

“Baby Steps” by Sarann Spiegel

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“They slipped briskly into an intimacy from which they never recovered.”

— *F. Scott Fitzgerald, This Side of Paradise*

“Someone has to leave first. This is a very old story.

There is no other version of this story.”

— *Richard Siken, War of the Foxes*

“We look at the world once, in childhood.

The rest is memory.”

— *Louise Glück, Nostos*

Mickey plucked at the B string, frowning as she tuned it higher and higher. Her guitars, despite being safely stowed away in the U-Haul, had jiggled about and got out of tune. She meant to deal with them sooner, but there was so much to figure out about the house and neighbors to meet and welcome baskets to accept and an angry daughter to handle. By the time she made it to her makeshift studio each night — because now they were *in a house*, and she had an *in-house studio* where she could write without having to leave her baby — her exhaustion eliminated the prospect of tuning four guitars. Today, though, was the first pleasant day since their arrival this side of the Hudson. She’d taken Jess to swim in the Delaware, who spluttered, obnoxiously adorable floaties strapped to her little arms. The exercise meant she napped peacefully in her stroller on the way home and for a bit after, too. Mickey managed to get halfway through reading the *Times* before Jess woke up. They had leftover empanadillas for dinner, watched a Tinkerbell movie, and then Jess took her bath and returned to bed. Mickey smiled as she tucked her daughter in, kissed her forehead. There was time to tune at least one guitar and get some playing in, diddle about, produce a line or two if she was lucky. It was the first night she gladly flicked the studio lights on.

She selected her acoustic, Heather. Jax would be disappointed — they spent these past few weeks declaring this a harder album, a return to the sound their band developed in their college days. Despite The Catch’s dissolution, they both missed making those songs, screaming and shredding until their emotional wells ran dry. He happily produced her solo stuff, won the

awards with her, and made a child with her, but she knew he lingered on the unexplored possibilities of The Catch. No one predicted her turn towards sprawling acoustic tracks, especially not him. But she was going to turn away from them. For his sake.

And yet... it was hard not to lean into acoustics here. Back in New York, graced by earsplitting guitars and subways, she could imagine that harshness, felt it rise up in her every time a man yelled from a stoop with violence in his eyes. Here, so far into Jersey it was basically Pennsylvania, everything was soft. She thought of Jess giggling as she splashed Mickey in the eye, the dappling sun, the stroller wheels over cracking pavement, and this home nestled in the trees.

Who said she had to work on the album right now anyway? She could play what she pleased for the joy of it. There was no rush.

Skipping over G to the A string, she plucked away, tuning. She almost had it when she heard a *thunk* from the other room. She stopped, hand silencing the strings.

Slap, slap, slap.

A small figure appeared in the open doorway, stuffed bunny in hand.

Mickey frowned. "What are you doing up, Jessie?"

Jess had her own frown on her face, and she so resembled Kermit the Frog that Mickey had to hold back laughter. "I can't sleep," she whined. "It's too quiet here." She crossed her arms, crushing Mr Bunny's head in the bend of her elbow.

Only a New York baby would think such a thing. Jess slept with the window open because Mickey slept with the window open. While enjoying the cool breeze, she'd accidentally taught her daughter to like the keening sirens, crashing garbage trucks, and drunken shouts. Breathing out her nose, Mickey set her guitar aside. *You made a little progress*, she told herself, pushing to her feet. "Someone sounds like a grump."

"I am not a grump," Jess said, stamping her foot.

Mickey faked a pout to hide her smile. "Okay. I'm sorry. What can I do to help?"

Jess pursed her lips, considering. Her hair was out of control, dark curls falling halfway down her back; Mickey wanted to cut it, but her daughter screamed shrilly whenever she proposed the idea. "I want a story."

She'd wanted a story the whole time, surely — ever since she crawled into bed. She waited until she believed an appropriate amount of time had passed before asking. Mickey sighed. "Of course." She ushered Jess back to her bed. Once her daughter settled underneath the covers, she sat on the edge and asked, "What kind of story would you like?"

"I want *the* story."

"*The* story?" Mickey chuckled a little, scratching at Jess' thermal-covered belly. "Which one is that?"

“The one about the girl and the boy in the forest. The true one.”

Mickey frowned, half-sincere, half-not. “Why do you think it’s true?”

Jess bit down on her bunny’s ear. Mickey gently pulled it from her mouth. “Because... you get sad. When you tell it. You get sad. And then tomorrow you’re quiet and sad. And then after you’re fine.”

Throat dry, Mickey managed a painful swallow. “Okay, fine,” she said, tracing the floral pattern on her daughter’s duvet rather than look her four-year-old in the eye. Jax would laugh at her and say, *everyone lies to their kids a little*, but Mickey didn’t want to raise a liar. So she avoided questions she didn’t want to answer, even when the questions masqueraded as statements. “I’ll tell you that story again, if you want.”

“I want.” She had damn Mr Bunny in her mouth again. Mickey sighed, tugging lightly on the bunny’s ear until Jess released him.

“Once upon a time, there was a girl whose parents moved her out of the city...”

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Twelve-year-old Mickey loathed the new house, much like her daughter would. It was old; the floors creaked and the doors squealed. She refused to help her parents unpack, instead running out of the backyard and down into the forest. She ignored her mother’s cry of, “Micaela Ferro, ¡vente pa’ ca!” and ran. The tears came. She tripped, unable to take care with such blurry vision, and then she was rolling down a hill. Dead leaves crunched beneath her small body. She completed seven and a half rolls before coming to a stop, trees taller and greener than they were just a few moments ago.

Mickey covered her face with muddy hands. She already missed New York and her teachers and cousins and the seals in the Central Park reservoir. (Her mother didn’t believe her about that, thought she was kidding around or talking to imaginary friends. But Mickey saw their bodies flick through the water. She reached out for one, once, and when the seal lifted its head it had a woman’s face and rows of sharp teeth. It snapped at her fingers, pulled off one of her fingernails. Her mother called her dramatic. Then she saw the blood.) As they drove across the George Washington Bridge, she looked back at the shrinking Manhattan skyline and swore she would return as an adult, if not sooner.

“Why are you crying?”

She gasped, hands falling away to reveal another kid a few feet away. Through the muddy, teary blur, Mickey could only make out long blond hair, a pale ivory face, and a dirtied dress. “I’m not crying,” she lied, rubbing at her eyes with the backs of her hands.

The other child scowled. “I see your tears.” They pointed to her, lines forming around a thin mouth. “You’re lying. Wait. You’re lying?”

“I’m not lying,” Mickey lied again. She stood and started to climb back up the hill. In the corner of her eye, a white rabbit hopped off. “Leave me alone, you creep.” She hoped this kid didn’t go to the school she was starting at. That would be super embarrassing. She would be the girl that lied about crying in the woods and the other kids wouldn’t want to be friends with someone so lame.

Mickey struggled up the hill, digging small hands into the soft earth. The grass was green here, not dry and brown like when they drove in. She glanced back at the still-frowning kid and ran back through the trees, leaves turning to orange and brown. The cold air bit at her bare arms as she slipped out of the woods, creaky house looming in the distance. She walked back slowly. Her father told her to take her muddy shoes off before coming inside, and her parents peered at her sadly over their dinner. Mickey refused to speak. She ate until her plate was clean, asking to be excused when her mother dared to ask her what was wrong. Her mother let her go with an angry wave of her hand. Stomping into the living room, Mickey put *10 Things I Hate About You* in the VHS. She pouted through the beginning, arms crossed, but was grinning sleepily by the end. Her father carried her up to bed, jokingly threatening to drop her the entire time — “Te vas a caer, Mikita!” — and she fell asleep in her new huge bedroom, anger ebbing away.

But the tide came back in the next morning, as the tide is wont to do. The house was just as wretched and the kids at her new school all already had friends. She tried not to cry at the back of the bus each afternoon. Sometimes she managed to make it to her bedroom; some days she broke down in the yard as the bus turned the corner. Her parents discussed the situation in low tones they thought she could not hear. They set up weekly meetings with the guidance counselor, believing she might open up to a stranger. She did not. She scribbled on coloring pages and lied about everyone being nice to her and having too many friends to count. The counselor knew she was lying, but you cannot help a girl who so clearly wants nothing to do with you.

Weeks passed. Mickey stopped crying. She started going into the forest more often and for longer periods of time. She tried to find the green patch again. Her parents nodded along, faces blank when she told them of the endless green in the middle of October. She decided to venture back in and find proof of her discovery: A leaf or blade of grass, too fresh and perfect for the season of death. Winter boots thudding through the snow, she went in again and again, parents frowning as they watched from inside the house.

No one seemed to understand her.

It was the first day of the new year, and Mickey woke up before her parents to fresh snowfall. She slid into snowpants, strapped on boots, zipped up her coat, pulled a beanie over her

two French braids, and ventured into the woods. Before leaving, she slipped her father's watch into her pocket.

The snow piled up to her knees. She took large steps, swinging her legs up and over. The descent was tedious, but the snow made it easy for her to slide down hills rather than walk or fall down them as she had before. Mickey checked the watch at random intervals throughout her journey. Sometimes it had been twenty minutes, sometimes three.

Half past nine, the packed snow beneath her feet lessened. The sun's rays burned brighter and the snow melted, giving way to green. Birds sang in the trees, a herd of deer ambled by, and tulips bloomed, kaleidoscopic in color.

Mickey pulled her hat off her head, sitting back in the plush grass. She unzipped her jacket and laid back, gasping at the preserved spring grove. She giggled. Surprised, she clasped a hand over her mouth, but that only made her laugh harder. Part of her considered that she might genuinely have lost her mind, but being so young, her want for a magical world preceded her self-concern.

"You again," a voice said.

Mickey sat up sharply. It was the same kid from before, only this time they wore a cleaner dress. They leaned against a skinny tree, arms crossed, brow drawn.

"Come back to lie some more?"

"No," Mickey said, unsure whether or not the words were honest. She held her jacket closed over her chest like the black down puffer would protect her. "I'm not supposed to talk to strangers." She realized the irony after she'd said it.

The kid reeled back a little, as if surprised. Then their head tilted to one side. "I am not a stranger. We met earlier."

Mickey smiled then. She'd never imagined there'd be a loophole. "That's not really what I meant."

"But I am correct."

"You're right, but that's not what it means."

"Then what does it mean?"

Mickey swallowed, trying to think of how to explain it. A bird chirped above them and another chirped back. "I don't know you."

The kid uncrossed their arms and sat, back to the tree. "You could know me if you wanted to know me."

"You want to be my friend?"

"We could be friends."

Her eyes stung, and Mickey pressed her forehead to her bent knees. Hidden, she breathed deep, hoping she might will the tears away. Too busy worrying over Mickey's lack of friends in

Jersey, her parents didn't realize she never quite had friends in New York, either. There were kids she sometimes played with in the park, and kids she sat with in class that she had conversations with, but she didn't have playdates. She sat alone at the peanut-free table during lunch. At recess, she climbed fences and swung on the swings, humming all the while. Lucky lunches were spent with her teachers, who took to her independent and seemingly mathematical mind. She enjoyed the workbooks her mother got for her each year, enjoyed five plus seventeen and eleven times two-hundred-forty. Most of all, she enjoyed the records her father played (Soda Stereo, Luis Alberto Spinetta) and yearned to join the music program her school offered. Her parents could not afford to buy her an instrument, so she resigned herself to peering through the window in the door, watching all the other kids make terrible music. *I could do that*, she thought. *I could be better than any of them.*

And now they were in Jersey. Mickey didn't know anything about her new school and her parents were too busy figuring out the logistics of their new life to investigate for her. There was a band program — she'd seen Elliot with a cello once — but she was not brave enough to ask again. So she met with the guidance counselor, colored her pages, and resigned herself to her fate.

“Are you alright?” the kid asked.

Mickey sniffled into her snow pants, scrubbed at her eyes. “I'm fine.” She looked up, wiping her nose on the sleeve of her jacket. *We could be friends.* “What's your name?”

The kid frowned. “I am not supposed to tell anyone that.”

“I know you can't tell strangers, but the only way to not be strangers is if you tell me. You said you wanted to be friends,” Mickey said, throat catching at the end. She sniffled again.

The kid's frown deepened. “How about you give me a name, and then you can call me that, and we will not be strangers. We will be friends.” They smiled, bright and toothy and impossibly warm. It loosened the knot in Mickey's chest.

“Okay,” she agreed. “Hmm. Do you want a girl's name or a boy's name? Or should it be a name that's both? Like, Jordan or something. You know.”

The kid looked at her with wide eyes. “You can pick?”

“No, *you* can pick. It's your name. What do *you* want?”

It seemed no one had ever asked them that. The kid looked left and right, as if expecting someone to jump from the shadows with a punishment on hand. A time-out, maybe. They leaned forward and gestured for Mickey to lean in as well. She did.

“A boy's name,” he whispered. “If you can.” Like this was a secret. Maybe it was, and if so, was that not the first indication of true friendship?

Mickey nodded intently. She hoped he understood that she understood the sanctity of the moment. “Okay. A boy's name.” She pursed her lips, running through names in her mind. She

knew an Elliot, a Ben, a James, a Sam. Her father was Dario but everyone called him Rico; her tíos were Gogo, Titi, and Jeje. This boy was different from the others, with his long blond hair and white face. He was pretty. Cute, even — a thought that made Mickey blush and cover her cheeks with her palms. What was a name for a pretty boy? She thought back to *10 Things*, which she'd watched twelve times since the move. "What about Heath?"

He grinned.

"I'm Mickey," she said. She put out her hand to shake, like adults did. Heath glanced at it, confused, but took it. She raised their clasped hands once, then again.

That was how Mickey became friends with the boy in the woods.

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The hallway spun. Mickey'd spent her first Halloweekend at some frat party — she couldn't remember then, despite having just departed. Her friends lived in Hartley, so they'd left her to her own devices at the door to John Jay. She was lucky to have made it inside. Presently, she walked with a hand against the wall, squinting at the doors in hopes one might have her name on it. None had yet.

The hallway kept spinning.

Mickey slid down the wall, put her head between her denim-clad legs. To do that, she had to remove her cowboy hat. Her and a friend had gone as Ennis Del Mar and Jack Twist, along with most of their gay peers. They'd thought themselves original, pushing the boundaries of the straight boys of Columbia, and both grimaced awkwardly when confronted with their overconfidence. There had been at least three other gay cowboys in their immediate vicinity all night.

The reek of marijuana wafted down the hall. Mickey's body declared everything too much; she turned to the side and vomited onto someone's cute little welcome mat.

Because Lady Fortuna often smiled down at her, the door to the dorm Mickey puked in front of opened. The door-opener paused upon seeing her Canadian-tuxedo-self sprawled on the floor, glanced down at the puke on their chevron welcome mat, and said, "Aw, man."

Mickey opened her eyes. The young man looming above her had brilliant brown, almost sepia, skin. Sweat gleamed on his forehead under the fluorescent lights and his hair was in braids. He grimaced, disgusted, then looked at her sadly.

"Really? You couldn't have puked at Josh's door? He's racist, he deserves it."

She exhaled shakily. "Sorry. I'll clean it up when I remember how to move." The last time she'd gotten this drunk was in junior year of high school. She stole her dad's beer from the garage and brought it to Heath's room. He had a higher tolerance for it, having been exposed to

whatever was in faery wine for so long. Mickey, however, had puked for a whole hour while Heath rubbed circles on her back and braided her hair to keep it out of her face. She doubted he would do her the same honor now.

The young man studied her, crease appearing between his eyebrows. “Are you good?”

“I just puked on your welcome mat.”

“I mean, do you want help?”

Mickey’s head rolled to the side. She laughed. “You want to help me?”

“You seem... not good, man. Do you want help?”

She looked back at him. His eyes were the perfect shade of brown, deep and dark but light enough to see the shadows of the iris. Brown like chestnuts. “Yeah. Yeah, I want help.”

He stepped over the puke, reached out to pick her up and lean him against her. “I’m Jaxon. Jax.”

Slumped against his shoulder, she said, “I’m Mickey.”

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“This isn’t what we agreed to.” Jax’s voice crackled over the phone. Mickey peeked over her shoulder, checking that Jess still hung from the monkey bars. “This isn’t what we discussed.”

“I know that.”

“I thought we agreed.”

“We did.”

“Then what happened?”

Mickey opened her mouth, head shaking slightly, but no words came. “I... My life looks different here, Jax.”

“So?”

“So... I made something that doesn’t align with what we agreed to. I’m only human.”

Mickey glanced over again to find Jess trying to stuff sand from the sandbox in her mouth.

“Hey!” Mickey yelled, holding the phone away from her as she snapped with her other hand.

“Jessamine Ferro, quitate esa de la boca!” Jess pouted and dropped the sand. Mickey pressed the phone to her ear. “Sorry. Jax, I just don’t think you get it.”

“Because I’m not in Jersey.”

“Yeah, and-”

“I’m coming out there in a few weeks to see the house anyway. Will I get it then?” She could practically see him lingering outside the studio, clicking a ballpoint pen to the beat of the song stuck in his head. She could see the frown lines around his mouth, the look in his eyes that said *There’s something you’re not telling me. You’ll never tell me.* He’d looked at her like that for

their whole lives. He'd looked at her like that when she said *let's have a kid*, he said *marry me*, and she said *no*; and when she said *I'm moving to Jersey and I think we should draw up a calendar for how Jess will split her time*, he said *why Jersey?* and she didn't say anything. She couldn't put words to it still.

Everything was hard to explain when no one would believe half of it.

Why Jersey? Because there's something magic about Jersey. New York is in my blood and in my bones but if my parents never moved to Jersey, I don't know who I'd be. Everything I have now is because we moved. Everything started there. Why Jersey? Why Jersey? Because I miss him and maybe if I go back I'll see him again.

Then Jax would ask who "he" was and Mickey's life would unravel.

She licked her lips. "Jax," she said, eyes stinging, throat closing. "Remember 'For Heath?'"

"Yeah," he said, the silent *duh* obvious in his voice. "The one about Heath Ledger."

Mickey blinked and tears fell. She wanted to laugh and tell him everything, or hang up and walk into the woods' open arms. "There's something here that every song I've ever written... I feel like every song I write, every album, everything, it's all me trying to access something here. Something I only feel here. And I wanted to write our album, Jax, I did, and I still do, but being here... It's all coming back and I didn't realize how much I missed it." He wouldn't understand the segue; he'd think she brought up the song and then started talking about something else, a classic Ferro non-sequitur. Most people thought she couldn't stay on topic for shit. If no one understood her as a kid, less people understood her now. Her music somehow both clarified and mystified her existence.

