

A SINGLE YEAR CAN CHANGE EVERYTHING

# Twenty-Seven

A NOVEL



P.L. HERNANDEZ

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*Twenty-Seven*

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*For Chris, a best friend, a grand love, an occasional partner in crime, and a home my soul can always return to. I love you, I love you, I love you. Don't forget.*

*For Damien, a single perfect rainbow after years of catastrophic storms. You were a miracle worth waiting for.*

*And for You, if you've ever felt broken, lost, or alone. I wrote this for you. May Jax's journey remind you that you are seen, and you are loved.*

# Note from the Author

Dear Reader,

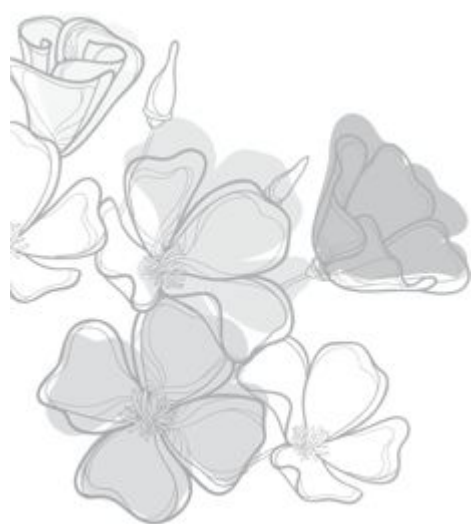
I'm tremendously grateful to you for picking up this book and reading Jax's story. It's just one variation of a journey that countless women have endured. Some you may know because they were brave enough to share. Some are still waiting for the right time and searching for the right words. You might even be one of them.

Before you dive in, please know that *Twenty-Seven* delves deeply into themes of infertility, pregnancy loss, depression, and anxiety. While I believe this story important for everyone to read, I also recognize that some of the themes and scenes may be triggering for those who have lived this journey.

Take care of yourselves first and always. I want you to enjoy the ride, but if any part of it is too difficult, put it down and come back when you are ready.

With love and gratitude,

P.L. Hernández



# Prologue

Woke up in the hospital on my twenty-seventh birthday and it took me a full year to put my life back together.

I hadn't realized it was in pieces, of course. That's the delicious naivety of your twenties. It's a false confidence that comes when you've checked off the goals on your life's to-do list, one accomplishment at a time.

Higher education? Check. Awesome career? Check. Impressive and extraordinarily good-looking boyfriend? Double Check. World Travel? Triple check. Swanky beachfront bungalow that I barely lived in? Check.

Impressive life resumés by age twenty-six are difficult to come by, but I'm an overachiever. Here's a little background ...

I'm Jaxon Samantha Cassidy. You can call me Jax for short, and no – Jax is not a boy's name. I'm a photographer. Specifically, a traveling music photographer. To get a little more specific, I work for *Rolling Stone*.

I have an older brother, Weston Elliot Cassidy, but I just call him West. He's got a fiancé, Casey, who's way out of his league. I have a dad as well (I call him Dad). He raised us both on his own.

You might wonder about my mom. You're in good company. I wonder about her too. The last time I saw her I was six, and she was waving at me from the back of a van. She was on her way to Nashville to become a famous country singer. As far as I know, she never made that dream come true.

I grew up in a small town in California most people have never heard of. Green Valley is a pin drop on a map, located at the southern tip of the Salinas Valley. The forty-five mile stretch of highway between Green Valley and Salinas is a sea of rolling lettuce and vegetable fields in every direction. We call it the “Salad Bowl” for obvious reasons. It’s not as well-known as San Francisco or Los Angeles, but you can check the packaging on any piece of produce at your grocery store and you’ll see it was grown in the Salinas Valley.

When I was seventeen, I graduated near the top of my class and hopped on a plane to NYU. It might have seemed scarier if my brother wasn’t already there. If I’m being honest, nothing scared me more than the idea of being stuck in the Salad Bowl for the rest of my life.

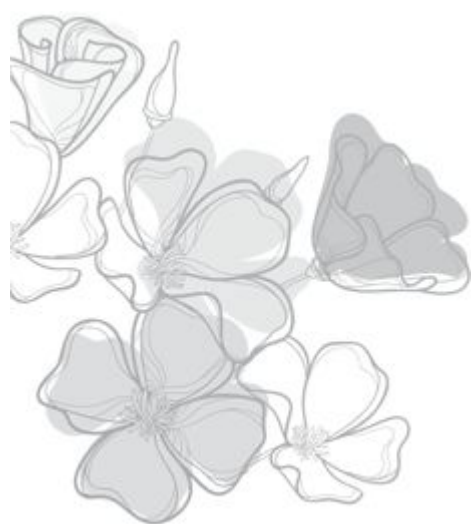
When I was twenty-one, I took a black-and-white photo of a boy I used to love, and it changed my life. He was in a band, singing a live show in a sweat infested nightclub in the city. He made all his rock star dreams come true, and that photo landed me the job of a lifetime. The rest, as they say, is history.

Here’s where it gets interesting ...

My dad decided I’d been away too long. He summoned me home for my twenty-seventh birthday. West and Casey flew in from Brooklyn, and Dad made reservations at an overpriced restaurant in LA.

We all had a lovely night, which was punctuated by a less than lovely morning in the hospital.





## “Home”

**A**S SOON as I took my phone off airplane mode, my brother started calling. My first thought was that he hadn't made it to the airport to pick me up. Punctuality was a tiny morsel of adulthood West hadn't figured out yet.

“Weston Cassidy,” I answered with false authority, “you'd better not be calling to tell me you're running late. If I can't count on my big brother to carry my bags, who *can* I count on?”

“You can count on your impressive ability to pack light. What do you have? Your laptop, camera bag, and a backpack?”

“Not the point.” It actually was the point. I did pack light.

“I'm calling to tell you I can see you—all adorable and angry. Look, see?” I noticed him waving from the crowd. “I'm waving like an idiot. But hey—I appreciate the vote of confidence.”

West and Casey flew into LA a few days before. “Wedding incidentals” is what Casey called it. I wasn't sure what that meant. Especially since they were getting married in New York, where they'd been living since college.

Once we locked eyes, he hung up and shoved his phone into his pocket. He began moving toward me in a slow-motion run. We're adults, so no one tells us we can't slow motion run to each other in a crowded airport. I did the same, and when we reached one another, he swooped me into a nearly suffocating bear hug.

“Little sister,” he stood back, evaluating me, “I see the camera bag. I see the laptop purse thingy,” he looked around me, “Where’s the bag full of torn jeans and leather jackets?”

“One leather jacket, West. I only have one, and I checked it.”

“I wish I could say it surprised me that your camera and laptop are more important to you than clean clothes, but it actually doesn’t.”

“Keep it up, smart ass,” I responded. “There is a carefully wrapped bottle of saki in my bag for you, which is why I had to check it.”

His eyes lit up. “Have I ever told you I love you the best?” He grabbed my bags and threw them over his shoulder. “I’m happy to carry your luggage.”

“Right.” I rolled my eyes. “Where’s your better half?”

“Handling wedding incidentals.”

“Is that code for something?”

“Yeah, I think it’s code for ‘West lost his birth certificate, and we need it to get married.’”

---

LA looks like a postcard. Even in the winter, the sun is always shining, and the palm trees create picture perfect and completely stereotypical silhouettes. Dad moved there after we left the nest. He restores classic cars. He used to teach geometry, and then he decided geometry was for the birds. Since there’s no shortage of people willing to blow money on old cars in LA, he does well for himself.

“Dad’s really excited to see you, Jax. When’s the last time you made it home?”

Brotherly lectures are the price I pay for airport pickups.

“It’s been a while. I don’t know.” I shrugged.

“You could come home more often, you know. He gets lonely. Not a lecture, I’m just sayin’.”

“You could come home more often too, West.” I rolled my eyes. “Not a lecture,” I taunted, “just sayin’.”

“You maintain a permanent residence here. I do not, so it would be easier for you—”

“Feel free to use it any time,” I interrupted. “I’ll make you a key.”

Anyone who knows me can tell you I’m a bit of a wanderer. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that. I’m three years younger than West, but I’ve seen more of the world. My life as a traveling photographer was a lot like a perpetual concert. I couldn’t imagine doing things any differently. After all, the only things I ever really loved growing up were listening to music and taking pictures.

“Where are we having dinner?” I asked, not-so-discreetly fishing for a subject change.

“Somewhere more expensive than Dad or I could afford.”

“So, I’m treating my family and closest friends to a birthday dinner for ... me?”

“Sorry, Jax. That’s the price of neglecting your loved ones.”

“I thought this lecture was the price of neglecting my loved ones,” I muttered under my breath.

From my point of view, no one was being neglected. I sent texts and emails, and I even made dates to video chat with each and every one of them. I probably saw them more than I would if I was stationary. It occurred to me I should start planning my own birthday celebrations.

West invited my best friends, Cindy and Lizzie, to join us for dinner. They’re the only non-familial relationships I kept

from my childhood.

In high school, Lizzie was a nerd. You've heard that expression "nose in a book"? That's not just an expression for Lizzie. It's a way of life. It's also her job. She reads manuscripts for a publishing house in LA. She's a bleeding heart and a hopeless romantic. Some might think that's a terrible combination of traits for a single girl living in the city—but she does alright for herself. She's got Cindy to look after her.

Cindy is the polar opposite of Lizzie. In high school, she took the quarterback's virginity and then broke up with him mid-season, leaving him both broken-hearted and athletically impotent. Now she designs clothes for a living. She loves fashion week and uncomfortable outfits. She believes in love, but not in the same way Lizzie does. Cindy believes in falling in love as often, and with as many beautiful men as possible. The only real true love in her life thus far had been her career. I could relate.

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West drove me home.

'Home' is a relative term, but in this case, I mean it in the sense that he drove me to the bungalow in Malibu, where I pay a monthly mortgage. It's quaint—painted black with a grey door, white window frames, and a white picket fence. There's an adorable patio and a perfect view of the Pacific Ocean from both the living room and master bedroom windows. The inside has hardwood floors and leather sofas and stainless-steel appliances. Everything has a place, and the place, as a whole, was clean and meticulously organized.

It looked like a home from a magazine, mostly because it was. It could have been anyone's house. The only personal touches were photos. There was a small selection of photos adorning the walls, including framed magazine covers I'd shot, and a framed photo of my fish, Prince Henry. Prince

Henry was the primary resident of the house and was still alive only by the good graces of my cleaning lady, Abigail.

“Can we crash in your guest bedroom?” West asked, as though I’d ever tell him no. Without waiting for a response, he made his way toward the back of the house.

“Might as well make yourself at home!” I shouted.

“Someone’s gotta make this place home!” He shot back.

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I laid on the couch with my legs stretched while my brother lounged on a chair across from me. Jet lag is a bitch. A week ago, I was at some massive venue in Japan. I was photographing an adorable blonde pop star and partaking in her candy backstage as we wound down from her sold out show. Suddenly there I was, hanging out with my brother as he spit-balled tiny bits of a straw wrapper into my hair.

“Ugh, gross,” I protested. “Fucking stop – you’re the worst.”

“Not even close,” he smirked. “No time for naps, princess. We’ve got dinner in like two hours. You should take a shower – and put something presentable on.”

“How long exactly do you imagine I take to get ready?” I asked, offended.

“I dunno. Like – two hours? Isn’t that sort of the standard for girls?”

“Not girls who live on the road.”

“Ok,” he scoffed. “Whatever you say, Kerouac.”

“Why’d you invite Cindy and Lizzie?” I asked. “Haven’t you tortured Cindy enough with unrequited love?”

“That’s dramatic.” He rolled his eyes. “They’re your friends. That’s why I invited them. When’s the last time you saw them?”

“I just talked to Lizzie like two weeks ago. And Cindy texted a picture of some naked dude last Friday.”

“Over share, Jaxon.”

“You’re not jealous, are you? Are you secretly hoping Cindy and Casey will fight over you?”

“No. That is both stupid and unrealistic.” He brushed it off.

When we were fourteen, Cindy saw a seventeen-year-old-West coming out of the shower on a Saturday morning. He sauntered out of the bathroom in a low hung towel and bumped into her as she made her way down to our kitchen. “My bad,” was his only response. Her pupils dilated into heart shapes, and she was sent hurling into the depths of puberty.

Unfortunately for her, West never took her seriously.

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After a quick shower and a wardrobe change, we arrived at a swanky rooftop restaurant downtown. I was surrounded by loved ones. Cindy and Lizzie told stories about their respective careers, and dates gone wrong, and dates gone ‘oh so very right.’ We talked about all the things typical of filling silence. Casey described the trials and tribulations of a bride-to-be in New York City and West kept his arm around her, rubbing her bare shoulder in a showing of support.

West talked about work as well. He’s a freelance cartoonist. When he was young, he used to scribble caricatures of his teachers on the bathroom walls. On one occasion, Dad got a call from the school. West was in trouble. One of his teachers found the drawings. Dad listened attentively to the principal’s unsolicited parenting advice, and after they left the meeting, Dad took West to an arts and crafts store and spent an excessive amount of money on art supplies. He called it ‘investing’ in West’s future.

“Tell us about Japan, Jax.” Cindy prodded.

These questions always made me uncomfortable. I could talk for hours about the airports in each city, but the cities themselves all start to blur together after a while. I remember the music. The encores and the cell phone flashlight slow songs, and the goodies in the dressing rooms. I remember the way the night made me feel. The electricity of thousands of people singing in unison. But to the dismay of my loved ones, I'm not much of a tourist.

"It was beautiful," was all I could muster. And it was. I just wasn't familiar with the landmarks.

"Wow. You should write a travel blog," West chuckled sarcastically from beside me.

"Shut up, West!" I looked around at everyone waiting for me to give a better response – a travel blog entry – and got flustered. "I don't know! It was Japan! Enormous buildings, impressive electronics, fast cars, lots of lights. It was Japan."

"It was Japan", she says," my dad teased. "Like any of us have ever been."

"I was working. I wasn't on vacation," I defended.

"Ok, fine," West cleared his throat, leaning his elbows on the table, "How was London? And don't give us that 'I was working' bullshit. You've always wanted to go to London."

"London was amazing. I wasn't there long, but I definitely want to go back soon. I visited the palace, but I couldn't make any of those super serious palace guards smile."

My brother was right. I had always wanted to go to London, but I always thought I'd be there with someone very specific. I'd left him behind too long ago for that to still be an option. London was bittersweet – but I'd never say that out loud.

"You're an international woman of mystery." Casey smiled and raised a glass for a toast she had no intention of making.



Lizzie stepped in.

“Happy twenty-seventh birthday, Jax. We love you. Thank you for making time in your very busy schedule of infinite rock concerts and jet setting to celebrate with us.” Everyone nodded in silent agreement. “And cheers to West and Casey. May you both live a life of love, happiness, and the kind of adventure so common to Jax, she doesn’t even like to talk about it anymore!”

She winked, and I rolled my eyes as everyone clinked their sparkling champagne glasses together.

I’m more of a whiskey girl. Champagne bubbles tickle my throat, and besides – I have bad champagne memories. I drank it anyway, and I didn’t complain. I know that on some level, these types of events are more for your loved ones than for you. This one in particular was for my dad, who I’d noticed look over at me several times throughout the night like I might disappear at any moment.

Just as everyone set their glasses down, a waitress in a black bow tie brought out a birthday cake. One of those fancy cakes you only see in magazines. The baker’s signature was printed on a chocolate medallion placed on the cake like an advert, with my name written in perfect chocolate cursive.

As the conversations continued around me, I felt an itch definitive of being out of place. That itch is painfully common. The traditional idea of “home” never quite resonated with me. I longed for airport terminals, sunsets in the sky, and those little “U” shaped pillows you put behind your neck so you can sleep comfortably through a flight. I lived my whole life, never particularly attached to any one place.

My bungalow, for example. It had too much stuff. I lived off of eight things in a duffel bag. As my brother had described it – torn jeans and leather jackets. That was my life to him. What he’d never understand was the essence of it. The

booze and the faint hint of cannabis smoke in the air. The sweaty dancing and cell phone lights like an ocean of stars. A life lived at night. Poetry set to music. Screaming fans and songs so good they'll bring you to tears every fucking time. I'd never grow tired of falling in love with music over and over again. This was home to me. Last week I was in Japan, the month before I'd been in London, and in two weeks I'd be in New York.

When the socializing dwindled into tired sighs, I paid the tab and hugged my dad goodnight. I said my goodbyes and walked with my brother and Casey as they made their way out of the restaurant. I'd meet them back at the bungalow later. I had someone else I needed to see.

"Where you headed, sis?" West threw a heavy arm around me, sloppily slurring his words. "Blow off your asshole boyfriend. Come back with us, we'll play some poker."

West wasn't a fan of Jason.

Jason McGinnis – impressive boyfriend extraordinaire. After a certain age, it feels weird to call someone your boyfriend. It's even weirder when you only see them on the rare occasion that they can fly to wherever you are.

"Well, West, I could have blown him off if you'd invited him to dinner."

"Dad doesn't like him," he responded, dismissing the idea that Jason could ever sit through a family dinner. I knew he was right.

"You mean *you* don't like him."

"No one likes him," he countered. "You barely like him. Which is convenient, since you only see him a few times a year."

"I see him," I insisted, "on video chat," I insisted a little less loudly.

“OH! Are we talking about Jason?” Cindy interrupted, as she came up behind us.

“Yes. West seems to think I don’t like him. Which is stupid. If I didn’t like him, I’d have dumped him ages ago.”

“West is right,” Cindy agreed. “No one likes him. Including you. If you liked him, you’d have married him by now. Lord knows he’s been nudging you there for a while now.”

Jason is a lawyer. I met him the way I meet most people – I took a picture of him at a concert. He walked confidently up to me, smiling, and asked if he could have a copy. He wrote his phone number on the inside of my palm, and we started dating. He was conventionally attractive, and I was back in California for a short hiatus. When the time came for me to leave again, Jason wasn’t happy about it. What I’d thought was a short fling, he’d interpreted as the beginnings of a relationship.

He wasn’t ready to let go. He said we could do the long-distance thing and he would come to me whenever possible. He made good on his promises. Despite the little effort I put into the relationship, he began to casually drop marriage talk into everyday conversations. It had only been six months. I know plenty of people get married after a relatively short period of time, and some of them go on to live happily ever after. I wasn’t one of them. Rushed relationships made me feel panicked and suffocated. Maybe it was because I was raised by a single parent, or maybe it was the devastating heartbreak of my early twenties—but I was a take-it-slow kind of girl.

Jason wanted a family. He wanted a picture frame stock photo life. Unfortunately for him, I’d never put much thought into having kids. Not in the immediate future, anyway. Maybe in a different time, maybe with a different boy – but not in this time, and not with him.

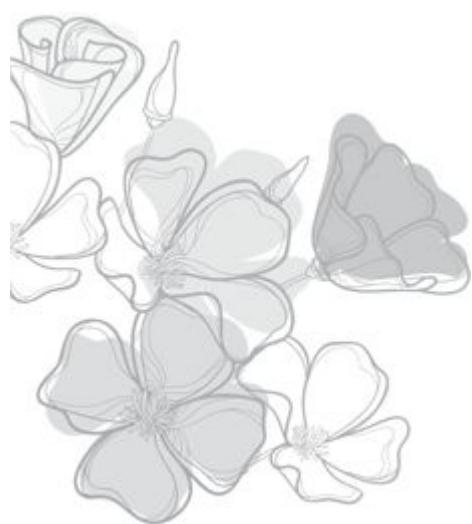
“I like him fine,” I said. “I’m just not ready to get married. That’s not a reflection on him - it’s a reflection on me.”

“Yes. That’s very romantic.” Lizzie commented from behind me as she made her way toward the group.

“Ok. As much as I’m enjoying this commentary on my life, I’ve got to go. I’ll see you all later.”

I gave everyone a final hug goodbye and tried not to notice how they all lingered just a little longer than normal. Cindy and Lizzie implored me not to leave without saying goodbye, and even my brother told me how much he’d missed me. I hated to admit it—but I knew my brother was right.

I had been away too long.



# The Ides of March

**I**T HURT— and I'm not one to complain, but this really fucking hurt. It felt like dying. For a second, I thought I might be. I may have even wished I was. Anything had to be better than the amount of pain I was in. Several sensations hit me all at once, starting with an intense pressure worse than I'd ever felt in my life, followed immediately by a sharp, excruciating, stabbing pain.

Everything after was a blur. I heard the loud wailing of sirens, and I felt the cold wet of the pavement painted in blood. That's the last thing I remember before the world went dark.

---

The year we read Julius Caesar in school, a few of my asshole classmates thought it would be funny to point at me on my birthday and shout "beware the ides of March!" I guess that's what I get for being born on March 15<sup>th</sup>. Eventually, Lizzie reclaimed it by simply saying, "happy ides of March." It kind of stuck. Every year since, Lizzie has wished me happy ides of March. Until this year—when she simply made a birthday toast at a rooftop restaurant. That should have been my first clue that something was off with the universe.

When I woke up on the morning of my birthday, I was in the hospital.

"Dad?"

Dad opened his eyes to the sound of my voice and looked at me like I was a miracle.

“Jaxon.” He sighed away the weight of the world in the two syllables it took to say my name.

“Dad? What happened?”

“You were in an accident. You’re ok, but ...”

His eyes got misty. Dad’s not a crier, so this concerned me.

Every part of me was in pain, reminding me that pain was the last thing I remembered. I looked around the room for some semblance of a clue as to what had happened. Probably a car accident, maybe a drunk driver. A nurse came in and took my blood pressure, which, incidentally, is one of the worst sorts of torture. She checked a bunch of wires and asked how I was feeling. She directed my line of sight to a pain chart on the wall. It showed a series of faces, going from 1 to 10, 1 being a smiley face, 10 being a crying face, and 2 through 9 being a progression between the two.

I told her my pain was an 8.75. She smiled and said I’m the first person she’s ever come across who used decimals in their pain rating. It only made sense. It wasn’t a 9, but it was much worse than an 8. She said she’d come back with ice chips and showed me how to use the morphine drip.

I wondered why I needed a morphine drip.

I looked down at an intricate arrangement of pillows around my hips. Even just the thought of moving was painful, so I opted to stay as still as possible.

I looked over at my dad, who still looked as though he might burst into tears.

“Dad - not that I’m not in a substantial amount of pain, because I am - but I’m alive. I can wiggle all my appendages, and I’m not missing any important bits. I’m ok.”

He rubbed the worry lines on his forehead, and I wondered momentarily if I actually did have all of my important bits.

“You were in an accident, sweetheart.”

“Yeah, I’d gathered that.”

“Jaxon. Not the time for smart ass remarks,” he said curtly.

“Sorry.”

“You were in an accident. There was a drunk driver on the road going the opposite direction. It looks like you might have been in the middle of a text. I don’t know. I only say so because of how the cops found your phone. It was cracked, but they could see it was open on a text screen. You probably didn’t see him swerve into your lane, and he hit your car. It flipped over, and because it’s a flimsy piece of shit, you weren’t all that protected. You got caught under a heavy piece and broke your pelvic bone.”

That explained the pressure and the stabbing.

“I didn’t even know you could break a pelvic bone.” I said, thinking this was the weirdest injury ever.

“I’m just tellin’ you what the doctor told me. There’s more. All sorts of medical mumbo jumbo. Someone smarter than me will come in and explain, I’m sure. The bottom line is, you had surgery, and they put in some pins or screws or something to set your bones right.”

Almost as if on cue, a tall, gorgeous, red headed doctor came in and asked Dad to leave the room. She wanted to explain the long and short of my injuries, though I couldn’t understand why my dad had to leave for her to do that. I asked for him to stay.

“Jaxon,” she addressed me and smiled sympathetically. “I’m Doctor McAllister. I overheard you talking to your dad. Did he explain about your injuries?”

I nodded in the affirmative. “He said I broke my pelvic bone and that they put it back together with pins and screws.” I



grew anxious, worried that her gentle tone and sympathetic smiles were foreboding.

She nodded her head. “Yes. In very basic terms, your pubis bone, which is one of the three bones that make up your pelvic bone, was severely fractured in the accident. When the fracture is less severe, the bones will heal on their own, with time. This wasn’t the case with your injury, and we did surgery to repair the bone. As your dad said, we stabilized the bone with the use of screws, which were inserted into the bone to repair it.”

“But?” I asked, attempting to be proactive.

“But the injury to your pelvic region was significant. Simply put, your uterus was punctured when the bone was broken, and the damage to your uterine wall was,” she paused, either for dramatic effect or to allow me a moment to brace myself. “Well, the damage was irreparable.”

“Umm,” I swallowed a large lump in my throat. All of this was fucking horrible. “Ok. So. What does that mean? Do I, uh, do I have a big hole in my baby maker?”

My response may have lacked poise, but how *should* you respond to news of a punctured uterus?

“Not exactly. We were able to repair the puncture, however, there will be significant scarring on the uterine wall. Because of the scarring and the severity of the damage, I’m sorry to say, Jaxon, you won’t be able to conceive. You won’t be able to have children.”

*You won’t be able to have children.*

There’s a word for that, and the word is ‘barren’. What it means is, all the anatomical and reproductive stuff that makes being a girl special was no longer something I could do.

Dr. McAllister went on talking for several minutes, but I only heard fragments of what she said. She called it a ‘life-altering event.’ She let me know there were supportive

resources that might be helpful during my recovery. She talked about freezing eggs and other fertility options available to me in the future. I wasn't ready to hear any of it. All I heard was the resounding news that one day I was normal and the next I was permanently damaged. A broken girl.

This would be something I'd have to deal with, obviously. In my own time. But in the immediate future, I was supposed to be getting on a plane in two weeks and going back to work. The prospect of which was suddenly very appealing.

I heard her repeat my name once or twice. She must have asked a question. "Jaxon? Jaxon? I'll be referring you to an OBGYN for follow up. Would you also like a referral for a therapist?"

"Uh. Yeah. Yes. Thank you."

"Do you have any questions?" she asked.

"Yeah, uh – am I ok? Other than the whole – barren – thing? I'm supposed to be catching a plane and going back to work in about two weeks, so I'm just wondering how long the follow up will take."

"Oh, no, Jaxon, I'm afraid that won't be possible." Dr. McAllister seemed surprised I'd ever consider going back to work so soon after a 'life-altering event.' "You can return to work, eventually. But I understand you travel frequently for work. You won't be able to do that in another two weeks. You won't be able to do that in another two months. There is a period of recovery with these sorts of injuries and surgical procedures. You won't be fully back to yourself for at least another five months."

"Five months? You can't be serious," I argued.

"I couldn't be more serious. You'll be here in the hospital for at least another week, and you won't be able to travel for another couple of months. Even then, it may still be very

uncomfortable. We'll need to monitor your recovery, Jaxon. You'll be having follow-up appointments with both me and the OBGYN. And I strongly recommend you take advantage of the therapeutic referral. Often the mental toll can have longer lasting effects than the physical."

"Longer lasting effects than never being able to have kids?" I snapped.

"Jaxon!" my dad said sternly. "Dr. McAllister is trying to help you."

"Dad – I know – but therapy isn't going to fix my uterus, right? That's all I'm saying."

"It's ok, Jax. I understand. This is a lot all at once. I'm going to leave you to get some rest, and I'll be back to check on you tomorrow morning."

Dr. McAllister was right. It was a lot to process. Not sure exactly where to start, I figured I should call my boss. 'Boss' is an interesting choice of words because my job couldn't be micromanaged, or even really managed at all. There were no timecards. No office door with my name on it. I took pictures. It was that simple. They called and told me when and where to show up and emailed me itineraries and plane tickets. They paid me via direct deposit to an account I'd given them to pay me for the first photo of mine they ever bought. It was the dream gig, and as far as bosses go, mine was more in the abstract.

Still, I'd need to call and let someone know to find another photographer for whatever was happening in New York in two weeks. At *Rolling Stone*, that someone went by the name of Phil Hammersmith. Phil Hammersmith has a very official sounding title that I never remember. He gets paid a lot of money to sit in an enormous office decorated with signed music memorabilia. At *Rolling Stone*, he's also the guy who sets contracts with all the photographers.

Phil is pretty cool. Sometimes he gets requests for specific photographers, and sometimes he assigns the photographers he knows will love the music most. Phil has this theory that when the photographer loves the subject, the outcome is magic.

I called him directly, but his secretary, Jessica said he was out to a business lunch. I gave her the basics. Sort of like a telegraph. “Can’t make it to New York (stop). Was in a pretty serious accident (stop). Going to need to take some time off (stop). Could be several months (stop). Will keep you updated on when I can return to work (stop).”

Jessica sounded concerned, and she asked if I was ok. “No Jessica,” I wanted to say, “I broke my lady bits. And if that weren’t bad enough, I’ve just been told I’ll be stuck at home for the next five months. Apparently, there’s a period of recovery that needs ‘monitoring.’”

I didn’t say that. No person raised in polite society would ever give such a cynical response to an honest question. Besides, Jessica was nice. In place of what I truly wanted to say, I simply thanked her, and said I was ok. No one wants the truth. Not about this kind of thing. It’s sad and dark and uncomfortable, so for everyone’s sake – we lie and pretend we’re ok.

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The Hospital food was delicious. The first day or so, they only let me have liquids. Soup and whatnot. Even that was pretty good, but by the third day, all bets were off. There was a steady stream of visitors during pretty much every minute of the approved visiting hours. Dad was there every morning, and West (who put off going home until my release) came in the early afternoons. Cindy and Lizzie took turns taking late lunches and would show up just as West was leaving. There were flowers everywhere. California poppies, to be precise, because those are my favorites. West brought a new stuffed animal every day. He did it ironically, because I hate stuffed

animals. He had the whole of the nursing staff believing he'd never disappointed anyone in his life, but in actuality, he was just being an asshole.

Jason came too.

Jason came on March 16<sup>th</sup>, the day after my birthday. He was quiet and awkward, and I knew Dad had told him. Why he would ever presume to think this was his news to tell was completely lost on me. I'll spare you the dirty details. Suffice it to say – a broken girl is not a girl you marry. Not when you're Jason McGinnis, big shot lawyer and future patriarch of a picture-perfect family.

The worst part was how he couldn't look me in the eye. Two weeks prior, he'd been making plans to take me to jewelry stores, and on March 16<sup>th</sup> he wouldn't look me in the fucking eyes.

He spouted the sort of bullshit you'd expect to hear in this situation. He loves me. He always will. He wishes things could have been different. He'll always remember us fondly, but we had to be honest with each other. A family wasn't something I ever really wanted to begin with.

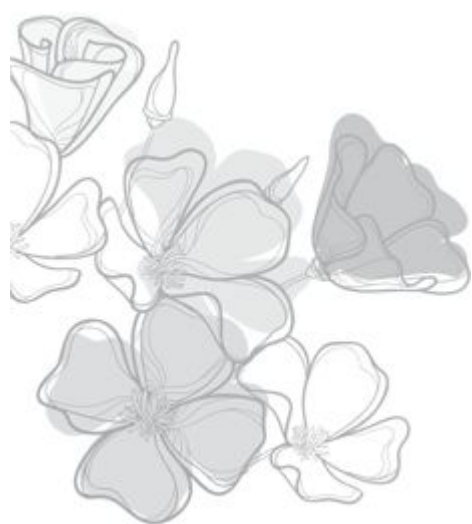
When he ran out of things to say, he just sighed and said he was sorry. He kissed me on the forehead and walked out the door. For all the money in the world, he couldn't buy a little bit of empathy.

And good-fucking-riddance.

He wasn't "The One." He never set my insides on fire. Maybe I wanted him to be right for me because he's an idealized fantasy. He's a magazine cover. He's what you're supposed to want as you settle into the stability of your thirties.

That's not me, though, and some part of me knew – aside from being a great lay – my brother was right. I never really

liked him all that much.



# A Lot of Work

**T**HERE'S SOMETHING no one tells you about 'life altering events.' They tend to be a lot of work. For you, and for everyone around you. These are the things you think about in the middle of the night in a cold hospital room. It's difficult to sleep. Someone is always coming in to check on you – your vitals, all your wires, your pain levels. Even for those folks, it's a lot of work.

When I was nine and had my tonsils taken out, my dad took me to get ice cream every day of my recovery. He'd decided ice cream was a cure all, and we ate it until I felt better. I wished this was that simple. My dad must have felt the same way because he started showing up with pints of ice cream. He came on the first day I was home from the hospital, and he kept coming. He did my laundry and rolled up my socks in little tube bundles. He grocery shopped, and he drove me to all my doctors' appointments. For brief moments throughout the day, I'd feel like a little kid again. He never complained, but nevertheless, it was a lot of work.

I considered all the different ways we try to fix problems that are out of our control. All the things we do when we feel completely helpless. I wondered how much bigger that helplessness must feel when the problem is with your own kid. And then it hit me – I'd probably never know.

The pain of an old memory I kept locked away rose through my stomach, making me feel nauseous. Before it lingered long enough to actually make me vomit, I heard my dad's voice calling me back to the present.



“You ok, kid?” We were at a red light on our way home from a particularly invasive day at the OBGYN.

I wasn't ok. The OBGYN's office makes every attempt to be comfortable. They have fake flowers all over the place and posters of smiling babies. The seats in the waiting room are pink and cushiony, and the bathrooms are top notch. Everyone is nice and soft spoken, especially when they tell you to strip down and put on the world's smallest paper robe. Amenities aside, it's still cold and uncomfortable.

They take all these x-rays of your lady garden, even though they already know it isn't going to grow any fucking seeds. They do it just to be sure, I guess. The x-ray tech didn't say much. She just moved the little doppler around and clicked her keyboard intermittently. She showed me the x-ray of my broken uterus. I say x-ray, but I mean ultrasound. Ultrasound is too weird to say—but that is essentially what it was. The most depressing ultrasound ever. It looks like all the other ultrasounds you see on the various social media pages of your grown-up friends as they announce “YAY! I'M PREGNANT!” or when they've found out “IT'S A (enter gender of choice here)!”

This wasn't those ultrasounds. It looked like them on screen, with my name in the upper left-hand corner and my date of birth—the whole nine yards - but it's pointedly different. It's just vacant. Totally empty except for the little white blip that represented the scar that represented my baby maker being stabbed by my broken-whatever-bone.

I could feel my dad burning a hole in my head with his concerned gaze. “Jaxon? You okay?”

For a fleeting moment, I wanted to confess that I was a fucking mess, but that's not how we do things.

“Yeah,” I smiled meekly. “Just tired.”

“It’s been a long afternoon,” he agreed, and patted me on the knee. He took my social cues and changed the subject. “Tell me about the time you saw the Stones, kid. I saw them when I was younger but taking their photos must have been out of this world.”

The Rolling Stones were my dad’s favorite band and, bless his heart, for thinking I was anywhere near a good enough photographer to photograph their shows. I just liked their music. It reminded me of hanging around with my dad, tinkering in the garage.

“Yeah, they put on a great show. They were perfect. Sounded just as good as they did on that old record you used to play in the garage, you remember?”

“Oh yeah!” He exclaimed. “That used to belong to your mo—” He stopped himself before he let the word “mom” come out of his mouth. We don’t talk about her. “It belonged to an old friend.”

“Old friend” was the euphemism he used to avoid discussion or questions. It wasn’t totally untrue. West once told me they were high school sweethearts. I wanted to call him out on it, but I didn’t. I never did. Just as he’d done for me a moment before, I followed his lead and quickly changed the subject.

“I hate to disappoint you, Dad, but I didn’t photograph them. I’m good, but not *that* good.”

“Now that’s not true at all, kid. You think I keep a subscription for this new generation music? Not so. It’s to see your stuff. Not just anyone can land a job at *Rolling Stone*.”

“Thanks, Dad.” I smiled warmly.

I leaned against the headrest and turned to look out the window. The palm trees blurred into the Pacific, and I felt overwhelmed. My first instinct was to pull myself out of the

situation, but when the situation is just your life now – how do you do that? I wanted to get on a plane. I wanted to get back to my normal life. I missed the airports, the planes, and the captain welcoming me to my next destination. The only place I was headed was home, and the only one there waiting for me was my fish, Prince Henry.

“It’s been a hard day, kid. Just keep waking up. It’ll get better.”

*Just keep waking up.*

The sentiment made me uncomfortable, like Dad worried I might off myself. I wouldn’t do that. Though there is little worse than having your dad drive you to your invasive gynecological appointments, I still wanted to live.

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I heard Dad on the phone with West that afternoon. He spoke in whispered murmurs, which made me want to listen. If he’d used a normal volume, I’d have assumed they were discussing wedding things, and proceeded not to care. The hushed tones enticed me to pay attention.

He told West he was worried. I wasn’t talking as much, and I just kept staring out of windows and losing track of conversations. He’d have to ask me questions two or three times before I realized he was talking. He didn’t know what to do. He didn’t know how to help or how to make it better. He said he worried how my life would turn out, and that was a gut punch.

After several quiet minutes, he started to sniffle and then cleared his throat. I knew he was trying not to get emotional, which he’d been doing a lot lately. I listened intently as he continued.

“Honestly, son, I don’t know. She’s never talked about kids one way or the other. But that really isn’t the point. The point is now she doesn’t even get the choice. It’s a lot to process,

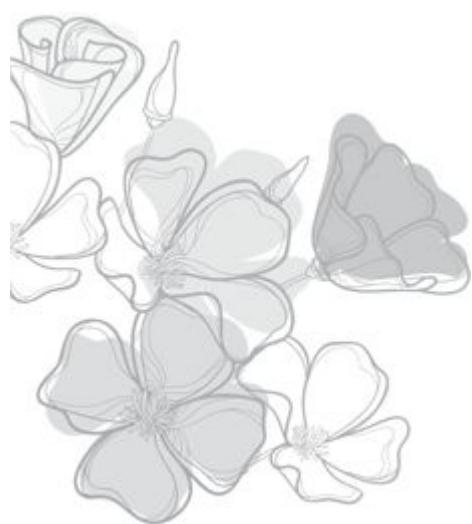
and I'm worried she's not dealing with it. Future imaginary grandkids are not important to me. You two are what's important, and right now she ain't herself. She makes these awkward jokes, and I don't know whether to laugh with her, or get her drunk so she can cry it out." ... silence ... "I know she's not a crier, but something's got to give." ... silence ... "I'm not gonna call them, that'll be up to her." ... silence ... "no, she hasn't seen either of them since she left the hospital." ... silence ... "yeah, maybe she just needs space. I don't know. I don't know what to do."

He meant he didn't know what to do with me. Like I said – all of this was a lot of work. I felt sick and burdensome.

I read this thing once that said when a person suffers a significant trauma; they start to project how they're feeling on to the things that people say. People are just concerned. People just give a shit, but what the person hears becomes an echo of what's going on inside of them. For me, this was as significant of a trauma as it gets. I tried to keep the proverbial flood gates at bay. Anxiety I never knew I had began to scratch at a mental wall, holding back all the things in my life I'd never bothered to face. All the 'significant traumas' were just there, swimming around behind a psychological dam that was hanging on by a thread.

The only way out is through, and that's the way you heal. But this wasn't the day. I couldn't let the wall come down on the day my newly minted OBGYN showed me an empty x-ray of my completely useless uterus.

I was glad to have heard my dad say he wasn't worried about future grandkids, because at least on my part – Prince Henry was the only grandkid he'd ever have.



# May

**T**HE MONTH of May would be better.

It had to be, because I was getting better (physically, anyway). Dad went home, which was a relief in and of itself. I loved my dad, but I'd never been so happy to wash my own underwear.

Abigail (my housekeeper) kept coming over twice a week to help me keep the house livable. Back when life was still normal, I'd check in with her over email or on the phone a few times a month, and she'd send me pictures of Prince Henry. All the pictures looked the same. A fish can't pose for the camera, but I appreciated the gesture, and I appreciated her. As much as I already adored her, being with her in person was a vastly superior experience. Sort of like bathing in sunshine and rainbows.

She's six years older than me and is the single parent of twin daughters. Somehow, Abigail still makes time to take care of herself. Between making sure I'm taken care of, being a mom, and attending to all her other clients, Abigail takes classes at night. She's studying to be a nurse. She grew up in Kentucky and married her high school sweetheart after he joined the Army. They lived a lot of places, but California was the place they lived when he died in combat. He never got to meet his daughters.

I wondered where Abigail acquired the strength and resiliency to do what life required of her. She did all the things she needed to do every day, and then some. I wondered if I could ever be that strong. She made me feel like I might be,

because she radiated hope and happiness and possibility. People like Abigail make you feel like you can do anything – even if it’s just in the fleeting moment you’re in their presence.

One day, she noticed me solemnly staring out the window. She made me a cup of tea and brought me a blanket. She didn’t have to ask what was wrong. She might have even been insightful enough to realize I, myself, didn’t know what was wrong. She just did what needed doing. That’s her superpower.

She sat down next to me, and she told me we can’t control what happens to us in this life. All we can control is how we go on about the business of living. I knew as soon as she said it, I should probably write it down. Nuggets of wisdom like that are best catalogued for future reference when the going gets tough and the tough can’t figure out what the fuck to do with their lives.

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Toward the end of May, Abigail took a well-deserved two-week vacation. She took her daughters to Disney World. She left precise instructions for me on how to keep the place intact while she was away, including how and when to feed Prince Henry.

Her trip happened to coincide with Dad visiting West in New York. The wedding was still five months away, but Casey liked to get things done early. She was a bit of a planning tyrant, but Dad was still happy and eager to help.

It was the first time I’d been alone in over two months.

I took a few days to shamelessly walk around in my underwear with my music playing too loud. I watched movies I hadn’t seen in ages. I listened to every track on every record that ever made me laugh and cry and think about life.

One in particular sat alone on a shelf, daring me to listen to it. *Headaches & Heartbreak*. It had been sent to me by one Finnley Archibald Hendricks, lead singer of the renowned Brit

pop rock band, Black Heart Sunday. He was also my first love, and the subject of the photo that landed me my dream job. When *Rolling Stone* reviewed the album, they called it “vulnerable and heartbreaking. An intimate chronicle of an all-consuming love, gone too soon.”

I wasn't dead – we'd just broken up.

Maybe to him it felt like dying. Maybe it did to me a little as well. After our split, I bought the house in Malibu. I couldn't be in New York anymore. Not with him, and not without him. Sadness and anger fueled me—one concert after another, all the way to my own version of success. It did the same for him. He received all the praise and accolades, but fuck him, I never listened to that album. Even when it showed up on my doorstep with a simple note in his familiar, all capitalized boy handwriting. “*I loved you then. I love you still. I'll love you always.*”

I tucked the note into the album sleeve the day I got it and never looked at it again. I hadn't heard a single note on that album, and I wasn't going to listen to it that day.

Instead, I decided it was a good idea to call Lizzie and Cindy. I hadn't seen either of them since I left the hospital. The only communication we'd had was the occasional text to our group chat. At least once a week, I assured them I was ok, and updated them on what I was reading and watching to pass the time. Everyone being out of town felt like a good reason to have a slumber party. We used to have them all the time as teenagers, and they were some of the most exquisite nights of my life. It would be even better now that we could drink and talk about sex, rather than just imagining it.

We planned to spend Memorial Day Weekend together. We'd drink, barbeque, and make good use of the beach I had for a front lawn. It would be a celebration of the time I spent at home alone, taking care of myself and keeping my fish alive.

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Cindy and Lizzie showed up that Friday with sleeping bags and duffels in tow. I recognized them as the ones we used when we were younger, surprised they'd kept anything that long.

“Did you buy the booze?” Cindy asked, wasting no time with niceties.

“Yes. As requested, I bought cake batter vodka for you guys – which – gross, and whiskey flavored whiskey for myself.”

“You think you're too cool for cake batter vodka?” Lizzie asked, judgmentally.

“I think cake batter and vodka are two things that should never have been put together in the first place.”

“It tastes like a fucking cupcake, Jaxon.” Cindy pointed a manicured finger in my direction. “You'd know this if you weren't such an alcohol snob. Now – where can we drop our stuff?”

I directed them to drop their things in the living room. I'd covered the living room floor with an elaborate arrangement of couch cushions and pillows. It was the ideal setup for movie watching. Lizzie opened her duffle bag to reveal a stash of 90s era Shakespeare adaptations.

“Elizabeth!” Cindy scolded. “Where are all of your clothes?”

“Cynthia!” Lizzie mocked, “are we going to the fucking prom? No. We aren't. So, I don't need clothes. Just *10 Things I Hate About You* and some clean undies.”

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Their presence in my house gave me an instant feeling of normalcy. We lounged atop our enormous living room floor bed watching movies we hadn't seen since we were kids. Cindy talked on and on about boys. Just as I was starting to

think some things never change, Lizzie interjected some juicy gossip of her own.

“I met a guy.” Lizzie bit her bottom lip through an enormous grin.

“You met a guy?” Cindy asked skeptically. “Ok. I’ll bite. Give us the dirty details.”

Cindy expected too much. After more than a decade of friendship, she still hadn’t learned that Lizzie’s details would never entirely be “dirty.” Lizzie just wanted to talk about eyes and smiles and the way boys run their fingers through their hair when they get nervous.

“His name is Garrett. He’s in a band. They’ve been touring locally and they’re actually really good!”

I was instantly skeptical. “No. Lizzie – listen. You can’t date a musician. I know musicians. I photograph and travel and party with musicians. A musician is the absolute last thing you need.”

“Umm,” Cindy interjected, “you dated a musician, and it turned out pretty well for you.”

“Are you serious?” I turned my attention to Cindy, giving her a disappointed glare. “No, it didn’t. It turned out horribly!”

“Jax,” she countered, “you got a career, an album, and a pretty great breakup story out of it. You’re literally immortalized in song. It didn’t turn out *that* bad.”

“What the fuck are you talking about? I would trade *all* those things not to have—” I stopped myself talking. The truth was, the cost of that relationship was sky high, but they didn’t need to know that. Some things you keep to yourself. “Never mind. It doesn’t matter. The point is this is a terrible idea.”

Cindy rolled her eyes and turned back to Lizzie. “Don’t listen to her.” She took another shot of cake batter vodka and

then asked the question that had been burning in her throat. “So. Is he a good lay?”

“CINDY!” Lizzie’s face flushed bright pink.

“Don’t do that!” I hissed. “Don’t ask her questions you know will embarrass her. You’re being an asshole.”

“I actually haven’t, you know ...”

“We know. It’s ok. Continue,” I told her, squeezing her hand.

She talked more about him, describing him like a boy she’d manifested out of a book. We listened as she tried to paint a verbal picture of the quintessential hazel-ness of his eyes, and his curly hair, and his big strong guitar playing arms.

I didn’t say much, even when prompted. I knew it was likely to invite questions I didn’t want to answer. I didn’t approve of musicians as a general rule. Then I realized all my general rules were pretty much bullshit. What did I know about love? Not a lot. My very limited experiences all had miserable endings. That included my most recent experience with a guy I barely liked.

Lizzie had recently asked me when I could last recall being well and truly in love. It may have been that gorgeous musician who immortalized the entirety of our relationship into a single album, sixteen songs long. Maybe no one would ever live up to that standard. Maybe it scarred me for life, like an old sports injury that never really stops hurting. It was difficult to say, and unfortunately, I wasn’t one for introspection.

Thankfully, this conversation wasn’t about me. It was about Lizzie.

Lizzie met Garrett in a coffee shop about a month prior. She’d bumped into his table and spilled coffee all over lyrics he’d been working on. She said he thought it was kismet. He’d

also met his last girlfriend in a coffee shop. I wondered why it didn't occur to him to learn his lesson about girls in coffee shops. The dreamy kind. Overly idealistic. I loved Lizzie, but she'd read too many books. Garrett wasn't likely to live up to the archetype. That's the problem with boys in books. They aren't realistic.

"Speaking of ending horribly, have you heard from Jason at all?" Cindy asked, pulling me out of my thoughts.

"Nope. And I don't expect to, either. He made his feelings pretty clear."

"Yeah, well. He's a piece of shit." She responded.

I shrugged. "I mean, yeah, but – I don't know – I get it. He wanted a laundry list of things I was never going to give him. Why continue wasting each other's time?"

"Are you ok?" Lizzie asked in a sympathetic tone, reaching over to hold my hand.

"Fuck Jason." I said, drinking the last of the whiskey in my glass.

They both followed suit, taking shots of their cake flavored alcohol, chanting "FUCK JASON!" in perfect sync.

Eventually, the boy talk made a smooth transition into deep discussions about the universal female struggle. I found myself relieved. I'd had enough of boys and their archaic expectations of finding a girl who can 'make babies'.

*A girl who can make babies ... fuck.*

I'd said out loud what I'd meant to only think in my head. The girls sat perfectly still, staring at me like I'd broken the good china.

Moments passed into an eternity before either of them said anything.

“Babies are overrated.” Cindy finally said. “They can’t even do anything.”

I tried to hold in my laughter, but I was unsuccessful, choking on a piece of popcorn I’d just put in my mouth.

Lizzie smiled warmly. She gave Cindy a knowing look and then proceeded with caution. “But, if you ever wanted to talk about the whole ... babies situation, we’re here. You know that, right?”

“I appreciate that *so* much, really.” I flashed an inauthentic smile. “But no. I’m good, slip of the tongue.”

“Jax,” Cindy started in. “Listen. We weren’t going to bring it up because we figured, you know, you’d talk about it if you wanted to. But I think it’s worth saying – even if you don’t want to, it might make you feel better if you did.”

Cindy is ... intuitive. And no one likes it.

She might have been right. But the thing about the dark stuff is it tends to be all-consuming. I didn’t want to be consumed. I didn’t want it to be all things all the time, and I didn’t want it to become my single defining characteristic. I wasn’t having many conversations about it, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t swimming in it every time I had a quiet moment to myself.

Some days need to be normal, or you won’t survive.

“Ok,” I submitted, “I’ll make you a deal. You each get one question. Then we eat ice cream and never bring it up again, ok?”

“What’s the number one worst part of this entire fucktrastophe?” Cindy asked.

The response was simple. It’s your period. They laughed at my answer, and I laughed along with them because it was so obvious. It’s also the truth.

It's like going to the grocery store and buying eggs you're never going to use. Then, after about a month or so, you throw them all over the ground, making a huge mess in the process. My first thought in the month that followed my accident was: *Really? This is a thing I still have to deal with?*

All girls proclaimed barren should get a free pass on menstrual cycles as far as I'm concerned. No one needs a monthly reminder of their permanent status as a childless spinster.

I did my best to keep my answers light. I assumed they wanted honesty, but it was difficult to know how brutal they wanted that honesty to be. We laughed when it was funny, and when it wasn't, they sat with me in reflective stillness. Once I ran out of things to say, I sighed with a small amount of relief, because talking did, in fact, make me feel a little better.

The room fell silent, and Lizzie turned to me, asking in a whisper, "Are you sure you're ok?"

I'd been getting that question a lot. Three little unassuming words. A gesture of concern. An implied invitation to lean on someone's emotional shoulder. There wasn't a simple answer, and unfortunately, the simple answer is what people expect from you.

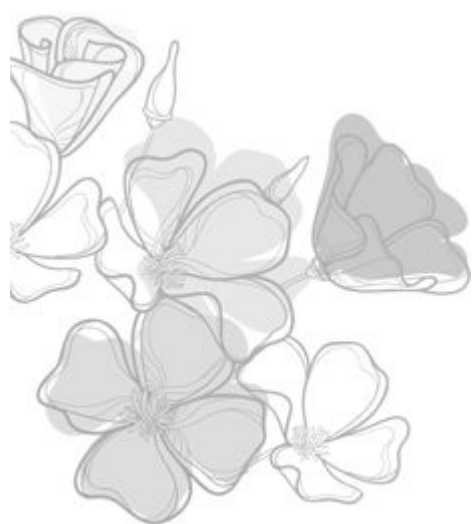
"I don't know," I said. "Probably not."

I meant to say yes. By the looks on their faces, that's the response they were expecting, but good friends don't shy away or change the subject. They scooted closer to me, turning us into a triangle with our knees touching. They each extended a hand to me, grabbing on to mine and squeezing tightly.

If I was a crier, that would have been a crying moment. Sensing the tension building in the silence, Cindy let go of my hand.

“You’re definitely not – but you will be,” she assured, smiling sweetly. “And let’s be honest, there’s already so much wrong with you. What’s one more thing?”

She winked and poured me another shot.





# Prince Henry

**O**N MONDAY, after Cindy and Lizzie went home, I found Prince Henry floating in his fish tank. His eyes were open. He looked alive, but he just wasn't himself.

I realized I'd fed him cleaning pellets rather than fish food.

A thousand emotions flooded through me. Not the least of which was that I'd never have been able to take care of a kid anyway, since I'd probably killed my fish. I instinctively picked up my phone to dial Abigail, but refrained. She didn't need this drama during her vacation, and I didn't want to disappoint her.

I was still moving slowly and popping the expensive pain pills, but I searched as quickly as I could for a sweater and a cardboard box. I hauled Prince Henry out to the car and placed him in the passenger seat. His bowl sat securely on a tight cushion of my sweater stuffed into a box that held Chinese takeout the night before. I buckled him in for good measure and made my way to the nearest animal hospital.

This situation was obviously better handled by medical professionals. As I drove urgently toward our destination, it occurred to me that I was responsible for Prince Henry's life. I couldn't let him die. I started to think about all the things I'd done over the weekend, and how little time and attention I'd paid him. I sat with the notion that my own carelessness might have killed him, and I felt sick.

Prince Henry is a fish. I know. But he's MY fish, and he's important. Tightness grew in my chest as I prayed that

whatever veterinarian was on duty that day was brilliant and had graduated at the top of their class. I hoped they could give Prince Henry the level of care that he deserved.

I parked and pulled Prince Henry's bowl out of my passenger seat, hugging him close to my chest and assuring him everything would be ok. I rushed into the entryway designated for cats – because there was no fish entry, and I worried that a barking dog might frighten him more than he already was.

As I approached the counter, I heard the receptionist setting an appointment over the phone. I rang the service bell because this was an emergency.

She looked up at me and smiled. “Yes ma’am, I’ll be with you shortly.”

I watched as she typed for several excruciating moments. When she finished, she wished the person on the phone a good day and turned her attention back to me.

“Good afternoon. How can we help you today?”

That’s when the verbal flood gates opened.

“Hi, yes, my name is Jaxon Cassidy, and this is Prince Henry.” I hugged him tighter. “He’s – umm – he’s my fish, and I was supposed to, well, my cleaning lady does it, but she’s on vacation. She took her twins to Florida. Anyway. I was supposed to feed him, but I think I might have given him cleaning pellets by mistake, and now he’s not swimming, and I think,” I took a deep breath, realizing I was on the verge of tears. “I think he needs his stomach pumped.”

The lady smiled and did her best to keep from laughing.

“I’m so sorry, Ms. Cassidy, but we don’t pump fish’s stomachs.”

“Ok, I realize I probably sound crazy right now. I get it. He’s just a fish, right? But here’s the thing, Miss,” I looked at her name tag, “Ellie?” She nodded. “Ellie – here’s the thing. I know he’s just a fish, but he’s my fish. He’s my fish-baby, and I was supposed to take care of him. I’m supposed to keep him alive, and I couldn’t get this one fucking thing right! I’m sorry – I’m so sorry. I don’t mean to curse. But this fish is the absolute most important fish in the universe. He ate cleaning products, and I know that living things are not supposed to eat cleaning products, so I just need someone to come out here and look at my fish and pump his stomach, because he can’t die. He can’t die.”

My loud heavy breaths reenforced the panic in my words. Ellie smiled sympathetically at me; a look that was becoming all too familiar.

“Ok,” she said. “Let me call the doctor and you can talk to him. I’m not certain he can pump Prince Henry’s stomach, but maybe he can check him out and let you know what you can do next.”

Ellie walked back toward that mysterious part of an animal hospital no one’s ever been to, except the animals and the staff. I hugged Prince Henry’s bowl, still worried as I watched him just sort of float. He’d started to move again – but he still didn’t look like himself.

Ellie was in the back for several minutes that felt like hours. While I sat there waiting, I convinced myself she was probably back there laughing at my stupidity and Prince Henry’s misfortunes. When she returned, she seemed appropriately concerned, but there was no doctor with her.

“Ms. Cassidy?” She motioned me to the counter meekly. I picked up Prince Henry, keeping him close to my chest. “Doctor Summers is with a patient. A vet tech can check Prince Henry if you’re in a hurry, but he wondered if it

wouldn't be too much trouble for you to wait for him instead? He'd like to speak with you and see Prince Henry himself."

"Yes, thank you," I responded, glad to be taken seriously. "I'm happy to wait."

Ellie completed the new patient process for Prince Henry while we waited. She asked me several questions about him. How long I'd had him, his eating habits, regular pet patient stuff. Once the process was complete, I sat with him in the cat waiting area for another half hour. I read the pet care magazines on the side tables and learned more about feline dental care than I'd ever need to know.

In the middle of a sentence about receding gums, I heard my name. My whole name.

"Jaxon Samantha Cassidy – as I live and breathe."

I felt certain I hadn't given Ellie my middle name.

"Doctor," I looked up as I shut the magazine, nearly choking on my own breath, "Sum ... mers?"

Carter Summers.

I'd recognize Carter Summers after any length of time, anywhere in the world, and I'd go instantly weak in the knees.

He knew my brother growing up, which meant he knew me too. Before I got pretty. He'd moved to California from Boston when he was twelve, and he played little league with West, and then high school baseball. They were inseparable until they graduated, and Carter joined the Air Force. They'd been best friends back then, but these days they weren't particularly close. Like most high school friendships, theirs had simmered down to a social media friendship.

He was the same, but different. He was tall, which sounds like a generalization, but I'm 5'9" in flats, and he was still about 5 inches taller than me. He had wavy, strawberry blonde

hair, and his eyes couldn't decide whether to be blue or green. He wore one of those white doctor coats, and under his coat, he was all dressed up in slacks and an argyle sweater. It was a distinctly different look than the torn jeans and Vans he used to wear as a teenager. He was all grown up.

He laughed. He knew he'd thrown me off. "C'mon, Jax, I'll take you back into one of the exam rooms."

Exam rooms for animals are just as cold and sterile as they are for humans. They even have pictures of other animals doing fun activities, presumably to make the animals feel more comfortable. Carter leaned back on the counter, and I placed Prince Henry's bowl onto the exam table. He crossed his arms over his chest and continued to smile a thousand watts in my direction.

"Are you gonna check him?" I asked.

"He's fine, Jax. He's swimming."

"Well. Can you check on him just to be sure? I think he might need to have his stomach pumped. I – god this is gonna sound so stupid – but I dropped these little pellets, they're like water cleaners or something, I don't know – my cleaning lady uses them. Anyway—I dropped those in his bowl instead of food."

He laughed, and I remembered that in addition to the weak knees, he also used to make my blood boil.

"Jax, we can't pump a fish's stomach."

"I'm glad you're amused." I stood up, moving toward the exam table. I'd obviously need to take Prince Henry elsewhere.

"Wait, wait," his laugh died down. "I'm sorry. Ok—let me ask you this – did you see Prince Henry eat the pellets?"

"No, but it was his feeding time."

“Just because he’s a fish doesn’t mean he’s stupid. He probably knows the pellets aren’t food. He’s swimming, he looks ok, I’m sure he’s fine.”

“But there aren’t any more pellets in the bowl,” I reasoned.

“Well, no, there wouldn’t be. They dissolve.” He pressed his lips together, trying not to laugh.

“Oh.” I said awkwardly.

He smiled, but licked his bottom lip, trying to conceal it. “If it’ll put your mind at ease, I can have one of the techs put him in some fresh water and clean out his bowl. Just to be sure.”

I puffed my chest out, trying to look like the adult that I was. I’ve traveled the world, after all, and I wasn’t going to let Carter Summers make me feel like a fifteen-year-old again.

“Yes. I’d appreciate that.” I stood up, extending my arm out for a handshake. “Thank you, Carter.”

He looked at me strangely, probably wondering why I was being so formal, and held up a finger – signaling me to wait a moment. I let my arm fall back to my side as he opened the door that led to the back and called for a vet tech.

An effervescent young girl wearing scrubs with kitties on them came into the room and took the fishbowl. “Don’t worry Ms. Cassidy,” she smiled, “we’ll take good care of Prince Henry.”

I expected the visit would be over once the vet tech left the room, but Carter just stood there smiling at me until I got nervous.

“How’s your brother?” He asked, making small talk.

“He’s good. He’s getting married in October.” I stood up as well, not wanting to feel towered over.

“Yeah, I saw he was engaged. I get a Christmas card from them every year. Good for him. What about you?”

“I’m not getting married.” I answered before my brain had the opportunity to conjure a normal response.

He looked down at his shoes, smiling coyly. “Well, that’s good news.”

He stayed quiet for a few seconds that became inevitably uncomfortable for me. He just kept smiling like he had a secret only the two of us knew. Unfortunately, I wasn’t in on the secret.

Eager to break the silence, I got back to business. “Well, thank you for taking care of Prince Henry. He’s ... important.”

“Hey, I get it. All fur babies are important, that’s why I’m here. But I guess in Prince Henry’s case, he’s more like a gill baby.”

It took a second, but when I got the joke, I laughed louder than I meant to. “Yeah. Because – because of the gills. That’s funny.”

*Awkward.*

The vet tech returned before I could make an even bigger idiot of myself. She was holding Prince Henry in a very clean-looking bowl.

“He’s all set, Ms. Cassidy, and he’s swimming like a champ.”

She made a few notes in a manila folder, seemingly missing the tension between Carter and me. He just kept smiling and staring while I picked nervously at the split ends in my hair. What I would have given for him to look at me that way back when I still had acne and braces.

It’s been my experience that a clerk, or a receptionist or someone else, rings you up at the end of any sort of doctor’s

visit, but when the vet tech asked me to follow her out front, Carter insisted he'd take care of me. He walked me out to the front and told the receptionist that Prince Henry's visit was no charge – he was fine, after all, and the visit had taken very little time.

He also insisted I let him help me to my car. I wondered what I could possibly need help with. My car was parked literally right outside the front door. He took Prince Henry's bowl from me and carried it. He even opened the door and held it for me. Once we got to my car, he carefully placed Prince Henry in the front seat inside the cardboard box car seat that I'd made.

“Well. Thank you for checking on Prince Henry and for, you know, not charging me.” I thought for a moment and then kept talking, though I should have stopped. “That part actually wasn't necessary. I'm fully capable of paying for the care of my pets.”

He leaned against my passenger side door in the same smug way he'd leaned against the counter in the exam room.

“You're welcome,” he smiled his stupid smile again, “and I'm sure you're more than capable. I just can't see charging an old friend to clean her fishbowl.”

Maybe it was my own insecurities, but something in his tone felt condescending.

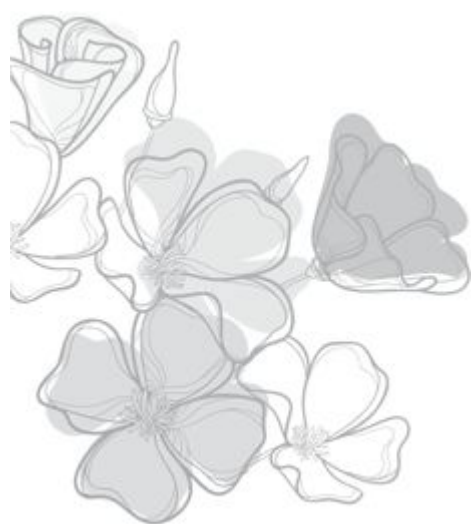
“I'm not sure you could classify us as 'old friends.'” I opened my driver's side door and heard him chuckle.

“You wouldn't?”

“No.” Free bowl cleaning or not – I was way too old to be teased by my brother's annoying friend.

“What a shame. We'll have to work on that.” He smiled again and walked back toward the office door.





# Legendary

**W**EST CALLED after receiving an email from his old friend Carter-fucking-Summers. He wanted my phone number. West hadn't heard from Carter in months, not since the last Christmas card exchange.

“So? What'd you tell him?” I asked.

“We talked for a little while, and then I gave him your number and email address.”

“West! What the fuck?”

“What? C'mon. You've been obsessed with Carter Summers since before you wore a bra.”

“Obsessed? No. That's an exaggeration. I had a *small* crush on him when I was a teenager. *Had*, being the operative word. I'm an adult now.”

“Yeah, you're an adult now. Just like you were the last time you visited me and used my computer to quote-email work stuff-unquote.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means I know you also used my computer to stalk Carter Summers on my social media.”

I had done that, but it was a moment of weakness, and I'd never intended for my brother to find out.

“How'd you even find out about that?”

“I'm your brother. I know everything.”

I had no intention of answering Carter Summers' phone calls or his emails. It was very nice of him to make sure Prince Henry was ok, but he'd sort of acted like a smug asshole in the process. I wasn't about to waste valuable cell minutes on him.

"I can't believe you gave him all my information. How about a little loyalty, West?"

West chuckled, and Casey spoke up. Apparently, I'd been on speaker phone. "Jax, I think it's cute that you ran into your childhood crush after all these years. And just so you know—I send him a Christmas card every year. Only him. No wife, no girlfriend."

"Well, then there's obviously something wrong with him, Case. If West can find a wife by this age, Carter Summers certainly should have."

"I saw pictures, Jax – he's gorgeous." She continued.

"What is it with the women in my life and Carter Summers?" West interrupted, before taking me off speaker. "Ok, Jax. Ignore him if you want, but he sounded pretty eager to see you again."

"I've got a lot going on, West. I can't just start a fling with Carter Summers."

I absent-mindedly flipped through a home improvement magazine, thinking I needed to find something to keep myself occupied.

"You've got absolutely nothing going on, Jaxon. And you could probably use the distraction."

"West, I—"

"Oh! What's that?" he made fake static noises.

"West!"

"Can't hear you Jax! Sorry! I really wanted to hear your witty comeback! Love you, bye!" He faked static a little

longer and then hung up on me.

---

The unfortunate timing wasn't lost on me. West's unsolicited opinions aside, I did have a lot going on. Sure, it was mostly internal turmoil mumbo jumbo, but what was I supposed to do? Have coffee with Carter Summers and confess mid-small talk that I was both mentally and reproductively a fucking mess?

