’ house here with my girl?”

Chase doesn’t back down. “I think I’ve made it clear that you disrespecting your daughter won’t ever be something I’ll tolerate. Regardless of where we are.”

Daddy raises out of his chair, pointing at Chase. He wobbles, unsteady on his feet and has to catch himself on the edge of the table.

“Pops, you okay?” Eli is half-standing, his eyes volleying between the three of us. Sarah sits next to him, her mouth gaping open. *Welcome to the family.*

“Of course he’s not fine. He’s never fine,” I hiss. “You would know that if you had spent more than ten minutes here in the past eight years.”

“Sis—”

“Don’t you ‘sis,’ me, Eli.”

“I’m fine, damnit!” Daddy’s voice roars, cutting off the argument and blanketing the room. “And I’m a goddamn adult. *I’m* the parent, and this—this is *my* house.” He points to Chase and me. “You two, go on... get. I don’t want you here.”

“Pops,” Eli whooshes out.

Tears fill my eyes, but I straighten my shoulders and raise my chin. “Fine. I don’t need this anyway.” I look at Eli. “Have fun catchin’ up on your missed years with Daddy. I’m sure he and this town will be thrilled to have you back. Sarah, it was nice to meet you. I’m so sorry you had to see this.” I stand up and face Chase. “Come on, let’s go for a drive.”

“Anywhere you want to go, baby.” He slides his hand down my arm, tangling our fingers, leading me out the door. Away from my dysfunctional family.

I’ll deal with them tomorrow.

Tonight, I think I’d like to lay under the stars and give my heart back to the man it’s always belonged to.

CHASE



Between Sunday night's almost kiss and Wednesday morning, I've had a lot of time to think. About Goldi. About me. Our past. Our future. How fucking perfect she is and how I'd spend the rest of my life loving the hell out of her if only she'd let me.

I used to think I didn't deserve her. That I couldn't be who she needed me to be. Hell, I still don't think I was wrong—that boy was in no shape to handle Goldi. But I'm a man now. I've weathered the storms and forged through the rubble of living a life without her. I don't want to know that type of emptiness anymore.

She may be with Jax, but she was mine first.

I'm not surprised when she doesn't show up for work, even though I know she isn't sick. I figured she'd be scared off by what almost happened between us. What *keeps* almost happening between us. She better buckle up, because if she thought I was hard to handle before I decided to fight for her, she has no clue how difficult I'll be now.

She lets me touch her in the office. Lets me call her Goldi. *Baby*. The sudden change in her demeanor makes me dizzy, but it's not unwelcome. I'm fucking giddy over it.

I show up to her dad's house eager for our "talk." When I see Eli and his girl sitting at the kitchen table, laughing with Mr. Carson and sharing beers over their memories, my stomach sinks with worry. I don't think Goldi knows what

she's about to walk into. But fuck, I'm glad I'm here, so she doesn't have to face it alone.

All through dinner, I keep my eye on her. Assessing her face, watching her body language. I know the bow is about to break before it happens. I should have guessed it would be her father that adds the pressure to make it snap.

I respect Mr. Carson, and I want to help him. But I won't allow his disease to be an excuse for treating Goldi like a punching bag. It's beyond obvious he hasn't healed from his wife's death and Goldi's taken the brunt of the fallout. She lost her mom, her dad, her brother, and me all in one go. My heart weeps for what she's had to endure.

I'm thankful when she decides to get us out of the situation, instead of feeding into the toxic environment of her family dynamic. And even though she asked for a drive, I know where she really wants to go—what she really needs.

I'm not sure she's in the right headspace to talk about us, but I'm hoping with a little bit of relaxation, we might be able to get her there. Fuck her family for making her deal with shit like this. For the thousandth time, I wonder why Jax and Becca aren't around to help her carry the weight. I'm pretty confident she hasn't told them. I don't blame her, shame is a hell of an emotion. I felt it every day with my mom.

We get to the lake and I pull into our usual spot right on the bank. I look at Goldi. Her face is drawn and she's lost in her thoughts. I reach out, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. *Come back to me, baby.*

She turns, smiling. "Thank you for bringin' me here. How'd you know this is exactly what I needed?"

"How many times do I have to tell you I know you before you start to believe me?"

She takes a deep breath, hopping out of the truck and running around the back. She jumps in the bed and starts laying out the afghan. My heart skips as I watch her. She's so comfortable in my truck, by my side, with my things. *With me.*

I'm so busy staring, I don't make a move to leave my seat. She pushes her hair out of her face and glances at me, her hands on her hips.

She speaks loud, making sure I hear every word through the back window. "Well, Chase Adams... you just gonna sit there like a dud, or you plannin' on comin' back here to woo me?"

My stomach somersaults as I open my door and walk around, leaning my arms over the side of the truck bed. I arch a brow. "Who said anything about wooing?"

She plops down on the afghan, her eyes twinkling. "I did. Just now. Your ears broke?"

"Maybe I don't woo. You know it's never been my strong suit," I tease.

She rises on her knees, scooting closer to the side of the truck. "Lucky you have me here to practice on then, huh."

My heart beats the fuck out of my chest. "Is that what this is? Practice?"

"No," she whispers, pushing her body against the truck's metal frame. "This is the main event."

My eyes follow her fingers as they slide up my forearms and rest on my shoulders. Every nerve lights up at her touch. "Are you saying what I think you are?"

Her cheeks bloom and suddenly pink is my favorite fucking color. She leans her forehead against mine and her breath fans my face. "I'm tired of bein' angry with you."

The jagged pieces of my broken soul quiver, eager to mend. "You are?"

She nods.

"What would you rather be, instead?"

"Yours."

I'm on her in the next breath, stealing the remnants of her words. Drowning in her forgiveness. Her mouth opens

immediately, warm honey and vanilla coating my senses and slinking through my veins, heating me up from the inside.

Fuck.

Her tongue tangles with mine, and my entire being groans from the taste of her. *Finally.*

I reach around the back of her head to pull her in closer, my fingers knotting in her hair. I tug on the strands, and she gives me the sweetest moan. *Fuck this truck for being in my way.*

She rises up on her knees, leaning over the edge until her breasts push into my chest, her mouth pressing harder into mine. Her tongue delves deeper, then retreats only to be replaced by her teeth nipping my bottom lip. My cock jumps, jealous of my mouth.

The sound of laughter down the bank has me slowing our kiss, trying to regain some sense. Her hands clutch the fabric of my shirt, pulling me back. Like she's desperate for more. I've dreamed of this moment, so I give in, losing myself in the euphoria of her touch.

Finally, I break away, my chest heaving.

Goldi grins at me, her eyes glazed, her cherry lips swollen.

My soul fucking sings.

I lean back in, pecking her lips and trailing a line of kisses along her face. My hand grasps the nape of her neck, my mouth resting against the shell of her ear. "Promise you're mine?"

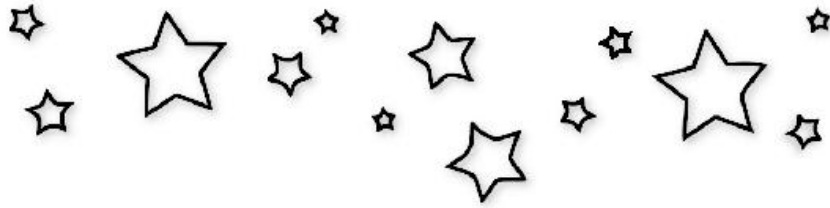
I feel her smile against my cheek. "Cross my heart and hope to die."



JOURNAL ENTRY #347

She's mine. I'll never lose her again.

ALINA



Chase and I kissed our way back together, and all I want is to drag him to my place and make up for all the lost years between us. But he's walking me to my door and leaving me there. Just a big ball of pent-up hormones and damp panties. He says he's trying to be a gentleman.

He can leave the gentle. I'll take the man.

Regardless, I'm floating through my tiny apartment on a cloud. I'm feeling lighter than I have in years. I had forgotten what it felt like to become Chase Adams's girl, and I'm basking in the happiness. There are still a lot of things that we need to deal with. Things I know we'll have to work through. But I'm spending the rest of tonight lost in my joy.

Jax still hasn't talked to me, but I know he's been around town. Becca's been keeping tabs on him. I call and text every day, but the only response is him saying he needs some space. It sucks, and I hate that I've hurt him.

I'm scared of what he'll do when he finds out about Chase and me. I don't want to lose him, but I'm no longer willing to give up my chance at happiness to appease somebody else. Not even Jax. That being said, I don't want him to think I'll let him disappear from my life like he hasn't been the best thing in it. I grab my phone to send him a text. Again.

Me: You don't have to respond. I know you probably won't anyway. That's okay. I just wanted to tell you again that I'm sorry for hurting you. And I hope you'll be at brunch on Saturday. I miss you, Teeth.

Sadness bubbles in my chest, breaking through my haze of happiness. I tap the phone against my mouth, praying for a response. But I don't really expect one, so when it vibrates against my lips, I startle. My phone drops onto the ground and I lean down quickly to grab it.

Chase: Made it home safe.

I smile.

Me: Good. Is it weird that I already miss you?

Chase: No. Is it weird that I've spent the last eight years missing you?

My heart skips. I wish he had stayed at my place.

Me: Are you free tomorrow night? My place is small, but it's all mine. And it's... cozy.

Chase: Damn, I wish I fucking could. I promised Anna I'd help her out tomorrow night with some planning for Sam's retirement party.

I try to tamp down the disappointment. I'm happy he's so close to his parents. I used to be pretty close to them, too. Anna was like a second mother to me, but after Lily ran away, things changed. When Mama died and Chase was gone for good, our families stopped talking altogether. Not that I noticed at the time. Or would have cared either way. Still, there's been a few times where I've seen Anna in passing, and the coldness in her eyes stings. There used to be only warmth there.

My phone vibrates again, bringing me out of my thoughts.

Chase: How about Friday evening, you come over to my place and I'll cook you dinner? Work on that whole "wooing" thing.

Me: Yeah, that's a good idea. You really need the practice. Will I see you tomorrow?

Chase: You couldn't keep me away if you tried.

I bite my lip, grinning. This feels good.



MY EYES ARE BURNING from staring at the office computer, and a headache is on the verge of turning into a migraine. I am beyond ready for this day to be over. I've been doing menial tasks, like usual, but for some reason, it's harder than normal to be content with my job today. I'm stuck back here pushing papers when all I really want to do is dance. I heave a sigh and rub the palm of my hands into my eye sockets, trying to alleviate the pressure. My phone is on the desk next to me. I keep it handy because for some reason Regina likes to call my cell instead of the work number.

It vibrates. I don't answer it, just watch as it dances across the desk. I snap out of my daze long enough to realize it may have been my boss calling, so I grab it and light up the screen.

Jax.

It's three in the afternoon. Hardly a time where I'd be able to answer, which is probably why he called right now. An alert pops up letting me know he left a voicemail. My lips purse, my insides twisting, and my heart racing at the thought of what it will say. I think I'll wait until I'm home to listen. Just in case it's something awful like him saying he never wants to see me again, or that I'm the biggest mistake he's ever made in his life. I don't know if my heart can handle that kind of pain. Not when I've been so happy for the past twenty-four hours.

I think of Chase and the anxiety in my stomach unravels, the threads floating around until they twist up my insides for an entirely different reason.

I stand up, groaning as my knees crack, my muscles burning with the stretch. I've been sitting in the office for hours and I would kill for some caffeine. I make my way to the break room off the hallway and almost cry at the sight of freshly brewed coffee. I've just finished pouring myself a cup when hands touch my waist, making me jump. Hot liquid sloshes over the edge of my mug, spilling onto the Formica countertop. My stomach jolts before settling with a simmer I

feel deep in my belly. I lean against the hard body that's pressed against me.

“Do you have any idea how fucking sexy you look right now?” Chase's voice rumbles in my ear, his nose trailing the length of my neck. Goose bumps blossom down my arms.

I close my eyes at the sensation and smile.

His fingers tighten and he pushes his hips into me. I can feel every single hard inch of him pressed against the back of my pencil skirt. *How have I gone without him for so long?* The simmer in my belly starts to boil.

Chase groans. “You like teasing me, don't you? Prancing around in that tight little skirt, knowing that every man here is wishing they could touch what's mine.” He traces the curve of my hips, moving up until he's teasing the underside of my breasts. His hands rise and fall with each stuttered breath I take.

I glance at the open door. *Anyone could walk by and see this.* The thought sends a shot of arousal through me, my legs becoming unsteady from the rush. His thumbs brush over my nipples. The ghost of his touch tortures me. I wish he'd just rip off my blouse so I could feel him on my skin. He leans down, the tips of his hair tickling my shoulder as he bites my neck, gently. The thought that he might leave a mark makes a moan slip through my lips.

“Fuck, Goldi.” He rests his forehead on my back, his breathing deep and ragged. I push back against him, desperate to feel how much I affect him. He groans, pressing his thick length into me, thrusting slightly. I'm slick between my thighs. I press my legs together, worried my wetness will drip down them from how turned on I am.

Footsteps make us break apart. I lean forward, grabbing a napkin to look like I'm cleaning up the forgotten spill. Chase moves to my side, cocking his hip against the countertop.

Jack and a couple of other guys walk into the room. Suddenly the air is stifling. I can feel the heat in my cheeks, my excitement at Chase's touch still surging through me, and I

wonder if everyone else can feel the tension. I don't dare look up to see.

Chase, on the other hand, is unperturbed. I sneak a glance at him and his dimples tease me with how freaking lickable they are.

There's muffled conversation, but for the life of me, I can't tell what's being said over the pounding in my ears. I take deep breaths, my fingers tightening on the soggy napkin I'm still holding. Jack and the guys are sitting at the small round table in the middle of the room. Chase has his arms crossed. Smirking at me.

"What?" I try to scowl.

Chase's smile widens. "I didn't say anything."

"You didn't have to." I narrow my eyes, a grin taking over my face.

"Mmmm," he hums. He steps closer, grabbing a mug and the coffee pot. His arm brushes against mine with the movement, and I suck in a breath. The fire in my body rages, still lit up from his earlier touch.

"You going to your dad's tonight?"

I frown. I don't want to think about Daddy or Eli right now. I'd much rather stay lost in my Chase bubble. "Nope. He's got Eli here, what's he need me for?"

Chase eyes me over the rim of his mug.

My throat tightens painfully. Eli hasn't even tried to talk to me. I know he's busy with Sarah and Daddy, but I thought he'd at least reach out. It's sad—realizing you don't know your own flesh and blood. His words from last night briefly run through my mind, but I brush them away. It's not *my* fault I don't know him. I won't let him place blame on me for his distance.

Chase levels me with a knowing look. "I'll be at Sam and Anna's for most of the night, but call me if you need anything. Or if you just want to talk. Say hi. Let me hear your voice."

I grin and his eyes spark. He leans in close, placing his coffee mug on the counter. “I better get back to work.”

I glance at his cup. He didn’t even drink any of it. His hand brushes against my side, squeezing. He walks away, smacking one of the guys playfully on the head on his way out.

It’s not until I get home from work that I find the courage to listen to Jax’s voicemail.

“Hey, sweetheart. Sorry I’m just returning your calls. I’ve been... well, you know. Anyway—” He clears his throat. “I miss you, girl. I was hoping you were free tonight and maybe I could swing by to talk? I don’t know. Let me know.”

I fumble with my phone, trying to get my fingers to work properly long enough to call him back, but he doesn’t answer. *Of course.* We’re forever playing phone tag. I send him a text instead.

Me: Yes! I’ll be home all night. You can stop by whenever. I miss you, too.

He doesn’t write back, but there’s a knock at the door a few hours later. I’m in pajamas—at the beginning stages of a movie marathon—a tub of ice cream in my hands. I jump up, nerves making me jittery.

I swing open the door. Jax is smiling. The sight of him makes my panic dissipate, and I sigh in relief. “Hiya, Teeth.”

“Hey, sweetheart. Big night planned?” He quirks a brow at my attire and I look down. There may or may not be a chocolate ice cream stain on my holey Sugarlake High dance team shirt, and I know my hair is a knotted mess on my head.

I shrug. “Ya get what ya get. Take it or leave it, buster. Wanna come in?” I open the door wider and he walks through, going straight to the couch and making himself comfortable. *Good. This is a good sign.*

I watch him closely as I sit down, folding my legs underneath me. He stares, his leg crossed over his knee, his arm thrown on the back of the couch. He seems relaxed. I chew on my lip, waiting for him to say something.

He sighs, running a hand through his hair. “You’re making me tense, sweetheart. Cut it out. I’m not mad.”

I look up from where I’m picking at my fingers. “You’re not?”

“No. I mean... I was. I was *pissed* you’ve been spending time with Chase. But I just needed a few days to lick my wounds. Once I calmed down, I realized how much of a dick I was.”

“Jax, *I* was the one who said things to you I can’t take back. You’ve been everything to me for so long, and I’ve taken you for granted. And I’m sorry—” My voice breaks. “I’m so sorry for how I’ve made you feel.”

His eyes hold mine, emotion pouring out of them. “I forgive you. And I’m sorry for making you feel like you couldn’t come to me. Like you couldn’t tell me about Chase.” He leans forward, grabbing my hands in his. “You’re my best friend, Alina May. I love you. And even though I wish like hell you were mine, I’ll live the rest of my life happy as long as you’re in it.”

Relief floods through me, dousing the burning ache in my gut. I squeeze his hands. “You deserve the everything kind of love, Teeth.”

He chuckles, pulling back, but I grip his hands tighter. “You’ll find it someday. Mark my words, it’s gonna knock you on your booty, and I’ll be right there, front row. Cheerin’ for it the hardest. You just wait and see.”

A tear trails down his face and my heart twists. I’ve never seen Jax cry before.

“Damn, you’re a bitch. I can’t stay mad at you to save my life.” He laughs.

I want to grab his laughter and hold on for dear life because what I’m about to say might steal it away.

I cringe. “There is somethin’ you should know.”

He groans, throwing his body against the couch and running his hands over his face. “Don’t tell me, Lee.”

“I have to.”

“You’re back with him, aren’t you?” He peeks at me from between his fingers.

“I am, and I love you, Jax, but I won’t apologize for it.”

His hands drop into his lap, a sigh leaving his lips. “You don’t need to apologize to me, sweetheart. I just hope you know what the hell you’re doing. He doesn’t deserve you.”

I nod, knowing this was the way he’d feel. “The boy he was didn’t deserve me. But he’s changed, Jax. Truly. You should talk to him and you’ll see it, too.”

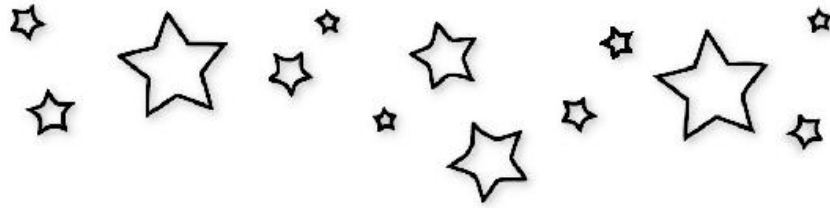
“Yeah, well... I’ll be at Sam’s retirement party next weekend, so I’m sure I’ll get my chance.” He grimaces. Clearly, he isn’t ready to forgive.

If I was a smart woman, I’d take this heavy moment between us and spill all my secrets. Tell him how Daddy’s a sea of struggle and I’m drowning in his wake.

But I don’t.

I’ve already seen the grief in his eyes tonight, I don’t want to see pity there, too. So instead, I press play on my remote, and we spend the rest of the night getting lost in tales with happy endings.

ALINA



I'm fixing to snap on Regina. It's not a good look as her employee, but if she doesn't take a step away from Chase and put away that hoochie-mama cleavage, I may just lose it. I've been standing in the corner of the dance studio, watching them have a "meeting" for the past twenty minutes. Regina told me I could leave for the day, but fat chance of that with the way she's been eyeing my man since she walked in.

I look her up and down. She's attractive in a cougarish type of way. I thought she was married, but she isn't wearing a wedding ring. *I bet she just took it off.*

Chase is taking me back to his place tonight for dinner, and instead of going home to freshen up like I originally planned, I'm here watching them like a jealous girlfriend.

I'm too far away to hear the conversation, but it doesn't matter. I know he's going over everything they've completed for the week. Regina wanted brand new floor-to-ceiling windows installed in the main dance studio. She said it would help drum up business if people on the street could look right in and see the classes. He installed them today, and of course, she just *had* to come in and see them. It makes sense, seeing as how this is her place. But did she really need to undo those extra buttons on her blouse beforehand?