Jax didn't say anything. That was okay. How was he supposed to get it when she dealt him vague references to a past he didn't know existed? She remembered his face after they first had sex, his narrowed eyes and him saying, *I feel like I can never get in your head*.

Maybe because you don't belong in there, she'd said.

I want to belong in there.

"Mick," he said.

"I'll see you when you come to see Jess," Mickey said in a rush. She opened her eyes to find Jess gone from the monkey bars, the sandbox, the slide. *Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck*. "We can talk about it then. We can scrap this thing if you want."

"I don't want to scrap it if it matters to you, Mickey--"

"I have to go." She hung up, pressed her hands to her temples and tried to remember how to breathe. "Jess? Jessie? Jessamine, baby?" The tears kept coming. She couldn't remember crying like this since Jess turned one. She ran around the park, towards the field that led out into the woods. "Jess? Jess? Are you there, Jessie? Jess?"

Jess' curly head popped out of the grass. She beamed, a three-leaf clover held in her chubby kid fingers. "Look, Mami. Mami, look!"

Mickey dropped to her knees, pulled Jess into her lap, and started to sob. "Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God. You scared me to death, Jessie." Her breath shuddered and she ran her fingers through Jess' hair. The strands were like wet satin against her palm. "Oh my God."

"Why are you crying, Mami?"

"Because I'm scared, Jess. I'm so scared." She kissed her daughter's little forehead, clutched her face in her hands. "I'm so scared. Are you scared?"

Jess shook her head. "No, I don't get scared."

Mickey laugh-sobbed. "You don't get scared?"

"Nope."

"Okay. Will you be my brave little knight, then? Will you protect me? Because I get so scared. I'm so scared all the time, baby."

Jess smiled, gap-toothed, and pressed her chubby hands to Mickey's wet face. "I promise," she said.

Mickey nodded and kissed Jess' head again.

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"I didn't think you were real when we first met," Heath said. He pulled himself up onto a tree branch and perched easily in the crook. His feet swung back and forth in his new linen pants. It was the first time Mickey'd seen him in pants and a button-up instead of a dress. In them, his smile came easier and his laughter rung louder. He was the most himself he'd been in the year Mickey'd known him.

She stood on a branch below him, grimacing at his branch and the tree trunk, unsure how to reach him and unconfident in her abilities. Heath demanded she know how to climb trees if she was consistently visiting Faerie. That was a long conversation, one that resulted in Mickey arriving home far later in the night than a thirteen-year-old should.

After they officially met, Mickey forged into the woods as often as possible. Before joining band (which she did last April, Dad explaining that they could, in fact, afford an instrument now that they weren't paying New York rent every month), she visited daily. With weekday band practice and violin lessons on the weekend, she was lucky to visit twice a week. Eventually, when Heath tied his hair back and Mickey marveled at the pointed end of his ear, he told her everything. He wasn't human, he was a faery prince; his mother ruled the Spring Court, also known as the evergreen place Mickey kept discovering him in. She walked between realms without realizing. He explained such an ability was an unusual and that they should investigate at

some point, but neither had yet. The next time they saw each other, he gave her a glass locket with a four-leaf clover pressed inside because *the clover will protect you from us*. He told her to put salt in it, so she did. He told her to wear her socks inside out whenever she visited, so she did. He told her not to say thank you or to apologize unless she wanted to owe a faery a debt, so she didn't. When she told him that she returned home at strange times, disappearing either for minutes or hours or, once, arriving home earlier than she'd left and receiving a curious eyebrow raise from her abuela, he told her to put dirt from the human world in her father's watch. She did. The watch sat on her wrist now, as she reached for the branch Heath sat upon. With the dirt inside, it kept human time rather than spin wildly, as it had when Mickey and Heath formally met. Currently, the watch read 4:15. She would leave at five o'clock.

Now that they'd defeated the issue of her odd hours, her parents were simply happy Mickey had a friend. They accepted her taking her father's watch with few questions. They did ask about the locket that hung from her neck at all times. Mickey said it was a gift.

"What do you mean, you didn't think I was real?"

Heath reached a hand down to help Mickey up. She took it, squealing when he pulled her up quickly and easily. He helped her position herself properly on the branch, and when she — blushing furiously — almost fell, they agreed it was safest for him to lean against the trunk with her leaning against him. His heart thudded at the back of her skull. She traced swirls on his linen-covered knees.

"Your kind," he said, because they weren't technically the same ilk even if Heath felt more like her than anyone else ever had, "has a belief that after humans die, they come to Faerie."

"People think this is the afterlife?" Mickey asked. She turned her head back slightly, glimpsed Heath's chin and his nostrils.

"Yeah. Because sometimes, if the world is quiet enough, you can see someone in the trees that should not be there. Someone dead. Supposedly, my mother doesn't travel through the brush anymore because she saw her brother once in the trees."

Mickey paused in drawing a swirl. "Is he dead?"

She heard Heath nod, blond hair shifting against the tree. He'd cut it shorter a few months ago. It still brushed his shoulders, but now Mickey's hair was longer, which she teased him for relentlessly. *Long hair was your thing*. "She killed him."

"She killed him?"

"Yeah. It's not uncommon in Faerie to kill your siblings. Especially if you're royal."

"That's horrible."

"A lot of things are here."

“You’re not,” Mickey said. She tilted her head back and Heath tilted his head down, and then they were looking at each other upside down. “I think you’re pretty great.”

A year later, and his smile only warmed her more, from her toes to her scalp. “I think you are the greatest, Micaela Ferro.”

“Don’t full name me. It makes me feel like I’m in trouble.”

Heath pressed his lips together, licked them once. Mickey didn’t know it then, but much later, she’d see that look for the trouble it was. “I like using your full name,” he said. His hand moved to untangle the knots at the ends of her hair. “If you used my full name, I’d do whatever you wanted. But I can use yours and you remain you. It’s a beautiful freedom that you’re lucky to have.”

Mickey sucked in a breath — later, she’d see the trouble there, too. She looked out at the trees. Her watch read 4:45. “I have to go,” she lied. “I have to get back.”

“One more minute?”

Comfortable against his chest, she nodded. “Okay. But then I really do have to go.”

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Jax took, rather quickly, to introducing Mickey to new music. He had more cassettes in his dorm room than he did books and an iPod he downloaded files to (sometimes illegally). He played her his favorite Alice Coltrane record (*Journey in Satchidananda*) and her most recent (*Translinear Light*), along with *Madvillainy*, various Black Sabbath records, *College Dropout*, and more. She sat on his bed, mindlessly fluffing his pillows, while he rifled through his four bins overflowing with tapes, asking her *do you know* Stories of the City, Stories of the Sea, *what about* Ok Computer, *or* Parachutes? She answered *of course, obviously, who do you think I am?* He asked her if she was into Sufjan Stevens. She rambled on about the strength of his last three albums (*Michigan, Seven Swans, and Illinois*) and how despite the instrumentation of *Illinois* soothing her band-kid heart, she was partial to *Seven Swans*. In her hands was Jax’s stuffed bunny, raggedy from childhood. She contorted its arms so it was hiding its face. Smiling, she pulled its arms away, sticking her tongue out as she played peek-a-boo with herself.

Eventually, Jax asked offhand about Nirvana, and Mickey said, “I never really got into them.”

Jax’s cassettes clicked together. Mickey turned to see him staring at her, aghast. “You’re kidding. You’re fucking kidding. Right?”

She turned back to the pig, rolling her lips into her mouth in an attempt to not laugh. His crunched-up eyebrows and his one dimple were too adorable to take seriously. “*No, I’m not.*”

“*Mickey,*” he said, disbelieving and desperate.

“Jax.”

He pushed to his feet, shoved a bin back into place, a cassette gripped tight in his hand. “You’re a band freak.” He completed the world’s most exaggerated eye roll. “I bet you only listened to classical music growing up.”

Mickey frowned, shaking the pig’s head. “No. I only listened to classical stuff for band. Or if my violin teacher made me. I mean, I like Haydn. But my dad played a lot of Spanish stuff growing up. You know, Santana, Maná, Los Enanitos Verdes.” At Jax’s blank look: “‘Oye Mi Amor?’ ‘Maria Maria?’”

He shrugged. “It’s all Spanish to me,” he said. He came over to the bed, sat next to her, leaving a thin inch of space between them. Then, “Except ‘Maria Maria.’ Everyone knows that song.”

“You’re funny,” she deadpanned.

Jax smiled anyway. “I know, thank you.” He grabbed his walkman off his nightstand, slid the tape in. Usually he handed the headphones over, but this time he put them over Mickey’s ears himself. He held his hands there for a long moment, blinking his deep brown eyes a few times. His palms fell back to his lap. Mickey swallowed, smiling politely. “I would play *Bleach*,” he said, “but I think we need to go mainstream for your plebeian taste.” Mickey scoffed and Jax grinned. “So *Nevermind* it is.” He pressed play.

“Screw you, Jax,” she said as the first chords of “Smells Like Teen Spirit” sounded.

His hand slid away from the walkman. “You wish.”

Mickey studied him: The line of his nose, his jaw, the bits of his scalp revealed by his tightly woven braids. He smiled and she glimpsed a sliver of off-white tooth behind his lips. She shook her head. “No.”

“Be honest.” He nodded towards her, too dramatically to be anything but sarcastic. “You do.”

“You really think very highly of yourself,” she said, laughing.

“I’m kidding,” he said. “Obviously I’m kidding. You’re my music buddy. Rocco-” his roommate- “asked me about music once, when I was unpacking. He saw all the tapes and was curious. I must’ve been talking too long because he cut me off mid-sentence and now refuses to play music out loud. Even when his friends are over. I think he’s afraid I’ll start talking and never stop.” He chuckled, and Mickey did too, knocking his shoulder with hers. Once settled, Jax bit his lip and turned to her. “How are you liking my friend Kurt so far?”

Mickey nodded and shrugged. She’d heard “Smells Like Teen Spirit” before, as she was a young woman living in America, but had never gone further. She was halfway through “In Bloom” and found herself liking it more than she expected. “It’s good,” she said.

“It’s good?”

“It’s Nir-*vah*-na.”

He smiled again. Mickey had to take a breath. “That it is, my friend. That it is.” His hand went to her thigh, patting it twice. “Well, enjoy. I think I’m gonna catch up on some reading. I have an exam next week...” Jax, despite his clear passion for the art of aural composition, was studying Economics. He said it was for “the sake of his future.” Mickey wanted to argue for the sake of his sanity, and his sleep — she often ran into him in the hallway late at night, him returning from the library, her having woken up at one in the morning with a desperate need to pee — but she knew better than to get involved. Instead she went to tiny concerts with him downtown and introduced him to a girl in her English class, Sawyer, who was looking to start a band.

His hand lingered.

Mickey glanced at it, then him. She tilted her head slightly, and after a sharp inhale, ran a hand up Jax’s arm, letting it rest at the crook of his neck.

He waited, mouth open.

She leaned in and kissed him. He responded immediately, grip on her thigh tightening, other hand moving to cup the side of her face. “Come As You Are” was white noise as Mickey straddled Jax’s lap. Jax’s hands slipped up Mickey’s face and accidentally pushed the headphones backwards. The plastic hit her shoulder blades hard; her pained noise reverberated in Jax’s mouth. Then the wire threatened to choke her, and she leaned away, laughing. Jax helped her pull the headphones off, threw the walkman aside with a carelessness Mickey would not have expected from him regarding his treasured player, and pulled her back into him.

She was topless and her pants were halfway to unbuttoned when Rocco walked in. He grunt-shouted, said, “Oh my God, what the fuck, why didn’t you put a sock on the door?” Mickey yelped, rolling towards the wall, hands moving to her chest in an effort to cover herself. Jax sat back on his haunches and licked his swollen lips.

“Sometimes shit happens and you forget, alright? I’m sorry. Can you go?” Jax gestured to the door hanging wide open, allowing anyone remotely curious to peek in.

Rocco grabbed for things on his desk, started rooting around for things in his drawers. “I need my shit first. Jeez.” He slammed a drawer, opened another. “I would’ve knocked or something if I... Where the fuck is it, holy shit? Holy shit. What the fuck. God hates me.”

Mickey started to laugh, body shaking beneath Jax. He laughed too, shattering the illusion of anger and diluting his demands. “Dude, get out, or close the door, or *something*. Fuck, Rocco. Come on, man.”

“Can’t you see we’re busy?” Mickey said to the wall, still giggling, mostly because she thought it’d be funny. Jax laughed harder, so she considered it a win.

Rocco gripped his binder with white knuckles. “Of course I FUCKING SEE THAT!”

At his yell, a girl peeked in, frowning. Jax caught her eye and shook his head. She made a face before running off.

“The mood’s been killed,” Jax said.

“Slaughtered,” Mickey agreed.

“God fucking help me,” Rocco moaned.

Mickey tried to sit up. “We can help.”

Jax pushed her back to the mattress, hand flat against her chest, and she blushed from head to toe. “No we can’t.”

“This is your fault,” Rocco said.

“How is this my fault?”

“I’m frazzled because of you! And her! I can see her tits!”

“Then stop looking!”

“I need my shit, man!”

“Stop looking at her boobs, dude!” Jax laughed, which made Mickey and even Rocco laugh. He covered his eyes with his hands. “And for your shit! Fucking hell, *give up*. Anyone else would’ve by now. Jesus Christ.”

Mickey tried to nod solemnly while horizontal, Jax’s hands covering her chest to maintain the dignity they’d both definitely lost. She appreciated the thought anyway. “He’s right.”

Rocco sighed, half-heartedly shutting his drawers, though he’d made such a mess of them that they would not close all the way. “I’ll go, I’m going,” he said, making for the door.

“Thank God,” Jax said.

“Bye Rocco,” Mickey chirped.

“Bye, fuck me.” Rocco slammed the door shut behind him.

Jax did not remove his hands. “Well. That was the least romantic thing that has ever happened to anyone. Ever.”

Mickey shrugged, hair shifting against Jax’s pillow. “I don’t know. That’s a once-in-a-lifetime moment. Kind of unforgettable. I’d say that’s pretty romantic.”

He smiled with half his mouth. “You can go if you want. I won’t blame you.”

“No, you can blame Rocco.”

He started to laugh, body shaking against Mickey’s. “Why did he stay so long?”

“I have no idea. He stayed *so* long. I would’ve done a full 180.”

“Anyone would’ve. Anyone. Literally anyone.”

“Not him.”

“What the fuck, man? What’s his problem?”

Mickey shrugged again, chuckling. She bit her lip. “I don’t wanna go.”

Jax's brow furrowed. "No?"

She shook her head. "No."

"Okay. Then stay," he said, leaning in.

She nodded. "I will," she said, and kissed him again. On the floor, the walkman played "Endless, Nameless," and that is how Mickey would have described the feeling in her chest, blooming like ivy around her lungs and ribs, if only she could hear the song. They would finish listening to the tape later that night, Mickey wearing one of Jax's Chicago Bulls tees. They shared the headphones, sides glued together, chests turned inwards as their bodies caved towards one another. Mickey would listen to the whole Nirvana discography in order the following week. Despite her favorite of the band's tracks appearing on *In Utero*, she would later tell *Rolling Stone* (and anyone who asked) that her favorite Nirvana record was *Nevermind*.

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Mickey lingered in the lobby of Jax's new apartment building. He'd moved south, found a nice penthouse with huge windows where NoLIta met the Lower East Side. He wanted an extra bedroom for his brother to occupy whenever he visited (which was often ever since he'd last visited and met a girl at one of the many clubs he'd dragged Jax to). Being closer to his favorite venues — Mercury Lounge and Bowery Ballroom — was a plus. Mickey preferred Brooklyn venues and, when touring, arranged dates at Brooklyn Steel. There was something about its warehouse lineage — she hoped the strings echoed backwards in time for long-forgotten laborers to hear. When she explained this to Jax, he said, "Sometimes I forget how much of an *artist* you are." In his mouth, *artist* could be a bad word.

Memories of her old haunts were interrupted by the *ding!* of the elevator doors sliding open. She stepped backwards, spotting Jax as he emerged, a polite smile on his face.

Their child was nowhere to be found.

"¿Dónde está mi niña?"

Jax sighed. It a newer variant, a strain developed and perfected in the post-Jess era of their lives. Mickey still remembered all the other ones — there was the my-homework-is-piling-up sigh, the an-ex-just-texted-me sigh, the we-agreed-we-would-leave-the-studio-an-hour-ago sigh — but she was now most familiar with the parent sigh, the producer sigh, and the Mickey-I-am-so-tired-of-your-shit sigh. "She doesn't wanna come downstairs."

"¿Por qué no?"

"We both know you speak to me in Spanish when you want to piss me off. Can we not?"

Mickey adjusted the shoulder strap of her bag and pursed her lips. "Why doesn't she want to come down? And who's upstairs with her? Did you leave her alone?"

He shrugged, palms turning toward her in surrender. “She says she wants to stay in New York. And no, of course not. Naomi is up there with her.” Naomi was a newer girlfriend, having entered their lives about seven months ago. She was a model-thin publicist Jax met through the modern jazz group she worked for and he worked with. She was extremely beautiful, had her shit together, and was into single dads. Despite being the most likable of Jax’s three girlfriends post-Jess, Mickey hated her. It didn’t help that she was good with kids.

Mickey held back a mean laugh. “Naomi, right.”

Jax scoffed. “Don’t be like that.”

“Like what?”

“You don’t get to do both, Mickey. You can’t play the jealous ex after dumping me. Over and over again.” He sighed his Mickey-I-am-so-tired-of-your-shit sigh. “You can’t do both.”

“I’m not jealous, I’m just worried about what happens when you and Naomi inevitably end things. How is Jess going to feel after getting attached?”

“You’re the queen of deflection.” Then, “Inevitable? You’re an asshole.”

“Fine.” She gritted her teeth. “I’ll get back to the point. This is all... Jess?”

His face twisted. “What do you mean by that?”

“I mean, did you plant this idea in Jess’ head that she didn’t have to come back home?”

“First of all, it’s fucked of you to suggest that, and second of all, this is her home, too.”