No. That could not happen. Not with Carter, not with anyone. I didn't have the emotional bandwidth.

I called Cindy. I was certain she'd know what to do.

"Cindy," I responded when she picked up. "I have a boy-mergency."

I practically heard her ears perk up through the phone line.

"A *boy-mergency*?" She asked, intrigued. "Well, Jaxon Samantha – that is very good news."

"Yeah, I'm not sure I'd classify this as good news. Please come immediately."

---

Cindy showed up at my front door about an hour later, carrying a bouquet of California poppies. In her mind, there was nothing strange about buying flowers for a girlfriend. Quite the opposite. Ninety percent of all the flowers I'd received in my life had come from Cindy in times of heartbreak or turmoil.

"Tell me everything." She plopped herself down on my couch and unbuttoned her slacks.

"Do you remember Carter Summers?"

She sat up immediately, leaning her elbows on her knees and resting her chin in her hands.

"Do I remember Carter-six feet of teenage dreamboat-Summers? Carter-ocean blue eyes and dirty blonde hair-

Summers? Carter-propelled a Jaxon Cassidy into puberty-Summers? Uh, yeah. Of fucking course I remember Carter Summers.”

I immediately regretted calling her over.

“I ran into him.”

“You *ran into* him?” She smirked, “Please tell me you mean that in the literal sense.”

“Yeah, and no – not in the literal sense. I ran into him at the animal hospital.”

“What were you doing at the animal hospital?” She asked.

“Prince Henry got sick.”

“Your fish?”

“Yes – asshole. My fish. He’s my,” I remembered Carter’s words, “you know, he’s my gill baby.” I smiled.

“What the fuck is a gill baby?”

“It’s like – you know – when you have pets instead of kids.”

Cindy wasn’t the maternal type, not for human kids and not for animal kids. She opened her mouth to make a smart-ass remark and then seemed to think better of it.

“Ok. So, what happened with Prince Henry? Is he ok?”

“Yeah, he’s fine. But that isn’t the big story here. The big story is that Carter Summers attended to him. I think he’s Prince Henry’s pediatrician now.”

“Jax, I think pediatricians are just for kids.”

“Yeah, and Prince Henry is basically a baby, so ...” I scoffed. “Anyway. He reached out to West and asked for my contact info.”

Her eyes lit up. This salacious news is exactly what brought her here.

“And? Did West give it to him?”

“Obviously. West couldn’t mind his own business to save his life.”

“So, has he called?” She asked, prodding me to get to the point.

“No. And even if he does, I have no intention of seeing him again.”

“That’s stupid. You’re on vacation and you have absolutely nothing better to do than live out your childhood fantasies.”

“I’m not here on vacation.”

“Yeah, no shit, Jaxon. It’s a euphemism.” She rolled her eyes. “All I’m saying is, a little bit of fun wouldn’t kill you. It might help for you to get out of your head for a little while.”

“I’m totally fine,” I snapped. “I don’t need to get out of my head, whatever that means.”

“It means you’re going through it. The surgery, the breakup with Jason, it’s a lot to get over. Carter Summers seems like he’d be a perfect bridge.” She wriggled her eyebrows suggestively.

“I don’t need a bridge. And I don’t need to complicate things by throwing another boy into the mix.”

“Oh! Ok. Cool. You’ve got it all figured out! My mistake. I didn’t realize you called me here just so you could talk yourself around and around with the pleasure of an audience.” She paused for me to respond and continued talking when I didn’t. “Listen, for what it’s worth, I think you should give him a chance. He’s Carter Summers. He’s legendary. You really wanna pass this up?”

---

Nervous energy dictates that I yank out strands of my hair when things get too stressful. It's a terrible habit I've had since I was a kid. In adulthood, I'd learned the magic of a ponytail is that it curtails this particular brand of crazy.

I tied my hair up in a ponytail.

I'm not a talker, nor do I believe in the mystical arts referred to as "therapy," but I took Dr. McAllister up on her offer for a therapist referral. She could see the reluctance on my face. She told me that this therapist was a friend from grad school and promised it wouldn't be lame. I figured, what did I have to lose? This shit couldn't possibly get any worse.

The therapist, Dr. Nancy, had an admittedly comfortable couch, which was a cliché all on its own. Nancy is her last name, which I feel I must point out because when I first heard her name, I was immediately turned off. I thought she might be a hippie doctor who insisted on being called by her title and first name. Nope. Her name was Dr. Agatha Nancy.

She was ok, as far as shrinks go. She took some basic notes on family and medical history; no mom, one dad, one brother, and a bit of bad fucking luck. She lost me on the second visit when she focused too much on breathing exercises. She told me that when I started to feel panicked or upset, I could practice "intentional breathing," whatever the fuck that means, and it would help me recenter myself.

I didn't make a third appointment. There had to be more to mental health than sitting still and breathing. I decided I could probably figure it out on my own.

But as I sat there with Cindy that day, tying my hair into a ponytail, I caught myself listening to the sound of my own inhale and exhale. It focused me, so I did it again, this time more ... intentionally. I started to calm down, and suddenly "intentional breathing" seemed a little less like bullshit.

Maybe Dr. Nancy was on to something after all.

---

“Jax? Jax? Are you ok?” Cindy’s voice sounded distant, and the room looked blurry, and I realized we’d been having a conversation before I drifted off.

“Yeah. Sorry. I just – spaced out.”

“You mean, disassociated? Has that been happening a lot lately?” She sounded concerned.

“Ok, Dr. Phil. I have no idea what that means.”

“It means you go somewhere in your head when the stuff happening in your life is too difficult to process.”

“Uh,” I chuckled nervously. “I don’t think it’s that serious. I just get distracted sometimes and I drift off. You know how it is. It’s not a big deal.”

“Actually, I *don’t* know how it is. And I do think it’s a big deal. Have you been seeing the therapist your doctor recommended?”

“Yeah, but I don’t really know if it was my kind of thing. She mostly talked about how to breathe – which – I think I’ve got figured out.”

She narrowed her eyes, looking past what I was saying, trying to find the truth. “Can I speak freely?” She asked cautiously.

“I guess.”

“You’re not the bad shit that happens to you.” She paused for a few tense moments. “That’s it. You’re not the bad shit that happens to you. You’re not the sum of your misfortunes. You’re a collection of beautiful moments and grandiose experiences, and a life told through pictures, and this – crap hand you’ve been dealt, it’s just that. It’s a crap hand. It doesn’t define who you are or how you live your life. And it sure as shit doesn’t get to be a factor in whether you let Carter Summers take you out for coffee or lunch, or whatever. Ok?”



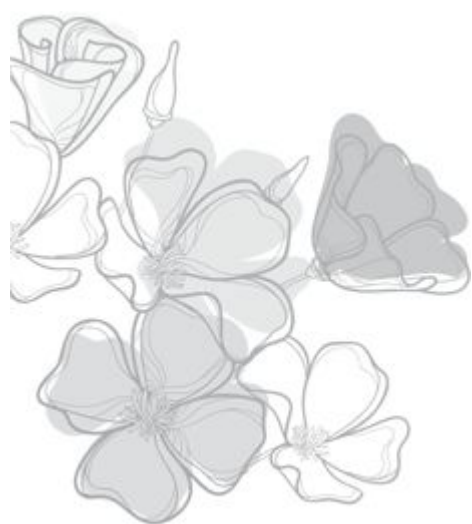
I wished she'd written it down. I wanted to read it again later, when I was alone, and let it cauterize itself onto my heart, so I'd remember when I needed it most.

*I'm not the bad shit that happens to me.*

As if by divine intervention, just as she was gathering her things to leave, my phone started to ring. She picked it up, knowing I wouldn't.

“Hey, this is Jax's phone.” She paused for a response. “Carter Summers! From high school? Well, I'll be damned. Yup, she's right here. Hold on a sec.”

She handed me the phone and quietly saw herself out, winking at me as she closed the front door.



## Ten in the Morning

CARTER SUMMERS insisted I let him take me to brunch. When he offered, I couldn't fathom what that might look like. I'm a late dinner and dark liquor sort of girl. Brunch at ten in the morning isn't exactly my idea of a dream date.

But this wasn't a date.

I'd like to say I couldn't remember the last time I was up and put together at that hour, but that was no longer true. Doctors appointments are best done in the morning, so that you have the rest of the day to be somber about them. This early morning outing, however, would surely be more fun than doctors appointments.

My wardrobe was fairly limited to thread-bare t-shirts and jeans. Carefree as my wardrobe tended to be, though, this was Carter Summers. This occasion called for a little effort. A splash of color in my outfit and a bit of makeup on my face.

Three months before my birthday, I was in Rome at three in the morning. I was drunk and taking pictures of the city in the last clean shirt I had. I fell into a famous fountain with my drinking buddy. Taking pictures of oneself in front of fountains whilst intoxicated is not wise. I woke up the next morning thanking the universe that at least my bra was dry. I zipped my leather jacket over it and made my way down to a charming boutique I'd passed every day on the way to my hotel. I bought a purple blouse. It was a low-slung scoop neck and a three-quarter sleeve; I know this because the lady working that morning told me that a low-cut scoop neck and three-quarter

sleeve would accentuate my gorgeous collarbone while hiding my boney arms.

Purple was sufficiently colorful, and that blouse looked great with my last pair of clean jeans. When deciding on shoes, I always consult the memory of Cindy in my head saying, ‘if you won’t buy proper shoes, boots are always more dressy than high-top Converse; and for church, funerals, or weddings you can probably get away with flats.’

I grabbed the pair of black suede booties I’d also purchased on that trip. No one would ever accuse me of being stylish – but that’s a great pair of shoes.

No outfit is complete without oversized sunglasses to protect me from the daylight, and the leather jacket that decidedly tells people I don’t give a shit. I grabbed both and made my way to a little café that Carter swore had the best crêpes in all of California.

---

“I’ll take a tall stack of pancakes and the breakfast platter with bacon. OH! And milk, please. Thank you.” I smiled at the waitress. If being out at ten in the morning sucked for me, it probably sucked for her, too. She had that sort of disposition.

“You should have ordered the crêpes,” Carter commented judgmentally.

“I don’t eat crêpes,” I responded.

“You say that with a lot of conviction, considering ...”

“Considering?”

“Considering it’s just breakfast.”

“Well—I’m not a snob. So I just eat regular sized pancakes, not super flimsy thin ones.” I tried not to smile.

“Judgmental, much? Also, crêpes are an adult food. Pancakes are for children.”

“I’m definitely an adult,” I snapped back, “just not a snobby one. And I thought this was brunch.”

“It’s brunch for normal people, but I can tell ten in the morning is pretty early for you – so let’s just call it breakfast.” He smiled, keeping his eyes focused on mine.

Adult Carter looked a lot like teenage Carter. It wasn’t like that day at the animal hospital when he’d been all dressed up. He wore dark blue jeans, a white cotton Henley, and worn-down leather boots.

Seventeen-year-old Carter dressed similarly, but back then it was baseball shirts and checkered Vans. His hair was a little darker. It had been blonder back then, but his smile was still the same and his eyes were still distracting.

“What are you thinking about?” He asked, as I continued to pretend not to stare at him.

“I was just remembering teenage Carter.”

“Well, if you remember anything interesting, please feel free to share.”

*Everything I remembered about him was interesting.*

“Oh, Carter.” I grinned. “You weren’t that interesting.”

“You’re still kind of an asshole, so that’s cute.” He smiled, seemingly charmed by my verbal judo.

One of the last times I’d seen him, he was eighteen and leaving for basic training. We were at a graduation party, which Dad forced West to take me to after I lied about finding cigarettes in his room. I knew he’d make West take me along if it might keep him out of trouble. I wanted to be wherever West was, because he was older and cooler and about to move clear across the country.

The guy throwing the party was rich. His parents owned a vineyard on several acres of land. Part of living in the boring

bit of California is that all the cool parties are either at a river or someone's farm. In Green Valley, that river was Arroyo Seco, and that guy was Beau McSherrie. His house was up on a hilltop overlooking miles of grape vines. It looked like it was made mostly of dark wood and glass windows. I remember hating home a little less that night, because I could see every star in the sky.

I stood on a balcony with Carter talking about constellations because he was about to leave, and I wasn't ready to say goodbye. He called me a nerd but for a moment, I swear I caught him being interested in everything I had to say. The moment faded into the night's end, and I was sure I'd never see him again. Just as I began to feel the ache of my heart breaking, he leaned in and kissed me under that starlit sky.

That's a secret no one knew, except for me and the guy who sat opposite me at breakfast. It was probably why he kept smiling.

"So – what's new? Update me on the last twelve years." I broke the silence with an abrupt subject change.

"Smooth transition, Jax."

"Yeah, I'm known for that. But, you said you wanted to catch up, so ... catch me up."

He'd done his obligatory three years of military service and then Uncle Sam paid for him to go to college. While he was in school, he volunteered at an animal shelter and decided that helping fur-folk was his calling. He said a lot more, but I only remember a small amount. That's because of his eyes. Or his crooked smile. Or some deadly combination of the two. He wanted to hear more about me, but I was the last thing I wanted to talk about.

"Oh, you know. It's all very mundane."

“I doubt that very much,” he prodded. “Is it true you took that *Rolling Stone* cover of Fi—”

“Shh,” I stopped him, “Don’t say his name. You’ll call down the thunder and lightning and groupies.” He looked at me like he couldn’t be sure if I was kidding. I smiled. “And yes, it’s true.”

“You dated him.” It was more an accusation than a question. He knew. He’d probably seen it on the internet.

“I loved him,” I clarified.

“Loved him? That’s a little dramatic,” he teased.

I’d been accused of being dramatic more than once in my life, but how could I live without some level of drama? Dramatics are on brand for artists in general, and in particular for musicians. Without the dramatics, how can you bring the world to tears with a single lyric?

“Yeah, well. You don’t land the cover of *Rolling Stone* without a little drama,” I shrugged. “But sure, I guess you could oversimplify it to dramatics.”

I smiled like his comment hadn’t slightly wounded my ego. He’d called me ‘a little dramatic’ once before when we were young. I asked him if he would write to me, and maybe-kinda-sorted insinuated that I might love him. But what the fuck can you possibly know about love when you’re fifteen, right?

The memory glimmered across my eyes, and I knew he noticed. His eyebrows furrowed as he searched his mind for something to say that might make me feel better about how I felt before I was old enough to know any better.

“I didn’t mean to—”

“I know.” I smiled again, mustering more authenticity. “It’s ok. I was at NYU when we met. He was all – messy black

hair, big brown eyes, and an unapologetic British accent. He wrote the most gorgeous strings of words and when he sang them, he made me sad in a way that made me love the sadness. I loved everything about him. And then I took that picture and I guess the world decided they loved him too.”

I laughed because there was a deeper truth to that love story. It’s forever memorialized in songs and photos I’ll never get away from. It felt like everyone in the world already knew, but it was still too depressing to talk about over breakfast.

“Not the whole world,” he noted. “Honestly, he always seemed like a pretentious asshole to me.”

I smiled, remembering how Finn always considered ‘pretentious’ a compliment. “He was a lot of things. ‘Pretentious’ is just the thing that made him famous.”

He sipped his coffee and tried not to look too charmed. “I didn’t know you liked that sort of thing.”

“Oh Carter. You could fill a library with the things you don’t know about me.” I winked, because it seemed like that cliché of a moment when winking is appropriate. “Can we talk about one of your ex-girlfriends now?”

“Yes.” He nodded. “Get cozy while I tell you all about the dreaded Emily, longtime girlfriend turned cautionary tale.”

Carter’s story about Emily was longer and more involved than what I’d been willing to divulge about Finn. He met her in college, and she was tall, blonde, and rich. I imagined she probably looked like the girl version of Carter. She surfed, because she’d grown up in San Diego. He studied philosophy, and she was pre-med, and that meant he’d never be good enough in her parents’ eyes.

The final straw was when they started talking about marriage. She went out and bought herself an engagement ring befitting a girl of her upbringing. She was certain she’d done



him a favor, since this was a ring he never could have afforded on his own.

“Wow.” I said, shocked into near silence.

“Yeah. Pretty bad, huh?” He chuckled.

“Just a bit.”

“So how did it end with ...” Carter hesitated to say his name.

“Oh, you know. Life.” I thought distantly to a moment I actively kept locked in the recesses of my mind.

“That is ... painfully vague,” he laughed. “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.”

“Well ...” I searched for a string of words to tell him the truth, but not the whole of it. “We both went around the world, but in different directions. We called and wrote and did video chats. Then we called a little less, and the video chats got a little sadder. The months went by, and the time differences got longer. One day I was in Australia, and he was in California. It was three in the morning for him, and he was still a little drunk from a show. He told me his heart was too broken to keep trying to love me from the opposite side of the world.”

“Wow, that’s,” he clicked his tongue to the roof of his mouth, and I could see he was trying not to say the wrong thing. “That’s really fucking sad.”

“Yeah, he was all sad eyes and tired hair, looking at me through his phone screen like he just wanted to reach out and touch me. And then two perfect double D breasts emerged onto his screen from behind him,” I laughed. “And a girl a lot prettier than me, with distinctly sex smudged eyeliner, asked him to shut off the light so she could go back to sleep.”

“Fucking, *ouch*.” He tried not to laugh.

“Fucking ouch, indeed.” I rolled my eyes at the recollection. “He meant it though – the part about being heartbroken. But as it turns out, heartbreak isn’t an ailment you can cure with perfect double D’s. And there’s a whole album of songs I still can’t listen to, to prove it.”

He looked at me with sorry eyes, as if to say he’d never treat me that way. He held it for half a second before deciding to lighten the mood.

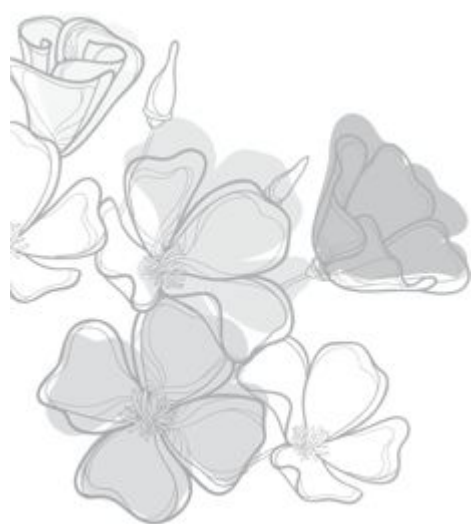
“So. Sex-smudged eyeliner, huh? That’s a thing?”

“Not for me. But for anyone who bothers with eyeliner – yeah – that’s a thing.”

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Ten in the morning made a smooth transition into afternoon as we continued to talk about our lives. When we could see that the waitress was tired of asking if we needed anything else, I insisted on paying the check and he walked me to the car I’d been borrowing from my dad. Before I could shut the driver’s side door, he had a bright idea.

“What about ice cream?” he proposed, nudging his head toward the shops just a block away. “I’m not quite ready to say goodbye.”



# Things You Can't Take Back

**WE** WALKED together licking ice cream as he kept 'accidentally' bumping his shoulder into mine. He told jokes so dumb you can't help but laugh, and as I caught my breath, I tried to remember the last time I'd laughed so hard.

In a moment of boldness, he looked over at me the way I'd always wished he would when I was a teenager.

"You know, if you were mine, I'd never hurt you like that."

"How do you mean?" I asked, still calming down from a fit of laughter.

"The double D's."

I could have been his. He had no idea of the ease with which he could have had me ten years earlier if only he'd tried. I hadn't seen Finn in a long time, but I still felt defensive of him. I still felt defensive of us. No one would ever know what it was like when we were together, and so no one could ever really understand what it felt like when we fell apart.

"If we're being honest, though, you don't really know what you'd do in that situation. People cope differently. Some people enlist the help of perfect breasts, and others minimize important moments as 'little girl crushes' and call you dramatic as they leave town to join the military."

"Wow, been hanging on to that one for a while now, haven't we?" It was a low blow; one I saw in the flicker of regret in his eyes. "Touché."

“Sorry. I’m a little,” I started to smile, “some people say I’m a little dramatic.”

“Who would ever say that?” He laughed before moving on. “So, do you guys keep in touch? Do you ever see him?” He asked curiously.

“Why the interest in my love life, Carter?” He was starting to ask questions I didn’t want to answer.

“It’s a general interest in you, Jaxon.”

My stomach tightened at the thought of Carter having a ‘general interest’ in me after all these years.

“No, we don’t actively keep in touch. But we do see each other sometimes. Usually at festivals or award shows. You know how it is.”

He laughed. “Your brother said you do that.”

“Do what?”

“Nonchalantly talk about your life like everyone knows what it’s like to be you.”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s not as glamorous as it seems.”

“So, when you see him, is it weird?”

“Nah. It’s always pretty friendly. It’s been a while since we were together. Almost four years. I think there are some connections that are hard to break though, so we’re always friendly when we see each other. He greets me with a sweaty hug and tells me he’s happy to see me doing well. He’ll grab my camera and snap a few shots of the two of us together, and then he’ll rush off with a groupie.”

“He sounds regretful,” he noted sarcastically.

“He probably is, honestly. But there are some things you can’t take back, and some loves you can’t go home to. The last

time I saw him, it was brief and mostly superficial. When's the last time you saw the dreaded Emily?"

He thought for a moment before answering. "The last I saw Emily was in a newspaper. Wedding announcement. Heart surgeon, I think. It was a picture of them with her parents. Her dad looked ecstatic, and her ring was enormous, so I guess she got everything she ever wanted."

"If I didn't know you any better, Carter, I'd say that sounded a little bitter."

"Well, there's a backstory, and brace yourself, because it's a scandal!" He lifted four fingers to his lips like he wasn't supposed to talk about it. "She called me during her bachelorette party. She was crying, saying she wished things were different, and she wanted to see me."

"Wow. Did you go see her?"

"Nah. It's like you said, you know? Some things you can't take back. I told her she was just nervous, and this is what she wanted. The big wedding, the rich husband, the status – all of it. She sniffled a little but agreed I was right. She apologized for calling, and that's the last I heard from her. A few days later, I saw that picture in the newspaper and figured she was where she wanted to be."

---

We sat together in the sand, looking out at the Pacific, in silent retrospect of the (frankly) exhausting string of conversations we'd just had. After several minutes of silence, he asked me about work.

I told him about a time I'd grown particularly close to an indie-folk band, and they invited me on tour with them. I talked about the many places I'd seen, and how the only constant is the way music moves people. The crying girls in the front row, the lighters and cell phone flashlights that look like stars in a big crowd during the perfect slow song.

“Seems like that kind of life makes it sort of hard to settle down and grow up,” he said, interrupting my train of thought.

The insinuation that I wasn't a grown up, jolted me. I supposed it might seem that way to someone who worked in an office with a steady schedule.

“I guess that all just depends on your definition of ‘grown up.’ I'm pretty grown. My life just looks a little different than most.”

“Fair enough. So, what, are you just here on vacation? You're not trying to settle down?”

*Settle down.*

I hate that phrase. It implies your life can't be settled unless you're living the cookie cutter version of adulthood.

“Just needed a break, I guess.” Like so much of what I'd already divulged, it was the truth, just not the whole of it.

“Huh,” he mused as he twiddled a broken seashell between his fingers, “that's a half-truth if I've ever heard one.”

“You think so?”

“Absolutely. There's got to be more to the story, but you insist on being mysterious. Don't worry. I'll wait a few more dates before I press the issue any further.”

“A few more dates? Aren't you getting a little ahead of yourself?”

“Oh, please,” he laughed.

And just like that, we were blanketed in awkward silence. We'd run out of things to say. Not to be outdone by stillness, he rubbed his hands up and down the knees of his jeans, and he asked me to see a movie with him.

---

When I was sixteen and Carter was nineteen, he came home for Christmas. He came to our house to visit West, also

home on a break. They hung out in West's room all day, playing video games and talking about girls. Dad fed them pizza and beer, because 'if Carter's old enough to serve his country, he's old enough for a brewski!'

The night ended with West going to a party and Carter saying he needed to get home. He lingered around the doorway to my bedroom as West ran past him, saying goodbye on his way out.

I pretended not to see him. I lay on my back with a book directly above me, and a giant set of headphones covering my ears. He walked into my room and sat down at the foot of my bed, lifting my legs and draping them across his lap. He leaned over the edge of the bed and pulled something out of his messenger bag, placing it on my lap.

A vinyl record. *What's the Story (Morning Glory)*, by Oasis. My favorite album. I used to listen to it every day, crying over lyrics I could feel in my soul.

I took my headphones off. "What's this?" I asked him.

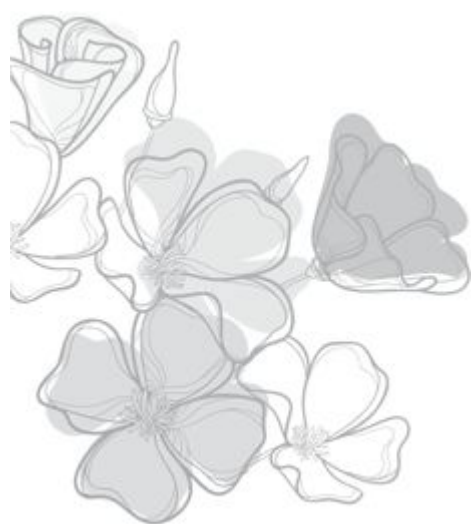
He responded, "Oh, you know. I figured you'd worn out your CD listening to "Wonderwall" on repeat." He bought it in London. He knew I always wanted to go there, just like he knew Oasis was my favorite band.

He stood up and said he really did have to get home, and I stood up too. I hugged him, thanking him for the record. He lingered in the embrace longer than would have been acceptable to my brother. Before letting go, he asked in a whisper if he could take me to the movies. I nodded 'yes' into the crook of his neck and he kissed me on the forehead before leaving.

He never took me to that movie.

Better late than never, I supposed.





# A River Party

GRADUATED from high school when I was seventeen. Why is that relevant? It's relevant insofar as ten-year reunions are relevant. Not to me, of course, but to my friends who I can never say no to.

I understood that these sorts of events were supposed to happen right around graduation time, but what do I know about throwing a ten-year reunion? The genius (and I use that term with a full force of sarcasm) that is Cherrie McSherrie (yes, that's her real name) decided that the best Green Valley High School reunions happen at the outset of July. According to the reunion newsletter, authored by the lovely Miss McSherrie: "July is for parades, and rodeos, and carnivals, and FUN!" Since ten-year reunions obviously fall into the category of 'FUN' ours also needed to be in July.

It's not a short trip to Green Valley. It takes five hours to get there from Malibu, so ours would be a weekend trip. Cherrie McSherrie, who had been a good friend of Cindy's back in high school, graciously offered us her guestroom. A convenient perk, considering there was only one good hotel in the small town, and it was sure to be overrun by former classmates.

I wish I'd had the foresight to tell Cindy and Lizzie that it was still too soon post-surgery for five-hour road trips. I didn't think that far ahead. I'd made the mistake of telling them that Dr. McAllister had cleared me for car rides, just in case I wanted to get away for the 4<sup>th</sup> of July holiday. Dr. McAllister

was under the impression that ‘a little bit of fun’ would be good for the healing process.

That’s how I ended up on a road trip back to the Salad Bowl with my friends. The worst of it was not the reunion. Don’t get me wrong, reunions are bad enough on their own, but this reunion was also a river party.

River parties. Because you’re never too old to pretend you’re too young.

Cherrie McSherrie never bothered with leaving our hometown. That might sound bitchy, and it is a little, but if I were Cherrie, I wouldn’t have left either. The McSherrie family were royalty throughout the Salinas Valley. McSherrie Vineyard employed a good portion of the people who lived in the cluster of small towns between Green Valley and Salinas. Headquartered in Green Valley itself, McSherrie Vineyard also supplied much of the community revenue. The family home, aptly named McSherrie Manor, sat atop a large hillside overlooking acres of grapevines as far as the eye could see. In fact, that balcony in the big fancy house where Carter and I shared our first kiss? You guessed it. McSherrie Manor.

Cindy caught us up on all things McSherrie during our long drive. Beau McSherrie, Cherrie’s older brother and former classmate of West and Carter, stayed behind after his own graduation to learn the family business. Ten short years later and he now runs the place. Cherrie was their head of marketing. She was in the middle of planning a very expensive wedding to a local politician, Gary Waterson, who was rumored to be running for mayor in the next term. Nothing could be more fitting than the future Mrs. Cherrie McSherrie-Waterson being the first lady of Green Valley.

“Cherrie just texted asking for our ETA,” Cindy noted from the front seat. “We’re going to her place first to get changed before the reunion. She’s so excited to see you girls!”

I rolled my eyes. Neither Lizzie or I had ever been on Cherrie McSherrie's radar in high school.

“What's that about, Jax?” Cindy asked, apparently having caught my eye roll in the rearview mirror. “She's genuinely excited to see you. She wants to hear all about life as a music photographer.”

“Oh, and I'm just dying to tell her. You know how much I love girl-talk!”

“Be nice, Jaxon.” Even as she said it, Lizzie looked back, giving me a knowing smirk.

“Sounds like her life is still picture perfect.” I said, staring out at the perfect alignment of lush green lettuce fields.

We'd finally arrived in the valley.

“No one's life is perfect, Jax. You're such a snob,” Cindy responded. “Please tell me you brought something appropriate to wear.”

“Yeah. More jeans and t-shirts. Oh, and clean underwear.”

“Is that really what you plan to wear to the reunion?” Cindy continued glaring at me through the rearview.

“Yes, that's exactly what I plan to wear to this ten-year reunion kegger on the river. Sorry, I left my cocktail dress in my other suitcase, along with my other personality.”

“Well, not to worry,” she said with a devilish grin. “I've got plenty of cocktail dresses in my closet, and I packed one for you.”

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As it turns out, the reunion wasn't actually on the river. It was at some liquor scented lodge overlooking the river. Everyone was there – the valedictorian, the head cheerleader, the quarterback whose virtue was stolen by Cindy. Our school colors were prominent in streamers and flowers made of

tissue. For a second, I thought I might be drowning in a parade float.

Pictures adorned the walls all around us. Our teenage selves memorialized in photo collage after photo collage. I found one of Cindy, Lizzie and me. Cindy in a short plaid skirt, Lizzie with her cardigan and a book tucked at her side, and me in a pair of torn jeans and a Radiohead t-shirt. I gently traced the tattered edges with my finger, worried the photo might dissolve at any moment. I thought about the simplicity of catching a person's soul in a photo.

That faded picture of us told the truth of who we really were. Time evolves you, but at your core, you are who you've always been. We'd always be those girls. The fashionista, the book worm, and the outcast. We do everything we can to convince ourselves we are bigger and better than we were at seventeen, but we're the same. We just have more money and better versions of the same clothes.

I picked invisible lint balls off the skin-tight dress Cindy forced me into in Cherrie McSherrie's newly remodeled bathroom. I wished to God I was wearing a pair of torn jeans and a Radiohead t-shirt instead.

"Well Jaxon Samantha Cassidy, aren't you just the prettiest little sight for sore eyes." I recognized the fake southern accent of the devil incarnate – Tuesday Salcedo.

A barely there and completely contrived southern accent is a thing you hear sometimes when you live in a farming community. Girls who live on ranches and ride horses and wear pink cowboy boots to cliché river parties are a staple in Green Valley. Tuesday Salcedo wasn't nearly that authentic. She had always been her own special variety of fake. I've been wondering since the first grade who names their kid after a day of the week and been waiting just as long for Tuesday to get her comeuppance.

‘Comeuppance’ is the kind of word you only use when talking about your arch nemesis; as is the phrase ‘arch nemesis.’ Tuesday’s last name used to be Carat. Her dad was a bull rider from Omaha, but Bucky “No Buck” Carat would never settle down in a town like Green Valley. He bailed before Tuesday’s mom ever found out she was pregnant. Her mom eventually married Mr. Salcedo, a well-off local seed vendor. He adopted Tuesday when we were in the fourth grade, turning her frankly ridiculous name into one that rolled off the tongue a little easier.

They should have moved her closer to the back of the class with the other S’s, but the teachers had grown accustomed to sitting her right next to me. There she stayed, right behind me, all the way up to the last class of our senior year. Every day, with the contrived accent she’d learned from her new dad, she spilled poisoned sugar into my ear. Boys don’t like girls who only wear ripped up pants, and why did I think I was so much smarter than everyone else? Boys don’t like that either.

Suffice it to say, it did not surprise me to turn around and find twenty-seven-year-old Tuesday was just as smug as she’d always been. She greeted me with a malevolent smirk as she cradled her very pregnant belly in her perfectly manicured hands.

“Look at you, honey! You’ve finally learned how to dress yourself!”

“And look at you! You’ll finally have someone to pass on that fake ass accent to, *honey*.”

“Oh Jax!” Cherrie interrupted, “She’s just kidding. Come on, now!” She put an arm around Tuesday’s shoulder, squeezing it tightly and asserting her alpha female dominance. “Tuesday, Jax is back home for a few months. She’s taken a break from her jet setting just in time for the reunion!”

Tuesday looked down self-consciously at her ring finger. “Beau and I are married now. My ring just doesn’t fit on account of the swelling.”

“Ahh. So, Tuesday McSherrie then? How nice for you,” I said through gritted teeth.

“It really is nice for me. And what about you? I’d heard a rumor somewhere that you dated Finn Hendricks. Didn’t he die from an overdose or something?”

Cherrie squeezed her shoulder again, silently reminding her of her place.

“Or something.” I smiled wider, “But we don’t name drop for clout. Only groupies do that.”

“He won a Grammy, right Jax?” Cherrie stepped in, surprising me with an assist. “For that song he wrote for you?”

“For that *album* he wrote for her,” Cindy corrected. A great girlfriend is as good, if not better, than a bulletproof vest. “You’ll never guess who she’s dating these days, though,” Cindy continued.

“No, I’m really not, we just—” I tried to stop her before she finished her thought.

“Carter Summers,” she blurted out. “Didn’t you used to have a little crush on him, Tuesday?”

Tuesday’s smirk twisted downward into a sour pout. I forgave Cindy for her exaggeration of my newly re-formed friendship with Carter.

“Oh, you’re dating Carter? That’s – wow,” she stumbled her words, “So nice. Beau and I keep in touch on Facebook, but we haven’t heard from him in ages.” She chuckled uncomfortably.

“Oh, yeah?” Cindy started back in. “Funny, he actually reached out to West, asking for her number because he wanted

to get back in touch. Romantic, huh? But I'm sure you're swimming in romance, being married to Beau McSherrie and all."

Just when I didn't think she could frown any harder, she did. A heartbeat later, she recalibrated, refusing to show cracks in her plaster.

"Well, good for you, Jaxon. Ya'll will make the prettiest little babies." She rubbed her own pregnant belly and sighed with relief when she heard her husband's voice greet us from behind her.

I was relieved too, because there's nothing quite like a strong male presence to slow down baby talk.

"You aren't pickin' on my little sister's friends, are you, baby?" Beau McSherrie winked at us. He knew he'd married Satan, but pickin's were slim.

"Just a little friendly girl talk, baby. I'll go get you a drink." Tuesday kissed him on the cheek and penguin-sauntered away, as only a person nine months pregnant could.

"Jax Cassidy. We did not expect to see you here." Beau stayed behind for a little girl talk of his own. "Last time I talked to your brother, he told me you were in Europe, doin' – whatever it is photographers do."

*Not condescending at all.*

"Taking pictures?" I offered.

"Yeah, that." He side-eyed Cindy, "Hey Cin."

Beau always had a crush on Cindy, though everyone knew she only had eyes for West. My hometown was like a poorly written Shakespeare comedy.

"Hey Beau," Cindy responded. "Still married to the devil, I see."



“Oh, c’mon now. You know she’s a poor man’s Cindy. If you’d have me, I’d still be your guy.” His sister nudged him forcefully in his side with her elbow. He laughed like adultery was just another part of everyday life in Green Valley.

“You don’t look like a poor man to me, Beau McSherrie. I heard you were hosting the after party. Or is that just a nasty rumor?”

“Oh, well, Cin, you know me. The nasty rumors are *always* true. I’m hosting up at McSherrie Manor. Our folks are in Paris for a few weeks, so Tuesday and I have been house sitting. Nothing says old high school days like throwing a party at your parent’s house!”

“Well, count us in. I love a good after party.” Cindy smiled again and looped her arm with mine, turning us toward our table.

There was something distinctly yucky about Cindy flirting with a married man. Even yuckier was Beau McSherrie’s blatant lack of any and all respect for his wife, no matter how horrible she might be. I made sure to say so, on our way to his stupid after party.

Cindy said she knew it was yucky, but Tuesday deserved it for her little comment about having babies. Cherrie couldn’t know the significance of Cindy’s words, but she still sweetly agreed. She said it was no one’s business if or when I had babies, least of all Tuesday’s, and that she was just being a bitch, anyway.

I felt instantly horrible for having bad-mouthed her all the way there from Malibu.

We went back to Cherrie’s for some necessities, and I changed back into my regular self. We all packed into Cherrie’s SUV and headed up the hill to her parents’ house. We hung around McSherrie Manor for several hours, and all the old popular kids drank the McSherrie’s booze like it was

still illegal. It wasn't long before I found myself on the patio deck, once again looking up at the starry sky.

I tried not to think about Tuesday Salcedo's prediction that Carter and I would make the cutest little babies. We wouldn't. Not now, not a year from now, not ever.

How disappointed would Carter be when the truth was finally divulged to him? I didn't owe him any of my secrets, and I still wasn't comfortable sharing that one with him, but my omission was starting to feel like lying. Freefalls down the anxiety rabbit hole happen quickly. The unsteadiness of indecision began to grab hold of my thoughts when a vibration in my pocket brought me back to reality. 'Dr. Summers' flashed at the top of my screen, with a picture of Carter snuggled up with his loveable dog, Pepper.

"Doctor Summers." I answered, the smile apparent in my voice.

"Jaxon Samantha. What are you up to?"

"Not a damn thing. How about you?"

"I was just thinking about doing some competitive bowling. Would you like to be the sacrificial loser?"

I wondered if I stole Cherrie's expensive car, how fast it could get me back to Malibu.

"Sadly, I can't do it."

"You hate losing that badly, huh?"

"I wouldn't be the loser. I'm a fantastic bowler. Sadly, I'm not in town to prove it to you."

"You've up and left without even so much as a Dear John letter?"

I laughed. "Relax, drama king. I'm still in California."

"Ooh, I love riddles. Give me another clue."

I leaned both elbows on the patio ledge and looked down at the town lights, smirking irrepressibly.

“Ok. I’m still in California, and the last time I was standing where I’m standing right now, I got the kiss of a lifetime.”

“Umm. Are you with Finn Hendricks right now?” He whispered the name like a curse. I giggled like a schoolgirl.

“No. This kiss was even more legendary than any chronicled in song.”

“Really? Because I looked up the lyrics to that song about a night in San Francisco, and I’ve gotta say, I’ve never blushed so bright in my life.”

“Can’t claim that one, unfortunately. He and I never were in California at the same time.”

“Ok, I need another hint. I obviously don’t know enough about your kissing history to pinpoint your kisses of a lifetime.”

“Fine, but you’re going to feel ridiculous when you riddle this out.” I sat down in a large lounge chair and zipped up my jacket, protecting myself from the night cold. “I’m still in California, and the last time I was standing where I’m standing right now, I arrived in my brother’s car. Oh, and I was still wearing braces when I got the kiss of a lifetime.”

I heard what sounded like him bumping into a wall, and nearly choking on (or spitting out) whatever he was drinking. It finally dawned on him what I was talking about.

“Are you in – are you – you’re in–”

“Stumbling over words is a trait I find very charming, just so you know,” I chuckled.

“You’re in Green Valley. Of course you are. It’s your ten-year reunion. I’m such an idiot.”

“How’d you know it was my ten-year reunion?”

“I saw a picture of Beau McSherrie online with his wife under a ‘Welcome Back GVHS Alumni’ sign. He married a girl from your year. I don’t know if you knew her. She used to have a crush on me. It was super awkward.”

I felt a little triumphant at his use of the word ‘awkward.’

“Tuesday Salcedo?”

“Yeah, that’s the one. Do you know she left a pair of underwear in my locker once? I was a senior and West, that asshole, thought it was the funniest thing. He showed them to Beau and said they belonged to Cindy, because – you know – Beau always had a thing for Cindy. Beau kept the underwear in his gym locker for like three months or something.”

Nothing about this story surprised me. Not the part about Tuesday, and not the part about my brother, who was absolutely an asshole when he was younger. Only one question came to mind as I tried to process the absurdity of it all.

“Were they clean?” I asked.

“Jax! I don’t know! Why don’t you go ask Beau McSherrie? He definitely seems like a panty sniffer. Funny how they ended up married, huh?”

“Earlier tonight he told us Tuesday was a ‘poor man’s Cindy’.”

“Oh, jeez. Of course he did. He’s always been a prick.”

We sat silent on the phone for several thick seconds. I began to wonder if my cell connection had died when he finally broke the silence.

“I wish I were there,” he confessed. “I’d kiss you again.”

His words made my heart burst and my stomach fall into my shoes. For a second it felt like heaven until all at once

several negative thoughts came flooding into my consciousness.

I could never really keep Carter Summers. He deserved to have the ‘cutest little babies.’ But I sure as hell wanted him, even if just temporarily.

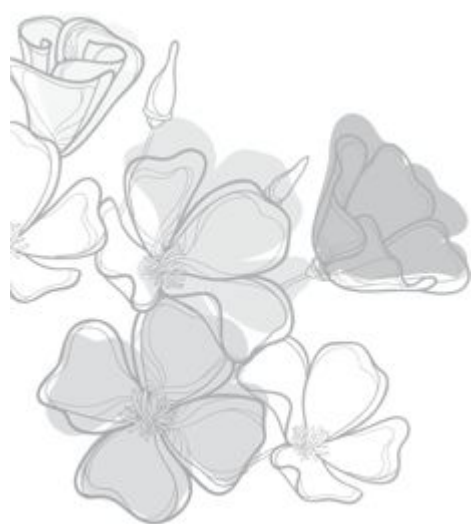
My worry turned bitter and cold as I wondered if this panic was what my therapist meant when she said keeping it all in would make me feel worse. Then he said my name, and the sound of it reverberating in my ear calmed me down.

“Jax? You still there?”

It would be ok. This would be ok.

“I’m here.” I cleared my throat. “And I’ll be back in a few days. Let’s you and I find a vineyard patio and figure it out then, yeah?”

“Yeah.”



# Teenage Dream

I WAS living in a teenage dream. The amount of attention Carter paid me left my head in a tailspin. I hadn't expected any of this when I drove to an animal hospital frantically trying to save the life of my sweet baby goldfish.

It didn't escape my notice, however, that this was the worst timing ever. I'd been counting down the days to full recovery so I could get back to work. Technically, I'd be clear by August, and Phil Hammersmith was chomping at the bits to have me back. He'd been in contact once or twice to get updates and let me know I was missed. He'd also mentioned that a few artists I regularly shot for had come around asking for me.

Phil was surprisingly supportive. He was always careful never to pry and asked frequently how I wanted him to spin the situation. I told him it might be a few more months, but I was eager to get back into it, and that it would likely be some time in the early fall.

Even though I was just weeks away from being cleared by Dr. McAllister, it didn't make sense to me to leave for two months just to return for my brother's wedding in October. When I left, I wanted to put it all in my rearview for a good long while.

There was just one six-foot-two strawberry blonde complication, and he was currently taking a shower in my bathroom.

When I returned from the reunion, Carter took me to the movies. Then Carter took me to dinner. Carter called the next day and Carter sent California poppies to my house. He'd been listening, and he knew they were the only flowers I liked.

It went on and on. He and his big lovable dog came to my house night after night and weekend after weekend. They sat around my living room listening to music and listening to me talk about music. Sometimes Carter would seem to just be staring at me, but then he'd contribute to the conversation to let me know he was still paying attention. He even listened to my top ten albums of all time.

We did things he liked, too. He was a movie snob, and I got a fair amount of judgment about all the movies I hadn't seen. Not just over the last several years, but over the span of my lifetime. I did watch movies, just not the movies he deemed the most important movies in cinema. I didn't like horror movies, old westerns, or movies in black and white. But I watched them. Every single one he recommended, and then I listened to him talk about the genius in the color palettes and the cinematography.

"How do you not like movies in black and white?" he asked one day. "Most of the pictures you've had published are in black and white."

"I don't know," I responded. "I just don't. My brain needs more."

"More of what?"

"More stuff. More color. More pop culture references. I'm sorry! I just can't do black and white movies. In fact, I don't even want to watch anything from before I was like twelve years old."

"Oh my goodness. It's worse than I thought. Your lack of cinematic appreciation is appalling," he waved me off, disappointed.



“I can’t relate! I like stuff that’s my own age.” I smiled cutely.

“I’m not your age, and you like me.”

“Maybe that’s why you like these old ass movies,” I teased, “Cause you’re too old. In fact, now that I think about it, maybe I *don’t* like you.”

He threw a decorative pillow at me, which I caught and threw back at him. It turned into a flirtatious pillow fight, which evolved into him kissing me breathlessly on the living room floor.

“Are you sure you don’t like me?” He asked in a whisper.

“Eh.” I shrugged. “More investigation is necessary,” I said, feigning a stoic disposition.

He leaned in to kiss me again.

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Lying awake tangled up with him at three in the morning was a dream that teenage me could never have fathomed. But something still itched at my brain. An existential dread in the pit of my stomach told me that perfect on paper doesn’t equate to perfect in real life—and yet, he was just so painfully perfect in both realms.

I didn’t know what to do. Most of the time, it felt right. It felt perfect. But sometimes, in the ungodly hours of the morning, I felt out of place – like I was a square peg in the round hole of his life. It didn’t fit, and I couldn’t pinpoint why. I could feel him getting more and more serious by the day, and I knew this was speeding in a direction I wouldn’t be able to reverse.

I got up to pee, and when I returned, he was awake, arms crossed behind his head, sleep confused but still painfully gorgeous.

“Hello, beautiful,” he said in his sleep voice. “I rolled over to hug you and you were gone, and momentarily I thought you might have ditched me.”

I crawled back into bed. “Why on earth would I ditch you?”

“I don’t know. I get the sense you might be looking for a reason to. If you are, you should know it’ll be hard to find one. I’m very loveable.”

“Well, if by ‘ditch you,’ you mean me going back to work, then yes. Eventually, that’s going to happen. But not tonight, so don’t worry your pretty little head about it.”

“Why does it have to happen at all?” he asked, wheels visibly turning in his head.

“You can’t be serious,” I laughed. “Who’s going to pay for this lavish beach front lifestyle?”

He turned onto his side and propped himself up on his elbow. “I’m completely serious. There’s lots of photogenic stuff in California. Why can’t you stay – you know – with me?”

“I’m with you right now. Why isn’t that enough?” I sat up in bed, obviously not going back to sleep any time soon.

He ran his fingers through his hair, and I could tell this had been on his mind for some time. “But would it be so terrible to stay? Like – forever?”

*Forever.*

I was not prepared to have this conversation.

“Carter.”

“What?” he asked sheepishly.

“Doesn’t it feel a little soon to be throwing around ‘F’ bombs? We’ve been together like five minutes.”

“Does the word ‘forever’ feel like an ‘F’ bomb to you? Also, it’s been more than two months. I don’t think five minutes is a fair representation of time here.” He pulled me close to him. “And, no, nothing about this feels fast. It feels like we’ve been moving toward some version of this since we were teenagers.”

I scooted away from him, resolved not to be distracted by his boy scented pajamas. “How do you figure? Because you kissed me once and bought me an Oasis album?”

“Jax,” he looked at me, wounded. “Don’t you remember how it used to be? Any room we were in together felt like an empty one. Like it was just us. I always felt that way, like you were magic and magnetic, and I just wanted to linger a little longer. I just wanted to be around you.”

“I don’t remember any of that. I remember I had an awkward crush on you. You were always with my brother. You were always hanging around girls taller and prettier than me, with their long legs and tiny jean shorts.”

“Nah, that wasn’t me. That was West. I hate tiny jean shorts. You know what I was super into? Torn jeans and Radiohead t-shirts and dirty Converse.”

“That’s – oddly specific,” I said sarcastically.

“Yeah,” he laughed, “very niche.” He pulled me back into a snuggle, running his long fingers up and down my spine. “I was always looking at you when you were looking up at the sky, dreaming about leaving home. I remember it so clearly. I even asked West once if he thought it would be weird if I asked you to homecoming.”

His comment immediately piqued my interest because West never shared that important piece of information with me.

“No, you didn’t. Don’t tell me that – don’t say that. Fuck, I’m about to get so mad at my brother.”

“I did. He told me sisters were off limits. He said he’d never date my sister, which was an easy promise considering I’m an only child. But, you know, he was my best friend. Plus, you were probably too young anyway, and I was joining the military. I let it go. I pretended it wasn’t a big deal, even though it was. Then you came waltzing into my clinic, panicked about killing your goldfish, a pet which, by the way, is notoriously difficult to keep alive. I just thought this might be the universe giving us another chance.”

“I don’t know if it’s that simple.”

“It can be,” he said, gripping my hips and pressing me closer to him. “You just stay. You stay until your brother’s wedding, and then you stay a little longer. Before you know it, you’re home.”

My silence spoke volumes about the things I wasn’t willing to say, which inevitably made it difficult to have the conversation with any level of authenticity.

“We don’t have to figure it all out tonight,” he conceded, letting go of his grip on me. “I just wanted to throw it out there. I’m available for settling down if settling down is a thing you’d ever planned to do.”

He kissed me on the forehead and burrowed himself back into a sleeping position, facing away from me. Everything about his last comment felt loaded.

I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t quickly falling for Carter, but realistically, some part of me had been falling for him half my life. What was just supposed to be a little bit of fun quickly turned into a lot of attachment. I worried I wouldn’t be ready to say goodbye when the time came.

Eventually, I'd have to be honest with him. That's the only way he would be able to understand why I was leaving. Only then would he understand that I wasn't the best fit for whatever life he had planned for himself. It wasn't a conversation for that moment. Like most other difficult things, I put it on a mental to do list for later because difficult things are not my forte.

Carter left for work when the daylight came, and I got on a mini conference call with my girlfriends. I shared the very intense conversation held in the early hours of that morning.

"Jax, are you in the fucking 'L' word with Carter?" Lizzie asked in a panic, "because that's what this sounds like. And I think it's getting too serious to keep keeping secrets."

"I hate to agree here, Jax, but she's right," Cindy concurred.

"What the fuck is the 'L' word?"

"C'mon Jax, you're too smart to play dumb," Cindy responded.

"Ok fine. No. I am absolutely *not* in the 'L' word with Carter. Are you crazy? It's barely been two months. I've got my eye on the prize, and the prize is getting well, and getting the fuck on with my life."

"I don't know if 'getting well' has ever been on any of your to do lists, Jax," Cindy commented under her breath.

"Oh, fuck off, Cin."

"Jax – she's just trying to say that your goal has been to physically heal," Lizzie stepped in, "but how are you doing with the other stuff? None of this is easy and you've barely talked about any of it. It's clearly affecting you – because you keep saying that Carter deserves more. You think we don't know what you mean by that? Don't you think it should be for him to decide what he deserves?"

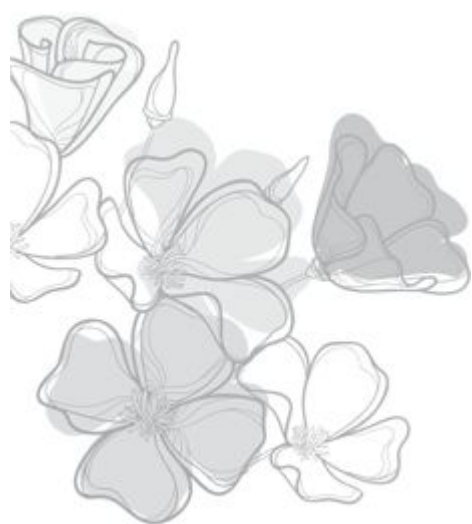
“Excuse you!” I snapped back. “I do talk about it! In therapy. And if going to therapy doesn’t scream emotional healing, I don’t know what does.”

“Therapy? Ok, Jax,” Cindy said, rolling her eyes. “You went like twice and then stopped when they told you to take deep breaths.”

I’d intended for them to be on my side, but they seemed to be aggressively team Carter. Cindy reminded me how I’d basically been in love with Carter since forever and that he’s perfect. Lizzie pointed out that it wouldn’t be the worst idea in the world for me to think about settling down.

*This is why I don’t come home.*

It never felt like enough, even when it was all I could give. It wasn’t enough for Carter, and it apparently wasn’t enough for my closest friends. I wasn’t crazy for wanting my life back—for missing the airports and the loud music and the tours. I wasn’t wrong to continue chasing one dream, even if there was another one right in front of me.



## August's End

**A**UGUST TREATED me well. Carter and I fell into a wonderfully comfortable routine. All it took was the simple act of avoiding any and all conversations that might prompt too many questions. Or feelings. Was it superficial comfort? Sure. But even superficial comfort can be nice. Many of those summer days found me curled up with him and Pepper, the big black snuggle dog, on the couch.

It surprised me how easy it all came once I made the decision to enjoy it for what it was. Ours was different from other relationships I'd been in. It was calm in a way I hadn't experienced before. I know relationships shouldn't be particularly painful or difficult, but being with Carter was like easing back into my favorite sweater.

He continued to insist he'd had a crush on me in high school, but no matter how many of my memories I replayed, I couldn't see it. Hearing him recall stories of our time together felt like he'd been watching a different version of the same movie. As much as his version of events flattered me, I found myself keeping him at a distance.

My impending return to normalcy loomed heavy over us like a doomsday clock, and we each handled it in our own ways. I kept him at arm's length, knowing there was always an end date to this rekindling. He tried to pull me closer, always pointing out how nice it might be to 'settle down' and ease gracefully into full adulthood. Every time he said the word 'adulthood' I cringed at the notion that adulthood only had one static version. His version.



I liked my own version. World travel, creativity thick in the air, and best of all, music. My heart churned with restlessness and the unwavering want to take my camera out of its bag. It had been sitting there, stationary, since that day back in March when my brother picked me up from the airport. Still, some part of me knew my friends had been right – I had somehow, accidentally, fallen into the fucking L-word with him. Conflicted, I wondered if maybe there was some version of having it all that didn't make me feel dreadfully out of place.

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“What are you thinking about, baby?” Carter reached his arm across the back of the couch and twirled several strands of my hair between his fingers.

I might be the only girl in the world who despises the pet name ‘baby.’ He was trying it out for the first time that day. “I was just thinking it’s been a while since I’ve taken a picture of anything.” Half-truths.

“And – what? You think you’re going to somehow stop being a photographer? I just saw you taking pictures of Prince Henry with your cell phone the other day.” He gripped my shoulder with his hand and pulled me in closer to him.

“Taking pictures of Prince Henry with my cell phone and shooting a show with my actual camera are two very different things. I guess I’m just anxious to get back to the world.”

“Baby, you’re in the world.” *There it was again.* “And as I’ve said before, there’s plenty to take pictures of in California. Just pull your camera out of wherever you’ve been hiding it and go outside and take some pictures.”

“That’s a little condescending. Also, stop calling me ‘baby,’ it’s weird.” I sat up, moving away from his touch.

“How is that condescending, Jax?”

“Because taking pictures of random shit outside, or my fish, isn’t my job. My job is different. That’s like me telling you to start a side job as a dentist because the medical field is the medical field.”

He chuckled and moved closer to me again, “Uh, ok, baby, what’s going on here?”

I stood up off the couch. “Stop calling me that.”

“Jax – it’s a term of endearment. What do you want me to call you?”

“Just call me by my name. Just Jax. *Fuck.*”

“Ok. I’ll ask again, what’s going on here? What did I do wrong?”

“Nothing. I just. I know. I know I’m in the world, Carter. I haven’t missed the fact that I’m moping around paradise. But I miss my world. And it’s not so simple to replace it with another just because you want me to.”

He stood up to close the distance between us, and he did something I’ve only ever seen in movies. He nudged my chin upward with his pointer finger and cupped my cheek with his hand. With his free hand, he tucked my hair behind my ear and rubbed my bottom lip gently with his thumb.

He kissed me. In that breathless way. In a way that demands for you to gasp for breath like you’re on a rollercoaster drop. It wasn’t our first kiss, or our second, or even our twentieth—but it made a bold statement. I leaned into him because he was warm, in every sense of the word. Certainly warmer than I’d ever been.

When the kissing stopped, we didn’t move away from one another. We caught our breath by stealing each other’s and I felt his eyes fall shut by the brush of his eyelashes.

“I wish I knew what was going on with you,” he whispered. “All I was trying to say was—just take pictures. You don’t have to leave to do it. You don’t even have to get paid. Just take pictures if that’s what you want to do. I’ll be here, just waiting to see the world from your point of view, in whatever way you want to show it to me.”

The ache in his voice broke my heart.

“Why’d you come home if you didn’t want to stay?” he asked, leaning his forehead against mine.

Before I could dodge his question, he kissed me again—like he didn’t want the answer. I still wasn’t ready to give him one. I didn’t know why. By no fault of his own—something continued to hold me back. Some mental or emotional door I couldn’t walk through, even though he’d made it abundantly clear there was no danger on the other side.

I needed a neutral perspective. I needed to go back to therapy.

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“What’s the longest relationship you’ve ever been in?” Dr. Nancy asked over a cup of tea. Though I’d stopped seeing her after only two visits, she graciously agreed to take me back.

“Three years. Almost four.”

“Was that Jason, the lawyer who ended things while you were in the hospital?”

“No.”

She waited a few seconds for me to elaborate and smiled coyly when I didn’t. “You’ll have to give me a little more than that, Jax.”

“He,” I blew out a long breath I’d been holding in. Therapy is meant to be therapeutic, but it stressed me the hell out. “He was a musician. I mean, he still is, but he also was back then. Finn. That’s his name”

“Ok. Tell me about Finn.”

“He’s British. I met him in New York. I was nineteen, in school at NYU. He was sitting on a park bench singing the saddest song I’d ever heard. Just him and an acoustic guitar – and his buddy filming it with a handheld camera.”

“And how did you end up dating?”

“I was walking by, and I stopped to listen to his song. He saw me standing there and suddenly, he was singing to me. I’d never broken his heart; I’d never even seen the guy—but I felt sad. I felt guilty for whatever or whoever had happened to him. It was in his eyes. He was brooding, but also brilliant and funny, but also self-conscious and self-aware. I’d never encountered so many things in one person before.” I scratched my wrist, as I tended to do when my nerves got the better of me. “Black Heart Sunday.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Black Heart Sunday. That’s the name of his band.”

The look on her face told me she immediately recognized the band name, but she didn’t know my connection. It was surprising. Everywhere I went in the world people seemed to know – somehow people always knew that maybe the first sad song hadn’t been about me, but every one after certainly was. But she didn’t. Not until that moment. She wasn’t much older than me, maybe seven years or so, but her life was older than mine. She hadn’t known about me and the sad British rock prince.

“Do you mean Finn Hendricks?” she asked.

“Yes.”

She laughed, not at me – but at the circumstance.

“Your longest relationship was with Finn Hendricks?”  
Something clicked in her mind. Some bit of information I’d

given her and the bit I'd just divulged, had added up. "You took that picture. For the music magazine."

"Yup." I smiled.

"Wow. Well," she pursed her lips together, undoubtedly searching for something appropriate to say. "It's beautiful. It's very telling. Very vulnerable."

I'm not sure what I'd been expecting her to say, but it wasn't that.

"The picture?"

"Yes, Jax. The picture."

"You mean Finn, though, right?"

"No. I don't know anything about the band except what I hear coming from my daughter's bedroom and the pictures up on her wall—that photo being one of them. I've looked and often wondered how someone so young could be so sad. But it's what you saw, what you revealed about him – it humanized him. People like to think of famous people as gods, but you probably just saw him."

"Your daughter must be pretty deep for a teenager. Their music, like lyrically anyway, it can be kinda sad."

"Well, I think all teenagers are deep. I'm sure you recall what that was like. But this isn't a conversation about her, though I can certainly appreciate your attempts to deflect. Tell me, how did your relationship end?"

"With me in Australia, and him and a very pretty fan in California."

"That betrayal must have been difficult for you."

"No. I mean – yeah, it was a difficult situation, but not because of the other girl."

"Tell me more," she prompted.

“Everything changed so fast. One minute we were in a small shitty apartment, and I was taking pictures of him playing guitar on his couch, and then suddenly we were on world tours. Just not the same world tours. We weren’t equipped for it and when it all started to happen for us, it was on the heels of a sort of really sad thing. I can’t – I mean, I don’t want to say what it was, but it was fucking awful. Some days, it felt like we weren’t chasing our dreams as much as we were running away from each other. I think it was a betrayal of circumstance more than it was a betrayal of love.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning, I never thought he didn’t love me. And it wasn’t a matter of me not loving him.” I gulped, starting to shake from the nervousness of honesty. “It’s hard to describe. But loving him felt like a jolt of electricity. It was everywhere, down to the tips of my fingers and toes. In the end, it wasn’t about love, you know? It was just fucking life. It got too hard.”

“It often does. Have you considered that navigating the relationship got harder as life got more complicated? On paper, you seem to be pretty good at life. Maybe it was just hard to navigate both.”

“Trust me – I’m not that good at life. I’m just good at faking it.”

She smiled fondly. “That feels like something we should explore more next time.” She looked down at her watch and I realized I’d been talking long enough for the sky to transition from light to darkness. “We’re out of time.”

“And it was just starting to get good.” I smirked.

“Indeed. Let’s get back to it next week, ok?”

“Ok.”

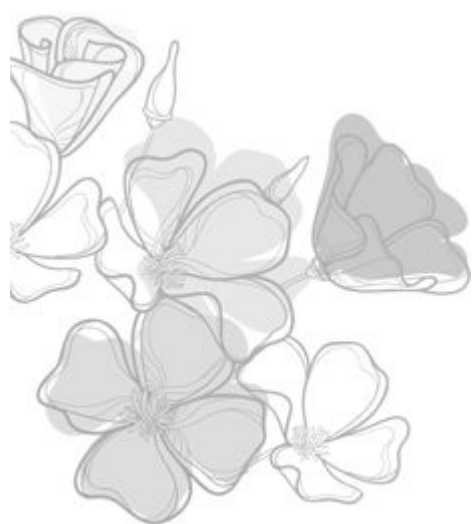
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I stayed up that night thinking about therapists. How do they decide what to talk about while they're charging you an obscene amount of money for your own personal tell-all?

I kept seeing Dr. Nancy. In the following session, I told her things between Carter and me were tense. I told her about the argument that day on the couch. She thought it might be the progression of feelings between us that triggered panic in my brain. We talked about how “the event” (that’s what she called my accident, ‘the event’) was only part of the issue. It was more likely a combination of things.

Something in my past relationships. Something in my childhood. Things that made intimacy and vulnerability difficult for me. Did I have a tendency to run away? And if so, how did my career choice play into that need? I wasn’t willing to accept the idea that I was “running away” from stuff. A restless heart isn’t synonymous with a damaged heart. I just wanted to see the world – it was innumerable less complicated than Dr. Nancy wanted to make it.

I would be seeing Dr. Nancy once a week for the remainder of my time in Malibu. I needed a little more normalcy to talk about on her couch.





# A Country Boy

I DECIDED to try life Carter's way. He'd invited me to take pictures of anything, so I asked him to take me to his favorite place in the world.

His favorite place was not what I expected.

Carter showed up on my doorstep with Pepper in tow, promptly at six in the morning. He didn't have a logical reason for his ridiculous arrival time. He just said it would be a long drive, and I could sleep in the truck. I grew up around trucks, but I hadn't ridden in many, so didn't realize how hard they were to get into.

"C'mon," he challenged. "You can do it. You grew up in the country."

"My brother drove a Honda. I wasn't riding around in trucks. But challenge accepted." I grabbed on to the inside of the roof handle and hoisted my ass up into the truck seat, glad for the looseness of my jeans.

It was only when Carter hopped into the driver's side that I noticed he didn't dress for the beach. That's where I thought we were going. Instead, he wore thread bare blue jeans, a plaid button-down shirt, and his old worn brown leather boots. Were he not already wearing a sweaty old baseball cap, I'd have expected him to pull a cowboy hat out from under his seat.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked.

"I'm not tellin' you until we get far enough out of the city that you won't demand I take you home."

“If you don’t tell me where you’re taking me, I’m likely to demand you take me home, anyway.”

He turned to me and smirked, several stray hairs poking out from the bottom of his cap. “You’re a real control freak, Jaxon Samantha—you know that?”

“So my therapist tells me.”

“I wish I knew all the things your therapist knows.” He turned up the stereo and adamantly ignored my question.

“Destination?” I asked again.

“Don’t-freakin-worry-about-itsville.” He smiled wider. “Can you surrender absolute control for a few hours? You can’t take pictures of the smog. You asked me to take you to my favorite place. I’m taking you there.”

“I thought your favorite place would be the beach.”

“Oh, Jaxon. You could fill an entire library with the things you don’t know about me.” He winked as he regurgitated my words back at me.

I looked out of the back window to the truck bed, where Pepper lay harnessed to something in the back that kept him from jumping out into traffic. As soon as we hit the 101 North, I knew exactly where we were headed.

*Green Fucking Valley.*

I’d always assumed Carter was a kindred spirit, having joined the military to get the hell out of the Salad Bowl, but apparently, he was a hometown boy at heart. I rolled my eyes at him and turned back to look at Pepper again, taking pictures of him enjoying the wind in his fur. After a few snaps, I tucked my camera away and settled in for a long nap.

Four short hours later, I woke up to the sight of the McSherrie Vineyard grapevines out of the window. We’d arrived. Carter pulled off the freeway and on to a back road I’d

never been down on. I hadn't done much back-road exploration in my youth. It was an old, forgotten road. Carter explained that before the 101 Freeway came along, folks used to travel on old back roads that stretched all the way from northern California to Mexico.

