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Fiction

### The One That Got Away.

The group home's backyard was quiet after lights out, the usual shouts and laughter of excited kids was replaced by the drone of cicadas in the bushes. Cassandra sat cross-legged under the contorted Velvet Mesquite tree by the fence, his elbows resting on his knees. The bark scratched at his back through his thin t-shirt, but he didn't mind. This was their spot— his, Jasper's, and sometimes Marin's when she wasn't busy sneaking cookies from the kitchen. Jasper dropped down beside him, the dry grass crunching under his weight.

"Told you I'd get out here," they said, grinning like they'd just managed a jailbreak.

Cassandra rolled his eyes. "Yeah, well, Marin owes me two bucks. She bet you wouldn't make it past Miss Garcia."

"Miss Garcia doesn't scare me," Jasper shot back, though their smirk faltered. "Okay, maybe a little. She's fast for an old lady."

They both laughed, their voices low, careful not to attract attention. Jasper stretched their legs out in front of them, leaning back on their hands as they tilted their head toward the sky.

"Think we'll ever leave this place?" Jasper asked, their voice softer now.

Cassandra shrugged, picking at a blade of grass. "Don't know. Probably not me. They want kids who don't talk back, and I talk back a lot."

"You don't talk back," Jasper said.

"Yeah, I do. Just not to you."

Jasper looked over at him, their gray eyes catching the faint moonlight. “You’ll get out, Cass. You’ll see. And even if we don’t leave at the same time... I’ll come back for you. I promise.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep,” Cassandro muttered, but there was no real malice in his words, just the blunt pessimism life had taught him to carry from a young age.

Jasper sat up straighter, leaning toward him. “I mean it,” they said firmly. “You and me—we’re like Pinky and the Brain. Nobody’s pulling us apart. Not even a cool, new family.”

Cassandro wanted to believe them, but the truth sat heavy in his chest. Families wanted kids like Jasper—bright-eyed and hopeful. Not kids like him, who slouched and glared and scraped their knees climbing places they weren’t supposed to. But he nodded anyway.

“Yeah. Okay.”

For a while, they sat there in silence, the cicadas filling the gaps where words could’ve gone.

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It had been twelve years since that conversation, yet it continued to echo in Cassandro’s mind, refusing to be forgotten. Cassandro clutched a crumpled Pepsi can, the cold seeping into his fingers as he leaned against the railings on the edge of the apartment rooftop. The city lights flickered below, casting a grimy glow over the cracked, often overlooked concrete. He took a final swig, staring out to the starry sky as if it could offer him a life-changing epiphany, but all he got was the faint sound of traffic and a night wind that cut through his worn-out hoodie, blowing against his black hair—still streaked with faded red tips—into his face.

*Jasper.*

His mind kept circling back to Jasper, no matter how hard he tried to shake them off. His best friend, his maybe-something-more, and now, the guy couldn't even talk to them without feeling like a joke. Ever since Jasper introduced him to their "partner," Cassandro had felt a dull ache, like he'd been forcefully pushed aside. He'd started feeling like a ghost, just drifting from his bed, to his shift as a waiter at the crappy diner, and back to bed, wondering where he'd messed up.

"Screw it," he muttered, tossing the empty can toward the city below and watching it as it slowly fell to its demise. He headed downstairs to his apartment and yanked his helmet from its hook by the door, before stomping down the fire escape to the lot where his second-hand motorcycle waited.

He swung a leg over the bike, his slim frame settling in as he reached forward, his chipped fingernails gripping the faded handlebars. He kicked the bike to life, the engine growling with force, filling the empty space and cutting through the quiet of the parking lot. With one last look around, he twisted the throttle, and he was off, a fast blur against the dark pavement. As the bike roared through the empty streets, his mind flickered back to that rundown apartment of his, a monotonous prison of torn gray wallpaper that he had temporarily escaped. This was freedom... the wind tearing through his hoodie, his old Converse sneakers scraping against the pedals, the blur of street lamps whipping past. Cassandro barely noticed the speedometer as the needle inched higher, the reckless rush drowning out everything else. Somewhere along the way, another set of headlights appeared beside him— another bike keeping pace, almost provocingly. Without thinking, Cassandro flicked his chin up, giving the driver a smirk that he wouldn't even be able to see, a silent dare. He twisted the throttle harder, leaning forward as the bike surged

ahead. The cool night air bit at the exposed skin of his hands, the long street seemingly endless, with lights and shadows flashing past as he leaned into a turn.

