



Come to Me Quietly: The Closer to You Series

By A. L. Jackson

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From the acclaimed bestselling author of *Lost to You* and *When We Collide* comes a New Adult novel of one woman's obsession: a man who's as passionate as he is elusive—and as tempting as he is trouble...

Aleena Moore is haunted by Jared Holt. It's been six years since she's seen her brother's best friend, the self-destructive bad boy she secretly loved in high school. As the years pass, she knows it's time to move on. Time to decide between a practical nursing degree and her true dream as an artist. Time to get over Jared and give another guy a chance...

Just when she opens her heart to her friend, Gabe, Aly returns home to find Jared sleeping on her couch. The teenage boy she loved has grown into a man she can't resist. Covered in tattoos and lost in rage, he's begging to be saved from his demons—the memories of the day he destroyed his family. As the two reconnect, their passion is hot enough to torch Aly's judgment. But can she risk her future for a man who lives on the edge of destruction?

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for A.L. Jackson's novels

“Exquisite, beautiful, poignant—A.L. Jackson is in a league of her own!”—S.C. Stephens, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Reckless*

“A devastatingly beautiful story of love, grief, and healing. Every emotion on the page will grip at your heart, and leave you stuck in the characters’ lives for days after.”—Molly McAdams, *New York Times* bestselling author.

“*Come To Me Quietly* is a riveting tale of loss, two souls destined to be together and discovering strength in forgiving ones self from regrets keeping them chained to finding true happiness. Simply breathtaking.”—Gail McHugh, *New York Times* Bestselling Authors of *Collide* and *Pulse*

“A.L. Jackson has written such an emotionally impactful story that grabs you right from the start.”—Kim Karr, author of *Torn*

“A.L. Jackson delivered another emotionally driven love story. I was captivated from the first page until the last.”—*RomanceLoversBookBlog*

“Oh this book was amazing. I know I gush like a school girl, but I cannot contain myself when I find a story that leaves me clutching its pages to my heart.”—*Tina's Book Reviews*

“Can A.L. Jackson write anything but excellence? Not in my eyes!...5 star perfection!”—*Madison Says*

About the Author

A. L. Jackson spends her days writing in Southern Arizona where she lives with her husband and three beautiful children. She is the author of *Lost to You*, *When We Collide*, *Take This Regret*, and *Pulled*.

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Prologue

Dashed lines blur until they become a solid line. My bones vibrate from the thousands of miles I've spent straddling this leather seat, the muscles in my right arm screaming from the hours my hand has been locked on the throttle.

But I don't stop. I can't, and I don't know why. Something in my gut spurs me forward. I plow ahead.

Hot air blasts my face and my hair thrashes in uncontrolled chaos.

I bite back a bitter laugh.

Uncontrolled chaos. That's exactly how they described me.

The desert sky goes on forever, an ocean of the deepest blue. The city rises like a beacon in the distance. Because I am drawn.

What am I doing?

There is nothing here for me. I know it. I've already destroyed it all. I destroy everything I touch.

Still I can do nothing but press on.

ONE

Aleena

I was propped up on my bed with my sketch pad balanced on my bent knees. Megan was doing her best not to laugh from where she sat cross-legged at the end of my bed, bouncing.

“Hold still,” I commanded, biting my bottom lip as I attempted to get her mouth just right. The shading was difficult, and I wanted it perfect. Megan had the most genuine smile of any person I’d ever met. I refused to mess it up.

“But I have to pee,” she whined. She bounced a little harder. She couldn’t hold it in any longer, and she released this hysterical laugh as she rolled off the edge of my bed. “I’ll be right back.”

With a groan, I tossed my sketch pad to the bed. “You’re such a pain in my ass, Megan,” I called after her as she ran out my door and across the hall to the bathroom. She’d gotten up to pee at least three times in the last hour. The girl could not sit still to save her life.

“That’s why you love me so much,” she yelled back.

The bathroom door slammed behind her, and I picked the pad back up to study it.

Megan’s striking face stared back at me, smiling, her normally long blond hair traced in shades of charcoal, her normally blue eyes wide and black.

She’d been my best friend since she’d moved here from Rhode Island during our sophomore year of high school almost five years ago. I loved drawing her because she was so different than the typical model who offered herself up. She was short, just shy of the five-two mark, wore her curves well, and had a unique face. It was somehow both sweet and curious, this constant expression that made me think of innocence trying to work itself out.

She still lived with her parents in the same neighborhood where I’d grown up, just two streets over from my old house where my parents and younger brother still lived. She hung out here a lot at the apartment that I’d shared with my older brother, Christopher, since I’d graduated from high school two years ago. Christopher and I both went to ASU, and our apartment was near the campus. I was going to school to be a nurse, but God, sometimes I wished I could do something with my art. I knew it was absurd, that there was little chance that anything would come of it. That didn’t mean I didn’t want it.

She was grinning when she came back less than two minutes later.

“Feel better?”

“Oh yeah.” Climbing back onto the bed, she crawled forward to steal a peek.

I hid the pad against my chest.

“Let me see.” She reached out and tried to grab it.

I shook my head and held it closer. “You know the rules.”

“I know, I know.” She sat back. No one ever got to see. No one except for me.

From the floor, Megan’s phone rang in her purse. She leaned over to dig it out. When she rose back up, excitement had transformed her expression. “It’s him,” she mouthed to me as she accepted the call and brought it to her ear. “Hello?”

Turning back to my sketch, I tried not to smile while I listened to her talk to Sam. She’d been chasing that guy for the last month, ever since she’d hung out with him at a party our friend Calista had thrown in May to celebrate the end of last semester. One kiss and she was hooked. I wasn’t so sure he felt the same.

“Yeah . . . ?we can come . . . ?okay, see you there.”

She dropped her phone to the bed and squealed.

Oh God. Megan didn’t squeal. She was in trouble.

