

Prologue

July — Tucson, Arizona

"I can't, Dag. I just can't," I cried, hanging on to the side of the pool with everything I had in me. The overhead sun was hot, and it made me sweat underneath the orange floats around my biceps.

"Of course you can, Chase. Come on. Swim to me."

I wanted to cry but didn't dare, not in front of my fourteen-year-old babysitter. She was new this summer, our first year together, and already Dagny was everything to me — my friend, my hero. She was so pretty and fun. I didn't want her to think I was a baby.

"Please, can we just get out now?" I clung a little more tightly to the side, glancing at the ladder just five feet away. I could try for it. Dagny might get mad, though. I didn't want her mad at me.

"We'll get out soon, hon. You said you wanted to learn to swim. What happened to that?"

She stood in the middle of the pool in her green bathing suit, short blonde hair slicked back from her face, green eyes looking concerned. I looked at the part of her that was out of the water. Would I ever look like that? My mom said Dagny was going to be short when she grew up, but I didn't see what difference that made. I thought she was perfect. She knew a lot about everything, and knew so many games and fun things to do. My best friend Carrie wished she had Dagny as a babysitter, too.

"I do." I pouted. I did want to swim and didn't want to disappoint her or make her mad at me. I didn't know what to do. "But I can't, Dagny. I just can't."

Dagny swam over to me, stood right in front of me, and bent down to look me in the eye. She brushed some hair off my face. She said once that my hair was the darkest hair she had ever seen. That made me happy.

"Honey, you never fail if you quit. But then you never win, either." She smiled at me. She had such a nice smile.

"Okay."

Her smile grew bigger as she backed away from me again. I could do this, I had to. My mommy got mad at me all the time because she said I didn't try for her. I never wanted to let Dagny down.

I turned so I was facing the rest of the pool, and took a deep breath. I let go of the side with one hand but wasn't ready to let go with both hands yet. Dagny's smile widened encouragingly.

"Come on, Chase. You can do it; I know you can."

I nodded, not feeling at all as confident in my own ability as my babysitter did. I let go with the other hand and felt my body drop into the water, the water clear up to my chin.

"Oh, no! Dagny!" I panicked as I felt one of the floaties on my arm sliding down, my body lowering with it. "Help!" Water was going up my nose, filling my mouth and eyes. I started to cry, and my eyes stung with tears and water. I felt strong arms wrap around me, drawing me up to the surface and back to the wall.

"Shh, it's okay. I've got you."

I cried, burying my head against her chest, so angry with myself, so worried she wouldn't like me anymore and would stop being my babysitter. I didn't know how to express that to Dagny.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to, honest."

"I know, Chase. It's okay. We'll try again another time."

Chapter One

"Yes, Mom, my room is fine. ... No, I haven't met my roommate yet. Don't really want to, either. Why couldn't I just get a single? ... I know, I know. ... Yeah, see you guys next weekend. ... I love you too. Bye." I pushed END on the phone and plopped down on the narrow mattress.

I had been in my dorm room at the University of Arizona for an hour, and already my mom was trickling into my college life. She had called me on the cell phone nearly every five minutes on the drive here, which wouldn't be bad except that it's only a little more than a half hour drive from home. Personally, I thought she kept calling to make sure I was actually going to the university and not pulling off on some side road to join the local circus.

I'd thought about going to school out of state but didn't really want to register in the first place and didn't want to waste any more of my parents' money than I had to. I was lucky enough, as it was, to have folks in a position where they could help me.

I was a bit of a black sheep in my family. My older sister, Carla, the apple of my father's eye, was going to the University of California at Berkley to follow in his footsteps and get her medical degree. My father was a pediatrician and my mother, an administrator at my old high school. The Marins were quite educated, and happy to be so. But not me. Chase Marin was known as the "lacking" one in the family. I loved my family, don't get me wrong. I just didn't like the way they felt a need to push me in directions I really didn't want to go.

Hell, I'd made them happy by agreeing to go to college.

I grabbed the larger of my two suitcases and tossed it onto the bed. Looking around, I saw that each of us, my roommate and I, had one dresser and a tiny closet at the foot of our beds. Good thing I'd packed light. As I refolded a shirt, the cell phone ring tone played Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*. My mother had bought the phone for me, which I had been happy about at the time, but at the moment it was feeling like an electronic leash more than a device for added freedom.

"Hello?"

"Hey, babe. What's up?"

"Hey, Mike. I'm just unpacking." I tossed the shirt at the suitcase and sat on the bed, a small smile coming to my face. Mike and I had been dating semi-seriously for nearly a year, and my parents thought he was the greatest thing since Swiss cheese. He was already a student at UA, and they figured he'd be a good influence on me. If only they had known he was flirting with academic probation, they might not have been so happy.

"Hey, want to go out for something to eat?" he asked. "I've arranged a party later tonight to celebrate."

