



The Night Sky

by Alessa

I turned my head slightly and let out a breath of air between my parted lips. The night was falling steadily around me, and I could hear the loud chatter and laughter inside the house. I leaned forward and glanced up at the night sky with a slight smile on my face. It was moments like this that cleared my mind and my thoughts and made me feel sane.

The door behind me creaked and opened, accompanied by a pair of footsteps echoing on the wooden porch. I felt my back tense before I forced myself to relax.

"I booked that spot," came her relaxed, joking voice before I felt her body heat on my skin, mingling with my own. I could smell the floral scent of shampoo in her hair and her own faint fragrance, which made my cheeks turn suddenly warm. I gripped the porch railing tighter and was already smiling slightly when I felt her eyes on me. "You really like the night sky, huh?"

My lips curled, but I quelled the reaction. "The stars," I said simply. I glanced at her for a quick second.

Carly looked thoughtful. "Hmm, yeah," she mused. "The first time I saw you, you were staring at the sky, on the beach..." she trailed off. I didn't bother saying anything because I didn't trust myself to say words just yet. Not to her, and definitely not about *us*. She chuckled quietly and shifted, shoving her hands inside her winter jacket. "It was night, and everyone was around the bonfire or dancing... but you chose to sit by yourself and stare at the sky."

My lips were firmly shut as I felt the familiar warmth spread through my chest, and for one second I allowed myself to feel happy that she actually remembered *that* day.

"You were talking to yourself," she recalled. "And you had a book with you. You're the only person I know who'd actually bring three books to a beach party." Carly's voice was teasing, and I heard a faint chuckle in her words.

Despite myself, I smiled. "I don't feel that comfortable in large crowds," I said, laughing a little as I ran a hand through my hair unconsciously. A habit of mine when I'm really nervous.

"I know, Elin. I wouldn't want you any other way."

I swerved a little on my feet, and I turned my head away from her. A slight shiver ran through my body, but I knew it wasn't because of the cold. I automatically stepped away from her and shoved my hands into my pockets. "How's the Christmas party going?" I asked, feeling like it was my turn to speak.

"Ugh," Carly shrugged. "I was bored, although the cake was delicious," she commented, patting her flat stomach. Usually I would smirk and tease her with a quick comment, but I didn't say anything this time. Instead, I smiled at her, showing that I heard her before averting my eyes when she was about to lock eyes. "The parents are showing baby pictures," she said after a moment, filling in the silence.

Thankfully, it's not my house," I sighed.

She chuckled. "Nor mine. I wouldn't be able to bear it."

I had to smile. "I wonder how Nathan's taking it."

"Groaning, moaning... basically in agony. That's when I decided to leave him in his misery."

I scoffed, "Some friend you are."

"The greatest," her eyes twinkled, and an irresistible smile filled her face. I turned away again and suddenly felt my stomach sink and my body feel cold all over. I closed my eyes longer than necessary before I swivelled around without thinking.

"I have to pee," I said bluntly.

"Geez, normal people don't say that."

I stopped walking after hearing her words. My back was turned to her, and I smiled to myself for a brief second before the familiar cold feeling swept into my chest, leaving me empty.

"I'm not normal," I managed to say before I disappeared into the house.

"I figured," I heard her reply.

I turned a corner of the hallway and stood still, hidden from her view, before shaking myself up and breathing out to regain my senses. Carly always managed to get under my skin, picking apart my defences without even trying. At first, I figured it was because of her engaging personality, her confidence, just basically the way she is... but then, when the feelings grew more complicated and confusing, I realised it was something totally different, and it scared me more than I wanted to admit.

I took a shaky breath and made my way upstairs, seeking a quiet corner of privacy, something I'd hope to achieve outside, only to be interrupted when *she* appeared.

I hesitantly stopped in front of a certain door before knocking once. When I didn't hear anything, I pushed the door open and breathed a sigh of relief when I saw that no one was present. I needed solitude to clear my head and regain my senses. I was painfully aware of my heart beating like a hammer behind my chest, and it wasn't a good sign. If I stayed away from her, it would make things better. Or so I wished. In any case, I hoped she wouldn't mind.

I closed the door behind me, only to be knocked forward when it opened and slammed against my rear end.

"My bad!"

I hid my groan. I glared at the floor, wondering what I ever did to deserve this, before sighing and standing up on my feet. I felt gentle hands on my upper arm, and I instantly froze and pushed them away, muttering, "S—Sorry."

