

## heart on your sleeve

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## heart on your sleeve

by [carriewilsons \(ahsokastano\)](#)

### Summary

you were always a little anxious, and then you died. alex centric. pre-death in 1995.

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**Disclaimer: I don't own Julie and the Phantoms.**

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*you'll wear your heart on your sleeve, and i'll keep my hand clenched on the steering wheel.*

— Sunset Curve, “Long Weekend” from the Sunset Curve 1994 Demo.

When you first see Luke, you're eleven. He wears a guitar on his back that's nearly twice his size — you're both small, both in your middle school's music program. Pastor Tim suggested music for all the nervous energy your mom frets over, and no one knows that this moment has set hundreds of others into motion.

You don't sit beside one another. He sits up front: Eager, wide-eyed, greedy to take in all Mr. Suarez has to offer. You sit in the back: Hesitant, closed-off, anxiously tapping your hands on your knees. Your mother hates it when you do this. She *always* reprimands you and smacks at your hands. Mr Suarez, however, takes note of this and sits you at the drums.

It isn't love at first sight. You're new, so you suck at it.

You've only ever tapped out rhythmless beats on your knees, tables, the windows of the car, but now you're reading music and trying to put notes together — it feels helpless and impossible.

It was anxiety talking, of course. But at the time you didn't know what you felt was common, had a name. Back then, you felt weird and out of place, like you were nearing a finish line the world kept inching away.

And then Luke entered your life. He began taking residence in your heart, your mind. Soon, you let

yourself become his.

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Obviously you knew Luke Patterson. He had begun playing his guitar over the summer, and he was basically a musical prodigy. The boy was engaged in class, he asked questions and soaked up everything like a sponge.

You're surprised that he knew you. You sat in the back, pretending like you didn't exist.

Despite being the oldest, the center of attention was best suited for your younger sisters: Allana and Alicia, but especially Allana.

She was the middle child, but refused to be ignored. She was two years younger than you, but she burned for the spotlight. Alicia is only three, and she is the center of attention because, well, she's a baby, but she's also the cutest. Besides, you'd rather have your parents forget you. It's easiest when they're overlooking you, because when they see you, it feels like all they ever see is flaws you don't know how to fix.

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Luke comes in one day in October while you're practicing, but it's more like taking out your frustration on school equipment because everything sounds wrong, wrong, *wrong*!

You're seconds away from throwing the sticks in frustration when the brunette peers around the corner curiously and shoots you his signature Luke smile. Your heart lurches in fear, but also something else. Something more?

At the time, though, it doesn't matter.

You jump up in panic, as if you've been caught doing something wrong, and the stool you sat upon falls. You catch the drums that are tipping, cymbals crashing loudly. You both look at one another, then Luke laughs and you laugh, too, nervous and reserved.

"You're Alex, right?" he asks, watching you pick up the stool and adjust the drum kit.

You startle, shocked that he knows you, then you blush and look down. "Yeah. Why?"

Luke shrugs nonchalantly, but he has an excited twinkle in his eyes and an eager smile on his face as he says, "You play the drums."

You blush harder, coughing, "Er, that's an overstatement."

Luke waves a hand, "You've improved."

You pause, then look up and Luke nods. "No, really, you have! You have more purpose, like under the noise, there's something. You know?"

You don't, but you feel flattered and flustered at the compliment.

Luke straddles the back of a chair, watching you for a moment. "I've wanted to start a band," he admits and feel something inside you give way from the nerves.

"Listen... improvement or not, we both know I'm *nowhere* near that." You hold your hands up in a sorry gesture, but have to bend down because you dropped the sticks. Red faced, you look at Luke who has begun to laugh.

"Well yeah, but it's not like I'm ready either, but we could jam together."

And that's how it begins.

You and Luke jam everyday during lunch and then after school. Drums are easier with a partner, with someone to bounce things off of. You even write drum solos to Luke's riffs. It warms you, because soon, he is your best friend.

He's always over your house. Allana is enthralled with him, and she's nine, so she thinks it's true love and that Luke will marry her one day. You find yourself uncharacteristically jealous and bitter at the thought.

You don't really get why your gut twists at the idea of Luke kissing a girl, or even dating. It's inevitable, really. Everyone says Luke is the most handsome boy in the grade, and he's flirty as fuck. He's effortlessly charming, even the teachers let his bullshit slide.

You cruelly tell Allana she's not Luke's type and you feel guilt when tears well in her blue eyes. She calls you a jerk before she runs off, and you don't know why you'd do that to her. Allana might be nine, but you're close with her. You don't see her as a nuisance or a bratty kid sister, but you wish you did. It has to be better than the guilt you felt, as if you'd slapped her across the face.

You bring her ice cream later, but you still don't know why this sad jealousy sits inside your gut. You wish it would go away, and it won't be the first time you try to will this feeling out of you. Before this feeling had a name, or the shame that came with it.

Then, you think this feeling must be dread because if Luke dates that'll mean change, and you've always hated change.

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You're thirteen and red faced, sitting with Luke up in your old treehouse. Luke is laughing because your mother wants you to join the marching band in the fall.

You've gotten good at drums. So good, you convinced your parents to split the difference so you can buy a set of drums for yourself.

Luke has nothing against marching band. Neither you or Luke are the type to have school spirit, and the thought of you in the marching band is hilarious.

“Shut up!” you snap, shoving him, but you’re laughing, too.

It is funny, but way more annoying, and you know Luke understands.

Your mother wants you to be Mr. High School come September. She wants you in clubs, making friends. She wants you to get a girlfriend, go to the homecoming dance, be more active in church — but you always hated church.

The only one among you and your siblings that even remotely likes church is four year old Alicia, but it’s mostly because she’s in the classrooms in the basement playing with her friends and then gets to eat the Sunday potluck.

You just want to be in a band, but it’s always just been you and Luke *jamming*.

No one has clicked, but there is a boy who was in Luke’s Language Arts class he has a sixth sense for: Reggie Peters. You know of him, but have never really had a class with him, and you barely spare the dark haired boy a glance when you pass one another. Whenever he comes up, that gut-curdling feeling comes over you, and you irrationally hate him.

“Can he even play an instrument?” You all but sneer one night. Your back is to Luke, and you’re in his room, tossing socked balls into the hoop hanging on his door.

“I have talked to him, Alex,” Luke replies and you swear to God you can hear the grin in his voice. “He’s interested in bass, but he plays the keyboard.”

You clutch the ball too long and miss the shot. Luke boos, you give him the finger.

“Just give him a chance,” Luke pleads and you give in.

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Reggie is the missing piece you needed. Reggie is kind of ditzy, and you resent him for Luke's attention (and you don't know why, but you're fourteen and nothing is rational, right?). You begin to make jabs at him, but the boy either doesn't get it, or is too happy-go-lucky to care. His friend, Bobby, though? Well, he catches everything.

Bobby is a year older, but was held back and he's Reggie's best friend. He plays rhythm guitar, and the four of them are incredible. Bobby has a garage his parents don't use, and Luke calls them fate.

Bobby watches you like a hawk, and he makes you almost uncomfortable, but you're not really intimidated. It's almost like he knows something about yourself that you don't. He gives you the same look your dad gives you, the look your mom gets when she yells at you for letting Allana do your nails, or Alicia put makeup on your face. Like you're this alien that's dropped from the sky and entered their home.

But it's not the same.

It's more like he knows, but doesn't know if he should. As if you'd be hurt if he gave it words, and that scares you.

Luke and Reggie are oblivious to this, though. When you spend the night at Luke's, because your parents refuse you to have sleepovers anymore - *especially* with Luke, you two are curled in his bed and he's starry-eyed as he talks about the band.

"Alex, we're going to be legends, man. You and me, just like we said."

He's looking at you with such intensity, and you realize suddenly that your eyes are on his lips. You want to kiss him. You're burning with the need to capture his lips, hold his face between your hands — you want him.

Apart of you recoils at this. The rest of you is afraid.

“It’s gonna be you and me, on tour! Everyone will be singing our songs, they’ll know our names,” he said as he fell asleep and you swallow, because now that’s exactly what you’re afraid of.

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You begin to distance yourself from Luke.

He’s always been a touchy-feely sort of friend, but now you shy away from his grasp, you break out of hugs, and you don’t sleepover anymore.

He’s hurt.

It kills you to see that pain in his eyes, but what are you supposed to do? You’d lose him either way, but at least you’re still in his life.

You soon realize that Reggie isn’t the airhead you thought he was. He notices the change, but it puts him on edge, like he’s waiting for something bad to happen between you and Luke. He watches with timid eyes, he hangs back and tries to make himself small. Nothing happens, but Reggie’s fear sets you on edge. You’re nervous constantly, and your hands hardly ever still.

Luke finds you at the picnic tables at school one day at lunch. You’ve avoided him for nearly a month, and you can see the hard set of his jaw and the pain in his eyes, but he’s got you cornered. You were too busy tapping your pencil against your book, trying to make sense of *Catch 22*, and he sat down across from you silently. When you look up, you recoil back in shock.

Luke wasn’t loud, but he wears heavy Vans and has a chain in his pocket, he’s not exactly subtle.

“What’s wrong with you?” He’s angry, but his voice is pinched, like he’s holding back tears, but his eyes are dry.



“What do you mean?” you asked, fidgeting uncomfortable, looking towards the school and his eyes narrow.

“Cut the shit. Why are you avoiding me?”

“I’m not. I’ve just been... busy.” It’s such a weak excuse that shame fills you, but what can you say? *“Sorry Luke, I realize that I have a crush on you!”* or even better: *“Yeah, man, but it’s because I might be gay, and maybe we could have a heart-to-heart and hold hands and skip if you don’t try and kick my ass first, because guess what? I have a fucking crush on you!”*

Luke’s eyes narrow, and you’ve never seen him look this way. You suddenly take him in a new light: You’re both fourteen, but you’re four inches taller than him, but Luke likes weights, so he’s bulkier in the shoulders. You couldn’t really best him in a fight, mostly because you’ve never fought before. You have two little sisters who are in elementary school, you haven’t had the chance to rough house, really. “Don’t lie to me, Alex. We’re best friends, we don’t do this shit to each other!”

There’s a layer beneath this hurt that you can hear loud and clear: We’re family. And you were. Your parents were shitty, your home lives weren’t abusive, no one hit you guys, but your parents were just... You think of your mom’s reprimands over little things: Alicia doing your hair, you and Allana dancing to Madonna, you liking pink, or letting the girls paint your nails. These things weren’t wrong, but they’re treated like crimes. You’re just being a good big brother, but it’s seen as something dirty.

Now you knew why...

You heave a sigh. “I’m not doing anything, Luke. I’ve just been busy,” and you hold up your book for proof, but Luke sneers.

“I can’t stand liars.”

It’s like a slap to the face, but you take it. “Well, I’m not.”

Luke seems to deflate, his shoulders fold inward and he looks at you pleadingly, “Did I do something wrong?”

You close your eyes and your hand clenches the pencil, you can feel the wood nearly give under your grasp. “No.” There’s so much emotion in that word. It comes out raw, and you feel a stabbing wound in your gut, because you can hear the plea in Luke’s words: I can change. You don’t want Luke to change. You wish you could change. That you could crawl from your skin and be new. You want to be anyone else, but you’re trapped.

You’ve seen the graffiti on the ways. That word — that dreaded fucking word, and you imagine your band, your friends — Luke, and that word falling out in disgust, because you’re dirty. They’d say you had AIDS, probably. It’s the gay disease. Your hands tremble, and you try and shut the door on these thoughts, because Luke isn’t this person. You know that these are good people, but your mind forces you to watch, to remake these scenarios.

Luke grabs your hand and you want to sob. You clench your eyes tighter and Luke squeezes your hand. “Alex,” he whispers.

“Please,” you whisper. You’re pleading for mercy, but from what? Your mind? His love? Your love for him? It’s all tangled together and soon, the web this secret has woven is going to hang you from its gallows. You lower your head, tears are leaking out and you can feel Luke’s helpless look upon you.

“Alex, what’s wrong? What did I do? Whatever it is, I’m sorry, man. I’m so fucking sorry.”

“It’s not you,” you whisper in shame. Sweeping everything into your bag, you take your hand back and stand, “it’s me. It’s my fault.” And with that, you run as fast as your legs carry you. You don’t go back to school that day, instead, you try to out run this curse, this poison upon your life.

You wish again to be anyone but yourself.

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**Author’s Note:** Are we back at it again with the sadness? Yes we are bb! So anyways, this was originally going to be a oneshot, but then things got out of hand and here we are. As always, these sad musings are dedicated to my lovely ladies: Halle and Terri, who might drag me across the coals for more sad times, but it’s worth it.

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**Disclaimer: I don't own Julie and the Phantoms.**

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*i had a million questions on my mind, but all the answers lead me right to you.*

— Sunset Curve, “Long Weekend” from the Sunset Curve 1994 Demo.

Luke spends half the time refusing to look at you and the other half pleading to you with his wide, puppy dog eyes. You feel like shit denying him reason, and the tension in the band is at an all time high.

On one hot day that December, you're playing the drums too aggressively. You can't focus and you're missing notes, playing the wrong verses, and the more you screw up the angrier you get.

Suddenly, Reggie stops and covers his ears. He's shaking, and Bobby is beside him, telling Reggie that it's okay and to breathe. You don't miss the looks the older guitarist flash at you and Luke, but you're watching Reggie tremble and Bobby comfort him, like he's a child. It's the way you've comforted Alicia and Allana during storms, or after earthquakes.

Reggie is only a few days older than you but sometimes he feels like the baby of the group, not you.

You hardly know much about Reggie, and truly you don't know if that's odd or not. How much of yourself have you revealed to these new boys?

All you know is Reggie is the youngest of two known siblings: His older sister Tillie, who despite being a senior, you share art with. Tillie was effortless: She had long, waist length black hair that

you're pretty sure she could sit on. She had a tall, athletic frame, but you don't know if she's exactly into team work, and she flirted with everyone. From the little of her you could gather in a forty-five minute class, you sense Tillie is more weapon than girl. She reeled people in, took what she wanted and discarded as she pleased. She's everything Reggie is not. She was someone who, from what you can only guess, has lived a hard life where you'd need sharp teeth and claws, but an even sharper mind.

Seamus McNally, you assume, is Reggie's half-brother. He's twenty and lives in Seattle, trying to make it big in the music scene up there. He taught Reggie how to play, and Seamus's band is good. You've heard their demo. The Crow's Wing is what they call themselves, and their music is alternative rock, but even though you'd never voice it and be *that* asshole, you think Luke's lyrics are better. Sunset Curve's sound is tighter, despite being younger and in theory, less skilled.

You don't know of Reggie's life beyond the band and school: He sucks at english and math, but understands science to at least keep a B average, and as you grip your cymbals tightly, you realize you're afraid for him.

"I —" you begin, but you have no words. Should you apologize? Bobby's looks suggested it was your fault, but why? Your lips tremble, unsure and frightened as Bobby leads Reggie outside for some much needed fresh air.

When it's just you and Luke, you two have mirrored expression of panic and guilt.

You look away first and fiddle with the snare.

"Alex..." Luke says your name so quietly, that despite the room being quiet enough to hear a pin drop, you almost miss it.

You look up at him, and you can feel the sadness, you drown in his eyes, an endless blue-green reserved for beautiful nature scenery and fairytales. It all lives inside Luke's very soul, and all you want to do is dive in and escape, be apart of his story.

"Please talk to me." It hurts you to hear him forgo his pride.

Luke is arrogant about one thing: His music. He is talented, and he's proud of it. It's truly the only thing he holds close to his chest. Sure, he knows he's a charmer and his looks will take him far in life, but everyone clings to their pride.

You shut your eyes, trying to keep the tears at bay.

“I’m sorry,” you whisper. Because you are sorry for being this way.

Tainted. Sinful. Corrupted.

It’s what Pastor Tim would say. What your parents and the good people of the church as they shunned you.

Diseased.

You’ve heard the talk: It’s either a learned behavior, a disease of the brain, or the times. Good Christians see the debauchery of sex, drugs and rock n’ roll.

You have never been influenced by anyone. As far as you know, everyone in your life is straight. You’ve never had sex, the idea of drugs scares you, though you know Bobby has smoked weed, and rock is more accepting, but you’ve been raised to treat your neighbor as thyself. You suppose circumstances change depending on the hypocrisy your parents can spew, but all the same, you hate it.

“What do you have to be sorry for?” He’s searching you, but your walls are up.

“Alex, why —“ But he’s cut off by Bobby, who has a dark look in his eyes.

“Practice is done for the day. Get out.” His voice is cold, like the tip of a blade.

“Is Reggie okay?” Luke asks, face worried and eyes bright with worry and leftover sadness.

Bobby glares and you feel boxed in, like you just discovered you were prey and were going to pay for not knowing it sooner.

“I don’t know what the fuck is going on between you two,” he snarls viciously, “but if you want back in his space, you better find a way to kiss and makeup, or I’ll beat the feelings right out of you.”

His dark onyx eyes linger on you a second longer than they did Luke, and you feel yourself go cold.

Was it a threat to them or to *you*?

Here’s the thing about Bobby: He’s a wild card. You didn’t know it that day, but he’s the only one among you with good, supportive parents.

You like Emily and Mitch, Luke’s parents, but they don’t support Luke’s passion. They want him to be someone he’s not, and you know the feeling well.

You don’t think Bobby wouldn’t accept you as is, but then again, who knows?

You shy away and Luke says, “Take it easy, man.” But Bobby isn’t fucking around. He pins Luke with a dark look, his teeth bared and sharp as he curls his lip and you’re frozen in fear.

“I fucking mean it. Whatever issues you two have, it’s over.” Bobby’s nostrils flare, then he takes a breath, but nothing really physically changes, but it’s almost like this breath encases him in ice, and it scares you even more. “This is somewhere Reggie feels safe, and if you two can’t keep that, then I can’t have you here. Now get out.”

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Reggie isn’t outside when you two leave the garage, and you make a move to go towards the bus stop when Luke grabs your arm. “Alex, please! You can’t just not talk to me.” His voice cracks along the words and your heart fractures more, because you know he’s crying. “You’re my best friend, Alex, you can’t just shut me out like this!” *I need you, I need you, I need you!* You can hear it clear as crystal and you shut your eyes, lips tremble and you know you’re going to cry. “Please!”

You can't look at him, but he has a death grip on your elbow. You distantly think that there might be bruises tomorrow, but mostly you're focused on holding yourself together. It'd be so easy to shatter, but if you did, you'd have to be reborn — you could never be the person you were before, and you're scared of who you might become and what would have to be done to survive.

"I don't think we can do this anymore. I'm sorry." *It's not you, it's me.*

For a moment it's quiet. The whole world seemed to have frozen in this moment, and you can feel Luke grasp your words, reshape and discard and pick them up again. You feel him tense, feel the crackle of anger in his blood and bone, you know his jaw is set in anger and you're a coward because you don't even face him.

"So after all that, I'm just that easy to discard?" He throws your arm from his grasp. "Fine," he spat and you just keep looking down the sidewalk where the corner goes to the bus stop and Luke makes a noise. "Fine! Don't look at me, just leave me behind. Fuck you, Alex." He shoves you as he leaves, his shoulders hunched, his book bag like a turtle's shell on his back and you walk the opposite way, and when you turn that corner you break and cry.

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It's Bobby who comes to see you, and he's annoyed as he sits beside you outside the school. You're eating PB&J and have The Smiths on, and it's somber, so Bobby shoves your headphones down. "Are you fucking serious, Alex?"

You recoil. "What the fuck!?"

Bobby ignores that and plows on, "What is wrong with you? I told you both to handle it, not fucking split up!"

Your cheeks are red and your fists are clenched in anger, "We weren't together!"

Bobby blinks, then sneers. "You think I don't know that?"

“I don’t know what you *think* you know,” you snap back.

“Cut the shit. I don’t care what I know, or think I know, or anything. You’re being a fucking prick, and you know it. I don’t care what the reason is, you’re being a piece of shit.”

You flinch. Bobby sighs, rubbing a hand down his face and shakes his head. “I don’t care Alex,” and you look at him and he stares you dead in the eye. “I. Don’t. Care.”

Your lip trembles and you look away, because you don’t know what to say. You’re scared, and you feel so raw and exposed, and for some reason it hurts. You know it’s a relief in hindsight, but it fucking hurts you to the bone. You let out a shaky breath and put your head in your hands, and he claps a hand on your neck and shakes you gently.

“Alex, it’s okay.”

You make a noise that you can’t even believe could come from inside you and you shake your head, tears falling. “It’s not.”

“Yes it is. Don’t you ever fucking say that, you hear me?! You’re fine, and anyone who doesn’t think that is a fucking douchebag and will have me to deal with.”

You shake your head. “If my family knew, if people knew —“ You can’t even finish it, the thought makes you sick. “I just want to be normal. I just want my best friend.”

Bobby is quiet and you cry, and suddenly Bobby says, “I won’t tell anyone, but I think you should talk to Luke. This world is fucking shitty, it’s probably worse without your best friend.”

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Luke isn’t himself in music. He’s closed up, so un-Luke that Ms. Abbot keeps pausing and looking



at him, like he's something inhuman, or a work of art she can't decide if she doesn't like or is afraid of. You slump in your seat, shame eating at you as the minutes drag. It feels like a twenty-five years have passed by the time the bell rings, and Luke is out the door so fast, all you can do is gape at his chair, then Ms. Abbot.

"Alex, is Luke okay?" she asks gently. "Are you okay?"

You gape, then look down and she gives a knowing nod. "Did you two get in a fight?"

"Yeah."

She hums. "Ah. Well, this too shall pass."

You bristle. You hate that statement. It's something your mother says to invalidate you and your sisters' feelings, and you know Ms. Abbott is just being nice, but the statement makes you burn inside. Clamping your jaw shut, you refuse to look up. She grips your shoulder and then you leave the room, angry and your nostrils flare.

*This too shall pass.*

His sexuality, whatever it is, will not pass. He's not stupid, he will be this for the rest of his life, and he can't change that, no matter how hard he'd wish it away.

You run out the exit door, feel the fresh December air against your skin as you run, and you shut your eyes. *I like Luke Patterson. I'm gay...*

You feel that first break, you begin to shatter as you sob, collapsing to the ground, the soft grass of the woods under your knees, not caring if gym is running the mile or if you'll be alone for days on end. *I like Luke Patterson, and I'm gay.* You think it over and over and over again, and when you finally stop crying, your eyes red and swollen, you get up and you head home. You don't know who you are, but you're numb and deep down, you know this is just the beginning.

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Luke begins to date Meghann James. He takes her to the Winter Formal, and you two haven't talked. Bobby and Reggie play interference, but you aren't ready to talk to Luke about this. You can't.

Your home Friday, your parents are at the Randalls for dinner, and Alicia is playing with her dolls and Allana has on *All My Children*, and normally you'd watch with her, but you're pacing. Allana pauses the TV in annoyance and turns to glare at you.

"Stop it!" she snaps angrily, her blue eyes narrowed at you and Alicia looks up from her dolls, her own blue eyes widened. You pause mid stride.

"Sorry," you say and sit on the couch, but instantly begin to fidget and tap your knees and Allana groans.

"Okay, what's wrong," the twelve year old asks as she turns off the TV and tosses the remote on the coffee table, turning to face you head on with her arm on the back of the couch, head in hand. When you stay silent, she scowls. "Alex, c'mon."

You sigh. "Leave it, Lana."

"Is the band still broken up?" She asks sadly, making patterns on the couch with her other hand. It's your turn to scowl and you look away.

"I miss Luke," says Alicia, but it's so cheerfully said as she plays with her doll.

"Me, too," Allana agrees.

You agree with them silently, but instead you bristle. "Shut up," you mutter and Allana shoots you a hurt look.

"You're mean lately. I hate it!" she snaps. Her cheeks are red and her mouth is puckered in anger.

“What’s your problem?”

You’re shaking and Allana and Alicia are looking at you, and they’re afraid and you want to stop. You want to be normal, and the brother they can be proud of, but you’re not. You’re you, and you have flaws and secrets and scars, and you have a deep shame that’s killing you.

“If I told you something, would you swear not to tell mom or dad?” Alicia and Allana seem to sit at attention at that. Allana is interested. She has a scheming face on and you glare at her. “I mean it. Both of you. Mom and dad can’t know.”

“Yeah. Sure, sure,” Allana says eagerly and you hold her gaze and she deflates, and then she looks scared. “What did you do?” she whispers.

“Nothing. But you have to swear to me you want. Do you get that, Alicia? This is very important. Very top secret,” you whisper, like it’s a game and Alicia perks up, nodding eagerly because she loves this game. Alicia is small and is always collecting secrets, and despite the fact that she’s five going on six, she understands when to keep her mouth shut.

“Alex,” Allana says quietly, and she’s scared: Her face is pale and her blue eyes are wide and bright, and she’s taking you in, as if you’re going to admit to a murder or a heist. Maybe she’s watching too many soaps...

