My Heart’s Been Far From You

by Thebonemoose

Summary

Jack woke up to a crisp autumn morning. The air smelled sweet, and earthy, and above him was a canopy of trees, branching out and letting in beams of early-morning sunlight.

He was on a bed of soft leaves, slightly damp from the dew. He took a deep breath. He sat up.

There was something… something Jack couldn’t remember. Something important, he thought. Crucial, even. But it was fuzzy, he couldn’t get a grip.

Oh, well.

Or: Jack wakes up in Perdition Wood with no idea how he got there, and the strange sensation that something was missing.

Notes

So this is the first fic I’ve ever posted! I hope you enjoy, I really love this fandom and I can’t wait to see how Jack ACTUALLY comes back. By the way, the title is from River by Leon Bridges which is a stunningly beautiful song and it always makes me think of Jack returning.
Jack woke up to a crisp autumn morning. The air smelled sweet, and earthy, and above him was a canopy of trees, branching out and letting in beams of early-morning sunlight.

He was on a bed of soft leaves, slightly damp from the dew. He took a deep breath. He sat up.

There was something… something Jack couldn’t remember. Something important, he thought. Crucial, even. But it was fuzzy, he couldn’t get a grip.

Oh, well.

He stood and stretched, and his muscles cried out in ecstasy and agony in equal measures. It was like he’d been underground for years, and suddenly found himself above the surface again. Reborn, his mind supplied.

Jack saw, once he finally took stock of his surroundings, that he was on a trail. How he got there, he had no idea, but a sign indicated that it wasn’t much further to the parking lot, and maybe he’d find a car he recognized there. It was a stretch, but… well, it wasn’t like he had anything better to do.

The walk was short, but his legs felt shaky, so he took frequent breaks. Eventually, he found his footing, and the steps came easier, and then the journey passed in no time at all.

The parking lot had a few cars, but none that he recognized. A Sheriff’s patrol car, a truck, and a beat-up ford, but Jack didn’t know the model. It was probably a newer one, he reasoned. Exclusive, maybe.

There was a rickety old sign in the parking lot that pointed down the road, indicating that the town was in that direction.

Jack could wait at the parking lot, but who knew when the owners of the cars would be back? And would they even give him a ride?

Especially considering he didn’t know where he was or how he’d gotten there. His pockets were empty of his wallet and phone, so no ID, nothing to prove he was who he claimed.

No, it would be better to just start walking, and hope a car came along and he could hitch a ride.

So he set out. And he vastly overestimated his strength, because he nearly collapsed after walking for only twenty minutes.

But he kept going. And then almost fell over again, so, whilst he was heaving for breath, he decided it would be prudent if he took several breaks every few minutes.

Then, luckily, a car did come along, and Jack stuck his thumb out and hoped to heaven that he wouldn’t have to hobble along all the way into town.

The van slowed, and Jack scanned the logo on it before it stopped completely. It appeared to be a landscaping business, judging by the amount of green on the logo.

Jack really didn’t care, as long as they gave him a ride.

The driver rolled his window down, and looked at Jack. The driver made absolutely no effort to conceal his suspicion. “You… need a ride?” He narrowed his eyes.
“Yeah,” Jack said, panting heavily and probably looking like some sort of vagrant with leaves in his hair. Fuck, this wasn’t looking good for him.

“You a murderer?” The driver was looking at him with an expression like he’d just eaten lemons.

Jack tensed. “...no? Are you?”

The man looked taken aback. “No!” He replied, clearly offended.

Jack raised his palms in a show of peace. “Well, as long as neither of us want to kill each other, are you headed to town?”

The man nodded. “Yeah. Alright, dude, get in. But don’t try to kill me, because I- I know martial arts.”

He had the look of someone who didn’t know a thing about martial arts, but would take that secret to their grave.

Jack didn’t push it. “Won’t be a problem.”

The ride was only about twenty minutes, but Jack became increasingly grateful as the minutes wore on. He would never have been able to walk that distance before nightfall, not with his sore limbs.

He felt a rush of gratitude for the stranger driving.

“What’s your name?”

The driver eyed him. He clicked his tongue. “Pete. Yours?”

“Jack.”

“Well, Jack, we made it to town. Where do you want me to drop you? Side note, I’m not going out of my way, so your options are the Library and Rose’s diner.”

“Uh… the diner is fine, thanks.”

Pete promptly drove him to the diner, and ushered Jack out with a degree of impatience. “Okay, bye! Damn, I’m late, Mr. B is gonna KILL me, uh… I gotta go, bye!” And with that, he drove off in a thick cloud of exhaust, and Jack resisted his body’s urge to gag at the offensive smell.

He spent a few moments gasping for air, then surveyed the diner he was at. It looked comfortable enough, as much as any small town diner. Classic look, neon “open” sign, vinyl covered booths.

He opened the door.

It chimed predictably, and a middle-aged waitress with blue eye shadow glanced at him curiously as he entered. She kindly told him to sit anywhere, so he picked a booth.

She placed a menu in front of him, and looked him up and down. “I don’t think I’ve seen you around before, are you new to King Falls?”

King Falls. That was significant. It jolted something loose. The fog seemed to lift, just slightly, He… he’d investigated King Falls. He wanted to go, to visit. But somebody… somebody didn’t want to go, wouldn’t go with him. “I don’t believe the hype.” That’s what they’d said. Jack felt a rush of fondness for that nameless, formless person in his memory, but swallowed it quickly.
“Yeah,” Jack said, looking up at the waitress. “I’m new.”

“Well,” she smiled. “Welcome. There’s the menu, holler if you need me, sugar.”

She walked away, and his eyes blankly scanned the laminated menu, but his brain was far away, settled on that vague somebody.

He… he loved them, he was sure. They loved him back, he thought. But he couldn’t— it was just so fuzzy, and—

Coffee.

That’s what he needed.

He waved down the waitress. “Can I just start with a coffee?”

She nodded, and went to grab and pot and a mug.

He perused the selection of sugars and sugar-frauds that huddled in a little plastic dish by the ketchup while the waitress poured his coffee.

“Fresh pot, all ready for you,” she smiled.

He smiled back, politely, but he thought she understood he’d rather be alone at the moment, because she didn’t approach him again.

He was in King Falls. That was definite. He was alone, presumably. Alone, without the significant and blurred presence of that Someone. He glanced at his coffee.

Steam swirled gently in the air above it.

He didn’t take a drink.

Jack thought it was probably a good idea to really take a moment and freak out about why the hell he woke up in the forest with no recollection of how he got there.

He made eye contact with the waitress by accident, and she walked over. “Anything I can help you with?”

He furrowed his brows. “Um… yes, actually. Do you have any newspapers lying around?”

She shrugged. “I can check for you. Let me look.”