"Sure. Celebrate what?"

"Whatever."

“Great. Sure, count me in.”

“So, who did you get as a roomie?”

I could hear the smile in his voice and imagined the smirk on his face. “Hell if I know. She hasn’t showed up yet. She can stay lost, for all I care.” I flopped back, staring up at the ceiling and the dirty marks around the walls where posters used to hang, idly wondering what they had depicted. “God, I so don’t want to be here.”

“I know. But your folks are happy and won’t give you shit, so suck it up.”

“Yeah, thanks. You’re no help whatsoever.”

“I do my best. I gotta run; just wanted to see if you got here okay, since you never called or anything.”

I rolled my eyes at his patronizing tone. “Sorry. I forgot.”

“Later.”

“See ya.” I ended the call and turned off the phone. I didn’t want anyone else to reach out and touch me, just wanted to crawl into bed and sulk all alone. As I set the phone at the foot of the bed, I spotted my guitar case standing against the wall. I forgot about my sulk and got up and snagged it. My trusty acoustic Melo in hand, I sat on the floor, positioned my fingers, and began to play, softly humming along.

As night fell, I finished putting away the last of my clothes, slamming the dresser drawer closed with my hip and heading to the mirror that hung on the back of the door. Mike would be here soon, so I figured I should start getting ready to go out. My hair — which I had let grow out since chopping it last summer, thereby completely freaking out my parents — now hung just below my shoulders. I gathered it up and tied it back into a ponytail. I stared at the face that was reflected back at me. Mike loved my eyes; he said they were an awesome shade of blue. I didn’t mind them. I was the only one in my family to have such light eyes; everyone else had hazel or brown. I swear my mom and the milkman have some serious explaining to do. She says no, but who knows.

I decided to change out of my grubby, comfy jeans and put on a pair of cargo shorts and a tank. It was still ridiculously hot out, and I was anxiously waiting for fall and winter to take away some of the heat. Slipping my tennis shoes on, I was ready to go.

I reached for the doorknob, only to have my hand nearly whacked off as the door opened into me. Stunned, I took a step back, cradling my injured hand against my chest. A head appeared around the door, eyes wide as saucers.

“Oh my goodness! Did I hurt you?”

“Well, I guess everything still works.” Just to be sure, I wiggled my fingers and rotated my hand around, testing the wrist. “Who the hell are you?”

“Oh...” The girl stepped into the room, her hand to her mouth. “You mustn’t say things like that.”

I put my hands on my hips, ready to pounce. “Like what?”

“Hell is a place, not a word to be thrown around lightly.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

The girl pushed the door all the way open, revealing a large duffel bag and two suitcases. She wore a dress, sleeveless, which hung on her stick-thin body and ended just above her ankles. A large silver cross hung from a chain just above her breasts. “Hello.” She smiled warmly. “My name is Natalie.”

“Um, hi, Natalie. Chase.” I extended my left hand, not wanting to chance her doing any more damage to the right.

“Oh, you’re a southpaw, just like me.” Her brown eyes twinkled.

I looked down at my hand, wondering what the hell she was talking about. She wiggled her left hand in clarification and I chuckled. “Uh, sure.” So was Hitler. “Look, I gotta get going. My stuff’s all unpacked, so any space left is yours for the taking.”

“Okay. Thank you, Chase. That’s very nice of you.” She smiled again, the biggest damn smile I’d ever seen. What was this girl on?

“Later.”

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I closed my eyes to the satisfying taste of the Mich as it slid down my throat. “Ahhh. Oh, that’s good.” I smiled at the bottle in my hand, having been denied for nearly two weeks. My parents had taken me on a short vacation just before school, and they’d spent the entire time watching my every move and consumption.

So far, about ten people had shown up at the apartment that Mike shared with his friend Mario. They had a party every semester to get things going, and it was just a matter of time before everyone else showed up. That’s how we met. Even though I was still in high school, I had come to the party last year with my friend, Carrie. She knew a friend of a friend of a friend of Mike’s and had introduced us. This year, she and I were both legitimate freshman. And not *only* was the beer flowing, but I would have free reign of the Mike’s pool table to kick some serious ass. It got even more funny as everyone got drunk or high.

Carrie sat next to me, her eyes closed as she exhaled, a puff of white smoke escaping her mouth. She smiled and looked at me, extending her hand. I accepted the small white roach and took a drag, cringing as the harsh smoke burned my lungs and throat, coughing slightly. I rarely did pot, but felt the need tonight. I handed the joint to Mike and leaned back in my chair.

“How do you feel?” Carrie asked, running her fingers through the hair of the girl sitting beside her.

“Okay, I guess. That shit tastes funny tonight, though.” I glanced at Mario, who had just taken a drag. “They better not have put anything in it.”

Carrie shrugged, her short red hair falling into her face. “Who knows? Right now I don’t really give a fuck.” She reached over and grabbed the girl and drew her into a kiss, large and sloppy.