The town looked different from the back roads. Maybe because there wasn't much town to be seen from our vantage point. Just mountains and lettuce fields that seemed to stretch on forever. He seemed to be headed to a specific destination, but everything we passed looked the same to my unfamiliar eyes. He eventually turned down another dirt road into a lettuce field and then continued down the dirt path until all we could see were trees and overgrown vegetation leading up a small hilltop. He parked just at the bottom of said hilltop and shut off his ignition.

"Should I be worried that I don't have cell reception?" I asked, looking at my phone screen and shoving my arm determinately out of the window, searching for a signal.

"You should consider yourself lucky you don't have cell reception. Don't you remember growing up without one?"

"Vaguely."

"Well, cell reception or no, we have arrived." He hopped out of the truck and waved his hand in front of him, proudly presenting his favorite place. "Get out of the truck, Jax. I thought you were an adventurer?"

"I'm not the – you know – wilderness sort of adventurer." I jumped out of the truck and made my way to his side, stepping carefully through the overgrown weeds.

"This isn't the wilderness, sweetheart," he pointed northeast, "that's the town over there. It's not even five miles away."

It was bright and sunny, (two of my least favorite things), and because of the severe lack of buildings, it was also a little windy. I wished I'd worn a ponytail. I puffed a breath of air upward, blowing hair out of my face, and reached up into the truck for my jacket and camera, slinging the camera strap over my shoulder.

He reached his hand out for mine and led me up the small hillside. The closer we got to the top, the louder I heard running water. Once we got there, I saw a small creek down below.

"You see that over there?" He said, pointing toward grapevines in the distance. "That's McSherrie Vineyard."

I took a picture of the scenic view and noticed him smiling at me from the corner of my eye, so I took a picture of that as well.

"We're here to photograph nature, not boyfriends."

"I don't photograph nature. I photograph people. Boyfriends among them."

He continued down the hillside toward the creek. I recognized it as soon as I saw it. I'd seen that creek in several senior pictures. Sadly, I myself had never been there. I took more pictures.

"Can I ask you a question?" I asked between clicks.

"Of course." He smiled as he waved his giant hand in front of my lens, screwing up one of my shots.

"Is this legitimately your favorite place?"

"Yup. I used to come out here all the time in high school."

"Green Valley? Green Valley is really your favorite place in the world?"

"Absolutely. I actually love every bit of mileage between here and Salinas, if I'm being honest. The lettuce fields, the

California Poppies growing wild on the side of the freeway. The gold and purple sunsets with the mountains in the background. I feel completely at peace as soon as I drive past the county line, signaling me that I'm home. This place is magical. I've always thought so."

"Ok. So, then why'd you leave?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I don't know. Serve my country, pay for college, travel a bit. But there's no place like home, right?"

"I wouldn't know. I was always so eager to leave and never come back. I just thought it was the same for you."

"Uh, no." He chuckled. "There's a difference between wanting to travel and wanting to run away."

As we continued toward the creek, Carter did all sorts of adorable country boy things. He picked up a stick and whacked small rocks with it as he walked, kicking up dirt just for the sake of getting his boots dusty.

And I took pictures.

"Where's your favorite place?" He asked.

"Believe it or not, no one's ever asked me that. I don't know. I've never given it much thought."

"Too many to choose from?" He teased.

"No, it's not that." I thought a little longer and then it hit me. "Actually, you know what, I think it's the airport."

"You're joking, right? The airport?" He shook his head. "No one chooses the airport as their favorite place."

"Don't judge me." I kicked dirt in the general direction of his boot. "The airport is wonderful for lots of different reasons."

"Yeah, well, you discuss that with your therapist and next week you let me know why you love the airport so much." He

drew a frowny face in the dirt with his stick. “Why do you go to a therapist, anyway?”

“That isn’t wilderness conversation, Carter.”

“This isn’t the wilderness, Jax.”

“Well, it sounds like the most likely reason I see a therapist is because my favorite place is the airport.” I smiled.

We sat together at the bottom of the hillside, throwing rocks into the creek. Carter pulled his phone from his pocket and put on a play list of country music I hadn’t heard since I was a teenager. He asked for my camera and took pictures as I threw stones into the water, and then turned it toward me and snapped a few more.

I leaned my head on his shoulder once I ran out of stones to throw. I peeked through the crosshairs of the camera lens, catching sight of what he was photographing. I nudged his wrists just a few inches to the left to center the squirrel he was taking a picture of. The sound of the shutter frightened the squirrel, and it ran away. He turned the camera around to face us and leaned his head against mine, ordering me to smile through gritted teeth.

“Is this how Finn Hendricks does it?” He asked.

“Why are you always asking about Finn Hendricks? Are you using me to get to him?”

“Maybe I’m a little jealous. Who do you talk about more in therapy? Me, or Finn Hendricks?”

“After this wilderness adventure? Definitely you. And stop calling him by his first and last name. He’s not a unicorn. He’s just another drunk musician.”

“Do you reckon he’s drunk right now?”

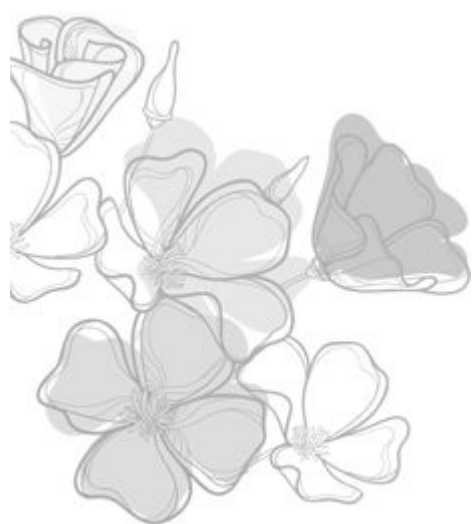
I stood up with a heavy sigh and dusted nonexistent dirt off the knees of my jeans. “Yes. Now, can we please stop talking

about him? Like, forever?”

He looked up at me from his seated position. “Sorry, he’s just so pretty, you know? With his long curly hair and big brown eyes.”

“You’re so stupid. And I mean that with a great deal of fondness.” I stretched my arms out to him, helping him off the ground.

He wrapped his arms around my waist, pulling me close to him, into a kiss. “I’m happy to hear you’re so fond of me, because we’ve got one more adventure before I take you back home ...”





# An Apple Pie Life

I'D NEVER been to the house where Carter grew up, so I had absolutely no warning for what was to come. He drove slowly down each street, windows rolled down, sweetly recalling memories from his childhood. We even drove past Green Valley High, and I caught the familiar sight of our mascot, a giant colorful Viking painted on the side of the gym.

“Do you want to jump the fence and make out behind the bleachers or something?” He asked.

“Would it be weird if I said yes?” I smiled coyly.

“Absolutely not,” he said excitedly, turning off the main road and making his way to the back parking lot of the school.

“Carter – I was kidding. Do not take me back to high school.”

“We’re definitely going. I have a permanent marker in my glove compartment. I’m gonna write our names on the bleachers.”

He parked in the student lot, and we walked to the bleachers that surrounded the track and soccer fields. We climbed our way up about halfway and sat together on the cold metal, holding hands.

“I wish Tuesday Salcedo could see us now,” I commented under my breath.

“Do you? Because they don’t live far from here. I could call Beau, ask him to bring beers and stuff.”

For a moment, I worried he was serious.

“They’re probably at church. It’s Sunday, Carter.”

He laughed. “Well, service just let out not that long ago. Which I know because my mom goes to church with the McSherries. She keeps me updated on the town gossip.”

It was strange how comfortably he still fit in to every little corner of the community, right down to how accessible the people were to him. He pulled the marker out of his pocket and started to write our names on the bleachers with a little heart in between. Ours sat next to a bunch of other names of kids who probably hadn’t graduated yet.

“I can’t believe you’re so at home here.” I commented.

“Why? I come home all the time to see my mom and help out with community events and stuff. I even keep in touch with the vet who runs the animal hospital. I worked with him for a little while when I came home from college. He always talks about me taking over when he retires.”

“Would you want to do that?”

“I mean – of course. But I never take him too seriously. He’s a workaholic and I know it’ll be a long while before he’s ready to call it quits.”

“Can I ask you something? I promise it’s not meant to be judgmental.”

“Of course,” he said, placing the marker back in his pocket. “Ask me anything.”

“Why do you still come back here so often?”

“Well, my mom is here, and I still think of this as home, so getting involved matters to me. Maybe I want to come back someday, you know – start a family.”

*Start a family.*

It hit me like a punch to the ovary.

“Oh.” I said solemnly.

He noticed the look on my face. “Not any time soon.” He laughed, “it’s more like a ten-year plan. But if you’re gonna raise a family, wouldn’t you want to do it here, in the place where you grew up?”

“So that’s a thing you want? Kids and a family and stuff?”

“Doesn’t everyone?”

I tried to remember if I’d ever once considered having kids as part of my life’s plan. Everything changed so suddenly and permanently. I couldn’t recall if I’d ever put any actual thought into it. Maybe once. Different boy, different time. But we don’t talk about that and we don’t think about it either.

“No,” I responded, “I don’t think everyone does. Maybe you take it for granted that it’s the next step of adulthood?”

“You don’t want kids?” He asked plainly.

“That’s hard to answer. For me, I mean. For me, it’s hard to answer.”

*Half-truths.*

“You’ve never thought about it?” he pressed.

“I guess I never thought of myself as particularly maternal. I don’t have a mom, so I don’t know what motherhood looks like. I do know this much – a family isn’t in my ten-year plan.” I stood up, suddenly anxious.

This was the moment. This was the time to tell him, and every moment after this, I’d feel like a liar.

I started to utter the words, but something stopped me. I wanted to tell him. I wanted so desperately to feel comfortable sharing all the deepest and darkest parts of myself with him, but I didn’t. And I didn’t know why. Maybe it was the fact that I knew I’d be leaving soon (even if he didn’t). Maybe it was something in the way he always presumed to know what was

best for me. My mind swam with a hundred reasons to continue keeping my secrets.

The silence passed on as he waited for an answer, but I didn't have one. So, I didn't tell him. In the end, hearing what he wanted out of life cemented what I'd been thinking all along. We were not a good fit in the long term. Knowing that made my decision easier to live with.

“Ugh, I feel weird now. Let's go get ice cream. Is that drive in place still open? The one with the amazing vanilla milkshakes.”

He looked at me, brows furrowed, wondering which nerve he'd hit. I could see him calculating whether to press the issue or just move on. Eventually, he opted for the latter and bounced up from where he'd been sitting.

“Yes.” He said, “Let's get you a milkshake. Then we just have one last stop, and I can get you out of here, city girl.” He winked.

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‘One last stop’ ended up being the house where he grew up to meet his mom. I wanted to melt into a puddle right there in the front seat of his truck and disappear from the day. I wanted to spontaneously combust into nothingness. I wanted to vanish into thin air. Any of those options would have been better than getting out of the truck and meeting his mother.

Mothers make me uncomfortable. I don't need a session with Dr. Nancy to know why. I don't have one. On one hand, seeing other people with their moms makes me sad. On the other, I have no idea how to act around moms in general. Carter promised it was just a quick lunch and then we were going home. He insisted he couldn't spend the day in Green Valley and not visit his mom.

He helped me down off the truck and interlocked his fingers with mine, holding on tight. He didn't knock on the

door, he just walked right in.

The whole house smelled like apple pie.

“Is that my son?” His mom asked excitedly as she wiped her hands on a kitchen towel hanging from her back jeans pocket and made her way to us.

“With Jaxon Cassidy?” She pretended to be surprised. “You’re all grown up.” She hugged me warmly and kissed my cheek. “How’s your dad and brother?”

Her hug caught me off guard. Dad was more of a pat you on the back of the shoulder kind of parent. We weren’t a hugging family.

“They’re good!” I responded, trying not to appear as uncomfortable as I felt on the inside. “West is still in New York. He’s getting married in a couple of months.”

“Oh yes,” she responded. “Carter told me all about it. You know his cousin is also getting married soon. In Boston. She’s as close as he ever had to a sister. You should join him!”

“MOM!” Carter shouted from the living room, embarrassed. “Mom, please. I haven’t asked her yet.”

An electric shock of anxiety raced through my body at the thought of accompanying him to a wedding. As it was, the prospect of asking him to be my date to West’s wedding was nerve wracking.

“I’m sorry, son. But honestly – just ask her.” She rolled her eyes and smiled at me. “Boys.” She said simply, as if it were an explanation for all things.

Carter took me on a tour of the house and showed me his childhood bedroom. It was surreal to think he used to sleep there. He was so tall, and the bed looked tiny in comparison. All over the walls were baseball trophies and ribbons, photos of him and his friends, including a teenage West, and random

trinkets. It was frozen in time. What kind of childhood is so wholesome that your parent is inclined to keep your room just as you left it when you went away?

I started opening drawers and looking through old papers and photos, not quite important enough to make it to the wall. Next to a bundle of pens, I found a familiar photo. Me, Cindy, and Lizzie up against a wall at school. It was the same photo I'd seen at the reunion.

“Where'd you get this?” I asked, showing it to him.

He took it from me, smiling fondly. “I had a friend on the yearbook staff. She made me a copy, knowing I had a thing for you. She also knew it was a secret thing, and that you were off limits.”

“A secret thing, huh?” I asked, teasing. “Is that why I didn't make it to your photo wall?”

“Are you kidding? What do you think West would have done if he'd seen that picture? No, I absolutely could not put you up there.”

He raised his hands to my forehead, pushing the hair out of my face, and kissing me softly. “But nothing's stopping me from putting pictures of you all over the place, now,” he said, taking the photo from me and sliding it into his back pocket. “I'm gonna zoom in and make this my screensaver.”

Downstairs in the dining room, his mom had laid out several photo albums for us to look through while she finished serving lunch. While we ate, she told stories about him as a kid back in Boston. She said he'd always been shy, but that changed once they moved to California. He became more outgoing and made more friends, blossoming into the popular teenager I remembered.

“He's such a good boy,” she beamed. “And to think, someday he'll have a family of his own. He's always talked

about buying a plot of land so he could have a lot of animals to tend to.” She smiled sweetly at him and patted him on the leg. “When he’s ready to settle down, he’ll come back home to Green Valley.”

She started to slice the apple pie she’d baked fresh earlier that morning. She made a point to let me know it was Carter’s favorite. I half expected her to serve it with freshly churned vanilla ice cream.

“Do you get back here much since your dad moved?” She asked me.

“Oh me? No, I don’t come back here at all. I mean – I was just here for my ten-year reunion, but before that I hadn’t been back since I left for college. My dad’s in LA, and my brother’s in New York. Plus, I travel a lot for work.”

“Jax is a photographer, Mom,” Carter interjected. “She takes photos of musicians. She’s had her pictures published in *Rolling Stone*.”

“Oh, wow!” she replied. “That’s so interesting. Have you ever thought of opening a photography studio? Like the ones where you kids all had your senior photos taken?”

I wasn’t sure how to verbalize what I wanted to say without sounding like an asshole. “You know – I never thought of it. My work is more like live music and the creative process and stuff like that. I have thought about publishing a book of photos I’ve taken over the years. That’s something I’d love to do someday.”

“So, how will you make it all work once you settle down to start a family?” She asked invasively.

“Mom!” Carter interrupted, “Mom – that’s not – we’re not there yet. That’s so personal.”

“Oh, c’mon Carter. You’ve known you wanted to be a dad since you were a little boy. I’m sure Jax knows what she wants

out of life just the same.”

She couldn't possibly have been more wrong.

“You know, to be honest, I never really thought about having kids. I love to travel, and I love my work. I haven't planned much beyond that. I'm still just kind of figuring it out, I guess.”

“Oh honey. That's nice when you're younger. Or if you're a man. For men, it's different, but for a woman, you're on the clock.” She winked, probably imagining this meeting was going well.

It was not.

I could see on Carter's face he wanted to die a little. He began shoveling apple pie into his mouth, trying to get us out of there as quickly as he could.

“I'm sitting on pins and needles waiting for grandbabies,” she continued. “I picture Carter starting a family, coaching sports for his kids, being active in his church and community. All these things make for a good, honest life. I'm sure your dad can't wait to be a grandpa. And Green Valley is such a wonderful place to raise a family.”

Carter stood up and grabbed both of our plates, taking them abruptly to the sink. “Mom, it's getting late. We've got to get back. But thank you for lunch. And for having absolutely zero boundaries.”

“Oh, Carter. Don't be so dramatic.” She laughed and hugged him.

As we said our brief goodbyes, she hugged me again. “I hope I'll see you again soon, sweetheart! You say hi to your dad, and you two get home safe.”

No sooner did the front door close that I wanted to vomit. I could tell she meant well, but I'd never been asked so many



personal questions in such a short period of time. Not even from the person I pay to ask me personal questions.

We hopped in the truck, and I stared vacantly at the hour on the clock. It was four o'clock. We'd be back in Malibu by eight if traffic wasn't bad.

"You ok?" Carter asked once we were safely back on the 101 South. I stayed silent. "I'm so sorry. My mom is a little," he searched his mind for an appropriate adjective, "well, she's a little nosey. But she means well. She's just – you know – she's a mom."

"No, I don't know, Carter." I spoke up abruptly. "I don't have a mom."

"You know I didn't mean it like that," he snapped.

"Is that really your ten-year plan? You want to go home and coach little league and shit? Why did you bring me here? You know I hate it here."

He suddenly looked regretful and a little hurt. "I mean, I knew you hated high school. I guess I didn't realize you hated home."

"It's not home for me! It's just the place I grew up! You have all these memories and friends and people you keep in touch with. That's not me. My friends are in LA, my dad is there, and my brother is on the other side of the country."

He reached over and placed his hand on my thigh, squeezing it gently as a gesture of empathy. "Sweetheart, I'm sorry. I just wanted to give you a different perspective. Show it to you from my eyes. I know your life is different. But that doesn't stop me from wanting to have you in every single part of mine. I'm sorry about my mom. She's a lot. In hindsight, it was probably too soon to bring you to meet her."

It was hard to gauge whether I was overreacting. Especially since my reaction was colored by bits of key

information Carter hadn't been privy to. All I knew was I was exhausted. I let the tranquil hum of the freeway relax me, and my eyelids got heavier and heavier until they finally fell shut. I could feel myself falling asleep, so I scootched closer to him, resting my head on his shoulder.

“Do you forgive me?” He asked.

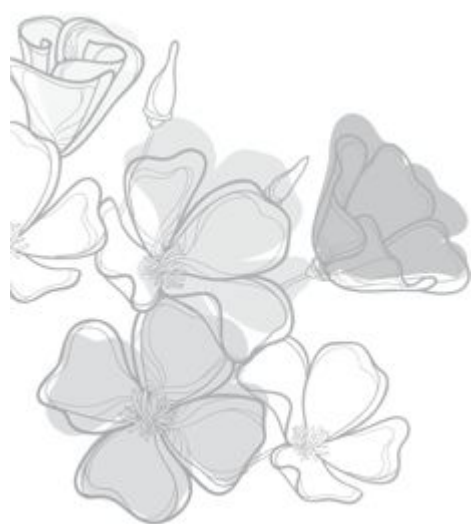
“Of course I fucking forgive you. You're gorgeous, you smell amazing, and your dog has literal puppy eyes. Just, please, no more talking, ok?”

“Ok.” He leaned down and kissed the top of my head before pulling an item out of his back pocket. It was the photo of me and my friends I'd found in his room. “But also, I thought you should have this.”

“Really?” I didn't expect the wave of emotions that washed over me from that simple thoughtful gesture.

“Yeah, really.” He said, “I don't need to carry around a ten-year-old photo anymore. I've got the real you right here next to me.”

I let my eyes flutter shut again and fell into a dream. I decided it was best to save my panic attack for my therapy appointment the next day.



# Uncomfortable Conversations About Mothers

“**H**E TOOK me to meet his mother, Dr. Nancy. His *mother.*”

Dr. Nancy made a brave attempt not to laugh. I hadn't had much experience with therapists, but I was certain the point was not to pay them to laugh at you.

“And how did that go?”

“It was weird. I mean, I knew this lady when I was a little kid. And I wouldn't even say I knew her. I'd say I waved at her a few times when she dropped him off for sleepovers with West before he was old enough to drive. And here she was, serving me apple pie and asking me some of the most invasive questions I'd ever been asked in my life.”

“West is your brother?”

“Yes. Sorry.” I pulled my hair into a ponytail to keep from tearing it out. “She kissed me on the cheek and told me she was happy we reconnected. She told me that her son has plans to move back home, start a family, and *coach little league*. And you know what else? He said he couldn't leave town without stopping to see his mom, but I gotta say, this woman did not look surprised to see me. You know what that means, Dr. Nancy?”

“I have an idea, but I'm eager to hear what you think it means.”

“It means he talks to his mother about me.”

“Is that bad?”

“Yes. It’s very bad.”

“Can I ask why?”

“Because it’s a lot of pressure. He wants a family. I can’t give that to him. And when I inevitably leave, he’s going to call his mom, and cry on her shoulder or whatever, and she’s going to think I’m the devil.”

“Has it occurred to you that this trip was probably the perfect opportunity to talk to him about all of this?”

“Yes, but no.”

“Why?”

“I just can’t. I don’t know why. I try. I see these moments and I think – this is it, Jax – just do it. But I can’t. I don’t feel comfortable talking to him about it. I don’t want him to look at me and see me as this –fucking – reproductive disaster. It’s going to ruin everything.”

“Is it possible he’s trying to see you just as you are and you’re keeping him from truly understanding you? Have you thought maybe that’s what will ruin everything in the end?”

“Once I leave, it’s not going to matter.”

“When you leave?” She asked.

“Yeah. I’ve gotta get back to my life. That was always the plan. I’m just waiting on West’s wedding, and then I’m gone.”

“So, just an observation here, Jax – but I’ve heard you say several times that you need to get back to your life. Has it occurred to you that you’re already in your life? You’re living it right now. Your life is happening. It’s not a bad life by any stretch of the imagination, but you seem so eager to leave. Why is that?”

“Because my job isn’t in LA. My job is, you know, sort of a traveling gig.” I said it as if it should have been obvious.

“Right – that’s a great point,” she responded. “But have you ever stopped to ask yourself why you’d choose a career that would keep you so far from home all the time? A career that almost requires you maintain very distant and superficial relationships?”

“I wanted to travel. And hey – I wouldn’t call my relationships ‘superficial’.”

“It seems more likely you wanted to get as far away from home as possible. The question is, why? You seem to have a wonderfully supportive family who loves you very much, and strong friendships that you’ve maintained since you were young.”

“Is this a girl question?” I narrowed my eyes judgmentally. “Like girls are supposed to be predisposed to never want to leave home or something? No one asked West why he was disconnecting himself from his family when he decided to go to school in New York. People leave home, Doc. It’s totally normal.”

“Yes, West did leave home. But he comes back, and often from what you’ve told me. He’s also gone to make a home elsewhere, where he’s built other significant connections and relationships. Would you say that you’ve done the same? And no—this isn’t a ‘girl’ question. It’s a question of whether you’re building your life or running away from your past.”

“I’m not sure I’m getting you. I left home to go to school. Same as West. I just got a different kind of job. I’m not sorry for my career choices.”

“Nor should you be. You’re very successful, and you have every right to be proud of your accomplishments. It’s about the connections you keep—or don’t keep, rather. And the way you navigate your life and relationships. Is it really a love of

traveling? I've met people who love to travel. They talk about their travels at length. You mention them in passing, like they're incidental. Honestly, I've heard you talk about the airport with more fondness than any city or country you've traveled to."

There comes a point in every conversation with your therapist where you get to a level of discomfort so severe it makes you lose your words. I thought I'd reached that point—and then Dr. Nancy asked her next probative question.

"Do you want to talk about your mom?" Dr. Nancy broached the subject very slowly and carefully, the same way you might approach a wounded animal with sharp teeth.

"Nope."

"Jax, I hate to be cliché, but you do realize – at some point, we're going to have to talk about your mother, right?"

She was right. But mommy issues were just one of those problems I'd rather admit to having, call my admission a success, and skip right over the details.

"Ok, fine. But ask open-ended questions. This isn't a thing I'm just going to go all confessional about. Ok? Ok. Go – before I change my mind."

"Fair enough. Let's start simple. What was her name?"

"Maggie Cassidy. But I think after she left, she probably started going by her maiden name, McCafferty."

"Ok. How old were you when she left?" She continued with caution.

"Six or seven, I think."

"What do you remember about her? Not about her leaving, just about her."

I did my best to describe her for Dr. Nancy.

My mom was judgmental. That's more a criticism of her character than a memory, I know – but – that's what I remember. Even at age six or seven, I knew what being judged felt like. I'd not yet learned the word, but I knew what it meant. She never seemed particularly satisfied with the daughter she had, always trying to transform me into the daughter she wanted. I never understood this. I never understood wanting to be someone you aren't. I told Dr. Nancy that, luckily; she left before I started to understand it.

She wanted to be a star. A musician. She used to sing everywhere. I loved it when I was younger, but as I got older, it just reminded me that she wasn't where she wanted to be. Which was also a reminder that I wasn't who she wanted me to be. She was always angry with Dad. She yelled when she wasn't singing, and she never did typical mom stuff. She didn't make dinner, or clean house, or tuck anyone into bed. When she wasn't singing or yelling at Dad, she was sleeping.

She slept a lot. She was always sad, and I didn't understand why. She'd lie in bed for days at a time. Dad and West would leave her to it. When I think about it now, I wonder how long it had to have been going on before they knew to just leave her alone. I hadn't learned that lesson yet. I would go check on her. She would tell me to do something with my hair. She always said I'd be so much prettier if I just did something with my hair. That's the funny thing though—I didn't know how. She never taught me.

Dr. Nancy asked me to dig deep and try to find a memory of her that made me smile.

I told her I have one memory. I don't think about it often. It's precious, but it's also painful, so I don't like to put it into the universe. Dr. Nancy assured me that putting it into the universe would probably make me feel better on some cosmic level. She promised it would be cathartic, and I trust Dr. Nancy, so I go ahead and tell her.



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It's bedtime and I'm all showered and in my Wonder Woman pajamas. I go in to say goodnight to my mom. She says I'd be so much prettier if I just did something with my hair. I get sad and drop my head in defeat, and I start to quietly leave the room. She'll be fine in a few days, and I know I should probably leave her alone until she feels better. As I start to leave, she calls my name, 'Jaxie'. She's the only person that's ever called me that. She calls me back, and she sits up after days of barely turning her head.

She reached under her side of the bed and pulled out a plastic box and opened it to reveal its full of foam curling rollers. She walked to the master bathroom and grabbed a brush and a box full of bobby pins, and sat cross-legged on the bed, placing me directly in front of her. My legs dangled off the side of the bed and she started to sing.

After every last strand of my hair was twisted up into a roller, she wrapped my head into a hot pink bandana. She instructed me to take out the rollers in the morning and run my fingers through the curls to set them free. I remember she said everything in the world is so much prettier when it's allowed to be free. When she was done, she walked me to my bed. For the first time I can remember, she tucked me in and kissed me on the forehead, the way you see moms do in movies. She told me not to forget she loves me.

When I woke up the next morning, I did exactly as she told me. I took out the rollers and ran my small fingers through my hair several times to 'set the curls free.' I got dressed up in a pink plaid shirt she bought me at a fair she'd sung at a few months before. I went to look for her, but she wasn't in bed. I kept walking through the house, looking for her until I saw her outside on the front lawn with Dad. She was crying and Dad was yelling. I don't know what he was saying, but I remember being confused by the look on his face. I couldn't tell if he was angry or sad.

The curse of adulthood is – now I understand it was both.

She was crying, so I ran outside to show her my hair. I thought it would make her happy. Even at that age, I felt like there was nothing more important I could be doing than trying to make her happy.

She bit her quivering bottom lip and smiled as she choked out tears. Her face was red and swollen and I realized she was holding an old leather suitcase. From the curbside, another man in the passenger seat of a van yelled at her that it was time to go. “Maggie!” he yelled over and over. “Maggie – c’mon darlin. There’s no winnin’ here. We gotta go. This ain’t ever gonna get any easier.”

I asked her where she was going and if I could come too. She leaned down to kiss the top of my head, saying I looked beautiful and that she’d write a song for me. I held on to her wrist as she tried to walk toward the van. That’s when West came running outside. She started to cry – out loud, hysterically – and she said to West, “Take your sister, sweetheart. I love you, take your sister.”

West un-gripped my hands from her wrist. Once he got my hands free, he started pulling me toward the front door to get me back inside. I was screaming and crying, begging her not to leave without me. I kept saying over and over, “I set the curls free! I set the curls free just like you said!” I promised her I’d comb my hair every day if she would just take me with her. She got into the van. The last thing I remember is looking back and seeing her wave goodbye from the back window.

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That’s my best and worst memory of her all rolled into one single awful day.

Dr. Nancy was silent for a moment, and then she asked me a question I hadn’t been expecting. “Have you ever tried to find her?”

“Who?” I asked. She couldn’t possibly be talking about my mother.

“Your mother.”

“Uh.” I laughed sardonically. “No.”

“So, you don’t know what ever happened to her? I ask because you speak about her as though she’s passed away.”

“She could be dead, for all I know. Why would I ever talk about her in the present tense?”

“Interesting.” She continued to scribble notes.

Not sure what she meant, I gave Dr. Nancy a smart-ass smirk and looked down at my cell phone. “Whelp! It’s about that time, huh?”

“Yes, it is. But one last thing before we end our session. Between now and next week, I’d like you to think about why you’ve never tried to find her. And whether you think her absence has had any effect on your ability to form healthy attachments.”

“What? Why?”

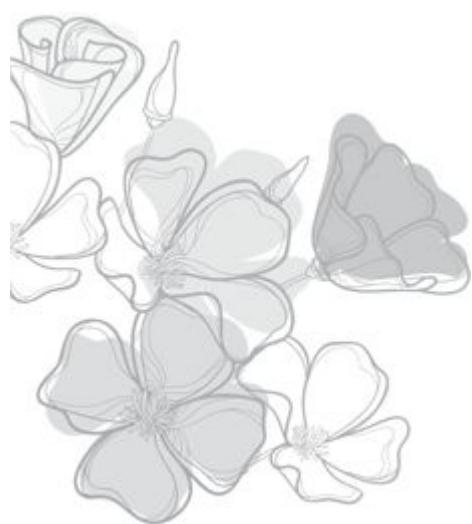
“There’s no wrong answer here, Jax. I just think it’s important for you to ask yourself these questions and explore the answers. I could ask them, but I think you’re less likely to talk about it with me than you are just to think about it on your own.”

Dr. Nancy had a talent for fucking me up with her poignant questions. After I left her office, I sat in the car in complete silence, wondering why I’d never looked Maggie up.

For most of my life, I told myself and everyone else that she didn’t matter. But sometimes, when I thought about curling my hair or when I’d hear country music in passing, I’d wonder.

Did she make all her dreams come true? Was the life she ended up with worth the one she left behind? So many of these questions were now relevant in my own life. Things I'd need to answer for myself before long.

Maybe there were still lessons to be learned from Maggie's choices.



# Pink

**“M**AGGIE MCCAFFERTY found short-lived fame in the late ‘90’s with the one hit wonder “Pink”, which is rumored to be inspired by a child she gave up for adoption in the mid ‘80’s. Little is known about McCafferty before she arrived on the Nashville scene. What is known is that she came to Nashville from Southern California in the early ‘90s. She and her band were well known for their proclivity toward hard liquor and even harder drugs. The group had a string of failed attempts at stardom when, in 1997, they hit it big with “Pink”, which won McCafferty a Grammy, and an ‘up and comer’ award from the Academy of Country Music.

*While the band maintained a loyal following—they were never elevated to the level of fame McCafferty so desperately aspired to. After gaining a large following with the release of their hit song – McCafferty released a disappointing second album which critics called a ‘mediocre sophomore slump, lacking the personal touch and lyrical poeticism of the song that made her famous.’*

*In 2001, McCafferty was admitted to a local hospital following a suicide attempt. She went into rehab shortly thereafter. In a “Where Are They Now” interview for Steel Guitar Magazine, McCafferty revealed that she’d struggled with depression for many years and was diagnosed with bipolar disorder at age 17. When asked who inspired the song that made her famous, she fought back tears, telling the interviewer that the truth of the song was much more disappointing than the myth.*

*After a long struggle with sobriety and a string of volatile relationships with fellow musicians, McCafferty was found dead of an apparent drug overdose in her Nashville home in 2007. The singer/songwriter's death was ruled a suicide after investigators found a hand-written note near an emptied bottle of prescription pills and a glass of whiskey. The note read simply, 'I love you, and I'm sorry.'*"

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My mother's Wikipedia page was wrought with information about how she lived and died after the day she wove goodbye from the back of a van. I knew with certainty it was her because there were pictures, and even after twenty years, I could never forget her face. The page linked to an Internet video of her performing "Pink" at an awards show in the 90s. Below the video, in the description, were the lyrics.

The lyrics described me on that day – the last day that she'd seen me. The curly hair, the pink plaid shirt, and the rosy cheeks, which the song failed to mention were red and flushed from crying. She described me in the abstract. She sang about me as though I'd been imaginary – as though she'd never actually seen or known me. After a bit more digging, I found fan theories. Her fans believed she never actually saw me, and instead had been imagining a daughter she'd given up at birth or aborted. Critics called it 'beautiful and solemn,' and a 'true testament to the courage of vulnerability.' One critic said, 'Through the strength it took to tell her story, McCafferty will have empowered a generation of women the world over to not be ashamed of the difficult choice of giving up a child at a young age.'

How many women had she empowered after she left her own daughter to figure out womanhood alone?

Technically, the theories were true. That song was about a daughter she'd given up at a young age – but Maggie McCafferty never clued anyone in that she'd been married,

with a ten-year-old son. She never told anyone the daughter she'd given up wasn't abstract. She left that daughter crying on the front lawn, to chase a dream she only partially made come true.

Something else about the discovery made me sick. Only a year after her suicide, I'd met Finn Hendricks, and a few short years later, after he'd broken my heart in pursuit of the same fucking dream, he also won a Grammy for an album full of songs written for and about yours truly.

*There must be something wrong with me.*

It was a curse, or maybe a defect, to be loved and then abandoned by so many people in pain.

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In pursuit of a more productive manifestation of my anger, I printed out the Wikipedia page and called West via video chat.

“Hey, Sis!” He answered brightly.

I held the printed page in front of my face, directly into the camera, where I knew he'd be able to read it. “Did you know about this?”

“What's that?”

“West, don't play stupid. Did you know about this? About Maggie?”

“You mean, Mom?”

“Yeah, whatever. You know what I mean. Did you know about this – about this song, or whatever? And that she's fucking dead?”

His face fell. He wasn't surprised. He knew, and he kept it from me.

“Jax, I—”

“You lied.”



“No,” he said in his own defense. “No, I didn’t lie. I just didn’t tell you.”

“So, you and Dad did what? Had a family meeting and decided I was too fragile to know the truth? That’s really fucking great, West.”

“That never happened. I found out on my own a few years back. I went looking for her when it became clear to me that Casey was the one. I started saving up for an engagement ring and I thought about contacting her. I found all this shit out. To be honest, I didn’t know what to think, or how to deal with it, so I kept it to myself. I never told you or Dad because you’re like two peas in a pod. You both live in a world where you pretend the tough shit isn’t real. It was right after you and Finn split up. I figured if you wanted to know where she was, you’d look for her. I didn’t want to drudge up old shit for you in the middle of everything you had going on. I’m sorry, Jax, but for once, it wasn’t about you. It was about me, and how I decided to process it.”

“So, you just figured you’d process it alone.”

“Well, yeah. Jax, you barely remember her. You never even talk about her. It’s like you think you manifested from thin air, like you never had a mother at all. I may not be the one she wrote the song about, but I’m sure as hell the one who remembers all the fights, and the crying, and the depression. I’m the one that had to pull you away from her while Dad screamed at her if she left, she could never come back. Regardless of how you might be feeling right now, I had to deal with it in my own way, and it had nothing to do with you.”

We sat staring into our respective webcams, in suffocating silence as West caught his breath. Casey walked in behind him, asking if everything was ok.

“Yeah,” he said, looking back at her. “Sorry babe. It’s just Jax. Everything’s fine.”

“Ok,” she answered, not entirely convinced. “Well – hey Jax! Miss you!” she smiled. “I’ll be in the dining room working on the seating chart. OH! That reminds me, Jax, are you bringing someone?”

I swallowed the lump in my throat and plastered a fake smile on my face. “You mean, like, a date?”

“Yes, Jaxon! Like a date. A date named Carter Summers, maybe?”

“Uh. Yeah—I think so. I haven’t really talked to him about it—but I guess put me down for a plus one.”

West smiled at me. It wasn’t apologetic, but it was understanding—and how could I really stay mad at the only person in the world who could understand how this news might feel to me? Even if I’d never truly understand how it felt to him.

“Jax, I should probably ... you know ...”

“Help Casey with the seating chart? That’s probably wise. We’ll talk later, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

---

I found Maggie McCafferty’s one hit wonder and downloaded a digital copy. It seemed to be the least I could do in her memory. I don’t know how long I left the song on repeat. Somewhere between play one and twenty, and halfway through a bottle of whiskey, I remembered I still had that pink plaid shirt. It was in a box of old things from my childhood that I left taped up in the closet of my guest bedroom. A pile of shit I didn’t want to remember, but wasn’t quite ready to forget.

I dug the box from the back of the closet and blew dust off the lid in one long exhaustive exhale. I cut the tape open with a box cutter and rummaged through old yearbook photos that Lizzie had confiscated during her years on the yearbook staff. Many of them featured a young Carter Summers. Carter was the type to show up in the yearbook over and over without any effort. He was in the background, or the foreground of a stereotypically perfect teenage life. Laughing with his friends, playing baseball, dressed up as a cheerleader to support the girls basketball team.

I continued to rummage. Down below all the photos and academic awards, and my eighth-grade graduation gown, I found the offending shirt. When I unfolded it, an old, tattered photo of my mother fell out – one I didn't remember having kept. It was Maggie McCafferty as she'd have the world know her—no husband, no kids. She was young, probably in her teens, and perched on the hood of an old car, probably Dad's. It was a candid photo of her laughing, with her head thrown back and her hair draped down to her waist. Her hair was dark brown and wavy, and she wore heart shaped sunglasses. She didn't have a worry in the world. The inscription on the back of the photo in Dad's handwriting confirmed that he'd taken it. It read "Mags, July '81".

The shirt was tiny. How had I ever been that small? I thought about burning it or using it for kitchen rags—or using it for kitchen rags and then burning it. I cut a large square out and threw the rest in the trash. I took it to the bathroom to toss under the sink and caught my reflection in the mirror. I looked just like her. Same dark hair, but mine was straight. Same olive skin, same lips. The realization made me immediately angry.

*Fuck her. Why couldn't I look like my dad?*

I'm not sure what drove me to it, but I rolled up the cloth and tied it from the base of my neck to the top of my head,

using it as a headband. “Pink” continued playing on repeat in the background.

I’d all but memorized every lyric when I heard a knock at my door. Whiskey bottle in hand, and pink headband tangled in my hair—I drug my feet to the front door and squinted through the peephole.

*Carter Summers. It was always fucking Carter Summers.*

I opened the door and waved my arm past me into the living room, welcoming him in a most regal manner.

“Hey, handsome.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck, still gripping the bottle for dear life, and kissed him as neatly as I could manage.

“I love whiskey kisses in the early afternoon,” he smiled down at me cautiously as he peeled my arms off him. “You ok, Jax?”

“Do you like my headband?”

“I love your headband. I mean, it’s a little, uh – colorful, but yeah. It’s cute.”

“My mom gave it to me.” Technically true.

“Your mom?” he asked cautiously.

Carter knew something was wrong because no one in my family ever talked about a mom. He confiscated the whiskey bottle from my death grip and took it to the kitchen, putting it up high enough that I couldn’t reach it.

“Yup.” I threw my arm around his shoulders, having to stand on my tiptoes because of his height and my lack of shoes.

“Well, it’s lovely,” he smiled sweetly, probably thinking I was in no shape for a serious conversation about my long-lost

mother. He wrapped his arm beneath mine to support my faltering weight, and walked me to the long couch, where he sat me down before sitting down next to me, stretching my legs across his lap. “Are you ... having a nice day?”

“Eh,” I shrugged my shoulders.

It didn't take long for him to realize there was a distinctly depressing song on repeat blaring through my speaker system. “And here I was thinking you didn't like country music.”

“Have you heard this song?” I asked.

“I don't think so. Is it new?”

“Nope. It's from 1997.”

“Yeah, it sounds like it's from 1997. Where'd you find it?”

“My mom wrote it,” I hiccupped. “It's about me. Listen to the words.”

I watched his face as he listened intently to the lyrics. He looked at me, confused, and I pointed at my headband.

“That's me. I'm pink-or-whatever.”

He noticed the Wikipedia page open on my laptop and took a closer look as he started to put two and two together.

“Your mom is this lady?” He pointed to the picture of her featured on the page. “Maggie McCafferty?”

“Yup. She's dead. She died,” I hiccupped again. “She killed herself. You know ... drugs.”

“Jax,” he shut the lid on my laptop. “Jax, can I turn this song off?”

“No, it's my song.”

“No, I know. I understand it's your song, but sweetheart, it's really fucking depressing.” He stood up and shut off the speaker system.

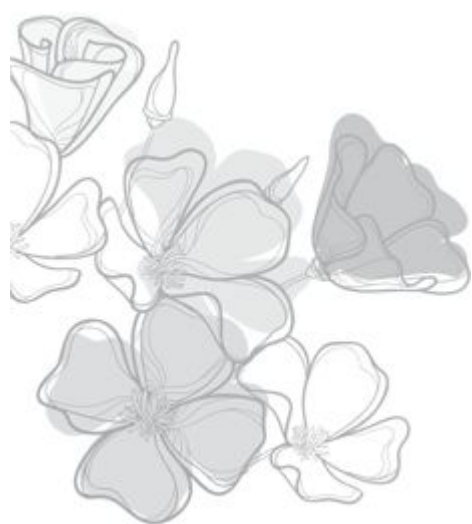
“Carter, that’s my *song!*” I shouted.

“What’s going on here?”

“My mom sucks. I’m like – a magnet for depressed artists. They leave and then they write songs, and they get famous. Read the Wikipedia page, Carter. Everyone thinks this bitch like – had an abortion or gave me up for adoption or something. Like she’s courageous for writing a song about it. That’s not what happened. She left me and West crying on the front lawn. And then she took the worst day of my life and used it as a fucking avenue to success. This. This is why I see a therapist.”

He just pulled me into an embrace and held me there tightly.

“I’m sorry your mom sucks. This song sucks, too, by the way. And so does the color pink. Fuck your mom, this stupid song, and the color pink.” He took the headband off of my head and shoved it in his back pocket. “But you *don’t* suck. And you’re too cool for this headband.”



## Four-Letter Words

**W**HEN I woke up, it was dark outside. Atop my nightstand, I found a glass of water and two aspirin. My better senses told me it was only one glass of water, but my blurry vision thought it might be two. I tried to sit up and let out the familiar groans of a person realizing they're getting too old to drink like they used to.

The sounds of an enthusiastic infomercial in the distance caught my attention. Sulking slowly through the hallway, I found Carter in the living room, sprawled out across the couch with his feet propped up on the armrest. I tucked myself into a sliver of open couch space, snuggling up next to him.

“Good morning, sunshine,” he smiled with concerned eyes.

“What time is it?” I asked, still groggy.

“It's nearly three in the morning.” He switched off the television and sat up. “How's your head?”

“Uh,” I rubbed the heel of my hand into my forehead as if that could possibly make a difference. “It hurts. Why are you still awake?”

“I wasn't, but I am now. I heard the pitter patter of your little feet coming down the hallway. We should take a walk and get some fresh air.”

He stood up and unzipped the hooded sweater he'd been wearing over a pajama top. He was also wearing pajama bottoms, and I tried to remember whether he'd been wearing pajamas when he'd arrived earlier.



He draped his sweater over my shoulders, and I looked down at my bare legs and feet. “I can’t go outside like this.”

“Yes, you can. You’re clothed, it’s three in the morning, and there’s a beach outside your front door. C’mon. The cool air will make you feel better.”

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We walked along the coastline, fingers intertwined. In the dark, the ocean looked like black marble, with the moon reflected on its surface. The chilled air nipped at my bare skin as I tucked my free arm inside the sweater. I waited patiently for Carter to ask me about the afternoon’s events, or to spew out some scripted piece of good advice, but he never did. He just kept walking.

Eventually, the silence became stifling. When it became clear he wouldn’t be the first to break it, I began sifting through conversation starters in my head. I lost focus on how sick I felt, becoming anxious the longer the silence stretched out into nowhere.

“I have a proposition for you.”

He laughed under his breath. “The silence really gets you, doesn’t it?”

“Yes. But also, I have a proposition for you.”

“I’m listening.”

“I want you to come to New York with me for West’s wedding.”

“Honey, that’s not really a proposition. That’s just you asking me on a date.”

“Ok, fine. So, be my date for my brother’s wedding. I don’t know if this is weird for you or not. It’s next month, in October. It’ll be a long weekend, like Thursday to Monday. And you’ll have to go to New York.”

“Why do I feel like you’re spouting out reasons for me to say no? I accept your proposition, as terribly planned as it was, but that’s understandable, considering ...”

“Considering?”

“Considering I can see how hard you’re trying to pretend you’re not hung over,” he teased.

“No pretense here. I take full responsibility for my hangover. I’m not as young as I used to be.”

“Ok. Fair enough. I accept your proposition with one condition. You come to Boston with me for my cousin’s wedding.” He smiled at his own cleverness, teasing me with my own finely worded proposition. “The good news is you love the airport, so flying to Boston shouldn’t be a problem for you.”

I didn’t want to go to Boston. I didn’t want to meet more of his family or dance at his cousin’s wedding or become more attached to him than I already was. Had Casey not cornered me about bringing a date, I probably wouldn’t have asked him at all. I’m not a huge fan of weddings. I don’t like getting all dressed up, and I’m a terrible dancer.

Stuff like that isn’t fun for me in any way, shape, or form. Then there’s the finality of it all. I always wonder if either the bride or groom are anxious about being contractually obligated to another person for the rest of their lives. It’s one thing to choose to love someone, and to stick it out with them for as long as you can manage. It’s an entirely different, terrifying thing to legally bind yourselves together.

In California, it takes six whole months for a divorce to be finalized—*at minimum*. That means if both parties are amiable about the whole thing, and there are no kids or property to sort out, it still takes a full six months to be well and truly divorced.

*Six. Months.*

One hundred and eighty days. That's enough time to travel to a bunch of countries, get two-thirds of the way through a pregnancy, write a song, produce an album, learn to drive, or recover from a car accident that resulted in a broken pelvis bone. Some people haven't even known each other for a full six months before they get married. But if they change their minds, or it just doesn't work out, it still takes six months before they can be free of one another.

I think about these things at weddings, and it makes me nauseous, and my palms get very sweaty. I worry the couple hasn't thought about the practical things. Who will take care of kids if they have them? Who will manage the finances? Who's going to cook dinner and who will do the grocery shopping? Will they go to church? Will they share in the household chores equally? What if one of them dies? Does the other know how they want their remains handled? I think about these things, and I want to crawl under a rock. I don't want to dance or drink or be merry at all.

Admittedly, though, there is one bit I really do enjoy. The moment when everyone turns around to look at the bride as she arrives at the end of the aisle. I don't look at the bride; I look at the groom. Everyone always misses it, but that look on the groom's face is everything. Whether they've thought about all of the above listed real-life issues, love wins the moment every time. I've never been anyone's wedding photographer, but I always take a picture of the groom, and send it to the couple as a gift.

Romance isn't dead, it's just petrifying.

And yet – how could I refuse such a charming, middle of the night beach proposition?

“Deal,” I conceded. “I’ll go to your cousin’s wedding. But I’m not wearing a dress.”

“Fine. But you’re not wearing jeans either.”

We shook on it.

We walked back to the bungalow draped in silence again. When we arrived, we hung out on the front porch, deciding it was best at that point to wait for the sunrise. The last person I did that with was Finn Hendricks, but it felt different with Carter. Less chaotic, more stereotypical (but in a good way).

“You wanna talk to me about this afternoon?” He finally asked.

“No.”

“Aww!” He pulled me in closer to his side and shook my shoulder. “That’s so cute. Let me re-phrase. Let’s talk about this afternoon.”

*Sigh.*

“Ok. What do you want to know?”

“Why’d you suddenly decide to look for your mom? A woman that, since I’ve known you and your brother, neither of you has ever so much as mentioned. What’s going on with you?”

“I don’t know. It came up in therapy, and I realized I’d never even considered looking for her. And then looking for her was all I could think about. After I found out what happened, I called West. Turns out he’d known for years but never bothered to tell me – which – whatever. He had his own fairly valid reasons. But I just figured if ever there was an excuse to drink a half bottle of whiskey, this was it.”

“Wow,” he responded. “That sounds awful, finding out like that. What prompted it in therapy? Do you want to talk about that more? Did you just start going? I could be wrong. Maybe you’ve been going for years, but isn’t ‘tell me about your mother’ one of the first questions they ask?”

No one wants to have this conversation hungover and reeking of hard liquor. Some people don't want to have it at all.

“Why are you always asking me this? It's probably a HIPPA violation if I tell you.”

“Jax, it's only a HIPPA violation if someone *else* tells me.”

“Can I get a pass on this? I want to tell you, but also I don't. I don't know, I'm still sort of working it all out. What I do know is, I don't want to tell you right this minute. Can you just trust me and let me process it in my own way and in my own time?”

“How long is that gonna take?”

“Carter, I don't have a response for that. It'll take as long as it takes. I'm making this life shit up as I go.”

“I'm gonna spit something out, and you can – you know – process it in your own way, or in therapy, or whatever. I just need you to know, I, I lo—”

“Please don't do that,” I cut him off. I knew what was coming. “Don't say that. I can't deal with it right now. Can we just agree that this is fun and we're having a really great time together, and stop just short of what you're about to do?”

“No,” he answered curtly.

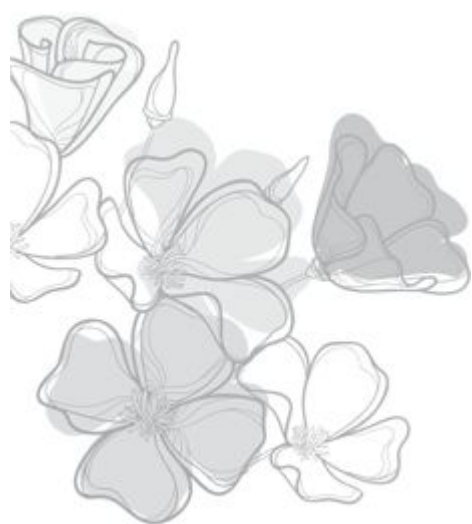
“No?”

“No, Jax. We can't. I can't anyway. Maybe you can. Maybe you compartmentalize better than I ever will, but fuck—I'm falling in love with you. And yeah—there's some top-secret shit going on with you, and I wish you'd be more honest about it. It's all terrifying, and not just for you. But here we are. I held your hair at one thirty this morning while you threw up, and anger-cried yourself back to sleep. I told you everything would be ok, and after you fell back asleep, I

cleaned up your bathroom floor. I fucking love you, Jaxon. If that's not convenient for you, well, that sucks—but it doesn't make it any less real.”

Love. A little four-letter word. It's supposed to mean that someone chooses you. Every day, over and over, they accept you for all that you are and all that you aren't, in any given moment – at every given moment – for the rest of your life. I think that's what motivates people to get married. Everyone's always searching for it. Everyone's always chasing it.

But me? I was always running away from it.



# Boston

WISH I could say I leaned into Carter's sunrise confession. That it made me see everything more clearly, and I opened my heart to him in a way I hadn't been willing to before. That would have been easier than what happened.

Instead, I pushed him away. But he never left. When I sent his calls to voicemail, he left cute ones. When I said I didn't feel like going out, he came over with pizza and old movies. When I told him I wasn't sure if I was still up for a trip to Boston, he sent me a picture of the airport with a sad face and an overlay text that said, "Airport misses Jax."

He knows I fucking love airports.

---

Before our flight to Boston, I called Cindy for help looking for an outfit. I was determined to keep my promise not to wear a dress. Cindy didn't need to be asked twice to go shopping, and she outfitted me in something wedding casual, but still appropriately cool. The cost of this favor was conversations about my love life.

"Wow. I suddenly understand the word 'posh.'" I said, staring at myself in a tall mirror. "I love it, Cin. Thank you. You didn't have to pay for it, though."

"I didn't pay for it," she laughed. "The designer owes me a favor," she kissed my cheek, leaving a bold, red-lipped smooch mark that would undoubtedly be difficult to remove. "Let's talk about life."



My favorite thing about Cindy is also my least favorite thing. She has no tolerance for bullshit or pretense. I told her in a text that Carter dropped the ‘L-Bomb,’ and she’d responded with a simple ‘wow.’ I knew she wouldn’t leave it at that. She’d use the shopping trip to have a full conversation about it.

“I don’t want to talk about life,” I complained.

“Of course you don’t. We’re gonna talk about it, anyway.”

“Don’t you think we should wait until we’re with Lizzie to talk about this?”

“No. Lizzie and I have already talked, and we’re on the same page. You can consider me an emissary of Cindy and Lizzie.”

The next words out of my mouth were becoming more and more frequent. “Ok. What do you want to know?”

“I thought it’d be fairly obvious,” she said. “Carter told you he loved you. He invited you to his cousin’s wedding. You’re taking him to West’s wedding. What’s going on?”

“Well—I needed a date for my brother’s wedding. And he needed a date for his cousin’s. Is this really the line of questioning you wanna go with? I’ve seen you approach men at coffee shops to get a wedding date. Or—that dude from the gas station where you get your oil changed? Remember? You took him to your Aunt Clare’s 80<sup>th</sup> birthday?”

“Touché. But to be fair, this is Carter Summers we’re talking about. He isn’t just some gas station Joe. And now you’re not even answering his calls? Why?”

“You can’t even remember the guy’s name? And you want to lecture me about love and relationships.”

“For your information, Jaxon Samantha—the lovely boy from the gas station was, in fact, named Joe.”

Cindy spent the rest of the afternoon reading off a script very similar to that of Dr. Nancy's. I need to learn to make real connections. If I'm not careful, I'm going to lose Carter. When am I going to tell him about my ... issue ...?

These were things I'd already considered while I lay awake at night wondering why the universe conspired to send me into Carter Summers' veterinary practice at the worst possible time in my life.

There's no checklist for making big life decisions. Even if there was, I doubt it would work for me. What is the difference between what's good for you and what your heart actually desires? Why do they always have to be so different? For some people, it's easy to figure out. Their heart tells them to go right, and their brain agrees. My heart and brain always travel in opposite directions. For once in my life, the thing that my heart desires is also the thing that's good for me.

Tragically, I'm not always so good at what's good for me.

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"I can't believe we're sitting in first class," Carter exclaimed, sipping the free alcohol he'd just been served.

"I have a lot of miles. You'll always travel in style when you travel with me."

While we'd been sitting around waiting to board the plane, I pulled out my camera and guided him through the process of taking pictures of people. Not just people's faces, but the human condition itself. We took a photo of a little girl holding on to a stuffed bear by its arm, hanging her head after saying goodbye to her mother – a uniformed soldier. We took a picture of an elderly man seeing his grandson running toward him after getting off the plane. We took pictures of lovers, and mothers, and fathers. Families saying hello and some saying goodbye. We took pictures of the exhaustion on people's faces that always seems to accompany travel. And when he wasn't looking, I took pictures of Carter.

I took pictures of Carter seeing things for the very first time, anxious as we waited for the plane. I took pictures of his worn-out boots and the rips in his jeans, admiring the way he sits with one ankle propped on to his opposite knee. I didn't know how much longer all this would last. I didn't want the pictures Lizzie stole from the yearbook room to be the only ones I had of him. I took pictures of us—of my head leaned against his shoulder, of us smiling and making weird faces.

I took pictures of Carter leaned back in his first-class seat sipping free liquor, and when he fell asleep on the flight to Boston – I took pictures of that too.

---

I'd been to Boston only once before, but there wouldn't be time to sight see. Carter had an entire agenda of family events his cousin Charlie (the bride) had emailed that to him.

Charlie's mother was Carter's mom's sister. They'd been close growing up, even though Charlie always lived in Boston. Their moms kept in close contact, and Carter visited Boston regularly. Charlie was my age, and Carter told me that she'd been like a little sister to him growing up.

Charlie was vivacious. She wore bright colors and spoke with a thick New England accent. She studied English Literature and Drama in college and now taught creative writing at a local junior college. She was passionate about her love for the Red Sox. In fact, the only thing stronger than her love for the Red Sox was her fiery hatred of the Yankees. She was a significant amount shorter than Carter, but you'd never know it by her enormous personality.

In stark contrast, her soon-to-be husband, Dominic, was quiet. He taught history at a local private high school. He doted on her as all girls hope to be doted on. She sat on his lap telling stories that first night I met them, and he held her hips as if to keep her from floating away. He refilled her glass when

it was empty, and he carried her high heels when she decided it was time to be barefoot.

Eventually, I snuck away to the bar for a drink, but could still hear the laughter from Charlie's stories echoing loudly in the background. I paid for my drink and stayed back for a few moments, observing Carter in his element. He'd always been a California boy in my mind, but something about being there with the entirety of his family brought the Boston out in him.

"He talks about you a lot."

I turned to my left to see Dominic standing beside me, marveling at the radiance surrounding Charlie.

"Hopefully nothing too horrible!" I responded playfully.

"Not at all. Charlie says he used to talk about you when he was younger, too. Before he joined the service. Did you know he liked you back then?"

I smiled, recalling the movie date he never took me on.

"Back then, I always thought he just saw me as West's dumb little sister."

"West is your brother?"

"Yeah, sorry. I forget not everyone knows everyone I know."

"Charlie told me last night he was bringing you. She remembers when he was in high school, he always worried your brother would punch him straight in the nose if he ever found out Carter liked you. You seem to have found your way back together. Must have been your lucky stars, huh?"

I thought of all the things that brought me back home, and subsequently to Carter. Lucky stars isn't how I would describe it.

"I think he's pretty great, too."

“So, do you think you two will ever, you know ...” Dominic gestured to the large gathering – a universal uncomfortable question that doesn’t have a good answer.

“I’ve never really thought about it. It’s only been a few months.”

“Yeah—but what’s a few months?” He winked.

Obviously, he was one of those people who didn’t know how many months it takes to finalize a divorce in California.

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They held the wedding ceremony in a grandiose Catholic church building larger than any building in Green Valley. When the enormous church organ began playing “here comes the bride”, the entire audience turned around toward the door in anticipation of Charlie’s big entrance. I did the opposite. I kept my eyes on Dominic, waiting for the doors to open and for his eyes to catch the first sight of her. Dominic’s reaction didn’t disappoint.

At the wishes of her mom, Charlie opted for the full Catholic mass, and I lost count of how many times I knelt down and stood back up. At various tense moments throughout the ceremony, I felt Carter looking at me, sometimes out of the corner of his eye, and other times, he didn’t bother to be inconspicuous. Before long, I was actually looking forward to the reception, usually my least favorite part of these events.

“Do you like to dance?” He whispered into my hair.

I rolled my eyes and turned to him, smirking. “Do I strike you as the kind of girl that likes to dance?”

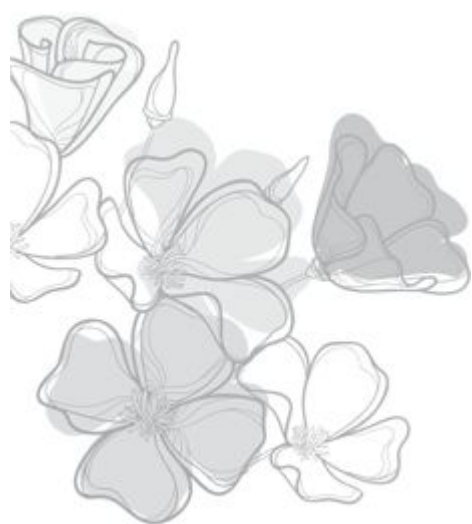
“You strike me as the kind of girl that throws herself into mosh pits at concerts.”

I bit back my laughter as I heard Charlie fighting back tears in her vows. “Stop making me laugh. You’re ruining the

moment.”

He laced his fingers through mine and lifted them to his lips, kissing the back of my hand, and whispered, “I love you” onto my skin.

Saying it in silence didn’t make it any more comfortable for me. Mostly, I just wished he’d stop saying it altogether.



# Open Bars

**O** PEN BARS are the single best investment you can make for your wedding. Charlie and Dominic spared no expense—and I'd decidedly spent enough time being sober for one day.

I drank. I drank and then I drank some more. Carter asked me if I'd had enough and suggested I stop. The world got blurry, and I felt like I might be able to dance. I couldn't give him what he wanted, but at least if I kept drinking, I could dance with him. So, I kept drinking.

The more I drank, the better I felt. The music got louder, and the celebration felt more celebratory. There may have even been a few 'woo hoo's. At some point, I could tell by the disappointed look on his face that he wasn't having fun anymore, even though I'd been dancing all night.

“Sweetheart, don't get me wrong, it was fun the first time around, but I'd rather not hold your hair back while you throw up tonight.”

“That's not gonna happen. I feel fine. I feel fucking amazing. No throwing up tonight. In fact,” I leaned in closer to whisper, “Cindy took me shopping and bought me matching underwear. Which, just F-Y-I, I'm currently wearing.” I clicked my tongue against my teeth and winked at him.

“Can I get you to drink some water so that you don't pass out before I get the chance to see those?”

“I need to pee,” I said abruptly, stumbling away from him.



“Do what you gotta do. I’ll just be here, waiting with water.”

On my return walk from the bathroom, I noticed two blurry figures that looked a little like Carter and his mom arguing at our table. As I approached, my suspicions were confirmed. Though I could only partially make out what they were saying—it sounded a lot like probative questions about mine and Carter’s future. Carter pled with her not to ask me any more invasive questions.

“I’m your mother, Carter – I’m allowed to ask embarrassing questions,” I heard her say as I got closer.

“No, Mom, you’re really not. You don’t get it. These are more than just embarrassing questions to her. Please mind your own business.”

My logical brain told me I should also mind my own business and hang back in the crowd until they stopped arguing. My lack of inhibitions propelled me forward into their semi-private conversation about me.

“Ask me what, Jillian?” I’d never called her by her first name before. But I figured, what the hell. We were already miles more familiar than I ever wanted to be.

“I was just telling Carter here. It’s obvious how much you care about each other and how serious this is getting.”

“Mom! Don’t!” Carter shout whispered from behind her.

“Well, he’s fantastic. You raised a good one.” I smiled widely and slung my arm around her shoulder, not concerned with whether she could smell the alcohol on me.

She, in turn, flung her arm around my shoulder and shook me lovingly. “Between you and me? I’m not getting any younger. I was just telling Carter I think he should move up his ten-year plan by a few years. All I really want is for him to

settle down with the right girl and give me the one thing all mothers dream of.”

“What’s that?” I asked, completely clueless to what was coming, though I should have seen it from the bathroom.

“Grandchildren, dear.”

*Fuck.*

There are several things I could have said in that moment, all of which would have been infinitely better than what I actually said.

“Oh, wow. That sucks for you, Jillian!”

Carter and his mother simultaneously snapped their heads in my direction like a pair of deer in headlights.

“Excuse me?” She gasped.

“Mom, Jax and I are nowhere *near* there yet. Leave your future imaginary grandchildren out of this and please drop it.”

“Yeah,” I laughed sardonically. “They’re going to be *spectacularly* imaginary.”

“You don’t want kids, Jax?” she asked with a tone of polite judgement.

“Who knows, Jill! Not me! Not at twenty-seven! But it doesn’t matter now, anyway. That choice was made for me.” I pressed my lips together in an insincere smile. “Guess I’m not the right girl after all, huh?”

“Meaning?”

“Mom—” Carter stepped between us, “that’s enough.”

“Meaning I’m fucked, Jillian! I’m broken! Sorry! You’re not getting any grandbabies from this factory. It’s closed the fuck down! See, I got in this nifty little car accident about six months back and it, *quite literally*, broke my fucking uterus.

Surprise! I can't have kids. Thank you for playing 'how many deeply personal questions can we ask our son's girlfriend!'"

I'd started half shouting when I meant to only be speaking in meek tones. I wouldn't go so far as to say everyone was looking at me, but a fair amount of people standing in our immediate vicinity absolutely were. Including Charlie and Dominic.

Immediately, I regretted the delivery of this previously highly classified information. Especially when I saw the looks on people's faces. Some were empathetic, some shocked, and some just embarrassed for me. Carter though? He looked like he could cry. I wasn't sorry, though. I was relieved he finally knew the truth. I'm not a betting woman, but if I were, I'd have bet the awkward plane ride home would be followed by an even more awkward split back in California.

I'd have to find another date to West and Casey's wedding, but at least I wouldn't have to feel guilty about leaving.

Charlie was the first, and only, to approach me.

"Jax, honey, I need to pee. Come help me with this dress? I think my maid of honor is off somewhere fraternizing with my best man."

Charlie walked me back toward a dressing room area designated for the bride and her bridal party, which had its own personal bathroom. Rather than making her way through the clearly marked restroom door, she plopped herself down onto one of the three lavish couches that filled the room. She patted the seat cushion next to her inviting me to have a seat. I obliged, suddenly feeling stone-cold sober.

"Charlie, I'm so sorry, I—"

"Oh, Jax, no. Please. My aunt Jill is so fucking nosey."

I hadn't been expecting that.

“I – I mean, aren’t most moms?” I had no idea.

“No. Well ... maybe. Still not an excuse. Personally—there is nothing I hate more than being asked when Dominic and I are going to start popping out kids. I mean – really. What fucking business is it of people to ask? It’s so invasive.”

“I totally agree.”

“Of course you do. Any modern woman with half a brain would. Take you, for example. You’ve been traveling since you left college. You made a career out of it. It would be *perfectly* acceptable for you not to want kids. On the other hand, it would be perfectly acceptable for you to have come home, ready to settle down and have kids with Carter. Plus, it’s only been—what? Like, four months or something since you guys reconnected?”

