

Jessie's Girl
By Rick Spring
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Jessie is a friend,
Yeah I know he's been a good friend of mine
But lately something's changed
It ain't hard to define
Jessie's got himself a girl
And I want to make her mine
And she's watching him with those eyes
And she's lovin' him with that body, I just know it
And he's holding her in his arms late, late at night

You know I wish that I had Jessie's girl
I wish that I had Jessie's girl
Where can I find a woman like that

I'll play along with this charade
That doesn't seem to be a reason to change
You know I feel so dirty when they start talking cute
I wanna tell her that I love her but the point is probably moot
'Cause she's watching him with those eyes
And she's lovin' him with that body, I just know it
And he's holding her in his arms late, late at night

(Chorus)

Like Jessie's girl
I wish that I had Jessie's girl
Where can I find a woman
Where can I find a woman like that

And I'm lookin' in the mirror all the time
Wonderin' what she don't see in me
I've been funny; I've been cool with the lines
Ain't that the way love's supposed to be
Tell me where can I find a woman like that

(Chorus)

I wish that I had Jessie's girl
I want, I want Jessie's girl

It's so cliché when they talk about it. Girl meets boy then meets boy's best friend and then, well, the story is as old as the day is long. I don't want to be a cliché. I don't want him. Or at least that's what I tell myself. I'm a bad liar.

Jessie's been his friend for as long as they both can remember. They like to reminisce like that. Old college buddies. Two boys stuck in the same classes together. Two boys starting a band. They are like chalk and cheese in some ways. Jessie is so tall, dark, with the brown eyes of a gentle old soul and hair as long as a girl's. Matt, well, he couldn't be more different. He's loud, brash, overly charismatic with blue eyes and dimples that he uses to his advantage on a regular basis. He's not tall either. My height. Too slim for his own good. I want him to have more flaws. I want to hate his floppy hair. I want to pick him apart, thread by thread, unravel his good looks until I can't see them anymore. And yet they still pervade my dreams.

I don't know how I ended up with Jessie.

The first time Jessie asked me out was like any other day on campus. I was looking at notices on the board outside the local coffee shop, the smell of bitter caffeine and raucous laughter pressing into the back of my brain as I searched for a potential roommate. I was tired, cranky, and broke. My part-time job and classes were grinding me down. I needed a dye job and a haircut, my maroon hair growing out into my natural mousy brown. I wasn't really paying attention to the shadow on my back.

"Do you mind moving over a bit?" said a voice from behind me.

Irritated, I twisted around to bark something just as snotty back, but the dark chocolate eyes stopped me. That and the tiny crinkles of humor around those same eyes. I just stared impolitely.

“Jessie.” He switched a stack of band flyers from one hand to the other, his large spare hand stretched out to me.

“And?” I crossed my arms.

He gave me a weird look, his hand frozen between us. “And what?”

“Right. So who told you? It’s a bit premature for nicknames don’t you think?”

A broad grin developed on his face as if he knew something that I didn’t. Who the hell was this guy? He coughed into his hand before holding it back out to me.

“Let’s start again. Hello, my name is Jessie.”

The sudden realization hit me, my ego quickly retreating. “Jessica,” I mumbled. Like he hadn’t already figured it out. I shook his hand.

He gave me an even wider smile that made little flutters in my stomach. “It must be written in the stars, Jessica, because even I couldn’t pull something like this off. What are you doing Saturday night?” That’s how comfortable he was. He wasn’t even trying, his easy-going nature a magnet. And he wasn’t hard on the eyes either. Not even thirty seconds and I was already going to his next gig. Just like that. Little did I know about Matt.

The show wasn’t bad. It was a mixture as it was with all these things. Frat boys, blond girls, hipsters in black, overachievers, the whole gamut for a liberal arts college – dancing the

dance we all know – drinking, laughing, fighting, fucking in the men’s’ bathroom. Jessie had winked at me from the stage, which had been kinda cute, him strapped behind his guitar. I’d barely noticed Matt, my eyes only on Jessie. Even in baggy jeans and a Sonic Youth t-shirt, he had my attention.