Jack blinked, and she was gone. That was probably not good, right? It typically takes people longer than that to walk away. He was getting tired. He should have some caffeine.

His coffee was cold now. Was he losing time? That wasn’t good. Something was probably wrong if he was losing time. That was usually a sign on alien abductions.

Or maybe he wasn’t losing time, he was just in severe need of a mental health professional. Not that he’d be likely to find one in town; after all, it didn’t seem likely that situations like his happened often, even in King Falls.

Wait, even in King Falls? Why did he…

Jack furrowed his brow. This was getting muddled.
The waitress was back in front of him now. She was holding a newspaper. “It’s a week old, is that okay?”

He nodded without realizing. She left the newspaper on the table. His arms were heavy, but he brought the newspaper closer to his face.

No.

That couldn’t possibly be correct.

It’s wasn’t 2019. It wasn’t, it was 2014– or was it 2015? What day was it, again?

Jack shut his eyes right. He was getting a headache. He just needed to lie down, probably. He’d be fine if he could lie down.

He slowly inched himself into a prone position on the booth, his hands underneath his head. His eyelids got heavier, and he felt the most comfortable he had in years.

As he was drifting off, he heard some muted voices, discussing… something.

“-o is this guy, Jessie?”

“He’s just a customer, asked for a coffee and didn’t drink a single sip. He’s been here for a few hours. He’s polite, I figure he’s probably drunk. Just let him sleep it off, Rose.”

“Alright, but if he breaks something it’s coming out of your paycheck!”

“Yeah, yeah.”

And then there was nothing, just blissful sleep.

(Sammy’s POV)

“We’ve been searching this fucking forest for hours now, and we still haven’t found any sign that Jack is here. What if we screwed it up, and he’s still stuck?” Sammy swallowed thickly, leaning against a tree and wiping sweat off his brow. He liked hiking, but this was excessive, even without the added anxiety of searching for Jack.

Lily stopped a few feet from him. “Calm down, Sammy. We’ll find him. He’s here, I can feel him.”

“Here, like, in Perdition Wood, or here like, he’s in the world again?” Ben asked, brushing a leaf from his hair.

“Look, it worked, okay? I’m sure of it. He’s back. We just need to find him. Chin up, Sammy. We’ll keep trying.” Lily smiled, and Sammy thought she was being uncharacteristically understanding.

“Since when are you the voice of optimistic reason?” Sammy asked, one brow raised.

“Since Ben stopped and left the spot open.”

“Hey! I’m still optimistically reasonable! Or is it reasonably optimistic?” Ben quirked his head.

“Not to interrupt, y’all, but Mrs. Jensen said she and Tim are on their way; they’ve come to join the search party.” Katie came to stand beside Lily and stretched her back.
“Emily and Ron still over by the creek?” Ben asked Katie.

She nodded. “Affirmative, Mr. Arnold. I hear they’re heading this way soon, though. Ron said he may have to tap out to man the tackle shop, but it’s possible he’ll come back later. Troy is finishing up at the station, he should be here in about thirty minutes.”

“Alright. Let’s split up, Sammy, you and Ben head Southeast, meet up with Emily. Katie and I will keep going North, we’ll loop back around after a while. Keep your radios on, I think we’re far enough into the woods now that our cell service is out,” Lily addressed the three of them.

“Aye aye, captain,” Ben said, and grabbed Sammy’s arm, heading Southeast.

“Why is she the leader now? Who chose that?”

“Sammy, I love you, and I know you’re only this salty because you’re worried, but bro, you gotta chill.”

Sammy grumbled at him.

The hours passed with easy conversation and an ever-widening pit of fear in Sammy’s chest.

He couldn’t shake the feeling that they should have found him by now. He should be with them, safe, at peace, and instead he was alone, still. Sammy felt like he failed him, again.

But no, he couldn’t go down that road again. He wouldn’t. The search continued.

The sun had begun setting, and he could tell his companions were as exhausted as he was. Mary and Tim had left a bit ago, needing to get back to their kids. Lily radioed a minute ago, and explained that she and Katie were going back to town to rest.

Ben and Emily walked into view, the fading light illuminating their hair in golden halos. “I’m heading out, I have to be at work early tomorrow,” Emily told Sammy, and squeezed Ben’s hand. They embraced, and she waved to Sammy and began trekking through the woods back to the parking lot.

“Be careful!” Ben called, and she looked back at him with a smile.

“You too, boys!” She disappeared into the trees.

Ben turned to Sammy. “Is Troy here?”

“Right here, good buddy,” Troy called, a few meters back. He broke through the foliage and returned to them. “We’re losing light, boys, I think we oughta head back and regroup. We can come back tomorrow morning with the full troops. Ron said he can do all day tomorrow, plus Hershel and Cecil said they’d come out, and the Jensens and Chet, too! Loretta said she’d drop by in the afternoon, as well. She promised extra provisions in the form of a pie.”

“Oh, Loretta’s pie! By the way, I also heard Jacob Williams might come, and Doyle. Pete… well, he didn’t say either way. He might help search if we pay him,” Ben added. “Oh, and Mr. Thompson, and J- and D- Fink.”

“Point is, we’ve got people willing to help,” Troy said.

Sammy sighed and scrubbed his face with his hands. He took a moment to watch the waning light
through the trees, then turned back to Ben and Troy.

“You’re right. We should go,” Sammy grimaced as he spoke. Ben gave him a sympathetic look.

The walk to the parking lot was fairly short, and Troy left first, peeling away in his cruiser.

Ben walked around to the driver’s side, evidently sensing that Sammy was not in the mood to be behind a steering wheel that evening. Sammy watched from the passenger’s seat as Ben struggled to adjust his distance from the pedals. It took… longer than it should have. Sammy nearly laughed, but he stopped himself. It felt wrong. It felt like he would be disrespecting the gravity of the situation.

Besides, his heart was still heavy with thoughts of Jack.

It always would be, and it always had, ever since Sammy met Jack. But this time was different. This was a feeling he had barely felt, not in the past-half decade. He was so close. Jack was within reach for the first time in five years, and Sammy could barely stem the sheer ache of missing him that he felt. It was constant, but Sammy had learned to manage it. Not anymore, though. Not when he was this close.

Sammy had a lot of fears, but he knew they weren’t helpful at the moment. He didn’t let them overtake him, surprisingly. The therapy sessions Ben had begged him to go to had taught him something useful, and Sammy was proud to say that he was stronger than he thought he ever would be.

But that didn’t mean he wasn’t swallowing down tears when he thought about Jack, alone, displaced from time, in the wilderness.

He let out a shaky exhale.

“You good, Sammy?” Ben asked. They’d been driving for a few minutes by then, the radio playing softly in the background.