“You know what I mean.”

Jax held a finger up, head shaking. “You’re the one who switched states. You’re the one who decided we should split time like this. I wanted to get lawyers involved, you didn’t-”

“Lawyers would’ve made this whole thing worse.”

“Like it isn’t bad enough?” He threw his hands up. “She threw a fit, Mick. What was I supposed to do? If anything I can keep her one more night and she can go back with you tomorrow.”

“I’m already here, dipshit. I’m not driving there and back again and you can’t drive, so it’s not like you can drop her off. I’m the one doing the round trips. And she has school tomorrow!”

“She can miss one day.”

“Not if missing one day becomes a habit, which it will.” Mickey pressed her fingers to her temples and laughed a humorless, horrible laugh. “I bet you already told her she could stay another night. I bet you told her you’d come down here and talk me into it.”

He shook his head. His right cheek dimpled. “I did not.”

“You’re lying. I know you’re lying because your cheeks are dimpling.” She poked the dimple. Did he think she didn’t know his tells by now? She knew him inside and out, backwards

and forwards. He was the father of her child. She was the mother of his. There would never be another chosen tie so unbreakable.

Jax shrugged. “You can spend the night here if you don’t want to go back.”

“Bring my daughter downstairs, jackass.” Mickey sat on the floor and smiled up at Jax. He rolled his eyes, turned back to the elevator, and said nothing more before the doors closed.

Mickey waited.

The two of them hadn’t fought like that in a long time. If they argued now, it mostly pertained to the work — conflicts over sound or timbre or a chord progression. When it came to Jess, they normally agreed. If Jess’ six-year-old temper could do this to them now, what would happen when Jess was ten, or thirteen, or twenty? What would puberty-fueled angst bring into the mix? Mickey had imagined Jess getting older and everything with Jax getting easier (if he ever grew out of resenting Mickey for rejecting him). She hadn’t considered a life where Jess made things harder.

She glanced at her watch, face scratched from years of dirt and sand swishing inside. Twenty-three minutes had passed since Jess was supposed to be downstairs.

Ding! The elevator opened, revealing Jax and Jess, the latter clutching Mr Bunny in desperate hands, cheeks tear-stained. Jax mussed her hair and walked her out of the elevator. Upon reaching Mickey, she said, “I didn’t want you-” her hiccoughs fractured her sentence- “to think I don’t love you.”

Mickey shook her head. “I know you love me, Jessie baby. And I love you.”

Jess wobbled over, pressed her face into Mickey’s chest. “I’m sorry,” she cried. “Can we go home?”

“Of course we can go home.” Mickey ran a hand through her daughter’s hair, kissed the crown of her skull. She remembered when Jess’ head was soft to the touch and she feared prodding the wrong spot. Her baby was already getting so big. “Maybe we can call Mama Mimi on the way and get her to bring some quesitos out to the car.” Jess nodded, wiping her tears on Mr Bunny’s decades-old ear. Mickey clutched Jess’ small hand in hers and led her out to the car.

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High school did not turn out like Mickey expected. The school was too large for cliques to flourish, the band kids either thought they were prodigies and practiced constantly or thought they were failures and practiced constantly, and Mickey found herself accidentally rebuffing proposals of friendship, not recognizing them as such. Noticing her acuity for math, kids asked for her help. She denied them: *I’m busy after school. Yes, that day and that one, and that one, oh, and that one too.* She was busy. There was band practice, violin lessons — plus she had taken up

piano after buying one cheap at a neighbor's yard sale. And when she wasn't busy with music or schoolwork, she was with Heath.

"You're lying," Heath said, laid out in the grass. They were hiding from his personal guard. Heath's mother had grown tired of running the largest Faerie court (by land mass, not population) and she wanted Heath to prepare for his succession. He was an only child, like Mickey, so he couldn't spurn the job in hopes that another sibling would step up. This meant the time Heath spent with Mickey was time spent shirking responsibilities. But being royal, his mother could literally send his responsibilities to hunt him down. And she did. "You're a liar."

"I'm not lying!"

He side-eyed her. "Maybe you don't think you are, but you are."

Mickey nudged him with her shoulder. Their sides were pressed together, entirely flush, position made necessary by the narrow gap in the bushes. Her nudge resulted in him leaning too far into the bush, leaves rustling as he rebounded and fell on top of her. Four eyes widened and they clapped their hands over their mouths, tucked their faces into the dirt, shaking with silent laughter. They shushed each other and shushed each other some more.

Loud, crunching footsteps came. "We should go that way," a guard said, and the footsteps resumed, quickly fading away.

"They've left," Heath said, sitting back on his haunches. He brushed the dirt from his hands and smiled. "I know you're wrong."

Mickey looked up at him from where she laid in the dirt. Her elbow pressed into a soft bit of soil as she leaned her head on her hand. "How are you so sure?" She tilted her head back, two long brown braids brushing the grass. She hadn't changed out of her white t-shirt before running into the woods. Already she could hear Mami's cry at the grass and dirt stains she'd return with. She didn't know what her parents pictured her doing in the woods, but they definitely thought her a slob.

Heath gestured to her face. "Because you're you."

"I'm me, which means boys like me?"

"Boys. Girls." He shrugged one shoulder. "Everyone. How could they not?"

Mickey laughed. "How could they?" She was freshly fifteen, had been for a few days now. Three years into puberty, her insecurities were a voracious Venus flytrap she would never completely vanquish.

"You're beautiful and funny. You're the best person I know. What do you mean?" His face screwed up, wrinkled and confused. He did not relate to her lack of self-esteem. Faeries, it seemed, did not falter in this respect, many verging on narcissism from a young age. Even Heath liked himself more than she liked herself, and he'd lived in the wrong body for most of his childhood (because they were no longer children, they were teenagers, *thank you*).

Mickey dropped her arms back to the ground and fell into them, cradling her own face in the dirt. Tears welled in her eyes. She didn't want Heath to see — he regularly witnessed her tears, and that fact lit a fire of shame in her. She must've already looked so weak to him, so frail and human. Then she went and cried every other day. He probably called her pathetic in his head. Maybe their whole friendship was an act of pity on his part. *Poor little human. Always so sad. I guess I should help her out.*

Heath's hand brushed her shoulder blade. "Mickey."

Sometimes, when shame, loneliness, and rage carved her open, Mickey wished she'd been born a faery. It wouldn't matter if she was born to a careless nymph that tossed her to suckle the pigs. She would've been born beautiful and immortal and ethereal and Heath and her would get to spend every minute with each other and she could be his princess and go to the revels he complained about and dance and she wouldn't have to worry about dancing until her feet opened up and she bled dry, falling to the ground a shriveled, disgusting corpse. Face in the dirt, sweaty forehead sticking to her dark arm hair, she wished. Her body shook with sobs.

"Mickey," Heath said, exasperated and sad. He grabbed at her upper arms and dragged her sideways, pulling her into his arms. His hands scrubbed over her back as she wept into his neck.

"I'm such- such a- loser," she said through her sobs.

He shook his head against hers. "No you're not."

"I'm sorry- sorry I'm always- always cry- crying."

"Mickey, you're going to make me cry."

She fisted the dark silk of his shirt in her hands. "I'm sorry."

His hands moved from her back to cradle her face, pulling her away just enough to look her in the eye. Through her tears, he was a pale blur, warm and beautiful. "Why are you sorry?" he asked, and he really did sound like he was crying, too.

"I'm always- always making you take- take care of me."

His lips turned down. "You take care of me, too."

She scoffed.

"You do," he said, nodding and holding her face tighter. "You helped me plan how to tell my mom about me. You make me laugh. You come hang out with me where I live because I can't go where you live. You brought me those human snacks to try that time, remember? You hide with me. You listen to me. When I tell you something horrible, like every time I steal from courtiers, you tell me you still love me and that I'm not completely awful. You forgive me for things you shouldn't forgive me for, like when I almost let that selkie drown you."

"You didn't know she was going to do that."

"I should've known. I was a fool not to think she would."

Mickey shook her head, Heath's hands moving with her. "I saw selkies growing up. They swam in the park. I knew what could've happened. It was my- my bad."

"See? You're still forgiving me when you shouldn't."

Her tears lessened enough that she could see the tears on his face now, too.

"You gave me my *name*, Mickey," he said, voice breaking. "There's nothing else you need to do for me. That's everything. You're everything."

Mickey swallowed harshly.

"Do we understand each other?"

She nodded. He nodded. She wiped the tears from his cheeks, and he wiped the tears from hers. They both rubbed their hands against their pants, mirroring one another. The thought made Mickey chuckle.

Heath beamed tearily. "What are you laughing at?"

"You and me. We're funny."

His eyes roved over her face before he turned away, smile tightening.

Mickey poked his stomach. "What?"

The trees branches rustled. Heath turned back, eyes on his knees. "Mickey," he started. Then he froze, words trapped on his tongue. He was very pretty. Mickey knew this from the beginning, mentally calling him beautiful since she first laid eyes on him. His golden hair, the harsh line of his large nose, with a jaw and cheekbones sharp enough to slice her brown fingers. He had the loveliest, brightest gummy smile. She missed it, wished it hadn't fallen away so quickly. In the perfect world, he would always be smiling.

He looked up, and Mickey brushed her lips against his.

The kiss lasted only a moment — though, with the time dilation between her world and his, it could have been a lifetime.

She leaned back, face hot. Heath gaped at her.

"I'm sorry," she said, hands covering her cheeks. "I'm so sorry."

He shook his head. "Don't be sorry." He smiled that gummy smile, laughed to himself, pressed his hands over his eyes. "By Mab, Mickey. I'm surprised. You surprised me."

Mickey felt her eyes widen. She reached out to clasp his wrist. "I just wanted you to smile," she said, so honest her chest ached with the admission. "It doesn't have to... I mean..." Papi told her recently she was too young for romance. He tickled her on the couch and Mami said, *she's old enough for anything she wants, unless I've said otherwise*. Papi asked why *he* couldn't say otherwise, and Mami said she was top dog in the Ferro household. Then Papi tickled her, she spilled vegetable oil on the counter, and they playfully argued in Spanish, mouths moving a mile a minute. Mickey wondered what Papi would say if she came home and said *I kissed a boy in the woods*. "What do you..." She couldn't form a complete sentence. "Um."

Heath laughed, or maybe sobbed, because tears spilled over his cheeks again. One of his hands ran along the side of her face, curving behind her ear and down the line of her braid. He tugged on the end of it. “Mickey, I...”

He never finished the sentence, but Mickey understood. She wrapped her arms around him again, squeezed him until he squeezed her back; they squeezed so hard Mickey thought one of them would pop and their innards would intertwine, blood mixing as it soaked into the soil.

“I love you, Heath,” she said to the trees, chin tucked over his shoulder.

“I love you, Micaela Ferro,” he answered.

Neither of them were quite sure if they meant it any differently now, but they didn’t need to be. Here, in this hidden corner of the universe where the Spring Court and a Jersian wood intersected and collapsed in on each other, they would always be understood.

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Kismet’s Mickey Ferro on Her Debut, *The Catch*, and Loneliness

by Tariq Al-Ghazzawi

January 13th, 2012

At eight P.M. on a Friday, most New Yorkers are either preparing for a night on the town or have already begun their twilight odyssey. In East Williamsburg, hundreds of New Yorkers have flocked to Brooklyn Steel to share a space with Mickey Ferro, the woman behind Kismet. Following a critically-acclaimed indie rock debut (and a middling sophomore release) with her college band *The Catch*, Ferro invested in her solo project; her self-titled debut, released on Jagjaguwar at the tail-end of last year, consists of sprawling indie folk tracks that verge on orchestral. Few expected the switch, but over sandwiches at her local café — which she politely asks me not to name so as to protect her privacy — Ferro explains the record was a long time coming.

“I really got into music after my parents moved us out to New Jersey,” she says. Her mother and father, first- and second-generation Puerto Rican immigrants respectively, met while attending separate universities in New York and married soon after. Ferro spent her early childhood in Stuyvesant Town before the family moved to South Jersey. Despite growing up on her parent’s Spanish rock records, her first foray into playing music, she tells me, was the school band. “The first instrument I learned to play was violin. That surprises people, since [in *The Catch*] I was on keys. But it was the easiest to carry back and forth. Guitars weren’t an option. I loved violin, I think it’s one of the most beautiful instruments, and I think that really shines through on my solo stuff.”

And she's right — the orchestral feeling I mentioned earlier often owes itself to the string accompaniments. Ferro plays one of three violins, enlisting colleagues to play cello, trumpet, and even saxophone on various tracks. She leans most into her musical roots on the stunning finale, an instrumental track titled "For Heath" (which speculative critics and fans believe refers to the late Heath Ledger, whom Ferro has expressed a love for in previous interviews). When I ask about said track, Ferro freezes for a moment, and a tight smile crosses her face.

"I was a lonely kid, and I think the older I get, the more I realize just how lonely I was. I didn't really have friends until middle school, and I only had one friend before *The Catch*. That's college. And I wrote that song..." Ferro trails off, starts over. "'For Heath' was the first song I wrote that appears on the album. I never meant for it to end up on the record, but when I was looking at everything, I said, 'this belongs here.' It defines the record. Everything else formed around it. There aren't any lyrics but I wanted to capture how it feels to finally be understood by one person, and how that first touch of intimacy with someone comes to define an entire lifetime. It's about a friendship, or a relationship, really, that shapes you as person."

A relationship with a celebrity? Ferro laughs. "You could say that." Then she slides from her stool and says, "Let's take a walk."

We turn a corner and begin a walk through the park. Ferro points out trees and benches that have played a role in key moments of inspiration, then to a statue under which *The Catch* used to play for passersby. She tells me, "We started off playing in the park. Jax always says it's because we wanted to go to the people and see if they liked our sound before we went anywhere with it, but I think we all just wanted money."

Jaxon Boone, or Jax, as she calls him, is Ferro's friend-turned-bandmate-turned-producer-turned-rumored-boyfriend. He worked with her on *Kismet* and is said to be working with her on the sophomore album as well. "I think people expect *The Catch* to have had this terrible falling out, because we were doing so well and then suddenly we were announcing our split." She shakes her head. "Everyone's on good terms. We just all wanted different things — Sawyer [Page]'s getting her PhD in Psychology, Kaulana [Koa]'s in LA, and Jax and I are here — but we agreed that if we ever want the same thing again, we'll pick up where we left off."

As our interview draws to a close, I circle back to an earlier topic of conversation: Ferro described the loneliness of childhood and how formative that is, so I ask about the loneliness of her newfound fame, if it's become isolating. Her face turns serious as she considers the question.

"I think it is inherently isolating," she says. "It's harder now for me to not only see loved ones, but for them to really, truly, see me. Because people write about me and everyone's coming up with theories. The internet only makes it worse. When I do see family, conversations will circle headlines they've seen. Everyone wants to know what's true and what isn't, and it's hard because sometimes the press is thinking about facets of my life I haven't had time to think about

yet. [*Laughs*] I don't feel like I've changed per se, but because there's a new way to see me, people think I have."

But are you lonely? I ask.

She stops on the corner, tight smile back again as she holds a hand up to block out the sun. "I think when you grow up lonely, it's hard to think of yourself as anything but alone. You know? I guess I'm trying to say yes without saying yes. [*Laughs*] Yes, I'm lonely. I've always been lonely. I think I'll always be lonely. But I'm not alone." Then she smiles, actually smiles. "If you print that, all my friends and family are gonna call me and think I'm losing it. Abuela, I'm okay. I'm loved. I'm eating enough. I promise."

Quotes have been edited for clarity and brevity.

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Jess took her first steps in Mickey's studio apartment in the Village. The apartment was her last one in New York, rented from her mom's old coworker's cousin. It was cheap, small, and verged on broken-down, but by the time Mickey moved in, she'd already declared the situation temporary. She needed out of Jax's place — unable to bear living with him after dumping him again — and a place to stay while she looked for houses in Jersey. Jess' crib, play area, and half-used packs of baby wipes occupied the living room. Newspapers, mail, and takeout containers were strewn across the kitchen table, leaving the counter free for baby bottles and pots of pasta, Mickey's main food group at the moment. Her bedroom was without decoration: A queen mattress on the floor, books piled in a corner, and boxes that would be pointless to unpack. When Jess wasn't in need of care, Mickey surfed the internet for house listings. She sent them to her recently retired mother, who would tour the houses for her and send notes like "broken lightswitch" and "only a psychopath would raise a child here. NO."

October had come and gone again. Jess was officially one whole year old, and Mickey was officially tired of house-hunting. She did not know that she would be looking for two years and six months more before finding anything suitable or that by the time they moved in, Jess would be far past the crawling stage and enrolled in pre-school. Because of this, the temporary Village apartment was, in fact, a regular apartment.

Mickey unpacked her record player and set it up in the corner of her bedroom. She put on *What's Going On*, lit a single candle, and laid, unmoving, in bed. The record spun, Marvin Gaye singing into the endless dark. Mickey tried to recall a time when she wasn't exhausted.

Wood creaked in the living room.

She shot up, tripping over herself, worried that Jess had fallen out of her crib, skull cracked and brains spilling onto the floor.

But the baby was still there, fists around the bars. With that mighty little grip, Jess shook the crib, wooden slats creaking.

Sighing, beyond relieved, Mickey picked up her daughter and held her close. She rocked her as she walked back to the bedroom, humming along to “Flyin’ High (In The Friendly Sky).”

Jess beamed, revealing little teeth. She happily swung her fists through the air.

Mickey sat back on the mattress, propped Jess between her legs. She helped her daughter to stand on her itty bitty feet — Mickey yearned to bite them; every time she looked at Jess she wanted to eat her up like a mean old witch in a fairytale — and leaned back, baby-grip tight around her finger.

She closed her eyes and let Marvin take her away.

Only a few moments later, small fingers slipped from her large one.

She sat up to see Jess moving towards the stack of books in the corner. No, moving was the wrong word, just as wrong as crawling. Because Jess, without any hesitation, took step after step. They were baby steps, some veering sideways or slightly backwards. Her course was tangential; if you were to draw a line from point A (Mickey’s legs) to point B (books), the line would curl and swirl and cross itself over and over. But she was walking. She ended up in a different place. Her path wasn’t linear, but by the end, it was forward.

Mickey gasped. She clapped her hands over her mouth, tears stinging behind her eyes.