“Yeah. Something like that.”

“This situation sounds fucking terrible. And, by the look on his face, I’m assuming Carter didn’t know. Which sucks, but like—when is the right time for that conversation when you’ve just started dating someone? You don’t seem like the hugging type, or else I’d give you a hug.”

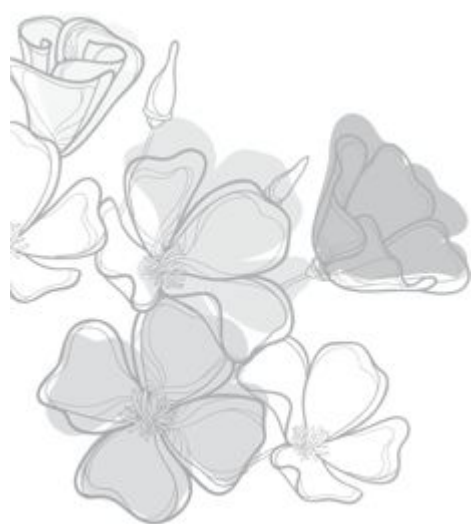
“I came home for my birthday in March, and on my way to my ex’s house, I was in an accident. I’ll spare you the gory details. Suffice it to say—suddenly I can’t have kids. And I just—I keep asking myself, would I have even wanted them, you know? I don’t know—I’d never really thought about it before. Maybe I wouldn’t have—but the thing is, I’d have loved the choice.”

Spilling secrets to a girl I’d only met two days prior on the night of her wedding was not how I’d envisioned getting all of this off my chest. But something about Charlie—or maybe something about how she didn’t know me at all—made it easy.

“Can I offer you some unsolicited advice? About Carter, I mean? Talk to him. Tell him everything you just told me.”

“I can’t imagine it’s going to make a difference. I think once we get home, it’ll probably be time to call it quits. No one,” I cleared my throat, choking back tears, “you know, no one wants a broken girl.”

“I don’t know if I’d call you broken, Jax. And I wouldn’t bet against my cousin. I see the way he looks at you. Maybe I’m wrong, but on some level, you must know, you’re taking decisions away from him just like this decision was taken from you. You never know how people will surprise you unless you give them the chance.”



# Someone's Dad

**H**IS EYES were kind, but he'd never look at me the same again.

I was sure there was a painful goodbye at the end of a long drive after a long flight home. He didn't say a single word. He'd whispered the night before, when he thought I was asleep, that he loved me—even if I didn't love him back.

I didn't know if I loved him. All I knew of love was scribbled illegibly into abstract lyrics in an old notebook belonging to Finn Hendricks. I knew it hurt my heart to hear him say I didn't love him back.

I couldn't know if I loved him. I was still trying to decide if I loved myself.

He parked in my driveway. With a continued tangible silence, he grabbed our bags out of the back of his truck and opened the passenger side door, extending a hand out to help me down the steep drop to the pavement. I unlocked the front door and walked inside, waiting patiently next to the key ring for whatever he was sure to say next. I mean—how long really can one guy stay quiet?

He dropped the bags next to the foot of my couch and when he realized I was still standing anxiously at the front door, he walked back and extended his hand out to me again. He led the way to my bedroom at the back end of my bungalow.

Any minute he would drop the breakup bomb. It would suck and it would hurt—but I'd be ok.

He didn't do any of what I expected. Instead, he kicked his shoes off. I bit back a smile when I noticed the big-toe-hole in his left sock. It was *not* the appropriate moment for sock jokes. He shut off the light switch and lay down on my bed, waiting for me to join him. When I didn't, he looked up at me curiously.

“Don't you think we should get some shuteye? Or are you gonna just stand there—all awkward—until the sun comes up?”

“I thought—”

“That I'd wanna talk?”

“Yeah,” I said sheepishly.

He smirked, a hopeful sign. “Yeah – I wanna talk – just not right now. It's two in the morning and we've been traveling all damn day and night. I swear, man – I know you're used to that night life, I get it – but I'm not a brit-rock dick wad, so I need my beauty sleep.”

There was a sting in his words and in his tone. He hadn't tried to hide it, but it caught me off guard.

I crawled into bed, and, despite his earlier tone, he pulled me close to him and pressed his lips lovingly to my forehead. “Get some sleep, Jaxon. We'll talk tomorrow.”

Best efforts be damned – I wasn't going to get any sleep, which gave my head plenty of time to fuck with me. All that's left to do when you're tangled up next to a man as peaceful and lovely as Carter Summers, is lay there and think.

So, I thought about the life ahead of me, and the one Carter deserved. I thought about decisions I couldn't change any more, and the person I'd become as a result of the things I *could* change but never bothered to.



I thought about the sort of life-altering event that really fucks you up – like getting into a car accident on your twenty-seventh birthday and breaking everything that makes you special. People want to know if you're ok. They ask if you need anything. They want to know what's on your mind. And the thing about people is – they only partly mean it.

Here's the truth about people: they expect pleasant answers from you. They want you to say you're ok, they want you to say you don't need anything, and they want you to meekly answer 'oh, nothing' when asked what's on your mind.

People don't want the truth. The truth is dark and unpleasant. The truth is uncomfortable.

The truth about people is they don't want the truth about you.

Knowing what I know – how could I ever share the truth with anyone? How could I share any of this shit with Carter?

I decided I didn't need painfully honest conversations with Carter that end in him packing up his toothbrush and bailing on me. I got out of bed at about seven thirty, put on a pot of coffee, and scrambled some eggs. I'd let him say what he needed to say and then I'd say I was leaving, which I was ... after West's wedding. I'd say thanks for a great time, but I need to get the hell on with the business of living my life. This was not real life.

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The smell of coffee and scrambled eggs coaxed him out of bed, though I'm certain he was still sleepy. He stumbled into the kitchen, all perfectly disheveled hair and draw string pajama bottoms, yawning through his morning greeting. He sat down on one of the tall kitchen bar stools, placing his elbows on the counter and resting his chin in his palms.

“Stop looking at me like that,” I said, grabbing a pair of plates out of the cabinet.

“Stop looking at you like what?”

“Like that – like how you’re looking at me. Stop it.”

“Like what? Say it and I’ll stop.”

“Your patented Carter Summers smolder. Stop it.”

“Sweetheart, that’s not what this is at all,” he sighed, running his lanky fingers through his hair. He stood up from where he’d been sitting and took my face between his hands, kissing me the way he did the first time. The *very* first time, when I was fifteen and stupid. We stopped only when we needed to breathe, and he whispered against my lips, “I’m sorry.”

You know those clichés where a kiss is so magnanimous and breathtaking that you close your eyes when it’s over because that’s the only way you can catch your breath? Those don’t just happen in books and movies – sometimes they happen in my kitchen.

“Wh – what exactly are you sorry for?” He left me a stuttering mess, the same way he always did.

“I’m sorry for what happened to you. I’m sorry my mom can’t mind her own fucking business. For all the things I’ve done, or haven’t done, that somehow made you feel like you couldn’t be honest with me.”

That’s not how I’d envisioned that conversation going.

“I can’t do this with you, Carter. And it’s not about you. It’s about me.”

He laughed, backing away defensively. “Are you kidding? C’mon. Don’t say that – you’re so smart. You’re way too smart for clichés. If this conversation ends in you running away from me, don’t start it with ‘it’s not you, it’s me.’”

“I’m not – that’s not what this is.”

*Lie.*

“Ok – then let’s talk. Let’s be really uncomfortably honest with each other.”

“Why? Because I owe it to you?” I snapped back.

“No. Because you owe it to yourself.”

“I *have* been honest with myself. Me, myself, and I? We’re good.”

“I doubt that very much,” he said. “Ok, look – I’ll make this easier. I’m just gonna ask open-ended questions and you answer them.”

He could have been a therapist if he wasn’t a vet.

“Fuck. Fine – go.” I scratched my head because this topic, in particular, makes my skull itch. “No – wait – this isn’t a coffee conversation.”

I pulled a bottle of whiskey and a small glass out of the liquor cabinet.

“It’s not even eight in the morning, Jaxon.”

“Yeah? Well – maybe add ‘alcoholic’ to the list of things that are wrong with me.” I took a swig and then gave him the thumbs up to proceed.

“Tell me what’s going on with you.”

Now or never – at least he already knew the answer to his questions. I just needed to fill in the blanks.

“Ok. Let me start at the beginning. I came home for my birthday. My dad kind of insisted. Plus, I’d been dating this guy who had been bugging me for a while to come home. So, I did. Anyway – we had dinner and afterward, I headed out to visit my ex. The next thing I know, I’m feeling this, like, insane amount of pain. I passed out, and when I woke up, I was in the hospital. A doctor came in and told me I’d broken my pelvic bone and they’d done surgery to repair it – but some

stuff happened with my uterus when the bones broke, and I wouldn't be able to have kids.”

By the time I'd stumbled my way to the end of my explanation, Carter was holding on tightly to my hand from the other side of the breakfast bar.

He proceeded cautiously. “That's a lot to go through. How are you feeling about it all?”

“Honestly?”

“As honestly as you're comfortable with.”

I wanted to run away. The truth feels that way. Like it might suffocate you if you don't retreat. That's exactly how I wanted to answer his questions – by leaving, and not answering them at all. So, I figured I should just start by saying so.

“I wanted to run away. It would have been so easy – I was supposed to start my next assignment two weeks after my accident. I figured I'd lie around my house, pop some pain meds, and then get back on a plane. When I told my doctor, she almost laughed. I must be the first person in history to think they can just get back to work after an accident like that. And then she dropped the atomic news on me. I wouldn't be ok to get back to work for another four or five months. So, now here I am – holding hands with Carter-fucking-Summers at my breakfast bar, drinking whiskey before eight in the morning.”

I'm not a crier. I hadn't intended to start then, but sometimes the universe is bigger than what you intend. I felt a steady stream of treasonous tears trickle down my cheeks. An itch in the back of my throat urged me to open my mouth and sob. I bit violently down onto the right-side corner of my bottom lip because open mouthed sobbing will never be an option. When it became too painful, I licked the bitten spot and tasted the salt of my tears.

The last time I'd cried in front of another person, that person was Finn Hendricks. We were sitting at the edge of a bathtub, and he reacted with a measure of discomfort matched only by my own.

Carter Summers is not Finn Hendricks.

He made his way around to my side of the breakfast bar and swiped the water from my cheeks. He pressed his forehead to mine and whispered, "I love you. It's ok. I love you."

He was wrong. His loving me didn't make any of it ok. He needed to know. He deserved better than I'd ever be able to give him.

"I can't ..." I started to speak – but have you ever had one of those moments where you start to say something important and then feel like you might vomit? What I was about to say, I'd never said – not like I was going to say it. I was certain I'd be ruining someone's shoes immediately after.

"I'll never be anyone's mom. My mom was fucking terrible. She squandered mom-hood. I'll never even get to be someone's terrible mom, but you? You would make a really great dad. And you will. You'll get to be someone's amazing dad, because it's September. It's September, and that means – I get to go back to my life."

"What does that mean?" He panicked. He kept a steady tone, but his eyes gave him away. They would always give him away.

"That means I've been wanting to run away, and now I can," I said calmly, at peace with my decision.

"You can't spend your life running away from shit that's too hard, Jax!" The low calm volume of his voice rose steadily into a shout. I wondered if this – our first real fight – would be our last.

“It’s not just that. It’s more than that. I’ve spent the last ten years building a life, Carter. And it’s amazing. It’s a good life. It’s not just taking pictures. It’s a snapshot. A thousand moments of a thousand human feelings, set to music. My whole life, I’ve never known how to deal with my own emotions. But at least I get to hang around with all these beautiful creative souls who always have the right words on the tips of their tongues. That’s it. That’s my life, and it *has* to be enough – because that’s all it’ll ever be.”

He wasn’t convinced.

“That’s another shitty decision, Jax. It’s not bad luck, it’s you, actively walking out on me because I told you I loved you and you’re too emotionally constipated to admit you love me too.”

I’ve never been called emotionally constipated. It was funny at exactly the wrong moment, and it made me laugh.

“It’s not funny, Jaxon.”

“Are you suggesting I take an emotional shit?”

“I’m suggesting you’re an asshole.” He didn’t think it was funny.

“I am an asshole. But that’s ok, because I’m gonna call my boss, and find someone who needs their picture taken. I’m gonna get on a plane, and you’re gonna go find someone who isn’t.”

“That’s not what I want,” he insisted.

“No – that’s what *I* want. And you may not see it now, but you’ll be better off for it. And I’m sorry I lied by omission. I’m sorry I kept going on dates with you, and letting you kiss me, and holding your hand. I was always going to leave, and nothing you could have done would have made me stay. It sucks right now, but it’s going to be ok. And when it feels like it isn’t, just take the easy road and blame me.”

I wanted to leave. That would have been the perfect time to do so – but it was my house, so I was going to need to do the worst thing in the world.

“Go home, Carter,” I said coldly.

“Are you – you’re serious?”

“Serious as a girl who can never make you a dad.”

“Stop fucking *saying* that.”

“It sucks, right? But you’re not stuck with me. It’s simple – grab your shit, and just go home.”

He reached his hand out for me, and for the first time in all the years I’d known him, I recoiled. “Carter! Go the fuck home! Please!”

“No. No, you don’t get to do that.”

I walked toward the door grabbing a sweater on my way. “Leave, or I will. This is done. It’s over. You don’t tell me what I *get* to do. I’m a grown fucking woman.” I opened the door, staring at him, refusing to look away, like a game of relationship chicken. “Carter. Go.”

And he did.

I commenced audible sobbing as soon as he shut the door. I put “Glycerine” on repeat, curled up on the couch, and cried with every ounce of pent-up rage and sadness I had in me.

Sad songs make the tears flow better, and this one is my favorite song to cry to. From the opening guitar chords all the way through the sorrowful violins, the deep ache and graveled voice lulled me with lyrics that were burned into my soul since I was a kid. I cried for twenty minutes before I heard a loud knock at the door.

Of course he’d come back. I was an asshole, and he was an idiot – but I ran to the front door, anyway. Eyes half swollen

shut and vision blurred from tears. I yanked the front door open and threw myself into his arms.

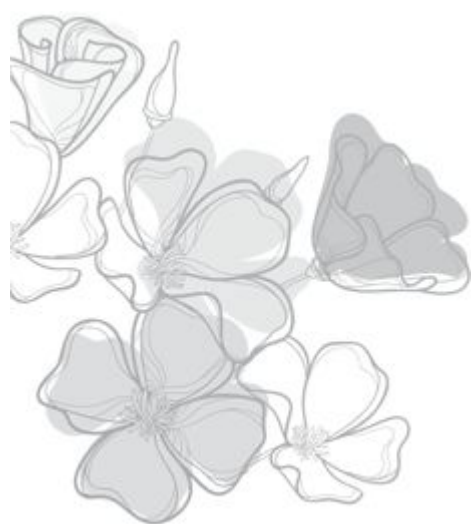
And then the scent – painfully familiar, but not Carter-Summers-familiar.

And then the accent.

“Hello, darling.”

Finn.





# Finnley Archibald Hendricks

**F**INNLEY ARCHIBALD Hendricks comes from a nice family. In his whole life, he's never had anything to rage against. His mom bakes pies when he's home, and always calls him "Finny". His dad is a lawyer. He had a two-parent, perfectly normal upbringing in South London. He even got brand new school clothes every year. Finn Hendricks came from a nice family and somehow still ended up tortured.

I didn't love him anymore – but it still hurt me to look at him, because Finn Hendricks is like a stormy British dream. Some dangerous mix of love, and sadness, and sex, and music. His hair is always messy because there's no way to tame that caliber of curl. He wears thick brown tortoise shell glasses that he can't see past his nose without. He keeps his hair short on the sides and messy on top, just long enough to run his fingers through, because he likes to do that when he's nervous. He's got a shade of brown eyes that makes blue-eyed boys jealous. He wears a maroon leather jacket because he's too progressive to wear a regular ol' black one. He wears ironic thread bare t-shirts underneath, and jeans just tight enough to be salacious. His worn-out Converse matched the color of his jacket, because even though he wants to be rock & roll, he still gives a shit what people think.

"Jax – are you going to ask me in? Or should I just bugger off?"

Two things came to mind in that moment. The first was a resounding disappointment that he wasn't Carter Summers. The second was that I hadn't been alone in a room with Finn

Hendricks since a dramatically teary goodbye on a rainy day in New York. Naturally, I continued to stand dumbstruck in my doorway.

“I rang you,” he blurted out, nearly shouting, darting his left hand into his hair. “Loads of times, but you didn’t pick up. So, I said to the lads – let’s just go to her, then, shall we?”

I wanted to ask him if he was already in California when he’d made the suggestion, but I still wasn’t sure if I should let him in.

“I got a bit worried you’d gone lost in the doldrums or something.” He looked me up and down. “Can I be honest? I think I might have been spot on. You look like shit, Jax.” He looked past me, a subtle hint he wanted to be let in. He spotted the open bottle of whiskey on my breakfast bar. “Are you drinking? It’s barely morning – what the fuck are you on about? Did somebody die?” He looked straight into my eyes, which caught me off guard. I backed away; hit by nerves I hadn’t felt in years. The swift movement made him nervous too, and he pulled his cell phone out of his too-tight-jeans, dialing a number and holding the phone to his ear. *‘Yeah, mate, she’s alive – but barely just. Take a run about the neighborhood. And bring coffee. I think she’s drunk.’*

“I’m not drunk, I’m just sad,” I mumbled. I could barely hear the words in my own ear.

“What?”

“I’m ...” I sighed, and then raised my voice to a level louder than he deserved, “I’m not drunk! I’m fucking sad!”

“Honestly, love, you look a bit of both.”

I flipped him off.

“Are you gonna let me in, then?”

I moved out of his way – a begrudging invitation to come on in.

“To what do I owe the honor?” I asked, walking into the kitchen for another drink.

“I told you – I rang you, and you didn’t pick up. I just kept getting your voicemail.”

I nodded my head toward the whiskey bottle and gestured toward him with the glass in my hand. Another silent invitation.

He looked confused. “Jaxon, no. I never thought I’d say this, much less to you, but it’s too early, isn’t it? To be drinking?”

“Is it? That’s not the Finn Hendricks I know.” I took a swig. “What are you doing here?”

“Didn’t you get my messages?”

“Nope. I’ve been out of state.”

“And you left your phone in California?” He looked confused.

“No, it’s just been off most of the time because I was at a wed– wait why ... why are you here? You called me. Great. What the fuck for?”

“It’s a long story.”

I looked down at my pajamas. “Does it look like I have somewhere I need to be?”

“Alright,” he squinted at me, obviously annoyed, and rolled up his sleeves, “it’s actually not that long of a story, and here it is. I rang Phil Hammersmith at Rolling-fucking-Stone, yeah? Looking for our favorite photographer, and he said you’d been in hospital. And I said to Phil, no fuckin’ way, cause if she’d been in hospital, she’d have told me. I mean – I know I was a shit boyfriend, but I still care what happens to

her. She knows that. She'd have called to let me know she was alright."

Finn was the last person – and I mean the very *last* person I'd expect would want to hear from me in the event of an emergency. We'd been to the hospital once together, and it hadn't gone so well for either of us.

"I'm fine," I said.

"Well, it's good to know you're alive, but I'm not entirely sure you're fine." He yanked the bottle out of my hand.

"Give that back," I demanded.

"No."

I lunged toward him, trying to snatch back the bottle. I hadn't intended to become an alcoholic, but I wasn't gonna let Finn-Tequila Bottles on Stage-Hendricks tell me when I could and couldn't drink.

"Give it the fuck back," I said, this time a little angrier.

"You've gone a bit mad then, haven't you? Whiskey before ten is a bit much, so I think I'll just hang on to this, if that's alright?"

"No. It's not alright. Give it back," I huffed – frustrated because who the fuck was he? "Actually – give it back and go back to London, where you came from."

"I wasn't in London, love."

"And stop calling me 'love'."

"I wasn't in London, Jaxon Samantha. I was in Canada, worried because Phil Hammersmith said you'd been in hospital, but he didn't bloody know what was wrong, and he didn't know when you'd be back to work. So, I rang you, and I left messages, and then I finally just said – fuck it. I flew my mates to fucking Los Angeles, and I'll be honest, I'd hoped for a warmer welcome."

“Why do you even care?” I waved him off dismissively.

“Are you serious? Why do I even care?”

“I’m fine.”

“You said you were sad. So, go on then, tell me what’s wrong.”

“I just broke up with my boyfriend.”

“The lawyer? Good, he was an idiot.”

“No. What is this, girl talk?”

“I can braid your hair if you’d like.” He smirked his stupid, endearing smirk.

“It’s a really long story.”

“Well, darling, I’ve flown all the way here from Canada to hear it.”

He twisted the top back on to the whiskey bottle and made his way to my living room, plopping himself on the couch. I wanted to tell him what happened – everything that happened, but I’d told the story way too many times for one day.

“I was in a car accident. It was ... well, suffice it to say – it was fucking terrible. I was in the hospital for a bit, and when I got out, my doctors told me it would be a long healing process. I called Phil’s secretary and let her know I needed to take a leave. I didn’t think to call you because – frankly – why the fuck would I? We’re not friends – we’re *barely* acquaintances, and I’m sorry – but I didn’t think you’d want to hear about me being in the hospital, considering the *last* time I was in the hospital.”

I spit the last bit out with an acidic tone only he would understand.

“We’re barely acquaintances, are we? That’s not fair.”

“Well, fair or not, I just didn’t think you’d care.”

“You really didn’t think I’d care that you were hurt? Has it been that many years, then? Have you forgotten everything you meant to me?”

My cell phone started to ring. I didn’t have it on me, but I’d turned it on loud as soon as Carter left, so I could hear it if he called while I was sobbing.

“I’ve gotta – hold on.” I ran to the back of the house, toward my room.

“You’re bloody joking, right? I’ve phoned you more times than I can count, and the middle of this conversation is when you decide to start picking up?”

It was Carter. I ignored the call. I didn’t want to, but he couldn’t have had worse timing if he’d called during a tsunami.

“It was Carter.”

“Fucking great for Carter. Who the hell is Carter?”

“He’s my – he was my—”

“Your boyfriend?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, shouldn’t you be answering? Or are you hoping he’ll come ‘round as well?”

“You’re such an asshole. Have you heard enough? I’m fine. I’m alive. You’ve confirmed it – and now I’m sure there’s some groupie somewhere waiting to be given the Royal Finn Treatment.”

“Jaxon.”

“What?”

He seemed tired of me. He seemed frustrated. He seemed like he wanted to say something that should have gone without

saying. And then he mustered up all the courage he had left and went ahead with the elephant in the room.

“Enjoyed the album, did you? Did you even bother to give it a listen? Not-fucking-likely since you appear to be operating under the assumption that I – somehow – do not give a shit about what happens to you.”

“I didn’t listen to it.”

He started to laugh. Nervously. Angrily. “Are you joking?”

“Nope.”

“Well then, I think it’s about time you did.” He pulled his phone out again, navigating quickly through several screens before finally landing on a screen which displayed an all too familiar album cover.

“Of course you bought your own album. Why am I not surprised?”

“No offense, love, but you reek of whiskey and girl tears. Take this,” he shoved his phone in my hand, “take it – please. Go have a shower. The lads will be here with coffee any minute now. Get dressed and comb your fucking hair. I think I owe you breakfast.”

“I don’t want—”

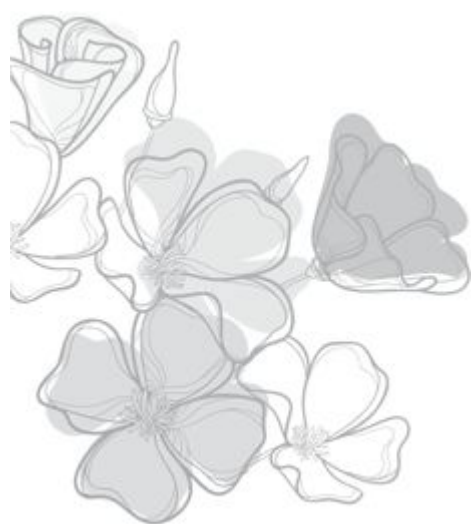
“Yeah – that’s quite clear. Nonetheless – please, let me buy you breakfast.”

I conceded more easily than I should have, taking his phone and walking down the hall toward my master bathroom.

“Oh, and Jaxon, love – don’t look through my photos. It’s tits galore in there, and you don’t need any more reason to be angry with me!”

*Fucking asshole.*





# A Debt of Breakfast

**F**INN HENDRICKS, by his own admission, owed me a debt of breakfast. He still remembered how I took my coffee, and that I preferred pancakes to crêpes. Some trivial bits of information, I suppose, never truly leave you.

“You look really lovely,” he said, looking up at me through his long eyelashes from the brim of his teacup.

“Not two hours ago you said I looked like shit.” I narrowed my eyes at him.

“Well – a shower suits you, because now you look lovely.”

It was lip service. My hair was in a wet mop of a bun, and I’d put on the cleanest pair of sweatpants I could find on my bedroom floor. My shirt may have even been inside out. I felt better, and most certainly looked better than I had when he knocked on my door, but by no stretch of the imagination did I look ‘lovely.’

Finn flirted with the waitress. She was young, blonde, and peppy, with a tube of pink lip gloss peeking out from the pocket of her apron. She didn’t recognize him. Black Heart Sunday was popular enough, but she seemed more like the country music type. Nonetheless, she was captivated. It’s hard not to be, because he’s gorgeous and British and he calls everyone ‘darling.’

“She’s very impressed by you, and she doesn’t even know who you are,” I smirked.

“She doesn’t really seem the Black Heart Sunday sort, does she?” He noted.

“There’s a ‘sort’?”

“Yeah,” he continued, “black jumpers and plaid skirts. It’s like a school uniform, only edgier. You’re not allowed into a show if you’re not wearing some variation of it.”

“It must be really difficult for you to be such a god amongst women.”

He bit back another smile. “You’re thoroughly enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“I’m not enjoying this at all. Except for the pancakes. The pancakes here are fucking amazing.”

I’d taken him to the place Carter took me on our first outing. Hindsight, being what it is, that was a bad idea. But they did have great pancakes.

He licked his bottom lip, no longer able to contain his smile. “I’m glad you’re alive.”

“That’s gotta be the nicest thing anyone’s said to me in ages. Thanks Finn.”

“That’s no bullshit, Jax. After Phil told me you’d been in hospital, I was mad with worry.”

“Well, you obviously knew I was alive. I’d told Phil’s secretary as much, but I appreciate the sentiment. None of that explains why you were looking for me in the first place.”

He began fiddling with his hair – his nervous tell – and focused intently on the stirring of his tea.

“I’d like you to come back to the U.K. with me – the, the band. With the band, I mean.”

“To England? What for?”

“We’re laying down tracks for the next album, and I’d like you to photograph us.”

“You know I usually do this – like – on tours, right?”

“Yeah, we’d like you to do that as well.” He removed his left hand from his hair, leaving a wreckage of black curls. “If you’d like.”

It didn’t escape my notice that England and Finn Hendricks were the perfect distance from sunny California, and the even sunnier disposition of Carter Summers.

“We were in Canada playing a festival. We’ve got a few more stops here on the West Coast before we head home. We’ll be back in England before the end of October. I’d quite like for you to join us. You don’t have to stick around for the whole tour. But stay around for the record and the shows in the U.K., and we’ll have you back in California by March, right around your birthday.”

I cringed at the reminder of my birthday. It had nearly been six months since the great uterine fiasco of my twenty-seventh year. Not knowing any better, Finn took my reaction to be a response to his request.

He looked back down into his tea and picked at the outside of his thumb nail with his forefinger, another nervous tell. It must have been strange for him to fly to California to ask me to be his own personal photographer. I hadn’t played that role since we broke up.

“Can I think about it?” I asked. “When do I need to let you know?”

His gaze drew upward, directly into my eyes. He sighed a breath of relief. He knew me well enough to know I would just tell him to fuck off if I wasn’t interested.

“Truthfully, love – you’re the only one I want. Show up on my doorstep on Halloween. Show up sooner. Whatever you’d prefer.”

“You always know just what to say to a girl.”

“Erm ... Jaxon? There’s a tall blonde bloke standing behind you, and he looks like he’d like to hit me.”

I turned around in my seat to find six feet, two inches of angry Carter Summers. “This isn’t what it looks like,” I said immediately.

“Really? Because it looks like you’re about to run away with this Brit-rock bags of dicks,” he said coldly.

“I’m not running away with anyone. I told you – it’s time for me to go back to work.”

“Is this why you didn’t answer my call earlier? Why is he here? Shouldn’t he be sleeping it off somewhere?”

“Oy, mate! I’m sorry, but do I know you?” Finn activated his angry eyebrows.

“He just showed up,” I said, holding my hand just centimeters away from Carter’s stomach, as if that could stop him from hitting Finn if he really wanted to. “A little bit after you left, he knocked at my door. I thought it was you.”

“I didn’t *leave*,” he growled.

“What?”

“I *didn’t* leave!” he repeated, this time in a shout. “You essentially told me to go fuck myself and sent me on my way.”

*Semantics.*

“Whatever. A little bit after that, he showed up.”

“Listen – Carter? Is that your name? Carter, listen mate – I didn’t know you two were a thing, I just came to ask her back to England with the band, I’m in a—”

“Yeah – I know who you are, asshole. Stop calling me ‘mate.’ You’re not fucking Australian, and we aren’t buddies.”

“That’s not—” I stood up next to Carter, grabbing his hand to redirect his focus, “that’s not how it sounds. He’s just here

to ask me to join him on tour.”

“That’s actually exactly how it sounds.”

“To take pictures, Carter. *Fuck.*”

“Because you’re the world’s one and only music photographer? How *has* the earth been turning with you in California all this time? C’mon Jax – it’s British charm bullshit. He’s asking you back to *have* you back.”

“Well, that’s not gonna happen.” I turned my gaze to Finn, to be certain he understood.

He threw his hands up in innocent surrender. “I’m not here for that, alright? And, by the way, it’s not *my* fault I’m British. I was born this way, mate.”

“Right. That makes sense. Because all the musicians she photographs make house calls.”

“I *bloody* rang her! She didn’t answer! Is it really necessary for me to repeat this story? I called Phil, he told me she’d been in hospital, I got worried, she wasn’t picking up. So, I’m here. Not sure if you’re aware, Carter – but we used to be a bit close.” Finn kept his gaze on me.

To say I could literally feel the tension between them would be an understatement, and not just because I was standing between them. Finn was, for the most part, a non-confrontational guy. So was Carter, but Carter was angry to the fullest extent of anger he could muster. And Finn wasn’t going to back down. I needed to diffuse the situation.

“Carter. Can I ask, in the most non-accusatory tone ever, what you’re doing here?”

“Can you walk me to my car so we can talk?” He asked calmly, turning his attention back to me.

“Yes. But heads up, we’re not going to rehash everything from this morning in a public parking lot.” I looked back

toward Finn. “Finn, give me a few minutes. I’ll be right back.”

“Of course, darling. I’ll pay the tab? We can finish our conversation back at your place.”

“Thanks – and stop calling me ‘darling.’”

On the short walk to Carter’s truck, I noticed he was carrying two bags of takeout, which was probably too much food for one guy.

“It’s not all for me,” he said, seeming to have read my mind. “You didn’t pick up when I called, and I felt stupid having given up so easily this morning. I thought I could bribe you with breakfast. I came to pick up the food and saw you sitting out on the patio with an ex-boyfriend you supposedly haven’t spoken to in ages. Care to clue me in?”

He might have been calling me a liar. I lied about a lot, but not about Finn. It had been over a year since I last spoke to him, including the times I ran into him at events. We hadn’t had a meaningful conversation since our split.

“That was the truth. He just showed up. He contacted the magazine to find out if I could shoot some stuff for their next album. They know we have history, so they told him I’d been in an accident and was home on leave. He tried to call, he got worried, and he flew out here.”

“Why would he do that? Why would he be so tremendously worried about you that he’d think it was appropriate to fly to California looking for you?”

“I don’t know, Carter. He’s fucking – over the top. That’s just who he is. I heard a knock at the door, and I thought it was you, but it was Finn. I was kind of a wreck, which worried him even more, and he sort of barged his way in.”

“Did you tell him what happened?”

“Yeah – well, sort of. I told him I was in a car accident, and that I had surgery. He isn’t really entitled to the rest of the story.”

“And now he’s gonna whisk you away on some stupid tour? And you’re gonna go? Just like that? What about West and Casey’s wedding? Or had you forgotten I’m supposed to be your date?”

“I think a break-up gets you out of wedding date duty.”

“Jax, I don’t want out of wedding date duty. Don’t you get it? There’s a full stack of pancakes and a white flag in one of these bags. This break up is stupid.”

“I know it seems stupid to you, but this is hard enough without having you look at me every day, knowing that I’m broken.”

He reached out and put his hand on my cheek. I instinctually leaned into it. “You’re not broken,” he said. “I love you, and you’re not broken.” He pressed his forehead to mine, and just as I could feel the water works building up behind my eyes, I recoiled.

“I told you; I don’t want to re-hash all of this.”

“Are you going with him?”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s bullshit, Jax. Don’t go with him. This isn’t what you need.”

“Oh, really? Please, enlighten me. What is it that I *need*?”

“You need to go home, sleep it off and calm down, so that we can have the real adult conversation I wanted to have with you this morning.”

*How fucking patronizing.*



“Carter! I am a real fucking adult. Don’t be so patronizing. This may not be your idea of what life is supposed to look like, but this *is* my life. The rest of it – the California dream – it’s just that. It’s a dream. It’s a vacation. But this is my career. It’s how I pay for all this fancy beachfront shit I’ve been indulging in for all these months. And that ‘British bag of dicks,’ is the *reason* I even have a job to go back to. And beyond that he’s someone who, unfortunately, I’ll always care enough about to do a favor for. So, am I going? Probably. But that’s not your business anymore.”

The silence nearly suffocated us for approximately sixty seconds before I heard Finn’s voice awkwardly call out from behind me.

“Are you about ready, love?”

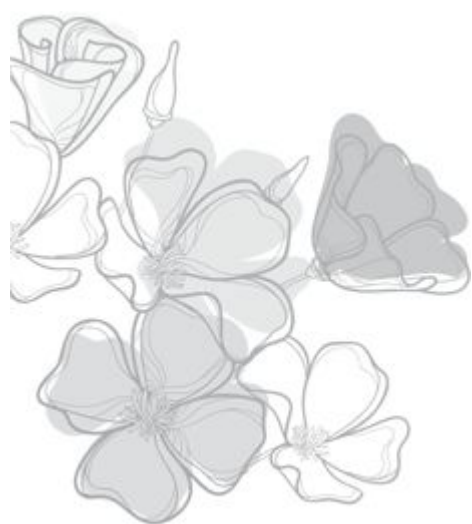
“Don’t call her that!” Carter recalibrated his anger in Finn’s direction.

“Carter!” I rubbed the heel of my palm back and forth across my forehead, like it would somehow magically make both of them disappear. “Stop.”

Carter leaned in close and tucked a stray strand of hair behind my ear. “This is a mistake, Jax. You love me and leaving the country won’t change that. You’re waiting for me to give up on you, but that’s not gonna happen. If you need to run off with Finn Hendricks to get it – then that’s what you need to do. But when you get there, and you’re surrounded by music and smoke and lights and whiskey, and you realize it’s not enough anymore, I’ll be here waiting for you to come home. Because I love you too.”

And then he kissed me. He placed his thumb on my bottom lip and tugged gently downward, and his top lip landed on the crease of my mouth. And I couldn’t breathe or think or move.

I can’t ever remember being as afraid of anything in my life as I was in that moment that he might be right.



# Skeletons in the Travel Bag

**F**INN AND I sat in silence in his rental car outside of the restaurant for what felt like an hour. Realistically, it was probably only about five minutes. He didn't know what to say. The last time Finn had seen me being properly kissed; it had been him doing the kissing. More than that, he'd likely heard more of our conversation than I would have wanted.

“He said ‘you’re not broken,’” Finn blurted out as if he’d been thinking about it for the entirety of our silence. “Why’d he say that? Those words specifically?”

“How long were you listening to our conversation, exactly?”

“Long enough to wonder why you might think you’re broken.”

“It’s a long story.”

“Yeah – you keep saying that. But I came here for this. For you. For your long stories, and your inability to be honest with the people who love you. For your stained t-shirts and your knack for question evasion. I came here for you – all of you. So, what the bloody hell is going on?”

“Finn, if you’re here with some grand plan to win me back —”

“I’m not here for that. I’ve said as much, yeah? But you’re important. I can’t keep carrying on seeing you at parties and award shows, pretending we just casually knew one another. You were everything, Jax. I need to make it right with us, whatever that means. I’m not here to complicate your life. I’m

just here for you. I care about you, and I can't keep existing in a world where you're not a part of my life."

I couldn't hide from Finn. He saw me. He always had. In some of my darkest hours. In loneliness. In sickness. In doubt. When I didn't have two cents to scrape together for a cheeseburger. That's why he would always be able to look at me, on any given day, no matter how much time had passed, and tell if I was ok.

"So, what's the plan? Best fucking friends forever? Is that even possible for us?" I asked.

"I don't have a plan, love. I just want you around. So, for now, we're gonna get drunk on the beach. We'll say all the things we never said, and you'll fess up to whatever is going on with you. That's it. I'm sure that's not how Prince Charming handles business, but I'm a bit rougher around the edges, I'm sure you recall."

---

Finn and I sat in the sand, staring out on to the Pacific – a bottle of whiskey between us, laughing about who we'd been before we were old enough to know better. By the time we ran out of fond memories, it was late afternoon, and the air was crisp enough to be uncomfortable without a sweater.

"You've been running around with a heavy skeleton in your travel bag, Jax. It's a wonder you can fit all your clothes in there."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that particular skeleton isn't yours to carry. It's mine. And I'm sorry. It's not on you, love. It's time to put it down and walk away from it. Let it go."

"I don't—"

"Yes, you do, babe. It wasn't your fault. None of it was your fault. That skeleton belongs to me."

*“... we’re better off, babe. Our lives are just beginning. It feels like a shit deal now, but we’ve dodged a bit of a bullet, haven’t we?”*

Finn’s use of that particular endearment brought a memory rushing back to me in technicolor. He’d done it on purpose.

“Don’t call me that.”

“It wasn’t your fault. And everything that came after – the fighting and the fucking around and the breakup. That’s on me as well.”

“I left first.”

“And that’s on me as well.”

And another memory ...

*“Finn! Finn, there’s something wrong! There’s something wrong with me!”*

*“You had a bit too much last night, babe. Go back to sleep.”*

*“No, Finn, my stomach hurts. What time is it?”*

*“It’s five in the morning, Jaxon.”*

*“Finn! Finn – wake up, honey! I’m – I think I’m bleeding. I think I’m bleeding.”*

*Finn reached over to the lamp on his nightstand and turned it on, revealing a terrifying amount of bright red soaking our white sheets.*

*“Fuck, Jaxon – fuck, babe – did you cut yourself?”*

*“Oh God. Oh God. What’s happening? What’s happening to me?” I started to cry, terrified. This was the kind of thing you only ever see in movies. “Finn – get the keys. Get the keys. Something is wrong. I think I need to go to the hospital.”*

*“What’s wrong, love? Should I call your brother? Who can I call?”*

*“I don’t know! Please, just get the keys. We need to go now.”*

---

Finn and I spend New Year’s Day of my twenty-third year in the hospital.

New Year’s Eve had been different. Black Heart Sunday signed their record deal. They’d be putting out an album and going on tour. The mainstream had taken notice after seeing Finn’s picture on the cover of *Rolling Stone* – an issue about up-and-coming bands and artists. The photo was taken by his girlfriend, an unknown photographer living in the city ... me. Life would never be the same. We celebrated, laughing and screaming as we drank champagne.

I never had champagne before that night. It was different from beer and hard liquor. It went down easy – bubbly, like soda. We threw strawberries into the glasses like we were upper-class hot shit. We drank, and we drank. We clinked glasses with our friends and ate chocolate and danced. On our way back to Finn’s tiny apartment, I fell in the snow, right on my ass. He got down on the ground with me, and we laughed as he wrapped his leather jacket around my shoulders. He confessed he’d fallen in love with me the very first day he saw me in the park. He said he’d love me for the rest of his life.

We sat there on the frozen ground until our asses were numb, and then he pulled me up and took me home. On a scale of one to mind blowing – the best sex we’d ever had was on that night. And because my best memories are so often tangled up with my worst, we spent the next two days in the hospital.

*“Jaxon, I’d like to speak with you about the results of your blood tests. Would you prefer to speak alone?” A tall, handsome doctor with blonde hair and a powder blue tie sat on a round swivel stool next to the hospital bed I was lying in.*

*“No. Finn and I – we’re together. Anything you need to say to me is ok for him to hear.”*

*“Are you certain you’d like him to stay?”*

*“Doc, we’re – you know – we’re in love. So, I’m here.” Finn squeezed my hand. “I’m here, my love.”*

*“Whatever it is – just tell me. Am I ok?” I asked anxiously.*

*“We need to keep you here to monitor your blood loss and determine next steps. If it doesn’t slow in the next hour, you’ll likely need to have surgery. But you’ll be ok, Jaxon.”*

*“What surgery? What for? What’s going on?”*

*“I’m sorry, Jaxon, but you’re having a miscarriage. Based on your blood test results and your last menstrual period, it appears you were about ten weeks along. Normally miscarriages pass on their own, but the amount of blood you’ve lost is an indicator there might still be some fetal tissue in your uterus. The surgery is to remove the tissue in order to stop the bleeding.” My heart stopped. All of a sudden, a million things I never knew I always wanted with Finn came speeding through my consciousness. “Did you know, Jax?” the doctor asked.*

*“Did I know?”*

*“That you were pregnant?”*

*“No, I, I didn’t – I took,” I swallowed loudly as I felt Finn’s hand loosen from mine. Suddenly I felt very much alone. “I take – I take birth control, so I didn’t think – you know – that I could get ...”*

---

*“You found me crying in the hospital bathroom, remember?” I asked solemnly*

*“I do.”*

*“I was sitting on the edge of the bathtub, and you said, and I quote, ‘we’ve dodged a bit of a bullet, haven’t we?’”*

*“I remember.”*

“Did you mean that?”

“Jax – I was twenty-four years old. I was about to cut a record and go on tour and be the fucking rockstar I’d been dreaming of all my life.”

“That’s not an answer, Finn. You came here, you said you wanted to sort it out, and you drudged this up. Be honest. Did you mean what you said?”

“It’s a bit more complicated than a yes or a no, isn’t it?”

“No, it’s not. You either meant it, or you didn’t.”

“Part of me meant it, yeah. And part of me was gutted. That’s a path I’d never considered. But when the doctor said it out loud, it flashed past me, like I was dying. A whole life. A life with you. A family. A house. An office job. I’d sing to our kids, and you’d photograph our life, but that’s as far as it would ever go. Part of me felt broken, but part of me was relieved. I never should have said that to you, though. I never should’ve said it out loud. I should have told you the other bit, shouldn’t I?”

*“Babe, should I call your brother?”*

*“No.”*

*“Jaxon – I’m a bit out of my depth here. You’ve just had surgery. You could have died with all the blood you lost. You cried all night last night. I found you crying on the bathtub. And today, nothing. You haven’t said a single word.”*

*“Don’t call West. It’s ok if you don’t want to be here and you just want to go home. But don’t call my brother.”*

*“Do you want me to go home?”*

*“If you don’t want to be here, then yes – I want you to go home.”*

*“Well, that’s stupid, isn’t it? Of course I don’t want to be here. Neither of us wants to be here. But I want to be with you.”*



*“Then stay. Just don’t call West.”*

*“Jaxon.”*

*I turned around. I faced the wall. Something about the concerned look on his face made me want to vomit. I had to get my shit together. We dodged a bullet, but if I didn’t get it together, he’d call West and West would call Dad. Dad would bring me home.*

“It wasn’t your fault, Jax. That’s not your skeleton, babe – it’s mine.”

“It’s fine. You were right. We dodged a bullet.”

I’d repeated it to myself so many times since that day, I started to believe it.

“No, love.” He took my hand in his and kissed my knuckles. “Remember the night before? I said I’d love you for the rest of my life. I meant it. I love you still, babe. You know what I realized after I slept my way through California after we broke up? We didn’t dodge a bullet – the bullet was the heartbreak. The bullshit that came immediately after. Me pushing you away, and you running away from me. Any life we lived together would have been a dream, and now we’ll never know. But it’s ok. It’s not your fault. None of what went on that night, or the thousand nights thereafter, is your fault.”

“I was in that accident, on my birthday, and I was hurt pretty bad. I can’t, umm ... I can’t have kids now. And you know what? For a second, I thought to myself, I probably dodged a bullet. But I didn’t. This kind of shit changes everything. It changes how people look at you and how they see your life. It changes every relationship you’ll ever have going forward. There was nowhere for me to go. Nothing for me to do but think about how I probably would’ve been a terrible parent. Then Carter came along. But he’s a normal guy, you know? He wants a family and a normal life, and he’ll never be able to get that from me. When he finally found out, I

sent him away. I broke up with him. And you know what – he dodged a bullet too.”

There was nothing else to say. After a bit of thick silence, Finn blurted out the only thing you can say in a moment like that.

“Fuck. That’s fucking terrible.”

“I know, right?”

“That’s fucking terrible,” he repeated, no doubt trying to wrap his head around it.

“I know.”

“You’re not a bullet, Jax. And you’re not broken.”

“I don’t know. I feel like I’ve always been broken in one way or another. But now there’s something I can put my finger on. Something *tangibly* wrong with me.”

“No way. You’re not broken. You’re an unrealized dream. You’re perfect song lyrics. You’re a record’s worth of heartbreak.”

“I’ll come to England.”

“Smooth subject change.”

“I’m serious. It might be exactly what I need right now.”

“England is exactly what you need right now, is it?” he repeated skeptically.

“Meaning?”

“Meaning you’re running away. Clearly. You ran away from me as well, didn’t you? But I earned it. Have you even given Prince Charming the opportunity to be a cock?”

“Are you renegeing on your job offer?”

“I’d be bloody stupid to tell you not to come, wouldn’t I? And I’m not stupid – but I am selfish. So, you’re welcome to

come whenever you're ready. I'm just telling you the truth. Don't blanket it with logic. Call it what it is."

"West is getting married next month – you wanna come with me? Make a scene?"

He squinted at me, confused and intrigued.

"Are you asking me to be your wedding date?"

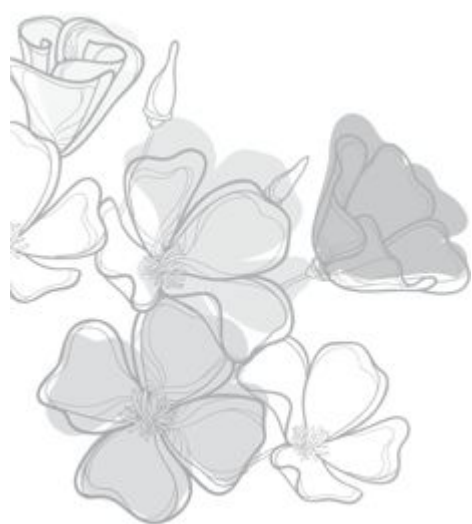
"Not like a *date* date. Just a friendly wedding date."

"Churches and love and all that? I'm already feeling itchy. But I sort of owe you one, don't I?"

"Probably more than one, if we're being honest." I clicked my tongue to the roof of my mouth and bit back a smile.

"Alright. If the time comes for you to get on the plane and as a last resort you've decided it's a wise choice to bring me to a wedding, then yeah, phone me. And if not, I'll owe you one because I bloody hate weddings. Either way, I'll see your smiling face back in the U.K., yeah?"

"Yeah."



# The Problem With Brothers

**W**EST INVITED Carter to his wedding.

His official story was that he sent Carter a separate invite as a longtime friend who he wanted to be present for his special day. It was bullshit. The truth was the last-minute invite was familial intrusion cloaked in niceties. Carter would show up, even though he knew I'd have preferred he just skipped it. His official story was that he couldn't miss his oldest friend's wedding.

Some semblance of a warning would have been nice, but West and Casey decided I wasn't likely to show up if I knew he would be there. Not entirely fair, though I'd been avoiding Carter like the plague ever since I told him I was going to England.

I hadn't so much as told him as *texted* him. This is how it went ...

*Me: took Finn up on his offer*

*Me: I'm going to England. I just need some time.*

*Carter: I'm coming over.*

He did come over, but I didn't answer the door. Or the countless text messages and voice messages that followed. I felt empowered in the notion that I didn't owe anyone an explanation. Least of all, Carter Summers.

He called my brother, and my brother called me with a well-rehearsed logical argument about why running off with Finn Hendricks was the worst idea I'd had since dating Finn Hendricks. He said Finn was the last thing I needed at a time like this. Casey encouraged him from the background, reminding him to remind me about how Carter could give me something Finn would never be able to—a home and stability.

*Fuck home and stability.*

But I digress. Here's how I found out he was going to the wedding ...

There I sat with Cindy, Lizzie, and Lizzie's boyfriend, Garrett, curled into a cozy leather airport chair. Garrett introduced himself as 'Garrett, \*handshake\*, Garrett Henley.' "Like the t-shirt?" I asked him, as he smiled widely and responded, "Yeah, like the t-shirt."

Garrett-like-the-t-shirt-Henley decided it was an opportune time to make small talk.

"I love weddings. They're so romantic," he mused.

I tried not to snarl at him. Most of his charm was just him trying to be impressive. This was the first time Cindy and I were meeting him. Nice guy, but a little too fictional boy in a book perfect for my taste. Perfect teeth, dark curly hair, hazel eyes – and plaid, like this was 90s Seattle, and all he wanted was to make it big.

"I know, right?" Lizzie clung to the inside of his elbow, hanging on every syllable.

"Gross," Cindy rolled her eyes. I smiled, thankful she'd said it so I wouldn't have to.

"No, seriously!" He continued. "I just think there's something so spectacular about the first time you see your one and only someone walking toward you to your very own forever."

“Is this guy serious?” I shook my head like the non-believer I was and pulled my dark sunglasses off my head to put them on. Kind of an asshole move, but that’s how bright their love was.

“You gals don’t like weddings?”

“I like weddings with open bars and gorgeous groomsmen.” Cindy winked.

“I like weddings I don’t have to go to,” I said, pulling the hood of my sweater over my head.

“Well – I love weddings. What about you, babe?”

I gagged a little in my mouth.

“I do too. Don’t mind these two – they’re just bitches.”

“Rude,” I said, curling up next to Cindy and leaning my head on her shoulders.

“Oh – is this about Carter coming to the wedding?” Garrett commented.

I shot up to full attention, just in time to see Cindy and Lizzie shaking their heads furiously at him, begging him to shut the hell up.

“What do you know about Carter?” I interrogated.

“Just that your brother invited him even though you broke up,” Garrett didn’t seem to be in on the secret. “But he’s your brother, so of course you’re still going.”

Cindy and Lizzie simultaneously looked around at every corner of the airport that wasn’t occupied by me.

“Did you two know about this?” I asked, glaring at both of them.

Cindy actually whistled – her attempt at nonchalance. Lizzie elbowed her perfectly coiffed boyfriend in the rib.

“Ow! Ohhh,” he blurted out, suddenly realizing his faux pas.

“You guys?” I asked again.

“I’m sorry, Jax. I didn’t realize—” he stumbled for the right string of words and failed miserably at finding them.

“That my friends were so treacherous?”

“I’m gonna run to the restroom and let you girls sort this out.” He kissed Lizzie on the forehead, giving her apologetic puppy dog eyes, and made a quick exit.

“What the fuck is going on?” I demanded.

“West has been plotting with Carter about how to get you back. When you wouldn’t answer his calls or open the door for him, Carter asked West to send him a separate invite, so you’d have to see him at the wedding,” Lizzie word vomited all over me.

“And how did you two come upon this information?”

“I ran in to Carter grabbing coffee last week. He told me he’d see me at West and Casey’s wedding,” Cindy confessed. “I emailed West and asked if he knew you guys had broken up. West said he knew, but you were making a huge mistake running off with Finn Hendricks, which you are, by the way. He said he invited Carter, hoping that seeing him again would remind you how much you guys love each other.”

“And then you told Lizzie?”

“Well, yeah – I had to tell someone, and I couldn’t exactly tell you.”

“And then Lizzie told Dream Boat Henley, over there?”

“What?” she asked, innocently. “I tell him everything. He’s my person.”

“Gross.” I rolled my eyes.



“I’d think you’d understand better than anyone, Jax! He’s a musician!” She countered.

“He’s a musician? So fucking what? Who cares if he’s a musician?”

“I thought you’d like him!”

“I like him fine! Stop trying to deter me from the actual issue here. *Betrayal*.”

“That’s super dramatic, Jax,” Cindy said as she searched her purse for a tube of lip-gloss.

“You’re right, *Cynthia*! *Betrayal is* dramatic.”

“As are your face, your tone, and your use of verbiage, *Jaxon*!” Lizzie added.

“Look,” Cindy said through her freshly applied berry sparkle gloss, “we can’t stop you from going to the U.K., even if it is a terrible decision cloaked in a strategic professional move. But we *can* help your brother remind you how much you care about Carter. And that’s all we’re doing.”

“And what if I was bringing a date?” I asked.

“You aren’t,” Cindy dismissed.

“How do you know?”

“Because you aren’t. Calm down, drama queen.”

“Well, if you *were*,” Lizzie interjected, sitting up a bit straighter, “it would be a scandal. So, it’s a good thing you aren’t.”

“Well, buckle up, bitches. Shit’s about to get scandalous,” I flipped my hair angrily, “Because I am bringing a date.” I turned my back to them before muttering, “I hate all of you, by the way.”

“Even Garrett?” Cindy asked.

“Especially Garrett,” I said, not realizing he was standing behind me.

“So ... you probably don’t want this hot chocolate? How sad. I got it with extra whipped cream,” he smiled apologetically.

“Hot chocolate with extra whipped cream is the first stone in your very long road to redemption, Henley-like-the-t-shirt.” I snatched the warm beverage out of his hand and sipped it, trying not to get whipped cream on my nose.

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As a teenager, I used to harbor a fantasy that Carter would show up unexpectedly at my doorstep in a nice suit and whisk me away to the winter formal. On principle, I was anti school dances. But just in case, I bought a dress that caught my eyes in a store. It was white and adorned with black flowers all over.

I’m anti dress, and yet something about the stark contrast of the colors against my dark hair felt like a fairy tale. He bought me a record from London, after all. What greater love language is there than music? Plus, he asked to take me to a movie, and he’d kissed me. The winter formal wasn’t that far of a stretch. He knew when the dance was because he was cool and popular. He always went, but with friends, never a date. He’d go with me, though, because I was different.

A surprise to absolutely no one – that dream never came true. Eventually, I gave the dress away. This memory struck me clear as day as I sat on the plane, unable to sleep, remembering the bridesmaid dresses Casey picked out were white, with black fucking flowers.

Ten years too late, Carter was about to show up in a suit and surprise me at a formal event. No doubt, he would strut into the reception, tall and messy haired, in a perfectly fitted suit. He would see me in the stupid dress, and it would be terrible. Not because I wouldn’t look good in the dress – oh no

– I’d look fucking amazing. It would be terrible because Carter being there was an irony of fate I didn’t need. It was another decision made on my behalf.

My brother. My friends. Carter. They all decided they knew what was best for me. They didn’t much care how I felt. They were sure I was wrong, so how I felt didn’t matter.

How comforting must it be to live with that degree of self-righteousness? No matter, because no amount of scheming or trying to maneuver me in the direction they wanted me to go would change my mind.

I needed to call in a favor from Finn.

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“Jax – wake up, we’re here.”

Cindy nudged me gently. When I looked over at her, I realized she’d put on a full face of make-up and had somehow curled her hair.

“Did you actually get dressed up to see my brother at the airport, even though you are here for his wedding?”

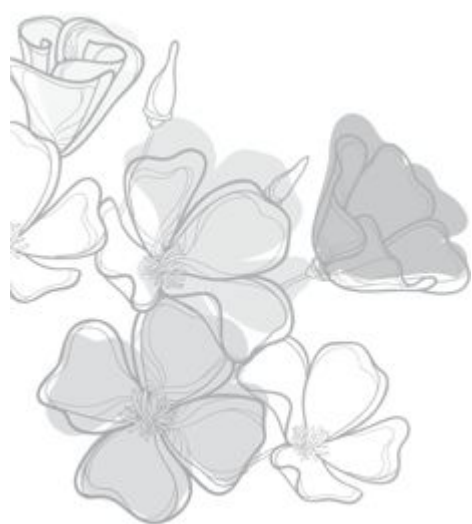
She blushed, “Shut up.”

“Don’t you think it’s time to get over it?”

“I’m way over it. But – you never know who you’ll see in an airport in New York, so you should always look your best,” she winked.

West waited for us right outside of our gate. He was glowing. Immaculately happy. It made me slightly less inclined to yell at him. I hugged him tightly, and whispered in his ear like a mafia boss, “I know what you did. This betrayal won’t go unanswered.”

He kissed my cheek and smiled impishly. “Big brother knows best, Jaxon.”



# An Act of Relationship War

**O**N THE day of the wedding, the bridesmaids all gathered in the early hours of the morning to get our hair and makeup done. Casey looked happy, the way you should when you're hours away from contractually binding yourself to another person. The way you'd look when you'd never refer to it as 'contractually binding.'

The girl talk ran rampant as Casey entertained her friends with stories about her and West's early courtship. He would draw pictures of an adorable cartoon her, going on adventures with an adorable cartoon him. Her friends swooned, listening intently and daydreaming about someday finding a man who would make all their dreams come true.

I wanted to make my own dreams come true. I'm not anti love, nor am I anti dream boy. I just didn't buy in to the notion that finding one great love would be the pinnacle of my life's achievements. Who's to say there's only one great love for every person? There is so much to love in the world, and so many dream boys for so many different dreams.

"Jax? Did you hear me?" The sound of Casey's voice in the distance pulled me prematurely out of my thoughts.

"Sorry, what?"

"Give us the scoop on Finn! I know most of the girls here are dying for details." Giggles all around echoed the sentiment.

The question caught me off guard, considering Casey's objection to me 'running off' with Finn. "There's nothing to

tell, really. It's been a long time since we were together.”

“And yet – you’re following him to England,” Casey said, dripping passive aggression.

“It’s not like that. I’m going back to work. It’s like you’ve all forgotten that my job is *literally* to follow bands.”

A nameless bridesmaid with hot rollers in her hair leaned towards me. “But we still want details. Even if you aren’t running away with him.”

The nostalgia of my Finn days never wanes. No matter how angry I am at him, and regardless of how it ended. I’m protective of those memories. But I knew the follow-up questions would be about Carter. So, I told them about Finn. I told them about how he is lovely and kind and brilliant. He’s all the things you’d imagine when you see him in interviews, and simultaneously so many things you’d never expect.

He’s self-conscious, and sad, and cripplingly shy. He wears glasses. He can’t see past his nose without them, but he never wears them on stage. Not being able to make out faces in the crowd allows him the pretense of confidence. He wears the word ‘pretentious’ like a badge of honor. He sleeps with the television on because he has a hard time quieting his mind. He hears every noise in the world, and it sounds like music to him. He thinks in song lyrics, and he writes down clever one-liners in a tattered notebook he carries in his back pocket. He writes in pen. He likes the feel of it scratching against paper. He never uses pencil. He says that pencils are for mathematicians and people who aren’t confident in their decisions, and he is neither.

“How dreamy ...” Nameless Bridesmaid sighed.

“He’s a lot of things. Dreamy amongst them.”

“Sounds to me like you still love him. Even after all this time.” Casey smirked from the makeup chair.

“I do love him. In some ways, I always will. But not like how you’re insinuating.”

“And what about Carter? He thinks you’re leaving him to be with Finn,” Casey pressed.

This was not a conversation for me, Casey, and seven of her closest friends. She wanted me to be happy, and in her version of my happiness, I have my very own wedding day, just like hers. My version of happy was different.

“Who’s Carter?” Nameless Bridesmaid asked.

“He’s basically the love of her life,” Casey answered without hesitation. “Literally. She’s loved Carter since she was like twelve or something.”

“I mean, are we sure Finn isn’t the love of her life? Did you hear how she just described him?”

“We’re sure. Finn is a bad influence. She’s just good with words. Carter is stable and normal and a healthy choice.

“Yeah, nothing says sexy like a stable, normal, healthy choice!” Her cousin chimed in from beside me.

“So, then, tell us about Carter!” Nameless Bridesmaid inquired.

I couldn’t describe Carter with the same level of eloquence I’d used talking about Finn. Hindsight is 20/20, and I simply didn’t have it yet with Carter. He was an open wound. Everything still hurt. Everything still made me angry. And some part of me was still trying to decide if I was making the biggest mistake of my life.

“We’re not gonna talk about Carter,” I said, disappointing everyone in the room.

“Girl! We need to know who the players are!” Nameless Bridesmaid prodded, highly invested in this soap opera of a situation.

None of those nosy bridesmaids needed to know all the ways Carter was perfect on paper. “Sorry! I think I’ve already divulged enough information. You’ll have to wait and read my memoirs, like the rest of the world.”

“Wait for the memoirs? No, girl. Give us something. *Anything!*” Nameless Bridesmaid insisted.

I sighed in defeat. “Well, I’ll tell you this. It’s complicated. And it’s about to get more complicated because,” I looked down at a text I just received. Finn letting me know he’d landed and checked into the hotel where the wedding was being held. “Finn is my date to the wedding.”

Casey’s jaw dropped. “No, he’s not. He was definitely not invited.”

“Casey, I needed a date. I wasn’t going to bring Carter, and no one bothered to tell me he’d been invited on his own.”

Nameless Bridesmaid gasped as we all saw the panicked breath start to rise in Casey’s chest.

“Jax, our wedding day isn’t the day to hash out all your drama. Inviting Finn was not cool.”

“You made it a day for me to hash out all my drama when you and my brother decided to invite an ex who you both knew I was actively avoiding, in an effort to force my hand into getting back together with him.”

There were no dramatic plans in my back pocket. I just needed some backup. Finn was a fun and handsome distraction who I could trust not to cause drama. I could not say the same for Carter.

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The golden hour finally arrived, and we were all queued up in the church, waiting for Casey to make her grand entrance. I wasn’t their photographer, but months before the big day, I got a call from Casey asking me for a simple request. One picture.



Just one. A good shot of West watching her walk down the aisle. I was happy to oblige. These moments are always my favorite.

I'd never seen my brother like he was on that day, excitedly standing at the end of a long walk down a rose petal adorned church aisle, waiting for the rest of his life. To say he looked in love would be an understatement and a great disservice. He looked like the full gamut of emotions you have over a lifetime hit him all at once, in the span of sixty seconds. I tried to photograph as many of those emotions as I could.

I asked Finn to meet me for the reception. There was no point in having him sit awkwardly in a church pew by himself. He agreed – particularly since the church bit is, in his words, “the dullest part.” I hadn't seen Carter yet, but I knew he was there because, unlike Finn, he wouldn't skip the ceremony just to go straight to the party.

The main reason I needed a date was because Casey, in her infinite bridal wisdom, decided it would be fun to announce each member of the bridal party being escorted by their significant other. Like a fucking cotillion. It wasn't an issue for most of the bridesmaids, who were either married to, or in long-term relationships with, most of the groomsmen. At some point in adulthood, that happens. Most of your friends become couple friends.

I say, “most of” but what I really mean is “all but me.” The small detail of an embarrassing and singularly solo wedding party entrance was the final pro on the mental pros and cons list I'd made when deciding to find a last-minute date. When Casey originally pitched the idea, I too was in a relationship. Upon hearing the news that Carter would be at the wedding, I felt mortified at the prospect of walking into the reception alone.

Finn and I had a plan. I would text him at go time, and he'd meet me outside the ballroom door. He was a night person, and the more day sleep he could get, the better presented he would be. Plan in mind, he booked a room at the hotel where the reception was held. This would make it quick for him to join me and quick for him to leave.

We smiled through an hour and a half of wedding photos after the ceremony. The minutes counted down and the sun began to set. Before I really wanted to, or was prepared for, I'd be seeing Carter again. Actually, he'd be seeing me walking into a ballroom with Finn Hendricks on my arm.

Walking into the hotel lobby situated outside the ballroom doors, I felt the familiar nausea of anticipation generally associated with Carter. Historically, those feelings always tipped toward the positive. That night it was pointedly different. It tipped toward doom. The apocalyptic feeling that I was running headfirst into a moment that would change the landscape of our breakup.

I'd insisted that my joining Finn in England wasn't about a rekindling of an old love. But bringing Finn to the wedding would be interpreted as an unspoken admission on my part that England was about more than work. An act of relationship war. I felt similarly about Carter's decision to attend the wedding in the first place. The difference was that everyone around us saw his act of war as him fighting *for* me. Romantic, right? My act of war wouldn't be looked upon so kindly.

Love is complex and relationships are even more so. I was admittedly not great at either. I'm not a sympathetic protagonist, so I hit send on a text to Finn after several seconds of hovering my pointer finger over the send button. In what seemed like an instant, I spotted him walking toward me, all dapper suits and glasses and perfectly coiffed hair.

“Shit Jax, you look incredible,” he whispered as he offered me the inside of his elbow.

“Thanks for showing up,” I responded as I clung to his arm like a life jacket. I meant it in a grandiose way – for all the times he’d shown up for me, which in the grand scheme, far outnumbered the times he didn’t.

“Always, love,” he winked, swallowing a lump in his throat. It hadn’t occurred to me he’d be just as anxious as I was.

“Name, please?” The DJ asked from beside me.

“Oh, I’m – uh ... I’m Jax Cassidy. My brother’s the groom.”

The DJ, a small blonde woman named Mandi, smiled sweetly with the patience of a person who’s done this a thousand times. “I know your name, sweetie – I’m asking for your escort’s name.”