He nodded. “I’m- yeah. Just, well… you know.”

Ben hummed. “Yeah, I do. Let’s head home and shower, then I’ll text Troy and ask to meet at Rose’s. I don’t know about you, but I could really go for some pancake puppies right about now.”

Sammy mustered up smile. “Yeah, me too.”

He tried not to drown in his anxieties. It… half worked.

When Jack woke up, there was a gentle din. He peeled himself off of the booth and sat up, squinting against the bright diner lights. There were a few other patrons sitting in booths around the diner, and chatting quietly amongst themselves. The dinner rush, he supposed. It was dark outside.

“Would you like a coffee?” A waitress asked. He didn’t recognize her. His originally waitress probably went home, he realized distantly. He slept for a while, then.

He nodded at her, still groggy. He managed to unstick his tongue from the roof of his mouth in time to say “and a water, please.” She nodded, and left.

When she returned, he gulped the water down quickly. He took his time with the coffee. It was
black, which was not usually how he took his coffee, but he didn’t want to wait.

“Can I get you something to eat, sir?”

He looked up, just then realizing she was still there. He’d spilled a few drops of coffee on his shirt. It was already rumpled from the nap, but he had bigger fish to fry. “Um… whatever’s good?”

“Pancake puppies are the specialty.”

“Then I’ll take that.”

“I’ll have that out for you soon,” she said, and took his menu.

He felt better, after his nap. Still couldn’t remember why he was in King Falls, alone without Sa… S… without his Someone. And why he woke up in the forest, missing, apparently, for the past five years.

He scrubbed his face with his hands and couldn’t resist the groan that left his throat. He ran his hands through his hair, and almost tried to smooth it back down again, afterwards, but stopped at the last second. What did it matter how he looked? He just slept in a diner for several hours. Normal human rules did not apply to Jack Wright on this day.

The waitress came back with a plate full of what was evidently, the legendary pancake puppies. Jack did have to admit, they looked excellent. They were dusted with powdered sugar, and the waitress dropped a bottle of syrup off as well. Jack’s body got the memo that he was able to eat then, because his hunger hit him like a freight train and he almost pitched forward over the table because of it. He waited until the pangs subsided slightly, then cut into a pancake puppy with his fork (shaking, because low blood sugar, duh) and brought it to his mouth.

And honestly? Jack understood. Pancake puppies were an oddity, but one that was both comforting and nostalgic, somehow, in spite of Jack never having eaten them before in his life.

He made short work of the rest of the pancake puppies, and when his waitress came by to ask how he liked the food, all he could do was nod lethargically. She laughed and topped off his coffee, then told him she’d bring another water. She dropped it off a few moments later.

Jack felt better after resting and eating. Which, of course, he should’ve known. That’s what Sa-Some… Someone? That’s what Someone always said. Take care of himself. That’s what they said.

And when Jack didn’t, he knew that they would do it for him.

No. Wait. Not…not they, he. He would do it for Jack. He always took care of Jack.

But then… where was He? Why was Jack alone, in the coziest dinner on the west coast, after eating a plate of breakfast food that should’ve been shared?

He furrowed his brow and wrapped his hands around the coffee mug, letting the heat warm him, soothe him.

Whoever he was, he wasn’t here right now. Jack would have to figure this out for himself.

Starting with what he remembered.

He lived in LA. That was clear. His parents were alive, but they didn’t talk much. He had a sibling? Someone he was close to… but they had a fight? They weren’t talking?
A sister! He had a sister! She was named after a plant, he was sure of it.

Ivy, Rose, Daisy…

No.

Lily. His sister was called Lily, and he loved her.

She was mad at him. And Someone. Because ... because they left her.

Lily hated being left behind. She always did.

The Someone was still vague, but Jack was proud of himself. He’d figured something out. He wanted to keep trying.

Starting with why he was here. What was so special about King Falls?

Jack scoffed. What wasn’t special about king falls?

Hold up. King Falls was special. It was... it was weird. It was a strange, odd, enigma of a town.

With… ghosts! It had ghosts! No, wait, apparitions. And a lake monster, Kingy? No, Kingsie.

What else, what else?

There were… werewolves. He remembered hearing about werewolves. And a Bigfoot? No, Big John, that was what they called him.

But there was something else, too. Jack was close, he was so, so close, he could almost taste it—

Phone calls. He’d gotten phone calls. Back in LA. In their house, from five years ago. He’d gotten strange phone calls, from some woman. He’d been paranoid. He’d been anxious, angry. He’d lashed out.

There was a place ... a bad place. A place of darkness. Of nothing. Thinking about it made Jack’s hair stand on end. He clenched his jaw.

Void.

He’d been in the void. Jack had been trapped in the void for five fucking years, oh god—

He took a shuddering breath. Perdition Wood, in King Falls. That’s where he’d woken up. And inside of Perdition Wood was the Devil’s Doorstep. The entrance to the void. Or, rather, one entrance to the void.

Because Jack hadn’t been taken in King Falls. No, he remembered. He was stolen away from his home, from his life, from the man he loved. Snatched away, by a monster.

Fuck that thing. He was going to find Lily, find that Someone, and he was going to make a life with them. He didn’t care where or how. He just needed to find them.

But how could he? How could he, when he couldn’t even remember the name of his partner? When he couldn’t even remember what he looked like?

It was an S something. Sa…
Sam.
No, not Sam.
Sammy.

Jack breathed out a sigh of relief as his memories came flooding back.

They’d fallen in love in college, both too scared to really do anything about it. Back then, it had felt like the three of them against the world.

Lovely, sarcastic Sammy, with his perfect radio voice and endless, long suffering patience for Jack’s paranormal bullshit—

Now Jack was in King Falls, like he always said he’d be, and Sammy wasn’t here beside him.

Fuck. Fuck, he had to find Sammy. He probably didn’t have the same phone number, he probably moved—
Oh. Oh shit.

Sammy probably thought Jack was dead. He’d been gone for five years. missing. Vanished, out of thin air.

What if Sammy had moved on? What if Sammy didn’t even care that Jack was back? But no, Sammy wouldn’t do that, would he? Not to Jack, not to his—

Not to his fiancé. That’s right. Jack had proposed. Jack had proposed, and Sammy was so surprised. But he said yes, even though Jack could feel his fear, all the worry about the future that threatened to drown them constantly. Sammy had said yes, and he’d put the ring in a chain and wore it under his shirt. Even at work, while he pretended to be the hetero-douchebag Shotgun Sammy.

Jack prayed, silently, to any benevolent, loving thing that was listening, to please not have let Sammy move on. It was selfish, he knew, and for him to want for Sammy to have ached and mourned all those years, all alone?

Well, Jack had the easy part. He didn’t remember the void. Not yet, at least. Sammy had to take the slow way.