I watch her giggle and preen for what feels like hours, until she finally leaves. But not before giving Chase her personal cell number just "in case he thinks of anything else he might need." *Please.*

She breezes by, giving me a funny look and walking out the door. Chase stops in front of me, smiling like the cat that got the cream.

I cross my arms and scowl. “What are you lookin’ so pleased about?”

He glances at the front door. Once he sees the coast is clear, his hands go straight to my hips. He squeezes, leaning in and stealing a kiss. “Can’t I be pleased to see my woman?”

Butterflies go crazy in my stomach, but I maintain my glare. “I just don’t think you should encourage her, is all.”

“Who, Regina?” He laughs, backing up a step. “That woman’s been out to get me since day one, Goldi. Hate to break it to you. There’s no encouragement necessary.”

Huh. I guess I was so busy trying to ignore Chase that I missed the signs. Probably for the best. If I had noticed her salivating over him, it would have made me green with envy.

“Are you ready to go?” I don’t want to think about Regina anymore.

He leans against the wall. “What’s the rush?”

I shrug, my hands out to my sides. “Aren’t you hungry?”

“Starving.” His eyes darken as he straightens.

He stalks toward me.

I take a step back.

He takes another step forward.

I stumble back another step.

I’m against the windows now, my hands pushing against his chest. “You’re gonna smudge the new windows.”

His head lowers and he nips my neck. “Don’t care.”

“Well, maybe I *do*,” I say, leaning my head to the side so he has better access.

“Mmm... seems like it.” He presses against me, flattening my back to the glass.

His palms move down my sides, his body following their trek. He drops to his knees, running the back of his hand up the inside of my leg. All the way up. My skirt bunches around my hips. The cool air blows through the red lace of my panties. *Glad I wore my good underwear.*

“What are you doin’?” I push on his shoulders halfheartedly.

“Eating.” He leans in and kisses my clit through the lace.

My muscles seize.

His hands glide along the outside of my panties, sliding them down my legs until they’re gone. I’m vulnerable. Exposed. *At his mercy.* His tongue meets my core. He’s all warmth and wet and I swear when he licks me from bottom to top and swirls his tongue around, I’m the closest I’ve ever been to heaven.

“I need... I need...”

“Tell me what you need, baby,” he murmurs. His tongue slides up my slit and hovers. Right next to where I really want him. So *close* to where I need him.

His nose brushes against me, and he moves it back and forth. “*Fuck*, you even smell perfect.”

I can’t find my words. I grab the back of his head, my fingers tangling through his hair as I pull him into me. He smirks against my skin, the scruff on his jaw scratching the inside of my thighs. Finally, his tongue goes where I desperately need him. Twirling around my clit.

Yes.

“Oh, God.” My eyes close, lost in the pleasure. He kisses down to my entrance, licking up my arousal.

One of his hands is on my stomach, pressing me firmly into the window. His other hand traces down my side, moving between my legs.

He pulls back. “You taste so fucking good, Goldi. Even better than I remember.” His fingers brush against me—lingering touches that don’t satisfy the ache.

My fingers tighten in his hair. “Chase, please...”

“Please, what?” One finger dips inside, barely. Teasing. Driving me insane. I fist my hair, delirious with want.

“Make me come... I—I need to come.” My body flushes red hot from my words. I’ve never talked dirty before.

Chase’s eyes sizzle and his fingers dive into me, curling in and hitting *that* spot. He sucks my clit into his mouth. Not licks. *Sucks*.

My head slams against the window and I bite my lip to stop the scream. Pressure builds low in my belly until I can’t focus on anything other than what he’s doing to me.

Just a little more.

His fingers scissor inside me and my hips jolt forward. I’m so far gone. I ride his face. I can’t help it. He groans again, the vibration sending ripples of pleasure spiraling up my body. The coil inside me tightens.

His touch disappears. I’m about to protest, but before I can, he grabs my hips, hoisting me up. My legs drape over his shoulders and just like that, he’s pinning me to the window. His hands underneath me and his face between my thighs.

The glass is cold against my heated skin. My head shakes back and forth, my body trembling. I’m so close. *So close*. He doesn’t put his fingers back inside me, but he doesn’t need to. One more pass of his tongue and I unravel.

The sensation shoots through me and my thighs tighten around his head. I feel him dive down, drinking up my juices. It’s dirty and perfect and makes me feel so, *so* hot.

Slowly, I come back down to Earth. Chase lowers my legs and settles back on his heels, grinning wide and licking his lips. His face is glossy from my orgasm, and I have the strongest urge to kiss it off his face. So I do. I launch off the window and into his arms, making him fall back from the force. I can feel how hard he is, his thickness pressing against me. Between that and the taste of my pleasure on his tongue, I’m ready for round two.

Eventually, I have to stop to catch my breath. Reason filters through me as I lay against his chest on the dance studio floor. I just let Chase eat me out against Regina's brand new window, in broad daylight.

I don't regret it. *I'd let him do that to me anywhere.*

My legs are still shaky as I stand and then bend to pick my panties up off the floor. I slip them back on and rearrange my skirt, finger-brushing my hair as I smirk at Chase. "Well, that was unexpected."

"Best damn meal I've ever had." He winks. "You ready to go? It's my turn to feed *you*."

I'm sure he means dinner, but the double entendre in his words has me thinking wicked thoughts. I imagine him in my mouth and a tingle shoots through me. Thick... throbbing... mine.

I'm more than ready to go.

We make it to Chase's, and I'm surprised at how nice his place is. It's on the edge of town, a two bed/two bath, one-story house. I'm not sure what I expected. A bachelor pad, maybe? This definitely isn't that. It's manly, but also homey. Comfortable. Filled with solid oak furniture and dark brown leather.

I spin around and survey the open floor plan. The living room opens to the kitchen, a granite island separating the spaces.

"Surprised?" Chase is standing in front of the fridge, popping the top off a beer.

"Yeah. This isn't what I expected." I look around. This feels like a home. *How did he do this so fast?* "Did you hire a decorator?"

He chokes on his beer, coughing and sputtering. My eyes narrow. "Uhh... kind of. Not really. My uh, my ex-girlfriend is an interior designer."

Hello floor, meet my heart. *Ex-girlfriend*. I shouldn't care. We've been apart for years. It's unrealistic to think he

wouldn't have moved on in that time. But it still burns. As mad as I've been—as much as I thought I hated him, I was never able to give myself to another person that way. Hookups with no strings attached? Sure. But a relationship means there were *feelings*. Feelings that once only belonged to me. For the second time today, jealousy pricks at my insides.

I wonder how much of an “ex” she really is. He's never mentioned her before, although I'm not sure when I would have given him the chance. But if she helped him design this place... he hasn't been back that long.

“Oh.” *Great job actin' unaffected, Lee.* “So she was down here with you and decorated? That was... nice of her.”

He shakes his head. “No, she just ordered the furniture. Helped out a bit. She didn't spend much time here.” He gulps down another mouthful of beer.

“Was that the woman on the phone?” I blurt.

He cocks his head. “You'll need to be more specific.”

“That night—the night you came and helped me with Daddy. There was a woman's voice in the background.”

“There was,” he agrees.

“Was that her?” I'm acting crazy, and I know it. I have no right to ask him these things.

“Would it bother you if it was?”

“Yes. No... maybe? I don't know, Chase. It *shouldn't* bother me 'cause you weren't mine. But I won't lie and say it doesn't sting.”

He walks around the counter and cups my face in his hands. His eyes are dark, his brows drawn. “I've always been yours.”

I bite my cheek to stop myself from saying things I have no right saying.

“You don't think it drives me crazy to know you've been with Jax?” He growls Jax's name and my stomach jumps into

my throat. My head jerks back, surprised by his words. *He thinks I was with Jax?*

He crosses his arms. “Does he know about us yet, Goldi? Is he someone I need to worry about?”

“Where did you even get that idea? I was never with Jax.”

His forehead creases. “What? That’s not... I was sure.”

I shake my head, stepping into him and running my hands over his arms. “He’s my best friend, and yeah, he wants more.” Guilt swims around my veins. “But I’ve never felt that way about him. I’ve never felt that way about anyone. Only you.”

“Are you saying you’ve never been with anyone else?”

My mind goes to Logan. “I’m not sayin’ that... but you’re the only relationship I’ve ever had.” I shrug like that fact doesn’t make me sound completely pathetic.

A grin creeps up his face. “Does it make me an asshole to say that I fucking love that?”

“Yes. But you’ve always been an asshole.” I smile, leaning up to kiss him. “So, how long has this ‘ex’ been an ex? If she —”

“I don’t want to talk about her.” He’s quick to cut me off. “I want to focus on us.” He walks me backward until I hit the back of the sofa. His tongue traces my lips before he dips it into my mouth, kissing me deep. I whimper. *What was I talkin’ about, anyway?*

He breaks the kiss, taking my hand, and leading me to the kitchen. “Contrary to what you may believe from what I’ve whipped up at your dad’s house, I’m not a culinary genius by any stretch of the imagination. I hope you’re good with homemade pasta.” He kisses his fingers like he’s a chef.

“That depends. Will there be garlic bread?”

He grabs his chest. “I’m offended you even asked that.”

I giggle. I love this.

I watch him move around the kitchen while he makes dinner. Chase can act like he hasn't learned how to cook, but compared to the skills he had growing up, things have vastly improved. Honestly, he could have ordered pizza and I would have thought it was a gourmet meal as long as I was having it next to him. But it's truly delicious.

I lean back in my chair, patting my belly. "I ate way too much. I feel like I'm gonna explode."

"Sexy." He wags his eyebrows.

"I sure hope so. I'm really makin' an effort here." I laugh.

"Don't tell me you didn't save room for dessert." He's clearing the plates, walking them to the sink.

"Depends." I rest my chin on my hand, watching him. "What's on the menu?"

A shrill noise interrupts the conversation. The blood in my veins turns to ice. I know that ringtone.

"Daddy must be at The Watering Hole." I frown.

Chase stops doing the dishes and turns toward me. "How do you know?"

"Because that's the ringtone I set for when they call. It's the only one that wakes me up if it's the middle of the night." I grind my teeth, grabbing my phone out of my purse.

"Hey, Johnny. Let me guess."

"Lee... the cops are here. I'm sorry, there was nothin' I could do. My owner's here tonight and wasn't havin' it."

I rub my forehead, the headache growing strong behind my eyes. "Don't worry about it. Daddy does it to himself. Should I head there or the station?"

Chase stands straighter at my words.

"The station. I'm sorry, Lee. My hands are tied."

"Stop apologizin', Johnny. The only one who should be sorry is Daddy. Thanks for the call."

I hang up, my tears of frustration boiling over. Chase rushes to me, kneeling between my legs. His hands squeeze my knees and I focus on his touch to keep me grounded.

“I’m so sorry. Our date is ruined and I was so lookin’ forward—” My voice chokes, my hand coming up to cover my mouth.

“Hey, hey... it’s okay, baby.” He brushes my hair back. “Our date isn’t ruined. We’ll go take care of this, and then you’re gonna come right back here. With me. Where you belong. Okay?”

I hiccup. “Okay.”

He doesn’t ask any more questions. Not until we’re on the road and he needs to know where to go. The whole drive, he touches me. Rubbing my knee, stroking the back of my hand. He’s just there. Supporting me. Letting me know I’m not alone. That he’s in it with me, now.

I don’t remember when I fell in love with Chase Adams the first time around. It was mixed in somewhere with all the other feelings of growing up.

But this time? This time, I’ll remember.

CHASE



Goldi's fucking dad, man. I shouldn't be surprised we had to pick him up from the Sweetwater County Detention Center, but I am. I assumed Eli would take his father's issues seriously. Goldi let me know that wasn't the case. Maybe this will be the wake-up call Eli needs because things are not okay here. He left Goldi with a hell of a burden on her shoulders. One that she didn't ask for, and that she shouldn't have to carry alone.

Goldi's pissed. She didn't say the words, but I got the gist when she didn't even attempt a conversation with her dad. Not that he tried to talk to her. I've noticed he never does. My stomach burns when I think about it. I'm sad she has to experience how addiction steals people's love.

Her dad struggles to walk himself to the front door. My arm goes around his waist, his around my shoulders. We've already learned the steps to this dance. It's one we practice often. All the while, Goldi's gearing up for battle. I see it in the rigidity of her features and the way she stomps through the door.

Eli and his fiancée Sarah are sitting on the living room couch, watching TV.

He shoots to his feet when he sees Goldi. "Sis, what are you doing here?"

She walks right up to him and shoves his shoulders. He stumbles back, his legs hitting the furniture.

"What the hell, Lee?"

“When are you gonna get it, huh?” she hisses. “I thought you bein’ back would make you see. Get you to realize how bad things are, but here you are... sittin’ pretty with your girl while Daddy’s runnin’ around town makin’ a fool of himself.”

“I’m not his babysitter. Pops is a grown man.”

I scoff. I can’t help it. This dude is being so fucking blind.

“Do you know where we just came from, Eli?” Goldi asks.

I’m still standing in the doorway, Mr. Carson in my arms. He shifts, his weight sinking into me. I move forward, sitting him in his recliner. He hunches over, passed out. Sarah gasps when she notices the state of Mr. Carson. Eli moves his gaze from Goldi over to me and his shit-faced father.

His mouth parts and he lifts a heavy brow. “What happened?”

Goldi huffs out a laugh. “What do you think happened, Eli? The same thing that always happens. If Daddy doesn’t have a babysitter, he gets behind the wheel, drunk as a skunk, and ends up at his favorite bar. Only his favorite bar has *banned* him ‘cause he always causes a scene.”

Eli cringes. “Lee, I didn’t know...”

“I’ve told you a thousand times!” she screams, throwing her arms in the air. “Begged you a hundred more. You don’t *listen*, Eli. You don’t wanna hear it.”

Eli looks over at his dad, the grief settling heavy in his eyes. “I didn’t think it was this bad,” he whispers. “Pops said he was meeting up with his buddies. He said you just like to hover, like to control things ever since Ma die—since Ma’s been gone.”

Goldi shakes her head, exhaustion blanketing her features. “The only buddies Daddy has are Jim, Jack, and Johnny. Oh, and the cops that picked him up and booked him tonight.”

Eli’s eyes grow big. “He was arrested?”

Tears well in Goldi’s eyes, and it makes my stomach churn. I’d do anything to take this pain for her. I wish I could. I’m used to it—lived with it all my life. More wouldn’t hurt

me. I know this is something that will dig deep in her soul and settle in. Something she'll carry for the rest of her days. I can't spare her from that. All I can do is help her navigate through the heartbreak.

"You gotta open your eyes. Daddy ain't the hero you've always seen him as. I just need a minute," she says, wiping under her eyes. She brushes past us into the kitchen.

The air is quiet but heavy. Eli collapses onto the couch. Sarah scoots closer, running her hand up and down his back as he leans forward with his head in his hands.

Eli looks up. "Thanks, man, for going with her."

I bite my tongue. There's a lot I want to say. Mainly, I want to ask where the hell he was, and what the fuck he was thinking.

"Do you think she's overreacting a little?" He's looking at Sarah, so I assume his question is aimed toward her.

I blow out a breath, my small amount of restraint disappearing with his question. "You know, you may not want to hear it, but fuck it. Ignoring the problem won't make it go away, Eli. It won't make it stop. It'll just continue to spiral out of control, and then one day... one day, you'll wake up and wonder what the hell you were thinking. You'll wonder how you could have been so goddamn blind."

I pause to breathe through the sudden pain in my chest. "Trust me, when that day comes? The regret will rot you from the fucking inside. Because you'll know—you'll *know* that you didn't do everything in your power to save them when you had the chance. You didn't do *anything*." I shake my head. "I hope to God you wake up before then."

Eli blinks at me. I don't know if he heard a word I said, but I don't stick around to find out. I leave the room to find Goldi. She's coming out of the bathroom, her eyes puffy but her face clear.

She smiles when she sees me. "Ready to get outta here?"

I nod, gripping her hand. "You alright?"

She sighs, grasping my fingers tight. “Yeah, I’m alright. Just ready to leave.”

I lead her out the front door and to my truck. I’m ready to get her home and take her mind off the heaviness. We were off to such a good start before her dad interrupted our night.

I swear I can still taste her on my lips. Feasting on her pussy out in the open wasn’t my plan, but goddamn her jealousy turned me on. So I did what any man in my situation would do. I dropped to my knees and worshiped her with my tongue.

We’re pulling up to a stoplight when I see Goldi unbuckle her seatbelt from the corner of my eye. I turn to watch her. She gives me a wicked smile as she leans over the console and trails kisses up my neck. A shiver races down my spine.

Her hand creeps over my chest, and I smirk. “What are you doing?”

Her bottom lip gets fat as she looks up at me. “You promised me dessert.”

I’m already half-hard and her words stiffen my cock until it’s trying to burst through my jeans. Maybe the right thing to do is to tell her she doesn’t have to do this. Tell her to wait. She just went through an emotional moment with her family, and I don’t want her to regret anything that happens. But she looks so damn sexy, bent over my console with her head in my lap, so I lift my hips to give her better access.

She brushes her fingertips along the waistband of my jeans as the light turns green. Every touch sends a tingle through my body, making it difficult to concentrate on steering. The clank of my buckle and the sound of my zipper has me biting my cheek with anticipation. I can’t see what she’s doing since my eyes are on the road, but *fuck me*, can I feel it.

She reaches inside my pants, her palm rubbing against the bulge that’s growing by the second. Goldi wastes no time, wrapping her fingers around my length. The coldness of her hand is a shock to my system, and my cock jumps in her hand.

We pull up to another stoplight, cars surrounding us even though it's well past nine at night. Fire sparks in my veins and the rest of my blood rushes to my groin. Goldi hums in approval and I glance down as her head lowers, licking my tip like it's a fucking ice cream cone.

I suck in a breath and fist her hair, pulling it away from her face so I can watch how gorgeous she looks as she swallows me. I glance back at the light. *Stay red. Stay red. Stay red.*

It turns green. I accelerate, trying to think about anything other than how fucking hot it is to have my dick in Goldi's mouth while I drive. She's so damn greedy for me. It turns me the fuck on.

She's teasing, licking up one side and down the other, swirling her tongue around the head. I'm about to go crazy from how bad I want to shove myself deep inside her. Her mouth. Her pussy. Fuck, I don't care as long as it happens.

I bite my lip as she lowers her head, my hand that's holding her hair following the movement. I glance down at the beautiful sight. She sucks me deep and I throb against her tongue. I hit the back of her throat, gritting my teeth so I don't come.

"Goddamn, Goldi." My hand tightens in her hair. She hums. *Fucking hums* around the base of my dick, and I thrust to see if I can get just a little bit deeper. She swallows around me and my foot jerks on the gas pedal.

She lifts her head, flattening her tongue as she slides back up, exposing me to the cool air. I take my eyes off the road to look at her. Spit connects her bottom lip to my shaft, saliva coating the length and making it glossy. *Damn.* She's filthy and I love it.

I grow harder, my balls tightening as I watch her dive back down. She starts slow, but by the time we're turning on my street she's got a rhythm, bobbing her head and working me so fucking good. I lift my hips, over and over—completely blissed out.

I want to fuck her. So bad. I need her to stop. If she doesn't, I'm going to spurt my cum down her throat, and I'd rather be balls deep in her pussy for that. But I can't form the words. The promise of pleasure steals my ability to do anything.

Her mouth pops off me and I moan in protest.

"Give it to me," she rasps, swallowing me down her throat again. She isn't using her hands, but she doesn't need to because her mouth is perfection. Nobody has *ever* been able to take me as deep as she does.

Her words, coupled with the sight of her cheeks hollowing as she sucks is all it takes.

My cock jerks and throbs, shooting into her mouth. The fear of veering us off the road makes my blood pump and heightens the sensation. I grip the steering wheel tight with one hand, my other still tangled in her hair. Her tongue massages the underside of my cock, milking me for every drop.

She releases me, tucking me back into my jeans and leaving a kiss on top of the fabric. She sits back, her eyes sparkling. Somehow, I've made it to my driveway.

"*Jesus, Goldi.*" My chest is heaving, my brain trying to crawl out of the fog.

She wipes the corner of her lip, sucking her thumb into her mouth and winking. "Yum."

My cock twitches.

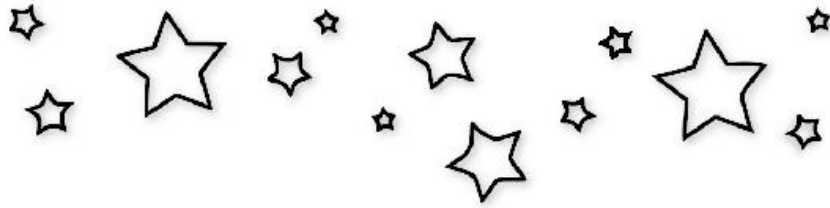
How the fuck did I think I could live without her?