You take in a breath and clench your fists, because this will be the first time you’ve said it aloud. It’s something you haven’t given voice to, even alone when you look in the mirror, you’re mind screaming it because it all makes sense. “I’m gay.”

Allana starts and Alicia laughs, because she doesn’t know what that word means and she repeats it. “I’m gay, too!”

“Don’t do that,” Allana snaps, but her eyes are on Alex. She still looks afraid, because she gets it.

“Don’t repeat that in front of mom or dad.”

“Why?” Alicia asks, her hands on her hips in such an Allana stance that Alex can see her whole future unfolding before him. “What does it mean?” she asks turning to you, her demeanor softening.

“It’s not bad, but mom and dad won’t like it,” Allana says and you feel that pain you felt with Bobby. Or maybe it’s relief. It’s like a weight lifts and the world might still be resting on your shoulders, but Allana is beside you, trying to help. Your eyes well and she grabs your hands, her eyes still scared and her lips tremble. “Mom and dad won’t understand.”

“No. No they wouldn’t,” you say, a hardness in your voice and Alicia crawls into your lap.

“Why not?” she asks, resting her cheek against your chest and you cuddle her.

“Because they’re awful!” Allana snuffles, trying to hide the fact that she’s begun to cry.

“It’s... complicated.”

“Why?”

You think about it, because how do you explain this to a child. Is it even right to tell kids about this? Then you resent the thought. You haven’t done anything wrong, not really. Not at all. You like Luke. You’ve always liked boys.

“You know how Allana likes Luke?” you ask and Alicia grins and nods, motioning for you to lean closer.

“She writes Mrs Luke Patterson in her diary,” she whispers with a giggle and Allana looks up and makes an affronted noise.

“Alicia!” But you laughed, and it feels like the weight has floated away, like someone cut strings of balloons and you laugh at this.

“Oh shut up, Alex!”

“Well,” you say as you calm, “I like Luke, too.”

Allana's mouth parts in an "o" and Alicia grins, "I like Luke too!" she squeals, bouncing in your lap.

"Oh great, all the Mercers' have a thing for Luke, that's not weird at all," Allana scowls halfheartedly and you laugh again, tickling Alicia.

When you come down after tucking Alicia in bed, Allana is sitting on the couch with the TV off and she turns to look at you. "Mom and dad will kill you if they find out," she said softly, her voice full of fear.

"I know."

You two stay quiet and then Allana says, "I think I always knew. I wasn't denying it, but I never gave it a name..."

"Me, too."

You look at your socked feet, because no way will your mother allow shoes on her clean carpets! You have a million emotions, but there are no words for them.

"Alex," she says and you look up at her, and tears are running down her face as she says, "I don't want you to hate yourself for this. Promise me you won't!"

You want to promise her, but you can't.

"You're my big brother, and I know we're supposed to be in a sibling rivalry or whatever, but this isn't bad. It's not."

"It doesn't make life easy."

"So what? It's not like our life is charmed."

She has a point, but you cross your arms over your chest stubbornly.

“Dad is such a prick,” she snarls, and you know she’s thinking of every little moment, just as you had, because now you have clarity of the digs, the insults. If you confirmed this, he’d probably strangle you, he’ll definitely disown you. You’re mother will look at you with shame and disgust, and it doesn’t matter. You would’ve never been her perfect son anyway.

“You shouldn’t say that,” you reprimand with a sigh. You’re parents would never do it for you if they knew the truth, but it doesn’t take a lot to convince anyone that you’re a better person than they’ll ever be.

“I know,” she says, plucking at a loose thread on the couch. “I love you.”

You soften, “I love you, too.”

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“The band can’t be over,” Reggie protests to you one day during study block. You give your notes the annoyed glance meant for him, but you haven’t had the heart to be mean to Reggie, not after what you saw in the garage.

Reggie *needed* a safe place, Tillie was all sharp edges, and it’s colored Reggie’s life different for you, but you can’t ask. If you’re right, then what? And if you let ignorance be bliss, was the blood that could fall staining your hands?

“Just talk to Luke. Please, Alex,” he begs and you look up to big brown eyes and you groan.

“You’re worse than my sisters,” you snap.

“Is that a yes, then?”

“No!”

Someone shushes you and you give them a ‘get a life’ look before turning back to the dark haired boy. “It’s complicated.”

“Don’t be a cliché,” Reggie scoffs. You bit back your reply and glare harder at your notes. “Alex, don’t throw the band away because of some — I don’t know.”

“It’s not Luke,” you said.

“Then what is it?”

“Like I said, it’s complicated.”

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Meghann is sweet, and you don’t know if it makes things better or worse.

You and Luke don’t talk, and even if he knew to, you know he’s not rubbing her in your face. It just hurts to see them together, kissing against her locker, holding hands. It hurts a lot.

By the time you come back from winter break, they’re official and she wears one of his hoodies constantly, and you’re drowning in jealousy. It’s a mixed kind of jealousy: Yes, you want to date Luke and you’re in love with him as a friend and you’re attracted to him, but it’s more than that. It’s not just with Luke and Meghann, it’s everywhere. Bobby and his casual flings. How Reggie can effortlessly flirt and get numbers. It’s Sien Walker and Jasper Rollins who make out by your locker. It’s Mei Ling Fan and Jared Lewis who hold hands and talk politics and chess. It’s the freedom they have to express their feelings for one another without fear or judgement or hate, and it burns you from the inside out.

Even if you liked another boy who liked you back, it would never be what they had. Your love would be like a dirty secret. It'd happen in dark hallways, abandoned rooms, never allowed to be in the light of day like everyone else. You would never be able to wear your boyfriend's hoodie. Hell, you would never be able to sling your arm on his shoulder and walk down the hall, let alone kiss or hold hands.

It's not fair, and you want to hate everyone for this because hating yourself has become so exhausting. You want to spread it around, take the burden off your soul. *You didn't do anything wrong.*

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Luke comes up to your locker and thrusts something at you a week after winter break. Your brown furrows as you look at his hand and see a small box wrapped in red tissue paper.

"Here," he says, and all you can do is stare at it. Your hand is still clutching the locker door you were about to close and your other hand is clutching your world civics textbook, and all you can do is stare in frozen silence at the box in Luke's calloused hand.

Luke shakes the box, rattling its contents like you're a dog he's summoning with a promise of treats, and you would've been offended if one: It was anyone but Luke, and two: You weren't purely dumbfounded by this.

"You got me a gift?" you asked, confused as you look him in the eye for the first time in weeks. Diving into his blue-green eyes feels like coming home.

At the eye contact, Luke seems to soften and he nods. "You're still my best friend," he replies and you feel tears prick your eyes and you look back down at the small, red-wrapped box.

Unless there was literal cat shit in that box, you didn't deserve it, but Luke forgoes the niceties and picks up your hand that's let go of the locker door and places the box on your palm and waits.



Slowly you tear the paper and open it. Inside, there's a thin silver chain and you blink, then hesitantly pull it out and examine it. "Luke," you whisper.

"It's your bling... from the joke."

The joke. It was an inside joke they had from Vanilla Ice's *Ice Ice Baby*, because when the song came out it was all Allana would play. She claimed to be in love with Vanilla Ice and had two posters of him, one on the ceiling above her bed, and the other behind her door until your parents lost it and threw them out, but before they realized Vanilla Ice was a rapper, you and Luke would laugh and get fake silver chains from the dispense machines at the arcade for a nickle and sing *Ice Ice Baby* over and over again as you skated along the board walk.

You grasp the chain tight, and it's real, long lasting and suddenly you throw your arms around him, pulling him close and you're crying.

Luke squeezes back, burying his face into your neck and he's crying, too.

"I'm sorry," you whispered over and over, and Luke rubs your back, reassuring you that everything is okay.

When you pull away, it takes everything in you not to kiss him, to move away and recreate space between you two.

Wiping your face with the back of your hand, you apologize again, but Luke stops you.

"I need to know, Alex. It's killing me. I don't know what I did to make you hate me, to make you quit the band!" He's crying now, but he keeps his eyes on you as tears stream from the corners of his eyes.

"I don't hate you!" you say quickly, alarmed and you feel shame.

"You must if you quit the band! You wanted it as much as I did! I know you did, just be honest and tell me! I can't apologize if I don't know!" *Stop punishing me!*

You're trembling and you think of Reggie that day in the studio, Bobby holding him and assuring him that everything will be okay.

Luke's touch to your shoulder is pleading, and you nod, more to yourself than him and grab his arm, leading him into the empty classroom and shut the door. You fidget with the hem of your shirt, your hair, and your so fucking scared to say it. Saying it changes everything, even if it'd be half the truth.

"You can tell me," he assures you, but you can hear the tremor in his voice, that he's stealing himself for the worst.

"I'm gay."

The world stands still again, and in the back of your mind you realize as long as you live, you will have to come out to every new person you meet. You feel yourself curl away from the thought, but freeze at the hurt and shame on Luke's face.

"You thought I wouldn't — that I'd —" but he can't form the words, he's trembling and holding back tears, and his voice cracks as he covers his mouth, trying to hold himself together. He shakes his head vigorously and says, "I love you, Alex, and I certainly don't give a fuck about who you love as long as you're happy."

You warm at that, but it's like lukewarm tea: Stale and bitter. You love him. That's the problem.

"Luke..." you don't know what to say, because you are afraid. Who could blame you? It's 1993, Freddie Mercury has just died two months prior from AIDS, and you've heard the talk about him, Elton John. There are people in this school who would kill you for this, and you both know this.

He looks away, wipes his face with the sleeve of his hoodie, glowering at the door. "I'm sorry that I made you feel that way."

"You didn't."

"Well clearly you didn't feel safe," he says angrily, and you know the anger is at himself.

You bite your lip. “I did. Luke, it’s complicated. It’s not black and white,” you argue but Luke gives you a look and you shut up.

“Then explain it,” he begs.

You close your eyes. “Not now. Please.”

It’s quiet for a moment, then Luke nods, and then he hugs you and leads you to the door, “Let’s ditch for the day and get some fries.”

You smile and follow him out the room. You love him, but today fries on the boardwalk and acceptance is more than enough.

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After that, life goes on. You rejoin the band, though everyone says you were never out, and things seemingly go back to normal. Or a new normal, at least.

The space between you and Luke isn’t as vast and open as before, but the crack is still there. You don’t accept invites to spend the night, you don’t allow yourself to be as handsy as before. The comfort level isn’t as gone, but it’s never going to be what it was.

Luke is still with Meghann, and she’s nice to you. You have things in common, and you do like her, but it’s hard. You endure it, you smile and laugh and have fun, but deep down you feel something whither away. It wasn’t hope. You’re not naive, Luke is your best friend, but he’ll never be your boyfriend and you accepted that along time ago. You need him in your life, and he needs you in his.

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“A dance?” Luke all but sneers, though he’s trying to be civil. He might not be Mr High School, but Meghann is on student council and is in the committee planning the spring dance.

“Yes!” Meghann squeals, her brown curls bobbing as she bounces excitedly on the balls of her feet. You’re all in front of Luke’s locker in the south hallway, and the Spring dance is a few months away, but they need music and Meghann is, if anything, a girl who loves to plan, but either she’s oblivious to Luke’s utter disdain for the flyer in her hands announcing auditions, or ignoring it.

You almost feel sorry for her. Luke, like everyone, has his flaws, but his biggest one? He’s a music snob. Sure, he loves the artistry and the craft, but he wouldn’t be caught dead with a CD for the bubblegum pop genre, and this extended to music venues.

“Oh, c’mon you guys! It’ll be fun!” she says with a wide smile. She should be in cheerleading, it almost makes you enthusiastic. But almost.

She’s looking at the four of you and each of you have different versions of grimaces on your face, but Reggie at least looks like he’d consider it. Meghann pouts and turns to Luke. “Please... for me?” she bats her long lashes and you roll your eyes, turning away before you fake gag like Bobby, who is snickering and ignoring pointed glares from Luke.

Reggie snickers before looking at you.

“We’ll see,” Luke compromises, clearly not wanting to be a dick about it. She nods, kisses his cheek and walks in the direction of her next class with a thank you echoing down the halls. When she’s out of sight and possible ear shot, Bobby lets out a laugh.

“Shut up!” Luke hisses, clutching the flyer and it crumples a bit on the side in his hand.

“Man, you are whipped,” he laughs. Luke’s ears are red and you look pointedly at your shoes.

“So what? She’s nice.” He looks down at the flyer and leans back against his locker, shutting his eyes before saying. “This would help her out a lot.”

Reggie nods. “We haven’t played anywhere yet to be choosy,” he points out, and you can’t tell if he’s being eager or a good person. Probably the latter. Reggie is a good person, and Meghann is a sweet girl.

Luke waves a hand at Reggie. “Exactly!”

“But a dance?” you hear yourself saying, and you feel like a piece of shit as you rub the toe of your sneaker into the linoleum, watching with intense interest versus seeing the potential look on Luke’s face.

The others sigh, you all shoulder your bags and silently vow to think on it.

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In the end, you decide to play the dance. It’s the end of February, and there was a Sweet Hearts dance that Luke got roped into attending.

He tried to rope you in, too, but you stayed home with Alicia so Allana could go to the movies with a boy she’s been eying, Lyon Im. Your parents think she’s with her best friend, Lizzie Munkowitz, and your parents are out on a date night. When they come home, Alicia is asleep and Allana phoned you from the Munkowitz’s (you checked, you talked to Tracy, Lizzie’s mom) and is staying the night.

You’re laying in bed, not near sleep but it’s not like there’s anything else to do but lay in the dark and think, when you hear tapping on your window. Your heart lurches and you sit up, listening and hear it again. Eying the window across the room, you slowly get up and reach for your biology text book. You wish you had a bat, but you hated sports and hindsight is 20/20, after all.

Going over to the window, you throw back the curtains and pull up your blinds to see Luke. Luke in a suit, and he’s on the ledge of your roof. You know it’d be easy to sneak out your window, but you never thought you’d actually experience *this*!

“Can I come in?” he whispers, it’s muffled by the glass. “It’s cold.”

You open the window and he climbs in when you move aside.

“Thanks,” he says and you blink.

“Uh, what’re you doing here?”

Luke looks down, then he sighs. “I couldn’t go home. Me and my mom... Look, we had another fight, and I just don’t want to see her right now.”

You nod. “Okay.” Then you turn to your dresser and pull out some clothes. “You look like a fucking penguin,” you explain, handing him the pants and shirt and turn when Luke begins to change.

“You don’t have to do that,” Luke says, sounding hurt.

“I always have,” you say, playing with a loose string on your pants. You hear Luke’s sigh, and it sounds sad.

“I don’t care if you’re gay, Alex.”

“It’s not for you,” you snap back, turning your head slightly over your shoulder. He hasn’t moved to take off the suit. Luke looks shocked and you feel your heart sink, but you say nothing. It’s true. It’s not that you did this because you’re attracted to Luke, you’ve done it to Reggie and Bobby, boys in the locker room. You don’t *want* to look. You’re not ready to explore it, to fixate on things. Only eight people know, and one is still playing with Barbies.

Luke drops it, and that night he sleeps on the extra comforter and blanket on the floor. Neither of you fall asleep at first, and before you fall off Luke says something, “It doesn’t matter to me, Alex. I need you to know that.”

You want to reply, because you have a feeling he means something else, but you’re so fucking tired and by the time you wake up at nearly eight the next morning, you don’t even remember what he’s said to you.

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**Author's Note:** "It's only going to be three chapters," I said, like a naive fool. As if I'm not at my big age to know my own bullshit. Anyways, I think it's best to end that part right there. As always and forever, this is dedicated to my two little rays of sunshine: Halle and Terri.

**Disclaimer: I don't own Julie and the Phantoms.**

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*with these long ways home, we extend our weekends.*

— Sunset Curve, “Long Weekend” from the Sunset Curve 1994 Demo.

“I think that’s the tightest we’ve ever sounded!” Luke exclaimed when you guys finished your cover of KISS’s “I was made for loving you.”

At first, you’d all been pissed that you’d have to play covers — you had originals, and after some compromise, the committee agreed to a mix of both your songs and covers.

“So people know the songs,” Claire Daniels said, popping her gum and sharing a look with Cheyenne Robinson. Both were blonde, both were on the cheer squad, and one would be the homecoming queen, the other prom. You didn’t hate them, but you just hated how John Hughes was sometimes just so on it.

You nod, happy, but you want to play *your* music, *your* sound! Maybe that’s bratty, but who cares?

“I still vote we cover *dude looks like a lady*,” Bobby laughed, taking a big drink of his water as he shoved Reggie playfully.

Luke laughs and shakes his head, “Meg would kill me. She thinks the committee hates her!”



They probably do, but you don't say it aloud. Those girls might be mean and catty, doesn't mean you have to be, too.

Reggie opens his mouth, but Luke cuts him off. "And no country songs, no Jimmy Buffett, and *no* Beach Boys!"

You snicker as you pat a deflating Reggie on the arm. "He means it affectionately," you assure him, and Reggie sighs dramatically.

"A little beach rock never killed anyone," he pouts.

"Whatever, Moon Doggy," Luke says as he tosses the dark-haired boy a bottle of water.

You laugh and Luke looks at you for a moment, missing as Reggie sticks his tongue out at him.

For a second, your heart races, but then the moment passes and you guys go back to rehearsal. You and Luke share glances throughout it, and by the end of practice, you don't know what is real and what is in your head.

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The night of the Spring Formal, you all forgo suits and ties, much to Meghann's dismay (and you can't blame her, Luke does look good in a suit, but you prefer his sleeveless shirts and baggy pants anyway). You're backstage, trying not to freak out and pacing, muttering notes to yourself, afraid you're going to forget everything.

Luke comes over, making you pause mid-stride, and grabs your hand gently. "Alex," he says with quiet reassurance, "It's okay."

You feel yourself nod, but you're looking down into his blue-green eyes, drowning.

You want to kiss him, and you break away at the thought. It's dangerous to have a thought like that here in the open, even if Luke didn't have a girlfriend, or he wasn't straight, the temptation could be a literal death sentence. "I'm fine," you say to the left side of his face as if you noticed something. When Luke turns to see what it is you're staring at, you move further away.

When Luke turns back, he looks betrayed, but you ignore that, too. It's *you* who would lose everything. Not him.

It's Bobby who shoves you toward the stage, and you see Luke transform. He was born to perform, you were born to stay in the shadows.

You were opposites, and sadly, you were the only one attracting.

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The adrenaline courses through you like white water rapids as soon as the set is finished. People are screaming for more Sunset Curve music as you stare back in awe, blonde hair matted to your forehead from sweat, and all you see is the crowd and the widened eyes and bright smiles of your friends.

You allow yourself a moment to take this all in, because fifty years from now, when you tell the story of the band, you'll think of this dance that will seem so insignificant in the grand scheme of things, and know *this* was the night things had changed.

Before it was a dream, like catching a shooting star: A childish whim, but now you can see your whole future open up. You and your friends will be legends, and from the look you can see on Luke's face, he's determined to pave the way to the stars himself.

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If there's a club, suddenly Sunset Curve is playing it. Reggie and Luke love book clubs the most: The snacks, the homemade lemonade, and the cute old ladies dotting over them, it's everything they love. You're hesitant. You know how old women are about gays, you've been to church your whole life, so your wall is up. Bobby, however, is too cool for old people.

They read an array of books. They love murder mysteries the most — especially the cozy ones with no real stakes that involve (what you can only assume) talking cats and pastries and letters of the alphabet.

The music doesn't fit the ambiance, but the leader, Gladys, smiles and offers cookies and sweetened sun tea, you hate tea, but you drink every last drop in the glass provided as if sun tea could stave off any possible detection of your gayness.

"These cookies are amazing, Mrs. Wagner," Reggie says between bites, trying and failing not to spray crumbs.

You realize, suddenly, in your annoyance, that it looks like Reggie's lost weight. It's hard to tell because of his bulky leather jacket, but you notice Gladys has made him a doggy bag when the night is done.

If Luke notices, he has an excellent poker face, but you can tell Bobby is concerned. You decide to bring a double lunch on Monday.

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The transition to sophomores is almost funny, but Sunset Curve had begun to make its name. It helped that people flock to Luke, Bobby, and Reggie, they were magnets for socialization, but then girls started noticing you, too.

You let them down with a softer touch, citing psycho, controlling parents, and no spare time outside of school, the band, and your new job as the busboy at Lioni's, the pizzeria at the end of the boardwalk.

Luke always eyes you when girls come up and put their hands on your arms, flirt and bat their eyes, and then one day he finally gives into whatever he's been thinking.

"Would you ever date anyone?" he asks you as you rummage inside your locker for geometry notes.

The question throws you off guard. You pause, then look at him, "What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said," he replies, leaning against the locker beside yours.

You bite your lip, unsure if you're anxious, annoyed, or both as you look around the congested hallway. "I haven't exactly thought about it."

"We're fifteen," he says as if that's the legal green light you were waiting for.

You give him a dry look. "And?"

"I don't know!" he says quietly, but it feels like he burst like a balloon.

"Given the circumstances, I think flying under the radar is my only option."

Luke's mouth puckers. "Do you want to?"

You close your locker calmly before turning to him, your blue eyes icy, "What are my options here? This isn't exactly the school of love and acceptance for normal shit, but *this*?" You let out a bitter laugh.

Luke frowns, and it makes you so fucking angry. You put the lock in harshly, turn, and storm off because you're going to say shit you don't mean — or maybe you do mean it, but it's unfair to say.

Does it matter, though? Life isn't exactly fair to *you*.

"Alex," he says, grabbing your arm, "c'mon, please!"

You turn and look down at him. "I have geometry, see you later." With that, you storm off, stewing as you see couple after couple. It was a stupid question, but he was even stupider still for wanting what he saw.

Not here,

Maybe not ever.

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Luke's breakup with Meghann blindsides everyone. It was private, and Luke says nothing about it. You don't even know when it happened, but Meghann stops coming around, when you pass her in the halls, she looks so unlike her that it's almost scary.

When asked by a worried Reggie, he has nothing to say, he just shrugs.

"I'm fine. It wasn't a big deal," he says, but it's a lie. It *does* matter. It matters more than either you or he expects because Meghann's a total sweetheart, but she wasn't forever.

You notice Luke looking at you, but he turns away quickly, face red and hand rubbing the back of his neck.

You ignore that racing of your heart because it's stupid to want what you can never have, and dumber to want someone that everyone wants.

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September bleeds into October, and another shift happens.

It begins with Reggie missing practice. It sets off a warning bell in everyone's mind, and when he doesn't come to school on Monday, you find yourself wishing you still had art with Tillie, to ask or see if she'd have shown, but instead, all the three of you can do is stew in your worry and agree to go to his place after school.

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Bobby has only been once when he was nine, which strikes you as odd. He's been on that side, but Lower Beach, or Knife Beach, as it's gracefully nicknamed, isn't where you expect Reggie to live.

If your parents caught you here, gang wars and muggings will be the least of your worries.

Reggie's house is old and falling down, if it's even possible, it looks almost like a trailer being held up by spite and rotting wood. You and Luke have the same shocked expression that only grows wider to the man who answers the door.

The only traces of Reggie you can find is that he has black hair and sort of looks like Tillie, but just in the scowl.

The man is either in his late forties or early fifties, hair graying and he's in boxers and a dirty undershirt. He looks mean, and he also looks like a man who owns a shotgun and would not hesitate to use it on a couple of fifteen-year-olds.

It's hard to believe a man who looks so vicious and hateful could create someone like Reggie, who is always sweet and kind, like a ray of sunshine.

Your stomach sinks as you begin to fear the worst.

“What do you want?” the man growls, giving them menacing looks that don’t outwardly phase Bobby, who steps forward.

“Is Reggie here?” Bobby sneers at the man, eying him.

Mr. Peters stands taller, puffing out his chest. “What’s it to you?” the man spits, his face red with anger, the veins of his forehead and neck bulging as he stares face-to-face with Bobby. You want to pull Bobby back to safety, but you’re frozen. Life as you know it reshapes before your very eyes, and you think you might be sick.

“He wasn’t at school, we have his shit,” Bobby spits back, and he looks menacing. You think of that day in his garage, Bobby’s reaction, Reggie’s trembling and you feel your hands shake because *this* man was Reggie's dad.

Bobby looks like he could tear Mr. Peters limb from limb as the man says, “He’s not here.” Then Mr. Peters slams the door right in your face.

Bobby’s hands clench to wide fists and he hits the door with one, then turns away in absolute disgust.

“Where are we going?” Luke asks, sounding determined.

“I know a few places he might be,” is all Bobby says in response as the two of you follow him.

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In the end, you guys find him at the end of the beach. Waves lap at the end of his knee-soaked black jeans, and his left eye is bruised and swollen.

“That son of a bitch!” snarls Bobby menacingly, but he’s surprisingly gentle when he takes Reggie’s face to get a better look at the injury.

Reggie shies away, cringing at some other injury you can’t see, and goes, “It’s nothing. I’m fine.”

“Your dad did this to you?” Luke asks, horrified.

Even though you knew, you were praying for a “no”, and that Reggie uncharacteristically got into a fight. It was *Knife Beach*, it could happen. You just knew it didn’t.