He had to get out of this diner, he had to find Sammy, had to contact Lily— shit, she probably thought he was dead. She was even more of a skeptic than Sammy.

He stood up and walked to his waitress, who was cracking her gum and playing tic tac toe with herself on her order notebook. “Hey, what can I help you with? More coffee?” She asked, looking up.

He shook his head, and instinctively patted his back pocket to feel for his wallet, but…

He didn’t have it, of course. No wallet, no phone. He sighed. “Listen, I… have had a weird day. I’m so sorry, I don’t have my wallet on me and didn’t realize until just now, but I swear I’m good for it, I’ll come back and pay as soon as I get some cash—“

He watched as her face fell, and could already tell she was about to reach her last straw.

“Look, my name is Jack Wright, I’ll- I’ll make an IOU, or something, whatever it takes to—“

“Did you say your name was Jack Wright?” She looked at him, her eyes alight.
Before he could answer, the door dinged. A group of people walked in, led by a tall man in a Sheriff’s uniform. He was talking, and Jack caught the end of his sentence. “-you know this is what he’d want, bud! We’ll regroup, get some food in you, and continue the search after, in the morning! Hopefully even get some sleep tonight, although I know you’ll fight me on it. But dammit, bud, you’re no good to anybody if you run yourself ragged.”

Another voice chimed in. “He’s right, you know. Even Lily took a nap, and you know how...intense she was during the search. Intensely positive, really which is a… weird look on her. Anyways look, we know he’s back on this plane of existence, he’s in the world again. It’s just a matter of finding him.”

Then a sigh, and a man with a bun and the tiredest eyes Jack had ever seen stepped in. “I know, I really do, it’s just... we’ve been looking for Jack for so long, and what if... guys, what if something happens to him? Here, on Earth, and I can’t get to him? I’ll have failed him, again, and I can’t... I can’t lose Jack again.”

Jack turned, his mouth half open.

That was him. They were talking about him. He was Jack. Obviously, dumbass, a part of him that sounded like Lily said, but Jack wasn’t listening. All of his attention was focused on that tired man with the bun.

“Sammy.”

The man’s eyes snapped up. They widened in what Jack desperately hoped was recognition and not, like, disgust at how intensely a random stranger was looking at him.

His mouth opened, and out of it came the most beautiful, broken sound Jack had ever heard. “Jack?”

The din of the diner seemed to fade away, or maybe the patrons stopped chattering in order to witness the spectacle before them.

Jack didn’t care, either way. His heart was threatening to burst from his chest, and his lungs had quit on him, and Sammy was right there. He was old, and he looked harrowed, but he was right there. As beautiful as ever.

Jack wasn’t sure who moved first. Probably both of them. But suddenly, the 20 or so feet that separated them was being quickly encroached upon, and then there was no space between them at all, just Jack in Sammy’s arms, finally.

He heard someone sobbing, and hoped they would pipe down soon so he could continue hugging his fiancé, but then he realized he was the one sobbing. And actually, so was his fiancé.

Jack tried to pull away so they could talk, but Sammy shook his head and held him even tighter. “No, not yet.”

So Jack let himself be held, and he allowed himself the freedom to hold his fiancé in a restaurant full of people, and he cried.

After some time, Sammy finally pulled back, tears staining his cheeks. Jack realized somewhat absentmindedly that the men Sammy had entered with were still there, staring at them slack jawed. Jack filed that away for analysis at a later date.

“You got old,” he said. He almost regretted it, but then he saw Sammy’s reaction.
Sammy made a noise that was somewhere between a sob and a laugh, and looked at him with so much love that Jack felt surely he would drown in it, and then he said, “fuck you, Wright.”

Then Jack was the one sob-laughing, and Sammy’s tall friend was clearing his throat awkwardly, his sheriff hat clutched in front of his chest. He was clearly trying hard not to look too happy for Sammy.

Meanwhile, Sammy’s short friend was making no such efforts, and instead was openly weeping at their display.

Sammy turned to the tall one, his arms still very much around Jack.

Evidently, these people knew Sammy well. Well enough for him to be out to them, which is something that the Sammy that Jack remembered would have never even considered.

“Um… let’s sit?” Sammy said, suddenly awkward. He and Jack squished into an empty booth, opposite the short friend (in front of Jack) and the tall one, across from Sammy.

They were silent for a moment, but then Sammy took it upon himself to do introductions.

“Well, obviously, this is Jack. Jack, this is Troy Krieghauser, sheriff of King Falls.”

“Mighty good pleasure to meet you, Jack,” Troy said, grinning in a way that was so genuine that Jack couldn’t help but smile along.

Then Sammy moved on to the short one. “And this is Ben Arnold, my best friend. Well, co-best friend,” Sammy said, motioning to Troy.

Ben was practically vibrating out of his seat. “It’s so good to meet you, dude. I’ve been waiting for this for years. Not as long as Sammy, obviously, but you get me. And I just wanna say… I love you, man. I know that’s weird because you don’t know me, but I feel like I know you and I am so, so glad you’re back.” Ben looked at him with the same kind of openness Troy displayed, and Jack felt deeply touched.

“Wow… thank you, I don’t know what to say.” Jack smiled, and Sammy looked at him in pure elation.

Then Ben paled. “Oh shit.” He looked at Troy and Sammy, dread tinting his features. “We forgot to tell Lily.”

Troy shook his head. “Already on it, I texted Katie before we sat down. I think they’re on their way.”

Sammy breathed an audible sigh of relief.

“Lily? Lily’s here?” He looked to Sammy, who nodded, smiling.

“Holy shit. Holy shit, this is so much.” He felt like the floor had been dropped from under him, in the strangest and best possible way. His stomach was still swooping just from being near Sammy, and Sammy had had a life for those five years, he’d had friends, good friends, who knew about them, their relationship. It was… overwhelming.

Sammy turned to him, concern etched in all the lines in his face. He had crows feet, now. He didn’t, before. It was strange, like seeing a picture of someone from long before you knew them. It was still them, but they were so different. Jack swallowed down a pit of anxiety, that pervasive, nagging thought of what if Sammy is different, and you two don’t fit together anymore.
“Are you okay? We can go somewhere else, anywhere you want.” Sammy’s voice was soft, and scratchier than normal. At least that was familiar.

“No, no, I’m… I’m okay. Just… confused.” Sammy squeezed his hand under the table, and a spike of joy burst in Jack’s chest, calming the noise inside of him.

Ben nodded. “That’s understandable. What… I mean, do you remember… everything?”

“Well… I remember our house in LA, which… I’m assuming is long gone, by now.”

Sammy winced.

