

Strike by Christina Fudge

Have you ever felt truly lost?

Like you didn't know anything? Not even yourself?

Standing face to face with myself in the mirror, I felt lost. I started to wonder who I was, who I had become.

Some pathetic little girl who didn't have the strength to stand up for herself, when she finally took the time to realize that she was being treated unfairly?

I wasn't this girl. I had become someone I never wanted to be. I became one of those girls I wanted to help.

I became weak. Weak, broken and hopeless. I was worthless.

Perhaps . . . perhaps I did deserve this.

I shook my head, fiercely. *No. No, I didn't deserve this. My aunt most certainly didn't deserve what happened to her. And neither do I.*

"This ends . . . now." I whispered, locking my gaze with myself, seeing the stubborn spark of fire that had been lost for months now. I closed the foundation case, shoved it in my bag, and walked downstairs, ready to face the worst, yet best, thing that had ever happened to me.

As the doorbell rang, I opened the door to reveal that entity. My boyfriend of the last year, Chase Mitchells.

"Hey, Pippi." He smiled, using his nickname that he had given to me when we first met, breaking my heart a little more. He stepped inside my house, kissing me on the cheek. He didn't notice my flinch, as he asked, "Ready to go?"

"Act-actually, I think I'm going to walk to school today."

"What? Why? What's wrong?"

"N-nothing, I just thought I should get some exercise, and fresh air. Good for the heart." I smiled, slightly at him, but dropped it as soon as I saw the anger in his eyes as he glared.

"Don't lie to me."

I sighed, "I don't want to go to school with you, Chase."

"Why not? You always go to school with me. What's wrong with today? Do you honestly

want to walk? I'll walk with you. You know I will.”

“Ever. I don't want to go to school with you ever again.” I took a deep breath, before uttering the words I never thought I would say. “I want to break up.” I told him, looking at the ground.

The silence that followed was deadly and I was too scared to look up.

“What?” He asked, calmly, a scary kind of calm, which was laced with anger.

“This isn't going to work out.”

“What garbage are you going on with?” He yelled, taking a step closer. Flinching, I took a step back. Stepping into my personal space, he gripped my forearms roughly. “You don't want to break up with me.”

“Yes. I do.”

“Why?! Are you leaving me for some other dude? Is that it? I knew it! You *were* cheating on me! Weren't you?”

“No, no, no, I swear, I never did anything like that. I *love* you!”

“Then why the *hell* are you breaking up with me?!”

“You hurt me!” I yelled in his face. “You blame everything on me. You think we're falling apart because of me, but it's not. It's because of *you*.” I spat at him, and within the next second, my head was whipped to the side, with an awful stinging ache vibrating through my face. Gasping, I placed my hand on my cheek, and turned to face him.

“You ungrateful little brat! I do everything for you! I love you! And you repay me by doing this!” He yelled in my face. “You know what, we don't have time for this. We're going to be late, come on.” He roughly gripped my hand and dragged me to his car. I was devastated at the fact that my parents worked an awful lot.

Once inside, he turned to face me, remorse clear on his face. “Baby, I'm so sorry. I – I didn't mean to.”

“That's what you always say, Chase. I . . . I don't deserve this. No one does.”

“Are – are you saying I'm not good enough for you?”

“No.” I shook my head, looking down at my folded hands, “I'm saying I don't deserve to be hit. I wish I could believe you when you say you don't mean it. But, we both know it's going to happen again, and I can't deal with that.”

“It won't happen again, Pippi, I promise. This time it's for real. I'm so sorry. I love you, so much.” I shook my head, and was shocked when he started pulling on my hair, bringing my face closer to his. “Are you serious? I'm here apologizing, telling you how much I love you, and you don't even care? You're a worthless, ungrateful, spoiled, witch, you know that?” He said, roughly pushing me away, and turning to start the car. “We're never breaking up, you're just upset and not thinking clearly, I understand that. Everything will be fine later; you just need some time to think. And put your hair up, you know I like it up.”

Silently putting my fiery red hair up in a high ponytail, I mentally cursed myself. I should have seen this coming. Blinking back the tears that were threatening to escape, I leaned my head against the window, silently wishing we could go back to the way things were when we first started going out.

What happened? We used to be so happy.

Maybe I just need to remind him of how we used to be.

Yes. I can make a CD for him, with a bunch of pictures and videos, and I can include our songs. He'll love it, see how we're falling apart, and we can mend our broken relationship.

