

# LOVE Has NO Boundaries



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# BRANDON'S LAUGHTER Ellen Holiday

# Love Has No Boundaries

*An M/M Romance series*

## BRANDON'S LAUGHTER

By Ellen Holiday

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

### What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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# BRANDON'S LAUGHTER

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## Photo Description

Black-and-white photo of two men laughing together; one is leaning on the other's shoulder.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*We have known each other nearly all our lives. We grew up in the same mid-sized conservative town in the south, but it took music and distance to bring us from acquaintances to this moment. How did we get here from there?*

*Sincerely,*

*Brandilyn*

## Story Info

**Genre:** historical

**Tags:** musicians, military, sweet no sex, coming of age, reunited, young adult characters, angst

**Word count:** 16,563

*Author's Note*

Some minor liberties have been taken with historical timelines in this piece. Hopefully they will not detract from your enjoyment of the story.

# BRANDON'S LAUGHTER

By **Ellen Holiday**

I remember hearing it from the time we were children. Babies, even—our birthdays were just a few weeks apart, and to hear my mom tell it, she and Mrs. Burns next door used to take walks in the park together, pushing their strollers or toting their bundles of joy on their chests like good mamas. I sang, she tells me, and Brandon just laughed, a burble of infectious baby laughter that made old men playing chess and teenagers having a smoke near the fence turn and laugh in return.

And when we were six and seven, and we played games of tag across the yard or dragged our scooters out to the edge of town to tear across the pavement, he'd always laugh the whole way, laugh and win, and I'd sit there afterward with a skinned knee, glaring at him and wondering why it was that he didn't take anything serious.

Brandon used to change the rules midway. When we were tearing for the fence, and I reached it first, he'd say "and back" as he came up behind me, barely touching it, and race back the other way. Of course he won when he did stuff like that, but he'd just laugh and laugh in triumph and enjoyment. I got sore about it. Mom would say "Richie, for Pete's sake, it's just a game," and all I knew was that Brandon was a terrible person who was an awful cheater and a liar and he didn't even care that he was a terrible person, and nobody else cared either 'cause when he laughed everyone else would laugh too. But I glowered and I demanded that wrongs be righted—and everyone just told me not to take it so seriously.

Not surprising I shook myself free of Brandon as soon as we were old enough. Middle school was the way to do that. Everyone was separating, cracking apart like ice under a stream of warm water, into their own little groups. By then I was a musician. I had picked up my dad's old guitar at the age of seven and been picking at it ever since. A few chords I needed to be

taught, and the rest just fell into place. After school you could usually find me, Eddie, Dara, and a couple of the others out on the back stoop, scaring off the squirrels with a little country jam. Dara had a sweet voice and liked to bang out a rhythm on her knees. Eddie wrote lyrics about dusty roads and the moon, and I set 'em to music. Dara and I worked out harmonies, and we had our own little concert to get us geared up for the homework we still had to do.

Brandon was an athlete. He played baseball after school, on the other side of the yard. He slammed that ball farther than I'd ever seen. And every time he rounded the bases and came back on home, he laughed. Laughter that echoed, caught the sunlight like the wing of a bird, scattered all around us in iridescent fragments. Laughter I could see and feel deep in the heart of me. It got in the way of our songs, and I used to break off, my chords useless against the resonant everywhere-ness of all that laughter.

Dara called me on it. "You gotta stop cuttin' off every time Brandon laughs, or we're never gonna be ready for the talent show."

"He's gotta stop laughing," I said. "Sounds like a hyena."

"He doesn't," said Eddie. "It's not even that loud. Why you care so much, Richie?"

"I don't care. It annoys me." As far as I knew that was the truth. I pouted at Eddie defiantly and took a loud strum of the guitar to cut off the conversation. "C'mon, one more time, from the top of the second verse. *In the wind*—"

We were damn proud of that song. It was a mutual writing effort, everyone giving their little bits of lyrics and chord changes and vocalizations, and in the end we were sure it would propel us straight to fame and fortune. Richie, Dara, and Eddie—someday we would think of a decent name for our group. For now we were going with R.E.D., because of our initials. Didn't matter if you pronounced it RED or R-E-D. Half the time we went one way, half the time we went another.

The announcer at the middle school talent show pronounced it R-E-D. We went on after the majorette and before that weird girl who could juggle beanbags while standing on one foot. Dara, Eddie, and me, shuffling onto the



stage, Dara with her single cymbal, Eddie holding the microphone for both of us and me on the guitar with my pick. We sang our little hearts out, and just after that part where we did the three-part harmony, singing about the way our hearts filled up like a river and dried out again into sand, I swear you could have heard a pin drop in that auditorium.

Boy, we were right about fame and fortune, or at least the middle school version of it. At fourteen years and three days, my life was made. The way people clapped and cheered. The way the teachers came up afterward to tell me they had no idea I was that talented. I shuffled my feet and went aw-shucks to it all, but inside I was doin' a jig. Felt so good. Got my first hit of the fame monster then and God, was I addicted. And the best of it hadn't even happened yet.

The best of it was the weekend after the talent show, Brandon hanging over the fence that separated our yards. "Hey," he said.

"Hey." I still wasn't liking him much. Nothing but a stranger with an annoying laugh. The races of our childhood weren't pleasant memories, and they were a long time ago.

"I liked your song," he said. There was something about the way he was peering at me, like he was curious, like I was some kind of weird animal. I felt caged in, sized up. I muttered out a thanks.

"I mean, I thought it was really good. I think you're talented. I hear guitar playing some days but I never thought it was you, I thought it was your dad."

"Oh." What did he want? "Well, it's me."

"Do you write them, too?" he asked after a moment. "The songs?"

"We write 'em together. The band and I." And now I felt a flare-up of pleasure. They were the band. Even though we were just a cymbal (sometimes a drum set, when we practiced at Dara's place) and a guitar. Now, that felt good no matter who I was telling it to.

"That's cool," Brandon said. "I can't play anything. Dad says I can't carry a tune in a bucket."

“You play baseball,” I pointed out.

“Yeah, not the same kind of play, though.”

“No,” I agreed, “not quite the same kind—Why are you talking to me?” It just came out, spitting itself out of my mouth like an unruly cough. “We don’t talk.”

“Told you.” Brandon eased upward onto the fence. I could see his whole body now, line of his arm, cock of his hip against the picket. He was wearing a clean white T-shirt that ought to have been dirty from the way he seemed to shinny up the fence. “I liked the song. I liked your voice.”

“And I said thank you.” This was getting weird.

“Anything wrong with me talkin’ to you?”

I fidgeted. “I don’t know you very well.”

“You used to.” He grinned and with all those white teeth bared I could hear his laugh without him even letting it loose. “We used to be friends.”

“We were kids.” I was fourteen saying it, as far from a kid as I could imagine at the time. The gulf that separated then and now seemed a universe wide. “And you were...”

His eyebrows shot up. “I was what?”

“Nothing.” I looked at my feet.

“C’mon, Richie, what?”

“You were kind of a jerk.”

“I was?” He leaped over the fence then, and a flash of tight stomach flesh passed before my eyes when I looked up in surprise. His T-shirt was riding up around his chest and something hot sunk in my gut to a place I wasn’t expecting. I took in a breath. “I’m sorry. I remember you were fun.”

“Yeah, ’cause you got your laughs messing with me.”

“Well, I’m sorry.” He walked toward me. Cornered in my own yard, I looked to and fro for a place to hide. “I didn’t mean to make you sore at me, honest.”

What was I supposed to do with that? His eyes, little brown buttons, were grabbing mine. “S okay.”

“So friends, then?”

“Whatever,” I said, and his face fell. I’d never seen him that disappointed, and it was my fault. I extended a hand. “Sure, then. Friends.”

His hand fell into mine, warm and big, the hand of a jock. “Cool.” And he smiled full and bright again. “So do you have other songs you wrote? I wanna hear them.”

“They’re no big deal,” I protested, but he kept needling at me until I was heading inside again to grab my guitar. That day I sat on the back porch ’til night had fallen and the mosquitoes were out, just playing songs, Brandon Burns on the steps listening raptly.

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Things changed after that. Brandon said hi in the halls. He came to listen to R.E.D. jam. Eddie gave him odd looks at first, but Dara smiled as sweetly as she could and started wearing more skirts to school. I don’t think Brandon ever noticed. His eyes were on me every time. I could feel them, steady and admiring. It was a good feeling, to have Brandon think I was so cool, especially since the whole world seemed to think he was so cool.

And as high school wore away and he popped over the fence a few times a week to hang out and talk, I guess I grew to admire him too. He had a sense of humor that was always pulling a breezy comment from the most serious of subjects. And I still couldn’t help being serious about too much: tests, and the band, and my parents asking me too often if I had a girlfriend. (It was a pain. They kept asking about Dara, even though it was obvious Dara only had eyes for Brandon. Even when we were eating dinner together, along with Eddie, after a practice, Dara would go on and on about how Brandon had hit two

home runs the last game, and Mom would nod and smile and look vaguely distressed.)