"It's you, Elin," Carly said, surprised. "You told me you were gonna pee," she accused. I shrugged, not bothering to hide anything from her this time.

"I lied," I said briskly. She stared at me, stunned, before smirking to herself and shaking her head. Sighing, I stepped back, inwardly thinking of ways to excuse myself. "So, what're you doing here?" I demanded, crossing my arms over my chest. "I was going to change."

"In Grandma's bedroom?" she asked with a smirk on her face. I pursed my lips, knowing she had caught me in a lie once again. "Besides, it's not like it's going to make any difference," she shrugged.

I wrinkled my nose. "Didn't need to know that."

She gave off a confused look before realisation dawned on her face. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

My facial expression didn't betray my thoughts. Instead, I smiled teasingly and turned my head. "I know. Calm down, Carly." I moved away from her and sat at the edge of a bed after I turned the lights on in the room. Being alone in a dark bedroom with Carly was something I only had the courage to play out in my secret fantasies.

I learned a lot of things in my years of knowing her and being her best friend. One thing is that she can read my eyes better than I can register my own emotions. It was a gift in her case, but a curse for me.

"So you're avoiding me, Elin," she announced pragmatically after making herself comfortable on the floor, her back leaning against the side of the bed. I pulled up my legs and sat cross-legged, leaning against the bed, while we both stared at the wall in front of us.

"Nope."

"You're lying, Elin," she said simply.

My shoulders shook a little, and I gripped the bed comforter tighter. "You caught me," I said flatly. "I'm lying. I'm Sorry, Carly."

"You really don't sound sorry," she murmured, and I felt my heart thud painfully, reminding me of something important that always seemed to slip from my mind. I let out a breath. *I need to get out of here.*

"I am," I said, already standing up. "I'm hungry," I said quickly when her head turned to face me. I offered her a tight smile and slipped away before she had the chance to say anything. I was barely two steps out the door when I felt her behind me, felt her fingers on my skin as she reached for my hand, taking a firm hold of it. My breath hitched.

"Then you won't mind if I join you?" she said casually, closing the lights and door behind us. I was frozen, staring down the hallway, unseeing.

"No," I said hollowly, my legs already walking towards the kitchen.

I was fast-walking, and we both knew it, but I couldn't seem to stop myself. All I could think about was her hand in mine. She was holding my hand, and something was tugging inside me and... and I just *had* to get away from her as soon as possible—something she was making increasingly difficult.

No, seriously," she said, sounding too close. I abruptly felt a soft pair of hands tugging on my own, and I swear my lungs were about to collapse. I stared desperately down the hallway before forcing myself to look at her. I found myself staring into her serious and worried eyes.

"Why are you avoiding me, Elin?"

"I—I'm not," I said guardedly, my eyes flickering back and forth. I felt bouncy. I needed to get away from her. I felt her hand tighten, and I knew she wasn't going to make this any easier. I forced myself to look at her. "I'm not, Carly," I repeated. "Really, I'm not. Now, please, let go of me."

"You're lying, Elin," she said simply, yet again.

I didn't say anything because it was true, and I also knew it was too late for confessions. The feelings that I managed to lock away began to spread through my chest, and it was difficult to breathe. I felt numb and cold and unable to move.

We just stood there, two girls staring at each other, her hands still around mine, while I desperately tried to feel anything besides the numbing pain spreading through my body.

"Can you let go of my hand, please?" I whispered.

She held my eyes. "No." She lowered her gaze. "Answer me first," she murmured.

I didn't need to because someone walked past us, giving me just enough time to yank my hand and turn away on my heel. I let out a breath when I was finally far enough from her piercing, questioning eyes. I made it into the crowded area and inwardly cheered, knowing she wouldn't pressure me into answering such a ludicrous question in a room full of people.

I shook my head and walked to the refreshment table. I filled a small plate with a few sliced fruits and chocolate chip cookies.

Nathan and Carly happened to be my best friends. We've known each other since elementary school, and we were so alike yet so different. We cared about our school grades, we were into the same music, and we always hung around each other's homes. Little quirks separated us from being exactly the same, but other aspects also made us so much alike.

We were generally sarcastic towards other people. We loved reading and writing. We wanted to go to the same university and have parties any chance we got. We always dreamed of our perfect fairytale.

But at the same time, little things made us opposites. I loved chocolate, and Carly preferred candy, while Nathan avoided both. Carly and Nathan loved mornings with the sun, but I preferred the night sky with the moon and stars. Carly would rather go shopping than spend her free time at the library, something that I and Nathan would do any chance we got.