Jess stumbled, and Mickey leaped out to grab her, but Jess righted herself and kept going. She reached the books easily, touched the spine of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* with a pudgy finger.

Mickey pulled Jess into her arms, squealing with delight. Hand in her daughter’s satin curls, she felt whole — so full she could burst.

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Jess giggled madly, crying, “Again, again!” She held tightly to Jax’s right hand and Sawyer’s left, small feet pounding against the sidewalk. “Again, again!”

Mickey wanted to remind Jess about inside voices, recalled Jax’s frequent reminders to *lighten up*, and let herself smile instead.

“Are you ready?” Jax asked. Their daughter nodded vigorously. Sawyer started counting down from three, and on two they swung her between their outstretched arms, her short legs curled into her chest so her feet wouldn’t scrape the cement. Jess giggled, screeching. Mickey winced, and catching Rachel’s eye, huffed a laugh.

“She’s super cute,” Rachel told her. The two of them got stuck together after leaving the restaurant where they’d all had brunch. It was a rather spontaneous outing — Mickey had driven into the city to pick up Jess, and upon arriving at Jax’s place, was asked if she had any interest in meeting Sawyer in the Meatpacking District. Mickey opened her mouth to say no, expecting to be tag-teamed by two old bandmates interested in revitalizing said band. Then Jess appeared with clasped hands and the word “please,” and saying no was suddenly off the table. Over the phone, Mickey and Sawyer talked Jax into a morning at Pastis. Sawyer brought her wife along because “double date, fun,” and “she loves the potatoes and would kill me if I went without her.”

It was during brunch that Mickey realized how close Jax was with Sawyer and Rachel. Mickey couldn’t even remember Rachel’s last name. She spent most of the meal coloring with Jess, listening to the adults talk like she was eight years old, too.

They left the restaurant quickly, hoping to avoid the group of late twenty-somethings who’d been staring at them. Alas, they were not quick enough and were forced to engage in a conversation along the lines of *yes, that’s us, oh haha no we don’t want to take photos because then everyone will want a photo, ok fine one photo*. Other patrons began to look at them sideways. An old man who definitely did not know who they were started for them, and so they peeled out, speed-walking up the street and into the Village.

Now she and Rachel walked beside each other, sending each other apologetic looks whenever their arms brushed. “She is,” Mickey said. “She didn’t get any of it from me.”

Rachel tsked, tilting her head side to side. “Mm, I don’t know. She’s your spitting image.” She smiled. “And I’ve seen the photos. I think if I was into music in college I would’ve been totally into you.”

Mickey chuckled. “Thanks, I guess.”

“It was obviously the popular opinion.”

They both looked at Jax. Rachel raised her eyebrows; Mickey smiled politely.

“A popular mistake,” Mickey said.

Rachel shrugged. “I don’t know. There’s still time. Anything can happen.”

Frowning, Mickey reared back. “I really don’t think that you-”

“Oh look,” Rachel said, stopping abruptly. Mickey, two steps ahead, paused and turned, brow furrowed. Rachel pointed at a nearby building. There was a hazy look in her eye, like she was seeing through layers of smoke. “There’s a psychic.” She raised her voice, called, “Sawyer! There’s a psychic!”

Down the street, Sawyer and Jax turned to glance at them. They had a short, indecipherable exchange, and then swung Jess back towards Rachel, Mickey, and the psychic. Mickey struggled not to roll her eyes.

“What, honey?” Sawyer asked.

Rachel smiled pleasantly. Mickey could not tell if this was an actual interest of hers or some game she was playing. “There’s a psychic.” She pointed again. Mickey forced a smile, bit back the words *not real*. “We should go.”

Sawyer made a face, clarifying that if this was an interest of Rachel’s, Sawyer was either not privy to it or not a fan. She and Jax shared a look. “Uh, you want to go?”

Rachel gestured to them all. “We can all go.”

“Um-”

Mickey spoke through gritted teeth. “I don’t think-”

“How about you two go?” Jax said, smiling. “I think Jess wants to go to the park a few blocks down. You guys can meet us over there once you’re done.” His “us” seemed to mean him and Sawyer.

Mickey glared at Jax, hopefully conveying the number of knives she was going to stab him with. “Why don’t I go with you, and the happily married couple can meet the psychic?”

Sawyer shook her head. “Oh no. You know how I get with all that. You like magic, Mickey. You should go.” Her smile said *if you make me go in there, no one is getting out alive*. “I’m a little queasy anyway. I need the fresh air.”

Mickey had millions of things she wanted to say. *I like fantasy novels, not fakers, or you have no idea what magic really is, and Jax, help me out?* Despite the perceived chill and the occasional pettiness, Mickey knew Jax would come if called. So would she. Recently, his mother had been in and out of the hospital with concerns about a lump in her underarm. Mickey spent two weeks on the phone with Jax, a couple nights at his place, and a day by his side at the hospital. They explained it away, declaring her the deliverer of Jess, the soothing balm of all soothing balms. But Mickey held him in the hall one night, whispering words of comfort as she rubbed his back. They were many things to each other — exes, bandmates, peers, coparents — but they were friends first and would be friends always, no matter how hard their friendship was. Jax having Naomi and Mickey living in a different state had no impact on their being each other’s emergency contact. It was the way it was.

She could not, however, use that as an excuse to avoid a psychic. “Great,” she lied.

Jax and Sawyer swung Jess away. Mickey followed Rachel inside.

The reading room looked exactly how they did on television: Dim lamps with scarves thrown overtop, a fake crystal ball on a small table, a neon sign, and miniature stools that looked remarkably uncomfortable. Everything was velvet for some reason. Crystals and little idols were scattered on every surface, including the floor.

A figure loomed behind a beaded curtain.

Mickey wished for death.

“What is it you require?” the psychic asked from the shadows, distinctly British.

Rachel gently shoved Mickey forward. “She’d like a reading,” she said.

The psychic stepped out from behind the curtain. He was young, slim, and deathly pale. He wore a Twilight t-shirt and washed-out jeans that were a size too big, flip flops peeking out from under the fraying hem. His face was gaunt, hair bleached so platinum it was practically white, and his eyes... his eyes were red. Not bloodshot or stoned, whites of the eye cloudy. His irises were properly red.

He scanned her, curious. “Would you now?” he said, smiling.

Mickey glanced at Rachel, whose expression indicated total calm. She looked back to the psychic. He crossed his arms, raised an eyebrow challengingly. Mickey sucked on her teeth and said, “Yeah. I would.”

The psychic clapped his hands. “Well, well. Have a seat.”

Mickey stepped towards the table bearing the crystal ball, but the psychic shook his head and gestured to a wooden coffee table bare of any frivolity. It was the most normal piece of furniture in the whole room. Mickey sat on the floor in front of it, legs crossed. The psychic mirrored her position.

She met his eye again, and this close, his ears looked pointed, not curved.

Her hand went automatically to the locket hanging from her neck. She could not feel the salt or the clover, but the glass, warm from her body, was comfort enough. She was protected. Somewhat.

The psychic’s eye followed the motion. He grinned. “I could smell you for miles,” he said. “I have been waiting for you.”

Mickey glanced at Rachel, who was slumped on the floor, eyes shut.

The psychic shook his head. “Do not fret over her. I did it for her own good. She would never be able to comprehend the truth of the matter between us. It would drive her mad. She is not like you.” His smile grew large enough to eat her whole.

“You shouldn’t be able to do that to her,” Mickey said, voice shaking. “I’ve known people like you. They’re not that powerful.” But she thought of the odd look Rachel had when outside — the psychic probably orchestrated this whole meeting, talons rooting around in Rachel’s unprotected mind. Mickey worried her salt would not do her any good.

“You knew a young one. He is more powerful now, tied to the land as he is. I am old in a way you cannot begin to understand.” His head tilted minutely. “I have drunk deeply from wells of power that no one as young as your king would be able to find. And so I can do what I please.”

Mickey shook her head, lips pursing as tears welled in her eyes. “What do you want from me?”

He grabbed her forearm. Mickey squealed, wincing, but his white fingers dug hard into her flesh. With his other hand, he pressed a long, uncut thumbnail into her skin. She squirmed, crying out as he sliced her skin open. Blood rose in his wake. He ran the pad of his thumb back up her arm, swiping away the blood and licking it off his finger. Mickey's head swayed. She glanced down at her forearm, which, save a few red flecks, was perfectly fine.

Around his thumb, he said, "Your blood." His tongue flicked out and in, lightning fast. "It was promised to me. A debt you now owe. And if I cannot have you..." He smiled. "You are lucky I have grown fond of your family. I almost want no harm to come to you."

She pulled her arm back, and this time he let her. "What are you talking about?"

"Have you never wondered, *why me?* You and your beloved king intended to look into the matter, once. You did not get around to it. Too busy crying and fucking." He scowled. "You do not truly believe Faerie opened itself to you on a whim? And then continued to open itself to you, time and time again?"

The sound of her own breathing was loud in her ears. She held her arm to her chest like it was a wounded animal. "What?" She did not understand. Frankly, she had never thought about it until she'd resigned herself to never returning. Then she'd carved a rune in her childhood closet and was too overwhelmed to consider the logic. She thought maybe the rules didn't apply.

As if reading her mind, the psychic said, "Do not be a fool. The rules always apply. You simply did not know what game you were playing."

Mickey's gaze flicked between his red, red eyes. She was too old for this. She thought the last time she saw Heath would be the last time she'd deal with magic. *Then why wear the locket?* she asked herself. *Why go back to New Jersey?* She shook her head. *You wanted this.* "What game am I playing?"

The psychic smiled, sucked his thumb again. "Ask your grandmother."

In the corner of Mickey's eye, Rachel was pulled to standing, like a marionette readying itself for a show. She blinked herself awake.

The psychic stood. "We are closed for the day. Get out."

Rachel's brow furrowed. "What?"

"Get out," the faery said, and disappeared behind the curtain. The beads shimmered.

Mickey turned to meet Rachel's eye. Whatever Rachel saw in her face, she didn't like it. "What happened?" she asked. She pressed a hand to her forehead and laughed, uncomfortable. "I feel like I blacked out or something." She laughed again. Her brain was trying to explain away the oddity of the situation, stretching to fill in the gaps left behind by magic. Real, actual magic.

The beaded curtain rattled. A small woman appeared, smile eager. "You are here for a reading?"

"We just had one," Rachel said. Mickey pushed to her feet.

The woman shook her head. “What?”

“We just had one. Your... associate, he just gave her one.”

The woman made a face. “I work alone.”

Mickey pulled her wallet from her pocket, threw a few ten-dollar bills on the table.

Rachel breathed in and out, lips quivering. “What?”

Mickey put a hand on her arm and started to lead her towards the door. “We’re good, thanks,” she called over her shoulder. “Keep the change.” In Rachel’s ear: “Let’s go.”

“This place is weird,” Rachel said, breaths coming unevenly. “I’m kind of freaking out.”

“Everything’s good. Everything’s fine.” Mickey continued to move Rachel out the door and onto the sidewalk.

Rachel swayed, bending in half. Her ivory face was ashen. “I think I’m gonna be sick.”

“Then let’s get to the curb.” Mickey led her to the nearby hydrant. They both sat on the curb, Rachel in child’s pose, Mickey pulling Rachel’s dark hair back from her face. They sat there for a while. Mickey texted Jax with her free hand, telling him to come back and get them, then slid her phone back into her pocket.

Mickey was rubbing Rachel’s back when Sawyer came running. She squatted and put her own hand on top of Mickey’s. “Rach? Rach, what’s wrong?” She glanced at Mickey. “What happened?”

Jax appeared, Jess’ small hand in his. A crease formed between his eyebrows. Jess had one to match. “What’s going on?”

Mickey looked up at him, at Sawyer, and back again. She started to laugh. “I have no fucking clue,” she said, shaking. “I just- Wow. Wow.”

Sawyer and Jax stared at her, shocked. Maybe even horrified.

Rachel retched.

Mickey’s head started to pound.

Sawyer, without looking away from Mickey, asked, “Rach, what happened in there?”

Rachel shook her head, a string of saliva hanging from her bottom lip. “I don’t know. I don’t know.”

“Can you take her hair?” Mickey offered the handful to Sawyer, who took it easily, other hand on Rachel’s face. Shakily, Mickey stood. Jax’s hand shot out to support her, and she let him. “I need to go home,” she said, thinking of her parents’ house. Time was warping around her like it had when she was a little girl in the woods. She was sixteen; she was thirty-six; she was eighty. “Would you mind taking her an extra night?”

Jax looked concerned. “No, why?”

Jess gazed at her, face crumpled. “Mami?”

“I’ll tell you later,” she said to Jax. His face pinched — he knew she would not tell him later — but he said nothing, allowing her her secrets. Extremely grateful, and feeling his hand on her waist, she automatically stood on her tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek. He froze, eyes wide. She leaned away, squatting down to pull Jess into her arms. “I love you. Te quiero mucho. Be good for your father.”

Jess arms were tight around her neck. “Why are you leaving?”

She didn’t want to lie, but she couldn’t tell her daughter that a monster sliced her arm open. There was no avoiding the question, either. She thought of faeries and their half-truths. “I don’t feel well. I’ll be okay in the morning, but you need to stay an extra night here, with your father. For me.” She pulled away, tucked Jess’ hair behind her ears. “Can you do that for me, my little knight?”

Her daughter nodded sadly.

“I have something for you,” Mickey said.

Jess frowned, then smiled, surprised. “Really?” She had a gap between her two front teeth. It was very cute, but Mickey knew it would disappear when she eventually got braces.

Mickey nodded. “Yeah, I do. Wanna see?”

“Duh.” *Duh* was one of Jess’ new favorite words. Jax, ironically, wasn’t a fan.

She reached around to the back of her neck, removing the locket. Mickey was glad it was there for her today, and although she knew she might need it again, she’d much rather her daughter have it. She closed the clasp around Jess’ neck. The glass locket almost reached her belly button. It bounced against her stomach, salt shaking inside. “Don’t take it off, okay?”

Jess met her eye, little face too solemn for her own good. She nodded.

Mickey took her face in her hands, pressed a kiss to her forehead, and stood. She gave Jax and Sawyer a thin smile. “I’ll see you guys,” she said. And then she was gone.

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“I made something for you.”

Heath’s hand stilled in her hair. She laid half on top of him, leg slung over his hips and arms around his chest. She pressed a kiss to his shoulder, brown eyes meeting green. “I told you not to get me anything.”

“I didn’t *get* you *any*-thing,” she said, smiling. Pride swelled in her chest — she’d loopholed the prince of the loophole people. “I *made some*-thing for you. There’s a difference.”

He covered his face with a hand. “Mickey.”

“You’ll like it.” She patted his chest, then sat up. “I promise.”

“I’m sure I’ll like it, but I didn’t want you to go through the trouble.”

She took his chin between her thumb and forefinger. “There’s no *trouble*. It’s your birthday. I wanted to do something for you because I *love* you.” She hadn’t tired of saying it in this way yet. She didn’t think she ever would.

“And I love you.” (She wouldn’t tire of hearing him say it, either.)

“Great. So you’ll shut up and let me give you your gift.”

He shook his head, but he was grinning. “Fine. Give it to me.”

She stood, put her hands on her hips, modeling his pale pink silk shirt, barely covering her chest with only three buttons buttoned. She posed for a moment, letting him assume there was no true gift and that she had been joking.

He lifted a hand then let it hit the mattress. “Well?”

Mickey grinned, bending over to slide her violin case out from under Heath’s bed. His smile dropped as she opened the case, fussed with her violin, and pressed it against her shoulder. He gaped and her grin became something more delicate as she set about tuning her violin.

“Ready?” she asked.

“Mickey, what did you-”

She played. She’d spent a whole month composing the piece for him, the super creative title (“For Heath”) scrawled at the top of her paper in her notorious chicken-scratch. The idea came to her while watching her high school production of *Romeo and Juliet*. Most of the kids were terrible actors, making for a rather unremarkable show, but the Queen Mab speech was striking. Whenever Mercutio paused, for breath or laughter, the violinist’s fingers slid up the scale, an eerie call from another world. Mickey’d been unable to fall asleep that night, thinking only of the violin. She slipped from her bed, arms crossed as she peered out the window into the trees. She heard the slide, a tremulous birdsong, and thought of afternoons spent with Heath. She tried to mimic the sound on her own violin; she got halfway to alright by the time her father stumbled down the hall with a silent gesture — a hand slicing across his wrinkled throat — to cut it. It took her a week to perfect the slide and a few weeks more to come up with everything around it. The slides were punctuation marks between long, flowery sentences, each an attempt to capture a memory as a jeweler preserved a daisy in resin. A strand here of the sun setting over evergreen hills, a strand there of them each taking garden shears and lopping off each other’s hair. Her fingers slid like laughter from memory to memory.

Her bow slid to a stop. She removed her violin from her shoulder, rolled away the tension in her shoulder blades, and opened her eyes.

Heath stared at her, hypnotized. He swallowed, licking his lips and asking, “You wrote that? For me?”

Mickey bit the inside of her cheek. “Yeah,” she said, thinking, *oh my god did it suck what if that sucked oh my god oh my god!!!!!!!!!!!!* “Was it good? Did you like it?”

He sat up, feet planted on either side of her, and when she looked up she realized his eyes were teary. “It was brilliant. Gorgeous. Everything.” He took her face in his hands, thumb on her throat bobbing as she swallowed her nerves. “You’re wonderful. It’s amazing. I didn’t know you could do that.”

“Do what?”

“That.” He pointed to the violin. “You have to keep doing that.”

“I play in the school band, Heath,” she said, laughing.

He waved a hand dismissively. “Not that. This.” He slid to the floor in front of her, legs coming around her, hand sliding over hers where it held the violin in resting position. “You wrote something incredible, Mickey. I have heard ancient bards play on instruments blessed by the old gods to enrapture everyone within nine acres, and none of them have moved me so much as you.”

She forced an awkward chuckle. “Well, I wrote it for you-”

“No,” he interrupted. “No, this is not about me.” His hand moved to his chest, settled over his heart. “None of this has anything to do with me. I have nothing to do with your music. I am honored you wrote it with me in mind, or dedicated it to me, or... I’m honored to receive this as a gift. But you, Mickey... That music was in you. I am sure there is more. There is probably a well of it in you, ready to be harvested. And you should. By Mab, you’re only sixteen. There is so much more you will do. And I cannot wait to bear witness.”

