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My
Return
to the
Walter
Boys

ALI NOVAK



 sourcebooks
fire

Because you've barely spoken
to me since you left.

Fri, Jun 28 at 5:16 p.m.

JACKIE HOWARD

Hey Cole. I'm sorry for going AWOL.
It's been more difficult than I thought
to be home again. I need some
time to figure things out. Can we
talk when I get back in August?

one

THE FIRST TIME I ARRIVED in Colorado, I was a nervous wreck. It made sense, given the circumstances. Not only was I forced to leave the only home I'd ever known, but I had to move across the country to live with a stranger, one who conveniently forgot to mention her *twelve* children until we were settled on the plane.

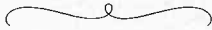
This time was different, though.

When my flight touched down at Denver International Airport, I couldn't blame those past things for the uncomfortable fluttering inside my chest; New York was no longer the only place I'd ever lived, Katherine had become a mother figure to me, and her twelve kids? They had taught me that I didn't always need to be perfect.

There was a singular reason for my current apprehension—sooner rather than later, I would have to face Cole Walter, and God only knew what kind of reception I'd receive. As I waited for the baggage carousel to deliver my suitcase, I almost texted him. Thankfully, I only

typed out three words before realizing what I was doing and deleting the message. Maybe that made me a coward, but what could I possibly say after not talking to him for nearly two months? Besides, if he didn't already know I was back, he'd find out soon enough. News and gossip spread like wildfire in the Walter household.

Hopefully by then, I could find the words I needed to apologize.



I don't consider myself a violent person. But when Isaac Walter pulled up to the curb over an hour later with a shit-eating grin plastered across his face like he wasn't inexcusably late, I couldn't help but picture my hands wrapped around his throat. After stowing my suitcase in the bed of the truck, I yanked open the passenger door and threw him the chilliest glare I could muster.

"Where *were* you? I've been waiting for—"

"Hey, Jackie. So good to see you," he said, flipping down the sun visor to inspect his reflection. "Before you give me whatever dressing-down I'm sure you rehearsed, I have a question for you." He raked his fingers through his jet-black hair before glancing over at me as I climbed inside. "Do you have your driver's license?"

"No," I said through gritted teeth. Growing up in the city, I never expected to need one. "Why does that matter?"

"Because if looks could kill, you'd have a body to hide and a very long walk home. Shouldn't you be thanking me for picking you up?"

"Not when you were supposed to be here ages ago!"

"It's not my fault your flight was delayed," he replied, which I

grudgingly had to admit was true. Katherine was originally meant to collect me from the airport, but then my morning departure was pushed back to the point where my arrival conflicted with Jordan's soccer game.

"No, but your aunt promised me you'd be—"

"It doesn't matter what she promised, because she did it without asking me first," Isaac exclaimed, a muscle in his jaw twitching. He took a breath, then added in a calmer tone, "I had plans."

"Okay, fine," I grumbled as I buckled my seat belt, "but would it have killed you to let me know?"

"Sorry, but you called at a bad time. Well, bad for you. Amazing for me. Let's just say I was... at the *climax* of things."

I narrowed my eyes at his turn of phrase. Judging by the smug tone of Isaac's voice, ignorance was bliss, but if my suspicion about his tardiness was true, then I'd be willing to reconsider my stance on nonviolence. The lacy blue bra abandoned on the floorboard was suspicious but not concrete proof. While finding underwear in the boys' shared vehicle wasn't a frequent occurrence, it wasn't out of the ordinary either. What caught my attention, however, was the number of cigarettes in the empty Glacier Gulp cup Isaac was using as an ashtray, enough to make me think another person had been smoking in the truck with him. Besides, the cab smelled like tobacco and—my face flushed.

Sex. The truck smelled like sex. I didn't notice it initially since the eau de lung cancer masked the odor, but the distinctive scent of musk and sweat lingered in the cab.

"Oh my God!" I rolled down the window to let in some fresh air.

"Were you screwing someone in here?"

"*Moi?*" He splayed a hand against his sternum, brows knit together in exaggerated offense. "That's a serious accusation. What makes you think that?"

"Because it reeks of sex!"

"Okay, you caught me," Isaac said, flashing me another violence-inducing grin. "But tell me—how do *you* know what sex smells like?"