Brandon saw me practice, so I started going to baseball games when I could. It was only fair. But at sixteen, I felt like a hopeless dummy sitting there in the stands by myself, along with all the parents, with the kids all clustered along the fence cheering. I asked Dara if she wanted to go with me, a few times, but she was always going with her girlfriends. Besides, the way she came up to Brandon between innings, offering him water and a towel, made me feel kind of sick to my stomach.

Watching Brandon stretch his glove high in the air, watching his feet leave the ground like he was some kind of rocket ship—it made me feel things I really didn't want the other kids to know about. Or see. Because they'd be able to see it, if they got close enough.

We knew about queers, of course, in a nebulous sort of way. I didn't know any, and I was pretty convinced that there weren't any in our town. We didn't know much about how it worked, except for it was something pretty bad and basically turned a boy into a girl. There was also something about bath houses that we heard people grumble about. But as far as I knew, they were some kind of other species. I didn't ever expect it to touch my life.

Still, I was a teenager, and I did stuff, in the shower or late at night, and when I did stuff there were tight muscles and long legs in my mind, not girls' breasts or curvy backsides. Afterward, I felt weird and guilty, but nobody ever knew or caught me, so it didn't matter in real life. What I thought about in private was my business.

Dara wheedled Brandon into going out with her, and they were an item for a little while, but they broke up pretty fast, and Brandon stopped coming to practices. It hurt, not to have him there, but I got it. Still, Dara was changing, too. She was starting to wear all kinds of weird makeup and listen to pop music on the radio, and somehow she ended up like a ghost—fading away from the band one absence or excuse at a time, sometimes showing up but not singing, sometimes thumping on a drumbeat absently like she didn't much

care what song we were practicing. By the time we were juniors, R.E.D. had winnowed itself down to R.E.

Eddie was pretty cool with it. He liked the harmonizing, and he'd started taking voice lessons. For a while there was no band, because he got the lead in the school musical and had to practice every day after school. Those afternoons I would just watch the baseball team practice, or head home with my guitar and write songs into the night. Songs about being alone, and not knowing what I wanted to do with my life, or who I wanted to be with.

"That's a depressing song," Brandon said when I finished playing one for him. "You really don't have any idea what you want to do?"

"You do?" The thought was alien to me. I couldn't imagine being that together.

"I'm going into the army."

The answer was as ready as it was shocking. Brandon's dad had fought in Korea, so it made sense, but this wasn't a time to think about joining the army. Not with what was going on in Vietnam. My heart clenched with fear, but I wasn't going to show it.

"That's okay," I said dismissively, picking at the strings of my guitar, trying to look idle, unconcerned.

"Yeah." If Brandon picked up on my sudden nerves, he didn't show it. "But you should go to Nashville. Get famous."

I laughed. "Yeah, that's right. I'll get famous." As good as we were, it was always about playing here and there at clubs when we got old enough to do that. We weren't gonna end up on the radio.

"I mean it." Brandon leaned in. It was dark out, and the porch light was a dim, blinking bulb above us. When he towered over me, hunching over so I could look up and meet his eyes, I was thrown into shadow. My heart skipped, then danced an odd, quickened two-step. "You're good, Richie. You've always been so good."

Dollars and Opry engagements flew past my mind. I couldn't help it. It was a tempting fantasy.

"See?" He grinned. "You're thinking about it."

Whatever expression I'd let creep onto my face, I wiped it out in a second and scowled. "And you're laughing at me."

"I'm not." But the giggles were threatening to escape his mouth even so.

I got up. The guitar made a terrifying creaking sound as I swung it downward and held it loosely by its neck. For a moment I thought I'd broken it, and looked down. It was still in one piece. When I looked up again, I was an inch from Brandon's face.

Something happened, something I couldn't name. It happened in less than a breath, just with Brandon's eyes on me and my eyes on him in the dull light. Something jumped between us and stood there, throbbing like a beating heart, invisible, but I couldn't rid it from my vision. My whole head started ringing with the reverberations from its every beat.

"Look," I said, and I could barely get the words out. "I take things too seriously. So if you tell me I've got what it takes, I'm gonna believe you, and I'm gonna try, and I'm gonna fail, and then you can laugh at me even more. Don't be that jerk you used to be. Don't do that to me."

He sighed. Though I wouldn't have thought it possible, he inched a little closer. I could barely see his features, just a pink, out-of-focus stretch of flesh with hazy eyes and lips somewhere.

"I told you," he said, "I'm not laughing."

The hazy pink of his eyelids drooped. I heard myself swallow.

Then cicadas were buzzing and the porch light fizzled out entirely, and I was standing so still I couldn't bear it and started to tremble. It took time for the realization to work its way to my brain that Brandon had closed the distance between us and sealed his lips on mine, that he was kissing me, and that I was letting him. With the realization came a sudden flare of sensation

dropping down into my gut and through to my toes. I thought I was being set on fire.

It was over in a moment. Brandon gazed at me, eyes half lidded, mouth curled into the barest smile. The kind that didn't even hint of laughter.

I searched for words. But Brandon already had them.

"Nobody has to know," he said.

It was all I needed to hear. I wanted to feel that plunge of heat, the one that was still making my knees shake, one more time. When I reached out to pull him in by the back of the neck, when his lips hit mine again, there it went, crimson washing in front of my closed eyes and prickles making everything on my body that could stand on end do just that. And over and over it returned, when his mouth moved on mine, when I opened my mouth and he licked along the shape of my lips. When he touched his tongue to mine, brief contact though it was, I heard myself make a noise I'd never made before in my life. He had grabbed my hand on the neck of the guitar, covered it with his own. The strings made some strangled noise and then fell silent.

I don't know how long we stood out there, just kissing and kissing. It felt like forever. And when it stopped, it was way too soon.

"Richie," he said urgently, and repeated himself: "Nobody has to know."

I nodded. My lips were tingling too hard to let sound through.

"I should go back," he said, nudging his head toward the fence between our houses.

Another stupid nod from me.

"Good night," he said.

He was off the staircase before I managed to mumble a hoarse "good night" back.

The minute he was gone, I made a break for my bedroom. My head was swirling and I didn't want to talk to anybody. I had too much on my mind, and too much tension in my body.

God, I slept so well that night.

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Brandon still played baseball. He still got girlfriends. Hell, I had one for a few months toward the end of junior year. And Eddie finished his play, and came back to the band, for a while. But things were different. Eddie had fallen in love with theater. He wanted to study singing, seriously. He wanted to do opera, he said. And some of those new musicals by some guy from London. I was on my own when I played my guitar, so I did it mostly in my own backyard, or on the bridge over the creek, or somewhere dark and isolated where nobody could ever find us.

Because it was always me and Brandon. He listened to every iteration, every new verse and chorus I worked out. He suggested better rhymes. And then we kissed. And kissed and kissed and kissed some more, and pressed our bodies close together on the blanket or the porch steps, or in the back of Dad's pickup when he let me take it out. His hands were warm and wandering under my shirt, on the bare skin of my back. Our hips moved together, like they were their own animals. I had to pull back so I wouldn't come in my pants most nights. Sometimes I just did. Sometimes I brought another pair of boxers with me. Sometimes I just hoped nobody would notice.

Like Brandon said, nobody had to know a thing. We just did what we did. It didn't mean anything. We weren't queers, we were just... doing things. As friends. It was okay. We liked it, so what did it matter why?

In the meantime, I found a guitar teacher in town and started to look toward college. Maybe I could study music. Maybe I had a shot at Nashville after all. At least I could try. And then I could come back here if I messed up, and Dad would have me join the family business and it'd be all okay. Optimism had started to brighten all my days. I saw a future for myself for the first time.

Mom and Dad asked me if there was a girl once or twice. I said no. They looked at each other knowingly and told me to take good care of her. I rolled



my eyes and went on doing whatever I was doing. They could think what they wanted. I was just happy.

Brandon had a girlfriend when senior prom time came around. Elaine was pretty, with ringlets of brown hair and a bright smile, and it was never in doubt that they'd go to the prom together. I thought maybe I wouldn't go at all, but Brandon convinced me, told me it was the only senior prom I'd ever have. I'd rather have been playing on the stage than dancing on the floor, but I asked Dara to go with me and she said sure, why not.

So off we went to the school gym, plastered with ribbons and balloons as it was, Dara in a green dress that looked good with her dark hair and me in a tuxedo that itched. We didn't hang out that much anymore. I didn't know what to talk to her about. I drove in silence the whole way.

Once we got there, Dara immediately splintered off into a group of girlfriends. They were clucking and gossiping away, and I ended up standing against the wall, watching the goings-on, with no date to dance with and no appetite for the punch. I was just existing, just breathing against the backdrop, as much a piece of furniture as any of the folding chairs that sat abandoned, or occupied by similarly awkward types, around the corners of the room.