She jumps out of the truck, sashaying that sweet ass all the way up to my front door. I hurry to meet her there, sweeping her into my arms. She squeals, locking her hands around my neck and laughing.

I smile down at her. "You are in so much trouble."

I walk her inside and kick the door closed behind us.

CHASE



The blood still hasn't redistributed to all of my limbs. The second I kick the door shut, Goldi is on me again, shoving her tongue in my mouth and rubbing herself on my dick. I stumble my way to the kitchen, setting her on the island that overlooks the living room. My hands grip her thighs and I'm between her legs, lost in her taste. I just came down her throat, and somehow I'm hard again.

I break my lips away. "I really do have dessert for us."

My eyes are drawn to her tits as they rise and fall with her heavy breaths. I want to tear her shirt off and see how long it takes to make her come from sucking her nipples. *Fuck. Keep it together.*

"Do you want dessert? Chocolate. It's chocolate. Cake," I stutter.

Her hand slides up my torso until she wraps it around my neck, tugging my face to hers. Our lips brush. "I kind of had somethin' else in mind."

She nips my bottom lip with her teeth and pulls away, but I grip her face in my hands and bring her back. *She tastes so good.*

"Oh yeah? What's that?" I manage to ask in between kisses.

Her skirt is bunched around her hips, and she presses herself against my hard-on. She looks at me from under her lashes. "Take me to your bedroom and I'd be happy to show you. This is somethin' that's a bit better if demonstrated."

My heart slams against my ribcage.

I lift her from the counter, wrapping her legs around my waist, my cock hard and thick against her. She starts sucking on my neck and *holy shit*, I need to get us to a bedroom—any bedroom, as fast as possible. I briefly think about throwing her against the wall and fucking her in the hallway, but I don't want that for our first time. My legs move fast, rushing us into my room. I drop her to the bed, my body covering hers. Immediately she starts grinding against me. She's aggressive as hell, and while it's the biggest turn-on of my life, I want to slow this down.

Savor her.

Take my time.

Commit every touch to memory.

I unwrap her arms from around me and stand up, gazing down at her in awe. My stomach somersaults, my nerves lighting up. I've been waiting to have her like this for so long. *So fucking long.*

Her leg extends, trying to wrap around my waist and pull me back.

I grab her ankle in my hand and kiss her silky skin. "Slow down, baby. We have all night."

I skim my hand up her calf. My lips follow, peppering kisses up her leg. On the inside of her knee. Her inner thigh. What she's giving me is a fucking gift—to have the chance to love her body as much as I love her soul.

She whimpers and fidgets. I press one of my hands against her stomach to keep her in place. My lips hit her skirt. I take the hem and drag it up with my teeth, putting her lace-covered pussy on display.

Delicious.

She shivers. I start unbuttoning her blouse. Slowly. Methodically. After every button pops, I kiss the skin underneath. I want to worship every perfect inch of her. Her shirt falls open, and I stop to drink her in. Her tits are fucking

amazing, showcased in a red lace bra that matches her underwear, and I'm dying to know if her nipples are hard underneath.

I kiss along the waistband of her skirt, grabbing it with my fingers and pulling it down. She lifts her hips to help. She tastes *so. Fucking. Good.*

I pull the cups of her bra, exposing her for my pleasure. My tongue peeks out, circling her areola, then sucking, until I feel it stiffen in my mouth. She moans and pushes into my erection. I have never wanted to be inside someone as bad as I want to be deep inside her.

Her hands reach down, unbuckling my belt. She fumbles, so I help, unzipping my pants, and shoving them off. My mouth never leaves her breast, I just lick my way over to work on her other nipple.

She wraps her fingers around my dick, over my boxers, and *God*, her hand feels better than any pussy I've ever had. She slides her palm up and down, slowly—the fabric creating friction that has my cock weeping for more. There's a wet spot forming on my briefs and I know if she doesn't stop, this will be over before it really begins.

“Chase...” she begs.

I hum, my hand reaching down to press against her clit. She's drenching my fingers, even through her panties.

Her breath blows against my ear, sending a shiver through my body. “Chase,” she whispers. “I want you to *fuck* me.”

My entire body spasms. Hearing Goldi say fuck is one of the most erotic moments of my life.

She grips my cock harder, massaging me so damn good. “I need to feel you... please.”

I rest my forehead on her chest, trying to control the heat building in my groin.

“*Jesus*. Okay, let me grab a condom.”

Her hand pauses. “I don't—I don't want you to use one.”

My heart stammers, my stomach flipping. I've never fucked without one before, and the thought of feeling Goldi bare has my cock pulsing.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I'm on birth control and I've never... I've never done it without one. I don't want there to be anything between us." Pink rises on her cheeks.

Her words undo me. I slide her panties down her legs, her pussy bare and on display. *Beautiful*. I eat her up with my gaze. She's naked from the waist down, her blouse splayed open and the cups of her bra bunched under her breasts. Her cheeks are rosy, her honey hair contrasting against the black of my bedspread, making her look like an angel. *My angel*.

Mine.

She leans on her elbows, watching me watch her. My hands glide up her arms, slipping underneath her blouse, sliding it down her shoulders. I trail kisses up her neck, nipping her earlobe as I undo her bra. It falls from her body and I'm drunk on the view. The outside is just as beautiful as her inside.

I push her up the bed, crawling over her. She pulls my boxers down and I rip my shirt over my head.

Now it's Goldi who stares. She licks her lips, a possessive gleam filtering through her eyes. *That's right, baby. I'm yours just as much as you're mine.* She grabs my cock and pulls me against her until the length of me is pressed along the heat of her pussy. I glance down at where we're touching. I thrust forward, dragging every inch through her pussy lips until my tip grazes her clit. She gasps, and I bite my lip.

I move my hips back, my cock pulling away from her warmth and line myself up at her entrance. I pause, my breath stuttering in my lungs. I want to remember this moment forever.

"Chase, please," she begs again.

I hold her eyes with mine as I move forward, slipping inside her slowly. Inch by inch. She's hot and tight and wet as

fuck and *goddamn*, I can't believe this is happening. Her pussy clenches and my body reacts, sinking into her. I'm deep. So. Fucking. Deep. The threads of our connection light me up, zinging through every nerve ending. I love her. I fucking *love* her. I've never felt anything like this.

Goldi closes her eyes, turning her head to moan into the sheets. My hand reaches up to grip her chin. "No, baby. Look at me."

I pull my hips back until just my tip is inside her.

I wait.

She opens her eyes.

I plunge deep and hard, making sure she feels every inch of me. I work up a rhythm. Long, deep strokes. Her pussy hugs my shaft on every thrust. She moans, her muscles clenching again and the burn of my orgasm licks at my insides.

"Does that feel good?" I ask, grinding against her clit.

"Yes, oh my *God*. Chase... I didn't know it could feel like this."

I lean down to suck her neck, needing her taste in my mouth—wanting her to consume all of my senses. She pushes on my chest and I leave the warmth of her body as she tries to turn us. I go willingly, turned the fuck on that she wants to take control. Leaning back on my elbows, I watch as she positions herself over me, straddling my thighs. My eyes devour her. She's so sexy.

My breath is heavy from exertion and my gaze is glued to where she's sinking her pretty pussy down on me. Inch by agonizing inch, her tight cunt swallows my length. I fist my sheets to keep from thrusting up into her. I want to see what she does when she's in control. The view of her on top drives me insane with her perfect tits and those parted lips that suck me so damn good.

She lowers all the way down until she's sitting in my lap. Her hips rotate. A tingle races through me.

She grinds down. My hands shoot to her hips.

She rises up and I'm transfixed by her arousal coating the length of my cock.

Her hand traces along her stomach until she's cupping her tit. Her other hand tangles in her hair, gripping it tight as she rides me. *Holy fuck*. I wish I could take a picture because this is by far the sexiest sight of my life.

My cock swells.

"Shit, Goldi. You need to stop."

She shakes her head, riding me faster. Every muscle in my body tightens. I grab her hips, trying to slow her down. She doesn't, instead she fucking squeezes around me and I let out a moan, my eyes rolling in the back of my head. *Fuck*.

She smirks and does it again. My grip becomes tighter as I flip her over, grabbing her wrists in my hand and pinning them above her head. She inhales sharply, surprised by the sudden change in position.

I grin down at her. "My turn."

I thrust hard. The slight sheen of sweat makes our bodies slick against each other as we move in tandem. Our lips are so close we're breathing the same air and it heightens fucking everything.

She breathes out, I breathe in.

I wonder if she can taste how much I need her.

My hips drive into her steadily and hers rise underneath to meet me thrust for thrust. My teeth graze her mouth, her chin, her neck, her breast. Anywhere I can reach. I'm fucking wild for her.

"Are you gonna give it to me, Goldi?" Our mouths brush. "I want to feel you come all over my cock."

She arches into me, closing her eyes as her body convulses, her inner walls gripping me tight as hell, contracting around me. The sensation envelops me, and I have to fight to keep my eyes open as the pleasure threatens to take

me under. I want to see every second of her coming apart for me. Because of me. *With* me.

My balls draw up as my orgasm prickles. “Fuck, baby. Goddamn.”

Goldi opens her eyes. “Come inside me.”

My orgasm scorches through me, frying every nerve ending and making my vision go white. I push as deep as I can go, my cock jerking as I coat the inside of her.

Holy shit.

I collapse on top of her, my hair sticking to my forehead and my chest heaving. Goldi traces her fingers up and down my back. Aftershocks run through me, making my body jump from her touch.

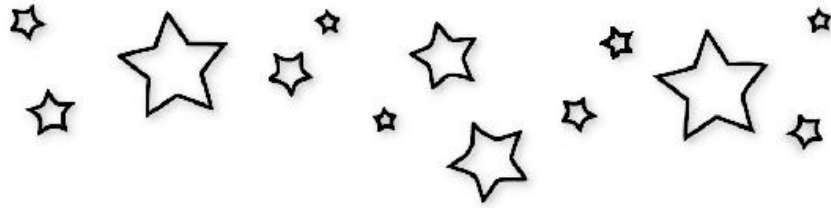
It could be seconds, or it could be minutes later, but I finally roll off her. She giggles.

I turn my head. “Something funny?”

“I just... that was the best sex I’ve ever had. I wouldn’t have wasted all those years if I had known I was missin’ out on *that*.”

I smirk at her. It’s about all I can do right now, my body still feels like Jell-O. But, yeah. Definitely the best sex of my life.

ALINA



Being with Chase was more than I thought it ever could be. I always knew it would be explosive between us, but that was another level. I've never had someone take control of my body, and just know what I need.

Dang, I wanna do it again.

He's girthy. Bigger than Logan, for sure. He stretched me in ways I didn't know would feel good to be stretched. I'm sore and content lying in his bed, my fingers trailing his chest, my head resting in the nook of his arm. He sweeps a kiss across my hair and I hide my smile in his side.

"Do you have plans this weekend?" he asks.

"Nope. Why?" It's semi-true. Technically, I have brunch plans with Becca and Jax, but I can cancel on them for one week.

"I want you to come with me to Nashville. There's somewhere I want to take you."

I look up at him. "You gonna show me where you've been all this time?"

He grins. "There's this thing I go to on Sundays. I'd like you to come with me."

"Oh yeah? What kind of 'thing?'"

"A meeting." His words carry a serious vibe that washes away my relaxation. "It's helped me a lot, and I thought maybe it could help you too."

The cozy warmth in my chest starts to chill. I push against him, sliding away. “*Help* me? Why do you think I need help?”

He’s quick to pull me back, his strong arms cocooning me as he drops kisses on my cheeks. The anger that was threatening under the surface melts away.

“I don’t mean it like that,” he reassures. “It’s a group for people who have been affected by addiction.”

I scoff. “I’m not an addict, Chase. That’s Daddy. I don’t need a group to tell me that.”

“I know, baby. It’s a place for support.”

I feel the scowl transform my face and Chase frowns as he stares at me. “I know it’s the last thing you want to do. I mean, it was the last fucking thing I wanted to do, too. So I get it. Believe me. But this isn’t a group that will judge you. You don’t need to say anything. No one even has to know about your dad.”

I run his words through my head. “I don’t have to say anything?”

“No.” He shakes his head. “I’d like you to come though. It’s an important part of me. And you’re also an important part. The *most* important part. I really want to share this with you.”

This is not what I had in mind when he asked if I was busy this weekend, but I can’t deny the curiosity that’s brimming, wondering what it was like for him in Nashville during our years apart.

“Okay. I’ll go.”

In the middle of the night, Chase slips inside me again. I don’t resist, even though I’m sore. And then again this morning, when he takes me up against the shower wall—I revel in the sting.

After breakfast, he drops me home so I can pack an overnight bag for Nashville. I text Becca and Jax, canceling brunch. I feel guilty because I haven’t told Becca about Chase yet, so I ask her to stop by. I’m nervous to tell her. Becca isn’t

known for her soft-spoken words or her understanding. She was the one who was there from the beginning with Chase and me. From the first unrequited crush to the soul-crushing loss that swallowed me after he was gone. If anyone has a right to be upset about our relationship, it's her.

I'm throwing clothes in my bag when she shows up. She walks in like she owns the place, sashaying through the doorway.

"I know you think you can just ditch me and Jax for brunch, but I've come to force you to go."

I smirk as I fold my shirt and place it in my bag. "I can't go, Becca. I'm goin' out of town for the night."

She plops down on my bed, frowning. "Oh. With who?"

I steal a glance at her, my nerves making eye contact impossible. Here we go. *Rip it off like a Band-Aid.* "Chase."

Becca stares at me, her face blank. I continue flitting around my room, flinging clothes that I don't need for a one-day trip into my bag. Anything to keep busy so I don't feel the weight of her gaze.

After going through every possible wardrobe combination, I can't take the silence anymore. "Are you gonna say somethin'? You're makin' me nervous."

Becca tilts her head, blinking.

"Well." I raise my hands. "You've got *nothin'* to say about this?"

She sighs, breaking her stare and picking at her nails. "What would you like me to say, Lee? You've clearly made up your mind already. You're a big girl, I don't need to fight your battles for you."

My eyes sting from how wide I open them. I press the back of my hand against her forehead. "You feelin' okay? No snarky comeback? No witty retort?"

She bats my hand away. "Just so we're clear, you *want* me to be a bitch about this?"

I sit down on the bed, my face scrunching at her question. “I don’t... I don’t know. I’m confused by your reaction. I was prepared to defend myself and here you are messin’ up my plans.”

She rolls her eyes. “I have other things to worry about, Lee. If you wanna go down a road that you already know I don’t approve of, that’s on you. I’ll be here to wipe your tears when he inevitably fucks it all up. *Again.*”

I chew on my lip. “You really think he’s gonna mess up again?”

She lifts her shoulders. “He’s a man. That’s what men do.” She falls back on my bed, crossing her hands over her stomach. “Hey, how come you gave out my number, Lee?”

My eyebrows draw in. “What on Earth are you talkin’ about?”

She levels me with a glare. “My number. You gave it to Eli’s... thing.” She waves her hand in the air. “Samantha or whatever her name is.”

“Sarah,” I correct.

“Whatever.”

“Uhm. Okay, I’m sorry. I didn’t think it was a big deal.”

“Well, it is,” she says, crossing her arms.

I narrow my eyes. “I gave it to her ‘cause I’m tired of tryin’ to figure out what the heck is goin’ on with you and my brother. It’s *exhaustin’*, Becca. And while we’re on the subject—just so you know... I’m not dumb.”

Her face pales and she pulls her hair into a ponytail, moving it to her other shoulder before releasing it. She’s always played with her hair when she’s nervous. The fact she’s doing it right now is a big tell.

“I don’t know why you keep sayin’ things like that. Your brother’s a jerk, and he always has been. I saw him around campus sometimes. He didn’t like things I had to say and I didn’t like the way he abandoned you. We didn’t exactly get along.”

“Okay. So what’s the big deal with Sarah then?”

“I don’t like her.” She shrugs.

“Mmhm. Well, I’m sorry. You’ve known Eli since you were in diapers. I really didn’t think a thing of it.”

She twirls the ends of her hair between her fingers, blowing out a breath. “That’s alright. I’m just pissed off because my old man’s thrilled to have somethin’ for me to do. He keeps tellin’ me ‘idle hands are the Devil’s playground.’”

“So he’s makin’ you help?”

She scoffs. “He’s puttin’ me in charge of the whole damn ceremony.”

My jaw drops. “Do you even wanna do somethin’ like that? Your daddy should realize you’re twenty-six and capable of makin’ your own decisions.”

“Yeah, well... that’s a fight for another day.”

She stares at her hands. I watch her, wondering what it is that’s making her so melancholy.

She looks at me, pasting a smile on her face. “You never told me where asshole of the century is takin’ you.”

I want to keep pressing her on Eli. She’s crazy if she thinks I’m stupid enough to buy her story, but I let her steer the conversation in a different direction. Since she’s in charge of his wedding ceremony, there will be plenty of opportunities for me to watch them together. Plus, I’m sure they’ll both be at Sam’s retirement party next weekend. Everyone in town is going. Even Daddy.



I’M NOT sure what to expect from this mini-trip with Chase. We’re only here for one night, and I’ve already seen almost everything there is to see of Nashville, so I don’t have any grandiose ideas. I’m anxious to experience a bit of what Chase’s life was like without me. I want to see this side of

him, even if that means sitting in a room full of people whose scars remind me I'm still bleeding.

We debate whether to order room service. I figure it would be a shame to not experience the Nashville nightlife, so we end up going to a casual spot downtown. A band is playing on the patio, so I'm thankful we're being led to a table inside where we can still talk. I slide into the booth, looking at our surroundings. It's busy, but then again, it's Saturday night so I shouldn't be surprised. The walls are bright pops of color. Neon greens and purples clash against the dark concrete floors. This place is clearly not known for its aesthetics.

"Is this your favorite restaurant here in Nashville?" I tease.

He smiles. "I don't really have a favorite. But this is where I would come sometimes to grab a beer. Their food's decent. Plus, I can't take you to a fancy place. Wouldn't want to ruin my reputation and make you think I was trying to woo you."

He winks and I giggle. "No, no chance of that." I glance down at the menu, perusing the options.

"See anything you like?" he asks.

I grin at him from across the table. "This is perfect. They have fried green tomatoes, which is all I need to be happy."

The waiter comes around bringing us drinks and taking our orders. We're left to relative silence, only the bass drum from the outside band thrumming in our ears. I see his mind working and I wonder what he's thinking. Does he regret bringing me here? Is he thinking about his ex? Did he bring *her* here?

Stop it.

"So, tell me about this thing you're takin' me to tomorrow."

He sips his beer, his eyes never leaving mine. "It's a group meeting. We get together in the basement of a church and share stories. My therapist actually encouraged me to go a few years ago, and it's helped me with... everything, really."

I still can't wrap my head around Chase seeing a therapist. I've tried to imagine it a million times, but I always come up short. "How often do you go?"

"Every weekend. I actually lead it, now." Something that looks an awful lot like pride fills his eyes. Shock weaves its way through my system as I listen to him. "I don't know how the fuck they decided I'd be the best for that. But here I am."

The waiter interrupts, dropping off our fried green tomatoes. They smell delicious, but I don't want to ruin the moment by indulging.

Instead, I urge him to continue. "How does it help?"

"Easy question." He smirks, his fingers tightening around his beer. "I never processed all the emotion that came with being the son of an addict. Never let myself really feel it." His head is angled down, but his eyes glance up at me. "The shame that surrounds it. The feelings of complete fucking failure. The anger I have toward my mom... toward Lily."

My heart pangs with an ache so sharp it shoots to my toes. Even though he isn't talking about me, I'm rubbed raw from his words. Each syllable pulls at the emotions I keep hidden away.

"I've lived with that shit all my life, Goldi. I let it infect every fucking part of me. And it wasn't until I went to this group and heard other people's stories—saw the pain, and the anger, and the misplaced embarrassment on other people's faces..." He shakes his head, taking another sip of his beer. "That shit makes you put things in perspective. For the first time, I realized I wasn't alone."

I don't really know what to say. Nausea is rolling around in my belly over the thought of going to this meeting with him—of being witness to the feelings I try to ignore. But I push down the anxiety. This is important to him. I'm honored he wants to share this vulnerable part of his life.