“Sounds like you have a date tonight,” I muttered, my attention trained on the motion of my hand.

“Not me, we,” she countered. “Sam is having a party tonight, and he wants us to come. I can’t believe he actually called,” she said, obviously talking to herself. “Two weeks and no word from him. I was beginning to think he was going to ditch me.”

Beginning to?

So maybe I was a little protective of my best friend.

I hopped off the bed and went to my closet, dug through until I found the little black skirt I’d tucked in the back. I yanked it from the hanger and tossed it to her. “Here . . . ?wear this. It’ll look a lot better on you than it does on me. You know it was those legs that tripped Sam up in the first place. I think the guy literally stumbled.” I pointed at her. “And you better make him work for it.”

“Oh, he’s definitely going to have to work for it. You know me better than that.” Megan held up the skirt to inspect it. “This is really cute.” She looked up with a grin. “Maybe you should wear it. You know Gabe’s gonna be there.” The last she said in that singsong voice that she only used because she knew it annoyed the hell out of me.

“Pssh,” I huffed under my breath, and she laughed because she of all people knew Gabe wasn’t really that much of a draw. Gabe was my kind-of boyfriend. By kind of, I meant he was a guy who wouldn’t leave me alone or take no for an answer. But he was unbearably cute and sweet in a boy-next-door kind of way and I didn’t really know how to cut him loose without hurting his feelings.

And he was safe.

She lowered the skirt to her lap. “You should really quit stringing that guy along. It’s kind of sad.” Her tease turned serious, her blue eyes sober as she looked up at me from the bed.

I tossed a pair of shorts to change into on my bed. "I'm not stringing him along, Megan. He's the one who's strung himself to me."

"Whatever, Aly. You just keep telling yourself that. You always do."

I could see the concern pass over her eyes, could almost hear the argument pass through her lips, *the lecture*.

"Just don't, okay?" I said.

She blinked a couple of times, as if doing that would clear whatever picture she saw in her mind. "I just don't get you sometimes, Aly."

The party was mellow, just a few people hanging out on a Thursday at the house Sam shared with a couple of other guys.

Most of us were out back, sitting around the pool drinking beer. The yard lights were off, the area cast in a muted glow from the lights shining through the bank of windows inside Sam's house. Megan was curled up with him on a lounge at the far end of the pool, their voices hushed and relaxed. Behind me flames rose and crackled from an in-ground fire pit, and a few people sat around in the chairs that circled it.

Leaning back on my hands, I dipped my feet into the pool. Water rippled out over the surface, the ridges illuminated above the shadows as they lapped across the pool. Even at eleven o'clock at night, it was still hot. Summer in Phoenix was my favorite. It always had been. Heat saturated everything, radiated from the concrete and pavement, pressed down from the sky. Bugs trilled and birds rustled through the trees. I loved that I could be in the middle of the sprawling city and still feel like I was out in the wilderness. Peaceful. There was no other way to describe it.

I wasn't surprised when Gabe settled down beside me. We'd chatted a little throughout the evening, but for the most part, I'd avoided him. He was shirtless and only wore a pair of white swim trunks. "You want to join me?" he asked, inclining his head toward the pool in invitation.

"Nah. I'm good," I said, even though the thought of the cool water was incredibly appealing.

Tilting his head back to get a better view of me, he almost smiled. Strands of his light brown hair flopped to the side, and his dark brown eyes swam with something I wished I didn't see. "You're missing out," he said.

I laughed quietly and shook my head. He was so obvious.

"I am, huh?"

One side of his mouth twitched. "Yeah, you are."

"Fine," I said.

What can it hurt?

Or I guessed the more appropriate question would be, why did it hurt? It was stupid. Childish. But I didn't know how to let it go.

Forcing myself to my feet, I pulled off my tank top and slipped out of the little shorts I'd worn over my green bikini.

Gabe's expression lifted with slow appreciation.

Embarrassed, I turned away and jumped in. My body sank to the bottom of the pool. I floated, weightless, the length of my black hair spreading out and drifting away. It was cool, invigorating. The water blocked out the voices and the noise of everyone else, and for a few seconds, I reveled in the solitude. When my lungs grew tight, I propelled myself up to the surface. I sucked in a huge breath of air as I flung my hair back from my face.

Gabe was already waist deep in the pool, smiling at me. "You have to be the most gorgeous girl I've ever seen, Aly," he murmured as he edged forward.

Lights from inside cast his face in shadows, but I could see the beauty in his silhouette. And I wanted to want him, wanted to somehow get back the part of me that I'd given away that night so long ago.

I didn't say anything, just stared at Gabe as he inched forward. I didn't stop him when his hands found my hips and didn't stop his kiss.

It felt nice.

But there would always be something missing.

TWO

Jared

Everything had changed even while everything seemed to remain the same. I rode the streets, searching. For what, I didn't know. In the six years I'd been gone, the city had crawled out past its boundaries, but the old neighborhood appeared as if it'd been frozen in time, like a snapshot I looked at from afar. A picture I'd been erased from.

I pulled onto the dirt off the main street, directly across the street from where I'd grown up. Every memory that ever mattered I'd experienced here. They were only that. Memories. I propped my booted foot on the ground to hold my bike up while I just stared. Cars flew by, my vision blurred in the flashes of metal.

What the fuck was I thinking? That this was a good idea? Because it was most assuredly not a fucking good idea.

I'd been back in town for almost a week. It'd taken me that

long to even build up the nerve to get this close to the old neighborhood. Maybe I just wanted to torture myself, to make myself pay a little more, although no amends could ever be made. I'd already tried to pay the price, but fate wouldn't even allow me that.

As if I were anchored to the past, I couldn't force myself to leave. I could almost see us playing in the middle of the quiet street, hiding, chasing, laughing, running through the vacant land that backed the neighborhood. If I strained hard enough, I could hear my mom's voice as she leaned out the front door and called me to dinner, could see my father pulling in to the driveway at the end of the workday, could picture my little sister's face pressed against the window as she waited for me to return home.