Jack chuckled. “It’s fine, Sammy. I remember the three of us, you, me, Lily, our past. Radio. Then… Us. California. Shock-Jock fame. I remember… getting obsessed, with King Falls. Worse than the other times.” Jack swallowed thickly. “I remember proposing. We were so happy,” he said, looking at Sammy. Sammy gave him a watery smile.

Jack sobered. “…And then I remember getting calls, and whispers, and- nothing. Just black. A dark, cold place. Timeless, and… god, so fucking lonely.”

“Void,” whispered Ben.

Jack nodded. “It felt like I was there for eternity, but other times it felt like I had only been there for a moment. Then… I woke up in the forest this morning. No phone or wallet. I hitched a ride back to town, came to the diner, passed out. Ate some food, and I was about to beg the waitress to accept my IOU when I heard you guys. I didn’t remember much at first, especially not you, Sammy. Just my name, basically. That was a… bleak eight hours.”

“Well… it’s been a pretty bleak five years, if I’m honest.” Sammy attempted a smile, but it fell a little flat. Nobody mentioned it. Jack ignored the clenching in his chest. He was getting good at it.

Ben, meanwhile, looked as if he felt the full weight of that statement. All the previous excitement had dwindled, and he had the expression of a man who was haunted. It was the same look Sammy carried, now.

Jack rubbed his thumb on the back of Sammy’s hand; his still held securely in Sammy’s.

Then the door dinged, and two women came rushing in.

Without Jack even noticing, Sammy had slid out of the booth and pulled Jack up with him, only to be nearly tackled by a lady-shaped blur. He wrapped his arms around her to prevent them both from falling over.

“Lily?” Jack asked, the suspicious lump in his throat having returned full force. The person in his arms nodded vigorously. She pulled away and looked at him through teary eyes, her hands flitting all over, as if checking for herself that he was here, present, for real.

He felt like the floor had, once again, been dropped out from under him. He should probably start getting used to that.

She looked older, too. There were a few strands of gray in her hair, but she had just as strong of a presence as ever, even in her short stature. His big sister.

“It’s me, Lil. I’m back,” he said, and what little resolve she had left seemed to crumble as she pulled him close again.
“I’m never letting you out of my sight ever again,” she mumbled into his shirt, and he laughed through his tears.

“I think I’m okay with that.” He gave her one last squeeze.

Lily released him, and Jack sat back down in the booth. Sammy moved to sit beside Jack again, but Lily grabbed Sammy’s arm and pulled her to him, just like she had with Jack. Sammy’s arms wrapped easily around her, and the two embraced tightly for a moment before parting. Lily sat in the spot recently vacated by Troy (who had joined the woman that Lily came in with and sat in the booth behind theirs) and Sammy returned to his spot beside Jack.

Jack’s jaw fell. “Wait a minute, what is that? You guys hate each other. Why are you hugging?”

Ben and the woman beside Troy both snorted at that.

Lily and Sammy shared a look (which made Jack feel strangely, to say the least). “We don’t… hate… each other…” Sammy mumbled, at the same time Lily murmured “hate is a strong word…”

Ben sighed loudly. “You’re both so stupid. Everybody knows you love each other. The whole GD town knows you love each other. Cut the bullshit, please. Also, Emily is on her way, and she’s super mad everyone got here before her.”

Everyone but Jack and Ben grimaced, apparently at this Emily person’s anger.

Jack wondered just what kind of company Sammy was keeping these days. He really liked them.

“I’m Deputy Katie Lynch, by the way. I assume you’re Jack Wright. I have to say, meeting you is a mighty pleasure, Mr. Jack,” said the woman in the booth with Troy. She hung over the top of it, propped up on her elbows.

She nodded kindly at him, and Jack managed to stammer out a “thanks, you too.”

Lily, meanwhile, was looking at Katie like she’d hung the moon in the sky, which was… interesting, to say the least.

More than a few customers were paying their checks and leaving at that point, likely sensing that something big was about to happen and it would be better for all parties if only those involved were, well, involved. Most of the waitstaff had moved to the back, excluding one or two, who were bringing bills to tables. Finally, the last stragglers left, and the waiters went into the kitchen, and another woman stomped in through the front doors with a chime and a determined look. She beelined for the group of them, and stopped when she saw them all loosely gathered around Jack.

Instead of addressing him, though, she looked to his right. “Oh, Sammy,” she’d said, her tone heavy, and wrapped him in a hug, which he reciprocated without hesitation.

Jack was, not for the first time that day, very confused. But he also felt safe, and loved, and as comfortable as he could in a group of strangers who all knew way more about him then he did about them.

The woman, probably Emily, took a chair from a different table and placed it alongside their booth.

“T’ll be Emily. It’s really good to meet you, Jack.” She looked at him with the sort of kindness and understanding he had begun to expect from the people Sammy had made his life with.

“So I keep hearing,” he said, a little helplessly. The group chuckled.
“Well, I guess we should start at the beginning?” Ben suggested. The consensus was a general agreement with him.

“The beginning… of what?” Jack looked to Sammy.

“What you missed. Crash course on the last five years,” Sammy said, smiling slightly.

“Knowing Ben, there’ll probably be a test at the end,” Lily sniped, and Ben nudged her. She glared at him and nudged him back, and he rolled his eyes.

“You’re a child, Lily.”

“YOU’RE a child, Benny. At least I’m not the same height as a five-year-old.”

Ben turned to her with fury in his eyes, and Jack couldn’t stop himself from saying, “what is going on?”

Six people all turned to look at him, and wow, that was a lot of attention for a guy who hadn’t spoken to another person in approximately five years.

Ben stuck his tongue out at Lily, and she rolled her eyes.

“Anyways, I believe we were debriefing for Mr. Wright?” Katie said politely, and Ben and Lily began to act their ages again.

A vacuum of silence filled the diner.

“So— Can I start?” Emily began, then turned to inquire at the group at large. At Sammy and Lily’s nods, she resumed. “Well… uh, for starters, Sammy, Ben, and Lily all share an apartment. Ben and I are dating, and the four of us have been working to… well, to bring you back.”

Jack furrowed his brow as he absorbed this. Not only were Lily and Sammy living in King Falls, but they were living together? Voluntarily?

He really had been gone a long time. He stamped down the wave of sadness that accompanied that thought. He tuned back in.

“It wasn’t just the four of us, though! We’ve had a ton of help from a lot of our friends, and we couldn’t have done it alone,” Ben was saying.

“Right.” Emily folded her hands on the table.

“Okay, and… how did ‘this’ all happen?” Jack made a vague hand gesture.

“‘This’?” Troy asked.

“Um… how come Sammy’s in King Falls? With Lily? How come you all know that Sammy and I are together and Sammy is… not freaking out, to say the least? Just- general confusion about everything, really, that’s where I’m at currently,” Jack finished. He suddenly felt very, very tired.

