

MOONLESS WITHOUT YOU

By Kilroy AM

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Part 20: Escape

We didn't talk on the walk to Simon's car, hunched over with our hoods up to protect ourselves from the rain which had died down to a drizzle. When we did finally talk, sheltered in Simon's car, the conversation was two lines long.

"What's your address?" he asked

"Off Cosmogordon, on Darlene and Twelfth."

After that, we returned to awkward silence.

We pulled up to my block around ten or fifteen minutes later. Sam's car was in the driveway, so Simon parallel parked on the street, easily sliding his Prius in between a truck and a coupe. Further reasons to spring for a compact car.

"Thanks for the ride," I said. "See you around?"

"One sec," Simon replied, reaching for something in the back. "You said your birthday's coming up, right?"

"Yeah, almost two weeks. September 19th."

"Happy early birthday." He pulled out a shopping bag and offered it to me. I dug through it, finding a red, velvet-skinned journal, around pocket-sized.

"I don't know if you write or keep diaries at all," he said, "But this one's from my favorite stationary brand. If you don't, you can put to-do lists or dates in it."

"Thanks. I like it," I told him. It was too nice to use as a shopping list organizer.

"I should have asked for your favorite color, earlier."

I shook my head. "No, I meant it when I said I liked it. My favorite color's pink, so it's close enough."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Don't tell anyone on penalty of death."

"I'm good with secrets," Simon laughed.

"If that's true, then I won't need a diary, huh?" We both gave a chuckle that died down. Still admiring the gift, I paged through the ruled pages, finding the paper texture smooth and fine. It'd be a sin to stain it.

"You, um... you did pay for this, right?" I cautiously asked.

Simon became appalled. "Do I look like the type?"

"No, no, it's just that..." I tried to figure out how to turn my words coherent. "What would you do if you thought your friend stole something?"

Simon frowned. "Collin, did you steal something?"

"I didn't, I swear. It's about a friend of mine, not me." I ran my fingers through the side of my hair. "He and I went out somewhere, and I... think he took something without paying for it."

"Well, I wouldn't be his friend anymore if I caught him stealing."

“But what if he stole it for you?” I asked. “Because he knew you wanted it, but couldn’t afford it?”

“If this is still hypothetically about you—“

“No!” I groaned, frustrated. “Look, I tried to give it back, and he insisted I kept it. I don’t want to tell on him, though, because I don’t think that would help. But I don’t want to keep the thing, either.”

“So letting him get away *would* help?”

“No, I mean, I... guess, I don’t know him well enough.” Where was I going with this? “He told me he skips school because people expect him to, so maybe he stole for the same reason. We’re going to be hanging out again soon. What do you think I should do?”

“What does it matter what I think?” Still, Simon tightened and loosened his grip on the wheel as he thought. “If you really want to hang out with this person, and you won’t take my advice not to, I don’t know what to tell you. Maybe it’s a one-off, maybe he’s stupidly reckless. Maybe he’ll change, maybe he won’t. Most people don’t.”

“Alright...” I sighed deeply. “I should go.”

“Take care.”

Grabbing my school bag, I unbuckled and got out of the car. Before I left, I popped my head in to ask Simon one last thing. It took a swallow to get the words out.

“Oh, uh, are you shifting with anyone tomorrow?”

“Sorry, I’m busy,” he flatly responded. “Bye, Collin. Don’t forget your stuff.”

I “Yeah, bye again.”

“Don’t get into trouble over someone else’s problems.”

“No promises,” I smirked.

Instead of being charmed, Simon frowned.



Even though we wouldn’t be shifting until nightfall, I was up early Saturday morning, digging through my closet trying to figure out what to wear. They tell you all the time in high school, how you look isn’t life or death. Clearly advice from an adult that hasn’t been in school for the past two decades. I surveyed my room and made the sudden, gross realization I’d been piling laundry in the corner for the past week. My good jeans were in the laundry; maybe I’d wear them one last time before the wash.

What if Ash and his friends were appalled by the smell, though? Full moons pumped up everyone’s senses, and smelly wasn’t my go-to for first impressions. Could I squeeze in a load before he came to pick me up?

Maybe. Best to plan for a backup anyways.

Ripped jeans were in, so I grabbed an old pair originally slated for the dumpster that were fraying along the hems. A band shirt was the obvious choice for my outfit, but which? The Strokes? Kooks? It wasn’t just Ash that was going to be there; his friends were coming, too. The Who, then. Everyone liked The Who.

I brushed and flossed, then examined each pimple on my face, debating whether or not to pop a few. In the process, I examined my left ear, gingerly touching it where Simon had pointed out the scar. The roots of my hair were showing, too. Searching my room yet again, it

took digging through bedsheets and displacing my mattress before I found a beanie to hide both.

I took one last look at the white flower beside my bed—so close to bloom—and went downstairs to start a load. Sam was already up eating breakfast on the kitchen island, sorting through her mail. She used a single, extended claw to rip through envelopes like a letter opener. At her age, minute, controlled shifts must've been trivial. Even Amy had issues ripping open Amazon packaging without bending back a nail.

"You look well," she commented as I grabbed a bowl of Cheerios and found a spot in the mess. "Are you still meeting with your friends tonight?"

"Yeah, late afternoon," I told Sam. "They're picking me up."

"Remember what I said?" A long, extended rip followed her comment.