All of it was an echo of what I had destroyed.

My chest tightened, and I fisted the grips on the handlebars as the anger raged. Aggression curled and coiled

my muscles and I squeezed my eyes closed. A twisted snarl rose in my throat, and I bit it back and held it in. My eyes flew open as I gunned the throttle and shot down the street. I wound through cars and pushed myself forward. I had no idea where I'd end up because there was no place I belonged.

I just rode.

Hours later, I sat with my elbows propped up on the bar, my boots hooked over the footrest on the stool. I took a long drag from my bottle of beer, eyeing Lily from where she watched me with a coy smile from behind the bar. The girl'd had the nerve to card me, and we'd been fast friends since.

At least I hoped we were. A mild grin lifted just one side of her mouth before she shook her head and turned away to lean

over and restock some beers, giving me the perfect view of her tight little ass.

Ice-cold liquid slid down my throat, and I breathed out a satisfied sigh. I'd forgotten how fucking hot the summers were in Phoenix.

When it felt as if I traveled every street in the city, I'd pulled in to the parking lot of this little bar. I was starving and in dire need of a beer. The place was pretty packed, filled with guys who appeared to be looking for a reprieve after a long day at work, there to unwind and catch the game, mixed in with some groups who were probably college students, dotted with a few like me.

Lily disappeared into the kitchen and reemerged with my burger. She set it down in front of me. She leaned across the bar on her forearms. Pieces of her chunky blond hair fell to one side as she tipped her head. "So, are you going to ask me for my number or just stare at me all night?"

I raised my brow as I took another drink of beer. "I figured I'd just wait here until you get off." I wasn't one to go through the motions or humor girls with pretenses.

She laughed with a hint of disbelief. "Pretty sure of yourself there, huh?"

I shrugged as I polished off my beer. I wasn't, really. I just didn't care. If she asked me back to her place, cool. But I wasn't going to be all torn up if she didn't. I'd find someone else. I always did.

Lines dented her forehead as she turned her attention to my hands, and she reached out in an attempt to trace my knuckles.

My heart sped, my hands fisting as I drew them back, my jaw tightening in warning as I lifted my chin.

She frowned when she looked up and found the expression on my face. She rocked back before she appeared to shake off the jolt of confusion she felt at my reaction. "You want another beer?"

"That'd be good," I said, my tone hard. It was always the same. They always fucking wanted to touch, to know, to dig. I didn't go there. Ever.

She nodded and turned away.

With an elbow on either side of my plate, I wrapped my hands around the huge burger and leaned in to take a bite. It tasted like heaven. I suppressed a groan. It'd been way too many hours since I'd had something to eat. I popped a fry in my mouth and went in to take another bite when in my periphery I sensed someone come to a standstill. He started to pass, but hesitated again before he stopped. Out of the corner of my eye, I kept a

watch on him. All I could see were his hands clenching and unclenching at his sides, like he was trying to make a decision about something. I didn't acknowledge him, just focused on this fucking delicious burger and hoped the dude got some common sense and walked away before he got his ass beat.

He came in closer to the bar and cocked his head around to look at me. "Jared?"

My head snapped up to take in this guy who was really fucking tall, and even though he was lankier than shit, it was pretty clear he could go a round or two. His black hair was wild and sticking up all over the place, and his dark green eyes were wide with shock. He dropped onto the barstool next to me, staring at me like I was some sort of apparition.

I was pretty sure we were each having about the exact same effect on the other. For a minute every muscle in my body froze, my mouth gaping, before the shock wore off. Then I laughed and grabbed a napkin and wiped it across my mouth as I spun my stool toward him. "Well, shit, if it isn't Christopher Moore. How the hell are you, man?"

A thousand memories pushed to the forefront of my mind. I could see them all there, too, flickering across his face.

Christopher and I had been thicker than blood. He'd been both my best friend and the brother I never had.

A smile erupted on his face and he shook his head. "I'm good . . . ?really good." He blinked as if he still couldn't believe I was there. "How have you been?" His tone shifted, grew heavy as he leaned with one elbow on the bar, facing me. His attention shot from my face to my hands fidgeting on my lap and back up to my face again. He sat back, his brow pinching together. "Where have you been, Jared? I mean . . . ?I haven't heard from you in years. Why . . ." He wrenched his hand through his hair, unable to complete the question, his voice trailing off.

What the hell was I supposed to say? Christopher had written me all these bullshit letters saying none of it was my fault, that everything would be okay, that he *got* it, but he got *nothing*. How could he? I was the one who lay in my cell at night with the pictures of what I'd done burned in my mind. When I closed my eyes, they were the only thing I saw. And it was most definitely *my fault*. I never returned any of his letters, never called, never let any of them know where I went once I was released. I didn't need Christopher or anyone else to feed me lies, to try to convince me one day I'd heal or some fucking garbage like that. Maybe my heart beat on, but I died the day *she* did.

I trained my voice, acted casual. "I've been working up in New Jersey the last few years. I was able to save up some money, so it's been good."

He pressed his lips together. "And when did you get back?" he asked, although I heard the question. *Why are you back?* I was glad he didn't ask because I didn't fucking know.

"About a week ago."

Lily showed up in front of us with a fresh beer and began

wiping down the counter. Her gaze landed on Christopher. "Can I get you anything?"

"No, thanks, I'm good." He waved her off and turned back to me. "Where are you staying?"

I sipped at my beer. "I've been staying at this shitty motel while I look for an apartment . . . ?across town."

For a second he worked his mouth in consideration. He released a breath and cocked his head to the side. “Why don’t you come stay with me while you look? It’d be cool to catch up. It has to suck to be living in a motel.”

“Nah, man, I couldn’t impose like that.”

“It’s not imposing. You’re like family.”

Internally I cringed at his assertion. Yeah, maybe I’d been like family once. Not anymore.