“Well,” Sammy cleared his throat. “after you… disappeared, I tried to investigate on my own. The LA police weren’t getting anywhere, and I was locked out of the investigation anyway, because I wasn’t family. So I started looking into King Falls, and realized it was the only possible lead I had, however slim, so I moved. I emailed the station manager at King Falls Am, and he gave me a job. That’s how I met Ben, actually. He was my producer, but I dragged him into being my cohost on the first night. And he clawed his way into friendship with me.”
“As he is wont to do,” Lily mentioned, and Emily mumbled a quiet, fond “accurate.”

Ben beamed. “Also, Tim got abducted on air on your first night, don’t forget to tell him about that,” he added.

Jack whipped around to stare at Sammy. “What? You had an on-air abduction and I MISSED IT?! YOU FUCKER, THAT’S MY DREAM!” Jack suddenly sobered as a realization hit him. “Oh, shit, is the guy okay?”

Ben nodded at him, and made a gesture that Jack took as ‘we’ll explain later.’

“Yeah… um, this town is every bit as weird as you thought it was, by the way,” Sammy said, shrugging somewhat sheepishly.

“It’s probably more weird, realistically.” Lily started stacking sugar packets into a tower, and hummed angrily when they fell.

“Oh my god,” was all Jack could think to say. They continued on.

“So, Year one. We began the feud with Beauregard, we found that body in the lake, Oh, the Electrolocaust! And all the rainbow lights after that…we got those flowers (still blame you for that, by the way, Sammy.) crop circles… Oh! And how could I forget the Best Small Town in America celebration!” Ben grinned, clearly remembering something fondly.

Troy, however, had a far-off look in his eye. “Dark, dark days,” he whispered, and Katie patted his arm comfortingly.

“Are you kidding? That was one of the best days of my life! I mean, fuck Grisham, for real, but it marked the birth of Suplex Sammy Stevens! Do you know what he said to me? He said, AND I QUOTE: ‘Post my bail, Ben!’ And then he went on stage and punched the mayor. Easily the best thing Sammy has ever said to me.”

“Really? Of all the heartfelt, emotional, found-family gooey things I’ve said to you, ‘post my bail’ was your favorite? Unbelievable,” Sammy scoffed, then noticed Jack’s intense look.

“You… did… what, Samuel?” Jack felt like his brain was a cassette tape with all the tape unspooled.

Lily watched this unfold with unrestrained glee.

Sammy pursed his lips and did not make eye contact with Jack. He sucked his teeth and looked down at the tabletop.

“Sammy, light of my life, did you punch a mayor. On stage. In front of a crowd of people.”

Sammy nodded slowly, still not looking at Jack.

“Why… why did you do that?”

“In Sammy’s defense… Grisham is a douchebag,” Ben said, and assenting murmurs were heard all around the table, including “oh yeah,” and “huge dickwad.”

“Uh...He… deserved it?” Sammy shrugged and winced.

Jack thumped his head on the table. “Just… keep going,” he said, slightly muffled.

Emily picked up the torch. “Well, we told you how Tim Jensen was abducted by a UFO we call the
Rainbow Lights on Sammy’s first day, May 1st, 2015, right?”

“That was his name, Tim Jensen,” Ben clarified.

Jack nodded.

“He was returned on April 2nd, in 2016. He showed up at a local business owner’s house completely naked. He was acting very strangely, though, and would continue to do so for... some time. It…uh, we’ll tell you in a second.” Emily paused, and looked slightly pained for a moment. Ben reached across Lily and briefly squeezed her hand.

She nodded, and continued. “So, exactly a year later, on the first Samiversary, I was also abducted, by the same rainbow lights that stole Tim. Also… on air.”

Ben swallowed thickly, and reached for Emily at the same time she reached for him. Sammy squeezed Emily’s other arm.

“Ben worked tirelessly on a plan to get Emily back, and did, eventually, with the help of a lot of our friends. It was really... it was really rough, there, for a while,” Sammy said. “But we got her back, along with the original Tim Jensen.”

“That first Tim Jensen that was returned was an evil Tim Jensen robot who works for the Science Institute. That’s the local mega-corporate cult, basically. Also, there’s an Emily bot too, and she’s terrifying and homicidal. Well, both the bots are, really.” Ben let out a long sigh.

“Wow, you were right about this place being weirder than I thought.” Jack leaned against Sammy slightly, who grabbed his hand underneath the table again. “I feel like I should be taking notes or drawing a diagram.”

Lily smiled at him, and Ben continued on.

“Anyways, Em had some memory problems, and some... other issues, but she’s good now, as is Tim, mostly. He and Mary Jensen, his wife, and their kids have been through a lot, and the Jensen clan have stuck with Sammy and I through basically everything,” Ben added.

Sammy nodded solemnly. “And then... Year 3.”

The table was quiet, and Jack felt suddenly alarmed at the serious mood of the room. “What? What is it?”

Sammy sighed. “Our third year broadcasting together was... rough. Well, so was our second, what with Emily missing and Ben... out of sorts. I- well, as I’m sure you can imagine, Jack, I... I was not okay without you. I pretended to be, for a very, very long time. But I... was not. My grief over losing you consumed me, and I hated myself for not being able to find you, no matter how hard I tried.” Sammy’s breathe stuttered, and he swallowed thickly. Jack held on to him tightly.

“Ben’s friendship, and the show we have together was, for a long time, the only bright thing in my life. I- I had been lying to everybody, Jack. Just like Shotgun Sammy, but worse, in a way, because I was myself, but a shoddily constructed version of me. I pretended that I didn’t know exactly how Ben felt when he lost the love of his life. And I pretended that I didn’t know how Mary Jensen felt when the same happened to her. And I pretended I was okay, and that I was straight, and I pretended I didn’t know Lily when she came to town with her podcast: “

“Ew Lily, a podcast?” Jack interrupted with a scowl, hoping desperately that his attempt at humor would take that edge out of Sammy’s voice.
It worked, and Sammy laughed. He clutched to Jack like a lifeline. “I was just… I was lying, Jack. Like I have been my whole life, to everyone but you. But I guess old habits…” he trailed off.

Jack saw the way the people at that table looked at Sammy. He knew that look. It was the same way he looked at Sammy. It was a look full of love, and a deep-seated need to protect him, to show him that he wasn’t alone.

“Well, long story short, Emily’s disgusting, abusive, frog-loving creep of an ex boyfriend outed me on-air, and I freaked out and destroyed some equipment, and Ben and I assumed we were off-air because the equipment was broken, but... we were still live. And we had an extremely emotional conversation about me, and you, too, and… all of our listeners heard it.”