The flush on my face deepened to the point of burning. While I had zero experience with *that*, this wasn't the first time the truck had been used for something other than transportation. I would never forget the mortification of get inside one day after school, wrinkling my nose, and asking what the foul smell was. Danny, Lee, and Nathan had laughed the entire drive home.

"Let me get this straight," I said, ignoring his question. "You made me wait for more than an hour because you were hooking up with someone?"

Isaac didn't even attempt to look contrite as he put the truck in drive and carefully navigated back into the hectic *Tetris* that was the arrivals pickup area. "Like I said, I had plans."

Taking a deep breath, I willed myself to remain calm. Spending the summer in New York helped me come to a startling realization—I liked living with the Walters. As a whole, they were fun-loving, supportive, and always made me laugh. But while absence did make my heart grow fonder, it also made me forget how irritating some of them could be.

"You're unbelievable."

His lips quirked. "So I've heard. Repeatedly."

Even though I wanted to throttle Isaac, it had been a long day of travel, and I didn't have the energy to put up with more of his typical nauseating innuendos, so I put in my earbuds. Maybe I would bribe one of his younger cousins to help me get revenge once I had a good night's sleep.

"Aw, come on, Jackie," he pouted. "Don't be like that. We haven't seen each other all summer."

"Which clearly wasn't long enough."

Turning up my music, I pointedly focused my attention out the window and settled in for the drive. I only had to ignore Isaac for two minutes before he gave up trying to talk to me, and without the distraction, my thoughts wandered back to Cole. How could they not when the last time I took this road, albeit in the opposite direction, I'd been on cloud nine even though I was soaked to the skin? My heart stuttered as I recalled our goodbye kiss, but I quickly shoved my feelings down; they'd only make my reunion with Cole more difficult.

By the time we reached Copper Valley, the small mountain town near the Walters' ranch, my mouth tasted faintly of blood from chewing on my lip. My nerves were quickly forgotten when we drove down Main Street.

"What's going on?" I asked, looking out the window as workers unloaded barricades on the corners surrounding the town square.

"Oh, are you speaking to me now?"

"That's subject to further review." Like whether he continued to be an ass.

"They're setting up for the block party tomorrow," he explained. "There's gonna be cotton candy and face painting and a water balloon toss. Exactly the kind of wholesome bullshit you're into. I'm sure you'll have a blast."

I raised an eyebrow. "And you wonder why I don't want to talk to you?"

Ten minutes later, Isaac pulled onto a familiar gravel drive. When we crested the hill and the ranch came into view, a slow smile spread across my face. Everything looked exactly the same. Backdropped by endless blue sky and green fields was the large farmhouse with welcoming yellow shutters, multiple additions, and a wraparound porch that still needed a paint job.

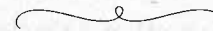
Katherine was out the front door before my feet hit the ground. "Jackie, you're here!" she said, pulling me into a tight hug. "Oh honey, I missed you so much. When Isaac told me your flight was delayed again, I felt awful. You must be so exhausted."

Delayed *again*? I narrowed my eyes at Isaac over Katherine's shoulder, and he smirked.

Ugh, what a lying little shit!

I pulled away from the hug but didn't bother correcting Katherine. Snitching was a cardinal sin among the Walter siblings, a lesson I learned the hard way, so no matter how much his dishonesty irked me, I refused to make the same mistake twice.

"Thanks, Katherine," I said as she guided me into the house. "It's good to be back."



My sister, Lucy, used to love making fun of my obsession with lists.

Blame my type A personality, but making them soothed my soul: daily to-do lists I completed with regimental proficiency, whimsical bucket lists I never looked at again, birthday and Christmas gift ideas lists organized by price, best-of lists used to rank my favorite books and movies. I even had one to rule them all—a master index list of all my important lists.

A few weeks into summer, when Danny mentioned how homesick he was, I made a list of everything I missed about Colorado so he wouldn't feel so alone. At the very top of that list was Nathan's music. I loved hearing him play, whether he was in the middle of composing a new song and the notes were clumsy or it was a piece he long ago perfected, because it helped me slow down; no matter what I was doing or how many thoughts were rushing through my head, I always stopped to listen.

