

# BROKEN BOYS

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BEYOND FRIENDSHIPS

Dak Kopec

ATRHYDIAN MEDIA

BROKEN BOYS  
Beyond Friendships  
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## Woman in Red

A warm autumn breeze wafted through the Southern California mountain area of Big Bear Lake. Perched in the San Bernardino Mountains, this is the only area in Southern California boasting four seasons.

It was late October, and Blake Roberts, a handsome man in his 50s with greying blond hair, sat in a rocking chair gazing through a large window at the lake just beyond the gently swaying treetops. The shimmering waters looked especially beautiful behind the multitude of red, orange, and yellow leaves of the maple and oak trees planted nearly 30 years ago. Blake had moved to this mountain community to escape a past that continued to haunt him.

The house was quiet, and Blake was deep in thought, but this peaceful contemplation ended abruptly when he heard someone at the front gate.

*That must be her!* he thought as he stood up.

The monitor by the front door revealed a beautiful, middle-aged woman sitting in a car. She had shoulder-length, dark brown hair and wore a hat and black sunglasses. Blake didn't respond right away. He watched as the pale-faced woman took off her glasses, revealing her blue eyes and perfect complexion.

"Is it really you?" he whispered as he looked with disbelief at the image of an aging shadow from his past.

He continued to watch the woman move about in her car and then reach to push the buzzer again.

After the jarring sound reverberated again through the silent house, Blake pushed the button on the intercom to respond.

"Hello?" he said.

"Blake, it's me—Ivy Vandermark. Can I come in, please?"

Blake's body became cold with foreboding and dread. *Well... she's here*, he thought. *Time to find out what she needs.*

He pushed the button that opened the gates and went to the front door. He watched Ivy emerge from the midsize sedan parked in the driveway. She remained true to his recollection, except for a few youthful enhancements that only a plastic surgeon could provide. She wore a red dress, black gloves, black heels, and a matching black hat.

Ivy always presented herself with the style and sophistication that has long been edited out of our modern culture.

Ivy shut the car door and paused as she looked at Blake. Despite regular phone calls, texting, and sharing photos on social media, they hadn't seen each other in years. Seeing her across the driveway caused Blake to be flooded with memories of a time when happiness and joy were the primary emotions that filled their days.

Ivy quickly stepped forward. She wrapped her arms around him and held him tightly. "It's been way too long," she said.

Blake pulled back, overwhelmed by a flood of emotions he hadn't felt in years. "It's been a long time," he said, "and I have to wonder what's so important that you needed to fly 3,000 miles and then drive two hours to tell me."

She looked into his eyes. "I need your help with something important," she said.

Ivy needing Blake's help was something he never thought he'd hear. In addition to being a gorgeous woman, she was also one of the top contract attorneys in the nation. Blake knew he would honor whatever request she made. She was a Vandermark, and he owed that family more than he could ever repay in one lifetime.

"Come on inside," he nodded. "Would you like some coffee or tea?"

"Coffee would be great. I've been awake since 3 a.m. Eastern time."

"Make yourself comfortable, and I'll brew a new pot."

Ivy went into the living room and looked out the window. "Blake," she said, "I want to thank you for seeing me. I know you have better things to do."

"Of course," he replied from the kitchen as he made the coffee. "You're always welcome here. You know that."

Ivy didn't respond. She looked around the house. "I see you've kept the house pretty much the same."

"Yeah, for the most part," Blake replied. "There are some upgrades. The kitchen appliances are new—not that I use them. The flooring, some of the cabinets, and the countertops are also new."

"Yeah," she chuckled, "your ability to burn water is legendary!"

"Some things will never change."

Ivy walked over to the window and looked out over the lake. "I had forgotten how beautiful the lake is at this time of year."

"Yeah, I love how the colorful leaves look against the lake's waters," Blake said, carrying a tray into the living room. "You'd think

after all these years I'd tire of this view, but I don't. I love to watch the seasonal changes."

He poured two cups of coffee and handed Ivy hers.

"You've been up here a long time," she said.

"After everything that happened, this house and community became a refuge from the media and hateful people."

"Oh, I remember how terrible things were, and I know how cruel this life has been."

"Unfortunately," Blake said, looking at his coffee, "your family got wrapped up in that cruelty."

"Yes, it was hard, but we made it through, right?" Ivy said with a note of optimism.

"I only made it through because of your family," he smiled. "You, your parents, and Logan got me through it all. Who knows what would've happened to me if it weren't for you guys?"

"Family sticks by family!" she replied. "And you're part of our family."

"Unfortunately, I'm still haunted by those events," he sighed. "I doubt that'll ever change. I will likely take my guilt and pain to the grave."

"I know," Ivy said, nodding her head and looking down.

"Okay, I know you didn't come here to wander down the dark road of memory lane. Tell me what's new."

"Do you remember Lance and Cameron's place in the middle of the woods, where we used to party?"

"Yes, I do. Why?"

"All that land has been developed; those woods are now cookie-cutter McMansions. You wouldn't recognize it."

