

my life as a

Rock

album

LJ EVANS

ALWAYS

Letter One

*"When you say your prayers, try to understand, I've made mistakes, I'm just a man."
-Bon Jovi, Ingram, & Stanfill*

DEAR BELLA,

I watched you walk away today. You went through security without looking back. I wanted to bust something. I wanted a drink. I wanted you.

You went away because I'm an asshole. I know you say that isn't it. But if that wasn't at least partially true, you'd still be here, or I'd be there with you. Either way, we wouldn't be a country apart. The reality is, I can't keep anything good in my life for long.

I almost bought a ticket and followed you through security. But when I got to the ticket counter, your beautiful face flashed through my mind. And it wasn't your adoring face that I saw. It was your pissed off face. Because I knew that if I followed you now, it would only look like I was trying to possess you again. As if I didn't trust you to love me and go. As if I didn't trust you to eventually come home.

I realized the truth standing there. I don't trust you'll come back. Because there is still a messed-up part of me that is too used to being tossed away. It's a piece of me that I thought I'd thrown out like the garbage it was a long time ago.

But, I should know better than anyone how garbage can come back to life. Don't I weld fragmented pieces together every day? And this garbage, this jagged, bitter piece inside me needs to be mended together so that when you come back, as you say you will, you'll find someone soldered together with gold instead of cheap ass glue.

So that you can have someone who deserves you.

I can't let you go completely though, *Bella*. I won't. So, instead of crossing the line you told me not to cross and flying across this God forsaken country, or beating your family into a pulp trying to get your new phone number, I'm just going to write to you. I don't know if you'll even read the letters. And if you do, I can't promise they'll be pretty. But

hopefully my words will be good enough for you to understand something important. To understand that where I belong is next to you and where you belong is next to me, and that's all that matters. None of the other things that you worry about are important. Just us.

Bon Jovi isn't someone that you'd expect me to listen to. But his words sometimes feel like the story of our life. So today I'll use his words to help me convey to you what I mean. "I will love you forever and always." When you think of our memories, both the loving ones you cherish as well as the ones that made you want to say goodbye, I hope you'll be able to forgive me for making the mistakes I've made as the man I am becomes the man you deserve.

I'll just leave you with one more thought. It's something I wrote a long time ago when I was a screwed-up kid with a screwed-up life. Because it's *that* dumbass kid who's making it hard for me to just let you walk away without a fight. Without fighting to keep that wish that finally came true from disappearing all together.

*I ache,
I can't cry.
I hurt,
I can't let go.
I wish,
I can't obtain.
- Seth Carmen*

BLIND LOVE

PJ After Letter One

*"No one said this would be easy,
but no one said it'd be this hard."*

-Bon Jovi

PJ OPENS THE LETTER from Seth with trepidation. And just his greeting, *Dear Bella*, makes tears well and her stomach turn. He'd rarely called her PJ after that first twenty-four hours together. He'd always called her beautiful. His *Bella*. And it makes her ache.

She'd moved almost three thousand miles away from him on purpose. It wasn't just to attend grad school. Although that was what she told him and everyone else in her life.

She'd walked away because she'd been drowning.

She'd been lost in a wave of Seth.

She'd been lost in her own past and her own mistakes.

She'd moved to New York so she could breathe.

And she is doing all of that, breathing and living and going to school. She's even going out some with Haley and Mina. She's enjoying her life and her classes.

It's why she's waited two days before opening his letter. She was unsure about how much of the intensity that was Seth would pour from its pages. She hadn't given him her new phone number for just that reason. Because she'd known he couldn't resist calling and demanding that she answer, and she'd known she couldn't resist answering and being pulled back in.

So, as a compromise, she'd given him the address to the apartment instead. She'd assumed that a letter would be safer. That she could read a letter and set it aside without feeling the need to respond. And, if she was being honest with herself, she hadn't thought he'd write. Seth was always a man of few words and letters seemed like more words than he was capable of.

She hadn't counted on his *need* for her to counter his lack of communication skills.

As soon as she reads the letter, it brings her back to him and everything that happened in the crazy three and a half months they were together. Just as she knew it would.

What she hadn't expected was to be filled with longing. Longing to wrap her arms around his muscled torso. Longing to reassure the man with the broken kid inside of him that she did in fact still love him. Had loved him from the beginning even though she hadn't been good at showing it. Longing to feel beautiful, adored, and safe as she always did when she was with him.

But. That longing. All of those feelings. They're exactly why she left. There's more to her than longing. There's more to her than being Seth's whole world.

She needs to do this for her. She needs to do this for him. She needs to do this for them.

She puts his letter in one of the boxes she hasn't unpacked because there's no room to do so in the cramped apartment. Then she shuts the bedroom door and leaves the stinky walk-up that she shares with her friends. She catches the subway, hoping that today will be the day that she feels like she's caught up to herself again. Hoping she'll catch up to the girl that's been missing since she was thirteen.

