

Bridge

by

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Bridge

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ABSTRACT

Bridge, the beginning of a novel, is a character driven contemporary young adult piece following the main character after a trauma. It is a coming of age novel, a story of friendship, family, recovery, and love.

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How's The World Treating You?

I almost killed a Beatles fan this morning. It wasn't the first time, but that's not important. What's important is that the punk was trash talking Elvis, and that's not something you want to do around me. Especially not to my face. Sure, she was a chick, and me being the well-mannered 22-year-old that I was, shouldn't have had the urge to wipe the pretty smile off her face, but she got under my skin. I was in line at my local Walgreens picking up peppermint Ice Breakers Ice Cubes and a pack of menthols, along with some magazine's special edition with Elvis on the cover. It caught my eye as I waited for the old man in front of me. He stuffed his hands in every pocket on him, looking for his wallet, including the inside of that old yellow raincoat he wore even though it wasn't raining. The red trapper on his head looked real tight, and I swear I saw his right big toe peeping out of the hole in his brown boots, but I didn't see a bindle on him. No crooked walking stick slung with polka dotted fabric and a neat knot at the top. I started thinking maybe he wasn't a hobo but an ordinary man who didn't know what else to buy from a Walgreens except a set of West Loop Men's Acrylic Rib Crew Socks—black.

But who was I to judge his fashion choices? I was a guy standing there in blue suede boots and my usual razor faded pompadour, after all. Being a redhead didn't help either. Copper. If I cared I stuck out like a sore thumb, I may have considered something

a little less obnoxious, but I liked it too much. Made me feel like a tough guy from the 50s. Like Elvis. I guess the girl behind me saw the magazine in my hand—or maybe it was *Here Comes the Sun* coming on after a Phil Collins track on Mix 98.9, the local Adult Contemporary station—because she made a comment about Elvis lacking originality.

“The Beatles did so much more for music,” she said. One of those fans. Probably wasn’t real familiar with anything other than God awful *I Want to Hold Your Hand*.

“Huh?” I eyed her real careful. I never liked engaging in grocery line conversations. My mother also raised me to be polite to strangers regardless of how annoying they were—that girl could pretend to like whoever she wanted—but the second Elvis got dragged into it, I had to step up. Sometimes people crossed a line, and you had to take care of business when they did. It wasn't my fault she didn't realize her bugs were the ones who got to meet E that August in '65. Not the other way around.

“Elvis,” she said, pointing at my magazine, “didn't write his own songs. Plus, the guy went soft.” She twirled a lock of her blond hair as she spoke, fuchsia dyed tips curled around a finger.

“Really?” I glanced over my shoulder at her. “Yeah hhhe didn't write his own music,” I turned to point a finger at her, liking the way my gold Aloha Horseshoe ring glittered in the harsh fluorescent lighting, “but he sssang those songs like no one else. Doesn't make him less of an, an, an artist,” I said. She rolled her eyes and snorted and twisted her head, and I wasn’t sure if it was at my stuttering or that she couldn't believe what I was saying. Probably both.

“The dude was relevant in the fifties. He just got fat in the end and OD’d on the toilet. No artistry.”

“You’re one t-t-to talk. Didn't Paul McCartney and his bugs always drop acid before rrecording trash for six hours?” I turned my attention back to the man in front of me when I noticed him put some change in the cashier's hand, and hoped the girl would get the hint I wasn't interested in her useless debate anymore. But she wasn't done. She opened her mouth again and said Elvis was overrated.

“So, so, so John and the boys were the only groundbreaking artists ttto ever exist,” I said, “even though Lennon was the one who sssaid before Elvis, there was nothing?” I had to stop myself, because I was real tempted to go off. If I started a snobbish record store brawl right in the middle of the pharmacy, what would that say about my character?

Besides, she wasn't going to listen to me. Not when she was so willing to argue about music in a Walgreens while dressed in her *The Beatles* hoodie she'd probably been wearing all week. And I wasn't in the mood after getting three hours of sleep last night, which became a real problem four months ago when my life went to hell. The fluorescent lighting didn't help much either, despite my ring looking real cool whenever I wiggled my finger around.

The girl stood there still, waiting for an answer I knew she wouldn't like, my phone buzzed in my back jean pocket with a text for the hundredth time that day, and I grew more uncomfortable by the second, because the line wasn't moving and she was staring at me like she could see something I didn't want her to see and my hands started to sweat real bad I was afraid I'd ruin the magazine. I faced the front again. Last time. Managed to play it smooth, play it cool. Elvis and Beatles fans couldn't be friends.

The guy at the cash finally stuffed his wallet back into the pocket of that squeaky raincoat and shuffled out the door, plastic bag swinging in his hand. That's when I stepped up, praying with everything in me the little bug didn't follow too close to continue the conversation she still hadn't realized I wanted no part in. And when she stayed in place, probably offended and most definitely distracted by the folks slipping in through the automatic doors, I swallowed the lump in my throat and met the cashier with a quick smile. I looked away before I started to sweat and squirm, more than I usually did around people, and the voice in my head started shouting like she was looking at more than just me, seeing every detail, every flaw, every secret. And for all I know, she could be. So I looked over at the Chap Sticks tucked into the little cardboard boxes lined on a white rack. I grabbed a purple lighter from the last box and set it on the counter.

"Anything else?" the cashier asked, dragging the magazine, lighter, and cup of Ice Breakers towards her with squared, crimson nails. I stole a peek at her nametag: *Aaliyah*. She had nice teeth. White and neat like a line of pearls on a string.

"Yeah." I pointed behind her at the wall of smokes. "Uh, menthols. Two, please," I said, resisting asking for a third. She pushed open the case and scanned shelves of L&Ms, Basics, and Virginia Slims. Too bad no one around sold Chesterfields. They were James Dean's favorite. Elvis preferred cigars.

"These?" She waved two Marlboros. I nodded with another quick smile and flashed the driver's license I'd had in my hand before I got out of the car, even though I was sure I looked old enough. "You're too young to be smoking these."

"Ppprobably," I said. She shook her head and scanned the five items, careful not to bend the magazine, for which I was real thankful. I threw one last smile her way after

paying, just in case she didn't catch the first two, and headed out to my car. I let it run as I dug around the plastic bag for my cup of gum. If I wasn't smoking, I was popping Altoids or chewing gum real fast and real hard. My mom always called me out on it, said I looked too mean. It wasn't my intention, but I guess it complemented my look. Peppermint. Always peppermint. I liked to think I smelled like a cool twist of mint and ash instead of straight cigarettes, that stale stain, but I never could tell. You get used to it after a while. Like cat litter.

A gust of wind whirled in through the window I cracked open to air out the old cigarette smell and make room for the new. It had me bunching my shoulders until it passed. *Milkcow Blues Boogie* wailed from the speakers, Elvis on the last verse. While I could sit there listening to the same songs over and over, I had to find something to eat, because I never could commit to breakfast like a normal person, even when I didn't have to show up to work at the record shop until noon most of the time. In my defense, my stomach and breakfast didn't agree. In fact, me and mornings altogether didn't agree. It was 4:45 p.m. on a lovely October Monday, and I had to figure something out before a headache hit real hard and ruined my day. But I had a delivery to make first.

#

I fumbled with the keys on my lanyard, flipping past the key to the back door and the side door and the garage door until I had the front door's small silver key real tight between my fingers and the square package I had stuffed in my armpit. Siegfried came running once I stepped inside, weaving between my legs like he wanted me to step on his tiny cat paws with my Cuban heels. I didn't know what I'd do if I ever hurt the four-year-old Orange Tabby who happened to look a lot like Garfield. He wasn't as fat and

preferred käsespätzle to lasagna, but he was just as sadistic. Real obnoxious, too. He had cerebellar hypoplasia that made him real wobbly. We both had red hair and green eyes. We were miserable and liked the German food my parents made every once in a while. But the most important thing about that cool cat was the fact he loved Elvis just as much as I did.

“It’s for your own good. Move.” I gave him a hard nudge to the side.

“Hey,” my dad said, peeking his head out of the kitchen archway.

“Yyyou’re home early,” I said as I made my way over.

“Did I ruin your party plans?” He cracked a smile and adjusted the thin hearing aid tube resting over his ear. The television flashed and shouted from the family room, but I couldn’t make out what he had been watching.

“Yeah, you know I love a good party.” I set the package on the counter nearest to me. “This is the gift I promised you weeks ago. Order finally came iiiiin. You can’t open it until later, though.”

“Why not?”

“I have to make sure it’s the, the, the right one.” I’d managed to find a copy of *Opel-Gang*, Die Toten Hosen’s debut album from ’83, my dad’s favorite German punk band. I thought it’d be a nice surprise. A little bit of home since he hadn’t gone back to visit in almost thirty years. I had plans to borrow it, too.

“Well you shouldn’t have told me. Now the wait’s going to kill me.” He grabbed a glass cup from the cupboard and filled it from the sink. “What are you up to tonight? Your mother’s got a late shift at the hospital, and I didn’t think I’d be home early, so dinner might not happen.”

“I thought I’d grab a bite from sssomewhere.” I bent over to scoop Siegfried into my arms, his long hair clinging to the front of my black shirt.

“Hey, how’ve you been doing?” my dad asked, exhaling in the end like he regretted asking.

“Fine?” I peered at him between Siegfried’s ears.

“And work?” he asked.

“Same old stuff. Stacking records. Dealing with the public. C-c-can’t complain.” Siegfried squirmed in my hold before hopping out and wobbling away, the same way I squirmed in place under my father’s concerned gaze. He pulled a chair from the square table centered in the kitchen. That was never good.

“You stop by the store on the way?” He pointed at the Walgreens bag wrapped around my wrist.

“Grabbed some gum and cigarettes,” I said.

“I don’t know what made you pick up smoking over the summer, but I’m sure you know I don’t like it,” he said. “Neither does your mom. It reeks. Pretty much killed Opa. And all it does is make us worry—”

“I think the Alzheimer’s killed Opa,” I said. “And don’t worry. I’m nnot Audrick. I’m nnot on drugs. I don’t like it much either, but it helps.”

“Helps with what?”

“It’s nothing. It’s nothing,” I said. “In a funk. I’m a little wwound up is all.” I tried shrugging it off, my nerves, his questions. But my father always could tell when I was lying.

“What’s going on, Presley?”

“Come on, Dad. I’m not the problem.” I pressed my back to the wall. “Audrick’s dead. Hhhas been for three years. But it feels like you and mom, too, ever since you buried him.” I tapped my foot against a small rip in the patterned linoleum floor. If I didn't know any better, I'd think my older brother died just this morning, the way my dad eerily roamed the house like he was looking for something but not sure what, in the early hours right when the sun was coming up. How my mother refused to get out of bed, shutting out the light peeking in through the bedroom window with her blanket. Shutting out the world.

My dad pursed his lips, his eyes, bottle green like mine, low and to the side because I was right and he knew it. I didn’t know how he looked me straight in the eye and asked me what was wrong as though I didn’t notice the toll losing his kid to a heroin overdose had on them. It made me real angry, but I’d been angry at everything lately. He might’ve been able to read me like an open book, but I could read him just the same.

“Presley,” my dad said, “what about school?” I shrugged again. Sometimes, it was the only thing I could do.

“Wwwhat about it?” It was my turn to stare off at nothing.

“You took this fall semester off. I get it. But you have to go back.”

“I will.”

“I hate hounding you like this.”

“Then don’t.” I finally found it in myself to face him. He stared at his palms, tracing the same lines in his skin with a finger over and over again, his rusty eyebrows furrowed.

“I just need a break,” I said, wringing my hands, although, it looked more like they were cupped for prayer.

“From what?”

“Everything. I cccan’t breathe,” I told him, putting a hand to my chest where it always seemed to ache. “I got to get my feet on the ground. I keep falling behind. That’s why I’m not in school and why I’m smoking, Dad. For me.”

“So you're taking a break,” he said. “Then what, Presley?”

“I’m going to Graceland.”

Don't Ask Me Why

I eyed the fresh chalk drawings on Suzie's blackboards. Scribbles and sayings in every color of the rainbow, in every size, every font, camouflaging the menu also scribbled in chalk. The draft house was packed on a Monday evening, but I was too hungry to walk on out. Suzie's lit up downtown Youngstown. Gave it a bit of life. Some flare. I liked their hot dogs doused in obscure toppings, like blueberry mustard, and the tater tots even more. But I really went for their peanut butter and banana milkshake called the Elvis. Myself being named for the King of Rock 'n' Roll, I embraced it—the name and the image and the man—every chance I got.

Trying to forget the worry I caused my father earlier, I watched the band setting up on the small stage up front, hauling mics, lugging amps. I didn't recognize any of the guys as they passed back and forth. I counted the change in my hand three times over even though the cashier counted it out bill by bill when he handed it to me. One dollar, two, four, six—

“How's it going, Press?” A hand fell on my shoulder, fingers curled real tight. The money fell to the floor. A heat swallowed me. “Hey, you home?” It wasn't until she let go and waved that same sweaty hand in front of my face, that I recognized her.

“Chá?”

“Hey, it's Chá,” she rhymed, holding up a peace sign. “Where've you been hiding?” she asked and leaned back against one of the empty square tables. She gazed off towards the stage draped in frayed, grey carpet. We used to play in a band together. Here

at Suzie's a few times. Started back in high school and somehow kept it going up until a few months ago. Well, I left. I think the other four still played.

She adjusted the black, floppy felt hat she wore over her small afro. Her signature look. Big hair, big hats, and a wild smile made one hell of a drummer. Chá was everything I wished I was: real smart, well-spoken, confident. Since I wasn't any of those things, hanging around her was the next best option. She had a thing going with Audrick for a while before he died. The idiot didn't realize how lucky he was. Chá was kind, talented, gorgeous. She had skin like bronze and eyes that sparkled like it. And, personal business aside, Chá kept us band boys in line. Made sure Beau kept serious, Ziggy kept cool, Laine kept committed, and I kept my shit together, because I guess I had a tendency of losing my shit.

"Hhhiding?"

"You went and quit on us," she said.

"Been busy," I said, bending over to pick up my money.

"Are you still in school? Graphic design or whatever? You haven't cracked yet?"

"I'm taking some time off. Wwasn't going too well."

"I think I'm going back," she said. "You can't do anything these days without some degree."

"C-c-can't do shit with a degree." I stepped up to grab my milkshake when the cashier held out the plastic cup. "You guys still a band, or did Belgrade finally burn? Crash and burn?"

“We're still together, thank you very much. Even without you. You're not that special, Presley.” She pushed my chest with a finger. “Why don't you ask your number one fan?” She pointed behind me. “Look who I found, Zig.”

“The guy who bailed and left us without a guitar player and backup vocals for months?”

Ziggy eyed me real careful. I kept quiet, unsure of his tone. He could be real friendly and cheerful one second, serious as a heart attack the next. It depended on his mood and whether or not he liked you. Lucky for me, he liked me. At least, he used to.

“How's it going, Red?” he asked, putting an arm around my shoulders and yanking me real close I felt his breath on my ear. He was about three years older, moody, in your face, but he was so cool, none of that stuff mattered. He had slick black hair and blue eyes just as fierce. But what I really admired about the guy besides his great style was that voice of his. He had a sick set of pipes. I'm talking at least three octaves, able to sing every note on a guitar. He'd hit a note, and just when you thought he was done, he'd kick it up a notch. The least cool thing about him was his name, Zigmund, which is why most called him Zig for short and he insisted on Ziggy, vibing real hard with Bowie and his Spiders from Mars. He was everything glitter and glam rock stuffed in a tall, skinny frame.

“You might want to tell them to switch your to-go order. We're eating here. Change of plans,” he said. He grabbed me by the upper arm and dragged me to one of the tables. I pulled away. He and Chá sat across from me. I sunk into my seat and wasted no time fiddling with my thumbs. There was a small chip in the table, the corner, that

bothered me real bad, and the chair kept rocking back and forth, enough to make me want to switch seats. But I didn't dare disobey Ziggy. Not when he was looking at me like that.

"I need to know why you quit." he said. "You never gave me details. You just, poof! Vanished. You didn't even write me a goodbye letter."

"Family stuff," I said, staring at my distorted reflection in the metal napkin dispenser. I felt more like that reflection with each passing day, warped and stretched, spread thin.

"It shouldn't keep you from making music. You were great, Red. You've got heart when you play. I like that."

"Nnno time. I'm working. Money doesn't grow on trees." A waitress made her way over and placed the basket of tater tots and hot dog in front of me. "I'm trying to get to Memphis. Got to save up."

"Excuses." He slammed a hand against the table. He wasn't wrong. I was making excuses. I missed music and the band, but I didn't have it in me anymore, didn't feel it anymore. Empty. But even though the band was Ziggy's business, why I quit certainly wasn't.

"Oh, did you tell him?" Chá asked Zig, nudging him with her elbow. I glanced between the two, sitting up straight when neither said a word.

"Someone's looking for you, Red," Ziggy said.

"Me? Looking f-f-for me?" I pointed to myself. Most people didn't know I existed, and those who knew me well enough were dead, gone, or pissed at me.

"Are you avoiding Sawyer?" Chá asked.

"Sawyer?"

"Don't play dumb." Ziggy stole a tater tot from my basket. "Sawyer Malik. The kid with the pretty wavy hair. Your main squeeze. Your BFF."

"I know my best friend," I said. "What about him?"

"He said he's been trying to reach you, but you've been ignoring him. You poor babies didn't break up, did you?"

"What are you talking about, Ziggy? W-w-why would he contact you?"

"Because you're avoiding him. So he tried us. We were in a band together once upon a time," Chá said. "Besides, we're kind of friends with him. Through you and all."

"He's determined to talk to you, so if you're still avoiding him, I'd avoid leaving the house for a while. The guy sounded pissed."

"He has been blowing up my phone lately. I've just been busy," I said. "What did he tell you guys?" I asked, dragging the basket of tots closer to me before Ziggy ate them all.

"You'd know if you answered the phone," he said.

"Where's Presley? The asshole is ignoring me. Tell him I will find him." Chá had always been real good at impersonations. "But being the good friend that I am, I told him we hadn't heard from you for a while," she said, "which is true."

"And?" I pressed my arms into the table.

"I'm confused about this whole thing," Ziggy said, snatching another tot. "I thought Sawyer was your number one."

"I'm just not talking to him right now, is all," I said.

"Brrrr, Red. Ice cold. First us. Now him?"

"He'll get over it. I have other th-th-things to worry about."

“Yeah, you do. We've been talking,” he said, nudging Chá, “and we agree you gotta come back. We need you back.”

“It's nnot going to happen,” I said.

“I wouldn't say we need him,” Chá said. “We just want someone reliable—not that you're reliable, pulling the crap you pulled and ditching us. You know what I mean.”

“What for? Didn't you find a, a, a replacement?” I asked. “I thought I saw yyyou guys post something a while back.”

“Yeah. For a few weeks before he ditched us,” Ziggy said. “He kept complaining he didn't get to see his girlfriend as much anymore. That's why we're here, Mr. Presley, for you.”

“I'm nothing special. Lots of guys play guitar,” I said.

“But you play with a fire,” Ziggy said. “And you've got that back alley voice. That rasp and twang, Red, that mess you unleash when you get into a song. Lots of guys don't sing like that.”

“Folks don't come back for the guitar player, Zig,” I said. “It's always the singer, and, and, and you're the singer. Not me. Why don't you aaask Beau to find you someone. I'm sure he's real happy I'm gone.”

“Yeah, that's all I need, is one of Beau's frat bros,” he said. “You two were always at each other's throats. What's the deal, Presley?”

“Nothing,” I said, pushing the basket away from me. “I mmmean he thinks he runs shit. And he tried taking credit for my songs. I don't care how good of a bassist he is, he crossed a line.” I held my stomach, not liking the way it flipped and flopped all over itself.

“Ask Laine if he knows someone. He’s pretty social,” I said, looking past Ziggy at the men’s bathroom, just in case.

“Are you dealing with your stuff again?” Chá asked. She pulled her coat tight around her, white and fluffy like the Michelin Man. “Your anxiety? Because if you are, just say so instead of letting us shit on you.” Even though it often threw me off, I appreciated Chá's honesty. She was sincere. Then again, what did I know about sincerity?

“Maybe we should lay off for now, Zig.” Chá grabbed my hand.

“I’m fine,” I said. “There's got to be more to this. Suddenly cornering me when all I wanted was a milkshake.” I sunk in my seat again, folding my arms over my chest. Chá looked real unsure, like she didn't know what else to say. Ziggy shook his head before resting an elbow on the table and leaning towards me with an aimed finger.

“Look, Presley, I worked too hard and too long to see the band fall apart. We had a solid group that got legitimate gigs around town. People actually knew us, knew Belgrade,” he said. “I get that life happens, but you’re going to have to get over it. Music might be the thing that takes your mind off of everything. Come on.”

“Wwwhat are you getting at, Ziggy?”

“There's a battle of the bands tournament rolling around after the holidays, and we need you back if we're going to win it. All local bands. The winners get one of the main stages at VexFest in June and a major cash prize. Our chance for some exposure. Might be able to afford studio time. We’ll make it big. Put Youngstown, Ohio on the map.”

“I’m nnnnot doing VexFest or the tournament or, or, or anything like that.” The same heat as before crawled up my back, and the knot in my gut twisted tighter.

“You're rejoining the band, Presley. Maybe not today, but you will, and we're going to win. We'll be the hottest thing at Vex. Imagine one day making music for a living.”

“No.”

“You'd get to wear your blue suede shoes and shake, rattle, and roll all over stage like your beloved Elvis. What more could you want?”

“I can't do it. I won't.”

“Maybe he just needs some time, Zig,” Chá said. “He's been out of it for a minute. You can't just expect him to drop everything—”

“Listen,” Ziggy cut her off with a wave of his hand, “there's time. Sleep on it. Then we can talk.”

“You listen,” I said, stepping away from the table, “I'm not going to find you. I'm not doing the tournament. And I'm not rejoining the band. Savvy?”

All Shook Up

I hit the supermarket on the way home after my shift at the record store the next day. I doubted my folks had anything planned for dinner, with my mom working night shifts lately and my dad too tired to cook. Since my oma never got around to teaching me how to make sauerbraten before she died, which my mom loved, the least I could do was fry up some fish. Maybe I'd bake it. Not as messy. Not that it mattered what I made. My mom barely ate some days, and when she did, she refused to eat unless she could curl up on the sofa and balance her plate in her lap.

We avoided each other pretty well during her off days, my mother and me. We had periods where everything was fine and it felt like we were a normal family, and we had periods where she couldn't put up with me, like I was some miserable stepchild. She wouldn't say anything, which was ok, because I never had much to say anyway. Things would go back to normal. Back to my parents burying themselves in work and coming home too exhausted for anything other than crashing in front of the television. Back to me lying and making up terrible excuses at the dinner table when they noticed me playing with my peas and asked me if anything was wrong in an attempt to make it seem like our relationship hadn't taken a hit three years ago when Audrick died. I usually did real well with routine, but at this point, I wanted out. Only, I didn't know which way out was.

I walked to my car with a few plastic bags, and just as I pulled my keys from the deep pocket of my charcoal jacket, someone called my name and I froze and my keys hit the pavement.

“Presley, I thought it was you, with that hair of yours,” he said. I relaxed at the all too familiar accent.

“Hhhey, Mr. Malik,” I said, kicking at the ground so bad, I almost scuffed my boots.

“It's been a very long time. Where have you been?” he asked. “I was just thinking the other day how you and Sawyer buried that time capsule in our backyard,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. The autumn sun gleamed on his bald head. Sawyer’s father was the little ray of good in the world.

“Oh, that?” I said, “It was just a, a, a shoebox of junk. I don't even know what I put in there.” Guitar picks, a Batman comic, and a mixtape—well, CD—of my favorite Elvis songs just in case anyone ever did end up finding the thing. Exposure for future generations.

“He’s back, you know,” he said.

“Who is?”

“Sawyer. Who else?”

“He’s back?” I cleared my throat, suddenly interested in the big, gold button on my jacket sleeve. I tugged at it. Hard.

“Yes. Back from school for a while. He hasn’t called you? Why don't you stop by. Drink some tea and everything.” He stepped towards me. I stepped back the slightest bit and hoped he didn't notice.

“I, I, I would, but I have somewhere to rrrun, you know?” I said. “Soon though. Real soon.”

“I’ll let you go this time.” He poked my chest.

“Next time.” I waved an awkward wave before turning on my heels and heading to my car, the plastic bags, tight around my wrist, cutting off my circulation. Once inside, I cracked a window, shoved a cigarette in my mouth, and threw my head back against the rest.

Sawyer and I did a lot of dumb things like the time capsule over the years: pissing off of the treehouse in his backyard, drowning anthills with orange soda, trying to camp out on the small slab of roof outside my bedroom window. I hadn’t spoken to him much since June, but I’d be lying if I said I didn’t miss him. Sawyer was my best friend and more. He was family. We were a team since Kindergarten, seeing each other at our best and definitely at our worst. He got me. I didn’t do too hot in school, laughed at and whispered about whenever I had a panic attack or stuttered real bad.

Kids talked. He could have talked, too. But he didn't. He knew to give me space when I was agitated and to throw my head between my knees when I couldn't breathe. But like everything else in my life, our relationship fell apart. When he got a real big scholarship from Ohio State for killing it on the SAT, I saw him less and less. And I, dealing with my own baggage in recent months, ended up cutting off a lot of people, the people I needed most, most of all. Including Sawyer Malik. I could have told him what happened over the summer. I should have. And, fuck, did I want to. But that was a part of me I just didn't want him to see.

Guitar Man

I was up on the roof smoking, on my back listening to the 45 I had playing in my bedroom, *Return to Sender*, hoping the neighbors didn't think it was too loud. Something real small fell beside me. A rock, I thought, until another landed closer and I saw it was an acorn, brown and chipped.

"Oh, Presley!" someone called out. "Presley! Wherefore art thou, Presley?" I crawled over to see.

"Ziggy?"

"Deny thy father, and refuse thy name." He stood in the grass, somehow making it over the rickety, white fence, waving his arms in every which way.

"Wwwhat are you doing?" I asked, moving to sit down so my legs hung off the edge.

"I came to visit." He stepped closer to the house.

"Obviously. W-w-what's your reason?"

"I got a question for you, Red," he said.

"If it's about the band, then leave. I'm not coming back."

"I don't want to yell it for the whole neighborhood to hear. What if it's personal?"

“What are yyyou getting at?” I said.

“I need to get up there.” He pointed my way, wiggling his finger around.

“Zig, if you come up here, I'm coming down.”

“Don't be like that. I really want to talk to you about something.”

“If you can climb up,” I said, pausing for a drag on my cigarette, hoping I looked as serious as I felt, “be my guest.” He didn't say anything. Instead, he was clung to the trellis on the side of the house, climbing up towards me like the vines wound around it.

“You underestimate my long legs, Presley,” he said. My mistake. I forgot Ziggy had crazy ideas and acted on most of them. Like the slip and slide he made on a real hot summer day a few years back, using a grass sprinkler and plastic sheets. The idiot almost broke his neck. Twice.

“Please don't die,” I said and helped him up when he reached the top.

“See, I knew you cared,” he said. Ziggy stomped around the roof, taking in the view of the neighbor's house, tiny and brick and red like mine, and the view of what little backyard existed from that high up and the big tree right in front of us, its branches long and crooked like constellations.