“Our mistake, darling,” Finn responded from beside me with effortless charm. “Don’t mind Jax, she’s already got into the mini bar of her suite. A bit nervous about all the attention, I reckon. My name’s Finnley Hendricks.” He squeezed my hand, a reassurance I desperately needed in the moment. “Did you need my middle as well?”

DJ Mandi took a moment to process what she just heard and saw in front of her. She smiled a bit, licked her lips, and stumbled on her words. “Oh my gosh. I have you ... I have you ...”

“You haven’t had me yet, love, but the night’s still young,” he interrupted, thoroughly pleased with himself.

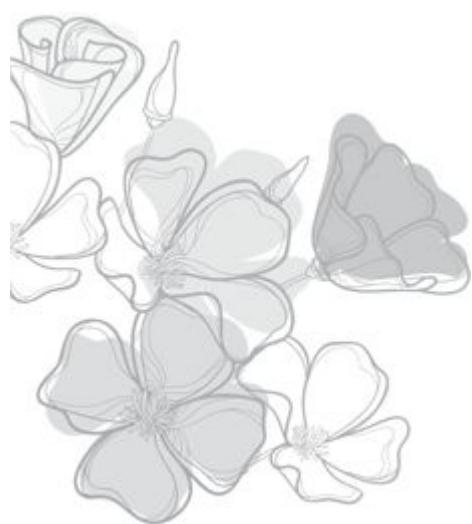
DJ Mandi gulped as nonchalantly as a person can. “I have your song on the playlist for tonight. I didn’t know you knew the bride and groom. Such a, like, what a weird ... koinkidink.”

*I didn't realize people still used "koinkidink."*

"Maybe just skip that one. Don't want to draw too much attention," I interjected.

"Oh, of course, Ms. Cassidy. I totally understand." She fixed her hair behind her ear with her long fingers and fidgeted nervously as Finn smiled at her in agreement. He turned to me and asked, "You ready, love?"

I would never be ready.



# Black, White, and Red All Over

I TRIED not to notice the audible gasps of people putting a face to the name of my escort. I focused on the extravagant decorations all around the ball room. Twinkling lights, strategically sized black and white balloons, and a grandiose black and white cake that looked suspiciously like the pattern of the bridesmaid dress I was wearing. It was a short walk to the long table in the back where the wedding party and their escorts were supposed to sit, but it felt like an eternity.

Finn reached over with his free hand and patted the back of mine. “I’ve spotted Prince Charming. Over in the corner. He’ll have the perfect view of our table from where he’s sitting.” My stomach dropped. “Don’t worry darling, you look ravishing. He’s going to rue the day he ever walked out on you.”

“He didn’t walk out on me, Finn. I broke up with him, remember?”

“Oh, right,” he chuckled quietly and shook his head. “Well, if I’m being quite honest, he looks ravishing as well. One of you will be ruing the day. That’s all I know.”

My eyes shot directly to the corner, where Finn spotted Carter. Carter’s face burned bright red as he caught sight of me, arm locked with Finn. He bit the bottom of his lip as he furrowed his perfectly sculpted eyebrows. Before the pain on his face registered in my brain, I thought to myself, what a gorgeous fucking creature he is.

“Is he wearing a deep purple suit? That’s hard to pull off. I should know, I once tried.” Finn stopped talking when he noticed me shivering. “Alright, love?”

“This might have been a bad idea.”

“I wasn’t going to be the one to break that to you, but he does look a bit shaken. Though he is pulling off that suit, to be sure.” He continued to lead me to the wedding party table.

“Can you stop talking about the fucking suit?”

“He’s not even wearing a tie. Is that a t-shirt under the blazer? He’s pulling it off. No one shows up looking like that to a wedding unless they’ve got shag plans.”

“Shag plans?”

“Are you quite certain he hasn’t brought a date? Maybe trying to make you jealous?”

“He’s sitting alone. Can you just be quiet?” I rolled my eyes, suddenly regretting my decision for more than the obvious reasons.

He laughed, “It’s alright Jax. We’ve only got to make it through one dance and then you lot can go hash it all out,” he wriggled his eyebrows suggestively. “And by hash it all out, I mean – you know.”

“Finn, shut up. Please.”

We sat down at a long rectangular table, with table cards reserved for me, and ‘guest.’ I looked down the table to the other side of Finn, and of course, there was Nameless Bridesmaid sitting in awe, shifting into a lean just this side of inappropriately close to him.

A server placed a plate of food in front of me. I hadn’t eaten all day, but food was the last thing on my mind. I felt my phone vibrate in my dress pocket and fought the urge to look in Carter’s direction.

Finn took bird sized bites and made casual conversation with Nameless Bridesmaid. He was charming to a degree she had never encountered up close. I could tell because she licked her lips several times over the course of one sentence, looking thirsty in every sense. His words were empty as he looked back in my direction every few minutes, searching my face for any visible warning that I might vomit. Or collapse.

I heard Nameless Bridesmaid like background noise. “Jax told us so much about you this morning while we were getting ready! You know – girl talk!” She giggled as her husband rolled his eyes from beside her.

“Well, Jax knows enough for a tell-all book. Hopefully she didn’t give away all my *dirty* little secrets,” he winked. Nameless Bridesmaid let out an audible sigh at the way his accent elongated the word “dirty.”

I felt my phone vibrate again.

“The dirty little secret Jax never shares about herself is that she’s a horrendous dancer. I’m glad our group dance isn’t choreographed!”

Nameless Bridesmaid laughed a little too loudly.

“Jax, isn’t your more recent ex, Carter, here? You’ve got your hands full!” Nameless Bridesmaid said, ever the nosey bitch.

Finn leaned in to her and inconspicuously pointed her in Carter’s direction. I couldn’t help but take another look. He’d let his facial hair grow, a small, manicured strawberry blonde beard, which looked more attractive than frankly was necessary. His crushed velvet purple suit paired with a boatneck black shirt underneath. He noticed me noticing him and ran his fingers furiously through his hair as he clicked on his phone to look at the screen.



My breath shuttered and Finn grabbed hold of my hand under the table, another reassuring gesture.

“Should I be worried he’s going to hit me?” he asked.

“Have you ever been worried about being hit before? No. There’s no need to start worrying yourself about it now.”

“Touché, Jaxon.” He shot me a sideways smirk. “But I’ve also never been the skinniest bloke in a love triangle involving Jaxon Samantha Cassidy.”

“This is *not* a love triangle, Finn.” I squeezed his knuckles together and watched him wince.

“Alright, darling – bring it down a notch. I’m only joking.”

My phone vibrated against my dress pocket again, but this time, Finn felt it buzz against his hand. “Is your dress ringing?”

“It’s my phone, in my pocket.”

“Your dress has *pockets*?” he asked excitedly. “Well, that’s bloody brilliant.” I’d never seen a man so excited about dress pockets. “Check it. It’ll be Mr. Purple Suit, won’t it?”

“What makes you think that?”

“Look at his face,” Finn nudged in Carter’s general direction, trying his best not to be obvious. “He keeps looking at his screen, and then back to you, and then to me. Any second now, he’s going to stroll over here and challenge me to a duel.”

“I’ll check it after our obligatory dance.”

“You’ll check it now, Jaxon. We’re all on pins and needles, aren’t we, Melissa?” I wondered who ‘Melissa’ was until I saw Nameless Bridesmaid nod in the affirmative. Of course. I’d been with her all day, but Finn is next to her for ten seconds and suddenly she has a name.

Finn let go of my hand and unabashedly shoved his into my dress pocket, accidentally tickling my side in the process. I jumped slightly and let out a loud, embarrassing giggle. Before my brain had the opportunity to process what was happening, Carter was walking purposefully in the direction of our table.

“Shit, shit, shit.” Finn started to push his chair back away from the table. “He’s really coming over here to punch me in the face. No more favors for you, Jaxon.” He scrambled in his pocket, looking for his room key, and tossed my phone onto the table in front of me.

“He’s not going to hit you. Calm down. Why are you being so skittish?”

Before Finn had a chance to come up with a witty retort, Carter was standing in front of us, face still red and brows still furrowed.

“I need to talk to you.” He stared directly at me in a manner that I can only describe as aggressive, but still pretty sexy.

“Listen, mate, I think you’ve got this whole thing wrong,” Finn responded, somehow still cluelessly under the impression that Carter walked through a room full of wedding guests to punch him in the face.

“I’m not talking to you, rock star.” He never took his eyes off of me.

“Carter, this isn’t the time or place,” I said curtly.

“I agree. But you aren’t answering my calls or opening the door for me, so here and now is all we’ve got.” He raised his eyebrows expectantly and shoved his hands in his pockets. “Get up, let’s go.”

“If I didn’t want to talk to you in the privacy of my own home, what makes you think I want to talk to you here in front of all these people? I don’t want to cause a scene.”

“Yeah, walking into a room full of people with this skinny little boy-bander seems like the best way to avoid drama.”

“Oy! I’m not a ‘boy-bander’!” Finn interjected.

“I just said, I’m not talking to you, dickwad.” He continued his intense stare. “Jaxon, you can either come with me so we can speak privately, or we can talk right here, in front of this dickhead, and this nice bridesmaid and her husband.”

Finn chuckled under his breath.

“What so funny, asshole?” Carter squared up.

“Just you, mate. Talking to this fully grown brilliant woman as though she were a child.” Finn stayed seated but stood his ground.

“Mind your fucking business, Doctor Who.”

“Is that meant to be an insult? A clue – it’s not. I’d be absolutely chuffed to be a Time Lord you fucking wanker.” Finn turned to me, lowering his tone, “Jax, you don’t have to go with Strawberry Tall Cake if you don’t want to. Particularly while he’s trying to act like your dad.”

“Are you two finished?” I asked, looking back and forth between them. “Carter, let’s go. And you need to make this quick.” I looked over at Finn and Melissa, her jaw on the floor. “I’ll be back before the dance.”

I followed Carter to a dimly lit corner in the hotel lobby, my arms crossed and my mind closed off to the impending conversation.

“Why did you bring him here? You knew I was coming. Why would you do that? It’s not enough for you to run off with him? He also gets to be your fucking wedding date?”

“I’ve told you repeatedly, I’m not running off with him. It’s not an elopement, it’s a job. And he’s here because he’s

one of my closest and oldest friends and I needed a date.”

“I was your date!”

“No you weren’t! I cancelled that date, you just refused to hear me. I’m not even sure why you came here. It’s done. It’s over. We decided.”

“*You* decided. You decided we were done. You decided what to tell me and what to keep from me, and *you* decided what kind of life you think I should have.”

I took a deep breath, accidentally inhaling the scent of him, as he moved closer to me than was necessary for how loudly he was talking.

“I decided what was best for *me*. It just so happens to also be what’s best for you. I’m sorry if none of this fits into the picturesque idea of us you had in your mind.”

“Picturesque idea? You never gave me the chance to have the full picture. All you gave me was bits and pieces. So now I’m here—”

I interrupted him. “Don’t you think this is hard enough without you showing up at my brother’s wedding? Go home, Carter. Go back to your life.”

“You’re so full of shit and you don’t even realize it.”

“If I’m so full of shit, then why are you here? And in that fucking suit, nonetheless.” I stood, hand on my waist, in full battle mode, as he stared back at me, speechless. “Yeah, that’s what I thought. I’m going back in.”

I turned to walk away, and he called out from behind me. “What’s wrong with my suit?”

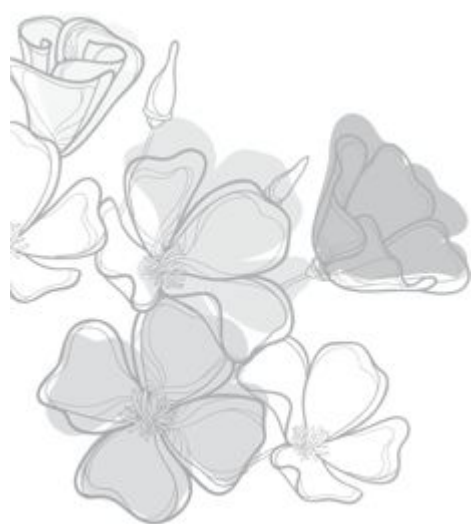
“Nothing. It’s perfect, just like you. But I’m not. And I can’t keep doing this with you.”

He walked toward me, moving into my personal space. “We’re perfect together,” he said softly.

“No, we aren’t. We’re oil and fucking water,” I protested as I tried to keep my senses about me, smelling his cologne.

I looked up again to say goodbye, and he leaned in and pressed his lips to mine. I felt him inhale, and the tension in my body fell into a puddle of feelings as the warmth of his hand registered on the small of my back. My eyelids fell shut as I returned the kiss with the ferocity of several hours’ worth of anger and anxiety. We went on like that for what felt like an eternity.

“You want to know why I came here? I came to tell you that you don’t get to make decisions for me, and you don’t get to walk out on me. I fucking love you. It’s not easy or convenient. It never has been. But here we are. I’m wearing a purple fucking suit because my cousin told me it would make me look amazing. And your dress is ... well, to be honest, it’s distracting. I want you, I love you, and you don’t get to leave me. Sorry.”



# *I am not a Sympathetic Protagonist*

**Y**OU KNOW that moment when the protagonist does something completely stupid and selfish? That's this moment. I'm not too self-righteous to admit it. I'm the asshole. And this? This is the moment any reasonable person would decide I deserve the heartbreak in store for me.

Here's a little recap:

I skipped the bridal party dance in favor of following Carter up to his hotel room, clumsily making out in elevators and down hallways on the way. I almost broke my damn ankle from nearly falling down in the heels I'd been wearing. Finn was right – Carter showed up in that outfit with “shag plans.” There wasn't a single ounce of petulance or self-righteousness in my body stronger than how good he looked and how desperately I wanted him.

We didn't spend much time talking, but at some point, after some off-the-cuff compliment about my dress, I revealed the deep, dark secret of my winter formal dress. I told him how heartbroken I'd been that he never followed through with his on again-off again insinuations that there might be more between us.

“Your brother would have killed me. I couldn't go there,” he said. “But I'm here now, and I'm not going anywhere.”

I still was. Going somewhere – that is. But that was no reason to spoil a beautiful night with an old argument.

I let him keep talking. He stared up at the ceiling, musing about what life could look like together, now that he had all

the pertinent information. Even with as tempting as his propositions were, they all involved me “staying home and settling down.” That little (monumental) life adjustment just wasn’t something I was willing to accept. I would still be leaving in the morning, albeit very quietly and carefully, so as not to wake him up.

When he fell asleep, I took stock of him in a way I hadn’t in all the other nights he’d fallen asleep before me. That might be the last time I ever saw him. Even if it wasn’t, he’d never forgive me. I was, for all intents and purposes, a few quiet hours from becoming the villain in his story.

I took note of the two little chicken pox scars on his forehead – so much more prominent when his eyebrows furrowed, but still visible if you look hard enough. The beauty mark just off to the bottom left side of his chin, below the corner of his mouth. Hard to see underneath all the stubble, but I knew exactly where to look. His long eyelashes. The tsunami of strawberry blonde hair still perfectly coiffed atop his head. The curves and edges of his torso, arms, and shoulders. The random tattoos on his shoulder, back, and underside of his biceps that I never asked about. How many of his stories hadn’t I heard because I’d been too wrapped up in my own shit to ask?

He deserved better. More than all the things I’d never be able to give him, I was still kind of an asshole at heart. Still selfish. Still afraid of commitment. Still terrified of standing still. That’s the big lesson I took away from standing still for seven months.

The last thing he said before falling asleep was that he loved me, and he knew it would all work out. After a long while of watching him sleep, I did what I always said I would. I left.



I pawed around the floor searching for my phone, and clicked it on, decreasing the brightness.

*Me: hey – are you up?*

*Finn: obviously*

*Finn: what are you still doing awake?*

*Me: I'm with Carter, I need a rescue*

*Finn: I fucking knew it.*

*Finn: he had shag plans. I told you and you pranced right into it*

*Me: fuck off*

*Me: can I hitch a ride with you to the airport?*

*Finn: you'd like a ride on the jet, would you?*

*Finn: are you certain?*

*Finn: still time to stay home and domesticate.*

*Me: you're the worst*

*Me: no, but seriously. Can I get a ride? What time are you leaving?*

*Finn: I'm packing up now. Headed out in about thirty*

I looked at the clock. It was four in the morning. I'd need to sneak out, get back to my room, and pack a bag. I could definitely make it.

*Me: I'll meet you in the lobby.*

*Finn: don't be late*

*Finn: or I'll leave without you and you can pay for your own bloody way.*

I picked my shoes up off the floor and slowly slipped my dress back on. Zipping it up as quietly as I could manage, I shoved my phone in the pocket. I took a last lingering look and tip-toed out of the room, careful not to let the door close too loudly behind me.

I met Finn in the hotel lobby. We were dressed similarly in jeans and leather jackets, but his jeans were more torn and raggedy than mine.

“Look at our matching outfits, Jaxon! We’re twins!” He smiled, trying to lighten a mood he rightfully expected to be somber.

“My jeans are clean. We are not the same.”

He rolled his eyes and huffed. “My jeans are clean,” he muttered under his breath as he offered me a hand with my bags.

“I got it.”

“I’m sure you do, love. I’m sure you do.”

---

After a long quiet ride to the airport, we stepped onto a private jet and waited on the tarmac. This was new for me. The last time I traveled with Finn, there were no jets. Only tour buses and business class flights. The inside looked smaller than what you see in the movies, but it was still impressive and way more comfortable than regular air travel. Finn settled in on the leather seat directly facing mine. He could see every inch of heartbreak on my face, but he knew

me well enough to know I'd already talked this topic to death and wouldn't want to revive it so early in the morning.

"I had a threesome last night," he blurted out.

I nearly choked on the swig of water I'd just taken. "Wait – what?"

"I had a threesome last night," he repeated.

"Are you serious?"

He smiled and cocked his eyebrows upward.

"Which two poor dumb girls did you talk into a threesome?" As soon as the words left my mouth, I dreaded the thought one of them could have been Cindy. She'd never met him in person, and he was so much more charming in person. Plus, I know she was licking her wounds after sitting idly by and watching West marry the love of his life.

"Melissa and—"

"*Melissa?*" I cut him off. "Nameless Bridesmaid? Finn, she's fucking married. That's sleazy, even for you." I shook my head in disappointment.

"If you'd let me finish!" He sighed loudly. He was already done with my shit, and we hadn't even gotten off the ground. "Melissa, and her lovely husband, Doug."

"What. The. Fuck." I was relieved it wasn't Cindy, but this was so much weirder.

"I don't discriminate, darling."

"Yes you do!" I rolled my eyes. "You have a pretty specific type, and Doug ain't it!"

"Oh, I've got a 'pretty specific type,' have I? Enlighten me then. Whats my 'type'?"

"You know, heavy eye make-up, big boobs, often blonde but not necessarily naturally blonde."

“You’re none of those things and we got on quite well.”

“That’s different.”

“Don’t put me in a box, Jaxon. I am a *free* spirit. A lover of love. A connoisseur of passionate experiences. A seeker of new adventures.”

“And Doug was into it?”

“Of *course* Doug was into it. What kind of bloke do you take me for?”

“No, I know, I just mean ... he didn’t seem like he’d be into it.”

“Well, that’s just you – putting people in boxes again,” he shrugged me off dismissively, “because Doug was definitely into it.”

“Gross.”

“Listen, this is your doing, isn’t it? You disappeared with Prince Charming Pet Doctor, and there I was, sitting alone at the bridal party table. I fully expected you to come back before the dance. When you didn’t, it was pretty clear what had happened. I was sat there like a sad puppy, so Melissa and Doug took me under their wing.”

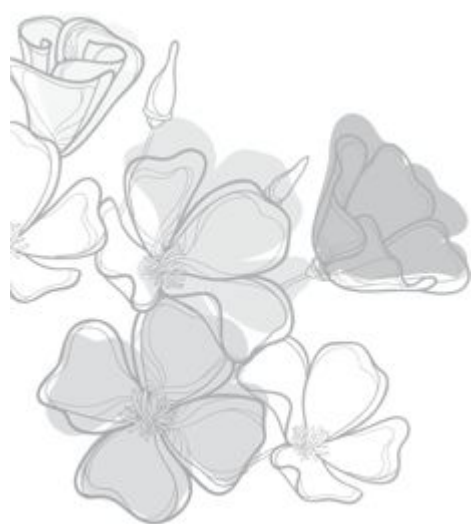
“I repeat – gross.”

“I’ll thank you to fuck right off, Jaxon Samantha. I will not be shamed.”

He pulled his headphones out of a satchel tucked away at his side, and put them on, clicking open his music app. I smiled when I noticed he was listening to his own songs. So many things about Finn Hendricks were still unbearably endearing, not the least of which was the fact that he was his own band’s biggest fan.

The jet took off, and I felt the ever familiar tug of gravity in the pit of my stomach as we lifted off the ground. I lay my

head back and closed my eyes, relieved to finally be getting back to normal life. Not to mention, proud of myself for sorting out so much of my internal bullshit while I'd been on hiatus.



# Arundel

**F**INN DIDN'T live in London anymore. As soon as he'd acquired enough money to buy a house, he bought one in the English Countryside. He settled in Arundel, an Austen-esque town in West Sussex. That's where we spent November and December.

Everyone was angry with me. Obviously. What kind of self-centered asshole spends the night with a nice boy like Carter Summers and then hops on a plane before he's even woken up? I hadn't heard from Carter, but I'd heard from everyone else. Not a lot of lectures, surprisingly. Not even a lot of phone calls. Just disappointed text messages with rhetorical questions. "Really, Jax?" "Why would you do that to Carter?" "Are you happy now?" "What is wrong with you?"

*So many things were wrong with me.*

I thought about trying to continue sessions with Dr. Nancy over the phone, but I wasn't prepared to confess my transgressions to her. I had a gut feeling that her disappointment would sting worst of all. I'd decided that for the moment, being squarely centered in the creative whirlpool of music making would be sufficiently therapeutic. That type of environment has always been healing for my soul.

---

I'll always remember being twenty-two with Finn, in a tiny apartment in New York City, watching him transform the strings of thoughts in his head into poetry for the masses. Finn carried around his guitar the way most people do their phones. He'd strum bits and pieces of music that I would later

recognize in full songs. In the summer, we didn't wear pants. Just oversized t-shirts and boxer briefs. He was always lost in thought, barely remembering I was there. I took photo after photo of him, pen behind his ear, legs stretched across the couch, ink stains on his fingers, and lyrics in notebooks. We used to have a secondhand coffee table we'd found outside with a sign that said: *free to a good home*.

Arundel felt like that, but a lot more expensive. A better camera. A coffee table that was purchased brand new. More than one guitar around the room. Pants. It was an easy routine to return to. I didn't love him the way I did back then, but I was still in awe of him with every piece of my heart.

I tried to capture on film what it felt like to be in that room with him and the band. Best friends since childhood, they reveled in the process of making a record together, even though they'd been doing it for so long. They drank, smoked, and tinkered with things around the studio. Sometimes instruments and sometimes random objects to give the music organic sounds from the world. Listeners would never notice, but they would feel it in the way the music gave them shivers, perfectly harmonized to the poeticism of Finn's lyrics.

I photographed the studio space too, littered with tea mugs, liquor bottles, ash trays, and take out boxes. Large comfortable leather couches that hugged you completely. Sound mix boards and computers and keyboards and microphones. More technology than I understood the purpose for. A single round table low to the ground with Finn's notebook and favorite pen. He would sit cross legged on the ground and scratch words to paper as they came to him, fingerprints all over his glasses, and a backup pen behind his ear.

Black Heart Sunday's home studio sat situated in the basement of Finn's countryside manor. He lived there alone, but the band spent most of their time there when writing and recording. I was staying in a large guest room that overlooked



rolling grass hills and a fortress of trees that separated Finn's estate from the rest of Arundel. In the distance, there was a literal castle.

It felt like a Jane Austen novel, but the inside was modern. Record plaques adorned the walls, along with professional photos of the band. Hanging prominently at the end of a long hallway that led to Finn's home office, the famous photo I'd taken of him all those years ago. Not the magazine cover – which was often what I saw. Just the photo. It was more personal that way, and I knew it was intentional.

He had no shortage of rooms, and though he lived there alone, he didn't seem the least bit lonely. He had a room for everything. An office, a library, a movie theater, a room just for video games, and several guest rooms where the band slept when recording sessions went too late or they were too drunk to make it safely to their own homes. He had multiple living rooms, and very few televisions.

Finn spent a lot of time in quiet spaces. He read a lot and when he wasn't reading, he was writing. It was always quiet enough to hear a conversation happening on the other end of the manor. Everything was comfortable and warm, even under the near constant cover of rainfall. He always had fires burning in the fireplaces, and each living room had a supply of large throw pillows and blankets.

It surprised me how serenely and quietly Finn lived, considering nothing about his life outside that space was serene or quiet. When your mind races constantly the way Finn's does, I suppose all you would want in a home is a little peace and quiet.

We spent a lot of time together, talking and reacquainting ourselves with a friendship that somehow never subsided. I realized I'd missed him when I was talking all that shit about him between the ages of twenty-three and twenty-six. We

slipped comfortably back into deep conversations about life, even with all the time gone by and the heartbreak between us. I understood, for the first time, that he'd been genuine every time we'd seen each other at various events. When he'd snap a photo and tell me he hoped I was well, he meant it. And he meant it when he showed up on my doorstep in California saying he was worried about me. Talking to him was easy and natural, even about things Dr. Nancy couldn't drag out of me.

Some connections never really fade. No matter how much time or space you put between them. No matter how the dynamic shifts, the connection remains. That would always be Finn and me. Somewhere on the path to that realization, I discovered how clearly he could see through my bullshit. He knew me better than anyone in the world. How was that still possible after so many years?

The months passed on, and though I felt like this was exactly what I was supposed to be doing, I still felt the ache of something missing and the anxiety of my choices. I couldn't deny, part of me was different now. My world would never be the same again.

---

On a rainy Tuesday afternoon, I sat in front of a large burning fireplace next to Finn, watching as he clicked through an album of photos on my laptop that I'd uploaded from my camera. He clicked a little too far back and found a collection of photos I'd forgotten about. He sat awkwardly still, staring at a photo of me and Carter sitting in front of a creek in Green Valley.

A sharp pain reverberated through me to the tips of my fingers and toes. A nausea I can only compare to a hangover began to rise into my throat and I recoiled as if I'd been hit in the stomach. Finn noticed my reaction and quickly closed the laptop. He scrunched up his nose and mouth, deciding whether to say anything.

“Has he called?” he asked gently.

“Nope.” I uncrossed my legs and started to get up from the couch.

“Where are you going, darling? It was only a question!” he said as I made my way down a long hallway to the bedroom where I’d been staying. “Jaxon!” He shouted as I, quite literally, walked away from my problems.

He followed me into the guest room, positioning himself on an oversized love seat in the corner of the room that faced the bed where I was sitting.

“You should phone him. Tell him how you feel. Say you’re sorry for leaving the way you did.”

“Finn – you’ve had your fair share of bad ideas, but that is by far the worst.”

“Why is that?” He kicked his feet up onto a large ottoman and settled in for a long conversation. “Is it because you’re the single most stubborn person on the planet? Or is it because you’ve settled on being sad and lonely for the rest of your life?”

“I’m neither sad nor lonely, Finn. I’m always surrounded by people.” I pulled a throw blanket from the foot of the bed and covered my legs, pulling my knees upward toward my chest.

“Darling, just because you’re never alone doesn’t mean you aren’t lonely.”

“Why are we talking about this?”

“Because, Jaxon. I don’t like seeing you in the state you’re in.”

“So, what do you want? You want me to call him up? Invite him to hang out here at your house?”

“I want you to have what you want. To be happy. So, if that will make you happy, then yes.”

The sentiment was loaded. My heart started to race and my breathing elevated. I was seconds away from either bursting into tears or having a panic attack. Possibly both.

“Why would you say that?” I asked. “Those words specifically. You want me to have what I want. What does that mean? Why am I here? Really?”

“Jax, there’s no ulterior motive. I told you; I can’t go on existing and not having you around. I said it because I meant it. I want you to have anything you want. Everything you want.”

“You don’t even like Carter.”

“That’s completely inconsequential if you do.” He stood up from where he’d been sitting and went to the bed, climbing up and positioning himself next to me. He tugged at the throw blanket – a silent insistence that I share it with him and extended his arm out, inviting me into a snuggle.

“Do you love him?” He asked, as I leaned into his side.

“I think so. I don’t know. He’s perfect for me, right? But no matter how badly I want it to feel perfect, it doesn’t.”

“Jax, only you know if he’s perfect for you or not. If he is, then you should figure it out. But if he isn’t, let him go.” He wrapped his arm around my shoulder and let out a heavy sigh. “After we split, I spent an entire year trying to drown myself in women and tequila. All the things I never said and the gestures I should have made sat on my chest crushing me until I could barely breath. I wrote them into songs. I was drowning in fucking sadness and I thought if you could hear it in my voice, you’d understand. I foolishly believed you can always go back to your soul mate, and that time doesn’t change anything. It does though, doesn’t it? So, I spent the following

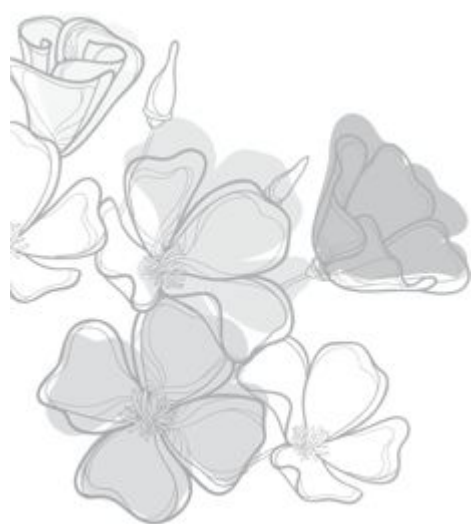
year winning awards and seeing you at shows somehow thinking you'd understand without me saying so – that I was still mad for you. That I couldn't breathe without you and I wanted you to come home. But you didn't, did you? And I was stupid to think all of it went without saying. I should have shown up on your doorstep with the courage to tell you how I felt. But I didn't. Time passed and we became a memory. My favorite memory – but a memory nonetheless.”

“Finn, it's not the same. I *chose* this. I'm not expecting him to come back. I want to become a memory to him so that he can move on and find a home with someone else.”

“You think that, but trust me, letting the love of your life become a memory and move on with someone else is highly overrated.”

“I've already made my choice. You don't have to worry about me, I'm going to be ok. This is a good life.”

He shook his head. “You're the dumbest smart person I know. It *was* a good life. It was a brilliant life. But everything's changed. You've changed. Maybe it was Carter, maybe it was the accident. Maybe something else you haven't yet told me. Whatever it is, you can't go on pretending you're the same person you were a year ago. You keep waiting for all of this to feel normal again. You keep thinking the next step, the next photograph, the next show, and it'll feel better. It's not going to feel better, Jax. Not until you feel better.”



# *Never Alone When You're Lonely*

I TOOK Finn's advice. Phone call after phone call to Carter went unanswered. I wanted to apologize for how I'd left and have a conversation about what was going on. Maybe there was a happy medium, and we could find it together. My messages all went to voicemail, and eventually the voicemail box was full. It was too little, too late. No call backs, no texts. Just silence.

There was only a little bit of time to wallow in self-pity, because it was go-time for the album release. Black Heart Sunday put the finishing touches on their third studio album on Christmas Eve. Finn titled it *Never Alone When You're Lonely* – a nod to his own cleverness and my quarter life crisis. The album interwove complex themes of love, soul mates, friendship, finding home, and of course – sex. He even included one about his threesome with Melissa and Doug.

After months of social media posts teasing new music to their fans, the band released their album on Christmas Day, receiving accolades from fans and critics alike. Many praised Finn for “once again putting to music what growing up feels like, with heart wrenching yet hopeful lyrics set to tune after tune that will make you dance and cry as you think about life.” Some even speculated that “Finn Hendricks has finally grown into his own and found his way out of the heart shattering sadness that skyrocketed the band to a-list fame just a few short years prior.”

Finn was pleased with himself – and with all the photos I'd taken. They released the photos online the same day as the

album. A photo journal chronicling the last few months. Finn set auto posts on the band's social media to release a new photo every hour for 48 hours, starting at midnight on Christmas. The fans went wild for the content, after months of the band having been mostly quiet on their accounts.

It was a resounding success. But trouble came on the third day after the album release, when Finn released a screenshot of the band's album dedication, which included a not-so-subtle nod to yours truly.

At the end of several thanks and sentiments of gratitude dedicated to the band's management team, families, and loved ones, sat a single quote that read plainly:

*"... and lastly to Jax Cassidy: a friend, a photographer, a grand love, an occasional partner in crime, and a home my soul can always return to. Thank you for being perfect lyrics over a sweet melody. With everlasting appreciation and adoration, Finn."*

I hadn't seen it yet when the phone calls started.

The first call came at four in the morning, and it was from Dad. I hadn't yet seen the offending post, so a call that early in the morning from my dad instantly put me on alert.

"Hey, dad. Is everything ok?"

"Hey kid. Anything you want to share with your old man?"

"Umm," my brain regressed to age fifteen, scouring my most recent memories, trying to remember if I'd done something wrong. "I don't think so?"

"About you and an old flame?"

There was no possible way Dad was *just* finding out about my Carter transgressions from West's wedding.

"Umm ... any old flame in particular?"

Dad huffed. "The one you're shackled up with, maybe?"



Very confused, possibly still a little inebriated from the night before, and definitely still asleep, I proceeded with caution. “Dad, do you mean Finn? Because I’m not—”

“Your brother is here,” he cut me off, “and he would like to speak with you.” West must have been home for the holidays.

“Finn? Really, Jax?” He said, exasperated and disappointed. “I’m not surprised. We all assumed after what happened at the wedding, and I’m sure you’ve been busy, but you should have said something. Do you know Carter found out about this on the internet? Do you know a tabloid reporter showed up at Dad’s shop?”

*What the actual fuck?*

“West, I have no idea what you’re talking about. It’s four in the morning. I haven’t even brushed my teeth yet.”

I sat up in bed and turned on the nightstand lamp. My phone had begun to buzz incessantly with the sound of notifications. Messages, social media alerts, and a phone call from Cindy. I pulled my phone away from my ear and checked one of the notifications. *Rolling Stone* Online posted an old photo of me and Finn and the tagline:

***“Old Flames Reignited: Finn Hendricks dedicates newly released album to Rolling Stone’s very own Jax Cassidy.”***

“West,” I interrupted him mid lecture, “I’m gonna have to call you back.”

I rushed down the hall to Finn’s bedroom and barged in, turning on every single light.

“Finn!” I yanked back the covers with the ferocity of someone who just read about their love life on the internet. “Finn! Wake up! You *asshole!*”

Finn shot up and opened his eyes, feeling around the pillow next to him for his glasses. “What’s wrong, love? What’s happened?” He found his glasses and shoved them clumsily on to his face.

“Old flames reignited!” I read from my phone screen as he sleepily rubbed his eyes, “Finn Hendricks dedicates newly released album to *Rolling Stone*’s very own Jax Cassidy!”

“Oy! it’s just tabloids, darling. We expected as much when we invited you to join us in the U.K.” He scratched his head, disheveling his morning mop of curls. “There’s no need to get upset.” He felt around for the bottle of aspirin on his nightstand, “particularly at four in the morning.”

“It’s not from a tabloid, Finn! It’s from Rolling Fucking Stone’s website! Why would you do that? What were you thinking?”

“I’m not following. Why would *Rolling Stone* print that nonsense?”

“Oh, I don’t know—” I spat sarcastically as I clicked open the photo of the band’s dedication, “Maybe because you wrote a dedication calling me a ‘home your soul can always return to’ and ‘perfect lyrics over a sweet melody?’”

“Oh. That.” He popped two aspirin.

“Yeah! That! Do you remember when you said you *weren’t* trying to complicate my life?”

He swung his legs over the side of his bed and stood up, walking toward me. “Babe, I swear, I’m not. It wasn’t meant to upset you.”

I took two steps back away from him. “Don’t fucking call me that. Who are you? You must think I’m fucking stupid, and you know what? Maybe I am. I followed you all the way over here on the promise of friendship, even though everyone told me it was a bad idea. And what did you do? You posted media

fodder. Something to confirm what everyone was already thinking.”

“Alright, look – I apologize, ok? That wasn’t my intention. But apart from the fact that every word of that dedication is true – you’re welcome, by the way, for such a lovely gesture – who bloody cares what everyone thinks? I meant every word I’ve said since I landed on your doorstep. But it’s complicated, isn’t it? I’m grateful for you being here, and I wanted to thank you. You deserve that. You deserve to be fawned over for the amazing artist you are in your own right, and not just the child that Carter bloody Summers thinks you are.”

*Fucking fantastic.*

“He saw the dedication online, Finn. You don’t think that’s going to complicate things?”

“Brilliant! I’m glad he saw it. Maybe he’ll stop acting like a twat and answer your calls!”

I tied my hair up into a ponytail because it was obviously going to be a long morning. “Finn. That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Why is that stupid?” He asked.

“Because! Not everyone is driven by anger and jealousy! Some people just get sad and hurt. He’s probably *less* inclined to answer my calls now that he thinks this is more than what it is!”

“Well, love – then maybe you should ask yourself if it’s time to stop calling.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Jax. It means if he can’t forgive you, maybe he doesn’t deserve you. And if you can’t bring yourself to admit to him you were wrong, then maybe you don’t actually love him.”

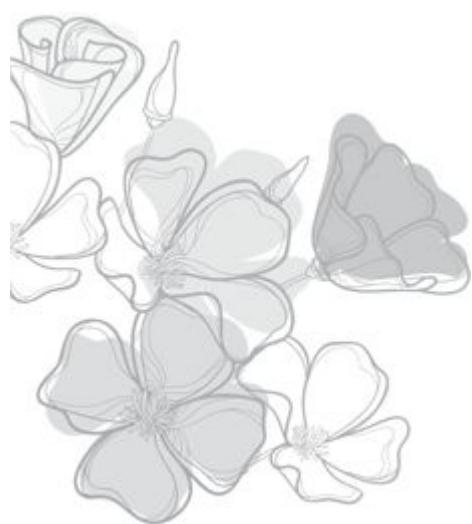
“So, who does deserve me?” I asked, laughing like a person about to have a mental breakdown. “You?”

“Absolutely not.” He put up his hands in surrender. “But this isn’t about me, love. And it isn’t about us. It’s about you. And as I’ve said, it’s well past time for you to sort yourself out. If you don’t do it now, then when will you? It’s not going to get any easier.”

“Did you even consider that you *made* this about us by putting something like that online for everyone to see? You’re about to do a fucking press tour, Finn! Every question you get will be about this!” I stormed out of his room, ready to go full nuclear. “Next time just say thank you!” I yelled as I went.

He followed me down the hall, equally furious for some reason. “I’m not concerned about the interviews! Obviously, we’re not back together! You’re an impossibly self-absorbed brat! And if we’d fallen back in love, there would definitely be more love songs, wouldn’t there? But NO! They’re about fucking friendship!” He yelled from behind me as I slammed the door shut in his face.

‘There would definitely be more love songs’ was the dumbest justification to explain away a rumor that I’d ever heard.



# The Doldrums

I MADE a lot of phone calls over the next several days. Most of them to Carter, who didn't pick up. I tried to explain the nuances in language and the quirks in Finn's personality in an effort to convince everyone that this wasn't what it looked like. It all fell on deaf ears. Most of my loved ones already assumed there was something more between Finn and me – because why would a woman ever leave a dreamy veterinarian? It couldn't be a career choice. It had to be another man.

I tried to call Carter again, but his mailbox was still full. The silence from him was deafening. It physically hurt. In the tips of my fingers. In my chest. In my stomach. I slept because I was exhausted. Every morning felt like the end of the world.

These feelings weren't new. Heartbreak had been brewing inside of me ever since I left New York. This was just more catastrophic. I'd expected Carter to call at some point between the months of November and December, but phones work both ways. I wasn't calling either, so I understood. Now, though – I was calling, probably too much. He just wasn't answering. What's worse, he also wasn't bothering to listen to the messages.

The wall of silence Carter erected between us spoke volumes. Finn is dramatic. In the immediate aftermath of our breakup, he called all the time. To fight, to cry, to make up. He sets the benchmark for my collective experiences with heartbreak, so I didn't realize staying completely silent was also an option.

Silence can break you.

I asked for this. I brought it to fruition. And yet, I didn't expect from one day to the next it would be as if he'd completely fallen off the face of the Earth. How could I have gotten exactly what I asked for so completely and thoroughly?

I didn't know what to do with a wall of silence. I couldn't talk to, or scream at, or cry with a wall of silence. It just bounced right back at me, reminding me to be careful what I wished for. I didn't know what to do with that either, so – I just fell into the doldrums.

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Not long before New Year's Eve, Finn found me sitting on a large armchair staring out the window at the pouring rain. I hadn't taken a shower. I hadn't slept, and I hadn't eaten since earlier the day prior. He must have said my name several times with no response, because he shook me back to reality with a concerned expression I wasn't familiar with.

He spoke. I don't know what he said. I wasn't really listening. He handed me a plate of toast. He spoke some more. I looked at him curiously and wondered to myself if I should try to focus on his words. I decided not to. He could tell.

He walked away but returned soon after, dragging another armchair behind him. He positioned himself right in front of me and said my name. I think it was my name, anyway. He said it over and over. I recognized how it looked rolling off his lips, but I wasn't listening. He started to snap his fingers in my face and the motion of his long skinny fingers focused my attention until I heard his voice coming through me like a blur of sounds slowly becoming clearer.

“Jaxon!”

I could hear him again.

“Jax, have you heard a single word I've said? You haven't eaten. You haven't slept. You need a shower, but instead

you're just sat here staring at the rain. Honestly, you look worse than the day I showed up unannounced on your doorstep. What's the matter?"

"Everything's the matter."

"Well, that's dramatic," he rolled his eyes, "can you be a bit more specific?" He crossed one leg over his knee and got comfortable. He planned on being there for a while. "What's happened? Did Carter ring you? Did you have a fight or something?"

"No."

"'No?' No, what, Jax? Give me something to work with."

"No. Carter didn't call. Carter didn't answer my calls. Carter didn't check my voicemails. Carter is gone. Now, please, go the fuck away."

"That's what you wanted, isn't it? So why are you sat here like it's the end of the world?"

The energy required to talk about this was more than I possessed in my entire body. Finn wouldn't go away. He just stared at me, expecting answers I didn't have. My body was heavy with exhaustion and hopelessness.

"Finn, go away. I don't need a babysitter."

Finn's eyes grew sorrowful. His capacity for empathy being what it was, I'd probably passed the doldrums on to him simply by sitting in such close proximity.

"Come with me," he said after several moments of silence. He pulled me reluctantly up from the most comfortable chair in the house and drug me along to the living room with the biggest fireplace. He sat down on the large couch centered in front of the fire and tugged at my wrist.

"Lay down, get a load off." He patted the empty space next to him and placed a pillow in his lap. "I'm going to braid your



hair, as girlfriends do.”

“Are we girlfriends now?”

“We’re everything there is to be, love.”

I laid down, stretching my legs across the length of the couch and propping my ankles on the opposite end from where Finn sat. I placed my head on the pillow in his lap and felt the treacherous wetness of tears betray my otherwise comatose demeanor. Historically, Finn had not handled crying with a great deal of tact, but he surprised me by remaining completely calm. He twirled my hair between his fingers gently as he worked several small braids into the sections he could reach without disturbing me.

“I used to write down all the things I wished I could say to you when we’d see one another in person, and all the things I remembered about you.”

“Oh yeah? And what did you remember?” I asked.

“I remember everything about you.”

“So, why not just tell me directly?”

“You’re not particularly approachable. Some might even say you’re *intimidating*. I was so melancholy all the time. It would rain and I convinced myself it was me bringing down the storm with my sadness. I know that’s stupid, but I had to put it all somewhere. There were things I couldn’t put on a record. I also wanted to be sure if I ever worked up the nerve to tell you, I’d already have the words written down.”

“Is this your roundabout way of telling me I should start a diary?”

“It’s not the worst idea.”

“Well, a lot of good it did you. You never told me any of the stuff you wrote down.”

“The moment never presented itself, love. And now the moment’s passed. It’d just be awkward now, wouldn’t it? I won’t have you thinking I’m still mad for you.”

“Yeah, heaven forbid.” I rolled my eyes, masking the sting of disappointment that he never told me all the things he felt back when he still felt them.

“Look, all I’m saying is diaries are cathartic and you should consider it.”

“If I promise to start one, will you let me read yours?”

“Mental health is not a quid pro quo, Jaxon. You either want to feel better, or you don’t.”

A smile crept its way to my lips. Finn made me feel better. Even when the world was coming down around me. Even when the rain would never stop.

“Stop smiling. You’re depressed.”

“Can I read your diary?”

“Jaxon,” he said with stern finality. He wasn’t going to let me read his diary.

“How do we always end up back here?”

“Back where? You’ve never even been to Arundel.”

“Don’t be so literal, Finn. I mean back here,” I gestured the circle of personal space around us, “with each other.”

He shrugged, tying up the final bits of loose hair into the braid. “Some souls are meant to be together. The universe will keep pushing them into the same space until they find the fit that works best.”

“Was that from your diary?”

“You’re an asshole.” He patted my head, signaling me to let him up.

“I’m sorry!” I chuckled. “I’m sorry. I was just kidding.”

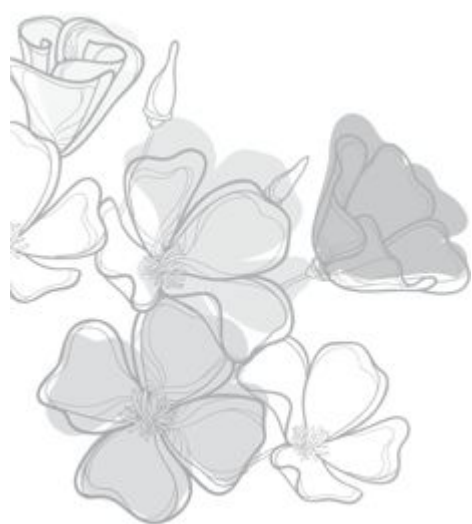
“I’m glad you’re amused. And I adore you, but you’re still an asshole. I’ve got to go to bed. I’ve got an interview on Radio 1 in the morning.”

“I’m gonna stay here a bit longer,” I said, snuggling up with a throw blanket.

“Mi casa es su casa, darling.”

“Hey Finn—” I called, stopping him mid step, “thank you, for – you know ...”

“I know.”



# There Would Definitely Be Love Songs

**I** DON'T know how long I laid there on that velvet couch, listening to the sound of the rain on the windows, but I'd fallen asleep. When I woke in the morning, the house was silent, and there was a bottle of water, two aspirin, and a leather-bound journal with a note on top.

*“Jax, something tells me you’ll wake with a pounding head, though you haven’t done any drinking. I’ll be on Radio 1 at ten if you’re awake and interested. Also, I’ve left you my journal. I’ve marked the least embarrassing entries. I trust you won’t be an asshole about it. I expect I’ll be around later this evening. –Finn”*

An entire day to myself and absolutely nothing to do. It felt like a good day to take a long shower and dig myself out of sadness. New Year’s Eve was the following day. Something about knowing the year would be over in forty-eight hours left me hopeful.

First things first. I grabbed my computer and found the Radio 1 live stream of Finn’s interview. It had already been on for a few minutes, but the first several minutes were always just niceties.

The radio host interviewing Finn was Jimmy Jones, a longtime favorite of Finn’s, and one of the early fans of Black Heart Sunday. Jimmy discovered the band shortly before they were featured as up-and-comers in *Rolling Stone* and had always supported their music with airtime and interviews.

“So, Finn,” Jimmy started in on the good stuff. “This album has been a long wait for the fans. What can they expect from it, and how will it be different from what we’ve seen from Black Heart Sunday in the past?”

Finn ran his fingers through his unkempt mop and smiled proudly. “Do you know what, Jimmy? I expect fans will find this album is a bit of fresh air. It’s like when you’ve been really properly sad for a bit, and then one day you just wake up and you feel better. You open your window, and the fresh air hits you and suddenly you’re like ‘yeah, alright,’ and you feel like things will turn out alright? That’s this album for me.”

“So, it’s hopeful?” Jimmy probed.

“Yeah, it’s hopeful, and it’s light. It’s music you listen to with the windows rolled down.”

Jimmy smiled. He’d been interviewing Finn since their first album came out, when their fan base was still pretty underground. “And you know, I’ve got to ask – what, or *who* rather, has got the famously brooding Finn Hendricks feeling so light and hopeful?”

Finn smiled and shook his head. He knew these questions were coming. “Honestly, Jimmy, I think it’s just been the right mix of periodic sobriety and maturity. I’ve grown up quite a bit since the last album, and it’s reflected in the writing and the music.”

“Speaking of the last album, the band took a bit of a break after that release, even though it was hugely successful. Why the long break?”

Finn bit the bottom corner of his lip, no doubt trying to string together a perfectly profound sentence to encapsulate the last three years.

“I wouldn’t say we’ve been on a break, Jimmy. We toured that album for nearly two years, and then took some time off

in Canada to regroup, write, and think about the next evolution of our music.”

“Your last album, *Headaches & Heartbreak*, won you lads a Grammy, loads of accolades, and a loyal fanbase. But it was also, notably, a sort of diary of your split from *Rolling Stone* photographer, Jax Cassidy.” Finn rolled his eyes as Jimmy spoke, and Jimmy, catching it, continued. “I know! I know, mate, but I’ve got to ask this, or I’ll be out of a job! So anyway – that last album was, obviously, deeply personal. I, for one, was just wrecked when I heard about your split. Your connection to Jax goes back to the very beginning. For those who don’t know – she, famously, took a photo of you which was featured on the cover of *Rolling Stone*. Some might say it set the trajectory for both of your careers. She’s clearly a massive part of yours, and the band’s story. Can you talk a bit about the role Jax has played in your journey and, inquiring female minds want to know – how are the two of you getting on these days?”

Jimmy asked the question thoughtfully and with love. Other interviewers wouldn’t be so gracious, but he always had a way of connecting it to the music. I could tell by the relieved look on Finn’s face, he was grateful that Radio 1 was his first stop on the press tour.

“Listen, mate – you know Jax. You’ve met her, so I don’t have to tell you, she’s a beam of light. A force of nature. To know her is really to love her. With *Headaches & Heartbreak*, that was such a raw time for me. She was, you know, the first great love of my life and such an inspiration to me, and to suddenly experience that loss was devastating. I poured it all into the music. I’m an artist, so that’s how I sort out my issues. Bless her, because she was gracious enough never to tell it from her perspective!” he laughed. “And I’ll always love her, but that time for us is long over.”

“No doubt there is still a lot of love there. She’s joined you in the U.K. to shoot a photo journal of the production of this album. It was hard not to spot your personal album dedication, saying, and I quote ‘to Jax Cassidy, a friend, a photographer, a grand love, an occasional partner in crime, and a home my soul can always return to. Thank you for being perfect lyrics over a sweet melody.’” Jimmy gave Finn a knowing smile. “That’s sending a pretty strong message. What is the message there? And dare I ask, are any of the new songs inspired by our favorite photographer?”

Finn laughed again, nearing discomfort. “The message is pretty simple. You grow up and go around the world and sometimes you learn that the people who used to be important will always be important. Jax and I will always hold that space for one another. She’s hugely successful, and bloody brilliant. She’s a wonderful friend and colleague, and I count myself lucky to know her. And the fact that she agreed to take time out of her schedule to come to the U.K. and do us this massive favor is proof that I haven’t burned all my bridges – just singed them a bit.” He winked at Jimmy. “As far as the songs on the album, truthfully, they’re inspired by a long hard look in the mirror. I think we can all benefit from a bit of that.”

“So, no romance then?” Jimmy asked with finality.

Finn chuckled, “Jimmy – if there was a romance, there would *definitely* be more love songs.”

“Alright, mate, touché, touché. So, you’re going to treat us to a song then, yeah?”

“I’d nearly forgotten about that, Jimmy, with how far up my rear-end you’ve just got with your questions!” Finn pulled a guitar out from a conveniently placed case under the interview desk. “This one’s called ‘Skylight,’” and he began to strum.

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I shut my laptop and stared at the tattered leather-bound journal in front of me, with little purple note flags sticking out of the top. An itch in my brain told me I didn't need to read it – if I'd never bothered to listen to *Headaches & Heartbreak*, why should I get the extra insight not shared with the world?

I never listen to that itch in my brain, so I grabbed the journal and flipped to the first tag.

*"I remember everything about you,"*

It began, barely punctuated and unedited ...

*"I always will. for the rest of my life, I will know you like the beat of my heart. the rhythm of my pulse. the echo in my brain. I remember everything about you, even the way the scar on your bottom lip aligns so perfectly with your upper canine. I wonder if you've bitten it there, after years of childhood anxiety you're too brave or too bloody stubborn to admit having. I remember the sound of your breathing after you fall asleep, and the smell of your shampoo lingering hours after a shower. and your eyelashes. your eyelashes, you may not know, travel halfway down your cheek, which flush red when you sleep because you are warm blooded. it could be the dead of winter and you'd still sleep without a blanket. you're so warm and I think I miss that the most.*

*So, I call you every day. rarely am I sober but I still can't muster the courage to tell you how fucking angry I am at you. maybe at me. maybe at us. I'm not sure anymore. I just know it wasn't meant to be this way. we were meant to find the world together. stadium shows and sweat, and lights, and you in the wings with your tattered jeans that, quite honestly, have just the slightest hint of funk because everybody knows you're not supposed to wash your jeans too often. they get more comfortable the longer you wear them, and yet somehow, they also smell like that peach scented lotion you bought at the dollar store that one time. it wasn't meant to be like this. we*

*were meant to find old age and wisdom together. I fear we've ruined it. so now I see you at shows from far away and you're laughing and smiling. I know it's disingenuous, because if I'm having such a hard time managing without you, how could you be managing so easily without me? I rang you and I was going to read this to you out loud. you'd come back. you'd come home. then I realized how fucking mad this all sounds. fuck it. this is stupid. I'm going to bed."*

Finn had the most beautiful way of making me sad. His words hit differently. He has all the right nuances and pauses in perfect places. Some people might tell you he overuses commas and periods – but I don't think that's true at all. He writes like he talks, and so reading his words is as good as him saying them to you directly.

I'd been granted approval to read a second diary entry, but I felt like it was a good time for a shower. I made my way to Finn's room because – let's face it – he's got the best bathroom I'd ever seen. I stood under the all-encompassing rainfall of the multi head shower system and let my mind wander.

My first thought was that my jeans do *not* have a funky smell. I wash them frequently. The next string of thoughts revolved around the frightening accuracy with which Finn described me. For so long, when he'd seen me smiling and laughing, it *was* disingenuous. I wasn't managing well without him at all. Had it been obvious, or did he only know because he knows everything about me?

I'd finished that bottle of peach scented lotion I bought at the dollar store. I could never find it again. I miss it still, like a moment in time I can never get back. I should have bought all the bottles they had. I loved the smell so much, and they were only a dollar – but I can't think that far ahead. That – I guess – is my problem.

I can't think far enough ahead to be sensible.

How could Finn have ever hung his hopes on me? How could I still be here – at twenty-seven, after months of therapy and intimate conversations, and still not know better than to make decisions with the same stupid impulsivity I had at twenty-two?

It should have been enough – reading one stream of Finn’s consciousness in his own perfect boy penmanship, but it wasn’t. When I got out of the shower, I wrapped myself in an oversized fluffy robe with Finn’s initials on it. I sat down on one of the plush chairs in front of his bed and flipped to the next tabbed page.

*“I’ll love you for the rest of my days, but today is the day I let you go. I’ll find you later, when my sadness evolves into wisdom, and I muck up the courage to go and find you in person. I’ll say I’m sorry, and maybe we’ll get drunk and talk it all out. I hope you’ll always be around. I hope my apologies are enough to remind you I’m not as bad as you remember. I struggle with the idea that if it didn’t last, it wasn’t real. I held on tight for so long, but – I think I’ve just sorted out that the realness of it isn’t by any means diluted by the ending. I think you might be a home my soul will always be able to return to. Whatever that might look like down the road will be good enough for me. Goodbye, my love.”*

I wasn’t expecting to read what was presumably the final Jax related diary entry. Finn had book-ended his entire heartbreak in two entries for my reading pleasure. I tossed the journal onto his bed, annoyed and impressed at how well he knew me.

I glanced at the analog alarm clock on his nightstand and noted it was somehow already six in the evening. How the hell had I spent the entire day just – thinking and showering in extravagance? I hadn’t even eaten. As soon as I realized it, my stomach grumbled loudly. I commandeered a pair of big white socks from Finn’s closet and ventured into the kitchen. No

sooner had I opened the refrigerator did I hear commotion near the front door.

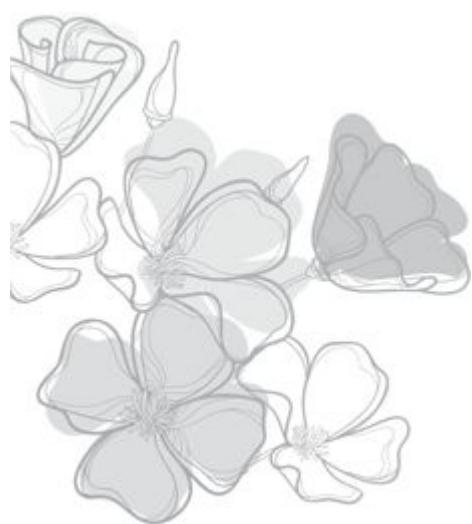
Finn was home, and I was absolutely going to give him shit about not using the formal and long beloved “Dear Diary” preface in his diary entries. I pulled down two whiskey glasses and a bottle from the cupboard. No one likes a long day of invasive interviews less than Finn, and he would undoubtedly appreciate a drink.

“Finn!” I called out from the kitchen, “I can’t fucking believe ‘there would definitely be love songs’ actually worked! We’re drinking this entire bottle of whiskey to celebrate!” I walked into the hallway toward the foyer, “also I took a shower so it’s a good—”

I stopped dead in my tracks when I saw Finn wasn’t alone at the front door.

“Good day, then love?” He smiled brightly, “glad you’ve finally gotten around to a shower. I’ve brought company.” He looked confused when he noticed me wearing his robe and socks.

“Nice robe,” a familiar voice said from behind Finn. And there, standing by the front door surrounded by luggage, were Cindy, Lizzie, and Garrett Henley.



# Everyone's More Judgmental than They Think They Are

**WISH** *I was dressed.*

I never had that nightmare where you're caught in a public space in your underwear and so desperately wish you were dressed, but I was having that moment in real time. I wished I was fucking dressed.

"So ... Finn invited us for New Year's Eve," Cindy spoke into the silence. "He said he thought you could use the company, but," she looked me up and down judgmentally, "you look like you're doing alright."

"I've invited your friends for our show tomorrow night," Finn declared, looking back and forth between the five of us, trying to figure out what he was missing. A few painful moments of continued quiet judgement passed before he spoke up again. "Let me show you all to your rooms. You must be spent."

I went to my own room and pulled on a pair of sweatpants and a threadbare t-shirt. I heard a light knock behind me.

"You still have that?" Finn asked.

I looked confusedly at him standing sheepishly in my doorway.

"The shirt, love," he clarified.

I looked down at myself, still confused.

"That's my shirt, Jax."

“No, it’s not. This is my shirt.”

“Well, yes, as happens when you borrow a shirt that you don’t return. At some point, I suppose it does become your shirt. But that shirt, most inarguably, started out as my shirt.”

I looked down again. I’d been absentmindedly wearing that shirt for as long as I can remember. It’s the most comfortable one I own. It’s soft, and it’s just slightly too big, and ... I realized in that moment that it was Finn’s fucking shirt.

I took it off and tossed it at him. “Take it.”

“It’s yours now, darling. I’m just surprised you still have it.” He tossed it back as I shuffled through a drawer full of comfortable shirts that seemed uncomfortable in comparison.

He looked at me, curious and confused. “Are you cross with me?”

“Why did you invite my friends here?” I grabbed the fucking shirt in defeat and put it back on.

“Because you’ve been sat at my house in complete sadness for long enough and I thought your friends could help.” He smirked at the t-shirt. “It looks better on you than it ever did on me.”

“Don’t do that.” I pulled on the socks I had taken out of his drawer earlier.

“Don’t do what?”

“Don’t be fucking charming.”

He bit back a smile. “Apologies.” He looked down at my feet, “are those ...”

“Yes. Yes, for fuck’s sake, ok? I stole your shirt and your robe and your socks. I thought we were gonna get drunk and celebrate ‘there’d definitely be more love songs.’ I wanted to

be comfortable, and I didn't realize you were inviting the judgement squad for a sleepover."

"Why are they the judgement squad? When I contacted Cindy and proposed the idea, she seemed concerned and more than pleased to come out here and help nurse you back to your somewhat normal mental health."

"Was that before, or after, the album dedication, Finn?"

"Before."

"Ok – well, now she thinks we're fucking, so she brought her judgey eyes. They all did. A heads up would have been helpful so that I could have worn my own robe."

"If you have your own robe, then why did you take mine?"

"It's a metaphor!"

"That's not a metaphor."

"Oh my god, you're the *worst*. I know it's not a metaphor, Finn – I just mean, like – if I had known I would have worn my own clothes, that's all."

"Why? Who bloody cares?"

"I care. I care because I've been doing all this damage control and then they show up and I'm just chillin' in your robe with a bottle of whiskey waiting for you to come home."

"Jaxon, that doesn't matter. They're your friends. They're not here to judge you. They're here to help you."

"Maybe, but everyone's more judgmental than they think they are."

"*You're* more judgmental than you think you are. I think you're being a little dramatic. They seem lovely."

"Ok well – you don't know them as well as I do. Prepare yourself for some unadulterated judgement." I walked out of



the room and down the long corridor toward the living room with the giant fireplace.

“Well, that’s on you as well, isn’t it? I always wanted to meet them, and you never let me,” he argued, following behind me.

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A three-hour-long playlist and an impressive amount of empty liquor bottles later, Lizzie lay with her head in Garrett’s lap.

“We should play Truth Shots, Dare, or Jenga,” Garrett said.

“What, what, and what now?” Cindy asked.

“Well, I guess it would just be Truth Shots or Dare. Unless Finn has Jenga.” He looked around, waiting for the rest of us to catch on. “I used to date this girl. She took me to meet her friends, and they had this made-up game, Truth Shots, Dare, or Jenga. One of them was an architect and was like – really good at Jenga. I don’t remember the rules honestly, but basically, it’s Truth or Dare, and you have to take a shot if you choose truth.”

“That seems like a ba—” I started.

“—a *great*,” Cindy cut me off, “a great idea. We know literally nothing about Finn. And I definitely have some questions for Garrett.”

I looked knowingly over to Finn; it was about to get real judgey. He winked slyly at me.

Or what he thought was slyly.

“I saw that,” Lizzie noted, narrowing her eyes at him.

“Jax,” Cindy said, raising an eyebrow, “you go first.”

“Dare,” I responded defiantly.

“I dare you to take a shot and answer a question,” she responded, not missing a beat.

“That’s not cool. Are there rules to this dumb game, Garrett?”

“Nah,” he responded, “anything goes.”

“Fine.” I took a swig, finishing the drink in my glass. “Go. And don’t be an asshole.”

“Why were you wearing Finn’s robe when we walked in?”

“I told you!” I shouted, pointing at Finn. “I told you. Judgmental.”

“I’m not being judgmental. I’m just curious. Answer the question.”

“Because. What most people don’t know about Finn is that he enjoys the luxury of unparalleled comfort. Now that he’s rich, he has the comfiest robes and towels and socks. I like that shit too, so I took his robe. Like when you steal a robe at a hotel.” I shot Cindy a dirty look. “Satisfied?”

“And my socks too – she’s taken my socks,” Finn muttered under his breath.

“That’s not helpful,” I muttered back.

“Alright,” Cindy responded suspiciously. “Seems *somewhat* legit.”

“I’ll have a go,” Finn said, throwing back the rest of what was in his glass. “Truth.”

“I’ve got this one.” Lizzie sat up from Garrett’s lap. “If you are, in fact, no longer in love with Jax, as you have claimed, why the album dedication? Is it true that you are full of shit?”

“That’s two questions, love.”

“The second question is a summation of the first. The first lends context to the second. They are one and the same. Spit it out,” Lizzie countered.

“This question was asked and answered this morning on Radio 1.”

“Well – we were on a plane, so ...” Lizzie peered at him. Finn wasn’t easily intimidated, but he looked nervous.

“It’s not a simple yes or no, is it? It’s complicated.”

*Not the answer I was expecting to hear.*

“Yes, it is,” I interjected. “It’s a simple no. Tell them.”

“It’s not a simple no. Are we being truthful here or not? I take Truth or Dare very seriously.”

“To be clear,” Lizzie spoke up, “saying ‘it’s complicated’ is also not an answer.”

“What the fuck do you mean it’s not a simple no?” I muttered at him through gritted teeth.

“When has anything ever been simple with you?” He answered back.

All eyes darted back and forth between us as a staunch reminder that we were no longer alone in this house, and *everything* was on the record.

“Ok. here’s the long and short of it. No, I did not show up to derail Jax’s life. I went to her because I needed a favor, but mostly because I was concerned, because yes – SURPRISE, I do love her. When you love someone as fiercely as I have loved her, it doesn’t just go away. And I fucked up the chance I had with her. I know. I was selfish when I should have been empathetic, and an idiot when I should have been a romantic. I can’t take back what happened at the hospital,” he said directly to me, lowering his volume, “or how I behaved after. But it still feels like we belong together.” He suddenly became aware of himself and everyone around him. I tried to steady my breathing. Cindy and Lizzie did not know about that thing in the hospital that one time. “But like — platonically, of

course.” He returned his gaze to Lizzie. “Look, soul mates come in all different forms. The idea of love isn’t as simple as wanting to fuck, do you know what I mean?” He looked nervously at Garrett, who looked like he wished he’d never recommended truth shots or dare. “He knows what I mean.”