A corner came up too suddenly. His stomach dropped as he realized he had miscalculated his distance from the curve, but he refused to let off the gas. The back tire skidded and screeched, fighting for traction as he leaned hard, his heart pounding against his chest. For a second, he thought he might go down, the pavement inching toward him in a blur.

His mind flashed to Jasper.

And then it flashed to nothing.

All that could be heard was the sound of the engine and the jolt of his bike barely clinging to the road as he straightened out, somehow keeping upright. When he finally pulled into an empty side street, he could feel his heartbeat in his throat, his whole body taut and electrified. His hands shook and jerked as he killed the engine. The silence settled in around him. He could almost laugh at himself— and he did. A breathless, bitter laugh escaped his lips. His carelessness had come close to costing him more than just a bruised ego, and for what? To feel the humming adrenaline in his bones for a few minutes, to run from the hurt gnawing at his chest?

“Fuck, what am I thinking?” he muttered dryly to himself, shaking his head as he stared at the scuffed corner of his beat-up sneakers, as if the whole thing was some kind of bad joke. The anger bubbled back up. He was angry at Jasper, at himself, at everything. But he knew he’d never admit it to anyone, not even himself.

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Cassandro's shift at the diner was a blur of tired faces, clinking dishes, and the smell of burnt coffee and acrid frying oil. The hum of an old ceiling fan barely cut through the heat of the diner, and Cassandro seemed to be stuck on autopilot, his mind currently busy with countless of orders and requests from customers, the adrenaline now a distant memory, replaced by an uncomfortable soreness in his hands from the way that the cold air had so viciously attacked his knuckles the night before. He placed a pile of dirty dishes into the sink at the back of the house, turning to grab a new apron that hung by the kitchen door when he saw Jasper standing by the front counter.

Cassandro forced a smirk, brushing past them. "What, you couldn't wait 'til I clocked out? Miss me that much already?"

Jasper's eyes were serious, there was a weight behind them that made Cassandro pause. "I heard about last night."

Cassandro's smirk faltered. He looked away, shaking his head. "Let me guess, word travels fast with Marin around."

Jasper's voice tightened. "Cass, you nearly wiped out. Do you even realize how stupid that was?"

Cassandro felt the familiar anger simmering, a wall rising between him and whatever stupid lecture Jasper was trying to pull him into.

"Oh, relax. I had it under control," he said, his tone laced with sarcasm. "Maybe I just needed a bit of thrill. You know, life's kinda dull when you're just living from paycheck to paycheck."

Jasper took a step closer, their voice low and tense. “This isn’t about ‘living paycheck to paycheck’, and you know it. You’re just...throwing yourself around like you’re trying to feel anything other than—”

“Other than what?” Cassandro snapped, cutting them off. “Tell me about it, Jasper. Since you apparently know me so well.”

Jasper’s face hardened, brows knitting closely together. “Look, if you’re hell-bent on wrecking yourself, fine. But stop acting like you’re the only one who feels left behind. I’m still here, trying to keep you from going off the deep end, and you’re acting like it means nothing to you.”

Cassandro’s hands clenched into fists, the words cutting deeper than he would like to admit. He forced a laugh, bitter and hollow. “Yeah? Well, I don’t need a babysitter, so save your lectures for someone who asked.”

A silence fell between them, the air now thick and dangerous, pulled taut like a tightrope ready to snap at any second. Jasper’s shoulders dropped slightly. A flicker of hurt crossed their face before they quickly masked it.

“I don’t know why I even bother,” they muttered, voice barely more than a whisper, and the tension quickly dissipated.

Cassandro stood there, frozen in place, as Jasper turned and walked out. He wanted to call out, to say something that would make them turn around— but all that came out was a dry, pitiful attempt at a comeback. “Yeah, go run back to your stupid, annoying, *perfect* girlfriend,” he said under his breath, though the words felt idiotic and empty, even to him. The gentle chime of the entry bell marked Jasper’s departure, and Cassandro was left with the sting of his half-witted words.

Left alone, Cassandro looked down at his scuffed shoes, anger and regret swirling in his chest. He had pushed Jasper away again, but this time, the silence that settled around him felt sharper, colder. It was a silence he'd caused, but as he stood there, he wondered— just for a moment— what it would feel like to let someone in instead, to open the door rather than watch it close.