That show had been just the beginning for me and Jessie. Next came coffee at the same coffee shop where we’d met. Then drinks at a little student hole in the wall before that date turned into open mike night with Jessie belting out a Bon Jovi song about love and holding on to what you’ve got. It was cheesy, but still endearing, always romantic that one. Of course, I ate that up, so much so that I finally relented and slept with him only two weeks later. It wasn’t bad. Not great either, but it had been satisfying enough. I was happy to settle for enough.

But I left out the part about Matt.

I try to forget about him, but he’s the chink in my armor. My one unchecked box. And as I whirl my way through our history, I can’t leave out the one defining moment for us even as I try to deny it now. All the time, people say *I will remember that moment for the rest of my life* or *I won’t forget this for as long as I live*, blah, blah, blah, like somehow that makes it solid as the ground, as all-encompassing as the sky. Yet that moment *did* define me. It still does. The three of us sharing a bed, drunk and giddy after a show, me stuck in the middle of two men who were like the sun and the moon. And feeling the pull of both.

To give Matt his credit, the flirtation was already there. The look, when he looked at me, sent shivers to places that had no business shivering. It had for weeks. Innocent teasing, double entendres when Jessie wasn’t looking. It didn’t even click in my brain that I should be paying attention until we ended up in that unmade bed. Three souls full of liquor-soaked desire.

And this is the moment I will remember for the rest of my life:

As I giggled at Jessie's hand on my leg, I wanted to say something witty and rude to Matt who'd been unusually quiet. I felt cheeky and insolent and girly. Our flirtations had always been innocent enough, but the heady combination of the booze and the hormones made me want to push the boat out. Just to be outrageous for a second. I didn't think anything of it as I turned to face him.

Bad call.

Matt laid there staring at me. His slim face had settled into the pillow, his messy hair draped about his face at just the right angle to make him look angelic and beddable. His eyes pierced through me much like an arrow would, his gaze all knowing, like he'd already figured out where we were heading. He gave me a secret dimpled smile that felt like it held the wonders of the universe if I was just willing to inch my face that much closer to his. But it would always be the eyes that held me to him. His grey blue eyes that hinted at possibilities that even I couldn't deny.

God, he was beautiful. And I wanted him. So badly that my breath hitched in my throat and for a second I felt actual physical pain that shot up from my belly to high up in my chest. I found it difficult to breathe as he drew his head towards mine, only inches from kissing him, his hand caressing the sensitive skin of my waist.

I was on fire. In a way that was both gut-wrenching and heinous.

For a split second, the world stopped and in my mind, I could envision it – a dusty crossroads. Hot, dirt clogged air that constricted my chest, making me want to cough as I stared

at the two different paths that diverged ahead of me: Jessie, in his old tattered jeans and tie dyed shirt with his easy smile and gentle eyes, his man's physique towering even from this distance beckoning me to follow him, to walk those few simple steps to security and predictability.

And the boy who secretly owned my heart. He stood on the other side of the road in his white button down shirt and black jeans as the dust settled on him, a sad smile that held unspeakable promises that I wasn't sure he could keep. Matt didn't so much as crook a finger, but just stood and stared. I didn't move – because we both knew that whatever this was, it wasn't going to happen.

In the bed, I shut my eyes to break the spell and turned away from Matt, the alcohol still muddling my brain, his fingers slipping from my waist, his beautiful eyes gone. Jessie's hand was warm and reassuring as I clamped down on my heart and made the decision that would stay with me for the next twenty years.

* * *

Being forty isn't that bad. At least that's what Jessie keeps telling me as he cups my ass and places a kiss on my forehead. We've been married sixteen years now.

“What do you want to do to celebrate tonight?” he asks. He's cuddled me into a hug that causes me to break out into a smile. I'm trying to put on my make-up in our infinitely small bathroom and he's going to make me late for work. Still, he kisses the side of my neck before giving me a cheeky grin in the mirror.

“I don’t know,” I reply, telling the truth. Applying another layer of mascara, I stop long enough to mull my mind over it. I mean it’s forty, it’s supposed to be big, right? Yet I hated birthdays. Why should this one be any different? “How about you decide? Surprise me.”

It is word speak more than anything else. Surprises have stopped for us a long time ago. We are settled, content, even without the children that we had hoped for. We are beyond that now and we are good. Better than good. We are happy.

“Well, maybe I’ll write you a song,” he says as his face gets that faraway look. I’ve seen it before. Wistfulness. Jessie hung his guitar strap up long ago and he’s poured all of his creativity into designing websites these days.