Christopher reached over, grabbed my beer, and drained half of it. I stifled a laugh. The guy hadn’t changed at all. Christopher was notorious for *borrowing* stuff. If I was ever missing anything, I knew where to find it.

“Help yourself,” I muttered as I waved my hand at my beer, and he just smirked.

“Anyway . . .” He tipped the bottle in my direction as if in thought, working something out. “I have a place I share with Aly. It’s just a few miles away. You’ll have to sleep on the couch, but it’s got to be better than living out of a motel. This is really cool. . . .” He nodded as if he were trying to convince himself this wasn’t a really bad idea. “I’m glad you’re back. It will be good to catch up . . .,” he rambled on before he slowed. He must have read the surprise on my face.

Aly is his roommate?

“Our parents and Augustyn still live in the old neighborhood, but when Aly decided to go to ASU, we figured it’d be

cool if she lived with me since we’re going to the same school. She moved in a couple of years ago . . . ?right after she graduated from high school,” he added as if to clear up my confusion.

If anything, it grew.

He just laughed. “Jared . . . ?she’s twenty years old.”

I tried to work it out in my head, the little black-haired girl who’d followed us around like we were the greatest things in the world while we teased her relentlessly. Still I would’ve killed for her. A grin fought for release when I thought of her knobby knees and buckteeth. By the time she was twelve, she was so tall and gangly she could barely stand on her two awkward feet. The last time I saw Christopher’s sister, she must’ve been about fourteen, but that year was just a blur. I couldn’t even picture her at that age.

I smiled lightly and shook my head. “No shit?”

“Man, you’ve been gone for six years. What’d you expect? To come back here and everything would be the same?”

I didn’t know what I expected.

Christopher let me off the hook with an easy grin. “It’s really good to have you back, Jared.” He stood and tossed a twenty on the bar, then clapped me on the back. “Thanks for the beer. Now go grab your shit. You’re coming back to my place.”

Christopher gave me his address, and I rode across town to the motel to get the few things I had, then headed back. It had to be getting close to midnight. Traffic was light, and the trip took me less than ten minutes.

Their apartment was in Tempe right near ASU. I turned right into their driveway and up to the gate, then entered the code Christopher had given me. It swung open, allowing me entry into the huge complex. Large three-story buildings were situated around the property, and sidewalks surrounded by trimmed grass and small shrubs lined the walkways. I didn't get impressed by material shit, and it wasn't like this was the foothills or anything, but it was a thousand times better than the hole I'd been staying in since I got into town a week ago.

Why I let Christopher talk me into coming here I wasn't sure. I'd come to Phoenix without intentions, without expectations, only with the few meager belongings I could strap to my back and this foreign need in the pit of my stomach.

I no longer understood joy, but I had to admit, it was good to see his face.

I had some money saved up from the construction job I'd somehow landed back in New Jersey. I'd been a supervisor and made good money. No one knew me from Adam there, and my records were sealed since I'd been a minor when everything went down. The day I turned eighteen, I was released, and I'd hitchhiked my way across the country, putting as much distance between this place and myself as I possibly could.

Funny how I ended up right back here again after running so far.

I was going to have to find a job soon. I wouldn't run short of money for a while, but I'd need some kind of employment to put on my application if I wanted to get my own place. I couldn't stay with Christopher forever.

Really, agreeing to come here at all was a train wreck waiting to happen.

He'd hate me before I was gone.

I'd bet on it.

Winding around to the back of the complex, I parked my bike in one of the visitor spots in front of his building. I hiked my bag farther up my back and tucked my hands in my jean

pockets as I ambled up the stairs to the second-floor landing. There were only two doors. Apartment 2602 was on the left. I rapped on the metal door.

Two seconds later, Christopher opened it. Cold air blasted across my face from the air conditioner, and I welcomed it as Christopher widened the door to let me in. "Come on in."

"This is seriously cool of you," I said as I stepped inside and took in my surroundings. It was a big, open room, the living area off to the left and the kitchen with a small, round table to the right. The two were separated by a low bar with three barstools sitting in front of it. The couch was in the middle of the living room. Behind it, a large sliding glass door led out to a small balcony.

Christopher gestured toward the couch. "Make yourself at home. Aly and I are pretty casual around here. I'm not doing much of anything this summer but sitting on my ass because I figure my senior year is going to be brutal, and Aly's working at a little restaurant while classes are out for the summer."

"Oh yeah? What are you studying?" I asked. Christopher had never been much of the studious type. I felt bad for even thinking I was surprised he'd made it that far in school.

He shrugged. "Just getting a bachelor's in business administration. I have no clue what I want to do with it,

but shit, my parents saved all that money for me to go to college. I figured I'd better make good on it."

"That's cool. I'm sure you'll figure it out."

"Thanks, man. I hope so." It seemed like he wasn't so confident. He ran a hand through his messy hair and heaved the air from his lungs. "Listen, let me grab you a blanket and pillow."

He headed down the hall, tapped his index finger on the first door on the right. "This is Aly's room. Off-limits, obviously." He craned his head back. "She's kind of private and pretty

much keeps to herself. You two probably won't run into each other all that much since she's working a lot while classes are out for the summer."

He touched the door on the left. "And this is Aly's bathroom. I don't think she'll mind if you use it." He said it as if it didn't really matter that much, but I couldn't imagine a girl wanting to share her bathroom with a guy she didn't really know.

"My room's at the end of the hall. There's a bathroom in there, too, if you need it."

"Thanks, man." I dropped my bag on the floor next to the huge black leather couch. It faced a large black TV stand with a flat-screen sitting on top of it. Controllers for a game console were stuffed inside a drawer with the wires sticking out.

I inclined my head toward it. "You still play?"

I kinda wanted to laugh because I used to have to drag his lazy ass outside to play or ride bikes or whatever the hell I wanted to do because Christopher always had his nose in a video game. He'd been the scrawny kid. When we were growing up, I'd kicked an ass or two in his name. Nobody had messed with him after that.