Once Chase pulled into a parking space at school, he cut the ignition, and turned to face me. “Pippi,” he spoke, his voice soft. His hand came up and caressed my cheek, turning my head to face him. I hadn't realized I was crying until his fingers softly brushed away tears that fell down my cheeks. “I'm so sorry,” he whispered, “I know that may not be enough right now, but I'll make it up to you, I promise.” He grasped my face gently between his large hands, “I love you, and I don't know what I'd do without you. Please, *please*, just don't leave me.” Looking into his eyes all I saw was clear sincerity and love, and I never wanted to see that go away. But, I knew as soon as I did something wrong, that look would be gone. “Cara?” Chase spoke, gaining my attention. “How about we hang out after school? I'll make it up to you. Okay? I'll even take you to that music store your always at on Oak Avenue. I'll get you that new CD you want. By whoever it was. And we can go to that little cafe down the street you and Katie go to.”

As he continued to speak fast and ramble on for a few minutes, I couldn't help but laugh, causing him to stop and he looked at me confused. “One, you're too cute when you ramble on, even Katie agrees. And two, spending time with you sounds great, but you're not getting me the CD.”

“Nonsense, it'd be my honour. It'd also be my honour to escort you to your locker and Biology class.” He smiled at me, before getting out of his car and coming over to my side, where he opened the door and held out his hand. I smiled brightly at him, and held his hand as we walked into the school. “So, I'm forgiven?”

“You're forgiven.” I said, leaning up to give him a quick kiss on the cheek. “I love you.”

Classes went by in a blur, and I most definitely got a C or lower on my math quiz, considering all I could think about was Chase. And not in a good way. I was constantly

wondering if I should have forgiven him so quickly.

I don't want to lose him, but I know he's going to hit me again. He's not going to stop after just doing it for months on end, is he?

Maybe not. But, he'll eventually stop. I know he will. He loves me and I love him. I just have to be positive.

"Hey, where were you this morning? You were almost late." Katie, my best friend, asked as I sat down at our lunch table.

"Yeah, um, me and Chase had a little . . .dispute today."

"Dispute? Little? Are you okay?"

I smiled reassuringly at her, "Of course. Everything's great."

"Oh okay, that's good." Katie smiled at me, but I could tell it was fake. She was giving a lot of fake smiles lately when it came to Chase. I tried to ask her about it, but she brushed it away and said I was being silly. "Do you want to hang out today?"

"I can't. I'm spending time with Chase today. I'm sorry."

"Of course you are." Katie sighed in annoyance.

"What's wrong with hanging out with my boyfriend?"

"Nothing, it's just . . . you're *always* with him. We never hang out anymore."

"That's not true. We hung out Friday."

"With *him!* I meant by ourselves! Not with any stupid controlling boyfriends! You're becoming a pathetic little girl who needs her boyfriend to be with her and tell her what to do! You're like your aunt and you'll end up just like her!" Katie shrieked.

Deadly silence followed us, as I started at her in shock. "I can't believe you just said that." I whispered, stunned.

I ran away from our table, blinking back the tears that threatened to escape. "Cara?" Chase yelled out from across the hall as I passed him. I made no move to stop and continued to walk quickly away. This wasn't okay with Chase, as he roughly grabbed my arm moments later, pulling me back towards him. "Hey. Stop." He snapped as he turned me towards him. But the anger in his blue eyes slowly faded away, "Cara, sweetie, what happened?"

I shook my head, whipping my tears away furiously. "Nothing, I'm being stupid." I whispered, my voice cracking, as I tried not to be weak in front of him. But, as I looked up into

his soft, pale blue eyes I felt my resistance crack, and broke down, letting him know what Katie had heartlessly said.

Whispering sweet nothings in my ear as he held me close, he tucked me under his arm leading me quickly down the hall. As we stopped in front of the boy's washroom, I opened my mouth, confused, but cut off in my sentence as he put a hand over my eyes and pulled me into the room. Snapping a 'get out', I heard feet shuffling along the floor, and then Chase removed his hand from my eyes.

"I'm so sorry, Pippi." He whispered, tucking a lock of my red hair, behind my ear. "She doesn't deserve you, if she can be so cruel to her 'best friend'. I always told you she was no good."

"Are you seriously using the 'I told you so' line?" Came my reply, in my pathetic broken voice.

Chase grimaced, and mumbled an apology, "You know I didn't mean it like that." He spoke sincerely, "Now, wash your face with some water; it might make you feel better. Plus your eyes are puffy and red, and if I know you, you don't want people to know you're crying."

"Except you." I informed him, before splashing my face with ice cold water. Dabbing my face with a paper towel, I turned to him. "Why is that? It was like an instant connection when we first met, I could let you see me in my most vulnerable moments, as you could with me. And we could talk to each other about everything."