Reggie jerked his chin away, and in the sand, he repeatedly makes the curve used in the Sunset Curve design.

Reggie had come up with the band name, and you suspected he spent a lot of time in this spot, looking at the horizon, probably daydreaming of a better tomorrow. Or maybe this was you trying to romanticize your close friend’s pain.

“It was an accident,” Reggie mumbles, not looking up from his hand in the sand, tracing that curve over and over again.

“An accident?” Bobby hissed.

Reggie’s ears were red, but you couldn’t see his face. Luke had gone almost gray, while Bobby was slowly going purple. You felt frozen. It was like time stood still because you couldn’t fathom this.

Sure, your parents could be cruel, but this was *Reggie*. It’d be like if his dad hit Alicia — he was too innocent and sincere — childlike.

Your heart sunk, because you knew you were simplifying things.

Sitting down beside him, you were surprised by your own actions, and then nearly cried when you



saw that Reggie was crying, and you placed your hand on top of his, making it go flat atop the curve. You didn't say the words: "It's okay," because it wasn't, and it never would be. Reggie would one day be okay, but not today. Not right now. It'd be an empty lie, so instead, you went, "Let's go get pizza."

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Clemenza's, the pizzeria close to Reggie's, sucked, but you all pile into a booth under a shelf full of dusty, fake grapes and vines. Reggie is fiddling with uneaten crust, refusing to make direct eye contact.

There's this tension so outside the four of you. It's an unwelcome guest trying to worm its way into the family. That's what this is, you realize as you look at Reggie's bruise and sense Bobby's anger and sit across from a fidgeting Luke — it's the same feeling you have with Allana and Alicia: Unyielding love, safety, that protective flame. You'd do anything for these three boys, and you knew they'd do the same for you.

"You're staying with me," Bobby says, and despite his tone leaving no room for argument, Reggie does.

"I can't! Besides, I told you, it was an accident," he says, looking panicked and then he glances around the restaurant. "He lost his job, Bobby. I knew better."

Your stomach rolls at that. You hear Luke make a noise, and when you turn to look, he's biting his lip and looks like he's on the verge of tears.

"Reg," you whisper, but words leave you.

"Was he going after your mom again?" Bobby asks, and you want to be sick.

Reggie shook his head and whispers, "No... she was at work." He swallows, shutting his eyes, "Things will get better once he's working again."

“Reggie...” You all whisper it because it’s horrifying and sad. You think of Tillie, who seemed to be tough as nails, and Reggie, trying to be brave, and it’s not fair.

You’re *supposed* to be able to rely on your parents. That’s the whole point.

“You’re staying with me for tonight, at least,” Bobby says and Reggie gives in, nodding.

“Okay.”

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That night, Luke climbs into your room, and he’s been crying, too. Maybe he’s been like you, thinking of how shitty your parents are, but at least it’s not like that. Maybe you’ve both been crying because you feel like shit for thinking that way. Either way, it’s the first time in months you scoot over and share the bed with him.

At first, you’re nervous. Your heart races and your upper lip is sweaty, but Luke is facing you, and you feel it all dissipate.

Luke takes your hand. “Is this okay?” he whispers, and you nod.

You two don’t talk. There is so much to say, the weight of your thoughts make it almost hard to breathe, but you two lay there, and when you wake up the next morning, his arms are around your waist, and you know you should slide out, create distance, but you don’t. You know it’s wrong, but for once, you just allow yourself to pretend it’s real.

Now that it's known, everything changes with Reggie.

You're more cautious, keep snarky comments to yourself, and now you and Luke treat him like he's more delicate than glass.

You know that's not fair, and you know it pisses Reggie off, but this isn't something you can unknow. It's worse than his panic attack — it was its trigger.

You wonder how long Bobby has known. You want to call the cops, but Bobby shuts that down. "Cops help no one. Besides, they'd take him to CPS, maybe a foster home. Here, it's better. He crashes in the loft sometimes."

Luke finds a couch at Good Will. You all clean it with disinfectant and make it presentable. It folds into a bed, so you steal old sheets your family never uses — it's the good Christian thing to do, and you laugh bitterly because you can picture the tight-lipped look your mother would give if she knew you stole her sheets.

Then, one day, Reggie snaps like a rubber band being pulled too taught. He's shaking and angry, and you realize you've never seen an angry Reggie. It almost scares you to see.

"I need you guys to fucking stop!" he snaps.

"Reggie —" Luke begins, but Reggie cuts him off.

"No! Stop it! I'm serious!" He sighs, running a hand down his face and you notice that he's crying, "You're my family, I can't —" his voice cracks, and he swallows. "I can't lose this. All I have are my parents. They're always on the verge of divorce, my brother hates my dad, and Tillie's gone to New York. You guys — *this* is all I have!"

You're the first to pull him into a hug, and the action releases the sob he's been holding onto for years.

"I just want to be a good son!" he cries into your chest, and the three of you wrap him in a hug.

You guys assure him he is. He's the best. More than what they'll ever deserve.

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Luke's parents are out of town for a wedding that night. He invites you over, and you keep laughing at how pissed Luke is getting because Emily keeps calling to "check in". Your parents haven't been that way in years. They've definitely taken for granted how reliable you are, and how much you care about your sisters.

Luke sits down beside you, and you resume the movie. You don't pay attention, it's some action movie that's kind of boring, and Luke begins to stare at you.

"What?" you ask, squirming selfconsciously in your spot on the couch.

Luke gives you a serious look, and you feel a small bead of anxiety begin to roll down your spine, and you swallow. "What?"

"You know I don't care if you like me, right?"

Your entire body goes cold as you freeze, blue eyes wide, lips parted. You felt cold as you turn to face him. You never felt cold anger before, it was a slightly scary out-of-body experience.

Luke doesn't seem to notice this, he just has this earnest look on his face that you want to punch.

"Oh, fuck you!" you hiss, standing up. You think you might storm out, but this new anger has you standing rooted to the spot, towering over your best friend, nostrils flaring, but you appear almost calm. "Don't be a fucking asshole!"

Luke jumps up. "Alex," he says, holding up his hands in an almost surrender. "I wasn't trying to

offend you, I swear!”

“What is it then? For your massive fucking ego, then? Fuck! You’re so full of yourself!”

Luke pales at that, his eyes are full of hurt and betrayal, and you think he might cry. You’re surprised you’re not crying right about now. “It’s not that!” he defends.

“Oh really?” you snarl, teeth showing and you feel the ice melt into raw, heated anger. “Fuck you, Patterson! My sexuality has *nothing* to do with you, and you acting like you’re doing me some favor makes you look like an absolute fucking douche bag!”

Luke frowns angrily. “I’m not acting like I’m doing you some massive favor!”

You scoff and look away, your face and ears are hot, and your hands shake. “Fine. Pity, then,” you sneer at him.

“Alex, you’re *my friend*, I’m not using you! How could you even think that?”

Your nostrils flare. “Don’t!”

The word is a loaded gun and Luke holds up his hands again. “Please, just listen to me!”

“No!” you snap. “I’m so fucking *sick* of people making me listen to their shit! My sexuality does not start and end with you, Luke!” You want to scream, cry, hit — this rage has been building up your whole life. It’s parts of your parents’ hatred and hypocrisy. It’s the look on Allana’s face when you said you were gay, the way she warned Alicia not to say “that word”, the way people treat the gays like they’re a walking AIDs case. You feel it all building and suddenly, you’re collapsed on the floor, like a house of cards, and you’re sobbing into your hands because life shouldn’t *literally* be so life and death.

You feel Luke’s arms wrap around you, and you cling to them as he holds you steady.

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Luke hands you a Dr. Pepper when alls said and done. You absently drink it just for something to occupy your hands for the time being.

“You okay?” Luke asks, and you nod absently. You don’t feel better, per se. It’s the post-cry hangover. You’re tired and you feel... nothing, just absentmindedly gross around your face, especially your eyes. Luke looks at you. “I’m sorry,” he says sincerely, but all you do is shrug, he wilts, turning away.

Luke picks up the VHS case that sat on the coffee table and begins to turn it in his hands. You watch it spin around and around, and you wonder if you’ll finish the movie, but hope that you guys just let it go. “I said it because I like you, too, Alex...”

It’s like someone’s vacuumed out all the air in the room — you know Reggie would make some Star Wars reference, but you brush that thought aside as you look at Luke, who has turned to look at you.

His face is open and honest, and you feel your heart clench again. You want to sob again because it’s not fucking fair. Either way, you’re the loser, but this loss feels like acid being poured upon your heart, melting it. Luke likes you back, and then what? Dirty secrets? Hiding in the shadows? If you guys were out and the open with this, then what? Being the martyr? Your parents would never let you stay. *Never*. That’s your reality... It’s probably even worse than that.

You’ve thought a lot about the future, but you’re fifteen, you haven’t thought of being rejected from places to live, jobs that will not hire you, or fire you if it’s known. To you, that’s an army thing. You have no construct of what bigotry is, or how it presents itself cleverly. How it gaslights, how it’s the hardest fight of your life. You don’t even know that then, in Luke’s living room, as you fight the inevitable dive into him, that both of your days are numbered and all you’ll ever know is the painful fight ahead of you and nothing more.

Maybe that’s a blessing, or maybe there’s no real way to make death at seventeen a shiny and presentable positivity because some things are just shitty and unfair, but all you know now is that Luke’s hands are on your neck and you’re bending down, and your first kiss is what people spend their whole lives writing songs about: Passion, fire, love — it’s all there in his lips, in the hands that find his hair, in the weightlessness of the fall.

You wonder, later, if Luke will write a song about this. If you might try and pen something, but now... now you're tangled in each other, not what-ifs and now-whats.

When you two-part for air, your chest is heaving and his lips are swollen, and you let your hands fall to your sides. It's then that you realize you're shaking and crying, Luke moves to touch you, but you skirt out of his reach.

"We can't," you choke out in a whisper, your lips quivering.

"We could! I want this, don't you?!" he argues, and he's angry. He was born under the God of war, he doesn't fear a good fight, but you're water and you go with the flow, desiring the path of least resistance.

"No!" you snap, even though you do want him and have wanted him this entire time. "You don't even know what doing this means! This isn't you and a girlfriend, Luke. People get killed over this shit!"

Luke has a mix of hurt, offended, and anger on his face, in his eyes, in the set of his mouth, even in his tone as he replies, "I know, Alex, I'm not fucking stupid. I didn't decide on a whim, God!" He throws his hands up and you feel yourself stiffen as if he's going to deliver a blow. Luke doesn't seem to notice as he begins to pace in anger.

"I thought you were cute, okay! That first day I talked to you was just an excuse. I'd notice you around, and I wanted to talk to you, but never had a reason, and then you were just there... I guess I had a crush, but at the time I didn't fucking realize it."

You freeze. "You..."

"I like — I don't know, I like people, I guess. Is that a thing? I don't fucking know if it is, I'm not even sure if it's true or not. I liked Meghann, I like you, I like Seniorita Flores. Fuck, I just *really* like *you*!"

You swallow as he grabs your hand. "I fucking like you a lot, Alex. I mean it. I have for a while, but then you avoided me, and then you came out, and... I just didn't want you to think what you did. I mean, I hope you like me, too, but I mean..." He rubs the back of his neck with his free hand and your knuckles with the other. His fingers are calloused and warm, and you soften to them.

“I...” But all your words have been flooded away by a moment you know can never last, but fuck it all if you want to bottle this emotion and cherish it forever. You want to happily drown: Fuck your parents, fuck the world, because you and Luke will be encased in this moment, a snow globe forever in the image of young love and potential.

But you can't. You're you: An anxious boy brought up by hateful people that you sadly need. Without them, you're homeless. No one would rent to a kid, even if you dropped out to pay for a place, and then you think about Allana and Alicia. They need you, and you need them.

“My parents would throw me out if they knew,” you say, tears in your eyes and tears fill his.

All this is is a beautiful what-if.

“I should go,” you whisper and begin to move, but Luke tugs your hand.

“Please stay.” There's so much he's not saying: Don't leave me again. Let's pretend just for tonight. Let us have this moment.

You know you should walk away, go home and cut your losses, but that's all you've ever done and Luke wants to pretend, and you're so fucking tired of being strong. You agree with a nod and crawl into bed beside him, and you guys hold onto each other and this beautiful moment where the world doesn't exist.

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When you both wake the next morning, you face one another. Sunlight streams in behind the curtains, and the light is so soft as you look at him, it feels like heartbreak as you touch his cheek and he closes his eyes.

“I want this,” he whispers, and you can hear the tears in his eyes as he curls into your hand.



You shake your head. “We couldn’t.”

“We can keep a secret. Who cares if people know, fuck other people! All I care about are you, Bobby and Reggie. Fuck the school, fuck our parents,” he says with hard resolve.

“It’s not that easy,” you whisper sadly.

“Why not? How would you even know?” He says with a harsh edge that cuts you. Tears slip out of your eyes, but you ignore them.

“I want us, but not like that.”

Luke cups your face, thumbs brushing away tears, and says, “I’d have you any way I could.”

“It’s not fair.”

“No. But that’s life, and I won’t live for other people. I want you, and you want me, too. *That’s* all that fucking matters to me, Alex. Doesn’t it to you?”

You kiss him, and it’s so different from your first kiss that felt sure and full of passion, this one is tentative and reserved, it’s full of fear and helplessness, and you let Luke guide you along. When you break apart, you lay back against the pillow and take his face in. His bangs need to be cut, but he wears them long to piss off his mom, and you can see the man he would’ve been: Brave, strong, fearless — everything you want to be.

“I don’t hate myself,” you say suddenly because it feels too important to leave unsaid. “I know everyone thinks gay people do, or should, but I don’t. I hate everyone else because they make me feel that way. That I should hate who I am. I hate that I have to hide, that we would be hiding and glancing over our shoulders.”

“We’re already doing that,” Luke sighed and rolls onto his back and you appreciate his profile. “I’m sick of pining, and I’m sick of waiting. I want to do this. We live in LA, we could hide in plain sight if we wanted to.”

You curl your hand under your cheek, and you know he's right. Why should you have to wait for your life to start? Because someone might hate that you love who you love? It's a valid reason, but you want and you want, so you finally take it.

“Okay.”

When he kisses you, you ignore the fact that you can see the end. You refuse to think of an ending. You're at the start of your story, and you deserve to enjoy that.

He curls into your side, and you hold him, and this time, you smile, because it's finally real.

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**Author's Note:** I wanted this chapter to be a touch longer, but alas it was not meant to be. This story gets longer and longer — I genuinely cannot control it, and fun fact, this story was almost called “long weekend” and was going to be a *oneshot* about the weekend Luke wrote this song about Alex, and now here we are three chapters and counting. I don't like talking myself into corners, because these characters have a life of their own and for all I know I could give a million chapters about them, but I think I have a set number and ending in sight, so there's that. Another fun fact: The day before Olivia Rodrigo dropped Sour, I had finished writing the bit about Reggie's family and his black eye, so “hope ur ok” **REALLY** hit for me. That being said, if you haven't listened to the album, love yourself and do that. “hope ur ok” is about Alex Mercer, but I also see Reggie there, too. It's called bias, I guess. Love you all, stay safe super cool party people and all likes and comments mean everything to my soul.

**Disclaimer:** I don't own Julie and the Phantoms.

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*you and i got lost in a city that we wanted to know our name.*

— Sunset Curve, “Get Lost” from the Sunset Curve 1994 Demo.

You can't decide, sitting across from Luke, who is making his way through the pile of carnitas tacos and nachos you both bough, if your first date is awkward, or if it's just general anxiety.

You feel too big for your body. Your nerves are lit up and you're jittery as you sit across from him at the picnic table, shredding a taco shell absentmindedly. It's like pre-show nerves, but worse. You worry people know, and that any minute someone's going to come and flip the table on you, then yell about how you're going to burn in Hell for all eternity. You haven't eaten a single thing since last night, and you can't find an appetite, and you're surprised Luke is completely unfazed.

Finally, Luke pauses in his long-winded discussion about song ideas that you were half-heartedly participating in with grunts and monosyllable answers and laughs, throwing a balled-up napkin at your chest. “Dude, you have to relax!” he says with a wide, playful grin.

“How can you be so calm about this?” you ask incredulously, dropping your taco shell onto the plate.

Luke shrugs as he scoops up meat and cheese onto a tortilla chip and shoves it into his mouth. “I don't know, I'm just comfortable around you. I can be myself.”

“*Too much* of yourself,” you quip.

“Hey!” Luke says with a laugh, tossing a chip your way. You dodge it and throw his napkin back that he catches with ease.

“I don’t care about anyone else,” Luke says and grabs your hand.

Your heart races and you want it to be butterflies. Again, you find yourself bitterly reflecting just how unfair all this is. You *deserve* to enjoy this without fear, just like anyone else — even like Luke is now. You know Luke didn’t grow up with your parents, the church, or their hate.

Sure, Luke didn’t get along with Mitch and Emily, and you knew that. His parents, especially his mother, hated where Luke’s aspirations were, but his parents loved him with all their heart, and he loved his parents. His parents’ love was unconditional.

“I don’t want to care about people either,” you say with a shaky breath and Luke squeezes your hand. You feel so much love in that moment. You could drown Luke’s love, and you don’t care if it’s too soon, or impractical — he’s your best friend and you love him, and you sure as hell know Luke loves you, too. You know Luke will love the way he lives: Boldly, all in, no holding back, and you wish to be that brave. You vow to live every day striving to be boldly yourself, even if it can’t be all at once.

You squeeze his hand back, “I promise I’m trying.”

Luke gives you a soft smile, looping your fingers with his. “I know. It’s scary, and this isn’t easy, but we’re here.”

You smile at your hand in his. “I’ve never been on a date before,” you admit, and you know he knows.

“Well it’s not all going to be tacos,” he vows with his signature cheesy grin.

“Really?” you ask, wide-eyed and surprised.

Luke puffs out his chest, and you know he wants it to be a joke, but you know him well enough to know that offended him. “I’ve been deemed a Prince Charming by the student body of La Cienega High School and you think *this* is it?” He shakes his head, tutting, “Oh no, my friend, today is just getting started.”

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When you’re finished eating, Luke drags you into a drug store and you both buy disposable cameras, straw hats, and Hawaiian shirts that are on discount. Luke gets sunblock and smears it on your nose and his, making them bright white.

You’re confused by all of this, naturally, but Luke refuses to answer any and all questions regarding just what the fuck you’re going to be doing next.

And then you gape at him, incredulous. You’re not a snob, or, you’d like to *think* you’re not, but you’re gaping at Luke, who is grinning ear-to-ear like he’s won the actual lottery. “A *City Tour*?” you ask, “but we live here!”

“Exactly!” He exclaims, “And I bet you’ve never been to half of these places!” He hands you a pamphlet, and you have to resentfully agree that you haven’t. Your parents aren’t exactly *fun* people, and they would never do something so... tourist-y.

Allana’s always wanted to go to Hollywood — hell, *you’ve* always wanted to go to Hollywood, and now you can’t think of a reason for why you’ve never just taken a bus with her.

“It’ll be fun,” Luke coaxes, and you find yourself agreeing.

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You guys get seats at the top of the open, double-decker bus. It’s hot out, and you and Luke

actually pile on the sunscreen before sitting close together.

To the naked eye, you're sure you look like two idiot teenage boys with *way* too much cash to blow. You're at the back of the bus, and Luke is at the inside seat, so you leaning against him looks like you're trying to see things the tour guide is pointing out.

It's the freest you've ever felt, being on this bus, with Luke's hand in yours between the seats, and when you two get off to explore Hollywood and TCL Chinese Theatre, you guys snap photos of everything, and no one bats an eye at you.

You're lost in the crowd, hand in Luke's, and no one fucking cares. Everyone is far too busy reading maps and taking photos, wrangling children who are in desperate need of naps and crowds watching street performers to notice that under their nose you're here with the boy you love, and you're not holding back.

It's a freedom you wish you could give to anyone who was ever afraid to be themselves, who hide because of danger, or even their own shame. You want to share the unexplainable joy of saying "Fuck you, this is me!", even if no one knows you're saying it.

Somehow, that's more liberating.

Luke gives you a quick kiss before you both sprint for the bus, and you feel lucky you live in LA, even if it's far from perfect — it was 1993. He laughs as he launches himself into the crowded bus, you in toe, laughing with him. You hold the safety rails, and an older woman in characteristically old lady clothes, complete with matching mint green pullover (complete with cats playing with yarn) and sweat pants, glares at the both of you. You and Luke share a look and burst out laughing, making her glare harder.

"Bobby would kick our asses if he knew we were on this tour," you laugh and Luke snorts.

"He's such a killjoy! This is fun!" Then Luke eyes you insecurely. "Right?"

You beam and cover his hand with yours, "This is perfect," you say as the bus hits a pothole and jostles you into him, and you both laugh as the old hag glares at you and moves her purse with a disgusted sniff. You don't care. Your camera is filled with photos that you never get developed because this day has been perfect and you don't want to risk anything changing these memories, or possibly destroying them.

The camera will collect dust for years after you and Luke pass, forgotten in the haste, before Allana at seventeen, the same age you were when you died, will find it buried in the junk of your bedside table. You'll never know that she gets these photos developed and sobs over them for the rest of her life because it's all so un-fucking-fair, but here, across from Luke on this crowded bus, you never felt more alive and yourself, and god, how could life ever be so unfair to you both?

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"There it is!" Luke shouts. You both had been walking for twenty minutes, and while you thought it was an aimless stroll down Sunset Boulevard, you follow his finger and see *it*.

The iconic lighted sign is tall against the building, and you know that playing there is the start of everything.

A band from your school, Justice Nation, was one of the top bands on the west coast because they played at The Orpheum, and Luke is looking at it the way a priest would look upon God.

"This place is our destiny, Alex. Sunset Curve is going to play there and we're going to be legends."

Normally you'd say something witty and sarcastic, but here, looking at the place, you couldn't have even if you wanted to.

"You think we can?" you ask absently as you stare up at The Orpheum in awe.

Luke is nodding, "I've been trying to plan out how, and it's not going to be easy... or cheap."

"Of course not," you sigh, that sentence snapping you back to reality as you look down from the building and kick at the sidewalk as you think of your pitiful check. You're lucky you can afford to keep batteries in your walkman, much less do something pricey.

“Hey, Ma’am,” Luke is saying suddenly to a curly-haired girl passing in the street. She graciously pauses, eyeing Luke in his getup with caution.

“My... friend and I were hoping if you’d take our photo for us.”

She eyes you and Luke, grins, then nods and takes the camera.

When Allana finds this photo, she and Bobby each get a copy: Allana frames it and keeps it in her apartment, while Bobby leaves his in his box where Sunset Curve stays alive with him. But for now, it’s a moment of two boys in love, holding each other tight, their eyes full of hope and big dreams. In that moment, the sky was their only limit.

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“Are we allowed to play behind clubs that haven’t booked us?” Reggie asks warily when Luke finishes explaining his idea.

“Yeah, like could we get in actual trouble?” you voice as you anxiously twirl your drumsticks around your hands.

“Course we can. The sidewalk is public property. If we were stalking some girl, the cops would do nothing to stop us, so the same law should apply,” Bobby says with a disgusted scoff at the law.

“Oh, well, with that logic. Our mistake, then,” you deadpan and Bobby hits your shoulder, making you wince.

“Bobby is disturbingly right,” Luke says with a slight wince as he rubs the back of his neck. “As long as we don’t play on their property, there’s nothing they can really do, beyond offering a noise complaint.”



“On Sunset Boulevard,” Bobby says with a scathing laugh, and even your lips begin to twitch at the thought of the 911 operator’s face if some fool did that.

Reggie, however, still looks apprehensive. Bobby gave his leg an encouraging squeeze. “C’mon, Reginald, we’ll be fine!”

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A few weeks later, when you come home, your mom has taken Alicia to the dentist and your dad is still at work. Luke is grounded, after failing his US History test, and you decided to come home to whatever peace Allana could offer.

When you enter the living room and remove your shoes, because god help the person who got a stain on June Mercer’s pristine white rugs, you see Allana is hanging upside down on the recliner with *Boy Meets World* playing on the TV. Your parents would be pissed if they were home to see her sitting like that with the TV on to some sitcom.

“Mom asked about you yesterday at dinner,” she says with no preamble. She’s watching Topanga dance with lipstick on her face across the screen, and even though her eyes haven’t shifted, she’s somehow watching you and gaging for your reaction.

You hang up your hoodie and stride through to the kitchen. You both know this is serious — she wouldn’t bring it up if it wasn’t, but you both know to tread lightly. “Yeah? What did she say?”

Allana stood up and turned the TV off. “She said you’ve been chipper lately.”

You let out a breath as you open the refrigerator door. *Shit* is literally all you can think as you shut your eyes for a moment to keep your composure.

You thought you’d been so clever and sly about Luke, trying to fly under your parents' radar, but of course, your mother would notice if she thought you were *dating*.