“Is that supposed to be an answer, or a manifesto? I’m so confused right now,” Cindy said through her own shock.

“I’d still fuck you in an instant, love,” Finn said, returning his attention to me.

My eyes shot wide open. This man couldn’t answer a simple question properly if his life depended on it.

“That’s not helpful,” I said in defeat.

“But, like – recreationally.” Everyone stared at him, wondering how deep he could dig this hole. “I won’t be judged by you lot. You’d probably all fuck one another given the right amount of alcohol and truth, so just calm down.”

“Moving right along!” I pulled the pony tail out of my hair. The night was giving me a headache, and I didn’t need my hair squeezed into oblivion to make it worse.

“Ok, my turn.” I sat up and glared directly at Cindy. “Truth or dare?”

“Bitch, truth,” she chugged her drink. “I am not scared of you.”

“Have you ever had a more than friendly encounter with my brother?”

She paused, trying to decide whether to play by the rules. “Yes.”

“*What?*”

“That’s two questions, sorry,” she protested. “You asked a yes or no question. Moving on ...”

“Not to worry.” Finn poured more vodka into Cindy’s glass. “I’ll get to the bottom of this.”

“I’m not going again, that’s not fair!” Cindy argued.

“Actually, Garrett said anything goes,” Lizzie said, shrugging.

“Cindy,” Finn cleared his throat, “please give a detailed accounting of your non platonic encounter with the young Mr. Cassidy.”

Cindy went on to tell the story of a pre-Casey, West. Home for a visit with Dad, uncertain about his future, out at a club with a friend from high school that he’d met up with. She ran in to him at the club, and he offered to share a car with her when she realized she’d left her credit card at home. In turn, she offered to let him crash on her couch. He shouldn’t have to pay extra to be taken all the way back to Dad’s house. She promised she’d drive him home in the morning.

They reminisced and looked through old yearbooks and she joked about having a crush on him. If she was being honest – it never really went away. They kissed.

He didn’t crash on the couch.

“And that’s it?” I asked, wondering how I’d never heard about any of this.

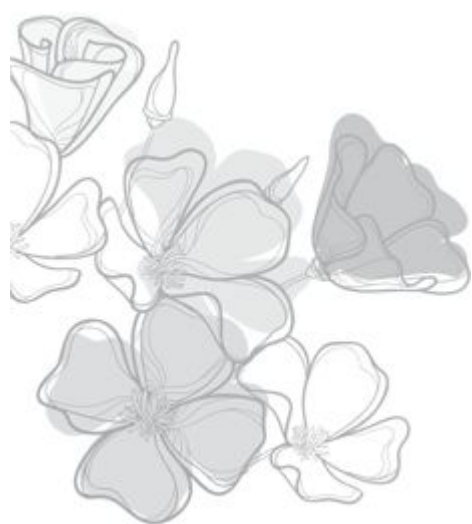
“He was gone in the morning. He made his own way back to your dad’s. He called me from the airport, and we agreed it was a one-time thing. He asked me not to tell you. A few weeks later he met Casey, and, as we all know – she’s perfect, so ...” she smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes.

The game went on like that for another hour or two. All of us asked the last questions in the world we’d ever want to answer, and we drank in excess to ease the vulnerability of it all. Eventually, a tired silence replaced our joking and conversational drinking. It was time to call it a night. Finn

showed everyone to their rooms, and as he said goodnight to Cindy and Lizzie, they both hugged him and told him he was a good friend. That was about as close to a stamp of approval as he would ever get from them.

“Breakfast in the morning, Jax?” Cindy shouted from down the hall.

“Yup!” I waved back from behind me. “Goodnight!”



# Platonic Soul Mates

**E**VERYONE HAD gone to sleep, but I was still awake in the dark, thinking about the construction of the ceiling and the meaning of life. What else do you do at three in the morning? I'd come close to finding facial patterns in the texture of the ceiling when I heard the shuffling of clumsy feet at my door.

"You're awake, aren't you?" Finnley Archibald Hendricks.

"Of course I am."

"Might as well hang out then." He flopped himself on the bed beside me. I could feel him staring a hole in the side of my head.

"Fine, but don't stare at me."

"Are you disappointed in your brother for wham, bam, thank you ma'am'ing your best mate?"

"Nah. I'm just glad she got to cross him off her bucket list."

"Alright then, I guess I was wrong. You're not more judgmental than you think you are."

"Thanks for bringing up the hospital in front of Cindy and Lizzie. They didn't know about that, so now I'll have to answer those questions, which is just ... awesome."

"I can tell by your condescending tone that you're being sarcastic, but you're welcome, nonetheless." He turned and laid on his back, joining in on the ceiling exploration. "I didn't



expect we'd move right into the deep topics, but we are still a bit drunk, so we may as well."

"I wish you hadn't said all that stuff," I said, rolling over onto my side to face him.

"Because you didn't want to hear it? Or because you didn't want your mates to hear it?"

"I don't know. Maybe the latter."

"Well, I wish you were more honest with the people who love you." He shrugged, unapologetic. "Do they know about the other stuff with your accident?"

"Yeah, but we don't really talk about it. We did at first, but it gets old. I hate being in this constant state of melancholy."

"Melancholy looks lovely on you." He turned on to his side as well. "Can I ask you a question?"

"We're still drunk so, might as well."

He continued, "why d'you never want to chat about the big stuff? Is it because Papa Cassidy doesn't possess a particularly high emotional intelligence and you just never learned how to be vulnerable?"

"Wow."

"I'm not trying to be an asshole, love. I just wonder if you wouldn't be better off having someone to chat about the big stuff?"

"I have you to talk about the big stuff."

"Yeah, since a few months ago. But who have you been talking to over the last three years?"

"Well, my therapist says," (he giggled from beside me) "don't laugh! I thought you weren't trying to be an asshole!"

"I'm sorry, love – go on. Your therapist says ..."

“My therapist says I’ve been running away from the big stuff for a while now. Apparently, running away from one’s problems is made exponentially more convenient when you travel for a living.”

“And suddenly you were hit with a wall of things you’d been running away from, while you were sat at home with nothing to do but think about the existential doom of your impending thirties?”

“Wow, I hadn’t actually thought of it that way, but yeah, that more or less sums it up. Hey – did I tell you that I found out what happened to my mom?”

“What? Are you serious? You definitely did not – but I’m dying for you to tell me now.”

Finn snuggled up with a pillow, pulling a throw blanket over his long legs and settling in for what would surely be several more hours of talking.

I told him about my mom.

I told him about everything.

Finn, I’d somehow forgotten, was the easiest person in the world to talk to. Whatever he may be thinking, his face tells you he is hanging on your every word. He listens and laughs in just the right moments. We started a conversation about my mother, and by the time my eyes started to feel heavy, we’d somehow migrated through twenty different topics with varying degrees of seriousness.

It was still dark, but I knew the light would be coming for us any moment. It had to be. How long had we been there talking about all the things in the world?

I felt the familiar pull of the greatest love of my life. Something in the way he laughed or smiled. Something in the way my name looked perfectly at home on his lips. Something

about a person who understands you so completely they know the very beat of your heart.

I didn't come here for this – but suddenly, if only momentarily, I wanted it again. In the hour of lovers and poets, half asleep and half hungover, I couldn't pinpoint when or why it returned to me. Maybe it was watching him make music again after so many years. Maybe it was the night he braided my hair, or the album dedication, or the diary entries. Maybe it never left me, and I was too angry, or stubborn, or drowning in self-denial to realize it.

I moved closer to him, touching my nose to his. His eyes crossed slightly – looking down at the proximity of our faces with a confused tiredness glazing over his face, so completely Finn it almost ached.

“I forgive you,” I whispered in the dark.

“Oh yeah?” He chuckled nervously, “what for, may I ask?”

“For breaking my heart.” Now was the moment to say it. There would never be another. “I forgive you for all the ways I never realized you were so important. Everything I know about love, I learned from you. I remember everything about you. I remember everything about us. And you finding me, somehow, in the exact moment I needed you to, is the most kismet shit ever. Maybe this is the next phase of my existential crisis, but doesn't it feel like home? Wouldn't it be easier if it were you and me? Maybe it was always supposed to be, and all the other bullshit was just the road back to you.”

I stopped talking, because a monologue in the dark is more Finn's brand. I was talking myself into a conclusion, or a decision, I would never be able to take back. Our noses still touched. A centimeter to the left or the right and we'd be lip locked. The air between us was heavy with possibility and history and love.

And then – he laughed ever so slightly.

“Are you going to kiss me?” he asked incredulously.

I pretended not to be mortified. “Do you want me to kiss you?”

“Well, I would never say no to you, darling, but ...”

*‘But.’*

The possibilities began to fade into the morning light creeping through my curtains. We weren’t in the dark anymore. It wasn’t just us anymore. We were no longer alone. The rest of the world would be waking up soon enough, and Finn began to ever-so-slightly back away from me.

“But ... you are going to say no.”

“Jax. Did it completely escape your notice how self-centered everything you just said was? I don’t want to be the next phase in your existential crisis. Nor do I want you to want me only because you know it’s easy. I can’t just be another way out for you. And please – don’t misunderstand. I would take you now and have you for the rest of your life if I thought that’s what you truly wanted. But here and now – it sounds like it’s just the next easy thing. Do you love Carter? If you do, you’ve got to tell him. Don’t be such a coward, Jax. I love you, but I refuse to be another excuse for you to run away from the big stuff.” He tucked my hair behind my ear. “You won’t ever have to wonder if we belong together, love. We do. But perhaps it’s as I said – platonically.”

My self-awareness kicked into overdrive. Was I the worst person ever?

“Are you wondering if you’re the bloody worst person ever?”

“Stop that. You’re not allowed to reject me and then read my mind with your next breath.”

“Don’t be salty, love. I’ll always be able to read your mind. And I’m not rejecting you. I’m inviting you to evolve your decision-making process. I’m not going to pretend we wouldn’t be happy together. But I’m not prepared to walk hand in hand with you for the rest of our lives, when there’s a possibility you’d always wonder if you would have been happier with Carter bloody Summers.”

The sun had fully risen, and for the first time possibly ever, Finn was the responsible one.

“You’re the worst,” I said, making best efforts to lighten the mood.

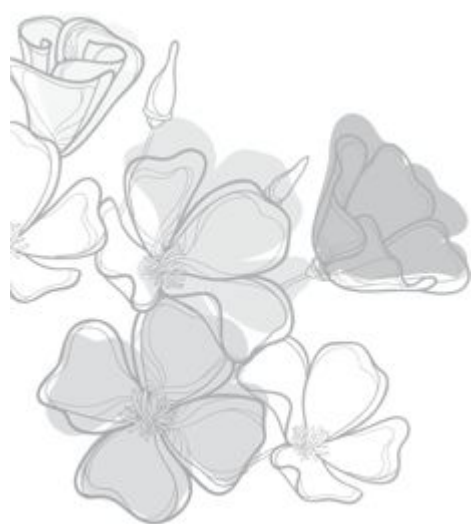
He scrunched his nose up. “Umm, I’m pretty sure Pretty Boy Pet Vet is the worst, but ok.” He stretched his long limbs. Neither of us had gotten any sleep.

“I hate you,” I said petulantly.

“Actually, I’m certain you’ve just confessed to loving me,” he smirked.

“I hate you so much,” I tried not to laugh.

“I know, love,” he smiled sweetly. “I’ve complicated your life, haven’t I? I apologize.” He kissed me on the forehead and got up to leave. “I told you this was a love triangle.”



# *This is Absolutely Not a Love Triangle*

**S**TAYING UP all night and getting up before noon becomes more difficult with age but is made infinitely less excruciating by the smell of pancakes in the distance. Fifteen minutes to noon, I stumbled into the kitchen with a headache reminding me to drink more water. My twenties and my invincibility were both nearly behind me.

“Good morning, Sunshine!” Lizzie smiled brightly at me. Garrett had her glowing like a teenager.

“We saw Finn leaving your room at like six in the morning. Dish.” Cindy passed me a plate of perfectly buttered pancakes and a little pouring dish with warm syrup.

“Full disclosure?” I was too tired for anything but.

“Obviously,” Cindy responded through a mouth full of pancakes.

“I tried to weasel my way into Finn’s pantaloons, and he wasn’t having it. He told me I was, and I quote, ‘self-centered.’ Oh, and he said he wasn’t willing to be the next phase of my existential crisis.”

Shock and awe all around.

“Wow,” Cindy nodded, impressed. “Go, Finn. I did not see that coming.”

“Did I skip a chapter? When did this become a love triangle?” Lizzie asked, intrigued.

“This is absolutely not a love triangle,” I protested.

“Are you sure?” Lizzie pressed. “I’ve read a lot of books, and this,” she gestured around the general vicinity of me, “this is definitely love triangular.”

“Yeah,” Cindy interjected as she chewed, “I hate to agree, but I have to agree. I gotta be honest. I was expecting Finn to be different, all things considered.”

I didn’t have to wonder what she meant. I never let them meet Finn when we were together. I never told them about the hospital. I never talked about him at all, really. He was too special, too personal, and we lived in a bubble of love and creativity that I compartmentalized completely from the rest of my life. So, when the time came to give an explanation, I gave the easiest one. He was an asshole and a cheater, and I never wanted to hear his stupid songs again.

For loyal friends, that’s enough. They filled in the rest. He was a dirtbag, he probably mistreated and underappreciated me. He exploited our experiences to get famous. All in all – he was gross. For as thoroughly angry as I was, I didn’t correct them. With the benefit of hindsight, I see him in the past and in the future for all the things he is now and will be down the road. He wasn’t the best back then, but he wasn’t as bad as I allowed them to believe.

“What were you expecting?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Someone less.” Cindy pressed her tongue between her lips, searching for the right descriptors. “Less insightful, less self-aware, and definitely less head over heels for you after all this time.”

Lizzie shook her head and pointed at Cindy in enthusiastic agreement. “Yup. That’s also what I was expecting. And, also, more drunk.”

“He’s not head over heels for me. I just told you guys. He turned me down. He said we belong together ‘platonically.’”



“You two throw the word ‘platonically’ around like two people trying to convince themselves they have no sexual tension,” Cindy noted, sliding a final pancake square around her syrupy plate.

“Oh my god, no,” I protested, “It’s not ... we’re not ...”

“I get the appeal though,” Lizzie interrupted. “He’s definitely written by a woman.”

Cindy and I both looked at her, confused. “What does that mean?” Cindy finally asked. “We never know what you mean when you start speaking book.”

“He’s like – cerebral. He’s dark and dreamy. He’s also the total personification of all Jax’s favorite things. Like if you were to take all the stuff Jax packs in her travel bag, throw it in a pot and mix it up, add whiskey and a British accent for flavoring, that’s Finn.”

“Yeah, but he’s no Carter,” Cindy rebutted. “Carter is the literal teenage dream. He’s like – if you went into an alternate universe and you encountered a healthy, functional, non asshole version of Jax. Carter is who that Jax is in a relationship with.”

“Yeah, ok,” Lizzie responded, “but let’s unpack that. Carter is the literal teenage dream. He’s Jax’s teenage dream. But Jax isn’t teenage Jax anymore. She’s more complex than that. Also – if Carter is the person alternate universe Jax is in a relationship with, is he a good fit for present universe Jax? Or have we all just *convinced* ourselves that he is because he’s a logical and responsible choice?”

I glanced between them as they passed the ball of my love life back and forth like a tennis match. Cindy, thinking of her next comeback, took my plate and put it in the sink.

“I wasn’t actually finished eating.”

“Carter is perfect for her. And he’s good for her. Even Finn knows it. He told her he didn’t want to be her next phase, which tells me he knows he’s not her forever. His words.”

“Finn wants Jax to be happy. He doesn’t want to be a complication, and he doesn’t want to be the reason Jax doesn’t get what she wants. Because he loves her. ‘His words.’”

“Platonically!” Cindy argued back.

“Oh ok. Now look who’s throwing around ‘platonically.’ Lizzie rolled her eyes.

“Let me ask you this,” Lizzie continued. For a moment, I thought she was going to ask me something, but she directed her gaze to Cindy. “Has anyone considered that in order to even *entertain* the idea of a serious relationship with Carter, Jax would have to completely change her life? Give up her career, stay home, and like – I don’t know – take pictures of plants or nature or whatever?”

“There are plenty of well-known home and gardening magazines, why *couldn’t* she do that?” Cindy asked.

“How long have you known her? She takes pictures of people, not plants. Anyone who’s paid an ounce of attention to her knows this. Could you design catholic school uniforms? Sure. But you wouldn’t want to, because that’s not what you do. Right?”

I shook my head fervently. Lizzie somehow won me over to her side.

Cindy clung too tightly to the notion that your first love was your true love because she’d never truly let go of West. I couldn’t empathize, partly because he is my brother, and partly because she never actively sought him out. Even in adulthood. Now she never could. It was the dictionary definition of unrequited love.

“So, disregarding Lizzie’s frankly treacherous perspective here, can I ask, what do you plan to do about Carter?” Cindy finally directed her question to me.

I didn’t know what to do about Carter. I could apologize. I could ask him to take me back or tell him I was wrong. I could regurgitate all the things he said to me the last time I saw him. But I couldn’t surrender to the notion that I had been wrong. Something about the way Carter walked in the world with the audacity of believing his way was the only way, didn’t sit well with me.

So – yes – I could apologize. But I’d already tried. I called him so much I filled his voicemail box with messages he never bothered to listen to. Inevitably, my apology was likely to fall on deaf ears.

As I sat there wishing I still had the plate of pancakes I didn’t finish, I thought about an alternate universe Jax, who wasn’t broken. Fully functioning reproductive system and healthy coping mechanisms. If I could have kids, would I even want them? Or was I mourning the loss of a path I never intended to take? Even the alternate universe, well-adjusted Jax, has issues with Carter. Carter’s idea of home was in stark contrast to my own, and, as Lizzie so eloquently pointed out, settling down with him would mean big compromises. In a life spent with Carter, how often would I see the airport? How often would I be taking pictures of people rather than plants? Even in the most ideal scenario, we didn’t fit.

I always thought that you couldn’t have a home while doing the job of globe-trotting. Spending several months with Finn showed me that a home and my career were not mutually exclusive. Although Carter tried to make me see it the whole time we’d been together, I didn’t understand until Finn showed it to me.

He wasn't trying to convince me of anything. He was just living his life. He'd been traveling, and would be again soon, yet he was so comfortably at home in this space he'd carved out for himself. Finn never felt like a stranger in his house. Everything about this space was completely and unapologetically Finn. It was warm and comfortable and quiet. It was home for him. As much so as the road, and the stage, and the studio.

Things around me were not as I originally presumed them to be, and Finnley Archibald Hendricks was not a train wreck. He was a fully functioning adult. He healed from the heartbreaks of our early twenties. His diary, his album, the decision to forgive himself and the stupidity of his younger years. It all melded together to form the Finn of now. This magnificently insightful, thoughtful, and completely non-judgmental human. This man – totally at peace with himself and his life.

Could I also have that life? A house that was a home. My photos framed on the walls like a highlight reel of my adventures. Drawers so inviting I'd be compelled to fill them with torn jeans, too big socks, and concert t-shirts collected when I wasn't home. Fireplaces and reflective silences, and big comfy couches where my friends and I could sit around and talk about our lives.

That girl doesn't have skeletons in her travel bag. And she wouldn't build a home on the foundational stability of a boy she loved as a teenager. That girl sought her own foundational stability.

“Jax?” Cindy repeated my name loudly, as if she'd been trying to resuscitate me from a trance. “Earth to Jax.”

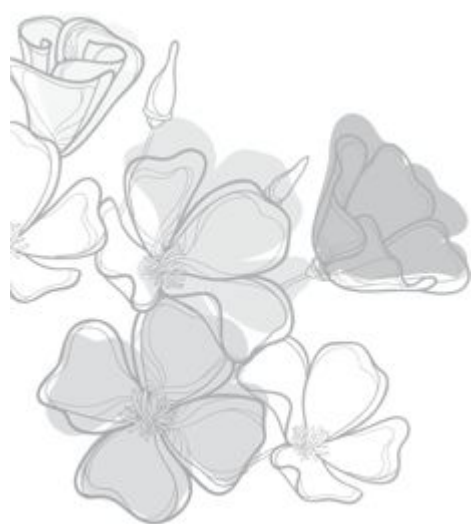
“Sorry,” I shook my head, snapping myself out of my inner monologue. “I drifted off.”

“Well, you haven’t had any sleep, so you must be exhausted,” Lizzie noted, offering a rescue.

“Ok, ok. But before we send you off to your afternoon nap – you never answered my question. What are you going to do about Carter?”

“I don’t know. I’ve called him a bunch of times. If he was interested in anything I had to say, he would have listened to the messages, called me back, answered a text, etcetera, etcetera. So, for today, I’m not gonna do anything about Carter. I’m going to take a power nap, then put on my favorite t-shirt with Finn’s face on it and take pictures of him from just offstage. Like the fully functioning *Rolling Stone* photographer he deserves. You ladies should get some rest. These Black Heart Sunday shows get a little wild.”

And with that, I power-walked my way back to bed, glowing with the newfound confidence of someone who might possibly be getting their shit together in the near future.



# The Royal Finn Treatment

**A**FTER A two-hour power nap, I awoke to the distant sounds of my alarm on the nightstand. I rubbed my eyes, trying to adjust to the natural light shining through my windows. In the distance, I heard Lizzie talking to a woman whose voice I didn't recognize. It quickly became clear that I'd missed quite a bit in the short time I'd been asleep.

Finn hurried into my room in pajama bottoms and one of his cushy robes, looking somewhat flustered.

"Jax, love. I've invited the band's stylist, Rene, to help with getting ready for tonight."

"How famous do you have to be before you call someone over to help you choose your jeans and t-shirt for the night?" I teased.

"It's not for me, Jax. It's for you lot. Have you forgotten it's New Year's Eve?" I had forgotten it was New Year's Eve. "I thought you and your mates might enjoy the Royal Finn Treatment." He harkened back to an insult I'd made to him months ago.

"That's not what the Royal Finn Treatment is," I clarified, worried that he'd taken my insult as a compliment. "The Royal Finn Treatment is a euphemism."

"Yes, I know," he said, blushing.

"For your indiscriminate sexcapades."

"I know, Jax, for fuck's sake. And don't slut shame me. I'm a free spirit. Also, don't pretend the Royal Finn Treatment

isn't an absolute gift."

"Ok," I laughed, "I'm sorry. Go on. What's this *lesser-known* Royal Finn Treatment?"

"I invited Rene here with a full wardrobe of ladies' clothes, and I've also invited Marissa, who does hair and makeup. I've given them *carte blanche* to play Fairy Godmother so that you can ring in the new year like the brilliant, gorgeous specimen that you are."

"What are you up to?" I asked suspiciously.

"I'm not up to anything. And even if I was, I would not be ruining it by telling you." He turned to walk out of the room.

I hurried along, following him into the master suite. "That definitely means you're up to something. What is it? What are you up to?"

He gently guided me back to the door, not so subtly kicking me out of his room. "I'll be having my shower now, so unless you're looking for the *other* Royal Finn Treatment, get out."

He sauntered into his bathroom, and I flung myself onto the comfiest armchair in his bedroom, safely out of view of his shower. I closed my eyes to capture a few more solitary silent moments before the chaos of dressing up started.

"Jax!" Cindy shouted from down the hall. "We know you're hiding in Finn's room! C'mon! We need to get dressed so they can do hair and makeup!"

*Hair and makeup. Fuck.*

Lizzie found me hiding behind a monogrammed pillow. "Get out from behind that pillow and tell me how much you love my outfit."

I threw the pillow back on to Finn's bed and took in the sight of her. She looked like a rock 'n' roll princess. A large



puffy tulle skirt hung just below her knees and sparkled all over in the light. Above the waist, a white light material t-shirt, with a quote from *Wuthering Heights*, her favorite book. To complete the look, a black leather jacket – because no rock show is complete without one.

“Oh wow,” I gasped.

“Do you like it?” She asked, twirling around the tulle of her skirt.

“Are you kidding? Of course I like it. I’m literally falling in love with you all over again.”

She blushed. “Do you think Garrett will like it?”

“I think Garrett would have liked the stained pajamas you wore at breakfast.”

Cindy sauntered in, wearing her own fancy outfit. “Lizzie, stop playing around and bring her out here. We need to get hair and make-up going.”

Cindy’s dress was champagne and short enough to show off her criminally long and gorgeous legs. It was a halter top with a plunged V-neck, because Cindy could pull it off. Strings of gold sequins hung from all the right places over the top layer of some material I couldn’t identify. And of course – tall black stilettos. I both admire and have a healthy fear of girls who can wear tall stilettos, Cindy among them.

“Holy shit!”

“I know. I look fucking delicious. It’s time for you to look equally delectable. We have your outfit picked out, but you need to take a shower and put it on.”

“You say ‘we,’ but I know you mean you, right?” I asked her.

“Actually – I didn’t give much input at all. Rene showed up already knowing what she wanted you to wear. She had like

three different versions of the same outfit, and we just picked the one with the most black.”

How in the world did a woman who had never met me have any idea what kind of outfit I should be wearing for New Year’s Eve? Cindy must have seen my wheels turning.

“Finn.”

“Finn, what?” I turned around, thinking he must have come out of the shower.

“No,” Cindy clarified, “I mean Finn – Finn told Rene what you should wear.” She watched a perplexed look on my face graduate into a blank stare. “You’re wondering how she showed up with a bunch of outfits already picked out for you. Finn told her what to bring. I heard him on the phone this morning. He described you with frightening but endearing accuracy.”

Cindy grabbed me by the hand, pulling me out of the armchair, and lead me down the hallway to a large empty room. There, laying on the bed, was my own New Year’s Eve outfit.

A pair of leather pants adorned with zippered pockets all over. The silver zippers adding shimmer to the dark leather. The top was a simple grey t-shirt. And for shoes, black leather ankle boots. The t-shirt was boat necked and sleeveless. Upon further examination, I realized it was shimmery – but you’d have to look closely or put it in just the right angle of light to notice. It was simple and elegant.

“Damn. That’s a good outfit. Thank you, Rene.” I reached my hand out to shake hers. “I’m Jax, by the way.”

She smiled, “Jax, it’s so nice to meet you in person. You are gorgeous, exactly as Finn described you.”

I took a second look. Something was missing. “No leather jacket?”

“Finn told me you didn’t need a leather jacket because no leather jacket in my arsenal would be as perfect or comfortable as your own.”

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After a quick shower, I took the clothes into the large closet of the room we were in and tried them on. I looked at myself in the full-length mirror. Everything fit like it had been tailor made for me.

“Wow. Finn picked this?” I asked nervously, picking at the sides of the shirt.

“Yup!” Rene smiled. “He was very specific. You two must be very close.”

Cindy came running into the room holding my leather jacket and stopped right in her tracks. “Wow. You look amazing.”

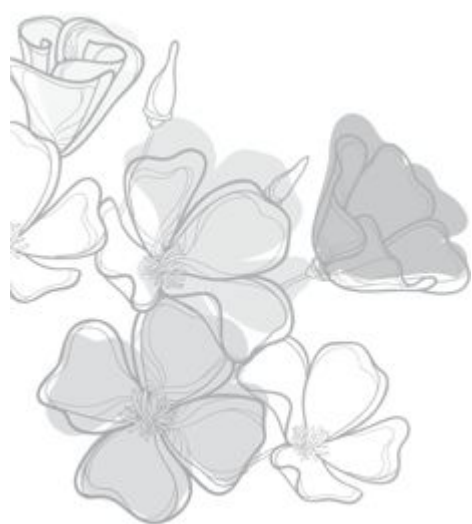
“Yeah,” Lizzie added, “I think I’m falling in love with *you* all over again. And there’s only one thing missing.”

I swung my jacket on. I hadn’t worn it in months, mostly because I’d been living my life in pajamas, sulking around Finn’s house.

“Perfect,” Rene commented, “you’re ready!”

“Not quite,” Cindy said. “You need some makeup on your face. You look like you stayed up all night with a British boy and then downplayed it all morning to your girlfriends.”

*Oddly specific.*



# I Could Fill a Library With The Things I Never Knew

**S**ITTING IN the hair and make-up chair, I pondered what Finn might be up to that prompted the Royal Finn Treatment. Cindy and Lizzie gossiped beside me about girls we went to high school with. Apparently, Tuesday and Beau McSherrie were getting a divorce. The scandal. He had been nonchalantly screwing the lonely housewives of the Salinas Valley while Tuesday had been growing a literal human in her body.

“I wonder if Carter heard about it,” I said absentmindedly. Cindy and Lizzie turned to look at me, surprised that I’d been listening.

“You should call him and find out,” Cindy proposed.

“Yeah, let me just call him really quick and leave him another voicemail he’s not going to listen to. Oh, wait! I forgot. His mailbox is full.”

“He probably already knows. It’s all over social media, and he’s still friends with Beau, right?” Lizzie was oblivious to the point.

“Do you guys think Finn invited him to the show tonight?” I asked, still suspicious about Finn’s intentions.

“Beau McSherrie? Why would Finn invite Beau McSherrie to his show? That’s so random,” Cindy responded, confused.

“No, not Beau. I’m talking about Carter. Do you guys think Finn invited Carter to come out for the show tonight? Do

you think that's why Finn is doing all this pampering?"

Cindy continued to stare confusedly at me.

"No," Lizzie broke the somewhat awkward silence, "I don't think that's what's going on."

"Why would Finn do that?" Cindy added. "He's not particularly fond of Carter. But even if he was, why would Carter agree to it? That doesn't make sense. Did you see them at the wedding? They don't like each other."

I shrugged my shoulders. "It was just a thought."

"Is that what you want?" Lizzie pressed. "You really want Finn to bring your ex out here to try and glue you back together?" Her tone told me the question was rhetorical.

"No, of course not," I dismissed, realizing I'd spoken out of turn. "I'm just trying to figure out what prompted all of this," I gestured around the room.

"It's New Year's Eve, Jax. He's just trying to be nice, and probably make a good impression on your friends," Lizzie continued, advocating for Finn.

"Maybe, but there's something else going on. I feel it in my bones."

"Calm down, Sherlock Holmes," Cindy interjected. "Like Lizzie said, he wants to make sure we have a good time. It's New Year's Eve and we're going to *his* concert."

---

After hair and makeup were done, I wandered around the house looking for Finn. It had been over an hour since we'd seen either him or Garrett. As I walked down the long hallway, I spotted Will, the band's drummer, in the distance. I hadn't seen him since the band finished recording the month prior. He smiled brightly at me, sprinting toward me to greet me with a hug. The kind of hug you might get from a bear, but one that's been trained to interact with humans.

Will and Finn were best friends since childhood. They were a yin and yang. Will had a quiet strength that balanced Finn's audacious personality. Seeing them together, it was clear that they were the heart and soul of the group. Finn always looked to Will for stability, peace, and honesty. All the things a really great friend does for you when you let them.

Their connection was ever present. Tangible every time they were together. During shows, you would often find Finn looking to Will during instrumental breaks or fading into the background to stand near him. Even in their speech patterns, the contrast was clear. Finn spoke quickly and abundantly, always saying in twenty words what he could have said in five. Will, on the other hand, spoke slowly and deliberately, and only when he had something important to say.

The rest of the world centers on Finn, but Finn looks to Will to center him.

"Hello, love!" He exclaimed. "Oh, wow, you look absolutely ravishing, if you don't mind my saying."

"Oh," I looked down at my legs, remembering I was the magazine cover version of myself. "Thank you," I tugged at my shirt. "Oddly enough, Finn picked it out."

"That doesn't seem odd to me at all. Finny picks out all our outfits. We must always coordinate without looking like we tried too hard to coordinate." He smiled slyly and winked. "The real surprise is you're still here. I was certain he'd find a way to fuck up this entire situation."

"Surprisingly, he's been pretty great," I smiled. "He's different than he used to be. Calmer. Wiser."

"Well, if I'm being truthful, I'm not surprised." He leaned in close to me and lowered his volume. "He'd murder me for saying so, but the lads and I are quite proud of him. He's been on a bit of a journey since your split. It was rough for a long while, but he's come around. He was pretty messed up after

what happened to you two and how he reacted at the hospital. He second guessed all his decisions and retreated into the drugs and booze. He even talked about quitting the band. It got dark there for a bit.”

I never knew anyone else in the world was aware of what happened at the hospital. Just me and Finn. I felt exposed and angry that Will knew something so personal about me. Then a moment of clarity washed over me. Will said “you two.” He said it like it happened to both of us. I lingered on the words and realized that from Finn’s perspective, it *had* happened to the both of us.

That never occurred to me before.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, darling,” Will interrupted my stream of consciousness. “I’ve just gone and dampened the mood, haven’t I?”

“No, it’s fine. I just didn’t realize he’d told anyone about that.” I crossed my arms over my stomach, fearing Will could see just by looking at me that I was a fucking reproductive disaster.

“As far as I know, he’s only told me.”

“Good to know.” I relaxed my arms. “So, when did it get light?”

“Beg your pardon?” He asked, not following my multiple trains of thought.

“You said it got dark for a bit. When did it start to get light?” I was hoping for some insight, or some clue as to when it might start to get better.

“Oh, right,” he scratched his head. “Well, that’s a longer story. I suppose it came down to the lads and I sitting him down and saying, ‘look mate – we can see you’re going through it, and you can’t carry on this way, you’ve got to lean on us for some of this.’ Part of it was he was always blitzed



out, and part of it was he wasn't eating or sleeping. He wasn't doing well at home on his own. We would take breaks, but he never seemed recharged when we'd return. We realized he was at home doing more of the same nonsense. So, we started coming around and making music, not to put out or anything, just making music for fun. He started keeping a journal. I suppose it was therapeutic. Most of that stuff ended up on the uh – the breakup album, as we call it. Eventually, he started to get better. He started waking up earlier and showering more, and just generally being more himself. If I had to pinpoint it, I'd say he started to feel better when he let out some of what he'd been holding in.”

I never thought to let go of some of what I'd been holding in. I'd been holding it in for so long, it felt quintessentially and definitively mine.

Finn wouldn't want me to know everything Will had just confessed in the hallway, but I was glad I knew. The Finn I thought had existed all these years, just didn't give a shit. From my point of view, he moved on so quickly and easily. I always thought I should too.

“I didn't realize it had been like that.”

Will shrugged. It was a big deal, and it wasn't, because this is the life you choose when you pick a best friend who is the main character of every story. Will knows Finn and accepts him without conditions.

Finn appeared at the end of the hallway dressed like a rockstar. He walked toward us before Will could disclose any other highly personal details about the last few years. He looked spectacular, dressed in jeans that fit and hugged him perfectly, and the only belt I'd ever seen him wear. A black leather belt so worn it looked brown. When tightened all the way, there was a significant amount of belt hanging to the side, which Finn always tucked into his left hip pocket. He wore a

threadbare black shirt with a white skull sketch screen printed on the chest, and a plain grey zip up hoodie. His maroon Converse adorned his long feet and hanging under his arm was a black suede bomber jacket.

“It’s not going to be that cold inside the venue, mate, you know that, right?” Will noted, gesturing to his jacket.

“I’ve got loads of layers, Will. Both emotionally and fashion-aly.”

“I don’t think ‘fashion-aly’ is a word,” I noted.

He turned his gaze to me, arching one eyebrow and biting down on his bottom lip. He put his hand over his chest like he was about to have a heart attack. His facial expression distracted me from my primary goal of teasing him.

“I think you mean to say ‘fashionably.’”

“Jaxon Samantha. I was not prepared for you to look the way you do. You are magnificent.”

Will looked away like he was intruding on a private moment.

Finn cleared his throat, no doubt remembering we were *platonic* soul mates.

“And to be clear, I meant ‘fashion-aly.’ I meant it to rhyme with emotionally. I’m the poet here, so I think I’ve got carte blanche to make up whatever words I see fit.” He turned his attention back to Will. “Have the lads gone on the bus with the crew? Or are the coming in the heli?”

*The ‘heli’?*

“No, mate – they’ve gone on the bus with the crew. Not everyone fancies a dramatic entrance. Some people just want to be early and prepared.”

“Aren’t you the early and prepared sort? What are you doing here, then?”

“Well, someone has to make sure you get there on time, and I drew the short straw. I’ve also made those, uh,” Will looked at me like he was doing his best not to disclose classified information, “those arrangements that you asked for, and your,” he looked over at me wearily again, “your, guest, has all the credentials they’ll need.”

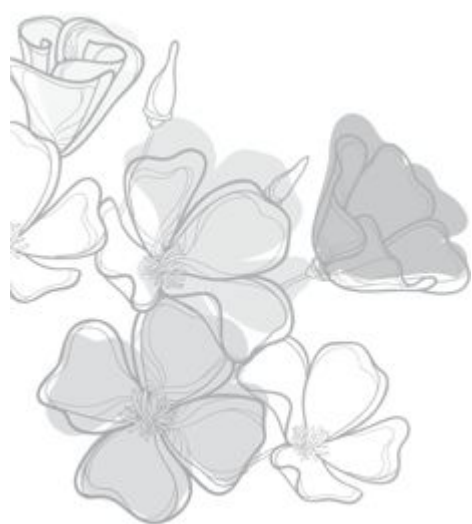
Their conversation pulled me out of my self-reflection long enough to remember I’d been suspicious of the evening from the moment I heard the words ‘hair and make-up.’

“Thanks, mate. Let me gather this bunch of deviants and I’ll meet you at the car, yeah?”

Will nodded in the affirmative and then turned to me. “It was good to see you, love,” he hugged me and kissed me on the cheek. “Make sure to get my good angles tonight.”

“What arrangements?” I asked Finn as soon as Will was out of earshot. “What special guest? What are you up to, Finnley?”

“Jax, love – go gather your friends. Honestly, I hate being late to shows.”



# New Year's Eve

**W**E GATHERED in the foyer and followed Finn out of the front door. In the driveway sat a large black SUV, so clean it looked like a mirror in the darkness, reflecting all the holiday lights on the house. As Finn and Will ushered us into the car, I realized we were missing Garrett.

“Finn, we can’t leave without Garrett. I didn’t even see him while we were getting ready. Where is he?”

“Oh, he’s gone ahead of us, love. He left hours ago, with the rest of the band on the bus. He wanted to meet some of the other bands and check out the set-up process. He’s already cleared it with Lizzie.”

I saw Will snickering out of the corner of my eye.

“What’s up? What am I missing?” I asked him.

“Was that purposeful?” Will gestured between Finn and me.

“What do you mean?”

“You’re wearing matching outfits. You realize that, right?”

I looked down at my outfit and then back to Finn. “No, no, he’s wearing a black shirt, mine’s grey.”

“Right, but he’s wearing a grey hoodie, which he’s zipped up, so essentially he is also wearing a grey top under his black jacket.”

I scratched my head, wrapping my mind around it, wondering if it actually was on purpose. “Finn, did you—”

“Of course not! It’s completely coincidental,” he said, unzipping his hoodie. “Sorry Jax, but you don’t own exclusive rights to mostly black wardrobes. I also like to wear all black. Will – shut it, mate.”

“Apologies.” Will put his hands up in front of his chest, a gesture of surrender. “You both look, like, really, really lovely, by the way.”

“William, you fucking knob. You are somehow managing to make it worse.” Finn’s use of Will’s full name made me giggle.

“Where are we going, anyway?” I asked.

“We’ve chartered a helicopter to take us to London tonight. It’s a special occasion, and I thought your friends might enjoy an aerial view of the city.”

“Why is it a special occasion?” I asked suspiciously.

“Because it’s New Year’s Eve, Jax. There’s no need for an interrogation.”

---

The helicopter blades whirring in front of us caused Cindy and Lizzie to hold down their skirts for dear life.

At the risk of ruining our hair, we all wore headsets so that we could hear each other along the way. Finn played travel guide as we approached the London skyline and pointed out landmarks as we flew over them. Lizzie was swept up by the majesty of seeing in real life what she’d only ever read about in books.

“We’ll be arriving soon,” Finn said, pointing at the O2 concert venue below. A large circular building capped with golden rods like a giant tiara, I would recognize the O2 from any photo or view anywhere in the world.

Cindy checked her lipstick and Lizzie fluffed her hair. I picked at nonexistent lint balls on my blouse and checked the

time on my phone. Black Heart Sunday was playing in a lineup of many other bands that night, but they were headlining and thus playing through to the midnight hour. This meant they would get to stop at 11:59 to countdown with the crowd before playing their encore songs after everyone kissed and rang in the new year.

The first thing we saw when we arrived was a barrage of screaming fans standing behind barriers. They waited to get a glimpse of Finn and Will on their way into the building. Not wanting to disappoint the fans, they both stopped briefly to take photos and sign a variety of paraphernalia. After a few minutes, they continued walking toward the building, holding their hands out to high five fans down the line until we walked through a door leading to the back hallways of the venue.

A jolt of electricity rushed through my limbs all the way down to my toes. This felt like home to me. Back to some normalcy. I could hear the music from the band on stage and the energy of the crowd jumping up and down. The movement and music traveled through every inch of the venue. I clutched my camera bag. It had been almost a year since I was at a live show.

Goosebumps ran from my elbows to my wrists as I tried to identify the sick feeling in my stomach. It was nerves. There was also the small matter of being present in the crowd for the first time while Finn performed songs he'd written about me.

“Alright then, Jax?”

The sound of Finn's voice, as it often does, pulled me out of my thoughts. “Yeah, I'm fine,” I smiled meekly.

“You're worried you've been out the game too long?” He asked as he popped M&Ms into his mouth. “You think your photos will be shit,” he declared through a full mouth.

“No. Shut up.”

“Oh my god, Jax, are you nervous?” Cindy jumped in.

“No. I’m fine.”

“Is it because we’ve never seen you at work?” Lizzie asked. “Are you having performance anxiety?”

Will snickered from behind Finn, tossing pretzels in his mouth and washing them down with soda and whiskey. “No way she’s nervous. She’s photographed bands way more famous than us. She probably feels self-conscious because I told her that she and Finn are wearing matching outfits.”

“Oh, bloody hell,” Finn said, taking off the black jacket. “Jaxon, leave your jacket on. We will not be wearing coordinated outfits tonight.”

“Oh, shit!” Cindy gasped when she saw it. “Was that on purpose?”

“No!” we both shouted at the same time. I checked my phone for the time.

“Is it nearly time?” Finn asked. “Your friends are lovely, but I’ve had enough of them.”

I shook my head in the affirmative. I was sick of them too.

A knock on the door distracted all of us. On the other side of it was none other than Garrett Henley, back from a full day’s worth of live music. He was a little sweaty and dressed in what I could only describe as his Sunday best. Jeans tighter than was probably necessary, a button-down plaid shirt, and a pair of lace-up boots. One look at Lizzie and he nearly tripped over his own feet.

He walked over to her and whispered something in her ear that none of us could hear. She blushed a shade of red I’d never seen before.

“You guys,” he said excitedly, “what a fucking amazing day. I don’t even have words. I’ve met so many people and



seen so many bands.”

Finn gave him an odd look. “Yeah, alright Garrett Henley like-the-t-shirt. Glad you’re having a great day.” He looked over at Will. “Mate, would you lead the girls out to where they’re supposed to be? I need a word with Jax before I go.”

Cindy called to me as she left the room, “Jax, we’ll see you out there!”

“Oh, no, darling. Jax doesn’t watch from the wings,” Will explained. “She’ll be right down in front of the stage at the start with our videographer. She moves around a bit on stage as well, but she likes to photograph from the front. She’s like a little lightning bolt.”

Garrett stayed behind momentarily and whispered something to Finn that I couldn’t hear. He shook Finn’s hand, and followed behind Will, presumably already knowing his way around the place.

“Jax, I need to tell you something before we go out there.”

Anxious about what he might say, I stopped him. “Finn – don’t worry about the songs off *Headaches & Heartbreak*. I know you have to play them. It won’t be weird for me.”

He looked at me, confused. “What the fuck are you on about? Of course we’re going to play them, Jax. They are literally our most famous songs. It’s not about you, love. It’s about Lizzie.”

What in the world could he possibly need to tell me about Lizzie? Then a terrible thought occurred to me.

“Did you,” I choked on my saliva, “oh my god, did you – with my—”

“What? No, of course not. Why in the world would you think that?” He shook his head at me in disappointment. “Just

– stop talking, please. I’ve only got a few moments and I need to tell you this.”

A crew member shouted at Finn from the hallway and pounded on the door. “Five minutes, mate – you need to make your way toward the stage!”

“Did you bring Carter out here? Just tell me now. Tell me now, I can’t be fucking surprised by that, Finn.”

“For fuck’s sake, Jax. Shut it for one moment, would you?” and then he caught himself in his own thoughts, “Wait, is that – is that what you want? Why would I – I mean, I thought ...” he shook his head, chasing away whatever he was going to say next. “Ok. Focus Jax,” he placed my face between his warm hands. “Garrett is meant to be popping the question to Lizzie. He’s got a ring in his too tight jeans, it’s happening tonight. On stage.”

“*What?*”

“Jaxon. Focus. It’s happening tonight – he’s going to do a song he’s been practicing with the lads and I, and then he’s going to ask her to marry him right before midnight.”

“Why are you just telling me this now? Oh my god, Finn!”

“Because you’re shit at keeping secrets, and frankly, you’ve been quite wrapped up in your own thoughts all day. I’m telling you now. You need to get the photo. She’s your best mate, and you’ll have the best seat in the house, won’t you?” He leaned in close to me. “Just be ready, ok?”

And then he kissed me.

Yes, you read that right. He *kissed* me.

Not particularly passionately, but definitely not platonically. Like a goodbye kiss given a thousand times before. It caught me off guard. It was brief and succinct.

“Shit, I’m sorry, I ... uh,” he shoved his hands into his pockets and looked down at his shoes, “force of habit.”

*Force of habit?*

“From four years ago?”

“I don’t know, Jax.”

“It hasn’t even been twenty-four hours since you turned me down last night. This morning. Whatever. What the fuck is happening right now?”

“Finn!” a crew member shouted from outside the door. “Time to go, mate!”

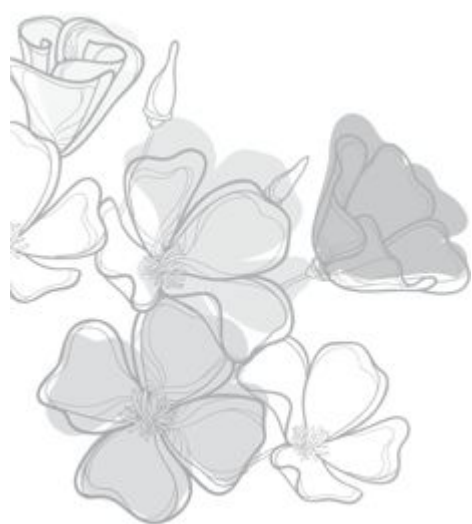
“I dunno.” He could have panicked, but he didn’t. Instead, he smiled at me.

“What do you mean you don’t know, Finn, you can’t just \_\_\_”

“Jax,” he cut me off, “we’ve got to go, yeah?” He ran his fingers through his hair. “Incidentally, I can tell that you’re a ball of nerves right now, but there’s no need. You’re brilliant. You’re perfect. You look fucking gorgeous.”

He stood facing the door and looked back, before walking back toward me in two long-legged strides. “That’s bullshit. I do know.” He pulled me close to him and kissed me again, this time definitively and vehemently. Before I could decide on a reaction, he pulled away, rushing back toward the door.

He looked back again and chuckled nervously, the red in his cheeks betraying his outward façade of confidence. “I’ll see you from the stage, love.”



# Black Heart Sunday

**B**LACK HEART Sunday is a drum heavy band, full of awkward dancers who love every minute together on stage. Garrett said he'd never seen so many drums on stage and that's because there are literally drums everywhere you look. There's a drum kit, and then random drums strewn all over the stage for pretty much any of the boys to play at various times during each of the songs. Finn keeps a drumstick in his back pocket. He uses it to point at the audience, and to occasionally go and bang on Will's drumkit.

It's not just drums, though. There are instruments all over. That seems obvious. They're a band, after all. But beyond that – they're a bunch of band geeks. So, it's not just a smorgasbord of drums, there are also multiple keyboards and guitars strategically placed all over, laptops for the synthesized stuff, and a random piano off to the side for the sad songs. Finn's superpower is that he expertly plays every single one.

Years had passed since I last saw and photographed them live. Their crowds were substantially smaller back then. The opening chords of the first song flowed from the speakers and my heart pounded with the beat of the drums and guitar riffs. The smooth reverberation of Finn's voice sent shivers down my spine, but I couldn't see him. I wasn't alone.

The eyes of thousands of fans scanned the stage, trying to find him, but the sound of his voice was coming from somewhere off to the side. I looked at Will, who caught the confusion on my face. He smiled, pointing a drumstick in the

direction of the spotlight moving slowly toward a side entrance of the stadium.

And there he was. A tall, lanky silhouette appeared from the general direction where Will pointed. His voice grew nearer and nearer as the crowd caught on and turned almost in perfect sync. They found him making a grand entrance no one had anticipated, except for the band, of course, all smirking at him from the stage.

Finn put the black jacket back on for his entrance through the crowd. He moved through a blocked off walkway, ushered by security, his hood securely over his head. He shook and held hands with screaming fans as he made his way toward the stage, signaling his band mates in ways only they'd understand. He would arrive on stage before the song's bridge. He reached as many fans as he could with his long arms, and those whose hands he couldn't touch, reached out to touch his shoulder, his back, his sleeve — anything they could, like he was a deity.

On his way past me, he sang to me, looking directly in my eyes as if thousands of people weren't watching. He held his microphone in one hand and his heart securely in his chest with the other. I was upside down. My heartbeat sounded in my ears, and I did the only thing I knew how. I clicked as quickly as I could. When I looked back at these photos later, they would be in such perfect sequence they may as well have been a video.

The words belonged to me as well, not just the look on his face — an adornment I'd always recognized as being reserved for me and me alone. I knew these words were mine. I understood the lyrical heartbreak camouflaged in electric pop melodies to be my fault entirely. How many times did he have to sing these songs before the words stopped hurting? He smiled, and I shook my head, playfully dismissing him and trying not to smile back.

When he finally arrived on the stage, he took his jacket off and danced, jumping up and down, flinging his head forward and back. His hood followed, falling on his head, and then flopping off. He was completely and effortlessly cool. He shouted, “Happy fucking New Year, London!” as soon as he had a moment between verses. The crowd erupted in screams and cheers, arms waving every which way, but still somehow in a coordinated movement. He jumped up and down with the beat, revealing momentarily the only bit of color he was wearing that night – the dark red of his boxer briefs, which happened to perfectly match his shoes.

Taking pictures of Finn is easy. He’s beautiful, and whether intentionally or not, he is always posing. He has a very specific way of moving around the stage and flailing his limbs around that is somehow both awkward and picture perfect. He moves in perfect sync with the rhythms, and the crowd moves with him like a heartbeat.

It isn’t just Finn. All the boys are easy to photograph. It’s their interactions with one another. The sideways smirks, the pats on the backs, and face splitting grins. It’s every single moment of pure, unfiltered joy as they hear thousands of people singing their own words back to them. To put it plainly, they make my job easy.

They played one more song before Finn graced the crowd with his opening remarks.

“Hello, you lot!” He addressed them like a group of close friends, and smiled sheepishly, looking down at his feet when they all shouted back. “London – it’s so good to see you. You look fucking gorgeous.” He let out a shy chuckle, allowing a few moments for screaming. “We’re called Black Heart Sunday, and we’re gonna play a few songs for you before we say good riddance to this wild fucking year. Is that alright?” More fanfare gave him the opportunity to run his fingers through his hair. “Alright. Before I shut up and sing, I just

want to shout out a few folks,” he pointed back to Will, “you’ll recognize William on the drums,” and then he pointed to his left, “the handsome rockstar on the bass is Jake,” and then to his right, “and this gorgeous gentleman on the keyboards is Miles.”

Each of the band members made their own unique greeting gestures to the crowd, and Finn held his hand over his heart – in perpetual gratitude that people wanted to hear music he’d made on a computer with his friends. “And I’m Finn,” pause for applause, “and before we get back to it, London, I also want to take a moment and say a special thank you to my favorite photographer in the whole wide world.”

*Oh god no.*

He smiled widely as “aww’s” poured in from the crowd. “Jax Cassidy,” he announced, pointing a drumstick down at me, prompting the spotlight to find me. “She’s here tonight to photograph us again, after years of being cross with me,” he laughed. The crowd screamed and cheered, and the rest of the band joined, shouting ‘woo hoo’s’ and clapping excitedly. Finn tinkered nervously with his earpiece and the wire hanging at his hip connecting him to the sound pack in his back pocket. “And I dunno, we might have some other surprises before the clock strikes midnight.” He shrugged, “Alright then, let’s get on with it,” he said, as he gestured to Will to count off to the next song.

The adrenaline and embarrassment of being spotlit carried me in a whirlwind through the next several songs. I ran back and forth across the ground level length of the stage, trying to catch everyone’s moments and good sides. The heat of a thousand people breathing and screaming and singing together got the better of the band. They had all taken off their respective sweaters and jackets, leaving only threadbare t-shirts with clever tag lines and reluctantly cool screen prints of animals and skulls and flowers.



The stadium went dark. A low humming of instruments played, letting folks know the show was not over, the stage was just being reset. From my vantage point, I could see the crew bringing out another microphone stand, a stool, and a guitar I didn't recognize.

A security guard hurried up to me and put his hand on the back of my shoulder to lead me forward. "Ma'am, Mr. Hendricks would like a word."

He ushered me to Finn, who was kneeling at the edge of the stage. Miles held the back of his belt to keep him from falling.

"Jax, now's the time, darling. Come up on stage and have your camera at the ready. We're about to bring Garrett out."

It took me a moment to remember what he'd told me on his way out of the dressing room, right before he turned my evening upside down.

"Jax? Have you got this?" He reached his hand out to me to help me climb on stage. As I hoisted up, I nearly fell forward, and he caught me, holding me tightly while I steadied myself. The electricity of our proximity shot straight through every nerve ending in my body, bringing me back to myself. "Steady, darling," he breathed, pressing me against him. "You alright? Perhaps you have been out of the game too long."

"Are you two quite finished?" Miles whispered from beside us, "or were you hoping to be caught fraternizing when the lights came on?"

He released me and I backed away from him, moving toward Miles' keyboards, just left of center between Will and the piano.

"We weren't fraternizing," I whispered back to him.

"Right, of course." Miles smirked, putting his earpiece back in.

“We’re doing Garrett’s track, alright mate?” Finn said to Miles before looking back at me. “Can you believe this bloke has me doing backup vocals at my own gig?” He winked, dripping bravado and charm.

When the lights came back up, Finn was on a stool front and center of the stage. He held his microphone with both hands, placed in its stand, and for some reason was wearing his glasses. I took a picture – because Finn in his glasses on stage was a rarity the entire female fandom would appreciate.

“Are we having fun yet, London?” He smiled as the familiar shouting traveled to his ears. “You lot may not know this – but I’m a bloody hopeless romantic, and a fan of well written love songs.” He adjusted his earpiece. “I’ve recently heard a good one, and I’d like to share it if that’s alright?” The crowd erupted in affirmative shouts. “Spectacular,” he stood up and made his way to the piano, securing the microphone in the stand attached to the top. I shifted my gaze, noticing sheet music and realizing why he was wearing glasses. “We’ve brought along a new friend tonight. He wrote this brilliant tune. His name is Garrett Henley. Garrett, mate – come on out.”

Garrett walked on to the stage, and I photographed him nervously rubbing his undoubtedly sweaty hands against his dark jeans. He looked like he might vomit. I wondered if he was more nervous about the number of people in the audience, or the small possibility that Lizzie might turn him down in front of a sold-out crowd on New Year’s Eve.

Where might one acquire the level of confidence it takes to pull off such a grandiose proposal? It was so perfectly tailored for a girl who’s spent her life swimming in the romantic ideologies of classic literature.

Between my thoughts and the sound of my camera clicks, I heard bits and pieces of his lyrics. *Heart on fire, soul come*

*alive, and I see forever in your eyes.* There was more, but I wasn't focused on the words so much as the faces. Finn at the piano, in his bold tortoise-shell glasses. Garrett, pale and sweaty at the microphone, eyes shut with palpable emotion animating every inch of his body. Lizzie, jaw practically on the floor and stars in her eyes. She had no idea what was coming. The arena, a midnight sky of blue flashlight stars.

The song faded, and I clicked my phone open to check the time. 11:53. The time was now. The crowd roared so loudly Finn had to put a finger to his lips to quiet them.

“Thank you, guys. Thank you so much,” Garrett said, humbled by the reaction. “I, uh – I wrote this song last week, while I was awake in the middle of the night, watching this beautiful creature breathing in the moonlight beside me. My chest started to ache, and I dreamt of a whole life with this person. I thought I'd been in love, so many times,” he looked over at Lizzie, “so many times, babe.”

Jake walked over to her and offered his hand. She froze, shocked and flustered. She shook her head ‘no.’ Jake smiled at her, nodding his head ‘yes,’ and coaxing her to the front of the stage where the spotlight found her and reflected the sparkle of her skirt in every direction of the auditorium.

“But it's never been like this before,” Garrett professed as he got down on one knee. I rushed to the front of Will's drum kit, and knelt behind them, getting Garrett's perspective of Lizzie's face.

I took snap after snap of Lizzie shaking, nearly in tears, and Garrett fumbling around in his pocket, probably wishing he'd worn looser jeans. I took a shot with the light focused on the crowd's thousand cell phone stars, and I captured the silhouettes of Garrett and Lizzie in the forefront. Half a second later, Garrett went for it.

“Elizabeth May Wallace, I’ve been wandering around the world missing a piece of my soul and I never even realized it until I found it in you. I fucking love you. Will you marry me?”

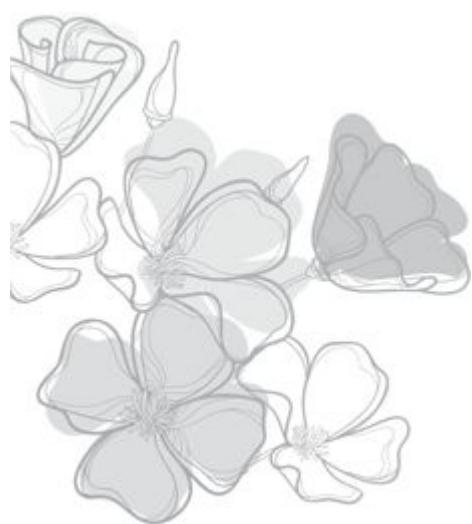
The crowd chanted “Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes!” in unison so loudly you could almost feel the sound waves. Garrett pulled the ring out of his jeans pocket and placed it on her shaking finger as she nodded her head in vigorous affirmation. She pulled him up from his knee and into her arms, kissing him sweetly and laughing through tears.

“That’s how it’s fucking done, mate!” Finn exclaimed from the piano, “and right on time!” He pointed at the large screen at the back of the stage used for the show’s video graphics. A countdown clock appeared. The crowd shouted louder and louder before they began counting down from 20. I shuffled toward the piano to take a shot of the band, Lizzie, and Garrett, in front of the countdown clock.

The stadium was dark except for the shimmering pulse of the clock counting down on screen. At “10,” Finn rushed to my side and reached for my hand in the darkness, interlocking his fingers with mine, rubbing his thumb gently on the back of my hand. I could feel him trembling.

“Why are you shaking?” I asked with a chuckle.

“You make me nervous,” he breathed, leaning in close and kissed me on the cheek before whispering “3, 2, 1. Happy New Year, Jaxon Samantha.”



# The Third Fucking Degree

**W**HEN THE fanfare fades, and the last of the confetti has been cleaned up, the boys of Black Heart Sunday are just a quartet of nerdy friends. They like to watch old movies and have sleep overs at Finn's house after a show. In honor of this tradition, he'd converted his basement into a theater, but instead of theater style recliners, he put a bunch of pillows, cushy couches, and throw blankets. It was the perfect location for post-show slumber parties.

At three in the morning on January 1<sup>st</sup>, we all sat together, sleepy in pajamas and smeared eyeliner, snuggled up with throw blankets and mugs of tea and hot chocolate. *Almost Famous*, a top ten favorite of Finn's, playing white noise in the background as we all came down from the high of an amazing night. Garrett and Lizzie cuddled together on one of the bigger couches, and I continued to take pictures of them – catching Lizzie frequently looking down at the stone on her finger.

“You were brilliant, mate. How'd you do with the nerves?” Will asked Garrett.

“I've never played in front of that many people. It was crazy. I swear I thought I was gonna throw up. How do you guys do it without feeling like awkward assholes?”

“Well, that's simple. We are awkward assholes, so we just lean into it,” Finn said.

“Yeah, Finn's definitely an asshole. For some reason, the awkward bit just comes off as charming,” Miles joked, throwing popcorn at him.

“Pro tip – if you’re as blind as I am, just leave your glasses at home. I guarantee you won’t be afraid of what you can’t see,” Finn continued.

“Yeah, and pro tip, if you’re the guy standing immediately to his right, he’s going to knock you over if you aren’t careful,” Jake added. “But, Lizzie, love – I’ve got to ask, were you just not going to come on stage? What did you think was going to happen?”

Lizzie laughed, “I had no idea. I thought you were gonna try to make me dance or something.”

“During a slow song?” Finn teased.

“I don’t know!” she laughed. “All I know is, I wasn’t expecting the most romantic proposal in the history of proposals.” She looked up at Garrett, stealing a kiss.

I instinctively looked over at Finn, who was already gazing at me. “I’m going upstairs. I need more hot choccy. Does anyone want anything?”

“More cookies,” Cindy commented through a mouthful of snacks.

“More tea,” Will requested.

“I also need more tea. I’ll join you,” Miles said, getting up from his seat.

I looked back to Finn and asked, “Do you need anything?” He smiled sleepily and shook his head no.

Up in the kitchen, I poured milk into a saucepan and set it to heat. Miles leaned against the kitchen island across from me and crossed his arms, giving me a knowing stare.

“What?” I asked.

“You know what.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Oh, I’m quite certain you do.” He narrowed his eyes, as if interrogating me. “When did that start again?”

“When did *what* start again?” I asked, feigning naivety.

“The Finn and Jax show. I saw you.”

“Saw me what?”

“Don’t play dumb, love. Were you or were you not entangling fingers with one Finnley Hendricks when the clock struck midnight, on stage, in front of thousands of people?”

My face flushed race car red.

“Yeah,” he laughed, “I noticed.” *Busted*. “I also noticed you falling into his arms as you climbed on stage.” *Busted again*. “How stupid do you lot think we are?”

“Miles, I—”

“‘Miles I won’t shatter his heart into a million bloody pieces like last time.’ Is that what you were going to say? Because that’s the only appropriate thing *to* say at the moment.”

“It felt like a pretty mutual shattering from my point of view,” I argued.

“Perhaps. But from my vantage point, whatever went on between the two of you royally fucked him up.”

“Well, from mine, everything that happened between us won him a Grammy and shot your band into the stratosphere. You’re welcome.” I turned around to take my milk off the stove, having moved past embarrassed straight into pissed off.

“Do you *really* reckon that’s what matters to us? He’s our best mate, Jax. And please, don’t flatter yourself. We were already on our way into the stratosphere. He’s brilliant. We’d have gotten there with or without the catastrophic heartbreak.”

*And here I was thinking these guys liked me.*



“You all flew to California to ask *me* for a favor. I didn’t go looking for you. What do you want me to say?”

“I’m not trying to be a dick, Jax. I love you; we all do. I just want to be sure you haven’t come here to escape your own life, at great personal expense to my mate. He’s doing really well, after years of being really unwell. We picked up the pieces and we glued him back together. But you’re not stupid. You must know it will always be you for him. No matter how cheeky or obnoxious he pretends to be. He is vulnerable and insecure.”

*No pressure, for fuck’s sake.*

“I’m not – you know – I’m not gonna go there with Finn. He knows that. Everything between us, is, you know, totally —”

“Platonic?”

“Yeah, exactly.”

“Right. Of course. It’s so peculiar. I’ve lived nearly three decades and never heard that word as often as I’ve heard it in the last three months.”

“Are you saying it’s all bullshit?”

“On some level, you know that it is. What did the two of you think was going to happen while you were sat around this big house on your own, talking about life and doing the same things you did together all those years ago? Or did you reckon your self-righteous anger would carry you safely past years of history, feelings, and his incessant fucking charm?”

“Alright. I hear you loud and clear. Don’t go there. Understood.”

“You’ve missed the point entirely. That’s not what I’m saying at all,” he reasoned. “I’m bloody rooting for you. We all are. We always have. I’m asking you to take a quick

peripheral peak out of your tunnel vision and recognize your impact on people. For him, it was immense and concentrated. There is no watered-down happy medium version of Finn. Every single thought and feeling he has is magnified. You know better than most how exhausting that is for the people around him, but imagine for a moment how exhausting it is for *him*. And ask yourself what happens to a person like that when they lose what they love most in the world.”

Before I could formulate a feasible defense, Will popped into the kitchen, looking for his tea.

“What’s taking so long? What are you lot gossiping about?” He noticed the look on my face. “Oh. Miles has given you ‘the talk’ hasn’t he? Miles, mate, I reckon it could have waited until everyone’s had a proper night’s sleep.”

It appeared this was a betrayal on all fronts. Disappointing, considering the conversation I’d had with Will the day prior.

“You knew I was getting the third fucking degree? Thanks for the warning.”

“Well, I didn’t realize you’d be getting it at this time of the morning, but yeah. Miles filled us in backstage after the show, and we all agreed you could do with a chat.”

“And, what? Miles drew the short straw?”

“Miles was the last one to clean the vomit off Finn in a bath before our little intervention, so yeah – it’s still a bit raw for him. The years they pass, but vomit memories are forever,” Will shrugged.

“Well, it sounds like all of you have already sorted this out in your heads. So why don’t you tell me, what exactly are you suggesting I do?”