I hated fighting then, hated even the sight of the tiniest amount of blood. But I did it for him.

After everything went down, fighting was pretty much all I did. When the pressure built, *the anger*, it had to be released. Fighting served as the perfect outlet—the way the adrenaline spiked, the way it rose until it cracked me open, then flooded through my muscles and wept free from my veins, draining everything until I felt nothing.

Those were the only nights I could sleep. They probably would've let me out earlier if they weren't constantly pulling me off some kid who got in my way. Of course assholes to beat on

in juvie were in no short supply. The population there was just a constant string of punks who deserved to get their asses kicked anyway.

Christopher laughed as he opened a closet in the hall. "Nah, I don't play all that much, but it's cool to unwind every once in a while." He tossed me a blanket and pillow. "You're welcome to stay as long as you want. I set a spare key for you on the coffee table." He pointed to the silver key before his hand fluttered in the direction of the kitchen. "Aly and I share food. Just be sure to chip in or whatever when she goes to the store."

"Yeah, for sure." I dropped the blanket and pillow on the couch, sat down, and unlaced my boots to pull them off. Midnight approached, and I felt wasted, worn, but I doubted I'd catch much sleep tonight. Anxiety was my constant companion, and it'd grown since I'd gotten back into town. A disquiet rumbled somewhere deep inside me, the same feeling that had urged me onto my bike and out onto the street little more than a

week ago. I hadn't even made a conscious decision to come.

The last four years since I'd been out of juvie I'd been focused, but without a goal. I showed up at the job site every day, worked hard, fought a little, and fucked a lot. A pathetic substitution for life, but it was all I had. And I'd had no intention of ever changing it.

Then nine days ago I got up in the morning and got on my bike and just rode.

Christopher pulled his cell phone from his pocket. "I'm going to give Aly a heads-up that you're here. I don't want her coming in and freaking out that there's a strange guy sleeping on the couch."

Nodding, I kneeled down and unzipped my bag. "Thanks again. I'm going to grab a shower and call it a night."

"Sounds good. Clean towels are in the hall closet." Christopher hesitated at the end of the hall, then finally said, "I'm glad you're back, Jared."

My jaw tightened, but I lifted it in his direction. "Yeah, me, too."

The shower felt awesome. I kind of felt bad to have my naked ass surrounded by all of Aly's girly shit, like I was some kind of unwilling voyeur, but there was nothing I could do about it. I grabbed a bottle of body wash and squirted a mound into my palm. Coconut. I lathered it over my body with my hands and rushed it over my face. Damn, it smelled good.

Shaking my head, I resisted the urge to laugh because this whole thing was insane.

I towed off, pulled on some boxer briefs and a clean pair of jeans.

Wandering out into the main room, I rubbed the towel through my damp hair and glanced over at the microwave. Already twelve forty.

Okay, so not really all that late, but was it weird Aly was still out? If I were Christopher, I wasn't sure how I'd deal with it, a sister out at all hours of the night. If I thought I couldn't sleep now . . .

My little sister's face hit me before I could stop it. *God*. I hadn't seen Courtney since she was nine. Not since the day she'd gone to live with my grandparents three weeks after I'd destroyed our family.

In the months that followed, my grandparents had wanted me to go with them, too, like maybe if they took me out of the house where my father drank away his days, they could save me from the downward spiral I was on. But I'd refused. There was nothing they could do to help me.

I was so much older than Courtney that I really hadn't ever known her all that well. I wondered what she looked like now—what she was like—if she was happy or if I'd ruined her life, too.

I flipped all the lights off except for the one that glowed beneath the microwave, spread the thin blanket out over the couch, and sank down onto it.

It was as comfortable as it looked.

Tucking the pillow under my head, I stared up at the darkened ceiling. Cold air pumped continuously from the vents, keeping out the suffocating heat outside. Everything felt incredibly still and silent. I could barely hear the muted passing of cars out on the main road and the quiet hum of insects in the shrubs outside.

Minutes ticked by as I lay alone with my thoughts. Nighttime was the worst, when the memories were so vivid, the images so graphic I was sure if I could just reach out far enough, I could stop it. Change it.

Fix it.

I'd do anything to be given that chance.

When I could stand it no longer, I let my eyes drift closed. They started as flickers, small blips in time. My heart sped as the sickness I kept down all day clawed through my veins and pounded in my ears. Nausea surged and I draped my arm over my eyes, squeezed them tight, wished for anything that would blot it out. Heat seared me from the inside out, and sweat broke out across my forehead and down the back of my neck.

Pain slammed me as everything closed in.

And all I wanted was to die.

THREE

Aleena

Cool water lapped around my waist as I waded toward the steps. I climbed out, the heat of the night a blanket of comfort as I emerged from the pool. Gabe trailed close behind me.

I grabbed a towel from the pile sitting at the edge of the pool. My hair was soaked, plastered against the sides of my face and clinging to my back. I rubbed the towel over my face and through my hair.

On the lounge, Megan was lost in Sam, a tangle of limbs and whispers.

A soft snort escaped my nose. She was making him work for it, all right. I couldn't blame her, though. I'd never seen her look at someone the way she'd been looking at him tonight. I just hoped he didn't turn out to be a complete asshole.

I glanced back at Gabe. I hoped Sam and Gabe were alike because I was sure he wasn't anything close to an asshole. Gabe

offered a tiny grin as he grabbed a towel for himself, a silent affirmation of my perception.

I realized tonight had been nice, that I felt good, and maybe spending time with Gabe didn't really hurt all that bad. I smiled back at him.

I turned away, laughing at a few of our friends who decided it was late enough and they'd had enough to drink to peel all their clothes off and jump in the pool.

Glad I climbed out before I ended up a party to that.

