Can’t Let You Go

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Chapter One

“What do you mean my bags aren’t here?”

I leaned over the counter at the O’Hare airport, fresh out of patience and smiles. The TSA employee’s fingers clickity-clacked on his keyboard, his generous brows knit together like an escaped wooly worm.

“I’m sorry, Miss Parker. Something apparently went very wrong, and your luggage seems to be on a flight to Reykjavik.”

“This is unacceptable. Who goes to Iceland?”

“Apparently your bags do. Look ma’am, I’m just the gate agent. You’ll have to talk to the folks in baggage.”

“I already did that.” I wanted to slap my hand on the counter and yell until Mr. Brows made this all okay, and I knew it wasn’t his job. But I just couldn't handle one more catastrophe. My bottom lip quivered, and I heard the pitiful words tumble from my lips. “My whole life is in those bags.”

“Surely not everything,” said a voice behind me.

That voice.

One I hadn’t heard in years, except in my dreams of home and heartache.
I turned around, pushing my tired, limp hair from my flushed cheek. Suddenly all the exhaustion of a ten hour flight evaporated, the weeks without sleep, the homesickness. All that I’d left behind in London.

“Charlie Benson.” His name came out of my mouth like a sacred whisper as he stood there smiling.

I immediately burst into tears.

“Hey.” Strong arms wrapped around me, and I was taken right back. My head pressed to Charlie’s chest, I inhaled his achingly familiar scent, and I was no longer this broken, exhausted twenty-three year old, who'd just spent a year studying abroad, the pieces of my heart the only luggage that followed. I was sixteen, back in my hometown of In Between, dancing with one sweet Charlie Benson on my back porch underneath the Texas stars.

“How are you here?” I dashed at the tears and took a much-needed step back. I let my eyes roam over the boy before me. Could I even call him a boy? He stood tall and broad shouldered, as if now carrying not just muscle, but some of the world’s responsibilities. With his dark dress pants, white button down, and navy tie, Charlie looked all man. And a professional one at that. “Are you headed home?”

“Yes. Got out of a meeting only minutes ago.” Charlie now lived and worked in the Windy City. “So my big brother and your best friend getting married. Crazy, huh?”

"Crazy that Frances and Joey got together, or that they're pulling this quickie wedding business?"

His smile told me he didn't share in my concern over Frances Vega and Joey Benson going from first date to wedding date in less than ninety days.
"I mean, three months?" I held up an appropriate number of fingers as a stunning visual aid. "Who does that? What's their rush?" Frances swore to me she wasn't pregnant, brainwashed, or trying to avoid testifying on Joey's behalf, but this was not like my neurotic, nerdy, logic-rulled best friend.

"I guess they just know it's right," Charlie said, as we both began to walk toward our gate. "I've never seen my brother so happy."

"It's called lust."

"Is it?" Charlie laughed. "That's just sad, Katie. When did you get so cynical?" He didn't bother to let me answer. "So trouble with your last flight?"

“It’s been the longest day. A flight cancellation, a lot of waiting and stress-eating, then the new plane got delayed, and for my finale, a little scrap with customs. It's so good to be finally headed home. ” To my mom and dad, my crazy grandmother, to people who loved me. My gosh, I'd missed them.

“How was living in London?”

*Don’t think about it. Don’t think about it.* “Very nice.”

“My mom keeps me updated on In Between. She said you were in some great plays on the West End.” At my nod he smiled. “She says you’re kind of a big deal.”

Glad someone thought so. “Just lucked into some good roles, I guess.”

*Flight 247 for Houston will now begin boarding our first class passengers. . .”* Rain pelted the wall of windows at the gate, and I wondered if the crew had noticed.

“Are you on this flight?” Charlie asked.

“Yes, you?”
“Yep. I’m going home until the wedding. A little working vacation.” He reached out, ran his hand down my arm, his head tilted just so. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“What, me? This?” I gestured to my mess of a face. “Jet lag, you know? And then the airline losing my stuff.” I gave a laugh so genuine, the Academy should’ve FexExed me an Oscar. “I’m sorry. I’m a little homesick, and when I saw you—” I shook my head and smiled. “I guess you were just a sight for sore eyes. So how are your folks?” I knew exactly how they were, but it was time to divert the focus from my crazy.

