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It was late afternoon, on the very last Wednesday of August, when I realized Disney had been lying to me for quite some time about Happily Ever Afters.

Because, you see, I was four days into mine, and my prince was nowhere to be found.

Gone. Vanished.

“I’ll definitely never forget you,” he’d said.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been this happy,” he’d said.

“Please don’t lose contact. I need to see you again one day,” he’d said.

So why was I here, sitting at the kitchen counter and banging my head against a metaphorical wall, weighing up the pros and cons of sending *yet another* message to him?

Like, okay. Yes, if I sent another it’d be three in a row. *Yes* that was semi-stalker level. But I could rationalize

this. The first message he'd ignored was in response to his own text on Saturday night. He'd said goodnight, and I'd said goodnight. End of conversation. He wasn't required to respond. So I could barely even count that.

Then the second message I'd sent didn't exactly *demand* a reply:

Totally failed at sneaking home.
Mom killed me. Hashtag worth
it. Please don't judge me for
saying hashtag. I'm too cool to
abide by your mundane social
expectations.

Sent: Sunday: 11:59 A.M.

Seen: Sunday: 2:13 P.M.

I mean, he could've glanced at that on his drive home and smiled, and not realized he was meant to text back, right? There wasn't strictly a question there, so, it was possible. Or maybe he'd seen it, gotten halfway through a reply, and been distracted by something.

Like a house fire. Or an alien abduction.

For four days.

Really, if you thought about it, I had to message him again. In a cool, casual, not desperate kinda way obviously. But with a question this time. So if he saw it and didn't reply, then I'd know *for sure* he was ignoring me.

Okay. I could do this. This wasn't a big deal. It was just a guy texting another guy. A guy who knew all my biggest secrets, had spent the better part of seven weeks making out with me, and had *Seen. Me. Naked*TM.

A guy who'd convinced me he really, really liked me.

A guy who'd *better* have been abducted by goddamn aliens.

So maybe a little bit of clinginess from me was justified. As long as it didn't *come across* as clingy, of course.

Simple. Okay. Go.

Hey Will! So I...

Nope. Backspace. Too planned looking.

Dude, you'd never guess what I...

What I *what*? There was no way to complete that sentence.

So, I'm assuming you've probably been abducted by aliens, but on the off chance you haven't been...

"Ollie. Do you have a second?"

I jumped so hard I almost pressed send. And let's be honest, if I'd done that, I might as well have thrown

myself in the lake. I tried not to seem too flustered as Mom sat on the wooden stool next to me. For good measure, I backspaced the message-in-progress. Just in case. “Uh, sure. What’s up?”

Uh oh. She had that *look* on her face.

My first thought was that it’d happened. Aunt Linda had passed away. I held my breath. As in literally. Like if I was caught breathing it’d make it true, and our family would fall right off its precarious perch on the edge of a cliff called cancer.

That was the reason we’d come to North Carolina in the first place, after all, when Aunt Linda’s health took a turn for the worse and she’d needed some time away, to chill out and see family and actually enjoy herself for once. Obviously, my family wanted to see her, so we met her here at the lake, the farthest she could safely go for a holiday. It was the biggest trip I’d taken from California for years, so I’d been more than up for it. I’d been appointed unofficial, unpaid, uncomplaining—but only because they’re so damn cute—nanny to her kids, and we’d rented side-by-side lake houses. Things had been good. Great, even. Best summer of my life I’d have said.

But now it was almost over, and it couldn’t be ending like this. It *couldn’t* be.

“Well, sweetie...” Mom started.

Dead. Dead. Dead.

“Aunt Linda is—”

Dead.

“—well, you know, she’s not doing great. You’ve been such a help over summer, but before that Uncle Roy was run thin trying to care for the kids and Linda, and they can’t afford childcare with the hospital bills. Not to mention all the extra things they could use a hand with at the moment. She’s my sister. I want to make sure I’m here for her.”

Wait. So Aunt Linda *hadn’t* passed away? The relief hit me so hard I almost missed Mom’s next words, too dizzy with happiness to focus.

“Your father and I have decided to put the house up for rent for a while. Maybe for a year or so. We have a place we can stay in Collinswood. Only a few streets away from Roy and Linda, actually. We’ll go back to San Jose next week to grab our stuff and say goodbye to everyone for now. You’ll be back here in time to start the school year.”

Wait, what? What, what and what, exactly?

“Stay... here? Move here, you mean? To North Carolina?”

But we were supposed to be going home next week. How could we *come back*?

Mom shrugged. Her blue, deep-set eyes had heavy bags underneath them, and her lightweight black cardigan was inside out. The tag, poking meekly out of the side seam, rustled as she dropped her arms by her side. “Ollie, we don’t have a choice.”

“But... do you... could I stay at home, and you guys can stay here?” Hey, the more I thought about it, the more sense it made. Just because I had fun playing babysitter for the summer didn’t mean I wanted to drop everything and make it a permanent role. “Yeah, actually, that could work. I can take care of the house, and I can drive myself around. I can pay the bills myself. I’ll pick up a few extra shifts at the store. I can come up later, if it looks like you’ll be here for a while, but... I mean, Mom, the band. And the guys. I can’t...”

