

1 CHASE

CHASE'S CELL PHONE VIBRATES ON his dresser. It sounds like a swarm of mosquitoes. He sits up straight in bed, slapping his hand down on the phone. *Hard*. The text message glows in the dark, and he squints while his eyes adjust.

Check your email ASAP. Then call me.—D.S.

Whatever Daniel Stein wants to tell him in the middle of the night had better be important. Bordering on earth shattering.

He groans. He considers ignoring it, but curiosity and goddamn loyalty get the best of him.

He drags himself out of bed, across his room, and down to the apartment's tiny kitchen/dining room/living room to flip on the computer. The computer warms up, humming to itself. Everything in his mother's apartment seems so much smaller than it was when he left nearly eight months ago. Still, it feels good to be home. Home for Christmas. In some ways it seems like he's never been gone, and in others it feels like a lifetime.

The cell phone vibrates again, muffled between his fingers. The cell

is an early Christmas present from his dad, Walter. His first cell phone ever. Chase flips it open. Another text. Hurry, bro. Urgent.

Chase types in the user name and password for his email account. Three new messages. But when he opens his inbox, only one message jumps out at him. Untitled, but from his old girlfriend, Rose. He hasn't heard a word from her since he left. Maybe now that he's back in town, she'll want to reconnect. His heart catches.

He clicks on the message, opening it. Addressed to Daniel, Becca, and himself. Short and sweet.

I'm writing to say good-bye. Becca, you can have anything you want from my room. Chase, I saved you a bunch of sketches. Thanks for being my friends. Please don't hate me for doing this. Love, Rose.

His mouth dries. What does that mean? *What the hell does that mean?* He stares at Rose's artwork, tacked to his wall, especially his favorite—that black-and-white chalk drawing of two hands connecting. It looks like her hand is reaching for him, as though he can hold on to her or save her or something.

Chase dials Daniel's number before he can sort out his thoughts. Daniel picks it up after half a ring. "Did you see it?"

"What the hell does it mean?"

"She's gonna kill herself! That's what it means. She's giving away her things. She's saying good-bye. Becca's freaking out over here." "Freaking out" sounds about right for Daniel's sister.

Chase tries to breathe. "I know it sounds like that. But I don't think Rose is the killing-yourself kind of girl."

"We gotta call 911," Becca's voice breaks through on the phone, like she just grabbed it from her brother's hands.

"I'm going over there," Chase decides. "Maybe I can talk her out of it."

"Shit, Chase, it might be too late." Daniel's voice pops back on.

"Or we might be wrong. Maybe she's running away. If we call the cops, we'll give her up. We both know her parents have kept her a prisoner in that house. Maybe she's finally had enough."

"I don't know..." Daniel breaks off. Chase can't remember another time he's ever heard Daniel speechless.

"Here, look. She sent the email ten minutes ago. There's time for me to get over there."

"Unless she has a gun."

"She doesn't have a gun." Chase sounds more confident than he feels. "I'll keep my cell phone on me. And I'll run."

BEFORE

2 CHASE

CRASHING AT DANIEL STEIN'S HOUSE had undeniable perks. The biggest perk was the sister factor. Younger sisters have hot friends, especially when they're only a year behind you in school and they just got their braces off. The second biggest perk, and the one that most often led him to stay over, was avoiding his own mom and the brewing of World War III on the home front.

Chase didn't bother to knock, just let himself right in like always. He found Daniel lounging in the living room, his earbuds tucked into his ears. Chase flicked a dangling blue-and-silver foil menorah and looked pointedly at Daniel. "Chanukah decorations?"

"It's been November for a whole freaking week, bro," Daniel said, taking the earbuds out. "Besides, you know my mom." He gestured to an overflowing box of Halloween skeletons and bats, decorations that had been up three days ago.

"I know your mom." Chase flopped onto the taupe suede couch—the kind of couch you could sink into. Everything about the Stein house felt like home. Well, not like *his* home. But the way he always imagined

home *should* feel. “Is she cooking tonight?”

“Are you inviting yourself over *again*?”

“There a problem with that?” Chase grinned.

“Not as long as there’s enough food for me.” Daniel patted his belly. For such a compact guy, he sure could put away a lot of latkes and roast. “Besides, you’re not the only one. Becca’s got a friend staying over too.”

“Seriously?” Chase had been hoping that.

“Yeah, that Rose girl. The one who looks like an exotic porn star.”

Chase knew who she was right way. “She’s hot,” he agreed. Suddenly, he wished he’d taken the time to pull on a clean T-shirt or comb his hair. He leaned over to catch a look at himself in the long, oval hallway mirror. His brown hair hung all messy and half covering his eyes, like it always did, even when he *had* combed it.

Daniel grinned. “I thought that’d cheer you up.”

“Cheer me up? I’m a goddamn pillar of sunshine. What’re you talking about? I don’t need cheering up!”

Daniel ignored this, leaping up and tackling Chase on the couch. He rubbed his knuckles in Chase’s hair. “What, your mom bring home some guy again?”

“Don’t want to talk about it.” Chase grabbed on and held both of Daniel’s wrists in one of his hands, keeping him an arm’s distance away. Chase nearly doubled Daniel’s size, so Daniel twisted and squirmed, trying to wrench a hand free.