"Do you—have you ever found Lily?" She was my best friend once upon a time, and I carry a lot of guilt for how I handled things with her. I ignored my worries well before I

spoke them. Too naive to know what was really going on, and then too stupid to speak up when I had the chance.

His mouth curves into a sad smile. “I don’t know if Sam and Anna are still searching. It wouldn’t surprise me. I don’t know where I’d even begin to look.” He tugs on the ends of his messy hair. “She could be anywhere, you know? She could be happy as hell living a life without me in it. Or maybe she’s dead in a ditch.” I see the torment as it swirls around his face, darkening the hazel of his eyes.

My breath hitches at the thought. “Don’t think that. Have you ever thought about lookin’ again?”

“For Lily?”

“Yeah. I mean, I don’t know how it works. But don’t they have private investigators—or whatever they’re called, that can do that? Hunt people down?”

“Huh.” His fingers scratch at the scruff on his jaw. “I’ve never thought about doing that. I’m not sure I’d even want to find her. Does that make me a shitty person?”

“No. It just makes you human, Chase.”

“I just—I’m so angry at her for leaving. Part of me feels like she’s had plenty of time to find her way back. She hasn’t, so I have to assume she wants to be left alone. And *that* makes me a piece of shit brother.” He stabs his finger into his chest. “I should be turning the world upside down, right?”

“Maybe.” I raise my shoulder as I bite into a tomato.

He huffs out a laugh. “Yeah, maybe.”

“Your sister was never known for her humility, Chase. You of all people should be able to relate to that. Maybe she wants to come home and feels like she can’t. Or maybe you’re right, and she wants nothin’ to do with you.”

He flinches, and I regret how blunt my words come across. But it’s the truth, and he should hear it. I reach across the table and grab his hand. “But... maybe Lily doesn’t *know* what she needs. Or maybe it’s not about her at all. If findin’ her will give you peace, then it’s worth doin’.”

His eyes soften as he listens to me.

“At least talk to your folks. Maybe they know somethin’,”
I implore.

He nods, picking up my hand and kissing the back of it. We don't speak of it anymore, changing the subject to something lighter. Something that doesn't take us to the darkest parts of who we are. I grab the surface level conversation and hang on tight.

I have a feeling that tomorrow, we'll be back in the dark again.

CHASE



It wasn't a spur of the moment decision to bring Goldi with me to a Nar-Anon meeting. I almost didn't ask her, afraid that she'd take it the wrong way. I wasn't wrong, she *did* get defensive, but at least she's here. I'm grateful as hell for it. But I'm also antsy as fuck. I rearrange the metal chairs in a circle, to a semi-circle, then back again.

We arrived before anyone else, but now there's a couple of families filtering in. Goldi's been lost in one of the newcomer pamphlets, so I leave her to read in peace while I finish getting everything ready.

There's a group of about twenty tonight. Some adults, some entire families, a few lone teenagers. I envy the teenagers who are here of their own volition. *If only I had been here, back then.*

It's been a while since I've told my story, but tonight I'm planning to share. I want to show Goldi the parts of me she's never seen—the pieces that were too broken to love her when I was a boy. Needless to say, I'm fucking nervous as shit. Telling a bunch of anonymous strangers was hard enough, but to lay it all on the line in front of Goldi? That's a whole different ball game.

I dive right in before I lose the nerve. I talk about Lily, even though most have heard the story. I talk about my mom and the wounds she caused that will never heal. I hear the murmurs of agreement when I speak of the weight of responsibility laid on my shoulders at such a young age. How it's still a struggle, *every day* to remember that my mom's

demons were her own. That the guilt I feel is misplaced. That it was never my job to make sure she was happy. I meet Goldi's eyes as I strip off my armor and show the naked man underneath. This is raw. This is real. This is me.

I talk about all of it, and then I listen. I listen to others share their grief. Some speak with hope, while others speak from loss.

It's easy to think about the addicts. Easy to sympathize with their disease, mourn their deaths. It's simple to put out a tweet about what a tragedy it is, and how we need to do something about the drug crisis. But nobody remembers to think of the people left behind. We're expected to dust off our knees from where we fell, and move on with our lives like we aren't ripped to shreds. Like it isn't taking fucking everything to simply breathe through the pain.

We are the forgotten. Even though we're the ones who are left to struggle.

This moment right here, with strangers coming together and laying their souls bare—this is why I brought Goldi. So she could see that she isn't alone. She isn't invisible. She isn't to blame.

Goldi sits in her spot long after the last person leaves. I make my way over, the metal legs of the chair scraping as I sit across from her. Her face is dry, but her eyes tell the story of her tears. She opens her mouth then closes it, her lips pressing together.

"I don't... I didn't..." She clears her throat. "I didn't think it was gonna be like that."

I nod because I fucking get it. I felt the same way at my first meeting.

"Those people," she says. "What they've been through..." Tears well up again, and her palms press to her eyes. She drops her hands, piercing me with her gaze. "*You* are strong. Stronger than I could ever be."

"You know that's not true, Goldi. I see strength in everything you do."

“I don’t feel it,” she whispers.

“I think that’s normal.” I lean forward, tangling our fingers together and resting them on my knees. “Do you want to talk about it?”

She shakes her head, looking at our hands. “Not really.”

I don’t push. I promised she wouldn’t have to say anything. But I hope that one day she will.



MONDAYS ARE ALWAYS BUSY, and today is no exception. We’re wrapping up the renovation at Tiny Dancers. As long as we stay on target, we’ll be done next week, and while I’m happy things have gone smoothly, I can’t help the disappointment that’s filling me up. Being done means no more weekday Goldi. No more tight skirts and hidden corners where I can kiss her breathless like I’ve been doing every chance I get today.

I head back to the office. It’s the end of the day and I want to let Goldi know I’m leaving and see if she wants to come over for dinner. She’s pacing the room, her cell up to her ear.

She turns when I walk in and smiles. “Yeah, that sounds good, Jax.”

Jax.

Bitterness sours my stomach. We’ll inevitably continue to run into each other. He’s best friends with the love of my life. But he was *my* best friend first. The loss of that friendship is something that still haunts me. I understand why he protected her the way he did, and as hard as it is for me to admit, I’m grateful she has him. But I can’t help that part of me feels betrayed. It was just so easy for him to drop me. Even all these years later, it stings.

I walk toward Goldi, backing her into the wall. She pushes against my chest, pointing to the phone, her eyes widening.

I widen mine back at her. “I don’t care,” I mouth.

I kiss my way down her body and drop to my knees. My hands caress her curves. *These fucking skirts of hers are going to be the death of me.* I lick my way up her thigh.

“Let me call you back, Jax.” Her phone clatters.

She grabs my hair and pulls. “Just what do you think you’re doin’?”

“Checking up on your multitasking skills. They need some work,” I tsk.

She breaks into a smile, smacking my shoulder and pushing me away. I fall back, laughing.

She walks behind the desk. “Regina’s on her way, so I’ll be stuck here a while. You leavin’ for the day?”

I stand up, dusting off my jeans. “That’s a shame. I wanted to have the taste of you on my tongue for the drive home.”

Her cheeks bloom. I love all the ways I can make her blush. I step into her and her arms wind around my neck.

“I could come over later if you want?” she says.

“I’d love that.” I kiss her deep, not wanting to leave because she feels so fucking good in my arms. “Guess that will have to hold me over.”

There’s a spring in my step when I leave, excited I’ll have her in my arms again in just a few hours. I start up my truck, groaning when I realize my gas tank is sitting on empty. I hate getting gas in Sweetwater—the price is higher than back home—but I don’t think I have enough to make the twenty-minute drive. There’s a station before the entrance to the freeway, so that’s where I stop.

I walk in, looking back to see which pump I’m on. There’s nobody else here except the guy working the register. I grab some water and go up front to pay.

“Do I know you?”

I glance at the cashier as I place the water on the counter and dig in my wallet. *Is he talking to me?* “I don’t think so, man.”

“Huh. You sure? You look real familiar. I never forget a face.” He taps his pointer finger to his head like he’s a fucking savant.

I look at him closer, seeing if I can place him. He’s skinny—almost too skinny, with pockmarks on his face and gaudy gold chains around his neck. *There’s something about those chains.* His hair is short with frosted tips. My brows furrow, a buried memory pricking the back of my mind.

“Don’t matter, I guess. This all for ya?” He reaches down and scratches his stomach.

Lightning strikes my entire body, bolting me in place. The memory of a skinny, pock-marked guy in a run-down house, with an unconscious Lily, slams behind my eyes.

Motherfucker.

I’m over the counter in less than a second, grabbing him by the chains I’m tempted to fucking murder him with.

“Yeah. You know me, you fucking bitch. Lily Adams. Ring any bells?” This time it’s *my* pointer finger jabbing into his head.

His eyes widen and he squirms, trying to escape my grip. I pull his chains tighter, twisting them.

“Oh, fuck. You’re that brother, right? Listen... I got nothin’ to do with her now, I swear!”

He’s panicking, his fingers clawing at my hands. “There are cameras, man. Just so you know. You hurt me, you won’t be gettin’ away with *shit.*”

I smirk. It’s touching how he thinks I give a fuck.

“I will pull you over this counter and revel in the last fucking breath you take, smiling at the cameras once I’m done. So if you know where she is, if you know *anything*, you better tell me. Right. Fucking. Now.”

He jerks away, but I yank him back. The chains cut into his skin, a trail of blood dripping down his neck. I’ve been waiting a long fucking time to get my hands on this prick. He’s not going anywhere.

“Man, come on. I don’t know! She ain’t lived here for years. Last I knew, she was gone to Arizona.”

“When was this?” I hiss through my teeth.

“She called a buddy of mine a few months ago... ow, quit!”

The door chimes and it distracts me long enough for him to wrench out of my grasp, the cheap chains breaking.

He runs over to the register and grabs the phone, pointing it at me. “Get outta here ‘fore I call the cops. I told you what I know. I don’t mess with Lily no more, not in years.”

I clench my fists. The urge to beat the fuck out of him is strong, but I hold myself together, repeating the serenity prayer in my head. The man who walked into the store is warily watching our interaction.

“You’re fucking lucky,” I point out.

Turning around, I speed-walk to my truck, knocking someone in the shoulder on my way out. I don’t breathe until I’m in my seat, slamming my palms on the steering wheel.

“Fuck. Fuck. *Fuck!*”

My heart is racing and my mind is spinning.

Arizona. She’s in Arizona.

ALINA



I think I might be in shock. Back when Lily overdosed and disappeared, a lot was left unsaid. Chase was closed off, and I was too afraid of pushing him to pry, so I didn't hear the details. I didn't realize he spent hours searching, and when he finally found her she was on the brink of death. Chase has lived with this memory seared into his brain, torturing him. An entire experience that would shape the rest of his life, and I had no idea of its depth. *I never knew.* My heart cracks because I never thought to ask.

He tells me about the gas station. My eyes grow wide with every sentence he utters. I'm cozy in a pair of his basketball shorts and a tee, sitting on his couch, watching him pace a hole through his living room floor.

"I mean, I have to do something, right?" he asks.

"You don't *have* to do anything. Do you think you should?"

He rips at his thick, dark hair. I'm surprised he has any left on his head after the years of abuse the strands have endured.

"I should have killed that motherfucker. I'm gonna go back. You think he's still there?" He stops in the middle of the room, spinning to face me. His fists open and close at his sides.

"I think you should take a deep breath." I inhale and blow it out to show him how it's done. He mimics me, and some of the rigidity leaves his posture. "Now, come over here. Sit down and we can talk this through." I pat the spot next to me.

He plops on the couch. I scoot him forward so he's on the edge, and I squeeze behind him, my fingers kneading the tension out of his shoulders. He groans, his head dropping to give me better access.

“Have you talked to your folks about any of this? I mean, do you ever bring up Lily?”

He blows out a breath. “No. We don't talk about her.”

My hands pause their movements. His words surprise me. “Never?”

“Never.”

“Well... then I think that's the first step. You need to talk to 'em. For all we know, they could've been in contact with her and not told you.”

His shoulders tighten. “They wouldn't do that.”

“Oh, no? Have you given them the impression you'd be open to hearin' about her?”

He quiets. The old Chase would clam up and change the subject anytime Lily's name was spoken. I wouldn't be surprised if his folks were scared to bring her up in conversation. But I could be wrong because this new Chase is an enigma. He's more open than he was in the past—this weekend in Nashville proved that.

The Nar-Anon meeting was different than I expected. I've been spending the past twenty-four hours processing, and I'm still not sure how I feel. I've heard about Alcoholics Anonymous. Heck, I've tried to get Daddy to go a thousand times. But I hadn't heard of a support group for friends and family.

Their stories were harrowing, digging deep inside, and pulling up ugly feelings I'd rather keep buried. Exposing the rawness I only uncover in solitude.

I didn't think there would ever be a day where Chase spoke his story. I spent years hoping he'd share his burdens. Even though I get now why he kept it buried, the fact I wasn't what he needed to heal is a bitter pill to swallow.

There are some things the heart can't forget. Loving Chase is one. Being hurt by him is another. But losing my daddy to the devil makes me understand. Chase's mama ravaged his soul, leaving him to pick up the pieces, and abilities become stunted when something is battered and bruised. It doesn't excuse his behavior. It doesn't lessen the phantom pain of his betrayals. But it helps.

"I've been thinking about what you said," he blurts.

"I say a lot of things." I press my fingers into a knot on his neck.

"About a private investigator. To find Lily. I wasn't planning on doing anything, but maybe this is the universe telling me I need to find her."

"Do you think that's what it is? A sign from God?" God. Universe. Same thing as far as I'm concerned.

"I don't fucking know." He tugs his hair again, leaning into me. "What do you think I should do?"

The lost look in his eyes makes me want to scour the world for him. I chew my lip, considering my words. "I reckon you should talk to your folks before you decide on anything."

He reaches back, palming my thigh. "Yeah, you're probably right. Will you come with me?"

My eyes bulge. "To talk to your folks?"

"Yeah. I don't want to do it alone." His voice cracks.

"Okay. I'll go." I slide my hands to his chest, wrapping my legs around his waist and squeezing tight.

I don't tell him how the thought of seeing them makes my stomach roll. How every time I've run into Anna, the air grows chilly. I don't open up about the resentment I feel knowing Sam dropped Daddy like he couldn't be bothered to help him through his pain.

I don't mention any of these things. But I sure do think them.



THE SMELL of fresh coffee wakes me, and I inhale deep, groaning as I stretch my muscles. I take my time getting out of Chase's bed, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. Snatching my phone off the end table, I check the time. I'm relieved I didn't oversleep. I don't want to be late for work, in case Regina's there.

Grabbing my clothes from my overnight bag, I head to the en suite. I don't have any of my toiletries—other than a toothbrush—so I'll have to use whatever's available. The thought of smelling like Chase all day makes my belly flutter.

Showered and dressed for the day, I walk to the kitchen in search of some caffeine and some kisses from my man. Chase is leaning on the counter, scrolling his phone while he sips coffee. He looks up and smiles. My heart skips. *Those dang dimples.*

"How you feeling today, Goldi?" he asks. Joy, pure and bright, fills me at his question. It's been a long time since I've heard it.

"Hi." I grin, planting a soft kiss on his lips. "I feel great."

His big hand grabs me from behind and squeezes, pulling me further into him. "Fuck, I love having you here in the morning. Did you sleep okay?"

I nod, swiping his coffee and taking a drink. I hum as it hits my tongue. There's just something about that first sip in the morning that can't be beaten. Having Chase next to me while I savor the taste is the cherry on top. I could get used to this.

His eyes darken as he watches me. "You better stop that."

"Stop what?" I murmur, taking another gulp.

"Everything you're doing. You're making me want to bend you over this counter, and we don't have time for that."

My body heats as I imagine the feeling of him behind me, pushing my hips into the granite with his thrusts. I shift and bite my lip, arousal zinging between my legs.

He interrupts my daydream. “I’m gonna be at the main office all day. I’ll talk to Sam about getting together for dinner tonight. Will that work for you?”

I rub my thumb over his lips. “Yep, works for me.”

His teeth snap at my fingers and I squeal, jerking my hand away. He chortles, standing up to grab his keys from the counter.

“I’ve gotta get going.” His hands frame my face, his tongue parting my lips and dipping in my mouth for a quick taste. My eyes flutter closed, and the threads of our connection dance—content that we’re finally together.

“Stay as long as you like, make yourself at home,” he whispers against my mouth.

My fingers circle his wrists. “Maybe I’ll just come straight here after work... if that’s okay?”

“Baby, you could move in tomorrow and I’d be okay with it.” He brushes my cheeks with his thumbs, leaving me with one last kiss.

That night, we pull into Sam and Anna’s driveway, but I’m stuck looking at the house three doors down. I haven’t talked to Eli or Daddy since our fight. Eli texted and tried to call, but I need to calm down before I answer. Otherwise, who knows what will come out of my mouth. I may say things I regret. Or I might ask what the heck he was thinking letting Daddy go to a bar. Or how come my best friend’s acting a fool over him getting hitched.

“Hey, you okay?” A squeeze on my thigh makes me realize I’ve been staring in a daze.

I muster up a smile. “Yeah, I’m fine. Just worryin’ is all.”

“Do you want to stop by there after dinner?” He tilts his head toward where I’ve been looking.

Do I? Yes. No. Maybe. Nothing good can come of it, but I can't help that I miss Daddy. Even if I know he isn't missing me.

"Maybe. Let's just deal with one thing at a time."

As we walk the pathway to his front door, my nerves grow tenfold, jumping around at the thought of seeing Sam and Anna. Chase walks right in, pulling me with him. Being here after so long is a bit surreal. There are so many memories tied up in this place, and I spent years trying to forget them.

The smell of good home cooking makes me pine for my mama. I missed my weekly visit on Sunday and feel guilty for not making it a priority once I came home. *Tomorrow, I'm makin' time.*

"Anybody home?" Chase hollers.

Anna swings around the corner, her long blonde hair twirling as she rushes into Chase's arms.

"Hi, honey." She palms his cheeks. The hole in my heart where Mama's love used to be aches.

"Hey, Anna." Chase beams. "Smells good in here, thanks for having us."

She smacks his shoulder, shushing him. "This is your home, you're always welcome." She glances at me, her blue eyes cooling. "Alina. How are you?"

She's polite—her southern roots strong, but that's the extent of her hospitality. Chase looks between us, reaching out and pulling me into his side. I don't miss the way Anna's eyes swing to where he holds me. Her lips purse.

I'm antsy, her judgment making my palms sweat. "Anna, thanks so much for havin' me. It smells delicious."

"Mmm. My pleasure." Her smile looks painful.

She turns back toward Chase, leaving me forgotten in the hallway, as she links their arms and walks to the kitchen. I follow behind, my stomach sinking at her disregard. *What did I do to make her hate me so much?*

“Is there anything I can help with?” I ask, looking around.

Anna doesn't spare me a glance. “I've got everything handled, thank you kindly. Make yourself at home.”

Chase starts to walk toward me, but Anna grips his arm, stealing his attention back as she tells him about the new yoga group she's in. He gazes at me over her shoulder and I wave him off.

What the heck do I do now? I peer out of the sliding back door and see Sam lounging in a chair, beer bottle to his lips. I head toward him.

Stepping outside allows me to breathe easy for the first time since we've shown up. The twilight sky bathes the ground in orangey-pink hues, showcasing the beauty that's lacking every other time of day. I plop in the lounge chair next to Sam.

“Beautiful evening, isn't it?” He smiles.

“One of the best Tennessee sunsets I've seen,” I agree.

“That's high praise coming from a native.”

“I call it like I see it, Mr. Adams.”

He angles his head, his gray speckled, sandy-brown hair flopping as he looks at me from amber eyes. “When have you ever called me anything other than Sam, Alina? Don't you start being formal now, just because it's been a few years.”

“Okay, Sam.” My lips curl, relieved the animosity from inside hasn't followed me.

“So, how ya been? It's been a while.”

“I'm great, thanks for askin.” It's an automatic response, and even though it isn't one-hundred percent true, it's the only answer he'll get.

He bobs his head, staring at the horizon. “And your dad?”

I hesitate. My knee-jerk reaction is to say he's fine, great. Better than ever. But I can't find it in myself to lie for him. Not anymore.

“He’s... strugglin’.”

Sam frowns. I glance at my hands, the urge to vomit out the truth overwhelming me, but the back door opens before I have the chance.

“Dinner’s ready, y’all!” Anna sings.

Sam looks like he wants me to keep talking, but I give him a small smile, shaking my head like it isn’t a big deal.

Daddy’s secret is safe for another day.