I rolled my eyes and talked with a mouth full of cereal. "You want to meet them first. I'll let you know when they come by." Hopefully, she'd put her claws away by then.

"Thank you, Collin. Eat plenty."

My phone buzzed. Ash was texting me. I quickly texted back with my free hand.

> Ash: still coming?

> Collin: yeah. sam wants to meet you.

> Ash: friend?

> Collin: legal guardian. sister's mom. wants you to come in, make sure we aren't starting a gang or organ theft racket

> Ash: lol sure

After I finished, I joined Amy in the living room, where she was knitting and watching rerun marathons on the TV. When I walked in, she was sighing heavily as she backtracked on a row. The frustration on her face cleared to a smile when she saw me.

"Still going out?" she asked.

"Yeah," I answered. "Ash'll be stopping in so Sam can run her little background check."

"I'm glad you worked that out. Will your friend be there, too?"

"You mean Simon?" I shook my head. "Said he was too busy to shift this weekend."

"Really?" My sister didn't hide her shock. "It's a full moon on a Saturday. Every high schooler must be chewing their leashes to get out tonight. If the clinic wasn't closed on weekends, it'd be a blood bath with my coworkers trying to get time off."

"Maybe he shifted already," I theorized. Or maybe he wasn't interested in shifting with me.

"Could be avoiding the crowd," Amy suggested. "From how you described your date yesterday, he seems the quiet type. If his pack is mostly family members, his elders might stick to safer times of the lunar cycle. Sam was like that when I was your age."

"It wasn't a date," I corrected about Simon. I'd shared most of the deets with Amy about yesterday, sans the heat towards the end. "Makes sense, though. He's not part of a pack at school."

"Some people naturally cling to the fringes, but not having your pack in class as a kid's tough. Especially in high school, when everyone's trying to fit in. He's cute, though."

"Yeah—I mean, about the social stuff!" My cheeks warmed. I understood the whole

packless part better than I wanted to, though.

"Maybe he's a vampire." Amy deviously smirked. "No known pack, reads old school literature, full of depthless knowledge, or at least more knowledge than your average sixteen to eighteen-year-old. Pale complexion, suspiciously nice car..."

"He's not a vampire, Amy. Were you spying on us?"

"Just through the curtains when he dropped you off. You didn't bring him in and introduce us, after all."

"I didn't want to scare him."

"Oh, you know Sam and I play nice with guests. But make sure you check for fangs next time you see him."

"It's a full moon, Amy. Half the population's got fangs."

She laughed, still tangling with her knitting. "Guess you'll have to wait to see him turn into a bat, then."

"Not funny."

For the rest of the morning and early afternoon, I paced around the house, enough to wear divots into the floorboard. Would Ash pick me up alone, or bring friends? What would they be like—would they be as chill as him, or test me, like Pierson's pack did? Did they bite? I wanted to text Ash about his pack's details, like how big it was, but that'd be desperate. What if he'd change his mind?

Five o'clock rolled around, and Ash finally texted me he was on his way. By my calculations (aka a quick Google search), sunset wouldn't be for two more hours. Enough time to get to know everyone, if we all met up beforehand.

He rolled up in a beat-up SUV, the kind that had a dent in the side door and a crooked bumper, and parked in the driveway. Hand-me-down for sure. I watched him through the living room window as he strolled to the door with lazy ease, his brown hair tussled and his red-gray flannel unbuttoned. Antsily, I waited for him to knock before swinging the door open.

"Hey," Ash said to me, his voice smoky and smooth.

"Hey," I responded. "Come in—Sam's just around the house. Shoes at the door."

Nodding, he complied, tossing his old leather boots by the door. I invited him to the living room couch as I fetched her. She was already on her way down the steps, having heard the door open well before I called her name. Politely, Ash stood up when he saw her, offering her an outreached hand.

"Ash," he introduced himself. "You must be Sam." At the end of his sentence, he added an extra wink.

"I am. Thanks for stopping in," Sam responded. "Co told me you'd be out with him for the night."

"Co, huh?" Ash said, turning towards me with a bemused grin. Why'd Sam have to call me that in front of a friend? "Yeah, we're just chilling the night at Devil's Ridge—"

"North Slopes," I hastily corrected him. "We, uh, already discussed how dangerous Devil's Ridge is after dark, so we changed our plans. Right?"

"Right, right." Ash had caught onto the lie quickly. "Sorry, that's what I meant. Names are

similar, y'know?"

"Yeah." There was skepticism in Sam's voice. "It's been a while since Co's shifted with someone his age, so I want to make sure everything's safe. I'm sure you and your pack are used to the terrain around town, but you know it's a parent's job to worry."

I flinched when she mentioned how long it'd been since I shifted with someone besides my own family. Again, Ash had that bemused look.

"Can we go now?" I whined. Sam frowned.

"Don't worry, he's in safe hands. Or paws, I should say," he joked. "We're pretty chill, y'know? Won't go far from town. All of us keep a tight eye out for each other, and I'll personally make sure Co stays in one piece. Swear on my tail."

"And you'll be back before dawn?"

"Course. We don't stay out late."

"Alright," Sam finally conceded. "Promise me you won't do anything stupid, okay, Collin J. Thomas?"

I nodded rapidly. "Promise, okay?"

"Don't make me ground you."

"Duh. See ya tomorrow?"

"Better." Finished with her veiled threat, she got over her hesitation and finally let us go. I laced my converses up fast as I could, Ash just wrapping his laces around his ankles and knotting them.