Mickey studied the joy on his face. It was all too much: His smile, the lights hung around his room, the metal strings digging into her palm. She pressed her forehead to Heath’s shoulder. His hand went automatically to the back of her neck, playing with the long strands of her hair.

“Don’t be overwhelmed,” he whispered, all-knowing when it came to her. “Be excited. This is *exciting*, Mickey.”

Into his sternum, she said, “You’re excited enough for the both of us.”

“Fine.” His fingers twisted through her hair, pulling it away from her face. “I will carry your excitement for now. I am good at that sort of thing. But a day will come when you want it for yourself, and I will happily hand it over. So you just let me know, okay?”

She nodded, his skin shifting under hers.

“How long before I can ask you to play it again?”

Guffawing, she pulled away from him, and his hand moved to play with the sleeve of her — his — shirt. “Really?”

“Come ooon,” he said. He pursed his bottom lip the way she’d taught him to years ago, blinking innocently. “Please?”

Mickey grinned, shaking her head. His head moved to follow hers, keeping himself in her eye-line, lip still pursed. She thought of them, fifty years from now, playing this game: Her

starting to wither away, him still seventeen and relentlessly beautiful. She bit her smile away and told him, “I love you.”

His puppy dog expression dropped. Clasping her face once more — she leaned into the touch — he said, as solemn as she had become, “This isn’t goodbye, Mickey.” She nodded, and his touch was more persistent now, forcing her to meet his eye. “There is no goodbye between you and me. We will always see each other again, even if that means we are restricted to the trees. You could be a rotten corpse and I would still love you. I’d pull you from the earth myself, just for one last glimpse. I’d sleep beside your skeleton. Okay?” She nodded again. “There are no goodbyes. There are only intermissions.”

“I love you,” she repeated.

“I love you,” he said, “I love you, I love you, I love you.”

Mickey was grateful that her boyfriend could not lie.

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Transcribed Video Clip from Adam Webster’s “Mickey Ferro and Jaxon Boone Talk Kismet’s Next Record”

March 19, 2014

Q: Why Kismet?

Ferro turns to look at Boone, who was already looking at her. They lock eyes for a moment before Ferro turns back to the interviewer.

MF: I think I’ve always loved the concept. Fate, you know, things being meant to be. [*Laughs*] I like imagining that everything is as it should be. And it’s a fun word. Kismet. I thought it was Yiddish-

JB: It’s Arabic.

MF: [*Nods*] Yeah. [*Shrugs*] I don’t know. I think it’s cool.

Q: Very different from The Catch.

Ferro and Boone laugh, and the former rests her hand on top of the latter’s without looking. Boone squeezes her hand.

MF: I guess, but it's basically the same thing. I mean, they're both one word. Essentially.

Q: Can I ask why you chose The Catch?

JB: [*Laughs*] You just did, man.

Ferro squeezes Boone's hand.

MF: Uh, I think it was Kaulana's idea, right?

She turns to face him, a small smile on her face.

JB: Yeah, it was Lana. We wanted something simple, like The Strokes, The Beatles, The Killers. A lot of people think it's a reference to fishing-

MF: [*Nodding*] Like the catch of the day.

JB: But we all liked it because it's fun to announce. Like, we were on Saturday Night Live once-

MF: That was insane.

JB: [*Shakes head*] A real fucking moment. I can't believe we did that. We were so little.

Q: You are little.

A beat.

MF: We are. We're young.

JB: Getting younger by the minute. [*Rubs his chin*] Anyway, when people announce us, we ask them to say, "This is The Catch." Or, at our live shows, we'd say, "We are The Catch."

MF: Like, when someone asks, "Yeah, but what's the catch?"

JB: [*Nods*] Exactly. *We* were the catch.

MF: But the fish thing works too. On a different level.

JB: Yeah, just not as fun. For me, at least.

Ferro's thumb sweeps along the back of Boone's hand.

Q: So, you're working on Kismet's second album. I loved the first one — my *girlfriend* loved the first one, oh my God. She asked if I could get your autograph.

MF: She can get my autograph. That's easy.

Q: That'd be sweet.

MF: Yeah, of course. [*Chuckles*] It's crazy to me that people even want it.

JB: You're fucking fantastic, why wouldn't they?

MF: [*Shrugs*] I don't know. I'm no king.

JB: Do you know a king?

Ferro laughs, squeezes Boone's hand.

Q: So, the sophomore record. How's that going for you? Do you have any insider info or secrets you'd like to share with us?

MF: And the world.

Q: And the world.

Ferro and Boone lock eyes again. When she speaks next, she looks at him, like it helps her think.

MF: Uh, I don't know. [*Sighs*] Insider info... It's called "Springtime in My Chest and A Lucky Star On My Forehead," which the people know already. That's a Joan Baez quote, from her memoir. I'm- I'm really excited about it, actually. I feel like... Well, people really liked my first record, *Kismet*. And "For Heath-"

Q: It's fantastic.

Boone smiles.

MF: Thank you, yeah. I, uh- I didn't expect it to get as big as it did. It wasn't a single. I mean, we released it as a single after the album dropped, but none of us thought it'd be a big hit. I love that people love it. *I love it.* The original composition is like... ancient. I wrote the first version when I was a teenager. So it's mind-boggling, but in a good way.

People really liked that record, and I love that record. It's self-titled for a reason; it feels very personal and close to my heart. Especially that last track. And it's so different than what we did with *The Catch*. A lot of record companies did not want it. [*Chuckles*] They didn't think it would sell. They said, "No, you're the indie rock girl. You weren't even the lead singer. You were on *keys*. No way. It'll flop." But luckily we found Jagjaguwar and they took a chance on me. They're releasing some of my favorite stuff from some of my favorite artists right now. Sharon Van Etten, Bon Iver... Great stuff. And they were interested and said they saw potential-

JB: Obviously they saw potential. You're a fucking star.

MF: [*Smiles*] And it worked. I'm proud of that record. We were in the studio around the clock. And I mean we. *Kismet* wouldn't exist without Jax. I wouldn't exist. I'd be dead in a ditch somewhere.

JB: Don't-

MF: No, do. You just... You *produced* the record. You helped me through every moment. Any time I had doubts, or wanted to try something new, you were there. You pushed me to do what you knew I was capable of doing. And you're credited as a writer on some of the songs. You found many a chord progression. [*Laughs*] You were... essential. You are essential. I'm the artist that I am because of you.

[*To interviewer*] I'd recommend his services to any musician. He'll find the greatness in you and help you harness it.

They smile privately at each other.

Q: Jesus, I feel like I should go.

JB: [*Laughs*] You should, yeah.

MF: Yeah, we need the room. Or the table. For sex stuff.

JB: [*Nods*] Yeah.

MF: [*Laughs*] Well, to get to the point... I feel like sophomore albums are so anticipated and talked-up. Any subsequent release is. I remember at a career fair as a kid I talked to this woman — she was a book editor. Because I thought I might do that. Write fantasy books or something, I don't know. And she told me that most debut novels are really strong because people have been working on them for a really long time. You want it to be perfect before you try and sell it to someone, you know? But then their next book, they've signed a deal and they have to do what might've taken them five years in one or two to be ready for the next release. And I feel like music works the same way sometimes. A band gets discovered, they've been working on their stuff for ages, you're hungry, and so you turn out something that can be really strong and very you. And then it releases and maybe you tour and you're burned out but you have to write the next record because the label wants it out. So something that was, like, years and years of build up has to happen again but better in less time. And everyone who liked your first one wants to see if this new thing lives up to the image they have of the first one, which feels individual and pure and untainted by the industry or audience. Then there's everyone who didn't like your first one but is interested if your next thing will suck as bad or worse, or maybe it'll be good. And so everyone's watching and you have so little time but you have to do the thing again. And visions change and artists get less pure and they're in the industry now and they have to jump through all these hoops, and if what you put out is not exactly like the first thing but better in every way, you've failed.

JB: It's a lot of pressure.

MF: It's a fuck-ton of pressure. Sorry Mimi-

JB: [*Laughing*] Your abuela?

MF: My abuela. But it is. With *The Catch*...

She turns to Boone.

JB: I don't think we had a sophomore slump, but we definitely did not outsell the first one. People liked it, but people liked our debut more.

MF: Yeah. So, I don't know, I'd like to not do that again. But it isn't just up to me. I can't satisfy everyone, there's no button for that in the studio.

JB: If only. [*Laughs*] I don't think that button would be good for anyone.

MF: It wouldn't. And I have other things going on in my life. Kismet isn't everything. There are other things I want to do. I'm almost twenty-seven, which is young, but also not. There are so many things I want for myself, and I've had to give up other things I wanted to be where I am and to have what I do, and that'll continue. Maybe people will think I'm sacrificing my music for my personal life, but, honestly, is that even a bad thing?

I don't know. I just want to take the pressure off it. You're dooming something if before it's born you already want certain things out of it. It's coming along nicely, I think, and I hope people like it.

JB: They will. It's a Mickey Ferro production. What's not to love?

Ferro and Boone smile at each other again, hands squeezing as something private seems to pass between them — a secret, or an inside joke.

MF: A Mickey *and* Jax production.

JB: Again: What's not to love? You and I make magic. Personally, I'm excited for what's in store.

Q: Fuck yeah, man. Now, about that autograph...

COMMENTS:

Anna Marie :P

Wow they're so cute it almost makes me sick lol

RileyLewwis

Adam if you don't bring that autograph home tonight, there will be blood

Nur Kader

I was at Columbia around the same time as them and they had a bit of a messy relationship back then, so I'm glad to see that they seem to have figured their shit out.

IAmTheCatch224

What do you mean messy relationship

Thomas, Not the Train Engine

Dude do not be starting rumors without evidence

Nur Kader

@IAmTheCatch224 @Thomas97243987532439782341 I'm not starting rumors, I'm being serious. One of my friends was close with Jax, so we hung out a few times and if I stopped him on the street, he'd say hi and ask how I was doing. He's a nice guy. I don't know Mickey personally, so take what I say about her with a grain of salt, but I remember in our junior year, the two of them had a huge, extremely messy breakup. Jax was totally messed up over it. He was depressed for like two months. My friend said that Mickey was an extraordinarily bad communicator and seemed to be hung up on her high school boyfriend. I'm sure she's a nice person, it just seemed like she got into a relationship she shouldn't have gotten into. But they're back together now and she seems better adjusted.

Thomas, Not the Train Engine

@NurKader12 Imagine dumping someones personal drama on the internet when no one asked

JJJJJJJJJJJ<3

that sounds true mickey does seem like a fucking bitch like shut your mouth cunt. she thinks nevermind is the best nirvana album like at that point stop making music HA

IAmTheCatch224

Woah

Load more (287)...

Logan

Wait I wanted to see them have sex on the table

George Washington's Dentures

the album is genuinely good, I'm glad she got free of the band and did her own thing, their second album was totally lackluster

UNDERTHEBRIDGE

The Catch's second album was only bad because Mickey wanted out of the band. If she knew how to commit they would've been a band of all time

George Washington's Dentures

@UNDERTHEBRIDGE how do you know she wanted out and that that even impacted them

UNDERTHEBRIDGE

@victoralvarez347 She released her first solo album a year after *Local Punching Bag*, which means she had to have been working on her own album during that time. Do you even know how the industry works?

Load more (32)...

Click4FunTimez

Need a hot date? Click this link (<https://cl.gy/XWop>) to see girls in your area! XD

&

Mickey sped down to the Holland Tunnel and out through the other side to her parents' house. She parked poorly and did not care to fix the job. She leaped out of the car, slamming the door behind her, and ran for the house. She was struggling to pick the spare key out of the many on her keyring when someone coughed.

Startled, Mickey dropped the keys. She sighed, picked them up, and once standing, saw her abuela staring at her, eyebrow raised, from her rocking chair on the front porch.

"What are you doing here, Micaela? Did your parents plan something without telling me?"

Mickey's hands fell to her sides, keys jangling. "I'm here to talk to you, actually."

Mimi gestured to the chair beside her. “Ven aquí.”

Slowly, she walked over and sat in the creaking chair. At Mimi’s nod, Mickey began to rock back and forth in time with her grandmother, heart beating unevenly in her chest.

“So?” Mimi asked at the same time Mickey asked, “What do you know about faeries?”

Mickey expected her grandmother to turn to her sharply, or to avoid the question. Mimi did neither; she smiled, blew air out of her nose, and gripped the armrests of the rocking chair a smidge tighter. “As much as you do.”

Unsure, she repeated, “As much as I do?”

“Sí.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Oh, you knew I knew.” Mickey moved to speak; her grandmother put up a hand. “Who caught you going in and out all those times?” She shook her head. “You knew I knew *something*.”

“And now I know you knew a hell of a lot,” Mickey said, unable to stop the anger rising in her voice. *Your blood was promised to me. And if I cannot have you...* Who would he have? Jess?

Mimi wagged her finger. “You don’t speak to me like this.”

“I’m sorry, but you can’t keep things from me like this. When were you going to say that faeries are after our blood?”

Mimi did turn sharply then. “What? Who told you that?”

Mickey threw up her hands. “What did you think I was referring to?”

“I thought you were finally gonna tell me what you were doing in there! I thought we were gonna discuss it all!”

“I went to a psychic today-”

“They’re all scammers.”

“I know that! I know that. But I went and a faery man cut my arm and licked my blood from his hand and told me it’s *owed to him!*” Mickey put her head in her hands and forced her tears to pass. “He told me there was a reason I could go in and out of Faerie like I did and that I’ve been playing a game and... and I asked him what it was, and he said... he said to ask you.” She met her grandmother’s eye, watched as devastation spread across her face. Mickey’s mouth twisted and her eyes stung. She shook her head. “Tell me, please, *for the love of God*, tell me what he meant.”

The corners of her abuela’s mouth turned down. “His hair was white, and his skin was white?”

“Yes.”

“Were his eyes red?”

“Yes,” Mickey breathed. “Yes. Yes.”

“I made a deal, once,” her grandmother said. Mickey opened her mouth to scream. Nothing came out. “I wanted another baby. Your grandfather and I tried, but I was infertile.”

Sorrowful: “*Mimi.*”

“Let me finish,” she said, and Mickey nodded. “We tried and tried. Nothing happened. For months. So I went to the doctor and they told me it would never happen. My uterus was the wrong shape. The chances were so small, it was hopeless. I cried and cried on the bus ride home. An older woman asked me what was wrong,” she choked on the words. “I told her- I told her what they’d told me. And do you know what she said? She said there was a demon in the woods who could give me whatever I wanted. It didn’t matter what the doctors said. The demon would get me my baby. So I went. I did not tell your abuelo. The thought of telling him his wife couldn’t give him what he always wanted...”

“It wouldn’t have been your fault, Mimi.”

Her grandmother gave her a hard look and continued, “He was like a shadow. The demon. He moved in the trees without making a sound. He was small, then. Like a... What’s the word... *Rabbit*. And a lizard. A rabbit-lizard. He asked me what I wanted. I told him I wanted a baby. He told me he could give me that, only he’d have to take something in return. I told him I’d give him anything for a baby, because you say those things when you’re desperate. You don’t mean them. But you know they mean every word they say. And they hold you to your word too. He asked for my blood in exchange. I agreed. He said we had a deal, and so I went home. A few days later I was pregnant. The doctors said it was a miracle. They thought they got the files confused, there must have been a mistake. Nine months later, your father was born.”

“This sounds like Rumpelstiltskin,” Mickey said.

“I know. And it was like that. Whuppity Stoorie, too. Those stories come from somewhere.” She shook her head. “On the day I came home with your father, a bunny rabbit was at my window. He wanted his payment. I said okay. He came to the door and became a person. A white man with red eyes. He reached out for your father. Instead I pricked myself with a safety pin and spilled the blood at his feet. He was upset that I tricked him. I played his game and beat him. They don’t like when you do that.” Her smile was sour. “We don’t owe him, Micaela. But he vowed that he’d get what he wanted. The doctors told me I couldn’t have children, and then I had two more boys. Three in all. It was impossible. But he wanted me to have them. He wanted me to have more kids so he would have more chances to take what he thinks is his.”

“And now he wants my daughter.”

Mimi grabbed for her arm, like the faery had. Mickey’s skin turned to gooseflesh. “He won’t have her. You watch that girl, Mickey. You watch her. He tried to get you — he let you into their world for years, and he never got you. He won’t get her. I promise you,” she said. Mickey

wanted to trust her abuela's word, but she knew the frailty of human promises. They were desperate wishes disguised as vows. "He won't get her. We are Ferros; strong like iron. He hasn't gotten us yet, and he won't get us now."

The wind chimes sang at the edge of the porch.

"Okay," Mickey said. She sat back, stared at her lap. "Okay."

Mimi nodded. "Everything will be *fine*."

How often had those words sounded like a prayer?

&

Mickey studied the pregnancy test, back against the floral wallpaper lining Sawyer's master bathroom, and she wondered if Heath wanted children. Imagining his eternally young face beaming down at a chubby baby caused her chest to pang. She pressed a hand to her breastbone, breathed in for four while staring at her cleavage. She was a week late, and despite having a lot of purposefully unprotected sex with Jax, she'd assumed it was nothing. The two pink lines said otherwise.

Heath told her that most faeries struggled with fertility, leading to few pregnancies and fewer children. His mother was lucky to have produced him. She'd tried for decades with various faery men and a few human men (flings more likely to result in success). She considered stealing a human baby and leaving a changeling in its place, but then she learned that Heath sat in her womb.

There had been a period of Mickey's life — a short, short period, practically a blip — when she considered whether she'd be the mother of Heath's child(ren). It'd take easier for her. Who could deny her connection to Faerie then? As mother of the Spring Court's young royalty, her place by Heath's side would be cemented. All those years of wishing would come to a sort of fruition.

Mickey swallowed the memory, wrapped the pregnancy test in toilet paper, and stuffed it at the bottom of the trash can, digging around and moving used tampons to properly hide the damned thing. She washed her hands twice in the teal sink. In the mirror, she peered at her reflection: bronze skin sparkled with sweat, mascara smudged under dark brown eyes, almost-black bangs stuck to her forehead, maroon lipstick smeared on her chin. The face of a twenty-seven-year-old. A pregnant twenty-seven-year-old.