CHASE



I watch as Goldi steps onto the back deck and sits next to Sam. I want to follow her, but I'd like a minute alone with Anna. There are a couple of things I need to get across before dinner. I didn't miss the animosity she was spewing toward Goldi, and even though Sam warned me, seeing it with my own eyes is disappointing. It never occurred to me they would blame Goldi for things going sour, and while I can't go back in time and fix the wrongs of my past, I sure as hell can make sure they don't continue in the future.

I watch Anna chop tomatoes and drone on about yoga. I'm trying to stay focused on what she's saying, but I'm too irritated to pay attention. Before this moment, I've never felt anything but love and admiration—for that to be tainted so quickly is jarring.

"Anna," I interrupt her rambling.

She turns from her chopping board, stopping mid-sentence.

"What was that?" I keep my voice low, not wanting anything to carry out back. The last thing I want is for Goldi to hear this conversation.

"I don't know what you mean." Anna glances toward the deck, letting me know she does, in fact, know what I'm talking about. She resumes chopping her tomatoes.

"I mean with Goldi, but I think you knew that."

She scoffs. "I'm treatin' her the same way I always have."

She's avoiding eye contact even though I'm sure she can feel the weight of my gaze. That's okay, she doesn't need to say anything. She just needs to listen.

"Can I ask you something, Anna? Do you love Sam?"

"You know I do." Her eyes soften.

"Can you imagine what it would be like if you had to live your life without him? How it would feel knowing the love of your life was out there, wanting absolutely nothing to do with you because of things that you did?"

The knife in Anna's hand pauses.

"And then imagine that by some miracle, you get a second chance. That *finally*, you get to experience being loved by the other half of your soul."

"Chase, I don't know—"

I cut her off. "I know I've never opened up to you. That's on me, and I'm sorry for any pain that's caused you."

Her eyes gloss over and she curls her lips in, her hand rising to her chest.

"But listen to me when I tell you this, Anna, because I'm only gonna say it once. Goldi is *it* for me. She always was and she always will be. Anything that happened in the past, *everything* that happened in the past is on me. She's not going anywhere. I lost her once, I won't lose her again. If you can't come to terms with that," I blow out a breath. "If you force me into making a choice... I won't bring her somewhere she feels unwelcome."

Anna wipes under her eyes. "She was Lily's *best friend*, Chase. Do you really believe she had nothin' to do with what Lily got into?"

My chin rises along with my eyebrows. "Is that what you think?"

"I find it hard to believe anything else."

"Lily hid the truth from every single one of us, Anna. Hell—she *lived* with us and we didn't know. Or maybe we did and

chose to be blind to what was right in front of our faces.” I shake my head. “Either way, projecting that on to Goldi isn’t okay.” I step closer, leaning my head down to catch her eyes with mine. “She isn’t to blame. Not for Lily. Not for me.”

Anna scowls. “She made you up and leave us. You couldn’t even hear the word Sugarlake without your bleedin’ heart spillin’ through your eyes. You can say whatever you want, but... I struggled for *years* to have children, and then I finally got two. If it weren’t for her” —she points the knife toward the back deck— “maybe I’d still have you both.”

I keep my face stoic, but inside, my heart is being wrung out to dry from her words. This is a lot deeper than a simple misunderstanding. Anna and Sam had years of fertility issues. If she’s blaming Goldi for the loss of her children, after years of struggling—that’s going to be more than a ten-minute conversation before dinner.

“That’s not fair,” I argue.

She shrugs, her eyes sad even through her smile. “It may not be, but it’s how I feel.”

My jaw clenches. “Be upset at Lily. Be angry at me. Be pissed off at the hand life dealt you... but please don’t think I’ll sit back and let you take it out on Goldi. I won’t bring her here to be disrespected.”

“I know.” She nods. “You love her more than you love us.”

My stomach sinks at her words. *I fucking hate this.* “I love you. You have been the best mom a guy could ask for.”

She gasps. It’s the first time I’ve said the words. The first time I’ve called her mom. I pull her in for a hug and she collapses against my chest. I hold her close, years of my mistakes and her longing culminating as tear stains on my shirt. After a few moments, she snuffles and pulls back.

I hold her by her shoulders. “I’m in love with her. Try to understand, Anna, *please*. My world was black for so long, you know?”

“And she’s the light?” Anna asks softly.

“She’s every star in the sky.”

Anna nods, wiping her tears and heading to the back patio to let Sam and Goldi know it’s time for dinner. I set the table, my stomach rumbling from the smell of Anna’s cooking. It’s one of the things I’ve missed most over the years. There’s a lot of takeout in my life when she isn’t there to feed me.

For the first half of dinner, we talk about Sam’s retirement party. It’s this Saturday, so Anna is trying to get all the last-minute details sorted. She’s excited, almost bouncing out of her seat when she talks. Sam, on the other hand, isn’t. I know for a fact he would rather not be retiring at all, but he’s doing it to appease Anna. *Happy wife, happy life*. Goldi and I haven’t even talked about the party, but she doesn’t seem surprised, so I’m assuming her family got the invite. I wonder if Mr. Carson plans on going. No one knows about his drinking, and I’m pretty fucking positive he’s past the point of being able to fake it.

There’s a lull in the conversation, and I know this is my chance. Nausea rages through my gut, and my knee hits the bottom of the table from my jitters. It doesn’t matter, my nerves won’t stop me from this. Now that I know Lily’s in Arizona, I won’t be able to rest until I make sure she’s okay.

“So.” I clear my throat. “Something interesting happened. I want to talk to you guys about it, but I’m not really sure how to bring it up.” I clench my fork, the metal stinging as it presses into my palm.

Anna places her napkin in her lap. “You know you can tell us anything, Chase.”

“Right.” I nod. “I ran into someone who knows Lily.”

The table goes mute. Anna’s smile drops and Sam’s shoulders stiffen.

Goldi reaches over and links our fingers, giving me the strength to continue. “He told me she’s in Arizona. Or at least, that she was a few months back.”

Sam leans forward, his elbows on the table, his attention rapt. “How does he know that? She still talks to him?”

“I don’t know, I wasn’t exactly in the best frame of mind for asking questions.” Even thinking about that motherfucker makes the rage bubble in my veins.

“Hmm.” Sam’s eyes are calculating. Anna is still frozen in her seat, her face drawn.

I look between them. “Do you guys still look for her? Has she ever reached out to you?”

Sam’s eyes droop like he’s disappointed I’d ask. “You really think we wouldn’t tell you that, son?”

“I wasn’t exactly open to hearing about her. Talking about her is hard for me.” I squeeze Goldi’s hand tight, using her to anchor me. “I’ve been thinking about hiring a private investigator.”

Sam leans back in his seat, sighing. “We hired one a few years back. He looked for over a year, but he never found anything.”

Goldi pipes in. “Do you think it would help if he knew she might be in Arizona? You know, somethin’ concrete to go on?”

Sam considers her words. “It’s possible.” He looks to Anna, who is stone still, silent as a lamb. “I think his name was Don something. Based in Nashville. He’s a bit seedy, but apparently, he’s the best. I’ll find his info and give it to you. Maybe you’ll have more luck than we did.”

I nod, my heart rising to my throat with the thought of finding Lily. It doesn’t settle back in my chest—even after I go home, sleep and get ready for work the next day.

After dinner, I thought I’d be able to talk everything through with Goldi. But then Becca called. I could hear her screeching from the driver’s side of the truck, and when Goldi turned her worried look my way, I knew I was losing her to her best friend for the night.

I haven’t seen her yet today. I’m supposed to be taking lunch, but I’m stuck staring at the contact info Sam just forwarded to my phone. Looks like I’m about to call this Don Calhoun guy. Sam warned me again that he’s a bit sketchy. I

don't give a fuck if he's the slimiest crook in the world as long as he can find my sister.

With shaky fingers, I press call and bring the phone up to my ear.

It rings... once... twice... three times, before it stops.

“Mason.”

I pull the phone away from my ear, squinting at the screen. *Mason?*

“Yeah, hi. I'm trying to reach a Don Calhoun? I was told this was his contact information.”

“Uh-huh. And what do you want with Don?”

“I'd rather keep that between Don and myself.”

“Well, considering that you called *my* number, asking *me* questions—that doesn't put you in a very good spot to make any demands, now does it?”

Is this guy fucking serious?

I sigh, exasperated already. “I'm calling for business. He did some work for my family in the past, and I'd like to hire him again.”

“Mhm. You lookin' to find someone or to get lost?”

The lines between my eyebrows crease. “I need to find someone. Listen, can you just put Don on the phone, or take a fucking message or something? I don't really have time for all this back and forth.”

“I'm afraid Don's not in commission. I'm in charge now, so you can either talk with me or hang up. Doesn't make a hell of a lot of difference to me either way.”

“Seems like a good business model,” I mumble.

A throaty chuckle comes down the line. “Don't need a good business model when you're the best. I can find anyone for you, it's not a problem. But there's a price. And I prefer to meet in person before going over the details.”

I lift my face to the sky, frustrated this isn't as cut and dry as I thought it would be. "Okay, that's fine. But I can't get out of town until Sunday."

"Nope."

"What do you mean, 'nope?'"

"I mean, Sunday won't work. Saturday's the one."

"I'm busy Saturday," I say through clenched teeth.

"I'll come to you."

I consider his offer. I'll be busy all day with Sam's retirement party, but fuck it. I can disappear for a few minutes. I give him the info and he says he'll call if anything changes.

One step closer.



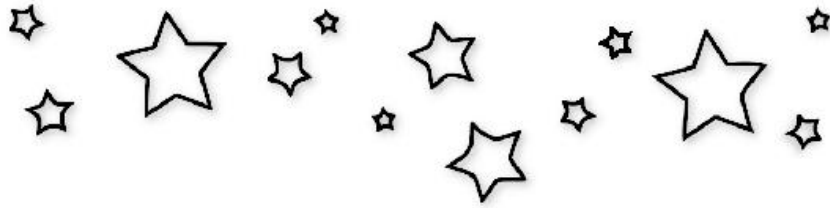
JOURNAL ENTRY #352

I should probably write about everything that's going on with Lily, that's what these journal entries are supposed to be for, right? Exiling my demons and all that. But I'm fucking tired of thinking about it. So Doc, if you're reading this, I guess you'll have to hope I'm in the mood to verbalize my shit when I'm there.

But I'll write about Goldi. I miss her. And that makes me feel a little pathetic because I saw her earlier today. I keep reminding myself to take things slow. I mean... not physically obviously. Now that my cock has felt the heaven that is her pussy, I don't think I can ever go without it again. But if I thought she would say yes, I'd move her into my place tomorrow. I want to be near her. Always. Is it too soon to have her here all the time? Is it normal to feel like this? The first time around things were intense, but I don't remember it being this fucking overwhelming. All I see is her. I taste the memory of her on my tongue. I fucking smell vanilla even when she isn't around. I'm going fucking crazy.

But I don't care. I'll live the rest of my life crazy, as long as I get to be crazy for her.

ALINA



“**Y**our brother is an asshole!” Becca screeches, throwing the front door closed behind her.

I smirk, holding out the glass of wine I had, poured and waiting. Chase and I were on our way to his place when she called in a tizzy. Her first official “meeting” with Eli and Sarah was today, and she threatened bodily harm if I dared to not be home when she showed up. So here I am, a bottle of wine and a listening ear.

“I take it things didn’t go well?” I try to hide my grin.

She glares at me. “No. Things did not *go well*. Your brother is literally the worst person I’ve ever had the displeasure of knowin’.”

My brow arches.

“I mean, how did you survive growin’ up with someone who’s so... so...”

“Particular?” I guess.

“Insane!” she shouts. “Ugh!”

I grimace as I watch her gulp down her glass of wine. *Yuck*. Red wine is meant to be savored, not chugged like a frat boy.

I try hard not to laugh, but it spills out anyway. It’s nice to know that even if Eli and I aren’t on good terms, he’s still *him*. As picky as the day is long, and as controlling as the moon with the tides.

“You shouldn’t let him get to you, Becca. He’s doin’ it on purpose. He loves gettin’ a rise outta people.”

“He’ll get a rise out of my foot when I shove it up his ass,” she mumbles, grabbing the wine bottle to refill her glass.

“Y’all have always been like oil and water. Remember how ticked he used to make you as a kid?” I smile at the memories. My heart squeezes, beating out a melancholy song that has me aching for my big brother.

“Well, I don’t know how Sarah puts up with him. I could *never*. Really, there’s no way I could ever marry that man, let alone live with him. It woulda been a terrible decision.”

My stomach jumps in my throat, the wine that just passed my lips shooting back into my glass. “Come again?”

She yawns, running a hand over her face. “Huh?”

“You said it *would* have been a terrible decision. What exactly are you referrin’ to in that statement? The marriage part, or the livin’ together part?”

Her spine straightens. “I didn’t say that. You misheard me.”

“What’d you say, then?”

“Hmmm?” She’s gulping down her wine. *Again*. “Hey, how was your trip with Chase?”

“Nope.” I shake my head. “Nope. No way. You don’t get to change the subject like that, Becca.”

She groans, throwing her head back. “I don’t wanna talk about Eli anymore.”

“That’s the whole reason you came over!” I throw my hands up.

“Well, I just needed to vent. I did and now I’m done.” She shrugs, tossing her curly hair over her shoulder.

Playin’ with her hair again. “You know, you and Eli are really startin’ to tick me off. I don’t appreciate bein’ the in-between for you two when neither of you will tell me what’s goin’ on.”

Becca doesn't say anything, just picks at her split ends.

I grab her hand. "You can tell me, you know? You're my best friend, Becca. Nothin' will ever change that. Just *please*, tell me what's goin' on."

"Nothin' is goin' on, Lee." Her voice is a whisper. She sounds exhausted by my line of questioning.

She should try bein' the one who has all the questions.

My intuition is an annoying gnat, flying around and nipping at my brain. But Becca's the most stubborn person I've ever met. Continuing to try to get her to talk would be like beating a dead horse.

I narrow my eyes. "If you say so."

Becca ends up staying the night, passing out on my couch shortly after she decided to avoid all conversation regarding Eli. I know what I heard. But it's just too crazy to believe. She's way too opinionated for someone like him, and he'd need to give up some of that precious control of his to have her. *Yeah, right*. Plus, there's no way on God's green earth Becca would hook up with my brother and not tell me about it.

I'm still thinking about it the next day while I'm sitting in the office and typing up a blog post for the Tiny Dancers website. Chase waltzes in, interrupting my thoughts, and my entire body fills up with my smile.

I love him.

My heart grows wings, flapping around my chest at the thought.

"Hey, baby." He leans down, kissing me. "Fuck, I missed you. Please tell me I get to see you tonight."

"You get to see me tonight," I speak against his lips.

"Do you want to go grab something to eat? I'm about to head out for some wings with the guys, thought I'd see if you wanted to come along."

I scrunch up my nose. I don't like wings. "Bleh. Pass. Thanks, though."

His face droops with disappointment, but I'd rather work through lunch and have time to stop for tulips on the way to Mama's grave.

"Okay. But I'll see you tonight? Want to go to the lake? Supposed to be a nice night."

I beam at the thought. "I'd love that."

He grins. "Alright, I'll pick you up at your place."

"I won't be home until a little later. I'm gonna go visit Mama."

His eyes gain a sadness to their hazel hue. We haven't really delved into the "Mama" conversation yet, and that's okay. I don't particularly care for the weight that comes along with the topic.

"Okay, baby. Call me if you need me." He presses a kiss to my temple, then reaches down and slips his hand under my skirt, grabbing a fistful of skin.

"Hey! Watch your hand, mister." I laugh, smacking him away.

"Can't blame a guy for trying." He winks.

Just like that, he lifts the heaviness.

A few hours later, my feet slip over the freshly watered grass surrounding the path that leads to Mama.

My heart palpitates as I stand in front of her tombstone. I expected it to be in disarray—wilting flowers, some leaves that need to be cleaned. But it's pristine. Cleaner than I've ever seen it, like someone took the time to meticulously scrub away all the dirt and grime. Fresh tulips sit in a vase with an envelope placed underneath. I step closer and peer down at the writing.

Dear, Ma.

My heart squeezes tight, forcing tears to trickle from my eyes. Eli came to see her. I wondered if he would. All the anger I felt toward him washes away, and I cry for my big brother.

“Hey, Mama.” I lay the flowers I brought along the bottom of her tombstone. “I see you had another visitor. I bet you’ve been missin’ him somethin’ fierce, huh?” I sit cross-legged, resting my elbows on my knees. “I’ve been askin’ for you to bring Eli home for years, and you finally did it. So thanks, I suppose. Although, this isn’t the way I expected it to happen.” I chuckle.

“Did you know he was gettin’ hitched?” I rest my chin in my hand. “I bet you were spyin’ on every second of him fallin’ in love, just couldn’t help yourself.”

Memories slide behind my eyes of Mama fussing over Eli and his “lonely heart.”

“Did you send Chase back to me, too?” A leaf blows onto my knee, and I pick it up, fingering the delicate greenery.

“You’re just movin’ down the list, huh?” I chew on my lip, frowning. “When ya gonna get to Daddy? Can you go be his guardian angel for a bit? I miss him almost as much as I miss you. For almost as long too.”

The breeze picks up, leaving a chill on my skin that’s unusual for this time of year. I close my eyes and meditate on the feeling—try to reach out and grasp a connection to Mama’s spirit. Eventually, a car door slams bringing me out of my reverie.

With a kiss to her name, I leave.

There’s a text waiting for me when I get to my car. I smile, seeing Jax’s name on my phone. He’s finally reaching out. I’ve wanted to smother him with my presence, but I know things are still raw. He says he needs space, so I’ve been trying to give that to him.

Jax: Hey sweetheart. What ya up to? Can we get together tonight? I’ve got some news.

Me: I’m busy tonight, but I’m all yours tomorrow evening! Wanna go out or stay in?

Jax: Shit, can’t do tomorrow.

Me: You going to Sam’s party on Saturday?

He's leaving town soon to go back to California, but I hope I get at least one more weekend with him before he does.

Jax: Yep. I'll be there to steal the show.

I grin.



It's a beautiful night at the lake. But it always is when I'm there with Chase. Once again, we're lying on the afghan in the back of his black pickup truck. Only this time, I'm not having to fight my feelings. No need to hesitate before reaching over and grabbing his hand, or rolling over and putting my head on his chest.

He tells me about the private investigator coming, and I vent my fears about Daddy. Mainly, that he won't be able to string together a "congrats" for Sam at his retirement party. Once we've lightened the weight of what's bringing us down, we're able to relax, and just enjoy the peace that comes along with being together beneath the stars.

He trails kisses down the column of my neck, and my body trembles under his touch. My stomach tightens as his hand dips below my summer dress.

"Have I ever told you how much I fucking *love* the fact you always wear skirts and dresses?" He slips under the fabric and slides through my folds, spreading the wetness that's leaking out of me from his touch and his words.

"Wh—why's that?" I stutter.

"Easy access." His breaths puff against my neck as he talks, and it sends shivers up and down my spine.

"Chase," I breathe. "We're in public."

"There's nobody here but us, baby."

He bites my collarbone, a sting setting in from the marks his teeth leave behind. He pushes a thick finger inside me, my eyes fluttering closed as I gasp into his touch. He starts to

slowly pump his finger in and out, frissons of lust sparking through my body.

“Besides,” he continues. “I think you’d like it if people were all around us, oblivious to the fact I’m about to make you come all over my hand.” He grinds his palm against me as he speaks.

My mouth parts, my eyes rolling back. I love that he knows what turns me on without me having to voice it. *Is that why he keeps doing things where anyone can see?* Heat spirals through my veins at the thought. He slips another finger in and moves faster, making me writhe underneath him. Tingles bloom between my legs.

He leans in, swiping his tongue along the length of my bottom lip before he moves his way down my body. He pushes my dress up further, his head disappearing underneath. I rise up on my elbows, scanning the shoreline to see if we’re still alone. Before I can make sure, my vision goes hazy from the sensation of his mouth closing around me. Right on that bundle of nerves begging to be touched. Licked. Caressed.

He twirls his tongue in tandem with his fingers, my heart beating to the pulse of my arousal. I drop back down, unable to hold myself up, tremors radiating through me. My legs wrap around him, his face fitting perfectly between them.

I lift my dress higher so I can watch him bobbing between my thighs. Reaching down, I grab fistfuls of his hair, pushing his face against me. He growls in response, his fingers twisting. Electricity lances through me.

My eyes have been closed but I force them open, wanting to watch as he makes me come apart. “Chase... I’m about to...”