"I swear that's happening everywhere," Blake said. "I don't know if you remember what it was like up here in the 90s, but many of the great little cabins have been torn down and replaced with big houses."

"I don't remember what it was like up here, but I noticed that the LA traffic has gotten worse, which I didn't think was possible."

Blake held his mug with two hands and leaned back in his chair. He was tired of the chit-chat and wished Ivy would just make her request. "Ivy, you didn't come from Boston to discuss the lake, bad development, and overpopulation, so what is it you need from me?"

"Just like Logan!" she smiled. "Always wanting to get straight to the point!"

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be rude, but I know your ask has to be important, or you wouldn't have come all this way."

“You’re right,” Ivy replied. “What I need to ask isn’t easy. That’s why I’m having such a hard time.”

“Ivy, you can ask me anything. I would move heaven and earth for you and your family.”

“Okay,” Ivy said. “But please, don’t answer right away. Think about it.”

“Ivy, you’re killing me! Just spit it out.”

“It’s Jillian.”

“Jillian? What’s wrong with her?”

“As you know, she got her master’s degree in journalism.”

“Yeah, and I understood she was doing well. Didn’t she graduate this past May?”

“Yes,” Ivy replied with a smile. “We’re so proud of her! And I have to tell you—she’s her father’s daughter in many ways.”

“You did a fantastic job raising her; you should be proud.”

Ivy looked down at her phone. After finding a photo, she handed her phone to Blake and said, “Here she is, on her graduation day.”

He looked at the photo. “She has grown into a beautiful woman,” he said.

“Yes, she has.”

“Is that Max and Madeline she’s standing with?”

“Yes,” Ivy said. “We’ve all gotten older!”

“Don’t tell Max I said this, but he looks like he’s put on some weight.”

“I won’t say a word,” Ivy replied with a snicker. “Age and long days sitting at a computer have affected all our waistlines.”

“It’s amazing how fast time passes, but you and Madeline still look amazing!”

“Thank you. Sometimes it feels like only yesterday when this California surfer boy arrived at our high school!”

“Wouldn’t it be great if we could go back to that time, if for no other reason than to laugh and be carefree once again?”

Ivy looked away. “Blake,” she sighed, “Jillian wants to write a book. She wants to tell your story.”

“She wants to *what?*” Blake asked, feeling a lump in his throat.

“She wants to write a book documenting the trial—and what happened to you.”

“Wow, now that’s a surprise!” Blake said, not sure how to respond.

“I told you this was a tough ask, and I don’t want you to answer right away. But you need to think about this.”

“Your daughter—a woman I have never met, wants to dig up a past that I have spent many years trying to forget?” Blake said, stunned by the request. “Now I know why you wanted to ask me in person!”

“I know I shouldn’t be asking,” said Ivy, in a conciliatory tone. “But I promised her.”

“It’s okay,” Blake said, seeing the anguish in Ivy’s eyes. “But seriously, wouldn’t you rather ask for a kidney or piece of my liver?”

“Trust me. I would have rather had a root canal without Novocaine than to ask this of you.”

Blake laughed. “Now that we both know we would have preferred something more physically painful than to deal with this request, have you explained what dredging up the past could mean? Ivy, our lives were turned upside down for a long time.”

“Oh, I know, and yes, I did explain what opening up those old wounds could mean, and I’ve been asking myself if this is a good idea since Jillian made the request. That’s why I wanted to come here and speak to you in person. You suffered more than any of us, but likewise, I have to wonder if maybe something good could come from that time?”

“Wow, after all of these years,” Blake said. “Jillian doesn’t know me from a stranger on the street, so what’s her interest?”

“I can only guess that you’re the mystery man behind the photos on walls in my parents’ house,” Ivy said. “She already knows a lot about the trial from the Internet, and she knows that Logan, my parents, and I were involved. But she doesn’t understand how and why things unfolded as they did, and you’ve never set the record straight. So, I think she’s curious about you, and, as an aspiring journalist, she believes she can write a book that will give you back your voice.”

“I don’t know,” Blake said, looking away. “To relive those memories. Ivy, that’s a lot to ask.”

“I understand. We know what the media did to you, Eden, and Logan. But, maybe a book with you and Jillian controlling the narrative could bring some real closure for all of us?”

“So, you think I should do this?” Blake asked.

“I think you should do what you’re comfortable doing,” Ivy replied. “I know what you went through, and I’ll support your decision either way.”

“But what if her editors demand greater sensationalism? Is there any chance she could lose control of the content?”



“Listen, Blake, even though Jillian doesn’t know you personally, she knows you’re a part of our family. She will not do anything to harm you, Eden, or anyone else.”

“But she can’t control publishers and their demands, and what if the publisher buys the story and kills it by not publishing it?”

“Those are good questions,” Ivy said. “Maybe, if you agree, she could self-publish? This would ensure that Jillian retains control of the content and that neither of you wastes your time?”

“Ivy, she’s your daughter. Do you think this would help her achieve her dreams?”