Megan rose like a shadow in the darkness, her voice hoarse. "Hey, Aly, I think someone keeps trying to call you. Your phone is lighting up like every five seconds." She reached for it from the small table where I'd left it, held it up while the backlight glowed, the ringer silenced. "Oh, looks like it's Christopher calling," she said, turning it toward me.

Barefoot, I tiptoed to where Megan still lay curled up with Sam. The backlight faded as I took my phone from her. I ran my finger over it and saw I missed three calls from him. "Weird," I mumbled as my nerves

spiked.

“Everything okay?” Megan asked.

I lifted one shoulder as I redialed. “I don’t know. He tried to call me three times.” Christopher never checked up on me.

Over the years, things had changed so much between us. When we were younger, Christopher had done his best to ditch me while I did my best to keep up with him and his friends. Funny, it was his idea that I move in with him once I graduated from high school. Since then, we’d grown really close. We looked so much alike, his green eyes just as bright as mine, though his hair was a shade darker—so black it was almost blue. He was tall, built in all the right places, and thin everywhere else. It made me laugh at how many heads he turned. When I moved in, I’d needed some time to get used to the constant string of girls he had parading in and out of his room. In the end, it came down to respecting each other’s privacy. We’d worked it out. He did his thing while I did mine.

I wandered out into a quiet corner of the yard. A slow dread seeped over me as I dialed the phone. I held the towel close to my body as if it were a cloak of protection. The call rang twice before Christopher answered.

“Hey,” I rushed out, “is everything all right?”

“Yeah . . .,” he said, his voice doused with distinct relief when he spoke. “I just needed to catch you before you got home.”

The small panic that had built up in my chest subsided, curiosity taking its place. “Oh . . . ?okay. What’s up?”

He hesitated, then practically begged as he whispered, “And please don’t get mad, okay? Because I really need you to be okay with this.”

I felt a frown form between my eyes. I could almost see him shifting uncomfortably as he sat on the edge of his bed. The vibe of this conversation was completely out of character for my typically carefree brother.

“What’s going on, Christopher?”

He blew out a gush of air. “Do you remember Jared Holt?”

The name was enough to knock the breath from my lungs.

Did I remember him?

When I looked back now, I wondered how it was possible for a heart to be broken at fourteen. But my heart had, because it’d broken for him. Still it was something my young mind could never fully comprehend. My feelings for Jared had haunted me, left this hollowed-out place deep inside me. I’d held on to that remnant of pain for so long, until it faded and transformed and became this mystery that inhabited the deepest recesses of my mind. A shadow of a memory.

The mention of his name ignited it, basking it in light and bringing it to life again.

I swallowed the lump lodged in my throat, though I still choked over the words. “Of course I remember him. Why?”

“He’s back, Aly.” As if he didn’t notice my shocked silence, he continued. “Cash and I were at The Vine

having a couple of beers, and he was there, just sitting at the bar like he'd been there all this time." I could hear the sadness wrap through Christopher's voice.

And I could picture the boy, his hair so blond it was almost white, his ice blue eyes somehow warm, dancing with joy and ease and mischief, his red lips stretched in a teasing smile.

Then all I saw was his pain.

"Is he okay?" I whispered.

"I don't know, Aly. How could he be?" Christopher released a defeated sigh. "He's . . . *different*. But he's here, and that's all that matters right now. I mean . . . *he's here*, at our apartment. He's been staying at some old motel, and I told him he could stay here until he found a place." Christopher paused, hesitating. "And God, Aly, I hope I didn't make a mistake inviting him here. He's been in so much trouble and I don't want to go asking for more of it, but seeing him tonight . . . *all* I could think about was all the good times we spent together as kids. He's my *best friend*. It doesn't matter what he did—nothing's ever going to change that. I couldn't just let him disappear again. I already told him you need your space and not to go bothering you. I really am sorry I didn't ask you first." With that, he stopped talking, an expectant silence hovering in the space between us as he asked me for permission, for this to be okay.

I didn't know if it was. A thousand what-ifs and fears and butterflies took flight in my stomach.

But even if it wasn't okay, there was no possible way I could say no.

"Yeah . . . *okay*. I don't mind him staying with us for a while." I bit my lip and blinked as I said it, trying to hold in the hysteria bubbling up in my chest.

In distinct contrast to my panic, the anxiety in my brother's voice lifted. "Thanks, Aly. I owe you."

"Don't worry about it."

Of course Christopher had no idea what it meant to me.

"Can we not mention this to Mom and Dad? I know it's our place and all, but I don't need Dad riding my ass about it. You know how he felt about everything."

"Sure," I said.

"Okay, I'll talk to you later, then."

"Talk to you later," I mumbled before the call went dead.

I turned back to the party. Megan lifted her head from the lounge, her eyebrows drawn. "What's going on?"

I shook my head. "Nothing. Christopher just wanted to let me know an old friend is back in town." I shrugged like it had no effect on me. "He's going to be staying with us for a while."

Megan shot up. "Really? Who?"

"Just an old friend who grew up with us. Jared Holt," I said with forced nonchalance.

She frowned. In all these years, it was a name that had never once been uttered from my mouth. "He left

before you moved here,” I added because I already saw the questions building in her eyes.

Her frown deepened, but for now, she let it go. I knew I’d be hearing about it later.

Gabe reached for me, but I subtly pulled away. “I think I’d better head home.” I slipped my shorts and T-shirt over my damp suit.

“Are you about ready to go, Megan?” I asked as I gathered my things and shoved them in my bag. My hands were shaking. *Damn it.* I slung my bag over my shoulder as I stood.

Megan glanced over at Sam, who was running lazy circles along her arm.

“You want me to take you home later?” he asked as he looked up at her.

She turned her attention back to me, apologetic. “I think I’ll hang out here for a little while, if that’s okay?” She bit at her bottom lip. I knew that expression well, and heard her silent *please*.