“Alex, she’s suspicious. I tried to throw her off, I did,” Allana says, her voice fraying with choked-up stress, worried she’d let you down.

“I know,” you assure her, shutting the door without even looking or grabbing anything. “It’s mom,” you say, staring at the white door only covered in a few magnets. Your parents never hung up tests or report cards, or even the drawings you guys had done. This door was nothing like you’d seen at Luke’s, or any other friend he’d ever had. No. June and Kurt Mercer ran their house neat and tidy. Military, just like your dad.

Nothing was ever good enough for Lieutenant Kurt Mercer or his wife, June. Nothing. If you got an A, why wasn’t it an A+? You got a 100? You should’ve asked for extra credit! It could never be enough for them, and you felt that burning resentment bubble in your gut as you looked at this blank door.

“She’s going to ask,” Allana says nervously.

You nod. “I know.” Then you grip your hair and pull at the ends, “Fuck!” you hiss out, feeling your resolve slowly unravel.

“You could lie, maybe!” Allana tries, giving you a weak smile.

You give her an even weaker smile back. “Yeah. Sure.” Then you turn and go to the stairs. “I’m going to take a nap or something. Don’t let mom catch you watching TV,” you needlessly remind her.

When you get to your room, you flop onto your bed and cover your face with your pillow, and then you just let yourself cry.

The thing about keeping a secret is that it's easy to do when everyone you care about knows about it. When your mom asks you what's gotten you so happy lately, it's easy to just shrug at the question.

"Lot's of things, I guess. I aced my geometry test, the bands doing good, and my manager wants to promote me to a server," you say as you dig your spoon into a bowl of corn flakes, wishing you had gotten up early and gotten pancakes with Luke at the diner, even if all your money is being saved to go towards recording a demo.

Your mother purses her lips, eyes narrowed slightly in suspicion. "Nothing else?" she asks, and you see Allana tighten her grip on the spoon that was nearly to her mouth. Alicia is watching the volley, and her blue eyes are wide before she goes back to her coloring book with haste.

"Yeah. Why?" you ask innocently.

Here's the thing about strict, overbearing parents: They produce excellent liars. You and Allana watched all the things forbidden right under their noses, and Alicia wasn't very much into snitching — she likes you and Allana too much to sell you both out for a morsel of your parents' affection. Besides, you and Allana allow her to get away with being a kid, not a "respectable young lady", cue: Allana faking vomiting here.

Your mother eyes you for a moment longer before turning to berate Allana on some essay she got a C on, and you give her a sympathetic look. It's useless to go against your parents. They're experts at gaslighting and emotional abuse. Whatever you say could make whatever Allana's punishment was far worse.

When you guys leave to take Alicia to school, you squeeze Allana's shoulder and take Alicia's hand. It's just the three of you against the world, and you wish you could do more than comfort them.

In your mind, you see The Orpheum, and you think of Luke's belief that Sunset Curve will play there and you take comfort in that. *One day, you think, then I'll have enough to take us from them.*

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Luke and Reggie are already practicing when you enter the studio. Bobby is nowhere in sight, but Luke plants a kiss on your lips as you drop your bag to the floor, earning a playful “Gross!” from Reggie.

“So I spoke with Dino at the Crystal Pineapple, and he was telling me how some record execs were scooping The Neon Room tonight, so go call your parents and tell them you're staying here tonight.”

Your stomach gives an anxious flip, but you do as you’re told and relay the message to Allana, who happened to answer the phone. She wishes you good luck before hanging up and says she’ll tell your parents you’re at Bobby’s studying for the night.

When you return, Luke hands you a new song. “It’s not for tonight, but I finished it this morning and wanted you to see it,” he says in an uncharacteristically shy way. You take it and scan over it, and your heart squeezes.

The song is called “Get Lost”, and you could fucking cry.

Luke is a gifted musician, but he’s an even more gifted lyricist. He managed to vocalize those feelings of your first date — there’s freedom, and the love, and the pride, and the yearning — and fuck!

Before you even realize what you’re doing, you grab him and pull him in for a kiss and Bobby wolf whistles and Reggie shouts, “Ew! Get a room!” You flip them both off and Luke puts Reggie into a playful headlock, and your heart feels full in that moment.

You don’t know much about soulmates, that’s more of Allana’s expertise, but twenty-seven years from now, as a ghost, you’re going to think of this moment and hear Allana say that she thinks a soul can have as many soulmates as it needed to feel whole, and realize these boys, your sisters, Julie, Willie, and maybe even Ray and Carlos, are the pieces your soul needed to be complete.

These boys, they’re as much a part of you as your sisters, and you’re grateful to have them, this band, and Luke.

Bobby ruffles your hair before grabbing a coke out of the mini-fridge, and Get Lost is passed around and you start the outline of a perfect drum solo, and Reggie thinks of a good bass line, and

when practice is over, you and Luke go up the road to The Quick Mart for snacks for tonight. Grabbing Luke's hand, you guys take refuge in the shadow of a shrub wall before you turn to the store and kiss him until his hair becomes tangled in the branches and you have to untangle him.

"I wish we had somewhere to be alone," you mutter once the last twig is dislodged and Luke shakes his hair out and gives you a shit-eating grin and waggles his eyebrows.

You shove him, but catch his arm before he can go back into the shrub. "Not like that, you pervert!"

Luke laughs and slings his arm around your shoulder. "We could always sneak back into the studio."

"Get your head out of the gutter, Patterson!" you warn playfully.

"Well, my parents will be out late next week, if you want to spend the night. We could hang out in the basement, like old times."

You swallow before grinning, pulling him close. "Sure."

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"I don't understand why Luke can't just stay here," your mom mutters in annoyance, "we have a guest room!"

You're grateful her back is to you and your dad isn't in the room, because your eye roll is beyond your control.

"Yeah, but the point is to hang out together."

Your mother gives a disapproving sniff, and you know her lip is curled upward. It makes your fists tighten, and you shove them into your hoodie's pockets.

You don't hate your parents. No kid does, not even the brattiest of teens. In this weird and twisted way, you love your parents just as they love you.

You don't want to ever come out to them. They would toss you out, or maybe there's worse. You've heard of things — conversion camps are what they called them, and people went to them, but you have no idea what happens there and you'd be damned if you were going to find out. You don't know what is inside your parents to make them so hateful that you or your sisters don't have, but you'll do anything to protect yourself and your little sisters.

You sometimes wonder if you three were given to them to guide them and try to show them the love they didn't seem to have. But maybe sometimes people were given a shitty hand, and maybe you're one of those people, but in this moment you *hate* your mother for making a fucking sleepover into an issue. And for what? To berate and belittle you? To guilt you?

"Aren't you two a little too old for sleepovers? You're boys," she says acidly.

You feel punched, you even take a step back. "What does *that* have to do with anything?"

You feel the years of criticisms behind the stare she gives you when she finally turns around.

You *know* she doesn't know. The thought would *never* cross her mind, but you can hear her and your dad yelling at you for playing with Allana's toys, letting Allana and Alicia do your hair and nails — for doing theirs, for liking pink and certain movies — all of it is in that look and you feel so angry but so sad. You want to sob, but also take your shoes and hit the pristine white walls with them, just to mess up everything your mom prides herself on, and then throw it all in her face. But you don't.

"We'll see," she says icily at her authority being questioned, and it may as well be a no.

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When your parents deny you, you go to your room and wait for everyone to be asleep before you leave the house.

Luke is surprised that you actually snuck out — you are, too, and your stomach rolls with anxiety at the thought of your parents catching on to you doing this, but your parents denied you out of pettiness, and you just don't fucking care about what the fuck they want.

Emily and Mitch must think Luke is in his room, because no one bothers the two of you, and it's the first time you two can really kiss without fear, no anxiety. No one is going to bother you two at nearly one in the morning, and both of your hands explore him as he explores you.

You two lay on the couch, touching and making out because you guys have never have the chance to just *be*. You can feel Luke, and you know he and Meghann have fooled around, and you suppose this might be the only chance you both will get for at least a while, but you just want to do *this*.

Luke bites your neck and you groan, and you feel him grin against your skin, breath tickling you as he laughs. "Fuck," he whispers pulling back and looking at you. "When do you have to be home?"

You think for a minute and whisper, "I'll sneak back around seven," then you pull him back in for a kiss and you both try to curl beside one another on the couch with the TV on low volume.

When you return home, you curl into bed with a smile on your face as you bring the sheet to your chin. You dream of Luke, of playing to a large crowd chanting your names, and when you sit across from your parents at breakfast, you laugh to yourself that you got away with it all.

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By the time Halloween rolls around, Sunset Curve is in high demand. The Quarterback that year,

Gunther Hall, goes up to Luke to ask if you guys would play.

“It’s unbelievable!” Luke says as he bites into his PB&J. You guys are in the music room, where you usually spend the lunch period, and your palms are sweaty as Luke recounts the story. You feel like an idiot because you hadn’t thought of Halloween in terms of High School, and you always take Alicia and Allana — who decided this year she was too old for trick or treating and is sneaking off to a party.

It’s weird to think of Allana as “too old” for anything, really, but you’ve already agreed to cover for her, and now you’re sitting here anxiously waiting for an in to tell them how you *can’t*.

Luke is eyeing you as if waiting. He knows you too well to know that something is up.

“I can’t,” you finally admit under his gaze. You drop your eyes to look at your shoes as Reggie’s eyes widen and Bobby’s jaw drops.

“What? Why?!” Bobby asks in disbelief.

“I didn’t realize you were going to be into playing Gunther’s,” you say sarcastically in response to Bobby, who is usually too punk for things like sports and popularity.

“Fuck off, you know this is a big deal,” he snaps back.

All you can do is shrug, then you sigh. “I take Alicia trick or treating, I can’t let her down like that.”

Everyone is quiet. They don’t dare ask why Allana or your parents can’t, then Luke says, “The party sounded like shit anyways. We didn’t even win homecoming.”

Your heart warms, but you feel a prick of guilt. This is huge — a *popular* senior wants you guys to perform at their party, but Luke is grinning at you.

“Maybe we could all accompany you,” Luke suggests and Bobby makes a face, but Reggie immediately elbows him and gives the punk boy a shrewd look.



You're flustered at the suggestion. When you were younger, Luke came with you and your sisters, but it's been at least two years, and you didn't expect being boyfriends to change that.

"If you guys want," you say, your cheeks are tinged pink as Luke and Reggie nod enthusiastically.

"Cool, cool!" Luke says and Bobby mutters under his breath, "Hardly," earning him a glare from both Luke and Reggie, which makes the elder boy deflate in defeat.

You keep your eyes trained on your shoes, but Luke touches your shoulder and gives you an encouraging grin.

"We'll be there."

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You nearly shove Alicia out the door before your parents can see you.

Alicia is dressed as Snow White, and you've put on a green jack you've found at Goodwill, and a purple sock hat, curtesy of Allana — though it's slightly too tight, to go as Dopey.

The boys meet you on the corner: Reggie is dressed as Han Solo and he strong-armed Luke into Luke Skywalker.

"Dude, how can you *not* go as Luke Skywalker?" Reggie had asked him incredulously as Luke had tried to weasel his way out of it.

Bobby is... Eddie Van Halen, maybe? It's hard to tell.

Alicia lets go of your hand when she sees them and bolts off down the road, launching herself into Luke's arms who laughs as he picks her up. Alicia is petite for seven, due to being nearly three months premature, and with the muscles Luke's been developing, you're sure she's as light as a feather to him.

She's talking excitedly to Reggie, who is engaged in what she's saying about the candy she wants tonight, and Luke kisses you on the lips before putting Alicia back down.

You guys let Alicia lead the way, and by the time you've all hit the second street, even Bobby is into it, giving her a piggyback ride as you all head west toward the beach, deciding to hit the boardwalk.

"Alex, Alex!" she chants, "can we go to the arcade? Please, please please!"

You give her some spare pocket change and she challenges Reggie into ski ball as Bobby heads towards the machines and you and Luke are left alone, you grin at him and hold up a quarter and lead him to Dance Dance, which Luke groans.

"I suck at this game!"

"Losing is good for you," you tease him as you put the quarter in and the machine lights up. You set it to easy, "To really hurt your ego," you snicker and Luke shoves you. As predicted, he fails miserably and you get an average score and Alicia and Reggie had been watching you halfway through the round and begs to try. She fails even worse than Luke, but Luke, Reggie, and you cheer her on.

"I better go get Bobby before he camps out at Dragon Slayer," Reggie said with a laugh as he makes his way toward the back, and Luke and Alicia dance. Luke fails even worse against Alicia, and it makes you love him even more.

On the way home, you carry Alicia, who is nodding off in your arms, and when you get to your street, you two kiss one another.

"Night," he whispers against your lips, and you grin before waving at the boys and thanking them. When you get in, your parents are most likely in bed, and you tuck Alicia in. She wakes up before you can leave and grabs your hand and you pause.

“I love you, Alex,” she whispers and you grin, kissing her forehead.

“Night, Monkey,” you say and turn off the light. Before going to your room, you check to see if Allana’s back and hear crying outside her door. You hesitate for a minute before knocking.

“Go away!” she wails, and it’s muffled by what you assume is her pillow.

“Allana?” you ask.

“Go away, Alex!” she says louder. You contemplate for a second before opening her door. She’s lying face first in her bed, still in her poodle skirt — she had gone as Sandy from Grease, and hours ago she’d been so excited as she’d done her hair, and now she looks heartbroken. “I said go away!” she snarls, lifting her head and glaring at you.

“Well, I’m not,” you say lamely. “What happened?”

“Nothing!” she snaps before breaking down into more sobs and you sit on her bed and rub her back.

When she calms, she rubs her eyes and you hug her. “Tyler made out with Skylar, even though he invited me! He hardly talked to me all night, and then I saw them just making out,” she cries again.

“That sucks,” you say sympathetically. “He fucking sucks.”

“He does,” she says, wiping her nose with the back of her hand. “I fucking hate middle school. I want to be an adult already!”

You laugh, “Something tells me adulthood fucking sucks, too. I mean, look at mom and dad.”

She’s quiet for a long moment, then she says, “I hate them.”

You know you should reprimand her, tell her she doesn’t, but you agree and just rub her back. “Do

you want me to stay with you?”

She nods, and you crawl into bed with her. Before she falls asleep, she says, “At least we’ll always have each other. Right?”

Your eyes are heavy, and you’re on the verge of sleep, and you nod. “Yeah. We will.”

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When Christmas comes, you and Luke exchange small gifts.

No one in the band can really afford anything, and you guys play a gig at some club on the strip that pays you basically nothing. You’re also far away from any goal you set, and it’s frustrating.

You give Luke a necklace of a guitar pick on a leather strap and he gives you a ring he’d clearly won, and you guys spend Christmas Eve night in his basement kissing.

“To think,” Luke murmurs when you break off the kiss to breathe, “this time next year we’ll both be able to drive.”

The thought makes you grin, as you imagine driving out of the city just to be with him.

You kiss him softly on the forehead and smile, then you both settle beside one another, feeling at ease.

Twirling the ring that now resides on your finger, you lay your head against his shoulder and say, “I keep thinking of life post-high school, or even during if we make it big.” It’s weird to admit this, to give it life. Your cheeks turn a light pink, and Luke turns to give you a soft and encouraging smile.

“Yeah?” he asks. “And what’s it like?” He’s being flirty and very soft, but you hear his timidity, and you wonder if he wonders if he’s in your future. He is. There is no doubt in your mind that no matter what happens in life, Luke will *always* be with you as your best friend.

“Peaceful,” you admit sadly and take his hand, running your thumb up and down the scar by Luke’s thumb from a broken guitar string. Luke had cried when the sharp string had sliced him, and you’d been eleven and you’d almost told him the thing your parents’ always said: *Boy don’t cry*. “I can breathe there. I can be myself.” You’re both quiet for a long moment as the confession seeps in. “I have to get us away from my parents.”

Luke takes your hand and squeezes it, his eyes full of empathy. “I’m sorry, Alex.”

You curl into him. “I am, too.” You don’t know if it’s for your parents or yourself — you never do. You just wish your parents were different. You wish a lot of things that may not seem right or fair, but it is what it is. You want for you and your sisters to feel loved, and secure, and safe.

Luke kisses the top of your head and wraps the two of you up in a blanket, and he turns on The Home Shopping Network, and you both laugh at things they’re trying to sell, and when the clock by the TV reads quarter to six, you make a move to stand.

Luke’s arms are around your waist, and you nearly fall on top of him, but somehow steady yourself. “I love you.”

You turn and cup his face, kissing him hard and desperately. “Merry Christmas, Luke,” you whisper as you press your forehead to him and briefly close your eyes before pulling away and head for home.

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On New Year's Eve, you take Allana and Alicia to Bobby’s. His mom is excited for you all to come over and she buys sparkling cider, and New Year's party hats, and noisemakers, and sparklers — honestly, Party City must have kissed her feet, because truly, Mrs. Haynes spared no expense

for this.

Bobby is embarrassed by her enthusiasm, but you put on the bedazzled feather crown that has “1994” in blue gems, that’s clearly meant for Alicia and prance around the room like a model, and the tension breaks like a damn as you all laugh and twirl noisemakers and snap crackers.

You guys play some songs for the girls, and Allana and Alicia dance around the studio, Alicia hopping and making noises, and Allana’s trying and failing to get a rhythm with Reggie, who thinks himself a 90’s John Deacon, and you decide right then and there 1994 will be *that* year.

You and Luke share a smile and when it’s midnight you two kiss, and Alicia has fallen asleep beside an equally tired Reggie around eleven.

You scoop the sleeping eight-year-old up, and Mrs. Haynes takes you, your sisters, and Luke home. The two of you make plans to see one another the next morning.

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Luke gets his license a few weeks before Spring Break and the two of you make plans to go camping.

You lie to your parents and say Reggie and Bobby are going, and deep down you know the band should use these two weeks of school-free days to work gigs and extra shifts, but you’re both desperate to get away and be alone.

When you guys leave school that Friday, you guys stop at Walmart to get supplies — mostly just junk food, jerky, and drinks. You both get flustered and red-faced as you look at condoms. You both read things that you have no idea what they mean, and there are way too many options that Luke grabs one at random and throws it in the cart just to end it, and then you’re beside him in the passenger seat, singing songs with your hand in his.

You’re surprised, when looking back, that you weren’t anxious about any of this —not even that

your parents could find out that you lied, and that you're just with Luke. You don't care. You're young and in love, and most importantly, you feel endless.

"I'm surprised Emily let you do this," you say as the car drives along the coast, the ocean waves crashing up against the rocks as the sun burns bright. You have a suspicion that the sun is going to set before you guys can get to the camp, and you both are either going to set up camp in the dark, or you're not going to be in a tent at all.

Luke lets out a bitter sounding laugh. "My dad convinced her. She's been getting on my ass again about the band and school."

Luke taps his fingers against the wheel to, what you think, is Crooked Teeth, but the radio is semi too high for you to make it out.

"I just can't wait to be free of her," he says with a surprising harshness that makes you flinch away. Luke deflates and looks guiltily out the window. "Sorry."

"Don't be," you assure, squeezing his hand.

"She just — she makes me so angry, and she refuses to hear what I have to say about *my* life. I get that she's my mother, but it's my life. *Mine*. I don't want the shit she wants, and she refuses to get that!"

You understand all too well what it's like to have parents that refuse to hear you or even see you as your own person, not a prop to their perfect family fantasy.

Sometimes, you wonder why your parents had kids. Then, you know, deep down it's for appearances. The good Christian things to do — two kids, white picket fence, things you don't think you want. You don't know for sure, though. Kids seem impossible, and you're not even sixteen yet, what the hell do you know about wanting a family? Marriage seems a million years away.

"I can't wait to get away from my parents, too," he admits.

You lean your head back against the headrest and close your eyes. "It's the only thing that keeps me going," you admit and Luke looks at you briefly before his eyes go back to the road. "If we

make it, I'm going to take Allana and Alicia away from them."

"That's a lot of responsibility," Luke says cautiously and you nod.

"I know, but I love them."

"I'd help you."

You know he would, and your heart squeezes as you shut your eyes to keep from crying. It's one of the nicest things a person could say to you.

"I love you," is all you can say when the tears are kept at bay and Luke lifts your hand and kisses the back.

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It's dusk by the time you guys get to the camp and set up your tent. Luke lights a fire, and neither of you knows it's not the safest thing in the world to throw dry pine needles into a fire, and the fire flares up and almost burns your sleeve when you and Luke throw handfuls in. You both laugh about it, and then burn marshmallows and make s'mores.

You two fuck around, throwing pine needles and pine cones at one another, and he grabs your waist and kisses you hard as you guys crash to the ground.

"We're alone," you say boldly and Luke grins and hums in agreement. When you guys go into the tent, your heart is racing and Luke is fidgeting and you both tell one another that you love each other, and when alls said and done, you hold one another and you feel whole.

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When you wake up the next morning, Luke is still sleeping and you look at him. He's so peaceful and young looking, and when he opens his eyes and sees you, he smiles.

"How long have you been up?" he asks groggily, rubbing his eyes before he stretches.

"Not long," you whisper, your voice scratchy from sleep.

Both of you are self-conscious from morning breath, and you both go to the woods to pee and Luke makes shitty coffee, but perfect eggs and bacon, and then you take your bags and go toward the lake. Kayak rentals are way out of your price range, so Luke and you decide to go for a hike before diving into the lake.

"We should've brought inner tubes," Luke whines as he floats back in the water and you splash him.

"Next time!" you say with a laugh before submerging yourself into the water.

When you two lay on the shore, Luke gives a sigh. "I can't believe tomorrow we have to go home."

You nod, "Neither can I. I wish this could last a little bit longer."

Luke rubs his face, and you can tell he's thinking of Emily and their fighting, and you look up at the cloudless blue sky. "Let's leave later than planned tomorrow," he says and you grin.

"Sounds perfect to me," you say and turn to him.

Luke puts his hands behind his head as he lays back with you, shutting his eyes. "We could call the boys and run away right now." You know he's kidding, but also not. It's tempting, but even so, you know Reggie, for as sad as it was, would never leave his parents behind. Bobby didn't have a

reason to leave. His parents loved him, but you knew he would because when you had it all, why not?

That night, when you lay beside Luke as his breathing becomes heavy and even, you wish for tomorrow never to come. You want to be this way forever with him, and when the sunrises and you're tangled against him, you guys kiss lazily, ignoring the day until the sun is too high in the sky and you both know no more time can be wasted.

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On the drive back, Luke stops at In and Out, and he drives the speed limit, unlike on the way out of the city. You guys seem to hit every light, and on yellows, he slows to a crawl. It makes you smile.

Neither of you wants to leave, but neither of you can risk getting in trouble, so when he stops two blocks from your house and you two briefly make out, you're both reluctant to read. When you finally do get out of the car and he finally drives away, you feel your heart drive away with him, hand still in his in the passenger seat.

**Author's Note:** Oh my God, me and this chapter have more beef than me and Owen did that one time he lied (by mistake) and confirmed JATP2. I can't even explain how many times I've rewritten the start of this chapter, and it finally came together but damn, man, it was the literal worst before the ball got rolling. If I'm being honest, I expected the chapter to end at a much different place and the next chapter starts in a different spot and then the epilogue, but with everything I do that involves writing, it just didn't go to plan. (I truly cannot emphasize enough how this was supposed to be a oneshot... One chapter and done, but here we are... part four and like 10k words in) But, I think we all get the vibe that I'm very bad with timelines that involve doing maths, and if you haven't gotten that vibe, hi, welcome to my confessional: I suck at maths, folks. Happy Pride Month, I'm a bisexual who can't do basic arithmetic, your ultimate representation! So yeah, where this chapter was originally going to end was 95 and I was like ... listen, I think it's best to not have this chapter be it's own feature length novel and combine my original idea for the next one. Also, I have a slight bone to pick with the 90s: What the fuck is with everything I ever watch being from 1996-1999 (AND MOSTLY FROM 1999, EVERY ROMCOM YOU LOVE IN THE 90S IS 1999) like... *Alex voice* HOW IS THAT POSSIBLE?

Anyways, just in case I missed things in editing, I want everyone to be on the same page: As of the end of this chapter, Alex, Luke, Reggie, and Bobby are all sixteen. (I see Luke as a March Aries, Reggie as a June Gemini, Alex as a June Cancer, and Bobby as a Virgo, and Halle I love you but you cannot fight me on these facts). Alicia is seven and born in December, so she's going on eight,

and Allana is thirteen going on fourteen, and is a July Leo. I know no one probably cares, but I do, and it's also how I hold myself accountable to keep these facts in order! I love writing.

Anyways part 293568546, I gave an Easter Egg of a certain character because I love making Halle lose her mind with me. Love you, bestie!

As always, this is dedicated to Halle and Terri, who always encourage me and supported me through my many mental breakdowns while writing this chapter. Thank you for all the lovely comments I received from the last part of this story. I did admittedly cry, especially when I wanted to give up writing this story for a while, and I love you all for loving this story. Please leave a like or comment if you can, but also check out this playlist I made for this story literally today because Halle sent me a song called "Good Things Fall Apart," by Illenium ft Jon Bellion. She said it's Lalex, and she was correct, four billion points to Hufflepuff house. [Here's](#) the playlist, enjoy. And while we're on the subject of Lalex songs, "Sweet Disposition," by The Temper Trap is also them. Love you besties, stay tuned for part five and the break in my sanity!