Jack felt sick to his stomach. “Sammy, oh my god-“

“It’s okay, Jack, really. I’m alright now. I hope Frickard rots in hell, but I’m good. I didn’t used to be, but I’m okay now.”

“I’m gonna kill that guy,” Jack said, his hand gripping tight to Sammy’s under the table. Sammy’s thumb rubbed gently along Jack’s hand, and Jack knew it was an effort to get Jack to call down.

It wouldn’t work.

“I’ll join you,” Emily muttered darkly, and Ben nodded.

“I hate Frickard just as much as the rest of you, but please don’t plan a murder right in front of two officers of the law,” Troy begged.

That got a few chuckles out of everyone, and Sammy continued.

“So, that was probably the third worst night of my life. Having every single one of my darkest secrets spilled to random people in the town is not necessarily my idea of a good time. But Ben… Ben was exactly what I needed at the time. I mean, there wasn’t much anyone could have done for me then, not with you gone, but Ben… he helped me. Still, I was in a really bad place, and I was ready to—“

Sammy swallowed thickly and his sentence stuttered off. He took a shuddering breath, and steeled himself, and continued.

“Jack, I… am ashamed to say it, but I was ready to give up. I knew you were in the void, but I had given up on getting you back. I am so, so sorry. I hated myself for it, but I knew I wasn’t like Ben. Not a hero, like him. I couldn’t have pulled you out of the darkness, not like he did with Emily. And… I’m sorry, Jack.”

Sammy was crying now, his head hung low, shoulders wracked with quiet sobs. Jack just took him in his arms and held him, in front of God and everyone, like it didn’t matter. And he guessed it didn’t. Times had changed while he was stuck. Sammy had changed. But he was still too hard on himself.

“Sammy, Sammy. It’s okay. There’s nothing to forgive. I’m here, now. Safe. With you. With the life you’ve built, the family you’ve made for yourself. Sammy, we made it. We’re okay.” He was mumbling into Sammy’s shoulder while Sammy clung to him, and from the corner of his eye he saw their companions turn away, just slightly, giving them as much privacy as possible without being disruptive.

They held each other for a few moments more, but when they separated they sat closer than ever.
“After, ahem, after that I told Ben I was leaving, the following May. I was upset that I couldn’t find you, obviously, and I was mad at Lily, too, because I thought surely she could do what I couldn’t. But she didn’t find you, either.

“Ben and everyone else in King Falls tried their hardest to get me to stay, but… well, I wasn’t listening. I had already made up my mind to go. I didn’t know where, really. I didn’t have any plan at all. I was… in a bad place. On the third anniversary of the show, I drove to Perdition Wood, to the… entrance of the void. And I tried to go in. I thought that if I couldn’t bring you back, maybe, at the very least, we could be together.

Jack’s eyes widened. “Sammy, no,” he said, breathlessly.

“But—“ Sammy’s voice was shaken again, his voice thick with emotion. “It wouldn’t take me. It was the scariest thing I’ve ever seen in my whole fucking life, and I knew as soon as I was there that I had made a mistake in thinking that was anything even close to an option.

“Walt, a man we knew, he helped me. He drove the shadows away so I could escape. He gave his life for mine.” There was a vacant look in his eyes, that haunted, absent expression. Then he snapped out of it. “Then, when I was driving down the road, on the phone with Ben, I saw… there were the rainbow lights, right above me. Hovering, chasing me. Swooping like a bird. Then it was hit by Beauregard’s laser, and it crashed and destroyed the radio station.”

“Holy fuck,” Jack said. Emily nodded.

“I moved in with Ben. He basically took care of me, for the several months we were out of work. Well, he was out of work. I didn’t renew my contract until like 7 months later. But I went to therapy, for the whole ‘not wanting to live’ thing. It was helpful, honestly. Slowly, I got better, with Ben and Emily and Troy’s help, and tons of other people. Lily and I slowly— and when I say slowly, I mean VERY slowly— came around to each other. She moved in with us, after I renewed my contract.”

Lily sat up straight, ready to take the mantle from Sammy. Good timing, too, because Jack could tell that Sammy had just about reached his emotional limit, and Jack couldn’t blame him.

“Sammy… was not the only one who’d had a rough year. I… had a pretty serious drinking problem, and at one point, Sammy had to come save me.” At Jack’s alarmed look, she hurried to clarify. “I was okay, just super drunk and barefoot on the side of a major highway. Troy found me, called the boys to come get me. So Sammy came, because he’s such a dad, and also a great person or whatever.” Lily exhaled. Jack felt sick, but it was mingled with a deep sense of relief. At least she was okay now. Jack sighed, and felt guilty. He hadn’t really considered how Lily might’ve fared in his absence.

“Careful Lily, if you say too many nice things you’ll get a tummy-ache,” Ben teased, and she swatted at him.

“So, anyways, the three of us— well, four, actually— got the bright idea to try and save you. Thanks to Ben, mostly, who wouldn’t let us give up under any circumstances.” Lily was wearing an expression that Jack could only describe as fond. The only people he’d seen that expression directed at were Sammy and himself. Ben it seemed, was now part of a very elite club known as “Men Lily Wright Cares About.” Jack smiled to himself, and forced himself to pay attention again.

“I realized something, when the four of us were working together to get you back, Jack. The reason I couldn’t do it, the reason Lily couldn’t do it— it was because we were alone. Both of us have… an unfortunate habit of not asking for help, not letting anyone in. We both reverted back to that, after you disappeared. And I realized that nobody does anything alone. It needed to be us, our family, to
bring you back. A family that you are a part of, Jack.” Sammy looked at Jack with reverence and hope, like he was staring down the barrel of their future, and had the bone-deep knowledge that Jack was in it, with him.

Jack swallowed the lump in his throat yet again.

“We can tell you the rest later. Right now, I think we should all go to bed,” Emily said, and all at once everyone seemed to realize how tired they all were.

“I should be getting back to Loretta, she’ll be missing me. But boys, I mean it when I say I could not be happier for you. Sammy, I- shoot, man, I keep crying! I just wanna say that you’re my best bud, and I’m proud of you, and you just- you rest now, you hear? You go and get the best damn sleep that you’ve had in 5 years, okay? I’ll see you tomorrow. Jack, welcome to King Falls. I hope you love this town as much as we love you,” Troy said, then bid them all goodbye and walked out. Katie followed suit shortly, waving to everyone except Lily, who followed her outside the diner, and watched as Katie drove away.

Jack felt like he should maybe feel out of place, or like a third wheel, but strangely, he didn’t. He felt like he fit right in.

The four of them scooched out of the booth and Emily went to go thank the owner of the diner for letting them stay so late. Jack heard Ben take Sammy aside. He tried not to listen in, but, well, Ben was not exactly the quietest talker.

