

## WISHBONE

I'm convinced Paxton is the Hulk or something. One minute, I'm up in his face, cussing him out, unloading years worth of adolescent resentment, and the next, he's got me shoved up against the bricks behind the gym, hands pinned behind my back.

I writhe and squirm and thrash about, flailing my body parts at him with enough force to dent car parts, but he doesn't budge. He's always been a freaking gorilla and I'm a twig. Helpless. Handless. Doomed. I try to kick him in the balls with my heel, but I can't. The angle's all wrong. Instead I just jam my knee into the brick wall and cry out. He cackles a high-pitched witch laugh and then tightens his grip on my wrists. *What a maniac. An absolute sociopath. He probably eats baby pandas for lunch.*

"All these years and you finally got something to say to me, huh?" he says.

"You're fucking evil," I spit, "let me go."

"Or what?"

I open my mouth to speak, but I'm shaking so bad that what was supposed to be a menacing "I'll end you" turns into an odd bleating sound.

I hold my breath. Maybe he didn't hear it.

*You bleated. Out loud. Like a goat. There's no way he missed it.*

He falters, and I can feel his grip loosen.

"-the *fuck*?" he says.

Oh this is bad. Catastrophically bad. I'll have to change my name and go to military school like dad said. *But wait.* He's stalled. Stunned. Frozen in place by my idiocy.

I'm certainly not bigger or stronger than Paxton, and under pressure, my brain might as well be mush, but I do have one competitive edge: I can descend into absolute insanity at the

drop of a hat. And not the screaming, cussing kind of insanity. I mean mouth-foaming, nail-clawing, neck-biting kind of insanity. Mom says I'm like the broken gas pedal on her old toyota corolla. I can go from 0 to 100 faster than the speed of light.

Before I can change my mind, I rear back and headbutt his jaw. There's a satisfying snap and then a grunt, and suddenly his hands fall from my wrists. It's official: I'm free. It feels so righteous, I could scream it across the void, but I don't. Because suddenly, with my newfound freedom, I feel dumb. Do I fight? Do I run?

I whip around to face him, and he nails me right in the teeth. I feel my lip split, and it's so shockingly painful that it almost feels good.

*Fucking hell.* I stumble back. My eyes sting.

He lunges forwards and wraps me in a headlock. I latch my teeth onto his bicep and clamp down like a feral animal. He yelps, and backs away from me like I'm on fire.

"Fuck you!" I scream, and then I make a break for it.

He lunges for me, but I'm on a roll, frantic limbs flailing every which way. He catches my wrist and I yank it free. He scrambles for my ankle, but it's like I'm covered in oil – slippery, spastic, and high on adrenaline. Nothing can catch me.

The universe must be a sick fuck, cause the second I think I've got some kind of edge on him, he white-knuckles my hair and drags me back by my roots. If I wasn't screaming bloody murder before, I am now because *holy fucking baby jesus, that hurts.*

Paxton's grip tightens further, and in one swift motion, he pivots me around, slamming me into the brick wall again. I gasp for air, but my throat strains and constricts. I feel like I'm wearing a vest that won't stop shrinking. My eyes prick and sting and something tight rises in my throat.

I claw at his backpack – the same one he’s had since middle school – dark blue with frayed straps and a worn-out zipper. As I claw at it, I can see tears start to form along the seams, and then suddenly the whole thing rips open, its contents spilling out onto the concrete. Coins, pencils, and erasers scatter every which way, but I don’t give a flying fuck, because behind a ball of crumpled notebook paper, I spot a small silver keychain in the shape of a wishbone.

I must be making some otherworldly unnerving expression, because Paxton whips around to see what I’m looking at and his whole body tenses. *Yeah, fuckface, I’m surprised too.*

“You kept it.” I say.

“I never clean out my backpack–”

“That’s a bold face lie.”

“It’s not,” he insists.

“You clean out everything. You’ve had OCD for years–”

“And you’ve been obsessed with me for years,” he snarls.

“Are you on fucking crack? You’re the one who still has a keychain I gave you in *fifth grade.*”

“I didn’t even know it was in there.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“I’m telling the truth,” he insists. Pleads even. I shake my head. I’m not buying his used car salesman pitch, and he knows it.

“I bet you still have yours on a fucking shrine or something,” he says.

“Look, I didn’t wanna go here today because I shouldn’t have to explain this to you,” I say, “but I was *never* into you. People just like to say shit when you come out. You were always just my friend.”

His face goes all droopy and misfortunate, like a stork, and for the first time in three years, I catch a glimpse of my friend's face. His *real* face.

“I know, I’m sorry...” he trails off.

“I don’t forgive you” I say, “you were a prick.”

“Yeah...”

Five minutes ago, he was 10-feet tall and full of fury, but the anger gone, and he looks so small without it, like he’s crumpled up in a part of himself. I’ve always had a crawlspace behind my eyes where I can shut the blinds on reality. I didn’t know he had one too.

There are so many things that need to be said, but he’s not going to say them, and it sure as hell shouldn’t have to be me. So we just sit there and simmer in the sun and it’s like we’re twelve again, after some tangle in the yard about who gets to play captain. In this moment, side by side, skinned knees and all, we’ve shed the years like backpacks slipping from our shoulders.

Tomorrow, we’ll go back to hating each other's guts, cause he wants to be like his father and I want to be nothing like mine, but for now, we’re just like we were: best friends. And somewhere, deep in a drawer, I have a matching keychain to show it.