

1. Vanessa

There were the footsteps again. Shuffling down the quiet halls of the school, the halls that were empty the last five Friday nights we had broken in.

All five of us looked at the cafeteria door, left open when Jax had declared he was going to steal copies of the SATs. It was a stupid joke, the same one he pulled last week that had almost driven Ashley to tears. She slithered her way behind Parker in the corner this time, hiding her face behind her perfectly trimmed blond bangs, whispering back and forth with Parker as the two of them were wont to do.

I turned towards Brian. He rolled over, leaning on his cast and looking at me like he wanted me to draw him.

"Vaness," he whispered, breaking the silence.

I hated when he called me that and he knew it. I think he thought I hated it in a way that made it endearing, like I told him I hated it but secretly loved it. Oh God, did he think it was flirting? Like it was his nickname for me like kiddo or cupcake or-

"Forgot the A again? Man, what they say about you jocks is right," Jax whispered, the last upright chair still in his fingertips. Behind him lay a path of overturned chairs cluttering the aisle between the tables that Brian and I laid on.

"I wasn't talking to you," Brian whispered back, his eyes not leaving me.

"I know that. My name's not Vaness. Nobody's here is. That's like calling you Bria." Jax let out a soft cackle. "Bria. I think I'm going to start using that from now on."

"Do it and I'll kill you."

"You're gonna kill me? Is that a threat? Should I be worried for my safety?"

"Shhhh!" Parker held his finger up to his lips. "Do you want whoever that is to hear us? Do you want to get in trouble?"

“Sometimes.” Jax winked at me.

“Vaness,” Brian whispered again.

Ugh. “Can you not call me that? It’s Vanessa.”

Brian was looking at me, making sure I was serious. He looked crestfallen when he realized I was.

“Yeah. Sure.” He turned onto his back, and looked up at the ceiling. “If you look at the little black dots in the ceiling tiles close enough, they almost look like stars.”

I squinted at the drop ceiling that hung above us. It looked like cheap ceiling tile, not like any night sky I had ever seen.

“You think?” I asked. I never knew with him. At times he seemed like the most poetic boy I had ever met, like his silence was filled with beautiful thoughts inside that head. And sometimes I thought he was dumb. So dumb that the fact he could walk and talk at the same time was amazing.

“No.”

Brian started laughing, trying to stifle it after he started, but it was too late. I shot him a quick glance as I started laughing too. I was trying to keep my voice down. I knew I shouldn’t be laughing, but I couldn’t help it.

“Shut up! I’m not getting in trouble because you two can’t shut up! We aren’t supposed to be here!” Ashley yelled in a whisper.

She was right. The shuffling steps were getting closer. I turned my attention back towards the open doorway. Jax let the chair slowly fall from his fingertips. Ashley wasn’t one to speak out like that. She must have been itching to yell since we first heard the footsteps. She was the one who would get in the most trouble after all; she was the one with the key we used to sneak into the cafeteria each Friday.

The boys snuck in from their all-boys high school after all the teachers had gone. Ashley and I spent the time waiting in the bathroom. She tucked in her already tucked in shirt while I rolled up my skirt and tugged at my green knee-highs. And she talked while I rolled on my makeup. It seemed like in those ten minutes Ashley needed to spill out everything or else she would float away. She had a personality, didn't ask questions or ask me if I was sure what she was saying was ok. She became a different person. And then the boys would come and she would retreat right back into her shell.

I looked over at her now, hiding behind Parker like a scared puppy. Parker was nervously tightening the tie knot around his neck that didn't need tightening. I was sure if I kept watching him he would do it again in a few minutes. I looked up at Jax, practically standing over me. He was rocking back and forth on his feet, growing antsy. I knew he was getting tired of staying quiet.

I listened for the footsteps. They seemed to be gone. Everything was silent. I slowly sat up, looking out the open door. I wondered if we would have been able to hear the steps if the door was closed.

Jax stopped rocking and started walking towards the door. I watched him go, his unbuttoned short sleeve dress shirt billowing out behind me like a wrinkled sail. He hopped up the three steps that lead to the open doorway.

"Where are you going? You can't go out there!" Parker whispered, but Jax was already gone. He disappeared through the doorway and into long locker-lined hallway. I watched the empty doorway. I could feel Brian's gaze on me as I turned towards him. He shrugged. Figured.

Suddenly, Jax let out a scream from the hallway. I was the first one to move, leaping off the table, running towards the door. I turned just in time to see Parker and Ashley leaning into each other, both frozen in place.

I hopped the three steps in one fluid motion. I could feel the stitching of my saddle shoes start to give as I landed. I reached the door, about to explode into the hallway.

Jax appeared, suddenly, too quickly for me to stop. I crashed into him, sending us both flying into the hallway. I slid on top of him. I could feel his arms reaching out around me, grabbing me by the waist as we slowed to a stop against the lockers.

Brian was the first to reach us, pulling me off Jax as quickly as he could.