“I don’t know, Blake. I’ve spoken to my mom and dad, and they see the advantages for Jillian. But we agree that the story belongs to *you*. As my dad said, the rest of us were only passengers on the ride.”

“Oh... Max!” Blake said with a smile as he remembered Ivy’s father.

“All I can say for sure is that 30 years ago, life was very different,” Ivy said. “People today are more open-minded.”

“Ivy, you’re a good mom for asking. But before I agree to anything, I need to know that Eden’s okay with this? You know the Australian press was cruel to her.”

“I’ve spoken with Eden. Obviously, she’s not thrilled with the idea, but she agrees—it’s your story and your decision. Just know that her mother is retired, and her family is no longer in any position that could incur negative fallout.”

Blake chuckled lightly. “I should’ve known you would have had all of my questions answered before you got here.”

“Well, I like to cover my bases. Honestly, Blake, I’m not here to persuade you. I’m here because I love you, and I love my daughter. Whatever you decide, I promise we will honor.”

“Gee, no pressure!” Blake replied sarcastically with a slight smile to make Ivy feel better. “Okay, maybe if I meet her? Maybe if we talked? I need to understand better what she hopes to gain from this and make sure my story doesn’t become sensationalized.”

Ivy smiled, indicating that she was pleased to hear those words. “Yes, you should meet her. She wants to know you, and I know you’ll love her.”

Blake looked at the floor and let out an ironic laugh.

“What’s so funny?” Ivy asked.

“I don’t know... I guess the storm is never really over, is it?”

“No, but you can control where the lightning strikes *this* time.”

Blake smiled at Ivy. “See, you can speak *Blogan!*”

Ivy laughed out loud. “It must be being with you that brings out the silliness in me.”

“Give Jillian my email address,” Blake smiled. “She and I can chat. We’ll get to know each other online. If I feel comfortable, I’ll coordinate with her to discuss how she would like to proceed.”

“Thank you,” Ivy said with an anxious smile that made him wonder if she had reservations.

“Oh, don’t thank me yet,” Blake said with a nervous laugh. “I just hope we all know what we’re doing.”

“Me too, my old friend,” Ivy said. “Me too!”

Ivy then walked around the coffee table and put her arms around Blake as she whispered in his ear, “It feels so good to hold you again. We all miss seeing you so much. Maybe you’ll return to Boston after you get to know Jillian. I know Mom and Dad would love to see you.”

“Maybe,” Blake replied half-heartedly.

When Ivy returned to Boston, she introduced Jillian to Blake through email. The two exchanged phone numbers and began texting each other. Much to Blake’s surprise, he spent close to an hour a day texting with Jillian. They discussed topics that included politics, television series, and music.

Just before Christmas, Blake sent a text to Jillian that said, *I can’t believe Christmas is right around the corner. When you get to my age, time seems to move at lightning speed, LOL.*

I know. Did you finish your Christmas shopping? I didn’t. I’m having a hard time deciding what to get my grandparents.

*No. I’ve been so busy that I haven’t had a chance to think about it. I’ll probably get sweaters for Max and Madeline. I’m thinking maybe a pair of ruby earrings for your mom—something to go with the dress she wore when she came up here.*

OMG, she’d love that, because it would mean that you noticed what she was wearing.

*I know. She’s always spent a lot of time on her looks and likes people to notice!*

I think she cares too much about how she looks.

*Maybe so, but we all have something important that others might think trivial. I work with one guy who is really good at grammar and critiques everyone’s email.*

OMG, he better not read my emails. I’m terrible at grammar.

*LOL! Me too. I think if the message is received, good enough.*

I don’t think my mom has ever accepted the idea of ‘good enough!’

Blake thought about Jillian’s words and then replied, *You’re probably right. She has always prided herself on having beauty and brains. I say we should*

*acknowledge that for her. Nothing wrong with letting people feel good about themselves.*

Yeah, you're right. I just want her to know that I would love her no matter what she looked like.

*She knows. I can promise you that.*

Okay, so tell me—what is your Christmas wish?

*Health and happiness for my family and friends. How about you?*

That's very sweet. But what do you wish for yourself?

*I don't have any wishes for myself. I haven't for a long time.*

Why? Don't you think you're worthy?

Blake read the message and felt that the conversation was getting too personal. *IDK, I guess I'm just content with the way things are. How about you? What's your Christmas wish?*

I'd rather not say what my wish is.

*Wow, that's kind of mean. You get me to tell you my wish, but you won't reciprocate?*

Well, to be fair, you didn't tell me your wish. You told me your wish for other people.

*LOL, touché. Okay, if I had to make a wish for myself, I'd wish my hair would stop thinning. I don't want to go bald.*

LOL, so I should buy you Rogaine for Christmas?

*Yup! Or a gift certificate for hair transplants. Now it's your turn. What's your Christmas wish?*

Okay, I'll tell you, but I am not dropping any hints!

*Noted.*

One of my wishes is to write a book about your life. I think the world should have the opportunity to hear your story from your point of view. My other wish I want to keep to myself. I don't want to jinx it.