I had promised myself I would try to reduce my partying to a manageable level, having nearly gotten kicked out of high school during my senior year for going to school drunk too many times. I had been so ashamed at the look of disappointment on my mom’s face. She had handled it fairly well, taking me to my Saturday detention class every time, not letting the lectures get too out of hand. They had done so much for me my entire life, the least I could do was keep my promise.

“Here.”

Mike was handing me the joint. I took it, stared at it a moment, then shook my head, handing it to Carrie as she finished her impromptu make out session. She happily took the small joint from my fingers.

More people began to show up, the party swinging into high gear. I downed the rest of my beer, reached for another, and began to mingle.

At the end of the night, I was awfully glad Mike lived within walking distance of campus. There was no way in hell he could have driven me home and had us make it alive. As I walked home, I grinned like a drunken idiot; my mom would have been so proud. Why is it that parents

feel the need to tell their children about all the dangers in the world — sickos, zits, periods, how to clean out the fish tank — but they never tell you about hangovers? I stumbled up the last set of stairs to my dorm room, my hand sliding along every wall to help steady myself. I dug in my pocket for the key to the room, figuring that Natalie was more than likely asleep at...I glanced at my watch, then glanced again. Couldn't read it. Hell, who knew what time it was?

After the third try, I managed to get the key in the lock and turn it, falling inside with the opening door. The room was dark, smelling of fresh soap and shampoo. I glanced in my roommate's direction, only to see her on the floor, kneeling beside her bed.

"Amen."

She stood, climbed under the sheet, her long nightgown looking terribly warm to sleep in. Within a few moments she was asleep, and I stumbled to my own bed, realizing I hadn't bothered to put any sheets on it before I had left. *Shit*. Deciding sleep was more important than bedclothes, I plopped down face first and was out.

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Classes started, and as I rushed around campus to find my first one, I realized this wasn't the auspicious beginning to my year that I'd hoped for. I settled my backpack a bit higher on my shoulders as I ran.

Breathless, I leaned against the doorway of Dr. Bordeaux's Advanced French class. I had taken French during my entire academic career thus far, having fallen in love with the language as a young child. This course was one of the few that I was really looking forward to at UA. Everyone was already settled in, some talking to the professor. I tried to sneak in, to no avail.

"*Excusez-moi, manque. Est-ce que je puis vous aider?*" He looked at me expectantly. His hair, once dark, was beginning to gray, his shirt pressed and starched, slacks impeccable along with newly shined Wingtips.

"Yeah. I'm enrolled in this class—"

"*En français, s'il vous plait.*" He put a hand on his hip, looking at me with disdain.

"Oh, sorry. Of course in French." I cleared my throat, taking a step toward his desk to explain that I did belong in his class and was sorry I was late.

"*Je vous laisserai cette fois, mais pas encore.* Learn to show up on time."

"I'm sorry, Dr. Bordeaux. It won't happen again."

"It better not. Get in here."

I took a seat near the back of the room, my usual location, and looked around to see who I would be stuck with for the next few months. We had a pretty good mixture of your bookworms, outcasts, etc. I wondered if I'd make any sort of connection with any of these folks. I always did that, no matter where I was. I wondered what went on inside their heads, what they were thinking and why. What made them tick? Would they like me? Why or why not? Why were they here, for what purpose—

"Listen! *Vous devez écouter et cesser de parler.*" He looked at me. He and I were not going to connect. I just had a feeling.

As the class continued, I realized that Bordeaux knew his stuff and took no crap. As long as I paid attention and did my work, we'd be fine. Part of me couldn't keep the slight grin off my face. It felt good to be a part of something again. For so long I had been disjointed, not caring, or rather, caring, but about the wrong things. And the wrong people.

The faces of my three friends flashed into my mind, their never-to-be-forgotten names on my tongue. I'd never forget that night, either, the night that really woke me up as to where I was headed.

Brian, Toni and Heather were driving home from Rick's party. I was supposed to go, but had come down with the flu. I have never in my life been so happy to be sick, nor will I ever feel so guilty, either. Brian was driving his Range Rover down the highway at a speed of sixty-two miles per hour, he and the other two drunk and high, a water tanker coming the opposite way. The truck driver couldn't react fast enough to the SUV that had drifted over to his side of the road. The heavy tanker, like a tank, wasn't real maneuverable. There was nothing the trucker could do.

I found out about it that same night, my mom waking me up to tell me the tragic news — not one of them has survived. I was devastated, having grown up with all three, going to preschool together, and then on to elementary, middle, and finally high school. Heather was supposed to follow me and Carrie to UA. Not to be. It took me a long time to get over the loss...and the realization that I would have been in that car with them.

By the time I returned my attention to Dr. Bordeaux, the abbreviated first class was over. With my next class not starting until noon, I made my way to a campus cafeteria. Carrie was supposed to meet me, and I hoped she could find the place. There were times she couldn't find her way out of a paper bag.