A few hours passed, and Cassandro clocked out, the ding of the register and the chatter of the remaining customers fading as he stepped into the cool Arizona night. The streetlights shone above him as he walked to the back lot with his hands shoved in his hoodie pockets. He rubbed his eyes, feeling the familiar ache of exhaustion, but this time the nagging weight in his chest wasn't from the usual frustration of customer complaints. Instead, it was the sting of a specific instance, a moment that had absolutely ruined his day. The dull, creeping feeling that had settled in since the argument with Jasper still clung to him, tight like a hoodie two sizes too small.

He didn't want to go home, not yet. He dreaded going back to the silence of his run-down apartment, the cold, cracked walls that seemed to absorb every word and thought and throw it back at him tenfold. As he rounded the corner of the diner's parking lot, he saw Marin leaning against the brick wall, her arms crossed loosely over her chest. Her short, choppy brown hair framed her sharp features, and the worn leather jacket she always wore seemed to absorb the dim light. She had been waiting for him.

"Hey," she greeted with a small nod, her eyes scanning him as though she was searching for cracks beneath the apathetic facade.

Cassandro gave her a half-hearted smirk, his hands stuffed into the pockets of his hoodie. "You on a stakeout or something?"

"You going somewhere tonight?" she retorted, her voice low, but with a hint of concern that Cassandro couldn't quite ignore.

He shrugged, trying to hide the tightness in his shoulders, but she wasn't buying it.

"Come on. Let me take you to that bar down the street with the cute college guys. You're gonna get all old and wrinkly on me if you stay cooped up in that tiny apartment of yours."

Cassandro opened his mouth to refuse but stopped. Maybe he did need to get out and maybe he just needed to stop thinking about the mess that his life had become for one night.

"Fine," he muttered. "But no weird speeches about how 'you just want to help'. I'm fine, Marin."

She raised an eyebrow as they headed to the sidewalk. "Yeah, you look *real* fine, Cass."

The walk to the bar was quiet— maybe uncomfortably so, but Marin didn't seem to mind. Upon entrance, the bar smelled of stale beer, the buzz of conversation and the sound of clinking glass washing over Cassandro like a wave. It was the kind of place where people went to drown something out and watch sports replays on the various screens, but who was he to judge?

They grabbed a booth in the corner, tucked away from the noise. Marin's presence was the only thing that kept Cassandro from completely spiralling. He leaned back, staring into his drink, trying not to notice the gnawing ache in his chest.

"You're still thinking about Jasper, huh?" Marin's voice cut through the haze of his thoughts.

Cassandro clenched his jaw, the muscles tightening painfully. He didn't want to talk about this, not now, but Marin wasn't going to drop it. She had always been able to see right through him.



“Of course I’m thinking about them,” Cassandro muttered, running his fingers along the edge of his glass. “They’ve got their perfect little life now. Their girlfriend, their college, their future... And here I am, just... stuck.”

Marin leaned in, her brow furrowed. “You’re not stuck. You’re just... not sure what you want. There’s a difference.”

Cassandro snorted bitterly. “I know exactly what I want. I want... I want things to not suck for once.” He slammed his glass down, startling a few people nearby. “I’m tired of being the guy that doesn’t fit anywhere, Marin.”

She leaned back, her expression softening. “You think Jasper doesn’t feel that way, too? You think they’re perfect all the time?”

Cassandro grumbled, the truth of her words making him feel stupid. He exhaled slowly, trying to tamp down the frustration boiling inside him.

“I don’t know what I think anymore,” he admitted quietly, voice raw. “I thought we were something, you know? Like, I’d always be there for them, and they’d be there for me. But now it’s just... I’m not the person they need anymore. I’m just a damn spectator in their life.”

Marin’s eyes softened. “You think you’re the only one feeling left out?”

Cassandro didn’t have an answer for that. He stared at his drink again, trying to keep his emotions in check. The bitterness in his throat made it hard to swallow.

“You don’t understand, Marin,” he muttered, his voice so quiet it felt like it could vanish into the air. “I’ve never been the guy that anyone wanted to keep around, not for long. And with Jasper, it felt different, you know? They’ve always been my person. I’ve been there for them, even when I had nothing to give. But now...” He stopped for a beat, hesitating. “Now, I don’t know what I am to them. And I don’t know if I want to find out.”

Marin sat there, silent for a long time, watching him with an understanding that felt like it could wrap around him, comforting, but infantilizing at the same time. Finally, she reached across the table, placing her hand over his.

“You’re not an spectator, Cass,” she said quietly. “And I get it. Trust me, I do. If there’s anything I’ve taken away from my last ten failed relationships, it’s that running only makes things worse in the end. You can’t keep running from everything, not even the stuff that hurts. So... stop pretending that you’re okay. You don’t have to fix everything tonight, but you have to face it. Otherwise, you’re gonna be a fly on the wall. And that’s not who you are.”