“Is this your, your, your first time on my roof or something?” I asked, giving him a funny look.

“It's been a while since we hung out,” he said. “You have a thing for cutting people off. I haven't been in your bedroom in a while either.” He was climbing in through the window before I could stop him.

“You don't just walk into people's houses like, like, like that.” I followed him in.
“You take your shoes off, too.”

“I climbed in. There's a difference.” He stood in the middle of the room, his hands on his hips, looking all around like he'd never seen it before.

“Did you get more Elvis merch since I was last here?” He picked up a display box with a single coin stuffed inside: an Elvis Presley “First Time on Louisiana Hayride” colorized state quarter I bought because it gave me an excuse to collect all the others.

“Are you surprised?” I said, falling back onto my bed with a small bounce.

“Aren't you supposed to be broke? Over hear buying Elvis quarters, you dumbass. You don't have more stuff under your bed, do you?”

“Nah. Ask me again after I go to Graceland,” I said. He waved me off. I'd been talking about going down there for years, something Oma and I were going to do someday, but there was always an obstacle in our way, be it money, time, health. I talked about going so much, no one really believed I would anymore. But I was real determined to change that.

Zig crouched before the stackable cube shelf I had in the corner. “Your vinyl collection is a thing of dreams, Presley. Protect it always,” he said.

“I'll try my best.” I kept all my Elvis records out on a shelf because I used them most. I had two bins full of all my other vinyl: Zeppelin, Aerosmith, Guns N' Roses; Fats Domino, Johnny Cash, Nat King Cole. I couldn't tell you all of them. I watched Ziggy flip through them.

“You know there's something I need,” he said.

“What's that?” I asked.

“This beauty.” He abandoned the records, leaving the bins out and in the way, and walked over to the wardrobe. He grabbed my acoustic guitar off the top, slung it around his body, and strummed it before looking over at me.

“You want t-t-to take it?” I asked, unsure how serious he was.

“Yup.”

“Over my dead body.”

“Why does it matter? I thought you quit music. You won’t miss it.” He spun around on one leg, playing a simple tune that sounded an awful lot like *Love Me Tender*.

“It matters because it’s, it’s, it’s mine. Oma got it for me as my first. That guitar is everything to me.”

“Doesn’t look like it,” he said, brushing the dust off with his sleeve. “And before you get too excited, I was playing *Aura Lee*, not your boy. I saw your eyes light up.”

“Same song, different lyrics,” I said. “Both Civil War. Could you p-p-put the guitar back?”

“Fine,” he said. “Hey, you got any pop? I walked all the way over here, and I’m thirsty.”

“I didn’t tell you to walk.”

“Smartass. My car’s in the shop. It’s making noise again. Depending how much he asks for, I may be driving with busted shocks for a while, so don’t get in if bouncing makes you nervous.”

“What makes you think I’m going anywhere with you? I quit the band, remember?”

“What’s up your ass?” He spun again. Played another tune. Spun again. When he faced me, “So, do you have pop?” he asked.

“Will you leave after? I really don’t hhhave time, and Sawyer’s been blowing up my phone. Again. It’s like you all suddenly remembered I’m alive.”

“I promise.”

“Okay.” I made my way downstairs to the fridge and took a minute to remember if Ziggy liked Pepsi more than Coke or Coke more than Pepsi, and if it was Pepsi, was he in the mood for regular or cherry, because I had both. I went with regular, but it didn’t matter, because when I got back to my room, I caught him out on the roof ready to run with a record under his arm and my guitar still strapped to him.

“What the hell?” I crawled through the window to stop him, but he was already halfway down the trellis. He let go and jumped the rest of the way down, almost tripping over a real big rock. “Yyyou can’t be ssserious.” I stood on the edge of the roof eyeing him real hard, a hand to my face because I couldn’t get my words out and the jackass really just robbed me and ran off. “If there’s a scratch on, on, on anything, you’re dead.”

“Relax. Your stuff is fine.”

“What a-a-are you doing?”

“You’re not rejoining the band, right? You don’t need this.” He held the guitar up by its neck. “So I’m holding onto it until you need it again. I’ll keep it safe.”

“Zziggy.”

“You know where to find me, Red.” He spun around one last time before jogging off and disappearing down the street. I fell back onto my ass, breathless, guitar-less.

When It Rains, It Really Pours

I didn't wake up to the Saturday sun peeking in through windows. I didn't bum around the house or eat Froot Loops or watch old Nickelodeon cartoons. But I did sit in my bed for an hour trying to shake the soreness in my chest from last night's surprise panic attack. I did make my way to the kitchen where I found a note from my dad taped to the fridge saying he had some errands to take care of for a few hours. And I did stand in the family room for a while wishing I hadn't woken up.

I sat hunched out on the front steps, a corner of the concrete crumbling a little more each day, my fingers woven around a Marlboro Menthol—the more tolerable of the sorts I'd tried—gazing out into the street. A cloud of smoke blocked my view of the lady who always jogged down that way in real short shorts and real nice legs and the preschoolers in the yard across fighting over toys in the front lawn and the large crow that hopped into the street to pick at squashed, squirrely remains.

I stayed like that for a minute, spine curved with my left elbow on my left knee and a cigarette pinched between my lips. I inhaled, smoke thick and sharp; a wire brush along the inner flesh of my throat. And I hated it, hated it, hated it, but it eased my shaky leg and troubled mind. A sick contract of *I'll help while I slowly kill you.*

I fiddled with the small speaker I often carried around the house, skipping a few songs in the playlist on my phone before pausing at E's *Just Pretend* and turning up the volume. I was a sucker for his ballads. I leaned back, settled in my seat, and stared out into the yard, into the street, into the world, wondering if by some chance I'd feel something in that moment. Or if I'd ever feel again. Sure enough, I did feel something, just not the something I wanted to feel. The same heat as always engulfed me. I kept my gaze low, trying real hard to ignore the person hovering over me.

"Hey, gingersnap, usually you call a person back when they leave a voicemail. Hell, a text would have worked," Sawyer said. I never looked at him. I never moved. Only blew out a line of smoke. Game over. "Holy shit. Is that a nose ring, Presley Atmen?" He leaned in close to flick the small, silver hoop in my left nostril.

Sawyer Malik was my best friend. Had been since Kindergarten. Although, I sometimes wondered if we were always just put in the same class together and at some point he realized he wasn't going to shake me. We were stuck like glue. He was my brother. He had a foul mouth on him, real motivation, and zero regrets.

"What made you get that? You usually pass out at the sight of needles," he said.

I kept sucking on my cigarette, because I didn't know what else to do with myself. One of the preschoolers across the street started bawling her eyes out. The mom scooped her up by the armpits and ushered the rest of the kids inside like a sheep dog, leaving me with nothing else to stare at except my own sneakers, unless the lady in the real short shorts came back up this way.

"If you're wondering how I found you, bud, I know the only place you'd be is at home," Sawyer said. "You've always been pretty boring." I stole a glance and noticed

him move the plastic bag he held from his left hand to his right. I couldn't quite make out what he had inside.

"You still smoking?" He snatched the cigarette from my hand just as I held it to my lips. "This shit kills you. I didn't think you were dumb." He threw it to the ground, crushing it with grey tennis shoes laced in neon blue.

The rest of the pack was up in my room, but I knew he wouldn't let me leave, not until he was done, what with, I had no clue. I pulled my knees up to my chest, trying real hard to keep it together, to play it cool, but he stayed in place, twisting that plastic bag, watching me with those sharp, speckled teak eyes that always saw right through me.

"Here," he said, dropping the bag in my lap. "Your favorite." He sat down beside me. I stopped biting at my nails when he turned off my speaker. I dug through the bag and pulled out a small green box. Turkish Delight was one of my favorite things to eat. Especially the rose flavored kind. Sawyer Malik was Arab and white. Palestinian and Mississippian. When it came to moonshine and Middle Eastern sweets, he had access to the real deal.

"See, I pay attention. Don't ever say I don't care," he said, slinging an arm around my shoulder, my head aimed down and pressed awkwardly against the crook of his elbow. Kids at school occasionally ran their mouths about Sawyer and how physical he could be, specifically with other guys. It was just a cultural thing. How he was brought up. In lots of cultures, stuff like that wasn't a big deal. Guys didn't overreact if you touched them, or, in my case, threw their arms around your shoulders. It took me some getting used to, Sawyer yanking me around, not because I thought it was weird, but

because of my mental illness and how off I always felt. But I was used to it now. It was just part of what made Sawyer, Sawyer.

“Now you owe me,” he said. I shoved the box against his chest. Some of the powdered sugar inside puffed out of the edges like small clouds.

“I’ll pass,” I said.

“Anjad? Is it going to be this awkward forever?” he asked, throwing in his Arabic exasperations like he always did, variations of *Wallah* which meant *I swear* or *Anjad* which meant something along the lines of *are you kidding me* or *are you serious*. I caught myself saying them sometimes the way I picked up *das ist mir wurscht* from Oma.

I had managed to avoid Sawyer for months. I thought I had won. But there he was on my front porch in old jeans and a bright blue Beatles t-shirt he wore to piss me off. It contrasted with his skin, a sort of golden oak.

“Take your shirt and, and, and go,” I told him, staring at my shoes.

“Not until I get my answers.” Sawyer opened the box and popped a square in his mouth, wiping the powdered sugar off his fingers and onto his jeans. “I’m gonna sit here and eat these until you talk.” He chewed loud.

“I’ll jjust go.” I got up, but he yanked me back down real hard.

“No more avoiding me,” he said. I got up again, my face hot, and pulled open the screen door. I bit at my nails and noticed this time because it hurt.

“You’ve been acting weird for months, dude.” Now he stood up, dropping the Turkish Delight at his feet. “All summer. I’ve been trying to figure you out this whole time. I come back to try to talk to you, my best friend, supposedly, and you’re kicking me off your front porch?”

“Stop.”

“You cut me off all of a sudden, man. Made me feel like an asshole, and no matter how many times I tried asking you what was wrong, you shut me down.”

“Sawyer—”

“So you’re gonna sit your Elvis loving ass down, and you’re gonna tell me what’s got you acting like this so I can be pissed at you for a minute.”

“Stop. Please.” I squirmed in place, fists in my pockets, my shoulders tight. Everything about Sawyer changed in an instant. His expression softened. He stepped back. He even picked up the candy. He knew when I needed space. That didn’t change. And that made treating him so cold all the more difficult.

“Press?”

“Fine. I’m fine. There’s nothing to talk about.”

“Presley.” He sucked in a deep breath and ran a hand through his hair. I couldn’t blame him. I did do all the things he said, after all.

“I sssaid I’m fine. I have to go.” I stepped inside and shut the red storm door before the screen door slammed in his face, a loud clash of aluminum.

Help Me

Stars were made of glitter. As kids, Sawyer and I always climbed out on the roof to sit and watch the sky. We'd talk about our real difficult teachers, about our crushes, Sawyer's comic books, Memphis, and all the impossible dreams we were convinced we could do if we stuck together. I'd reach up, grab a star, hold it tight. But I hadn't seen any stars in a long while, hadn't dreamed any dreams.

I sat on the floor with my back against the bed. Its metal frame dug into my spine and the breeze sneaking in through the window had me shivering. I found my dad hunched over bills on the kitchen table when I got home from work earlier, and my mother, who had the night off for the first time in a while, was biting at curly fries in front of the television. All it took was one comment, one glance or shrug or huff from either of them to start a fight that would run for the next three days. But that wasn't anything new, something I had grown used to since Audrick died. I always left when they started at each other, and they'd keep arguing. Loud. So loud, I heard it up in my room.

I passed by my dad in the upstairs hallway after their latest spat.

"Yyyou've been fighting a lot," I told him.

"Tell me about it," he said. "Some days, we're fine. Some days, we're not. And then there are days like today." He set a hand in my hair, gently tugging at a few locks.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“She says she can't do it anymore.” He spread out his fingers and rubbed my head, his hand heavy and warm. “I'm not so sure I can either.” He pulled away after that, mumbling something in German under his breath that I couldn't catch, and wandered off to some other part of the house where he'd stay until he was sure my mom was in bed or he fell asleep. And I ended up in my room where I'd sit locked away, real angry and bothered at everything.

My room, just like the stage, was one of the few places I found any real comfort, but it was also where I laid awake at night a victim of my own mind, where I sat on the cracked white tiles of my bathroom floor pressing the hot tips of cigarettes against my freckled thighs in a desperate attempt to feel something other than the fire in my chest that always burned real hot in the midst of a panic attack and never left afterwards. Only fading to a dull ache. A reminder I was never comfortable in my own skin.

I was like that for a while, sitting with the bedframe in my spine, accepting that there was nothing I could do, that my folks and I lived different lives in different houses, cut off from each other. I wondered if they felt the same or if it was just my depersonalization messing with me like usual. One minute I'm alone with my thoughts, bouncing my leg to the beat of a song and counting the bumps in the ceiling, the next I'm not. Not thinking, not counting. The edges of my room blurred, the lights dimmed, and me, drifting, peeled from my body the way a snake sheds skin. And regardless of what I did or how far I reached, I never could grab my hand to pull myself back together. I was stripped of my person, moved through life like a robot, automatized, mechanized, left empty in the world I knew but could no longer recognize.

I rolled over to my back to gauge if the floor was just as hard and cold as the bed frame. I dropped my head to the side only to catch two lime green eyes glowing under the bed.

“Come here.” I reached for Siegfried, pulling him out by the scruff, and set him on my stomach. He stomped all over me before curling up on my chest. “What did you do today? Get all the sleep I should be getting?” I stared him in the eye. I was sure he’d talk back one day. He meowed at me and stepped off my chest, wobbling back under the bed. I set my hands over my face, dragging up and down, trying to focus on the ticking clock, Elvis’s legs swinging back and forth.

Elvis was there from the beginning. I didn’t discover him on my own. Didn’t find old records in the attic as an adult. He was as much a part of me as the freckles on my skin. He was a family member. Some weird guardian angel. Hell, I wasn’t sure what he was, but he was there. Always singing. Always rocking on the TV. And I never wanted to watch or listen to anything else. I found solace in his music, solidarity with the man. I might have lacked rock star status and a signature smirk, but I still identified with E, saw the parts of him that were the parts of me, the parts no one ever wanted to see. We shared a name, and we shared troubles: heavy hearted, haunted, human.

The clock and the sound of Siegfried licking at his paws didn’t ground me much. So I jumped to my feet and paced about my room to get it all out, the bad feeling, wringing my hands, my legs like rubber, the shakes hitting me all over. But my heart still sped up and my breath still hitched and things kept building up real fast.

I had no choice but to ride the tide: Belgrade and my guitar and Sawyer and my folks and the screaming in my brain and now the little blue light that wouldn’t stop

blinking on my phone from another one of Sawyer's missed calls or ignored texts. But I couldn't ignore it, the squeeze, the pressure in my chest. I couldn't breathe, standing there in my bedroom wanting to smash in my walls, wanting to scream, to tear my skin from my frame. I stared hard into the dresser mirror, desperate, searching for someone, anyone, me, or who I used to be. But all I could see was a blur, a distorted image of someone who looked like me but couldn't possibly be me because there was no light in the eyes gazing back.

The *tick, tick, tick* of the clock clicked loud, the soundtrack to our face off where the both of us stood waiting for the other to crack, to give in and run, and the longer I stood there, the more I began to unravel—my heart thump, thump, thumping, chest real tight, tears pooling in the corners of my eyes, because the Presley in the mirror no longer stood alone. The nightmare, the man, hovered over him, crooked fingers gripping his shoulders, twisted lips pressed to his ear ready to swallow him whole, to strip him and break him. To rape him. Like he did four months ago on a sick summer night in a parking deck. I drew back my arm, and then I lunged, fist smashing, image shattering, scattering, littering the floor. Blood between my fingers. Fear bubbling in my bones.

It was me.

Nothingville

I sat in the hallway bathroom, the toilet lid real hard beneath my ass. I held my right arm by the wrist, my knuckles bloodied, stitched, and throbbing. The tub faucet dripped and the vanity lights had me squinting and the sound of my mother's medical tools clinking while she cleaned them in the sink made me nauseated.

"You okay?" she asked, looking over at me.

"What?"

"You're making a face. Your eyes."

"The light," I said. Each time I saw the needle, thought of it weaving in and out of me, my stomach turned and I was that much closer to shitting myself right there on the toilet—though I guess I wasn't in the worst place for that. I crossed my legs and clenched in a preventative effort, and rolled my hand over, looking at my stitches from the corners of my eyes. I never liked blood or needles or places like hospitals where people went to get cut open or die. Sometimes both. Lucky me, I got to go to the bathroom to get the shards of my bedroom mirror ripped out of my hand. If I died right there in the bathroom, on the cold toilet lid, I'd be okay with it. Sure it wouldn't be the most glamorous way to go, but if Elvis pulled it off, I wouldn't mind it either. It'd give people something to talk about.

“You know, I go to work to help other people,” she said. “Here I am sewing you up. Please, Presley, don’t do this to me.”

“I didn’t do it on purpose. I was angry. Frustrated.”

“So you punch a mirror? Had it been any worse, and you might not have been able to play guitar for a while. You think of that?” she said. “You’re lucky it’s not too serious.”

“I don’t know. I guess I didn’t th-th-think.” The only thing I could think anymore was the fact I was losing time. Clocks click, click, clicking away. I bit at my thumb, unable to shake the expression on her face when she walked in on me bleeding and crying. To make things worse, she thought breaking the news to me that my cousins were coming to stay for the weekend while her sister and her husband flew off for some mini vacation was a good way to distract me as she sewed my knuckles shut.

“Do Mason and Trish really have to come?” I asked. “They’re grown. Why do we have to babysit?”

“Your aunt felt bad for leaving. They’ll spend a night with us and then head home. Nothing crazy. It’ll be a nice change of scenery for them,” she said. “And us. No one ever comes over.

“Because our life is a mess,” I said, regretting it real fast.

“What makes you say that?” She stood at the sink still, eyeing me funny with her brown hair up in a high bun and her feet sliding out of her slip on sneakers. Her teal scrubs were real wrinkled, but that was my fault, taking up her time before work and all.

“Well, you and Dad hate each other,” I said. “And we got two bedrooms, Mom. Unless you want them in Audrick’s. They aren’t sleeping with me.”

“Bastian and I don’t hate each other, Presley. Watch your mouth.”

“Sorry.” I went back to biting my thumb.

“Besides, they’re not trouble making little kids anymore. They’ll be fine,” she said. But that was the problem. They were older. Bigger. Mason by a year, Trish just a few months younger than me. But I always felt like a little kid around them. Why would it be any different now? I give them one funny look and who’s to say Mason won’t put me in a chokehold? It’s nice to think people change when they get older, but they don’t. No one ever really changes. Including my macho man cousin, Mason, and his too cool for school sister from the depths of Salem, Ohio.

“I wwwwon’t be fine,” I said, sliding off the toilet. “It’s just going to be awkward.”

“They’re your cousins, not strangers. Why are you being like this?” she said.

“When was the last time you really spent time with them? Your high school graduation?”

“Distance makes the heart grow fonder.”

“What’s going on with you? You have your father and I worried,” she said.

“You two talk?” I picked at my nails even though there wasn’t much to pick. She hummed in question, hadn’t heard my comment over the sink faucet.

“Nothing,” I said with a laugh I didn’t mean to let slip. “I’m all right. Just t-t-trying to figure stuff out. Don’t stress about me.” I patted down my jeans. “Can I go?”

“Come on,” she said and shuffled out of the bathroom. I kept up behind her, unsure if I was free to go or had to linger around so she could keep an eye on me. I usually ended up on lockdown after an incident or episode scared my folks real bad. I hadn’t done anything stupid in a few years, but they didn’t risk it. Going off my

medication in high school under no one's supervision but my own didn't quite go according to plan. But that was my own fault.

"Honey," she said and pointed to the kitchen table, "you don't have to stand. You're not in trouble." She hopped from cupboard to cupboard, scouring the shelves for anything that'd fill her up during her long shift.

"Are you not eating these protein snacks?" She waved a blue Quest bar at me.

"Didn't even know we hhad them."

"It's mine now." She tossed it into her silver lunch box. "I didn't get a chance to cook anything. I didn't account for your stitches."

"Sorry," I said. I chewed at my cheek to distract from the swarming pain in my hand. I might as well have shoved my fist in a beehive.

"Shush. I didn't mean it like that. I'm just running around today. And every day," she said, taking a moment to lean against the counter and tighten her messy bun.

"You need a spa day or s-s-something," I said. "Don't worry about dinner. Chinese sounds good." I opened the bottom drawer where we stuffed all the menus and coupons, mostly expired, looking for Girard Wok's. She grabbed me by the cheeks and tilted my face to kiss the crown of my head.

"We'll talk later, you and I." She looped an arm through the straps on her lunchbox and headed to the front closet for her jacket.

"Talk? A-a-about what?" I asked, following her again.

"That." She pointed at my hand.

"Mom--"

“Presley,” she cut me off, her eyes tired, her voice caught in her throat the way it did whenever she talked about Audrick.

“I’m fine,” I said. I smiled real big so she’d buy it, and I think she did, or at least pretended to, because she nodded. And then she blew a kiss and left without asking any more questions. I shut the door after her, locked it, pulled the chain through, checked, and pressed my back to it, finding myself gasping, as though I’d been holding my breath around her the whole time. Hell, maybe I was. It wouldn’t be out of character.

Anxiety, panic, it made me selfish, so wrapped up in my own affairs I lost touch with the people around me, their problems, their fears. Sometimes, when I had a moment of calm, I’d step back and look real close at my folks, at the wrinkles at their eyes, the way they grimaced and grunted when they moved off the couch or left the kitchen table because it hurt to stand. And I’d regret it, looking so close, because it hit me real hard. The truth. The fact I was getting older and so were they, every hour, every day, waiting for Alzheimer's to take my dad the way it took Opa, or heart attacks or cancer or strokes because they were tired and sad and broken and I couldn’t fix them because I was tired and sad and broken, too.

It seemed the only thing I could do was the small stuff. Cook dinner when she couldn’t or run a load of laundry. Watch soccer with my dad and chant Deutschland vor! Auf geht's Deutschland! Even when Thomas Müller played a shitty game. I had to keep it together. Someone did. I had to take care of my mom. And my dad had to think I was all right even though I was the farthest thing from it.

Mess of Blues

Despite my tendency to plan everything, to go over every scenario, every possible outcome, conversation, and consequence, I was also real impulsive sometimes, and it caused me more trouble than good. I let things build until I couldn't bear it any more. Then *boom*.

I needed my guitar back. It ate away at me. The empty space in my room left a space in my soul, because that guitar wasn't just any guitar. It was my first, the acoustic Oma bought me when I was 11-years-old just like Elvis was when he got his from the Tupelo Hardware Company. It was the guitar I learned music with, what I spent days tuning and nights trying real hard to learn *Heartbreak Hotel* on and *Blue Suede Shoes* and even *Guitar Man* because I had the crazy idea that maybe, just maybe, I'd be able to play it as well as Jerry Reed did.

But I had a hard time with confrontation. Or maybe it was just Ziggy. Instead of getting the guitar back myself, I told him to bring it to the record store during my shift. I spent all afternoon fidgeting behind the counter, wondering when he'd show up, if he even would, and if my guitar would be there, too. When the tiny bell tied to the top of the door jingled for the hundredth time that day, I turned around so quick I almost lost my balance and slipped on the stack of plastic bags on the floor.

“Excited to see me?” Chá said, strolling over. I dropped my shoulders with a huff and prayed my ears weren’t as red as they felt.

“I’m working,” I said and crouched to tidy up the plastic bags to avoid another close call.

“No one’s stopping you. I’m just a customer,” she said, leaning over the counter to look at me. I didn’t know how she saw anything with that floppy hat on. “Recommend me some music. And don’t say– ”

“Elvis,” I said. “Over there. Yellow bin.” I threw up a finger. “We, we, we’ve got *The Sun Sessions*.”

“Anyone other than Elvis.”

“Out of ideas. Sorry.”

“Presley, get off your ass. Stand up.” Sometimes, she scolded me like my mother, and I didn’t know what else to do other than listen.

“Muddy Waters. You like the blues?” I asked, swiping dust off my knees. “Did Ziggy send you?”

“First mistake, Presley Atmen. I don’t take orders from anyone,” she said.

“Especially Zigmund.” She stuck her tongue out in the end. Chá was the one of few tough enough to not only disobey Ziggy, but tease him whenever the moment struck her. And he couldn’t do a damn thing about it.

“So wwwwwhy are you here?” I asked.

“Ziggy suggested I come. But it was just that. A suggestion,” she said. “I came of my own accord.” Chá had dimples that that made you go weak in the knees whenever she

smiled, myself included. I looked down at my shoes, tracing the white lace with my finger.

“You can tell good old Ziggy Stardust I’m not rejoining the band. Nnnot today. Nnnot tomorrow. Not ever. The only reason I told him to come here is because the asshole stole my guitar.”

“Second mistake, Presley Atmen. I’m no one’s messenger.” She didn’t stick her tongue out that time. She leaned against the front counter instead in a way that would’ve looked silly if it were anyone else.

“I’m not here to beg you to come back. Would it be nice? Of course. Rub it in Zig’s face that I got our guitarist back. But there are more pressing matters.”

“Such as?”

“Why’d you quit?” she asked. “I figured, as much as I hate doing it, I could be your shrink for a minute and let you get some stuff off your chest without Zig all up in your face. I felt bad for you the other day.”

“First mistake, Chá Butler. Asking st-st-stuff that isn’t your business.” I turned to grab a roll of receipt paper from the box on the floor. “We had this conversation. A guy can’t move on in his lllife without folks interrogating him?” I tried peeling the roll open but couldn’t get it with my bitten nails.

“Give me,” she said, taking it from my hand. “A guy can move on without question, Press, but you’re not the type to move on and let things go. So I know you didn’t just outgrow Belgrade. And I know you didn’t find something better. I could tell something was bothering you at Suzie’s the other day.”

“Second mistake. Assuming you know me.”

“I’d like to think I do,” she said.

“You knew Audrick, not me.”

“I can’t know both of you?”

“I didn’t sssay that,” I told her. “Only that you don’t.”

“Third mistake, Presley. Getting smart with me.” She pushed off the counter and crossed her arms.

“I’m not getting smart with anyone, Chá,” I said. “I just don’t get why you all can’t let it go. Let me go.”

“Friends don’t give up so easy. You think we wanted you to go off the grid? To put the band on hold like that? You think we didn’t miss you? All these years of working together, getting gigs, making music, you think none of it matters, Presley? I’m not convinced you even want to quit.”

I didn’t say anything, mostly because I didn’t know what to say. I could argue back and forth with Ziggy for as long as he wanted, but Chá was real good at getting to me, at shutting me up, making me own my faults.

“You’re just not acting like yourself. The thing with Sawyer is weird, too. So what, you’ve cut us all off? The few friends you have, just like that?” she said. Sawyer texted me twice the day after I slammed the door in his face. And then he stopped. It was real weird, because when Sawyer wanted something, be it answers, food, or attention, he didn’t quit until he got it. But this time, he just stopped. And I hated how much it bothered me, like I wasn’t the one who kicked him out of my house.