"Hey, you."

I turned, glad to see a familiar face. "Hey. I was just wondering if you were going to show up."

"Ha ha. Yes, I found it, and yes, I'm late. So sue me." Carrie sat in the chair opposite mine, dropping her bag on the table with a thud. "So how are your classes going so far?"

"Well, I've only had one, and so far so good, I guess. It's going to be a long year. Two hours of Dr. Bordeaux at a time; I may just have to kill myself. You?"

She shrugged, the long earrings in her double piercing making little *tink, tink* sounds against each other as she moved. "Okay, I guess. I've got some asshole for Bio. But I guess that's what happens when you're a freshman. God, I hope I get through the year without fucking killing anyone. Hey, you gonna go to the party tonight?"

I shrugged and sat back in my chair. "I was just thinking about Brian and Heather and Toni. Sad, you know? Me and Heather were supposed to be roomies. Instead, I got Mother Theresa. Not happy about this."

"Yeah, it's sad. If you're going to be stupid, though..."

"Come on, Car." I sat up in my chair, leaning my elbows on the table as I looked deep into my friend's blue eyes. "Do you really think they thought that party would be their last? I don't know." I sat back with a thud. "I just wonder about all of us sometimes — the things we're doing, whether they're right."

"Your mother would absolutely have an orgasm to hear you talking like this, you know."

"Yeah, I know."

"Come on, Chase baby. Don't wimp out on me now that we finally have some fucking freedom."

She looked at me for a long time. I wasn't sure what she was expecting me to say, so I just shrugged. "Come on. Let's get something to eat."

We found a place in the cafeteria that sold pizza and got in line. I leaned against the railing that separated the lines, my hands dangling as I looked around.

"So ,who was the chick at the party?"

Carrie shrugged. "Hell if I know. I don't even remember her name. I think it starts with a D or something. Darla? Doreen? Fuck it. I don't know."

I grinned. "Is she your newest squeeze?"

"Hell no! She was just fun for that night, and not even all that fun." She pulled a small mirror out of her bag and looked at her face. "Fucking Arizona heat; my make-up is melting." She pulled out a Kleenex and wiped off the heavy eye shadow before it streamed down her face, then quickly applied new color.

I shook my head in wonder. "My God, you're obsessed."

"Yeah, and?" She put her menagerie of make-up away and looked at me with a dark red smile.

"How much do you spend a month on that shit?" I moved forward as the line moved, taking my same stance when we stopped.

She shrugged. "Too much."

"So, what is it this week, Car? Gay, straight? You confuse the crap out of me."

"Yeah. Adam asked the same thing last night. I don't know. I guess it's just whoever I see, whatever gets me going, you know?"

"I guess."

We finished our lunches, and Carrie had to hurry to her next class. With nearly an hour remaining, I hung out, pulling out a piece of paper, deciding to write a little. No one had ever read any of my poetry or heard any of my songs. I liked to tell myself that I had yet to meet someone that I thought was worthy of that honor. Actually, I was just chicken. I didn't think anything I did was any good and couldn't bear to hear criticism about something that had come from the heart.

I hummed out the music as I re-read the lyrics I had written, words about how alone I felt, about how I wondered where I was drifting to, about how life can make you feel like you're being swallowed up and spat out whole. Don't get me wrong. I wasn't one of those depressed, let's-go-jump-from-a-bridge-to-make-a-point kind of teens. Nope. Just confused about life.

I glanced at my watch. "Shit." Well, two teachers would be getting the wrong impression of me right off the bat. I hurriedly jammed my notebook and pen into my bag and ran out of the cafeteria, headed for Psych 101.

By the grace of God I managed to make it in the door at exactly 12:00. I might have been out of breath and wanting to faint, but I was there. I found a seat in the back row, glancing around at the handful of students that were already there. It appeared that being on time to this class was a rarity.

I took out my notebook and continued to work on my song, staring off into space as I listened to the tune in my head. I could play this one on piano or guitar. I was sure they had a piano somewhere on campus. Or maybe I could coerce my folks into bringing up my keyboard when they came up for Parent Weekend in a few days. It was pretty large and I wondered if Natalie would mind.

"Hello, everyone. I want you all to close your eyes."

My eyes shot up at the sound of the voice. At the front of the room stood a surprisingly young woman. I remembered that I had heard a grad student TA taught this section of Psych.

"Come on, don't just look at me like I'm crazy."

That got a couple of chuckles, but everyone closed their eyes. I kept one slightly open. Did I know her from somewhere?

“Now I want you to imagine that there are no mental hospitals. I want you to conjure up a picture in your mind: imagine that the person you’re sitting next to is absolutely crazy, I mean a real loon.” Arms behind her back, rocking slightly on her heels, she looked around at all of us.