I returned a look of my own, my eyes soft, but pointed. *Be careful.*

The nod of her head was almost imperceptible. “I’ll call you tomorrow,” she promised.

It was crazy that we knew each other so well, could read each other without saying a word, yet she knew absolutely nothing about the one thing that affected me most.

“Okay, see you later.”

Gabe’s hand found my elbow. Everything about his touch was gentle. “I’ll walk you out.”

I didn’t say anything, just walked silently at his side, through the house, and out into the stillness of the sleeping neighborhood. I clicked the lock to my white Toyota Corolla. The yellow running lights flashed and I opened the door. Gabe dipped down to kiss me, and I turned my cheek.

His breath washed over my face in a frustrated huff as he edged back a fraction. “What’s up with you, Aly? One second we’re good and the next you won’t let me touch you.” He leaned in closer. “You’re always so fucking hot and cold. Didn’t you feel that back there? How good we could be together?”

I inclined my head to look up at him towering over me. “I’m sorry, Gabe,” I whispered as I shook my head. I didn’t want to hurt his feelings, but maybe Megan was right. I was just leading him on.

His hand was warm when he brought it to my cheek. “I’m not giving up on you.” His touch was tender, sweet.

He dropped his hand down to take mine, and he ran his thumb along the raised ridges that disfigured the outside of my left thumb. I squeezed my eyes shut and forced myself to keep from yanking it away. I hated when he did that.

“I’ll talk to you later, okay?” I muttered.

I jumped into the driver’s seat and started the engine, leaving Gabe standing in the middle of the street staring at me. I sped the short distance back to my apartment. My heart thundered so hard I felt it in my ears.

How many times had I imagined this? Seeing him again? Just to know he was really okay. So many of my

years had secretly been given to him. Nights spent in worry, plagued by questions I didn't understand. Seeing him would put it all at peace.

I would finally be able to let it go.

I drove around to the back of the apartment complex and pulled into my covered parking space. I sat there for the longest time, trying to calm my racing nerves.

Sucking in a deep breath, I climbed out of my car and grabbed my bag from the passenger's seat. Heat rushed over my skin, constricted my chest. With each step across the parking lot, my apprehension rose higher, this overpowering need to see him wound up with acute fear.

Finally I found the courage to slip my key into the lock. Quietly, I edged the door open to the darkened room. Muted

light bled from the kitchen. The air inside tasted thick with the unknown. My heart rate increased as I chanced a step deeper inside and shut the door. I could hear him, the shallow breaths he exhaled, this tension that radiated through the enclosed space. For a moment I stilled. Pictures of us playing as kids ran through my mind, the way he'd wait for me to catch up, then tug at my hair when I finally did. "*Hurry up, slowpoke, before your brother makes you go home.*" The memories of that boy drew me forward.

My eyes slowly adjusted to the faint light. His outline came into view, this unrecognizable man stretched out across the length of the couch, lost in sleep. His bare chest rose and fell, the motion almost labored, as if he struggled to get his lungs to work. One arm was flung over his face. He slept in his jeans, his feet extended over the end of the couch.

The entirety of his exposed body was marked, covered in lines and colors and indistinct designs. I edged forward. An unknown fascination drew me on, my fingers twitching as I fought the need to feel something familiar in this man who was so entirely unfamiliar. I held my breath as I closed in on the couch, inched forward, and allowed my gaze to travel along his body.

His eyes popped open, and I gasped as I stumbled back.

He jerked upright, his eyes wild as they worked to focus on me. They softened minimally as he took me in, roaming as they searched. Even then, they pinned my back to the wall.

I just stood there, breathless.

When he whispered, his voice pierced something inside me. "Aly?"

I was a fool if I ever thought I could let it go.

I blinked and tried to orient myself, forcing myself to speak. "I'm sorry for waking you."

He said nothing, just watched me with fiery eyes. I fidgeted and dropped my face under the intensity of his gaze. Flattening myself against the wall, I slid farther down the hall and fumbled behind me to find my doorknob. I pushed it open and escaped inside because I had no idea what to do with all the thoughts that tumbled through my mind.

I stood in the middle of my room, staring at the back of my closed door. A faint glow of light crept in from underneath.

Shedding my clothes and damp suit, I pulled on a new pair of panties, some sleep shorts, and a matching tank. I crawled onto my bed, flopped on my back, and stared at the ceiling.

My pulse accelerated as I thought of him on the other side of my door.

Jared Holt was here.

A whisper of a smile curled my lips. He was real, no longer a veiled mystery that I'd hidden away in my heart. He lived. He breathed.

And God, if he wasn't the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

When I woke up the next morning, diffused morning light slipped into my room through my blinds. Blinking, I stretched, extending my toes and lifting my arms over my head as I yawned. *Jared*. He was the first thing on my mind, and just the name made me smile. This morning, there was no need to coax myself out of bed. A flicker of excitement sparked in my chest when I thought of seeing Jared in broad daylight, hearing him speak, learning what he was like now. I crept across the floor. Cracking the door open, I peeked out. A blanket lay rumpled in a pile on the couch, and I could hear water running from a faucet in the bathroom.

I tiptoed into the kitchen and rummaged through the re

frigerator to find the container of orange juice. I stood on my toes to get a glass from the top shelf of the cabinet, filled it halfway, and took a sip. It was cold as it slid down my dry throat, and I closed my eyes as I swallowed, listening acutely as the faucet turned off and the door creaked open. A fever of nerves raced through me, my senses keening when I felt him emerge behind me.

I was still trying to reconcile the memories of my brother's childhood friend, the one I'd fancied as my own even if I had only been a delusional little girl, with the man I'd caught a glimmer of as I stared at him in the dark last night. I tried to make it all add up, the real man who was here with the fantasies I'd played out in my mind over the last six years, the images I'd conjured of Jared as he'd grown and I'd wondered and prayed that one day our paths would cross again. With just the glimpse I'd caught, I knew my imagination hadn't even begun to come close.