Not Brandon. He and Elaine made a splash from the minute they walked in, arm in arm like some sort of royal couple, and his teammates immediately surrounded them, their dates in tow, creating a wide circle of chatting that turned quickly into a dance circle in the middle of the floor. They all clapped their hands together and moved in time to the music in an effortless wiggle that I was sure would look stupid on my own body. Taffeta shimmered and tuxedo jackets were thrown over shoulders as the guys got sweaty. Eventually, one by one, they retired to the side to leave their jackets on the folding chairs. I was surprised nobody left one on top of my head. That was how useless and inanimate I felt.

I closed my eyes and tried to tune out the music. There was a song here, something about being the musical chair, watching the kids go round and round and never settling down on me. I lined up rhymes and put words in front

of words, starting to nod my head to my own beat. Maybe the night wasn't a total waste after all.

"Ugh," Dara said in my ear, "that is so disgusting."

My eyes flew open, and I glanced at her before following her gaze. She was staring at Brandon and Elaine, who had moved into a slow dance in each other's arms. Elaine was gazing up raptly at Brandon, who was smiling down at her, saying something funny that made her laugh. They were as handsome a couple as I could imagine, and Dara staring at them with such animosity only meant one thing.

"You still like him?"

"I never stopped liking him," she said, scowling. "You know, in three months of dating he never even kissed me. How much do you suppose he kisses that girl? I wonder if they've done it. I know I've seen him making out with her after games."

I froze. Of course Brandon and Elaine would make out. They were boyfriend and girlfriend. But having it pointed out to me felt weird and uncomfortable, like I'd been splattered with mud. I wanted to go hose myself down.

"I wonder how his lips feel," she said. "I bet he's a really good kisser."

And now it was guilt that kept me frozen. I knew the answer to that question. Yes, he was. The best. But what we did was just for fun, because it felt good. It didn't mean something the way a boy and a girl did. I shouldn't be feeling anything. Brandon was my friend. I should be thinking about a girlfriend too, especially since I was going to college soon. I'd have to get married someday, right?

I turned to her. "You know," I said, trying to be clever, "you could make me jealous if you talk like—"

But then Dara took in a breath and covered her hand with her mouth. I looked over and had to clench a fist at my side to keep from crying out. There they were, kissing. Right on the dance floor. Brandon's lips on hers the way

they had been on mine, with the same tenderness. Her body arching toward his with the same heat I had felt so many times. His body stayed stiff. I knew his body better than that. It moved, arched, too, when it wanted more.

“Lucky,” Dara muttered.

“Yeah,” I might have said, and turned away. My stomach was lurching. She laid a hand on my arm. “Richie?”

“Um.” I cleared my throat. “Um, you want to dance?”

“We might as well,” she said, noncommittal.

I put my arms around her, led her onto the dance floor, strategically placing Brandon out of her line of sight. I could see him, though. Odd angle, but I was pretty sure they were still kissing. I didn't want to watch, and I pulled Dara closer, lowered my head toward hers.

“You're not gonna try to kiss me, are you?” Dara said.

“What? No.”

“I guess it would be okay,” she went on. “I mean, we don't have anyone else.”

I shook my head. “I don't want to do that. It'd be weird.”

“It's no big deal, it's only a kiss.”

“I thought you didn't want to.” I lifted my head to scowl at her.

On the way, my eyes met Brandon's. Another shot of adrenalin raced through me, and Brandon broke his kiss with Elaine, staring at me, his lips red stained with her lipstick.

I never saw Dara coming. For the instant when she first touched my mouth, I froze, eyes closing, and then I came back to myself and pushed her away. God, no. Just... *no*. I sought Brandon's gaze again, and caught it a moment before he grabbed Elaine by the shoulders and wheeled her around. The two of them retreated from the dance floor, and I watched them make their way through the throng and toward the door.

Dara stared at me like I was crazy. “What’s wrong with you?”

“I don’t,” I said, and nodded over her shoulder. “They’re gone.”

She turned, spinning out of my arms, and stomped her foot in frustration. The dance was spoiled. I wanted to tear off my tuxedo jacket and run home full tilt. This whole prom had been a mistake.

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Somehow we made it through the rest of the night, and these are the times I guess when friendship really helps... Dara and I kept assuring each other that we weren’t going to let them ruin our night, that we could have just as good a time as friends, and there was nothing wrong with that. By the end of the night, we managed to dance together a few more times, but there was no more kissing—just talking, and maybe a little laughter, even if neither of us felt much like laughing.

I dropped her off and headed home. Mom and Dad were still up. They wanted to hear all about it. “It was fine,” I told them, “and I’m really tired. Can I tell you in the morning?”

Thank God they said yes. I’d have ’til the morning to come up with a half-decent lie.

Taking off my jacket and tie, shirt, and pants felt like a labor and a relief all at once. As they fell from my body, I felt the weight of too much knowledge, too much of the outside world melting off me. Here, in my own room, in my plaid pajama bottoms and a sleeveless white shirt, I was free, myself. The guy I knew I was, the guy who only came out when I was playing my guitar or talking with Brandon somewhere where nobody could see us. But just removing the layers was exhausting, and the knowledge that in the morning I’d have to put them back on—not the tuxedo of course but the other layers, the ones that hid who I was—made my eyelids droop and my heart sink into my stomach. Why couldn’t the rest of the world just leave me alone? Why couldn’t I hide here, in my own room, totally myself, forever?

Answer number one—because someone was throwing pebbles at my window.

One hit with a loud clunk, the others missed and fell in a scattering sound along the siding. I ran to the window and opened it. No doubt who it was. "Shh," I hissed, scowling down at Brandon. "My parents will hear."

He dropped the pebble in his hand and lifted his other to beckon at me.

I didn't want to go. The image of him and Elaine kissing was still swimming in a sick circle around my brain. To get close to him, to feel the magnetism, would be like being turned upsidedown. But his eyes were steady as he kept on beckoning, and he said something in a stage whisper that I could barely hear. In the end, I was going to have to go down to him, or he wouldn't go away.

I eased through my window onto the eave over the porch then dropped down onto the wooden planks, landing quietly on the balls of my bare feet. A quick look behind me, to make sure nobody was watching from inside, and I hurried down the steps onto the cool grass. Brandon stood still, a warm presence, drawing me in like a moth against a lantern. I had to force myself to stop a few feet away, or I would have gone right into his arms.

From this distance I could see the distress on his face. His lips were drawn tight and his cheeks looked sunken in, more than usual, as though he'd lost ten pounds in a single night. "Richie," he said, and reached out, then forced his hand back.

I had more control, or more fear. One of the two. "What?" I said, carefully, after biting down *Why are you home? Or, shouldn't you be at a hotel somewhere with Elaine?*

"I was at a hotel," he said, "with Elaine."

Damn him for reading my mind.

"She wanted me to," he said, and I didn't need to ask what she wanted him to do. "I was supposed to."

"Did you?" I asked. My whisper ached like the scratch of chalk against a blackboard.

"I tried," he said. "I did my best, I got—she got me to—" He shook his head. "I was thinking of you."

My heart swam with fear and joy and sick anticipation. "You did it with her and you were thinking of me? That's—that's not fair."

"I didn't," he said. "I couldn't. Richie, I—"

In another minute he was stepping forward, sliding his arms around me, and his mouth was on mine in a heartbeat, hard and insistent. That mouth, God, I'd missed it, I'd craved it on the dance floor, even when it was on Elaine's and I was dancing with Dara it had felt like we were dancing with each other, just our eyes in contact but our bodies aching. And it had felt so good, and it felt so good now, so good I wanted to pull him down over me in my own yard and—

"Shit," I whispered, and pushed him away. "Shit, stop it. Stop it, you were supposed to be kissing Elaine, you're supposed to be with her. She's your girlfriend."

"No, she's not," Brandon said. "She's a mask. She's a good girl and I've been terrible to her because I have never kissed her and not thought about you."

"Stop saying these things." I kept shaking my head, like I could push them out of existence if I just rattled them hard enough.

He reached for me again, pulled me close. Our bodies, our thighs, our stomachs, our chests, both flat, both boys', so right together alone in secret places but so wrong here, accompanied by words I never wanted to hear, truths I was determined not to acknowledge.

"I love you, Richie," he said. "You're the one I wanna be with. Not Elaine, not anyone but you."

"Stop it," I said. "Stop it." I summoned all my strength, placed my hands flat against his chest and meant to push. I meant to, but my hands slid upward instead, across his neck, prickling at his stubble, cupping his face. "Stop this."

"I know you love me, too," Brandon said. He kissed me again, and the bright fire that leaped through my gut never felt so sweet. I wanted to lie down in the grass with him more than anything, wanted to let him touch me all over.

