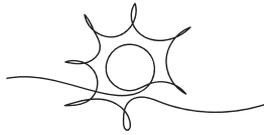


# Alicia berkeley



*28th March, 2007*

I walk into the kitchen of the house on Birch Street, the letter clutched in my hands. My dad sits at the table, the morning light streaming through the thin curtains, illuminating the steam rising from his cup. The newspaper is spread open, the edges curling. I pause in the doorway, thinking he hasn't noticed me.

Without looking up, he speaks. "Alicia, is that a speeding ticket?"

The words catch me off guard. "No, sir," I say, tightening my grip on the letter.

"A note from your principal?" He flips a page with a rustle. "You haven't gotten one of those in a while."

"Dad, no," I reply, my pulse thrumming in my ears. I take a deep breath and step closer to the table until I can smell the bitter aroma of his coffee.

*When The Sun Falls*

“Grab a cup, kiddo,” he says, gesturing toward the moka pot on the stove.

“No coffee for me.”

I’m already too electric on the inside. The letter quivers between my fingers, my palms damp.

“Dad,” I start, the words thick in my throat. “I’ve been accepted.”

He finally sets the newspaper down, his gaze landing on me for the first time this morning. It’s impossible to know what he’s thinking, and for a moment, my heart sinks. Is he going to yell at me? Tell me not to go? His moods can shift like quicksilver, and I always brace myself for the worst.

“Accepted?” he asks.

I swallow hard. “Berkeley. I’ve been accepted to Berkeley. The letter came in yesterday.”

For a moment, he doesn’t react. The old refrigerator rattles in the corner, and the floorboards creak under my shifting weight. I almost repeat myself, in case he hasn’t heard. But then the chair scrapes back, and he stands, placing both hands on my shoulders. He holds me at arm’s length.

“Kiddo, I knew you could do it.”

He pulls me into a bittersweet embrace. It should feel reassuring, but instead it weighs me down. Hugging my dad has always felt strange. It wasn’t something we did often. I can remember a few times: once when I was sick, once at Christmas when my sister and I gave him a box of cigars, and once when I was very small, after my mom left. He was crying then, and even as a child I knew the hug was more for him than for me.

Today’s hug feels like an early goodbye. Maybe even an apology—from either side. Part of it is celebration, but only a small one.

He lets go, I study the faint pride softening the hard lines of his face, the natural squint in his eyes.

“You’re going to do great things out there, kiddo,” he says.

“Thanks, Dad.”

My dad takes the acceptance letter from my hands and presses it to the fridge with a Joey’s Deli magnet.

“Berkeley. That’s far.” He lets out a huff, sinking back into his chair.

“Pretty far,” I say—almost like that’s the whole point.

“Do they tell you what you qualify for, or do we find that out later?”

“Later.”

He nods, smoothing his mustache. “There’s always a way, kiddo.”

The newspaper crinkles open, his face disappearing behind it. His hand lifts the coffee from the ring-stained spot on the table.

I drift out of the kitchen and sink onto the stairs, reeling. I can’t believe how supportive he’s been. You never know with him. Maybe he doesn’t think I’ll get the grants and loans I need to actually go. I know it won’t be easy—I’ll need a job, and more than a little luck. Dad can’t help much; he can barely keep things afloat as it is. But none of that matters. I’ll find a way.

I’ve dreamed of this moment for so long, and now that it’s here, it feels overwhelming, inevitable, and strangely hollow. I’ve always known I would leave—even back when I still had reasons to stay.

The one thing that might have tethered me to Sunfalls is the boy who shattered my heart last year. I still carry the broken shards of what we were. It isn’t easy, running into Chris on the occasional weekend or when he’s home for the holidays.

Luckily, he doesn't show up too often, and I've been too busy chasing Berkeley—extracurriculars, finals, everything—to think about him. Or to stand at the window too long on Thanksgiving, watching him pull into the driveway, backpack slung over his shoulder, running a hand through his hair as he walked inside. No time for that at all...

I dated Chase for a couple of months last semester, which kept me distracted for a while. He's studying Sociology at Clark University in Worcester, not too far. I mostly said yes because of his persistence. He's genuinely nice, considerate, and he helped me a lot with my college applications. But in the end, we didn't have that much in common beyond the fact that we both read Malcolm Gladwell.