So now, when I reached the upstairs landing and was met with a soft guitar melody coming from his room, the stress of the travel day immediately melted. Eager for our reunion, I left my suitcase by the stairs and stepped inside without bothering to knock.

It was a mindless mistake.

Nathan's bed was empty, but movement on the opposite side of the room captured my attention.

Three whole seconds passed before I processed the scene in front of me, and when I finally did, I drew a sharp breath. Alex was settled against the headboard, his hands grasping a girl's slender waist. It

took me another second to recognize her long, sleek hair and realize said girl was *Kim*, Alex's childhood bestie and one of the few friends I'd made after moving here. She was straddling his lap, her mouth attached to his neck, and both of them were shirtless.

"Oh my God!" I bumped into Nathan's desk as I scrambled backward and accidentally knocked a guitar capo to the floor.

Kim's head jerked up. She squeaked at the sight of me, then rolled off Alex to cover herself.

"Crap, I'm sorry," I said, squeezing my eye shut to avoid seeing anything else. Without waiting for a response, I fled the room.

"Jackie?" The bed squeaked, and a pair of feet slapped against the hardwood. "Jackie, wait!"

Which was, quite honestly, the last thing I wanted to do. Hightailing it down the hallway, I abandoned my suitcase in an effort to escape. I'd almost reached the safety of Katherine's old art studio when a hand circled my wrist.

"Hey," Alex said, gently tugging me away from the door. "Where are you off to in such a hurry?"

Since I caught him dry humping Kim, I thought the answer to his question was obvious: anywhere that *wasn't* his bedroom. But when I looked up at Alex for the first time since leaving, all I could do was open and close my mouth like an idiot.

Summer had been good to Alex Walter. He was sporting golden, sun-kissed skin, and his blond curls were lighter than normal, like he had spent every moment of the past few months outside. He'd hit a growth spurt too, because he now stood a full head taller than me. His

lips curved into a smile as I took in each change. It wasn't cocky, like a certain older brother's, but it was decidedly knowing.

"Um, hi." I offered him a hesitant smile and pretended there wasn't a blush creeping up my neck. "This isn't awkward at all."

Alex slipped his hands into the pockets of his gym shorts and leaned a shoulder against the wall. "Well, I'm not the one who barged in without knocking."

"Right," I said with a grimace. "I can't say this enough, but I'm *so* sorry. I heard the music and thought it was Nathan."

"I'm sorry too," he replied. "This wasn't how I planned for you to find out about us, but all is forgiven as long as you promise not to be mad at Kim? She's worried you won't want to be friends anymore." Judging by the expression on Alex's face, Kim wasn't the only one who was worried.

His concern was sweet but unnecessary. Spending the summer in New York only confirmed that our decision to split was the right one, because I'd hardly thought about him at all.

"She has nothing to worry about. We broke up, remember?"

"Yeah, I was there." His tone was light and teasing, but I could hear relief as well. "So we're good?"

"Better than. Honestly, I'm happy for you both," I told him, "but... um... I really did want to see Nathan. Any idea where he's at?"

"Oh, I see how it is." Alex was still shirtless, so when he folded his arms and smirked down at me from his recently acquired height, I had to make a conscious effort not to look. Just because we weren't together anymore didn't mean I was blind. "You dump

me, and Nathan steals my spot as your favorite Walter? I'm hurt, Jackie."

I almost shot back that he was never my favorite but bit my tongue at the last second. "Don't you have a girlfriend to get back to?"

"Touché." He pushed off the wall and headed back in the direction of his room. "Nathan's been spending a lot of time in the loft, so I'd check there," he told me. "I'll see you at dinner."

"Alex, wait! Do you know if—I mean, will your brother be home tonight?" If so, I needed to brace myself for the encounter.

He paused but didn't turn around. "Which brother? I have a few of those."

"You know who I'm talking about," I said gently.

"And you know we don't talk, so you're asking the wrong person."

"Okay," I said, letting the subject drop. I should've known better than to bring up Cole with him. "I guess I'll see you later."

After retrieving my suitcase and depositing it in my room, I set out in search of Nathan, mind whirling as I chewed over the afternoon's bombshell of a revelation. My ex, who I *lived* with, was dating my friend, neither of whom bothered to tell me about their newfound relationship. Not that they owed me an explanation, but some kind of warning would have been nice.