We've been best friends for almost ten years, and I knew we'd continue being friends in the future regardless of the obstacles we encountered along the way.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

I looked up and saw Nathan's aunt smiling warmly at me. Swallowing my food, I smiled at her and quickly shook my head. "Uh... I was just staring blankly into space," I said.

"With a smile on your face?" She raised an eyebrow.

"Yes."

She laughed, and I had to laugh as well. "I'm going to take a stab at it, but I'm guessing it's about a boy," she said suddenly.

I choked. "Oh, no, nothing like that..."

"You're distracted, love," she said, smiling. "You have this daydreaming look on your face."

"Not everything is about boys," I said sourly. She patted my back gently, and I sighed. "It's nothing, really. I'll have it solved." I poked at my chocolate chip cookie for a while, before looking up. "I'm changing schools next year, so... So after winter break I'll be going to a new school."

She narrowed her eyes and frowned. "How come I haven't heard this from Nathan? He's always telling us about you."

Guilt gnawed at me, and I swallowed hard and offered a weak smile. "I haven't told Nathan or Carly yet..." I inhaled quickly. "We promised that we'd graduate high school together, but I *really*... and I mean *really* have a good reason for doing this. We're still going to the same University, so that isn't so bad, right?"

She stared at me for a moment. "All that for a boy?"

I felt cold at her words. "No," I said, my voice quiet. "I... I've always wanted to go to this school."

Nathan's aunt made sounds of understanding, but I wasn't sure if she believed me. She stood up when someone called her and gave me a small smile before walking off after giving me a hug. I watched her leave, giving off a huge sigh of relief, and slumped into my seat, nibbling on my cookie idly as I replayed my responses in my head.

"So. Changing schools, huh?"

I felt my heart leap to my throat, and I absolutely froze in shock when I heard those words. I quickly put my plate down and turned just in time to see Carly sit down in the vacant seat next to me. I made a move to stand, but she shot me a cold look that clammed me up. She never looked at me like that, and it scared me.

I bit on my tongue hard before sighing loudly. "Eavesdropping is horrible," I said aloud.

"I don't give a shit, Elin," she said bluntly. I flinched involuntarily. She noticed this, and her features softened a little. "When..." she hesitated before dropping her gaze to the cup she was holding. "When did this happen?"

I shrugged. "A few days ago." In fact, it's been weeks in the making.

I saw her hand tighten, and I felt a chill inside me before pushing that feeling away. "Why didn't you tell us?"

I stared at the crowd of people. I looked at the Christmas tree and the TV playing loudly in the living room, with little kids captivated by the moving pictures. "I was going to," I said flatly.

She sighed. "Don't make me call you a liar again."

I smirked a little. "You'd find out eventually when I didn't show up for classes." She frowned at me, and my smirk grew. "Don't worry, we'll still hang out and stuff."

"But *why*?"

I grew silent, quietly thinking of an acceptable answer to Carly's question. But my mind had shut down in the face of the realisation. I was a fifteen-year-old kid. What did I know about love? All I could think of were excuses and more lies to hide this fact from the one I loved. I idly took my cookie and began eating it. "The classes," I finally said. "I want a different atmosphere before I set off for University."

"Friends don't do this to friends," she finally muttered. "Besides, we're still years away from finishing high school."

I sucked in a breath and stood up. "I need fresh air." I excused myself yet again and abruptly walked away from her. I heard her call my name, but I didn't stop until I reached the porch outside and instantly looked up at the sky.

I heard the screen door slam open and shut and loud footsteps.

"What the hell is wrong with you, Elin?" Her frustrated voice reached my ears from right behind me. "Why do you keep running away from me?!"

"I'm not..." I faltered. "I'm not running away from you, Carly."

She scoffed, not bothering with making jokes any longer. "Don't lie. I'm sick of it. How can you lie to me?" She moved forward, but I scooted away, and she shot me a dark look. "What's going on, Elin?" She exhaled loudly, and I suddenly felt awful. "Did I do something? Did I make you upset? Just tell me, *what* is it?"

"Nothing!" I blurted in a snap. "It's nothing. You didn't *do* anything. Just, please, please, stop asking!"

Carly grew silent. I shoved my hands into my pockets again and closed my eyes after lowering my gaze. I couldn't do this. I felt pressure at the back of my eyes, but I desperately forced the feeling away from me. Why did I even feel the need to cry, I thought bitterly, trying not to reach up and wipe my cheeks. This was stupid. I was stupid.