**Disclaimer:** I don't own Julie and the Phantoms.

**Trigger Warning:** Parent abuse. Physical violence. Please read with caution towards the end.

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*and i'd stall at every light and every sign just to keep your hand in mine on this long weekend.*

— Sunset Curve, "Long Weekend" from the Sunset Curve 1994 Demo.

Sixteen hits you like a wave you saw coming but didn't expect to feel as it did when you were fifteen. When you're younger, sixteen seems so grown up. It's an age that has a perk so grown up, it doesn't feel like it could ever be reached. When the morning comes, you don't feel different. In fact, you feel kind of put out that it's not something more.

You fail your driver's test. You got anxious during the written and second-guessed yourself, and then you fuck up during backing up. Your dad yells at you the whole way home and yells more when he notices your wet cheeks.

"We won't pay for another test. It's time you learn how to be a man," your father concludes as he violently puts the car into park.

The thing is, you've sadly had to be a man your whole life. Your sisters depend on you way more than they do your parents, you're just not your dad, and that pisses him off.

Your dad didn't teach you how to be a man, thankfully. You have compassion and you've always

made time to and prioritized your sisters and to learn from them. Your dad didn't even teach you how to shave or be a good person, you've learned it all by yourself. You say nothing, though. You refuse to engage, to be gaslit or hit, or anything else your dad could think to do, and when you sneak off to Luke's, he's baked you birthday cupcakes and presents one to you with a single lit candle.

When you blow it out, it's the same useless wish you've had your whole life, but it feels different this year as if it had the potential to come true. And maybe it did. You were sixteen, after all.

You don't know that before you die, you didn't have the time or the money to retake the test, or that by the time you and Luke go, all you both have are bikes.

The boys order a pizza the Saturday of your birth week and give you a mixed tape for *when* you can legally drive, and Monday, when Alicia comes home from bible camp she ties a bracelet on your wrist.

"I couldn't finish it in time for your birthday," she says sadly, "but Lana says this means," and she leans in close and whispers to your ear, "gay."

You startle and look down at your wrist and your eyes well with tears. It's a rainbow friendship bracelet and you choke down your tears, then you hug her so tight she wiggles in your grasp and claims she can't breathe, and when you let her go, she runs off giggling and you chase her, tickling her when you finally catch her.

Even in death, that bracelet follows you. The smallest piece of your sister that stays with you forever, but it becomes a way to ground yourself when the anxiety gets to be too much. It reminds you that no matter what, this tiny act of love couldn't be taken from you, no matter what your parents did.

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Luke picks you and Allana up that first day of school. Allana looks so grown up with her plaid skirt, white button-up, and hair pulled back by a plaid headband.

You jokingly ask her if she knows she's not attending a catholic prep, to which she gives you the finger.

Allana sits behind you and picks at the bagel Luke brought for her, and you sip your coffee, talking to him about the setlist for the gig that weekend.

"Dude, this is going to be our term," he says as he hits the wheel excitedly to each word. "We're so close to our demo money."

Your eyes sparkle with excitement and Allana moves forward, "Are you guys going to make other merch? It'd basically be free branding!"

You and Luke's eyes both widen at this. None of you had thought of that. Reggie had made the decal for your drums, but you guys haven't thought of buttons and shirts.

"Allana, you're a fucking genius!" Luke says excitedly, and you see her beam in the mirror. You feel your heart clench as Luke turns to you, and you see the infatuation in her eyes.

Guilt prickles at your skin like tiny ant bites as Luke, oblivious to Allana's look, says, "Alex, your sister is a fucking genius!"

You laugh and shove the guilt away and say, "Yeah, she is!" while reaching behind her for one of the most satisfying high-fives ever, and you settle back into the seat. "Though, that means more money," you point out, and Luke boos as he turns up the music.

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When Luke shares Allana's idea with Bobby and Reggie, the former groans loudly, placing his head into his hands dramatically, while Reggie gets a whimsical look on his face.

“That’s a great idea!” the dark-haired boy says, and you can see the gears shift in his mind as if he’s working on some life-altering equation.

“Yeah, and like she said: Free promo, get some more people interested in us!” Luke says, shaking Reggie with excitement.

“Boys, that’s great, but where the hell are we getting all this money? We’re all working our asses off, and with tips from the pier, we barely have enough for two hours of studio time.”

You feel your heart sink, and Reggie and Luke visibly deflate.

“Well, you don’t gotta be so mean about it,” Luke says with a dejected look.

Bobby looks guilty, but he’s right. You all know he’s right.

Luke sits backward in a chair, pouting, and now would be the *wrong* time to kiss him, no matter how cute he looks. Instead, you twirl your rainbow bracelet and chew your bottom lip. “We could table it for now, when money’s better.”

Bobby is looking at the floor and frowns, but not at you, just the situation. You four aren’t rolling in wealth, money’s always an issue.

“We need a miracle,” Reggie says and he sounds so defeated that you give him a side hug.

“Well, we’re going to get one,” Luke says with fierce determination. “We’re going to get gigs, get The Orpheum, and then it’ll all be in our grasp.”

It’s all pipe dreams, you know that, but sometimes pretty lies feel like sweet relief after drowning your whole life in ugly truths.

Besides, the four of you are more than determined. You guys fist bump one another before heading off to class, but Luke pulls you into an empty classroom and kisses you.

You two smile at one another when you break away, and he's gripping the back of your neck.

"You're okay, right?"

"Yeah. Are you?"

He nods, then he sighs and rubs his free hand down his face before releasing you. "I keep thinking about everything, you know? That we're this close," he says, holding up his hand and placing his index finger and thumb centimeters apart.

You nod. You understand entirely because it feels... almost hopeless, but also like you're on the edge and you can feel the fall, but you're not brave enough to do it just yet.

There wasn't a doubt between the four of you that you would be legends, not with Luke's lyrics and the band's general sound. Sunset Curve's music moved people.

Luke rubs his hand down his face, again, before taking one of your fidgeting hands, and he gives you a smile that can't quite meet his eyes, and your heart sinks at the sight. Seeing Luke doubt himself hurts you deeply. Luke is vibrant, and always so sure and confident, and you lean down and kiss him softly.

"Walk you to class?" Luke asks, and you nod, checking your schedule before you let him grasp your hand lightly before dropping it.

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The semester during the last leg of 1994 was intense, to say the least. If you had thought the band had doubled down before, you hadn't seen anything before that August.

If you weren't at work, on the pier, or at school, you were performing on the strip.



Luke was almost manic with the schedule, and by the time that October hit, no parents were immuned to being pissed off, even Reggie's.

"I'm getting a C in pre-calc," you say with panic when you all meet in the music room.

Luke groans, "My mom's on my ass, too, but my grades have always sucked."

You glare at the casual way it's said, and you envy him. If Luke had it his way, the band wouldn't even waste time at school. He always tries to get you guys to skip, and sometimes, he and Bobby do, but he doesn't get it. Under your parents' roof, it was their rules — no ifs, ands, or buts about it.

"I think this is a bit different than a talk with Emily," you spit, and Luke freezes. You regret saying it instantly, but it's true. Emily doesn't approve of the band, but your parents approve of *nothing*. He doesn't know what that's like.

He's quiet, and that makes Reggie visibly nervous. He's twitchy and sweaty as he tries to make stupid small talk. "I got the job at the grocery store, so between that and the paper route, I should be able to contribute more."

It's the way he says it that makes your heart twist. As if Reggie hasn't been pulling his weight, and you see Bobby and Luke give uneasy looks.

"But when will you have time for homework and shit?" Bobby asks worriedly. Bobby has hardly ever given a shit about his grades, but he always gets C's or low B's, much to your annoyance, but he'd be damned if Reggie was left to fail, and you and Luke share that sentiment. You worry about Reggie with his shitty dad and helpless mom, but Reggie loves both his parents and it concerns all of you.

Reggie always sees the good in someone, like a naive child, and when you have the foresight to reflect on your life, twenty-five years from now, you feel kind of bad how you and Luke baby him.

"Reg, we'll be fine," Luke lies effortlessly. "You don't need two jobs."

Reggie picks at a loose thread on the sleeve of his red flannel shirt, refusing to look at either of you. “Yeah, well my dad disagrees.”

“He can’t even hold down one job,” Bobby snarls, “he got fired from that store!”

It’s weird how little you (and Luke) still know about Reggie’s life. You know his mom is the assistant manager of the grocery store Reggie will work in, but that’s something new.

Reggie bristles at Bobby’s comment, and you can tell he’s trying to remain calm, but you can see how mad he is, and you don’t know if you should ignore it or comfort him. “He worked there when we were kids, and *don’t* talk about my dad like that.”

There’s a level of acid under his calm voice that shocks the three of you, but Bobby has the grace to apologize and look embarrassed. Reggie’s mood doesn’t lift and you three share looks.

“We can jam at the pier after school,” Luke suggests, *trying* to lighten Reggie’s mood. “It’ll be good practice for Saturday.”

Reggie hardly brightens as he nods, looking like his chipper Reggie self without the light behind him.

“Yeah, sounds great. I have to get to class,” he says, even though he doesn’t — there’s still twenty minutes left to lunch, but he gathers his bag and leaves. When the door shuts, you and Luke glare at Bobby.

“Why would you say that shit about his dad?” you hiss at the older boy who goes beet red from embarrassment.

“It just... I don’t know! It just slipped out!” he says defensively, but at least he looks remorseful. Bobby kicks his boot against the floor and is concentrating really hard on the motion. “You don’t know his family like I do! They’re awful to him — to his siblings, and Reggie just... he just loves them.”

Love wasn’t black and white, and you understood that, but it also felt abstract and unreal, as if love was outside yourself and could never be grasped, despite how deeply you loved. Hearing things like that, that love could be unconditional, it made you question it. It made you sometimes wonder

the point of it all when there were kids like you and Reggie who loved despite it all.

Luke's eyes soften, along with his shoulders, but you're still upset with Bobby. You hate Reggie's dad, and you knew nothing of his mom, but all you want is for Reggie to have a place where he can be safe.

When lunch ends, Luke takes your hand and squeezes it. "You okay?" he asks gently, because he knows you're not, and you can tell even he isn't.

"I just worry about Reggie," you admit, cheeks dusting a light pink.

Luke nods. "I worry about him, too. And you..."

You startle and almost drop your backpack in the process. "What?"

"You know why, Alex," he mumbles, playing with the hem of his sleeveless shirt.

You look away. "I'm fine."

"I want to believe that," he whispers gently.

Tears bit your eyes. "I worry about Allana and Alicia more," you admit. "I worry that I can't protect them from the type of people my parents are. I'm worried they're going to find out about us and throw me out, or *worse*. I don't even know what could be worse, but I have to be fine. Strong. For them," you say and Luke throws his arms around you.

"You don't have to be strong. Not with me. I care about you *and* your sisters, Alex," he says, leaning up and kissing you gently. "I worry about all you guys."

"Even Bobby?" you tease as you wipe your eyes with the sleeve of your hoodie and Luke laughs.

"Yeah, even that punk asshole," Luke says, lightly shoving you.

You look at him suddenly, and your eyes lock with his. “I’ll take care of you, too, Luke. You know that, right?”

Luke looks you right in the eyes and nods. “You and the boys and your sisters, *you’re* my family.”

When you guys leave the classroom, with nothing but a brush of your knuckles to his, you hold that moment inside you, letting it give you a sort of hope you’d always need.

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By the time November comes, you’re in charge of counting the money.

You sit on the floor in front of a makeshift table of old wooden milk crates and count each blessed bill and coin three times, then you make Bobby double check before your eyes sparkle.

“There’s enough!” you announce in a hushed tone before the studio explodes with noise. For only the four of you, it bounces off the walls. Reggie is in Bobby’s arms and is being lifted in victory as they both pump their fists in the air, shouting wildly. Luke’s knocked over the beach chair he’d been occupying and before you know it, his lips are on yours, and when he pulls back there are tears in his eyes and his face is bright and open.

“Shit guys, we’re going to have to pick songs! Pick how fucking many!” he says frantically as he jumps around, his energy too high to contain.

You guys argue, pouring over Luke’s lyric books before deciding on ten songs. You point out it’s a demo and you only have so much money to record and make the damn thing.

You all decide on a new song Luke and the rest of you have been perfecting called Now or Never to record first. It has strong vocals and fast pace, then Long Weekend, Get Lost, and by the time you guys have a list you’re vibrating with excitement.

“Seamus knows some people who might help with the album design for cheap,” Reggie says, writing on his arm to call his brother as Bobby suggests his friend from photography club to take photos.

It was as if this moment before the demo had set everything in 1995 in motion. The moment when your life is set in stone because this is where everything changed; the first domino that put the metaphorical stopwatch for you, Luke, and Reggie.

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When Luke holds your demo, it’s nothing but a plain black disc, but the way he holds it, it’s like this CD is a newborn baby.

It feels so official, but it also makes you feel weirdly empty. This goal you all strove and sacrificed for, now all that was left was —

“This is it, boys,” Luke says as he holds up his hotdog like a glass of champagne, and not like something that had condiments out of someone’s trunk, “this demo is our ticket to The Orpheum, then producers, and then tours.”

You all tap your hotdogs together.

“Allana found someone who’d do the shirts for cheap. She wants to show us her added design,” you say and shoot Reggie a hesitant look as you take a massive bite of hotdog. It was Reggie’s design, well, curve.

He nods eagerly, licking his fingers from his hotdog, looking contemplatively at the hotdog stand, as if to get another before frowning. Bobby notices this and spots him for it, claiming he wants another, too.

You settle into the musty-smelling couch beside Luke. Right across the street is the big building, and Luke is staring at it in awe.

Bobby gets up to talk to some girl — you don't recognize her, but you also don't care as you eagerly steal a moment with Luke, knotting your hand into his and curling into him slightly, making sure your clasped hands are hidden.

"We're almost there, Alex! Can't you taste it?"

"Actually, I taste more onions than anything else, and they taste pretty old."

Luke turns and gives you a playful glare, shoving you. "You're such a loser," he teases, and then he looks at your lips longingly before biting his. It's like a magnetic pull and it hurts to resist.

Luke could be like the sun most of the time (all of the time, but you felt it important for him to learn *some* modesty before becoming a famous rockstar), pulling people in, blinding them. You were helpless to him, like a planet forced to rotate around him. Luke genuinely didn't know the power he had over you — over anyone.

You tear your eyes away and stare up at the building.

"I bet this time next year, we'll have played there," Luke says, looking up with you as he squeezes your hand and jiggles his leg.

You can almost see it, can almost feel the adrenaline it would give you before fixing your eyes at him. He tears his eyes away to look back, and before whatever can happen happens, Reggie is flopping beside you with his hotdog, having already given Bobby his.

You fix Reggie with a dirty glare, but he's oblivious to it.

"Bobby wouldn't hear my thoughts on keeping the CD black," Reggie pouts, clueless to the fact he's ruined a moment.

Luke takes his hand from yours and reaches behind you to lightly dope slap the back of the dark-

haired boy's head, not thinking.

"Dude!" Luke says as he's doing it, and Reggie flinches briefly before settling and ignoring the concerned look you give him.

Luke is red-faced when you turn to him, and he apologizes profusely, but Reggie cuts him off.

"No, dude, it's fine," and he makes a move to get up and leave you and Luke to whatever it was you were about to do, but Luke stops him by asking for his CD ideas, which Reggie happily launches into.

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In the end, Seamus's friend, Bobby's photography girl, Reggie, and Allana come through with making the demo into an official-looking CD. When you hold it, *this* feels official: Produced, mature, and something people *will* take seriously.

Luke kisses the cover before taking out the jacket and giving a gleeful laugh at the Sunset Curve photo in the middle. It feels so grown up, like you caught a shooting star that showed you what you believe could only be your future: Tours, sold-out concerts, you and your sisters being free from your parents. It was all in your hands as you held that CD, but it slipped through your hands like ash when you weren't even looking.

"Wow," Reggie murmurs when he holds it, and you see tears in his eyes.

It's a moment that *maybe* you, Luke, and Reggie should regret. Maybe you all should regret meeting one another, and creating Sunset Curve, but you don't.

You could never.

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The second week of December, when all the houses are decorated with strings of fairy lights and trees in the windows, is when the second domino is hit.

Luke *always* fought with Emily. It was as constant as the sun rising and falling, but after the demo was found and this became real, shit hits the fan hard.

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He calls from the studio at quarter past nine. You were laying in bed doing the last bit of homework when your mom opened the door with a sour look on her face. It made your heart stop because you could've sworn up and down you'd done your chores, but then you see the phone in her hand.

"It's Luke," she informs you tersely, reaching to give you the phone. You stand to take it, but she pauses, looking you right in the eye as she says, "and do remind your friends not to call so late, Alex."

You nod, take the phone, and pause, waiting for the click of your parents' door.

"Hello? Luke?" you whisper, shutting your own door.

"Alex," Luke says, and you can tell he's crying, and you still. Your heart is racing with panic, and you have to clench your free hand into a fist to make it stop shaking. When he takes a shuddering breath, it's then you hear a sob break lose. "I fucked up really bad."



The phrase “blood went cold” never had more meaning than it did at that moment.

What did he mean? What had Luke done?

You picture a jail cell, Luke being locked away forever, but it had been worse.

“My mom and I had a massive fight — the worst we’d ever had.” He tries to collect himself, but you can tell it’s hard. “She went through my room — she’s apparently gotten smart, and she found the demo, and she lost it. She was going to make me quit that band, send me off if she had to,” he inhales sharply, and you can almost touch his anguish as he says, “I told her t go fuck herself, that I hated her — I called my mother a bitch as I packed my shit and left.”

He cries again, and you grip the receiver so tight you hear the battery pack creak threateningly.

“Where are you?” your voice is low, full of anxiety and unshed tears.

“The studio,” he croaks, and even though he can’t see you, you nod.

“I’ll be there, I just have to get away.”

Sneaking out Allana’s window is more practical than the front door when you *know* your parents are sleeping, and she vows to cover for you as best as she can. Bobby’s is twenty minutes by bus, and you have no idea what that calculates to by bike, but you pedal as hard and as fast as you can. When you get there, you’re a sweaty mess and push locks of damp hair out of your eyes and off your cheeks as you try to move quickly to the door.

You don’t know if Mr. Or Mrs. Haynes know Luke’s here — hell, you don’t even know if *Bobby* knows, but you don’t want to get caught, even if they probably wouldn’t care. You just know that happy-go-lucky Luke wouldn’t want to be seen like this if he hadn’t been yet.

The studio is dark when you enter, but you can hear crying and make out Luke on the couch with his head in his hands.

If you’re being honest, and you feel like a piece of shit for thinking this, but it’s like you’re

looking at the future you thought you'd have if your parents figured you out.

It scares you, but you love him more than you fear this shadow, and you go to him and hold him. Your shirt becomes damp, but you don't care. You won't let yourself fall asleep that night. When Luke finally drifts off, you try and keep your mind occupied, afraid of sleeping past the time of your parents' waking.

It's different from being eight streets away from Luke's, and it'll mean you'll have to leave soon, but your stomach drops at the thought of it.

You find an old Sunset Curve flier that's been trampled on and scrawl him a note, placing a bottle of water on top of it, hoping he'll notice both on the table when he wakes. When you sneak inside, it's almost dawn and you're sore and tired, but know sleep won't happen now and risk a shower.

When you leave the bathroom, your mother opens her bedroom door and stares at you. "What are you doing, Alex?" she snaps, and you flinch.

"I couldn't sleep. Had a nightmare," you mumble, unable to look at her cold blue eyes. "Sorry."

She sighs through her nose, and you picture a dragon and almost smile, but to be honest, after everything, you genuinely couldn't smile, even if you wanted to.

She moves past you and shuts the bathroom door, and you go to your room and cry for everything.

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"Luke just left?" Allana asks, her clear blue eyes wide and mouth parted in disbelief and anguish. Her blonde hair is in her hands, twisting it to knots as you conclude the story.

"Yeah," you sigh, rubbing your face. You know you shouldn't be telling her this, because she's

your little sister and you should be strong, but you're so fucking tired. And it's not just physically, you feel like the universe is placed upon your shoulders, and you're only sixteen. "It's so fucked up, Lana. The way his parents are, our parents..." You don't mention Reggie's. You couldn't. She'd cry, and then you'd cry, and you know Reggie wouldn't want her to know.

She chews her lip and you know she's resisting the urge to cry now, so you grab her hand and squeeze it.

"I'm lucky I have you. Alicia, too," she whispers, and she's so small in that moment, and you resist the urge to cry at the sight of her. She's fourteen, and she's grown beyond your years, and you feel like you failed her there, even if it was never your job to protect her from these things.

"I want to visit Luke after school. I doubt he'll be there after last night," you say with a tired sigh, because the idea of going to Bobby's versus home to bed is too much to think about, even if it's the right thing to do.

And you're right. You're called to the office during Homeroom, where a cop is there, along with Mich, who looks exhausted, and Emily, who looks shellshocked. You're uncomfortable as pass them and enter Principal Hernandez's office and he, the cop, and Vice Principal Jones ask you questions, all while Luke's parents wait hopefully out in the hall.

You suppose you should feel guilty for lying, it's not like Mitch and Emily don't know Bobby's, but you're more nervous about being caught. When you tell Luke about it after school, his jaw hardens.

"I'm not going home, not to be shipped off to some military school, or wherever she chooses to send me to!" He crosses his arms like a child, but you can't find it in yourself to say anything snarky about that. Instead, you let him rest his head on your shoulder and play with your fingers until he drifts to sleep. By that time, Bobby's come home from his shift and eyes Luke with a mix of pity and wariness.

"I can't believe he just took off," he says with an air of awe and you nod, moving Luke so he can lay on the couch without being disturbed.

"Yeah. It was a really bad fight," you say tiredly, casting a look at Luke. He looks so peaceful at first glance, but you can see how puffy and discolored his eyes are, and the redness on his nose. You wish you could take away Luke's pain.

Bobby nods and says, “He’ll be home by next week, but the cops and shit? That’s intense.”

You swallow nervously. You know Bobby hates the police, and he’d never sell you or Luke or Reggie out, but it scares you to know what Bobby told the cops.

“What did you say? You know, to the cops?”

“Those pigs,” Bobby says with a disgusted scoff. “The truth. I didn’t see Luke yesterday *or* today, I saw his bike this morning, but Luke crashes here sometimes when shit gets real bad, so I didn’t think twice about it when I left. I just thought he was ditching, or whatever. So,” Bobby shrugs, “I didn’t see him, and I said just that.”

You nod and pick at a thread at the hem of your shirt. Bobby eyes you, and you can almost hear his thoughts, how he thought that this would be you, so you turn away and look back at Luke.

In four months, Luke will be seventeen, but he looks so young and vulnerable. His face is blotchy, and his hair messy from all the tugging he’s done, and your heart is aching for him.

After a few more moments, you kiss the top of his head and head home, telling Bobby to let Luke know you said bye.

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When you get home, your parents are angry, because apparently, the cops asked them about Luke.

“Do you know how humiliating it was?” your mother snaps when she talks of the cops that came to the door. “What will the neighbors think?”

You can't find a shred of pity for her.

Emily and Mitch had lost their son, and while you'd done nothing to help them rectify that, your parents' reaction makes your blood boil.

"We don't want you hanging out with these — these *hooligans*," your mom settles on the word and you nearly roll your eyes, but thankfully have the sense to remain passive. "They're a bad influence on you! This band is a waste of time — a distraction!" your mother fumes and you feel yourself snap like a rubberband retaking its shape.

For sixteen years they'd pulled you too taut, and you feel the breaking point inside yourself.

"They're not a distraction!" you snap back, but when your father looks at you, you instantly recoil.

"*Don't* talk to your mother like that," he says, low and threateningly. It was a warning and your heart races.

"I always keep my grades up," you try, your desperate to finally get this out as your eyes fill up with frustrated tears. "I *always* do whatever you ask of me!"

"Alexander!" your father snaps, banging his hand on the table and you jump. "You will show us some respect!"

As if you were a disrespectful, spoiled brat. As if you didn't raise their daughters, sacrificed *your* life — no, it was never enough. You try to remind yourself that you will be seventeen at the end of June and then you'd have one year left, but it doesn't feel comforting. Instead, the thought of another year with them sounds more exhausting than anything you could even fathom.

All you can do is think of Luke in the dark studio, crying. How you all thought it'd be *you*... Conditional love was all your parents could give, and you were so fucking tired of trying to hold onto it because it was pointless. You couldn't *make* people love you. Love, like respect, was earned. It took time and effort, and your parents didn't respect you, they didn't see you. To them, you were a prop. A son, which made them superior, somehow. They were an All-American family: A big house, nice jobs, three kids, a picture-perfect family.