Mom rested her elbows on the counter and buried her forehead in her palms. “Ollie. Please. Don’t make this any more difficult.”

I slumped back, staring at my phone. What was I supposed to say here? It’s not that I was a brat or anything, but this was a lot to take in. My mind raced as it tried to process the enormity of it all. Senior year without any of my friends? At a totally unfamiliar school, with teachers who didn’t know me, right when grades actually started to matter? I’d have to quit my

job, and my band, and I'd miss homecoming...

Then I peeked back at Mom, and I only had to take one look at the expression on her face to realize this was non-negotiable. Reluctantly, I shoved all the reasons why this would ruin everything to the back of my mind. I'd come to terms with it all later. In my room. After finding an appropriately melancholy playlist on Spotify.

But—but—but, a part of me piped up. *It's not all melancholy. Now you live in the same state as Will. Seeing him again might actually be plausible now.*

My stomach flipped at the thought. You had silver linings, and you had platinum linings. This lining was firmly of the platinum variety. "Okay. Well, it's... sudden. But okay. We'll make it work."

Mom brightened, and pulled me into a hug. "That was easier than I expected."

My voice came out muffled against her chest. "I reserve the right to complain constantly moving forward. I'd sound like a monster if I said no and you know it. Not that I had a choice, did I?"

As Mom let me go, she gave a brief laugh. "No, God no, but I appreciate the cooperation all the same."

"At least you're honest." I forced a smile, and Mom hopped off the stool to start lunch preparations.

“We *will* make it work, I promise,” she said as she clattered around in the crisper to retrieve some tomato and lettuce. “Sometimes we have to make sacrifices for the people we love, right? It might not be ideal, but we may as well do it with a grin.”

I nodded absentmindedly and went back to my phone. At least the first problem was solved. This totally counted as a good enough reason to send multiple text messages.

Now he'd have to reply, right?

2

Hey. So. Funny story. I'm moving to NC for a while. I'm going to be living in Collinswood. Any chance that's near you?

Sent: Wednesday: 6:05 P.M.

Unread.

I was joking about the aliens thing, but it was starting to seem like the only plausible explanation. Who doesn't touch their phone for twelve days? *No one*, that's who. Seriously. Since I sent that text, I'd:

- Packed.
- Left the lake house.
- Flown home.
- Packed up my entire house.
- Said goodbye to all my friends.
- Consumed three milkshakes of pure misery.

One with Ryan, one with Hayley, and one more with Ryan because he had a late night craving after already officially saying goodbye to me.

- Flown to freaking Collinswood, A.K.A Podunk nowhere.
- Unpacked my entire house.
- Cried in secret twice.
- Cried a little bit in front of my parents once.
- Made a blood vow with myself to stop freaking crying.

Taken a tour of Podunk Nowhere and cried on the inside a bit when I realized all my shopping was going to have to be online from here on out.

- Watched Frozen three times. Twice, with my cousins in the room. Once, on my own because it was already in the DVD player and I couldn't be bothered changing it.

And in all that time, not one message from Will? Screw that. I was officially over it.

Not so over it that I didn't want to vent, though. And tonight was my chance. After several failed attempts, Ryan, Hayley and I had finally found a time we were all free to Skype. I'd intended to take the call in my room, but Mom decided at the last minute that she needed me

in the kitchen to peel the cucumbers for the salad. So I multi-tasked, with the laptop on the dining table, and a cutting board beside me.

Mom and Dad were cooking a special dinner to celebrate the grand opening of our new kitchen. Trouble was, our special meals were usually takeout, since we never had people over for dinner and therefore had no one to impress but ourselves. And Pad Thai from the restaurant down the street had historically impressed all three of us without fail.

By the time Dad cracked (no pun intended) and pulled up a Gordon Ramsay tutorial on YouTube to copy from, the counter, along with the floor, was littered with bread crumbs, salt, pepper and errant smudges of butter. Joining us in the kitchen were my very bored and crabby cousins, Crista, and Dylan.

Basically, the house was chaos, and adding a Skype call into it all didn't help.

"It's a *little loud* on your end," Ryan said, making a face into the camera. On the bed beside him, Hayley burst into giggles.

"Right, sorry. Just try to ignore it," I said. I had to speak on an angle in order to peel the cucumbers.

Ryan said something in response, but he was drowned out by Crista's whining.

“Aunt Catherine? Aunt Catherine? Aunt Catherine?” She followed Mom around the kitchen, holding onto her bowl of apple slices and cheddar cheese, while Mom pretended she couldn’t hear.

“Sorry, what?” I asked the screen.

Ryan and Hayley gave me matching amused looks. “I said, have you unpacked yet?” Ryan yelled.

I opened my mouth to reply, but ended up with an apple slice shoved unceremoniously in my face. “Don’t like the *skin*,” Dylan said in a firm voice, waving the apple around.

“It’s a little late for that, buddy,” I said. “Just eat around it.”

“The *skin*.”

“I’m busy right now, I’m peeling something else. It’d get cucumber juice all over your apple. Go get Aunt Catherine to help you.”

