

MOONLESS WITHOUT YOU

By Kilroy AM

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Part 25: Cassettes and Invites

Ash was in fifth today, having actually beat me to our usual corner. He had a cassette player out and a pair of headphones on—I think I'd only seen one before, and that was in an old 90s VHS movie. He hung his headset around his neck and smiled as I sat down.

"What'cha listening to?" I asked.

"Decemberists."

"Old band?"

He shook his head. "Unless you consider the late 2000s a long time ago. They still release their albums on cassette and vinyl. Check 'em out."

He took his headset off fully and held it out to me. Gently, I put them on as the old school player noisily rewinded in his hand. I wouldn't say the audio quality was better or worse than modern stuff, only different.

"I'm, uh, sorry about last week," I mentioned, still listening to Ash's music.

"Don't be," Ash insisted. "I'm sorry you walked back. Kind of a dick move, stranding you alone in the woods."

"It's fine. Nothing happened on the way bck."

"Yeah, I know. I followed."

"You followed?"

"Course. I promised your fam I'd make sure you got home safe, didn't I?"

"Oh, thanks." I scratched the back of my head. "You didn't have to leave your pack."

"They're self-sufficient. Next time we go out, I'll let you know. Try 2. You're a cool dude."

"So I keep hearing." Not that I believed it. "Hey, uh, can I ask you something? Don't get offended."

He nodded. "Sure, shoot."

I took a breath to prepare. "What's, like, going on? Between you and Selene's pack?"

Ash sighed, leaning back enough that his chair propped against the wall. "Differences in viewpoints, y'know?"

"You guys go back?"

"Sort of." He swiftly changed the subject. "What song you on?"

"Oh, uh, something about a bike getting stolen?"

"Apology Song," he laughed. "Lead singer, Colin Meloy used to live in Montana. Got his bike stolen outside of a grocery store. Well, his room mate's. Hey, maybe you're the same person."

"Maybe. Don't own a bike, though, let alone had it stolen."

"Well, when you do, make sure you keep it locked."

"I'll keep that in mind."

I continued to listen to music, debating whether or not to ask if Ash wanted to come to my inevitable birthday party. Great idea, if I wanted a pack fight in my dining room. Maybe I'd have two birthdays, if I couldn't get both packs at one. Sounded like a lot of work.

"Wanna go see if the Spanish teach's?" Ash asked out of the blue.

"Sure," I played along. "Feeling a little claustrophobic, anyways."

Our routine worked on the teacher yet again; who knows if he believed us or just gave up at this point. Still, we kept an eye out for any other adult patrolling the hall, in case they had a little bit more motivation than Mr. Sanger.

Only one turn left in our escape, and we ran into someone who recognized our tails right on the spot, the familiar shape of an oversized cello weighing down his back.

"Oh, hi, Simon," I greeted non-suspiciously. It was then I realized we hadn't spoken since he dropped me off at my house. Oof. "Are you leaving early?"

"Are you?" he asked. He wasn't looking at me but Ash, and I started to worry that (like all my friends so far) there was unspoken beef between the two, too. Ash didn't seem to care.

"We're on our way to see the Spanish teacher," I explained.

"Think you missed your turn."

"Gotta go to our lockers first."

"Isn't your locker in the junior halls?"

"Not mine," Ash interrupted with a lopsided grin. "You don't need our hall passes, do you?"

"No." Simon narrowed his eyes, immediately taking insult. It was nice, not being on the receiving end of that look for once. "I need to go practice. You two have fun with your... whatever."

"You, too," I reciprocated. "Hey, uh, my birthday's in a few weeks."

"I know."

"Would you be interested in, like--"

"I've gotta go. Text me," he curtly said and left without a formal *bye*.

After we got outside, Ash whistled loudly. "Who was that guy? Feel like I've seen him before in the distance, with that white hair and all. Wonder how he gets it colored like that."

