

A Brother Like Chase

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The day Chase asked Aliyah to be his girlfriend was the worst day of my life.

Not that anybody knew that. If anyone at school had to guess, they'd have probably said the worst day of my life was during the tenth grade talent show. I'd gotten so nervous before my set, I threw up all over my guitar and couldn't go on. It was embarrassing, but I have a pretty thick skin, so I got over it.

If Chase had to guess, he'd have said it was when we were eleven and I crashed into the back of his go-kart at the raceway and broke my arm. We'd waited three hours in the lobby for Dad to pick us up and take me to the hospital. I cried so hard I could barely breathe. It hurt like hell, but Chase was with me the whole time and he bought me a slushie to calm me down.

If Dad had to guess, he'd say it was when Chase and I were five and I'd gotten into a car accident. Mom and I had been hit by a drunk driver on the way home from my gymnastics lesson, and the car spun out of control and crashed into a light post. Thanks to the power of a good car seat, I was completely untouched. I remember a really pretty paramedic pulled me from the smoking SUV. She'd let me wear her hat and ride in the front of the ambulance with her.

Dad and Chase meet us at the hospital. That hadn't been so bad. Dad was rushed into the ICU, but Chase stayed with me the whole time and squeezed me until my ribs hurt. He smelled gross, like sweat and Big League Chew bubble gum, but he let me try on his baseball uniform. A nurse put on Scooby Doo in the lobby, and she covered us in a blanket when we got tired.

When we woke up in those uncomfortable chairs, it was a new day, and Mom was dead. For a long time, that was the worst day of my life. Chase didn't like to cry, he didn't like how it felt when his eyes would sting and his nose would get stuffy, but he cried so hard I thought he would burst. So, I pulled him into a hug, and it was my turn to hold him.

I know that sounds crazy. How could the worst day of my life change from my Mom's death to my brother telling me he was dating his girlfriend? It was like comparing apples to your parachute not opening when you skydive.

But things were complicated. Chase was the perfect guy. He commanded the spotlight, he was one of those hot shots, those class favorites. People were drawn to him, they wanted to hear what he thought. He's the charismatic one, the ambitious one, the one who's going places.

Chase, Chase, Chase, everything was all about Chase. Chase was so perfect, so sweet, so athletic, and somehow so smart too. Chase was going to get a basketball scholarship at a top university, maybe one day he'd even play for the Raptors. If that didn't work out, he could do anything he wanted. Maybe he'd cure cancer, or be the Prime Minister. The sky was the limit for a guy like him. "How does he do it?" They thought. "Chase really has it all," they said.

And they were right. Chase was the guy who picked up astronomy books for me from the library after he'd finished tutoring. He gave me a ride to school every day in his car even though he could take his friends instead. He always offered my friends and I a spot at their table during lunch, even though he knew we preferred to sit outside. He'd give me his kidney if I asked for it.

So when he told me the news, I plastered on a smile, twisting my face into something I hoped was convincing. Chase deserved this. "Wow! That's great, I'm really happy for you."

It was a lie.

And God, he was too busy beaming to even see that it was fake. Too busy gushing about Aliyah to notice that my lower lip quivered and my voice cracked. He was all bright blue eyes and brilliant white teeth and the happiest I'd seen him in a long time. The following week, he held her hand in the hallway and kissed her by our locker between our classes. I hated it. But it was Chase. So even if my heart was wrenching, I swallowed it down and put the smile back on.

"Excuse me lovebirds, can I get to my books?"

Chase chuckled and moved over, and I started to spin the lock when I glanced over and caught her eye. She had her Calculus textbook under her arm, and it reminded me I was three weeks behind on homework. Somehow, Aliyah never seemed fazed by the piles of practice problems Ms. Mavis would assign us. Everything just came so effortlessly to her. She looked a little breathless, (I grimaced at that, it's just gross to think about my twin brother being a good kisser) but nevertheless she looked as flawless as she always did. Smooth dark skin, perfectly managed curls, and brown eyes so deep they knocked anybody as useless as me right on their ass. My ears were buzzing with white noise as she tilted her head and smiled at me and...