“Aunt Catherine” gave me a warning look, and I ducked behind my laptop.

Hayley’s face had taken over the screen, so close I could almost count her pale blonde eyelashes. “So, we wanted to tell you in person, but we’ve been asked to play at Nathaniel’s!”

My mouth dropped open. “Wait, *really*?” Nathaniel’s was the dream when it came to underage gigs. Sure, it

wasn't *exactly* our audience, but the people who went there tended to be pretty open-minded when it came to music. If anything, we'd be likely to end up with a bunch of new fans who'd never heard of us.

Well, not "we", I guessed. They. They would end up with new fans.

"Ollie, Ollie, Dylan wants you to cut the skin off his apple," Crista said, appearing at my side out of thin air.

"I heard him. I'm just trying to talk to my friends right now."

"Your hands are free, aren't they?" Mom asked from across the kitchen. "Can't you grab a fresh knife?"

"Be right back," I said to Ryan and Hayley, but Hayley held up a hand. "No, look, we can barely hear you. Go hold the fort. We have to practice, anyway. We'll tell you more when we can talk properly."

But I hadn't even had a chance to tell them about Will. Or Collinswood. Or how Aunt Linda was. "Oh. Oh okay. Sure. We'll Skype soon, then, I guess?"

"Yeah, when we're all free. Soon."

I wrapped up the call, then dutifully removed the offending apple peel, to Dylan's delight.

Over by the stove, Mom hovered behind Dad, helpfully critiquing his cooking choices. "There's some more room in the skillet," she pointed out, leaning

against the counter. “Why don’t you put it all in? It’ll speed things up.”

“Gordon says if I put too much meat in the pan it’ll cook unevenly.”

“Well, God forbid you disobey Gordon.”

“Woe betide the fool that tries, Catherine.”

Outside, a car engine rumbled up the driveway. Crista and Dylan perked up as one, and, abandoning their snacks, sprinted to the front door, with my following after them. “*Mama’s here, Mama’s here, Mama’s here.*”

Aunt Linda had barely walked through the door when she was barreled over by two pint-sized missiles. “Ooff! Oh my gosh, I was only gone for a few hours,” she laughed, pulling them in for a hug.

Tonight, she looked weaker than usual. She’d lost her thick black hair a while ago, and while I was used to seeing her bald, tonight she still wore the paisley scarf she wrapped around her head when she went out. Weirdly, the scarf reminded me how much things had changed more than the hair loss did. Maybe it was because Linda had been so anti-headwear for longer than I’d been alive. I couldn’t even picture her in a sunhat, or beanie, or anything.

“They’re attention-starved,” I said. “We’ve been neglecting them.”

“I know, that’s why I leave them here. It makes me look better by comparison, and they’re *so much more grateful to have me*,” she said, poking the kids playfully in their stomachs as she spoke. They shrieked with laughter.

“How was it?” Mom asked as we entered the kitchen.

“Oh, you know. It’s a hospital. Glad it exists, but always gladder to be leaving it.” Aunt Linda lifted her handbag and nodded towards the living room. “Just let me put my things down, I’ll be two seconds.”

“I hope you’re hungry,” Mom said to her retreating back.

Aunt Linda’s voice was bright and cheerful as she replied. “To be honest, Cathy, I don’t remember what hunger feels like.”

Mom rolled her eyes, then caught sight of me slumping back down at the dining table. “How’s the salad coming along?”

“Oh, fine.” I reached for the peeler again.

“Sorry we interrupted your call.”

I nodded, not trusting myself to reply without getting all emotional again. I’d just really wanted to talk to Ryan and Hayley. So much had been uprooted. I wanted something that felt normal.

Mom pushed down on my hand to get me to let go of

the peeler. “Ollie, you need to relax. You’ll have plenty of opportunities to talk with your friends. Everything will be fine. I want you to practice some mindfulness.”

“No, Mom—”

“Yes, Ollie. With me.” Experience told me I best play along. Fighting would take longer than giving in at this point. “Now, I want you to picture all the things you’re grateful for. This lovely big house that costs an eighth of the rent of the one in San Jose. How’s that for a start? Big houses, and clean air, and having your parents around to cook you a nutritious meal... are you experiencing the gratitude?”

“Oh, totally.”

“Oliver, I don’t want any of your sarcasm. Picture your fingertips. How do they feel? How does the countertop feel underneath them? Ollie?”

“Mom, honestly I feel a little claustrophobic right now.”

She took her hands off my shoulders with a sheepish grimace. “Sorry. But work with me here, Ollie. You need to be relaaaaxed, and caaaallmm.”

See, Mom has some ideas about the world. She’s not super religious. Just more, I guess... spiritual? Basically, she believes in a Great, Ethereal Being out there in the universe that gives us whatever we want as long as we pretend that we’re totally happy and satisfied and

positive. If we're angry about something, though, it gives us more of it. A Great, Ethereal, petty-as-fuck Being, casually chilling out in the universe.

Which could've abducted Will, now I thought about it. Not that I cared about Will anymore, right?

Well, if I kept saying that, maybe the Great, Ethereal Being would make it so.