I didn't lie when I said I was happy for the both of them. Alex and Kim were friends long before I came into the picture. Plus, they shared all the same nerdy hobbies. It had always been a point of contention in our relationship—my disinterest in GoG and his inability to understand the importance I placed on doing well in school.

That said, this development would take time to get used to. Alex and Kim might fit well together, but it was still a startling change.

I was so lost in my thoughts, I made the five-minute walk to the barn on autopilot. When I cleared the top of the ladder and the loft came into view, I blinked in surprise. Here was another change. A dozen plastic dairy crates were stacked against the back wall to form a makeshift storage unit, and Nathan's collection of vinyl was housed inside. Additionally, the ancient TV was missing from the media cabinet; in its place sat a record player.

Nathan was stretched out across one of the lumpy couches, pencil in one hand and a book in the other. He must have heard my entrance and assumed I was someone else, because he let out a long-suffering sigh without looking up from what he was reading. "Jordan, I know I promised to help curate the soundtrack for your documentary, but you have to give me more than a couple hours. I haven't started yet."

"Not Jordan."

The pencil clattered on the floor as Nathan's head snapped up.

"Jackie?" he exclaimed, a grin stretching across his face. He tossed his book aside and scrambled to his feet. "You're back! I've been so— Wait, why do you look angry?"

I propped my hands on my hips. "Because you have some major explaining to do." Since I wasn't actually mad at him, I only waited a moment before dropping my angry act and pulling Nathan into a hug. Like Alex, he'd grown more than a few inches over the summer, and I grumbled to myself as he rested his chin on top of my head.

There was a hesitant look on his face when we broke apart. "About what exactly?"

"Hmm, let's think. Does Alex and Kim ring a bell?"

Nathan blinked at me. "But...you only just got here. How do you even *know* about that?"

"I heard music coming from your room when I went to put my suitcase away." The partial explanation was all it took for Nathan to cringe, and I had a feeling he knew exactly where my story was going. "It's no excuse, but we haven't seen each other in nearly three months, and I *missed* you."

"Oh no," he muttered, flopping onto the couch. "You walked in on them, didn't you?"

Nodding, I took a seat beside him. "They were half-naked and in the middle of a full-blown make-out session. Do you know how awkward that was?"

"Are you so traumatized that you forgot I share a room with Alex?" Nathan asked. "Why do you think I'm hiding out here? I've basically exiled myself to the loft since they started dating."

Oof, I hadn't considered that.

If the changes to the loft were anything to go by, he spent more than a fair amount of time in the barn. On second glance, I spotted a wicker basket filled with blankets and pillows. The thought of Nathan sleeping out here because Alex and Kim were getting busy frustrated me on his behalf. Unfortunately, a precedent of discourtesy toward one's roommate was already set in the Walter household—Danny once confessed sharing a room with Cole was a contributing

factor as to why he was such a night owl—and the dark circles under Nathan's eyes were telling.

Just how long had this been going on for?

When I asked him, he winced. "Er...they got together a couple of days after you left, so pretty much the entire time?"

"Are you *serious*?"

Nathan misconstrued my reaction. He muttered something to himself that sounded suspiciously like "shitshow" before launching into a misplaced apology. "I'm really sorry, Jackie. I knew this would happen. I've been trying all week to think of the best way to break the news to you, but—"

"Nathan," I said sharply, and he pressed himself so deep into the couch, it looked like he was trying to meld with the cushions. "I'm not upset because of what I found out but *when* I found out. We've had, what, half a dozen conversations this summer? Why didn't you tell me?" Even though I was fine with Alex and Kim's relationship, it would have been nice to process the news while in New York instead of being caught flat-footed the moment I returned.

"I know. It's just...you were gone, and it wasn't my place to say anything. Plus, it seemed like you needed a break from the drama. Honest to God, I planned on warning you once you got back. I figured I'd have more than a millisecond to do so, but I guess I should've know better considering my own experience this summer."

"Are they really that bad?" I asked after deciding to let things go. That Nathan had kept this secret from me was still upsetting, but I couldn't blame him for sticking to whatever bro code he had with his brothers.