I turn in his arms and give him a squeeze before placing a full kiss on his lips. He’d written me many a love song in our early years. It’s still a sweet gesture though.

“As long as it comes with a side of food, I’ll be a happy girl.” I give him one more squeeze and head into the bedroom, looking for my shoes before I am truly late for work. Not that tissue slides care. Grabbing my lab coat, I do a mental inventory of anything that’s missing. Travel mug. ID Tag. Car keys.

Jessie sticks his head around the bathroom door. The mischievous grin on his face lingers and it’s enough to give me pause. There’s something that he’s not telling me, but I’m too rushed to think about it. There will be time when I get home from work. As long as my family isn’t lurking behind the back of our living room couch with balloons and noise makers when I get home, it’ll be enough.

I should’ve been so lucky. It would never be enough.

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I'm dressed to the nines. Well, at the least that's how the saying goes. I let Jessie talk me into it. Not that I take a lot of coaxing. Something about his mood is infectious and for the first time in a while, I'm looking forward to whatever it is that he's planned.

I traipse out of our bedroom closet in a slinky black dress that hits all my curves in the right places, a lavish smile in place for him. Jessie woof whistles and it's the payout I'm looking for. I twirl on the spot, the hem of my dress flaring out ever so slightly at the knee, the hint of flesh above my knee just a glimpse. The maroon hair of my college years is gone although I'm still dying it red, just a more subtle shade to cover the gray hairs now. It goes with my blue eyes and the smile. I have pulled out all the stops for tonight.

"Damn, darling," Jessie drawls. "I'm not sure we're going to be able to leave the house." He's been lounging on our bed watching me, but he springs lightly from the bed and saunters towards me.

I put my hands out in front of me. He raises an eyebrow. "Oh no, you don't." I point to my body, to the way the dress clings to me. "This. This right here took some time. You're gonna have to wait." He makes a fake lunge for me and I squeal, darting around his outstretched hands, slapping ineffectively at his fingers as he tickles me.

"Just one kiss," he breathes into my ear and it makes me squirm a little bit more.

I shake my head at him. "Fine. But that's it. I want my surprise."

I give him a quick kiss on the mouth causing him to growl at me, but he still lets go. He looks good for forty-two. He still wears his hair on the longish side and there is pudg around his

middle that wasn't there that day outside of the coffee shop, but it's enough. He gives me one more smile, this one slightly more uncomfortable, as he fidgets in the suit he's pulled out just for tonight. The collar must be driving him nuts, I think to myself.

"Come on," he says to me as he heads down the hallway. "I promised we'd be on time."

I grab my clutch off the nightstand and follow Jessie down the hall. There's that feeling again. The one that I can't place. And it makes me uneasy.

* * *

Showing up at the boutique hotel, the puzzle pieces start to fit into place. Jessie and I walk across the plush carpet, through the wall papered hotel lobby, towards the restaurant that I now know he's booked for us. For a second, I'm impressed with his choice and even pleasantly surprised. I turn towards Jessie, giving him my best smile, but when I look ahead again, the smile slides away.

I see him waiting for us in the restaurant, and it's like someone has sucked all the oxygen from the room. But much worse. All I can do is stare at Matt.

It's like watching a moving photograph. Matt gets up from the table, his blue eyes locked on mine as he glides towards us. He's hardly changed. His hair is cut shorter, like Jessie's, but in a way that screams trendy. He's tan as if he's just come back from Barbados and his dark charcoal suit and linen shirt are cut just right for his slim build. The dimples appear out of nowhere although he's isn't self-conscious. He stares as if there is no one else around us. Bold yet boyish. And more handsome than he ever was twenty years ago . . . if that's possible.

My wholly unattainable boy.

But he's no longer a boy now – he's a married man.

My hand inches up to my throat, trying to choke down the suffocating panic. It feels like someone has hiked the temperature up in this over-hyped fusion restaurant by at least twenty degrees. The overwhelming wave of desire is almost enough to make me gag, and I stumble over the heels that I'm not used to wearing. Nothing catastrophic – just enough to be clumsy and unrefined. I know I'm blushing. I know that he can see it. I can feel my eyes water as I try to hold my shit together.

Jessie moves forward and claps him on the back before coming back to me. The pleased expression on his face almost causes me to lose it. He thinks I'm being sentimental. How wrong he is. I want to cry, but I can't.