“Sorry, Casey,” Aliyah said, timid in a way that she never was.

I cleared my throat, mustering up another smile. “It’s alright.”

It was too forced, and I could hear it. I winced, looking back to see if either of them noticed. Chase was too busy grinning like an idiot again, but I saw it on Aliya’s face, and for a moment something flickered there. Shit. I turned back to my locker, yanking out my history textbook and slamming it shut, more than ready to dart away and overthink the whole conversation later. Then I felt her catch my arm, and my stomach did somersaults.

“Casey, wait. Am I still coming by after school to finish up our project? It’s due Friday.”

I wanted to say no. The mission was complete, and she’d gotten the guy. But even Chase would have known something was off if I did. We’d been working on it every Tuesday and Thursday for almost two months now, it’s what got me into this whole mess in the first place.

“Yeah, of course. You can get a ride with me and Chase.” God. Why would I offer?

So because of my big mouth, I got to sit in the backseat of Chase’s beat up Mustang after school while she sat in the front. When we got home, Aliyah and I went into my bedroom, unpacking our homework while Chase kissed her goodbye and headed off to practise. I rummaged quietly through my notes when Aliyah stopped me with her hand.

“Casey, are you alright? You’ve been acting... strange.”

I flinched, my hands clamping so hard over my binder that my knuckles turned white. “Of course I’m fine. Why wouldn’t I be?”

More lies.

“It’s just, you haven’t really been yourself this week. I feel like you’ve been avoiding me. Did you and Chase get into a fight or something?”

God, she was too observant for her own good. Or maybe I just wasn’t as good at hiding my feelings as I thought I was.

“No, we didn’t fight,” I said honestly, hoping that would ease her mind. I felt a tiny smile start to pull at my mouth. “Though you’d have to define “fight” because I did throw a mozzarella stick at his head last night for leaving his gym bag open in our bathroom.”

“Gross,” Aliyah muttered, her nose crinkling. My heart thudded in my chest.

“It was,” I said, knocking my shoulder playfully against hers. “Just so you know what you’re getting into. I’ve gone through six scented candles in three months.”

There’s no feeling in the world quite like the rush I get when I make Aliyah laugh. It’s a shot of straight dopamine right through my chest, and it makes my whole brain feel fuzzy. I was probably looking at her like an idiot, but I couldn’t find it in me to care.

“Seriously though, are you sure you’re doing okay? I mean... I don’t want things to be weird between us just because I’m dating Chase now. You’re still my friend.”

Reality hit me like a truck, and I swallowed. Of course that’s what this was about. I had essentially been the mediator between the two of them since this whole project had started. She had the crush on Chase, and I had the access to him.

I know that sounds shitty, like Aliyah was only pretending to be my friend to get with Chase. But that wasn't the case. Aliyah was popular, and she had no reason to hang out with me to begin with, but she was also the nicest person I'd ever met. She'd never do anything like that.

The second time we got together to work on our project and she accidentally let it slip she liked him, I offered to help. I *wanted* to help. So I would drop hints here and there that she was interested, he would look at me with that blank expression that made me realize this little mission would be a lot harder than I originally thought. But it would be worth it, because as much as it pained me to admit it, Chase and Aliyah were kind of perfect for each other.

And I had been right. The afternoon after Chase told me they were together, Aliyah ran into my room and pulled me into a crushing hug, her arms wrapped tightly around my neck. Everything was Aliyah, the feel of her skin around my hands, her hair in my face, the overwhelming smell of strawberries and mint.

My back slammed against the bottom of my bed frame, and the headboard hit the wall, knocking down one of my posters. Taylor Swift fell down face first, sliding under my bed and out of sight. I hadn't even noticed it'd fallen until after she'd left, her words were coming out so fast I could barely gather them all together, never mind any actual coherent thoughts.

Chase. Dinner. Date. Kiss.

