BEFORE WE WERE INNOCENT

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To my own fierce friendships—some of which have lasted, some of which are lost. I think of you all often.

ONE

2018

I know it's her from the moment I hear the knock at my door. After ten years, with no warning, somehow, I still know.

Over the years, I've begun to think of Joni only in photographs—reassuringly flat shots of her golden arm slung over my shoulders, eyes knowing, grin wolfish, face tanned and inscrutable, maybe careless in the wrong light. Now that she is inches away, I remember the full animality of our friendship. The clamminess of her skin as we slept side by side, matching leg hairs dusting our thighs; the keloid scar just above her left temple; the viscous blood that would trickle from her nose often and without any warning, although usually when she was being her worst self, as if her body wanted so badly to remind us that she was human.

Joni's short hair is wet, slicked back, and her lips are swollen in the flickering porch light. I remember that she used to chew her bottom lip when she was feeling vulnerable, and I never mentioned it because it felt like a waste of this rare insight I'd

been given. Now I can see that her mouth looks painful, red raw where she's torn at it.

Joni doesn't attempt to hide her shock at my own appearance in return, and I stand rigidly as she takes me in—hair hanging limply to my waist, faded T-shirt thrown over flannel pajama shorts, pale skin that has seen less sun in five years than it used to in one summer. From afar, I've kept abreast of Joni's transformation from scrappy, magnetic teenager to overgroomed media rent-a-personality, but this is the first time she's seen me outside of my teenage state, probably seared as indelibly into her mind as it is my own (hip popped, pink tongue sticking out of lips coated in MAC's Rapturous).

"Jesus, Bess," she says finally. "You're a little fucking young to retire to the desert, aren't you?"

As Joni's openers go, it could have been a lot worse, but I still feel my perspective shift. I wonder if she can already sense the stifling flatness of life next to the Salton Sea—a wasteland or a kingdom, depending on how you ended up here.

"I need your help," Joni says next.

I think of the ghost between us. The three of us sticky with sweat, sunburned bodies loose from cheap beer as we danced to our favorite song underneath a palm leaf canopy, or lying on our stomachs on a hotel bed, dirty soles of our feet in the air, as Joni and I competed over who could shock Evangeline into laughing first. Then, inevitably—the unnatural angle of Ev's neck under the skinniest moon I've ever seen. Ten summers that have felt like ten seconds and ten lifetimes all at once.

When Joni takes a step toward me, I move away and she pretends not to notice, just like how I pretend not to notice that her hand is shaking as she plays with the button of her white linen shirt. I think about the last time we were together and the cruel things we both said, knowing they could never be undone. I think about everything I lost while Joni elevated our shared existence, upgrading her life like a company car. I

think about the end of that summer and feel the shame trickle down the back of my neck. There are ten thousand reasons why I shouldn't let Joni Le Bon inside my house tonight, but still, I take a step backward.

"Follow me," I say.

TWO

2018

I lead Joni into the kitchen, walking carefully around the saguaro cactus that shoots through the center of my house like a missile, causing the tiles around it to crack and cave. When I look down, I realize I'm wearing the humiliating pair of bunny slippers my ex-boyfriend Ivan gave me as a birthday present, and I wonder if I can slip them off before Joni notices.

"You are aware you have a strikingly phallic cactus," she says, more at ease now, "in the middle of your house."

"I had noticed," I say as I open the fridge. "Do you want some water?"

Joni frowns. "I'd prefer wine."

I rifle through the cupboard under the sink, coming up with a bottle of California chardonnay that Ivan must have bought before he decided I was unsalvageable. It has to be a shitty bottle for him to have left it behind, considering he unscrewed all the halogen lightbulbs on his way out.

I pour two glasses, watching as Joni takes in the surroundings—the slate gray blinds pulled down; the peeling shiplap walls and mismatched furniture; the stark print of sunflowers hanging on the wall above the TV, an image so bland that my brother once

asked if it came with the frame. If I see a flicker of approval on Joni's face, I think I know why—my home is the diametric opposite of the Calabasas McMansions we both grew up in, with their acute angles and surfaces designed so that you can never quite escape your own reflection, because why would you want to when you've spent thousands of dollars on tweakments to not only maintain but *elevate* your own face?

"You live here alone," Joni says.

"Does that surprise you?" I ask, leaning against the cabinet, waiting for her to tell me what she wants from me. Nine years ago, I spent my dead grandmother's inheritance on this cabin beneath the San Jacinto Mountains precisely because of its isolation—so that people from my past wouldn't just show up one day because they were "in the area."