"I have something for you," Carly suddenly said. I checked my emotions and turned around, blank-faced. She had an indifferent look on her face as well, and I wondered if she knew how much I was hurting inside. I watched her check the insides of her jacket for a while before producing a rolled-up sheet of paper.

"What is it?" I asked calmly. I was thankful that my voice didn't waver.

She held her hand out, and I took it.

I shot her a curious look before I could stop myself. Frowning a little, I slowly untied the ribbon and unravelled the paper. I read slowly.

International Star Registry

Wide-eyed, I looked up at her. Carly shrugged, but she was watching my face carefully. "I named a star after you."

I tried to take it in calmly, but nothing could stop me from shivering and the forceful sound of my blood rushing in my ears.

"Merry Christmas," she said quietly.

"I thought you forgot about my present," I said breathlessly. When we opened our presents, she carelessly apologised to me that she seemed to have left mine at her house. I didn't think much of it, even when Nathan smiled brighter than the sun when he received his.

Carly shrugged, searching for something in her pocket. "I wanted it to be between us only," she said quietly. I snorted at her words, feeling my eyes go wet. I knew a sob was rising in my throat, so I swallowed hard while rolling up the sheet of paper in my hands.

"Th—Thanks, Carly," I breathed out weakly, humbled by her present. I looked down quickly at the sheet of paper; the exact location of my star was written down, and an official certificate packaged it all. I clenched my free hand. "I'm really thankful," I murmured. I wanted to hug her. I *had* to...

But I couldn't.

"That's not all," she said, her voice slightly hesitant. Startled, I looked at her and saw her slowly take her hand out of her pocket. She opened a silver box, and my breath caught again. It was a star-shaped pendant on a necklace with my name engraved in the middle. She caught my look and smiled slightly. "Did you think a sheet of paper was your only present?"

"I..." I didn't know what to say.

Her smile grew a little as she carefully took the pendant out of its place. "Turn around."

I did, and she gently placed it around my neck and locked it from the back. I felt the coolness of the necklace settle on my skin, and I breathed out slowly, feeling slightly hazy. When I turned back around, I saw her looking right at me. We were inches apart.

"Thank you, Carly," I said quietly, with more feeling put into those two words than I ever thought possible.

Our gazes locked, and we fell into awkward but welcomed silence.

"Hey, you two!" The screen door suddenly slammed open, and Nathan stepped out with a bright smile on his face. "God, I was stuck wrenching my baby pictures from my Mom," he rolled his eyes playfully, but his face became worried once he noticed our silence. "You guys okay?"

I had taken a step back when I first heard the door open. I looked up from the ground, my smile already on my face. "Of course." I walked over to him, the pendant heavy on my neck, and poked him in the ribs. "Merry Christmas, Nathan," I whispered before looking back at Carly. Seeing her sad eyes made it hard for me to stay calm for much longer. I knew I needed to leave before I made an even bigger fool of myself. "I'm heading home, all right?"

"What? Already?" Nathan frowned, glancing between us. "Did something happen?" He looked worried before glaring at Carly. "Were you rude to her again?"

"No!" Carly answered, but she didn't say anything more.

"No," I repeated, smiling at Nathan. "I'm kind of tired, you know?"

He nodded slowly. My smile felt heavy and fake as I turned back to Carly to say goodbye. If I had it my way, I would've just walked away. But I couldn't. Our eyes were locked in a gaze, unable to let go of each other.

My face softened a little but settled easily when her eyes blinked and looked away. She had an unreadable expression on her face. I had this internal dilemma about how to proceed, but then, instead of just walking away, I engulfed her in a hug. I knew Nathan had a bemused look on his face.

"Merry Christmas," I whispered in her neck, thankful for not meeting her eyes this time. "And thank you." She knew what for.

Carly gasped once, and my eyes misted. I felt fire. "Take care, Elin," she said, her voice blank and hallow. I pulled away, ready to turn around. But then she said, "Will I... we," she muttered, "will we see you on Monday?"

"Why wouldn't we?" Nathan murmured, confused.

I stopped in front of the screen door before smirking to myself a little, already feeling the tears leak out. "Maybe," I said undecisively before stepping on the sidewalk.

I took three steps before pausing and chancing a glance over my shoulder, just in time to see Carly step into Nathan's arms when he pulled her in for a kiss.

She opened her eyes and saw me from over her boyfriend's shoulder.

I lifted my hand into one last wave. I turned around without looking back as the first tears rolled down my cheeks. With my hand still holding tightly onto the sheet of paper, I ignored my heart shattering into a million pieces all over again.

The End