I hung the poster back up later that night. I remembered thinking, if I'd finally gotten them together, why did I feel so... uneasy? It was like a dam had broken. I had been in complete denial, with two whole months of doomed feelings for her. How could I do that to myself? What kind of person willingly sets themselves up for that kind of pain?

When I pricked my finger on the thumbtack I was using, I realized there was a word for someone like me. A masochist. Only a masochist would willingly set up her crush with her twin brother. I put the tacks away and grabbed a pack of command strips.

It didn't help that everybody was so damn happy. Everybody was so damn happy, and I should be happy too. I knew it might take a few days to get settled into everything, but I could do it. I could be happy for them. So I made the decision to shut my mouth and smile. And I could do that for him. I could do that for her.

"Why would things be weird? All my hard work is finally paying off."

Aliyah pursed her lips, eyeing me up and down. My cheeks burned. "Okay, good point."

"I make a lot of those." I tried to keep my tone casual, and shrugged my shoulders for effect.

Aliyah snorted and pushed me with her hand, and I actually *giggled*. I was so useless.

"Come on, you know me. If something was wrong I'd tell you. I promise."

I didn't cringe at the lie this time. Maybe I could get better at this. If you lie enough to someone, do your words eventually start feeling like the truth?

It was unusually quiet as we put the finishing touches on our project. Normally while we worked, we'd talk each other's ears off. But I was too worried about saying something that would freak her out, and Aliyah was still watching me like she knew I'd just lied to her. We finished faster than we'd thought it would take, and our final report was all typed up and ready to go by the time Dad called us down for dinner.

As I opened the door for Aliyah to walk downstairs, I felt a pang in my chest. Now that we were done with this partner project, there was a good chance Aliyah wouldn't hang out with me alone anymore. Before this, we hadn't really been friends, and while we knew each other better now, she'd probably start spending most of her time with Chase.

Maybe that was a blessing in disguise. Maybe these stupid feelings would go away if I just stopped seeing her alone all the time.

"About time girls! Take a seat," Dad said as we walked in. I sat down next to him, and Aliyah took the seat across from me next to Chase. He must have come home and showered, because for once he

didn't smell like the boys locker room at the dinner table. I felt a spike of annoyance. He'd probably only done that because Aliyah was here.

Dad's cooking was always a little dry, but Aliyah didn't say a word and ate everything on her plate. Chase wrinkled his nose once or twice, and I left the green beans untouched, but Dad didn't seem to care as he rambled on about work and asked us about school. He, like the rest of the world, was ecstatic when Chase told him about Aliyah. He'd called them a perfect match.

When dinner had finished, I picked up the plates and took them to the sink. Chase was in the middle of a story, and Aliyah and Dad were laughing along to whatever he was saying, so I got to work washing dishes on my own. I set the water on hotter than I usually would, and by the time I'd finished, Chase and Aliyah had left the house on some kind of impromptu date and my hands were red and raw. Dad whistled as he wiped down the kitchen counter, and before I could stop him, he'd reached into the sink water to try and drain it. He yelped, pulling his hand back.

"Good God, lady! Watch the temperature. Are you trying to take your hands off?"

"Sorry," I mumbled, and I reached in to drain the water myself. He was a baby. It wasn't that hot. Dad sighed, leaning over to plant a quick kiss on the top of my head.

"It's okay, Casey. Just take better care of yourself."

Another life lesson that I'm learning too late. That, along with "don't be a masochist".

After I wrapped up the dishes, I climbed the stairs of the townhouse and up the roof, pushing beyond the balcony and lying against the crook of the roofing, invisible to anybody driving down my street. I loved it up here. I didn't see as many stars in the suburbs as I did when Dad took us fishing up North, but I still saw some of them. Like Venus. No matter where I was, if I looked up at the sky at night, I could always point out Venus.

That's because Venus is the brightest star in the sky. I don't know if I even like Venus all that much, but sometimes it's comforting, knowing that if I look up, I'll always be able to see it. At the very least, it's nice to see something familiar when you're feeling completely alone.

"Jesus, Casey. How long have you been out here? It's freezing tonight."