"It's because . . ." Chase took a step forward wrapping his arms around my waist, "We love each other. I love you. You love me. And we're meant to be."

"I do love you."

"And I love you." He said, pecking me on the lips.

But, you don't abuse the people you love, was the constant thought that ran through my head.

As I pulled away from his kiss, he looked at me confused. "I'm not kissing you in the boy's bathroom." I told him, sternly, and guided him out of the bathroom, with his arm around my shoulder.

"Why not?" He asked, laughing when I stared at him blankly. "The janitor's closet! We can totally make out in the janitor's closet!" Without giving him a glance, I tore away from his arms and walked away in another direction. He chuckled, and wrapped his arms around my waist pulling me into his chest. "Aw, come on! You know I'm kidding! I have more respect than that for my girl. Besides I like kissing you in public, to show everyone you're mine." He kissed me on the cheek, and softly took my hand in his. "Come on, Pippi, I'll walk you to class."

Smiling slightly to myself, I shook my head, as I followed obediently.

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The next three weeks of our relationship were . . . not as perfect as we once were, but it was better than the past few months.

So far, within these three weeks Chase has only gotten mad at me once. It was after I had forgiven Katie for the harsh words she had said, and cancelled on our date, in order to sleep over at her house. He didn't believe she was truly being sincere, and that she was eventually just going to make me cry again.

He was also suspended for three days, with two other guys after getting into a fight with them on school grounds. To say I was disappointed would be an understatement. But, the thing was I couldn't really complain about Chase being a troubled person.

That was what had drawn us to each other – we were both lost causes, trying to find our way.

Thirteen months ago, when I had met him, I was devastated over the death of my grandmother. At the time I had also just helped my aunt put her boyfriend behind bars, for sexually, mentally, and physically abusing her, since I was the only one besides her to witness anything. I had went to visit her and found him abusing her in their apartment. After trying to stop him, and yelling and cussing at him, I had received more than a few punches and kicks.

Trying to get over two painful, disturbing incidents isn't easy to do yourself. But that's the only way I ever dealt with anything – by myself. I didn't want anyone to know and see how weak I was. So I poured my heart out in my music.

Singing, playing and writing.

But I still had a huge weight over my shoulders.

And then I met Chase who, like me, was simply lost.

His family had just finished their trial against his father's abuse against them for years. We had instantly connected and been able to trust each other and feel comforted. We were comfortable enough to talk openly about everything.

And that was why I loved him. I could do anything, say anything and be anything around him.

I felt comfortable, loved, wanted and needed.

Everything everyone wants to feel.

I knew he was lost and he knew I was. We both helped each other find our way. And in a month we started dating.

I knew he was troubled and I also knew he was violent. He had got kicked off the basketball team for knocking some guy out in one punch. Apparently the guy was talking about me in a disrespectful manner Chase didn't like, so he got angry at him and the guy provoked him into punching him.

Chase's alibi to me was that he was 'simply defending my honour' so apparently I shouldn't have been so mad. But it still didn't make it right.

Around a month or so later he had started directing his anger and violence towards me. I never knew what I did wrong and still don't to this day. But it seemed that almost every little thing ticked him off.

Like a bomb, it blows up, but then it's over with, as quick as it happens.

I could never expect it.

What disappointed me the most was how angry and disgusted he was with his father, but yet he turned around and did the same thing. That and even after everything I told him about my aunt, he still abused me. Even after knowing how much it had affected me. It was bad enough knowing someone put their hands on my kind, loving aunt, whom I loved dearly, but then to also be on the receiving end makes you completely and utterly hopeless.

Chase knew this but yet, he had the nerve to help me feel more weak and hopeless.

But I never left him, not once. I couldn't. Walking away from him, would mean walking away from everything I've ever wanted and dreamed of.

I loved him. I still do.

And many people may think we're too young to know what real love is.

But they're wrong.

This is real. And I didn't want to lose it. So all I could do was hope. Hold on and have hope.

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“Sing it to me.” Chase gently commanded me, placing his hand on my shoulders as he stood behind me.

I stared at the piano in front of me, “I told you, it's not finished.”

“But you wrote the song for *me*. Can't *I* – the muse – at least hear half of it?”

“Mhmm, sure. Why not?” I grinned, letting my fingers glide over the keys, playing a tune. “I love you, you love me. We're a happy family! With a great big hug, and a kiss -”

“Ha-ha, you're hilarious.” Chase jested, cutting me off, and placing a soft kiss on my cheek. I turned around on the stool. Smiling up at him, I motioned with my hand for him to say the words I wanted to hear. “Fine. . .” he sighed, “I'll wait patiently until it's done.”