“What exactly is myself?” I asked. “I still work here. I still st-st-stutter. I still dig Elvis. I’m the same old Presley.”

“Is this because of Audrick? Are your parents not okay?”

“He’s dead. Old news. And so is the band.”

“Fourth mistake. You’re an asshole.”

“Took you this long to figure it out?” I took the receipt roll from her once she had peeled it open.

“I don’t know why I came. Screw this.”

“Chá,” I said, “you know I don’t always ffeel too good in the head. I’m just having some bad days. I’m a mess of blues. There’s nothing more to it.”

“If you say so,” she said, turning her back to me. “The invitation to rejoin is still open, I guess. Do what you want, Presley. I’m not chasing after anyone.”

Make The World Go Away

Elvis was a searcher. He was always looking real hard for something—peace, spirit, escape. I was the same, searching for grace, for a way out. From my mind. My own skin. And the more I ignored it—the want, the need for something more—the longer I sat around hoping for things to pass, the heavier the weight in my chest became. As if all the ugliness and shame would suddenly leave me. As if *he* would cease to exist. I really only had one option: Memphis. For real this time.

On the couch with my legs up and knees close to me, I had a red notebook in my lap. I first jotted down numbers, tried sorting out my finances to see if Graceland really could happen in the near future or if I was getting ahead of myself again. I'd done the numbers before. Lots of times. But this time, I was serious.

When the numbers weren't looking too hot, I started writing down possible side hustles, anything to earn an extra buck. Dog walking was a no. I cringed at the idea of dogs licking me. Shoveling driveways was a viable option in my beloved Ohio, but I'd have to wait for it to snow first, and by the looks of the warm weather we'd been having, it wasn't going to snow any time soon. Babysitting looked real promising, because folks needed their kids looked after rain or snow, but I couldn't even take care of myself, so I wasn't sure what made me think I could handle someone else's kid.

By the end, I was scribbling doodles along the top margin and wire spiral, trying my damn hardest to avoid a conversation with Mason and Trish who sat side by side on the other beige sofa and flipped aimlessly through television channels.

“What?” I finally asked when he wouldn't quit looking at me.

“You're not going to entertain us?” he asked. I hadn't been able to see his eyes until he took off his camouflage cap.

“The TV is a lot mmmore interesting than I am. Trust me,” I said, still drawing little comic book men across my notebook. “My dad's getting pizza later. Hhhe'll entertain you.”

“What's the point of us coming here?” Trish turned down the TV volume. “I can watch Food Network at home. Hey, you think Aunt Evaline cares if I try making something? Watching made me hungry.”

“If you clean after yourself, have at it,” I said. “I don't know what y-y-you expected,” I told them with a shrug. “My parents work all the time, and unless you want to watch Jailhouse Rock with me, I got nnnothing.”

“My bad, I thought you'd be a little more fun since the last time we saw you, Presley,” Mason said.

“Why don't you give us a tour of the house,” Trish suggested. “It looks like your mom redecorated.” She eyed the cheap flower canvas above the red, brick fireplace. I set the notebook aside, too distracted to finish detailing my doodle.

“Or your room. That's always been a work in progress.” She got up, looped around the sofa towards the stairs.

“Nnno one's going in, in, in my room. Off limits.”

“I remember you having lots of cool stuff in there. Come on, Presley. Vintage.”

“Yeah, collectables and, and, and important stuff that you guys don’t care about.”

“Why are you stuttering? Got something in there you don’t want us to see?”

Mason was behind her. “We won’t touch,” he said. And suddenly I was behind him, stomping up the creaking steps.

“Don’t you think it’s a little weird?” he said. “Having this dude’s face all over your room, Press. It’s like he’s watching us.” Mason faced off against my King Creole movie poster, Elvis in a leather jacket with an aimed fist and a curled lip. I wished I was that tough. Then maybe people would take me more seriously.

“Just, just, just don’t touch. Anything. If one thing’s out of place, I’ll— ”

“You’ll what?” Mason stepped to me. He fit his hat over my head, twisting it so it was backwards. “Relax, Presley. It’s not that big of a deal.” He pushed my shoulder back with a finger. “Audrick was never this antsy.”

“Don’t touch me.” I moved around him to sit on the bed. Trish flipped through my records, which I could tolerate, but Mason kept making faces at my posters and tin signs. And when he started fiddling with the row of photo books and biographies, organized by size, I was on my feet again. Maybe I was being too much, but I didn’t need his fingerprints all over the covers. The way he probably wouldn’t want my sweaty hands all over his guns.

“Let’s go somewhere,” I said. They both paused their digging to look at me. “I’m serious. I’ll entertain you. Just stop touching everything.”

“Sure,” Mason said. “Just don’t wear those pretty, little shoes, Press,” he said and pointed with a crooked finger at the blue suede boots by my bed. “Don’t want them getting dirty.”

#

Two birds in one stone. My nosey cousins couldn’t touch my stuff anymore, and if my mother asked, I could say we were having some quality time out of the house. Tell her we went on a drive to catch up and do cousinly stuff. Whatever the hell that meant. Entertaining them couldn't be that hard. Certainly not worse than the two of them moving my collectables around. I figured we'd stop somewhere along the way. Grab some food or cigarettes or ice cream. All things I could do in my pretty, little shoes. But Mason had other ideas.

When we left the house, we didn't get any *food* food, but we did stop at a gas station before heading out to an open area not too far from there. I guess all sorts of people went that way to shoot ducks out of the sky. I kept bugging them about needing cigarettes, I forgot to grab mine in the rush, and Mason had to pee real bad. It worked out all right. They got their slushies, competing to see who could better handle a brain freeze. I bought my menthols and smoked one by his green Silverado once he parked it in the grass. It smelled real bad of dead animals and booze.

The field wasn’t all that special. I was hoping to see rolling hills or little flowers hanging on in the cold weather, but there wasn’t any of that. Just grass. A few dips in the ground that you’d get your foot caught in. Some bunches of weeds that hadn’t yet died. An endless line of bare trees in the distance.

“Finished?” Mason slammed a hand beside my head against his truck. I jumped real bad, almost dropping my smoke. “Easy there,” he said. I didn’t say anything, just rolled up the sleeves of the denim jacket I had been wearing often lately. I liked the real cool TCB patch Oma added to the sleeve a few years back.

“I don't get you, man,” he said, throwing his cup to the ground. The leftover grape slush slithered out onto the grass.

“Wwwhat’s to get?” I asked, not looking at him. I could feel him eyeing me. I dropped the last of my cigarette, swiping my heel across. He stepped to me. Fast. A finger to my chest.

“Back off,” I said.

“You think you're better than us, don't you?” He pressed his finger real hard. I stepped back into the truck. I wouldn't be able to take him if things got physical. He was six feet of wild muscle, and I wasn’t much of a fighter. I wanted to look him in the eyes, to show I was real angry, but he was close. Too close. I started to squirm, waiting for him to move.

“I get it. None of us asked for this reunion. Our moms just planned the weekend for us, but shit, Presley, ever since we got here, you’ve had your nose in the air,” he said.

“Whatever.”

“See? Just like that. Too cool for us.”

“I’m nnot cocky, Mason. I’m just tired of people in my face,” I said. “Tired of, of, of everyone thinking they know everything. It has nothing to do with you.” I felt the anger building in me again. Agitation crawling across my skin.

“Piss off,” I said when he refused to step back. I shoved him away. And then I was holding my breath, because when he moved, I thought he was about throw a punch. Trish called his name from the truck before things blew up.

“Mason, lay off. We'll all get it if something happens,” she said. “Besides, Aunt Eveline is nice. It's not her fault Presley's being annoying.”

Mason clicked his tongue at me before stepping away, like he was upset he couldn't knock my teeth in like loose piano keys. He climbed into the passenger seat. I wanted to walk home, because I couldn't stand the thought of getting back in there with them and that awful smell, but we were pretty far out, and walking alone didn't sound real appealing.

“You ready for a show, Presley?” Mason asked when the both of them descended from the truck. I decided keeping quiet was best.

“I've been waiting a while to test this bad boy,” he said.

“Then shut up and get to it,” Trish told him. I wasn't sure what sort of show he was expecting out in the middle of nowhere, but I didn't like the look on his face, like he was doing something he wasn't supposed to be doing. I crouched down, dragging my squashed cigarette through Mason's leftover grape slushy.

“You won't tell, right, Press?” Trish peeked over her shoulder at me.

“What? Tell what?” I stood up and wiped my palms over my jeans. Mason flashed the black gun in his hand. Something strange churned inside me.

“Aaare you supposed to have that?” I asked.

“Of course,” he said. “My uncle’s Beretta M9. He gave it to me when I turned eighteen. I just ordered these LOK grips.” He aimed at the line of dying oak trees. “You might appreciate it, Presley. This one’s old school.”

“I don’t really like guns.” I watched him adjust his aim, lining up with the thick trunk of a tree. And then he fired. A roar across the field. It sent something rippling down my back. I kind of liked it. He shot a few more times, and I kept watching, kept feeling.

“Let me try,” I told him. He gave me a look I knew he’d give, but I was serious. I wanted the gun.

“Have you ever touched one before?” he asked.

“No. But there’s a first for, for, for everything.” I pulled it out of his hand, warm and weighted. Mason was right, I’d never even seen a gun in person, let alone touched one, but the crack and roar, the power, it struck something in me. I faced the trees, held the gun up, my arms as far away from me as possible because I didn’t know what I was doing and I was afraid the thing would backfire and mess me up real bad. Trish didn’t say a word, watching me from the side, waiting for me to wimp out or maybe shoot myself in the foot. Mason adjusted my arms, talked me through things. As much as we disagreed on things, at least I knew he didn’t want me dead.

I wiped the sweat from my right palm, dragged it across my jeans, and tightened my grip on the gun. I stared at that damn tree trunk and how it sat there stubborn, unmoving, taunting me. Laughing like *he* laughed before that night and during and after. Belittling me like he always did. My vision blurred. My face warmed. My knees buckled, hitting each other real hard. And the bark of the tree started looking like it was moving, like it was coming at me—

I pulled the trigger, and before the bang settled over us, I pulled it again and again and again until my stitched knuckles hurt and I couldn't bear the body-jolting recoil anymore and Mason and Trish's shouting broke through the ear-splitting booms.

I stepped back. I let go. The gun was on the ground. And so was I. On my ass. Shaking, shaking, shaking. Deaf to everything but the firing of the gun. Loud. Thundering. *Pow. Pow. Pow.* Over and over and over. Mason shook me by the shoulder, and I looked up at him, but I couldn't see real well and my chest hurt and my teeth chattered.

"Hey, get up. You're fine. Don't be a bitch about it." Mason waved his hands in my face, but it only made things worse. "Get up, Presley. It's just the adrenaline from firing."

"Fffine. I'm fine," I said.

"Bull shit. Looked like you pissed yourself," he said. I wanted to say I was okay, but I was having a hard time talking and breathing. He shook me by the shoulder again, pushed me towards the truck and kept pushing me until I started to climb in.

"Can't do anything with you, man," he said and slammed the door in my face.

It's Easy For You

When we got home, I slipped past my dad who was sitting in the living room. I ignored him when he jumped to his feet to call after me the same way Trish and Mason did when they followed me in. I went upstairs into the hallway bathroom, searching the shelves of the mirrored cabinet for some Pepto-Bismol or Imodium or anything that'd keep my insides from spilling out of me. But nothing. There was nothing. No Pepto. No Alka-Seltzer. Nothing. I threw a bottle of Aspirin against the glass shower door hoping it'd make me feel a little better, but it only made a loud *clang*.

“What are you doing?” My dad stood in the doorway. I shut the cabinet and held on to the door, avoiding my reflection in the mirror. He threw up his hands, an implied *well?* I walked out. Squeezed past him and into my own bedroom.

“Fforget it.” I paced by the door, wanting to leave. Not wanting to leave. I stared at my hands. Still shaking. He saw me looking. I scratched at my shoulders, my arms, my chest, desperate to escape the ugly feeling that always came with my attacks—if this even was an attack. Maybe it really was just all the adrenaline from firing the gun. Regardless, I didn't like it. Any control I had while shooting was out the window now.

“Sit,” he said. He sat first, at the edge of the bed, and patted the space next to him. I joined him, hunched over, my face in my hands, struggling to keep it together in front of him. He rubbed my back. I couldn’t help but laugh.

“What?” he said.

“Nothing, nothing,” I said.

“What happened? You and Mason beat the hell out of each other?” He looked me over.

“No. Nothing like that,” I said. “Just wanted to come home. Got irritated.”

“You looked like you were about to cry.” He grabbed me by the chin, looking at me like he was looking for the tracks of my tears. I pushed him away and stretched back to lie on the bed. I bet they were downstairs wondering if I was running my mouth about the gun.

“Try and keep your ass downstairs, Press. I know you don’t get along, but you can’t be a bad host. It’s family.” My dad moved to the door. “What’s with you and Mason anyway?”

“He made me feel like, like, like an idiot. You said it. We just don’t get along.”

“You have to stop letting people get under your skin, Presley,” he said. “It’s not always so serious. He’s your cousin. Boys are going to be boys.”

Boys will be boys. It slipped from everyone’s lips like sewage. Nate Gurtner would call me out when we went around the room reading from our American history textbooks and I couldn’t string a sentence together, leaned back in his chair, in his letterman jacket, humiliating me. And when I finally dragged myself to talk to Mrs.

Cooper because I was having a real bad time with it, I got *Boys will be Boys, Presley. He'll get bored sooner or later.*

When Dennis Figueroa wanted to see what set me off and followed me around all day poking and prodding my bubble until the flames in my chest flared and I punched him right in the mouth, I had to sit with him for two hours in detention, staring out the window at the way the wind blew real hard like it was laughing at me, until Principal Kovacs crossed his arms and told us, *I know boys will be boys, but try not to fight at school.*

When Josh Nelson shoved me against the lockers in front of everyone before the first bell rang because I tried real hard to dress like Elvis, he left me there avoiding my own brother's eyes. And after the bell finally rang, I didn't go to any damn adult.

I wondered, if I told someone—my parents, my friends, the cops, anyone—how Beau Campbell cornered me in a shitty parking deck, slammed me against the cold wall and raped me in revenge, and left me there, if they'd say boys will be boys.

“Okay, Dad. I get it.”

I Need Somebody To Lean On

Instead of listening to the *Fools Fall In Love* 45 I picked up at work earlier today or napping with Siegfried, I was helping my folks grill. They thought a backyard barbecue on an uncomfortably warm November day would be the spark Mason and Trish needed, the highlight of their weekend away from home. Burgers and turkey dogs and my dad's sauerkraut.

Mason and Trish didn't say much to me. After yesterday, they probably thought I was off my rocker. I couldn't really blame them, but if they were going to be around for another few hours, I had to figure out a way to make it through the rest of their stay without ripping my hair out.

I was proud to say I came to this conclusion all on my own: I was an asshole and an idiot, and I should have done what I was about to do from the beginning, but my pride got the better of me. Or maybe it was sheer embarrassment. I picked up my phone and I scrolled through the names in my contacts list and I hit the green dial button, waiting, waiting, dreading the dull ring, dreading the voice at the other end—

“Presley?”

“Sawyer, I need your help.”

#

Calling Sawyer was the worst thing I could have done. When he put me on speaker and let me bitch and moan while he got dressed to come over, I thought things might actually go my way for once. But when he got to my house, he gave me a half-assed *hey*, before proceeding to shake my dad's hand with fervor and shyly hug my mom. And then, the nerve of him, he sat between my cousins and started a conversation that still hadn't ended.

I was in the green, plastic chair a few feet away but still somehow outside of their circle. Two of the chair's legs were cracked, and I ended up bobbing around any time I shifted my weight. Sawyer would look at me every now and then, daring me to open my mouth. I put up my hands in defense and kept quiet, kept rocking on in my plastic chair.

I didn't expect the first thing he said to me to happen while we decorated our burgers by the grill. With Sawyer, it was usually food first, chitchat later.

"You owe me so bad," he said right when I bit into my sandwich. "You know what I was doing before you called? I was binge watching Law & Order. Now I'll never know who did it." He whacked the top bun onto his burger.

"No DVR?"

"It's full, smartass. My daddy can't get enough of the Chrisleys."

"Oh." I spooned some potato salad onto my plate. "C-C-Criminal Minds is better."

"Unbelievable." He walked away with a shake of his head.

"You know it's true," I said, following him. "Can I sit with the cool kids now?"

"If you keep your mouth shut, sure, Press."

"Am I in time-out or something?"

“You called me here to save your ass, and that’s what I’m doing, saving your ass,” he said. “Just shush and maybe they won’t give you a hard time. I’m trying to maintain the peace, but you gotta help me out, bud.”

“Fine.”

#

I’d never wanted to talk to someone as much as I did that day. I hadn’t had a real conversation with Sawyer, or anyone really, in months, since the assault. I was hearing things from Sawyer the same time as Trish and Mason, which rubbed me the wrong way. Or maybe it was just Mason that ground my gears. We weren’t always so hostile towards each other growing up, but we never liked each other much either. We just didn’t click. I liked music and art and things that made you feel. He liked getting dirty and beer and shooting things out of the sky so they stopped feeling.

Sawyer mentioned friends I didn’t know and how some girl liked him a lot and that he wasn’t sure how he truly felt about Ohio State. Only that it was real big over there and people liked to celebrate everything real hard.

At night, when the food had been put away, my mother took Mason and Trish out for dessert since their visit was coming to an end. I skipped. Claimed I had an upset stomach. I wound up in my room moving some things around, because I swear they were in there touching stuff when I wasn’t looking to mess with my head.

“There’s the damsel-in-distress.” Sawyer pushed open the door. “You staying up here with all this stuff is why people think you’re weird.”

“Screw people.” I picked at a corner of my *Good Times* album, avoiding Sawyer’s eyes even though I had no problem calling him over earlier.

“I didn’t say they were right,” he said. “So how are you planning on paying me back? Since I saved the day and all.”

“Wwwhat do you want?” I asked, slipping the record out of its sleeve. “Name your price. Buy you food? Any new comics come out?”

“Any other time, I’d ask for something substantial, but you’ve gone and made things complicated this time, bud,” he said. “I want to talk.”

“We already talked.” I set the needle against vinyl and watched it go.

“Well, I want to talk more,” he said. “You can’t just call me when you need something and avoid me afterwards. I’m your best friend. At least I thought I was. Driving me crazy with your teenage drama. Shit.”

“Fine. We’ll talk. Fine,” I said. “But outside. I can’t breathe in here.”

“No shit. Maybe if you didn’t have all this old Elvis stuff.” He moved to the window and pushed apart the grey curtains before pulling it open. I followed him out onto the roof, stopping the record and grabbing something off my desk first.

“What’s that?” Sawyer asked when I sat down to his left.

“The Turkish delight.”

“You mean you didn’t eat it already? You usually go through a box in two days. One day if the guilt doesn’t kill you.”

“Are we going to talk or are you going to make comments all night?” I shoved square of candy in my mouth. Sawyer took one, too.

“Wallah, I was going to be an asshole and get you the ones with nuts, but I figured I had to win you over, not annoy you,” he said.

“Your shirt annoys me enough. W-w-why are you wearing that damn Beatles shirt again?”

“I bought it just for that reason. No lie. You think I listen to this shit?” He glanced down at Paul McCartney’s folded face. “The only old music I listen to is good old EP, and that’s because you never listen to anything else when I’m around.”

“Why would I listen to anything else?” I said. “And don’t act like you don’t dig some of his songs. I see you tapping your foot every once in a while. Embrace it. Join us.”

“You fucking fanatics.” He grabbed another delight.

“Here.” I gave him the box.

“But they're yours. I have two other boxes at home.”

“Just hold them.” I wiggled the pack of menthols from my jacket pocket.

“Nope.” Sawyer snatched the cigarettes out of my hand real fast. “Anjad? Really?”

“Come on—”

“If you want to smoke until your lungs shrivel up, be my guest, but you’re not taking me down with you,” he said. “I suffer enough whenever my amo Musa visits and lights up the hookah three days straight.”

“Sawyer— ”

“Bite your fucking nails if you have to. You aren’t smoking. I’ll throw them off the roof.” I pursed my lips, defeated, and wasted no time picking at my nails. I didn’t say anything afterwards. Sawyer was the one who wanted to talk, after all.

“Can I ask just one question?” He held up a finger. I stared at the weathered, white house across the street, hoping he’d drop the subject if I just never faced him. But Sawyer wasn’t the type to back down so easily.

“What?” I said.

“Are you okay?”

“Huh?” I met his eyes for the first time since he showed up in town.

“You. Are you okay? Up here,” he said. I flinched when he raised a hand and tapped my temple, swallowing real hard afterwards. I was so stupid, jumping like that.

“I know you’ve always been crazy, bud, but sometimes you have your bad days. I don’t like those.”

“You think I do?” I leaned forward, resting my chin in my palm. “And no. I’m not okay.”

“Because?”

“Stuff.”

“Care to elaborate? I’m only gonna listen for a few minutes, so use your time wisely.”

“Doesn’t really matter. I’ll live.”

“That’s depressing,” he said. I sighed, because like shrugging, it was the only thing I could do. If I kept answering, he’d keep asking, and eventually, he’d get to the root of all this, and I didn’t need him getting involved. I did catch him eyeing my injured hand, but he never commented on it.

“My folks are bad,” I said. “They’re reeling again. Still grieving. And I jjust feel like I’m cracking all over.” Sawyer was the one person I could always trust, but I

surprised myself with how quick I was to open up, as if this whole mess between us never happened. I think he noticed I regretted saying so much, because he changed the subject.

“My dad told me he saw you,” he said.

“Yeah. I guess I hhhave a habit of running into people I’m trying to avoid,” I said.

“He mentioned you were back in town.”

“Yup. And here to stay.”

“What do you mean?” I turned to him.

“You never thought to ask why I’m suddenly back? Didn’t think it was weird to see me around in the middle of fall semester?”

“You mean you haven’t gone back to OSU? After we talked on the porch?”

“No. And I won’t be for a while. Maybe never,” he said.

“Why not?”

“You could pretend to be happy, Press. Jeez.” He leaned back, his arms outstretched behind him. “My mom had a stroke back in September,” he said.

This knot twisted in the back of my throat, and I got real hot all over the way I did the first time Alzheimer’s hit Opa real hard and he looked me dead in the eye, asking me who I was.

“Shit,” I said. “Is, is, is she ok?”

“She’s as ok as she can be, I guess,” he said, eyes still closed. “They say she might be ok after all the rehab. But I don’t know what okay really means.” He kept quiet for a moment after, and I kept looking at him, sure he wanted to say more say. “I was thinking about you the other day, bud.”

“Me?” I pointed to myself, my eyebrows furrowed.

“You at your grandma’s funeral, at Audrick’s, how you cried and cried and cried. And you when I found you on your front porch, how you just sat there, empty. I wondered, if my mom had died, which Presley I would have been.” He finally looked over at me. “And I wondered what had happened in between it all that made you so empty.”

What Now, What Next, Where To

Mr. Malik greeted me as always, with his wild handshake and a kiss on each cheek.

“Good to see you again,” he said, shutting the door for me so I could slip inside without dropping the flowers or chocolate I bought at the supermarket, those fancy, red Lindor truffles.

“Sit, sit.” He ushered me to the sofa that hadn't been moved or retouched in all the years I'd known the family.

“Sssorry I ran away last time. I had to do something,” I said. He waved it off with a smile, never the type to take things personally. Life was too short to be angry all the time, he'd always say.

“First, you're kicking me off your porch, then you're asking me for help, and now you're in my living room. Make up your mind, bud.” Sawyer stepped in from the kitchen, taking a real big sip of water out of the mason jar in his hand. “Miss me?”

“These are for your mom. From me and my folks,” I told him. “But they don't know about her. I wwwasn't sure if I was supposed to say something.”

“A gift? Let me see.”

“How nice of you,” Mr. Malik said, grabbing the shiny, red gift bag before Sawyer got into it. “I’ll make sure she gets it. You didn’t have to, Presley.”

“She’s like family. No big deal,” I said. He nodded appreciatively and carried the gift off to the other room.

“She’s sleeping right now,” Sawyer said. “I hope he doesn’t eat whatever you got.”

“There’s enough in there.”

“Don’t be so sure. He can eat,” he said. I stood in the foyer, rubbing at a spot on my sleeve.

“So, are you going to tell me or what?”

“Ttell you?”

“How you messed up your hand? Looks nasty,” he said.

“I punched my mirror,” I said, holding up my bandaged fist.

“White boy problems.”

“Dude, you’re half white,” I said.

“Irrelevant.”

“I just got real angry. I don’t know where it all came from,” I said. “It was stupid, aaand now my folks think I’m going off the deep end again.” I turned for the door.

“Anyway, sorry for, for all this venting lately,” I said. “And sorry for slamming the door in your face that day, too.”

“Just don’t do it again,” he said. “Does this mean we’re cool, or are we still doing this awkward breakup shit? The only reason I stopped bothering you was because I got the hint you wanted to be left alone.”

“I know.”

“So we’re good?” he asked. I didn’t say anything at first, hesitant to agree. I wanted everything to go back to normal, but I was afraid no matter what I did, things would never be the same. Even with my best friend. I feared the black star over my shoulder wasn’t going to stop following me. I feared the wall I had built to protect myself would soon crumble. Letting Sawyer back around me meant letting him back in, and he always, always knew when things weren’t right. I feared I’d be exposed again—raw. My secret was the only part of myself I had left.

“We’re good,” I said.

“Then let’s go get something to eat. I’m starving,” he said and grabbed his keys off the coffee table. “Actually, you’re driving. You still owe me.” He dropped them back onto the table, making a face when it sounded like he might have scratched the wood.

“Fine. Where to?”

“Mexican,” he said. “I’ve never had my own chauffeur before. Don’t keep me waiting.” He walked past me and out the door.

“Shut up.”

#

I wiggled my straw around, pumped it in and out of my soda. Pepsi. Sawyer played with his phone.

“Sorry. My roommate,” he said, setting it down. “He’s wondering what I’m doing. I should probably tell him I’m not going back to Columbus.”

“Speaking of school, what’re you going to do?” I asked.

“Now that I'm back here? If things stay okay at home, I should start in the spring. I want to stay close to my mom. Maybe we'll see each other on campus, huh Press? Hang out like the old days.”

“Nnnot quite,” I said. “My dad calls it a break. I say I dropped out.”

“You dropped out? Why?” he asked. “I thought you liked all that graphic design stuff.”

“I couldn't focus,” I said, chewing at my straw.

“So what are you going to do, bud?”

“Figure out a way to get to Graceland.”

“Other than that. You've been trying to figure out a way down there from the second you were born, Press. I'm talking life goals here. If your sorry ass isn't in school anymore, what are you doing? School gave you a routine. It kept you in line.”

“I dddon't know.”

“You don't tell me shit anymore. Treating me like some stranger,” he said.

“I don't want to bother anyone.”

“Anjad? We tell each other everything, Presley. Always have. Who else is going to listen to me complain about my overbearing parents?”

“*Your* overbearing parents?” I laughed into my cup. “Besides, y-y-you didn't tell me about your mom.”

“Because you weren't talking to me. I wanted to. Believe me.” He set both hands on the table, playing with the flap of his paper napkin.