"Are you off the grid?" she says instead. "Are you generating energy from compost or something?"

"Joni."

"I'm just trying to understand," she says.

"Why are you here?"

Joni nods and takes another sip of wine.

"It's my fiancée," she says. "Willa."

"Your fiancée," I repeat, even though I already know that "Willa" is Willa Bailey, semifamous influencer and activist—information I have gleaned from Joni's Instagram account, which I follow from an anonymous burner profile: @pizzancacti23. I can already picture Willa's face in my mind as clearly as I can any celebrity's—wide easy smile and thick, expressive brows that tend to cave inward when she talks, like the Sad Sam dog I kept stuffed down the side of my bed for the duration of my teenage years—but I would never give Joni the satisfaction of knowing it.

"Trouble in paradise?" I ask.

"I guess you could put it that way," Joni says carefully, and it

throws me. Is Joni careful now? Does she deliberate over each perfect word instead of letting them fly out of her mouth like a swarm of wasps?

I watch as she bites down on her lip, hard.

"A few weeks ago, Willa found out that I slept with someone else," she says after a long pause. "And, while I promised her it was a one-night thing, it wasn't exactly as simple as that …"

"You're still cheating on her," I say.

"I didn't say that," Joni snaps back like a snake before she catches herself, smiling a little.

"I may have been keeping a door open that I should have closed," she says, and I don't know why I'm surprised at how little she's changed.

"But, earlier tonight, Willa found a … photo that this person, Zoey, sent me, and I knew that it had to stop. So, I drove over to Zoey's apartment and I ended it. For real this time."

I stare at her, still unsure exactly what she wants from me. The Joni I knew always owned her choices unequivocally; *surely* she doesn't need me to tell her that she's a good person, that Willa probably doesn't deserve better, that she's only human despite all the praise and fervor and adulation claiming otherwise in the years since we were friends.

"The thing is, Willa thinks I came straight here," Joni says. "To give her some space."

"And why would she believe that?"

"Because every time I was with Zoey, Willa thought I was with you," Joni says levelly. "I told her we were planning something to mark the tenth anniversary. A celebration of Evangeline's life, since we obviously didn't make it to her funeral."

I swallow, wishing I hadn't asked, because what would a celebration of Ev's life even look like now? The only people we could invite would be other ghosts from our past—people Evangeline would also have been destined to outgrow and forget existed had she made it past her nineteenth birthday;

people who had never really known her anyway, not like we had.

"But, Bess. If Willa finds out I lied to her, it won't be good."

"It won't be good," I repeat. "Because … ?"

"*Because* I have the biggest month of my career coming up," Joni says. "*Because* everything I've ever done has been building toward this moment, my book release, and for someone who has built a career on radical honesty and authenticity, this secret *liaison* isn't exactly a great look for me."

Everything I've ever done. Funny how this book, this pinnacle of Joni's career, happens to land on the ten-year-anniversary summer of the incident that made her infamous, I think, fighting a swell of resentment. Her MO is self-help, only Joni never calls it that. In her posts, it's always *self-growth* and *personal development*, as if it's never too late to overhaul your disappointing personality.

"Not because you love Willa, though," I say. "What, did you just get bored of her?"

Joni glares at me.

"Bess, I don't want to go into the minutiae of my relationship with you right now, I'm just asking for your help."

For a split second, I am blindsided that, once again, Joni has built a life worth lying for to protect.

"You haven't actually told me what you want me to do," I say, even though by this point, I already know.

"If anyone asks, I left my house around six and got here at nine p.m.," Joni says slowly, scanning the kitchen and landing on the dirty pan still sitting on my stovetop, a telltale strand of anemic spaghetti hanging over the edge. "You made pasta, and then we sat in the kitchen drinking this bottle of wine and catching up about the past. It's three hours, Bess. What difference does it make to your life?"

I think of all the ways I could say no to Joni. I could tell her how horrified I am that she would ask me this—that after

ten years, I would be the person she canvasses to lie for her, even after everything we've been through. I could remind her of how badly she'd betrayed me the last time we saw each other, how much we'd wanted to hurt each other back then and how stunningly we succeeded. I could tell her about my life as it is now—how I've worked to tread lightly, to leave little trace of myself, to forget all the things we did and didn't do, constructing a new identity based on my actions rather than my instincts, and how Joni turning up and asking for this will disrupt everything all over again because I didn't leave space for anyone else in my life, but least of all her.