"I'm not..." My voice sounded hollow in my own ears. "Damn it, Brandon, we're not queers..."

And he laughed. Brandon laughed, loud enough that I looked around to make sure he hadn't woken the neighborhood. That goddamn laughter, my curse ever since I was born. "Really?" he said. "Richie, what do you think we've been doing?"

Blood rushed to my face. "We—that's—that's just between us. It's just—it's nothing, it's our secret, it doesn't mean—"

Oh, God.

With his laughter still echoing in my ears, I felt like the world's biggest fool. "Brandon, I can't be. You can't be. They won't let you in the army—"

But then his hands were gliding over my chin, and his smile so gentle in the dim night, and when his lips met mine I felt the tolling of a church bell deep inside me, and all I knew was I wanted to kiss him like this forever, wanted our bodies to slot together as perfectly as they always did, wanted anything and everything so long as Brandon was next to me, and none of it was right, all of it was a mistake and dangerous, and yet my hands were on his back, one taking a fistful of his shirt, holding on tight.

God, he was right. He was always right, and I loved him, and soon he'd be leaving, going off to boot camp and I'd be left alone and I didn't want to let go of him for even a moment before that inevitable parting. But the implications, the fallout, if I called myself that word, if I let myself be that thing... I was terrified, shaking against his body, and for all the solidness of him reassured me it was also a reminder of all the things that were wrong with this, with us...

"We can't," I whispered against his mouth, and then "I can't," and then I was pushing him back, not just pushing but shoving, hard, forcing him away from me until he stumbled and nearly landed on the grass, his long legs buckling. He stared at me, hurt, shocked. "Richie," he said.

“Go away,” I said, and the words tasted like bitter medicine in my mouth. “Go home, don’t come back, don’t come see me anymore.”

“Richie, don’t.”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “No, you don’t. You have to go to the army, you have to, and, and you’ll be far away and it’s not worth it, you’ll get over it, and you’ll think, why the hell did I spend my days on this? And... and you’ll find a girl, and what are you gonna tell her, that you thought you were queer, and how’s she gonna feel about that? You’re gonna ruin your whole life and I won’t let you. I won’t be part of it, so go home.”

I was probably crying. There was a salt taste on my lips. “Go home, Brandon.”

He made an unsteady step toward me, “Richie, don’t, you don’t mean it.”

“Go home,” I said, and turned away, heading for the back door. Didn’t matter if Mom and Dad caught me, punished me for sneaking out. It was better than staying out here with everything that hurt so bad and felt so unfairly good. It took all my strength not to look back, take one last look at Brandon’s face. But I couldn’t, or I’d be lost. I was already too close to the point of no return. My body, my aching heart, everything but my common sense wanted nothing more than to launch myself into Brandon’s arms and damn the consequences.

The door slammed behind me. I leaned my back against it, breathed hard, tried to control my racing heart. For a long time I counted my breaths, tried not to look back through the window. Eventually I gave in to the impulse. The yard was empty. Brandon was gone.

My parents slept through the whole thing. I crept upstairs, threw myself into bed, and curled up, trying to squeeze my body around my broken heart like the press of hard fingers around a wound. It just made my whole body throb, pain radiating out to every muscle and inch of skin. I’d never be with him again. I’d never touch him again. Even though I knew the pain would fade, right now I couldn’t imagine how I could make it through the night. How I fell asleep I didn’t know, but somehow I did.



Somehow the morning came, and somehow life went on. I saw Brandon in the hall at school, but it was like seeing a stranger. Our eyes would meet, and we'd look away. Where electricity had once set my whole body buzzing there was nothing but ice. It was over. We were over.

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We graduated in late May, and Brandon left for the army that summer. I didn't talk with him about it, but I knew everything through the conversations Mom and Mrs. Burns had. She related them over dinner, without a glance at me, without a word to acknowledge that Brandon and I had any kind of friendship. Either she figured I was talking to him on my own, or she had picked up on the way my whole body froze up at the sound of his name and figured we had some kind of falling out. I never loved my mother so much as in those moments. She understood, and she respected my feelings, even without knowing what they were.

Without Brandon next door, I wasn't living so much as waiting for the next chapter of my life to begin. I was enrolled in the local community college, and in September I'd begin classes. The normal lot, but also guitar and voice and composition, and my excitement at starting those classes tore through my boredom and melancholy. My guitar was my best friend in Brandon's absence, and all summer I wrote songs, melancholy ballads and toe-tapper tunes alike, about leaving old lives behind and looking back on mistakes and waiting for the next sunrise. I must have churned out two dozen songs by the time classes started. Eddie came by every so often to give me advice and help me work out the tough bits, but he was going to a fancy music school in New York I'd never heard of and in the fall he'd be gone. Dara wasn't in the picture anymore. The disastrous prom had ruined what was left of our friendship.

But college would bring new friends, and teachers who could help me write even better songs, and despite my leftover sadness, I was excited. It was just a shame that Brandon wasn't there to listen. Finishing a song no longer meant I had an audience to play it for. I just had to move on to the next song.

So when class started, I had a hell of a repertoire built up to share with my professors. They tried to fit me into a classical mold, to teach me basics and

make my sound into their creations, but I knew after every lesson that I wasn't playing or singing what I wanted to play and sing. As much as I got the concept that you gotta learn the fundamentals, my heart was throbbing with the desire to make my own kind of noise, and I couldn't do that in their classes.

And college wasn't the new life and new freedom I had wanted it to be. I made some friends, but not good ones, and a terrifying number of people from my high school were wandering around, as though I'd never graduated at all. Guess that's the way it happened in a town like mine. Nobody made much money, and you had to be something really special to make it out of the city limits and off to a university somewhere else in the world. I thought about Eddie a lot. Wished I was something special, like him. But no, I was just a country singer like every other country singer, with a guitar on my lap and a sob story or barrel of laughs to sing about. And I was only really happy when I had a chance to just let loose and do what I did best.

There was a sandwich shop on the corner near where the campus gave way to an ugly strip mall, and one day I wandered in to the strains of a guitar and the crooning of a voice, amplified so it echoed around the café. A girl in a red cowboy hat and equally red boots was singing, covering an old tune that had been popular about five years before, and in a second I forgot that I had actually come in to buy a sandwich.

"Can anyone sing here?" I asked the manager, who was in the back pulling packages of brown paper napkins out of huge cardboard boxes.

"Not anyone," he said. "You gotta make a demo tape for us and get some references."

"I can get that," I said. "Just tell me where to go and what to do."

I probably sounded like an idiot. Overeager, too young, whatever. All I knew was I saw an opening for a place where I could play my music, and I had to take it. And so for the next week, as I begged my professors for reference letters and sang into my tape recorder (and listened, and curled my lip, and re-recorded over the old tape until I could live with what I sounded like), my brain was locked into sandwich-shop-singer gear. It was the biggest dream I

could imagine, singing and strumming while folks around me chowed down and maybe, just maybe, tapped their feet or nodded their head to the beat. Applause wasn't even a part of the picture.

So when I finally booked the gig, and sang my first song, the applause very nearly scared the living daylights out of me. I'd sung, just one little song that always cheered me up when I felt blue about the world, and for a while all I could hear was my own voice, weird through the amp, and the comfortable strum of my guitar. It felt right, and I sang, enjoying the silence around me, thinking maybe nobody was even there to listen.

*It's like I hit the sky and now*

*I'm travelin' down, to meet the sweet green earth again.*

When it was over, I looked up and realized I'd misjudged the silence. I hadn't driven folks out. They'd put down their sandwiches, stopped slurping their soda pop, and were watching me from behind the counter, in the booths, even the doorway to the store. And an instant later, every last one of them put their hands together and applauded.

It sounded like an avalanche and it went on forever. I sat there, my guitar still buzzing from the last chord, and stared like a dumb owl. It didn't even occur to me to say thank you. I just waited for it to die down and went on to my next song.

By the time my set was done, the sandwich shop was packed with people—students mostly, including some kids I knew, but strangers too, who had been wandering by and stopped to listen. I didn't know what to make of it. Something small and exciting was beating inside my heart, a trapped bird, itching to fly out and take over my whole body, make me tremble all over. It was something I hadn't felt since the last time Brandon had kissed me.

Brandon. The memory came like a punch to the gut when I wasn't expecting it, and I looked down, my fingers tightening on my guitar. A piece of me wanted to crawl away, hide from them all.

But the manager was approaching now, and asking if I could do the same hour next week, and students were pressing forward to shake my hand. Before I knew it I was pledging to perform at the student fair the next week and the meeting of the country-western club the following month. And sometime, when it was all dying down, someone said to me, "You should go to Nashville."