"Are you ok?" He asked. I looked down to Jax, still on the floor, not realizing Brian was asking me. Jax was laughing. He slapped the floor and stood up, laughing harder and harder. Brian put his arm around me and walked me back into the cafeteria. I shook it off, and he tried to put it back. I spun away from him.

"Jax, what the hell was that?"

Jax closed the cafeteria door behind himself this time. He was almost crying he was laughing so hard now.

"I only had a second before you barreled into me, but you should have seen the looks on Parker and Ashley's face. Oh man, it was classic." He doubled over in laughter. I shook my head. I should have known better.

Jax regrouped and walked down to the last chair that still stood upright. He picked it up over his head.

"Got out there just in time to see the doors close and a car pull away. There's nobody here now." He spiked the chair into the ground, sending it bouncing down the aisle.

"Who was it who left?" Parker asked.

"Does it matter? Everybody's gone."

"Are you sure?" Ashley asked.

“Look- you guys are going to go disappear on one of your little adventures together anyway. If you don’t trust me, you can check for yourself.”

“I think they’re usually too busy to look for anyone else.” Brian said, a smirk on his face.

“What should we really do tonight?” Parker asked immediately, an obvious attempt at changing the conversation.

I knew what Ashley was going to say before she said it. It was the same suggestion she made every Friday night. “Mall.” She said.

“Diner?” Parker asked, as if we weren’t going to end up there later anyway. That was usually around 9 or 10, when the groups of kids would be staring each other down in the parking lots, yelling how they were going to fight and driving away instead.

“Adventureland?” Brian offered.

“We should get some booze,” Jax countered. Now we were talking.

“You can get some?” I asked, maybe too quickly. The dust had barely settled on his question.

“Hell yeah I can get some.”

“I’ve never been drunk before. I’ve never even drank,” Ashley started.

“Perfect. It’ll be great. Parker?” Jax called out.

“I mean- I’ve got to drive--” Parker stammered.

“Even better, we’ve got a DD. I’ll grab you some chips or something. Maybe some Red Bulls,” Jax said, pulling out his phone.

“But... where would...we drink it?” Ashley asked, her voice growing smaller by the syllable.

Brian looked around the empty cafeteria. “Why not here?”

“Because there could be someone here still. I think we should leave.” Ashley offered.

"If we leave where are we going to drink? Do you have another idea?" Jax looked up from his phone. "You gonna invite us over?"

Ashley didn't say anything. She didn't need to. Of course she wouldn't have Jax over her house. None of us went over each other's houses. It didn't work that way with us.

"Do I need to drive us somewhere? Because you sure as hell are not borrowing my car." Parker stood up as he spoke, pulling the keys from his pocket.

"You don't trust me?" Jax countered.

"Not with my car, no."

"Man- that is cold. Bria would trust me with his car."

Brian shook his head. We all knew that Brian wouldn't trust Jax with anything. Not until he had won me over, and I wasn't making it easy on him. Jax had his qualities too. He could score booze at the moment, for one. And I liked the new nickname. It would lead to a fight later, but for the time being it was funny.

"Maybe I'll only get enough for me and the girls then. What do you ladies like?"

"You wouldn't do that." Brian's hesitation gave it away. He could see me, drinking alone with Jax, laughing at his stupid jokes, my hand on his shoulder. Of course that's what he was thinking about. We all knew it, and I was happy to let him think it.

"Sure I would. You're supposed to be my friend but you won't let me borrow your car that isn't even here."

"We're friends?" Brian asked.

Jax shrugged. It was a valid question. We hung out every Friday. By definition, that would seem to make us friends. But somehow it didn't. I knew that. I think we all did.

"Oh, come on, senior football player, you don't have any way to score alcohol for yourself? I thought that you were the cool guys with all the girls and the beer."

“Well, you’re the one with the booze, so you say, so I’m going to say that you’re the cool one.”

Jax nodded and smiled, sneaking a look at me, trying to make sure I took in the moment. I rolled my eyes. If letting them fight over me would get some good booze, some good music, and a night to actually remember then I would be their ragdoll or whatever the hell it was they wanted to fight over. I just wanted the drinks.

“Alright. Let me make a few calls. I’ll be back in a few.”

“Don’t let anyone know we’re down here,” Ashley said as he walked away.

“Let people know? That would just mean I’d need to pick up more stuff.”

“Does that mean we’re staying here? Even with someone out there?” Ashley asked as Jax disappeared towards the back door of the cafeteria and into the darkness that made the vending machines stand out like neon lights on the highway.

I hopped down to the ground. We were staying, and we needed music.

“I’ll go make sure everyone is gone. You can stay here.”

“Or I can come.” She said, a glint in her eyes, following Parker as he started walking towards the door.

I barely took a step before it happened. The quiet was shattered. The noise was so loud it pierced my ears. I wanted to scream. The sound dug into my eardrums, squeezing as it droned on. It was unrelenting. I froze in place. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t think. I just wanted the noise to stop.