I lowered my chin to the desk so I could get a better look at her without her seeing me. She had blonde hair, cut just below her ears but all one length. One side was tucked behind an ear revealing a simple gold hoop earring. She wore a light green sleeveless top, exposing tan skin and arms that looked well toned. Her white slacks were fitted without being tight. She looked comfortable.

“Okay, now open your eyes, but don’t tell me what you saw or thought of. I want you to think of it as I take roll. Oh, since we’re on the subject of names, I’m Dagny Robertson. You can call me Miss R or Miss Robertson, up to you. I’m a grad student here, getting a Ph.D. in psychology. Okay...” She picked up a list off the podium and began to call out names.

I listened for a second before her voice faded out in my mind and I began to try to figure out the feeling of familiarity. I knew I had heard that name before, but for the life of me couldn’t remember where.

“Hello? Chase Marin? Earth to Chase?”

My head shot up as did my arm. “Here.”

She smiled. “Good to know.” She looked at me, her eyes narrowing for a second, cocking her head slightly. It almost looked as if she were in the middle of a thought before she shrugged and went on to the next name on the list. Finished with attendance, she moved out from behind the podium and began to walk the aisles, looking at various people and asking them questions about what they’d thought of and why. I was amused at some of the responses, including one guy who said that if that were the case, and everyone was crazy, then what he’ thought all along was true, and his brother really *was* insane. Another girl felt she could learn a lot from someone who was crazy, as she felt they saw the world for what it was, instead of having to live behind the protective walls of propriety.

“Okay. You all have come up with some pretty good thoughts about the world of the insane. What you probably don’t know is that about a third of our walking population would be considered mentally ill to some degree.” She looked around to see what we thought about that. There were murmurs and quiet chuckles throughout the room. “Pretty amazing, isn’t it?”

The girl next to me raised her hand.

“Yes?” She walked toward us.

“So how many of us in here could be considered crazy?”

Miss Robertson brought a finger up to her chin, tapping as she lost herself in calculation. Suddenly, she lurched at the girl — hands out wide, eyes open, and screaming.

“Jesus!” the girl yelped.

“Nope. Just crazy.” The TA laughed as she patted the girl’s shoulder. “It could be any of us, really.”

I watched her, listened to her talk. I could not shake the feeling of *déjà vu*. It was creepy. As Miss Robertson continued, the feeling intensified. What she had to say was very interesting; she obviously knew her stuff. She was amusing and intelligent, and I couldn’t shake the thought that I’d met her before. She had the slightest bit of an accent, one that I had heard before. Was it Texas? More Southern?

Finally the class was over and everyone got their things together, me included. I stood, slung my backpack over my shoulder, and headed down the aisle toward the door. The TA stood by the podium talking with students as they passed. I got closer and closer, looking at her without trying

to make it obvious. She was talking with another student, but her eyes fixed on me, and she gave me the slightest bit of a nod as I exited. Confused, I headed to my next class.

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Mike sat across from me, his half-devoured hamburger in hand as he chewed some fries. “What’s her name?” he mumbled around the food.

“Robertson. Dagny.” I absently played with the straw in my Coke.

“So what’s the deal?” He swallowed, wiped his mouth with the napkin, then took another massive bite from the burger.

I watched in amazed disgust. “God, that’s gross. Your mouth isn’t even big enough for that.”

He grinned, mashed food seeping out between his top and bottom teeth.

“Yeah, I’m impressed, you pig.” I sipped from my drink, my mind still indexing through people I’d known and seen. “Just can’t figure it out.”

“Why don’t you ask her?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Don’t want to look stupid, I guess.” I sighed. I had been accused of being a dweller, and my current fixation was proving that the assessment was right on. Finally deciding it didn’t matter, I finished my dinner.

Mike wiped his mouth and threw the napkin on his empty plate. “By the way, I talked to Doug today, and he wants to hear you sing.”

My head shot up, my eyes accusing. “Mike! You promised.”

“Come on, Chase. You’re so good. Please?” He gave me his puppy dog eyes, which would gain him nothing, as he should have known by now.

I sighed. “Shit.”

“You know you want to do it, so why don’t you? I’ll be there, too.” I lowered my eyes, and he lowered his head to try and capture them. “It’ll be just me and Doug, honest.”

I looked at him, sizing up his sincerity. “Fine. But only one song.”

“Yes!” He stood, quickly pumping his fist in the air.

“You’re embarrassing the shit out of me, Mike,” I mumbled, looking at everyone looking at him. He resumed his seat, a childish smile on his face. He ran a hand through his dark hair, making the normally unruly look even more unruly. “Get a hair cut,” I added.

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The garage was small and stuffy, the air hot and heavy. Mike sat with the bassist in their band, Casually In Debt, or CID as it was affectionately known. I stood with the mic in front of me, Melo in my hand, millions of songs running through my head, trying to figure out what the hell I wanted to sing. God, why was I doing this?