*"But you should go to Nashville. Get famous."*

I heard it in Brandon's voice. And for the first time, it didn't seem ridiculous. As much as it stung to think of him, he'd been my biggest fan since day one. He'd been determined to see me get this kind of recognition. And I couldn't help a smile thinking he'd be so delighted to watch this breakout performance. That's sure what he'd call it. And he'd give me a huge hug, after everyone was gone. I imagined him there, laughing, his arm slung around me as I buried my head in his shoulder, and started laughing myself, just from the excitement, and the birth of a new dream, and Brandon there beside me to witness it and help it happen.

And even as I headed home, the sound of Brandon's laughter followed me, as though it had really been there, ringing loud and joyful over the hubbub of the shop's patrons and the excited throbbing of my own heart.

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I made it through the year without dropping out, but in my head I was already packing. There was no feeling like the one I got when a song ended and the applause started, whether it was in a sandwich shop or at a party or in a concert hall. Oh, yeah. I got to do an end-of-year recital with my fellow music students, and all I can say is, it's great to be the only guy in the whole show whose songs everybody sings along to. I'd performed enough times by then that people knew the lyrics.

Mom and Dad were the last to be persuaded, but when I told them about the money I'd made, they added a little of their own to my starting funds. I shipped off to Nashville with the best wishes of the whole college, and my family to boot. It was a good start.

But when I arrived in Nashville it was raining, a dismal summer rain that blanketed the whole town in gray, and the dim neon lights of the Opry could barely penetrate the darkness. I sat in my new, unfurnished apartment, watching the rain outside the window, my clothes hung in the closet and my suitcase open and empty on the floor. At least I had my guitar, safe in its case, battered and loved. I kept it company on the floor that night. A mattress would have to be first on my to-buy list.

There was a song itching in the back of my mind that first night, something about gray days and lonely nights, but even when I strummed out a chord progression for it, it wouldn't go past the first verse.

The city got sunnier, and I started to pound the pavement looking for gigs. Problem was, I discovered, you had to know someone, you had to have a reference, and community college concerts didn't much count. I gave demo tapes out, but at some point my master tape got warped and I couldn't make copies anymore. And I couldn't sing loud enough in my apartment to make a decent demo, or the guy next door to me started whacking the side wall and yelling for me to cut down on the racket. Didn't make me feel very good about my music.

No word and no job, four months in. Money was running out. I had been singing on the sidewalks near bus stops for a few hours a day, but my music didn't turn heads like it did back home. I was a little fish in a big pond, like they say. Even wrote a song about it. I came home with money in ones, not twenties, but it kept me eating, barely.

And then, finally, I caught a break. I was pleading my case to every performing house in the city, crossing off names in the *Yellow Pages* as I went, and I walked into a café across town with a "Help Wanted" sign in the window. See, this was why I didn't have a job. I was holding out for one that'd let me perform. And finally, a heavyset fellow named Barry looked at me and folded his arms over his chest and said, "I'll tell you what. You wait tables for me at rush every night for a month, and you can do a set then."

I could have kissed him. I didn't, obviously, partly because it would have nullified the job offer, and partly because he wasn't my type.

Yeah, it was happening. I was starting to notice men—notice my reaction to them, and not hide it under a pile of bullshit seven stories high. Part of it was knowing now that gay people—I didn't call them queers anymore—were people, not some different species, and there were enough of them to put out a magazine. Part of it was being alone, in a town where nobody knew me, where I didn't have to hide from anybody but myself. Then there was the part of it where I just couldn't afford the effort it took to fight it anymore.

I worked that dinner rush as best I could, seven nights a week, for Barry. I dealt with complaining customers and drunks, eat-and-runners, and fickle tempers worthy of Goldilocks, smiled and returned orders to the kitchen and apologized for lukewarm fish and sour beer, which nobody seemed to mind a minor serving. No days off, no gold stars from Barry. Occasionally a good tip, which I cherished. And all the while I was listening to the live entertainment, comparing myself, imagining being in that spot, scaring myself with images of the patrons' disgust at having to put up with the subpar strumming and crooning of some just-out-of-high-school wannabe from the sticks who couldn't even please his next-door neighbor. By the time the end of the month had rolled around, I was starting to think maybe I should just keep waiting tables.

But Barry was as good as his word. "Tomorrow night," he said. "Bring your guitar."

It's amazing I even made it through the next day. I was shaking so hard through the dinner rush, you would have thought I'd drop every tray and break every glass in the restaurant. My head was a mess of what-ifs and oh-nos. My feet were itching to run away. This was going to be a disaster.

But all I had to do was get onto that stool, perch my guitar on my lap, and pull the microphone close, and my body knew what to do. A strange calm settled over me like a sudden, heavy fog. My guitar resonated calming chords into my gut, and by the time I sang my first note, I was in my comfortable place again. This was something I knew how to do. How people liked it, whether I got applause or not, was something entirely different. I could deal with that part later. For now, sing.

I sang “Falling” and “Dusty Roads” without a break, just lost in my own music. Then I looked up and remembered the restaurant around me. It wasn’t like the sandwich shop; I didn’t have people wandering in from outside, people dropping their sandwiches with slack jaws. But the patrons were attentive, some were smiling, some were holding hands with their dates and maybe swaying a little, coming to a standstill as the final chord faded out. And then, yes, there was applause.

I grinned hard. “Thank you,” I said into the microphone. “Thank you. I’m Richie Wilkins. This next song is called ‘I Think I Was Dreaming.’”

A grin near the bar caught my eye—just in my peripheral vision—and I thought for a minute Brandon was there, watching me. I didn’t want to look and be proven wrong. I folded the thought into my heart and kept on playing.

At the end of my set, I left the stage in a jumble of emotion. A euphoric kind of assurance had settled over me—yes, this is what I wanted to do my whole life, even if just in restaurants, even if it meant a month of waiting tables for each gig—but it was paired with sadness that this gig was over, that I had no prospects for another, and that now it was back to reality. I kept my head down as I returned my guitar to the back room and reattached my waiter’s apron, trying to control it all so it wouldn’t show on my face when I returned to the tables.

I nearly head-butted Barry in the chest.

He put one big hand on each shoulder and said, “Have you got more songs?”

It took me a minute to look up and face him. The smile on his face was totally uncharacteristic. He’d never so much as given me a nod of the head before. I had to blink to make sure this was the same guy. “Yeah,” I said, and wouldn’t you know it, a new one was trying to hatch itself into my head as I looked at him in puzzlement. “I’ve got about thirty original tunes total.”

“You’ll do five more of them next week,” he said. “Same day, but this time at nine.”

I had to set my jaw to keep it from dropping to the floor. "Really?" I must have stuttered like a kid.

"Really," he said. "Take the rest of the night off, Richie. Have a drink at the bar."

My heart still hammering, I wandered back out to the restaurant in a haze. A million possibilities were trying to etch their way into my mind. I was brilliant, a prodigy songwriter. Barry was putting me on and I would show up Saturday to a roomful of people pointing and laughing. I should go to the record companies tomorrow and tell them I was too good to miss. I should get out now, while I still had the applause ringing in my ears, before I screwed it all up again. My head was swimming so hard, I got dizzy and had to clutch the bar to keep my balance.

"That was great," said a fresh, tenor voice next to me. I looked up and saw Brandon.

No. It wasn't Brandon. It was the grin I saw earlier in my peripheral vision, but it didn't belong to Brandon. This was a man a few years older than me, with chestnut-brown hair and broad shoulders. He slid his elbow onto the bar and reached out his other hand to steady me. A curl of warmth went through me at the contact. "You doing okay?"

"Mm," I said. Not very eloquent, but it was all I could manage.

"Want a drink?" I shook my head. "My treat."

"I can't." His eyebrows shot up. I gave him a shaky grin. "Ask me in nine months."

"You must not be local," he said with a laugh, and the laugh was nothing like Brandon's—it was adult, deep and knowing, where Brandon's had been full of fresh, joyful innocence. "You think you're the only minor at this bar right now?"

I squinted. "You?"

"Not me," he said, laughing again. "But look around. This town is full of kids trying to make it big. Richie, right? I'm Josh." He held out his hand.



“Yeah.” I shook his hand, and kid though I might be, I knew what he wanted. It was in the firm press of his palm, the way his fingers moved on mine as the touch lingered. “Thanks for the compliment.”

“I mean it,” he said. “Those were originals, right? There’s a nice sense of small-town innocence to them. You’ve got roots.”

I nodded, though it was actually a little disheartening. I had hoped to shake off my hometown, not bring it with me to Nashville. “Thanks,” I repeated. “But do me a favor. Don’t tell me you’re a record producer here to help me make it big.”

He threw back his head and laughed. And again, he reminded me of Brandon—not the sound of the laugh but the look of it, the way he looked like he was having so much damn fun just being alive. “Are you kidding?” he said. “That’d ruin my chances.”

“Your chances?” I immediately regretted reflecting his words back at him.

But he was unashamed, nodding. “I think you’re cute. And I can tell what a guy likes.”

It was too much. Another whirl of dizziness upset my head and I white-knuckled the edge of the bar. “I, uh...”