Blake rolled his eyes at Jillian's resistance to telling him her wish. He then wrote, *Hmm—okay, what do you need from me for your first wish to come true?*

Oh, I don't want you to feel obligated. I know you value privacy.

Blake thought this was a strange message and wondered what Ivy had said to Jillian. He then wrote, *LOL, I didn't say I would do anything to make your wish come true. I only asked what you needed from me to make that wish come true.*

All I need from you is permission.

Blake smiled as he read her text and wrote, *Okay, Happy Christmas! You have my permission. Now what?*

A few minutes passed, and Blake wondered why Jillian didn't respond. Then Blake heard the *ding* indicating that a new text message had arrived.

Jillian's message said, *Really? Would you allow me to stay with you for a couple of months this spring?*

A couple of months seemed like a long time to spend with a young woman Blake had never met. Although, the ongoing dialogue they shared made Blake feel he had known this young lady for her entire life. And Jillian was a Vandermark?

*Nope, I would not,* Blake wrote back.

In the follow-up text, Blake wrote, *But I would be okay with you staying for a month after the New Year. There tends to be a lot going on in the spring, so I don't think I could do much more than a month.*

Are you really okay with me coming out and staying with you?

*Sure, why not?* Blake replied, feeling uneasy about the invitation he'd just extended.

I don't know. It's always seemed strange to me that our family adopted you, but I've never met you.

Blake paused to consider how he would respond to Jillian's comment. *Unfortunately, other reasons have prevented me from returning to Boston.*

Will you tell me those reasons?

*Maybe someday, but not today, or even tomorrow. There's too much pain associated with those reasons.*

Okay, but I am telling my mom that you said I could come to stay with you. So, no backing out!

Blake replied, feeling uneasy. *I won't. Shall we say the beginning of January?*

That sounds great.

A minute or two later, another text from Jillian came in.

Thanks, Blake! I can't wait to see you in person.

Blake smiled reading Jillian's message and wrote, *RB@U. Hey! I'm leaving town for a few days and won't have cell service. I'll text you when I get back.*

A couple of days later, Blake returned to the house and decided to send Jillian a text.

*Hey, you around?*

Yeah. How was the trip?

*Good, I was working on a fixer-upper house in a canyon, so there was no Internet or cell service. Kind of nice to be unplugged for a couple of days.*

Nice. Hey, as an FYI, my mom bought us tickets to see you.

Blake was surprised and replied to Jillian.

*Is your mom coming too?*

She's gonna show me around LA and then drop me off at your place. I hope that's okay?

*Yeab, all good. When are you arriving?*

We leave Boston on January 10th. Mom and I are going to spend the following day looking around LA. So, we'll be coming up to your place on the 12th. Is this good?

*Be warned, even though I'm in Southern California, I live in a ski resort in the mountains, so it can get cold. Not as cold as New England, but be sure to pack warm clothing.*

I know, my friends are jealous. I'll get to ski and snowboard Bear Mountain and Snow Summit while they're stuck in Stowe or Killington, where it's freezing!

Blake thought back to the cold wind chills in New England and replied, *LOL, I remember how cold Vermont can get. And no. We don't get that cold.*

Seriously, Blake, I can't wait to meet you in person—we will have so much fun!

*Fun?* Blake thought as he read Jillian's text. Not what he was thinking, but he'd go with fun for now.

*Yeab, it'll be fun. I'll see you soon.*

## Graduation Party

A few days later, late in the afternoon on a cloudy day, Blake was reading a book in the living room when he heard the door open.

“Is that you, Jillian?”

“Yeah, I took the bike for a ride around the lake.”

Jillian entered the living room where Blake was sitting in his chair. He looked over the top of his reading glasses and saw her rosy cheeks and messy hair. “I see you wore a hat, but you better have worn your helmet.”

“Of course,” she replied as she leaned to one side and combed her hair with her fingers. “I wore the helmet *over* my hat.”

“Good! There are some crazy drivers up here, and I hate that cyclists have to share the road with automobiles.”

“Traffic was really light, which made the ride more enjoyable.”

“Still, I think the city should develop proper bike trails. People on bicycles shouldn’t have to risk their lives when going for a ride.”

“Wow, what’s got you all riled up today?” Jillian asked.

“I don’t know,” Blake replied. “I guess I’m a little grumpy.”

“Well, I’m going upstairs to shower. Why don’t I grab you a glass of wine before I go? Maybe that will adjust your attitude.”

Blake looked at the clock, noting it was just before 4 p.m. “Ah, what the hell!” he said. “If we were in Boston, it would be seven. Sure, I’ll take that glass of wine.”

“Good for you! Maybe later we can talk about you and Logan moving out to California? That should put you in a better mood!”

“Hmm...” Blake said. “The wine part, definitely. The shower part, most definitely. And...”

“Wait,” Jillian interrupted. “Are you telling me I smell?”

Blake cast a sheepish smile, and before he could say another word, Jillian said, “Oh shut up, you mean man!” She then walked out of the room as Blake laughed. “Just for that comment, I’m giving you *white* wine tonight. That’ll teach you!” Jillian shouted from the kitchen.