"I think it's natural. And he's like that to everyone."

"Right. He got his bow up his rear or—"

“Where we going?” I interrupted.

Ash smiled. “Where ever, man. Anywhere outside of this hellhole.”

—

Anywhere outside of ‘this’ hellhole ended up being a pizza joint on Broadway. We grabbed a slice each, then headed to the bridge next to the skate park. Ash showed me some kick flips on his skateboard in between smokes.

Seb and Jo showed up. Seb looked out of breath, and Jo worked up from something.

“Bunch of Northside bitches got my number,” she complained to us immediately once the two got close.

Ash raised his eyebrow as he stood on his board.

“Called us trailer trash down by the river with their dumb toy dogs,” Jo continued. “Like we couldn’t hear ‘em. So I gave ‘em a piece of my mind.” She cracked her knuckles.

“Gonna get hot next full moon,” Seb contributed.

“All bite, no bark,” Ash shrugged. “We stick together, same as we always stuck it out.”

I thought about bringing up my birthday, but decided to leave before I got involved in the drama.

I got home before Sam got too suspicious, told her I stopped at the library for my poetry project then sequestered myself away in my room pretending to do homework. After dinner, I sent Simon a text.

For about ten minutes, I watched my phone screen for that little blue *Read* checkmark, hoping he hadn’t seen my message on his lock screen and ignored it. Finally, I saw him read it—instead of texting back, he called. I nearly dropped the phone.

“Sorry, I’m driving,” he said when I picked up. “Hard to text. Hope you don’t mind.”

“Definitely not,” I remarked. “I can wait until you get home or something.”

“Now’s fine. It’s a fifteen-minute drive home from school, and I want to focus on studying when I get home.”

“Have you been practicing at school this whole time?”

“Performing. School concert.” Simon went silent as I listened to the blinker of his car go off. Once he made his turn, he spoke again. “What did you want to ask me in the hall?”

“Well, my birthday’s coming, and I’m going to have a birthday party. Not this Saturday, but the next. My place.”

“You going to be hanging out with your friend?”

“Cheryl? Yeah.”

“Not her.”

“You mean Ash?” I idly toyed around with the combs on my dresser. “Probably not. I want to invite him, along with Ivy and Sebs and stuff, but I don’t think it’ll end well.”

“Why’s that?”

I debated between being artfully tact or spilling the beans. “Ash and his pack don’t like Cheryl and her pack. Specifically their alpha, Selene. I don’t know why.”

“Well, from the two seconds we spoke, I could’ve told you his anarchist vibe doesn’t quite match up with Cheryl’s... quieter, more mature pack behavior. Could be as simple as chemistry. I’ve seen packs tear at throats for less.”

“You know Ash, then?”

“No. Only Ivy. I don’t interact with people.”

“Does that make me not a person?” I joked. “You don’t sound a big fan of him, though.”

“You’re a person. There’s a difference—a person is smart. People are dumb.”

“Is that from one of your books, or an original quote?”

“Men in Black.” Simon sighed. “I’d have to get to know him more to like or dislike him. It’s poor etiquette to judge a book by its cover. Even if the cover is wearing a flannel jacket that came from Goodwill’s Goodwill.”

“Loaded, but alright,” I laughed. “Personally, I like his style. Anyways, I wanted to ask, since the other day, you and Cheryl’s pack got along really well, and I know that we haven’t really talked much since the bookstore, but maybe if you had time—“

“As much as I love long preambles, I’m trying to drive.”

“Can you come to my birthday?”

Simon took a sharp inhale. *“Well, I’ve got a lot of important things going on that weekend. Maybe I can see about penciling something in.”*

“If you’re that busy—“

“I’m kidding.”

“Fuck off.”

Simon laughed. It made him sound old. *“I’ll be there. Just tell me if you need anything. Like a soda or something. That sound good?”*

“Yeah,” I told him. *Abso-fucking-lutely.*