

Circle in the Sand (excerpt)

I sit on a brick wall just after sunrise, knowing the odds are against me. I watch the waves twenty yards in front of me—rolling, crashing, spraying, and bringing me solitude. This is where I need to be this morning. I shake the hair from my eyes and let the breeze blow it back. Some days, you can lick your lips and taste a hint of salt; today is one of them. The air is crisp, enticing goose bumps on my exposed arms, awakening my senses, and reminding me why I call this place home.

I look far beyond the whitewash hoping for a sign. The same sign I've searched for on so many other occasions. I need to see the smooth, dark-gray back folding over in the ocean as it releases a massive spray of water. That's my sign. It tells me everything is going to be okay. I have a better chance after sundown, but I need to see this now, before my appointment. Some sort of encouragement would be nice when I'm feeling so alone in this. Yes, I'm used to going it alone, but this time is different.

With my hands pressed down and grinding against the brick, I hang my head for a moment. Close my eyes and think. I go over the last few months and wonder about some of the decisions I've made. I know it seems as if I don't care what people think, but this one is big. I have no problem admitting that I screwed up. I can say that; I'm not a hypocrite. I say a silent prayer in my head, but as I often do, I cannot stay focused on what I'm praying for. That's because as of late I don't know what I want. I begin to sing "Every Rose Has Its Thorn" by Poison, the first song my dad taught me on the guitar when I was only eight years old. Those are my favorite memories of him, when it felt as if I had a real dad. My voice comes out soft, almost a whisper, and I can hear the music in my head. I tell myself that by the time I get to the chorus, I'll glance up and find what I need to see.

The familiar smell of eggs and onion from my favorite taco shop on the corner float under my nose, carried by the ocean breeze. I haven't eaten and now I'm distracted. An egg burrito from Juan's could be my sign, I try to convince myself. But it's no use. I hear the mechanical sound of something rolling toward me, so I stop singing. But I don't open my eyes. I just wait for it to pass.

"Hey, sexy," I hear behind me.

The voice doesn't match the words, so I'm curious. The thought of sustenance fades as I pop my head up, shift my body on the wall to face the sidewalk. A boy on a scooter, probably mid-teens, stares at me as he rolls slowly by.

"Hey!" I yell, stopping him in his tracks. My voice is sharp and deep, and for a second, he is frightened by it, but then I smile and see his fear melt into relief. I know I have this power over people—to make them fear me or love me. "C'mere, man."

His skin is light brown and reminds me of a warm cup of coffee that could whisk my chill away. Braids flutter on each side of his head like some crazy Red Riding Hood as he rolls toward me. His white T-shirt looks like an undershirt, with a gold cross on a chain hanging between the V-neck. His dark blue jeans hang low on his waist. I don't comment on the blue-and-white checkered boxers that border the top. Worst fashion trend since headbands.

"What's up, sexy?" he says and then smiles wide. His teeth are gorgeous, straight and white. It's an effort not to be taken in.

"What do you think you're doing calling a strange woman sexy?" I'm copying Emily's tone when she speaks to her kids, though I don't particularly mind his comment. I want to see what his response is.

He shrugs as he rolls closer and appears surprised to be getting a lecture from someone like me. I'm often told I look much younger than my twenty-eight years. I'm only five-two and my light skin and chubby cheeks don't help. "And why aren't you in school?" I can tell this kid has a story.

"I got suspended. What's your name so I won't have to call you sexy?"

I'm betting this type of charm works on girls his age, but still, I indulge him. I'm enjoying this distraction. "It's Jax. What's yours?"

"Dante." Then he tilts his head a click to the side. "Hey, I know you." He lets his scooter fall to the ground and, in one leap, hops up on the wall, staring down at me. "I saw you with your grandma when I was visiting my great aunt, Lydia."

I recognize instantly he's talking about Rose and Oak Grove, and I'm sure I've even spoken to Lydia before. My new connection with Rose has me there more, but not to volunteer. "That's not my grandma," is all I say.

"I heard you reading that boring ass book to them old ladies." He turns away and takes a few steps along the wall as if it's a balance beam.

“That boring ass book is *Pride and Prejudice*—a classic.”

“Yeah, well I’m against prejudice,” he says in a serious tone. Then he squints over his shoulder and shoots me a grin.

“So why’d you get suspended?” I ask, finding myself liking this kid’s style for some reason. I have no idea what time it is, so I should leave soon. But I still need my sign, and I want to find out more about Dante. This is what I live for—the opportunity to meet an interesting soul. It’s the reason we’re on this earth: to love, learn, and experience. One of the most worthwhile ways to do that is through human interaction.