“No, no, don’t do that!” Blake said in protest. “White wine gives me heartburn! Red only!”

“You should’ve thought about that before telling me I smell,” Jillian said as she entered the living room. “You know consequences suck!”

“You would be cruel to an old man?”

“You’re not old, and you’re lucky I’m a nice person!” Jillian said, giving Blake a snarky look as she handed him a glass of red wine.

“Bless you, my child!”

“Now, pace yourself. I don’t want to see an empty glass when I return.”

Blake took a sip and cast one of his innocent boyish looks. “You better hurry then!”

Jillian left the room, and Blake continued to read his book.

Roughly 30 minutes later, Jillian came into the living room carrying an open bottle of wine. “I come with reinforcements,” she declared.

Blake looked at her over his reading glasses. “Your timing is perfect,” he said, lifting his empty glass.

Jillian filled his glass from the open bottle. “I told you to pace yourself,” she said with a parental tone.

“Hey, it’s been 30 minutes! How slow do you want me to go?”

“Oh, I suppose,” Jillian said as she filled her own glass and sat on the sofa. “Now you have to tell me how you and Logan ended up in California.”

Blake put his book on the end table and took off his reading glasses, “Oh wow! Now *that’s* a story!”

“Yeah? Well then, tell me about it!”

“Mine and Logan’s California adventure began with graduation day,” Blake said.

“Why? What happened?”

“At the request of your grandfather, my father joined him to throw a big graduation party for our entire class in the town park. We had a band and tons of food in the open-air pavilion.”

“Sounds like fun,” Jillian said.

“It should have been,” Blake replied. “But between the private party Logan and I had with Jack, and my father, the day was a disaster.”

“Who’s Jack?” Jillian asked.

“The bourbon we were drinking,” Blake replied.

Jillian smiled. “Got it.”

“Hey, Cali, come here!” Logan said as he pulled me off to the side and handed me a flask. “It’s bourbon. Want some?”

“Ah, liquid courage,’ I said taking several swallows from the flask.

“Hey, slow down!’ Logan said. ‘We gotta pace ourselves.’

“Why?’ I asked. ‘This is our day, and you’ve got more, right?’

“Of course, I’ve got more, but we shouldn’t get hammered too soon.’

“Again, why not?’ I replied while taking another big swig before handing the flask back to Logan. ‘The sooner this thing is over, the better!’

“Logan finished what remained in the flask. ‘Not having too much fun, are you, Cali?’

“Nope,’ I replied, taking the flask from Logan and shaking it. ‘I keep hoping we can make it through the day without my father saying or doing something to embarrass me.’

“I think you’re worrying too much! Just enjoy the day.’

“Logan and I started walking to his car to fill the flask when Ivy stopped us. ‘And where are you two going?’ she asked.

“Just stepping away from the commotion,’ Logan replied. ‘We’ll be back.’

“Yeah, right!’ Ivy said. ‘You better not drink the whole bottle. I want some too!’

“Alright,’ Logan said. ‘I’ll give you the flask when we get back!’

“And there better be bourbon inside of it,’ Ivy replied. ‘Not water!’

“Wow, the distrust!’ Logan said, sounding astonished. ‘Can you believe the distrust I get from my own sister, Cali? It’s—well—shocking!’

“Dude,’ I replied, ‘when your sister cuts, she cuts deep.’

“Shut up, both of you, and hurry back!’ Ivy demanded.

“Logan and I continued to his car and grabbed the bottle of bourbon from the back seat. Luckily, he also had some plastic cups. We sat on the curb and poured ourselves some shots.

“I raised my cup to him and said, ‘To the best friend a guy could ever have!’

“Hear, hear!’ Logan replied as he tapped my cup with his and we drank.

“We then continued to take turns toasting our friendship and our future. “Cali,’ Logan said. ‘I think all our toasting is causing *us* to get toasted. We should get back to the party before we’re missed.’

“Ah, you’re worried Ivy will kick your ass if she has to wait for the flask!’



“‘Fuck, yeah! That girl’s crazy!’ Logan leaned toward me, putting his forehead against mine. ‘I’m glad you moved here, Cali! You’ve changed my life.’

“‘Me too, dude,’ I replied. ‘Never thought I’d have such a good friend!’

“‘Okay, enough of this chick flick thing,’ Logan said, jumping to his feet. ‘Let’s get this flask to Ivy before she sends out the National Guard.’

“‘Yeah, yeah. But dude, I’m telling you, I wish my dad weren’t here! I swear he’s gonna pull a Cinderella and turn into a jackass!’

“‘Not today, Cali,’ Logan said pulling me up from the curb. ‘Today is all about *us*. It’ll be good, you’ll see!’

“Logan and I walked back to the main pavilion. As we approached the crowded area, we joined Lance and Morris. Then, I heard my father’s voice over the speakers. I could see that he was standing on the stage with the band, speaking into one of the microphones.

“‘Can I have your attention, please!’ he said three times before everyone quietly looked at him.