His tongue moves faster. Circling. Flicking. Then he sucks *hard*, and I feel like I’m about to erupt. The pace of his fingers is audible from my arousal dripping on his hand.

I grip the strands of his hair tighter, twisting them as my back arches, pushing myself farther into his face. He groans like I’m the best meal he’s ever had.

I'm so close and I just need a little...

More...

Distant voices fill the air, and the panic that seizes my heart is all I need to push me over the edge.

I feel the moan building and Chase's hand shoots up to muffle the noise. I bite down on his palm to keep from screaming. My inner walls clench around his fingers, sucking him in deeper as fireworks of pleasure explode and sizzle through my body.

He continues to lap at me as I catch my breath and float back to my body.

"Holy crap," I say on an exhale.

He pops up and smiles, his mouth glistening. "Guess there was someone here after all."

"You're the worst." I laugh, rearranging my clothes.

"You love me."

I suck in a breath, and the carefree grin drops off his face. His words hang in the space between us.

I want to tell him that I do. *I do* love him. I don't think I ever stopped. But my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth and I can't get the words out.

"Hey, y'all got a light?" a voice interrupts our stare down, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

"Naw man, sorry," Chase responds before turning back to look at me. "You ready to get out of here?"

"Sure."

He grabs my hand, kissing the back of it, and the tension leaves my body with his gesture. "Okay, let's go."

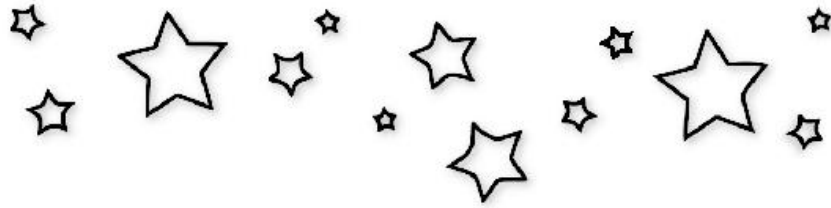
We're quiet on the drive to my place. It's one of my favorite things about Chase. He doesn't fill the air with empty thoughts. I find more comfort in his silence than I do in anyone else's words.

We pull up to the front of my building and say our goodbyes. Just as I'm opening the truck door I hear his phone ding. I look back to see him frowning at the screen. I lean in to give him a kiss, and his arm jerks, angling the phone away from me.

Alarm bells sound in my head.

I don't ask. Instead, I kiss him goodbye and run inside, thoughts of what he was hiding on his phone running through my head the rest of the night.

CHASE



It was a knee-jerk reaction. One that I'm kicking myself over having. I saw the look on Goldi's face when my hand jerked, but damn, I did not want her to see what was on my screen. *Fucking Marissa*. I thought everything was under control—that when I told her to cut it the fuck out with the naked pictures, she had listened. It's only natural that when she decides to start up with her bullshit again, I'm with Goldi.

My insides feel jumbled. They aren't going to calm down until I explain things to Goldi, but I need to do it in person. I want to look in her eyes and know she understands that when I pulled my phone away—it was to spare her the sight. Not for any other reason. Unfortunately, my explanation will have to wait because I won't see her today. I'm stuck at the main office, and I'm tied up tonight and tomorrow setting up for Sam's retirement party.

Still, I need to make sure we're okay. I pull out my phone and text her.

Me: Good morning, baby. I hope your night was filled with dreams of the lake. And us. Preferably the latter. Have a good day today. Anything planned tonight?

Goddamn, that was cheesy.

I look up as Sam walks in, and shoot him a grin. “Hey, old man, didn't expect to see you. I thought you'd be getting an early start on that retired life.”

“I can't seem to stay away.” He plops down in front of my desk, making himself comfortable. “I just came to check in on

you, have a chat.”

I glance at my phone one last time, pushing it to the side and giving Sam my full attention. “How are you feeling about everything? You ready for your new slow and boring life?”

He runs his fingers through his graying hair, chuckling. “I don’t know if I’ll ever be ready. I never thought about what life would be like after, you know? I spent my whole life working toward a goal. Owning my own company. And then, building that company into something that would last.”

“You’ve got it made now.” I smile.

“Yeah.” He sighs, lifting his arms to the side. “What do you do when your dreams have come true?”

“Fuck if I know. Make a new dream, I guess. You ready for your party?”

He lifts a shoulder as he brushes his hands down the front of his shirt. “I guess. It’s more for Anna’s benefit than mine.”

“I think we all know that.” I relax into my chair.

“The party’s actually the reason I came to talk to you. Everyone from our company will be there. I’m going to make the announcement officially that you’re taking over as CEO.”

My heart beats faster. *CEO*. I knew it was coming, but it’s still a shock to the system. Back when I was a teen, I dreamed of this happening. When I became a man, I thought that dream was washed away in the stream of my mistakes.

I grit my teeth and nod, overwhelmed with gratitude for my second chance. Sam’s eyes soften and I know he gets it. This is a big moment. I glance at my phone again, wondering if there’s a text from the woman I want to share *all* my moments with.

My phone finally chimes three hours later.

Goldi: Sorry! I just saw this. Regina’s in today and is being EXTRA special. I hope your day’s good. Do you want to go to Sam’s party together? Or should I plan to show up with Jax?

I want her to show up with me, not Jax. Not Becca. But I need to be there early, and I won't subject her to more one-on-one time with Anna.

Me: I'll be stuck at the rec hall, you'll be bored hanging around all day. I'll just meet you there. You having a good day?

Goldi: Would be better if you were here.

The knot in my stomach unravels and contentment rolls through me. There won't be a good opportunity before the party to talk about what happened. Still, I need her to know it isn't something we should ignore. I'm not an expert on relationships, by any means. *Fucking obviously.* But I do know there needs to be good communication at all times, from both sides. That was one of my biggest failures last time around.

Me: Will you come back to my place after the party? I want to fall asleep with you in my arms. I also want to explain what happened last night. It was stupid and isn't anything you need to worry about. I'll show you whatever you want if you feel like you need to see it.

Typing bubbles pop up, delete, then pop up again.

Goldi: Okay.



I'VE BEEN CARRYING in trays of food for what feels like forever. Anna had a local eatery cater the party, but instead of having them deliver, she offered my services to lug it all in—which is fine, I really don't mind. But damn, it's hot as hell today, and she ordered what feels like the entire fucking store.

There are tables set up along the edge of the room, slowly filling up with all the food I'm bringing in. I drop off the latest load and look around for Anna. I find her talking to some guy across the room. She throws her head back and laughs at something he says. She looks so happy, and it's enough to make my irritation at being an errand boy melt away. I walk over to them.

“Now’s your time to think up the next stage of torture, Anna. A couple more trips and all the food’ll be brought in,” I tease as I approach her.

She laughs. “Oh, I have plenty of things to keep you busy. Don’t you worry your pretty little head about that.”

“I don’t mind helpin’ if you need an extra set of hands,” the guy standing next to her chimes in.

I squint my eyes as I look at him. He looks familiar, but I can’t place where I’ve seen him. I’m not surprised. In a small town like Sugarlake, you’re bound to have seen everybody at some point. We probably went to school together—he looks about my age.

“Oh!” Anna exclaims. “Great! We can use all the hands we can get.” She turns toward me. “Do you two know each other already?”

He lifts his chin at me. “Chase, right? We went to school together.” My forehead scrunches as I try to remember him. My memory’s a little hazy from trying to block out a lot of those years.

He offers his hand. “I’m Logan. I’m not surprised you don’t remember, we didn’t really run in the same circles.”

The light bulb goes off as I shake his hand. *Logan*. He was a football player, I think. Hung out with that douchebag Reed—who I definitely *do* remember.

“Right. Yeah, man. My bad. You can come help bring in the last of the food trays since you’re offering.”

“Lead the way.” He grins.

After we’re done, I grab us both some water. We sit on the floor against the wall, taking a break before Anna tasks us with the next thing.

“You’re Sam and Anna’s son, right?” Logan asks.

“Something like that.” I look over at him. “How do you know Anna?”

“I’m a personal trainer here. She wanted some help promotin’ her yoga group, asked me to spread the word.” He unscrews his water bottle and takes a sip.

“She convince you to come to the party tonight, yet?”

He snorts out a laugh. “You know it.”

“I’m pretty sure she’s invited the entire town. You’d be the odd man out if you didn’t show up.”

His eyes gleam. “The whole town, huh? Maybe my piece will be there.”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. *His piece?* “Oh yeah? You got a girl?”

He shrugs, tossing his water bottle up in the air. “She ain’t my girl. I mean... she’s cool, but she’s just a nice way to pass the time. Haven’t seen her in a few weeks though.”

I don’t respond because I literally give zero fucks about this guy getting his dick wet.

“How about you? You got a girl?”

Now, *this* I do give a fuck about. “Yep.”

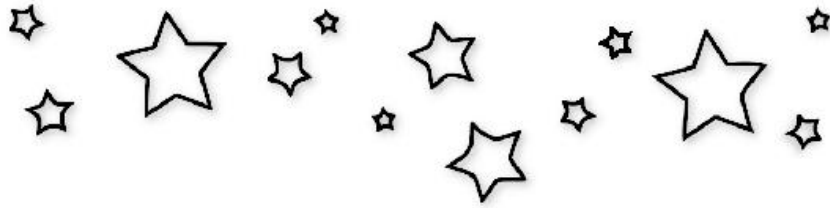
He stares at me. When I don’t elaborate he shakes his head, chuckling. “You don’t talk much, do you?”

I lean my head against the wall. “Not when there isn’t much to say.”

“Fair enough.” He stands up, dusting off his pants. “I’m gonna go find Anna and see what else she needs.”

He leaves me behind with thoughts of Goldi and how happy I am that she’s all fucking mine.

ALINA



I'm at brunch with Jax. Becca's down at the church meeting with Eli and Sarah, so it's just the two of us today. It's the first time I've seen him since our talk, and I hadn't realized how much I missed him until this moment. We're spending the day together before heading over to Sam's party tonight. It's Jax's last night before he leaves for California, and he said he wanted to go with me, even if he had to give me up at the doors.

"I'm moving," Jax blurts.

My hands grip the edge of the table, my equilibrium suddenly thrown off from his words. "What do you mean, you're *movin'*?"

"To California. I spend most of my time there anyway, and... there's not much holding me here."

He's movin' because of me. My heart cries as it cracks in my chest.

"Oh," I whisper. His words are another jagged cut to my soul, keeping tally of all the ways people leave. I don't know what to say. Even though I can't love him the way he wants, I still *love* him. The selfish part of me wishes that were enough.

He reaches out and grips my hand tight. "I'll still come back to visit. My mom would kill me if I didn't spend holidays with her. But this is something I need to do."

"Is it because of me?"

"A little," he admits.

My face crumples, the pieces of my heart falling into my stomach.

Jax rushes out his next words. “Please, sweetheart, don’t cry. I just need to get some space. Find myself, get over you. I can’t do that here... I need you to understand.”

I sniffle, nodding my head. I get it. But it doesn’t make it hurt any less. “Will w—we be okay?”

“Yeah, we’ll be okay.” With one more squeeze of my hand, he smiles. “No more of these tears, alright? I’ve got a hot date tonight, and I need her to be at her best.”

I giggle, drying my eyes.

We spend the rest of the day together. Time with him moves faster now that I know he’s about to be gone. He keeps the mood light, but still, anxiety eats at my insides as Jax pulls into the rec center’s parking lot. I tried to get a hold of Daddy and Eli, but neither of them answered, and things are still on edge with Chase. He reassured me there was nothing to worry about, but the ghosts of our past still float inside my head.

“You ready for this?” Jax asks as he parks. “It’s my last night here, sweetheart, let’s make it count.” His perfect teeth gleam in the artificial light of the street lamps.

My heart twinges. *He’s leavin’ and I don’t know when he’ll be comin’ back.*

I keep my eyes peeled for Chase as we walk in, but I don’t find him. Maybe he’s lost in the crowd. I think everyone in the history of Sugarlake is here.

“Shit, they really know how to throw a party, huh,” Jax murmurs, his hand on my lower back as he leads me farther into the room.

There are long tables set up along the walls—appetizers covering every inch. A bar sits in the corner of the room, and that’s where Jax steers me. He orders our drinks while I lean against the bar top, glancing around again for Chase. *Where is he?*

I don't see him, but my gaze snags on Anna talking to Logan. *Great.* I should have known he would be here. Logan notices me and a smile takes over his face as he says something to Anna and saunters over. We weren't in a relationship, but I still feel guilty about ghosting on him the way I did. I haven't even thought about him because I've been so tied up in Chase.

Anna watches as he walks over to me, and my insides tighten at her stare. *Super, more ammunition for the Hate Alina Brigade.*

Jax tenses next to me, squeezing my waist. He leans in to whisper in my ear. "I'm gonna go find the men's room. I'll be back."

I nod, keeping my eyes on Logan. I'm sure Jax is really leaving to avoid him, but honestly, I'm relieved. I don't want to deal with the drama tonight.

"Alina. Hey, I was hopin' you'd be here." Logan pulls me in for a hug. I squirm, uncomfortable with his attention.

"Yeah? Here I am." I back up, drinking from my wine as I glance around for Chase.

His eyes dim. "Everything okay?"

I sigh, lowering my glass onto the bar top and wringing my hands together. "Logan, I—"

His laughter cuts me off. "Don't tell me. You're endin' things."

I grimace. "Was there ever really somethin' to end?"

"There could have been if you had wanted."

"You're an amazin' man, but I'm with—"

Logan puts his hand up. "I don't need the story, babe. We were just havin' fun, right? It was bound to end at some point." His eyes peruse my body. "But damn, was it fun while it lasted."

"It *was* that."

His hands are in his pockets as he looks around the room. “Guess I need to rearrange my plans, then. Find someone else to take home tonight. I thought I had a sure thing once I saw you.”

His words bring a grin to my face. “Sorry to be a night ruiner. I’m sure there’s a line of ladies waitin’ for their chance.”

“Yeah, yeah. You don’t have to butter me up after you break my heart,” he jokes.

My eyes move past him as Anna walks up. “Alina, hi.” She smiles.

Logan leans in to kiss my cheek. “It was good to see you, Lee. Don’t be a stranger.” He turns and tips his head to Anna. “Mrs. Adams.”

“He’s such a sweet boy,” Anna says as she watches him leave.

“Mmm.” I sip from my wine, unsure of what to say. I’m surprised she’s even over here in the first place.

“Alina, I wanted to talk to you. This may not be the best time, but I’m not sure if I’ll have the chance again. I don’t see Chase willingly bringin’ you around again after the way I acted.”

The wine flows down the wrong pipe, and I bite back the cough. Is she apologizing? I wave her off. “Oh, no, Anna...”

“No, no. Let me say this.” She puts her hand on my arm. “I’ve been placin’ blame on your shoulders when you don’t deserve it. Chase chastised me good and well for it the other night, and it’s been on my mind ever since. I don’t know what all Chase has told you, but Sam and I struggled with conceiving. I prayed for children every day. Having Chase and Lily come into our lives was God’s answer.” A small smile graces her face as she thinks of her children. “Then they met you, and you lit both of them up from the inside. Especially Chase. Truly, I’ve never seen anything like it. When I lost them both, you were the easiest person to shift the blame to.”

The sting of her thoughts bites at my sensitive heart.

“I’m not proud of the way I’ve acted toward you, but there’s nothin’ I can do to change it. I also won’t lie to you. I’ve had years of buildin’ up the blame in my head, and as much as I’d like to pretend I can turn it off with a flip of a switch, it’s not that simple.”

Now *that* I understand. “I appreciate your honesty.”

“But I want you to know I’m gonna try like hell. I don’t want to lose Chase again, now that I’ve got him back. And I can see how happy you make him. How happy you’ve *always* made him.” She swipes a fallen strand of hair from her face. “Sam tells me I need to suck it up and just get outta the way, let love take its course.”

Her words don’t ring of a blossoming friendship, but they give me hope. “Thank you for tellin’ me. And for bein’ honest.” I respect that she came to me. If anyone understands not being able to turn feelings off, it’s me. I can give her time if that’s what she needs.

Anna pats my arm. “Oh, look who just showed up.” She points to the entrance. Daddy walks in followed by Eli and Sarah. My nerves sprout like weeds, wrapping around my chest and squeezing. *At least Daddy’s still walkin’ in a straight line.*

“I’ll let you catch up with your family, Alina. Thank you for givin’ me a moment of your time. You make sure that boy keeps comin’ home, you hear me?” She gives me a look that only a Mama can give, and I find myself smiling at her. I think we’ll be okay.

I head toward Eli and Daddy, figuring I might as well get it out of the way. “Hi, y’all.”

Eli grins as he sees me, and Sarah lifts her hand in a dainty wave. Daddy grunts and shoves past me, walking straight to the bar. *Okay, then. We’re still in the ignore Alina phase, I see.*

“I gather he’s in his usual form.”

Eli watches Daddy’s retreating back with a furrowed brow. “Yeah. I tried to convince him not to come. It caused a big thing at home.” He runs his fingers through his blond hair,

disheveling the strands. He looks tired, like being home has sucked the joy out of his soul.

“Hi, Sarah.” I turn toward her. “How goes the weddin’ stuff?”

“It’s going okay.” She smiles. The energy between the three of us is stilted and awkward. I’m dying to ask Eli about visiting Mama’s grave. But this isn’t the right place, and we have a host of other issues we need to work through. I stare at my big brother, drinking him in. The years have been kind to him, but I can see the stress he holds in both his posture and the few fine lines on his forehead. His eyes are stone, not giving anything away. Growing up, they were the window to his soul, and he always let people glance inside. I wonder what happened to make him feel like he needed to put up shutters.

Just as the thought crosses my mind, devastation swirls in his irises, the grief stealing my breath away. It’s just a second. A flash. But it’s there. The space between my brow wrinkles as I watch him.

“Guess who the cat drug in?” Jax’s voice comes from behind me and I spin to face him. He’s got his arm thrown over Becca’s shoulder, a lazy grin on his face. Becca stares straight at Eli. I look back and forth between them. Eli’s jaw is tight, and he reaches around Sarah’s waist, pulling her to his side, leaning into her. Like she’s a crutch.

Becca snaps her head to me and attempts a smile. “What’s up girl? You find the good booze yet? My chaperone over here” —she tilts her head toward Jax— “made me come find you first.”

I gasp. “How dare he.”

“I know, right?” Her hand lands on her hip. “I told him you of all people would understand. Especially in situations like these.” Her eyes slide back over to Eli, locking on to where he and Sarah are connected.

“Becca! Hi. Long time no see,” Sarah jokes, oblivious to the tension pulling the air.

“Hey, Sarah. You’re lookin’ just as pretty as you were this afternoon.” Becca musters a grin. “A true beauty. Eli’s a lucky man.”

Eli clears his throat, his eyes narrowing in Becca’s direction.

“The prodigal son returns home,” Jax snarks before looking at Sarah. “Hi, I’m Jax. You must be the lucky lady?”

Sarah blinks at him, in a daze. I smother my grin behind my hand. Jax has that effect on people. I remember my first time meeting him, and how he stunned me into silence too.

He puts his hand out, his other arm still wrapped around Becca’s shoulders. “Nice to meet you.”

Sarah shakes her head slightly, before placing her hand in his. “Pleasure’s all mine, and yes. I am. The lucky lady, that is. Are you Becca’s boyfriend?” She glances between them.

Eli stiffens, his eyes narrowing on Jax. A piece of the puzzle slots into place in my brain.

“Ha! He wishes,” Becca huffs. “Excuse me y’all, I need to step outside and get some air.”

She breaks away from Jax’s embrace and hurries toward the doors. Jax and I share a look. She’s definitely not okay. *And I think I know why.*

“I’m gonna go outside with her.” I turn back toward Eli. “Keep an eye on Daddy, would you?”

He nods, his jaw clenched, posture rigid—his gaze never leaving the space Becca left.

I find Becca on the edge of the sidewalk, staring at the parking lot. I don’t say anything as I sit beside her. I just nudge her with my shoulder and give her silent support. A few minutes pass, watching the cars filter in and out of the lot before I decide to use a line from Chase’s playbook.

“Do you wanna talk about it?”

“How many times do I gotta tell you, there’s nothin’ to talk about?”

“Oh, come off it, Becca. This ain’t you. Anyone with two eyes can tell somethin’ is wrong.”

She stays silent.

I chew on my lip. “Is it Eli?”

She scoffs. “No.”

I chew on my lip as I stare at her. “You know I don’t believe you, right?”

She sighs, running a hand through her hair. “Your brother has nothin’ to do with me, Lee. *That* I can promise you—Hey, isn’t that your man?” She perks up, pointing her finger across the parking lot.