“Sammy, I can stay at Emily’s tonight, if you guys would rather it be just the three of you. I know Jack is probably overwhelmed, and I don’t want to make him feel like he’s… entered into a life that’s not his own, you know? And I know it can get kinda crowded, so I figured maybe you’d want just you and Jack and Lily.” Ben was looking up at Sammy with a kind, open expression. Jack watched shock bloom in Sammy’s face.

“No, no, not at all! Ben, I haven’t talked to Jack yet obviously, so I will, but as for me? I definitely want you there. You’ve… you’ve been as much a part of this as Lily or me, and I don’t want you to feel like you have to tiptoe around us. I’ll talk to Jack, but I think it’ll be okay with you there, Ben.” Sammy smiled and Jack felt a rush of warmth in his chest.

Ben Arnold was the best damn person, and Jack could not be happier that Sammy had found a friend in him. There was a comfort in knowing you could trust someone with the person you love, and that was how Jack felt towards Ben.

Ben nodded, and said something about joining Emily I’m the kitchen, leaving Sammy and Jack effectively alone.

Sammy looked at him the same way he always did. Jack took a second to be grateful with every atom in him that Sammy existed, and that he loved Jack just as much as Jack loved him.

“Hey, stranger,” Jack said, and watched the way Sammy cringed. “Too soon?”

“You’re too much like your sister,” Sammy replied, and couldn’t conceal the grin spreading across his face. Jack entwined their hands and gazed at him.

He knew they were being disgusting, but he figured it was allowed. He hadn’t seen his fiancé in a
fucking half-decade, cut him some slack, maybe.

“Sammy,” Jack stage-whispered.

“Yeah?”

“I love you,” Jack said, and willed all of his emotions into those three words.

Some of them must have come through, because Sammy shut his eyes and teared up, and when he opened them, they were filled with a ferocity that Jack hadn’t even realized how badly he’d missed.

And suddenly the 6 inches of distance between them was far, far too much, and they were embracing and clutching to each other and whispering broken half-sentences into each other’s shirts.

They broke apart, and Jack wiped tears off his cheeks, then did the same to Sammy.

“I overheard you and Ben, by the way. I’d love for him to stay. He’s… he’s your family, Sammy.”

They both knew how meaningful that was for Sammy. The only true family Sammy ever had (at least, by his definition of family, ie, people who cared about you unconditionally) were Jack and Lily. That was no longer true, and Jack was so grateful for that handsome, energetic man in the kitchen.

“He could be your family, too,” Sammy said, hopefully.

“Are you proposing? I already did that.” Jack grabbed Sammy’s hand and held it up, his engagement ring shining in the diner lighting.

“I just… I wasn’t sure quite where we stood,” Sammy said, uncharacteristically shy.

Jack couldn’t help but smile. “Well… hopefully… in the not-too distant future… We’ll be standing at the altar. Or maybe not an altar, maybe a non-religious centerpiece of a ballroom, or… something.”

Sammy beamed at him, and something warm and comfortably heavy curled up in Jack’s chest.

“Thanks, guys!” Emily’s voice called as she walked out of the kitchen, her hand in Ben’s. She approached them with a smile. “They’re closing up now, I talked to Rose about payment, but all she’d accept is five free ads on the show.”

“I talked her up from one,” Ben said, shrugging nonchalantly. Emily grinned at him.

“I talked her up from one,” Ben said, shrugging nonchalantly. Emily grinned at him.

“I should get going, though. Benny, see you tomorrow.” She gave her boyfriend a kiss and then moved to Sammy. He had several inches on her, but she wrapped her arms around his neck and he ducked down as low as necessary for the hug to work.

She pulled away, and looked at him. “I am so, so happy for you both,” she told them, her eyes brimming with tears.

Jack nearly started up again, for the umpteenth time that night.

“Jack, it truly was wonderful to meet you, and I can’t wait to get to know you better.” Emily looked at him kindly, and then exited the diner, bidding Lily farewell on her way.

“Well, boys, shall we?” Ben said, twirling car keys around his finger and walking backwards. He almost tripped over an uneven tile, and Jack and Sammy both reached out to catch him before he went down backwards. Ben looked at them with wide eyes. “Oh my god, there’s double the dad,” he
muttered, and Sammy scoffed before nudging him out of the diner doors.

Lily sat on the curb outside and looked up at them fondly. She stood and brushed the dirt off her jeans.

“I’m driving,” she said, smirking.

“Wha- no! I have the keys!” Ben almost whined, and Jack had to stop himself from laughing.

“It’s my car, I should drive,” Sammy interjected, his hand still clasped in Jack’s.

“Oh whatever, Prius!” Lily said.

“That isn’t a Prius,” Jack said, looking down at the truck they were walking towards. Everybody ignored him.

Ben called out, “You’re a dirty rotten liar, Stevens, this is a gracious loaner from Ron Begley and you KNOW it!”

Lily scoffed and sat in the back, Sammy and Jack coming to sit beside her, with Ben sitting in the front.

“Good evening folks, I will EVIDENTLY be your chauffeur today-“ Ben joked as he started the car.

“King Falls Uber?” Lily looked at him with a brow raised.

Sammy and Ben let out identical groans. “I’m having Escobar flashbacks.” Ben pulled out of the parking lot.

“Fucking Pete Myers, dude.”

Jack was struck, yet again, by just how much he had missed. It was daunting, and it made his heart clench, but he tried to remind himself that he was surrounded by arguably the best people in the world, and he would not have to play catch-up all alone.

He furrowed his brows. “Wait, Pete? The guy who gave me a ride was named Pete.”

Sammy and Lily whirled around to look at him, and Ben gave him wide eyes in the rear view mirror.

“What kind of car was he driving?” Ben asked, far too urgently, in Jack’s opinion.

“Uh, a van? Had a lawn service decal on the side?”

Sammy leaned his head against the window with a thud. “I cannot fucking believe Peter Elonius Myers saw my long lost boyfriend before I did. What did I do to deserve that?”

“Maybe all your snark is catching up to you,” Lily sniper.

“Well, if that’s the case, you better watch out, Lily, your time is way past due,” Sammy quipped, and Ben had to stop them before a war broke out.

Jack almost wished he’d break out the ‘so help me I will turn this car around!’

“So how often do you get stuck babysitting these two?” Jack asked Ben, who laughed.

“Less than you’d think but more than I should,” he admitted.
Jack smiled, and looked at Sammy and Lily, seated on either side of him.

The drive was mostly quiet after that. They were all exhausted, physically and emotionally. Lily leaned her head against his shoulder and fell asleep, and Jack was overcome with a profound sense of rightness. This was exactly where he was supposed to be. Between his two favorite people, riding behind a new friend. Going home.

Home.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!