“Mom stays busy with my little sister. And Dad. . .” Charlie adjusted the strap of his laptop bag. “He’s ambitious as ever. Yours?”

“James and Millie are actually scheduled to leave on a mission trip to Haiti a few days after I arrive.” My foster parents had adopted me when I was seventeen, and I couldn’t have asked for a better mom and dad. I had taken their last name, officially becoming Katie Parker Scott, but Katie Parker was my stage name. And the only thing Charlie had ever called me.

It had been over five months since I’d seen my parents when they’d visited me at Christmas, and I was dying for a Scott family reunion.

The garbled voice came across the speakers again.

“Time for me to board,” Charlie said. “Where are you sitting?” He held out a hand for my ticket, and I fumbled in my bag to find it.

“It’s here somewhere.” I dug through the outer-pocket, coming up with a nail file, half a Snickers, two pieces of gum, and ten wads of semi-used Kleenex.

“Hey.” He stepped nearer. “You’re shaking.”

I waved it off. “Fatigue.”
He took my worn leather messenger bag, searched the middle compartment, and pulled out my ticket. “You’re still afraid of flying, aren’t you?”

The things people remembered. One senior class trip to Miami Beach in which I tried to storm the cockpit demanding two forms of identification from the pilots, and everyone labels you a full-blown nut job.

Please. I had grown up since then.

“Final boarding call…”

“It’s been incredible seeing you today.” Charlie pulled me in for a hug, and I just breathed him in. The warm, the familiar, the safe. “We have more catching up to do.” His voice was a caress near my ear. “Are you going to be okay?”

“Definitely. I haven’t had a flying meltdown in such a long time.”

It had been at least three hours.

Clutching a water bottle and my wrinkled ticket, I followed Charlie as we boarded the sparsely populated plane. He stopped off in row seven, while I schlepped to the very back of the cabin. Next to the bathroom. How these odiferous seats didn't come with a discount was beyond me.

I squeezed my bag in the bin above me, then settled into the window seat, hoping the two empty seats on my right remained that way. Buckling in, I checked my phone one last time. I quickly responded to a text from my mom, two from my dad, and five from my grandma that consisted of nothing more than her fish-lipped selfies with the message, “My face misses yours!”

And then there were those voicemails I’d immediately deleted.

Fifteen minutes later, we taxied down the runway. I sat in my blissfully empty row,
pushed my breath in and out, and prayed to the Lord Jesus to spare me one more day. I wasn’t afraid of what came after death. I was just a little terrified of the actual dying process. Especially if it involved crashing, flames, and wasted drink carts.

I was just promising the Holy Father my favorite mascara and first born when a shoulder bumped mine, as someone threw himself into the seat beside me. I continued to whisper my beggar’s prayer when a hand covered my clenched fingers.

I looked up.

Charlie smiled. He brushed my damp hair from my face like he’d done it a million times before. He pulled my hand from my lap and just held it in his.

“I’m not afraid to fly,” I said.

“Of course not.” He gave my fingers a squeeze. “It’s the fatigue.”

Thunder cracked outside. “Do you think it’s safe to be in the air?”

“I do.”

“But I read this report that when it storms, your statistical chances of—“

“It’s perfectly safe.”

“But sometimes lightning can strike the plane—“

“Nearly impossible.”

“And then there’s the possibility of—“

“Katie?”

My heart beat wildly, and my bones ached with exhaustion. “Yes?”

His gray eyes held mine. “I won’t let anything happen to us.”

“Promise?”

With a smile as safe as church and sweet as sun tea, he slowly nodded. “Always.”
Chapter Two

I was practically raised on the streets. By twelve, I had a rap sheet, knew how to steal to eat, could pick a lock with just paper clips and Trident, and could deflect the advances of my druggie mom’s boyfriends with one well-placed knee.

I was fearless.

And now here I sat in my worn, cramped plane seat two hours into the ride, shaking like a weed in a tornado, and noticing I was still clutching Charlie Benson’s hand like it was all that held us upright.

I let go and gave a small laugh. “Sorry.” Nothing like reuniting with an old friend by welcoming them into your neurotic phobia. “Takeoffs make me nervous.” And the part that comes after—the whole driving in the sky thing, hanging by clouds, winds, and various gravitational whims. “Takes me a while to wind down afterward.”