Matt embraces me in a hug before he kisses me on the side of my mouth and it's the sheer force of will power that keeps me from turning into it. The smell of clean linen and citrus is heavy between us. And his body heat. I can feel his chest through the linen shirt, through the flimsy dress that I now wish I hadn't worn. I want to hold him longer, breathe in his enticing smell, but he lets go too fast, and it's then that I realize that I've been clutching his jacket. Rattled, I step away. I can't look at him. I can't look at Jessie. This is my worst nightmare.

But Jessie is oblivious. He's talking about something work-related, but I can't focus on the words. I see Matt nodding, giving Jessie his winning smile, paying attention enough to not arouse suspicion, but I know without looking that his thoughts are in the same place as mine. Our spark, so dim for so long, crackles and spits to life in a way we both are only too aware of. Abruptly, I turn for the table, the rigor mortis of the smile on my face nothing compared to what's going inside of my head.

My heart cracks just a little and I wonder if anyone can hear it.

Matt gives me another intimate smile as he and Jessie make their way over to the table, and I almost choke back a laugh as I find myself once again seated between my sun and moon. Matt has taken his spot to my left; Jessie sits across from him and it's then that I feel trapped. Trapped between the man I settled for and the man who'd been my "what if" for almost two decades. What if I'd chosen wrong? What if I had been meant for another life? I pressed fingernails into the palm of my hand and took a sip of water before fastening a smile back on my face.

"So. Are you surprised?" Jessie is the first to speak. He nods his head towards Matt and smirks. He is talking to me, but it takes a second for me to catch on. Jessie isn't irritated, just confused as I try to recover. I run over my silence with a sip of water.

"Of course I am," I say as I make eye contact with my husband, setting my glass back down. My cheeks ache with the weight of my smile. He looks relieved, but it doesn't deter his enthusiasm.

"I was almost surprised myself when Matt called out of the blue. When he said he was going to be here for a few more days, I thought, 'What better surprise for Jess?' I have to say that you've turned out to be a handsome old son of a bitch." Jessie laughs at the end of his sentence, but Matt just smiles. He hasn't said a word yet.

The two of them look expectantly at me. It's an old routine. The go between. I'm supposed to be saying something. Anything. I place my napkin in my lap, avoiding Matt's gaze. It feels like something is caught in my throat so I take another sip of water.

“So how are Sierra and Charlie? He must be, what, nine years old now?” There have been holiday cards, once a year, updates that didn’t sit right with the picture of what I have envisioned for him. A wife and child. A son. As if he would be any different than any other man. The bitterness in my mouth tastes a bit like jealousy.

“They’re well,” Matt says. He has finally used words. His voice is as deep and throaty as I remember it being. “Charlie is a brilliant kid. I’m lucky.” There’s a little stab of pain in my sternum that’s hard to ignore. “But don’t let me bore you with family stuff. What have the two of you been doing? Catch me up on the last decade or two.”

Jessie doesn’t need any more prompting as he takes over where Matt left off, his voice rolling over me in its lullaby cadence until I look at Matt and feel the twitching beginning all over again. And it’s like that through our appetizers, through to our main course, where try as I might, I can’t keep from looking at Matt and wondering what he’s thinking, wondering how he can sit there and go through the motions. I’m finding it hard to concentrate on anything other than those dimples, the smattering of grey around his temples, the way he runs his finger down the side of his wine glass when he pauses to respond to one of Jessie’s questions. I’m not going to be able to take much more.

I take another bite of my duck, the fibrous flesh greasy and lukewarm, a texture that is doing nothing to alleviate the nausea I already feel. I’ve hardly touched my dinner, but no one seems to notice. Taking a deep breath, I reach for my wine and empty what’s left into my mouth, the fruity tang overwhelming the gamey taste. Counting backwards from ten, I take another deep breath and glance at my watch. It’s early still. Time has become a torture that I cannot escape yet. I need for this to end before I do something that I’ll never be able to take back.

And that's when I know the devil is listening. He arrives with the simple chime of a cellphone.

Jessie's work phone is ringing.

I stop pushing sautéed green beans around on my plate and see several emotions pass across his face: geniality, confusion, annoyance, and then resignation. My stomach plummets. I already know what the news is going to be.