Cassandro didn’t say anything at first. His heart ached from the pressure of her words, from the weight of everything he’d been avoiding.

“Maybe I just want to leave,” he said after a long pause, the words leaving his lips before he could stop them. “Leave everything behind. The apartment, the diner, this town... maybe I just want to be someone else, someone different.”

Marin’s gaze softened, but she didn’t try to talk him out of it. Instead, she gave a small nod. “You don’t have to leave to change, Cass,” she said quietly. “But if that’s what you want, you know I’ve got your back.”

Cassandro stared down at the table, his finger absently tracing the rim of his glass. The weight of Marin’s words hung in the air, too heavy to ignore. The noise of the bar seemed to blur into the background, and for a moment, it felt like it was just him and her, suspended in time.

“I don’t know if I can change, Marin,” he muttered, his voice quieter now, laced with exhaustion. “It feels like the same shit, over and over. No matter how fast I run, I always end up right back here. Stuck. Alone.”

Marin's fingers tightened around his hand for a moment before she let go, sitting back in her chair and giving him some space. She didn't say anything, but her eyes held an understanding that made the room feel a little less suffocating. Cassandra wasn't sure if it was the alcohol in his system or the rare comfort of someone who actually saw him for who he was, but for the first time in a long while, he allowed himself to breathe.

The noise of the bar buzzed louder, the laughter and chatter of other patrons filling the space between them. He let out a long, shaky breath, running a hand through his messy hair.

"I don't know what I'm doing, Marin," he admitted. "I don't know how to fix it."

Marin gave him a small, knowing smile. "You don't have to fix it all right now, Cass. One step at a time. You don't have to be anyone else. You just have to figure out who you are, and stop running from it."

Cassandra nodded thoughtfully, staring at his drink again. The ache in his chest had shifted, softening in a way that felt almost foreign, like a weight lifted just enough to let him breathe easier. The storm inside his head didn't completely snuff out, but it felt more like background noise than a constant scream.

"I think I get it," he murmured, though he wasn't sure if he truly did yet. It was all so overwhelming, but Marin's steady presence felt like the first real moment of clarity he'd had in weeks.

As the night wore on, the bar began to fill up with more laughter and clinking glasses, and Cassandra wasn't blocking it out anymore. He wasn't running from the present, not for tonight. Instead, he sat with it, allowing the moment of peace— of normalcy— to linger just a little longer.

“Thanks for this,” he said quietly, looking over at Marin, who was now distracted by a group of muscular guys walking past their booth.

She looked back at him with a grin. “Don’t mention it. But if you really want to make things better, Cass, maybe start by talking to Jasper. I heard from a little bird that they are just as restless and willing to figure things out as you are.”

Cassandro stared down at his chipped nails, his mind suddenly racing. Talking to Jasper. He hadn’t even thought of that, hadn’t considered the possibility that maybe, just maybe, there was a chance to fix things. Maybe he wasn’t as stuck as he’d thought.

He didn’t know what the future would bring. He didn’t know if he could make everything right with Jasper, or even if he could stop feeling like a shell of himself, but he knew that at least, this was one step forward.

As they left the bar, the cool breeze caressed his cheek, refreshing and raw. It felt like a small reminder that maybe, just maybe, things didn’t always have to be so suffocating. And maybe, just maybe, he could find a way to stop running.

Cassandro stood at the corner of his block minutes later, the distant sound of passing cars giving a soundtrack to the new thoughts in his head. Marin’s words echoed in his mind, and for the first time in days, he felt a flicker of calmness.

*One step at a time.*

The apartment felt heavy as he approached it. The flickering light from the hall outside his door did nothing to soothe the weight that still pressed on his chest. He stepped inside,

tossing his keys on the counter before dropping onto the couch. For a long moment, the only sound was the neverending hum of the fridge.

Should he call Jasper?

His phone felt heavy in his pocket. Would they pick up? Would they even want to hear from him after that argument? He let out a breath, pulling out the phone but hesitating to unlock it. Instead of dialling, his thumb hovered over the screen as the weight of the silence hit him once again.

Maybe a text instead.

Yeah, that'd work.

He opened the messaging app and stared at the empty text box, his heart beating a little faster than usual.

"Hey," he typed, his fingers hovering over the screen, "Can we talk? I've been thinking about—" He erased it immediately. Too direct. Too much. He tried again.