Chase vaulted up the edge of the roof, and despite the darkness I could still see a flash of white teeth. I didn't answer him right away, because I didn't actually know how long I'd been sitting there. Now that he'd mentioned it, I was kind of chilly in just a t-shirt and jeans. He sat next to me, pressing his back against the nook in the roof, and pushed me out of the way to make room. I glared at him.

"I'm fine. Can't you see that I want to be alone?"

There were so many great things about Chase, but he never knew when to take the hint and go away. I pushed him with my arm, but instead of going back through the balcony door where he came from, he reached over his stomach and pulled off his hoodie. He tossed it at me, and it hit me in the face. My glare shifted into a full blown scowl.

"Fuck off, Chase."

He glared back at me, clearly unimpressed. "I'm just trying to help. So put that on and tell me what's wrong."

My heart skipped a beat, and I turned my head away, trying to look anywhere but at him. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm not stupid you know," he retorted, nudging me with his shoulder. "Ever since I got with Aliyah, you've been so weird. You look at me like you want to kill me. I don't get it. You dropped hints that I should ask her out for weeks, and when I do you give me the cold shoulder. I asked Aliyah about it tonight when I drove her home and she said it was about my gym bag--"

My eyes widened and I turned on him, smacking him hard with the back of my hand. "You asked her? Why the fuck would you do that? You can't just mind your own business?"

Chase flinched away at my tone, and I immediately felt guilty. Even if he was my brother, this wasn't about him, and I knew that. It was about me.

"It's not your business," I said half heartedly, but I could already feel my whole body deflating.

"I know," he said quietly, slowly leaning back against the roof. I exhaled, and buried my head in my hands. The guilt was eating me alive. The guilt over building a friendship with Aliyah on lies. The guilt over not being honest with Chase. The guilt over not being honest with myself. I couldn't do it anymore.

I wrapped my hands tightly around his stupid Raptors hoodie and clutched it to my chest. Chase put his arm around my shoulder and gently pressed his nose into my hair, the same way he had when I broke my arm. And then it hit me. Why he'd driven Aliyah home early. Why he'd come out here instead of waiting for me to go back inside where Dad might be listening.

He already knew.

Twins can't read each other's minds. I always hated when people asked us that. "Oh you're twins? You must be so close. I bet you can tell what the other one is thinking." That's such bullshit. For the most part, we're no different than most siblings. Sure, you always get that pair that's convinced they're the next Oracle of Delphi, but Chase and I were never like that. We were our own people, with our own thoughts and feelings. We kept our own secrets. But sometimes, there was that uncomfortable buzzing feeling we got when we talked to one another. It's subtle, something you wouldn't notice unless you were also a twin.

On occasion, we finish each other's sentences. We craved the same foods. We shared a look and laughed at an unspoken joke. Or, like right then, when I could feel Chase's eyes on me. I knew he had that look in his eyes, the one that knew something big was about to happen. The same one Dad had when he found us in the hospital lobby wrapped up in that blanket, right before he told us that Mom was

dead. And because I just couldn't help it, because there was no getting out of this one, because he already knew and was just waiting for me to say it, the words were out of my mouth.

"I think I'm in love with her, Chase."

I dared to look over at him and waited for the anger, the resentment. At the very least, I expected some kind of disappointment. Because this was my fault, and I set him up for disaster, not the other way around. I was selfish, and I was the one in his way.

But this was Chase. And there wasn't a single resentful bone in his body.

"I know you do. It's okay, Casey. We'll figure something out."

I wanted to open my mouth and tell him no, that it won't be a problem, that I could shove it down. But nothing came out of my mouth. The words caught in my throat, and my eyes were stinging. I started sobbing like an idiot, burying my face into his hoodie. My body shook as he tugged me closer to him, squeezing me hard as he just sat there letting me cry. He kept telling me everything was going to be fine, but I knew better.

Somehow I felt even guiltier. Because he would do anything he could to help me at the cost of his own happiness. It's just what you did when you had a twin.

I didn't deserve a brother like Chase. And he definitely didn't deserve a sister like me.