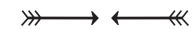
How the hell did Daniel know, anyway? Was it written on his forehead in red ink? Chase didn’t want to tell Daniel that he and his mom, Candy, had gotten into it again. Just a yelling match. But bad enough that his little sister, Daisy, had hid under her bed to cry. Chase found her there all red faced and puffy, her stuffed rabbit damp with tears. Daisy hadn’t done that since their dad left three years ago.

Chase loosened his hold and Daniel scrambled away, back to a safe distance on the couch. “Your dad’s not back, is he?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Chase repeated. For all Daniel’s self-piercings and pen-doodled tattoos, he was a good kid with one of those normal cookie-cutter lives. Not like Chase.

“Okay, okay.” Daniel grinned. “Go visit the girls. That’ll cheer you up.”

Chase ran his fingers through his curls and took a deep breath. “Right on, bro. I like the way you think. I’m gonna wander over there like I’m looking for you. Sound believable?” Chase didn’t wait for an answer, just turned and headed that way.



Rose Parsimmon and Becca Stein sat so close to each other on the worn plaid couch that they were almost sitting on each other’s laps. Only one thing was sexier than a hot girl in shorts. Two hot girls in shorts. Thank god he lived in Southern California, where shorts could be worn ten months out of the year.

Rose held a pencil between two fingers and appeared to be sketching something on a piece of white paper. Chase took a deep breath and walked over to the edge of the coffee table directly in front of the couch. He went to sit down, hoping the table wouldn’t crumble under his weight. Rose leaned her pencil to the side, using the edge for shading.

Becca lifted her eyes from *Cosmo*, giving Chase a long, hard look. “*Excuse us.*” Becca Stein and sarcasm were old friends.

Chase ignored her, studying Rose. She picked up her pencil for a moment and straightened, examining her drawing from a distance. Chase edged close enough that his knees nearly brushed hers. She was tanned, the color of a gingerbread cookie. Her skin seemed soft and clean.

Finally, Rose looked up. Bored brown eyes. He wanted to back out of the room immediately, but he held his ground. “Hey,” he greeted the girls, trying to sound casual.

“Hey,” Rose answered quietly. Politely. No indication that she would like to rest her gingerbread brown legs on his.

“Don’t you have better things to do than sit here and drool over my friends?” Becca asked, chewing on the tie of her sweatshirt. That girl always had something in her mouth. A pen or pencil with the end gnawed off, a piece of gum, or when she could sneak it, a cigarette.

“You hungry?” Chase joked back. “Your mom doesn’t feed you enough?”

Becca took the sweatshirt tie out of her mouth. “For your information, I’m trying to quit smoking. Daniel’s been on my case, but mostly because my parents would flip if they found out.” Becca pushed the sleeve up her arm, past the elbow. “They think I’m a good kid, you know. I can’t ruin it for them.”

Rose laughed through her nose. “Funny, isn’t it?” She nudged Becca with her foot. “Your parents think you’re an angel, so you pretend to be one. My parents think I’m a little shit, so I do my best to pretend they’re right. Wouldn’t want to disappoint them.”

“Oh, so you’re a little shit, huh?” Chase saw his opening and grabbed it.

“A shit and a half.” Rose met his gaze head on. “They would’ve returned me ages ago if they didn’t think it would make them look bad.”

“I don’t get it.” Chase tried not to stare at her eyes. They were larger than average and the color of mud puddles—but not in a bad way. “You can’t return your kid. What’re you gonna do? Shove her back in?”

“They wish.” Becca moved Rose’s sketch aside, then lay her head in Rose’s lap. Rose played with Becca’s hair, sectioning off three strands of hair and preparing to braid. “Rose is adopted, you dork.”

“Oh, come on, *Chase*,” Rose said. His heart skipped a beat when she said his name. “You can’t tell me you think I look anything like my parents.”

Chase pictured Mr. and Mrs. Parsimmon. He’d seen them bringing Rose to and from school for years. At *first* he had noticed them because they didn’t match Rose at all. And then he’d noticed them because their daughter was hotter than hot. The Parsimmons were old for parents—like more than halfway to grandparenthood, with skin as white as dough.

“Yep. I’m Satan’s love child,” Rose said nonchalantly, reaching into her pocket and pulling out a piece of sugar-free peppermint gum. “It is what it is. The trick is to have as much fun with it as possible.”

“Yeah, but your fun always winds up with someone being grounded,” Becca jumped in, complaining. “Although as long as it’s not me, I don’t really care.” Becca reached her hand out for the gum, and Rose ripped the piece in half. “You are a true friend,” Becca told her solemnly. “And you’re an amazing artist.” Becca pulled the sketch up from the coffee table and turned it so Chase could see.

It took him a second to realize what he was looking at. Two large eyes took up most of the space on the white page, but there were fingers too, near the edges of the eyes. It almost looked like someone had been hiding her eyes with her hands and had just peeked out from behind them. And then, as he looked closer, he saw a figure within the pupil of the eyes. A child’s silhouette. All alone.

“You made that?” Chase asked, knowing he sounded stupid, since obviously she had. “That’s, like, *art*.”

Rose smiled then, a full smile, all the way up to her eyes, and her whole face changed. He felt suddenly too large for his body. His tongue was heavy too, with nothing intelligent to say. Luckily, Rose spoke for him. “Just one of the many things my parents don’t seem to understand about me. Pop quiz,” she said. “What’s the opposite of love?”

“Hate.”

“Wrong,” Rose informed him. “The opposite of love is not giving a damn.”