“Sorry.” I picked at a corner of the medical tape holding the gauze around my knuckles in place.

“So now that you know, you can make up for the fact you were being a moody asshole by telling me what’s up. You look hit. Like something’s keeping you up all night.”

“You psychic or something?”

“Don’t tell anyone.” He held a finger to his lips. “You gotta give me something, bud. I’m still Sawyer. I won’t laugh at you that much. I promise.” He kicked me real hard in the shin. “Spit it out. You gotta start building bridges. Not walls. That’s always been your problem.”

I stirred my straw some more. It was hard building anything when I was drowning all the time.

“Why am I always the one opening up?” I asked.

“Because you’re the one who wears his heart on his sleeve,” he said.

“God, I hate you.” I took another swing of soda. “I think my parents are, are, are splitting. Splitting up,” I said. “Or they want to.”

“What?” He leaned back in his chair.

“They keep fighting. A lot,” I said. I saw it. Every day at home; my mother so exhausted by the end of the day, she didn’t have energy for anything; my father agitated when he couldn’t get an answer from her or a smile or a kiss. It started just like that. It always did.

“Did they say anything?” he asked.

“Only that she can’t do it anymore. At least that’s what she told my dad.” I pushed the Pepsi away.

“You talk to them about it?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because they never listen.”

“Look, bud, you have to stop letting people walk all over you like some fucking doormat. Even your own parents,” he said. “They’re not over Audrick, and they may never be. Shit’s hard. But you have to worry about you. Stand up. Do something for yourself for once. You’re always trying to please people, trying to do stuff by yourself. It’s annoying.”

“What am I supposed to do, Sawyer? I go to work. I, I, I come home. I don’t bother them with anything.”

“Hell if I know. That’s up to you to figure out,” he said. “Ask Elvis.”

“That’s nnnnot a bad idea.”

“That’s a very bad idea. Leave the guy alone. It’s been 50 years.”

“41 years, actually. Just this August.”

“Basically, if I walk in on you in the middle of some séance, this friendship is over. Okay?”

“No promises.”

It's Still Here

For as foulmouthed as he was, Sawyer had a way with words. I hated admitting he was right, but he was right. I really did have to stop letting people walk all over me like some fucking doormat. I really did have to do something for myself for once; although, I didn't want to do the something I had to do, because it meant talking to Ziggy, and sometimes, there was just no talking to Ziggy. So I yelled over the phone, sort of, because he still had my guitar, and I was real tired of everyone ignoring me whenever I did speak up.

"It's not just the guitar. I want to talk," I said. "Aaabout Belgrade."

"Okay, Red. Be at Suzie's at 11:00. We can talk."

I made my way downtown like he asked. Between Belgrade, his job at The Purple Cat, and whatever theater gigs he was involved in, you worked around Zig's schedule. Suzie's wasn't real busy in the morning. A few folks here and there. Some in the booths on the far left. Ziggy was at the bar, up on a stool with an elbow on the counter. He was in his phone, didn't see me, so I hit the bathroom first.

I had a habit of looking for the bathroom first thing wherever I went. Just in case an episode hit and I needed to go before the dry-heaves turned people off or I shit my brains out. I never liked admitting it, but I always worried when the next attack would

happen. When one would render me useless. I even noticed myself avoiding certain places if I felt off there. Like the grocery store. Something about that lighting made me sick, had me walking all lopsided and off balance through the aisles. The perks of panic disorder. Luckily, I was having an okay day, and I went in to wash my hands. They got real sweaty whenever I was nervous.

One of the faucets dripped real loud. I stepped to it and started washing my left hand, almost forgetting I wasn't supposed to get my bandages wet. The hot water steamed up the bottom of the mirror in front me. I pumped the soap dispenser and scrubbed as best I could.

The guy who stood at the urinal when I walked in cleared his throat and flushed. I pumped some more soap, liking the way it bubbled. The urinal guy was washing his hands, too, to my right one sink down, which was good, because for a second I thought he was going to walk right out. He had a tattoo on his upper left arm, feathers peeking out from his short sleeve. Wings like an angel's. There was a quote under it, but the cursive made it hard to read. It looked fresh. I had always wanted a tattoo, a sleeve of Elvis. I'd seen real cool TCB ones and slick '68 Comeback black leather scenes, but I hated needles. I'd die before I ever had one finished.

I shut off the water and shifted away when the guy reached over for the paper towel dispenser hanging beside the soap pump between us. That's when I saw the platinum blonde hair sticking out of his blue beanie. When I caught a whiff of his cologne. When I saw another tattoo, on his inner right forearm. Christ in jet black ink. His crown of thorns. His sunken eyes. The eyes I never forgot. The eyes I saw every time I shut my own.

The room spun.

Beau took the time to dry his hands. “Long time no see, Atmen,” he said, voice bitter, biting. He crumpled up the towel and threw it at me. I gripped the edge of the cast-iron sink, my fingers white. My thighs shook, and my voice caught in my throat. He took one step towards me. I took one step back.

If I spoke, it'd come out broken. If I spoke, he wouldn't listen. Just like that night. He moved again. So did I, backed up into the sink, the rust of the faucet handles chipping beneath my fingernails, my stitched knuckles sore. My body burned and my head buzzed and I was suffocating in his cologne, caught between the flashes of the parking deck and the person in front of me. I tried keeping it together, tried standing up, speaking up, but my chest kept closing up with each breath I took and my stomach churned and everything I felt that night struck me all at once. All I could do was stand there beneath his gaze, pressed against the cold sink.

He grabbed me by the collar of my denim jacket, his breath hot in my face. I pushed at his chest, but the sink in my back hurt too much and I had no strength in my arms, still trying to breathe, my pulse gushing so loud in my ears, he sounded far away like we were under water. He shoved me hard, cast-iron bruising my back. And then he was gone. Just like that.

I stumbled into one of the stalls. Slammed the door. Locked it. Pressed my back to it. Barred it. Boots sliding over wet tiles. I clawed at my shirt. At my chest. Wrung. Twisted so tight I'd snap in half. Desperate for one breath. One second of relief. But the pressure kept building. My head kept spinning. And I was going to die.

The Sun Sessions

At nineteen, a stammering Elvis walked into Sun Records on a hot summer day, and his life forever changed. He recorded *My Happiness* and *That's When Your Heartache Begins* for his mother, a birthday gift. That was the rumor. At the front desk, when Marion Keisker asked him who he thought he sounded like, E said *I don't sound like nobody*. And Keisker seemed to think so, too. Took down his name. Put him on hold. When Sam Phillips needed a ballad singer real bad in '54, Keisker told him to call the kid with the sideburns. Most folks seemed to think that was it. That E became the King of Rock 'n' Roll over night, but it took time, practice, patience. He worked real hard, worked on himself, worked with Scotty Moore and Bill Black. And finally, when it looked like things weren't going to work out, when Phillips wasn't getting what he needed from E, *That's All Right (Mama)* happened, and Elvis found his voice.

At fifteen, a stuttering Presley walked into his high school auditorium after school one winter afternoon, and his life forever changed, too. Ziggy, a senior at the time known as the loud theater kid who was held back once in the sixth grade for reasons no one ever could figure out, had heard I played guitar real good. So he cornered me at my locker, told me he was interested in recruiting me for a band he was starting and to meet him in the auditorium if I was interested in being recruited.

When the day came, I wiggled into the auditorium, pulling open the heavy wooden doors and dragging my equipment in behind me. Ziggy stood by the front row, singing to himself, something about a song and glory and how time flies. I couldn't tell you what it was from. Zig was in deep, the real deal, more than your silly school productions. The guy had a voice that made the hair on my neck stand the way it did the first time I heard Axl Rose on my dad's *Welcome to the Jungle* 45. I didn't know a lick about theater. The closest I ever got to musicals were E's movies, and even I could admit they weren't real good, poor guy got screwed over, but I did know Ziggy was a real good singer.

I listened for another few seconds, mostly because I was too shy to let him know I was there. I did that a lot, kept to myself, missed out on stuff, but E was real shy, too. Maybe even more than me. And things worked out for him. I tried not to beat myself up over it.

I didn't cough to let Ziggy know I was there. Didn't clear my throat. He eventually noticed me when I started making my way down the narrow aisle towards him with my guitar case on my back and my Lunchbox amp, in its cab, in my hand. After he assured me we wouldn't get in trouble for using the auditorium after school hours, I was up on stage, my black Keds squeaking on polished wooden floors, my right leg shaking real bad. It took five tries before I finally plugged the cord into the small black amp. I was already sweating and my tongue felt weird in my mouth and I had no idea how anyone did anything on stage, in front of other people no less. I only had once face in the crowd, Zig's head of wild black hair among the endless rows of folded red chairs, but I

still felt like Elvis during his first Ed Sullivan appearance. And I prayed to God I was Ziggy's cup of tea.

I played what I thought would show off my skill. Did a bit of *Kashmir*. Some *Final Countdown*. A splash of *Dirty Diana*. A slice of *Hey Joe*. I played the riff for Pantera's *Walk*, because, goddamn was I invincible when I did. And while I itched real bad to play some Elvis, I held back, because I didn't want him thinking I was the weird kid who didn't listen much to anything else, even though I was that kid, painfully so. But Zig's opinion of my taste in music mattered less and less the more I lost myself in the song, roaming about the stage, bobbing and bending my body to the riffs, almost yanking the cable out of the amp; music moving from mind to hands to guitar, pushing higher, higher, higher—

Of course it wasn't enough for Zig. Nothing ever was. He was my Sam Phillips, poking at me, wondering if there was anything else I knew I could do.

"I don't want you to just play guitar, Presley. A lot of people do," he said. "I want you to create something. I want you to sing. I think that's what's missing."

"I'm nno singer," I told him, approaching him at the edge of the stage. "I'll play anything. You name it. But I, I, I don't sing."

"I don't believe you," he said. We went back and forth for a good two minutes, Ziggy pushing me, me telling him I couldn't do it. I never thought myself a singer until he waved a hand at me and told me to shut the fuck up.

"Sing whatever you want. Just get the job done, or I'm walking. You want in the band?"

"I mean, I mean yeah. That's why I'm here," I said.

“Then prove it.”

Without a second thought, I laid into *Trying to Get to you*, because there was something about that song, about the way E sang it at his '68 Comeback—how he pushed and pulled at each note, each word, building to the chorus where he strained and gripped Scotty's Gibson and pushed off his chair, tight and raw; unhinged. His voice rasped in that comeback like mine was my whole life. So I pushed and pulled at each note, too, hitting the chorus and on the verge of losing control without a care because it felt too damn good.

I was named for the King of Rock 'n' Roll. The rebel. The coolest of the cool. And I felt it—him—his passion, because it was just as wild as my own. On stage, in that moment and every moment after, I was a rock star, even if we were only making noise in a real small bar for our friends. I didn't stutter. I didn't panic. Didn't worry about the warped wires in my brain. I was Presley, and nothing else existed but the lights and smell of beer. The blurred faces in the crowd and my own pulse beating louder than Chá's drums. My guitar strings bending by my fingers. I was every 70s Elvis ballad—big, bold, and brave.

With the last note, I rocked so far back on my heels, I almost lost my balance and fell over. I managed to catch myself, and I took a moment to push the hair out of my eyes, hoping maybe I didn't look as silly as I felt for nearly landing on my ass. I gripped the neck of my guitar and leaned forward to catch my breath. Ziggy didn't say anything. He only jumped up to sit on the edge of the stage, his legs hanging off, his eyebrows all bunched up like he couldn't decide the nicest way to tell me I was horrible and that I should give up music forever.

“See, you can sing,” he said. “My sources proved true.”

“Who told you I can sing?” I asked.

“A little birdie who knows you well enough.” He picked at the stage floor with purple nails.

“But I don’t sing around anyone. I don’t even play that much if someone’s c-c-close by. I get all nervous. I was hoping doing this band thing would help me with that. Everyone’s always telling me I need to, to, to get out of my shell,” I said.

“A lot of people know you play guitar, but the birdie said you’ve got a voice buried in you, too. And lo and behold, the birdie was right.”

Before I could interrogate Ziggy to figure out just who his little birdie was, even though I had a real good idea, he switched gears.

“You play acoustic, too, I assume?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “I prefer acoustic, bbbut I can play both.” I folded my arms over my chest before I started fidgeting real bad, even though it never helped, like putting a lid on a full pot of boiling water.

“Yeah?” He didn’t look at me then, still picking at the floor. I unfolded my arms and stuffed them into my jean pockets, my stomach starting to tighten in a way that had me eyeing the exit at the far right of the auditorium.

“I like Elvis, but I do other stuff,” I told him. “I don’t know, wwwwat you’ve heard around school, but I like to think I know what I’m doing. I play all kinds.”

“I hear you more than like the guy,” he said, giving me a knowing a look, seeing through the cool guy act I was trying real hard to pull off. I nodded, nudging my bangs

back into my eyes like I always did whenever I didn't want to face someone—when I couldn't.

“W-w-what do you mean?” I asked, crossing my arms again.

“You're one jumpsuit away from being one of those impersonators in Vegas.”

“Tribute artist is the preferred term, yyyou know,” I said. “You're paying tribute, and it's an art.” I regretting opening my mouth when he laughed.

“What is? Wearing glittered suits and singing a dead guy's songs?” he said.

“Nah, man.” I walked over to him. “It's about ssstepping into his shoes and, and, and feeling it. His music. The heart he put into it. Those artists aren't impersonating. They're searching.”

“For what?”

“The fire E had. That something special, you know? The reason we're talking about him today. I get up there, I'm Presley Atmen, but I'd be lying if I t-t-told you I wasn't searching, too.”

Ziggy hopped off the stage and grabbed the blue backpack he had stuffed into one of the folding chairs. He started up the aisle towards the exit, leaving me alone on the stage, the bright lights bothering me real bad.

“Hey,” he said, turning to look at me. I picked up my guitar, slung it over my shoulder, and squinted to see him.

“I like you, Red.” And then he was gone.

When Ziggy left, I should have, too, but against my better judgement, I marched out into the hallway towards locker 716, creaky and rusted, and slammed it shut to prove

a point, because I couldn't go home happy after nailing my audition. Presley Atmen accept he was good at something and that someone else agreed? Never.

"Do it again," Sawyer said. "I'll shove your punk ass in there."

"What did you tell Ziggy?" I asked.

"Ziggy?"

"Ziggy Javor. Sssenior. Does theater. Always singing in, in, in the hallway. A little birdie told him some things."

"Tweet, tweet. He asked me about you, is all. If you're any good."

"And?"

"I told him you're shitty and not to waste his time." He opened his locker again to grab his striped Adidas gym bag. "What do you think, I told him, bud? You've been making yourself sick over this audition all week. I said you're a kickass guitar player and a damn good singer, too."

"I don't sing around you." I set my amp down by my feet.

"Anjad? I've literally known you since we were two feet tall. I've heard you sing, Press," he said. "It's always *Hound Dog* this, *Love Me Tender* that. Don't get me started about your love affair with *Bridge Over Troubled Water*."

I fiddled with the lock on the locker next to his, spinning it around and around and around until I worried it'd come loose and fall off and Bria Peters wouldn't be able to get her stuff the next day.

"Look," Sawyer said, "I've got soccer. You deserve something that's yours, too. Just helping my best friend out. Shit."

"Sorry," I said. "You know hhhhow I get."

“You’re good.” He shut his locker. “How’d it go, anyway?”

“Uh, he said he liked me. I guess that’s good.”

“Yeah, no shit.”

“He could’ve said it to be nice.”

“I don’t think he’d do that. Seems like a to the point kind of guy.”

“So?”

“So you’re in the band. Most likely.”

“What if I’m not?”

“I have practice, so I’ll catch you later. Stop worrying,” he told me. “You’ll be fine. And don’t forget you’re coming over Friday to watch Dark Knight.”

“How could I forget? It’s only the hundredth time.”

“Listen, Atmen, I don’t come between you and Elvis. Don’t mess with my Batman.”

“Fair enough,” I said. “See you.” I fell back against his locker with a huff. If people weren’t asking me what was wrong, they were telling me not to worry, which was impossible because I was one big ball of worry and nausea. All I wanted was to be the cool cat that was in a band instead of the mentally ill kid or the stuttering redhead everyone called the flaming Nazi because he spent too much time with Oma and Opa and their heavy accents. But I couldn’t be that irked by Sawyer. Most times, he was the only thing keeping me from drowning.

I pulled the cellphone out of my front jean pocket to check the time but noticed a text message from a number I didn’t recognize. I took a peek: *You’re in, Red. You keep doing what you just did, and we’ll go places.* I pushed off the locker. Read the message

again. Couldn't catch my breath. Read the message again. Almost threw my phone against the wall in excitement and read that damn message one more time before saving Ziggy's number and replying with: *For real? Are you sure?* And then I wanted to throw my head against the wall for asking something so dumb.

"Are you sure?" I muttered to myself. I imagined Sawyer's face, his raised eyebrow, the way he'd say *Of course he's sure. He wouldn't have texted you if he wasn't, bud.* I cupped my mouth, realizing how crazy I must have looked, bouncing and talking to myself in the hallway. I got another text when I bent over to pick up my amp and head out. *Of course I'm sure. Welcome aboard, Mr. Presley.*

He called us Belgrade. Paid homage to the street his grandmother lived on all his life and the capital of his ancestor's beloved Serbia, though I was pretty sure it was pronounced real different in Serbian. Chá on drums. Beau on bass. Laine on guitar. Me on guitar and backing vocals, finally a part of something. We wore leather and ripped denim and too much black. Smearred eyeliner and chipped nail polish. Over time, the music morphed and so did our style and status. Less noise, less thrown together in Beau's garage, more polished, more gigs, pulling from hard rock, from sleaze rock, and from the glam greats Ziggy loved so much. And when I stepped into place, my leg going, hair in my eyes, I had E, with his hiccups and hitches, driving me.

When I looked at Ziggy, I saw the real deal. He had the look, the voice, the stage presence. I think he saw the world in different colors. What was blue to Chá and grey to me, was purple to Ziggy. He rode his own wavelength, rocked and rolled to his song and didn't give a damn if you couldn't keep up. I did my best at first, desperate to please, afraid I wouldn't meet his expectations and get my ass booted out, but I learned real fast

when it came to art and music, you couldn't chase after anyone. I had to find my own colors and shake, rattle, and roll to my own song. I had to find my voice, just like E did at Sun. Belgrade was my outlet and my charge, what kept me standing when my family was falling apart. With my guitar on my body and my mouth at the mic, I was free. I was vulnerable yet assured and so unlike the Presley slumped in that wobbly wooden chair, squirming beneath Beau's condescending gaze.

#

Some dry heaving, an upset stomach, and fifteen minutes later, I managed to crawl out of the bathroom and over to the table in the far back where Ziggy and Beau sat pressing buttons on their phones, screens lighting their faces in blue shadows. They looked up when I pulled out one of the chairs to sit.

"What happened?" Ziggy said, setting his phone aside. "I saw you walk in, and then you disappeared for a good twenty minutes."

"Uupset stomach. Must've eaten something earlier," I said.

"Well, I'll keep it short, in case you've gotta go." He nudged my side with an elbow and a chuckle.

"I-I-I said I wanted to talk to you," I told him, gripping the edge of the table, unsteady, afraid I'd fall over if I let go. My leg wouldn't quit trembling, the metal buckle of my boot hitting the chair *ting, ting, ting*. The muscles in my thighs strained so tight it hurt.

"Jjjust you," I said, staring at my fingers, at the table, the salt shaker—at anything and anywhere but Beau.

"Don't be like that, Presley," Ziggy said. "You sounded serious on the phone."

“Yeah. I want m-m-my guitar.”

“You just said you wanted to talk.”

“I’ve got nothing to say.”

“Look, I get there’s always been some tension between the two of you, but that’s why I told Beau to come. Let’s fix it. Water under the bridge.” Ziggy smacked my shoulder with the back of his hand when I still wouldn’t look at him, his nails painted in that glittered purple polish he’d been wearing since high school.

“I’ve been running around trying to find another guitarist, trying to keep Belgrade alive, and I keep coming back to you, because you were there with me from the start, Presley. Don’t throw it away over something silly. Whatever’s between you two, let’s get it all out now.”

“I don’t have a problem,” Beau said, his tone cool, all of him nonchalant, because I was the one who had come undone. “Strawberry Shortcake over here is the one always at me,” he said. “You should work on that temper.”

“Fuck you.”

“See?” He turned to Ziggy. I pushed back out of my chair and headed to the exit by the bathrooms. Another chair squeaked against the wooden floor, one of them coming after me. I kept walking, yanking my keys out of my pocket real fast, trying to get to the car before my legs gave out—heavy and stiff like walking through knee deep snow. Ziggy jogged around me to cut me off.

“Presley, I didn’t think calling him over would bother you so bad. I just thought it’s worth starting fresh,” he said. “I got excited you might come back.”

“I’ll, I’ll, I’ll join your fucking band, Ziggy. I jjust need a minute.” I spun around in place trying to remember where I parked, but all the cars looked the same, rows of rounded hunks of metal and grey packed in a small lot behind the brick building. I blinked real hard over and over, hoping to see things right, but all I could see was Ziggy waving a hand in my face.

“What’s your deal? Why are you so upset?”

“Nnot upset. Just don’t like the guy.” I spotted my car over Ziggy’s shoulder. “I hhave to go,” I said. He grabbed me by the arm.

“You can’t just call me down here and then bail,” he said. “Like I don’t have a million other things to do than baby you.”

“I said I’d join the band, okay? Just, just, just leave me alone.” I threw his hand off of me, moved around him to my car. He said something else, but I couldn’t catch it, didn’t care to. I needed to leave.

Where Do I Go From Here?

I dreaded walking into my house, because my dad's car wasn't the only car in the driveway. I saw Sawyer's blue Toyota, with all its chips and dents, and when I went inside, I saw Sawyer, with all his bullshit, hanging around my dad in the kitchen.

"You just walking into people's houses now?" I asked, grabbing a bottle of water from the fridge. I turned to look at them when neither said a word, Sawyer peeking at me from the corners of his eyes, trying to hide a grin, my father with a hand at his waist, his white sleeve rolled up and Opa's brown leather watch around his wrist.

"What? Is there something on me?" I felt my face and hair, ran my hands over my arms and thighs.

"Sorry," Sawyer said. "I think I got you in trouble."

"W-w-what do you mean?" I asked. My dad gave me a look. He moved to grab his own bottle of water, saying some things I was glad Sawyer couldn't understand.

"Just tell me. What?" I said, never a fan of suspense.

"You didn't think what happened to his mother is worth mentioning? We've known the family for over twenty years, Presley," my dad said. I swallowed real hard, getting hot all over. I didn't tell my folks what happened to Mrs. Malik. What's worse, I forgot, too caught up with myself and my insecurities like nothing else mattered in the

world. I couldn't bring myself to look at Sawyer, despite him not knowing I'd forgotten about his bedridden mother, the woman who treated me like a son since the day we met.

"Shit." It was all I could say.

"And quit swearing all the time," my dad said.

"I was going to tell you," I said, "but I didn't know if I was supposed to. I took a get well gift already, though."

"Oh yeah?"

"Ask Sawyer."

"I think my dad demolished the chocolate, but Mom loves the flowers," he said.

"Why didn't you tell him at the barbeque when my cousins were over?" I punched Sawyer in the arm, the idiot getting me in trouble like he always did. "Yyyou were talking to everyone that day except me."

"Don't be too hard on Press, Mr. Atmen. To be fair, we weren't telling people about Mom just yet. Like to keep things private. Besides, you know how scatterbrained he can be sometimes." Sawyer threw an arm around my shoulders. "But we love him anyway," he said. I pushed him off.

"Why are you here?" I asked.

"Bored. Wanted to do something. Don't like staying stuffed at home."

"Not feeling it t-t-today. I'll be upstairs."

"Not so fast." My dad grabbed the back of my shirt. "You're not locking yourself up there. Go out with Sawyer, or come get groceries with me. Pick one."

“Come on,” Sawyer said, looping his arm back around my shoulders, tugging real hard that time. “I’ve already got something planned.” He dragged me out to his car and was even so polite as to open the passenger side door for me.

“Where are we going?” I asked. He didn’t reply, getting into the driver’s seat instead. I got in, too, and asked again.

“Wherever the road takes us, bud.”

“Look, I’ll be honest,” I told him, “I’m hhhaving a real bad day. I just got back from talking to Ziggy, and I just want to—”

“Oooh, Ziggy? What’d you talk about?” He started backing out of the driveway. I didn’t reply at first, too busy looking at the road behind us, because he had a bad habit of whirring out of driveways without checking for other cars.

“I wanted to get mmmmy guitar back, but I don’t think he even really had it with him,” I said once the coast was clear.

“And then what?”

“I was stupid and, and, and told him I’d rejoin the band.”

“Stupid? You mean smart. Quitting the band was stupid,” he said. “I’m gone for a few months, and your life takes a 180.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, Sawyer.”

“I think I do. The band was your thing. Your baby. You and Zig from the start.”

“Yeah, but it didn’t stay just m-m-me and Zig.”

“Well, yeah. Bands usually have more than two people.”

“I know, I know,” I said. “Beau was there, too.”

“Is he still an asshole?”

“And then some.”

“Some people just suck, Presley. It’s not your fault he’s so miserable.”

“Yeah, but he t-t-takes it out on me. Always has. Not trying to be a baby about it, but shit. And no one sees it. It’s like he’s got some spell on him so people like him despite his bad personality. It’s crazy.”

“Don’t say that around my old man. He’ll make you wear one of his dumb nazar pendants.”

“He’s still that sssuperstitious?” I asked.

“You don’t even know,” he said. “Look, bud, if Beau gives you trouble or tries taking credit for your songs again, you’re going to have to say something. Pricks like that don’t learn until they’re put in place.”

“I tried before. I was even going tto talk to Ziggy about it over the summer.”

“And then?”

Beau looked down on me because of my disabilities. He made comments because I preferred acoustic and how no one could ever hear me. He envied me for writing Belgrade’s better songs—good songs that were mine. He belittled me. Dismissed me. And when I was sick of it, when I opened my mouth, he shut me up. He humiliated me to shut me down.

We had gone to a show in Pittsburgh to support some friends, another band desperate for a taste of something bigger, something more. I left early, the headache bubbling all day finally hitting me hard. Parking in one of the decks downtown, I had a real long walk from the show back to my car. Every other street light flickered, dusk falling thick. I strolled along the sidewalk, fists stuffed in the pockets of my slick, black

leather jacket I likened to E's Comeback outfit, half zipped with the collar popped. I hummed to myself. *Suspicious Minds* was the tune stuck in my brain, a change from *Polk Salad Annie* and *Maybelline* the week before, and it took everything in me to keep from dropping to a knee and belting the chorus right there in the street.

For a while, I was alone, until I stepped into the parking garage, lights shaking, ground buckling as cars pulled out. I paused to dig for my keys, only to drop them the second I grabbed hold, ring crashing against the cool concrete with a *cish*. I leaned over, left hand on my left knee, my right out and reaching. But when I slipped a finger through the hoop and scooped them up, I didn't sigh in relief or hum or sing. I didn't walk to my car. I didn't breathe.