My eyes follow her movement and I make out Chase. *Has he been out here this whole time?* He’s leaning against his black pickup truck, staring down at his phone. My heart speeds up at the sight of him.

“Yep, that’s my man. I’m gonna go say hi.” I’m standing up to head over there when his head shoots up and swings from side to side. *Is he lookin’ for me?*

A woman enters my line of sight causing my steps to falter. She’s gorgeous, her long jet-black hair swinging as she saunters up to Chase. She is the textbook definition of everything I’m not. My gut sinks and nausea builds, memories of our past playing out again in front of my eyes. I take a deep breath, trying to calm my racing heart. That was in the past, and he’s grown. He’s *different* now.

The woman steps closer to him. He grabs her shoulder and she smiles, letting me know there’s a familiarity there.

“Who the hell is that?” Becca comes up next to me.

I shake my head, my eyes glued to the scene before me. I have no idea who that is. But Chase obviously does.

I’m frozen in place, the stitches holding my heart together coming loose with every beat. She rises on her toes. *No*. I can’t look away, even as she slams her mouth on his, her fingers diving into his hair.

Bile rises in my throat and my stomach drops to the floor, making me dizzy. Becca's hand shoots out and grips my arm.

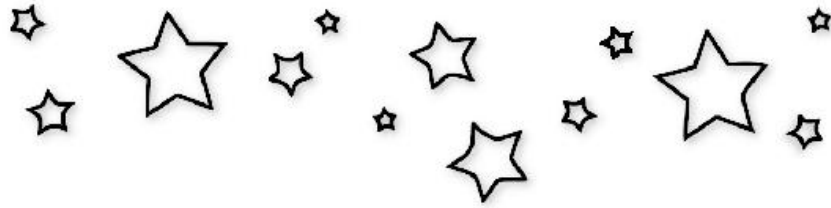
“Asshole!” Becca yells.

Her voice carries. Chase jerks back, whipping his head in our direction. His eyes lock on mine, widening in horror. The woman pulls at his arm, but he shoves her away, racing toward me.

My feet back up, my head shaking. *I can't. I won't.*

I turn. And I run.

CHASE



The text from an unknown number telling me “I look tasty” has me snapping my head up and scanning the area.

I’m outside waiting for the private investigator to get here, and who shows up instead? My psycho ex-girlfriend, who is proving with every fucking minute that it was a good decision to end things. Where was this crazy hiding all the years we were together?

“Chase.”

Motherfucking Marissa. I hear her voice before I see her, but soon enough she’s standing right in front of me.

“Marissa, what the fuck are you doing here? How many times do I have to tell you this isn’t going to happen?” I hiss at her, trying to keep my voice low.

She smirks, stepping into me. I grip her shoulders to push her back. Before I can get a word out, she plants her glossy, sticky lips on mine. They feel wrong. I rear back, but her fingers have locked in my hair and she presses harder against me. I try again, grabbing her wrists and wrenching my head just as I hear someone yell. I break free, looking at Marissa, disgusted. I turn toward the noise.

When I lock eyes with Goldi, my heart free-falls through my body and drops on the ground at my feet. *Fuck*. She looks gutted.

No.

I won't let this happen.

Marissa tries to pull me back, but I don't spare her a second glance. All I care about is getting to Goldi. Determination invades my bloodstream, propelling me faster.

“Goldi, wait!” I yell. “Goldi!”

She starts running, stumbling through the doors to the rec hall, and I chase her. I don't want to make a scene, but I will if I have to. If I let her get away, I'm not sure I'll get her back. Fear prickles my neck at the thought, but I bat it away.

Goldi pushes her way through the crowd. The sea of people slows her down, allowing me to catch up just as she hits the doors on the other side of the room.

I grab her wrist. “Goldi, damn. Hold up. That was *not* what it looked like. If you will just listen—”

She shakes her head and pushes through the doors. I follow her. I'll always follow her.

It's dark. Just a deserted hallway lined with empty rooms. Goldi runs to one of the doors and pulls, but I come up behind her and slam it closed again.

“Goldi, baby. *Please*. Just fucking talk to me. Say what you need to say and then give me the same courtesy. I'm telling you, that was not what it looked like.” My tone is pleading—desperate for her to understand. I will do *anything* to be with her. I plan to spend the rest of my fucking life with her, but we both have to be in this—through the good and the bad. We won't make it if we aren't.

She spins around, tears making her cheeks glisten. “Talk then.”

I open my mouth, but hesitate, trying to figure out where to start.

“Go on then, Chase. Talk!” she yells, her arms curling around her stomach.

My tongue shoots out to wet my lips. “That was Marissa. My ex. I ended things for-fucking-ever ago, before I even knew there was a chance with you.”

She huffs.

“It’s true. I ended things because every time I looked at her, I wished it was you.”

“Then what’s she doin’ here? And was that her the other night? On your ph–phone?” She snuffles.

“Yes.”

She turns her head, twisting her body, but I step closer, pressing her into the door and blocking her path. “Let me explain.”

Her eyes search mine, and she must see the truth in them, or fuck—I don’t know, maybe she’s just tired of fighting me. Either way, she blows out a shaky breath and relents.

“Marissa didn’t take the breakup well. She started sending me messages, and I swear to God, Goldi, I fucking shut them down every time. I blocked her number. I didn’t know she would be here. Anna invited her when we were still together, but I never thought in a million years...” I hang my head, grabbing my hair.

“But you kissed her,” Goldi bites.

I lift her chin with my fingertips. “She kissed *me*.”

Goldi shakes her head. “No—”

“Yes. Think about what you saw. Really think about it, baby. Did you see me kiss her back? Did you see me encourage her in any way? I was out there waiting for that Mason guy. I didn’t even know she was here. I promise you, Goldi.”

Her eyes are locked on me as she chews that beautiful bottom lip. My thumb reaches out, tugging it from between her teeth. “You have to trust me. This won’t work without it.”

“So now you don’t want us to work?” she accuses, again turning her head and trying to rip from my grasp.

I bring her face back. “I want us to work more than I’ve ever wanted anything in my life. More than Sam’s company. More than my mom’s love. More than finding Lily.”

She gasps.

“I fucking love you, Goldi. Don’t you know that? I love you. I’m *in* love with you. I have been since I was thirteen-years-old. And I want to spend every day for the rest of my life showing you just how much. I want to make up for all the days we’ve lost. But if you don’t trust me... if you can’t move past our history, we’ll both end up miserable. I don’t want that for you. Or for me.”

The air is muted behind the sound of my heart beating in my ears. I wait for her to say something. *Anything.*

She searches my eyes, sucking that lip between her teeth again and exhaling. “I love you, too.”

Relief surges through every cell in my body. *Thank fucking God.*

I lean in and kiss her, not giving her a chance to take back her words.

“Say it again,” I mumble into her mouth, my hands cupping her cheeks.

“I love you.” She smiles against my lips.

A door bangs open, and I groan.

“Oh, shit. My bad. I didn’t mean to... Lee? Is that you?”

We both turn toward the voice and my body stiffens as I see the guy from earlier today. What was his name?

“Logan, hi.” Goldi pushes against my chest, forcing me back a step as she straightens her dress.

Logan. That’s right. I look between them. He knows Goldi, too?

“So this is him, huh? Chase Adams? I never woulda guessed,” he chuckles, shaking his head slightly.

I look between them. Goldi’s cheeks are flushed a beautiful shade of pink, and I don’t know if it’s from me or from *Logan*—who all of a sudden I can’t fucking stand.

“Yep. He’s the one.” She beams at me, gripping my hand in hers. My chest swells with her attention.

Logan rubs the back of his neck. “Ah, hell. I’m sorry, man. If I had known I was talkin’ about your girl earlier today, I never would have brought it up.”

Talking about my... My eyebrows lift as his words hit me. “Goldi was your ‘piece?’”

He raises his hands in front of him, his face apologetic. “She ended things though, so don’t worry. She’s all yours.”

I laugh. Is this motherfucker serious? Of course, she’s mine. She’s always been mine. I take a step forward, a smile on my face as I imagine all the ways I’ll make him realize his mistake. Goldi’s hand tugs me back.

“Chase, don’t do this. You were just talkin’ about trust. So *trust* me when I say I’m yours. Just like I’m trustin’ you.”

I breathe sharply through my nose, leaning my forehead against hers. “Promise?”

“Cross my heart and hope to die.”

I look back toward Logan. “Listen, man—” Yelling cuts me off, muffled, but close enough to the door that the voice carries.

Fuck.

Mr. Carson.

My head swings to Goldi. I don’t let go of her hand as I rush through the doors back into the party. I stop short, watching the scene with wide eyes.

Mr. Carson has Sam’s shirt crumpled in his fist and is being held back by Jax. His face is red and spittle flies out of his mouth as he slurs his attack.

“No! I don’t give a good goddamn. I know... know what you said Sam, you sonnofabitch.”

Goldi is a statue, her worst fear playing out in front of her. *Where the fuck is Eli?*

By the time I get across the hall to them, Mr. Carson has been wrangled somewhat under control. Jax's hair is a mess, half of it falling out of his bun, and his eyes are round with shock as he tries to contain the beast of Mr. Carson's despair. It's obvious he had no clue this was going on.

Oh, Goldi.

In any other circumstance, I'm sure Jax would love to argue my interference, but at this moment he shows nothing but gratitude as I step between Mr. Carson and Sam to defuse the situation.

My gaze bounces to Sam. His face is red, and his lip is bleeding, but mainly he just looks sad.

I turn my attention to Goldi's dad. "Mr. Carson. Can you focus on what I'm saying to you?"

"Boy, you... you're always showin' up when you're not wanted. This here is man's business." He sways in Jax's arms. Jax's arms tense as he tightens his grip.

"I'm sure it is, sir. How about we take it outside and handle it there?"

The room is silent, hundreds of eyes watching as the Carson family secret spills into the open.

"I ain't got nothin' else to say." He points a finger at Sam. "You know... Gail was... I can't. How could you just bring her... up? My wife." He crumples, gripping his chest and sobbing.

I suck in a breath and twist around to peek at Sam. He watches his old friend with a frown, his forehead creased in concern.

"Mr. Carson," I try again. "Let's go out front, yeah?" I grasp his shoulder to steer him, but he jerks, the sudden movement pushing Jax back and allowing him to break free. He storms out of the hall, leaving a trail of gossip behind him.

"Shit," I mutter. I search for Goldi in the crowd. Her face is drained of color and she's clenching her fists. Over and over.

Like the motion is the only thing that's keeping her together. I turn quickly to Sam. "You okay?"

He lifts his chin in a nod, and then I'm chasing after Mr. Carson. I'm not sure where he's going, but I'm not trying to let him get there on his own. I run into the fresh air, the calm of the night deceiving with its stillness. I search for Mr. Carson or his truck, but can't find either.

Fuck.

Goldi bursts through the doors soon after me, panting from exertion.

"Is he gone?" She whips her head around.

"I think so. Want to go look for him?" I'm already grabbing the keys from my pocket, but she shakes her head, putting her hand on my arm to stop me.

"No. We'll never find him, and even if we did..." She shrugs. "Daddy needs to learn to lie in the bed he makes. There's only so much I can do."

I pull her into me, hugging her tight and kissing the top of her head. I know how hard that is for her to admit. But I'm so fucking proud of her for realizing it doesn't fall on her shoulders. I peer over her head, keeping an eye out in case Marissa decides to make another appearance. I have no clue where she went. Goldi says something, but the sound of an engine drowns her out. We turn toward the noise as a motorcycle rumbles into the lot, parking right outside the front doors. A man climbs off the bike, pushing his brown hair off his face and shrugging out of his black leather jacket. His arms are covered in sleeves of ink. *He definitely isn't from Sugarlake.*

"Who is *that*?" Goldi asks.

I shake my head because I have no fucking clue. He lights up a cigarette, worn black combat boots crossing as he leans against his bike. He's got a cell in his hand, and after a second my phone vibrates in my pocket. I grab it, staring at the screen.

Mason: Here.

My head snaps back to the biker. *That's* the private investigator?

“What is it?” Goldi asks, peeking at my phone.

“I think that's the guy, the PI. I'm gonna go talk to him. Want to come?”

She shakes her head. “I need to go hunt down Eli and tell him about Daddy.” She leans up and gives me a kiss. “Find me after?”

I nod, kissing her before she walks away.

We've caught Mason's attention and he swaggers over. The closer he gets, the more his details become clear. He's a fucking giant. I'm not a small guy by any means, but he towers over me.

“You Chase?”

“Yeah. Mason, I'm guessing?”

“The one and only.” He smirks, taking a drag off his cigarette.

“Great. Thanks for making the trip.”

He gets right to the point. “I don't have much time. There's a naked redhead in my bed back home just waiting for me to tear that ass up, so let's be quick. Who you looking for?”

“My sister. I don't really know much. Fucking nothing, actually—other than she might be in Arizona.”

He flicks his cigarette and sucks in air through his teeth. “Oh. Nope. I don't go anywhere near the west coast. Not even Arizona. I'll see what I can find by searching some records and making some calls, but you're shit out of luck for anything else.”

“What the fuck do you mean, you don't 'go near the west coast?' I was told by *you* that you could find anybody.”

He stands up straighter, his posture becoming defensive. His golden eyes flash. “I can. I'm just not *going* to.”

My nostrils flare and I clench my fists, trying to stay calm. “Price isn’t an issue. I’ll pay you whatever you want. I just... I need to find her. I need to know she’s okay.” I point at him. “You’re a fucking prick, but if you’re the best, you’re the guy I want.”

Mason’s chin lifts as he assesses what I’ve said. After a tense minute, a smile curls his face. “Yeah, alright. I’ll do it. I’ll give you my email and you can send me what I need. We do this on my timeline, you get me?”

“Yeah, I get you,” I say through my teeth.

“Wonderful.” The smile on his face grows. “Pleasure doing business. I’ll be in touch.”

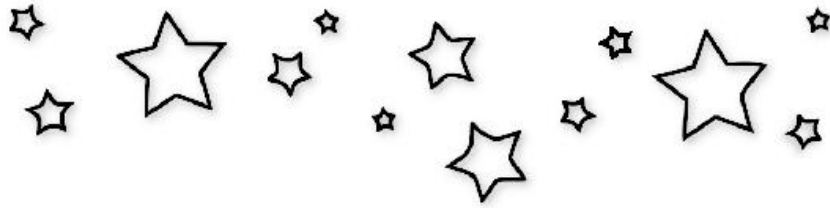
“That’s it? You needed to meet in person for that?” My brows touch my hairline. I have no clue why we couldn’t do this over the phone.

He’s already walking away, but he spins, walking backward. “You can’t tell the soul of a man if you can’t look in his eyes. I like to know who I’m doing business with.”

What the fuck does that even mean?

I watch as he sits on his bike, his arms sliding into his leather jacket, a cigarette dangling from his lips. The engine of his motorcycle purrs, and he salutes me before peeling out of the lot.

ALINA



I stare at my reflection in the restroom mirror. My body is trembling from the extreme highs and lows I've experienced in the past hour. *Dang, get it together, Lee.*

I believe Chase when he says it wasn't what it looked like. Maybe that makes me naive, I don't know. What I *do* know is that he's my forever. My soul recognized his from the moment we met. And he's right. If I don't trust him, what's the point? Now that the shock has worn off, I can look at the scene objectively. I see how my mind was lost in memories of the past, skewing my vision.

Daddy is a whole different issue. Every bone in my body wants to jump in a car and chase him down, but I know it won't do me any good. I'm tired of being his punching bag, and after going to that meeting with Chase, I've realized as long as I'm there cushioning his fall, he won't ever feel the pain. He has to hit rock bottom, and he needs to do it alone. But that doesn't mean I'm not worried.

I need to tell Eli. Where the heck is he?

I splash water on my face to cool my cheeks and head back to the party. The last thing I want is to walk in there now that everyone's seen Daddy at his worst—but I have no other option. I need to hunt down my brother.

I am not Daddy's choices.

I take a deep breath and push open the doors, working my way through the crowd. Music thumps from the speakers, and there's a group of people dancing in the middle of the room.

My body instinctively wants to lose itself in the music—forget about everything that’s happened, but I keep my eyes on the prize.

I slink to a corner, hiding in the shadows while I scan the area for my brother. I find Sarah chatting with Sam and Anna, but Eli isn’t with her. The thought briefly flitters through my mind of asking her where he is, but something holds me back. I’m not sure she’d be any more in the know than I am.

“Were you ever gonna tell me?”

My breath lodges in my throat as I spin around. “Jax.”

His hands are in his pockets, a storm raging in the forest of his eyes. “Sweetheart, how long has he been this bad?”

“No. Don’t you look at me like that, Jackson Rhoades.” I point my finger in his face. “That right there is *exactly* the reason I never said anything. Ever since Mama died and Eli left, all I get is looks of pity from everyone in town. I can’t stand the thought of you lookin’ at me that way too.”

Jax rocks back on his heels. “But it’s *me*.”

A short laugh comes out with my breath. “That’s even worse.”

He flinches, and I struggle to find the words.

“Jax... I didn’t tell you because you woulda rode in on your white horse and saved the day. I didn’t want that. You already hold me up whenever I’m fallin’ down, and I knew, *I knew* that I couldn’t be enough for you.” I glance down, the sting burning me from my chest to my eyes. “I didn’t want you to know I wasn’t enough for Daddy, too.”

“Alina. No. This is not your fault. *None* of this is your fault.”

I sniffle. “I know that now, I do. He’s really mean to me, Jax. Blames me for Mama—can’t even look at me. I didn’t want you to see it. I didn’t want anyone to know it.”

Jax’s arms engulf me. “It kills me you’ve been going through this all alone, sweetheart. You say the word and I’ll postpone my move. I’ll stay here for as long as you need.”

I shake my head against his chest. “No. You need to go. As much as I want you to stay, it would be the most selfish thing I could do, Jax.”

He hugs me tighter, and I get lost in the comfort of my best friend’s embrace. “I’m sorry. I should have told you.”

He lets out a deep exhale. “You’re telling me now.”

“I don’t deserve you.”

He pulls back, his hand cupping my cheek. “You deserve the world, Alina May. Promise me you’ll go out and get it.”

My belly burns and my heart rams against my ribcage. “Why does this feel like goodbye?”

“Maybe it is,” he says with glassy eyes.

My head finds his chest again and my tears fall faster, soaking into his shirt.

“Maybe sometimes you have to say goodbye, even when it hurts. Maybe that’s the only way to appreciate the hellos.”

I squeeze my eyes tight as I cling to him. “I love you, Jackson Rhoades. I’ll miss you every day.”

He hums, and I commit the feel of him to memory. Even though I want to stay like this for as long as I can, I let go.

“Have you seen Eli?” I tuck my hair behind my ears.

Jax shakes his head. “I can help you look if you want.”

“I’m gonna check the back hallway. Will you just keep an eye out? Tell him I’m lookin’ if you see him.”

I make my way to the hallway where Chase and I exchanged “I love yous.” My heart flutters at the memory. *He loves me.* If I’m honest, I think I already knew.

The hall is dark and quiet. I peer into the first couple of rooms. Nothing. I’m turning to leave when I hear a crash. The noise makes me jump, and I spin back around, cocking my head.

Thump.

I walk down the hallway, toward the last room on the left.

Thump.

I hear it again and before I know what I'm doing, I'm turning the door handle, throwing it open and stepping inside. I gasp, my eyes bulging and my hands flying to cover my mouth. Eli snaps his head up. He sees me and curses. I should be running out of the room and pouring bleach in my eyes, but I can't move. I'm glued to the scene of my best friend laid out on a table with my brother hovering over her. They're both wearing clothes, but barely. The pieces of fabric are jostled, like they started to take them off, then realized they didn't have the time.

I cover my eyes. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, holy crap. I'm sorry." The words spill out of me, even though sorry is the last thing I should be. "I'm not leavin' this room, so y'all do what you need to do and get decent quick. Let me know when it's safe to uncover my eyes. Oh my *God*."

A few minutes pass in relative silence, other than whispered words between them and the sound of zippers and snaps. It's enough time for my shock to morph into anger.

Eli clears his throat. "Lee, it's all good."

I drop my arms. "We must have different definitions of that phrase, Eli."

Becca walks toward me with her hands splayed in front of her. "Lee, this isn't what it looks like."

My face lifts toward the ceiling. "If I had a nickel for every time I've heard that phrase tonight." I laugh. "No. I think this is exactly what it looks like. And besides the fact Eli's engaged to be freakin' married, I probably wouldn't have cared." I pin her with my gaze. "But I *asked* you, Becca."