Now he looked taken aback. “Don’t tell me I was wrong.”

“I...” I gave him a wan smile. “I’ll have a drink now.”

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I didn’t go home with Josh that night. But he returned to the bar, and over a week we talked when I had a break and he bought me beers when my shift was over. And at the end of the week, after my second set was finished, I let him kiss me. It was a warm kiss, exciting, and my body thrilled to the sudden presence of that feeling, thought so long gone when Brandon disappeared from my backyard two years ago.

And the first time I referred to myself as gay, it was with Josh. The first time I lay down on a mattress and felt a body come down on mine, completely naked and vulnerable, it was Josh, and it was Josh who taught me how men

could make love to men, who taught me to love the burn and sweat of it, and it was Josh who first slung his arm around me in public and introduced me to his friends as his boyfriend.

He wasn't a record producer, but he was a reviewer, and his work appeared in *Nashville Out*. And though I hadn't noticed in the whirlwind of our romance and the feel of his eyes appraising me during every one of my sets, he'd coaxed more and more of them to come out on Saturday nights to listen to me sing. He couldn't review my work, but he could give me an audience. And eventually one of them had a friend with a small recording studio, and eventually I found myself there, recording a demo tape worth listening to.

When I took off the headphones after listening to the first track—expertly mixed and fleshed out with a piano riff and drums—I looked over at Josh, standing in the back of the mixing room with a small smile in his face, and said, “I didn't know I sounded like that.”

“The magic of the music industry,” Josh said. His grin gave me strength.

I still had no record deal. But somehow Josh had found a way for me to sing in a place that wasn't Barry's restaurant. It was a small club, and I was opening for another act, but I never heard cheers like that in my life. I'm pretty sure they were just cheering for the main event. But for whatever fraction belonged to me, I'd take it without complaint. And when the lead singer of the band following me shook my hand and told me I had real talent, I felt as though I could fly.

That night Josh told me he loved me. I didn't know if I could return his love, not with this whirlwind zooming around me, but he said I didn't have to. I told him I hoped I could, in time.

I wanted to. I truly did. But something was holding me back. Something that had taken hold of my heart long ago and wouldn't release it to just anyone, no matter how kind or good-hearted he may be.

I went home that night and wrote another verse to that same song that had wormed its way into my brain the night I arrived in Nashville, when the rain

felt like it'd go on forever. I still didn't know the chorus. It'd come to me, someday. When everything worked out.

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In the meantime, the nation was at war. Men were being drafted, plucked from their prime to go someplace where the heat and the stickiness rivaled the worst Louisiana swamp, and from what I heard whispered, things were happening there that warped a man's brain. I was thankful my number never came up. What happened on the other side of the world didn't concern me. I had enough trouble turning the gears of my own life.

But, I knew guys. I got to know guys who came into the restaurant for their last beer before basic training. I saw angry men yelling in street protests that were brought down by police carrying shields, as though the street was itself a battle. The city filled with men in uniform. A part of me had learned to appreciate that, but an undercurrent of sadness had crept into every interaction. There was fear everywhere—of being shipped out, of dying, of killing, of being used as a pawn in the chess games of a few very powerful people. And there was also the knowledge that if the government had turned to a draft, that meant most volunteer enlisted men were already fighting. It meant that someone I hadn't spoken to in years, someone I still thought about, was probably there.

I didn't like to think of how Brandon might be changed by the war. For me, the greatest sorrow would be if it stole his laughter. I prayed that wherever he was, whatever he was doing, he still found reasons to laugh. Amazing how that sound had been an annoyance when it was inescapable. Now, I longed to hear it again.

Josh and I broke up. I couldn't return his feelings, and I didn't know why. I was sure it was because I was starting to get regular gigs, paying ones, and I'd even been invited to play at one of the side tents at a festival in the summer. I was writing songs a mile a minute, testing them at the restaurant and then putting them out there in clubs if they did well enough.

That was my reason for not making things work with Josh. I was too career focused. But Josh was sure it was something else, and when it came right down to it, I wouldn't say he was wrong.

There were other men, as the months wore along: some one-night stands, some one-date disasters, some that lasted longer, and got further than others. But where my repertoire kept growing, until I'd filled a second album with the sounds of a little guy in a big city somewhere in a dangerous world, they kept crumbling. Some foundational step was missing. Something very basic, left in the dust a long time ago, and I couldn't recapture it with anyone.

Josh's friend, the studio owner, signed me. My first record had fair to middling sales. "Dusty Roads" made it onto the radio as a single. I didn't hear it often, but when I did, I had to smile. That song wasn't the same as the song Eddie and Dara and I had been so proud of, but it was based on it, and I wondered if either of them would hear it and recognize me. They didn't play a lot of country up in New York where Eddie was surely still singing though, and God only knew where Dara had got to. I asked my parents, during one call home, if they had any idea. They said they thought maybe she'd gone to Atlanta to get married.

"There's mail for you, though," Mom said, as an aside. "I'll go to the post office tomorrow and forward it on."

The way she put it, and the way it rolled through the conversation, I thought she meant mail from Dara. Looking back on it, that didn't make much sense. If there was mail from her, Mom would know where she was. But my mind was on songs and verses and the new bed I was planning to buy tomorrow with the profits from the single release of "Dusty Roads," and I wasn't thinking about anything very hard.

So a few days later, when I went to collect my mail, I nearly dropped the sheaf of bills and papers, and nearly slid to the ground myself. I had to collect my breath and straighten up. The lady in the first-floor apartment near the mailboxes asked me if I was feeling all right.

The letter was from Brandon.

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*Richie,*

*Hey, man. I hope you get this. I only know your parents' address. Maybe they can send it to you, wherever you are.*

*I wanted to write to tell you that I'm all right. I'm doing good. The Army's been good to me. I got to live on a base in Hawaii for a little bit, and then 'Nam happened. But I'm keeping away from the worst of it. We're taking care of a small city that we managed to hold before I even got here, so it's just about keeping healthy and not letting the locals rob you blind. But it's hot here. You can't imagine. And the mosquitoes are so bad.*

*They tell me we'll be heading home in another month. It feels like forever that I've been here, and I can't even imagine what a McDonald's hamburger looks like anymore. When I get back, I'm going to visit my folks, and then I'm going to McDonald's.*

*Richie,*

and here a few things were scratched out, hard, with black pen. What he'd decided on was:

*There are guys here. But none of them are you.*

*I hope you're still singing.*

*Love,*

*Brandon.*

I pressed the paper to my nose, trying to smell him, trying to catch a whiff of his sweat that might have made it onto the page and traveled around the world to make it to me. A little piece of Brandon. My eyes were stinging.

I wiped them, sniffing, glad nobody could see me, glad I'd waited to come upstairs before opening the envelope. Blinking, swallowing hard, I went to reread the letter and saw something on the folded-back edge of the page. I turned it over.

*P.S. Don't take everything so seriously. Laugh a little!*

The paper fluttered to the floor. I'd pick it up later, treasure it, tuck it in a book and take it out to read every night from then on. But for now, I scrambled for my guitar.

I finally knew the chorus to the song I'd been writing since I came to Nashville. And I knew what it was called.

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“Dusty Roads” faded from the charts. “Think I Was Dreaming”—they'd taken out the first “I” from the title, some sort of advertising thing—flopped. But I released another single, not on the album. This one was called “Sorry, Baby”. It was about Josh, even though the “baby” in the song was a girl. And this one took off.

I started to get fan letters. I was interviewed for magazines. Not big ones, like *People*, but important country music magazines. And I was playing, traveling even. I did a gig in New Orleans, another one in Jacksonville. Both opening for other acts, but people knew my name, and when I sang “Sorry, Baby”, they sang along. Even had a girl tell me it was an awful song and I was a terrible person for dumping that girl. I told her it was just a song. I told her it was years ago. I never told her it wasn't a girl, of course.

Eddie got in touch. I went up to New York to visit him. He was in the chorus of a Broadway show. He had learned to dance, too—even ballet. We had a good laugh over it. I told him a little about my life, and he congratulated me on my success—as though one single meant success. He asked me what it was like to be famous. I told him I was really just in the chorus, too. Nobody would remember my name in five, six months. But he laughed at that.

“It's gotta be amazing, to have your own concerts,” he said. “I wish I could get anyone besides my voice teacher to listen to me sing. I miss the band.”

“Me too,” I said. It was funny. I was coming to miss a lot of things about home.

Eddie wasn't the only one from home who wanted to know what it was like to be famous. Names from high school started to filter their way back into my life through my mailbox at the studio. I wrote back to a few, sent an autographed photo to the rest. Josh's friend—Darren—was frantic. His studio hadn't gotten so much play in a long time, and he barely knew what to do with me.

As for me, it was still all about the guitar and my own voice. The applause was nice too. The marketing was hard work. But the music was simple. I didn't have anything better to tell them than that, so what could I say?