I still felt it, his fist against my jaw. Always. I felt him, smelled him, heard him. On my tongue lingered the bitter aftertaste of guilt and shame.

"And then?"

"Wwwhat?" I looked over at Sawyer.

"You said you were gonna talk to Ziggy about it," he said. I pressed my forehead to the cold car window, eyeing the crumbs of food in the rubber lining.

"I changed my mind."

Relax

Sawyer wasn't lying when he said our destination wasn't real far. A few minutes from my house, right off North State Street. When we pulled into the small parking lot, I got out of the car and looked up at the sign pinned against the white brick building. I squinted, trying to read the gold gradient letters in some funky font. And then it hit, the gears in my brain all clicking together.

"What is that?" I asked, pointing at the sign.

"You can read," Sawyer said, locking the car after himself, *beep, beep*. "Come on." He walked past me, held the door open for me, the neon *Open* sign blinking in my face. "I said come on." He grabbed me by the arm and yanked me inside. The fluorescent lights and checkered floor, speckled black and white, had me squinting again.

"Sawyer, w-w-what are we doing here?"

"What does one do at a tattoo shop, Presley?"

"I'm not getting a tattoo." The gears in my head started working again, faster this time, making me hot and bothered and jittery all over.

"For a guy who's into all those bad boy rebels like James Dean and Elvis, you're a pretty shitty rebel yourself, bud," he said. "I bet you can't even remember the last time you got into some real trouble."

“Elvis didn’t have any tattoos. And what’s your point?”

“My point is, you’ve always wanted a tattoo, since, like, high school. Why wait any longer? I was thinking about getting the word *Freedom* somewhere on me. Up here, maybe.” He cupped his upper left arm.

“Why that?”

“Well my baba’s Palestinian. We bring politics into everything. And Mama grew up in Mississippi. They like freedom down there, too,” he said. The sudden *zzzz* of a machine struck me like a cymbal and made me reach for the door.

“Nope.” Sawyer blocked the exit. “No backing out of this one.”

“Sssawyer, I can’t. I get anxious.”

“You’re always anxious.”

“No, like, like, like I have a real bad vasovagal response to needles.”

“Ok, Mayo Clinic. You got your nose pierced, didn’t you?”

“It lasted two seconds. If I get tattooed, I will pass out.”

“It’s a walk-in. Get something small. If you do faint, I got you. It’s happened before and I didn’t let you die, right? ”

“But—”

“And you’ve always wanted a tattoo, right? Elvis?”

“But—”

“And now your best friend in the whole damn world is about to make your dream come true, right?”

“Sawyer, please.”

“Shut up.” He smacked the back of my head. “You already have an idea in mind, don’t you?” He crossed his arms when I didn’t answer, and I almost felt bad for making something that was supposed to be fun real frustrating. We stood to the right of the main entrance in the little lobby with a few black, mesh backed chairs. Sawyer handed me one of the portfolios from the glass coffee table. I took a seat and flipped through it, waiting for the guy up front who was on the phone. I dropped out of school before I had to assemble my own senior portfolio for review. The stress might’ve killed me, but I bet I would have ended up with some real cool pieces. I loved graphic design. It was something I was good at and a skill I could do something with.

I moved through Edison’s portfolio, who I assumed was the guy with the green gauges on the phone who peeked over at us when we walked in. A brunette sat in one of the chairs, the other tattoo artist real focused. The brunette bared her pale thigh for a vibrant, teal Cheshire Cat. The frayed fabric of her denim shorts tickled her skin. When she looked my way, probably thinking I was a creep for staring, I stuck my nose back into the binder, digging around for Edison’s lettering and logo samples, because if I really was getting a tattoo, it was going to be E’s TCB logo in black ink on the inside of my right forearm.

I went back and forth, excited at the prospect of a tattoo, holding my stomach because my trypanophobia clouded my judgement. The thought of it, needles, made me gag: piercing, cold metal, something moving around inside you. Not to mention my low pain tolerance. Unless my anxiety about pain heightened the pain itself and it actually wasn’t so bad in the first place. But it’s not like I knew the answer or could do anything

about it even if I did. There were certain rides I simply had to buckle in for. And by the look on Sawyer's face, this tattoo was one of them.

Once Edison had hung up the phone, he approached Sawyer and I. He greeted us, asked us what we were in for. We got past introductions and chatted about what I wanted and where I wanted it, me, biting at my nails, telling him I liked some of the sharp font work I spotted in his portfolio and if he could do something similar with the TCB logo I was itching for.

"Elvis?" Edison adjusted his blue, backwards baseball cap. "Nice. Don't think I've done one of these logos before."

"He's in deep," Sawyer said.

"Wait, so you're named Presley after Elvis specifically?"

"Eeverything about me is after Elvis," I told him, Sawyer nodding obnoxiously in agreement.

"Nice."

I ended up putting in a deposit so he could draw it up for me, which affected my Graceland fund and made the tattoo all the more real. I gave Sawyer a mean look whenever I could, and he laughed every time.

I liked what Edison showed me. He took a minute, holding the sketch he whipped up in different scales, to my arm to see just how big I wanted it. The paperwork followed. And then I was waiting again while he prepared everything. Sawyer made a joke about how I looked like I was expecting to get wheeled into open heart surgery.

I wondered, the entire time I sat in Edison's chair, what'd happen if I bailed. If I just got up and headed out the door real fast. When Sawyer had his face in his phone and

Edison had his back turned, fiddling with his equipment, the urge shook me, and just as I was about to stand up at the very least, Edison grabbed my right arm, extending it, and flashed a tiny yellow razor.

“Let’s see what we’ve gotta shave,” he said. I knew then my fate had been sealed. I was getting that tattoo. After he shaved and wiped my arm clean, he prepped it with some cream. He pressed the stencil to my skin afterwards.

“What do you think?” Edison asked, rolling back on his stool. I examined the stencil, following each line, the letters, bold, atop a striking lightning bolt with the right amount of zigzags. In middle school, some girls used to ask if they could draw on me, connect the freckles on my arms like some coloring book. I always said no, and they always asked why I was such a jerk.

“Looks good,” I said. He went back to his equipment while it dried. And then came the moment of truth.

“Let’s get to it,” he said.

And that’s exactly what he did, was get to it, which meant grabbing the machine, putting needles to my skin. I sucked in a sharp breath at the sudden vibration and ended up holding it in my chest until I couldn’t hold it any longer. I had my face turned, because it’d all go to hell if I looked. The sensation soon felt less like a vibration and more like a scratching, a dragging, so I gripped the chair arm with my free hand, nails digging deep into leather, and focused on that strain and pain instead. And for a while, I thought I was doing real good, answering Edison with a full *yes* whenever he asked if I was okay instead of just mumbling at him. He asked if I wanted to change the radio station, but

they didn't have Sirius XM's Elvis Radio, so I said it was fine leaving it on 98.9's the *80s To Now*.

"You ok, bud?" Sawyer asked.

"Why?" I said, staring at the stool behind him.

"You look like a ghost."

"I fucking told you what happens," I said, gripping the chair tighter. "Making me look like some bitch in front of people."

"Can we take break?" Sawyer asked. Edison paused to look at him. "He's got this needle phobia, and I'm scared if you don't stop, he's going to die on me."

"Yeah, sure. A lot of people get queasy," he said. "Everyone's got different limits. Take five."

"Hey, Press, guess who sent me a friend request out of nowhere the other day?" Sawyer said. I didn't say anything, popping some of the candy Edison had offered me in my mouth, not too interested in Sawyer's social media escapades when my arm was on fire. I wrapped my hands around the water bottle he'd given me, too, liking the cold.

"You remember Kara Bell?" he said.

"What? From high school?" I asked, sucking on the mint.

"Yup."

"Yyyou still in love with her?" I asked.

"Shit, I might be," he said. "Hey, remember Jennifer Liu?"

"Shut up."

"Weren't you planning on indoctrinating her into your Elvis cult so when you asked to dance your first wedding dance to *It's Now or Never* she didn't look at you like

you were crazy or suggest the, what do you call it, overplayed *Can't Help Falling in Love* instead?"

"I mean, that was the p-p-plan. Still is. Just probably not with Jennifer."

"No?"

"Too optimistic. I don't need Miss Sunshine. I need a realist. Plus, she didn't like Elvis. What kind of garbage is that?"

"Right. How dare she."

"Besides, it's not like she's down the street waiting for me to, to, to swing on by and sweep her off her feet," I said. "I think she went to architect school in Cincinnati."

"What, are you stalking her online?"

"She kept posting about it. I couldn't tell you what she's up to nowadays," I said. "I'm not in the market for a relationship right now anyway. I got to sort myself out first. I mmmight not even make it through this tattoo."

"You lasted longer than I thought you would. Wallah I'm proud of you," he said. "I don't get you, bud. You keep saying you have to sort stuff out and that you've got a lot going on, but you really don't have anything going on other than your job. So, I mean this with love, I don't get all your bitching," he said. "Sure, it may be none of my business, but I'm all confused."

"Don't you mean all shook up?"

"Shut up."

"I don't know, Sawyer. I jjjust don't feel right."

"What does right feel like?"

"Hell if I know. I've n-n-never really been right."

“So how can you know what right is if you’ve never been right?”

“I don’t even feel like my normal self anymore.”

“Look, bud, what’s it gonna take to get you back on your feet and feeling like Presley again? Because I’m here to stay, and if you’re going to be this depressing all the time, I can’t hang out with you.”

“I don’t know.”

“No, you do know. You’re just not telling me.”

“I don’t know why, but,” I said, pausing to crush and crunch my mint, “with me out of school and my folks still broken up o-o-over Audrick and things all scattered, I find myself wanting now more than ever to get to Graceland, as stupid as that sounds.”

“It’s not stupid, Press. It’s somewhere you’ve always wanted to go. Everyone’s got a dream vacation.”

“I know real deep down that’s not how it works, bbbut I have this crazy idea that if I go I’ll suddenly feel all better. A change of scene. Something that’s mine. For me.”

“So what’s stopping you?”

“Money’s part of it. It’s not cheap, you know. With, with, with the VIP tour and the new Guesthouse and souvenirs. If I go to Beale. Travel, too. I don’t work enough to pay for all that. I got a car and insurance. A phone. Hhhave to help my parents out with my little stuff at least.”

“So Presley’s got to get to Graceland so he can feel right again, but money is an issue. What else?”

“Shit, I hate flying. But I don’t think I can handle driving all the way down there either. I’m not too hot on the highway, you know that.” I rubbed my face, dragging my hands across in frustration. “How did I make it this far in life?”

“I wonder the same thing, my friend,” he said. “Okay, I think I’ve got the answer to all your problems, Presley.”

“You do?”

“Listen up. You said you told Ziggy you’d rejoin the band, right? Get back into music. Get back on your feet. Keep working and get that prize money from the tournament Zig’s been bothering you about, too. Use your cut to book Graceland.”

“And then what?”

“I help you get to Memphis. If you absolutely cannot fly, I will drive.”

“You will?” I sat up.

“Yes. I will drive the full eight hours to Memphis so you can feel up on Elvis’s dining room carpets or sniff his curtains or whatever the hell you freaks do.”

“It’s more like eleven and a half.”

“You’re paying for gas.”

“Deal.”

“There you go. I just got your life back on track. You don’t deserve me.”

“It’s, it’s, it’s not going to be so easy, Sawyer.”

“Sure it is. First, we gotta get your guitar back.” He pulled his car keys from his front jean pocket, jingling them in my face.

“We can’t just show up at Ziggy’s house.”

“Sure we can. I show up at yours all the time. You know I’m not gonna quit until we do it. You love Belgrade. Going back and getting your guitar back gets you one step closer to the gates of Graceland.”

I sat there, cringing at the way the water tasted mixed with the mint. I huffed at Sawyer, how he spoke to me, like promising Disney Land to a four-year-old. Although, I couldn’t deny the offer was tempting. Talking to someone else about Memphis, making those plans, it made it real. I couldn’t help myself. I took the bait.

“Fine,” I said. “We’ll go after this. He should be home bbby then.”

“Smart man. Let’s get you tatted up and out of here.”

Hard Luck

“How you holding up?” Sawyer asked, turning down the radio volume.

“It burns.” I held out my arm like I didn’t want it near me, like it wasn’t a part of me, and at the moment, it didn’t feel like it was, wound up in some healing wrap.

“Good.”

“Mmmaybe we shouldn’t bother Ziggy right now,” I said. “It’s late. He works. He’s got friends.”

“What about Graceland? You didn’t back out of the tattoo. If you can handle five needles stabbing you for a few hours, I think you can handle Zigmund Javor.”

“You’d be surprised,” I said. “The guy can be volatile.”

“Then don’t give him a reason to be.” He kept driving, ignoring my pleas to go home. I didn’t think I’d ever complained so much in my life, but I was being tossed from one uncomfortable situation to the next like a tennis ball, and it was starting to get to me real bad.

“So he’s not in that apartment anymore?”

“Zig? No. He’s been renting a two bedroom duplex since May, I think. Real sssmall, but more than what he had before.”

“More than you and me. Just a couple of small town guys still living at home.”

“Not as bad as folks make it out to be.”

“Family’s good.”

“Yeah.” I told Sawyer to slow down when we neared Ziggy’s street, cruising along until I spotted the brick duplex.

“Want me to come?”

“Sure,” I said. We stepped to Ziggy’s door on the right. I looked at the doorbell but didn’t press it. Silky white moths fluttered around the porch light, hitting the hanging glass frame with a loud *tap*.

“Ziggy equals band, which equals Graceland,” Sawyer said. “Stop overthinking everything.” He grabbed my arm, his fingers pinching the tattoo, and forced me to ring the bell. I pulled back, rubbing where it hurt. The door clicked open, and there Ziggy stood.

“Presley?”

“Hey,” I said.

“What do you want?” He crossed his arms and leaned against the doorframe, the hallway light casting a glow around him. He shooed away the moths.

“First, you nnever brought my guitar this morning,” I said. “I was hoping to get it.”

“I know.”

“And, and, and I’m sorry for being difficult then, too. Bad day. But I’m back. I’ll get it together.”

“Back where?” he asked. I scrunched my eyebrows, crossed my arms, shifted my weight from one leg to the other.

“The band. I said I’d rejoin. Outside by the c-c-cars. Remember?”

“I remember,” he said. “And then I said don’t worry about it.”

“Huh?” My breath, my drive, my motivation, it all drained from me, my lungs deflating, my body stiffening.

“You said you’d *join my fucking band* and then proceeded to ignore me,” he said. Thinking back, he did say something afterwards, but I was too shaky from seeing Beau.

“Did you think maybe he just didn’t hear you?” Sawyer said. I had almost forgotten he was there watching me make a fool of myself.

“Not right now, Malik,” Ziggy said, putting a hand up in his face. “You weren’t there.”

“Screw you,” Sawyer bit back.

“But Presley was there. You don’t have to worry about coming back. I found another guitarist.”

“But I said—”

“You ignored me all summer. You blew me and Chá off when we tried reaching out. We practically begged you to come back. But I’m done begging now.” He pushed off the doorframe and uncrossed his arms. “Look at your hand, for Christ’s sake, Presley. Can you even play?” he said. I drew my hand to my chest. The bandages were gone, and so were the stitches, but my knuckles still looked real rough—red, raw, scarred.

“Look, Presley. I’m not going to change my mind because you had your epiphany a little too late. You’re a good guitarist, but even you said it, lots of people play guitar.”

It hit me hard, a bowling ball to the gut, the ground swept out from under me. But I wasn't scared or shaky. I didn't want to bend over to catch my breath or keep the world from spinning. I wanted to scream. And I did.

"So, so, so why agree to meet up in the first place if you already had your mind made?" I said. "All that shit you talked about me and you from the start, about history and how you always came back to me, it was just that? Shit?" I stepped forward, pointing a finger at him, my jaw tight. "If you cared that much, funny how you replace me."

"Again, Presley, you've had all this time. We all waited. It's not my job to get your life together or wait until you do. I don't even know why you left in the first place. What else am I supposed to do?" he said. "I had the new guitarist on hold overnight. I agreed to meet you hoping you'd give me a solid yes right away so I wouldn't have to worry about it, but you dragged it out, and you argued with Beau."

"I left because I had to," I said. "Because I was in a bad place and, and, and being the band made it real bad, Zig."

"Then you should have said something."

"It's not something I can just say something about." I shut my eyes, rubbed and picked at my forehead like I did when things were too much, when my vision darkened and my ears started ringing and all the sounds and voices whipped around my skull. "I needed time off. But I'm okay now. I can do it," I said.

"You're not ok," he said. "You lied, you flaked, you quit school. You should work on yourself before coming over here thinking you can just pick up where you left off after treating us the way you did. Yeah, I heard you popped off on Chá when she

visited you at work. Don't think I'm dealing with this shit, because I'm not. I had to do what was best for Belgrade." He shooed the moths again. "Elvis has left the building."

I lunged, and when my fist came close to knocking the teeth from his mouth, Sawyer grabbed me by the waist to pull me back.

"Jesus, Press," he said, adjusting his hold on me.

"You're going to do this to me?" I said, pushing Sawyer away. He kept his hand on my shoulder in case I jumped again. "You're going to, to, to take it away? Just like that. Huh, Zig?"

"Who's yelling?" Another voice sounded from the house. Ziggy peered over his shoulder. He stepped aside, revealing Chá and Beau. Laine at the very back busy with his phone. And a blonde that looked real familiar.

"What do you want?" Beau asked. Saying what I wanted to say was always hard, but sometimes, in real bad situations, folks couldn't even get a full sentence out of me. I'd stand with a hand to my face, my mouth open, the words never coming. Just hot hair. And when that happened, all the muscles in my face tensed and I looked real silly and my hands started moving, trying to talk for me when my mouth couldn't.

"Talking to Ziggy," I managed. "Nnnot your business."

"That's not what I asked, Atmen," he said. "And it is my business, because unlike you, I'm still in the band."

They all fell quiet, including myself, because they had met behind my back, made that decision behind my back, moved on behind my back. I pinched the bridge of my nose, frustrated, baited, desperate to shake the awful feeling that clung to me—hesitation,

trepidation, consternation—the sound of my heart loud in my ears, the weakness in my legs that always made me wonder if I was dying of a brain tumor or MS instead of panic.

As angry as I was, as much as I wanted to tell them all off, as bad as I wanted to escape Beau's glare, I couldn't help but stare at the blonde. And then, like the tattoo shop, the gears all clicked in my head. I had been replaced by the Beatles girl I wanted to fight at Walgreens.

I Got Stung

I always had trouble telling others how I felt, and whenever I did, I always felt too much. I loved too much. I was too afraid. I got too angry over silly stuff. I didn't think there was such a thing as loving too much. I loved my family with my whole heart. I loved my friends. I loved Elvis. But all that love made me soft. It made me weak and exposed, when all my life I thought love made you strong, because you opened yourself up. You loved others and in turn ran the risk of losing them.

But maybe I did feel too much. When I argued with Sawyer in the car after leaving Ziggy's house until he gave in and let me open the window to smoke. When I walked into my house without greeting my parents and headed up to my room with no intention of coming out.

After the first hour, my mother crept up the creaky steps to tap real gentle on my door, to ask if I was all right. When met with silence, her tapping turned to knocking and her asking turned to shouting, because the one thing in the world she couldn't do was lose another kid. After spending my whole life thinking I'd be the one to off myself, in that moment, she must've thought I finally had the backbone to do it. But I didn't. And I wasn't sure I even wanted to, even though I didn't want to feel anymore. Even though I couldn't.

Her pleading stopped to allow for my father's orders. *Open the door. Open the door now. Your mother is crying. Presley, open the door. Please, Presley. Please, please, please.* Until he overpowered the cheap lock and threw open the door to find me alive, red eyed and on the floor.

"I'm okay," I told them, because as hurt as I was, they must have hurt more. Mom turned to leave. Dad only watched me. What else was he supposed to do? Help me up? Ask if I was fine? Tell me it'd blow over? He did all that, lifted me by my armpits, steadied me at the shoulders. But then what? I could see it in his eyes, the want, the need to tell me to stop. To stop being me, because it was killing all three of us. He didn't say it. Sat with me instead. Held on to me, because holding on was something we both could do.

"Are you taking your medication," he asked, sitting beside me on the bed, elbow to elbow, his hands hanging between his legs.

"I keep them in the kitchen sssso you know I do," I said. "Look at the date. Count them if you have to." I pulled my hand back, eyeing my nails. There wasn't much left to bite. So I hung my hands between my legs, too, and picked at what I could.

"So what's got you like this? You've been up and down a lot recently," he said.

"Just because I'm on pills, doesn't mean I'm always at a hundred percent," I said. "If it was that easy, Dad, everyone would be on, on, on meds."

"Forget the pills. What's pushing you, Presley?" he said, his tone changing like he knew I was up to something real bad and wanted me to fess up. "What's setting you off? Something at work?" he said. "Did someone get you in trouble? Are you hiding something?"

“I’m not Audrick,” I said. “I’m n-n-not hiding anything. I go to work, and I come home. What would I be hiding?”

“There has to be a reason.”

“I’m sick, Dad,” I said, standing up. “Always hhhave been. Sometimes people get real bad colds. I have real bad days. That’s all it is.” I wish I had stopped there. “You and Mom, sometimes you act like, like, like it hurts you more than it hurts me,” I said. I thought he’d look away sad and guilty, but he kept eyeing me like he didn’t believe me, so I pushed past the knot in my throat and fought to keep my cool, afraid if I let him come too close, he’d pull the thread and unravel everything I’d put away since that night. That was the last thing I needed, my father finding out what I let Beau do to me. How I let him win.

“Don’t talk to me like this is new stuff, Presley,” he said. “I know you’re sick, and I do my best to be what you need me to be in the moment. But you have to pull your weight, too. And you have to be honest with me if you need help. You have to ask for help. That’s one thing your brother didn’t do.”

“The band,” I said. “I got replaced.”

“What?”

“I was being difficult, and, and, and when I tried fixing things, I found out I’d been replaced. So I’m pissed. And I lost it a little.”

“Why didn’t you just say that?”

“Because I don’t want to be dramatic.” It took a little more convincing before he let things go, especially after I told him he could flip my room upside down if they were that worried I was following in my brother’s junkie footsteps.

“What’s that?” he asked, pointing to the bit of plastic peeking from my sleeve. I hesitated, not too sure how to tell him I’d gotten a spur-of-the-moment tattoo or how he’d react. Neither of my folks had tattoos; although, neither of my folks ever gave me the *don’t get tattoos* talk either. But if anyone wouldn’t bat an eye about it, it’d be the hardcore German punk my father was deep down inside.

“A tattoo,” I said, pulling up my sleeve. He took my hand, pulled my arm close to eye the art. He ran a thumb over the bottom tip of the lightning bolt on my wrist, the spot that hurt the most during.

“What the hell made you do that?” he asked.

“Sawyer,” I said. “Made me pay for it, t-t-too.”

“Did you get sick?”

“Kind of. But not so bad, looking back at it. Hurts real bad though. Like a sunburn or something.”

“TCB, huh?” He let go of my hand and stood up. “I like it. It suits you, Press.”

“Thanks. I wwant to see how long I can hide it from Mom.”

“It’s just a tattoo. She’ll live.” He smiled at me with a wink. “Presley, please don’t be afraid to ask for help,” he said before leaving me in my room under the condition I kept the door open. He might have liked the tattoo, but I guess he didn’t believe the band was the only reason I was so upset.

I plopped onto my striped comforter, red and blue, cozy in red and grey checkered pajama pants and a t-shirt of the same grey, left leg propped up, right leg hanging over, chewing at a fresh piece of gum. I counted the bumps in the ceiling like I always did, had a record running like I always did. *Solitaire* this time, because when I felt blue, the best

medicine was listening to E's bluer ballads. Maybe I was dramatic after all. Hard not to be when I was named after the guy.

Oma was the whole reason I got into him, why I was who I was. I didn't have a choice or a chance. She was one of those original fans, the crazy girls screaming non-stop in those black and white 50s videos where he's shaking his hips on Ed Sullivan and the camera man is desperately trying to keep it family friendly by filming only from the waist up. And all the girls, and even the guys, are tugging real hard at their hair and clothes, tugging at each other in this frenzy of teenage hormones and 50s rebellion.

I was invested in all his cheesy 60s movies, too, where he was a racecar driver in one and a motorcycle boy in another, trying to woo the pretty girl he always won in the end. But the 70s were my favorite, those fancy Vegas venues where he strutted across stage in jeweled jumpsuits and slick sideburns, belting old hits and new ballads in that black velvety voice that was his right to the end.

I realized, the older I got, I liked 70s Elvis the most because he was the saddest. He wasn't the rags to riches rebel. He wasn't the Hollywood star. He was a man with a broken heart and broken dreams who had been dragged around. He said it himself, that the image was one thing and the human being was another, and the more you tried living up to that image, of who they wanted you to be, the less human you became—the less *you*. E didn't have much left in him in the end. When the record spun, when he hit that note, life kept going on around him, and it was doing the same to me.

I spent the rest of the night like that, music mumbling, Danny Fisher staring at me from the King Creole poster pinned to my white walls, like Clint Reno in the Love Me Tender poster and Mike McCoy in Spinout. The light was off, but the lamppost outside

between our house and the neighbor's lit the night and my room enough to where I could walk around without stubbing my toe on anything. My phone, on the other hand, did not light up, set on the nightstand beside me, dark and silent. Sawyer must've had it with me. I was stupid, I couldn't blame him. Still, I looked at it every so often, hoping he'd send a *hey* or *you okay* or even a *you're a dumbass*. Eventually, I fell asleep to the fluttering light of the lamppost, the shaky shadows of my room the last thing I saw.

Trouble

My mother couldn't look at me the next day. My fit of anger over losing one of the most important things to me had apparently taken a toll on her. She packed her peanut butter and jelly sandwich in the kitchen and left for work, only pausing to tell me she worked until eleven that night and that there was a pot of chili in the fridge for dinner, though we might be out of sour cream. My dad couldn't take off to babysit me, so he called every few hours to check in. I spent most of the day on the couch watching *I Want My 80s* on MTV Classic. When Lauper's *Girls Just Want to Have Fun* came on for a third time, I got up and walked over to the big cardboard box in the corner left of the television.

It was almost mid-December, and of course, the Christmas tree was out. Had been since the day after Thanksgiving. My parents liked starting as early as was acceptable. Mom always asked Dad to dig the box of ornaments out of the basement. She didn't ask this year. He still did it. And since Audrick died, I was the one who did most of the decorating. As a kid, Oma and Opa used to decorate their Christmas tree with real wax candles like they did overseas. We tried real candles one year, too, but it had me worrying the whole time. I started using electric candles, keeping Oma's tradition, making it a little safer.

I loved Christmas. The snow when it crunched beneath boots. The gifts and store displays wrapped in red and gold and green. Elvis singing *Blue Christmas* and *Santa Bring My Baby Back to Me* nonstop in the mall, at the store, off my record. Family. It didn't snow. It wasn't even that cold yet. And even though things were different and it sometimes felt like we were all split up, something about the holiday seemed to soften my parents' hearts.

I was on my knees rummaging through the box when I noticed movement outside, the shadow of a person, the reflection of a car, something nearing the house. When I pushed off the floor to stand up and check it out, making a tiny space in the white curtain to peek, I saw Sawyer on the porch. I unlocked the front door for him.