His movements were slow as he inched around the bar and into the kitchen. For a moment, we stood in awkward silence, tension radiating between us. He finally mumbled a low "Good morning." His voice was thick, hoarse. My stomach knotted in anticipation as the sound slipped across my skin.

"Good morning," I whispered back. I took another sip of orange juice as I steeled myself. Then I finally gathered the nerve to look over my shoulder.

And I froze when I was able to finally really see him.

God.

Flickers of memories flashed through my vision, pictures of an almost white-haired boy who had spent so much time at my house when we were growing up that he might as well have lived there. The way he was always laughing and the constant

tease poised on the tip of his tongue. But above all that, he'd had the biggest heart of anyone I'd ever met. I could never forget the way his sharp ice blue eyes still managed to appear gentle when he spoke to me, or the way he was so interested in everything happening around him, his curiosity extending to the leaves on the

trees and even the bugs that crawled along the ground.

Now . . .

His hair had darkened a shade or two, the blond touched by the slightest of browns. It was short on the sides, and the top was just barely long enough that he managed to run his fingers anxiously through it as he stared back at me, while I stared in shock up at him. He wasn't as tall as Christopher, but tall enough to tower over me.

My hand clenched around my glass as my eyes widened. Then wandered.

Stubble coated his jaw, which was clenched tight as he worked one side of his mouth, nervously grinding his teeth. He smelled of peppermint and the faintest hint of cigarettes, this combination that was intoxicating and not the least bit unappealing. I couldn't stop myself from studying him, from taking in every inch of this man who held me in the palm of his hand without the slightest awareness that he did.

He stood in my kitchen in only his jeans. His waist was narrow, his shoulders wide. Sinewy muscle flexed down his arms. Strength rippled with even the slightest movement, and his jeans clung to hip bones that jutted out just above his waistband. My attention drifted down his legs to where he stood barefoot on the tile floor of the kitchen. Even his feet were sexy.

I blinked away the stupor. No. The images my mind had conjured had definitely not done him justice.

But none of those things were what I really saw. Instead my

attention went to what I hadn't fully made out last night. Almost every exposed inch of skin was covered in ink, these intricate designs that bled and wept, wound together to create an allusion to death. They all blended so none were distinct, just sweeps of color and innuendo that blurred from one horror to the next. Flames licked up along his entire right arm, a pair of bright blue eyes staring out from their depths, seeming to beg as if they were eternally damned to this raging fire. My attention was drawn to his hands, where the designs dripped down over his wrists and leaked onto his fingers. The knuckles on one hand had numbers that read 1990. The knuckles on the other were marked 2006.

Sickness coiled in my stomach as I realized the significance of the statement he made.

This boy was painted in his pain.

Tentatively, I dragged my gaze back to his face. Those gentle eyes were no longer gentle, but harsh as they pinned me with a completely different kind of intensity than had shattered me last night. This intensity raved with anger and hinted at disappointment.

He lifted his arms out to the side with his palms up, as if he were some kind of offering, although a sneer transformed his gorgeous face. "Go for it, Aly. You want to get inside me, too? Let's hear it."

I spun the rest of the way around so I was facing him. In the same motion, I floundered back. The sharp edge of the counter bit into the back of my hips as I instinctively moved away from the agitation curling through his body. "I didn't say anything," I said, the words chaotically tumbling from my mouth.

A shot of disbelieving laughter escaped him, and he shook his head as he turned away, his hands laced on the back of his

head as he seemed to struggle with what to say. He whipped back around. "Yeah, well, you didn't have to. I

get it. I don't need your fucking pity, so do us both a favor and pretend like I'm not here, all right?"

He shocked me by closing the space between us. His head cocked to the side as he nailed me with narrowed eyes. I could feel the rise and fall of his chest as he sucked in frantic breaths. My back bowed over the counter as he hissed in my face, "I don't need your shit, and I promise you, you don't need mine."

He released a bitter grunt as he leaned back, then stalked away.

I stood there trying to stop my head from spinning while he disappeared around the other side of the bar and out into the living room. He left me with a pounding heart and a cutting sense of disillusionment.

I heard him shuffling and digging through his things. I only caught a glimpse of him as he rushed out the door pulling a shirt over his head. He slammed the door shut behind him.

Oh my God. What the hell just happened?

I turned and pressed my palms into the counter for support. Dropping my head, I tried to work through the aftermath of the storm that was Jared Holt. How had we gone from a mumbled *good morning* to all-out war in three seconds flat? My pulse sped, and I pulled in even breaths, trying to calm myself and the panic that had built up in my nerves.

Guilt tugged at my consciousness because I knew part of it was my fault, the way I'd devoured every inch of his body as if he were some sort of exhibit on display. My thoughts had shot between blatant desire and heartbreak, mixed and merged into this thick emotion that had filled every crevice in my chest.

But what did he expect? That I wouldn't look? That he

could stand before me in nothing but jeans and my eyes wouldn't wander and seek him out?

"Shit," I whispered, trying to calm my reaction to him. But I couldn't help the way he'd made me feel. Part of me wanted to lash out at him for treating me like I was *nothing*, while the stronger part of me wanted to reach out and trace the lines that were etched across his body, to feel them because I knew in every single one there was a memory, that each projected a feeling, symbolized a moment in time that meant something to him. He was right. I wanted to get inside him.

Tears welled up in my eyes. They fell, and I wiped them away. Was it pity I felt? Was it pity that had created this emotion that had been born in me that night, pity that had woven itself through my heart and left it aching for him all these years?

I had to believe it was more than that.

Shaking it off, I found my strength and my footing. I went into the bathroom and turned the showerhead to the hottest setting, letting the steam fill the room as I tried to make sense of someone I didn't know.

But underneath all his armor, I did know him.

Beneath the anger, I recognized the boy I'd known so long ago.

I was pretty sure it was Jared who didn't know himself.

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