“We were in English class, and I turned to my friend Eugene and said, “Whoa, dat ass!”

I hold back a smile and say, “So they’re pretty strict about language at your school, huh?” I went to private school and less than that would have gotten you suspended. That’s why I spent half of eighth grade at home watching *Days of Our Lives*.

“No it wasn’t the language, it was *dat* ass.”

“What?”

“Dat ass belonged to my English teacher.” Dante spun on the wall, up on one toe like a ballerina. He was clearly proud of his performance, here and in the classroom.

I laugh, but contain myself quickly. I know I shouldn’t encourage the kid. I went through my own time of disrespect and challenging of authority, but this is his journey. I can hear in his voice; he will learn. “So shouldn’t you be at home then?”

“My mom sent me to the store. *Shit*, I better go before she beats *my* ass.”

“Well it was nice meeting you, Dante.” I shield my eyes with one hand and reach up to him with the other. He’s not paying attention to me and is now facing the water.

“Damn! Did you see that, Jax?” He points out to the sea, and I swivel back that way. My gaze follows his arm, my eyes scramble around until they make a connection. There it is. A solitary whale, bobbing in and out of the water, blasting a beautiful spray of ocean in the air. I fill my lungs with refreshing sea air, then let it all whoosh out freely.

“Thank you, Dante.”



I sit in the waiting room staring at my phone. I should leave Sage a message, in case I'm late. I'd driven twenty miles out of the way to get to this place, to make sure I didn't run into anyone I know. So I'll be cutting it close to get home on time. But I hate to lie so I decide otherwise and turn my phone off. It's not only that I hate to lie; often I'm simply incapable of it. I don't tell someone their new haircut looks nice if it's crap. I don't say I'm fine with something if I'm not. If you know me, you understand you're going to get it straight. I might throw out a warning of, "You don't want to hear my opinion." That's when you get lucky.

I search through my giant purse for something to do to keep my mind occupied. It's cluttered, but contains most anything I'd need in a variety of situations. I'm nothing if not prepared. Watching CNN as the other three in the room are doing is not an option. I couldn't care less about political bullshit. The bracelet I made for Sage's grandmother, Rose, is still in the plastic bag in the side pocket and catches my eye. She loved it, but it was too big so now I have to adjust it. I should have remembered her wrist was smaller than mine, withered away from age and illness. I wonder if I'll see Dante the next time I'm there. He seems sweet under all that swag. Plus, he found my sign, which makes me want him as a friend.

I snatch my book out and begin reading. I leave the bookmark in place because the girls will notice if I don't read where I left off. I really don't mind. *Pride and Prejudice* is my comfort read. After a few minutes a nurse steps through the door.

"Jacqueline?" she says.

The four of us eye her and then each other, but no one gets up. I turn my attention back to my book, but I'm soon distracted by a pair of hideous white shoes that have appeared next to my chair.

"Ms. Kensington?"

"Yes," I say, looking up. Her expression is fake happy. Like she's annoyed she had to seek me out.

"Jacqueline Kensington?"

That name is stuffed so far down my subconscious; I rarely recognize it or respond to it. "Yes, I'm sorry I didn't answer." I jam the book in my purse and stand. "It's Jax."

After we're behind closed doors and she's measuring my height, she says, "Is your name really Jacqueline Onassis Kensington?"

“Unfortunately, yes.” My grandmother’s obsession became my legacy. After my mother got knocked up at seventeen, my controlling grandmother promised to take care of us, pay for my private school, and let us live with her in Ocean Beach.

“I think it’s beautiful. *She* was beautiful,” she says as she jots something down and then points to the scale.

“Yes, but I’m nothing like her.” And I spent my life trying to convince my grandmother, and everyone else, of that.

I step on the scale. I don’t register my weight or ask her what she wrote, as I’m sure Sage and Emily would do. I’m an average girl and that’s fine with me. Sage is masterfully thin and literally works her ass off to be that way. Emily’s weight fluctuates between dangerously thin and big as a house because it seems she is always preparing to get pregnant, is pregnant, or has recently delivered.

We finish with the preliminaries, and she directs me to a room. It’s cold and feels hollow. Even the posters on the wall are clinical instead of sappy or inspirational, similar to some offices I’ve been in. My every movement echoes the sound of crumpled paper and makes me cringe. I hate being here, but I have no choice. As I sit and wait, I think about life. I think about how one night can change everything. Your destiny. Your identity. Then I think of my whale and how it surfaced just at the right time. *Everything’s going to be all right.* But when I glance down, I wonder why my hands are shaking.