"I know, but—"

"Don't. Don't try and excuse this away. I don't wanna hear it. I can't even begin to process this right now. All I know is how much it hurts that you thought I wouldn't understand." My eyes well, and it ticks me off because I am so *sick* of crying.

I bite back the tears. “I need to speak to my brother, Becca. Alone.”

She sniffs, nodding her head, not even glancing at Eli as she leaves. She pauses when she’s next to me, her shoulder brushing mine. “I’m sorry.” Her voice chokes on the words.

I stiffen my shoulders and keep my gaze on my big brother. I don’t speak until I hear the click of the door. Eli sits on the table he was just mauling my best friend on.

“While you were busy gettin’ your jollies with someone *other* than your fiancée, guess what you missed?”

He watches me with worried, cautious eyes. “What’s that, Lee?”

“I’ll tell you. Daddy gettin’ in a fight with the man of the hour, Sam. Bein’ a mess in front of the entire town and then stormin’ off drunk as a skunk. *That’s* what.” I throw my arm in the direction of the parking lot. “Now he’s out there, drivin’, sloppy and upset.”

“What?” Eli shoots up. “Where’d he go?”

“How should I know, Eli? Hopefully, home.”

He starts to pace. “Well, let’s go. We’ve gotta find him.”

I shake my head, standing strong. “I’m not goin’. I just thought you should know.”

Eli huffs, his eyes widening and his arms splaying to the sides. “What do you mean you’re not going?”

“Look, if you wanna spend your time chasin’ after Daddy and the devil on his shoulder, be my guest. He’ll leave you in the dust, and all that’ll be left is you chasin’ your own tail.”

His eyes soften. “I shouldn’t have left you to deal with him alone. I should have come back. Should have done more.” His voice raises with each declaration, and he resumes pacing.

My throat pinches with emotion because yeah, he should have. I put my hand up, stopping his rant. “Now’s not the time, Eli. Literally any other day you’ve been here would have worked. But tonight? I don’t wanna hear it.”

His steps falter and his jaw tics.

I turn to go, wanting nothing more than to find Chase and tell him I'm leaving. Even though I shouldn't. I haven't even seen Sam yet to congratulate him—other than when he was licking the blood off his lip that Daddy caused him to spill.

“Lee,” Eli says, his voice low and nervous. “You don't understand about Becca. It's not... we aren't... just go easy on her, okay? You're the best thing in her life, and she'd be devastated to lose you.”

I guffaw, my brows rising along with my chin. “You sure seem to know an awful lot about my best friend, Eli.”

His cheeks puff out and he hangs his head. “No. I don't know her at all.”

His voice cracks as he says it, sadness wrapping around his words and breaking them in half. But I don't have time to worry about the mess Becca and Eli are in. Not right now. Not after everything that's happened tonight. So I give a sharp nod and walk out the door.

When we make it back to the party, I spot Chase talking to Jax, which is surprising. My phone rings just as I'm walking over to them.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Lee. It's Buddy, down at the station. I uhh... your pa was just brought in. Thought I'd let you know. They're bookin' him now.”

I lift my head to the sky. *What else could possibly happen tonight?* “What's he there for, Bud?”

“He crashed into another vehicle goin' down the wrong way on Main Street.”

I suck in a breath, stumbling over my feet just as I reach Chase. I grab his arm to stay steady. Visions of getting a call about Mama flashes behind my eyes. “Is everyone okay?”

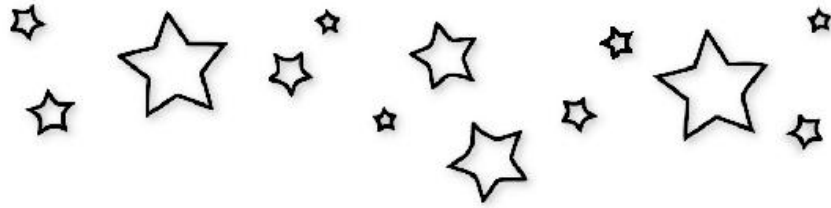
“They're banged up, but nothin' life threatenin'. There was a two-year-old and a pregnant woman in the car. He's lucky, it coulda been a lot worse. But, off the record? Your pa's gonna

need to get himself a lawyer. You can come pick him up in a few hours. Let him sober up a bit and get through his bond arraignment.”

The urge to run to Daddy’s side is strong. But I straighten my spine and remember what I just told Eli. “Naw, Bud. Thanks for the call. I think a night in jail will do him some good.”

I hang up my phone and turn it off.

ALINA



Chase and I are on the way back to his place. I begged him to stay, but he wasn't hearing it. I feel like a jerk for bailing on Sam's party before it was even halfway over, but I needed to get out of there.

His folks were extremely understanding. Sam hugged me as I apologized for Daddy, and he clapped Chase on the shoulder, saying "take care of your girl." It warms my heart to see a family that supports each other the way they do—the way mine hasn't in a long time.

I am mentally and physically drained by the time I plop down on Chase's couch. The fight with him seems like it happened light-years ago, instead of just three hours prior. *How can so much happen in so little time?*

Guilt spikes in my gut when I let myself think of Daddy sleepin' off his booze in a jail cell, but what else can I do? He wouldn't be grateful if I picked him up anyway.

Becca and Eli are something I can't even begin to scratch the surface of. The kicker is, I'm not even mad about the fact something is going on. I couldn't care less who they're with, as long as they're both happy. But Becca lied to me, and that hurts worse than any secret ever could. Still, as mad as I am, my heart hurts thinking about her planning Eli's wedding to someone else. I imagine what it would be like if that were Chase and my stomach revolts at the thought. I wish she had chosen to confide in me. I know how it feels to be collapsing under the weight of heavy secrets.

“You okay, baby? What a fucking night, right? Jesus.”
Chase rubs my shoulders.

I groan, the tension melting away under his skilled fingers.
“Yeah, you ain’t lyin’. But I don’t really wanna talk about any of that.”

“What do you want to do then?”

“I want you to make me forget. Just for tonight. Can you do that?”

He stops rubbing my shoulders, coming around to sit next to me. “I can. You sure you don’t want to talk about it?”

“I’m sure. Tonight should have been a celebration. Sam retiring. You becoming CEO.”

“You telling me you loved me,” he adds.

“And that.” I smile, kissing his lips.

“We still can, you know.”

“Can what?”

“Celebrate.” His hand travels up my leg.

“I like that idea very much.”

He leans in, parting my lips with his tongue, pushing me back on the couch. His body presses into mine, grinding, his hips hitting just the right spot even through our clothes.

I want him to push harder.

Press deeper.

He licks and sucks his way along my neck, pulling down my shirt and leaving a line of kisses on my collarbone. Every touch makes my body quiver. After everything that’s happened tonight, all I want is this. I want to sink into his touch and forget the world around us.

I grip his hair, pulling his face up to mine. “Take me to bed, Chase. Show me how much you love me.”

His eyes darken, lust rolling off him in waves and crashing into my skin, drowning me in his desire. He backs away, grabbing my hand and moving us down the hall.

Once we're in his room, he spins me around, his arms wrapping around my waist. We strip each other's clothes until we're bare. His hand touches the center of my chest, his palm resting against my speeding heart. He pushes slightly, the back of my knees buckling against the bed frame until I fall onto the mattress. His body follows mine, every inch of his chiseled body pressed against me.

I feel needy.

Desperate.

His touch slides down my arm and he picks up my hand, bringing it to his mouth. He kisses each fingertip. Slowly, lovingly.

His mouth meets mine again, his tongue plunging, tasting, licking. My fingers tangle with his as he raises my arms above my head. His length is pressed against my center and it pulses on top of me, making the ache between my legs unbearable. He slides deep inside me in one solid thrust. His eyes burn so deep into mine, I swear our souls can touch.

My fingers tighten around his as he pulls back out, then goes deep. Over and over. The friction between our bodies creates a buzz of energy that crackles and pops, weaving its way around us and infusing every pore with the way we're loving each other.

I could stay like this forever.

My hips rise to meet his, grinding my clit against his pubic bone on each pass. I'm delirious with pleasure, every nerve ending firing off tingles that shoot through my veins. He lets go of one of my hands, slipping down my body until he fits it around the curve of my ass, bringing me into him further, wrapping my leg around his waist.

He hits deeper this way. He plunges in, his hips speeding up.

If he keeps doin' that...

My orgasm races through my body like wildfire, touching every part of me. I clench around him, my body spasming.

“*Fuck, Goldi.*”

He moves faster, slamming inside me with sharp thrusts, chasing his own high. My ears are ringing and my body feels fuzzy as I admire him. I run my fingers along the lines of his face, every dip and curve of his high cheekbones and his sharp jaw. Down the crease between his eyes. Over that scar in his eyebrow, the one I’ve wanted to trace since the moment we met.

His body shivers. “Tell me you love me, Goldi.”

I lean up as far as I can, whispering it against his skin. “I love you.”

His body jerks, his rhythm faltering. I say it again. “I love you. I love you. I love you.”

“*Fuck.*” His thrusts turn erratic, his need trumping his skill, and I squeeze around him, trying to bring him over the edge.

His mouth parts, his eyes roll back and he lets out the sexiest groan, his muscles flexing against me. He pulses deep inside me as he explodes. I moan at the feeling.

He collapses, and I can feel his heartbeat against my chest.

Soft kisses press into the crook of my neck. “How you feeling, Goldi?”

Despite everything that’s happened today, there’s only one emotion I feel right now.

I smile.

“Happy.”



I WAKE up to a text from Eli.

Eli: Picked up Pops this morning. Can you come by and talk? We all need to sit down and it should happen today.

I roll my eyes at his demand, but know he isn't wrong. As much as I want to stay in Chase's bed and forget the rest of the world forever, I need to face things head-on.

He gave me his house key and said he wants me waiting in his bed when he gets back tonight from Nashville. He offered to skip the trip, but I don't want to be the reason he misses his therapy session and group. Plus, I told him to handle whatever he needs to with his ex to make sure she gets the message. *Trust.*

He kisses me goodbye on his front doorstep and hugs me tight. "I'm so fucking proud of you. Go handle your shit, Goldi, and don't let them drag you back down. You aren't meant to wither away in the shadow of someone else's demons. You're meant to shine."

The darkness tries to seep in my conscience and steal my light on the drive to Daddy's, but I don't let it. I focus on the way Chase makes me feel instead. The way I'm beginning to feel about myself.

I park the car and let Chase's words wrap around me, so even if I stagger, his voice will cushion my fall.

With a deep breath, I walk in the front door.

The smell of coffee brewing makes me nostalgic. I follow the sound of clangs and muffled voices and find Eli and Daddy sitting in the kitchen. Eli is dressed for the day, looking sharp in a button-down and dark blue jeans. Daddy is still in his clothes from the night before, looking greasy and worn, his head in his hands as his elbows rest on the table. Sarah is nowhere to be found.

"Hi, y'all," I greet them as I sit down.

Daddy's head pops up and his eyes meet mine. The baby blues are bloodshot, but they're clear and alert for the first time since Mama died. I suck in a breath, surprised he hasn't started numbing his pain.

"Alina," he rasps.

"Hi, Daddy. How ya feelin?" My lips curl into a sad smile, and I don't really know what to say. I'm not used to handling

him sober, my attempt at conversation is rusty after all these years.

“Thanks for comin’, honey.” My stomach jumps at the term of endearment. My eyes bounce to Eli, his jaw muscle tensing as he watches us. Daddy’s voice brings my attention back to him.

“I have some things I needa say, and you can take ‘em or leave ‘em, I guess. I don’t... I don’t deserve your time.” His hand comes up to wipe his mouth. “I’m messed up.”

My eyes widen, my palms becoming clammy as I grip my thighs under the table. *What is goin’ on?*

“Your mama...” his voice breaks. “Your mama was the best part of me. She pushed down the bad and brought out everything good. I never thought I’d have to learn to live without her. I guess we all know I never learned anyway. She’s been gone for damn—damn near a decade and she’d be ashamed of what I’ve become.” Tears line his lower lids and one spills over, dripping down his stubbled face.

“Daddy,” I breathe. I’m stunned.

He puts up his hand. “No, no. Lemme finish. I don’t think I can say it more than once.” He gulps his coffee, staring into the black liquid while he continues to talk. “I woke up this mornin’ with a poundin’ in my head, a sickness in my heart, and Bud the deputy tellin’ me that I damn near killed a family.”

I purse my lips, trying to keep it together while he talks.

“My first thought was to grab the nearest bottle and drown myself until I was sinkin’ in the numbness. That’s still what I want more than anything. But...” His eyes flick up to me. “My second thought was the guilt. I’m responsible for hurtin’ those people last night. And then as I laid there in that cell, waitin’ for someone to come and bail me out... all I could think about is how all these years, I’ve made you feel the exact same way.”

I suck in a stuttered breath and the dam bursts, years of waiting to hear the words he’s speaking form the tears that fall

down my face. I bite my cheek to keep from interrupting.

“I don’t... hell, I don’t know what the hell I’m doin’. And it hurts to look at ya, Alina. You’re so damn like her. I don’t think I’ll survive if I stare at ya too long.”

“Pops,” Eli starts.

I reach over, putting a hand on his arm, letting him know it’s okay. Daddy’s just being honest. He’s not saying anything I didn’t already know.

Daddy shakes his head, gripping his mug tighter. “Anyway, Bud says I’m gonna be lookin’ at payin’ that family’s hospital bills, among other things, and that I’ll need to lawyer up.”

Eli pipes in again. “We’ve talked this morning and decided it would be in Pop’s best interest to check into a ninety-day rehab program. I’ve been in contact with one over the past few days. They have a spot for him.”

My stomach flips so hard it makes me lose my breath. Hope is a dangerous feeling. *Eli’s been talkin’ to rehabs?* A piece of my anger chips away.

“When?” I gasp out.

Eli’s face is serious. “Today. This afternoon. I had Pops pack a bag and we leave in...” He glances down at his wrist-watch. “Thirty minutes.”

I whoosh out a breath, overwhelmed. I never could have guessed this would be my morning. I gaze at Daddy, his head still hanging over his coffee cup, embarrassment, and shame circling the air around him. Then I swing my gaze to Eli. Even though things are rocky between us, I can’t help the gratitude that fills me. Because he’s here now. He’s helping. He’s *present*. And at the end of the day, he’s still my big brother.

“That’s real good, Daddy.” I try to grab his hand, but he jerks, moving it out of reach. My heart twists. These things take time, I guess.

Daddy doesn’t say anything else. The words “I’m sorry” never cross his lips. And while I long to hear them, I’m not

surprised. We aren't okay. We're nowhere near healed. He has a lot to make up for, and I have a lot to forgive.

But for today, it's enough.

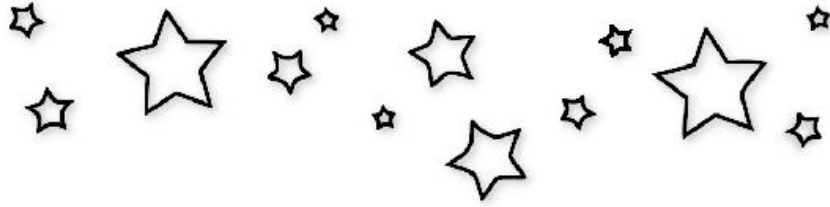
Thirty minutes later, I watch them leave, knowing Daddy's on his way into battle. I close my eyes and send up a prayer to God. And then I send one to Mama. I've been waiting on a miracle for years. Today feels like the perfect day to get one.

The breeze whips across my face, and I smile.

With a deep breath, I turn and walk away, heading back to Chase. To my love. To my future.

To the start of my happily-ever-after.

EPILOGUE



Journal Entry #423

Well, Doc. This is it. The last journal entry you'll read of mine. Does it still count as an entry if I'm ripping out the page to mail to you? It doesn't matter, I guess. It's been a hell of a ride, eh? Maybe you think that way of all your clients. I'll tell you one thing, my bank account is happy as hell that I'm no longer gonna be seeing you. And Goldi's happy that I have no reason to go back to Nashville. Less chance of running into Marissa that way. Not that she's been a problem ever since I threatened her with a restraining order.

Anyway, thanks for the recommendation of someone closer. Other than starting a new Nar-Anon chapter in Chattanooga, that was the last step to leave my old life behind and make Sugarlake really feel like home again. Home. Can you believe it? I can't. A year ago, this all felt like a dream that was out of reach, and now we're breaking ground on a house that I'll get to build with my own two hands. One that Goldi designed from top to bottom. She's still fucking perfect. Finally teaching dance at the studio that helped bring us together. I hope that one day I'll be helping her build her own studio. She hasn't told me that's what she wants, but I see it in her eyes, and fuck, I want to give it to her. I WILL give it to her.

I'm proposing tonight. I'm nervous as fuck. Spent a million fucking years trying to pick out a ring. Another hundred trying to plan the perfect way to ask. I had a big

celebration planned, invited everyone we love and even the ones we don't. But I canceled it. Instead, I'm gonna take her out to the lake. The stars that always lit the path to her are gonna be the ones that illuminate her face as she tells me she'll spend the rest of her life with me.

I can only fucking hope.

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference. Damn, those words have saved me more than once.

Also... since I won't be seeing you again, I might as well tell you. That private investigator I hired a fucking year ago to look for Lily? He called today.

He found her.

THANKS FOR READING BENEATH THE
STARS!

If you enjoyed, please consider taking a second to leave a review! Even one word can make all the difference. :)

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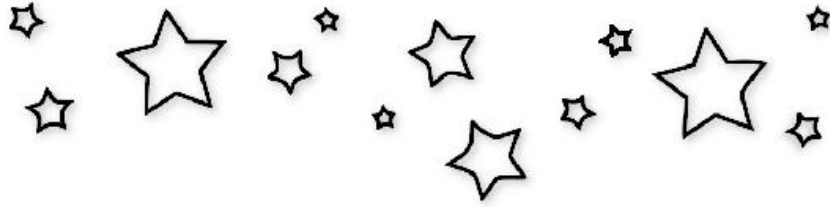
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



I have so many people who deserve more than a simple line at the end of this book.

I want to thank my TRIBE: My girls who talk me down when I'm having a horrible case of imposter syndrome, let me vent about not wanting to change things I *know* need changed, and lifting me up on both my worst and best days. I love y'all so much and this book wouldn't exist without you. The author version of Emily McIntire wouldn't exist without you!

Sav R. Miller, Marissa Gramoll, Lee'Rain Jacquot, Greer Rivers.

To my beta readers: Lord have mercy, y'all are some angels. Thank you for reading my work (sometimes chapter by chapter) tearing it down and helping me rebuild it into the best version of itself. Chase and Alina deserve their story to be told in the most beautiful way, and it only happened because of you.

Anne Lucy-Shanley, Ashley Adams, Etta Easton, A.V. Asher, Lee'Rain Jacquot, Greer Rivers, Alison Butler, Clara Elroy, Marissa Gramoll, Sav R. Miller, Ariel Mareroa, Melissa Whitman, Clari Fernandez Mezzadra, Ellouise Liston

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To my extended family: Thank you for always being supportive. Sorry not sorry about the sex scenes.

To my husband, Mike—my real life book boyfriend. The one I base my happily-ever-after's on. Thank you for being the most supportive husband and always pushing me to believe in my dreams. Thank you for taking on baby duty so I can write, and not complaining once about the dirty dishes in the sink or the laundry I didn't do while Chase and Alina were screaming in my head. (Thank you for also knowing that didn't mean I wanted you to try and do laundry. THERE IS A SYSTEM AND YOU WILL RUIN IT!) I had to go through a lot of duds in my life to get to you. I love you.

To my daughter, Melody. Thank you for being such a good sleeper so Mommy could write while you were down. Thank you for training me to survive on zero hours of sleep so I could push through the tired nights and create this book. I hope one day you see my name on my books and know that you can do and be *anything*. The stars are the limit, baby girl.

And last (but definitely NOT least) To you. The readers. Thank you for taking a chance on a brand new author, and reading all the way through to the end of the acknowledgments. All of this is because of you. Every single

second and every penned word. Thank you for letting me tell Chase and Alina's story, and thank you for wanting to read it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Emily McIntire is an emerging author of New Adult, Contemporary Romance. A long time songwriter, and an avid reader, Emily has always had a passion for the written word, and a penchant for painful, messy, beautiful romance. After all, what's a Happily-Ever-After without a dose of angst?

When she's not writing, you can find her chasing her crazy toddler around or laying by her pool with a good book. She lives in Florida with her husband, daughter, and their dog, Braylon.