"You're not going to kick me off the porch again, are you?" he said when I pushed open the screen door.

"Not unless you give me a reason to," I said, stepping aside to let him in. He took his shoes off on the mat. "Don't you have a house?" I asked. "And parents?"

"We're supposed to get our tree this weekend," he said, pointing at mine.

"I still don't think it's fair," I said, "hhow you get Christmas and two Eids."

"Sorry you weren't blessed with a bi-religious household, bud." Growing up, Sawyer attended Midnight Mass and Eid prayer. He fasted Ramadan and loved pinning the star to the top of the tree. He never liked being called half Arab or half white. Never liked having to explain how his father's Islam differed from his mother's Christianity. He was Sawyer Malik, and mass and prayer, fasting and Christmas, they were just the different parts that made him, him.

"I'm surprised you're t-talking to me," I said. He gave me a questioning look.

“You almost punched Zig, not me. Pretty sure we’re okay,” he said.

“I’m such an idiot.” I returned to my seat on the couch, pushing the blue blanket I’d been using aside.

“Usually, I’m the one ready to throw punches. What’s gotten into you?” he asked.

“I don’t know. It just took over,” I said. “And I can’t even be real angry at him. He’s right. I said no. I took too long. He’s only doing what he’s got to.”

“He didn’t have to be that sneaky about it. They were having a club meeting without even telling you that you were out of the band, Press. That’s a low blow,” he said. I threw up my hands, out of answers.

“You said you *had* to quit the band?” Sawyer said. I didn’t look at him. Ignored the comment. He sat down in my dad’s blue and white paisley armchair, the plastic bag he walked in with hanging off his wrist.

“Is that more Turkish Delight?” I asked.

“Something you might like a little more. Early Christmas gift.”

“Since when? We dddon’t do gifts,” I said.

“I didn’t really buy it. It just came into my possession, and I figured you’d use it way more than I would,” he said. “I’ve had it for a good minute. Kept forgetting to bring it.” He tossed the bag over. I pulled out the brown, square envelope and wiggled the blue disc free, my heart skipping a beat like it’s supposed to when you love someone real bad.

“It’s pretty old, and the original cover is gone, but the record itself works great. At least that’s what I was told,” he said. I ran a thumb across blue wax.

“You know what it is?” he asked.

“Unreleased live versions of *Bridge Over Troubled Water* and, and, and *Lawdy Miss Clawdy*. Sawyer, where’d you find this 45?” I asked.

“My uncle from down south visited a few weeks back. Came to see Mom,” he said. “He brought some stuff from their house down there. He remembered you. Said to give this to my friend with the weird thing for Elvis. I guess it's a rare record or something.” He shrugged his shoulders like it was nothing. “I haven't heard that one song in forever. *Bridge Over Troubled Water*. I know it's one of your favorites. You were always singing it.” he said. “Man, I hate that song.”

“Thank you very much,” I said, smiling real hard. I must have looked silly.

“I got something else you might like even more than that,” he said.

“Come on, then I’ll have to pay you back, and you’re always so difficult about it,” I said, watching him head to the front door. I pushed the 45 back into the envelope and set it on the sofa beside me.

“It’s in the car. Give me a second,” he said. “And you owe me regardless, for putting up with you all the time.” He stepped outside. I fell back against the cushions.

“When I tell you that you don’t deserve me, I mean it, bud,” he said when he returned. “Miss this?” He stepped in with my guitar, and I was on my feet real fast. “I didn’t think you’d leave without it last night, but you were too worked up,” he said.

“Did you break into his house?” I asked.

“No. Though, I was up for the challenge if I had to,” he said, taking his shoes off again. “I swung by before coming here. Zigmund was still home. I never had a problem with the guy, but he’s got one more time to get smart with me before I get mad.”

“He just give it to you?” I took the guitar from Sawyer, thumbing the cold tuning pegs.

“Yeah. I mean, I had to do some convincing. But yeah.”

“Sawyer.”

“I got smart with him first,” he said. “He did you dirty, Press. You were right. Despite what you might’ve done, you have a history, and for him to cut you like that isn’t right. If he wasn’t going to give it back, then we were going to take it back.”

“Thanks. Really. I know I’ve llost touch with it all lately, music, but not having my guitar with my, it felt wrong,” I said. Sawyer brushed it off and returned to the chair. I sat back down, too, strumming the strings, out of tune and lonely, angry at me that Sawyer was the one to do what I couldn’t. I picked a little more, but my smile faded, and guilt gripped me. I set the guitar down between my legs.

“I’m so shitty,” I said. He looked at me funny again.

“I don’t want a gift. You’d probably get me some Elvis mug. I’m good,” he said.

“Shut up. I’m serious,” I said. “The reason I didn’t ttell my parents your mom was sick was because I forgot.” I bit at my lip. “I got stuck in my head again and forgot about the p-p-people around me.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said.

“But you guys are family. And I just forgot. Like it wwwas nothing.”

“It’s not a big deal.”

“Why are you brushing this off?” I asked him. He didn’t answer at first, eyeing the muted Madonna on the TV

“Because it’s actually nice talking to someone who isn’t obsessed about it,” he finally said. “All our family and friends, people back from OSU, it’s all they’ve been talking about. Why’d I leave? How’s she doing? When am I coming back? I’m tired of it, man.”

It was my turn to look at him funny, to watch him fidget in the chair, chewing the inside of his cheek, shaking his knee like he was a rocket about to go off.

“Shit, I’m glad you forgot, Press,” he said. “I wish I could, too.” Sawyer never liked pity parties or *thinking of you* cards. I knew then that he wanted to escape it, the fear of almost losing his mother. Didn’t want to talk about it because maybe it’d be as though it never happened. Things would be like normal again. It would be okay.

“You know what's really bugging me?” he said, changing the subject. I humored him.

“What?”

“How Zig played you. I almost want to kick his ass for you. Beau’s too.”

“There’s nothing I c-c-can do at this point,” I said.

“Or is there?” He leaned forward in his seat. “You were their guitarist, sure. But what else?”

“I don't know what -”

“Punching the grins off their faces, while satisfying, might not be your best bet,” he said. “Accepting you're out of the band is one option, Press. Or you can play their game, too.”

“How?”

“What have you got that they don't? That they need?” Sawyer laughed when I caught on to what he was saying, my eyes widening, my heart beating fast. Emotional and shocked at what'd happened, I forgot I had the upper hand, that I could tip the scales just like that. I wasn't ever the type to act out of spite or anger, but I had looked like an idiot in front of Ziggy. In front of Chá. Beau. I glanced down at my arm, at the tattoo and how the ink seemed to bleed beneath the Saniderm wrap. TCB. It was about damn time I took care of some business.

“I always knew you were a good influence,” I told Sawyer. I grabbed my phone off the coffee table, tapped to Ziggy's name. It rang a few times before he answered.

“Yes, Presley?” he said, breathing hard like he'd been running. “I have to get to work. Your friend got your guitar already. What is it?”

“I'll keep it short,” I said. “I'm still out, right? Replaced?”

“Yeah. What didn't you get yesterday?”

“Just, just making sure. Hey, Zig,” I said.

“What?”

“If I can't be in the band, you can't use my songs.”

Never Again

I sat across from the Beatles girl, my ass creaking on the red, leather couch Zig got off his cousin when I shifted forward to cross my legs and rest an elbow on my thigh. I had a cigarette between my fingers, because if I ever needed one, it was in that moment in Ziggy's duplex, Ziggy hunched over in a chair, red and leather, too, close enough I could hear him breathing, Beatles Girl eyeing me while twirling the now silver ends of her blonde hair. The fuchsia must have faded. She wore it in a low side ponytail to her right, resting in the crook of her neck. The streaks of silver shimmered with her every move, in light. E used to dye his hair black velvet, but he looked real tough, not like some magical, Beatle loving unicorn.

Beatles Girl moved suddenly, leaned towards me to extend her hand, her arm full of loose silicone wristbands in every color off some html color picker.

"I'm Elise," she said. She wiggled her hand like she wanted to assure me she was friendly and wouldn't bite. I reciprocated the shake.

"Hey, I'm Pppresley," I said. She smiled, lifting her arm, pumping life into the gesture I wish would end before she noticed how sweaty my hands were. The two sizes too big, white V-neck she wore dipped, the lace top of her black bra bobbing in and out of view.

“You forget your name?” Beau rolled into the room from the kitchen and took a seat beside her, a Budweiser in hand. I pulled away from Elise. It was all I could do other than roll my eyes real hard at Beau for making me look stupid in front of her. Of course I didn’t forget my own name, and he knew I didn’t, because I corrected him, to no avail, every time he made that shitty comment over the years.

“The Elvis nut is named Presley?” she said.

“My first thought,” Laine said, also coming out of the kitchen with a beer. Laine was Belgrade’s second guitarist. He was the most laid back person I’d ever met. If he was any chiller, he’d be dead. He always did his own thing. Went with the flow. He was real simple. Liked country music and beer and guitar. He never clashed with any of us. Played fair. Always pulled his weight. The most shocking thing he’d ever done was show up to a rehearsal late because he’d just left the salon after getting the worst looking frosted tips I’d ever seen. Other than the bad hair choice, Laine was a solid dude.

“I didn’t nname myself, you know,” I said. “Just happened.”

“It’s not a bad thing,” he said. “It works. A little Elvis. A little Bowie.” He pointed at Ziggy.

“My bad,” Elise said. “Small world, huh? No hard feelings about our first encounter.”

“Yeah. Sure,” I said. “Wasn’t anything serious.”

“Why do you do that?” she asked, still bent forward at the edge of the sofa, her bra still peeking from the edges of her shirt’s neckline. “With your eyes.” She blinked real hard to demonstrate.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I hhhave real bad anxiety. I have all sorts of wonderful tics.” I put the cigarette to my mouth, hoping she’d see I didn’t want to talk about my aggressive blinking or the way I always winced and scrunched my nose.

“Guy’s a basket case,” Beau muttered between sips of beer.

“Guy’s killing me, is what he is,” Ziggy said, speaking for the first time in minutes. He sat up looking real frustrated. He’d called me earlier that day saying we needed to talk about Belgrade. I knew he only wanted to yell about why I wouldn’t let him use my songs. Even Sawyer, who hadn’t been around in a few days, knew when I told him, saying *Fuck that. Why would you go, Press?* But I came anyway. I wasn’t sure if I wanted closure, a chance to settle things, to bid the band farewell. Or if I wanted to see Zig squirm for the first time instead of myself.

“Presley, what are you doing?” he asked. “Why?”

“If I’m not in the band anymore, you’re not using mmmmy material,” I said. “Those are my songs. My words.”

“Presley, you can’t do that.”

“Sure I can.”

“You got that shit copyrighted?” he said. “Do you have any way of stopping us?”

“No,” I admitted, “but I was hoping you had some morals. Besides, you have other songs. They’re nnnnot all mine.”

“I don’t know who you think you are,” he said. “You’re not your little Elvis. You’re no one special, over here protecting your high school journals.”

“Aaall right, you fucking Adam Lambert wannabee. What have you been up to Zig, other than working and bitching at me?” I said. “And if, if, if they’re just journals,

why so desperate for them? Write your own damn songs.” I glanced at Beau, whose eyes never seemed to leave me.

Ziggy reached over, plucked the cigarette out of my hand, dropped it in the abandoned can of Miller Lite on the table before us. Beau moved in his seat, and when he did, I did, too, rising to my feet. Elise tilted her head, probably intrigued by the way all the muscles moved in my face like it was real cool that my jaw hurt and I blinked so hard I saw yellow spots.

“You may have written those songs, but we breathed life into them. We had just as much input,” Ziggy said. “What about the ones I worked on?”

“If I hadn’t written them, we’d still be doing covers,” I said. “You’re no songwriter, Zig. Shit, I bbbarely am. I can’t take the ones you worked on, but I’m taking mine.”

“Fuck it, Zig,” Beau said, standing up. “We don’t need his trash.” He moved towards the kitchen.

“That trash is wwwhat we’ve been playing every gig,” I said. He paused, his back turned, moving to look at me over his shoulder.

“Don’t start shit you can’t handle, Atmen,” he said and continued off. I hated him. I hated his slimy smile when he spoke. I hated that in his eyes, I’d always be the mud beneath his boots. I hated that he plagued me—bled into my room like the dark of night, enveloping my walls, gripping me, shaking me, until I got out of bed to smoke by the cracked open window or press pillows to my face in a silent roar or swallow my Klonopin dry until the drug raced through me and knocked me into black.

“Whatever,” I said, moving to the door. “I’m done.”

Mama Liked The Roses

“When was Elvis born?”

“January 8th, 1935.”

“Where?”

“Tupelo Mississippi.”

“To who?”

“Sawyer, you’re going to hhhave to do better. This is elementary stuff,” I said. I sat in my dad’s chair tuning my guitar.”

“To who?” he repeated.

“Vernon and Gladys. He had a twin brother, Jesse Garon, who was stillborn.

Come on.”

“Shit, Press. I don’t know. I found this random trivia card online,” he said, laying on the couch, his feet up on the arm. “How am I supposed to know this is easy stuff? I don’t know it.”

“Yyyeah, because you’re uncultured.”

“I think there are more important things than knowing when he bought Graceland,” he said.

“1957.”

“How many dumb movies?”

“31 movies. Two documentaries,” I said. “Oh, that’s what w-w-we should have watched.”

“You’re ridiculous,” he said. “Lightning round. How long did he serve?”

“Uh, ’58 to ’60

“Where was his last concert?”

“Indianapolis. The, the, the Market Square Arena.”

“Where did he serve?”

“Fort Hood for a little. And then Germany, of course. Friedberg? Yeah, Friedberg.”

“What did he do on national TV that, I don’t know, saved a lot of people?”

“Saved people?” I paused my tuning, looking up at the ceiling like I’d find the answer there in flashing lights. “The shot?” I said.

“Ding, ding, ding. We have a winner. You win absolutely nothing,” he said, dropping his phone onto this stomach. “This really happened?” he asked. “He got a polio vaccine on TV? And then immunization levels jumped from 0.6% to 80% in six months? You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“I’m sssure it wasn’t all because of him, but he definitely helped,” I said. He nodded, digesting what I said, or pretending to, at least.

“How’s your arm, by the way?” he asked.

“Healing nice. Looking good.” I pulled up my sleeve. “While I don’t a-a-appreciate you kidnapping me, I’m kind of glad you made me get this.”

“You’re welcome,” he said. “Do you have to do that now?”

“Do what?”

“Tune that thing. It’s annoying.”

“My house. There’s the door.”

“It’s not like you got anywhere to play it.” He forced a laugh, trying to get under my skin.

“Can’t argue there,” I said.

“I told you not to go talk to them yesterday,” he said. “Start your own fucking band. That’ll piss them off.”

“That’s more work than I want to do,” I said.

“Then go solo. Instead of Elvis in bright lights, it’ll be Presley.” Sawyer rolled off the couch and hit the kitchen, opening one cupboard and closing another. “You got any food, bud?” he called. “Other than this pasta in the fridge.”

“You don’t like spätzle?” I asked. “Check the pantry for chips. I don’t know.” He walked back in the room looking like he’d run a marathon. He set his hands on his waist.

“I’m bored,” he said. I opened my mouth to ask what in the world he expected me to do about it, but got distracted when my phone lit up in a silent notification.

“Hey,” he said, but I held up a finger to shush him while I read the text.

“What?” I said afterwards.

“I said I was bored.”

“Sorry?” I said. “Shouldn’t you work on registering or transferring back to school or whatever.”

“I mean I could,” he said. “Beats sitting around reviewing Elvis trivia,”

“One day it’ll come in handy, and you’ll regret being a dick about it.”

“Well, until that day comes, I don’t want to hear about it, bud.”

“So you going to do it?” I asked.

“Well, I would.”

“But?”

“The deadline’s long gone,” he said. “Extended vacation for me.”

“Great. Nnnow you’ll never leave.”

“Asshole. This is the first time I’ve been around all week. I have stuff on my end, too, you know. A life beyond Presley Atmen.” He plopped back onto the couch, the cushion sinking into the frame. “What were you reading? Elvis bull shit or did someone actually text you?”

“Text. From Chá.”

“Aren’t you tired of all this talking?” he asked. “How long does it take a guy to leave a band? Talk about some fucking drama.”

“Yeah, because it’s taking a t-t-toll on you, you poor baby.”

“What does Chá want?”

“She wants to visit later.”

“I can leave if you need me to,” he said, sitting up.

“She wants to visit Audrick.”

#

My right shoelace came undone. It bothered me real bad, but the bundle of roses I carried made it hard to reach, and I knew if I set them down I wouldn't be able to get

them looking as nice as they were when I bought them. I didn't want to bother Chá with it either, so I kept walking. It was finally cold out. December cold. Air sharp against skin.

Whenever I visited Oma the first few weeks after she died, my stomach twisted to knots and my throat closed up and there'd be an ache right in my chest. But not so much anymore. Standing at my grandmother's grave, I didn't know what to feel or to say or to do. But that happened to me a lot, not just at her grave. It was real hard to see, hard to ground myself in reality. I had to pinch myself or tap my foot to feel something other than myself splitting in two.

No matter how hard I blinked, I couldn't see things right. No matter how deep I dug my nails into my forearms, I couldn't feel things right. On some days when I was real busy, I didn't give into it as much. But on others, it got real bad, and I couldn't keep track of time or where I was supposed to go or what I had to do. Stuck. My feet glued to the ground, watching everybody else move on without me. And I couldn't tell anyone about it because I'd just sound crazier than usual. It got a lot worse after Beau. Always there. Just like him.

I set half the roses real careful on her grave, the other half on Opa's right beside her. White roses were her favorite. She always stuffed them into the weird vases she and Opa picked up from flea markets. The kind of stuff old people did together. Audrick was buried a few plots over in a grave my folks never could forget, in a grave I never could visit, because if I did, all my bad feelings, the bitter and the blue, would spill out of me, and that wasn't ok, because the cemetery was a place you went to pray and to heal, not blame the dead for being dead and dragging everyone else down with them.

The day they found him, I was on a dinner date with my mother, the first time we'd gotten together for some quality time in a long while since she always worked weird shifts and I got slammed with school work, the band, and my psychiatrist. I sat across from her in our striped booth, dunking hot chicken tenders in a cup of ranch dressing. Her phone went off. It was strange, because no one really called other than the hospital.

Half a minute later, after she dug it out of her purse, it rang again. Stranger, because no one ever called twice. She caught it that time, pressing the phone to her ear with a *Yeah?* That's when she fell back against the cushioned booth, when she gasped *What?* Said it with every bit of breath in her lungs. When she leapt to her feet and stumbled towards the restaurant's front doors, turning just once to look back at me. *Your brother. He did it this time.* When I dropped my chicken to my plate, grabbed her purse by its long, worn strap, and followed.

"I don't visit much anymore," Chá said when we stopped at Audrick's grave.

"I've only ever come with, with, with my folks," I said. She crouched, brushing the dirt from his name. She wasn't wearing any big hats today, her hair instead pulled up high. I loved when she wore it up, because I could see her sharp face, her big brown eyes-like sunflowers in sunlight-her dimples that always had me smiling in the end, too.

"I met someone," she said, sitting in the grass. "We've been talking for a few weeks. Turns out his mom's known my mom for a while. I guess I never paid attention as a kid."

"You want my approval or something?" I asked. I crossed my arms and stared at the small grave before us.

“I don't know,” she said. “That's what's bothering me. It's like I need someone to tell me that it's okay. It's okay to move on.”

“It's, it's, it's been three years, Chá. Audrick's nnot coming back. He's stuck here. But you shouldn't have to be.”

“You're always so cold when you talk about him,” she said, leaning back to peek up at me. The sun started to set, the sky clouded orange and blue like paint in water.

“Look what he did,” I said. “He fucked everything up. Broke your heart after dragging you around for two years. Ruined my parents. I hhhaven't seen my mom smile a real smile in months. My dad cries when he thinks no one's looking. And he left me. But I guess it isn't too different. He wasn't ever really there f-f-for me anyway.”

“You don't mean that, Presley. He was always there.”

“He was always high. Didn't have a care in the world.”

“This is more about you than it is him, isn't it?” she asked. I shifted my weight from one leg to the other, itching to smoke, my fingers racing along my thigh playing an invisible piano.

“Zig told me what happened when you went over,” she said. “So it's really over? You and the band?”

“It's for the best,” I said. “Wasn't good for me.”

“Is it though?” she asked.

“All I know is that yyyou've got to do the battle of the bands without me. But at least there's another girl now.”

“She's nice. Elise.”

“Nice doesn’t win you competitions.”

“She’s a good player, too, of course. Zig was the one who found her.”

“Fuck him. And, and, and fuck the Beatles girl, too.” I found a stick of gum in the pocket of my blue leather jacket, still wrapped in foil and stiff from the cold. I popped it into my mouth, sucking in winter air, too, because I liked the iciness and the menthol and the way it all soothed me.

“You sure you don’t wanna enter on your own? Solo act. It’s allowed in this one,” she said. “I know it’s called a battle of the bands, but anything goes.”

“Hah. You’re sounding like Sssawyer,” I said, sticking the empty gum wrapper back in my pocket. I looked at her. She didn’t say anything. Just played with the small silver stud in her ear.

“He talked to you, didn’t he. That idiot,” I said.

“He wanted to know tournament details and if it was something you could do by yourself,” she said, standing up. “So I told him. I think you should do it, Presley.”

“What?” I shook my head at her. “You tell Ziggy that?”

“Fuck him, right?” She formed a fist, hit me in the shoulder. “You should enter on your own. You can sing, and you’ve got a guitar.”

“So I look like an idiot in front of everyone? Including the, the, the guys.”

“So you can keep doing what you love without them stepping on you all the time,” she said. “Ziggy’s a good guy, but he’s oblivious and selfish when it comes to Belgrade. And Beau’s an asshole, I know that, but he’s talented, and you know Ziggy hates change. I never defended you because you had to do it yourself. I’m not your big

sister just because I was seeing your big brother.”

“If Ziggy hates change so much, hhhe sure got rid of me real fast.”

“He didn’t do it because he hates you or doesn’t value you, Press. He got emotional. He got mad. You leaving, you not giving him an answer, that messed things up for Belgrade, and you know this band is Ziggy’s baby. He did what he thought he had to.”

“Belgrade was my world for a long time, too, Chá. I put mmy heart into it. My everything. And now it’s gone.”

“Both sides are to blame, Press. You did disappear first. And you pushed us away,” she said. “But Zig shouldn’t have dragged you around that day either. He should have just broke the news and let you down gently. Not all this drama. Not all these goodbyes.”

“It’s like every time I fffind my feet, someone’s there to knock them from under me,” I said, tugging the popped collar of my jacket closer to me when a harsh wind whipped by us.

“If it feels right, do it, Presley,” she said. “I’m still with Zig. Like you said, Belgrade’s more than some band. It’s mine, too. But just because I can’t do it by myself doesn’t mean you can’t either. Don’t let anyone tell you that you can’t.”

This Is The Story

Chá left before it got real dark out. I took her spot in the grass, avoiding looking at Audrick's headstone the way I'd avoid looking at him. There wasn't much flavor left in the gum, but I chewed real hard, my teeth starting to ache.

My brother was a ghost. He haunted our family in life, and he haunted us in death, keeping my mom up on cold winter nights until he strolled in without an explanation and she was too relieved to even care; leaving such an ache in my dad's chest, he spent more time hunched over holding himself in raw grief in the family room than he did smiling. Ever since Audrick died, we had been anything but a family.

Our parents were the type to keep all of his stuff, his room untouched. My mother spent the first two anniversaries in his bedroom running her fingers across dusty dresser tops and window sills, crying over framed photographs she took of Audrick and his friends when they were real little, sitting on the bed wishing we buried her with him. But the last anniversary, she avoided the room completely. Left the door closed. The room his tomb.

He used to collect junk. All junk. Any junk. He'd litter the top of his dresser with change he picked off the street and alloy toy cars and gas pump receipts and a little tube of pink lipstick he never returned to Chá because he loved it on her and realized it was all

he had left once the smoke of their breakup cleared and he stood in the aftermath all by his lonesome. I rarely went in there. The way I rarely visited the cemetery.

“You suck,” I said. “We wouldn’t be in half this shit if, if, if you’d just stopped.” And then I stopped at what I’d said, remembering our parents and how they always begged me to stop. Then again, me and Audrick, we were different.

“I can’t fix what’s wrong with me, but you could’ve. Yyyou could’ve stopped what you were doing. But you kept doing it. You kept leaving until you finally couldn’t come back even if you wanted to.” I bit at my bottom lip, pressed hard until I was sure I’d draw blood, but the tears still fell, the wind derailing them so their tracks ran sideways across my face.

Audrick’s addiction started with a soccer injury. With surgery. Pain pills. But I wondered how much of it was powered by the darkness in his head and the fear in his chest. Had he been sick like me, burdened with the mental illness our family splashed in but never acknowledged? The draining depression. The persistent panic.

“Were you just running from it?” I didn’t know much of graveyard etiquette, but I didn’t see anyone around, and I knew my brother wouldn’t mind me smoking. He never smoked, but he always said he liked the smell of cigarettes when Opa would sit in his rocking chair on the front porch and puff away like there was no tomorrow. I lit one for myself, a fleeting flicker in the evening.

“You haven’t missed much,” I told him. “Mom left the nursing home. She’s at the hospital now. Must’ve gotten sick of all the old folks yelling at her. Mmmaybe management. I don’t know. Dad’s still doing his IT thing.” I zipped my jacket the rest of the way up, the cold getting to me.

“I quit school, you know. It was only a matter of time, right? You always hated helping me with math. I hated asking, too. Made me feel stupid.” We didn’t always get along. When I was real little, I wanted to be Elvis, sure, but I wanted to be like Audrick, too, because he was popular and smart and good at everything. Or seemed to be, at least. The older I got, the less I wanted to be like him and the more I wanted to overcome him. When I didn’t do too hot in school, when I missed out on playing with the other kids because I had to see my shrink or speech therapist, when I had our parents running around spread thin because of all that was wrong with me, he was responsible, easy, pleasant. And I hated him for it, because I was never given the same responsibilities. I was never easy or pleasant or anybody’s first choice.

“You were always Mom’s favorite.” After he died, my mother never looked at me same, like I had been the one who killed him. “You know, sometimes I think she wishes our places had been switched. That I was the one sssix feet under. Not you. Not that she’d ever admit it.” I looked up beyond Audrick’s grave, at the larger headstones, colossal crosses looming in the distance as though they would call to me across the tangerine sky.

The last time I felt anything other than anger towards my brother was the day of his funeral. I stood at his grave in all black, drenched in a bone chilling rain. My old cap-toe shoes sunk deep into mud. I cried real hard. Split in that moment. Everything a dull buzzing in my brain.

“I never told you shit,” I said, rolling my cigarette back and forth between my thumb and forefinger. “I assumed you didn’t care. But maybe that’s my fault. Assuming you didn’t care. Assuming you didn’t know.” I rolled off my ass to sit on my knees,

looking like I was about to dive into a silent prayer. “We did have some good times, though.”