“Good boy.” I mocked, patting his cheek, and laughing when he glared at me.

“You'll take forever to finish it though.” He complained.

“Oh, hush.”

“Chase.” We both turned our heads to face my dad, who stood in the door way. “It's 11 o'clock.” He announced, pointing to his watch.

“What happened to 11:30?” Chase sulked.

“I allowed that the last two Fridays. And no buts,” he interjected as Chase opened his mouth to speak. “We may love you Chase, but . . . scat.”

“Darn.”

“I've heard you swear before, and you've made the best impression possible, no need to be a suck-up.”

I laughed at my dad, and watched as Chase put a hand over his heart, wearing a fake hurt expression. “I resent that.”

“Good night, Chase.” Smiled my dad as he walked away.

“Good night Mr. Sommers!” Turning to face me as I stood up, Chase grinned mischievously. “You know I could always sneak through your window.”

Laughing, I pushed against his chest and lead him to the front door. “Go home.”

“Fine, fine.” Kissing me one last time, he whispered, sincerely, “I love you.”

“I love you.” I avowed, and watched him walk away out the door.

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The next afternoon, I was surprised to find Chase on my door step. “Hey. What are you doing here?” I asked, letting him inside.

“Well, you couldn't go out today because you were busy, so I decided to come over instead. I could even help with whatever you need to do.”

“I – uh – already have help actually.”

“Oh? Who? Katie?”

“Not exactly. . .” I trailed off, “You remember I told you about the history project my teacher was going to give us.”

He nodded. “Yeah, the one with partners. I assumed you would get paired with Katie. She's in all of your classes and you're always partners.”

“Yes, well, apparently Mr. White thought a better partner would be. . . Jace Winters.” I told him, quietly speaking the name.

“Pardon?”

“I said -”

“I know what you said!” He snapped. Flinching, I took a step back. This was what I had been afraid of. “Jace Winters? As in the one who was your homecoming date to last school year's home coming?”

“Yeah, him. It's no big deal, Chase. You know we're friends. It never bothered you before.”

“Well, it bothers me now! Why didn't you tell me!”

“Our teacher only told us yesterday!”

“You could have told me anytime yesterday! Did you not want to tell me? Are you happy to spend some time alone with him! Are you cheating on me? Is that it?”

“You need to calm down.” I stated, calmly walking away into the living room.

“Answer me, dammit! Do you not love me?” He yelled, gripping my forearm.

“Just leave. You're being ridiculous!” I snapped back at him, and tore my arm from his grip. My heart was breaking slightly. *I can't believe he's acting like this. We we're going so good.*

“Stop walking away from me!” He yelled, pushing me roughly.

In seconds, I was on the floor, my head aching.

As I opened my eyes, I finally understood the saying 'seeing stars'. As bright lights danced in front of my eyes, I blindly pressed a hand to my head, feeling the wet, cold, sticky substance called blood. I vaguely heard Chase's panicked voice, as he voiced how sorry he was, and how he loved me.

I then heard faint angry voices, laced with other voices that were layered with concern.

My world finally went black, as I heard a broken voice whisper, "I'm so sorry."

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Seven more days passed by in a heartbeat. Those days were filled with heartache, and pain.

After receiving a concussion and a few stitches from the . . . fall, I was released from the hospital.

I was then forced to tell my parents and the police that Chase had been abusing me for months. Causing my parents to press charges against him, even when I refused.

Saying that I was angry would be an understatement. Even furious wouldn't be accurate enough. I was destroyed to be honest.

I mean how would anyone feel if someone was pressing charges against someone they loved.

No one could understand why I wouldn't press charges. They all thought I was too scared, or that I was corrupted by Chase.

Which is why I was now in court, sitting at the witness stand. Being interrogated by my mom's lawyer.

"And how long did the abuse last?"

"Five maybe six months." I answered. Locking eyes with Chase, I mouthed "I'm sorry." Shaking his head, he mouthed that he was sorry. He wanted me to know that he knew it was his fault, that I shouldn't be sorry.

"And how did it start?"

I shook my head, "I can't remember."

"Miss Sommers -"

"I can't remember." I repeated in a stern voice.

“How far did the violence go? How severe was it?”

“It wasn't bad.” I whispered.

“Can you elaborate, Miss Sommers?”

“A simple slap, maybe punch. Gripping my arms roughly, enough to leave bruising. Pulling my hair. I had to wear foundation to cover up the bruises on my face, and sometimes I would wear long sleeves to cover up the bruises on my wrist.”

“Miss Sommers, did Mr. Mitchells ever sexually abuse you?”