When you leave them to your room, you imagine smashing a hammer to all the pictures of your

family lining the staircase, but lay face first in your bed and dream restlessly about boys crying in dark, dank garages masquerading as studios.

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Allana looks at the jean jacket you got at Second Chance, a thrift store on the way to the bus stop, with a skeptical look. “You sure you want me to ruin it? I have no way of fixing it if you hate it,” she warns with a raised eyebrow.

You nod with fierce determination, your jaw locked as you watch her move her hands down the fabric with a frown.

She takes the scissors and decides to just start ripping holes into it.

“Mom and dad will be mad,” she cautions when you put it on, and you suddenly feel more like yourself than you ever had, even with Luke or behind your drums. This is defiance so in your parents’ faces that you feel almost lighter than air.

“Good,” you say as you leave the room.

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Your parents are pissed when they see your jacket.

“This is a bad reflection on *us* as parents, Alexander,” your mother scolds.

You know your mother is serious since she's using your full name, but you defiantly don't care. This, and then your pink hood, are the only things you can do as a way of finally throwing up a middle finger to your parents, and you feel like that scene in Mary Poppins that Alicia used to watch religiously, when they're floating on the ceiling, laughing away. You feel better than that.

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When you get to the studio, Luke's eyes are wide when he sees the jacket, but grins as he kisses you. "Thank god you're here! Reggie wanted to watch Star Wars!" he says with a playful shudder.

"Hey!" Reggie says defensively. "Star Wars *is* cool!"

You and Luke share a look before fake gagging.

Reggie pouts and Luke ruffles his hair as he goes to get a drink. "So, I've had some time to think," Luke says as he pulls out three waters and hands one to you and Reggie.

"Well *that* can't be good," you tease and Luke flips you the bird as he begins chugging his water. Reggie laughs and sits down, tuning his bass, but is watching the two of you.

"Funny," Luke says mockingly when he's done, and he hits your arm playfully. "But anyway, since I'm not going back to school —"

"*What?!*"

You didn't mean to shout the word, but you're on your feet instantly. "Luke, you can't just drop out!" you say in horror.

Luke glares. "Well, I am. Where do you think they're going to look to find me? I'm not going back to that house. I'm done!"

Your throat is dry as you watch him. You know school has never been his thing — hell, you're not even sure if school is *your* thing, but even though Luke has a point, it's just crazy to you. You force yourself to slowly sit down and look at your hands because you just don't want to fight with him.

"I think I'm going to take on work so we can make the shirts and the CDs," he says.

Reggie is hesitant to nod, but you can't bring yourself to at all.

"I applied for a few jobs," he continues, "but I think it'd be smart to keep it all under the table, or whatever."

He's looking at you, and you can feel just how desperately he wants your approval, but you can't do it. Not even for him.

You don't want Luke to drop out, and you're trying to sift between the reasons and feel uneasy. Some are incredibly selfish: You'll miss him, and you wonder if you'll survive without him. School will be so fucking hard without all the stolen moments that have become so a part of your life, a part of the 'us' you and him have created, that you feel anxious when you think of living without him, even just as a friend.

And then there's that fear that lives deep in the crevices of your mind that the anxiety never gives up ground on, only gains it in inches and miles: What if Sunset Curve fails?

Your entire body seems to twist in fear of giving that thought a life outside of your anxiety.

It was like being handed something breakable, as if you, and you alone, could jinx the outcome of this band and had a hand in its fate.

Whether anyone would admit it or not, it was a rational thought: What would become of Luke if all the work resulted in shattered dreams and dashed hopes?

You can't look at him, not with that betraying thought racing across your mind, and Reggie shifts uncomfortably from the tension building and makes up some excuse to go inside.



When he's gone, you both quiet before Luke says, "What's wrong?" There's a defensive edge to his voice and you pick at your jacket.

"What exactly do you want me to say, Luke? Congratulations?"

"Don't be an asshole!" Luke snaps, glaring at you.

You look at the hem of your jacket. "I just don't agree."

"Well, what do you suggest I do? It's not like I can emancipate myself — it's not like I've never thought of these things before," he says angrily, his voice low and full of resentment as his fists curl at his sides.

It's not like you've never seen Luke angry before, because of course, you have. It's just different now because this old battle about Emily and Mitch has now transferred to you.

"I just don't think you've thought this through," you snap back.

"Fuck you!" he snarls before throwing himself into a lawn chair.

You *try* not to take it personally. Luke was angry and he didn't mean it, but it hurts. Your lip trembles and you go, "I'm only telling you the truth. We're juniors, Luke! Who knows how long —"

"Don't!" Luke croaks, and you realize he, too, is on the verge of tears.

"There's a chance —"

"You think I don't know that?! You think I don't agonize over this shit?" He explodes, and you recoil back at his anger as he hits the arms of the chair and jumps up to pace.

Your bottom lip is between your teeth, and you want to say more, but you can't. Not when he's like this and you're too angry — nothing productive would come of it.

Instead, you stand. "I think I should go," you say, your voice is shaking and you shove your hands into the jacket pockets so he can't see just how upset you really are.

Luke pales and stops pacing, he looks at you with worried eyes, and you see it all there in those eyes: The pain, the anger, the fear, but you can't stay.

"Alex, you don't have to."

You shake your head, biting your lip to try and compose yourself, and then say, "I don't want to discuss it like this." You take a deep, sharp breath, "we can talk later."

Luke gives you a look that's half pleading, half defensive, his eyes guarded. "I won't change my mind," he promises.

It's his life, and you know that and maybe school isn't "more", and maybe Sunset Curve will be international and you'll be wallpapering your house with hundred dollar bills, but you force yourself to nod and kiss his cheek before leaving.

You sometimes wish you'd known then that in the end, it hadn't mattered anyway.

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School is hard without Luke. You love Reggie and Bobby like brothers, but they aren't Luke. You get easily fed up with how almost unrealistically dumb Reggie can be, but then over how much of an asshole about things Bobby can be.

Luke laughs about it one night in the studio. You're both cuddled together on the couch, and it's

near the end of January and the studio is almost ice-cold, even for LA standards. You're snuggled at his side under a heavy blanket, and Luke goes quiet suddenly and begins to play with your hand.

"I don't miss it — school," and you tense, but Luke squeezes your hand. "I miss you, miss the boys... it's more lonely than I imagined it would be."

You hug him closer and he sighs, wrapping you up. "I just wish life didn't have to suck so much."

You can't help but laugh, "I wish it didn't either."

And then, against your better judgment, you fall asleep beside him.

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There's so much sunlight that it wakes you up the next morning. You groan into something hard, and you're disoriented. You always shut your shades and curtains at night, so when you push yourself up and feel something hard, but skin-like, you let out a cry and bash heads with Luke, whose torso you'd pushed on and woke up.

You freeze in between the groaning of pain and look at him. Luke!

You fly up and see the studio and curse, falling out of the couch, getting tangled in the blanket, and resisting the urge to cry hysterically.

"It's almost eight o'clock!" Luke says in a panic, and you could die as you scramble for the phone. There's a slim chance you could catch Allana, or even by the sheer grace of God, Alicia, and you could get away with it, but the person who answers is your mother.

"Hello?" and she sounds worried but hopeful, and you slam the phone down on the hanger.

“Shit!” you curse, and Luke runs over to your side, but you’re so frantic you brush past him in an angry rush.

“Shit! Shit! Shit! FUCK!” you swear, pacing because it’s inevitable that life as you’ve known it is completely over.

You contemplate not going home, but you know you have to face the music. Luke says he’ll go with you, which you’re grateful for, despite knowing you should go alone.

You both grab your bikes and when you’re halfway home, you stop and sit on the sidewalk and sob with your head on your knees.

“I’m scared,” you admit to Luke, and he holds you tight, letting you sob into his heavy jacket, rubbing soothing circles along your back.

He doesn’t tell you it’s going to be okay, because you both know it’s lies, but you let yourself cry before braving whatever reality will greet you at home.

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When you make it to your street, you both kiss briefly before you ride off. You know he’ll wait, you know there’s a chance he’ll sneak into your room like he used to, and it scares you, but it also gives you a sense of peace in the back of your mind as you ride off.

When you enter your house, you’ve barely cleared the threshold before a hand is wrapped in your hair.

“Where were you?” your dad screams in your face, and you can hear Allana and Alicia cry out, but it’s all background noise to the unexpected pain and roar in your ears.

He shakes you by the roots of your hair. “*WHERE WERE YOU?!*”

“Kurt!” your mother shouts, but you’re disoriented and it’s dizzying to be this close to him and be in this much pain. “Kurt, stop! Please!”

“Daddy, don’t!”

But you struggle to hear it, to see your dad, who is centimeters from your face.

“Bobby,” you choke out and gasp for air when he finally releases you.

There’s a loud *crack!* and you’re on the floor, dazed. Your cheek is throbbing and your teeth rattle from the punch.

You can see Allana and Alicia make moves to run to you, but your mother grabs them forcefully. “No!” she hisses.

You touch your cheek and the whole house is dead silent as if even the walls are holding their breath to see what will happen now.

Your father’s face is almost purple from his rage. “You snuck out for *that band*,” and you can’t even defend it out of fear, and you think of Reggie with his dad.

“*ANSWER ME!*”

“Yes!” you say back, unable to look at him, and he towers over you, grabs your hair again, and makes you look at him.

You never gave much thought to Heaven and Hell, not really. You knew people said being gay was a sin, but it was never listed in the seven deadly ones, and death seemed too far away to worry about salvation, anyway.

All you knew to do was to be a good person and hope for the best, but Hell had always been your parents, and you saw fire and brimstone in your father’s eyes as he grabbed you.

“Look at me when I talk to you, boy!” he says so viciously that spittle flies into your face. “What were you doing?” he asks dangerously.

“Nothing, we —“ he shakes your head so hard your eyes roll back.

“I said: “*What were you doing*”?”

You think of a million excuses. You blurt out, “We were practicing!”

He throws your hair away and you manage to catch yourself before you fall.

“Kurt, please!” your mom croaks out again.

“Shut up, June!” your dad snarls and you’ve never heard him talk like this to her before. Actually, you’ve never seen him this way before, even when he threatens you or Allana.

With your parents, it was a game of chess you were *always* going to lose. They played in mind games, guilt, fear, but this?

“You live under *my* roof,” your dad seethes in your face. “You live by *my* rules. You live by *my* standards!” He’s bent down to say it all inches from your face. “I better *never* catch you doing that ever again, you hear me, boy!? Or I’ll whip you so hard your ass will never see skin again! *Got it?!*”

You nod furiously.

“I said: “You got it”?”

“Y-yes, sir!”

There’s a pause as he eyes you. “Now get your ass upstairs. I better not see you until Monday

morning. Do you understand?"

You nod and try to take the stairs as fast as you can. You're shaking, and your vision is blurry, but when you make it to your room, it's like someone's dropped ice water on your head.

Luke is sitting on your desk chair, thumbing through a book and it scares you because of it being so unexpected, but also because you doubt downstairs is truly over.

"Oh my god! What happened?" Luke says before you can tell him to leave. He's out of the chair, book crashing to the floor, and he's cupping your chin to look at the bruise blossoming under your eye.

You see the fire in Luke's eyes, his protectiveness, and you ease away.

"Your dad did this?" he seethes, tracing his thumb under it, making you wince in, not only pain but at the question. It makes you close your eyes and force the tears to keep at bay.

"Please go, it's not a good time," you whisper.

"Like hell it is! Come with me," he pleads.

You give him a horrified look, "You think I'd leave my sisters alone here?"

"Alex, your dad gave you a black eye!" Luke hisses, trying to keep his voice low, but they raise near the end and you shush him fearfully.

"If I leave now, he'll kill me," you say, and it doesn't feel like an exaggeration.

Luke cups your face gently, and you put your hands gently on top of his, and you want to shove him away. You're so fucking tired, and you're scared, and you can't bring yourself to forsake this moment of comfort, but you should have.

You knew it before the gentle knock on your door, and you knew it before the creak of the door

being opened.

There was nothing either of you could do — it was like time stood still and you were watching from the outside as your mother timidly said your name and gasped.

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**Author's Note:** I read a fic this year where the Author's Notes were called "Sanity Updates" and I need you all to know that that's a mood and to consider these notes as an update on lack of sanity.

The way I hate that this chapter is split, and this story has one extra chapter just sends me into cool fury at myself because I realized partially through that I realized 1995 is the end, but like 1995 was like *the end* for twenty-five years... anyway. So I can't just cram it all in, this chapter is over 8k long, and that's a lot and what happens next doesn't deserve to be rushed. So if you feel as betrayed as I am, I didn't lie to you nor myself, this story lied to us. We are all victims here.

As forever and always, this fic is dedicated to Halle and Terri. I love you both so much, thank you for letting me cry about the injustice of this fic. Love you all, thank you for your likes and comments, you're beautiful people. I've begun working on the next chapter so hopefully, we'll all be seeing it soon!



**Disclaimer:** I don't own Julie and the Phantoms.

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*you and i were drifting in the starry skies, getting lost in the ashes of our broken lives*

— Sunset Curve, “Get Lost” from the Sunset Curve 1994 Demo.

There are moments you reflect on as a ghost, when Luke and Reggie are away and your mind just races. You can see the pivotal moments that created the domino effect that lead to your death. When you're alive, death is inevitable. One day you will be there, the next, you won't.

It's an ending that, in a perfect world, doesn't happen to three seventeen-year-olds who eat hotdogs two hours before the biggest gig in their would-be-careers, if Bobby's life hadn't proven that much. But for you three, death wasn't the end — for you, death was as if someone was writing you, got bored, shelved you, and picked you back up to throw you into a new plot entirely.

Even though the black room had only felt like an hour, there are things that happened, that was said, that it would be impossible for it to have only been an hour. Neither you, Luke, nor Reggie had really changed, but you knew things now that you hadn't in life about the two boys, and then there were things they had learned about you, too.

The one moment your brain refuses to let go of is Luke being up in your room and your mother's gasp.

“Alexander, what are you doing?” she hisses quietly as she comes into the room and shuts the door

quietly behind her.

Your mom is... it takes you a death sentence to realize she looks scared, panicked, and when this realization comes to you, it takes you telling Julie about it months later for you to see her love.

Your mother moves quickly, shoving Luke's hands away and grabbing yours, the grip is so tight that later you'll see bruises.

"What is he doing here? What is going on?"

Your mouth is dry, and you open your mouth, but nothing comes out. Your breath is shallow and your heart races as you watch everything unfold.

Somehow, your mom does the sign of the cross, and you feel sick as the situation truly hits you.

"Mom, we —" your eyes dart to Luke, who is holding in years of built-up anger for this woman's treatment of you, Allana, and even baby Alicia. You see how deep and protective this rage is in his blue-green eyes, and you shift your weight nervously. There's *too* much for one tiny space, and the last thing you want is your dad involved.

There are no excuses that come quick enough. None anyone could really say to brush off two boys in a room cupping one's face, but God didn't you wish for one. The worst part is that it's Luke for another reason. Luke isn't as much a missing person as he is a missing minor, making this whole thing that much worse. The situation of Luke just hiding out would be mortifying enough for June Mercer and her respectable image, but what she'd walked in on was intimate and raw — it was you and Luke, the rest of the world be damned. If only life could ever be that simple, where love was enough and being young meant being happy, like adults meant when they said things like, "you're *young*, what do you have to worry about?"

*Everything.*

You had always felt like the world had been placed upon your scrawny back, but because you were youthful, you should handle it like a weathered adult and never complain.

"He was —" you try again, but you can't grasp for the lies you used to have. That teen defiance, you've realized too late, was all hot air and gusto when no eyes were on you.

“What if your father had come in?” she hisses, her voice so low you mistook her panic for anger, and there are tears running down her cheeks, and when you think of those tears, you wonder if your mother knew then, or even be then.

This neither gives you peace or clarity, but it’s something you desperately need to know.

“Mrs. Mercer, we —“

“You don’t speak to me!” your mother snaps viciously at Luke, but her voice never raises and she pauses to listen. “I don’t know what I saw,” she says coldly, the mother you’ve always known sliding back into place. “You,” she turns to Luke with his messy bedhead and wrinkled clothes, and you think you can hear Luke’s teeth grind at the disgusted look she gives him, “get out of here and leave my son alone.”

Your heart clenches. “Mom, don’t —“

“Alex,” she snaps, but then you hear it and she hears it, and all three of you go pale when the noise hits you full-on: The sound of heavy boots on the staircase.

Your mom is frantic as she tells you both to stay and leaves the room. You look at Luke, and he looks at the window.

You can hear your mother stalling, but that day it didn’t register as her trying to help you, and if Luke and you had been smarter, he would’ve hidden in your closet, but instead your dad walks in to Luke nearly out the window and onto the tree.

It couldn’t have lasted longer than a few seconds, but the pause that followed your father’s entrance stretches for so long and the air crackles as he seems to explode with rage.

He makes a grab for you, but your mother desperately grabs his arm, and when he jerks away, June stumbles and catches herself on your dresser.

“Kurt, please! Please, stop!”

You're surprised when your dad does, going to your mother's side, making sure she's okay. She's crying, but you can't determine if it's from fear or pain, but your eyes cut to Luke, who, despite having paled to what he's witnessed, looks ready to fight. The whole situation sends shivers down your spine.

Your dad turns his own cold blue eyes to Luke, "Get. Out!" Though it's low and menacing, to you, it feels sharp and loud, like a gunshot.

Luke looks at you, and you're pleading with him to leave. He looks torn at the seams, because he knows you won't leave with him, but that leaving you is wrong.

Sometimes in life, the right choices masquerade as cowardice, and when you nod, he seems to crumble.

"Go, Luke," your mother says, though it sounds a bit pleading, and you know she's scared.

You know Luke wants to touch you and assure you the things he can't: We'll be okay, everything will be fine — and it makes you want to cry. He's so close to you, but he may as well be on the moon for as far away he feels when he leaves.

Your dad is red-faced and angry, and you wonder if he'll beat you to death. Instead, your dad says, "Why was he here? Was that who you were with?!"

Your tongue is stuck to the roof of your mouth, and you think you have an actual heart attack from the way it's beating inside your chest.

"*ANSWER ME!*" he shouts.

It takes every microcell you have to look up into his eyes and whisper the shameful, "Yes." The shame tastes like betrayal and bile. You're not ashamed of your love, you never fear it. You hate them for making you feel both about Luke.

Your mom looks at you, and you see her begging something, but you don't know what.

With shaking hands, you hold your father's disgusted gaze and he goes, "You're one of them, aren't you, boy? A disgusting —"

You flinch at the slur. You've heard your dad say it your whole life, had felt the pain and anger when he used it, but this is personal and it's different.

"No," you say in rejection to the word. "I'm —" and you realize that saying it is permanent. You will never be the Alex you once were, and a piece of you thrums with the longing to shed him, to become brand new. "I'm gay."

Your dad's look breaks you, and you wish it could just hurt — it was inevitable, but somewhere deep down, you were hoping for something better, or maybe it's just a tough pill to swallow: You can never prepare your heart for pain. Despite having your whole life to prepare, knowing that the love your parents had was conditional, you realize then that you'd never imagined what it would be like to lose it.

Their love had been like an imaginary friend: Useless, unhelpful, and a bit ludicrous, but it had been something. Now, without it, you saw your life stretched before you, and it was worse than any growing pain imaginable. It felt worse than being alone in the world. It was like being in a crowd of faceless people, and you just stood frozen, unsure who could help — who would help as the door of another life slammed closed behind you, barring you from ever going back.

The fury your dad had in his eyes now is scarier. It's cold, as if someone had poured water on a forest fire and you were left to survey the smokey damage.

"You are no son of mine," he spits. "I want you out!"

*And there it is*, you think bitterly, and you can't even cry about it. It doesn't hurt. This part just feels inevitable.

"No!" your mom cries out and you both turn and look at her in shock.

Your mom is someone people would consider beautiful. She has thick, strawberry blonde hair that many people mistake for red, a cute little button nose that Allana had inherited, and a large, but elegant mouth that was distinctly Alicia's, but without the single dimple on her right cheek. She was average height, shorter than you know, but you'd never noticed until then, and at one time had

been the Homecoming Queen. You look at her now as if you'd never really seen her, and your dad blinks, and his mouth pulls down angrily.

"June," he warns, and you are surprised to find out that you're ready to protect your mother, even though you know you haven't a chance in hell.

Your mother cuts her eyes to you and she's pleading with you before her normal icy demeanor slides into place. "Kurt, be sensible, please!" she snaps, and you're surprised she doesn't flick her hair off her shoulder as Allana sometimes does when she gets this tone. "He's sixteen, what would people say if we threw him out? They could get the police involved!"

It's like she's punching you in the heart, how she's boiled this down to be about *them*. No, of course, they can't throw you out! They have an image to maintain of the All American Family!

Your dad hesitates. This never occurred to him, and he casts you a disdainful look.

You're basically shit on his shoes now.

*So much for being a man!* You think bitterly as you cross your arms around your middle, protecting yourself from them.

Finally, your dad lets out a long, drawn-out sigh. "Fine. Fine!" The second is said with more force and resentment. "You can live here, but that is it!"

You go cold. What does that mean? But your father storms out, his anger scorching the earth you stood upon, and your mother lingers. You think she's going to say something, but instead, she leaves.

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You hear the door open again and hear your sisters come in as you lay in your bed. You hadn't dared gone to them, not wanting to risk their safety, and you trust Allana's judgment. When you sit up, Allana pales. Both girls are as white as ghosts and have matching bloodshot, puffy eyes, and they go to you, Alicia in a run where she launches herself into you, and you nearly drop her. Allana, however, is slow and hesitant, understanding the severity of the situation.

You can tell Allana is struggling not to sob, but Alicia is eight and hasn't learned such self-control as she openly wails on your shoulder and you comfort her with soothing backrubs, assuring her everything is okay.

Allana locks eyes with you, and her chin quivers. You throw an arm around her and the three of you huddle together, crying, and you both sandwich Alicia in tears and love.

"I-I was s-s-so scared!" Allana cries, touching your black eye gently, but you stifle a wince and take her hand.

"I'm fine. We're fine!" Because you could stay with them, be with them, and at the time, that's all that mattered. You didn't know the next domino had fallen and that the sand for you was running out. Your sisters were safe, and honestly, that's all you could find room in yourself to honestly care about.

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It's a true testament to Luke's unwavering love and loyalty when he finds you at school. He is almost invisible in his baggy clothes, and when he's at your locker, you can tell, like you, he's been crying.

You jump a bit and he tries to flash you a smile, but it's fragile and full of guilt and self-hatred, and you both almost burst into tears when you lock the door of an empty classroom.

"Are you and your sisters okay?" he chokes out, and you can see how yesterday he must've torn himself up about this and you hold him, and bury your face in his hair. If this moment hadn't been so heavy, you would have made a comment about dirty hair, or his need of a haircut, but there's no room for humor between you.

“We’re fine,” you assure, holding him tight. “Everything’s fine.”

He pulls back, disbelieving your words as he searches your face for a lie. His oceanic eyes narrow in suspicion. “What happened?”

When you finish the story, Luke’s jaw is dropped and he’s dazed and a bit horrified. “What does that mean? You live there, but that’s all?”

You shrug. You didn’t know, not even then. Allana had snuck you up a tiny plate of food, mostly because she was afraid of what your dad would do if he saw you again, and that morning you’d grabbed an apple and left as fast as Alicia and Allana would go.

It hung like an ominous cloud, because you could come home and now have a towel to sleep on in the basement, or now have to pay rent and food — you didn’t know, but you didn’t want to burden Luke with your fears. He was living in a garage, and off granola bars as far as you could tell, despite Mrs. Haynes trying to get him to eat with them. Luke had too much pride to live off of others for free, even if he was just a child and it was his right to have the basic necessities.

You knew you’d been raised on these same principles, to be offended and shamed by help or “handouts”, as if only filth fell on hard times and hard times could happen to anyone.

It made you sad, and you vowed to raise your kids to not believe this, and to whittle this from Allana and Alicia’s minds.

“I guess I’ll find out tonight,” you say trying to sound easy and cool, and not as if this wasn’t a massive source of stress in your life. Luke isn’t fooled based on the look he shoots you, and you have to look away.

“Promise me, Alex, that you’ll leave if it gets bad,” he pleads, and you can hear how close he is to crying.

You *can’t* promise him that. Even if you had to, you couldn’t.

When Alicia had been born, you’d been nine. Your mom had had a hard pregnancy — all the



adults had said so. You hadn't known then what it had meant, but then Alicia had been born almost three months premature.

Words like "lucky", "sick", "weak heart" had been used to describe your baby sister, who had one of the strongest hearts you'd ever known.

You'd watch her obsessively in the NICU window when your parents had allowed you to come, as if you alone could've cured her, and by some miracle, Alicia had lived. When you held her, and she'd gummed your finger in her tiny mouth, you'd cried.

There was something in you that made your sisters your whole world. You didn't know if it was the whole "being a man" bullshit or if it was because you were the oldest one, or maybe your heart loved too intensely, but the thought of something happening and you being safe with Luke, it made your whole body go cold at the sheer thought of it all.