Nausea roiled in her gut. What the fuck had she been thinking?

After splashing her face with water and drying it on Sawyer's hand towel, she opened the bathroom door.

Sawyer stood on the other side, frowning. Her honey blonde hair ended at her waist (longer than Heath's ever was) and it swung like curtains in the breeze when she shifted to one side, hand on her hip. She still dressed like the lead guitarist and vocalist she'd once been, big silver-buckled belts and sheer tank tops. "You good? You were in there a while."

Mickey nodded, pressed the inside of her wrist to her forehead. "Sorry. I'm good. I'm great." She forced a smile. "Is Kaulana still listing all the celebrities she's seen in LA?"

"More like listing the ones she's slept with." Sawyer snorted, bit her lip. "You sure you're good? We worry about you, you know. I read that interview you did a while back. Rachel called me at work after she read it because she thought we should put you on suicide watch."

"I'm not going to kill myself, Sawyer."

"I know that. It was a joke." Sawyer shifted to the other side and crossed her arms. "How are things with you and Jax? Is he good to you?"

Mickey laughed, taken aback. "What the fuck are you talking about? Yes, he's good to me. Things are good. You've seen us all night. He's obsessed with me. I think I disappointed him by not sitting in his lap like Rachel and you."

Sawyer's frown turned to a thoughtful pout. "You only curse when you're really fucked up about something. What's going on, Mick? You can talk to me."

"I am really, truly, perfectly fucking fine," Mickey said, stalking out of the bedroom and back to the dining room. Hearing her enter, Jax looked up, smile forming on his pretty lips. Mickey slid into his lap and linked her arms around his neck. One of his denim-clad arms slid around her waist, the other hand coming to rest on her thigh.

Sawyer came in hesitantly, gnawing on her thumbnail. She said nothing else about their exchange the rest of the night, only hugged Mickey goodbye tighter than she had in months and said into her ear, "I've got you, always."

Everything only worsened from there.

As the weeks went on, Mickey brushed off Jax's hands, lips, everything. His touchiness had increased since she confessed to being pregnant, and Mickey knew the gestures were sweet. She did. Her mother drove in from Jersey often to check on her, and when she witnessed Jax's helicopter-like fluttering, she cooed. Mickey did not. Every time he reached for her, every time she felt his breath against her neck, she shuddered. He smiled, or laughed, or spoke, and Mickey cringed, nauseous and repulsed. It got so bad that once Jax fell asleep, she slipped from their bed and curled up on the couch. She watched the *Narnia* movies, *Lord of the Rings*, or the animated version of *Alice in Wonderland*, waking up at dawn to a black television screen. Then she returned to bed, half asleep, and weathered Jax's peck on the cheek a few hours later. He whistled on his way to the bathroom. Mickey fought the urge to take a knife to her ears and pull a Van Gogh.

She spent her days either walking (later waddling) through a park, making music, or watching movies.

She meandered through the whole of Central Park, became so familiar with the turns and bends that she memorized the crannies between the stones. She lapped the reservoir fourteen times, glimpsed the selkies thrice. Once bored of that, she took the A train to Fort Tryon Park and wandered. Mickey had been to many parts of the world by then — she'd seen most of the United States, a lot of Europe, Asia, some of South America and Australia once, all on tour — but Fort Tryon was the first place she thought *this could be the Spring Court*. The grassy hills, stone staircases leading nowhere, lampposts bent in half like an old man's spine, the Met Cloisters' medieval appearance; everything combined and caught in Mickey's throat. She explored the whole park, learned it like one learned a lover's body, enveloped herself in a film of memories. Peering into the trees, she hoped to glimpse a faery king — not dead exactly, but definitely a ghost. Sometimes she convinced herself she did. Other times, she thought she saw herself in the trees, teenaged and dressed in white.

In her first and second trimesters, when she reached for a guitar, it was for Heather. Heather was her first acoustic, purchased in her second year at Columbia. (She refused to touch Jolene, the red electric guitar Jax gave her for her twenty-third birthday.) When she could manage it, she brought Heather to Fort Tryon, strumming under the trees. She recorded demos outside, humming under her breath as birds sung above her. Quickly, she became a swollen, round thing, and Heather became too much to deal with. She turned to the piano when inside, carrying her violin to the park if the mere thought didn't exhaust her. Those days recording her violin in Fort Tryon were the most fond in her memory. Polished wood tucked under her chin, she closed her eyes and played, trying to harness Spring fiddles. After Jess' birth — October 22nd, 2015, to twenty-eight-year-old parents — Mickey released the demos as an EP titled "Under the Hill." Critics' opinions varied, and most fans had little interest, but whenever someone came up to Mickey and listed "Under the Hill" as one of their favorite releases of hers, her heart grew five sizes. A quote from her favorite review: "Born and raised in Appalachia, Ferro's haunting demos feel like going home. Not backwards in time, but returning as an adult, everything you've left behind the same yet entirely different. You discover your hometown is a ghost town, haunted by you, your memories, and your every unfulfilled dream. Regardless of whether or not she has broken boundaries, I am grateful that 'Under the Hill' opened the floodgates to a catharsis I didn't know I needed."

The movies Mickey watched were either fantastical or centered upon a childhood romance. If she didn't fall asleep halfway through, she found herself crying by the end, an indescribable well of emotion rising in her. She retained so many sections of *The Return of the*

King dialogue that it became a party trick and watched *My Girl* so many times that Jax hid the DVD from her, tired of returning home to a weeping girlfriend who refused his offers of comfort.

A few weeks before her due date, Mickey tired of fantasies, no longer willing to wonder at what Heath might have said, wanted, or done. One afternoon, while Jax was in the studio with some up-and-coming indie band, Mickey drove to New Jersey. She used her spare key to let herself into her parents' house, leaving her bag and shoes by the door. The stairs creaked in all the same spots. She rounded the staircase and walked into her old bedroom that hadn't changed since she was twenty.

Mickey went to the window, moving the curtains so she could look out into the trees. She'd spent weeks of her college life researching Celtic runes in the New York Public Library on Fifth Avenue and the Butler Library, trying to find a symbol like the one Heath showed her when she was seventeen. He'd carved the shape into a tree, said *voilà*, and they walked through it to the Winter Court. They'd lingered just long enough for them each to throw a snowball at the other; Heath explained that Winter was unpredictable and rather dangerous since some scandal left the Court abandoned. He carved a matching rune onto another tree, and they walked right back into Spring. Once in New York, Mickey wanted to find it again, hoping she might carve a new portal and get to have another emotional tug-of-war with her ex-boyfriend. But the search was exhausting on top of her schoolwork, and the shape of the rune blurred in her mind, and then she met Jax, and she stopped looking.

Maybe being back in Jersey would help.

A knock came on her door. She turned to see Mimi in the doorway, thin eyebrow raised. In her hand was an index card, quivering as she waved it in the air. There was no *hello* or *what are you doing here*, only: "You've got mail, mi niña."

Mickey frowned. "Mail?"

Mimi waved the index card. "Come take it. You may be pregnant, but I'm old."

Rolling her eyes, Mickey walked around her bed and over to the door. She reached for the index card, and as her fingers brushed it, her grandmother pulled it away. Mickey tsked. "Come on, Mimi."

Her grandmother shrugged, feigning incredulity. "Don't you want to know who it's from?"

"Who's it from?"

"A girl," she said. Mickey raised her eyebrows. "A woman," she said, putting up a finger. "A beautiful woman. Very unique hair. And eyes."

"A woman gave you this index card? For me?"

"Yes. She was hiding her face with a scarf but was clearly filthy rich. And Irish. She said you might need it in the coming years. She said you were the only one who could fix it and that

she came...” Her grandmother put her hands up, like *get this*. “From the *future*.” She swirled her hands around. “OooOOOooo.”

“She said she came from the future,” Mickey said tonelessly. She tsked again. “Mimi, stop playing. I’m not five.”

Mimi leaned in close, breath hot against Mickey’s cheek. “You stop playing,” she said, suddenly serious. She handed Mickey the index card and, with a hard stare, turned and went downstairs.

Mickey scoffed, expecting the index card to say something like *te quiero mucho* or *extra flan in the fridge xx*. (Her grandmother learned the British used the letter x to represent kisses and decided the move was hers for the taking.) She looked down, still shaking her head at Mimi’s antics.

It was the rune. Heath’s rune.

She looked up, meaning to call out to her abuela, but she was already gone.

Mickey closed the door quietly, then went to her closet, thinking of Lucy and Mr Tumnus. Inside were a few stray hangers and taped up boxes with “MICKEY - BABY” or “MICKEY - TEEN” written on the side. She pushed them out of the closet with her feet, grunting as she went. She dug through her desk drawers until she found the Swiss Army Knife *tío* Titi got her for her thirteenth birthday. Mickey awkwardly sat on the floor, then shifted onto her hands and knees. She crawled into her closet and carved the rune into the wood backing. Her father’s watch (at this point, it was hers) was on her wrist. Her clover and salt locket hung from her neck. She never removed either from her person, not even to shower.

Taking a deep breath, she crawled headfirst into the closet. Body anticipating a wall, she closed her eyes, but no wall ever came. She crawled and crawled and crawled, inching along. After about four minutes, her hand landed on the heel of a shoe.

She opened her eyes. She was in a closet. Not her childhood closet, but an overstuffed closet, pairs of shoes in mountainous piles and elaborate silk things hanging in her face. Mickey pushed them aside, revealing a mahogany door. She shifted forward and reached out to push it. The door swung open, knob hitting the wall.

Mickey knew her pregnant body well enough to know standing up amongst the clothes and shoes would be too difficult. Instead, she shoved the shoes out of the closet. They disappeared, hit the ground with loud *thumps*. This enlightened Mickey to the fact of her being in a wardrobe. Lucy and Mr Tumnus were a more apt comparison than she’d expected. *Of course it’s a wardrobe, they’re fucking faeries*, she thought. Once she cleared enough shoes away, she sat on her ass and scooted out.

Heath gaped at her on the other side.

He was as beautiful as he'd always been. He'd cut his hair shorter, the longest of it brushing the shells of his pointed ears. The plum bathrobe he wore over dark, airy pants made his body look impossibly long. A triangle of his pale, bare chest was revealed. And atop his head sat a golden wreath blooming violets.

She'd scooted into the Spring King's bedroom. The ceiling depicted a lively revel that reminded Mickey of the one she attended ten years ago. Plum curtains hung open around a long wall of windows with a view of the rolling Spring hills. A huge bed sat in the center of the room, and on it a very beautiful faery woman scowled at Mickey. Her hair was the color of pumpkins and cider and dead leaves crunching underfoot, her eyes entirely black, no whites at all. Even sitting, Mickey could tell she was tall and thin and perfectly proportioned.

A laugh bubbled out of her. She hadn't considered the possibility that Heath might have someone else now. What a fool she was. What a stupid fucking idiot. Why'd she think Heath would be hung up on her the way she was on him? She tried. She had that on-and-off thing with Jax from the end of college to now, when they were most certainly *on* despite her wanting to be *off*. She'd seen other guys intermittently, a few girls as well. But nothing stuck. They'd get to the point where they were opening up, detailing childhoods, past relationships, and other events that shaped them, and Mickey couldn't do it. She'd known Jax almost ten years now and he still tried to barter for information. What was there to say? *When I was twelve I walked into the woods and met a boy and we fell in love and for a while we both wanted me to abandon the human world for the faery world — because he was a faery, he was the prince of the Spring Court, one of the two Seelie Courts — and I loved him then and I love him now because he was my best friend and with him I felt complete and understood in a way no one else can ever compete with, but I didn't take his offer because I love music and I love myself, or maybe I loved myself, past tense, and I wanted a life with him but I didn't want it enough to not want anything else.* She told one girl in early 2013, a girl who cornered her in the bathroom after a show to say that she loved her work. They left the bathroom and walked the dark streets, spilling their whole lives to each other. Mickey was drunk enough to admit who Heath was when asked. The following week, she'd woken up to a TMZ headline declaring her schizophrenic. The rumor lingered for years.

None of that meant Heath felt the same way. Maybe this faery woman understood him in a way she could never. Mickey was a blip on his radar, a mere few years in the scheme of an immortal life.

Mickey kept laughing. She guffawed, bent over her pregnant belly with her face in her hands. She laughed so hard she cried, and then she was just crying, because of course she was. When was she not crying?

“Who the fuck is this, Heath?” the faery woman spat.

Through the gaps in her fingers, Mickey saw Heath drop to his knees. “Mickey,” he said, maybe to her and maybe to the faery woman. His warm hands brushed hers, pulled them from her face. “Oh, Mickey. I was starting to think I might never see you alive again.”

Mickey cried.

The faery woman stood. “*This* is Mickey?” Her surprise — and resentment? — led Mickey to believe she’d come up in an earlier conversation. “*This one?* The woman weeping on our floor?”

“Leave us, Ophira,” Heath said, eyes on Mickey. When neither of them heard her move, Heath turned away, enraged. Mickey gulped, unfamiliar with the way anger twisted his face. “Ophira, *GET THE FUCK OUT!*”

Mickey choked on air.

Ophira looked at them. It was hard to tell where her eyes landed when her eyeballs were one color — Mickey was reminded of going to the Met and feeling like the portraits’ eyes followed her. “Of course, my liege. As your queen, I should do whatever you ask of me.” She grinned, a shark flashing teeth, and she stalked out, hands in fists. She slammed the door behind her, and though the sound was muffled by the walls, Mickey was sure Ophira screamed.

Heath looked at her with the gentlest green eyes. They were the precise shade of Fort Tryon’s fields. “What are you doing here?”

“You’re married,” Mickey said, breathless. “You’re king, and you’re married.”

He sat back on the grassy floor. “Yeah, well. Time passed.” How long for him? Ten years? Two? A month? A week? His eyes flicked back and forth between hers. “When we last spoke, I told you my coronation was soon.”

“You’re married,” she repeated.

“Yes.” He licked his lips, fidgeted with his rings. “Ophira is a mostly pleasant woman. A true faery. She is also the Autumn Queen. It seemed... smart, politically, to tie the two courts together.” His mouth tightened. “You understand.”

Mickey nodded. Tears slipped down her cheeks, and she quickly brushed them away so Heath wouldn’t reach out to do it. “I always understand,” she said.

He pressed the pad of his pointer finger to her left eyebrow. She gasped, small and quiet. His eyes gleamed. “It twitched. Are you lying to me again?”

She wanted to lie but knew it would do no good. There was no point in lying anymore — there was nothing left to preserve. She’d made sure of that. “I don’t know.”

A nod and a thin-lipped smile, there and gone. His finger fell away. “I understand.”

Uttering the words aloud felt antithetical.

She studied the lines forming on his forehead, around his mouth and eyes. So young for a faery yet he already looked aged. She traced them with her thumb. “Kingship’s wont,” he

whispered, and she nodded. She ran her thumb along the point of his ear, through the trimmed edges of his hair, down the line of his neck. She wanted to memorize the feeling, store the sensation in a box and preserve the comfort it gave her. Was it comfort, if your heart ached and you were unable to breathe? Or was it heartbreak, sorrow, loneliness? Mickey could not tell. The two often intertwined for her, were maybe even one and the same.

His hand went to her swollen belly. He smiled sadly. "Boy or girl?"

"You know that even if I knew it wouldn't necessarily be the truth."

He chuckled, blew air out of his nose. "Do you know?"

"They said girl." She shrugged. "I don't feel any particular way about it."

"Do you have a name?"

She nodded, head tilting to the right with memory's weight. "Remember that time we hid from the guards and I had an allergy attack because of that flower crown you made me?"

"Yes. The jessamine. You started taking allergy pills after that when you came to visit. There were no tissues so you wiped your nose on my shirt and when I kissed you your lips were a little snotty."

"Yeah," Mickey said, studying the rings on his hands. Which was the wedding ring? Did faeries have wedding rings, or was there some other ritual? "Jessamine. Jess."

He hummed. "Does your husband like it?"

"I'm not married. And it's not up to him."

"Do you not love him?"

Mickey felt herself smile. "Oh, I love him. I just don't know if I like him anymore. I go in and out."

"I'm sorry."

"I thought you weren't supposed to apologize. Or say thank you." At his pointed glance, she shook her head. "I remember the things you told me. I remember the rules." A beat. "I remember everything."

His hand went to her bent knee. "I only say those things to you."

"You want to owe me, Heath?"

"I owe you regardless."

Her whole body prickled. She smiled, tears welling up again. Her watch read 5:55. "I should go." She pushed off the ground, landed back inside the wardrobe, and started to scoot backwards. Looking into his green eyes hurt like nothing else had, a knife twisting in her heart and skull and soul. He could run her through with a sword if he wanted. Maybe he already had. "I shouldn't have come," she said.

"I'm glad you came," he said quickly. "I'm always glad to see you. You're always welcome." Silent, but heard: *Come back.*

She nodded, scooting further and further into the darkness. “I know. I will.”

“Your eyebrow,” he said.

She kept scooting, crawled backwards like a crab. He did not close the door. She watched him shrink as she traveled back to her childhood home, watched him become a pale dot in the darkness, then blink out of existence.

Cardboard poked her shoulder. It was the corner of a “MICKEY - TEEN” box. She leaned against it, stared at the wood she’d crawled through. It looked so solid. She moved the boxes back, hiding the rune from wandering eyes. She sat with her back to the closet, opened the watch face, and dumped the dirt out onto the floor.

Footsteps, down the hall. Mickey glanced up as her bedroom door creaked open.

Her mother stood in the gap. She was frail now, forehead crinkling in confusion. “Mikita? Did we have plans? What are you doing here?”

Mickey shook her head. “No plans. I just missed this place.”

Her mother stepped towards her, bones creaking as she sat on the floor. “Are you okay, Micaela? Dime, ¿qué pasó?”

The tears. Again. “I’m scared, Mami. I’m so scared.” Her hand went to her belly.

“Oh, Mikita. Todo va a estar bien. I did it. You can do it. It’s scary, but you’ll get the most priceless gift out of it.”

“I know. I just... Once I have this baby, Mami... This will be my life. Every possible future I could’ve had,” she said, gesturing to the future, “they’re all gone. Before this, I could imagine that I could go back and do different things. I could say yes instead of no. But now-” she rubbed her belly- “everything’s decided. There is no me without this anymore. There is no future I can steal back that doesn’t allow for the baby.”