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"I want to put you on TV," Darren said. I squinted. I didn't even own a TV. Everyone else did these days, but I only ever got depressed at the news.

"They put singers on TV?" I said dumbly.

He laughed. "Yes, they put singers on TV. Haven't you heard of *Soul Train*? *American Bandstand*?" I nodded, but my brain was muddled. I couldn't imagine what I would do to entertain anyone on a little screen.

"Anyway, this isn't any of them. It's a telethon. To help the soldiers coming home. They're busing in a bunch of guys from Fort Campbell to the Opry and..."

"Did you just say Opry?"

Because really, that's where everything stopped—my heart had seized up and exploded out all my pores in a burst of giddy sunlight. I never dreamed. Really. I never even considered it a possibility. I was an opening act. A two-hit wonder. I couldn't play the Opry. I'd never play the Opry.

"Don't get too excited, they just want you in for five minutes to play your two singles. It's not a paying gig either. It's for charity, that's the whole—"

"I'll do it."

"Hold on, Richie, don't..."

"I'll do it." It was the Opry. Who was going to say no to that?

When I calmed down enough to stop grinning and listen, Darren filled me in some more. The GIs from Fort Campbell would be the studio audience, and it would play on regional TV, since northern markets had little use for country music, even for the sake of the troops. The money was going to a charity to help veterans, especially disabled ones, find work and homes again. The statistics on homeless veterans blew me away. Turned out what they said about 'Nam was mostly true. You came home from that country so broken that, at worst, you still thought you were being shot at, and you couldn't live, couldn't work. I'd seen them from time to time in town with cardboard signs: HOME FROM NAM; NO WORK; PLEASE HELP. Half of them talked to themselves. It scared me half to death. I used to cross the street. Now I wanted to go out and find them all and give them each a twenty. They called it some kind of syndrome, what was wrong with them all. Most folks I knew just called it crazy, but suddenly it was simultaneously more and less scary. More, because I had shut my eyes to just what was going on in that country so far away. Less, because if Brandon were one of them...

I closed my eyes. A wave of nausea rolled over me. The thought of Brandon homeless with a cardboard sign, or jumping every time a truck backfired, made me want to sink down onto the floor and die. He had to be okay. He couldn't have been one of the unlucky ones. Not when his letter had been so upbeat and full of his trademark gentle humor. Not with that postscript tacked onto the other side. He had to be fine.

But there hadn't been another letter, and it was well past the time Brandon said he was coming home. And the news out of 'Nam was worse and worse with each passing day. Talk of soldiers forced to retreat, helicopters lifting them away. What if Brandon hadn't even gotten out? What if...?

The what-ifs would kill me. So I resolved to concentrate on the gig instead. I'd sing my heart out for those GIs who had made it back. If I could soothe their hearts with my tales of dusty roads and love gone wrong, it was my solemn duty to do so. Even the excitement of an Opry gig faded into the background. This was the work I wanted to do.



The logistics of the gig were pretty keen, though. They were holing all the performers up in a nearby hotel, which meant a room larger than my whole apartment, fancy food, maids to turn down my sheets for me. The hotels were often the best part of traveling. To get to stay in one right here in Nashville, without even having to deal with trains or planes to get there, was a luxury, and I was going to enjoy every minute of it. The other perk was a brand-new guitar, a gorgeous, gleaming slab of golden wood whose strings reverberated sweet sound with the barest strumming of my fingers. I'd come a long way since my dad's guitar and the back porch.

My parents would be watching. I offered to fly them in, but they said it was for the soldiers, not them, and it would be their honor to see their little boy on the television. I wished they lived closer. They were so proud of me and what I'd achieved, and all I wanted to do was embrace them. I could hear the tears in their voices.

Then, in what seemed like an eyelash's blink, the night had arrived, and I was standing backstage, with my guitar in tow. Darren paced behind me, anxious as a mother hen, but I was barely conscious of him. I'd brushed against people I never thought I would share space with in my life. Rosemary Clooney. Kris Kristofferson. These were the people who had volunteered their time for the local boys coming home from war, and somewhere among them, Richie Wilkins was supposed to fit in? The whole thing would have been laughable a year ago. I chuckled, and Darren looked over my shoulder, concerned. "Don't crack up," he warned me. "No funny business. This is live."

"I know live," I told him, putting on my most serious face. "I've been playing live for years. You're the one who's used to re-recording when things don't go well."

"Which is why I'm so nervous!" Darren said, and despite myself, I up and laughed. The craziness and nerves and excitement and dread shot through me in a peal of laughter that loosened my whole body and made me feel as though I was buzzing with sunshine. Now I was ready to perform.

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I had makeup on. That was the one thing that hadn't bothered me and suddenly started itching as I made my way onstage in the dark. In a minute they were going to introduce me and the lights would come up and I was supposed to start performing even before they were up all the way, and all I could think about was how badly I wanted to claw the foundation off my face. But that would create a mess on the strings, not to mention make me look as though I were the Striped Man. I fought the urge until I heard the announcer start to introduce me. And then I just wanted to keel over and die. I was sure my heart was trying to beat its way out of my chest and help me get there.

“Here to perform his hit singles, one of Nashville's brightest talents—” well thank you, but I still want to die—“Richie Wilkins!”

My fingers moved to the strings. The opening chords of “Dusty Roads”, their resonance, on the new guitar and with the microphone in front of them amplifying each tone, shocked me into total awareness. The crowd in front of me was massive, a black sea only marked by the flash of dog tags in the dark. I suddenly became aware of all of them, of all their desires and their pain, all projected upward, seeking comfort for what they'd seen and what they'd been through. They all wanted to go home.

I sang “Dusty Roads” for them. I sang about the river that headed south of town, the streets that were never driven on and were created for children's play. I sang, my new guitar and my voice resonating in the huge hall, about that place we all want to go back to. And if I missed home a little more than I'd missed it in all my years away, if that showed in a tear on my cheek, glistening in the harsh glare of the television spotlights, well then, maybe it was their fault. Their desire overwhelmed me, and I sang for them—I sang in their place. I'm pretty sure they sang along.

Spotlights roved over the crowd as they erupted into cheers. Roars, really. These men, standing up, applauding. I thought I saw tears on some cheeks, but maybe that was the wavering of my own vision. My fingers stung from the plucking of strings. My throat ached. And I was sad, and I missed home. I missed the part of me that I'd pushed away.

I leaned forward into the microphone. "Um," I said, and heard my own voice echo around the huge arena. In my peripheral vision, I could see production assistants stiffen. I wasn't supposed to speak.

"Um, I was going to sing 'Sorry, Baby'."

Cheers at the name of the song. My heart lurched.

"I was going to, but I'd like to sing a different song instead. This is—" I strummed a B flat major on my guitar, got the feeling of it. "This is a song I've been working on for a long time. It's about a friend of mine, good friend, who went to war just like all of you." My fingers were working on the intro now, on automatic pilot. For all the panic I was causing backstage, this moment, right now, felt totally natural. "I'm sending this out to him and to all of you, who did the bravest thing I can imagine, and who came home. And I'm..." I looked up at the ceiling, blinded by the lights, as though he were somewhere up there in a bleached-out heaven. "I'm just hoping you're home by now too."

The arena was quiet. I nodded and settled forward in my seat to sing.

*Made it through the desert*

*Found my way to town*

*But the pavement here is thirsty*

*And the water's pourin' down*

*Who's gonna see me in all this rain?*

*When am I gonna feel like I belong somewhere again?*

*'Cause the sound of Brandon's laughter*

*The way he used to laugh at me*

*That used to be my true direction*

*That used to be my family*

*He used to be my family*

*Scraped myself up off the pavement*

*Found somebody who loved me*

*Found a place to play my music  
And now I'm living and I'm free*

*But there's a chorus missing from every song  
And I'm still not sure if this is the place that I belong*

*And still the sound of Brandon's laughter  
Just keeps on rollin' round my heart  
How long's it been since I've heard it?  
How long's it been we've been apart?  
How long we gotta be apart...*

My voice cracked. I swallowed hard, and a rush of tears burst from my eyes.

*And if we could laugh together just one more time  
And if I could tell him anything at all  
I'd say the earth used to turn around your smile  
I'd say you'd better make it back here  
Because I've got so much to tell you  
I've got so much to show you  
I've got so much that's missing  
And only you can find*

I couldn't see anything through the tears. They were running down my cheeks, streaking the makeup from my face. Maybe ending my career. I didn't care. I had to sing, and somewhere far out there in the world, even if Brandon couldn't hear it, he had to feel it.