“‘I have a feeling the clock is about to strike midnight!’ I said to Logan, Morris and Lance. ‘You’ll see. Whatever he’s about to say, I guarantee it won’t be good!’

“‘Stay cool, Cali!’ Logan said. ‘Stay cool!’”

“My father proceeded to tell everyone how proud he was of me, and began to list my accomplishments.”

“Aw, that’s sweet!” Jillian replied. “He was proud of you.”

“I’m not so sure how much of his speech was about *me*,” Blake retorted. “I think most of it was about *him*, pumping himself up at my expense.”

“Why? What did he say?” Jillian asked.

“My father told the audience that I had received a full scholarship to Amherst College, and how proud he was that his son was going to attend such a prestigious school. Of course, the crowd clapped with enthusiasm, and my father beamed with pride.”

“I looked at Logan and said, ‘And there’s the bomb! He’ll now *demand* I go to Amherst!’

“Logan looked confused and said, ‘What happened to us only applying to schools we knew we’d never get into? Why did you even apply?’

“I didn’t. I only applied to the schools you applied to, dude, and I never applied for any scholarship! My father must have applied for me!”

“That’s so messed up,’ Morris said.

“‘Cali,’ said Logan, ‘your dad is obviously not on board with us taking a year off to travel. Are we still gonna do it?’

“‘Of course!’ I replied. ‘We’re going on our adventure, with or without my father’s permission!’

“‘Wow!’ Lance said. ‘I don’t envy you!’

“‘You know,’ I said to the guys, angry and embarrassed by my father’s stunt, ‘I’ve had enough of my father’s bullshit!’

“Logan looked concerned. “‘Cali, you gotta stay cool!’”

“After my father’s toast, the crowd wanted me to say something. ‘Speech, speech, speech!’ they chanted.

“‘They want you!’ Morris said. ‘You better give them something!’

“‘What do I say?’ I asked, hoping one of them would give me some advice.

“‘I got nothin’, Cali,’ Logan replied. ‘You’re on your own with this one.’”

“I was angry at my father for applying to that school on my behalf, Jillian, blindsiding me with this revelation, and then bullying me by making this announcement in front of everyone. Really pissed me off.”

“‘You think he was trying to bully you into college?’”

“‘Oh, I have no doubt,’” Blake replied. “‘This was another way for him to relive his life through me, and to separate me from Logan. He would have loved to receive a scholarship to a prestigious school, and he never liked my friendship with Logan. I think all the grief he had given me throughout my life blended with the bourbon. The result was a hefty dose of confidence to speak my mind.’”

“‘You better get up there,’ Logan said as he pushed me toward the stage. ‘But Cali, remember—stay cool!’

“Using Logan’s push as a starting point, I lunged onto the stage and grabbed the second mike from the stand.

“‘Thank you all for the... for your sport!’ I said as I looked down at the crowd and saw Logan, Lance, and Morris smirking; probably because I was slurring my words. ‘However, I will *not* be accepting the scholarship or going to Amherst this fall. Logan, my best bud, and I are going to spend the year traveling. Where we end up, we have no

idea! We're going to ride the winds of destiny for the next 12-15 months and see where they take us.'

"Interesting speech," Jillian said. "How did that go over? As if I don't already know!"

"Well," Blake said, "Logan, Lance, and Morris were laughing. So the speech couldn't have been too bad; or so I thought! Most everyone else murmured among themselves. But my father... well, he put his mike back on the stand and calmly left the pavilion. I was drunk, and I had disrespected my father in front of a bunch of people. Not one of my prouder moments."

"So, what happened?"

"After my father left the stage, I was speechless.

"Luckily, Max was there to save the day. He came up and took the mike my father was holding.

"Ladies and gentlemen,' Max said. 'Let's hear it for Blake and Logan for taking charge of their lives and growing into fine young men!' He then put his arm around me. 'We're proud of you and all your friends!' he said and then raised his glass, 'Here's to the Class of 1989! Congratulations! Now let's have some fun!'

"The crowd clapped, and Max led me off the stage as he said, 'You, son, better start practicing your apology. Drunk or not, you were out of line!'

"I know. I'm sorry, Mr. Vandermark.'

"Son,' Max said with a stern tone, 'we all make mistakes, but he is your father, and he deserves respect!'

"Logan then came over to us and said, while extending his fist, 'Way to stay cool, Cali!'

"I hit my fist against his, but didn't say anything.

"I think it's about time we blow this popsicle stand and get some greasy burgers and fries!' Logan said. 'What do you think?'

"I think that's a good idea!" Max said. "You need to sober up before you make that apology."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Jillian said. "Are you saying you and Logan were fist bumping back then? I thought that trend started when I was a kid?"

Blake laughed and picked up his glass. "We didn't fist bump the way they do today. Back in the early '80s, or maybe it was the late '70s when Logan and I were little, there was a cartoon with superheroes called *The Wonder Twins*. They would fist bump to activate their

powers. Logan and I would fist bump to reaffirm our friendship. Of course, no one except us knew what the fist bumps meant. Hell, who knew fist bumps would even become mainstream?”