Her mother’s hand went to her cheek, then her shoulder, and then her mother pulled Mickey into her sagging arms. Mami gripped tight when she wanted to. “It sounds scary now, but once the baby is born, Micaela, it won’t be. Everything will be decided and you will be so happy. Because you will love that baby more than you have ever loved anything else. I know you might not believe me, and I know postpartum is a thing-” they both laughed tearily- “but I also know you, and I know you have a hard time loving. I read that article. I know you think you’re alone. But now, you will never be alone. That is what this baby will give you. Someone to love forever. Pa’ siempre, Mikita. Pa’ siempre. You can’t feel alone if you’re a parent, because you know someone is out there that needs you, and you are tied to them. Pa’ siempre. Be grateful. Be grateful, because it goes by so fast.”

Crying, Mickey nodded. “Okay, Mami. Okay. Te quiero.”

“Te quiero mucho.” Her mother leaned back, patted her face twice. “Are you staying for dinner? Your father wants to order Chinese, but I think we can convince him to take us to that

nice Italian place. Hm?” She wiped the tears from Mickey’s face. “Vamos. I know you love that chocolate cake.”

Mickey cried, choked a laugh, and for the first time in a very long time, she felt seen.

&

Eighteen and at the tail-end of her high school career, Mickey told her parents she was going to prom. She *was* going out, but not to prom. The Flower Moon — or Milk Moon, as Heath preferred and Mickey was inclined to as well — happened to land on the same night. Heath had long wanted Mickey to attend a revel. Once he officially became her boyfriend, she yearned to go, too. (That conversation came soon after their first kiss. Neither of them opposed the titles and both were interested in a proper relationship. They were coming up on three years now — though no one else knew that. Mickey considered telling her parents, but then they’d ask if he could come to dinner, or if they could meet him, and they’d disapprove of a boy they didn’t know. She wished they knew him and that everything was regular and easy instead of fantastical and complicated. It was simple when Mickey only had music and Heath on her mind. Now Mickey was older and she wanted things other than a boyfriend that loved her and to live in Spring forever. She wanted to be the best musician she could be, to study math and music at Columbia in the fall — the acceptance rocked her to her core — and she wanted to go back to New York and play the concert venues she attended throughout the years. There was so much to want and so few ways to have it all.)

Entirely uninterested in prom at a school full of people she didn’t know or like, she eagerly signed on for a revel. She would finally walk amongst faeries that weren’t Heath. Fear for her own life previously held her back, but she was confident she knew enough to safely manage. Walking into the woods, she ran over the rules in her mind: *Do not eat or drink anything. Do not dance with anyone other than Heath. Do not take anyone’s hand. Do not say you’re sorry, or thank you. Do not accept any offer and do not say yes to a question you don’t understand, even if not answering makes you feel awkward. Awkward is better than dead.* It was harder to tell when Jersey collapsed into Spring when it was also Spring in Jersey, but soon enough Mickey found herself in a familiar copse of trees, a golden prince a few feet off chowing down on an apple.

When he looked up to see her, he threw the apple over his shoulder and picked her up in his arms. Mickey squealed. Heath bounced around, shouting, “I’m so glad you’re coming!” so loud that a white rabbit glared at him before bounding off. He carried her a bit further, then planted her on the ground. They walked into the palace with his arm around her shoulder. He hid her face in her jacket, said he was “performing a high-level concealment glamour” (Mickey understood this as *casting fancy magic spell*), and shushed her when she said, “I feel like you’re

not.” Of course, he was because he said he was, but the manner in which he did it seemed grossly unprofessional.

Once they got to the upper halls, he grabbed her wrist and pulled her along, sprinting to his room. “Quick, quick,” he said. “Quick, quick, quick.” He opened a door, shoved Mickey inside, closing and locking the door swiftly behind them.

Mickey fell backwards onto the bed. His room was rather small, squished in a corner in a very high up in the palace. The queen slept below the palace to divert possible assassins. Mickey often wondered why Heath was considered dispensable enough to live in an obvious location, especially as the sole heir. When she’d mentioned it, Heath simply shrugged.

“Do you think anyone saw you?” He asked, panting.

“I think they probably heard you yelling ‘QUICK QUICK!’ or ‘FANCY HIDING SPELL!’” She raised her head so she could meet Heath’s eye. “What’s the point of sneaking me in if you’re just gonna bring me to the revel? Everyone’s gonna see me there.”

He grinned from pointed ear to pointed ear. “Yeah, but you’ll be dressed nice enough that no one will *really* notice.”

Mickey glanced at her grey sweatshirt reading *COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY*. “I didn’t dress nice, though.”

“I have something.” He walked over to his tiny, tiny wardrobe and pulled a dress off a hook. He held the hanger up, other hand sweeping over the fabric as if to say, *Hey, look at this, huh?* “What do you think? Do you like it?”

Deep pink satin and tulle rippled down, resembling something Greco-Roman but a little over the top. Mickey leaped from the bed to run her fingers across it. She couldn’t believe he’d thought to find a dress for her. “Of course I like it, are you kidding?” Laughing, she shook her head. “How do you know it’ll fit?”

“I had them spell it so it would fit anyone. But even without, I think I know your body well enough.”

Seeing Heath’s horribly suggestive smirk, Mickey blushed and laughed some more. “I’m... I love it. I love you. Thank you, Heath.” She pushed onto her tiptoes to lean up and kiss him. Without looking back, he hung the dress up again, slung his arms around her waist, and walked her back onto the bed. As she hit the mattress, she turned away, laughing. “I should get ready.”

“We don’t have to be there for a few hours,” he said, kissing her cheek and forehead and jaw.

“Show me what you’re wearing.”

“No.” He kissed her again.

Eventually, after the sun set over the hills, Mickey slid into her magically-fitting dress. Heath wore a simple green blouse with airy, broad sleeves and matching green slacks. In the mirror, he pressed a kiss to the crown of her head where he'd braided her hair like a tiara. "We look like Spring," he said.

Mickey loved the young woman she saw in the mirror. "We do. You're grass and I'm a flower."

"We could look like this forever, you know."

She turned to look up at him as he turned to look down at her. Her nose brushed his chin. "What do you mean?"

Heath laughed to himself, uncomfortable. "I meant to say that later."

"Say it now."

"I just... I know you got into that wonderful college, and I know your parents are there, but I think you could love it here. I think we could be happy here. In Spring. Like we've always been. I'm going to be king soon, and you could be queen. We could live forever. *You* could live forever. And you could play your music for the court and we could be happy."

Mickey opened her mouth, but Heath cut her off.

"I don't expect you to want to. Not right now. That's why I meant to ask you after. Don't respond, just come to the revel and we'll dance and you'll see what it'd be like. And then you can tell me what you want, and I'll accept you at your word." He smiled tentatively. "Good?"

She took a deep breath, then nodded.

He kissed her cheek. "Great. Do you remember the dances I taught you last month?"

She didn't. "Who do you think I am?" Mickey hoped she sounded sarcastic or excited, not completely thrown off-guard by his... Well, by his marriage proposal. She was too young to get married. But the younger she agreed to stay in Faerie forever, the younger she'd be forevermore. If she wanted it to, this night could literally last forever.

Heath brushed baby hairs behind her ears. "You're human. You could forget all of this one day."

"I won't."

His finger brushed her eyebrow. "You don't know that. Don't lie to me, even to protect my feelings. I know when you do it. You have a tell."

Mickey pursed her lips, leaned away. "Really? And what is that?"

"If I tell you, you'll try not to do it. I'd rather keep that information to myself." He pulled her towards the door.

The Spring throne room (the main room, Heath explained) was the most wonderful thing Mickey'd ever seen. Soft grass flattened under their bare feet, tall entryways arched above their heads, the ceiling vaulted like a naturally-occurring cathedral. Pixies fluttered by while bards

played fiddles, imps jumping in what was likely a faery dance. Satyrs loitered and brownies cleaned up after them, plucking trash and used silverware or china from tables and then disappearing back into the crowd. Selkies splashed in a small salt-water pool on the other side of the room. Faeries plucked drinks from trays carried by dead-eyed waiters around the room. Mickey was enticed by a purple drink and almost reached out to grab one before remembering she wasn't supposed to. *Do not eat or drink anything.* Why was she so suddenly famished?

Mickey knew about Faerie for six years, had run around the Spring Court with a faery prince, but this was the first time any of it felt real. She clutched her locket, eyeing the endlessly beautiful faeries swirling around her.

A particularly enchanting woman with a snakeskin dress and serpent's tongue came up to her and asked, in the most sultry voice Mickey would ever hear, "Care to dance? I'll make it worth your while." She put out her hand.

Do not dance with anyone other than Heath. Do not take anyone's hand.

Heath's arm slid around her waist. "She'd rather not," he said with a smile.

Mickey's mouth formed the words *I'm good*, but no sound came out. She couldn't stop staring at the woman. She was the most beautiful person in the world. But Mickey had the strange feeling that if she agreed, she'd end the night having shed her own skin, and not in a fun, liberating metaphorical way. The woman tilted her head, predator-like. Mickey said, "No. Leave me be."

The woman's tongue flicked out hungrily, and with a sharp-toothed smile, she left them alone.

Heath pulled Mickey closer to him, lips brushing her ear. "You'll be *fine*. I'm here."

He smiled. Mickey melted.

He led her to the bards and imps, pulled her around him so they stood in proper ballroom formation, his right eyebrow quirking. "Are you ready?"

"I fucking hope so," she said, and then they were dancing.

At most family functions, Mickey's father pulled her to the dance floor. He ignored her claims of having two left feet — not false claims, mind you; very, very true claims — and dragged her through salsas, merengues, tangos, and bachatas. When she stepped on his toes, he playfully reprimanded her. When she moved the wrong way, he laughed at her, which made her laugh awkwardly, ready to bow out, but then he pulled her back into the correct position. She'd struggle through for an hour minimum. Once her father declared her hopeless, she traded seats with her mother, the actual dancer. Together, beaming, they swirled through the steps, moved like a single organism. They never missed a step, never fumbled. Mickey watched on the sidelines, hypnotized.

This was not that. She could not tell if there were steps to this dance or decipher any sort of choreography. Heath's lessons were useless against the pull of the music. She could not feel the floor beneath her. They were spinning, and the room was spinning, and everything was beautiful, and she wanted to dance until her heart failed her.

Heath's smile burned her retinas. She wondered if hers was similarly bright. Perhaps they were ablaze, fire licking up their bodies, stars burning in the grass.

Too soon, Heath pulled her from the ring of dancers. As everything came back into focus, Mickey thought every faery's smile was sharper than it had been before. Stumbling, she sagged against Heath, body topsy-turvy. He rushed her to the small selkie pool with a concerned look in his eyes and instructed her to drink. She did, wincing at the saltiness. The selkies watched them, giggling, and splashed Mickey in the eye.

Heath pulled her away. "Are you alright?"

She sat with her back to the wall, pressed a hand to her forehead. "I think so. The dancing..." There were no words for it.

"I thought because you were with me, you'd be okay." He shook his head, laughing at himself. "It's the selkie all over again."

She reached for his hand. "Stop it. It's not like that at all. I wanted this." *Wanted*, her brain supplied. *Past tense*.

"I think you should go home, Mickey."

Rearing back, she blinked, heat stewing in her chest. "What? I just got here."

He pulled his hands back, fidgeted with his rings. "You've been here hours."

"I meant the revel, Heath. You know that." She reached out again, and he flinched away. Mickey felt like a cracked glass. "Why are you being like this?"

He rolled his lips in his mouth, and Mickey remembered what he'd said earlier in the night: *I think we could be happy here. I'm going to be king soon, and you could be queen.* The revel was a taste of Faerie, and she slumped against the wall, dazed. He thought this would decide her fate, expected her to tell him no because she was weak here. There would always be a target on her back, no matter if she was queen, girlfriend, or plebeian. He was readying himself for heartbreak.

Mickey settled her hands in her lap. When she spoke, she made sure not to look up, to gaze only at her mostly-chipped purple nail polish. "Take me outside?" she asked. "I want to see the stars."

He lifted her into his arms. She clasped her hands around his neck, pressed her cheek to his collarbone. His pulse thrummed against her forehead. He carried her out through an archway, down a spiral staircase, through dirt tunnels, and into their copse of trees.

She slid to the ground, splayed out like a starfish, and smiled sadly up at him. “Show me the constellations.”

He curled against her, laying his blond head on her shoulder. He looked up, pointed out Orion and Cassiopeia and Centaurus. Regardless of their different realms, they shared the same sky. A sky Mickey didn't look at; she studied the geography of the side of Heath's face, the pale mole, the slope of his nose, the shadow of his invisible eyelashes, the acute angle of his ear. When he started to recount the stories of each constellation, Mickey reached for his hand.

“Heath,” she said.

He stopped. Didn't turn to her. He knew what was coming, but all his reasons were wrong.

“I'm not saying no because of the dance, Heath,” she said, and he swallowed, throat bobbing. “If I really wanted this forever, I wouldn't care because we'd figure it out like we figure everything out. And I'm so happy you offered. You have *no idea* how much it means that you offered. And if it was a few years ago, I would say yes.” He flinched. Mickey cursed herself for admitting that. “I love you, Heath. I love you like I'll never love anyone else. I don't think I have it in me to love anyone else like I love you. I think I'd die.

“It's just that...” Her eyes stung. “I want this, with you, I do. I do. But I want other things, too. You said yourself that there's so much for me to do. I can't do it here. My music is out there. And if I said yes, if I stayed here forever with you, I would only get one thing I want. And I think I deserve a chance to have more than one. I want to try to have more than one. It's a numbers game,” she said, laugh-sobbing. “And the odds kinda suck. And I know all of that makes it sound like I don't really love you. I wish I could say how much I love you, I wish I could quantify it for you, but I can't. That's the whole problem. I can't give you a number.”

“But you can give me numbers that the odds favor more than me,” he said.

She sat up. “That's not what I meant.”

“That is what you said.”

“I'm not like you. Not everything I say is exactly what I mean.”

He pushed up onto his elbows, mouth sour. “I know. That's why your left eyebrow twitches. Because you lie to me. You have lied to me for years.”

“Heath,” she breathed.

“Let us speak candidly: Do you want this forever? Yes or no?”

If Mickey was a cracked glass, now she shattered. “No,” she said. “But there's more to it than that-”

“What more is there? Your answer is no, Mickey. You want something else more than you want this.” He shrugged, lips pursed, eyes watery. “There is nothing wrong with that. You are entitled to that,” he said, so genuine it hurt. Because it was true and he knew it.

“Heath-”

He put out a hand. “Mickey, let it be done. It is decided. You said no. What else is there to say?”

She laugh-sobbed again, tears spilling over into the grass. *Always crying.* “I love you.”

A nod. “I love you, too. And I wish you said yes.” He pushed to his feet, forced her to look up at him from the grass where she wept. From this vantage point, she could see the unforgiving king he might carve himself into. She thought of his warning: *Do not accept any offer and do not say yes to a question you don’t understand.* He’d made an offer; she had no idea what it might entail. He hadn’t deigned to think the warning might apply to him.

“I’m *sorry*,” she said, knowing she wasn’t supposed to do that, either.

“Don’t be sorry. Never be sorry. *Never tell me sorry.* You will owe me. I do not want you to owe me, Mickey.” He reached out a hand. “Don’t cry. All is understood.”

That word barely meant anything anymore.

She let him pull her up. They trudged through the grass, up to the point in the woods where their worlds severed.

Mickey stopped with her hand in his, turned back to him.

He was beautiful even now.

Gulping, she asked, “Can I have my excitement now?”

He laughed with tears in his eyes. “Of course.” He pressed a hand over her heart and made a *shwoop* sound with his mouth. “There. I tried not to confuse my excitement with yours, but let me know if any of it feels weird.”

“You’re excited?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Because.” *This is goodbye, this is over, I’m leaving.*

He ran a hand down her arm. “I’ll see you again. I’m sure of it.”

I’m not. But she bit her lip and walked home through the trees. She fell asleep in her dress, mud caked on her feet, and woke up at six in the morning to her mother screeching. Her father stomped into the room, demanded she tell him where she’d been all night, they’d been worried sick, what in God’s name was she wearing? Mickey refused to answer. She picked leaves from between her toes — rusty and dead, as if once she stepped back into the human world, they’d withered. She was grounded for a week. It would be her first and last grounding. Her mother rushed from the room, rambling in Spanish, and her father pressed close to her.

“Mi niña, ¿qué pasa?” he asked, suddenly sympathetic.

Mickey let the dead leaves fall to the floor. “I think I broke someone’s heart, Papi.”

His arm came around her like Heath’s had the night prior. “Okay, and?”

She shook her head, curled into a ball. “I didn’t mean to.”

“What about your heart? What shape is it in, hm?”

She shook her head again. “I don’t know.” Crying, “Se rompió.”

He rubbed her arm. “Well, that’s only fair. ¿Es verdad?”

“Mhm.” She supposed it made sense: She’d fallen in love with a boy whose kind loved exchanges. She’d broken his heart, he’d broken hers. It was only fair.

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Mickey blinked herself awake, swiping her arm over her eyes. She first saw the yellow curtains fluttering in the breeze coming in through the open window. Jax must have opened it for her before getting into bed. She rolled over, hoping to snuggle deep into his chest and not remove herself until Jess cried a greeting.

The bed was empty.

The crib was empty, too. Jess’ blanket was crumpled in the corner, her stuffed bunny left curled up, one ear covering its eye. *Peekaboo*.

Mickey sat up. She reminded herself not to fear. There was no reason to believe someone had stolen her child away in the night — the faeries would have left a changeling in Jess’ place — or that an intruder had killed Jax, who woke up to the sound of lock-picking, and left his body cooling in the foyer. She took a few deep breaths at the edge of the bed, told herself everything was alright.

The low sound of Jax mumbling was now audible. She could not decipher the words, but she knew his voice better than she knew her own. Once, they’d mistakenly found themselves in Times Square on a Saturday afternoon (a consequence of not checking the MTA website before leaving the house). At some point, their hands slipped from each other’s grip, and Mickey lost Jax to the flood of slow-moving tourists. Through the cacophony of foreign languages, hot dog cart owners overcharging, those men advertising for bikes and buses, and hundreds of honking cars, she heard a whisper: *Over here*. If anyone asked, she would call it her conscience — maybe when it came to Jaxon Boone she had a sixth sense — but it was *his* voice, not hers. She turned in the direction of the sound. Over the sea of moving heads, she met his eye. They both smiled. It was a moment that would’ve made Mickey believe in magic if she hadn’t already.