“Hey,” Will said, “I’m team Fax.” he looked at Miles inquisitively. “Fax?” he asked, “Jinn? Which is better?”

“I think Jinn. It’s, you know, alcoholic. Not their particular brand, but it still works,” Miles shrugged.

“Are you two serious right now?”

“Listen – point being – we are team Jinn. Believe me, I’ve gotten an earful about your doctor boyfriend. He sounds like a self-righteous git. One of those blokes who thinks they are so superior just because he wears a tie to work, and you wear jeans. When in reality you probably make loads more money than he does, so if anyone should be giving up their career, it should be him. But that’s just my own totally unbiased opinion.”

“Oh yeah,” I smirked, “totally neutral.”

“Totally neutral,” Will said again, smiling.

“Alright – so while he was complaining about Carter, did he happen to mention,” I looked around to make sure no one else was in earshot, “that I tried to kiss him the other night and he turned me down?”

Miles’ eyes popped wide open. “Wow. The plot thickens.”

“He did mention that, yes. While we were in the studio yesterday during your midday nap.”

“And? What did he say?”

“He’s worried you’ll leave him again. Or worse – you won’t leave, but you’ll wish you’d married Doctor Blonde Hair. Who, again, totally unbiased opinion, isn’t even on your level, darling. What are you going to do in California? Take pictures of plants?”

“They have music in California, Will,” I argued.

“Well, that’s totally beside the point. Are you prepared to be sat at home for the rest of your life with a country boy, driving around in a truck, trying to pretend you aren’t dying to be on an airplane? At a festival? In another bloody country?”

Will looked around behind him, also making sure no one was eavesdropping. “Do you reckon Finn would *ever* try to tame you? Or hold you back by trying to convince you that your entire career has been a coping mechanism? Do you think he’d do anything but support your every single endeavor?”

“Just your totally unbiased opinion, right?” I rolled my eyes.

“Take it or leave it. But if you take it, take *care* of it. We’re a bit too old for another crisis. If the two of you are going to do it, do it properly. That’s all we’re asking.”

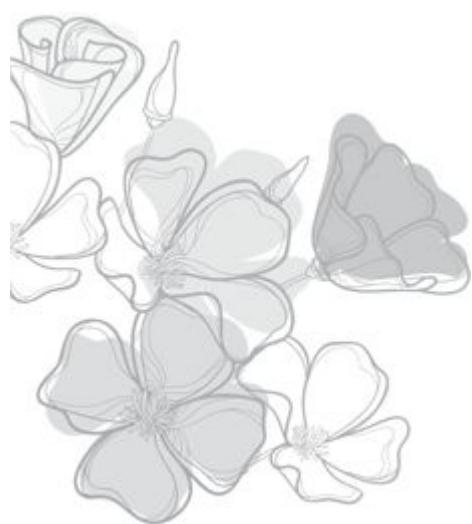
Miles yawned, and for the first time all night, I realized how exhausted I was.

“On that note, if the lectures have concluded, I should probably go to sleep. Are we the last ones standing?” I asked.

“Yes,” Will responded, moving closer to me to give me an apologetic hug. Miles joined in as well. “Are we having a dysfunctional family hug right now?”

“Yes,” Miles responded.

“I hate you guys.”



## Quintessentially and Definitively Mine

**I** DON'T know how long I'd been asleep, but the sound of the rain awoke me from a dream I'd been having about having my shit together. The first thing I saw was Finn, still in last night's clothes, laying across from me. He was above the blankets, making it infinitely difficult for me to shift, or cover myself any more than I already was.

People are never more beautiful than when they're asleep, but Finn was the exception. I'd forgotten over the years how much I loved his whiskey brown eyes, which are difficult to admire when closed. Nonetheless, he is a gorgeous sleeper. A thing few people notice is how long his eyelashes are, which is strange because looking down at his feet is sort of a typical Finn thing. He has light freckles, which are hard to discern unless you're within intimate proximity. His lips aren't particularly full, but they are in perfect ratio to the rest of his facial features. He'd begun to maintain a short length of facial hair. It looked unintentional but was fully purposeful and complimented his chiseled jawline better than a cleanly shaven face ever could. The curly mop atop his head, disheveled from the ever-present nervous tick of playing with it, lay flat against the pillow where his head rested.

I wanted to touch him. I wanted to wrap my fingers around his or move the stray curl from his forehead. I wanted to tinker with his belt – the long end still tucked into his hip pocket, or gently scratch the back of his neck in the way I know he loves. I didn't. I couldn't wake him up, afraid of whatever conversation was coming. What was I going to do about the

distinctly familiar feeling of my heart exploding at the sight of him? And the electric shock sensation of his skin against mine. What was I supposed to do about the breathlessness of a five-second kiss that felt just as universe altering as the first one, the last, and the thousand in between?

The longer I looked at him, I felt the anxiety of him reach every inch of me, down to my feet, into my fingertips, and my heart began to race. There was no universe that exists where this man is not in my stratosphere. None in which I was not either feverishly angry with him, or irrevocably in love with him. We also, it seemed, had no happy medium.

*So much for platonic soul mates.*

I let out a heavy sigh and saw his eyelashes flutter. I'd disrupted his peaceful sleep with all my fucking drama. When he opened them, he looked to be in pain. He rubbed his eyelids blearily.

"Good morning, handsome." I smiled sweetly.

He pulled a pillow against himself, hugging it and resting his chin on its edge. "I wanted to be here when you woke up," he explained, voice graveled from sleep.

"And so you are," I put my hand out to push his hair away from his forehead, but then thought better of it, apprehensive about what he might be thinking. "What's wrong?" I asked.

He swallowed a lump in his throat. "Have I – I fear I may have," he stumbled over his words in a way not typical of a poet. "Have I fucked this up?"

He started to shiver.

"Why are you shaking?" I asked, reaching for a blanket sitting at the foot of the bed.

He reached out for my wrist, keeping me from moving any further away.

“No, please don’t get up. I’m not – I’m not cold. I’m,” his voice started to shake, “fuck. I’m nervous. I’m just nervous. Please stay.” His choice of words struck me, remembering how Will said he was afraid I might leave him. “I need to say,” he continued, running his long fingers through his tangled hair, “I need to tell you—” his breath hitched, and he swallowed another lump.

“Tell me what?”

“I just needed to apologize, I—”

“Apologize? Why?” I asked, fearing he regretted the kiss, that he’d acted impulsively and thought better of it in the light of day.

“Jax,” he said impatiently. I wasn’t letting him get a word in edge wise. “I need to say this before I lose my nerve.” He took a pause and a deep breath. “I need to tell you that I’m sorry – if I’ve crossed a line you were resolved to stay behind. If I’ve misread and taken advantage of your friendship. I thought I needed – no, never mind, I won’t give excuses. I’m sorry. Full stop. And I hope you stay, with me, or with the band – or with me with the band.” He shook his head trying to pull himself together. “What the fuck am I saying? I’m so stupid,” he whispered to himself. “I guess what I’m asking is – please don’t go.”

“You thought you needed – what?” I asked.

“What?”

“You said you weren’t going to give excuses, but I’d like to hear them.”

“What difference does it make?” he asked.

“Everything you say makes a difference to me.”

“Oh,” he whispered, “well then. I was just going to say, I thought I needed to show you – you know, how I’ve been



feeling. I just thought if you knew, then you'd know the extent of your choices." He looked for a reaction on my face, but I couldn't look him in the eye. He'd see me too clearly. "If I've been presumptuous, I apologize."

"Is this the first time in your life you've ever been sorry for being presumptuous?" I asked, biting back a smile.

"I dunno," he responded, still shivering. "You make me feel sorry about a lot of things."

"Yeah?" I asked cautiously. "Are you sorry you kissed me?"

"Uh," he chuckled nervously, "no, not particularly."

"Then why are you apologizing?"

"Just in case I've been a bad friend, I suppose."

I looked down at his waist – fixated on his belt and the bottom seam of his shirt, not quite covering the skin of his stomach, and I also felt inclined to be a bad friend.

I boldly (and maybe stupidly, who knows) reached my hand out to touch the skin of his stomach and slid my fingers to the side, just under the seam of his boxer briefs, holding on to his waist for leverage. I pulled myself toward him, resting my forehead on his chest. His heart beat rapidly and he gasped as his body trembled.

"Is this ok?" I asked in a whisper.

"Yes," he whispered back.

He touched his lips to the top of my head, and I pushed my hand flat against the small of his back, pressing him against me.

"I think I love you. Again. And not platonically," I said into his shirt. "Is that ok?"

“Oh, babe,” he sighed in relief, “when has that ever not been ok? Of course that’s ok.” He shifted, trying to meet his eyes with mine.

“No,” I said, keeping my face firmly buried in his chest, “I have to tell you this, and I will lose my nerve if you’re looking at me with your – you know – with your magical fucking brown eyes.”

He chuckled, the tension in his body melting away. “I’m sorry. They’re the only pair I’ve got.”

“They’re perfect.”

“Thanks, I quite like yours as well.”

“Ok, stop being charming. I need to say this before I lose my nerve,” I held on tightly to him, “so just – just listen, ok?”

“Hanging on your every word.”

“I didn’t know how much I hurt you back then. After the mis – the, uh. The mis—” I couldn’t get the word out. I wasn’t certain I’d ever said it out loud, even to myself. “After our, um. Our—”

“You don’t have to say it, my love. I know,” he reassured, rubbing his thumb gently back and forth on the back of my arm.

“No, I do. I do need to say it, and I need to start to let it go.” I took a deep breath, steadying myself. “After the miscarriage, I didn’t realize how it must have felt for you. I wasn’t trying to hurt you, but I was shattered. I didn’t know what to do, or how to communicate it to you. I didn’t want to hold you back or pull you down with me, so I just pulled myself away. And I know that even when we were in the same room, I made you feel alone. I was trying to protect you from it, but eventually I couldn’t even look at you. It physically hurt because I just kept thinking about the miniature carbon copy of you – those eyes, your smirk, your smart-ass disposition

and I wanted to die. Not metaphorically. I wanted to go to sleep and stay asleep because that's the only time I wasn't completely consumed by grief."

I'd never said any of these things out loud. Not to him. Not to a therapist. Not even to myself in a mirror. He held on to me tightly.

"I wasn't trying to break your heart. I was trying to keep my own intact. But no one taught me how to do that, and I still can't be sure I won't fuck this up. I can't promise I won't break your heart again just trying to save myself."

"Oh, my darling," he responded empathetically, "don't you know? Isn't it obvious? I would happily have my heartbroken by you. Over and over. In any universe. For the rest of our lives. And I will always come back to you. I will always come back *for* you. There is nothing you could do, no heartbreak, no mistake, no amount of time or distance that could ever stop me loving you with everything I am and everything I have." He pulled my face up. "Grant me this, please. I need you to look at me when I say it." I shook my head in the affirmative, and he wiped a tear away from my cheek. "I am so deeply in love with you. It is unwavering, and it's so fucking urgent, I feel it, like fire, in every cell of my body. I would have had you live your life with the pet vet if that's truly what you wanted. And still – every word I put on paper for the rest of my life, would have belonged to you."

There was no response sufficient for what he said, so I just went with the first thing on my mind. "I wish you were under this blanket right now."

"Jaxon, are you trying to shag me? I'm trying to convince you to give us another chance, and you're trying to get into my trousers?"

"No!" I let out a giggle louder than intended. "I just want a snuggle. Oh my god!"

He shushed me. “Quiet, or you’ll wake up this entire house of opinionated and judgmental fucks.” He sat up, unlacing his shoes and kicking them off onto the floor. He crawled under the blanket, shimmying himself back into position, offering his arm as a pillow. He flicked the messy bun atop my head. “I like your messy bun.” He bit his lip and smiled shyly.

“I like your too large belt,” I countered, casually pulling the long end out of his hip pocket and wrapping it around my finger.

“Well, I like your favorite t-shirt that you stole from me,” he said, tugging at a stray string at the seam, fingers grazing my stomach.

“I like how you always coordinate your boxers to your shoes,” I teased.

“I do not do that.”

“Yes, you do,” I said confidently. “You like to show them off while you’re jumping around on stage.”

“Alright,” he said, his face flushing red, “busted.” He traced his fingers along the newly formed scar on my skin. “I like your surgical scar.”

“Ugh,” I rolled my eyes, “I hate it. It’s like a flashing neon sign reminding me I’m a fucking disaster.”

“It’s the parting gift from the surgery that brought you back around to me.”

A heavy reminder flooded my mind, and I felt compelled to speak it into an otherwise perfect moment.

“Finn. If you choose me, you know we can’t – I mean, you know I can’t have kids. You understand that, right?”

He looked at me confused, and for a moment I was mortified, wondering if I’d dreamt the conversation where I’d told him all of this.

“Let me ask you something,” he said, propping himself up on to his elbow, resolved to make a point. “Do you even want to have children?”

“I mean, it’s irrelevant. I physically cannot have them, so it doesn’t matter. I just need to make sure you understand, truly, what being with me means for you.”

“I’m not a scientist, Jax, but I have to ask, have they totally removed your ovaries? Apologies. I know that’s quite personal, but to be fair, you did call me out on matching my underwear with my shoes.”

“Well, no. But I have a—”

“You have a big scar,” he said definitively. “That’s all, babe. And I don’t mean to minimize it. I know it’s been traumatizing and completely turned your world inside out. But it doesn’t define you, and it certainly isn’t an indication of your worth as a partner or a woman. Personally, I think it makes you look like a super spy or something. But it doesn’t matter what I think, does it? This comes down to you being comfortable with yourself, because there’s nothing wrong with you. From where I’m standing, you’re absolutely fucking perfect.”

“I mean, I think that’s an oversimplification, but thank you.”

“It’s not darling. It’s simple. I know you feel as if a choice has been taken from you, but it hasn’t. There’s a world full of choices out there. Maybe not the ones you thought you’d have, but there’s nothing you can do about that now. All you can do is put the choices you *do* have in your pocket and examine them once you’re ready. Here’s a choice – you’ve still got ovaries and I’ve got more sperm than I know what to do with. We’ll take the ingredients, we’ll mix them together, and we’ll borrow an oven for the baking part. If you want children, we’ll have them. You can’t bake them on your own, but what does

that matter? The choice hasn't been taken from you, love. It just looks a bit different now."

"It's not that simple, Finn. A surrogate doesn't change the fact that I, myself, cannot have children. From the outside you see these solutions and you think – why wouldn't we use them? But it's bigger than that. There's a full mental load that goes along with this, and it's not reasonable or logical. But it's there – stewing in the back of my mind, reminding me I'm lesser than. I never even got the chance to grow into these decisions for myself. All of this happened *to* me, and I'm just trying to cope without being confused and angry all the time. I've never had a mom. I don't know what being a mom looks like. What if not being able to bond with a child during pregnancy means I won't bond with the child at all? What if I'm resentful of the woman who carries the child for me? What if the emotional and financial toll is too big for us to handle and it suffocates our relationship?"

"Jax – Jax – stop babe," he interrupted my downward spiral. "Listen, we'll cross all those bridges when we get to them. We're luckier than most. We've got loads of time and money. You don't need to have it all figured out now. You just need to come to terms with the cards you've been dealt, love. If you want a surrogate, then we'll figure it out. And if you don't, then we won't do it. If you want to adopt, we'll adopt. And if you want to parent fish, then we'll buy a massive aquarium, and if you want a dog, then we'll get a dog. When you're ready to make these decisions, we'll put on a pot of tea, or we'll polish off a bottle of whiskey, and we'll figure it out together. Whatever you want, that's what you'll have."

"Whatever I want?" I asked, feeling relieved.

"Well – with some limitations."

"Such as?"

"Cats. I'm allergic to cats. So we can't be parents to cats."

I searched his eyes for some sign he meant what he was saying. Some indication that when he looked at me – he didn't see this broken disaster I saw when I looked at myself.

“You're serious?”

“What in the world would make you think I wasn't?”

“And you don't think I'm broken?”

He smiled. “Babe, of course you're broken. We're all broken. How dull would we be if we weren't? But I love all million pieces of you, with all million pieces of me.”

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We laid there together, staring at one another for several comfortably silent minutes. Will had been right. The simple act of starting to let go of what I'd been carrying around for so long, made me feel better.

How many people in the world could I be comfortable with in a moment like this? Vulnerable, sitting in complete silence, and not looking away. I couldn't think of anyone else. Finn was it. He was the person I trusted most in the world with the darkest and most frightening parts of myself. He knew everything about me. He could see me completely, and beyond that, he could see twenty moves ahead, to the solutions that lie just beyond the fog. He didn't want to change me. He wanted to love me – just as I was.

“What are you thinking about now? Has the mental spiral concluded?”

“I was actually just thinking about something I read recently.”

“Well, don't keep it to yourself. What was it?”

“It was something the lead singer of my favorite band said. Something like ‘you're a home my soul can always return to,’ or some bullshit.” I smiled slyly.

“Oh, it’s bullshit, is it?” he asked, squinty eyed. I nodded my head in agreement. “You’ve got jokes,” he looked around the empty room and spoke to an invisible crowd, “she thinks she’s clever, she’s got jokes.”

“Mm hmm,” I hummed as he pulled me closer to him, poking me in the fucking surgical scar. “Ouch! Finn – fuck, that’s still healing.”

He stiffened up. “Oh god, babe, I’m so sorry, I didn’t—”

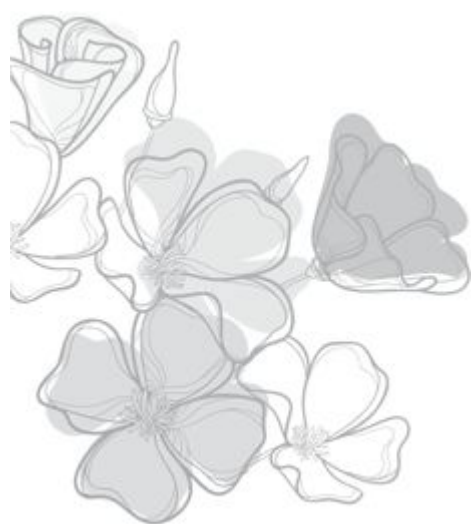
I shut him up the only way I’d ever known how – by kissing him. Thoroughly and deliberately.

“I’m just fucking with you,” I said when we came up for air.

“I always forget what an asshole you are because you’re so bloody adorable.” He tucked a stray hair behind my ear. “Not to kill the mood, but you know we’re going to have to tell our friends we’ve decided to fall in love again. And it’s got to be today before your mates fly back to California. And,” he poked me in the shoulder and then unceremoniously jumped out of bed. “You’re it! You’re doing it. I’m terrified of the whole bloody lot of them.”

*Fuck.*





# *You'll Never Have to Carry it Alone*

**WE DECIDED** we were stronger together. We were going to sit our friends down, provide breakfast, and confess what the fuck was going on. But when we walked into the kitchen, not only had our friends already eaten breakfast, but they'd also been treated to an earful from Miles about what he'd seen on stage the night before.

We were the last ones to the party – and in a completely anti climatic twist, our news was met with a combination of feigned sarcastic shock and knowing scoffs. To quote the newly engaged Lizzie – it was all completely predictable.

We planned to have a long conversation and answer a swarm of questions, but they gave far less fucks than we had expected. They were also less judgmental than we'd counted on. I probably bore the brunt of the lectures in the twenty-four hours leading up to our big reveal. The boys in the band said they were too exhausted to try and guess what was next in the Saga of Jinn. They'd rather just go home and sleep in their own beds.

When the breakfast food ran out and the mimosas ran dry, Miles, Will, and Jake handed out hugs and handshakes and wished everyone well. Finn and Garrett graciously offered to tag team the breakfast mess so that Cindy, Lizzie, and I could spend a few hours to together before they had to pack up and leave for the airport.

---

In the dim light of a rainy midday, Cindy, Lizzie, and I lounged around in the guest room where Lizzie and Garrett

had stayed. It felt like high school. Like the sleepover we had back in May after I'd come home from the hospital. Like one we'd had after Finn and I split all those years ago when I pretended the only thing wrong with me was a run-of-the-mill heartbreak.

This time would be different. No more pretending. Emboldened by the levity of love and acceptance from Finn, or the wisdom of Will, I decided to tell them about that thing at the hospital that one time. I couldn't keep carrying my heaviest burdens alone. There would never be a better moment, and truthfully, this was the missing piece they were looking for. The reason they couldn't reconcile the villain I'd made Finn out to be with the prince he was when they finally met him.

"What's up, Jax? You look like you're about to confess to a crime." Cindy interrupted my internal pep talk.

"I want to tell you guys something. I've been withholding information, and it feels," I sighed, this was harder than I thought it would be, "it feels fucking corrosive and I don't want to keep it a secret anymore."

Cindy reached out to hold my hand, and Lizzie extended hers as well. We formed a friendship triangle, like we'd always done when we sensed one of us needed a safe space.

"You guys were right," I started, "when you said you felt like you missed something. I made Finn the bad guy in my story, and he's not. He never was – I just could never bring myself to talk about what actually happened. Oversimplifying it to Finn's stupidity gave me a really convenient wall to hide behind. But, you know, you fake it until you make it, and when you repeat the same bullshit enough times, it becomes your truth. Then suddenly here I am feeling all this shit I wasn't supposed to be feeling about this asshole I thought I remembered hating, and I couldn't tell you guys. Because if I

told you, I'd also have to tell you how full of shit I've been. I'd have to tell you the truth – which – believe it or not, is so much harder than admitting I'm full of shit.”

They didn't know. How could they? I was still talking in circles; in a code they didn't understand. I continued to muster the nerve to tell them about the worst moment of my life.

“Honey, you don't owe us any explanations. You don't owe anyone an explanation about who you love and what makes you happy,” Cindy said.

“Yeah,” Lizzie continued, almost as if they'd practiced this speech. “We've been kinda hard on you – about the Carter stuff. But like – he landed on the silent treatment for his chosen response? Are you an asshole? Maybe. But honestly, so is he.”

She was right. He *was* being an asshole. An anxious pit sat squarely at the bottom of my stomach. Confronting Carter was a problem I couldn't avoid forever. The more time passed, the more I understood I'd likely have to deal with it in person. But that was a problem for another day.

“No, this isn't about Carter. I mean – it's not, *not* about Carter. I guess it's all connected, really. In the end, I think it's about me. I don't know. I feel like I keep giving you guys cryptic clues and I need to just spit it out.”

They looked back and forth at each other, worried and confused. I took in a deep breath, and I let it go.

“I guess I should start with the ending. The accident fucked me up. Literally, of course, but also mentally. It would have fucked anyone up – I know that. But for me, it drugged up some old shit I'd been carrying around. Stuff I haven't told anyone. And here it is.” I swallowed a lump in my throat. I knew running around repeating the word ‘miscarriage’ more than a few times in twenty-four hours was too much. I needed different words. “I was – um – I'd been pregnant, back when

Finn and I were together. Right before we broke up. And one snowy night in New York, we got drunk to celebrate the band being signed, and I was so drunk, I fell on the street in the snow. Later that night, I woke up, and I was covered in blood, and I didn't know what was happening. I hadn't known I was – you know – so we went to the hospital, and they told me I was having a miscarriage.”

I paused and looked between them, searching for silent permission to proceed, or some sign that I wasn't traumatizing them. They'd lost all color in their faces, and they each began to squeeze my hand a little tighter.

“It was pretty bad. By the time I got there I'd already lost a lot of blood, so they took me back right away. At first, they said they wanted to monitor me to see if the bleeding would slow down on its own. I wasn't under observation for long before I had to have surgery. I'll never forget the pain. It was so awful, like something being physically pulled out of me. And then it got worse. I had this sharp excruciating cramp, and I could feel myself bleeding, so I got up to use the restroom. When I sat down on the toilet, I felt another strong pull in my stomach, and then I heard this like, distinctly terrible splash. I screamed out loud. Not from the pain, just from – I don't know – the loss, I guess. I knew it was whatever version of a baby had grown in ten weeks, that's what they told me, it had been ten weeks. It wasn't a whole baby, I knew it was still a fetus, but still. It had been ours. Finn got scared, and he called a nurse. The nurse rushed into the bathroom, and I stood up. She looked in the toilet, then up at me and said ‘Honey, don't look in there. Just hold on to me. Let's walk out. I'll take care of it.’

“They thought the bleeding would stop on its own after that, but it didn't. When they realized it wasn't stopping, they said they had to do a vaginal ultrasound. I was in the worst pain of my life, but they still took me back and shoved a wand

where the sun doesn't shine and poked around in there like fucking archeologists. They told me there was still fetal tissue inside my uterus and that's why the bleeding hadn't stopped. They said I needed surgery right away to get the rest of it out. I'd already lost so much blood, and if they didn't get it out and stop the bleeding, I might bleed out. The anesthesia they gave me worked quickly. I just fell asleep and when I woke up, it was over. They told me everything was progressing as it should, and the bleeding had stopped. I remember thinking it was such a weird way to describe it. Progression is a word you use for moving forward. This was supposed to move forward, but instead just suddenly ended.

“And then it was just Finn and me, alone and completely dumbfounded. Another nurse came in and brought me a packet with resources – like for grief and loss and stuff. It didn't feel like I deserved that. Like that stuff was for moms who planned to have kids and lost them. It wasn't for me. I was just a dumb fucking kid, who hours before had no idea I was pregnant. I'd been out getting wasted and falling in the snow, then all of a sudden, we were just there like ‘what the fuck do we do now?’ Finn didn't know what to say or do, and when he finally spoke, he said the absolute wrong thing. He made this stupid comment. I think he meant to make himself feel better, or maybe both of us – but it sorta broke the last remaining string of my sanity. He said, ‘well we've dodged a bit of a bullet, haven't we?’”

I laughed, though it wasn't funny. It just felt better to let it out. I looked at Lizzie. She had tears streaming down her face. I hadn't heard her start to cry, but I'd been lost in the moment. Almost like being back in the room with my younger self, watching it happen like an episode of television.

“I'm ok,” I reassured them and squeezed their hands. “I mean, I'm not ok – I think we can all see that, but I think I will be.”

I took a breath of fresh air. I felt lighter than I had in years, so I kept going.

“I shut down. I didn’t shower, and I didn’t cry. I didn’t take pictures or talk to Finn about it – I just tried to pretend it was a bad dream. But inside my head, it felt like I was dying. Like all the best parts of me were slowly fading away and I couldn’t tell anyone because then I’d have to tell them why. I was mean. I was so mean to Finn all the time. I couldn’t look at him without thinking about what might have been. When he started to travel for the tour, I told him I didn’t want to go. I didn’t have a reason – I just didn’t want to. I stayed in bed and ignored his calls and texts. I couldn’t do anything.

“Months passed, and I just watched the seasons through the windows, and one day – I got a call from Phil Hammersmith asking me to get on a plane and photograph a band touring in the Midwest, so I went. When I got on the plane I felt better, or some version of it. Finn would be coming home soon, and I knew I couldn’t go back. When I caught him over video chat with that groupie, it was the perfect reason to leave him behind. I had a pile of money in a savings account, and I bought the bungalow, and I sent him an address where he could send my stuff. I made him a villain.

“Years went by, and I put it in a box in the back of my mind and I only think about it on the anniversary of it happening. I decided somewhere along the way that the breakup had been Finn’s fault. If he hadn’t handled the long distance with booze and groupies, we’d still be together, but that’s bullshit. *I* decided not to go with him, and *I* decided not to be there when he came home. I figured I was better off on my own because being with Finn – being around him – was too much.

“Time passed, and eventually everyone just stopped asking questions. Everyone stopped expecting me to show up and be a person. Fast forward to my twenty-seventh birthday. It

fucked me up all over again because I'd been fucked up all along without realizing. I couldn't tell Carter. What would I tell him? It wasn't supposed to get serious – I was supposed to be gone in a few months. Eventually it became a lie of omission until I word vomited everything to him at his cousin's wedding like the absolute disaster that I am. And you know the rest.”

“And then Finn showed up on your doorstep?” Cindy asked rhetorically.

“And then Finn showed up on my doorstep. Sober. Insightful. Apologetic. With an offer I couldn't refuse.”

“I don't know what to say,” Lizzie whispered through her tears. “I'm so sorry.”

“I don't think there's anything you can say. It sucks. It's a bad hand. I've been carrying it around and I never wanted to talk about it. I thought that would make it worse, but I feel better. Sorry to traumatize you guys.”

“You haven't traumatized us,” Cindy reassured.

“Yeah,” Lizzie continued. “What could possibly be more traumatizing than finding out Cindy had sex with your brother, right?”

“Oh god, I forgot about that! That information will be with me for the rest of my life.” I faked vomiting on Cindy, and she pulled me in to a very serious embrace.

“Fucking Jax,” she whispered into my hair. “We love you; you know that?” I shook my head in acknowledgement. “We can't carry this for you – but fuck, please hear me when I say you'll never have to carry it alone. You can talk about it. On the anniversary. When a memory strikes you in the middle of the night. When you wish your life had turned out different. Give it to us. Let us help you with the weight of it.”

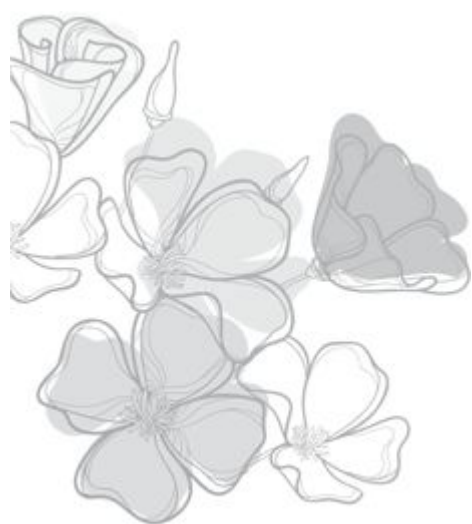


“I’m not ready to go home,” Lizzie confessed, inviting herself into mine and Cindy’s hug.

“You have to. You have a wedding to plan,” I reminded her.

“When are *you* coming home?” Cindy asked me.

“I don’t know,” I shrugged, “maybe I am home.”



# Home Might Be A Philosophical Concept, But Adulthood is Not

**J**ANUARY WAS peaceful. Just Finn and me, lying around his house while I took photographs of him, and the rain outside the windows. It felt like home, and home was so spectacularly comfortable. Cushy socks, Finn's thick glasses, and ink stains on his fingers. Late mornings and even later nights, tea and whiskey and pajamas all day.

But nothing lasts forever, and with every fleeting moment I was hyper-aware that at a point quickly approaching, Finn would be going on tour. I'd be going with him for the first part of it, but eventually I'd have to go back to California for my own North American Apologies Tour.

I was still working out the details in my head. I knew the anxiety I felt in the too quiet moments would not subside without some semblance of reconciliation. I was the asshole. I'm the hero of my own story, but I'm also self-aware enough to understand I'm also the asshole a lot of the time.

The tapping of a spoon against a teacup pulled me back down to reality. "Jax, love," Finn gestured toward me with the cup, "for you." I'd been laying on my favorite couch in the house staring up at the ceiling. I hadn't even heard him tinkering around in the kitchen.

I sat up and crossed my legs, adjusting my oversized socks, and took the cup from him. He pulled a spoon out of his pajama pants pocket and handed it to me.

I took the spoon and stirred the liquid in the cup, grimacing at something feeling off before realizing what it was.

“What’s the matter?” Finn asked as he sat down at the opposite end, extending his legs to rest on mine.

“My spoon’s too big.”

“What?” He asked, trying to decide if I was being serious.

“My spoon. It’s too big. I like the little spoons because I can stir the liquid easier. It’s an issue of spoon to cup ratio.”

He bit back a smile. “You’re serious.”

“It’s not funny, Finn. If the spoon is too big, I’ll spill tea all over myself.” I motioned forward to set my cup down on the coffee table. “I’ll be right back. I’m gonna go get a small spoon.”

“It *is* funny, Jax,” he said, as he leaned forward to grab my wrist and pull me back down to the couch. “It’s a spoon, babe. It’s just a spoon. Here,” he took the smaller spoon from his cup and handed it to me, “take mine, give me yours, easily resolved.” He examined my face before speaking again. “All sorted?”

“Yes,” I mumbled.

“Come again?”

“Yes, thank you,” I mumbled again.

“Apologies, I can’t—” he leaned in closer, “I can’t quite hear you; you’ll need to speak up. I’m in a band – loads of loud noise, not as young as I used to be.” He pointed at his ear.

“Yes,” I said louder, “it’s all sorted. Thank you. I just like the little spoon. It’s easier to use, that’s all.”

“You like the little spoon,” he repeated, “easier to use because of your abnormally small hands, is that it?”

“It’s not funny,” I insisted as I began to smile.

“You know what I think?” he asked as he took the teacup out of my hand, pulling me down on top of him. “I think you’re anxious about having to leave this house and returning to the world of pants and questions.” He kissed the top of my head, and I understood the sentiment as comradeship more than teasing. “It’s ok, darling. I know. And though my hands are normal sized, I fucking hate big spoons as well.”

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The logistics of returning to the world of pants and questions had become complicated by mine and Finn’s rekindling. We couldn’t forget the whole “there would definitely be more love songs” press tour. We had to ask ourselves the inevitable question of whether we were better off keeping our relationship a secret. To reveal, or not to reveal. If we came out with it, everyone would assume we’d been together the entire time, and just lying about it. If we kept it to ourselves, we’d be protecting our privacy, but we’d always be living in secret.

We talked it round and around for a solid week as the date of the first show quickly approached. When I agreed to join him in the U.K., I also agreed to stay with the band, at least for the first few weeks of shows, so we needed to decide. It would have been infinitely easier if I went back to California right away, but my instincts told me a second chance at a good relationship starts with joining him on tour this time around.

“I’ve got it,” Finn announced one stormy Thursday morning, “let’s keep it to ourselves for now, until you’ve had the chance to speak with your dad and your brother and,” long pause, “whomever else you feel like you need to inform.” He meant Carter. “When we get out to the West Coast for the American leg of the tour, I’ll meet your family – properly meet them – and we’ll just sort of come out with it after that.”

I sat up, untangling my legs from his and thought about it for a moment, still hesitant about “coming out with it.”

“I don’t want to keep it a secret, darling,” he continued, sensing my hesitation. “We never did that before. Why on earth would we do it now?”

“You’re a smidge more famous now than you were before. And, thanks to, no offense, because it’s spectacular, one particular breakup album, so is our whole relationship. I just don’t want the invasive questions.” I curled my fingers around his. “This is ours, you know? It’s just ours. But if we put it out there, if we let everyone in, then to some degree we’re making it theirs too. People love you, Finn. They’re invested in you – in your heart and in your heartbreak, and that’s a lot of pressure for a relationship.”

“I’m not concerned about what other people think.” He scooted away from me and grabbed his notebook. “Plus, I’ve already begun to write the love songs. You either make an honest man of me, or I’ll have to come out of the closet and profess my love for Will, because who bloody else would these songs be about?”

“You’re not going to budge on this, are you?” I asked.

“No, I will not be budging on this. I’ll negotiate timelines. I’m not going to negotiate keeping the most important part of my life a secret. This is my life, Jax. It’s always going to be this way. It doesn’t mean everyone’s entitled to our relationship. It will still be ours and ours alone. It just means that whether we share it or not, the suspicions will always be there. At least this way, we decide when, where, and how much we share. Plus, who would you rather have taking our photos? You – a professional who will make us look like the royalty we are? Or some random paparazzi who’s going to get us when we’re hung over?”

“Obviously me,” I conceded.

“Yeah, obviously you,” he nudged me playfully with his elbow. “Hold on – have we just made a well deliberated and very adult decision? I’m so proud of us. We’re doing marvelously.” He wiggled his eyebrows up and down and hoisted himself up off the couch. “Would you like a hot chocolate? I’ve only got enormously large spoons, but I can wash a small one for you if you’d like.”

I wanted to stay there with him for the rest of my life, drinking hot chocolate with small spoons and falling in love with the way little endearments fell from his tongue. But alas, months’ worth of consequences I’d been avoiding were waiting for me just past the gate of his long front driveway.

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It’s worth noting that while I was in therapy, Dr. Nancy told me I may have struggled with anxiety most of my life. Everything she said about it made complete sense. She asked me a list of semi diagnostic questions so relatable I worried she’d found an old diary. I took it with a grain of salt – but I took it, nonetheless.

One of the things she told me was that sometimes when you have anxiety, you may find yourself making best efforts to completely avoid dealing with things that are stressful, cause apprehension, or otherwise bring you worry. She thought this might be at the root of me traveling one flight at a time away from my problems.

Avoidance takes many forms, and sometimes that means being holed up in a British manor for a full season. These were the final moments – the last time this “us” would ever be ours again. We could wait as long as we wanted to tell the world, but Finn was right – the speculation always had, and always would, be there. As soon as we left this space, we’d be fair game.

I didn’t owe anyone an explanation, but there were a few apologies I needed to make. I remembered that summer day

Carter took me to meet his mom. She was hospitable, but her too quick familiarity had an invasive quality to it. She was crystal clear about the kind of life she wanted for her son. As she described it, I watched him, leaned back in an old wooden chair, basking in his inevitably perfect future.

He would move back to Green Valley eventually, when the town vet was ready to retire. He'd have a nice farm style house on a small plot of land, and he'd teach his kids how to take care of the animals that lived there. He'd have an amazing wife who bakes pies, sews patches over the holes of his jeans, and made all the baby food from scratch. When those kids got older, she did PTA and hung out with Cherrie McSherrie on the weekends, and, of course, all their kids played sports together.

That would never have been me. Functioning reproductive system or not, I couldn't even bake those sugar cookies that come pre-made and pre-cut at the grocery store. Nothing about the life Carter had in his mind, fit with the one I had in mine.

For one perfect summer, I got to live my teenage dream, but I was always going to wake up from it. Deep down, I always knew it had an expiration date.

I should have told him then and there. I should have been honest about who I was. I should have told him that every night of my childhood, when I went to sleep in my quaint little bed, I counted down the days until I could leave, and travel, and see the world. I should have said how much I loved being gone, and how aside from the people I loved, nothing about Green Valley ever felt like home.

If I'm being honest, I should have kept going to therapy. Instead, I lost myself in old country songs and charming dogs and plaid shirts. I made it about one singular thing. One bad experience. I took one bad hand and decided it was the entirety of the problem. I hyper-focused on choices I couldn't give him

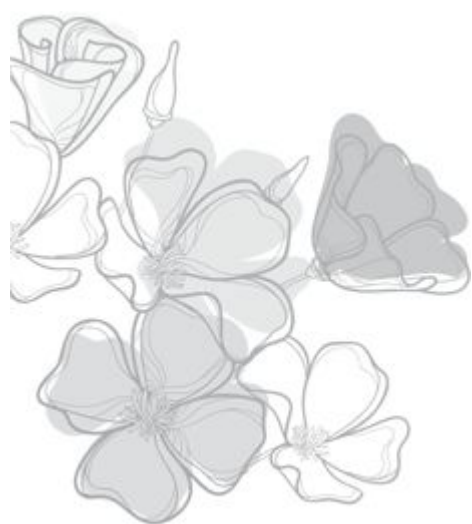


rather than taking a long hard look at the choices I never intended to.

You can't compare Carter and Finn. If they both live a hundred years, the only thing they'd ever have in common would be the misfortune of loving me. But here's what I know – two nights ago Finn sat across from me, watching me tinker with my camera, and he told me he would follow me anywhere in the world, for as long as I'd have him.

All Carter ever did was ask me not to leave.

You can't compare Carter and Finn – but there will always be people who are perfect, and there will always be people that are perfect for you.



## *This is Ours*

**S**OMETIMES FINN wakes up with blue ink on his cheekbone. He likes to write in blue. I don't know why, but I imagine it's because it looks less like print that's been copied to a page with a machine. He presses hard on the page. He writes with the urgency of someone who doesn't have enough space in his mind for all the words floating around in there. There's a textile serenity in running your fingers across the page and feeling the indent of the letters. I do it all the time, when I take pictures of his messy all capitalized letter penmanship.

There is magic in the art. An enchantment to memorializing a thought that became a poem, a poem that became a song, and a song that became a moment frozen in time.

I don't focus on the words themselves; I focus on the image. I don't know what the words will sound like until I hear them come out of his mouth. I just know I like the look of them. The way his S's and R's are so visually prominent in every word they grace with their presence, and how when he writes his name at the bottom, the "F" takes up more than its fair share of space. I like the way he separates the day, month, and year of the date with periods rather than forward slashes like most people. And I love the way the paper always smells like him – or maybe he just smells like paper. Both are equally inviting.

I loved almost everything about Finn, not just his handwriting, but in those final days of packing and preparing

to face the world of pants and questions – the notebooks and torn out pages were everywhere. Full songs. Discarded paragraphs. Random one-liners that could all have been album names. Little pieces of the contents of his complex mind, waiting for me to find and photograph. If we were anyone else, I'd be intruding. Opening the crinkled and crumpled papers would be invasive, but at the end of the day, he was a songwriter, and I was his photographer.

On our last day before leaving Arundel – surrounded by packed bags and instrument cases, I found it. A previously crinkled and now folded up notebook page. It had several one-liners scribbled out before one written neatly at the bottom.

~~*“This is Ours.”*~~

~~*“End of the world.”*~~

~~*“Stay up.”*~~

~~*“Just Write a Fucking Title, Mate.”*~~

*“Bad Friends.”*

And on the inside, a love song.

*Stay up with me tonight,  
let's dance together  
in the moonlight.  
just put your playlist on –  
the one that I like,  
you know –  
that one that I like.  
Leave the world outside,  
follow me  
straight into the sunlight –*

*if the world is ending tonight  
I'm gonna sing through it  
with you –  
right here with you.  
And you said – you said – you said  
“I think I've fallen again  
again – again”  
And when you look in my eyes  
I know I'm gonna be  
A bad friend tonight.  
So, steal all my t-shirts  
and you can drink my whiskey too,  
because you're more myself than I am  
and everything I am, is you.  
Now we're closing all the windows  
and we're laughing  
at the end of the world,  
we don't care about the outside  
cause in here it's just  
you and I.  
And you said – you said – you said  
“I know I've fallen again  
again – again,”  
just follow me down  
this rabbit hole  
laughing as we go –*

*because I know – you know,  
we're gonna be – we're gonna be  
bad friends tonight.*

“That’s not finished,” Finn commented from behind me, making me jump right out of my skin

“Oh, fuck!” I gasped and flung the paper onto the bed behind me. I turned to him, looking guilty, feeling for the first time like I’d invaded his privacy. “Fuck, you scared me.”

He smirked.

“What are you doing? I thought you were packing?” I asked, flustered.

“Would you like me to go?” He motioned behind him with his thumb.

“No,” I gulped, “no, I just – I thought you were, you know – packing.”

“Mm hmm.” He leaned against the doorframe, giving me a knowing grin, all disheveled hair and tattered sweaters. “What were *you* doing?”

“I was just, umm, packing.” I looked at an open suitcase revealing a sweater of his I’d decided to steal.

“Why are you being weird?” He asked, walking toward me.

“I’m not being weird.”

“Oh, ok, my mistake,” he said sarcastically, taking a single stride into my personal space. “Can I—” he asked, pushing me back on to the bed. He climbed halfway on top of me, resting his knee on the edge of the bed.

Blood rushed everywhere but my brain. “Yes,” I responded breathlessly.

He lowered himself down, stretching his long arm above my head. “This is lovely,” he whispered into my ear, his lips brushing against my skin, “but—”

“Mm hmm,” I mumbled, my heart beating out of my chest.

And then I heard it – the crinkling of paper just above my head.

*Of course.*

“I was just going to ask for my note paper back.” In a swift movement, he stood up, tucking the page in his back pocket.

“Oh my god,” I laughed, the mortification heating my cheeks to a bright red, “you’re such an asshole.”

“I told you, it’s not finished,” he said, kissing the tip of my nose.

“Well, I think it’s amazing, just as it is.” I pulled him back down to me as he tried to stand up.

“You’re completely biased,” he wriggled out of my grasp, “and you’re not finished packing.” He gave me another knowing look as he stood. “Why are you taking so many things? You came here with the smallest duffle bag I’ve ever seen, and you’re leaving with that duffle bag and a suitcase?”

I shrugged.

“Are you taking my sweaters?” he said, walking toward the open suitcase.

I shrugged again.

“Why are you taking my sweaters?” He said, looking through the folded-up hoodies and crew necks. “Jaxon, you sneaky little hoodie thief! I wondered where all my bloody jumpers had gone,” he continued to sort through them, picking one out from the middle. “You’re not taking this one, love. I’m sorry.”

“No!” I said louder than intended, lunging forward to grab it. I cleared my throat and tried to gather my composure. “I mean, no – I’m definitely taking that one. It’s my favorite.”

“Yeah? It’s my favorite too. Jax, I wear this nearly every day. You’re not taking it.”

“I know,” I mumbled under my breath, “it smells like you.”

“It, what?”

“It smells like you,” I said, a little quieter.

“What?” He heard me. He was just being dumb.

“It,” I cleared my throat, “smells like you.” I tugged it away from him and pulled it on over my head. “I’m taking it.”

He walked toward me, wrapping his arms around me and kissing the top of my head. “You ok, babe?”

A thousand emotions washed over me, and I couldn’t control them. “The last time we did this – it didn’t go well.”

“Well,” he scoffed, “that is the broadest statement ever made. Can you be a bit more specific, please?”

“The last time you went on tour.”

“Jax, you’re coming with me.”

“For two weeks!”

“Yeah, for two weeks, and then you’ll go back to the States, and I’ll see you in a month. We’ll be back together before your birthday. What’s the matter?”

“I don’t want to do this. I don’t want to leave. I don’t want to be apart, and I don’t want to see my dad or Carter or anyone. I just want to stay here.”

He wove his fingers between mine.



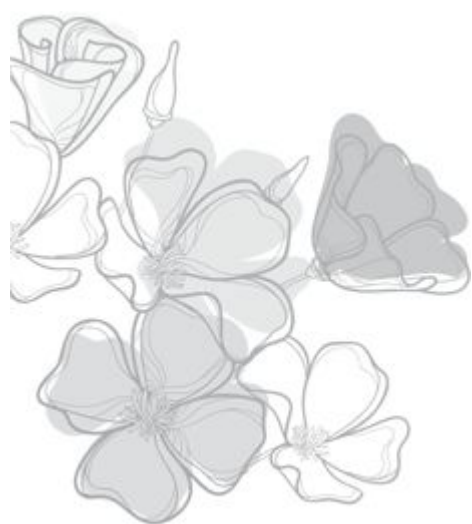
“Jaxon, my love,” he pressed a kiss to my forehead, “we can’t stay. We can’t hide here forever. We’ve got to go. We’re adults, with jobs and responsibilities, and things that need doing. It’s going to be different this time. But part of what makes it different is we don’t run away from the things we need to face. I don’t run away from you, you don’t run away from me, and we don’t run away from the messes we’ve made. And it is messy out there. I’ve got to meet your dad; I’ve got to do this properly this time around. It means something to me that we give this our best efforts, do you understand?”

“Yes,” I said solemnly, “I get it. I understand.”

“Plus, I promised Garrett Henley I would help him with some new music. I’m thinking of asking him to support us on tour while we’re in America.”

“What? That’s amazing!”

“Yeah, I know! I think it’ll be really lovely, and he can get some exposure, but that’s completely off the point.” We sat down on the bed side by side, and he put his arm around my shoulder, leaning me against him. “You’re going to be alright. I know it. You’re the strongest person I know. And I’m sorry about the pet vet. I know you loved him in your own way, and you never meant to hurt him. He may be angry, but deep down, he knows as well. All you can do is apologize. It’s for him to forgive you, or not. Whichever way it lands, you’ve got to be ok with it. Life keeps moving on – it’ll slow down a bit, but it’s not going to stop and wait for you. And if it helps you to know that I’m with you even when we’re apart, you can take all my favorite fucking sweaters.”



# A Rolling Stone Love Story

THOSE WERE the last of the moments that belonged only to us. Nothing would be the same after that day. Life had conditioned me to be apprehensive, but Finn wasn't. He'd fallen deeply in love with the idea of us as music royalty. He lit up at the thought of Phil Hammersmith peeing his pants with excitement over getting the exclusive on our rekindling. A fairy tale of forgiveness and redemption.

*A Rolling Stone love story.*

I absorbed his optimism through his sweaters. They smelled like his laundry soap and the pages of his notebooks. The beginning of February came and went more quickly than I wanted. I followed him all over Western Europe for a couple of weeks, taking the rest of the photos they needed for their live album. I ate the candy in his dressing room and rode on the tour bus, editing photos while they wrote songs. It was a tangible, creative energy I hadn't felt in years. It was electric, and not just because of the electric guitars.

Eagle eyed fans invested in the speculation of us being back together took photos of us being normal humans out in public. We did our best to appear platonic, but Finn looked like the personification of cloud nine. With only a few days left before my departing the tour, the pressure mounted from media outlets and radio hosts for Finn to confirm what everyone thought they already knew.

On the night before he put me on a plane back to America, Black Heart Sunday and their crew, including me, their trusty

photographer, stayed on the top levels of a fancy hotel. Finn and I got the penthouse.

We ordered room service. Waffles and chocolate covered strawberries and champagne. We laid opposite each other on a large plush couch, pontificating about life and love and art.

The ghost of a memory struck me as we laid there, legs entangled, recovering from a fit of laughter. Heartbreak never really leaves you. It lives in you, under the surface, waiting to remind you when you think you've made it to heaven, that you're still painfully human.

"The last time we had champagne together, we ended up in the hospital. I think it's bad luck. We should have ordered whiskey," I laughed. Sometimes dark humor gets you through.

"This isn't that, babe."

"I know. Its just – sometimes I forget and then suddenly, I remember. Like a sharp pain that jolts to every part of my body. Do you ever have that?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah?" The idea that he still thought about that night made me feel less alone.

"Yeah. I mean, there's obvious times. Like the anniversary of. I wake up on that day each year, as if I've forgotten something. I try to remember what I've forgotten. I walk around all day checking my pockets for my phone and wallet and keys, and then I remember. I remember what I'd forgotten and why it's significant." He pulled my foot up, massaging the arch over my plush sock. "And then sometimes it's just random. It'll hit me, walking past a shop, or seeing an advert. Once it was a diaper commercial. Those times are the worst. You expect to be solemn about it sometimes, but you don't expect it to come out of nowhere."

"I never realized it stuck with you that much."

“For a long while, I tried not to think about it. I tried to mute it in the usual unhealthy ways. But that made it worse. So, I tried to let it in a little bit, and then I just got angry. Angry with God, angry with myself, angry with you for pushing me away when we needed each other the most.”

“When did it get better?” I asked.

“I’m not certain it has. I think it’s just gotten easier to manage. I started to write it all down. I knew I could never put it in a song. It’s too personal, and it’s not mine to share. It was ours. But I would write the songs, or letters to the sky or whatever, and then just burn the pages. It just needed to come out one way or another. I always thought talking about it would make it worse, but once I let it out, I felt loads better. I only talked to Will about it. Mostly I wrote it down.”

“I’m so sorry, Finn.”

“Whatever for?”

“For running around the world thinking this was mine and mine alone.”

“You’ve got nothing to apologize for, darling. It’s just a piece of us now. It always will be. But it’s not the whole of us. You should never be sorry for feeling sad, for remembering, for wanting to talk it around. I love talking to you. I’ll talk about anything with you, forever.”

All his words sounded like song lyrics. Some people think he’s full of shit, but I know that’s just how the sentences form in his mind. He can’t help it. He wouldn’t want to, even if he could.

I looked at him for a long sixty seconds, examining every inch of his face. I’d be getting on a plane in a handful of hours, and I needed to sleep – but sleep is overrated. It would be almost a month before I’d see him again. I hopped up from the couch, holding my hand out to his.

“C’mon, there’s something we need to do before the sun comes up,” I said playfully.

“Is it sex?” he asked bluntly.

I rolled my eyes. “No. Well – I mean, yes, but no, that’s not what I’m talking about.”

He stood up, stretching his long arms over his head and letting out a mighty yawn. “Alright then,” he grabbed my hand, “tell me, what do we *have* to do before the sun comes up?”

I led him outside to the balcony, standing on my tip toes to ruffle his already ruffled curls.

“We need to do our debut couple photoshoot,” I kissed him curtly. “It’s like you said – we don’t want some random paparazzi taking our photo while we’re hung over. And by the time I see you again, all the cats will be out of all the bags.”

I set the self-timer on my phone and photographed a silhouette of us in front of the city skyline, our foreheads touching, and our fingers interlocked. And another, and another. Some in color. Some in black and white. Some all smiles, and some looking only at one another. Some were just his ink-stained fingers intertwined with mine. The sun began to rise, and we took one final shot before shutting the blackout curtains and curling into bed for a few sweet hours.

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In the thick silence of the drive to the airport, I gnawed on the inside of my lip as we approached the drop off curb. Saying goodbye would be the hardest part.

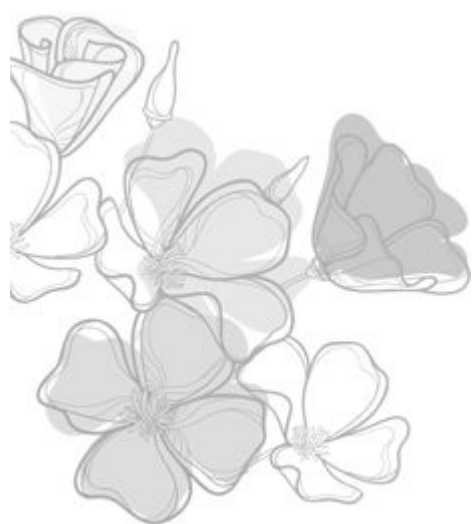
“Your eyes are my absolute favorite shade of brown,” I said.

“It’s because they photograph well. Can you believe there’s people running around out there with blue and green eyes? Pfft.”

I chuckled. “Do you take anything seriously?”

“I take you seriously,” he declared, “and I fucking love you, ok? Don’t forget.” He looked past me for a moment. “I want to kiss you so badly, but there is a nosey bloke standing right outside of your window. So, I will see you for your twenty-eighth, and I will talk to you every day until then.”

“I love you too,” I said, taking one last glance before getting out of the car and walking away.





# The North American Apology Tour

**L**IZZIE AND Garrett made me a playlist for the plane. It was a vast assortment of music genres. Their combined knowledge of movie soundtracks and popular music made for a playlist that was exactly what I needed to hype me up for this North American Apologies Tour.

The tour began on the East Coast, with West. I didn't ask my brother to pick me up from the airport. That would have been tacky. I also didn't assume it would be ok for me to sleep on his couch. I did the responsible things. I called a rideshare, booked a hotel room, and called Casey to make sure they'd be home. It was a little too close to Valentine's Day and I would never begrudge newlyweds a romantic holiday.

I also planned to see Phil Hammersmith to sort out my travel schedule for the next six months. One of the things Finn and I discussed was coordinating home bases. We'd spend half the year in Arundel, and the other half in Malibu. This would require a bit more planning on both of our parts. The trade-off was having a stable place to return when we weren't on the road. Having spent the last several months in a stable home base, I knew it was worth the effort. I was also tasked with giving Phil the exclusive on the soon to be breaking news of our love life.

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I didn't show up empty-handed. I brought a box of French pastries for Casey and a bottle of expensive whiskey for my brother. As I gathered my things to make my way to West and Casey's, my phone pinged with encouraging texts from Finn.

**Finn:** *good luck, darling, go heal those familial bonds.*

**Me:** *I was thinking I should keep ignoring them and eventually he'll just sort of get over it. Thoughts?*

**Finn:** *initial thoughts are that's a terrible fucking idea and it's bound to ruin Christmas.*

**Finn:** *better to just get on with it now.*

**Finn:** *when are you meeting Phil Hammersmith?*

**Me:** *day after tomorrow*

**Finn:** *Hug him for me, will you?*

**Me:** *No.*

**Finn:** *Boo. Alright. I'll call you after the show tonight.*

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I stood on the doorstep of my brother and Casey's brownstone, apprehensively putting out my finger to ring the doorbell. I had a memory of West from when I was a little girl. A bunch of them, really. A super-cut of West taking care of me. West pouring my cereal. West helping me with homework. West pulling my laundry out of the dryer and turning the chore into a game. West arguing with Dad, insisting it wasn't his responsibility to take care of me, complaining that he wanted to go out with his friends.

I wanted to cry.

I'd never thought about how much time he spent taking care of me, because he never made it seem like work. He never stopped being my brother, no matter how tired he was of being my brother. He was only a few years older than me and yet, he was also a lifetime older.

I stood on the doorstep for what felt like an eternity before Casey answered the door. She cocked her head to the side and smiled warmly in the inviting way only she could.

Before I could utter a single syllable, she pulled me into a tight embrace. “I’m so happy to see you,” she said quietly into my ear. “You look absolutely radiant.”

“Thank you,” I responded, squeezing her in kind. “I combed my hair and took a shower. I think that’s the radiance you’re seeing.” I joked. “I’m happy to see you too.”

“Come inside. He’s cooking pasta and drinking wine.” She gave me a knowing look.

“So, he knows I’m coming then?”

“Uh, yeah.” She giggled. “I think I read somewhere that honest communication is the cornerstone of any good marriage.”

I walked down the long hallway toward the kitchen. On my way, I noticed his artwork adorning the walls, and wedding photos amongst several other photos of their shared life. This was a grown-up space. It always had been, but the wedding photos cemented it. I stopped and stared at the largest one. It was West and Casey standing in front of a courtyard full of trees, backs facing the camera, looking at each other with their foreheads pressed together. Casey’s long veil and dress train draped the cement ground behind them. Next to that photo was a cartoon West had done of Casey standing around laughing, animated with different sized hearts fluttering around her cartoon head. Cartoon West sat on a park bench in the distance, staring at her with stars in his eyes.

“Jax?” The sound of Casey’s voice brought me back to the present. “You coming?”

“Yeah, sorry. I’ve just never seen these.” I touched the glass of the photo framed cartoon.

“Some guys write songs, and some guys draw pictures,” she said, shrugging.

West peaked his head around the corner. My heart began to race as he came toward me, and then he grinned. I immediately felt the relief of someone whose big brother loves them completely and without conditions.

He wrapped me in an embrace, and said coolly, “why didn’t you call me? I would have picked you up from the airport.”

“Well – I figured I should put in a little effort.” I squeezed him back, and he led me to the kitchen with his arm around me.

We sat together in their dining room, eating the pasta West made. I was later told he made it from scratch using a pasta maker they’d received as a wedding gift. As they laughed and told stories from their honeymoon, I looked around their kitchen and living room at all the knick-knacks people put in their houses to make it a home. The ones around my house were generic. There were some framed photos I’d taken, but I’d let someone else do the decorating. Almost nothing in my own house was significant to me in any way.

In contrast, West and Casey’s home was fully and completely West and Casey. Framed movie posters of films they’d seen when they first started dating, books they’d read and could quote, and crappy pottery they’d made once on a date night. A small corner shelf in the distance donned a bunch of boxed puzzle games. Those solve-a-crime-from-home game boxes that you can subscribe to and get once a month. West and Casey loved doing shit like that together. They were both highly intelligent and didn’t find it at all strange to do homework together as a romantic activity. They prided themselves on never, and I mean – never, ever – looking up puzzle clues online. When they finished a box, they put it up

to display – a symbol of literal hours spent together just using their brains.

“I have to tell you guys something,” I blurted out between superficial conversation topics.

“Is it that you’re back together with Finn Hendricks?” Casey asked bluntly.

“It’s that – wait – what?” I hadn’t fully heard her question in my resolve to tell them that I was back together with Finn Hendricks. “Yeah – yes, that’s – how, um – how did you know that?”

West rolled his eyes and chugged the contents of his wine glass. “She follows a social media fan account about you guys.”

“What?” I had not been expecting that.

“Yup. ‘@jinn.n.news.’ It’s like a play on words. Like gin & juice.” West pressed his lips together disapprovingly. “She’s the smartest girl in the world, but she loves a good gossip column.”

“It’s not gossip if it’s true,” Casey said unapologetically.

“This is,” I searched my mind for a nice way of saying ‘really fucking creepy.’ “This is kind of unexpected, Casey.”

“It’s not *that* unexpected. I mean, c’mon, you’ve been trouncing around in public wearing his sweaters. You definitely could have hidden it a little better.”

“No, not – not that. I’m talking about the fan page.”

“Oh, that.” Casey waved her hand dismissively and giggled. “We had to keep up with you somehow. You kind of dropped off the face of the earth for a minute. And, unlike your brother, I’m not too cool to stalk you on the internet.”

I looked over to West who was still drinking and shaking his head, disapproving of Casey’s guilty pleasure. When I

thought about it a little longer, I supposed it wasn't entirely surprising that someone who solved puzzles for fun would figure it out. Hindsight being what it was, I probably should have worn my own sweaters.

“Are you mad?” I asked West.

“At your choice of boyfriend? I don't care about that if you're happy, which, incidentally, I didn't think you had been. I thought you hated him. You said he was, and I quote, ‘a toxic asshole’. Am I mad about your tendency to disappear on your family and pretend you're an only child and an orphan? Yeah. But I've been mad about that for years. It's nothing new.”

Casey stood up, sensing things were about to get tense. She kissed West on the cheek and urged me to either crash on the couch or come back for breakfast in the morning.

“That's not totally true,” I responded.

“Which part, Jax?”

“The part about Finn being a toxic asshole. We had, like – kind of a really bad thing happen to us, and it was more me being a toxic asshole than him, but I—”

“Jax,” he interrupted, “it doesn't matter. I don't care who you date or who you love. I just care that you're happy. Have you really been avoiding me all these months because you thought I was mad at you? For what? Bailing on Carter? I don't give a shit about that. Be with who makes you happy. Here's what I care about. You were in an accident. You could have fucking died, dude. But you didn't, you got another chance. To live your life, to fix your relationships, to face all the bullshit that's been weighing you down since you were a kid. But you didn't. You started to. You bonded with Dad, Casey and I started hearing from you all the time, and you were putting in quality time with your friends. Then, all of a sudden, Finn shows up and you leave. And that's the last we heard from you.

“I care about the fact that I had to hear about your life from a fucking fan account run by teenagers. I’m your brother. I love you. I’m always going to love you. I’ll never give up on you and I’ll never be so mad that I won’t pick you up from the airport. But fuck – do better. You’ve been through a lot of shit, but that’s not an excuse to be an asshole. You’re grown up now. You can’t keep hanging on to the unhealthy coping mechanisms that used to get you through. Dad hasn’t heard from you. I haven’t heard from you. Apparently, the only reason Cindy and Lizzie have heard from you is because your boyfriend literally brought them directly to you. Can you imagine how abandoned you’d feel if any one of us treated you that way?”

Silence.

I wasn’t sure how to respond to his scathing and frighteningly accurate accounting of the last year. I needed him to know that my leaving wasn’t Finn’s fault, but I could also read the room. What he was trying to say was that this was about me. Not Finn, and not Carter. He was right. On my solemn journey to figuring my shit out, I hadn’t called, and I hadn’t texted. I was just gone. I’d been laboring under the assumption that he was mad about me walking out on Carter. I’d missed the point entirely. Absolutely nothing I could say was going to explain away the ways I’d hurt him.

“I’m so sorry, West. This whole year has wreaked complete fucking havoc on every part of me that I thought I knew. Every doctor’s appointment, every conversation, every therapy session, it’s just drudged up more and more and more. Finding out about Mom, getting together with Carter, my fucking ten-year high school reunion, even Finn coming back. It felt like standing in the center of a trash compacter and the walls were moving closer and closer to me. As they get closer, they crush little bits and pieces of who I thought I was and what I thought I wanted. I wasn’t trying to alienate anyone. I

was just trying not to drown in my own head. I know I'll always be a little selfish, but I'm trying to be better. I'm trying to be more – accountable – I guess? And that's why I'm here. That's why I didn't ask you to pick me up from the airport, because how shitty would it have been for me to call you out of the blue after months of radio silence and ask you for a favor? That seemed like the stupidest thing I could do.”

The look on his face softened – a good sign that I was saying some of what I needed to be saying.

“I still would have done it, though. I would have gone to get you.”

“I know. But I guess the point is, I'm trying to be less of an asshole, and I thought making my way here on my own, without asking you to pick me up so I could apologize, was like step one in trying to do better.”

He smiled. “I guess that's a good start.”

“And I'm sorry I didn't tell you about Finn. It's just, it's complicated. It's also a *very* recent development. If I'm being honest, I felt responsible for hurting Carter, and I know he's your friend. I just didn't want you to be disappointed in me.”

“Listen, I don't know Finn. I don't have any reason not to like him except the reasons you gave me. As for Carter – I warned him not to go out with you. Not to be a dick, but when he started talking about you like you hung the damn moon, I told him that you weren't in a good head space. I told him you're never in one place too long and weren't likely to settle down. I also tried to tell him I didn't think you were over your ex. All your relationships since Finn have been like ticking boxes off a checklist of things you think you're *supposed* to do. I don't know what went on between you to cause the breakup. In hindsight, I probably shouldn't have invited him to the wedding without talking to you first. But I want you to know I don't have any loyalties to Carter. You're my sister,



Jax. I'm always on your side. But just out of curiosity, how recent of a development is the Finn stuff?"

"Uh – New Year's Eve. I think I knew before that it was going that way, and I just wasn't ready to admit it. But I swear, when I left, I did not plan on this happening."

"I mean – you brought him to the wedding. You really had no intention of getting back together at that point?"

"Nah. I just didn't want to show up alone once I knew Carter would be there. I was already planning on going to England, and he just did me the favor of being my plus one."

"So – what changed?" He asked, becoming invested in the Jinn saga.

"I don't know. I guess everything changed once I got there. I had to take a long hard look in the mirror. He understands me in a way I've never felt understood by anyone else. He didn't try to push any ideas on me about what he thought was best for me. He just existed alongside me. He listened to my stories, and he made me tea, and he braided my hair. He gave me advice on how to let go of some of what I'd been carrying. He was just a really good friend. And one day I looked at him and thought – like – fuck, I think I'm supposed to exist with this person for the rest of my life. Do you know what I mean?"