His eyes softened, and I remembered all the times as a teenager I’d stared into them, sure there was a God, and He had baptized Charlie with a benevolence of genetic blessings that resulted in one beautiful, intelligent boy who had routinely taken my breath away.

“I love to fly.” Charlie rested his head against the seat and smiled. “I’ve put in a lot of miles in the last year. I love the rocking of the plane, the hum of the engine. Some of the best sleeping conditions.”
“Right.” I would have to be drugged unconscious. “So tell me about your job.”

Charlie had gone to college in Chicago, leaving the town of In Between, while I had stayed behind, doing junior college, then moving on to a state university in South Texas.

His gaze left mine, and he looked down the aisle toward the flight attendant pushing a cart. “Nothing exciting. I interned for this company my senior year. They hired me right after graduation.”

“What do you do?”

“I’m very entry level,” he said. “I’m kind of a glorified paper pusher right now.”

“I know that won’t last long. What company did you say you’re with?”

“Would you like a beverage?” The flight attendant brought her silver cart to a stop by us, her red lips smiling.

I requested a soda, and the woman popped the top on the can and poured it over ice.

“You probably want to give her the whole can,” Charlie said. “I think Katie here could use the stiff drink.”

“Would you like me to pour in some complimentary tequila?” the flight attendant asked.

I nodded vigorously. “Yes, please.”

“I was just kidding.” She laughed and pushed her cart down the aisle.

More cruelty delivered mid-air. Thanks, lady.


“Maybe you could keep talking.” I snuggled my side into the chair, facing my old friend. My old boyfriend. “Keep my mind off our imminent doom.”
He laughed. “Tell me about you. You haven’t been too present on Facebook the last year. Hard to tell what you’ve been up to.”

Images of the last six years flashed through my mind. Some of them amazing. Some of them . . . not worth thinking on. “I finally graduated.” I took a bolstering swig of soda, enjoying the way it burned going down. “Then I got selected to go work in London.” Had that been a blessing or a curse?

“My mom said you were in some pretty impressive productions.”

I’d forgotten how intense his gray eyes could be. So focused, like I was the only person he wanted to be talking to. Those eyes were older now, still full of mischief, always reflecting an intimidating intelligence, but now there was something more looking back at me. Something darker, maybe a little bit heavy. Like Charlie Benson might have had some sadness and secrets of his own.

“It was an unforgettable experience,” I finally said.

“How long are you staying?”

“A while.” I left it at that, clutching my arm rest as we hit a few bumps of turbulence. “What about you?”

He lifted his drink and absently swirled it, studying the dark contents. “I’m staying until the wedding at least. Spend some time with my family.” Charlie had his brother Joey, who was four years older than us, but he also had a very young sister who had come along our junior year of high school, a late surprise to his parents.

The wedding was still almost a month away. “So you could be in In Between for quite a while.”
“My job is pretty flexible right now. I can work from anywhere. I never get to spend any time with Sadie. Skype is great, but I think we need some brother-sister time.”

"That’s really sweet." I didn’t know Joey well, but I hoped he was just as thoughtful. Frances deserved the best.

The plane made a sharp jerk to the right, and I slapped my hand on Charlie’s. I frantically looked around, but neither of the flight attendants seemed concerned. The person across from us read a *People*, while the couple a row ahead amiably chatted away.

Lightning cracked outside, and I jumped.

Charlie’s fingers slid back and forth over mine. “We’re fine,” he said as the plane dipped, sending my stomach to my feet. “Just a storm.”

And just how many more of those did I have to endure?

I looked at my hand captured in his, and I knew Charlie was just being nice. That’s just who he was. But the rhythmic strokes of his fingers calmed my frayed nerves as nothing else had on this long voyage home.

The plane began to shake and rattle like the busted glove compartment on my old Toyota. Only I couldn’t turn up the radio, sing my car solos, and drown out the noisy vibrations.

“Why do you think we didn’t work out?” I asked.

Charlie didn’t startle. Merely lifted a dark brow as he inclined his head closer to mine. “Where did that come from?”

“Was it me?”

“—”

“Is there something about me that pushes guys away? That asks to be dumped?”
His hand on mine stilled just as a flight attendant gave a staticky report. “Ladies and gentlemen, we will be preparing for landing soon, and the captain has turned on the seat belt sign a bit early. We’re hitting a brief patch of turbulence with this storm, but we’ll be out of it in no time and getting you on the ground.”