Mickey pressed her head between her knees, thanked whatever higher power existed, and went into the hall.

Jax was rooting around in the fridge. He held Jess in one arm, her small feet wrinkling his white t-shirt. “What are you in the mood for, Jessie? We have banana slop, oatmeal slop, avocado slop.” He picked up a container and frowned. “It’s all slop.” Jess babbled incoherently, and Jax rocked her in his arm. “Mami’s not up yet, so milk isn’t an option. It’s slop or bust.”

Standing in the doorway, Mickey leaned her head against the wall, content to watch.

Jess hid in the crook of Jax's neck. Jax made the cutest, saddest, most beautiful puppy-dog-begging-for-scraps face. Mickey's heart threatened to burst. "Jessie, come on," he said, frown so cartoonish yet sincere, "I know you like this stuff. Yeah, half of it ends up on the floor, but you get the other half in your mouth sometimes." He rocked her again. "I think we should do banana. A lot of people eat bananas for breakfast. What do you think?"

Mickey pressed her smile against the wall. For a split second, she considered not leaving. She could wake up to this every morning. Slop or bust for the next sixty years. It wouldn't be too bad. It might even be great.

Jax, who probably had a corresponding sixth sense for Mickey Ferro, turned. His eyes caught hers. His mouth was slightly ajar, expression open and vulnerable. He looked at her with so much love in his eyes that Mickey froze, overwhelmed. Then he smiled, and somehow his greeting of "Good morning, Mick" was more raw than the look on his face. Mickey thought she'd glance down to see her stomach cut open and organs spilling out onto the tiled floor.

She swallowed painfully. "G'morning," she said, and knew she had to go.

&

The day after the revel, Mickey suffered a painful headache and a roiling in her gut. She slouched through the house in raggedy sweatpants, hair violently tangled, face puffy. She poured herself a bowl of cereal while her parents watched, pity seeping from their pores. She managed maybe five spoonfuls. The Cheerios were ash in her mouth. She dumped the bowl in the sink, pouring the cereal out and experiencing a transient moment of bliss when she turned the garbage disposal on, glorying in the violent gurgle and crunch. Her parents and abuela stared at her; she cringed away from her parents' frowns, felt like a frog mid-dissection under Mimi's knowing gaze. Her parents could read the heartbreak, of course, but her grandmother... her grandmother saw something else.

"I'm going for a walk," Mickey announced, to everyone's surprise, including her own. It sounded right, though. "Yeah. I'm gonna go for a walk."

"Be careful, Micaela," her father said. Her mother nodded. Her grandmother frowned.

"I'll be back soon."

She went out the back door, which should've been her body's first hint to her brain. Arms crossed, she trekked into the trees. She walked without thinking. Perhaps it was her heart leading, for what she did think about was Heath's face the night before, along with everything he'd said. *You lie to me. You have lied to me for years. I love you, too. I wish you said yes. I do not want you to owe me. I'll see you again.* Her vision blurred and her face was wet. She walked.

She passed the log with the whorl like an old woman's hand, the rabbit-hole housing an albino rabbit, and the tree with west-facing moss. Each landmark was a sign Spring was close. She brushed a hand along the tree trunks and branches, rubbed halfheartedly at her tears. She wanted to apologize, take it all back, get on her knees and beg Heath to have her again. *I want to be your faery queen, I don't care about any of the rest of it, fuck my parents and my abuela and have me.* Who else had she ever needed, anyway? She'd told Heath last night that she wasn't like him, but she was. In the important ways. She loved him, and he loved her, and they understood each other, and that was all they needed. She would learn to play fiddle with the bards, maybe join their ranks and become the bard queen, too. Heath and her would be together forever. They'd marry under carnations eternally in bloom. She could see her hands in Heath's hair, his lips on hers, their kiss sealing an unbreakable vow. She would never grow old; she'd be a young woman until the sun exploded and they all became heat. Even then, her particles would vibrate next to Heath's, and the world would start over again, and she'd find him again, because she always found him without ever having to look.

Mickey walked out of the trees and into a gas station parking lot.

Discombobulated, she turned around, walking back into the trees.

She trod over green leaves and grass, muddying the soles of her Birkenstocks. She walked, passing the tree with west-facing moss, the rabbit-hole, the whorled log. Every step was a stake in her heart.

She turned, tried again.

Gas station.

She turned.

Her house.

She turned.

She turned.

She turned.

She turned.

She turned.

She turned.

"How was your walk?" Her abuela asked from the couch. She was watching *American Idol*. Onscreen, some girl named Carrie Underwood was weeping tears of joy, the judges clapping and looking on with smiles. Her grandmother shook her head, muttered, "She's not even good." To Mickey again, "You were gone for a while. Did you see what you wanted to?"

Mickey had not moved since entering the house. "They were closed," she said. She had walked, and walked, and walked, and she never arrived in the Spring Court. It was the first time this had happened. She would try again in the weeks leading up to her first semester of college,

and she would continue to walk straight through to the gas station. Whatever magic allowed her in now shut her out. She could not help but wonder if her “no” had sealed Heath away from her — had he done the sealing himself? She had not considered that a door closing on an opportunity might be taken literally.

“Oh, mi niña, come here.”

Mickey crawled into her grandmother’s lap and imagined Heath, waiting for her to return and promise herself to him, as he slowly realized she would not arrive. *I want to*, her body screamed. *I want to, I tried to, I’m sorry*. Only, if those things were true, she would never have come home last night.

She pressed her face into her abuela’s neck. Carrie Underwood started to sing.

&

Mickey never exactly subscribed to the concept of maternal instincts. No moment had passed where she felt certain of anything regarding her child without having the evidence before her. Part of her thought the whole idea was stupid; another part of her thought maybe she was missing something inherent without realizing. In times where the second part seemed to triumph over the first, she remembered her mother saying, *You will never be alone. That is what this baby will give you*. The words rung true. Mickey was never alone. Even when she was physically, bodily alone, thoughts of Jess dripped like water from a broken tap. Every day, minute, hour: *Jess, Jess, Jess, Jess, Jess*. Some nights she woke up multiple times to check that Jess was in bed, asleep, with that dreamy little smile on her face. Mickey was no longer alone, and she’d come to fear the possibility that, someday, she might be again.

Her grandmother told her to watch her girl. She did. She became more and more protective, never missing a drop-off or pick-up from school. She drove Jess to every playdate, shaking hands with the parents and peering deep into their eyes to check for malice or the haze she’d seen in Rachel’s. She suffered a family dinner with Naomi on the pretense of *I’m okay with this now!* with the true intention to investigate her motives (they were to date Jax). Jess was no longer allowed to wander through the woods as she pleased, much to her frustration. Their food veered a little too salty, just in case. She left hagstones around the house, in drawers and on top of dressers, because the internet said looking through the hole would reveal a faery’s glamour. St John’s Wort hung from the doorjamb like mezuzahs. She instructed Jess to wear her socks inside out; Jess called her crazy, yelled, “They’re stories, Mom. They’re *made up!*” For that, Jess faced a time-out, and while her daughter sulked in her room, Mickey sat downstairs in the kitchen, replaying the fight. Jess said they were “made up,” but Mickey recognized the tone of a little girl who wished her words weren’t true. She drank a whole bottle of wine that night and

cried on the phone to Jax, who did not understand her slurred rant yet stayed on the line even when Naomi asked him to hang up.

In the studio, Mickey plucked idly at her guitar. She needed to write a new song, or a sliver of a new song, so she'd have something to show Jax and the record executives. Her brain decided it would rather consider possible birthday gifts for Jess. Her baby was going to be ten the following week. Double digits. Jess was counting down the days, anxious to officially be a "big girl." Mickey hadn't bought anything yet. Jax intended to hand down his old walkman and cassette tapes, still intent on getting their daughter interested in the family business. Mickey'd given up on that front ages ago, long before Jess was even born.

Mickey plucked an E. *E E E E E E E E*.

In the other room, her phone rang.

She returned her guitar to its stand, walked out into the hall, down the stairs, and into the kitchen. Her ringtone was on its last go-around when she picked up. "Hello?"

"Hi there, is this Micaela Ferro, mother of Jessamine Ferro?"

Her heart stopped. Full names always meant trouble. "Yes, this is she. Who is this?"

"Hi, I'm Erica, the school secretary. I'm calling because—"

Mickey heard the rest as if underwater, burbled and indistinguishable. Her body tipped to the side; she caught herself on the marble counter. Her knees shook, bobbling like Jess' jello cups.

Her own voice sounded far-off. "What do you mean, she didn't come back from recess?"

"After recess, every teacher is instructed to retake attendance. When Mr Yoon took attendance, Jess was absent. He called us, and we called the lunch aides, who searched the playground with school security. Other students say they saw Jess go into the trees. We searched there, too. Jess has not turned up. She seemed to have been talking to herself, but it's possible she was talking to someone the kids couldn't see."

Mickey bent in half over the counter. "Have you called the cops?"

"Yes, my coworker Peter is calling right now."

"Oh my God," Mickey breathed. "Oh my God. I have to call her dad. I have to call Jax."

Erica sighed on the other end. "If you think you can't manage it, his number is in her file. I can do it for you." The sound of pages flipping. "You should probably take a minute and then get to the police station. File a report. I'm not trying to overwhelm you — just the opposite. I'd like to help and am more than willing to—"

"No, it's okay." Her mouth was forming words faster than she was thinking. Was that possible? "I can do it. I need to do it. I don't want him hearing it from anyone else."

"Okay, Mrs Ferro. I—"

"Ms Ferro. Miss. I'm not married." Even now, she couldn't curb the instinct.

“Sorry, Ms Ferro. I will call you — or the police will call you — with any updates. I’m praying for you.” The sharp sound of a phone slamming into the receiver, the hollow tone like someone repeating *over over over over over*.

Mickey pulled the phone away from her face. Her fingers moved to dial Jax’s number so slow that the air could’ve been molasses. Once she’d pressed call and held the phone to her ear, dial tone ringing, she walked back towards the stairs.

The tone stopped abruptly. Drums clashed on the other end. “Mickey, what is it? I’m working.”

“Hi,” she breathed. She took one step at a time, tried to remember right left right left.

“Mickey?” He probably covered his other ear with his hand, walked out of the recording studio into the hall. A door slammed; the other end was quiet. “Mickey, what’s wrong?”

She reached the second floor. “Um. I got a call.”

“Yeah? And?”

Jess’ bedroom door was open, the empty space a bared wound. “Jess didn’t come back inside after recess.” She shook her head, half-aware she was doing it. She’d been so relentlessly protective. What good had any of it done?

“What?” A sharp, discordant note in his voice: Worry. “What do you mean? What happened?”

“They don’t know. She didn’t go back inside.” She exhaled, breath shaking. Licked her lips as she stepped into Jess’ room. Right left right left right left. The floorboards creaked like Mickey’s old house. The one her father was dying inside.

“Have they called the police?”

“They called them. Why didn’t she go back inside, Jax?”

“Mickey, Mickey. Mickey. What the fuck is going on? Has anyone looked for her?”

She went to the bookshelf. Her hand rolled over the spines: *D’Aulaires’ Book of Greek Myths*. *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. *The Chronicles of Narnia*. *Peter Pan; or, The Boy Who Wouldn’t Grow Up*. “They looked. They’re looking.” *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*. *Faeries, Elves & Goblins: The Old Stories*. *Tam Lin*. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. *The Spiderwick Chronicles*. “Why didn’t she go back inside?” she repeated, but the words dulled on her tongue. She pulled *The Wrath of Mulgarath* off the shelf, studied the cover.

How many books had she bought Jess that told stories of kids discovering a hidden magical world? How many times had she recounted her own stories of the boy in the woods and the world of eternal Spring? Not only had she assured her daughter that the world truly was magical, she brought her daughter to the place where the magic happened. She said *I moved to Jersey and met a fairy prince* and moved her daughter to Jersey. She played “Under the Hill” on loop, telling Jess how old folk tales described faeries as living under the rolling Irish hills. She

made her daughter promise to be her brave little knight and then dressed her as one for Halloween three years in a row. She gave Jess the locket. Her daughter roamed freely through fields and through the woods because Mickey allowed it. She gave her daughter every reason to dream and no reason to fear. She'd forgotten some people were born fearless, assumed her daughter would take after her and live a cowardly life, not considering she might take after Jax, who probed, asked questions, and said what he wanted when he wanted.

Had she been stupidly hoping Jess might stumble into Faerie and bring Heath back into her life? Had she been playing at a return to the past without realizing what it would cost her? The psychic and Mimi had made it transparent: Jess' life was on the line. Mickey'd been playing with fire. She had no right to be surprised that she'd burned the house down.

“Mickey, can you *fucking listen when I talk?*”

She slid the book back into its place on the shelf, barely comprehending her own hand existing in physical space. She was floating. Maybe Heath could see her in the trees, leaping from branch to branch. Earlier that morning, she dropped Jess at the curb, rolling down the window to watch her wave an exasperated goodbye. Jess' head of curls bobbed up and down as she walked, her and that too-big red backpack. Mickey had not driven away until her daughter disappeared behind the door. That would be her last memory of her little girl: Smiling up at one of the aides in her white tank top and little blue overalls, light-up Sketchers glittering in the sun, locket hidden under her shirt. Mickey tried to recall the satiny feeling of Jess' hair and already found the memory slipping away.

“You always do this. You've been fucking ignoring me our entire lives. You make decisions without asking me what I think as if I'm not a part of your life, and I've learned to shut the fuck up because you never hear what I have to say. You left me after you gave birth to our fucking kid who is now *missing*, and I'm asking you, if only just this once, to fucking engage in a conversation with me. To *engage*. Listen and respond and take in. Can you do that for me? Just this once? Because our daughter could be fucking dead and I'm in a different state because you decided — *YOU* decided — this would be better for us as a family. I can't help you if you won't help me. So please, for the love of God, *talk to me*, Mickey.”

Mickey turned away from the books. A corner of the floral wallpaper was peeling off. “She's not dead, Jax.”

“How do you know that?”

“I don't know.” Mickey swallowed, throat and mouth the Sahara. She could see it plainly: Jess in the copse of trees during recess, pulling grass from the earth. A rabbit-shaped shadow appearing, offering a trip everyone dreamed of but only children were brave enough to actually wish for. Fingernails stained green, believing her books and her mother's stories would ensure she wasn't led astray, Jess agreeing. Jess being swept away into another place. A more beautiful

place. An uglier place. The universe bending in half and then righting itself, and a child thinking their dreams fulfilled. Every atom inside Mickey, every electron and proton and fucking neutron spinning around was sure: Jess was in Faerie. And she was never coming back. “Call it a maternal instinct,” she croaked.

She hoped Heath would take good care of her kid.

On the other end, Jax began to cry. “What do we do?”

Mickey sat on the edge of her daughter’s bed. She pulled the tucked in covers away — recently Jess had taken to making her bed before school, a step towards responsibility that usually made Mickey’s heart soar and now made her want to die — and slid under the sheets. She curled up, too big for the twin mattress. “Can you come here? I need you.” She pressed a hand to her face. No tears. “I need you here.”

It was unfair. She had always been unfair to him. Since the day they were nineteen and he said *I think I’m in love with you* and she kissed him while picturing branches and pink dresses and a blond boy’s smile, or when they were eighteen and rather than tear her a new one for puking in front of his door, he helped her to the bathroom, and then to her dorm, ensuring she drank water and took a bunch of aspirin. He gave her everything, including *Jess*, and she couldn’t even tell him the truth.

Jax sniffed, snot burbling in his nose. Hoarsely, he said, “Yeah. I’ll get on the next train out.”

Mickey rolled onto her back. “I love you,” she said. Her body warmed with gratitude. Burned with it. She’d chosen Jax to have her kid, and she’d reconsidered and almost regretted that decision one million times. Now, world collapsing around her, that pervasive loneliness turning its head and creeping back in, she couldn’t imagine having chosen anyone else. She hadn’t told him the truth but he was still going to get on the next train, unlock the door, crawl into this twin bed with her, and hold her hand as they stared into the endless chasm before them. Only he would understand.

She owed him everything. She owed him the truth. She owed him what he always wanted.

“See you soon,” she said, and hung up before he could say he loved her back.

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They pronounced her missing, first; then, after weeks of fruitless searching, they pronounced her dead. TMZ showed up at the house with probing, insensitive questions. Jax had to stop Mickey from throwing a frying pan at them. When the paparazzi started targeting him, she, in turn, had to stop him from wielding cutlery.

The evening before the funeral, Mickey got into the shower and a few minutes in started sobbing so hard her knees went out from under her. Hearing the *kerthunk*, Jax banged loudly at the bathroom door, shouting, “Are you okay?” She was unable to answer. He eventually came in, and upon finding her on the floor, turned off the water, pulled her up, dried her with a towel warm from the dryer, clothed her, and tucked her into the bed they’d been sharing. He helped her dress the next morning, too. They spoke in low tones, murmuring, like if they were too loud the Grim Reaper would come back for them as a child returns for a misplaced toy or a parent for their keys. Neither said it but both knew they would happily follow Jess into the dark.

At the funeral, Mickey stood beside a weeping Jax, his hand clasping hers like a lifeline. Their families (including Sawyer, Rachel, and Kaulana, who’d taken a red-eye overseas to be there) stood with them. Mickey’s mother and father cried silently. Mimi sat beside them, stone-faced, chest heaving arrhythmically. Jax’s mother sat with her, dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief. His father shook his head sadly every three minutes like he was trying to meet a respectable number. His brother and brother’s wife spent the whole service trying to hush their squalling baby, who shrieked like a banshee, and for this reason, no one could bring themselves to mind. Naomi stood in the back and left early, unnoticed and forgotten. The priest said something beautiful about their not-dead daughter over her empty coffin, and as the mahogany box was lowered into the ground, Mickey heard it: A guitar riff, harsh and unyielding, rage embodied.

Jax leaned close to her that evening, resting his head on her shoulder. She paused in throwing away used paper plates from the wake to turn to him. She caressed the back of his head, thought *baby steps*, and whispered directly into his ear, “I think we should get the band back together.”