He nodded. "I got horribly sick once. I mean like, worst flu of my life, sick. And Casey showed up at my apartment with a video game console and a backpack full of pajamas and cold meds. She wasn't there to take care of me, though she did. She was there so I wouldn't have to suffer alone. She got sick too, which she'd anticipated, but she didn't care. She told me, 'If you're sick, I'm sick. Whatever we do, we're doing it together.' We played video games and ate soup and drank cough syrup for a week. So, yeah. I know exactly what you mean."

My phone lit up. A middle of the night text from Finn after a missed call. I didn't realize how late it was or how long we'd been talking. The text read simply: *oh, how I wish you were here.*

“Are we gonna get to meet him this time?” West asked, gesturing to my phone screen.

I sighed. “Yup. He’s coming to California next month for my birthday. He wants to meet you and Dad and, I don’t know, win you over with his British politeness. Which brings me to my next request. I’d like you and Casey to fly out for my birthday, on me. I just feel like a re-do of last year’s festivities are in order.”

He laughed. “If you’ll be home – I’ll be there. What’s the plan? Party? Rooftop dinner?”

I rolled my eyes. “I’ve had enough of rooftop dinners for one lifetime. But honestly, I have no idea. Finn is planning it with Cindy and Lizzie.”

“Wow. Color me impressed,” he said, starting to yawn. He looked at the clock on his microwave. “Are you staying?” He asked.

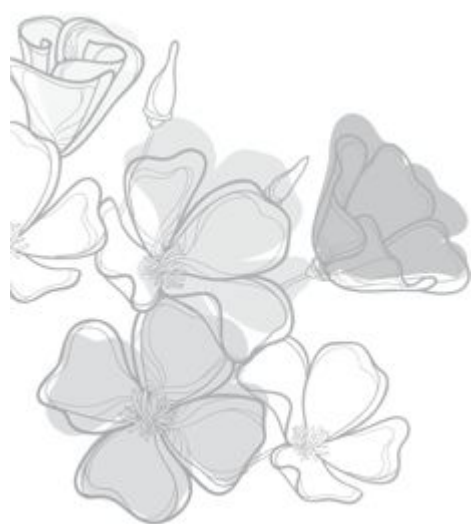
“Nope – got myself a hotel room, like a big girl,” I wiggled my eyebrows, thoroughly impressed with myself. I stood up, gathering my things, and calling it a night. He pulled me into another hug.

“I love you, dude. Thank you for tonight. Are you coming back for breakfast?” He asked, hopefully.

“I am coming back for breakfast, and then I’ve got some meetings before I fly out in a few days.”

“Where to next?” he asked.

“California.”



# My Father's Daughter

**B**EFORE BOARDING a plane to California, I had my final meeting in a series of meetings with Phil Hammersmith. We threw a little method into my madness. I decided with a bit of negotiation, I actually could have it all. Luckily, I'd garnered some good will and seniority at the magazine.

What did I want out of the next phase of my career, and how could I achieve a good work/life balance? In the end, it came down to creating parameters. I'd always just gotten a call and hopped on a plane, no delay and no questions asked. In my next five years, I wanted to do it differently. I wanted to make time for the things and people who were important. That meant setting some limitations on where I was willing to go and when. I also wanted to create some sort of artistic legacy of my own. Sometimes taking photographs of other people's art can feel a little like being a super fan.

Here's what I negotiated ...

I would photograph shows and bands exclusively on the West Coast and in New York between the months of February and September. From October to January, I would do it in Europe. This would ensure that for at least half of the year, I would always be easily accessible to either my dad, my brother, and my friends. I also negotiated a two-week transition period in September and again in January to travel and get settled. I wanted first dibs on up-and-coming bands while on the West Coast. Lastly, I wanted to start working on publishing a book of photos of the artists I'd photographed

through the years. *Rolling Stone's* online presence would support me by doing an article on the project and endorsing it ahead of the release.

Phil asked me why up-and-coming bands. I told him that one of my favorite things about the early days of Black Heart Sunday was the intimacy of their shows. It's a vulnerability that becomes increasingly difficult to maintain once you're famous. No photo is more honest than the one you take of an artist realizing for the first time that the crowd knows the words to their songs, or when they get called back out for their first encore. Photographing those moments sometimes gives them that little extra push toward the stardom they'd been waiting for. I wanted to be a part of that for as long as I could.

Plus, there's nothing cooler than seeing bands play before they blow up.

To sweeten the pot, I promised Phil we'd give *Rolling Stone's* online presence first dibs on interviewing Finn once we announced we'd gotten back together. I told him I would even provide a few photos taken by yours truly that no one else would have access to. Finn was right – Phil did pee his pants a little at the news. He stood up and shook my hand, telling me that on a personal note – he was glad to have me back in the saddle.

“The music world missed you, Jax,” he said, as he walked me to his office door to show me out.

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Sitting at the airport waiting to board the plane, I people watched as I tended to do when waiting for a flight. I remembered all the things I love about the airport. The connection of people. A thousand different emotions on display. Sadness, exuberance, exhaustion. I loved watching military reunions – especially ones with little kids holding up signs they made themselves. There are whole video blogs

dedicated to emotional military reunions, and I got the honor of seeing them live in person.

Before long, I noticed the unusually high number of daughters waiting for their dads at the airport. Not just the military reunions – but all the reunions, one after another, seemed to be fathers and daughters. It may have just been me, noticing most frequently what weighed heavily on my mind. I wasn't nervous about seeing my dad. I knew nothing I did could ever make him stay mad for long. Plus, me being an absentee daughter, for better or worse, was not a new development. The anxiety was specific to having any kind of serious conversation with him. He was not big on feelings.

I'm confident admitting I've probably struggled with emotional intelligence all my life. I am truly my father's daughter in that way. Even when I was younger, I never felt comfortable being around friends who were talking about their feelings. I wasn't comfortable with anything that I deemed "girl things." I wanted to be. I so desperately wanted to be amongst the magical masses that are girls and women. I wanted to cry and talk about my feelings and tell my friends when I was on my period, but I just couldn't. I didn't have the requisite vocabulary. My default was to back slowly out of any room that was getting too emotional, or rapidly change the subject and never think about it again.

When I was about nine or ten, I sat with my dad watching tv late one night while West was at a sleepover. We saw a commercial featuring a mother sitting with her daughter, braiding her hair. I turned to my dad, tears welling up, and told him I missed my mom. I asked when she was coming home. She'd been gone for years at that point, and my dad never talked about her. None of us did. She was just gone one day, and we went on with life, pretending she'd never been there to begin with.

“Oh, kid,” my dad said, looking around the room for a quick escape, “let’s watch something else. This show has too many commercials.” And he changed the channel.

That was how we did things at home. When shit got too heavy, we just changed the channel. What that meant for me in the long term was that having to face difficult moments in my life gave me a hefty helping of anxiety. Usually, to the point of complete avoidance. And while I knew my dad was the one person who would understand this better than anyone, I still didn’t want to talk to him about feelings.

I knew he wouldn’t be comfortable being as honest with me as West. He wouldn’t know the right thing to say the way Finn does, and I could guarantee he wouldn’t hold my hand and cry the way Cindy and Lizzie do. We were the same, and that meant every part of this would be infinitely more difficult. And awkward as hell.

I told myself it would be worth it. One conversation and then it would be done. I looked forward to spending more time with my dad. I loved to be around him. Even though we never had a lot of heart felt conversations, the time we spent was never boring. Dad liked to tinker. He liked to build and make things. He was tactile, a lot like West, I suppose. He learned by doing, so that’s how he taught me. I would sit with him while he worked on old cars or talk his ear off about music while he painted model planes from World War II.

He was the kind of dad who was always studying for a history test he was never going to have to take. He passionately told me stories from the war that he’d read in books and seen in documentaries. Spending the day with my dad was always fun and busy. When you spend a lot of time pointedly avoiding talking about your problems – the best way to spend that time is doing activities to ensure you’re also too tired to talk about your problems at night.

Suddenly I heard the voice of the ticket taker calling for my flight to board. I stood up and grabbed my things, moving toward the line, fumbling around in my bag for my ticket. Once I was on the plane, I quickly found my seat and pulled my comfiest airplane pillow from my carry on.

I still needed to let my dad know I was coming to California. I also needed a ride from the airport. First things first, I texted my dad.

**Me:** *hey dad, just checking in to let you know I'm headed back home to California for a few weeks.*

**Me:** *Can we grab dinner? I'm boarding the plane now, maybe tomorrow night?*

**Dad:** *welcome back to the land of the living kid. I'd love to have dinner with you. Tomorrow night is perfect. It'll give you a chance to get some shut eye after a long flight.*

**Dad:** *can we have steak?*

**Me:** *omg dad. Yes, of course*

I sent another text to Cindy, who I knew could leave work whenever she wanted, to ask her for a ride.

**Me:** *Can I get an airport pickup?*

**Cindy:** *When?*

**Me:** *In about 5 hours*

**Cindy:** *OMG, all this personal growth and you still wait until the last possible second to let people know you*



*need a ride?*

**Me:** *it's not the last possible second if I haven't left NYC.  
It's not like I'm texting you from LAX*

**Cindy:** *I guess I should count my blessings then?*

**Cindy:** *how did it go with West? All sorted?*

**Me:** *yup. 1 down, 2 to go*

**Cindy:** *saving the most dramatic for last?*

**Me:** *obviously.*

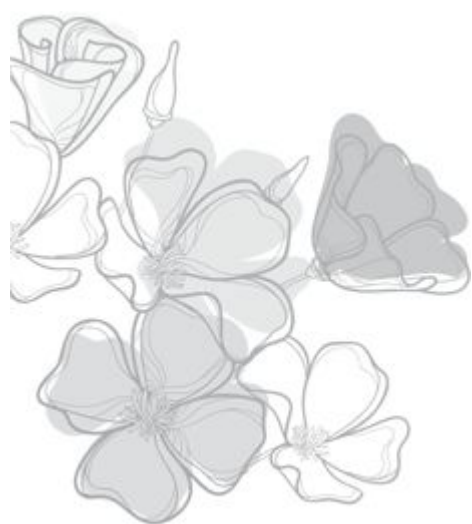
**Me:** *ok, going on airplane mode. I'll text you my flight  
info.*

I felt the vibration of the plane's engine, ready for takeoff, and settled in for an inflight nap.

Mentally preparing for the West Coast leg of my North American Apology Tour, I thought about something Finn said to me. We're grown now, and we don't run away from the things we need to face. Going back to California meant facing Carter. It meant apologizing for the mess I'd made, so that we could both move forward with closure.

He'd forgive me, or he wouldn't. The forgiveness itself wasn't really the point. The point was – I'd grown up, and my antics weren't cute anymore.

Forgiveness or none, I no longer run away from the messes I've made. The anxiety of things left unsaid and undone is too fucking corrosive for someone about to turn twenty-eight.



# California

IT WAS already warm in California. That's the magical thing about it – it's warm all year long. Except, of course, for the flooding, and then the mudslides that immediately follow, but anyone who grew up in California knows that's a small price to pay to live in paradise.

It had grown on me. Somewhere between surgery, house arrest, therapy, and falling in and out and back in love. Green Valley wasn't my favorite place, but I loved California. With a newfound peace in my soul, I was finally able to appreciate the full force of it.

Sitting in the passenger seat of Cindy's too expensive car, I leaned my head against the leather headrest and hung my arm out the window, wiggling my long fingers back and forth. The warm afternoon breeze flowed through them as I breathed in the smell of salt watered air.

Outside was picture perfect and I felt like I was seeing it for the first time. The green of the palm trees was greener, and the blue of the Pacific was bluer. The sun, ending its daily shift, melted into the moon just waking up and painted the sky golden and purple and royal blue. I stared out into the sunset, listening to the sound of my own breathing. I usually felt uncomfortable in these silences, but not this time. I tried to remember when I first realized that California sunsets were enchanted. I wondered if I'd ever realized it at all, or if I'd just been wandering around paradise too moody to notice.

I've been told introspection is important, and there's no better backdrop for looking inward than actual fucking

paradise. My therapist, Doctor Nancy, told me that the work of healing is a lifelong process. She said I'd likely always need to do it in one way or another. Introspection was a good place to start.

As I felt the chill of the evening air, I focused on the song playing from Cindy's old country songs playlist. "Strawberry Wine" filled me with nostalgia for simpler days.

"I used to sing this song at karaoke," I said without thinking.

"Really?" Cindy asked, taken completely aback by my unprompted confession.

"Finn and I used to go to karaoke all the time when we were younger. He sang Coldplay, and Radiohead, and Blur. I sang country songs I reluctantly knew the words to from my childhood."

"I didn't think you were much of a fan, to be honest."

"I'm not – I mean I wasn't. I think they just felt familiar, and I liked that. I always sang the same four or five songs and eventually I secretly started to love them. They were all so bittersweet in their familiarity. They sounded like how putting on one of West's sweaters felt. Or watching movies with you guys and eating microwave popcorn. I always thought I hated California. Now I know I didn't."

"It's never too late to come home, though. You know that, right?"

"Yeah, I know. But it kind of sucks that twenty-three-year-old me can't come home. She could have really used it, I think."

"Twenty-eight-year-old you could really use it too. I'm glad you've decided to dedicate some time to being here. We miss you. I know your dad does too, even if he doesn't tell you." She smiled at me empathetically and then joked the

moment off, “So, what’s next? House hunting with Finn in Green Valley?”

I rolled my eyes. “Abso-fucking-lutely not. Even though Finn would probably love it there. Here is home enough.”

“So, were you any good?” She asked, teasing.

“You know what? I was! It might surprise you to know that I was a karaoke queen. But I was chill. I would sit at the bar next to Finn, and the microphone would get passed to me and I just sat there and sang my little heart out. Also, when you achieve a certain level of karaoke greatness, the DJ puts together an envelope for you and fills it with the little paper slips of all the songs you sing. At the height of my karaoke fame, I wouldn’t even choose the songs. I’d just tell the DJ to surprise me.”

“This is the wildest shit I’ve ever heard. It basically sounds like we’re doing karaoke for your birthday.”

“No way, I can’t do it anymore. I would die. It’s been too long. I guarantee you I’m no good anymore. Plus, you can’t do karaoke with a famous musician. That’s fucking mortifying.”

“It’s only mortifying if he sings his own songs. But something tells me he could probably even pull that off. I’m curious though. Why’d you stop?”

“I guess it was just one of those things that was mine and Finn’s and after the hospital, we weren’t ourselves. We weren’t out doing all the things we used to love. And then he went on tour, and then and then and then – you know, life happened. I’d have felt stupid and sad doing it without him. But sometimes, when I’m on long drives, I put the songs on. I sing them way too loud with the windows open, just hoping I don’t end up at a red light next to someone I know.”

She started her country music playlist over again and rolled down the windows. She raised the volume to full

capacity, and began to sing “Heads Carolina, Tails California” and nudged me with her elbow, inviting me to do the same.

We sang loudly as our hair tangled itself up in the ocean air. For the first time in the longest time, I felt at peace. Impending uncomfortable conversations aside, all was right in the world.

A vibration on my hip startled me out of the moment. It was a text from Finn.

***Finn:*** *have you landed safely, my love?*

***Me:*** *yes. The eagle has landed.*

***Finn:*** *was the pet vet waiting for you at the airport?*

***Me:*** *...*

***Finn:*** *only joking.*

He wasn't joking. He knew on some level I'd come here to get a bit of closure with a person who was perfect on paper. A change of subject was in order.

***Me:*** *I was just singing old country songs in the car with Cindy.*

***Finn:*** *ooh! return of the karaoke queen!*

***Me:*** *lol! I told her all about my glory days*

***Finn:*** *let's go for your birthday!*

***Me:*** *absolutely not*

***Finn:*** *singing in dive bars with you is one of my favorite*

*things in the entire world.*

**Me:** *I'm too out of practice and you're too famous*

**Finn:** *neither of those things are true*

**Me:** *\*shrug\**

**Finn:** *why on earth do you do that? Use the emojis. That's the whole of their purpose*

**Me:** *\*thumbs down\**

**Finn:** *for fucks sake, Jaxon.*

**Me:** *\*giggle\**

**Finn:** *I love you. You're the worst. Call me later.*

Cindy eyeballed me from the driver's seat as I smiled and bit the corner of my lip, as one does when they are being flirted with.

"Finn." I responded to her silent question.

"Ah," she shook her head in acknowledgement. "Is he feeling weird at all about you planning to meet up with Carter?"

"I don't think so. Maybe a little. He knows it has to be done, and he's not particularly insecure about us, but ..."

"It's Carter," she echoed my thoughts exactly.

"Yes. Though there's no reason for insecurities. I don't think he's going to be excited to see me, or particularly jazzed to hear what I have to say."

"I mean, why? It's not like *you* stopped answering *his* calls, right?"

“I know, but I definitely did leave him alone in a hotel room with zero closure.”

“He could have gotten it if he’d picked up the phone. Don’t get me wrong. I’m pro Carter, but just because you’re an asshole doesn’t mean you’re the *only* asshole. There’s a lot he could have done differently. It might not have turned out any differently, but he would’ve come out smelling more like roses.”

I tried not to think too much about Carter. Instead, I looked down at the hole in the knees of my jeans and picked at the tattered jean fibers. These are the jeans I was wearing when my brother picked me up from the airport almost a year prior.

They are my favorite pair, and by complete happenstance, I changed out of them to go to dinner, opting for fancier dark blue jeans. Much like my uterus, those jeans got completely fucked beyond repair. I continued to pull at the frayed material and thought about the luck of a simple decision.

Simple decisions change your life.

I came home. I changed my jeans. I sent a text when I should have been watching the road. I chose Carter. I chose Finn. I chose me. And now here I was again, in the same pair of jeans. A single year can change everything.

I’d come home for closure, and to get my house in order. Literally. I was supposed to decide whether I wanted to sell my house and find something different with Finn once he arrived – or – keep my house and make space for him. For his part, he decided to keep his house and make space for me. It was an easy decision because there was plenty of space. I thought my decision would be easy, too. I’d never been particularly attached to my bungalow, plus it was a small space with not a lot of options for making room for anyone else.

Cindy parked in the driveway and my eyes became fixed on the front door, grey with two small rectangular windows



toward the top. My housekeeper, Abigail, hung seasonal wreaths from the door – that was something I didn't know before. In the time I'd spent at home, she changed it several times. There was an Easter wreath, a fourth of July wreath, and a fall wreath in September. The wreath currently donning the door was for Valentine's Day.

“Do you think you'll keep it?” Cindy asked.

“I'm not sure. At first, I was set on selling it, but – now I don't know. I like it. It sort of grew on me while I was here, but it's definitely too small.”

At the foot of the front door, I saw a large box sitting on the porch. It had to have arrived recently, because Abigail had been there earlier in the day to attend to my goldfish, Prince Henry, and she always checks the mail and brings in my packages when she comes.

“It's probably a bomb,” Cindy whispered.

“Stop. It's not a bomb. Who would want to bomb me?”

“Carter.” She answered.

“That's not funny.”

I walked toward the box and immediately recognized the penmanship on the address label. It was from Finn.

“See, it's not a bomb. It's from Finn,” I said, pointing at the address label.

“It's a love bomb. Even worse.”

“It's not a love bomb. Why are you being so weird? It's just a package.”

I opened it as soon as we got inside. I found a bunch of clothes neatly folded and vacuum sealed in large plastic bags. There were also bubble wrapped framed posters, photos, and vinyl records. Taped to the inside of one of the box flaps was an envelope with my name written in cursive. On the inside, a

sheet of notebook paper with a short note written in blotchy black ink.

*“Just a few things to make the bungalow feel like home. It’s your decision, but I quite like it. I like the idea that we can get drunk on the beach at our leisure. And the water pressure in your shower is divine. I love you, I love you, I love you. Don’t forget.*

*Yours again and always, Finn.”*

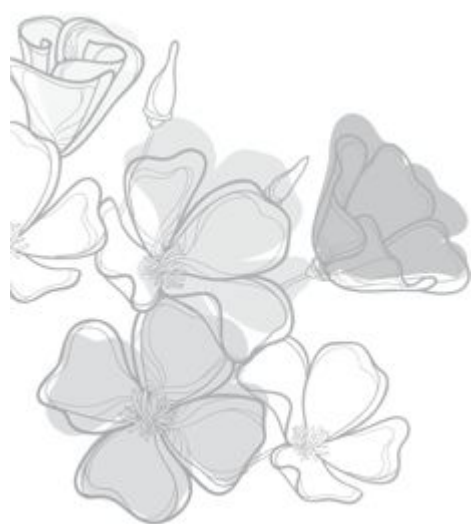
I smiled and smelled the notebook paper with the small hope that it might still smell like him. Not surprisingly, it did a bit.

“What’s it say?” Cindy asked.

“The usual supportive stuff,” I said, still smiling as I handed it to her to read on her own.

She smiled too. “I’m not sure there’s anything *usual* about that level of supportive,” she handed it back to me. “If he’s not careful, he’ll have us all madly in love with him before summer arrives.”

Truth be told – that man had never been careful a day in his life.



# My Mother's Daughter

ONE OF the bubble-wrapped framed photos Finn sent was our *Rolling Stone* cover. It had its own little sticky note adhered to the glass of the frame that said: *may we always be as mad for each other as we were in this moment*. It had a little lopsided heart next to it.

When I asked him if he'd sent the one he had in Arundel, he told me he'd had it reprinted and framed. He said no matter which home we were in, it should be with us, to remind us how – at our best, we make each other better.

I hung it at the end of my hallway the next morning and stood silently for several moments, looking at it. It's my favorite photo in the world. Even when I hated him, I loved to look at it, and remember who I'd been at the precipice of the rest of my life.

I spent the day unpacking his things and finding places to put them away. It surprised me how easy it was to make space for him in my little bungalow. As the hours passed, I found myself wanting to settle bits and pieces of my life into the empty drawers and shelves. When I got tired of unpacking, I went out and sat with my toes in the sand, looking at the majesty of the Pacific Ocean.

Before long, it was time to get ready for dinner with Dad. I didn't have a car. I never bought one after the accident because there was always someone around to drive me where I needed to go. That night, he came to pick me up.

I did something I didn't do very often. I put makeup on. I had it in the bathroom and didn't usually have a use for it. As I drug the liquid eyeliner across my eyelid, and the velvet red lipstick across my bottom lip, I lost myself in my own reflection. I looked like my mother.

Dad kept pictures and trinkets of hers locked somewhere in a box of things he never thinks about or acknowledges having. He never showed them to me, but I know he has them. Once, when I was packing away my things before leaving for college, I stumbled upon a box that was taped tightly around the edges. I ran my fingers across the tape, considering opening it. When Dad saw me, he took the box away. "That's not yours, kid," he told me. "Mind your business."

Many times throughout my life, I wondered if I was anything like her, but I knew I could never ask. It was made clear to me from as early as I could remember. We do not talk about her, we do not ask about her, and we absolutely do not ever cry about her. Those are things we shove down deep and never let out. Or, in my dad's case, those are things we shove in a box, tape up tightly, and throw in the attic.

No sooner had I curled my eyelashes and applied mascara did I hear my doorbell ring. I put my leather jacket on, shoved the lipstick in my pocket, and hurried to open the door. There my dad stood, looking somewhat dressed up as well. My brother probably spilled the beans and told him I was on an apology tour.

He cleared his throat as he took a long look at me. "Wow, kid. You look like you're feeling much better."

"It's the magic of makeup."

I shoved my keys in my pocket and turned to my dad, who had his arm out for me to take. He led me out of the front door to the car and hurried to the passenger side to open the door for me – as he always did, with all doors. Antiquated as it may

be, I always let him because I understood the gesture as one of love and respect.

The car ride to the restaurant was loaded with silence. The less he talked, the more I wondered if he also had something he wanted to talk to me about. Eventually, he asked about my flight, about the weather in New York, and if it rained all the time in England – basic superficial conversation filler.

We arrived at our destination and once seated, I ordered a whiskey, betting it would make everything a lot easier.

My dad isn't easy to talk to – not because he isn't a good listener, but because if you know him, you know that any kind of talking beyond the superficial makes him uncomfortable. The silence is less an indication of listening and more an indication that he'd rather be anywhere else. When he also ordered whiskey, I knew I was missing something.

He cleared his throat.

“So, kid,” he began, “I spoke with your brother last night ...”

*Treachery.*

“Oh yeah?” I feigned naivety. “About anything in particular?”

“Well, we talked about your birthday a bit, and he mentioned you might have some important things to talk to me about.”

*Fucking West.*

“Yeah – I've got some things, just kind of wanted to—”

“And I, uh. I wanted to run something by you as well.”

*Plot twist.*

“But,” he laughed nervously, “I want you to go first – you know – ladies first and all.”

I cocked my head to the side and looked at him, squinty eyed. What had I just walked into? He lifted his glass to his lips, and I heard the clanking of the ice in the glass before I noticed his hands shaking. What in the world could be making my stoic dad nervous?

“Well,” I started, thrown completely off by my curiosity, which was sure to distract me from what I wanted to say. I sighed. I shouldn’t have needed to rehearse this. Practiced vulnerability is barely vulnerability at all. “Ok – you’re making me nervous with your nervousness. What’s going on, Dad?”

All at once I got a gut wrenching feeling he wasn’t ok. “Is something wrong? Are you – are you, like, sick?”

He broke into uncomfortable laughter. “Oh, gosh! No, kid. No. I apologize – I didn’t mean to worry you. I just didn’t want to steal your thunder here.”

“Thunder sufficiently stolen, Dad. Just tell me what’s going on.”

He took another long swig of whiskey and then called over the waiter to ask for another before I’d even had my second sip. I had a feeling I’d be driving home.

“Here’s the thing kid – I’m not,” he leaned in toward me, and quieted nearly to a whisper, “I’m not that comfortable talking about this kind of stuff, so I apologize in advance if this is the most awkward conversation in a long line of awkward conversations we’ve had during your life.”

There was comfort in knowing he understood how awkward it had always been.

“I, um,” he cleared his throat again, “I’ve been uh – well – I’ve been seeing a nice lady.”

I tried to hide my shock, but this was definitely not how I pictured the night going.

“Dad – that’s great! Why would you feel nervous about telling me good news?”

“I just didn’t know how you’d feel, after, you know, your mom.”

I looked around, wondering if he was talking to me. I can count on one hand the number of times in my life he’s ever uttered the words “your mom.”

“Dad, I’m confused. We’ve never talked about mom, and I barely even remember you both being in the same space. It feels like you’ve been a single parent my whole life, so why wouldn’t I want you to be with someone who can make you happy?”

He started blinking incessantly and picking at the inside corner of his eye as the waiter delivered him another whiskey. It took me a moment to realize he was getting teary eyed.

“I uh – you know – I met Maggie, your mom I mean, I met her when I was just a kid. Just a stupid teenager, you know?”

“Dad, why – why are you telling me all this? We don’t have to – you don’t have to talk about this, it’s ok.”

“No – no. It’s not ok, Jax.” He took another drink. His confession felt familiar. I too had the terrible habit of making off-the-cuff declarations to people who were completely unprepared. “Listen, I know I never talked to you about your mom. Maybe I should have. I should have told you what she was up to and told you when she passed. I should have showed you the box of pictures and old love letters I keep in the attic.”

“Wait – you knew? You knew she died?” He nodded silently. “So, everyone knew but me? And no one figured I might want to be let in on the secret?”

“It wasn’t a secret, Jax. It was a tragedy. And kid – you didn’t need any more tragedy in your life.”



“Dad, that wasn’t your decision to make. I can decide how much I can handle. I’m an adult.”

He rolled his eyes, “C’mon, kid. Up until recently, you’ve been an adult in your own special way. And you can’t blame your old man for wanting to protect you.”

“What does that mean?” I asked, offended and hurt.

“It means we never saw you. You never came home, you barely called, and every phone call was short – like calling home was a thing on a to do list you were marking off.” He rubbed his chin and sighed, appearing to make a silent decision about whether to say what he really wanted to.

“Go on, Dad. Don’t hold back,” I spoke up.

“Jaxon. I sent you to college. You couldn’t get out of town fast enough. You got on a plane. You turned to me, and you waved goodbye. You never came back. Does that sound familiar to you?”

“That’s not fair.”

“Kid, I’m not saying this to be mean. I’m saying it because it’s true. And at least when your mom did it, she made sure I knew she was never coming home.”

No. I was not my mother’s daughter. Not like that.

“Dad, that’s bullshit. I came home.”

“Did you? Or did you just show up in LA to buy a house and immediately leave again? Jax, I packed all of yours and your brothers’ things in a U-Haul and moved them down here. I still have them in my attic. Boxes of memories neither of you want to look back on, but I miss those kids. I miss *my* kids. You came home sometimes, and you checked checking on your dad off your list, and you left again. You were never the same after you moved to New York.”

“Dad, you didn’t make any of this easy on either of us. I know you did the best with the tools in your toolbox, but I needed more. I had questions and feelings. And I love you – but all you ever did was tell me not to bring it up. Secrets are corrosive. They eat away at you, and they ate away at me. I literally had to google my mom to find out she died. That’s how I found out what happened to her. And the fact that you and West have known all along while I’ve been floating around the world trying not to think of her, is infuriating.”

I flagged down a waiter and asked for a soda because nothing good could possibly come from both of us having this conversation over whiskey.

“We’ve gotten off track,” he said, reaching into his back pocket for his wallet.

“Oh – was there a road map for this conversation?” I spat sardonically.

He opened his wallet and pulled out a picture, handing it to me. It was faded and bent from a lifetime of living next to his social security card. It was my mom and me.

The photo could have been one of those sample pictures in a frame of a happy family. My mom laughed with her whole chest; her head thrown back. I was equally joyful, surrounded by records, as we sat cross legged next to a record player in the family living room. I couldn’t have been more than three or four.

“You always loved music,” he started again. “That’s a thing you got from her. She had so many records. Country music was her passion, but she loved all types. She would sing to you when she was pregnant, and when you came into the world, her singing was the only thing that could calm you at night. You got older, and she played you all her records. She told me if you ended up having bad taste in music, it wouldn’t be because of her. You knew the albums by the cover photos,

and you would pick your favorites out of a lineup. Eventually we realized you were picking your favorites based on the cover art. And that's when we realized you also loved photos."

"What was she like?" I asked. This seemed like as good a time as any.

"Oh," he smiled. "She was like a thunderstorm in a drought. She was everything you needed, but she was dangerous and uncontrollable. She left a lot of damage in her wake. She was too much and not enough all at once, if you can imagine that." I nodded in acknowledgement. "From the moment I laid eyes on her, my life changed. She was magnetic and magic. You couldn't stay away from her, and you'd never want to. But she dealt with a lot of demons, and they got worse as she got older.

"Eventually, she started to feel like she was running out of time to live her life. She didn't want to live it as a wife and mother. When she was up, it was a wonderful life, but when she was down – you know – she was *low* down. Nothing helped. She slept all the time and she cried and cried. She couldn't be consoled. Sometimes she wouldn't even get out of bed, but then a week or two later, she'd be back on the highs. As the years went by, the lows stretched out from weeks to months until one day I looked at her and barely recognized her at all. She was consumed by sadness. She had to go. I understood why, but no amount of understanding makes being left behind feel any less like being left behind."

"I'm so sorry, Dad. I don't know what to say."

"It's not for you to say anything, kid. It was on me to tell you who she was – all of who she was. She was so many things, it's just that the leaving is the last thing we remember. She was complicated – a lot like you. She was a lot of wonderful things, creative and smart and artsy. She felt things at every extreme, sadness and happiness, all of it. It was

overwhelming for her. When you were younger, I could see it was similar for you. My biggest fear was that it might consume you the way it did her. I thought the best thing I could do for you was help you learn to control it. But I see now, I wasn't helping you control it at all – I was teaching you to lock it away and that wasn't any healthier.

“I'm not like the greatest at this stuff, but Janice – that's the woman I've been seeing – she gets me talking. She helps me see the bigger picture. I just didn't want you to think I didn't love your mom, because I loved her more than I could handle. I didn't keep her from you because I hated her. It was just too hard to look at those pictures and tell you all the stories. When I found out she passed, I didn't know how to tell you and even though I didn't know the details, you seemed to be going through some things yourself at the time. Having to do with this British kid, maybe?”

“Oh, Dad. That's a longer, sadder story for another night. But suffice it to say, I think he's 'The One.'”

“What about West's friend?”

“He's what your brain wants, not what your heart wants.”

“Mm hmm.” He grumbled and nodded in understanding.

“Well, your old man doesn't know much, but here's what I do know – you deserve someone who matches you in every way. Someone who challenges you to be better, gets drunk with you when you need it and then splashes cold water on your face the next day. Someone who isn't afraid to tell you the things you need to hear and has enough sense to tell you the things you deserve to hear. Is that him?”

I smiled, “Yeah.”

“You know, a reporter came by the shop a few months back and showed me a photo of the two of you from years ago. They said you were back together. I guess they were right.”

“Yeah, that was before we got back together. But I’m sorry about that, Dad. That should never have happened. I don’t ever want the circumstances of our lives to disrupt the peace of yours.”

“It’s ok. I just wondered if he’s so important to you, why’d you never bring him around to meet me? I understand if you’re embarrassed, but I’d like to maybe meet him at least once.”

My heart broke at the idea that my dad thought he might be an embarrassment to me. Nothing could be further from the truth. He was the gravity holding me to the earth all my life.

I reached across the table to grab his hand. “Dad – no. That’s not it at all. This was my own shit. It didn’t have anything to do with you. I love you so much and I’m so proud to be your daughter, and I’m gonna do better. I talked to my boss and I’m gonna spend half the year here at home, doing jobs locally. Finn will be here with me. I want him to know you and I want you to get to know him too. Maybe you can even visit us in England, and he can take you to visit historical World War II sites or something.”

His eyes lit up.

“Is that the kind of thing he’s into?” He asked, hopeful.

“Dad, he’s so eager to impress you. He’s probably hired a tutor to teach him everything there is to know before he meets you.”

“So, I will get to meet him then?”

“Well,” I smiled, “of course. He’ll be here for my birthday; I want him to meet everyone.”

“I’d never wish you ill, Jax, but I’m glad you got stuck here at home for so long. Maybe it gave you the chance to get to know yourself again for the first time in a long time. I know it gave me the chance to know you again.”

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We shifted the conversation to lighter topics, and he told me all about Janice, a woman who'd brought in her classic car for a repair and knew more about cars than Dad had expected. They hit it off and had been hanging out for a while when she finally made the first move and kissed him at the movies. The idea of my dad at the movies was completely foreign to me, but if Janice was getting him out of his comfort zone, then she had my seal of approval.

He asked my permission to bring Janice to my birthday so I could meet her. I agreed and assured him I'd be home often enough to get to know her as much as he was comfortable with.

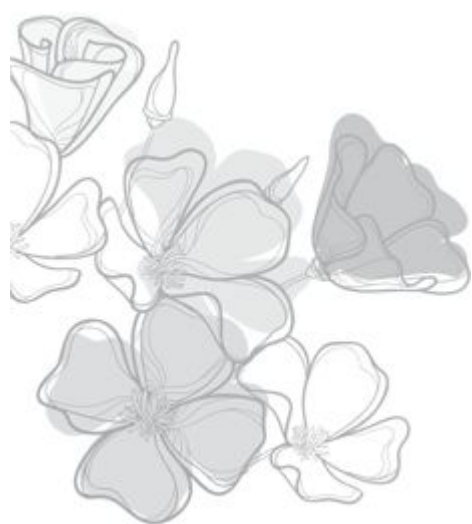
When we got back to my house, he walked me to my door and did a scan of the area to make sure no intruders were hiding in small spaces – that's another thing he always did for me.

He told me he had something in the trunk of his car to give me and ran out into the night air to retrieve it. When he returned, he handed me a shoebox and told me they were pictures of my mom, some of me and her together, and old trinkets and things he wanted me to have. He hugged me and kissed me on the cheek, telling me he was glad we'd gotten to air some things out.

Janice was a good influence.

I laid in bed that night, completely at peace. I forgave my mom, because what other choice did I have? I couldn't let it eat at me for the rest of my life. Strangely, I was happy to know more about her, and hear that I was like the best parts of her. Mostly, I think I was relieved to know that I wasn't crazy. That my dad had been missing her all those years, too.

I drifted off into sleep, exhausted from the emotional dinner with my dad. Far too exhausted, in fact, to think too much about the final leg of my apology tour.



# The Misfortune of Loving Me

IT WAS hard to connect with Finn these days. It felt like we were always just missing each other. Time zones for the other side of the country are hard enough, but time zones for the other side of the world were entirely impossible. He was always awake when I was asleep, and vice versa. We'd come into the habit of sending voice recordings to one another. It's like talking on the phone, but in your own time.

He created funny little titles for his voice recordings, like episodes of a podcast. The last one he sent me was titled "This One is Just More Questions About Carter." In it he asked if I'd spoken to Carter yet (which I had not), and if I had not – when I was going to stop being a chicken shit and go talk to him. He said, and I quote, "are you planning on doing it before I arrive, or shall we do it together?" It was a mild push for me to do what inevitably needed doing.

My original plan had been to go and see him a few days after dinner with my dad. But he didn't know I was coming, so there was no harm in putting it off a few more days. After those days came and went, it turned into another week, which then turned into two. Before I realized how much time I'd spent avoiding it, I'd stumbled into the beginning of March.

The beginning of March was also a countdown to Finn arriving in California and, of course, my twenty-eighth birthday. My dreaded conversation with Carter needed to be had and needed to be had immediately.

Some part of me told myself I didn't actually need to talk to him. When I did the math, I hadn't had any contact with this



man since October. Five months was a long time. Nothing about the last five months gave me any indication he wanted to hear what I had to say. So much had changed. I tried to recall the last thing I'd send to him in the last voicemail he didn't listen to. I'm sure it was solemn, but in no way was it an "ok, I get it, goodbye forever and have a wonderful life," message.

I was going to show up at the pet clinic on one of the days I know he leaves early and try to accost him for a drink or a late lunch. He probably had a girlfriend now. Boys like Carter don't have any trouble finding someone to love them. That girlfriend probably didn't think too highly of me, and I'm sure she wouldn't appreciate me stalking her boyfriend at his place of business. Maybe all of this was a bad idea, and I probably shouldn't do it.

I had to do it. But I didn't want to. I knew it wouldn't go well, and all I could hope for was not to have an awkward encounter with a new girlfriend who was likely to hit me. I decided to have the conversation the next day, and when the next day arrived, I still wasn't ready.

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I put on a pair of dark blue jeans, the ones that make me feel the most confident – not the ones that are the most comfortable, and a black slinky top. I knew showing up in an old, tattered band t-shirt and jeans with holes in them was just not going to garner any feelings of goodwill. After all, Carter had reminded me time and time again that I was a grownup. I even took a few minutes to wear makeup – feeling like it might serve me well as battle armor.

I still hadn't bought a car, but Lizzie let me borrow hers. I tried to borrow Cindy's, but she barely let me breathe in her car, much less drive it. Lizzie's car, a cute little silver Volvo, smelled of strawberries and had a stack of hair ties sitting neatly around the shift knob. All of these things were perfectly

on character for Lizzie, as was her offer to take me and wait for me in the car while I spoke to him.

I'd declined, and as soon I found myself sitting in the parking lot in front of the clinic, I felt sick to my stomach. I could see Carter from the front window of the building, laughing with his front desk staff and carrying a satchel over his shoulder. He was still perfect. Heartbroken, self-righteous, and probably still pissed off at me, but definitely still perfect.

I parked next to him, so there was no possibility he wouldn't see me. Before he exited the clinic, I got out of the car and leaned against the hood. I made best efforts to appear cooler than I am by any stretch of the imagination.

When he saw me, he looked surprised, and not particularly pleased. He stood motionless for a moment, giving me a dirty look and trying to decide whether he wanted to give me the time of day. When the moment was over, he'd apparently decided he did not. He rolled his eyes and rushed to his driver's side door.

"What's a girl gotta do to get some attention from a nice veterinarian?" I shouted over the hood of his car. "Do I need to bring my fish back in?"

He gave me another dirty look and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'm not doing this today."

"Do you want to do it tomorrow?" I asked sheepishly.

"No." He opened his car door and started to get in.

"Carter!" I shouted a little louder. "What the fuck? Come on, it's been five months!"

He quickly got out of the car and rushed over to me. "You left me in a fucking hotel room, Jax. You got on a plane with your ex-boyfriend. What the fuck? What the fuck indeed."

“I was always gonna get on a plane with Finn, you knew that.”

“Yeah, ok. I’m done. Like I said – I’m not doing this today.” He started to put his things in the car.

“When are you going to do it? Because I left you a bunch of messages that you never even bothered listening to. I left you messages until your voicemail box was full. I didn’t even realize that was a thing that could happen for fuck’s sake.” I opened the door to Lizzie’s car and started to get in, because this, obviously, had been a huge mistake.

“Listen to your voice messages for what? I wasn’t interested in anything you had to say. I’m still not. You made your choice – you left with him,” he walked toward me as I was halfway in the driver’s seat, “and, you’re so full of shit, you know that? You were *so* full of shit talking about how it wasn’t like that between you, and how you weren’t going to get back together. Him with his stupid accent talking about how he wasn’t here for that. But it took less than ninety days, Jax. Ninety *fucking* days, for him to write and dedicate another stupid album to you. He shared it with the whole damn internet, talking about how you’re his soul mate.

“So, I guess I’m the fucking idiot for thinking you were ever going to come back to me, or love me, or even be the slightest bit honest with me.” He tossed his satchel onto the roof of his car in frustration. “I took you to meet my mom, Jax. *Fuck.*” His voice started to break. “I just wanted – I don’t even know – it doesn’t matter anymore. But all of this is what I was trying to avoid,” he gestured between the two of us.

“All of what?” I asked.

“All the drama. I was just here, casually living my life, when you walked in with your goldfish. I would have done anything for you. That’s the worst part. I loved you and all you ever had to do was be honest with me. About literally

anything. Honest about why you were home. Honest about Finn. Honest about what you wanted from me – which was just, I don't know, to fulfill a childhood fantasy or something?"

"Carter, I was as honest with you as I could be. You just didn't like what I had to say. I told you what my life was like. You took it for granted that I was just biding time until I decided to settle down. You patronized everything about me, and you watered down my entire career to just taking pictures of anything, anywhere. And yeah, you took me to meet your mom, but you know what? I didn't ask you to do that. You sprung it on me, and if you'd ask me in advance, I would have freely told you I wasn't ready. Then your mom sat me down at her kitchen table and showed me a roadmap of the rest of your life. Your plan to move back home, find a nice apple pie baking wife and have some kids in little league, getting wine wasted with the fucking McSherries. That's not me, Carter. That's never been me, and it'll never be me. I can't give you that life, because to me, that life is a prison. A beautiful prison to be sure, but a golden cage is still a locked cage."

He spat sardonic laughter. "A golden cage is still a locked cage? Ok, Jax. Give me a fucking break. A gold cage is still a locked cage – well, I'm sorry for loving you. I'm sorry for giving a shit. Where was wonder boy while all this was happening? Having indiscriminate sex and not caring about you in the slightest. Then he shows up on your doorstep, whisks you back into the land of loud music and dark liquor, so now you're ready? For him you're ready? To settle down and live happily ever after? But when I offered it to you, it was a prison? How does *any* of that make sense? Maybe I'm just dumb. Not cool enough for the rock music scene. Not cool enough to drink whiskey and take black and white photos and say bullshit like you're a 'soul my home can always return to.' Come on. It's so disingenuous. I thought you were smarter than that, but I guess not." He shrugged off the insult.

“Dude, how fucking dare you,” I said. “How dare you patronize me like that. You have no idea what I’ve been through, or who I am. You infantilized me, you made it seem like I was a little fucking kid who needed your help to grow up. You spent so long thinking you’re so much better and more adult than me. Why? Just because you wear sweater vests to work? You looked at me and my life, and you decided I could do better. You loved me, but it was *always* conditional on me becoming who you thought I was supposed to be. You saw problems to solve, and Finn only ever saw me.”

“Jax, don’t delude yourself into thinking you’re not just as much to blame. Finn only saw you? Maybe that’s because you *let* him see you. So, cool. This is who you are. This is your life. You’re happy. You’re good. You got the guy you wanted. It wasn’t a secret. You’re not here delivering news. He’s fucking famous. You don’t think there are pictures of the two of you all over the internet? Why are you here? What were you hoping to accomplish?”

“I’m here to tell you I’m sorry. I was trying to make amends. I was gonna take you to get fucking tacos or something.”

“I don’t need you to ruin tacos with your self-serving bullshit. I can get my own tacos.” He started to walk away.

“You’re a sore fucking loser, you know that?”

“Well, that’s the thing Jax – I didn’t realize it was a competition. You told me he was just a friend. So, yeah – I guess I’m a little sore about it.”

“Don’t do that. He *was* just a friend. But it didn’t matter what I said, you decided I was a liar the minute he showed up. You turned it into a competition the instant you saw him.”

“You caused a scene at my cousin’s wedding. You yelled at my mom, over shared in front of my entire family, and then when I tried to talk to you about it, you broke up with me for

no reason. You kicked me out of your house, and less than twelve hours later, you're having pancakes with him."

"I didn't know he was coming," I insisted.

"Just tell me, Jax – what was the fucking point of us? Huh? Did you love me at all? Or was it all just killing time?"

"If you don't know how I felt about you, you weren't paying attention." The conversation was going around in painful circles and nothing I could ever say was going to make it ok for him. "You know what – this was a mistake. I just wanted to apologize, tell you I was wrong for how I left, and wish you well. That's why I came. I wanted to explain that I never meant to end up back together with Finn – but he's who I'm supposed to be with. He accepts me for who I am without conditions."

"You're sorry? Ok, fine. But you don't need me to accept that apology. Like everything else in the past year, that apology was about you. It's about you making yourself feel better. It's about you not having a guilty conscience. You are astonishingly selfish, you know that? You're one of the most selfish people I've ever met in my life. And I thought it was just immaturity, but in hindsight, I realize it's just who you are. So, you're probably right – Finn is the one you're supposed to be with."

"It's not self-serving. I'm trying to be honest with you for once. I wanted you to know how important you were to me. Not just five months ago, but ten years ago. You're Carter fucking Summers. And I saw you that day in the clinic and you saved my fish, and you saved me too. I was in a dark place, and you shined a light. I can never repay you for that. But I'd changed. I didn't realize how different we were. I'm not good for you, Carter. And if we're being really honest with ourselves, you aren't good for me either. One of us was always

going to have to change for us to be together, and that's not how it should be."

"So where does that leave us, then?" He asked, the hurt apparent in his voice.

"It just leaves us with apologies and goodbyes. And it's ok. We get to live our lives. You find someone who wants to put on a pair of jeans and boots, and you go to the river with a picnic basket, and you live your life. And I'm gonna live mine."

"Everything you're saying makes sense to you – in your own head, but you don't even realize how much I loved you. You were like gravity. I would have lived whatever life you wanted me to. I didn't want to change you – I just wanted to be with you. And you fucking ruined it."

"That's *you* deluding yourself, Carter, and it's bullshit. You were never gonna do that. You were never gonna give up your life, and I wasn't gonna give up mine. And there's nothing wrong with that. But how I went about it wasn't ok. And that's why I came here to say I'm sorry."

He paused for a long moment, considering whether he hated me or whether he was just hurt.

"I don't forgive you."

"Are you serious? Now who's the adult?"

"It's still me, Jax! You're spoiled and you're used to getting whatever-the-fuck you want, but you don't get to have this. I'm grown up enough to know that you can't have it both ways, and you don't get to dictate how other people deal with how you made them feel. You got the life you wanted? Cool. I hope you never have to ask yourself if it was worth it. You don't get to come here on your terms and in your time and have it end happily ever after. What did you expect I was going to do? Hug you and tell you I'd always love you? Say

that I understand, and I forgive you? I'm sorry. I understand, but I *don't* forgive you. And that's all there is. You came for closure? You can have it. It's closed. You're not entitled to anything more than that."

He stood silent in his anger, breathing heavily and looking down at his watch like there was somewhere else he needed to be. He was right, there was nothing left to say. It was closed.

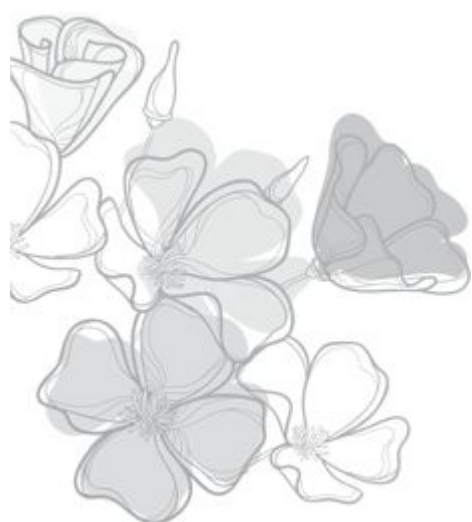
"Fair enough. I'm sorry I hurt you, but I'll always be grateful for you, and I'm gonna miss you."

He started to put his things in the car before looking at me one last time. "I hope you don't. But if you do, do me a favor – write it in a journal. Don't come back looking for me."

He got in the car and shut the door. He put it in reverse and drove away without looking back. And everything hurt. I didn't want it to end that way, and I didn't want him to be so angry. But he was right – I wasn't entitled to what I wanted when it came to him.

He'd forgive me or he wouldn't – in his own time. That had to be enough. I trusted that it would be.





## Twenty-Eight

**O**N MY final day of twenty-seven, I opened my eyes to one Finnley Archibald Hendricks sleeping peacefully next to me. The California sunshine permeating my bedroom window illuminated his curls. I hadn't realized how much I'd missed him until he showed up on my doorstep a full twenty-four hours earlier than expected. He'd flown all night to get to me.

Awake in the silence, I wondered what twenty-eight would bring, and if I'd miss being twenty-seven. A thousand defining moments in my life flashed through my brain like scrolling through digital photos. So many of them happened in those last twelve months. I would never be the same, but I wasn't all that different.

Since Finn had arrived, we'd made some big decisions and taken care of some things I'd been avoiding. We decided to keep the bungalow. He didn't need a home studio. There were plenty of places in LA to record music. Garrett Henley agreed to join Black Heart Sunday on tour while they were in the States. We would be doing a minimal amount of karaoke for my birthday after, and only after, I'd had a fancy dinner and a lot to drink. Finally – I'd bought a car. Something sporty with dark brown leather interior, in a cool color that you don't see very often. More expensive than a car should be, but still completely Jax. And it had a state-of-the-art sound system.

I exhaled a breath I felt like I'd been holding in all year long. I looked around my room, suddenly alive with the things that make a house a home. When I came here a year ago, home

was a word I only ever used in the abstract. It didn't mean much to me. It was a fleeting idea. Home was the airport. Home was a concert. Home was my favorite hotels in my favorite cities. It was never stationary. It didn't feel so far away anymore. Home was still the airport and the concerts, and the camera lens. But home was also Arundel and Malibu. My goldfish. The plants I'd recently invested in that adorned my walls and shelves. Home was the person lying next to me, breathing steadily in his sleep. Home was my brother and dad and my best friends. It was all tangible. It wasn't pie in the sky. Not anymore.

I didn't have a lot of stuff, but my girlfriends made sure I could fill the house with things that were personal. Cindy took me shopping. New leather jackets and jeans whose holes were manufactured and not earned. Lizzie brought me books, ones she read and loved, and some she insisted reminded her of me because of a particularly precocious heroine.

The plants. The pictures. The clothes in the closet that weren't just mine. Finn's hair gel on my bathroom counter. The robe's he had sent over from his house because he remembered how much I loved them. These were all little pieces of me that enveloped a space and made it feel like I was always supposed to be here, lost in my own thoughts.

There was no going back to sleep. I carefully rolled out of bed and put on a pair of fuzzy socks and a long cardigan I liked to wear when I drank tea. I went to the kitchen to make hot chocolate, then took it to my living room to read an old book Lizzie had given me. When he woke, Finn came stumbling sleepily into the living room in a pair of drawstring plaid pajama bottoms. His hair stuck straight up in every direction.

"Good morning, my love." He smiled sweetly and planted a kiss on the top of my head. He settled on the opposite side of the couch, intertwining his long lanky legs with mine. He sat

there silently for several moments before I realized he was watching me read.

“I can’t have you doing that. You’re making me nervous.”

“Doing what?” He asked, feigning naivety.

“Watching me read.”

“I like watching you read. You look perfectly at home, and it’s beautiful. Watching you read is one of my favorite things in the world.”

I rolled my eyes. “Everything is your favorite thing in the world,” I teased.

“I’m a passionate guy,” he shrugged. “Can I tell you something?”

“Of course.” I carefully placed an old receipt in between the pages to mark my spot and closed the book.

“All these years, every year on your birthday, I would think of you. I’d wonder what you were doing, and I wished I was with you, doing it too. Whatever it might be. What did you do last year – before the accident?”

“I had dinner with my dad, my brother, Casey, Lizzie, and Cindy. Casey was stressed out about wedding planning, trying to get the flavor of the cake they’d picked out for me because she liked it so much. We were at some rooftop restaurant. I left early to go see the guy I was dating – and, well, I didn’t make it there.”

“The lawyer?”

“Yes, the lawyer.”

“Well, tonight will be much of the same,” he said, “minus the traumatic near-death experience. I know you’d never wreck a car you’d just driven off the lot. I’ve planned it all with your mates. Your dad and his new lady friend will be

meeting us there and,” he looked down at his watch, “we’re due to pick up your brother at the airport in about an hour.”

He leaned forward and took the book out of my hand, kissing me like he’d been dying to do it all his life. Kissing never got old with Finn. He always kissed me with the urgency of someone who loved me more than I could understand. I hoped he always would.

“I guess I should get dressed.”

“Get dressed. Go in your pajamas. It’s neither here nor there to me.” He got up and walked toward the bathroom. “But I will be getting dressed. I can’t meet your brother in plaid trousers.”

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I spotted my brother and Casey immediately. West and I ran to each other in slow motion, the way we always did at the airport. Finn followed behind me rubbing his nervous hands together. I greeted West with a tight hug and a slap on the arm and then hugged Casey in turn.

Finn cleared his throat from beside me. “Hi there, West – Casey, I’m Finn – so glad to finally meet you both. I can take your bag, mate,” he said, grabbing West’s duffle.

“You can skip the formalities, dude. We know who you are – you kinda crashed our wedding,” he said playfully.

“One of my bridesmaids had quite the evening because of you,” Casey teased, moving in to give him a warm hug. “We’re glad to meet you, too.”

*I’d almost forgotten about that.*

Back at the bungalow where West and Casey would be staying for the weekend, West and I took a walk on the beach. I recounted the emotional conversation I’d had with Dad, and he confessed he’d known Dad was going to talk to me about

our mom because Dad had done the same with him the month before. He'd also given West a stack of old photos.

“I guess everyone's handling their bullshit these days, huh?”

“Nah, it's mostly just you and Dad. It's like you both took some kind of diarrhetic for your emotional constipation.” He slung his arm around me. “It's been exhausting if I'm being honest. I'm hoping maybe we can just go back to only talking once every few months.” He laughed. “I'm glad you're here. I'm glad you found a way to make it a home without compromising your life. You look really happy – and I hate to say it, but Finn is pretty great.”

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A short while and an outfit change later, we found ourselves at the same rooftop bar we'd gone to last year. Cindy's idea. She said we were taking it back. We were replacing the shitty memories with better ones. Once Dad and Janice had enough of an opportunity to ask Finn all their invasive questions, they'd get tired because they're old, and they'd call it a night, leaving the rest of the night for karaoke.

I still kind of thought it was a terrible idea.

When we approached the table, my dad stood up to meet us and greeted Finn with a firm handshake, which Finn would later tell me hurt like hell.

“Hello, Sir,” Finn said. “I'm so glad to finally meet you. I'm absolutely mad for your daughter, and I can't wait to spend some more time getting to know you.”

“Mm hmm,” my dad grumbled. “I listened to your album, kid. Pretty depressing stuff. Did you, uh – did you thank my daughter when you won that Grammy?”

Finn started to sweat. “I uh–” he laughed nervously and looked over at me, “did – did I thank you? I'm not, I don't

really recall, uh,” he chuckled again, at a complete loss for words. Maybe for the first time in his life.

I shook my head at my dad, trying not to laugh. I’m not sure Finn Hendricks had ever had the pleasure of being properly intimidated by someone’s dad before.

“Dad – knock it off,” I insisted.

“I’m more of a classic rock guy, myself, you know what I mean?”

“Absolutely. I’m a classic rock guy as well, actually. I mean, listening to my mum’s old records is what made me love music to begin with,” Finn said, quickly saving the conversation. “I’ve said to Jax that I hope you’ll visit us in Arundel over the winter. I’d love to show you my record collection and introduce you to my mum. She’s got a garden where she grows her own tomatoes and herbs, and she makes her own pasta sauce. You both would really enjoy it there, I think. And I can take you to see some historical war sites. Jax has told me you’re really interested in European history.”

Finn held his breath as my dad stared at him, deciding whether to let him off the hook. Dad smiled, patting him on the shoulder. “Now you’re speaking my language, kid!”

That was all it took. They spent the next hour talking about the world wars and all the battle sites Dad might be able to visit if he came to Europe. Finn had become a history connoisseur on purpose over the last month, and it paid off more than he could have imagined.

Garrett and Lizzie regaled us with talk of their wedding plans, telling us they’d picked a date for next summer. Garrett and Finn talked about how much they looked forward to spending some time together on the road. Lizzie declared that she’d decided Cindy and I would be co-maids of honor and told us she’d decided that nothing could possibly be more elegant than a black and white wedding.

And on and on the small talk continued, but this time around, it didn't feel suffocating, and I didn't want it to end. Eventually, the waiter came out holding another fancy cake with my name written in cursive in chocolate frosting. Every single person I loved most in the world sang me "Happy Birthday". My friends took pictures of me nuzzled into Finn's side with my dad and brother smiling brightly beside us, our eyes lit up by the sparkled candles before I blew them out to make a wish.

We said goodbye to my dad in the parking lot, as West tried unsuccessfully to convince him to come to karaoke. The rest of the night passed in a blur of drunken singing. Finn and I singing the same songs from all those years ago. This time, when I sang, I took the time to notice how he looked at me – like I was the most magical creature he'd ever encountered. He mouthed the words along with me, holding his hand over his heart in a silent gesture of adoration.

Cindy and Lizzie, on the other hand, sang along loudly and drunkenly, woo-hoo'ing all the way through and cheering when the song ended. Cindy threw her arm around me and proclaimed I had always been a country kid deep down inside.

West and Casey called it a night first, forever the most responsible ones. Not long after, we all followed suit. Cindy had driven with us in my brand-new car, so we took her home as well. Lizzie had her own designated driver in Garrett Henley. On the way to Cindy's, she sang loudly along with the songs on the radio from the back, as I threatened her not to vomit on my new leather seats. When we arrived at her apartment, Finn helped her to her door and made sure she got in safely before returning to the car to make sure I returned home safely as well.

And then it was just us again. Driving through the city in comfortable silence, my eyes began to fall heavy, but I didn't want to stop looking at him. I leaned against the headrest and



gazed at his perfect side profile, noticing the way his ink-stained fingers wrapped around the gearshift and feeling the fullness of my heart in my chest.

I could have died there and never had any regrets.

I wouldn't, though. I'd learned somewhere along the way that life goes on. With or without you. The prospect of life and love didn't scare me anymore. I was a fully realized version of myself, and that it gave me a confidence I'd only been pretending to have up until that moment.

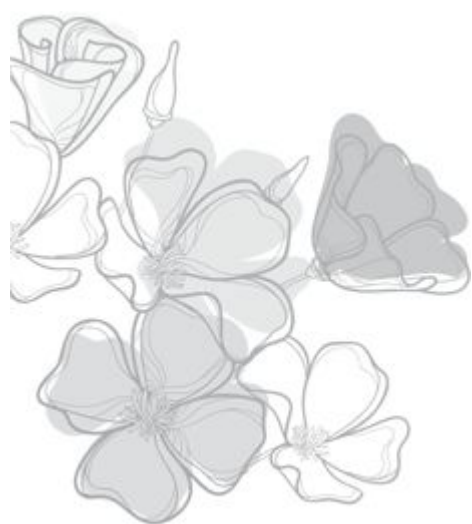
At a red light, he turned and looked back at me, smiling sweetly and pointing at the digital clock on the dashboard.

It was officially March 15<sup>th</sup>.

"You're twenty-eight," he said. "How does it feel?"

"It feels like the ending and the beginning all at once," I replied as the light turned green, and we drove off again into the night.

THE END.



## Epilogue: Thirty

**A** BLACK emerald cut stone sat squarely on my ring finger, distracting me as I made best efforts to scribble a dedication on the inside cover of *An Off Beat Love Story*. This book had my name on the spine, and a hundred pages filled with the photo journey of a lifetime. Poetry set to music, conveniently captured on film.

Dr. Nancy wouldn't care what I wrote on the inside. The gesture was enough. She, more than most, knew what I was thinking better than I did. And I didn't want to be late.

I scribbled on the inside:

*I'm not good with words, but you already know. Thank you for putting up with my shit. – Jax.*

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I drove in circles around a full parking lot, asking myself who the hell goes to therapy on their birthday. Me – because it was the only day this week Dr. Nancy could get me in. I'm nothing if not dedicated to the preservation of my own mental health.

The night before, at the same rooftop restaurant I'd been celebrating all my birthdays since twenty-seven, and in front of all my family and friends, Finn asked me to marry him. Lizzie and Garrett's six-month-old baby, Lily, slept in her carrier peacefully while everyone cheered and congratulated us. Only a musician's baby could sleep through a commotion like that. I couldn't take my eyes off the ring. I grew up seeing diamonds set in gold bands, but this one was made just for me.

The band was silver. The stone was deep black. It was simple and simultaneously bold.

When the end of your twenties comes, it sneaks up on you in ways you don't expect. When I was younger, I always wanted to be in my twenties. I craved the chaos and the excitement of learning to live life on your own, falling in love, and traveling the world. I did all those things. So, on the last night of my twenties, all I wanted for the next ten years was peace of mind, and calmness of spirit. Twenty-Nine had been one of the best years of my life, and I would miss it dearly.

Lizzie's baby was born in September. I became an auntie for the first time just before Finn and I left for our time in Arundel. Not everyone's journey to parenthood comes so easily. After their first year of marriage, West and Casey began struggling to get pregnant. And the times they had been pregnant, Casey miscarried. A thing she'd counted on her whole life was suddenly out of reach. They'd seen doctors and infertility specialists, and they tried IVF. All attempts were thus far unsuccessful. They see friends around them having kids and they are gracious and loving, but they are heartbroken. People ask Casey when they will start a family, and she is polite, but it breaks her a little more inside every time she has to answer an invasive question.

I learned that not everyone's story has a happy ending. That lesson is the hardest part of growing up. So, as Finn promised all those years ago, we took out a bottle of whiskey and we talked about the choices in front of us. Did we want to be parents? Were all the things we'd have to go through to achieve parenthood worth it to us? Could we handle it? In the end, we decided our lives were full, complete, and full of love, even without kids. We would spoil our friends' kids, and hopefully someday, my brother's kid, too. We would live as we always had, discovering the world together. Music and art and books and movies, travel and exploration and adventure.

We even started doing those puzzle boxes West and Casey love so much (but we use the hints).

Our lives were exactly as we wanted them to be. Black Heart Sunday continued to grow and evolve their sound. As for me—I continued to make my mark on music in my own way, by discovering new bands and giving them the gift of all their firsts memorialized in a photo. I published my book, and *Rolling Stone* threw me a launch party. Finn built a studio in LA and he and the boys started their own label. They decided it shouldn't just be me out in the world discovering new musicians.

Cindy went to Paris and started her own clothing line. We saw her regularly during our time in the U.K. Nothing could be more fitting, and no one looked better in a beret. We all planned to get together in January for my dad and Janice's wedding. We all had our own hurdles, but we were living our lives in the best way we knew how. For the most part—it was going pretty fucking great.

But not all days are good days, and the storm clouds still stay with me, reminding me not every day can be sunshine. So, I still see Dr. Nancy once a week while I'm in California.

“Dr. Nancy, your parking lot sucks. I need my own parking spot.”

Dr. Nancy shook her head at me. Somehow, she still hadn't had enough of my nonsense. “Jax, you're here once a week for six months out of the year. Even I don't have my own parking spot.”

“I brought you a copy of my book.” I handed her the book before I plopped myself down on her couch. “I thought you could show it to your daughter. I know how much she's into music. There are some pretty cool bands in there.”

“Thank you, and yes, I will show this to her. She'll be home this weekend from Stanford to visit.”

“Damn, Dr. Nancy. Stanford? That’s amazing.”

She smiled her smile that lets me know it’s time to get down to business. “How was this week?”

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Dr. Nancy and I talked about all the usual things for the rest of the hour, and when my time was up, we said our goodbyes. Walking back down to my car, I saw a group of girls dressed up and laughing together on the sidewalk. They’d just come out of the restaurant next to Dr. Nancy’s office. One of them was wearing a crown.

They waved me down from across the street. “Hey! Hey lady! Do you think you could take our picture?”

“Sure,” I said, walking across the street to meet them. The one who waved me down handed me her phone, camera at the ready.

“Oh my god, thank you so much! We forgot to ask the waiter to take it while we were still inside. It’s kind of a special day.”

“Oh yeah?” I asked, lining them all up together and walking backward to get them all in the frame. “What’s the occasion?”

The girl with the crown smiled shyly, cheeks turning red from secondhand embarrassment. “It’s not that big of a deal. It’s just, it’s my birthday.”

“Really?” I asked, ecstatic to meet a birthday twin. “Mine too!”

“Oh my gosh, seriously? Happy birthday! How old are you turning?” She asked excitedly.

“Thirty,” I said, handing back the phone to her friend.

“I can’t wait to be in my thirties! Please tell me you get it all figured out by that age?”

I thought for a moment and then smiled. “You know what? Yeah. You kind of do. How about you? How old are you today?”

“Twenty-Seven.”

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