"Why did you do it?" I ask quietly, and Joni's eyes flash with fury.

"You're not listening to me," she says, speaking slowly as if I'm being willfully stupid. "I would have thought that you, more than anyone, wouldn't question me."

I swallow a rising lump at the back of my throat.

The problem is, Joni has always known who I am. And that's exactly why she's back.

THREE

2018

In the morning, Joni is poised and collected, already showered as she deftly works the imposing coffee machine my parents insisted on sending me, eyebrows groomed, smile impenetrable. I stand by the breakfast counter and, when she places a bowl of cereal in front of me, I try to appreciate being waited on, even if it is just dry shredded wheat from someone who has gone our entire adult lives without wanting to see me until now.

"Is everything okay today?" I ask.

"Okay?"

"With Willa," I say, eyeing her curiously.

"Oh." Joni tucks her dark hair behind her ear. "I'm not sure. I left my phone at home."

I stare at her for a moment longer. "You can use mine if you want."

Joni waves her hand at me and searches for something in the fridge.

"I have half-and-half under the sink," I say. "If that's what you're looking for."

Joni winces and closes the fridge.

"I'm sorry for asking you to help me after … everything," she says, widening her eyes at me. The mannerism is so odd, so decidedly un-Joni-like, that I instinctively narrow my own eyes back at her.

"How have you been, anyway?" I ask. "Apart from this."

"What a tragically *quotidian* question," Joni says as she studies the use-by date on a bottle of Advil before tossing it into the trash. "You realize I haven't seen you in nearly a decade?"

And whose fault is that? I think.

"Fine," I say. "How's your mom?"

"If you find out, do let me know," Joni says, without missing a beat. "Last I heard, she was in Dubai. She still doesn't believe in the internet."

As she's talking, I take a seat in the low fishing chair I keep set up for the rare occasions my own parents visit from wherever they are in the world. Their visits are generally fraught, and we all avoid referencing life before 2008, unless my brother, Steven, is there, because he has all the tact and confidence of a Southern California real estate agent despite working in software engineering, and he never seems to notice when my parents go pale or when my smile has been pasted on my face for so long that my lips are cracked. Every time they leave, they invariably try to replace every freestanding item in my home, and I invariably have to send it all back.

I open my laptop and sign in to the complaints interface of the dating app I moderate: 5oulm8s. It's 6:05 a.m., an hour before I'd usually start, but I want to make it clear to Joni that I'm not going to mold my entire day around her just because she's been back in my life for all of six hours. Now seems as good a time as any to start sifting through the darkest dregs of online behavior—the private interactions on a dating app notorious for its hookup culture.

"Is this your work uniform?" Joni asks. I look down at my gray leggings, already sagging at the knees, and the oversized

green 5oulm8s hoodie I received when I first joined the team nearly eight years ago.

"I am both wearing this and working, yes …"

"I mean, your whole vibe," Joni says. "This is a deliberate choice?"

"I work from home," I snap. "And you were hardly looking like Gisele yourself last night."

Joni grins at me, her mouth as wide and knowing as it was the day I met her. I feel a small sense of relief that the Joni I once knew is still in there somewhere, underneath all that taut and glossy skin and motivational messaging, until I wonder whether she is hoping for the same, if she will try to coax out the old Bess, the one I've taught to yield and be good and expect little.

"We were always so envious of your hair," Joni says now, the subtext being that nobody would be envious of anything about me right now. As she talks, she reaches out and takes a clump of my hair in her hands, the split ends nearly translucent in the morning sunlight.

"It's just dead skin, Joni," I say, and Joni raises her eyebrows slightly, as if someone else were here to log her dissatisfaction with my answer.

"Have you spoken to Theo recently?" she asks casually.

"Not for years," I say. Joni nods like she had expected that answer, which begs the question of why she asked it in the first place.

"So, what's Zoey like?" I ask.

"Touché," Joni says, and it feels like it's one for one now, an eye for an eye, and maybe we can stop poking each other to find the places we're still tender.

"Joni, as thrilling as it has been to see you, I do actually need to start work," I say.

"What do you do?"

"I'm a moderator for 5oulm8s. The dating app."

I brace myself for Joni to bring up the gaping divergence

between my current job and my childhood dream of moving to New York and becoming the next Patti Smith, but she just runs the back of her hand across her lips.

"Soul mates," she repeats. "You know, I tell my followers not to be bound by concepts like *soul mates* or *destiny*. Those labels are just designed to imprison you, to make you feel so grateful you never stop to question anything."