“She sounded worried didn't she? Did you hear that tension?” I sat up as straight as my seatbelt would let me, frantically taking in every detail around me—the location of the flight attendants, the body language of fellow passengers, the reassuring presence of the wings that still seem to be blessedly attached.

Charlie poured more drink into my icy cup. He was probably regretting sitting by me. He probably wished I’d drink my diet soda and happily pass out in a carbonated coma, so he could go back to his own seat and read his Wall Street Journal or whatever it was a calm, normal professional would read.

I needed medication.

“Here, eat some of these.” Charlie reached into the leather bag at his feet and pulled out a box of M&Ms.

I snatched them out of his grip and downed a handful. I chewed vigorously, savoring the sugar and chocolate on my tongue. What if this was the last time I tasted such heaven?

The plane, deciding the shaking was just its opening act, brought on the full-on quaking, jumping up and down like a Pentecostal at a Holy Ghost revival. My butt gained some air, and I turned my frightened gaze to Charlie. “What’s happening?”
“Turbulence.” He lifted a shoulder in such a lazy fashion, you’d have thought he hadn’t noticed the way his hair bounced on his head from the aeronautical shenanigan.

“You were asking me why we didn’t work out.”

“I was?” Those overhead bins were vibrating loud enough to crack something. Like a wall.

His smile was a slow lifting of the lips. “Why do you think we didn’t make it?”

I tightened my seatbelt, trying not to wonder at the age and durability of it.

“Because you had your eye on some blonde Barbie who I could never compete with.”

“That’s not true.”

“That you didn’t have your eye on Chelsea Blake?” My high school nemesis.

He had the decency to look guilty. “That you couldn’t compare. You were prettier and smarter than her any day.”

Men in shimmy-shaky planes will say anything. “But you dumped me to go after her.”

“Geez, that was high school. And I believe it was a mutual break-up. What was that guy’s name you started dating that summer?”

“Tate.” Sweet boy, but we had made better friends than a romantic duo. When he had dumped me he’d said, “Katie, your heart’s just somewhere else. And it’s not with me.”

“I got smart our senior year,” Charlie said. “Finally worked up the nerve to ask you to prom.” He squeezed the hand he was still holding and gave me a look that zinged right to my weary core. “And you and I spent most of the night camping on a blanket under the stars.”
“At the lake.” I’d been in a wreck that week, missing school for five days. With my leg in a cast, prom had been too much for me, and Charlie had come to my rescue, taking me out to the lake. He’d built me a fire, made a pallet on the rocky ground, tucked me into the crook of his arm, and pointed out every constellation he could find in that April sky while I rested my head on his chest and listened to the crickets and the cadence of his heart.

Then we graduated. And Charlie Benson, of the lingering kisses and spell-binding astronomy, had moved away.

Rain and wind battled outside my window, and I uttered a quick litany of prayers. Prayers that begged for calm skies and fifty more years of life.

“Guys don’t stick around though.” I watched bolt of lightning slash the sky.

“Eventually they find someone else, something better.”

He leaned close. “Is that what you really think? That you weren’t good enough?”

“It’s hard to argue with history.” I held up a hand to stop him from interrupting.

“I’m not trying to be pitiful. I just want to get to the bottom of it. I’m tired of making mistakes, wasting my time.” Being tossed out, left behind.

The plane took a leap north then dipped back down. My breath caught in my throat. “I want off this thing,” I said. “I want off this thing right now.”

“Please put your seats in the upright position,” announced the flight attendant.

“Return your tray to its proper place.”

The pilot took his turn next, giving instructions and saying God only knew what—probably Last Rites. But I couldn't hear a thing for the rising noise around me. Somewhere up front a baby wailed. Nervous chatter swelled within the cabin.
“What’s the pilot saying?” My heart beat a crazed staccato, and I wanted to both cry and laugh at the insanity of it all.

“He said to stay calm, that we’d be out of this storm soon.” Charlie took quick stock of the situation around us, then turned his attention back to me. “You were telling me why you broke my heart when we saw each other last.”

“I did not.”

I expected him to smile, to follow up with a joke.

But Charlie said nothing.