Audrick was the one who taught me how to roller skate. He encouraged me to agree to swimming lessons. He’d taken me to the Dairy Queen a few blocks over every other day during summertime. I’d get my cherry dipped cone. Audrick his lemon lime freeze. I’d spot the lightning bugs in Oma and Opa’s backyard, and he’d catch them in the large mason jar with holes poked in the top, because we only wanted to look at the lightning bugs, not kill them.

He changed when seventh grade hit real hard. His new clothes were cool. Sports were cool. The guys, girls, games. Not family. Not his 10-year-old mess of a little brother who looked up to him—who looked out for him in the hallways like a buoy in the ocean when the waves rose real high.

“I don’t know what to do,” I told him. “I feel like a blue fly caught in a web, spinning but never getting anywhere.” I went back to sitting on my ass when my knees started hurting, legs off to the side. I held myself up with my left arm. “I can’t breathe. Can’t bear the bulk of it all, man. It’s like stones are piled on my chest.” I smeared away more tears with the back of my wrist. “I’m always crying. Always rrrunning. Still that scared 10-year-old, not who I thought I’d be by now, you know? I worked so hard. So fucking hard just to be able to stand up by myself, and it was all taken in a minute. Just like that. Just like you.” I tilted my head back, looked up into the blended blue in the sky.

“I came here to vent, because I didn’t want to bother anyone with it. And I came to ask you something, being my big brother and all. What would you do,” I asked, “if someone hurt you real bad? If someone messed you up.” I picked a blob of dirt off his

headstone. Chá must have missed it. “You owe me for all the shit you left me with. You’ve always been real selfish. Haunting us like you never even left.” I started to stand, laughing as I did. “I guess you don’t have to be dead to haunt someone. Aaand who am I kidding? You let your monster win.” I stared long at his stone, at his name, crying harder at the thought of *Presley Atmen* engraved there instead.

God, I was a mess. I raised my arm, wiggled my wrist out of my sleeve to see my ‘68 Special watch cuff, Elvis leaned forward with his guitar and a smirk behind the ticking hands.

“What about you, E? What did you do when you were sad and stuck? Help a guy out.” The wind whipped again. Merciless. An endless howl. “How’d you come back?”

Solitaire

My talk with Chá and Audrick left me with a strange feeling, a weight in my gut, and I wasn't sure if it was good or bad. Only that it was there making things uncomfortable. The days went by. One after the other. Just like that. Like turning pages in a book. I forgot what time I worked that day and arrived at the record store ten minutes late. I took over, so my boss, Kristie, could eat lunch. A few folks browsed the bins, going down the alphabet. I was behind the counter for a while lining up bags and rolls of receipt paper.

The bell on the door jingled like it always did when someone walked in. I was reaching for an album on the small, black shelf on the wall up above the register. I peeked behind me through the gap between my neck and shoulder. I lost my grip, and the album fell off, smacking the tiled floor with a *thwack*.

“Wwwhat are you doing?” I asked. Beau didn't say anything. He just frowned at me like it was his favorite thing to do. A few customers still hung around, digging through the box of 45s in the back, but I couldn't help tensing up, my shoulders tight.

“Are you serious?” he said.

“I don't know. I don't know w-w-what you're talking about.” I bent over to pick up the album, forcing myself to move, dodging his look.

“Enough making those faces like you’re stupid,” he said. “You’re going to tell us we can’t play our usual set, and now you’ve gone and entered the tournament as a solo act? Are you fucking serious, Atmen?”

“How’d you find out?” I asked, nearly dropping the record again.

“I know one of the guys who’s putting the whole thing together,” he said. “He told me he saw your name. Recognized it. Wondered what’d happened.”

“You guys rreplaced me. What does it matter what I do,” I said.

“I’m so sick of you acting like you’re better. Like you’re something special.” He set both hands on the glass counter, smudging it, pressing real hard, his fingers turning white. “Just because Zig picked you first back in the day.”

“Is that why you, you, you hate me?” I asked, pressing the album to my chest, holding on to it for support, like it was the only thing keeping him from coming after me.

“I hate you because you’re always playing dumb and innocent. Presley can do no wrong. Let’s not stress the princess out before she starts hyperventilating in a paper bag. Get the fuck out of here with that, man.”

“I nnnnever asked for special treatment. I carried my weight. You know that. You’re here because I said—because I wwwwon’t—”

“Because you won’t let us use the songs, yeah. Part of it,” he said, finishing my sentences for me like he always loved to do. “You’ve been mouthy lately. Finally grew some balls, Atmen?” He threw and arm out with a *ha!* in an attempt to swipe the album from me. I pulled away, as far as I could in the small space.

“You’ve got to leave,” I said. “Now.”

“You going to call security on me?”

“Get out before y-y-you-”

“Before I what? Huh? Speak up,” he said. I threw the record to my feet, slammed it real hard it might’ve snapped, because I sure as hell did.

“Don’t make a ssscene in front of the customers.”

“You can’t kick me out,” he said, pressed against the counter again. I stepped to him, face to face, finding the gall to look him in the eye for the first time despite him being able to see, despite him knowing the toll he’d taken on me, on my soul. He was the burden on my back. The water in my lungs. And I felt my breath leave me with every tick of the clock, shrinking into myself because it seemed no matter what I did or said or felt, he always came out on top.

“I can’t sstop you from using my songs,” I said, letting go of my work, my words, all I’d managed to write over the years because I couldn’t stand talking about it anymore. The Presley who scribbled those words about girls with long black hair and pretty green eyes, songs about the boys running wild and free, in his notebook, wasn’t the Presley losing his mind before Beau. “Take them. But you’re nnot going to win.” The tournament. The battle between us that started from nothing, for no reason other than Beau wanting it to.

“I think I already did,” he said, pushing off the counter and heading for the door, knocking over a small cassette display along the way. I stepped over to the wooden rack and the one hundred tapes—some still in their slots, some on the burgundy carpet. Wham’s *Make it Big* was on top, George and Andrew’s cracked faces looking at me funny. I dropped to my knees to clean up the mess before Kristie’s lunch ended, pretending the customers weren’t staring me as I gathered the cassettes and slipped them back into the

rack. I didn't realize I was shaking until the lid of an open cassette box smacked against itself with a *clack, clack, clack* when I tried putting it away.

The last of the customers ended up leaving without buying anything. Whether it was because of Beau's behavior or the real nasty look on my face, I wasn't sure, only that by the end of my shift, I stood between the front counter and first row of vinyl unsure what to do with myself. The *fzzz* of the long fluorescent light bulbs screwed into the ceiling filled the space—my head. I smelled something subtle, smoke, burning that had me twisting my face and thinking I was having a stroke despite knowing deep down I wasn't, and there wasn't anyone around to ask if they smelled it, too, so I brought my hands to my face to sniff the sanitizer I'd used not too long ago to distract me, but the lights kept *fzzzing* and every breath I breathed went straight to my head like the noise and I wasn't seeing right or feeling right or thinking right, because all I could think was that any second my hurtling heart would stop—freeze—die right in my chest and no one would know until it was too late.

I hit the backroom, finding Kristie wiping her hands with a paper towel over the trash can.

“Anyone out there?” she asked.

“Uh, no,” I said, setting a hand on the white wall in hopes the cold or textured brick would ground me. I stepped closer to it, my balance seeming off like it often did when I got real bad. I never fell, but it scared me enough to take caution. It was the worst in the shower when I kept flinching, thinking I was going to slip and smash my face against the faucet. I bent my knees, put all my weight into my legs to make sure I was stable.

“You’re looking kind of pale,” Kristie said. “More than usual. Like you have to shit or something.”

“Caught something, mmmaybe,” I said, holding my stomach.

“You’re about done for today anyway. You can go. I’ve got it.”

“You sure?” I asked, relieved I wouldn’t have to stay boxed up in there for another half hour. She nodded and moved out to the counter, patting my back along the way. I grabbed my jacket off the chair, my phone off the table, and slipped out through the back door.

Harbor Lights

My freshman year of high school, I overheard Audrick and a friend of his talking about some old walking trails down in Niles not far from one of the parks he played soccer at as a kid. There was a rusted out bridge overlooking the Mahoning river. I wasn't sure if he went out there to mess with girls and act like a jackass with his friends or if he went out there to break needles in his skin, only that when Sawyer and I went once despite my protests, there was something about it, the foliage along the riverbank, the twisted trees looking like something out of *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, the bridge's rotting red, that spoke to something in me. Something sad. I went back a few years ago to take photos for some class project, but otherwise avoided it, convinced I'd somehow manage to cut myself on a rail and get tetanus. Not exactly how I wanted to go.

I inched along the abandoned bridge, pressing one nostril shut with a finger and inhaling deeply before switching and exhaling through the other side. Some dumb yoga technique I found on YouTube a long while back that actually helped when I couldn't fill my lungs. I took another few steps, another few ragged breaths, until I couldn't move my legs anymore. I gripped my arms at the elbows, and my foot *tap, tap, tapped*. I couldn't remember the last time I felt comfortable in my own body, the last time I had any control. It always slipped right through my fingers like sand in an hourglass.

I pulled the pack of menthols from my jacket and held one between my lips while I dug for the lighter. I made a spot in the dirt, sat, crossed my legs. I smoked, because there wasn't anything else for me to do out there, except maybe stare at the sky between the diagonal railing, but I couldn't see any colors. I eyed my cigarette for a moment before pressing the tip to the patch of skin peeking between my pant leg and the top of my black sock. *One.* I held it. *Two.* Feeling nothing. *Three.* Jaw clenched. *Four.* Eyes watering. *Five.* At five I pulled away. At five I felt something.

I felt real heavy all over, too. Tired. Something turned in my gut. Something tightened in my throat and blazed in my chest. I stood up in one last attempt to walk it off, but it only made things worse. I dropped the smoke and ground it into steel with the heel of my boot. I wound back and arm and threw the lighter out over the bridge. I paced and shook and swore. I pulled at my hair, wrung my hands, and mumbled to myself like a crazy person—and I was, crazy. Crazy for thinking I could shrug it off. Crazy for thinking I could pretend my rape was nothing and move forward like it'd never happened. But that was the problem. It did happen. And I couldn't shake it no matter how desperate I was to do so.

I should have known that for me, folding it up like a little piece of paper, bottling it up and throwing it out to sea, would come back to bite me, because ocean bottles always found their way back to get picked up by someone else.

I should have known that telling myself it was okay—that I was okay—wasn't going to work this time around. But if I couldn't tell myself that, who could I tell? After all they'd been through, the last thing my parents needed was to know that I'd messed up real bad, gotten myself in trouble, couldn't handle it. And the last thing I needed was to

put myself on the spot in front of my bandmates. To be singled out more than I already was for the way I was, even though they were understanding and kind. To open my mouth to strangers who'd laugh or stare or tell me it didn't happen because it couldn't happen, and that if it really did happen, why did I let it. The second I opened my mouth about it to anyone, I was weak. A victim. A liar. And that's not who I wanted to be.

What I did want was to understand Beau. Not because I was interested in him as a person. Not because I wanted to be like him. But because I wanted to know why this animosity existed between us. Beau was a guy who had everything handed to him. Money. Chicks. Talent. Brains. The ability to be and do and think and say whatever he wanted without trouble, without question. It was bizarre, our relationship. I knew he was uncomfortable around me from the start of Belgrade. He never had patience when I stuttered. He didn't know how to act if I was having an attack. And I was fine with that disdain. It wasn't anything new. I was willing to look past it, because on stage we had real good chemistry.

Me, Beau, and Laine. Two guitars. A bass. We were comfortable. Confident. In control. We shared the music, shared the stage, the crowd, the time. When I moved to play up to the folks rocking their heads along to the song in the front, Ziggy egged me on with a *Go! Go!* and a kick of his leg. When the song slowed, Beau rocked to Chá's drumming like a pendulum. When Ziggy jumped into his higher register, screaming with his tongue hanging out of his mouth, easing tension, looking lewd, Laine and I slammed back to back into each other, guitars alive, until I swung over to belt into the mic with Zig. Our music was real. It was good. We were good. In the moment. In the music.

But maybe that's what it was. The more comfortable we got with each other, the more comfortable he got with me, and the less discomfort he felt towards my issues, because they weren't so much issues anymore as they were a means of entertainment for him. Instead of looking awkwardly to the side waiting for me to finish whenever I had my blocks, Beau would finish my sentences for me or m-m-mock me, claiming it was only to lighten the mood when all it did was make me feel like a dumbass in front of my friends and other bands between sets, like I was less of a man because of it.

He wasn't special, Beau. Beau was everyone. I'd known lots of Beau's. He was the group of boys laughing during my Social Studies presentation. He was the team captain pretending I wasn't an option when picking players for kickball. He was the guy grabbing me by the hair calling me a lit match, a firetruck, a tampon, because redheaded guys weren't attractive. We weren't superheroes or action stars. We were freaks. But Belgrade's Beau hit me hardest. I hated myself for it. I hated him, too, with every fiber of my being. And he hated me. Admitted it at the record store. Zig picked me first, the youngest, the least experienced. I was the mess, the stutterer, the crazy kid who couldn't hold a conversation or look you in the eye, but I was the damn good guitar player, too. The damn good singer. The damn good song writer, while he was just the damn good bassist. Belgrade was just as much mine as it was his, and me threatening to speak up, to talk to Ziggy, it set Beau off, because he didn't want to lose it either.

I sat down again, legs dangling off the edge, and there upon the bridge, I let go. Trembling, choking, crying. Trying to pull myself together. Trying to handle it on my own. I should've been strong enough, but I wasn't. I never was. I'd been taken care of my whole life. And now, when it mattered most, when I needed Presley more than ever, I

couldn't find him. I was losing the wild war waging in my heart, desperate to tell someone that I wasn't okay but so afraid of the every possible consequence of doing so. Afraid of what they'd say. Of what they'd think. Of what he'd do.

I shook, my whole body shook, sweat to skin, a sharp pain in my chest. The water below moved louder, faster, until it was all I could hear, all I could see. And in that moment, it was all I wanted to feel, to take one last breath before the plunge--but I didn't like those thoughts. Didn't want to lose to them. To Beau. So I started to hum. I started to sing. Thinking maybe that'd help me ride the wave back to shore. Up on that *Bridge Over Troubled Water*.

In April 1972, Elvis wore the Royal Blue Fireworks jumpsuit. When the piano faded in, the crowd faded out, and time slowed. E stood on stage, eyes shut, promising us he was on our side. God, did I need that song. I was down and weary and oh so small, always looking for a hand to grab--E's hand when he belted he'd be the bridge when the pain was too much, throwing it up and out with his voice for anyone who was listening.

I'd always heard the song, but never listened until the lyrics struck me at 12-years-old. Paul Simon might've written it, but E delivered with the same passion as the gospel Swan Silvertones Simon looked to, to write it in the first place. Elvis changed the game of rock 'n' roll, but at the end of the day, the man never forgot his roots. He was all about gospel. All about soul. Sometimes, that song was the only song I listened to for days, in the car, from my phone, off a record--the blue 45 from Sawyer spinning every day since I'd gotten it.

Sawyer hadn't been around the last week or so, and I couldn't help but think I'd bothered him real bad, acting like my problems outweighed his. As bad as I wanted to

tough it out alone, as much as I should have, I couldn't help but give in, fishing my phone out of my pocket. I pressed down my thumb, held the phone to my ear. One ring. Two rings. Three rings.

Back in the day, whenever I wasn't feeling real hot, instead of worrying my mom or Oma about it, I'd call Sawyer over or go to his house. I didn't expect him to do anything about it. There wasn't anything he could do. I just liked sitting in the same room with someone who wouldn't smother me. He'd play his PlayStation or watch dumb YouTube videos, and I'd wait for my panic to pass, knowing I had a friend in the world.

Four rings. Five rings. Six. *Your call has been forwarded to an automated voice messaging system. 330-581-3798 is not available. At the tone please record your message. When you've finished recording you may hang up, or press one for more options. Beep.*

"Hhhey, you got a minute?" I said. "I'm real s-s-sorry, but I'm freaking out, and I ended up on that bridge. Yyyou know, the one I always thought looked real cool. I, I, I need—fuck, I think I'm losing it, man. Call me."

He didn't call me. So I called him again. And again. I texted a few times. Nothing. The sun started sinking, and so did I. The cigarette burn on my ankle itched, and I sucked my teeth every time my jeans rubbed against it. I walked back to my car, hoping it was where I left it, because for a moment I thought I forgot the keys inside. But they were in my pocket, stabbing me while I walked the way fear stabbed at my chest, over and over and over until it had me grunting and twisting the front of my shirt. I got in the car and started it, moving real slow until I settled enough to get home.

You Better Run

Somehow, I always ended up on the old concrete steps of my front porch. Alone. Smoking. Pissed off at everything. Turning my head just enough so the neighbor up our ass didn't think I was looking to say hello. And somehow, Sawyer always showed up to make things worse. He pulled into our short driveway, shut his door with a little more force than necessary, looking like he was pissed off, too. He walked up to me and stood there. Nothing else.

"You're blocking my view," I told him. He put his cellphone in my face, making me lean back because of its brightness.

"Are you fucking nuts," he said, "calling that many times." He put the iPhone away in his pocket. "I wasn't ignoring you. Had something going on. Didn't have my phone on me the whole time."

"It's fine," I said, standing up to put out my cigarette. I shoved my fists into my dark denim pockets, fingering the tiny strings of lint inside. There was a torn tissue in the left pocket.

"What's up?" he asked. I kicked at the ground. I didn't know if I looked it, but I could still feel my body trembling, vibrating like my guitar strings.

“Nnnothing. I was being stupid. Had to blow off sssome steam,” I said. “I shouldn’t have called.”

“Anjad? You were at that bridge. You never go there.”

“Not a big deal,” I said, flicking the strand of hair that broke free from my raked back pompadour. I crossed my eyes to look up at it.

“You were going to jump,” he said, making me freeze. “You were going to-”

“No, I wwwasn’t,” I said.

“But you wanted to.” He stepped back, shaking his head, huffing and puffing like my dad always did whenever he got real frustrated with me.

“Take it down a notch, Sssawyer. I didn’t do shit. I wasn’t going to do shit.”

“I know you, Presley. I know when you’re lying. You get this fucking look on your face.”

“Let it go, man.”

“What? Pretend you weren’t about to top yourself? Do you know what you sounded like on the voicemail? If I didn’t know you, I’d think you were tweaking. Hey?” He stepped back to me, snapping his fingers at me. “Are you listening? Shit, maybe I don’t know you.”

“Can you not do that,” I said, pushing his arm away. “I w-w-wasn’t tweaking. I was freaking out. Like always.”

“You never like bothering anyone with your panic attacks unless they’re bad, Press. You never call me like that.”

“Just let it go. Please,” I said, almost begged. “My whole life, everyone, you included, treated me like a baby, like it, it, it was your job to look after me. I don’t have to

tell you everything. I don't have open up, oor bleed. I can keep some things for myself. For me.”

“Dude, I’m not wrong for coming over when you were the one who asked me to.”

“Bbbut you're looking at me funny and pushing me like my shrink and making me talk about shit I don’t want to talk about,” I said, all of me tight, tight, tight.

“What are you getting at?”

“You're my friend, Sawyer. Nnnot my caretaker.”

“Screw you.” He shoved me, both hands to my chest. Before I could think or speak or breathe, I had a fist zooming straight for his face, but Sawyer moved at the last second. He threw a punch at me. I dodged. I went in again, hot, hot, too hot, bad hot. Burning. I was on fire and Beau was the fuel. I swung. I missed. And then Sawyer got lucky. Nailed me right in the mouth. I bit the inside of my cheek. I tasted blood. I stumbled back. He charged, wrapped his arms around me, picked me up off the ground, and flipped me in whichever way. I hit the grass hard, laid on my back, looked up at the evening sky with its long wispy clouds and scattered stars, faded. And then I was looking at Sawyer. Right in the eyes. He hovered over me, stood with his legs on either side of me. He grabbed me by the front of my shirt, lifted my shoulders off the ground. I had seen Sawyer angry before. Real angry. But never like this. And never at me.

“You fucking suck,” he said, seething, his arms shaking like I had been all day.

“We’ve known each other all our lives, man. I’ve been there for you when no one was. I’ve seen the parts of you no one’s wanted to see.” He got louder with each sentence. I wanted to cut him off, to say something to stop him, but there was nothing to say.

“Everything I've done for you, Presley, is because you've been there for me just the same.

Because life is hard, and I know how much harder it can be for you. Because I don't want you jumping off bridges when you feel like you don't have a fucking friend in the world. I want you to build them.”

He let go of my shirt and moved away. I pushed myself up to sit, feeling like a gong had gone off in my head.

“Wallah, you’re annoying,” he said and rubbed the side of his face where I’d cut him with my ring. “You gonna tell me why you were out there now?”

“No,” I said.

“You have this habit of keeping things to yourself until something big sets you off. Then you go do stupid shit. You’ve gotta start giving me more credit. Just because I don’t always call things out doesn’t mean I don’t notice.” He rubbed at his face some more and looked at his hand.

“My rrring grazed you, is all. You’re not bleeding.”

“You better hope I’m not,” he said. I put the back of my hand to my lip and pulled back to see blood.

“You’re not gonna pass out on me, are you?” he asked.

“Nnno,” I said, licking my lip without meaning to. The taste of iron filled my mouth. “I don't like blood, but I don’t pass out because of it.”

“How am I supposed to know anymore? You're off the rails, man. Throwing punches at everyone. Moody. I mean, Jesus Christ, Press.”

I stood up and walked to the front door, my wrist still to my lip.

“You just gonna leave?” he said. “Gonna go up to your room and play with your records.”

“Piss off,” I said. “I’m gr-gr-grabbing some ice. I’ll be back.” I headed into the kitchen, washing my hands with the blue Ajax before grabbing two small baggies and filling them with ice from the lidded plastic bucket in the freezer. When I walked back outside, Sawyer was sitting in the grass, leaned back on his arms. I tossed a bag of ice at him. He threw up his hands to catch it.

“I don’t think I landed a hhit on you, but there,” I said, taking my seat back on the steps. I held my bag against my jaw first, moving up to my lip when it had stopped bleeding. It eventually found its way to my left temple, because my head hurt way more than anything else. Sawyer opened his bag and started eating the ice cubs, crunching real loud.

“Seriously?” I said.

“Shut up,” he said with his mouth full. We sat without saying anything, icing our bruised faces and egos like fools.

“I had a panic attack,” he said. “Or anxiety attack. Whatever.”

“Boo-fucking-hoo,” I said, pressing the pack harder against my head.

“I’m serious, you jackass. When my dad called to tell me what happened to Mom. I was alone in my dorm. My roommate was out.” He popped another ice cube into his mouth. “Do you always feel like that? I know I’ve asked a lot in the past, but I thought I was going to die. I almost called an ambulance.”

“Usually,” I said. “It’s like you’ve gotta shit and puke at the same time. Y-y-your face hurts. Can’t see right. Everyone’s different though.”

“I couldn’t breathe,” he said. “And when I looked at my hands or myself in the mirror, I wasn’t seeing myself right.”

“Good times,” I said. “My balance goes to hell during bad ones. L-I-like I can’t trust my legs. The worst is when it wakes you up. It’s weird. Like your brain’s falling out of your head and someone set a bomb off in your chest.”

“Is that what happened on the bridge?” he asked.

“It’s why I ended up on the bridge.”

“Idiot.” He threw a block of ice at me. I emptied my baggie onto the grass.

“Come on,” I said. He raised his eyebrows at me. “Let’s go. Your place.”

“My place? Why?”

“Because I’ve been a rrrreal bad friend.”

Suspicious Minds

I followed Sawyer to his house in my own car. I'd feel bad if I made him drive me home afterwards. There was another car in the driveway when we pulled in, a scarlet Nissan Sentra parked up against the garage.

"Whose car is that?" I asked when we walked across the yard to the front door.

"My Amto Hasna's here. Came to see Mom," he said.

"Oh, your dad's sister?"

"Yup. The one who thinks you're beautiful or some shit."

"Sshhe likes my hair, is all," I said, combing my fingers through it.

"She's been here almost a week now. Been helping out since things have settled down."

"That's why I hhhaven't seen you. You could have said something."

"I don't have to tell you everything," he said with a pout, making fun of me for what I'd said earlier. I flipped him the bird. He grabbed the screen door's handle but didn't pull it open. He just stood there, picking at where the black paint started to chip and white peeked through.

"Maybe I should have, though," he said.

"Should have what?"

“Said something. I don’t know.” He shook his head. Sawyer was always the go-getter. He was sharp, ready, could take on anything. I wasn’t used to seeing him so conflicted. So confused.

“I’ve made it this far without having to bury anyone,” he said, still picking at the paint. “I’m not used to death like—”

“Like I am,” I said. “I’m nnot used to it just because of Audrick or my grandparents, you know. But I’m not the best person for this subject. Folks like me spend our whole lives running from death. I think eeverything’s going to kill me despite knowing no matter how far I run, it’s always going to catch up.”

“My mom’s not even dead, but I feel like I’ve been running ever since I came back to Youngstown,” he said. “And now you’re calling me from bridges. Got me scared my best friend's gonna kill himself. Don't make me stand at your grave, Press.”

“I’m okay,” I told him. “I, I, I’ve got a lot of livin’ to do. Just been in a funk lately. Had to get some things off my chest.” I pushed his arm away and grabbed the door handle. “Don’t worry about me.” I pulled it open and stepped inside, moving to the right to slip out of my boots. The house smelled real good. Garlic and cardamom. Bay leaves. The blend of Arabic spices I was often exposed to whenever his father’s side of the family came to visit. The blend of Arabic spices his aunt was probably stirring up in the kitchen.

Sawyer followed me in, still hesitant, still looking insecure like I was some stranger he didn’t know how to act around—the way he kept twisting his mouth, the way he kept pressing his tongue against his cheek before speaking. I was going to say something. Maybe ask if he was all right. I was real tempted to squeeze the answer out of

him the way he'd done to me a million times over the years like one of those Pop-Eyes toys. But right when I opened my mouth, his aunt Hasna swung through the archway, her legs in the kitchen, torso in the family room.

“Sawyer, habibi, did you get the lemons?”

“Lemons?” he asked, kicking his sneakers aside.

“I sent you to get lemons for the molokhia. You can't eat molokhia without lemon,” she said. He looked at me with a whispered *shit*.

“I got distracted. I'm sorry,” he said. “You remember Presley. He's high maintenance. Made me forget.” He shoved me for added effect.

“Presley! It's been so long.” She shuffled over to us in her pink house slippers. She pulled me against her with one arm, holding out the other that was sticky with rice and I didn't know what else. She smelled like the garlic she was cooking and an old perfume not unlike the one Oma used to wear all day every day no matter where she was. And though it was familiar and Amto Hasna was familiar, the real bad feeling crawling up my back wasn't; a flesh eating virus, an alarming surge of heat that had me wiggling away from her without making it obvious I was uncomfortable with her touch.

“Sssorry,” I said, rubbing my nose, “I thought I w-w-was going to sneeze.” I looked over to see Sawyer eyeing me funny like he'd been doing ever since we rekindled our friendship. So I eyed him funny back, the both of us suspecting each other of something we weren't quite sure of. I did know, however, that it was about to be one long night if we were going to go on with suspicious minds.