"Hmmm," I say, thinking of the videos I've watched of the masses of followers who show up at Joni's speaking engagements—women who fill sprawling ballrooms and marquees in places like Palos Verdes and Great Neck carrying Le Bon Babes–branded tote bags as they work up the courage to leave their husbands and take what they truly deserve, and who shout back her snappy catchphrases with the unselfconscious abandon of the newly converted. And it has become something of a cult—Joni has one of the top weekly podcasts in the country, where she coaches anonymous callers through a crisis; a YouTube channel on which she interviews other women in media about their tool kits for emotional resilience; and a further side hustle as a keynote speaker. She is also a regular on the daytime TV circuit, doling out advice on bouncing back from adversity, seemingly working double time after any sort of national crisis. She's worked ferociously to use what happened to us to her advantage, and her success is further proof of her dogma—the idea that through determination and sheer grit alone you can all but guarantee your own happiness.

"I want someone to be with me because they wake up each morning and *choose* me," Joni continues. "Not because of some ridiculous myth that we found each other because we were destined to do so, as if to drift apart would then amount to some massive universal failure as well as a personal one."

"*From Blocked to Unlocked*," I say, quoting the title of her book, mostly to shut her up. "*Choose your way to happiness*."

Joni glances at me quickly, a small smile appearing on her face.

"So you keep track of my career," she says.

"You're hard to miss," I say. "Is that a regular slot on *The Morning Hour*, or do they just cart you out after a national tragedy to offer up pithy platitudes and toxic positivity?"

"You may well laugh, but those pithy platitudes paid off my mortgage," Joni says. "Or, I should say, those national tragedies did."

"Did you ever do a test to find out if you're an actual psychopath?" I ask.

"I asked my therapist once."

"And what did they say?"

"She said I probably wasn't," Joni says. "Or she might have said possibly."

"That's a big difference," I say.

Joni grins at me.

"Okay, Joni," I say. "I have to focus on work now."

"I haven't seen you in years, and you can't even have breakfast with me?"

"Unfortunately, I don't have access to the same mine of refrigerator magnet quotes you seem to have plundered," I say instead, realizing as I do how easy it is to fall back into our old rhythm, the well-rehearsed patter of saying a lot without saying anything at all. "So I had to find an actual job."

Joni is quiet for a moment.

"I know it's weird, me turning up here after however long, but doesn't it mean something that, after all this time, you're the person I came to first?"

"Maybe your new friends are just worse liars than I am," I say.

"I came here because there isn't anyone else in the world I trust as much as I trust you," Joni says softly.

I swallow, keeping my eyes trained on the laptop even as

my heart jumps in my chest at her words. *A throwback,* I tell myself. A former version of myself still desperate to be needed by sixteen-year-old Joni with her fierce wit and her monogrammed lime green iPod Nano.

"And maybe something good can come out of this whole shit show," she says.

I raise my eyebrows at her.

"You," she says as she slips her oversized Gucci sunglasses over her eyes. "You and me."

I watch as she finally moves across the room to leave, unpredictable as ever. When she reaches the door, Joni turns back around to appraise me one final time.

"It's the difference of a matter of hours. Can you do it for me, Bess?"

As she's talking, I think I see a flash of the Joni I once believed existed underneath her jagged confidence—my loyal, vulnerable friend who would always strike first but only ever to protect us. The one who would have done anything for me, and who once proved it in the worst possible way.

And, after a moment, I nod.

FOUR

2018

Once Joni has left, I throw myself into the day's work, tearing through the first few complaints quickly. With each case, I have the option of only three responses—ignore, block, or warn. There is a definitive list of circumstances and behaviors that warrant an instant block (unsolicited nudes, transphobia or any hate speech, soliciting and general phishing for ca$h), and these are the holy grail of cases as they take up the least time, leaving little room for interpretation. Complaints that result in a warning are generally more nuanced situations that could be interpreted in various ways, and they can take a little longer to unpack. I open a complaint where a female user has accused a male user of standing her up at their arranged meeting spot, and I skim through their messages, the last of which was an exchange of phone numbers a few days earlier. In this case, since the users were no longer interacting within the app, there's only one action I can take. I click *ignore* and continue to the next complaint. I swipe through some more cases, blocking a user five thousand miles away for unleashing a flurry of misogynistic language that would have once made me flinch but now registers only as being blessedly simple to resolve. *Block*. Then another dick pic sent after a user didn't