“What kind of question is *that*?” I asked, appalled. *How could someone think that he would do that to me? Then again, everyone but me was thinking the worst of him at the moment.*

“Miss Sommers I need an answer, please.”

“No! No, of course not. He would *never*.” I breathed, unable to think something like that.

“There is no reason to protect Mr. Mitchells, Miss -”

“He didn't do anything like that! He would never. No, he respected me! We decided we would wait! He's not some monster you all play him out to be! He made a mistake!” I yelled furiously and desperately.

“Miss Sommers please calm down.” The judge spoke gently, but in a firm voice.

“No further questions.” My mom's lawyer announced, and I quickly took my seat next to my father. I sat numbly, unable to listen to anything else and waited for the judges verdict.

My hands curled into fists, my patience was wearing thin. My heart finally dropped, when the lawyer announced Chase guilty, and that he would be sent to the Juvenile Detention Centre. My eyes filled with tears, as my head hung low.

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“One week until prom! Cara! One week!” Katie yelled, jumping up and down like a kid on Christmas, as we walked down the school halls. “Come on! Aren't you excited?”

“No, no, I am! Really.” I told her, smiling.

“Then what's the problem, Cara?”

“It's nothing. It's just . . . I don't know. I guess, I just pictured going to Graduation and Prom with Chase is all.” I whispered, looking at the ground.

Katie gave me a sympathetic look, and placed a hand on my arm lightly. “I know, sweetie, and I don't want to tell you that maybe this is for -”

As she broke off and stared behind me, I looked at her confused, “Katie? What's wrong? What are you -?” I broke off as I followed her gaze. “Looking at?” Finishing my question, my voice was barely above a whisper. “Chase?” Walking slowly towards us was my abusive ex-boyfriend who I was still, sadly, madly in love with. He got out? Already?

How long as he been out?

Why didn't he come sooner?

No, no I didn't want to see him, I didn't care.

But, I did. I always had, and always will.

Three months. It had been three months since I saw him, his smile, his smouldering eyes. Three months since I had heard his calming voice.

Oh God, I didn't know whether to jump in his arms or run away in fear.

“Hi.” He said, cautiously, almost as if he was afraid of how I would react.

“Hi.”

“Can I – uh – talk to you? Please.”

“We're actually going to be late if we don't leave soon.” Katie interrupted coming to stand beside me. Looking down at Chase's closed fists I saw him unclench and clench them repeatedly, trying to control his anger. I guess he had been getting better.

“It's fine Katie. Wait for me by your car, please?” She nodded, slowly and cautiously walking away.

“When did you get out?” I asked him, after moments of silence, and started to walk outside, with him trailing beside me.

“Two days ago. My parents are talking to the principal.” He stopped walking and turned towards me at the bottom of the school steps. “I'm doing good, Pippi. I'm in therapy and I'm taking anti-depressants. I – uh, I have Intermittent Explosive Disorder.”

“Yeah, I know, your brother tried to tell me how you were doing and everything.”

“Tried?”

“Yes. I'm sorry, I just – I couldn't deal with it, I'm so sorry. I'm constantly wondering what

I could have done better to fix it, what I did wrong.”

“Hey, hey, hey. You didn't do anything. It wasn't your fault. It was all me. I'm so sorry, I made you feel like that, but you were right when you said it was all me.”

“But you were fine when we first started dating. I must have done something -”

“No. I was violent before, you know that.” He reasoned with me. “I just ended up getting angry at the girl I loved. I slipped over the edge.”

“I should have been there to bring you back.” I felt defeated. I didn't do anything to help him. I should have done *something*.

“You did help me, Cara. I'm getting better *because* of you. You're the reason I sat through those damn sessions, you're the reason I take the pills. I *need* to get better for *you*. I'm not gonna ask you to take me back. That's not fair, and it's wrong of me. But I can't stop myself from asking if I can be in your life again someday, somehow.”

I looked up into his sincere eyes, and felt myself fall in love with him all over again. But, did I really want him back in my life? Did I want to go through pain again? The pain of watching anger form in the eyes of the one you loved, the pain of watching his hand come up to strike me?

Did I really want to risk it all happening again?

The answer: yes.

I was always going to love him, I was always going to wish I was with him, always wish I was in his embrace.

Grasping his large hand with my small one, I smiled up at him. “You never left.” I told him. “We can take it slow. And eventually I'll be able to look at you without having conflicting emotions. I can't wait until that day. I just want to love you without having doubts in the back of my head. We'll make it through whatever. I know it. It's like Katie said a few months ago, you and I, Chase, are endgame. And no matter what, I'll always love you.”