“Okay, Chase, any time you’re ready.” Doug smiled at me, gathering his mid-back length hair into a ponytail at the crown of his head, the hair underneath shaved. Sighing heavily, I took a step toward the mic, closed my eyes, and let the song flow out.

“Hey, Jude...” As the song went on, I felt myself become lighter and lighter, my eyes never opening. I had never sung for people before, but as the song took hold, my hands strumming along, my nervousness died at the tip of my tongue, lost in the words and their meaning. I dragged out the last chord, slowly opening my eyes.

Doug and Mike sat riveted in their seats, neither moving or saying a word. Finally Doug cleared his throat. "Wow. Sign on the dotted line."

I grinned, my shyness coming back tenfold. "Kay."

He stood and walked over to me. "How do you feel about being our new lead singer?"

I looked at him, eyes wide in surprise. "Wait, I thought I was just coming to audition for back-up." I glanced at Mike accusingly.

"Well, initially you were. There's no way I can let you go, though. Shit, no way." Doug stroked his goatee. A huge smile plastered on his face, the guitarist turned to my boyfriend. I smiled too, not sure what to say.

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The dorm was quiet, everyone wanting to start the year with good study habits and decent bedtimes. I knew it was a matter of time before that changed, but for now it worked. I put my key into the lock and opened the door. It was only near midnight so Natalie was still awake, studying at her desk. She turned to me with a smile.

"Hello, Chase. Thank goodness you're okay. I was beginning to worry."

"Nope. I'm fine. Just had an audition to go to." I smiled as I changed for bed.

When she realized I was taking my shirt off, my roommate quickly looked away and buried her nose in her textbook. "Oh? An audition for what?" Hearing me slip into bed, she turned to look at me again. I lay on top of the sheet in a tank and pair of boxers.

"For a band. I guess I'm their new singer," I said, bringing my hands up behind my head. I stared at the one single poster I had hung up, a poster I had gotten at a Melissa Etheridge concert last summer. That had been so much fun, my first taste of the great one.

"Really? You sing?" Natalie turned her chair around to face me fully, her hands clasped in her lap, silver cross catching the light from her desk lamp. "I saw your guitar the other day. You play?"

"Yup."

"Oh, thank you, Lord." She smiled up at the ceiling. I looked up to see what she was looking at. Only water stained tile. I looked back at her. "Our Bible study group meets every Tuesday night to worship, and we're talking about...see I'm the president of our little group...we're talking about bringing in musical guests to entertain us."

Oh, Lord, indeed! I saw where this was headed and steeled myself for the question.

"Would you? I mean, could you sing and play for us, Chase? Please?" She brought up her clasped hands as she begged.

"Well, I'm not that good, really," I stuttered.

"Oh, I beg to differ. If you made lead singer for a band, I bet you're a wonderful singer. And to have your very own musical instrument, that is a gift from God, Chase. Please share it."

I looked at her, her big doe eyes begging me. How could I possibly say no to that? "Okay. You get me music ahead of time so I can learn some, and I'll do it."

"Oh!" Natalie jumped up from her chair and ran over to the bed, nearly throwing herself on me as she gave me a massive hug. "Thank you, thank you, thank you. Bless you, Chase. That is so nice of you." She finally stepped away from the bed, smiling down on me as if I was a saint myself. "I must go to bed now. Early class." She switched off the desk light and I scooted down on my bed, fully expecting quiet as we both went to sleep. Not to be.

Natalie took two towels from her little closet, folded them both into perfect padded little squares, placed them just so on the floor, then knelt down, a knee on each towel. She clasped her hands together, closed her eyes, and began to mumble her prayers. I watched her in absolutely amazement. I thought I heard my name spoken, then she turned to look over her shoulder at me, that huge smile firmly in place, before turning back to her bed, elbows resting on her mattress. She mumbled on for a few more minutes before startling me with a loud, "Amen." She climbed into bed and not another sound was heard out of her.

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I refolded the wash cloth and stuck it on my forehead again. The closer we got to fall, the hotter the weather seemed to be getting. I didn't understand that for a second.

"Does it need to be sprayed down again?" Carrie asked, water bottle in hand just in case. She had just finished spraying herself down though we sat under a tree, the only immediate shade we could find. It was way too hot, the day's temperatures reaching the one hundred mark, and the dry desert air didn't help.

"Why did my parents feel the need to live in an oven?" I wondered aloud, lying back on the grass, the wet terrycloth cooling my head. We had our usual break for lunch between classes and had decided to have a picnic.

"So, tell me about this TA of yours again. What's the deal with her?" Carrie asked, taking a bite from her taco.

"I don't know. She just really looks familiar. Can't place it. Don't you hate that?"

She nodded, wiping some cheese from her lip. "She cute? I mean you said she's young, right?" She took a drink of her Sprite, then wiped her mouth again. "I've never had sex with a teacher-type." She stared out over campus, the wheels in her mind smoking away.