*So now the sound of Brandon's laughter  
Echoes forever in my soul  
And someday I pray I'll hear it  
And that day I will be whole,*

*Doesn't matter what comes after  
Or what battles we will fight*

*Just bring me back Brandon's laughter*

*Bring him back to me*

*Bring him back to me tonight.*

I don't know what happened. I don't know whether they applauded or booed. I don't know if I was shuttled offstage like an embarrassment or hailed as a hero. I don't even remember leaving the stage. I just knew what I had sung was true, truer than anything I'd ever sung, and I felt as though my heart were lying on that stage still, pale under the lights, beating desperately against the tide of a life that was taking me somewhere I didn't want to go.

I missed home.

"Why'd you never play that song for me?" Darren was hissing in my ear. I think he was angry, or maybe he was impressed. It was hard to tell, and I didn't care. I trudged my way through the trample and rush of the backstage crowd and made my way out into the night. I lost Darren somewhere along the way. I might have stepped on the toes of somebody famous. None of it mattered.

I made it out past the security guards and the media tents, finally finding unobstructed sidewalk, and I set out for my hotel. Or I tried. But a hand caught mine.

One of the vets, a brown-skinned young man with earnest eyes, had been running after me. He'd reached out and grabbed me with, I realized, his only hand. The other arm was cut off at the elbow. I stared at the stump a second, then forced my gaze back to his face. And if the amputation had made me catch my breath, his eyes riveted my attention.

They knew.

"You'll get him back, man," the vet said in a shaking voice. "You just gotta have faith. You just gotta keep praying."

I opened my mouth, closed it again. What could I say?

"I know what it's like," he went on. "But you have got to have faith. It's the only thing, it's the only thing that makes it worth it, knowing that you've got him back there at home waiting for you." It took me a moment to realize he wasn't talking about me. "You fight and you hurt and you lose things, you lose people and friends, and you remember he's there and you keep on fighting. You gotta live. Because you've gotta see him one more time."

I nodded. The tears that had been stuck behind my eyes came flowing forward, two hot streams that wet my face and tingled with salt taste when I licked my lips. "I don't even know where he is," I said. "I haven't seen him in years."

"He'll find you," he told me. "I promise, he'll find you."

I reached out and pulled him into a hug. He hugged me back, fierce, the stump of an arm pressing against my arm, his one hand on my back. The whole night stopped around us, letting us be brothers, letting us understand each other.

"Pray," he whispered in my ear, and even though I'd never been a praying type, that's all I did the whole way back to the hotel.

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Morning came too suddenly and too early for my liking. My head was pounding and I felt dry from the bottom up. I stumbled into the bathroom and drank three glasses of water straight from the tap before I could even turn on the bathroom light without being blinded. My throat ached and my hands felt stiff and useless.

They'd stuffed a note under my door, information about checkout, saying I had to be out by noon. I figured some of the big names staying had transport waiting for them, but I just had the bus. Which was plenty for me, but I wasn't looking forward to it so much. I stepped in the shower, let the water run over my body, and slowly awoke to the memory of what happened last night.

I realized I had no idea how things had worked out. How the telethon had gone, whether my outburst had caused a storm or been hailed as brilliance, or maybe ignored completely. For the first time, those things seemed like they

might be important. I had made it so far past the goals I'd set for myself that I realized I had a career that could be broken. As in, I could actually ruin my life with a mistake like this. If it was a mistake. All I'd known in that moment was that it was a song I needed to sing.

I wondered if Darren would have a message waiting for me at the front desk. It seemed like the sort of thing he'd do. After my shower, I picked up the phone to call downstairs, but the sound of the dial tone made me feel sick. At least if I wandered downstairs, I could wear dark glasses. This was the worst hangover I'd ever had, and I'd managed a few since the night Josh took me out to celebrate my legality.

I might as well just gather my things and check out now, I figured. I only had a duffel bag for clothes, plus my guitar case. It took me a few minutes to put everything together, and I took a long look at the room. Big bed, fluffy pillows, clean and quiet and starched, a luxurious respite from the apartment I had to scour and sweep myself if I wanted to keep it free of ants and rats. I'd miss it even more than I'd miss the stage at the Opry, miss that moment of bittersweet triumph when a thousand military men put their hands together for a scrawny singer who wasn't even brave enough to face his feelings. With a sigh, I retreated to the door and headed downstairs.

"Sir, I'm not allowed to give out that information!"

A concierge's voice, booming and full, hit me the minute I stepped out of the elevator. A group of hotel patrons were standing close to the elevator banks, looking at something around the corner and whispering to each other.

"Did you not hear what I just told you?"

"I heard you, sir, but we have confidentiality, please, I'm going to have to call the police."

My head pulsed. Some loudmouth was stalking one of the celebrities staying here. Maybe I would go back upstairs and hide in that room until it all blew over. I hit the elevator button.

"Didn't you watch the damn concert? That song. It was about me."

My guitar hit the floor with a slam and jangle of strings.

“The song was about Brandon. I’m Brandon. Look at my license, that’s me.”

I didn’t hear my duffel bag hit the floor. I didn’t hear my own feet scuff against the tile. I felt it all, but everything was muted. All that mattered was action. Was getting around that corner. Was coming face to face with—

Brandon.

I lifted my sunglasses from my eyes and stared, open-mouthed.

*Brandon.*

“Richie?”

Oh, my God. The curly hair. The arms. The eyes. It was. It was him.

“Richie, it’s me.” The corner of his mouth, quirking upward—that smile—his fingers reaching out... “It’s me,” he said, again, but I knew, I knew from the smile, and when I propelled myself full speed into his arms, he laughed.

He laughed. Thank God.

I held him, shaking, not caring who saw, not caring if my career imploded and I received death threats from fundamentalists for the rest of my life, all the nightmare scenarios flashing by me like slapstick comedy, too ludicrously unimportant to be anything but cause for laughter. And soon I was laughing too, my head buried in his shoulder, feeling the warm rich rumble of his voice as his laugh joined mine, as his arms held me tight and everything that was wrong with the world righted itself.

He kissed me, right there in front of everybody, and his lips were soft and it was as though no time had passed, as though we’d just kissed goodnight on the back porch of my parents’ house the night before. I don’t know if I was laughing or crying into the kiss. Maybe both. Probably both.

The first sign that any time had passed was the flash of his dog tags in my vision when I pulled back. I slid my hand under them, remembering a pair



winking at me from the blackness last night. "Were you at the concert?" I asked. The idea seemed too wondrous to be real.

He laughed again, and if he never answered me and just kept making that joyful noise for the rest of my life it would have been okay. "We watched the concert on TV," he said, "My folks and me. I told you I was going to see them first when I got back, didn't I?"

I nodded. I'd reread that letter enough times to recite it from memory. "Then how'd you—"

"You should have seen it, Richie," he said, grinning. "You played that song, and it ended, and I was just sitting there with my jaw on the floor. And my parents looked at me, and my father cleared his throat, and suddenly I was all 'I gotta go.' And I rode all night 'til I got here."

He nodded toward the front doors, big glass affairs with a revolving door in the middle. On the other side, a policeman was busy writing up a ticket for an ostentatious motorcycle parked right up on the sidewalk.

"Oh, my God," I said, and Brandon looked back and took note, but didn't care. I wanted to yell at him. A parking ticket like that was going to cost real money. But it was Brandon, and he was here, and suddenly I understood why he never took anything seriously. He knew the things that really counted, and a parking ticket wasn't one.

But he looked like he'd remembered one just now. His face had drained of color. "Richie," he said. "There's not—there's nobody else, is there? I didn't just screw you up, did I?"

I looked him square in the eye. "There were others," I said. "But none of them were you."

The recognition of his own words flashed through his face and then he was bringing me in for another kiss, and though there were scoffs around me and maybe that policeman was headed in here next to break us up I didn't care. Brandon's lips were on mine again and we were pressed together so tight nobody could break us apart. Everything that mattered was all right.

“Think I can fit on that?” I said, looking back toward the motorcycle. “With my bag and my guitar? I wanna go back home with you.”

He blinked. “You do? To your folks?”

“I miss them. Besides,” I shrugged, “I’ve never been on a motorcycle before.”

“You—” He kept blinking, as though somehow his sight could clear and make sense of my words. “Let me get this straight. You’ve played at the Opry, but you’ve never ridden on a motorcycle?”

I frowned. “So? So what?”

Brandon just threw back his head and laughed. And after a moment I laughed too, pressing my face into his leather jacket, my grin wide and my heart sailing. It was pretty funny, when I thought about it again. But my laughter wasn’t amusement, it was happiness. Brandon and I were laughing together again, just like I’d prayed. That missing piece of me was back, strong and unbroken by time or war. Brandon’s laughter was ringing in my ears again.

“Get your stuff,” he said, kissing the top of my head.

I looked up at him expectantly, and he gave me a grin and nodded.

“C’mon, Richie. I’ll take you home.”

**THE END**

## **Author Bio**

*Ellen Holiday released her first novel, Inside the Beltway, last year with Dreamspinner Press. Her most recent novella, Small Miracles, was a best-seller. She lives in the greater Washington, D.C., area with her husband and two novels in progress.*

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