Jessie shakes his head and sighs, giving me one of his tight smiles. He's afraid I'm going to be disappointed and that my birthday is ruined. He's partially right.

"There's a problem with a site launch. No one seems to be able to tell their ass from their elbow. I'm sorry, babe. I'm gonna have to go in." He starts to rise from his chair, pulling his wallet out from inside of his coat, and right then, I'm so thankful, so utterly relieved to escape my own personal hell that Jessie's hand hardly registers. He has stopped my ascent with a gentle nudge.

"No, you stay. Catch up with Matt. Do you mind making sure she gets home okay?" he asks over my head. I can feel the color drain from my face, but I keep my eyes locked on Jessie's face, hoping he reads my silent plea. It's no use. His attention is already on work. He's as far from me as if he was already in the office.

"Sure," Matt murmurs. "And dinner's on me. I've already asked them to charge it to my room."

Jessie reaches for Matt outstretched hand one more time and shakes it. "Thanks, man. Well, it's good to see you. Next time, don't let it be so long."

Jessie kisses the top of my head and then he's gone. And I'm finding it hard to breathe.

Matt's hand is gentle when he places it on top of mine. His thumb rubs tiny circles on the side of my wrist that makes me catch my breath before he runs one finger up the inside of my arm and back again. I could pull my hand away and storm out of this restaurant. Go after Jessie. But I don't. And it's then that I know I've sealed my own fate.

"Jessie's been my good friend for a long time, Jess." He says it quietly. It's a moot point and we both know it – a half stab attempt to absolve the blame – but we play along with the charade anyhow.

"And yet you still want it." My voice is quiet like his.

"You know I do." His words ignite the desire in my chest and I feel ludicrously giddy as he bows his head for a second, breaking eye contact before changing his mind. When he glances back up, he looks more defiant. "And you know what? It doesn't feel wrong to me. Maybe there's something broken inside me, Jess, but I just don't *care*." When his words don't elicit a response right away, he becomes almost truculent. "Don't pretend like I'm the only daring one here. Not now. Not like this."

And I know he's right. I know it like I know my own name. My voice trembles, but I don't stop the words from coming because what I say next is the truth. "I know. I'm surprised myself, but you've always had that effect."

He gives me a cheeky grin but he doesn't stop his hand. "It's good to know it's not wasted on you."

Always the tease, always the joker . . . always my soft spot. But I need to know where I stand. I need to know how far this goes, what the outcome will be. I pull my hand away. “But that doesn’t change things, does it? I mean for us . . . after.” Matt pauses before saying anything and when he does, the words surprise me.

“Are you happy, Jess?” he asks. He plays with the fork on his left, pushing it across the table.

I want to say I thought so until you showed back up in my life and showed me what I was missing and now I want what I can’t have, but I don’t say that. I say what he wants to hear.

“Of course.” That’s what I say instead.

“Then that’s your answer. I’m happy, too. I don’t do affairs.”

Confused, I want to ask him what he means, but then it clicks for me, what he’s trying to get at that I’m too obtuse to see right away. There is no future, there is no us, there is only *now*. This night. After that, he’ll disappear just like he did twenty years ago. Could I handle that? That’s what he’s asking me. Am I willing to check our box and walk away?

I frown, knowing he can see it. “You make the assumption that by scratching the itch, it’ll go away, but what if it doesn’t? What if it gets worse, Matt? Even after all these years, all it takes is this,” I motion between the two of us, “and look where we are.”

Matt pushes his chair closer and places his hand palm side up on the table. I bite my bottom lip and look around us nervously. No one is paying any attention to us. He knows. He takes a sip of wine and clears his throat, seeking my full attention. No matter what, he has it.

“I have always lived my life closer to the edge than you, Jess. It’s the way I like it, but the choice is yours. I’ve wanted to make you mine, well, forever, but I won’t promise something I can’t deliver. If you want to come with me, all you have to do is take my hand.”

And my heart cracks just a little more. There it is. Lying out on the table. No promises. No strings attached. Just right here, right now. A final opportunity to answer the question that has plagued me for half a life-time.

I slip my hand into his. Matt squeezes it gently but firmly, his eyes solely focused on my face. But he doesn’t ask me if I’m sure, he doesn’t say anything. Instead, he nods his head and gives me his winning smile.

He takes me by the hand and leads me to the elevator.