“That’s so cool!” Jillian said. “I love it!”

Blake smiled.

“After Max left, Logan and I left the party and went to the hamburger joint across the street for greasy burgers and chili fries. When we walked in, we saw Lance and Morris and joined them.

“I don’t think your dad is too happy with you right now!” Morris said.

“Yeah, man,” Lance said, teasing me. “That was one hell of a speech you gave... *We’re going to ride the winds of destiny!* All that was missing were the rainbows and unicorns.”

“Hey, what have you guys got planned for the summer?” Logan asked.

“Coming to your boy’s rescue,” Morris said to Logan with a chuckle.

“You know we’re only bustin’ your chops,” Lance said.

“Yeah,” Morris said. “That’s what friends are for.”

“I know,” I said, “I’m just in for a shitload of trouble, and it ain’t gonna be pretty!”

“Don’t hate me for saying this,” Lance said. “But applying to that school and for the scholarship without telling you, that was a lame-ass thing to do.”

“Guys!” Logan said forcefully. “Time to change the subject!”

“Okay,” Morris said. “I’m going to Greece for a couple of months with my cousin in July. Then Lance and I are off to Dartmouth in the fall.”

“What are you doing for the summer?” Logan asked Lance.

“I don’t know. You guys will be on *the winds of destiny*. Morris will be in Greece. If Clay’s back from rehab, it’ll be him, me, and Cameron.”

“I thought Cameron was going to do that climb in the Himalayas with his buddy Riley?” Morris said.

“Ah, shit, I forgot all about that!” Lance said. “You’re right. If Clay’s back, then it’ll be just him and me, I guess.”

“He’s supposed to be back by the end of the month,” Logan said. “I’m sure you guys will find something fun to do.”

“It’s not going to be the same,” Morris said.

“I know,’ Logan replied. ‘We’ve been together for so long. But I guess we all have to grow up and go in our own direction at some point.’

“The four of us continued eating and talking for the next couple of hours,” Blake said to Jillian. “Logan and I left the hamburger joint about an hour after Lance and Morris. When I got home, the real drama began.”

“Why? What happened?”

“I pulled into the driveway and was very nervous because I knew my father would be raging mad. I turned the Jeep’s engine off and looked at the house for a few minutes. The warm spring winds had turned the leaves so the shiny back portions fluttered in the breeze. I learned that this was a sign of an impending thunderstorm. I wondered which storm would be worse, the one on the outside of the house or the one on the inside.

“When I finally got the courage to go inside, I was met by my father, who was sitting in the living room. He was remarkably calm and, without a hello, he demanded I give him my keys to the house.”

“What do you want?” I asked, confused by the request.

“My father remained sitting with no expression. He then leaned forward in his chair and said, ‘If you and Logan want to ride *the winds of destiny*, you won’t want anything stable such as a home, room, or even a bed to tie you down!’

“Dad!” I replied, feeling stunned and confused. ‘Don’t you think you’re overreacting?’

“No!” he shouted as he slammed his fist down on the glass coffee table, causing it to break. ‘I worked too hard to get you where you are today, and I’m not interested in watching you throw your life away by hanging out with some rich drifter kid!’

“Silence and tension filled the room. My father was not only controlling, but when he got angry, he would also become violent. His breaking the coffee table with his fist was upsetting, because that meant my face was probably next.”

“Dad,” I said, thinking this might be a good time to give the apology that I had been rehearsing in my head.

“But before I could say anything, my father said with a cold and stern tone, ‘Give me the key and get out of my house!’

“I was shaking uncontrollably but managed to pull my keys out of my pocket. I fumbled as I tried to get the key off the keyring. I was

shaking so hard that I pulled my thumbnail back from the nail bed, but I didn't feel the pain until later. Once I got the key off, I threw it to him because I didn't want to get within punching range."

"You were that afraid of him?" Jillian asked.

"I was. He did not like to be defied, and certainly did not like to be embarrassed. I did both, and that was unforgivable in his mind."

"Did he hit you?" Jillian asked.

"No, but he glared at me as I backed my way out of the house.

"Before I got outside the door, he said, 'Your stuff will be packed and put in the garage. You can pick it up tomorrow. Anything left behind will be thrown out.'

"Okay," I said and continued out the door.

"Once outside, I walked briskly to my Jeep. I thought for sure my father would follow me and beat the shit out of me."

"So, he was abusive?" Jillian asked.

"I don't know," Blake replied. "He had hit me in the past, but most of his abuse was verbal."

"Hmm... So what did you do?"

"I started the engine and as I was about to back out when I heard my mother asking me not to leave. I didn't respond. I just looked at her standing on the walkway. She had been verbally torn down and controlled by my father for so many years that in many ways, he made her into a non-person, a facsimile of his idea of what a wife should be.

"Come on, Blake," my mother said. "Try to understand his point of view! He only wants what's best for you!"

"Why, Mom?" I replied, feeling betrayed by her defense of his actions. "Why does he always have to control my life? Why can't my life be my own?"