"You don't understand," you say and Luke gives you a hurt look, and you know it was kind of a shitty thing to say.

Sunset Curve *was* family. Four boys, four brothers, or soulmates, but there was something drastically different about your sisters, regardless of brotherhood. It was something you couldn't explain, but knew, without a single doubt, that it was something Reggie would understand. Sometimes, your blood was honestly thicker than water, even if it was to your detriment.

When Luke leaves, you've missed your morning classes and wish you could stay in the band room and hit the drums. You used to hate the drums because you sucked at them, and now, you were one of the best drummers in the county. You can't even believe your eleven-year-old self, or Luke, or the men you thought you were going to become. It's all you think about in civics — that time had shaped you, molded you into someone the boy who had sat in the music room hating sucking at the drums probably wouldn't recognize you, and maybe you wouldn't recognize your twenty-five-year-old self when you looked back now. Then your teacher calls on you, and you realize civics probably isn't the place for an internal crisis.

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That night at dinner, your parents ignore you. And not in ways of questions or passive jabs like, “Allana, tell Alex to pass the salt” when you sit at their shoulder. No, it’s nothing like that.

Your chair is still there, Allana set the table, so you do have a plate, cup, and silverware. When you sit down, your parents don’t object to it, and Allana hands you the peas and no one says anything. All three of you eye your parents when you ease the fork to your mouth hesitantly.

Instead of your father taking the fork through your skull or something, they ask Allana and Alicia questions about their grades, their homework, and your dad lectures Allana on her C in algebra, all the while never flicking their eyes your way.

At first, you feel a slight weight shift from your shoulders. Are they simply not going to bother you — even your dad? If the answer was yes, you were sure you could’ve done a series of backflips, because how lucky could you be?

And then the weight, plus a fear the size of a herd of elephants is placed upon your shoulders because you *weren’t* that lucky. At all. There was a catch, and maybe all it was was psychological warfare, but now, even the *thought* of a creek on the floorboards had you cowering.

What you’d call the fairly logical side tried to reason that not even your parents could be that cruel, but then again, your dad was a former marine — he use to have men break rocks into smaller rocks, this was (*could!*) be in the family of that. *Right?!*

If you were Allana Mercer, however, she thought it was as crazy as saying the moon landing was a hoax. The younger blonde girl didn’t have the patience for nonsense, and it was probably why Alicia had always preferred you for make-believe.

“Just think of yourself as being off the hook,” she’d said as they’d left school a few weeks later, heading to get Alicia from the elementary school. Allana flicked her long hair from her shoulder impatiently, “So they never talk to you again? Big deal! I call that a blessing, Alex.”

You look down at her shoes for distraction. She has on white go-go boots that she scored from Second Chance. Normally, she hides them in her backpack and wears the kiddie shoes your mother buys for her, like Mary-Janes and saddle shoes, you don’t comment on them, but you pray you hadn’t inspired her to be rebellious.

“You saw how dad was,” you mutter to her boots.

She pales and looks away in shame, and you wish you hadn’t said anything.

“I’m just saying it doesn’t seem so bad,” she, too, mutters, and you can hear her jealousy.

You can’t exactly blame her. Allana will be fifteen in August, and being a teenager is hard enough without the family you have, but Allana, despite what your parents think, isn’t stupid. She got decent grades, and it probably sucked to be the middle child — the forgotten one, especially between two seemingly smarter and more talented siblings, but it *wasn’t* true. Sure, Alicia, at just eight, was smart and sturdy and put all who knew her to shame with her tender, but strong heart. Yes, you got good grades, but not for a love of school or loftier ambitions that required these things. You got A’s because you *had* to, but you drummed because you *loved* it. You felt at home behind your drums, you were at peace.

Allana had fashion, and while many would roll their eyes at something so feminine, Allana was simply brilliant at what she could do, and yeah, her sewing was shoddy, but she was fourteen and would learn.

Her jealousy made you ache, but what exactly could you say?

“I’m just anxious. I can’t exactly trust them,” you say as you kick a broken bit of sidewalk.

Allana looks down, and even though she says nothing, you know she agrees.

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By mid-February, everything has a hopeless tinge around the edges. You’re now a server, Luke plays at the pier daily and does odd jobs that never makes him more than ten dollars, and everything feels like it’s falling apart.

It’s a cynical way to think about it, you guess, but you nearly hate everyone.

People who want extra Parmigiano (said in a fake Italian accent) make you want to scream. Teachers and their essays, Luke and his unwavering hope, Reggie's naivety, Bobby's fellow cynicism — you hate it all. You're exhausted and annoyed by existing, and above all, you truly think you hate your parents.

You thought you hated them before, but this feeling is like a wound gone infected. It's slowly killing you, but there's no way to cut it from yourself. This infection seeps into everything, but the worst is how it affects the band, Luke, Reggie, and Bobby separately... especially Luke.

Luke is obsessive with Sunset Curve's success, and maybe before the shit hit the fan you would've loved his dedication, but now you see it as obnoxious and inconsiderate. You hate yourself for resenting him.

Luke knows something's changed, and he tries to be good and ask about home, Allana, and Alicia, but you're annoyed that he's skirting the real questions and you punish him for it.

*Why?* You find yourself constantly asking yourself when you see the hurt looks or the slump of his shoulders. *Why can't I be nice, or talk to him?*

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"You and Luke aren't going to break up, right?" Allana asks near the end of February when she overhears the end of your conversation with Luke.

You knew you sounded irritated and bordering rude during the call, but the question stuns you.

"No! Why?" you ask, almost suspiciously as if Luke would confide in your fourteen-year-old sister.

Allana gives you a piercing look. "Well, you've been fucking shitty to everyone, and I'm surprised Luke isn't the exception."

You look away in shame and fidget with a notebook on the table holding the phone. “I haven’t meant to.” Then you look up, “I haven’t been that way to you guys, right?” you ask her anxiously, searching her face.

Allana shrugs. “Not mean, just... quiet. I’m worried about you.”

She says the last part quietly and so vulnerably that you feel almost like you’ve failed your one job. You move a cup full of pens and you wish you could be a better brother, human — you wish you didn’t ruin everything.

“Alex?” Allana whispers, and you realize she’s right beside you, touching your wrist gently. You realize you’re crying and she freezes, then her arms are suddenly around you, and you’re sobbing into her hair.

She squeezes you hard, and when all’s said and done, you’re on the floor and her head is on your shoulder and your head is atop of her’s.

“You can be such an emotional doofus sometimes,” she chides teasingly and you playfully nudge her. You’re both quiet for a moment before she says, “I think you should call Luke back and apologize.”

You nod and she leaves, and when you call the studio, you get the answering machine and hang up. You should apologize in person, anyway.

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“A break?” Luke whispers, as if saying this concept higher than that would make it real.

You hadn’t meant to ask for one. You didn’t even know if you wanted one, but once the words were out of your mouth, you agreed with whatever part of yourself had you saying them. You both needed an emotional break, between Luke’s drama and yours it was killing you both metaphorically at the time. *Another thing robbed*, you’d later think bitterly.

The love hasn't faded or dimmed for you. Luke made you burn with passion, not sexually, but for the things you loved: Music, love in general, happiness, being a better drummer, better songwriter, better writer of music! He made you strive to be better, to want better, and in life, it was rare to find someone you could love like Luke, but his love could be exhausting, and you hated yourself for letting the flame run low, for being upset, and defensive, for not being someone worthy.

“Yeah,” you say, your voice thick with sadness and you feel shame for crying. You were hurting him, what right did you have to tears?

Luke swallowed, and you can see in the forward pitch of his shoulders and the sadness on his handsome face that he's searching and finding all the personal blame in this.

You touch him, then recoil in guilt, but Luke grabs your hand before it gets too far away, and when he looks at you, his eyes plead with you to stay and not to shut him out, not to leave him alone. You squeeze his hand and he somehow relaxes, like he'd been holding his breath.

“Neither of us did anything wrong,” you say, because it's true! Neither of you had many choices of how your life went, and all either of you wanted was to be accepted and happy, but it was everyone else who made things hard and complex. “I'm not good for you right now, and if I'm being a bit honest, maybe you're not good for me either right now.”

Luke's face crumbles and you want to cry. “You're the best thing for me!” he pleads, forgoing his pride and you hate yourself for being the mature one, the parental figure first — the protector.

You shake your head. “It's not fair to punish you, but I can't hurt you like that. I love you too much to be so shitty to you.”

You wish you were wise, even if your actions are noble and mature.

If you were wise you could've voiced everything better, explained that you were angry at the world, but knew it was easier to be mad at him, at Reggie, at Bobby — you'd know that it was this way because you knew their love was unconditional and sturdy, and it was easier to take things out on that type of love. If you were wise, you could explain that Luke's obsession with The Orpheum and producers were not for them, but as a way to *maybe* settle the score with Emily, but more for permission to go home as someone worthy, not as a cruel son who'd left in a fit of rage.

But you're sixteen, and you are not philosophical. You're just a kid who has a sense of right and wrong, and you know Luke holds things too close, like a child holding a butterfly, unaware of its strength or the delicate nature of things. Despite everything, that might be your favorite part about Luke: His unyielding, child-like loyalty.

Luke is crying quietly. His hands flex in and out of fists, and finally, he wipes his face, nods, and goes up to the loft.

You leave without a word, and on the bus ride home, you feel yourself finally cry with your head pressed to the glass.

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The Monday after the breakup, Reggie tiptoes around you. Everything that can lead back to Luke has seemingly vanished from his vocabulary. You're touched by it, but also for some reason, a bit resentful. After all, you'd been the one to push pause on things, right? What right did you have to such sensitivity?

Bobby, however, openly thinks you're an idiot.

"Not working it out is cowardly," he accuses.

"Well there's nothing to work out — it's not even about us."

Bobby thinks that's a lame, fortune cookie excuse, but you don't think shit like "someday you'll understand" because you don't think there's a lesson to be had, but Bobby looks back, and maybe you should feel comfort that in his own way, he did understand now.

But then, especially for Bobby, it was easy for things to be black and white.

Maybe because you were gay, but also from a conservative family that life wasn't that way. You wanted to hate them, but couldn't really, and at Bobby's accusations you wanted to hate him, but couldn't.

Allana, however, is openly devastated. She tries not to cry, but then she cries over the idea of Luke ostracizing her and runs to her room. Alicia curls in a ball on your lap, mourning like a child of divorce, and maybe you'd find these things funny if they weren't such testaments to how broken your family is.

Later that week, though, Allana confronts you. She brings in freshly baked cookies and a glass of ice-cold milk, and you can almost taste the interrogation she's about to unleash.

"Why did you end things?" she asks as she stretches out on the bed beside you.

You sigh and close your journal. You suck at songwriting, anyway.

"We didn't break up, it's a break." She rolls her eyes. "But I did it because it's the right thing to do."

She gives you a sour look and you sigh before continuing. "Lana, I'm not —" you hesitate, trying not to eye her.

You don't want to lighten the load on your shoulders by placing some on her's. She's fifteen and it feels wrong, but she goads you.

"You're not what?" she asks, her head tilted and blue eyes narrowed with suspicion, but you can see the love and compassion in them, too.

"Right now I'm just not in a good place, and neither is Luke."

Allana's face comes alive with panic, but before she can so much as take a breath, you say, "Yeah, it's been a bit hard, but I'll be fine, and so will he. We just need a break from something, A. It's just a breather."



It's a lie by omission, but you decide if all parents can give some white lies like Santa and the Tooth Fairy, then you can lie about where you are mentally to not worry your younger sister.

"I just don't want us to be ruined by drama. Especially not mine, y'know?"

Allana hesitates, then slowly nods after a long, extended moment of searching your face. Her bottom lip is between her teeth, and you know she's resisting the urge to ask something she thinks might upset you.

If you were the brother you wanted to be, you would've encouraged her to ask, but you're tired of telling lies and half-truths, so eventually, after a long and uncharacteristic period of silence between the two of you, she leaves behind the milk and cookies, taking the hint to leave. When you nap, you don't rest. You have interconnecting flashes of the band breaking up, Allana missing and Alicia being too far away to reach, and you perceive that as danger. When you finally wake, you're covered in sweat and your heart is beating too fast. You open your window and there's a sharp coldness you feel in your bones.

You lean your head out and close your eyes, trying to erase the already fading dream. You don't realize you're crying as you begin to think of before. You wish you could've wished for something other than your time with Luke, but before him, you never had a place to really land before and you miss him.

You angrily clench your hands around the windowsill. You want to scream out the window, to Mitch and Emily, to your parents, and at injustice in general, but instead, you slam the window shut so hard that the glass rattles. You throw yourself back on the bed, trying again for another restless sleep.

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Luke manages to book more gigs. There's a fierce determination in his eyes, and you almost feel sorry for anyone with the nerve to turn him away.

There is this weird duality of gratefulness and resentment that the quiet moments between you and Luke are seemingly over. Reggie and Bobby have made it almost their life's mission to make sure you two are never alone together. You don't really know if it's because you know Luke like the back of your hand, or if you're possibly projecting your feelings onto him, but you can tell he's annoyed by this, too. Whether Reggie and Bobby are doing this to protect you and Luke, or Sunset Curve, you don't know, and you feel guilt for resenting either reason.

When there's one particular day mid-march when Reggie has hay fever and Bobby's mother needed help with something out of her reach, you and Luke find yourselves alone and awkward in the studio. You both fumble with your instruments, and you think of the moments when you'd been too scared to talk to him, when you realized you'd had a crush, that you liked boys, or even when you thought he was just too cool to speak to you. How the hell did life circle back to that?

"How's everything been?" he asks hesitantly. You can tell he's been afraid to ask, how forcibly nonchalant he's made the words.

You inwardly wince at the shrug you give in response, wondering if you and Luke simply forgot to just... be.

"It's been the same, really. They ignore me, and... it's weird," you find yourself saying and you can't find it in you to stop. "All the time I spent wishing they'd leave me alone, and now I find myself wishing that they'd just talk to me again. Funny, huh?" you say with a slight laugh.

Luke looks like that's the furthest thing from funny he's ever heard.

In his eyes, you hear all that he wants to say, but instead, he says, "Allana's told me she's worried about you." That makes you pause.

"You and Allana talk?" you almost mistake the emotion that surges through as jealousy. Maybe in the heat of the moment, you do feel a twinge of jealousy, but instead, you know now that you felt left out. These were two people you told everything to, and you believed that they did the same, especially Allana, and now you feel cut out. You don't know which it hurts more from, this faux betrayal.

Luke nods slowly, "I think after everything, she just needed someone. She called here one night and we just kind of talked.

Maybe it was the sharp twinge of jealousy mixed with a bit of paranoia, but a small betraying piece of who you are feels jaded, like Allana took her shot with Luke. You feel sick and shove the thought away, wishing you'd never let it happen. Allana wasn't the type to do that. Allana, if she loved you, would let her love and devotion destroy her. She loved too much, too recklessly, and going after Luke wouldn't even be an option for her, no matter how much she'd want to.

"I worry about her. All of you," he adds, and you recognize his brotherly concern as your own. You feel sickened by the comfort it gives you.

"I've been shitty," you admit and you realize your throat is tight and that your cheeks are wet.

Luke shakes his head and grabs your shoulders, all hesitation gone. "No, you've been hurt! You're upset, and that's okay, Alex!"

Luke wipes away a few tears with his thumb and you feel yourself falling apart. Luke moves back, looking guilty as he realized the line he's crossed. "Sorry!"

"Don't be," you croak out, wiping at your face with the hem of your shirt.

He looks at you, and there are so many emotions there. "You two would tell me, right? If home wasn't safe..."

You automatically want to say yes. It's such a natural response to it, but you pause and have to think about it, because you know for your sisters, yes — no questions, but yourself... no.

"That's what I thought," he says and sits down. You see just how exhausted he is, and you're sure you're no better.

"Allana would tell you," you say halfheartedly, as if that would put him at ease.

Luke observes the ring on his thumb, twisting it. He doesn't reply, and this act makes you feel small and a bit defensive.

You play with your bracelet, wishing he'd say something. He's not punishing you, and you know that. Luke just has to accept that it is what it is, and you know neither he or the boys can — like you with Reggie. You understand, but you want to shake him, and you wonder if you'd stay like Reggie if you didn't have sisters. Maybe leaving isn't that easy.

When Bobby comes back and senses the tension all he does is heave a heavy, exhausted sigh. God, if only he knew.

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By the end of March, Luke meets Dan. Dan was a nobody who was somehow going to make you all into somebodies. It's the classic downward spiral of a friend of a friend of a cousin of a sister's ex-boyfriend's half brother who wants you guys to audition and play at the Vibe Yellow, the club owned by one of the investors for The Orpheum.

Or, that was how Luke explained the situation at hand in excitement while the three of you sat listening in confusion, blinking at him.

“Guys!” he implores, jumping onto the couch and shaking Bobby, “this is huge!”

“Is it?” you ask, and you're being genuine, still lost on how he knows this person (was he ex-half brother or ex-friend?), but Luke thinks you're being cheeky.

“Yes, you dork!” he says, knowing your hat off.

You grumpily pick it up off the floor, dust it off, and shove it back onto your head with a huffy sigh.

“Luke... this is fucking gibberish as far as I'm concerned,” Bobby says in annoyance as he crosses his arms.

Luke frowns, his mood dampened. “This club,” Luke explains with far less joy, “is basically our foot into The Orpheum.”

“But... how?” Reggie asks, hesitating and looking back and forth fearfully, as if he thinks Luke is seconds away from a mental break.

Luke’s hardened gaze goes away at Reggie’s nervousness, and he sighs and continues as patiently as he can, “Dan knows the bar manager, and if the managers like us, they’ll recommend us to the owner, who is also involved at The Orpheum.”

There’s a long pause before the excitement begins.

It isn’t much — not even a guarantee, but for the four of them who had very little happy news as of late, it may as well have been Christmas come early.

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April of 1995 was the hardest for you. You throw yourself into music, but everything is being dog piled against you at home.

Your parents tell Allana to tell you meals were for family only, and the pizzeria only allows free meals when you work, so now you have to buy cheap meals out because you can’t use the kitchen.

Your trig grade goes from an A to nearly an F, despite trying to concentrate on homework and studying. You buy a pink hoodie and your dad calls you *that* slur, and the acknowledgment makes you lie in bed for two days. You can’t afford to miss shifts, but Allana calls out for you, and then the third day she and Alicia force you out of the house. Allana buys three small chocolate ice cream cones and you both sit in the park while Alicia plays with the other kids on the monkey bars.

You and her sit on the swings, eating your ice cream in silence as her feet drag along the mulch.

“What should I do to help you?” she asks suddenly as she plants her feet firmly on the mulch and

turns to face you with helpless blue eyes.

You startle and nearly drop your cone. “Help with what?” you ask stupidly, your ice cream melting on your hand.

“With how your feeling,” she says, shifting uncomfortably in the swing. “You’re upset, and I’m scared. I don’t know what to do!”

You look down at your shoes in shame.

“You can talk to me, you know... I’m your sister.”

You couldn’t. Not really... Not without feeling like an asshole.

“Alex... you’re still my best friend — it’s still the three of us against them, right?”

You remember the times her voice had a light airiness that children have when conspiring against adults, but you don’t feel it now, and neither does she.

You’ve become the odd man out, just like that, and you feel a tight pain in your chest. You feel so alone in that moment, and you feel a deep shame surge within you. Your sisters are undoubtedly your whole world, but you feel like you’re outside a window and looking in on them — they’re just outside your reach.

“Right?” she says again, and you hear the catch in her breathing and you turn to see that she’s watching you with tear-filled eyes. She looks even younger than Alicia in that moment.

Alicia, you knew, was the one destined for great beauty — everyone said it, as if trying to pit her and Allana against one another, but you never thought about shit like that. You didn’t care if others thought of your sisters as pretty or smart, they were yours and to you, they were perfect. But the thing that strikes you is how *delicate* Allana looks.

Alicia was *tiny*, and she would probably never grow over five feet, but Allana was almost average height and always appeared sturdy, unmovable, but you see what a facade it has been.

Her eyes are dark indigo, like what the bottom of the Arctic should be. She has the same buttery blonde color hair you do, but hers is stick straight, unlike the princess-like hair of Alicia, or the thick, strawberry blonde waves of your mother. Allana's hair is thin and almost sparse looking, and she always wore it long, making her look almost younger. Her face, though heart-shaped, looks breakable now, like her bones were too thin, too small to be allowed. Had she always been this way, or had you just seen her as the strong, fierce girl and built her up from that?

It scares you to not know which Allana is the truth.

You grab her hand, despite it being sticky from melted ice cream. "Of course," you say frantically. "*Always!*"

What a big fucking lie that was...

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May had, not only you climbing the walls, but Luke, Reggie, and Bobby as well.

Sunset Curve's name was basically in lights by the end of April, like a belated birthday gift to Luke.

Anyone who liked music, or four hot boys, lined the sidewalks in droves, desperate for tickets or glances of you guys. At one point Luke, and then Reggie by equal accident — though the dark-haired boy seemed to have enjoyed it much more than Luke, who just found it funny — had caused a mob.

Luke knew he was a good looking, charming guy, but you suspected he often forgot because his arrogance lay more in his talent (and in your opinion, rightfully so!). He had gone up to a group of giggling teenage girls before you could advise against it — lord knew you knew that teenage girls with a single goal could move mountains. Luke had had t-shirts with the clear intention of handing them out, and suddenly you, him, and Bobby had been chased along the strip until by a miracle you lost them.

"Fucking Christ!" Bobby had laughed as he leaned against the door of the building you were all

hiding in. Despite panting, Bobby threw his head back, looking as delighted as you'd ever seen him as he and Luke fist-bumped. You glare, trying hard to catch your breath as you clutched the stitch in your side.

"That wasn't funny!" you snap.

Bobby goes to pinch your cheek, but you slap his hand away.

"Aw, poor wittle Alex," he teases, and you glare harder, eyes basically slits that can barely see him, and then you glare at Luke, who snorts.

"That's what our life's going to be soon," Luke says, his eyes glittering with excitement.

Reggie pouts when he learns about what he's missed, and before a show at the Purple Pelican, he causes his own mini-riot when he walks too close to a crowd.

"I can't believe they like us!" Reggie says when he tells the story later, eyes shining with wonder. "Imagine! I mean, it's us!"

"There's no time for modesty in show biz, Reginald!" Luke says jokingly, and Bobby playfully bows.

When you reflect later, you're glad you're background. There's too much stress involved when that many people care about you. When you fall asleep that night, you're thinking about rabid fangirls and sold out shows, and Luke, laughing and egging everyone on.

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Before life went even more pear-shaped, you're alone with Luke in the studio one night before the end of May. It's not the way it once was — despite the late hour, you're both sitting on the couch, eating a pizza you brought from the end of your shift. You're going to sleep up in the loft, unable to stand being around your parents and their silence, or their disapproving glares — it's weighing on



you in ways you'd never imagined.

You and Luke don't talk about this, though. You can tell he desperately wants to, but instead, you complain about work and school, ask Luke about Dan, and Luke leans his head back against the couch.

"I wrote a song this week," and it's odd, because Luke is always writing music and songs, and has never sound so... insecure before. You raise a brow, waiting for him to continue, more than intrigued.

Luke rakes his nails along the couch, playing with a tiny loose string nervously, unable to look at you. "I don't know how I feel about it," he admits quietly. "I don't even know what to really *do* with it," his eyes are fixed on his hands and their placement on the couch. "I've actually been working on it for a while..."

You don't know what to say. You're afraid that the song might be about you, but then you feel like an asshole, but you don't know what else could make Luke feel this nervous.

Your mind begins flicking through categories and discarding them as soon as they cross your mind: School, his parents, Reggie and Bobby — but you freeze as an unpleasant thought hits you.

It's wrong for it to hurt, but it all just clicks: He's found someone else.

You wilt under the thought. Sure, you'd ended things, but you thought that maybe — no! You want to be *happy* for Luke. You do! He's so full of love, that *of course* this was bound to happen. He wasn't just *your* sun, he was the actual sun. You'd always said people revolved around Luke, whether they wanted to or not. Well, point proven! Point to The Universe!

"C-Can I play it for you?" he asks, nervously stuttering out the words, his cheeks becoming red.

You swallow. You want to say no and get used to the fact he's moved on when you have not, but you feel yourself nod and he gets up to grab his acoustic guitar. He opens a notebook and it's covered in his chicken scrawl, violent cross-outs with far too much ink and force than necessary, torn bits are taken from the paper, and when he begins the first note, you're surprised of how soft and calm the open melody is, and even more shocked that it's about his mother.

Normally, Luke plays the whole song — he is usually open no matter what the song is about, but this song, you can tell that he can't; it's too painful, too raw, and too recent. He stops abruptly, his face red and wet, and he clears his throat, still unable to look over at you.

You gently pick up his notebook and your heart pangs. In a way, you can relate. You know a version of these emotions, and when you put the book down, you find that your face is wet, too.