"Jas, I know we—" Another backspace.

He was being ridiculous. This was easy, right? Just tell them you want to talk and get it over with. They were friends. They were supposed to be really close. But every time he tried to put it into words, the fear of confrontation gripped him, quickly backtracking and taking it all back.

Cassandro quickly sat up, straightening his back as he scrolled through the conversation history. Messages from before. When things were easier. Before the distance started settling between them, before the new life and new faces showed up. He stared at the string of messages, each one more distant than the last. He felt like an idiot. Taking a deep breath, he started again, but this time, he didn't overthink it.

“Can we talk? I messed up.” His finger hovered over the send button. For a split second, it felt right, like the words were the key to unlocking something he’d kept locked inside for far too long.

But he didn’t hit send. He just... couldn’t.

He deleted it. Again.

A deep exhale followed, Cassandro lightly smacking the phone against his forehead. His heart was hammering. He thought about Jasper’s face, the way they’d looked at him when they’d left. Hurt. Tired.

“Maybe tomorrow,” he whispered, locking the phone and throwing it carelessly on the coffee table. But tomorrow was hours away, and tonight, the silence between them was deafening.

Cassandro sighs deeply, his body heavy with exhaustion, the day’s weight pressing down on him. He reclines on the couch, one arm thrown across his eyes, the other draped loosely over his chest. The familiar hum of the apartment fades as his thoughts drift in and out. His room was right down the hall, but something about the couch was calling to him tonight. Its worn cushions, the way the springs creak and the gentleness with which it cradled him ... it all made it easier for him to let go.

Before he realizes it, his breathing steadies, and sleep finds him quietly and without warning.

Suddenly, Cassandro was back in that moment, a memory that had branded itself in his head ever since it happened. It was sophomore year. Everything felt more exciting and new back then. The sunlight filtered through the tall windows of Jasper’s new home, casting soft, intricate patterns on the floor. Jasper was lounging in their bed with a sketchpad in hand, their eyes

focused on the textured paper as they carefully sketched Cassandro's face. He remembered that moment vividly— the smell of the sandalwood incense, the hum of the air conditioning, the Polaroid pictures hanging on string lights, some photos depicting Jasper with their new parents and some depicting silly pictures of Cassandro and Marin. It was one of those rare, perfect afternoons after school where time seemed to slow down. Cassandro had been lost in his thoughts, feeling both out of place in the gorgeous house and entirely at home in Jasper's presence. Jasper's eyes flicked up from their sketchpad, meeting Cassandro's for just a moment.

"You don't have to sit so still," they said, their voice carrying that light, teasing edge Cassandro could never resist.

Cassandro blinked, suddenly aware of how rigid he was. He let out a soft chuckle, feeling a flush creep up his ears. "Uh... yeah, right. Sorry. I just didn't wanna mess up your sketch or whatever."

Jasper tilted their head to the side slightly, a small smile playing on their lips. "Relax. You're not gonna mess it up. It's just a sketch."

Cassandro's blush deepened and something strange flickered in his chest— something he couldn't place. "I guess I was making this harder than it needed to be."

Jasper raised an eyebrow, and then they'd gone back to their drawing, capturing every little detail. "It's okay. Just... take a breath and stop acting like you're on a mugshot or something."

For a moment, the room fell back into a calm silence, broken only by the soft scratching of Jasper's pencil. Cassandro found his gaze wandering over the room again. The silky bedspread, the carefully arranged bookshelves, the way the sunlight caught Jasper's curls. It all felt so... safe. Cassandro's gaze ultimately fell on Jasper's face, and his eyes lingered on the

curve of their lips, the way their tongue peeked out ever so slightly in concentration. The tenderness in their movements, the delicate scratch of the pencil against the paper, the sunlight reflecting in their eyes... it all made Cassandro's heart beat a little faster, a little heavier. It was just a sketch. Just a moment. But as he stared at Jasper, his pulse quickened, and he realized, with a jolt, that he wasn't seeing them as just a best friend anymore.

Something warm curled inside him, something both familiar and new. It was a thought he hadn't wanted to hear but couldn't ignore. His fingers itched to reach out, to touch, to say something. But he didn't know what to say. He felt caught between a desire to stay in the moment and a fear of what would happen if he acknowledged just how much this moment and Jasper meant to him.

Jasper caught his gaze again, their lips curling into a knowing smile, but there was something different about it this time. Something more tender. More real.

And in that second, something clicked inside him. His pulse raced as the truth settled in, almost painfully: he was in love with Jasper.