I haven't told my sister Isabella about Berkeley. She knows I applied—I overheard Dad mentioning it to her while she was setting the table one night. We haven't talked much since the blowout we had after Chris and I broke up. It was during Spaghetti Thursday. She said I was being dramatic, when she knows I've liked Chris my whole life. Granted, I *was* being dramatic—refusing to eat, crying at the table after Dad told me I couldn't go to my room. Let's just say spaghetti flew across the kitchen. And maybe a meatball or two. Dad was not happy—mostly with me, since I was the one who threw first.

Isabella's apologized since, but only because she's been in a good mood after getting a new boyfriend. His name is Jared, and he's finishing his residency. He speaks calmly, the way doctors do, and has a grounded energy. Good for him—he'll need it dating my sister.

Speaking of doctors, Maddie got into Tufts. She's going to be pre-med. She wants to work in the ER, and I know she'll be wonderful at it. I've avoided going over to the Parkers' house, but she still comes here. College applications have turned our friendship

from inseparable into quick whispered check-ins during biology, or promises to hang out soon. We've had a few study sessions together, but our styles couldn't be more different: I like loud music, frequent breaks to chat, doodle, stretch my legs. Maddie prefers the silence of her room or the library, her focus absolute. And if you try talking, she'll give you the death stare. She's a woman on a mission.

We did go on a double date over winter break with Chase and his friend Bruno, an exchange student. Bruno really liked Maddie, but she ghosted him. He probably sent her a text in the middle of a study session, and she wasn't having it. That double date ended up being one of my last with Chase. A couple of days before Christmas, I told him it wasn't going to work. I knew I had to when I caught myself trying way too hard to shop for a gift for him, but all I could see were flannel shirts, Radiohead albums, and Celtics hats—the kind that would've looked perfect on a certain someone else.

A certain someone who was home for Christmas, ironically wearing a Celtics jersey the day he arrived. That night, I lay in bed, unable to sleep. In my head, the same fantasy played on repeat until it started to feel real, my senses so attuned to it. I saw myself placing my feet on the cold floor, climbing down the stairs, slipping out the front door, across our yard, then over to the Parkers'. I felt the wet grass prickling under my feet, the worn wood of their porch steps, the sharp echo of a knock reverberating in my mind as my hand hit the door. My eyes widened as Chris opened it—hair messy, pajamas on—and in that imagined moment he kissed me, again and again, right there in the doorway. We weren't worried about being seen. We both knew it was only a delusion, destined to vanish. Just the sting of it remained.

I've had plenty of dreams since Chris and I broke up—my mind's way of trying to satisfy what my body still craves.

The morning after this particular one, I called Chase and told him we needed to talk. He still gave me the gift he'd picked out—a sketchpad and a fancy pencil case. Chase is a good guy. I hope he finds someone to spoil, someone to take on dates to the expensive restaurants he loves so much.

As for Chris, I'm finally about to be free—from hiding behind the window, from wondering if his car would be parked next door on the weekend, from panicking in the grocery store because I spotted him in the ice cream aisle. I'll be far away. Thousands of miles. If that doesn't ease some of this heartache, I don't know what will.

Maybe I'll go to Japan after that. It's even further, and I already know their architecture—I did a whole AP Art History project on it, which I'm sure helped my Berkeley application.

And if Japan doesn't do the trick, I can try Mars. Or the Moon. In that case, I might as well apply for an internship at NASA. Because escaping Chris Parker might be my life's greatest mission.

If Isabella were here, she'd call that dramatic. Maybe some people get over their first love more easily than I have, once the love itself is gone. But what if it never leaves? How do you get over that? The worst part is when the lover is gone but the love lingers—because then every thought is longing, every craving goes unanswered. And you know there's someone out there carrying a piece of you that you can never reclaim, because now they're inaccessible, untouchable.

The thought makes me spring to my feet. I have too much to do, no time to dwell. I'll save the torment of limerence for later—when I'm at Berkeley, unpacking in my dorm room, still dreaming about the gaze of a boy I once couldn't stop loving.

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