I pushed her shoulder. "That is so wrong."

She shrugged. "Hey, if she's cute."

"She is." I readjusted the towel to accommodate a sip of my Gatorade.

"Hey, I heard about you and CID. Congrats." My friend flashed one of her huge grins. "I'm so happy for you, Chase. You're so good; it's about time you did something with your talent." She crumpled the trash from her lunch and tossed it into a nearby trashcan before reclining next to me, arms above her head.

"Yeah, well, I'm not so sure what I think about it." I sat up, pulling my knees to my chest, wiping my forehead with the cloth that was quickly drying.

"You're going to do fine; you know it. There is absolutely nothing that can go wrong. You have to believe. When is the first gig?" Carrie pulled a pack of cigarettes out of her bag and lit one. I watched, hating when she lit up but really unable to say anything. That was one habit I was forever grateful I hadn't picked up.

"We have a show at some bar called Gotfry's on Friday night." I leaned back against the tree behind me, closing my eyes. The heat was giving me such a headache.

"Wow. That soon. Good for you."

"Yeah."

Carrie left for class, and I stayed where I was, staring up into the sky. I'd been at UA for just under a week, and so far was enjoying my stay. Part of me felt as if I were in a prison of sorts. My father had given me a stern lecture the night before I left, making it crystal clear that he expected to have two professional daughters. Since the almighty Carla was already headed for her M.D.,

that meant I could either follow that path, or go into law, or pick some other thing I had no interest in. I hated the pressure of successful parents. It wasn't fair. What if I wanted to be a ditch digger, or just a bum on the street? Neither of these was true, mind you, but what if? I felt I should have that right.

A glance at my watch told me it was time to head to Psych.

This group seemed to have figured out where they were supposed to be at noon on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. The class was a bit smaller than it had been Monday, which was fine, as it was a large class. I sat in my same seat, way in the back, notebook already out alongside my psych book.

The song I had started the other day was there waiting for me. I hadn't had a chance to work on it since. I looked over the lines, closing my eyes as I sang in the dark cave that was my mind, tapping my fingers on my desk in time. Suddenly I felt someone's presence very near me. Slowly opening my eyes, I looked up at Miss Robertson. She was staring at me, her head slightly cocked to the side, and she opened her mouth, about to speak.

"Miss R? Can you come here for a moment?"

Her head shot up in the direction of someone sitting near the front and she smiled at me before walking away. I watched her go, wondering what she had stopped to talk to me about. I couldn't imagine I had already gotten myself in trouble. After speaking with the other student for a moment, she took her place in front of the podium. Miss R looked good in a skirt that reached to just below her knees, a dark gray color, with a satin maroon top, sleeveless yet again.

"Greetings, everyone. I have some bad news for you all. Today we have a pop quiz."

This was followed by the obligatory grumbling and sounds of notebooks and pens and books being taken out of bags or put on the floor. I watched with half-hearted interest.

"This quiz will be on what I assigned you to read on Monday. Hopefully, you all did." She smiled wickedly and walked to the first row of desks with a stack of papers in her hand. "Put this face down on your desk and don't start until I tell you, please."

I moved everything from my desk to the floor except for my pen, watching as the TA gave the front person in our row enough tests to pass back for all of us. She licked her thumb as she tried to separate the pages, then glanced briefly at me before moving on. Within five minutes, everyone had a quiz and was waiting for the word to start.

"Okay, you may begin."

I flipped the page over, afraid of what I'd find, since I hadn't bothered to read the assigned pages. My brows drew together as I read the questions and chewed on the cap of my Bic. It wasn't that bad. I quickly read through the questions, marking answers as I went, stopping to think about one before I circled "A" and moved on, whizzing through the material, getting lost in it until I reached the end of the sheet. I'd had no idea I had gotten through the entire 50-question quiz already. I leaned back in my chair, looking at my handiwork, then looked around to see heads bowed as my fellow classmates continued working. I set my pen down and began to chew on my lip.

The door near the TA's desk opened, and a man entered. He walked over to Miss Robertson and sat on the edge of the desk, apparently in an attempt to look suave. He was an older man, probably in his mid- to late fifties, hair graying around the temples, skin tan, probably from hours of golf. He looked like one of those types. His white dress shirt was unbuttoned just enough to show off the gold chain he wore around his neck, the shirt tucked into khakis.

I was amused to see this man flirting with our teacher. He didn't even try to hide it. I watched Miss R to see what her reaction would be. She was polite, but did not rise to the bait. For some reason, I was proud she handled herself so well as the guy made an ass out of himself.

"Okay, time's up." The TA stood from the desk, turning her back on the man who now wore a stunned expression, and walking toward the head of the first row.