"I think it's incredible," you tell him gently. Luke makes a choked noise and you hug him. He curls into your shoulder, clutching you tight and he cries. You rub his back soothingly.

"I miss them," he says. You know Luke is lonely — more lonely than you realized. You hold him closer. When he calms down, he pulls away, and you let him. "I'm sorry," he apologizes, mopping his face with his shirt.

You wave it off, and Luke says, "I know this is probably a shitty thing to say, but I'm glad you're here." You beam, knowing Reggie stays often and when you curl up on the blankets in the loft, you find yourself wishing you could stay, but then you banish the thought as you drift asleep, not realizing that for the first time in months you feel safe.

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Your father's hateful mutterings increase throughout the rest of May into June, and between that, the depressive silence from your mother, and paranoia about if he'd do something to you, it wore on your mind and body.

As the school year began to fizzle out into a close, you found this fear mounting inside you. You suppose that you could get a second job, maybe stay out of the house more, until one day in the second week of June, it'd been raining heavily, and Bobby had begun the habit of picking you and Reggie up and dropping you off for a while, and your dad had noticed.

At first, it'd been nothing more than glares and sneers, and then one night he'd gotten drunk.

Alicia had been sitting in your lap as you braided her hair, Allana lay half-sprawled across the bean bag chair she'd dragged in, reading a magazine she'd smuggled into the house, and you have Guns and Roses playing in the background when a glass smashes loudly downstairs. The three of you freeze, looking at one another, and then fearfully at the closed door.

There's yelling downstairs — your dad's voice is filling the house like a miasma, and he's screaming about something or another the three of you normally could ignore.

Your dad got drunk often and vented about you, calling you slurs and other awful things that would make Allana and Alicia sneak in and curl beside you. Allana would whisper about how these things were not true, that your dad was an asshole, but it had *never* been like this.

Alicia is curled against your chest, burying her face against it in fear. You hold her as she trembles in fear, hold Allana as she joins you both, both you and Allana shielding Alicia between you as you eye the door, unsure of what you could do if it opened.

*"I want that — out of here, June! It's diseased, and I won't stand for it anymore! I want it out of our house!"*

You know your mom is saying something, but none of you can hear it, and you're all too terrified to open the door or creep to the stairs.

*"I don't fucking care what they'll think! It's a disease, it'll get the other two! That thing is no child to us!"* your dad thunders and Allana looks up, eyes bright and narrowed, but she shakes her head to you. She grabs your arm and you look at her before she starts to cry. You grab her hand, trying to tell her you're okay as your stomach churns. You think you might be sick.

Will he come up here? Will he pass out?

It goes on for what feels like hours, but your dad must fall asleep on the couch like he sometimes does when he's drunk. You assume your mom has gone to bed, but Alicia's scared whimpers distract you, and finally, she and Allana fall asleep. You can't sleep, and when the sun rises, you still don't feel safe.

School had ended, you have the day off, and when you look in the bathroom mirror hours later, you realize just how powerless you are to stop your dad.

Your face has hollowed, like how Reggie's was when he'd barely had the money for food. You're pale and gaunt, and...

Would it be safer for everyone, even your mom, if you left?

When you see your mother later, before meeting the guys at the pier, the answer is in the faint purple on her cheek, despite her attempt to hide it. It's all the answer you need.

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Alicia burst into your room the next morning, another sleepless night where you contemplated your actions before packing, stopping, crying, packing, pacing, crying — the cycle endless. Alicia freezes as she holds the door, her words dying on her lips.

Her blue eyes are wide, filling with tears and confusion at the sight of your room. Every drawer is opened, the closet is emptied, and everything you own is strewn about with your half-full backpack in the middle of the chaos on the floor.

“Wh-where are y-you g-going?” she asks in a trembling voice, knowing immediately that you're not simply spending the night with Luke.

You look at her, feeling the blood drain from your face, and before you can answer, Allana bounds in.

“Hey, Alex, have you seen my walk —“ but the question dies on her lips, her hands gripped in her hair, frozen in the action of pulling up her hair into a ponytail.

Her hair flops back down as she stares, open-mouthed and Alicia's whimpering on the side, but then she breaks down into quiet sobbing.

“Alex?” Allana asks, looking up at you with a betrayed look on her face.

You were going to tell them, of course. You planned to pull them aside, to make sure they knew the address and phone number of the studio, to understand why you were going this. But this...

“Y-you’re leaving us?!” Allana choked out, a broken sob escaping her.

You think you might just be sick right there from the surge of nerves and emotions, but you squeeze your eyes shut. “I-I can’t stay. It isn’t s-safe.” It takes all you have to get it out, and Allana picks up Alicia, despite her not being much bigger than the younger girl, as Alicia wails “no, Alex, no!” over and over again.

Allana sits on your bed, tears streaming down her pale cheeks with Alicia in her lap. She looks like a girl who has been turned to marble, and you can’t turn away from her.

“I’m sorry,” you whisper out, squeezing your eyes closed.

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You pack, Alicia sits on your bed beside Allana, sniffing and trying to look brave, but Allana is still.

You discard clothes, packing the ones you love, and dismissing anything you second guess on impulse, and finally, you pull out some money and try to give it to Allana. She recoils from it in horror.

“Just in case!” you say, thrusting it at her again.

“I won’t! You need it!” she protests. Her voice is thin, on the verge of hysteria as she stares the precious bills down.

“Please.” You both look at one another, an understanding somehow, despite how young you both are.

This is all you can do for them now.

She hesitates, staring you in the eye, then she slowly reaches for it and takes it with a trembling hand. You zip up your bag, hoisting it and your duffle bag up on your back.

Alicia bursts into horrible sobs again and you pick her up, hugging her tightly.

When you finally leave, they both follow you. Alicia sits on the bottom steps to sob loudly into her knees, Allana standing in front of the staircase, trying not to cry herself. Your dad is at work, but your mom emerges from the kitchen in a floral apron, flour dusting its front and her arms. She looks confused at first, not noticing your bags, just wondering why all her children are crying at the foot of the stairs, then she looks at you and her face goes white and lips thin.

“You’re leaving?” There is no accusation, just acceptance, as if she knew it was only a matter of time.

You give a stiff nod. “Yes.”

She looks at you for a long, long moment, then she nods, turns, and heads back into the kitchen.

Allana is stricken by the coldness, vaguely you are, too. Tightening your hold on the duffle bag draped across your middle, you open the door.

Allana doesn’t let it close behind you as she follows you out, standing on the porch as she watches you grab your bike.

You turn to her and say, “If anything — *ANYTHING* happens, go to the studio with Alicia!”

She looks at you and nods. “I promise!”

You mount your bike as Alicia comes out, but you're pedaling hard as she cries out your name, and you cry the whole way to the studio.

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Luke wraps you in a hug when you enter with your things. He's shocked and pale, with wide eyes as he leads you to the couch, searching you all over.

"I-it w-w-wasn't s-safe," you get out between sobs. Luke doesn't ask you anything as you cry. All he does is rub your back and hold you.

Hours after you've calmed down, Luke brings you a massive mug of coffee and you drink deeply, letting its warmth soothe you.

Luke doesn't prod you for details, but you tell him about your mom's cheek and cry into your mug, ashamed.

"Alex, it's okay," Luke assures you quietly, rubbing your back. "It'll be okay."

Even though neither you nor Luke can see into the future, you allow that to comfort you as you sleep in the loft that night, praying your mother and sisters were safe.

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After a particularly brutal shift later on that June, you come into the loft with aching feet, sauce splattered clothes, and a scowl on your face as Luke, Bobby, and Reggie were waiting with bated breath for your arrival. Luke is practically vibrating with excitement as Bobby looks almost murderous with crossed arms and a scowl even worse than yours from his perch on the lawn chair. Reggie, however, looks anxious as he sat on the couch and played with the Rubik's Cube you'd been anxiously toying with, making all the progress you'd made vanish, since he was nowhere near solving a side of the cube, let alone the whole thing.

"Good! You're home!" Luke exploded like a firework, jumping up from his place beside Reggie where he'd been jittery-legged and wringing his hands with anticipation. He tugs your arm and forces you to take his former place as he stands before you all dramatically. "I have some news!"

"Clearly," you mutter darkly, rubbing the place he grabbed with a glare.

Luke chooses to ignore you and Bobby as he jumps up onto the makeshift table and throws his hands upward toward the ceiling. “We’re playing The Orpheum!” he shouts, his head thrown back.

You can’t remember the moments past that.

You hear screaming, shouting yourself as you jump and hug Reggie. You remember diving into Luke and Reggie’s arms and they hold you up like they’re Johnny Castle and you’re Baby Houseman from Dirty Dancing. Bobby blasts music until his dad angrily storms into the studio and briefly celebrates with you guys before going back to bed, and you have the best sleep of your life that night. When you wake in the morning, you have to pinch yourself because it’s too good to be true, and it’s also your birthday.

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Allana and Alicia come with a cake Allana’s made and a homemade card by Alicia. Luke gave you a mixed cassette tape, and Bobby hands you a new black hat, and Reggie gets you a punch of Reese’s pieces and snickers.

Despite it being one of the best birthdays of your life, the end is bittersweet as Allana drags off a clinging Alicia, tears in her own eyes as Alicia cries. When they leave, you go up to the loft and cry quietly about it, thinking that The Orpheum is the beginning, and soon, the three of you will all be together again.

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You four practice till fingers bled and voices went hoarse, and during that final week of your life, a tear-streaked-faced Allana entered the studio.

Luke had been tuning his guitar and made some excuse to leave, giving Allana an uneasy look before hurrying off into the house.



Your stomach drops at her appearance. “What happened?” you demand anxiously, a surge of protectiveness overcoming you.

Allana shook her head. “I— I—“ She cries and throws her arms around you, crying into your chest.

You hold her, “Allana, Allana,” you say gently, trying to soothe her.

“I-I-I m-miss you!” she cried hard. “Please c-come ho-home!”

You freeze mid-motion, trying to rub circles in her back. “Allana...” you whisper quietly, full of guilt and remorse. “Allana, I can’t do that...”

Allana, still crying, pulls back. Her face is red and blotchy, blue eyes swollen and nose running, and she looks four rather than fourteen.

Tears still streaming, she says, “I can’t be alone with them! Please, come with me! Mom might let you, or I could leave!” She says the last one with so much hope that it feels like a knife to your chest.

“Lana, what about Alicia? We can’t take her, you can’t leave her! Think of what dad could do!” you try and reason with her, your fear rising.

Allana glares, her cheeks becoming darker as she says, “You left us! What about us?! What’s your excuse!?”

“Allana, you know what dad —“

“You left *me* alone with them!” she shouts over you, still crying with her fists clenched at her sides.

“I never wanted to,” you say, your voice unable to go louder than a whisper as you try and hold your own tears at bay. “I didn’t want this!”

She crosses her arms angrily, “You *need* to come home! *I need you!*”

You’re both crying as you shake your head. “Dad his mom! I *can’t* risk you guys like that!”

“*Mom!* You’re worried about *mom?! She doesn’t give a shit* about us, and you know it!”

“What if he came after one of you?!” You shout, and you feel your gut twist violently at the thought.

She swipes angrily at her tears, but she’s too angry to say anything in reply.

“If I go home, it’ll make everything worse,” you say.

Her eyes flash. “You’re such a coward! You left me alone with them, with Alicia, and you get to be *here!* I hate you!”

Her eyes widen as what she says hits her, the remorse clear as day on her face. Those words hit you right in the chest, but surprisingly, you hold yourself together, the pain numbing you like a calm before a storm.

Allana has too much pride to take it back, and behind her, you see Luke come in, his eyes wide.

“A, you don’t mean that,” he says gently, clearly having been listening to this fight. You’re too numb for indignation, and Allana is too angry at you to spare any for Luke.

She turns to him, then back to you. “You’re an awful brother!” she spits spitefully. “I hope you and Luke are happy now,” she finishes and runs out. You can’t even bring yourself to run after her. You stand there, still as a statue with useless tears running down your face, and then you take a shuddering breath as the pain hits you.

Luke touches your arm. “She didn’t mean it! She’s just upset!”

You nod, wipe your eyes, and let out a tiny sob into your wrist mid-swipe before finding a way to

compose. You evade Luke's hugs and touches, the mere thought of being loved or comforted right then is too overwhelming to bear.

Allana was right, after all. After everything, you'd left. She had every right to hate you, to be mad, to potentially never talk to you again.

Evading Luke, you head up to the loft and cry quietly into your comforter and pillows, thinking that Saturday you'd be playing The Orpheum, and soon, your life would change forever.

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**Author's Note:** I mean, he wasn't wrong. His life did change forever! Ah... Well, here we are friends, at the end of the story! Like officially. We still have an epilogue I have to edit, but as for the 90s, they're over. No more brown lipstick or non-live action Powerpuff Girls. Welcome to Hellsville, baby, the epilogue is 2020!

I laugh at that pre-author's note, this chapter is 11,100 words when I had the sheer audacity to tell you all that the last chapter would be far too long to post — and I was right, but like what the hell? I don't know what to tell you guys, this story has a life of its own! Thank you all for the love and support, it makes me cry tears of happiness. As always, this is dedicated to Halle and Terri, who keep me sane when the story becomes too much! Please like and comment, they're always appreciated it! I love you all!

## epilogue.

### epilogue

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**Disclaimer:** I don't own Julie and the Phantoms.

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**March 2020.**

*my life, my life would be real low, zero, flying solo /  
my life, my life would be real low, zero, flying solo without you.*

— Julie and the Phantoms, “Flying Solo.”

“Are they straight washed now?” Julie asks as Bobby — *Trevor’s* version of Long Weekend plays.

You shoot her a confused look from your place on the floor, sprawled across her beanbag chair. Sometimes, Julie said the weirdest shit. But then again, so did Willie. It was hard to rectify that you’d missed twenty-five years of culture and that in another timeline — assuming that if ghosts existed, so did multiple timelines — you were in your forties. That made you a bit uncomfortable. But, then again, so did being a ghost. It was “a part of the culture” as Willie would say. Or you thought.

To be honest, the lingo went above your head most of the time.

“You know, has the queer love Luke wrote been erased because Trevor is a straight man?” she clarified, realizing you didn’t get it.

You hadn’t even thought of that, and you felt an anger light inside you. “I don’t know,” you say honestly. “The music was *ours*. Once, anyways...” you add bitterly.

Julie sits up in her bed, “It still is!” Her voice is fierce and protective. Julie Molina had grown on you, and surprisingly, the three of you had grown on her, too. It was surprising that it had been only a few weeks since you had all performed Bright. Even stranger, the weeks since you’d all returned, or whatever. There was no real word for what the three of you had done, and Willie had never heard of ghosts vanishing just to reappear. Nor had he heard of ghosts who could be visible to lifers without Caleb’s help. You three were anomalies. It made you anxious, so you chose not to dwell on it when other things could distract you.

The thing Willie had said that day lingered in the back of your mind: Unfinished business... Was it really Trevor and the music like Luke thought, or was it — you refused to go there. You’d been avoiding it like the plague and focused on Julie, despite that hurting, too.

Julie reminded you so much of your sisters that it made an ache inside you. She had Alicia’s sweetness and Allana’s passion, and sometimes you’d pretend like it was before. Julie liked soap operas, though the ones of nowadays were so... different. They were better than the years of Days of Our Lives and The Bold and the Beautiful. She watched specific ones, like Pretty Little Liars, which was so awful that it was good, and The Secret Life of the American teenager, which was just plain awful, but Julie had confessed her favorites had dead parents or that she watched with her mother. “*You’d love Gilmore Girls,*” she’d said. “*My aunt’s been wanting me to rewatch it. We were almost done before —*” but her voice had broke and you’d tried to comfort her, but found your hand only passed through her. You could relate to that pain, but you didn’t lament on the fact that you were missing people, too. That you, too, were in pain.

Instead, you sighed and rolled over to face her. “I liked that song you wrote, for Flynn,” you say. “It reminded me of something Luke would write.”

Julie went pink and shot you a wide grin. You could see why Luke liked her so much, and you were surprised that you weren’t jealous. You were actually quite curious if they were soulmates — if Willie was yours. Allana had believed in all that, and you’d always rolled your eyes, but it made a bit of sense, really. You felt connected to Julie, to Reggie, to Luke and Willie. Clearly, there had to be some merit to the idea for it to have existed at all, right.

“Really?” She says, her voice awe-struck. “Don’t tell Luke this, but that’s pretty incredible if it’s true! I mean, he technically wrote all my favorite songs,” her eyes glittering with delight at the idea of it.

You laugh. “As if Luke needs an even bigger head.”

Julie snorts, rolling her eyes fondly at Luke.

Bobby — *Trevor's* voice continues to sing out the familiar lyrics that had once brought you all the happiness in the world when Luke had sung them, and you felt your fists curl.

*And all I ever wanted was for you and I to get lost in this place we dreamt of knowing our names /*

*But you and I got lost in our dreams and each other's eyes /*

*Take my hand, babe, come get lost with me and I'll try and show you the world /*

*Get lost with me, and make a new place we could call home*

"I used to love this song," you confess bitterly. "Luke wrote it about us."

Then you cast Julie an uneasy look out the corner of your eye, your heart racing at the confession. Julie, however, looks startled. "You and Luke dated!" Her cheeks were pink and she looked a bit guilty, a bit horrified. "I didn't realize that," she mutters to her purple comforter.

Your heart — if it was still there — sank and you look down at the floor, holding tears at bay. You had never been open in your life, so you hadn't exactly faced much rejection, the worst being your parents and no one else, but this hurt. You hardly knew Julie, but you'd assumed she was okay with it. She listened to music that was openly gay, Flynn had discussed a cute girl and she and Julie had giggled over her, you'd mentioned Willie, but you could understand the misunderstanding between possibility and friendship, but you guessed you'd been wrong about the bespectacled girl.

Suddenly, though, Julie is in front of you, her eyes wide and face red as she tries to grab your hands but hers go through yours, and she's saying, "Not like that," she's breathlessly searching your face. "I'd never mean it like that! I just didn't realize you and Luke were — are," she's cringing around the words.

"We broke up a few months — er, twenty-five years ago," you correct.

"I didn't know you were exes," she says with embarrassment and what appeared to be shame. "Not that it matters, it's stupid. Really stupid!"

You eye her, confused. 2020 was so fucking weird. Or had people always been this way? Were you somehow detached from it all because you were a ghost? "Why would it be stupid?" you ask in suspicion, eyes narrowed as if you're trying to solve a rather hard calculus problem.

If it's possible, Julie's face goes even redder. "Ah! No reason! None!"

She's waving her hands like mad as if to ward you off, but you say, "Julie."

She's frantic, her eyes darting around the room as if to escape or grab her cross again, but instead, she's wringing her hands nervously. "Alex, believe me, it's me being stupid. Really!" She chews on her bottom lip and began to take interest in her chipped pink nails.

"Is it because you like him?" you ask, genuinely innocent but you feel like a jackass when her eyes go wider.

"Wh-what!? N-no!"

Like the older brother you are, you shoot her a playful grin and she buries her face into her hands.

"Don't worry, I can keep a secret!"

Julie murmurs something incoherent as she shakes her head and you laugh. You want to tell her it's reciprocated, but decide that wouldn't prove you trustworthy. Besides, Luke hasn't exactly said so, but it's too obvious. Even Reggie's begun to notice the way Luke lights up when the subject of Julie comes up.

She peers at you, still bright red, and goes, "He's cute, but I don't want him getting ideas."

"Yeah, sure," you wave off and she tries to whack your arm, nostrils flaring when the hand goes straight through your shoulder like mist.

"I told you," you say with a hollow laugh, "we're not exactly breakable now."

She glares, and you can tell she thinks that isn't exactly fair. "Don't you guys have other places to haunt?" she asks with exasperation, but you can tell she doesn't really mean it.

You shrug and lay back. “Probably,” you tease.

Julie lies down beside you, and you want to tell her to turn off Bobby — *Trevor* when a thought seems to have occurred to her and she peers over at you anxiously. “You guys do have families. Right?”

The question sends a shock through you and you swallow. “I’m sure we still do, in a matter of speaking.”

Julie gives you a confused look and you shrug, but don’t turn to look at her. To be honest, you knew the only one who’d found their family was Luke.

You had followed him one day with Reggie, and the Patterson’s have never left their ranch house on Wild Flower Lane, while Reggie had tried to find his parents, brother, and sister but with no dice so far. You, on the other hand, had never tried.

Maybe it was because Allana’s words had been too fresh, or you feared that maybe Alicia did indeed have a weak heart, but nothing in you could look.

“It’s been twenty-five years, Julie,” you say slowly and her face crumbles and she chews on her lip again.

There’s an uncomfortable silence between you both and you turn and realize she’s crying quietly.

“Hey! Hey, what’s wrong?” You ask her gently and she snuffles.

“It’s just I feel so bad that this has happened to you guys! You don’t deserve it!” she whimpers the last bit, trying to wipe at her face, but is smearing makeup everywhere.

You go to pat her, but freeze midway and drop your hand, scowling at it. Julie looks at you, eyes wet and bright under her long lashes, and you smile. “It’s not so bad.”

You don’t know if you’re lying or not, because being a ghost did have some positives, but most of them were Willie, but also Julie. You were happy to have met the girl and her family. Well, mostly



her aunt and brother. Her dad, while he was pleasant enough, made you wary.

Julie lays back down and looks up at her ceiling, then sighs. “So you guys really haven’t looked into your families?”

You don’t know if she is accusing you or genuinely mystified by the concept, but you feel defensive. “It’s been twenty-five years,” you remind her in a waspish tone, your cheeks dusting pink.

Julie turns to look at you and gives a slight frown. “I know that.”

“Well, things change in twenty-five years. Where would we even look.”

“The internet,” she says simply and you laugh, because you’re not used to the 2020 version of the internet where people can find secret base camps based on electric poles and shit. No, the dial-up you knew was as good as a joke now. They didn’t even have answering machines anymore! Julie frowns deeper, “I’m serious! Give me a name and birthdate and I’m sure I could find whoever.”

You froze, and then eye her now silent laptop on the bed warily. “Fine.” When you don’t give a name and she eyes you, planning on wearing you down. It’s your turn to sigh as you say, “Alright, alright!” You hastily decide on the one who could be fine, “Allana Mercer, July 23, 1980.”

Julie gives you a wide-eyed look of horror. “Allana Wilson!? Trevor’s ex!?”

It’s your turn to freeze. “What?”

Julie takes her phone from her pocket and you hear that weird unlock noise and fast typing, but you’re frozen to really register it.

Allana... Allana and Bobby! Had Allana even cared about Bobby back then? You always thought she’d been a bit intimidated of him, but then she’d been so enthralled with Luke — and suddenly, Julie’s phone is being thrust under your nose and an old blonde, far too old looking, if you’re being honest, with bleached blonde hair and blue eyes staring back at you.

You grab the phone, staring at it in horror. Your sister — your once fourteen-year-old sister with pin-straight hair the same buttery blonde as yours, now looks, well, the only word you can think of is haunted. Her face, once very pretty and heart-shaped is now sunken, almost wrinkled, and her eyes are almost hard and far too old for a once beautiful face. Your hands tremble, the phone shakes violently, but you don't seem to notice as you soak in Allana of 2020.

Julie is looking at you anxiously as you look at her phone, gripping it tight and willing this woman to not be your baby sister as you read the headline: Allana Wilson, DUI Charge February 7th, 2020, Faces Court Hearing.

“Th— THIS CANT BE ALLANA!” You don't even know that you've shouted until Julie jumps in her spot, but you're too beside yourself to offer the younger girl anything. You feel a wetness on your face, you know you're shaking, but it's like it's happening to someone else. All you can do is think of Allana that day, leaving. You think of the Allana you knew that feels like a few months prior but it was years ago.

*“The mourning does that. It never really goes away, but I'm sure it's possibly worse if you haven't been existing with it,”* that had been what Willie said, but this was worse than mourning.

Failure courses around you, you can taste it foul in your mouth. Allana is — she was —

“Alex, Alex!” Julie has taken the phone and she's in your face shouting, her hands uselessly flailing and you look at her, eyes wide.

You look back at her and look at the phone, and then you poof away, back to your street but you don't move. Instead, you finally scream all forty-one years of pent-up rage and cry.

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**Author's Note:** And we've made it!

I must confess, this is definitely a beginning of a series I've been wanting to do for most of 2021, but what is time... I want to do like a spinoff of Allana post-Alex's death and how Bobby got Sunset Curve songs, and everything that happened in between. But also, I want to write about Alex's unfinished business with his sisters and where they ended up (there's technically two, but I don't want to spoil too much because if you guessed who Allana is in the pseudo-cannon I've made, you are most likely right!). I don't know when they'll be up, because I need a break from tragedy, but I promise you will see them ASAP if you have any interest. Also, they *won't* be in second person POV, so there's a little bonus (for you or me, I'm not quite sure at the moment, but )! Thank you all for the love you've given this story, I love you all. As always, Halle and Terri,

you're my little angels, thank you for being you!

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