"Why can't the two of you try to see each other's point of view! My mother yelled. "But no, all you do is fight, and it's me who loses!"

"Mom, you lost a long time ago," I replied. "Look what he's done. We're not a family. We're nothing more than some idea he has in his head. I'm sorry, Mom, I can't do this anymore!"

"My mother didn't say anything. She just looked at me and cried.

"Then, disappointed or disgusted, I remember shaking my head, and putting my Jeep in gear. I was so angry and hurt. All I wanted was vengeance and to hurt him as much as he hurt me! So, I drove onto the grass, cut my front wheels, and stomped on the gas pedal. I spun my Jeep around and then fishtailed through the lawn as I left."

“Where’d you go?” Jillian asked.

“At first, I drove around trying to clear my head. Then, after a bit, I drove to the park. Not the side where the party was, but where we used to play football. I sat on top of a picnic table with my feet on the bench and looked out over the dark field. I started to cry as I wondered if there was any way I could be what my father wanted. I remember the warm spring winds blew storm clouds across the sky. In the distance, I heard the rumble of thunder and saw flashes of lightning. I laughed to myself because I thought the conditions were a perfect metaphor for my life.”

“Then, I heard a voice from behind me.

“Hey, Cali, you’re watching ghosts,’ said Logan. ‘You know there’s no one playing on the field, right?’

“What are you doing here?’ I asked, wiping away my tears.

“Your mother called my mother and asked if you were at our house. She then explained what went down between you and your father, and blah, blah, blah. So, I thought I’d better find you.’

“Logan sat down next to me on the picnic table and put his arm around my shoulders. ‘Sorry, Cali. That was a horrible thing your father did.’

“I don’t know exactly what happened next. It was as if the touch of another person blew up a dam in my mind. I was filled with emotions, and I started to weep so hard that I lost my breath. I couldn’t look at Logan because I was embarrassed as I fell apart.

“Fuck, dude!’ I wailed. ‘All my life, he has tried to control everything, to make me into his ideal self! Never once thinking about me, it was always about *him* and how great *he* was! Well, what about *me*! Aren’t I entitled to my own life? Can’t I follow my own path! Jesus Christ, Logan, why couldn’t he be more like your father—supportive of where and what you want to do, encouraging you to find your own path!’

“I don’t know, Cali,’ Logan said softly with his arm around my shoulders, staring at the empty field and careful to respect my privacy as I fell to pieces.

“In a choked-up voice, I continued. ‘Can you believe he kicked me out of the house, all because I don’t want to follow his planned path? He made me give him the key to the house and told me to get out! I know I shouldn’t have contradicted him in front of everyone, and I wanted to tell him how sorry I was, but he didn’t let me. Instead, he disowned me. Cut me loose as if I didn’t matter!’

“I continued to blubber and tried desperately to catch my breath. I felt Logan’s arm pull me into him as I continued. ‘And what did I do to deserve his hate? I’ll tell you what I did. I dared to say that I wanted my life to be my own. Is that the choice I have to make? Being alone in the world, or being someone I’m not? Jesus Christ, if I go to Amherst, will he then tell me who I can marry? How many children to have? Where I should live and work? Fuck! Where does it end? When I’m dead?’

“Logan didn’t say anything. He just listened, and continued to look straight ahead as I asked, ‘Why, Logan? Why can’t he love and support me for who I am? It’s always an ultimatum! So now what? I have nothing—no money, no home, and no family! Do I give in to him, or be true to myself?’

“Logan squeezed into me and said, ‘You have me!’”

“I looked at Logan and smiled. Those were probably the best words he could have said at that moment,” Blake said. “Logan always seemed to know when sitting in silence was the best approach and knowing what to say when words were needed!”

Blake then paused to drink some of his wine while looking down at the floor. He needed to gather his thoughts before continuing.

“I calmed down,” he said, “but I was emotionally drained, and my eyes were sore from crying.”

“How did you find me?” I asked.

“Logan smiled and mussed up my hair. ‘First, I went to the hamburger joint, then I came here.’

“The hamburger joint?” I asked.

“Yeah! There’s nothing better than a good greasy burger with fries and a shake when your dad’s being a total fuckhead!”

“I laughed. ‘That sounds really good!’

“Well, what are we waiting for?” said Logan. “They’re open all night!”

“Give me a minute,” I said.

“Come on, Cali!” Logan said, jumping from the table and extending his hand. “Time to get off the cross and let someone else use the wood!”

“Yeah, okay,” I replied with a smile.

“Seriously, Cali,” Logan said as we walked to his car. “As long as I’m alive, you’ll never be alone!”



“Shut up!” I said pulling away from him. “You’re totally turning this into a chick flick moment!”

“I know,” he said, laughing. “I think this is the part where you say, *Ab, Logan; you’re the best!*” Then we’re supposed to hug as the sun rises in the background!”

“Yeah... let’s not do that,” I replied. “Let’s eat greasy burgers instead!”

“Now *that’s* the spirit!” Logan replied as he mussed up my hair.”