“You're staying to eat with us, right?” Amto Hasna asked. “Food is done. You'll eat a little, and then you can do whatever you want. Khalas, I've decided.” She moved a

lot when she spoke, her wrists rolling, head shaking so much her short black curls ricocheted off her round face.

I couldn't argue with the woman. It'd end bad. Besides, her food was real good, and I was there for Sawyer, to see Mrs. Malik, not just to say hello and sneak out. The few times I had been over, Mrs. Malik was sleeping or at an appointment or somewhere else in the house. I'd seen Oma sick. I'd seen Opa lose his mind to Alzheimer's. But I was still real scared to see Sawyer's mom, because she wasn't old. She wasn't supposed to be sick or broken. She was supposed to be working during the day and watching trash television at night, not cooped up wherever she was. But what did I know? Maybe she wasn't as bad as I thought. Maybe I was overthinking. Overreacting. Signature Presley.

#

Sawyer and I hung out in the living room watching South Park after Amto Hasna insisted we didn't have to go get her lemons. The bottle of lemon juice she found at the back of the fridge would work just the same. I didn't believe her.

"What's she making again?" I asked.

"Molokhia."

"Which one is that?"

"The leaves. The green soupy stuff," Sawyer said. "With the chicken and the rice. You've had it before. Probably. Yeah. It's standard cooking when family visits."

"Maybe you should learn how to make it," I said.

"Yeah, because that's all I want, is to stand around cooking for you, bud."

"Just a suggestion." The oak grandfather clock wedged in the far left corner of the living room went off, catching me off guard, making me sit up the way my cat did

whenever a noise scared him. It rang for a few seconds or so, but it felt longer. Minutes of real low ringtones, one after the other that I felt in my bones.

“You forget the clock was there?” Sawyer asked. “I thought you always liked it, because you like anything that’s old and crusty. Like Elvis.”

“It’s been a while since we hung out here,” I said, staring ahead at the patterned rug and tiny dust bunny curled beneath the rocking chair.

“I guess. I don’t remember you being jumpy though. Not this jumpy, at least. The clock’s not gonna eat you.”

“Yeah. It’s you I have to worry about,” I said, touching my busted lip. His aunt didn’t notice the bumps and scrapes on our faces. At least, I didn’t think she did. But she was never the type to notice details. She talked too fast, moved too quick to see the small things. I was the opposite. I noticed everything. Every chip in the wall. Every hair out of place. But all that hyperawareness ever did was ensure I was never comfortable, not even alone in my own room. She was lucky.

“Hey,” Sawyer said, leaned forward, “when you see my mom, just be prepared.”

“Wwwhat do you mean?”

“Wallah, she’s not the same person, Press,” he said. “I’ve been trying to figure out how to explain it, but I can’t even understand it myself. The stroke took her. And I know how you get. I’ve seen you in hospitals and stuff.”

“You keep saying that. Like I can’t handle anything,” I said.

“I can’t even handle it, man. I can’t even look at her. She’s my mom for God’s sake. She just started walking again. Barely. She can’t talk. Lost all her words.” He put a hand over his mouth like he was nauseated, but I don’t think he was. He was trying not to

cry, and I didn't know what to do or say, because I was the one always crying. When I reached out to grab his shoulder reassuringly, he pushed off the couch and stood up, clearing his throat, shaking his head, poor bastard thinking it would help get rid of those nasty feelings. I felt useless and out of place there, in my best friend's house, in a home I cherished as much as my own.

“Come help,” he said. “I don't want Amto Hasna setting the table alone.”

I'll Be There

Mrs. Malik sat across from me at the dinner table in a yellow shirt and black button cardigan. I didn't think she had use of her right arm, because she kept it low and pinned to her side like it would fly away like a stringed balloon if she didn't. Mr. Malik had his chair stuck to hers, helping her grab what she needed. Sawyer picked at his food, scooping up spoonfuls of the molokhia and watching it drip back into his bowl.

"Don't be shy, Presley. Eat," Amto Hasna said. "Sawyer, make sure he eats."

"He's not shy," he said.

"Here," She reached across the table, grabbing the metal tongs, clicking them twice before setting a crisped chicken thigh on my plate.

"I'm good. Rreally," I said.

"Just that. Last one," she said, pointing her fork at me. I looked to Sawyer for help, but he was still too busy playing with his food, his leg shaking annoyingly under the table. I hoped I wasn't that irritating when I fidgeted.

"How are your parents, Presley?" Mr. Malik asked.

"Good. Good. Working a lot. Nothing new," I said. He smiled. Any other time, he'd ask more questions like if I was seeing anyone yet or how school was or plans I had for the summer. And he'd laugh and make jokes. But after asking about my folks, he

went back to chewing his chicken and helping Sawyer's mom, his head lowered, shoulders hunched like he'd been defeated. Looking back at Sawyer, it was the same for him, too.

"Thanks, Amto," he said, scooting back in his chair.

"That's it? No more?" she said.

"I'm not that hungry. I ate before stopping at Press's," he said, giving me a look so I'd play along if needed.

"You better eat later. There's a lot left. I made too much," she said, waving her fork at him that time.

"You always make too much." He took his plates to the kitchen. He didn't come back right away. I heard the sink faucet run and the clanking of dishes. Sawyer must have been real bothered if he was doing dishes without being asked to. The others didn't think much of it, too busy eating. So I did the same, focused on the molokhia in front of me. I didn't know when I'd get to have it again.

#

I planned on leaving a little after dinner, but Mr. Malik and Amto Hasna insisted I stay. She jumped to her feet before I could, telling me I couldn't leave now that she was up to make tea with mint. Sawyer helped her serve it on a silver trimmed tray, telling me to *hurry up and fucking pick one* when I took my time deciding which cup I wanted.

Mrs. Malik sat with us, pressed into the couch cushions. If she sunk any further in, she'd disappear. She looked tired, but seemed to enjoy the company. She had the same life in her brown eyes that was there before the stroke, life that Sawyer couldn't see because it hurt too much to look. She nodded and smiled and drank tea along with us. But

she didn't speak much. At first, when Sawyer said she'd lost her words, I thought maybe she was experiencing something like my own blocks, but after sitting with her and looking some stuff up on my phone when no one was paying any attention, I learned that wasn't the case. I always knew what I wanted to say. I had words. I just couldn't say them. But I don't think Mrs. Malik had words anymore. At least not all the words she used to have. I think they were gone. Like they'd been erased. It made me real sad, seeing her like that. Quiet. Unmoving. Because I was so used to her running around like my own mother. It made me sadder, scared, to think that in a blink of an eye, it could be my mother there pressed against the couch. My mother buried next to Audrick.

#

When I thought I could leave after the tea, Amto Hasna got up to make Turkish coffee, pouring it in tiny cups, shot glasses decorated with thin handles and Arab mosaic in blue, white, and gold. I took my cup, setting it against its matching saucer.

Mr. Malik turned down the television volume, close to muting the soap opera via satellite that Amto Hasna was watching between making us hot beverages and force feeding me Turkish Delight, a slice of knafa, and these real good shortbread cookies called ghiraybeh that were shaped like the letter *S* and that I couldn't ever pronounce.

"She loves her Lebanese shows," he said, like he'd sat through one too many.

"My oma was the same," I said. "She watched a lot of stuff, but I specifically remember *Pastewka* and, and, and *Heimat*."

Sawyer left to clean up, picking up empty plates and washing dishes again. His parents headed off when Mrs. Malik started getting sleepy. Which left me and Amto Hasna alone in the living room with the silent soap opera flashing across the screen.

“Are you taking care of my Sawyer?” she asked, moving to sit next to me. I think I made a face, about to laugh off her question, because he was the one always taking care of me, even when I didn’t want him to. But I took a moment to consider it, thought about it real hard.

“Not as much as I should be,” I said in the end.

“You have to. For me. He’s not happy.”

“Sawyer?” I scooched up in my seat. “He’s not shy though. Hhhe’d say something. Always has, if something was bothering him.”

“He didn’t like Ohio State,” she said. “Don’t repeat this or he’ll be upset with me, but he hated it. He didn’t make friends. He couldn’t focus.”

“Really?” Sawyer was the type to give, give, give and never ask for anything in return. He always wanted to help. Always wanted the people around him to be comfortable. And I never once thought how comfortable or uncomfortable he might have been. All this time, I thought he was loving OSU. Living it up. Taking care of business. But I guess I was just assuming again. I needed to stop that. Thinking I knew everything and everyone when I didn’t even know my best friend. When I didn’t know myself.

“Look,” she said, “Sawyer’s baba, when he’s like this, when men are stressed, you get emotional, and you’re useless.”

I nodded in agreement. I knew I was, at least.

“He’s too young to be taking care of his parents like this,” she said. “He’s pretending he’s fine, but he’s scared. I see it in his face.” She grabbed my hands, held them in her own, her wedding ring clinking against my Aloha Horseshoe ring.

“He’ll never admit he needs help. He’ll keep pretending,” she said. “Just make sure he knows you’re there if he ever does ask.”

Mama

Sawyer was in the kitchen still washing those dishes, stacking plates and bowls in the plastic drying rack.

“I’m about to head out in a minute,” I said, walking my empty coffee cup over to him. “This your new hobby?”

“Just helping out,” he said, taking it from me. “Don’t want to hear my old man run his mouth later.” He finished washing whatever was left. I grabbed a can of Sprite from the fridge. The Pepsi looked real good, but I needed to lay off the caffeine. It messed with me real bad sometimes, and I just had both coffee and tea.

“You should take the rest of the pack. No one’s going to drink it,” he said, drying the last of the clean cups with a towel when there wasn’t any room left in the rack. “My dad bought it yesterday for today’s dinner. You know, fancy.”

“I’ll just drink it when I’m here,” I said and popped open the can. He grabbed the last cup to dry.

“Sure. Whatever.”

“You good?” I asked.

“Yeah, Presley. I’m great.”

“What’s with the, the, the mood flip?”

“You’re one to talk, with your bipolar ass.”

“You’re hilarious, Sawyer. I’m actually dying, that was so funny.”

“Cut it out, man.” The cup slipped from his hands. Hit the tiled floor. Shattered. He swore under his breath and stepped away from the glass after responding to the call from the living room, telling his aunt everything was all right even though it wasn’t. He bent over, started picking up the larger shards.

“Don’t half ass it, unless you want to step in it later,” I said.

“I know, Presley,” he said. I watched him. I watched the glass on the floor and how the jagged edges sparkled in the kitchen light.

“Earlier, you said I c-c-couldn’t handle it,” I said. “I think you’re the one who can’t handle it.”

He grabbed another few pieces of glass before standing back up, breathing long and deep like he was holding something back.

“What do you want from me?” he said, his arms loose at his sides, the glass in both palms pressing and poking into his skin.

“Your mom, she’s going to be okay,” I said. “She may be different, but people don’t change, Sawyer.”

Raised On Rock

I spent a lot of time studying E's 50s footage growing up, the very first performances when he was thrust into a world of superstardom. He was a rebel, the Hillbilly Cat, the Memphis Flash. I wanted to dye my hair black like he did, because my red made me a target school. I wanted to master the lip curl, because he looked tough and dangerous and got all the girls, and I thought if I could do it, I'd look tough and dangerous, too, so no one would mess with me, and cool enough to get all the girls. Of course things didn't go according to plan. People did mess with me, and tragically, I didn't get any girls, but I tried not to feel too bad about it. He might've been a rock star, but as a kid, Elvis was the total opposite. The guy took a lot of flak from his classmates. He was dirt poor, white trash, greasy. He was real shy. He showed up to class dressed like a pimp.

E stuttered, too. There was some debate on whether it was an actual speech impediment. I didn't think it was, but he stuttered enough on TV and in interviews to be noticed. Like when he tried introducing *Maybellene* at the Louisiana Hayride and couldn't string a sentence together. Or when he was on Martindale's *Teenage Dance Party* promoting his charity show and he stopped, putting a hand to his face like I often did when I got stuck, trying to say what he wanted while the audience chuckled. I knew if

E tripped over his own words like me, I'd be fine. I knew if he had trouble at school like me, I'd be fine. If he wore flashy clothes and flashy hair despite people laughing at him, like me, I'd be fine. I could, too. I could be me and be fine.

My family had pictures of me at five-years-old glued to the television mesmerized by the *Aloha From Hawaii* special, because it started off with a shot of Earth from space and real loud satellite beeps, E's name flashing in different languages among the stars—although I didn't know that's what those scribbles were at the time.

The venue was dark, and the theme from *2001: A Space Odyssey* rumbled, camera flashing to the faces in the crowd before rolling into E's intro on stage. It was amazing, broadcast via satellite around the world. It was real cool, the idea, but the whole satellite thing was a way for Colonel Tom Parker to shut E up. He never performed outside of North America, because his manager didn't have the right papers and was afraid he'd get his sorry ass deported if he left the states. So E had to suffer and never got to sing overseas. I read a story in this Denis Johnson book once about a guy and this Elvis conspiracy theory of his where he said the colonel ruined Elvis. The colonel leached him and bleached him. And isn't that the truth?

E stepped up to the mic with his guitar and started with *See See Rider*, the stones on his American Eagle suit sparkling, a lei around his neck. I was told I bounced around the living room like a puppy when he got to his rockabilly and rock 'n' roll hits. But let's be honest, that show was all about *American Trilogy*.

As wild as the Hawaii concert was, it was the '68 *Comeback Special* that rocked my socks. It was the best he ever sounded. The best he ever looked. The best he ever performed, in black leather, grit in his voice, because he hadn't been on stage in over

seven years by then, and with the shift in music and little shits like the Beatles invading the radio waves, E had a lot to prove and a throne to reclaim. And my God, did he do that and so much more. When the comeback was on, there was no talking. There was no dancing. Just me and the TV and whoever else was willing to put up with my rules, because the comeback wasn't a show, it was an experience. The sit-down jam session. The *Guitar Man* storyline weaving the whole thing together. The *If I Can Dream* finale still relevant today. It shaped me as a musician. And now, more than ever, I needed that inspiration.

I had five days before the battle of the bands tournament. I went to bed every night wondering if it'd be best to drop out, to just quit this whole stunt and save myself the embarrassment I was so afraid of.

“What aren't you afraid of?” I said to myself while flipping through Alfred Wertheimer's *Elvis: A King in the Making*, hoping to find a badass photo that'd slap the rock 'n' roll back in my bones. Back in the day, my psychiatrist made me write a list of all the things I feared, and by now, it was probably twice as long. Heights. Flying. Open water. Highway driving. Family dying. Me dying. Sitting in class where someone could walk in to shoot up the place. Being in public where someone could shoot up the place. Going to sleep and never waking up. The beating heart in my chest. The gushing blood in my veins. Cutting my hand on a can of Siegfried's cat food and getting infected. Spiders making a home in the toes of the pairs of shoes I wore the least.

“You can't drop out of the contest. Stupid.” I'd end up disappointing Chá. And Sawyer would never let me hear the end of it. He'd been counting down the days for me despite me begging him not to. And what would E think? This was my chance, right?

“My comeback, right, E?” I was glad my father wasn’t home, because if he saw me sitting around the empty house talking to myself and flipping through the photo book like teenage girls flipped through celebrity magazines, he’d drag my sorry ass down to campus and force them to take me back despite the fact spring semester already started.

I shut the book and set it aside. It wasn’t going to win me any competition, but my guitar could. I’d been carrying it all around the house these last few days in case the little light in my brain clicked on and I knew what songs I wanted to perform at the battle. Of course, I didn’t have anything. The light bulb zapped, burned out. I stretched across my bed, threw out an arm, too lazy to get up and grab the guitar. I got a finger through the strap and pulled it the rest of the way towards me until it was in my lap.

Oma bought it for me one September, deciding I needed a hobby. I never tried sports. I was sick a lot as a kid, my mental health issues acting up before anyone knew what it was. I couldn’t commit to a team. So guitar it was. Anything to get me closer to E. I practiced on my own for a while but started getting frustrated when I wasn’t improving. So for Christmas one year, she paid for sessions, and once I got the hang of things, once I gained my confidence—the rest was history.

I considered doing one of my own songs, but after Beau showed up at the record shop, I didn’t want any of it anymore. Belgrade. The main reason I took back my songs was because I didn’t want them thinking they could play me more than they already did. I didn’t even care about winning. Not really. I was doing it to prove a point to Zig. I was doing it because Sawyer and Chá said I had to. I was doing it because maybe if I proved to everyone else I could do it, I could prove it to myself, too. That I was okay. That I could move forward. No more whining. No more bridges or blowups.

I wasn't sure what I'd wear either. I was always real flashy, but on stage, I took it to another level. I loved clothes. If I liked it, if I felt real good in it, I wore it. Didn't matter what anyone said. The way E wore ducktails and used to show up to school in pink and black dress pants and boleros he bought from Beale. I also liked dressing up and looking tough to make up for the fact I was applesauce on the inside.

The clothes, I could figure that out last minute. My outfit wouldn't mean shit unless I had something to play. I liked all sorts of music. It was weird, that I was having so much trouble deciding. I immersed myself in as much as I could, grabbed things from here, borrowed stuff from there, because that was the best way to learn and to grow. But when it came down to it, rockabilly, the blues, and R&B, those were my favorites. That's what I loved. That's what moved me. What I felt, from the hair on my head down to my toes. I started wondering if maybe that was what I needed for the competition. No loud guitars. No drums. None of the larger-than-life riffs or melodies from Belgrade's glam inspired core. Just the blues. Just a voice, a guitar, soul. That's all Elvis needed when he stepped into Sun. Maybe that's all Presley needed, too.

One for the Money

I stood in my room biting at my finger, in a real dilemma. First, I still didn't know what songs to play. I paced around the house thinking the answer would strike me like a lightning bolt. I dug through the vinyl at work hoping the answer would jump into my hands. I was going to do Elvis, that much I knew. I'd be the only one to do it, that's for sure, and I'd get to share the love. But I didn't know where to start. The guy had somewhere over 700 recordings. I just needed four. If I was going to go all Hillbilly Cat on stage, it had to count.

"Hey, honey, could you pull the clothes out of the dryer when it dings?" my mom asked, walking in on my second problem. "What's all this?" I wasn't sure if she was referring to the jeans strewn about the bed or the 600 belts and pairs of shoes piled on the floor in front of my closet door.

"Uh, trying to find something to wear," I said.

"For what?"

"The competition. Yyyou know. Friday."

"It's Tuesday, Presley."

"Exactly."

"Why aren't you coordinating with your band? Where are the others?" she asked.

“I’m not in it anymore. Remember?” I said. “I thought you knew. I got replaced.”

“You never told me.”

“I must’ve forgot to,” I said, grabbing a gold belt that caught my eye. “I thought I told Dad.”

“Well if you did, he didn’t tell me,” she said. Way to go, Dad. Another reason for her to think I was keeping secrets. Just what I needed.

“Oh. Sssorry.” I dropped the belt. It wasn’t going to work.

“I got called in early. Please don’t forget the dryer,” she said, knocked on the door with her knuckles to emphasize the point, and left. *No I’m sorry things didn’t work out with the guys, Presley. No good luck Friday. Just don’t forget the dryer.*

“These for sure.” I picked up my blue suede boots.

Two for the Show

“Are you shitting yourself yet?” Sawyer asked. He grabbed a handful of fries from his basket.

“Shut up,” I said. “And why are we eating wings again? We just hhhad them.”

“Well say something next time, bud. I forgot you can’t eat like a normal person in public,” he said.

“I can eat in public. Just not wings. Gets all over the place. I feel like people stare.”

“Napkins, bud.” He waved one around like a little white flag. “And it’s not just wings. You can’t even drink out of cans or bottles in front of people unless you stick a straw in it. Chicken wings are not to blame here.”

“Gee, I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t answer me. Are you shitting yourself yet?”

“I’m starting to regret making up wwwwith you. I was better off by myself.”

“Of course you were. Talking to Elvis’s dead ass all day.”

“I know what I’m wearing, at least,” I said. I’d finally settled on my blue suede shoes, of course, a pair of black leather pants, a black button down that looked real silky, especially in the right light, and a small scarf around my neck, inspired by the outfit E

wore when he opened the '68 Comeback with *Trouble* and *Guitar Man*. Although, my scarf was blue, not red.

“That’ll get you first place for sure. Forget the music. As long as Presley looks good. Idiot.”

“I’ll figure out.”

“I hope so. Tick tock. Two days, Atmen.”

“This whole thing’s a mistake,” I said, my stomach all wonky. “And I thought the p-p-point of me coming out today was to get my mind and nerves off the battle.”

“You know damn well nothing in this world, not even Elvis himself rising from the dead, is gonna get your mind off the battle,” Sawyer said. “Two days, Atmen.” He tore into another chicken drum like he hadn’t been fed in weeks. “Two days.”

Three To Get Ready

I figured I'd be shaky on stage. I didn't think I'd be shaky practicing at home the night before. At least, not as shaky as I was. My heart kept banging against my ribs, my head hurt real bad, and I got that weird feeling in my legs that had me doubting my ability to stand, let alone strut across stage the next day. In the past, a little pre-show nerves was good for me. For all of us. It was normal. But this was real bad. I got sick. Spent some time in the bathroom. I forgot silly things, like lyrics and transitions from bridges to choruses. I took my time changing guitar strings. I wasted half an hour looking for my red, '68 guitar pick, because I all of a sudden couldn't play unless I used that specific pick. I couldn't find it, which led to me huffing and puffing all over my bedroom, because I needed that pick and I was sick to my stomach and any bit of confidence I had left in me disappeared and I really didn't want to see Beau again.

Now Go, Cat, Go

Belgrade took part in a few local music competitions over the years. Sometimes, the events were a way to get some exposure and network with other bands. Sometimes the promise of merch and equipment was nice. Sometimes it was the cash prize, a few extra bucks to help the broke bands buy some studio time. But they weren't always the best to participate in. Sure, every band wanted to make it big, but at these gigs, not every band played because they loved to play. Battles get toxic. Folks get nasty. All to impress some judges who, most of the time, aren't even well versed in the business. Local higher ups. The owners of the bars we played at. This event was no different. But we did it anyway.

After losing a few and coming in second once, Ziggy shied away from competitions for a while. He was angry first. Said it was a popularity contest instead of a music competition. Didn't think it was fair to go through all that only for the winner to be the group of asshats who sold the most tickets to their friends. Then he started saying we needed to polish our sound, to figure out what it is we were really trying to do. The story were we trying to tell. I was surprised he was so adamant about entering this time around. But after I ditched them for a while and put everyone on hold without much of a choice, I guess he was desperate for anything that'd get the wheels turning again. I couldn't blame him.

I was backstage hanging out. Well, I wished I was hanging out. I was fidgeting in my chair, not sure where to put or how to cross my legs, like I suddenly forgot how to sit. People came and left, talking, yelling, rushing.

“Are you hungry or something?” Sawyer asked. He stood beside me, leaned against the wall, craning his neck forward to stare at his phone. “You’ve been biting your nails ten minutes straight. I timed you.”

“I’m good.” I stuck my hands under my ass to keep me from biting whatever was left. I glanced around the room. Black folding chairs were scattered about the space. There was an oddly placed round mirror on the brick wall behind me. The wall across the room had old band tour posters taped to it, floor to ceiling: The Stones, Aerosmith, Metallica, Mötley Crüe—bright yellows, reds, and greens, bold fonts, photos, facades. Two guys stood just outside the doorway out in the small lot. They smoked cigarettes, pausing between drags to swear and shake their heads at something that must have pissed them off real bad.

“Fucking stinks,” Sawyer said with his nose against his arm, trying to breathe in the fabric of his blue hoodie instead of the smoke that rolled inside.

“You can go,” I said. “I don’t even think yyyou’re allowed back here unless you’re participating.”

“Well, no one’s kicked me out. Who’s to say I’m not your drummer?”

“Yet.” I was hoping he’d leave so I could smoke, too, and go back to biting my nails or twisting in my chair without him shaking my shoulder or hitting the back of my head.

“Fine. I’ll go.” He put his phone away and pushed off the wall. He turned around before reaching the door. “You got this, bud!” he said, throwing up two thumbs and catching the eye of everyone else back there. God, I hated him. I gave him a look telling him to leave already, but that was my first mistake, thinking he’d listen when he knew he was getting under my skin. So I resorted to begging, mouthing *please*, because Sawyer Malik was a terrible person.

“TCB, Press. TCB.” He aimed finger guns at me with the added *click, click* of his tongue before finally leaving. I stared at my shoes, because I had a feeling the others were staring at me. Then the next band started, the *clang, clang, clang, clang* of cymbals making me jolt back in my seat. I looked through the smoke, through the second doorway that led into the rest of the venue, and caught sight of Ziggy. He was wearing a red leather jacket, the sleeves fringed with white velvet. I wanted him to look my way. I wanted him to see that I was there, too. I wanted him to get angry that I didn’t need them. *Every great artist needs a comeback, I’d say. My ’68 Special.*

Chá followed him, in tight vinyl pants, also red and real shiny, twirling her drumsticks as hard as I tapped my foot. They lined up, next to take the stage. Laine slipped in front of Chá, disappearing from view with Zig. Beatles Girl hung out at the end of the line chewing gum, blowing pink bubbles, her hair pulled tight and high, she could use it as a weapon. When she bent over to tie her laces, I saw that Beau had been at her side the entire time, his arm around her neck and shoulders, touching her even while she tied her shoes. I looked away. Moved my chair up so he wouldn’t see me if he turned.

I rubbed at my tattoo. I had a feeling I wasn’t going to take care of any business. I was going to bomb, flop, tank. How would the story go? Presley Atmen never makes it to

stage, because this time, the panic really did kill him. Presley Atmen goes out there ready to rock, only to trip over all the chords and fall face first into the equipment. Presley Atmen starts his set but freezes mid song, forgetting the lyrics, and is reduced to a stuttering, twitching mess.

“Shit.” I had my hands in my hair, feeling the pomade between my sweaty fingers. The guy in the chair a few feet away from me looked up from tinkering with his bass to give me what I thought was an irritated look, his head tilted. That’s when I noticed how bad my leg had been shaking, my boot heels clunking against the chipped concrete floors. I stopped. Flashed an apologetic smile. He waved it off, probably nervous, too. When my leg started going again, I got up and headed for the back lot to squeeze in a smoke before my death sentence.

There was a black milk crate. I kicked it out of the way and sat down. Black and blue and amber twisted together in the sky. The air was clean and crisp, real nice to breathe in—one, two three—breathe out. My cigarette shrunk and so did time, bit by bit, minute by minute. I pushed back my sleeve, took a look at my watch.

“Well, E, it’s now or never.”

Blue Suede Shoes

It's real nice, how nerves, all that ugliness, dissipate when you strike that first chord. The stage, even as I stood there all alone, no Belgrade to shield me, was one place I could always breathe. I looked past the lights. Past the ferment and the faces and the fear. Focused on just the mic. Just the pedalboard and the guitar. Just me. Like E. 1968. Just my blue suede shoes moving to my *Mess of Blues*, my *New Orleans*, my *Dixieland Rock*. At the end, when sweat soaked my shirt, when my legs felt like rubber, when I shut my eyes because of all the lights, I laid into *Trying to Get to You*, because there was something about that song. On stage, alone, I felt like I could sing for days. It felt as though instead of running from the amp to the guitar, all the electricity was running through me, sparking my fire. Reviving me.

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