"Please pass your papers up to the front. Thank you." She collected them down the line, smiling at the person who handed her the stack. "Everyone, this is Dr. Sauder. He is the head of the psychology department." She indicated the man who had risen from her desk. He smiled at everyone.

"Hello, and welcome to Psych 101," Sauder said. "You are very lucky to have Dagny as your teacher. She's wonderful." He smiled at her.

Yeah, I bet she is. I rolled my eyes. Finally, the old man left and our TA stood in front of the class.

"Okay, folks, since this is our first quiz, I want to go over these with you. These aren't for a grade." A sigh of relief came from somewhere behind me. I grinned. "Yes, I heard that, so don't panic just yet. I just want to see where you all are. So, shall we?" She smiled at the class again, such a great smile, and looked at a piece of paper she had in her hand. "Let's begin."

The TA went over every question, asking different people what they thought the answer should be, or why they chose what they did. I watched her, watched her mannerisms, the way she looked and talked to people. I knew her; I knew the way she worked. But how? It was almost as if she came from a dream, a person I'd conjured up long ago but couldn't quite figure out where I'd left her. I had the distinct feeling that Dagny had played some sort of role in my life. *Dammit, who are you?*

"Okay, now hang on a second. Don't get frustrated just yet." I looked up to see the TA talking with a girl not far from me. "It's actually less complicated than you're making it out to be... I'm sorry; I haven't memorized names yet."

"Kelly."

"Kelly. Think about it for a second. What type of thought process would it be considered if someone were to go into a sudden rage?" Miss R's voice was calm and even, almost comforting.

"This is driving me crazy. I read the text, Miss Robertson, I promise."

Miss R smiled reassuringly. "I believe you."

The girl was quiet for a moment. You could almost see the wheels turning in her head as she concentrated. "I can't do this." The girl surprised us all by starting to get really angry at herself. "I'm going to flunk out of this class. I can't. I can't fail, Miss Robertson."

The TA bent down over the girl's desk, hands on either side. "Kelly, you never fail if you quit. But then you never win, either."

I stared, those words reverberating over and over in my head. I saw the water, the pool in our backyard, the orange floats on my arms...

"...but I can't, Dagny. I just can't." Dagny swam over to me, standing right in front of me and bending down to look me in the eye. She brushed some hair off my face...

"Honey, you never fail if you quit. But then you never win, either." She smiled at me. She had such a nice smile.

"Dag," I muttered, looking at my former babysitter as she moved away from Kelly's desk to talk to another student. Holy shit! How could I have forgotten her? How could I not have recognized her? She had been such a profound influence on me, even for the short time she was in my life.

As I looked at her now, I could see it all over again, and was shocked that I hadn't picked up on it the moment I saw her. I remembered when she had come by my parents' house to tell me she couldn't babysit me anymore, that her parents were moving.

"Want to go for a walk, Chase?" she asked, standing just inside the front door of my house.

"Sure!" I was so excited. Just me and Dag, even on a day when my parents were home. She had come especially to see me.

Dagny took my hand and led me toward the park that was just across the street and down a bit. She took me to the swings and started to push me.

"I'm afraid I won't be your babysitter anymore, Chase," she said, her voice sad.

I craned my neck around to look at her, dragging the toes of my tennis shoes in the dirt to stop my momentum. "What? Why not?" Fully stopped, I jumped out of the rubber seat.

"Well, my dad got a new job. We have to go back home to Texas for a little while."

She sat in the dirt, not caring if her shorts got dirty. I loved that. I sat with her as we both made patterns with a stick. "So if it's only for a while, you'll be back, right?" I was filled with so much hope. Maybe I could have her as my babysitter again next summer.

"Well, hon, I just don't know." She ran a hand through my hair, combing it with her fingers.

"I don't want another babysitter!" I jumped up, throwing myself at her, her arms wrapping around my small body. I couldn't keep the tears inside. Dagny rubbed my back, whispering quiet words of comfort into my ear.

"Are you okay?"

I jerked in my seat, startled, and looked up into the green eyes of my memory. She smiled as she sat in the empty desk in front of me. I looked around to see that the other people in the class were beginning to filter out, then looked back at my teacher.

"Yeah. I'm fine." I felt really stupid. How long had I been drifting in my own thoughts?

"I wondered where you had disappeared to there for a while." She smiled again. "It's been a long time, Chase. How have you been?"

I stared at her, shocked. "You remember me?"

"Of course. How could I forget Chase Marin?" She put her hand on my arm for a second. "So, did you ever learn how to swim?" She smiled again.

I shook my head sheepishly. "No. Never tried again."

She leaned back from my desk, hand on her chest. "After all the time and effort that we put into it that year? Tsk, tsk." She smiled and stood. "Well, I must say I'm shocked and utterly pleased to have you in the class, Chase. It's wonderful to see you again, all grown up."

Suddenly I felt very shy. "Thanks. You, too." With a small chuckle, she walked to her desk.