Chapter 1 – Eliana

The town was quiet and new, and that made me anxious, but it was stunning.

The air was crisp, and leaves hugged the curb of the street I walked down. My curly brown hair whipped around in all directions as I walked. Every house I passed was your average beach house on pole foundations and painted in beautiful pastel colors. The large windows let me see inside stranger’s homes and allowed me to imagine what their lives looked like. Most of the homes were small, which made sense because this was a small town, so it seemed like a peaceful place.

The house all sat behind the row of businesses. As I trudged uphill, dragging my suitcase behind me, I stared at them all. They were small too, but still bright with life. Each building was its own unique color. I passed a pastel pink boutique and watched women shuffle through clothes that hung on racks. There was a bright blue market and the smell of fresh fish floated through the air and into my nose. The buildings were attached and there was only an alley that separated a set of six buildings from another set of ten. It was a small street, but busy with quiet life.

The breeze dragged the salty air into my nose, and I relaxed slightly at the familiarity. The ocean had always been my safe place, and I was happy to have it near me when I walked into such an uncomfortable position. I hated new places and new people, let alone a town that my runaway older sister had been living in for the past ten years, but at least I had a beach nearby.

I continued to drag my big white suitcase behind me and struggled to keep my purse on my shoulder, while I held my phone to my ear.

“Eliana? Are you there? Is it pretty?” my best friend Kaliyah asked through the phone.

I broke from my trance. “It’s actually beautiful. I can’t believe she’s been here this whole time in Morro Bay. It’s only five and half hours from San Diego, and she never came to see me.”

“I can hear how tense you are,” Kaliyah said. “You need to relax.”

Anger built up inside me. Kaliyah always pretended to understand what I went through, but when your older sister runs away from home at sixteen and doesn’t even leave you a note…well you don’t ever really recover from that.

I huffed. “It’s just weird. I’m just grateful she didn’t live in Texas or something. At least this town will distract me from all of the drama and trauma.”

Kaliyah laughed. “Drama and trauma follow us everywhere. Just relax and take it in, Eliana. Everything will be okay.”

Kaliyah and I had been best friends since I was sixteen. We bonded over the high school drama we had been going through our sophomore year, and once we got to really know each other we bonded over our similar family traumas. That’s what we always said to each other; the drama and trauma follow us everywhere.

I shrugged even though she couldn’t see me. “I just want to hurry and get back home. I feel like my sister’s ghost is here and she’s watching me.”

I continued to look at every store I walked by. The bookstore was supposed to be at the end of this street somewhere.

“Maybe you shouldn’t rush it,” Kaliyah said, and I rolled my eyes. “Maybe this will help you process your grief and mourn your sister.”

I shook my head. “Mila left me and my family with no explanation; there’s nobody to mourn.”

A boy sat behind a folding table on the sidewalk in front of coffee shop I was about to pass. There was a big sign taped to the front of his table that said **BUY MY LEMONADE FOR A DOLLAR**, written in blue marker and shaky handwriting.

“I have to go, Kaliyah,” I said into the phone. “I’ll call you once I’m settled in.”

I hung up the phone, shoved it into the back pocket of my jeans, and walked up the few feet to the little boy’s lemonade stand with my suitcase dragging behind me on the rough sidewalk. He sat antsy and his blonde hair was messy on top of his head. A woman sat quietly on her phone in a folding chair behind him. He couldn’t have been older than eight, because he reminded me a lot of my little brother.

“Hi!” the little boy practically screamed. “Would you like to buy some lemonade?”

I smiled. “I would love to buy some, but who made it?”

The little boy beamed, and his smile showed his missing front tooth. “I did. It’s my own special recipe.”

“And who are you?” I laughed. “I don’t want to buy lemonade from a stranger.”

“My name is Jacob, and I’m selling lemonade so I can join my big brother’s football team. He says I’m too little, but I think I’m actually super strong for a third grader.”

“Okay, Jacob,” I said. “I will definitely buy a cup.”

He grabbed a plastic cup and piled it full of ice, lowered the nozzle of the jug on the table and filled it with the bright yellow lemonade. I shuffled through my purse and pulled out my wallet. The boy handed me the cup and I gave him a twenty-dollar bill.

“Keep the change.” I winked.

“Thank you!” Jacob yelled.

He turned to the woman sitting in the chair behind him. He jumped up and down and shouted about the twenty dollars I had just gifted him. The woman got up and walked over to me, she opened her mouth, but paused and stared at me with squinted eyes.

“Oh my god,” the woman whispered. “You look just like her.”

I cleared my throat. “Jacob was just telling me about how he needed money to join his brother’s football team. I just wanted to help in any way I could.”

“You’re her sister, aren’t you?” the woman asked. “You’re Mila’s little sister. You have the same hair and eyes. I mean seriously you guys could be twins.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I am.” I could feel the heat rising in my face from embarrassment and awkwardness. I don’t even know what my sister looked like past the age of sixteen, I kind of wished I did. Maybe we looked more alike than we used to. When we were kids, people always talked about how different we looked, and I had always wanted to look just like Mila because she was so pretty. My throat grew tight, and I cleared my throat.

The woman smiled. “I heard you were taking over her store. It’s so nice to meet you!”

I frowned. “I’m actually selling it. I don’t plan to take anything over. It was nice to meet you, and thank you for the lemonade, Jacob.”

I turned and walked away quickly. My chest hurt and my breathing became quick. I needed to sit down and relax. I wanted to be back home, but I’m here. I just needed to get everything handled as quickly as I could. That’s what was in my control, everything else I needed to ignore—the people, the memories, and especially Mila.