BED OF ROSES

Letter Two

"I want to lay you down on a bed of roses. For tonight I'll sleep on a bed of nails."

-Bon Jovi

DEAR BELLA,

I tried to start this letter a couple thousand times now. There's a damn room full of balled up paper to prove it. The truth is, I just didn't know what to write. Should I try to tell you that I see where we went wrong? That I see where I went wrong? Or should I just beg you to come home?

Part of our problem was that there was so much going on in this thick skull of mine that I couldn't express. Things embedded into me from my past that caused me to react the way I did. But, it was also why I loved you the way I did. The way I do. And so, I can't believe it's all bad.

But, I don't want to write to you about my messed up past either. So, the next best thing is to start at the beginning of us. To try to tell you now the things I should have told you then.

When I met you, I was sleeping on a bed of nails. A bed of my own making. Even though I thought I was living in the now and making my life into something my *abuela* would have been proud of, I was really living as if I didn't deserve anything more. Living as if solitude and art was enough.

The first time I saw you, I thought you were her. That's the reality. I understand you hate that. But, I can't stop it from being true. And even though it wasn't true for more than a few seconds, in that moment she is what I saw when I saw you. I did a double take and my heart stopped, forgetting to pump blood. Forgetting to send air through my veins while I locked my gaze on a mess of chestnut curls.

Locke and Dylan Waters were standing next to me in deep discussion about me. About my art. But it just became a droning in my ear that receded into the background once I'd

seen her... you... and suddenly I couldn't shake my body out of its frozen position enough to listen or care. I was stuck in a sudden flight to Tennessee, thinking, *How is she here?*

Locke is the only manager who will put up with my bad attitude, but even he narrowed his eyes at me when I didn't respond to the question that had been asked. For one second, I thought he'd snap his fingers in my face, and you know that would have ended with him up against a wall, and me without a manager.

I stepped around Locke to try to see her again, you again. But she was gone, and my brain went into panic mode. My breath was aching to get out of me and yet I still couldn't exhale.

And then I caught a glimpse of a purple dress once more. Cam had always liked purple. I turned cold eyes to Locke and tossed out, "Text me later."

Before he could even think to try to stop me, I strode away with a single-minded purpose. Find her. Find Cam.

When I turned the corner around the waterfall mountain that I'd created when I'd been nothing more than a dumbass kid in Tennessee, I caught her staring up at the peacock at the top. It was a bird in flight, and I'd always imagined her as a bird. You couldn't keep Cam down.

My breath finally returned in sharp, jagged movements as if my heart had been removed and then shoved back into my chest. I imagined the surprise that would be in her gray eyes when I eased up next to her. I was sure that it would be followed quickly by her shit-eating grin.

"Ms. Swayne?" I said, hoping I sounded as suave and bad ass as she used to believe I was. But I was really scared shitless, so I couldn't look down yet. I was worried I'd see the pity that had been in her eyes the last time I'd seen her. When she'd had a muscled arm wrapped protectively around her that hadn't belonged to me.

So, when the voice that returned mine was a breathless volley, it shattered all my hopes into a million pieces. Like I'd once shattered a gilded cage with a glass bird inside it which was supposed to be her.

"Pardon me?"

It was your voice. And even at the time, in the middle of my tortured disappointment, I registered how sweet it was. It was light and melodic but it wasn't the gravely, energetic one I heard in my dreams.

I looked down at you with what my *abuela* used to call my devil eyes. I know it. You know it. And when I did, I still caught some Cam in you. You weren't a doppelgänger, but something like a wavy reflection. Your eyes weren't gray, but instead shimmered with a hint of silvery mica that meant they would change colors with what you wore.

That they'd change like the sky changed at sunset.

And I realized then, as I hadn't from the brief glimpse of you, that there wasn't any way in this lifetime that you were tall enough to be Cam. Cam almost met me eye to eye when we were together, and even though I'd continued to grow once I'd left her, you were way too small. You barely reached my shoulder. At least a foot shorter than my six-two.

You've always accused me of being frustratingly vague when I speak. It's so I won't be brutally cruel instead. And, at that moment, with the disappointment radiating off of me because you weren't what I had lost and thought I needed, I could only curse and storm away. I'm sorry now that I hurt you.

It took me all of five strides to be staring down at the liquor table. I could feel the thirst. Before that day, it had been a long time since I'd actively had to stop myself from pouring a drink. It had been five and a half years since I'd stopped. And there'd only been one time I'd slipped since then. Only one before you. But seeing you and not her... that letdown... it was enough to make me thirstier than I'd been since my mom died.

When you tapped my arm, I continued to be the bastard I'd always been and ignored you because I was battling for control. Battling to come back from the edge of that loss of Cam all over again.

"Look, jackass, you mind telling me what that was all about?" And that combination of your melodious voice and your harsh words dragged my attention away from the alcohol and my loss.

And in those few seconds, you changed my life.

I looked down at you and was caught in a whole different way. A way that had nothing to do with Cam and everything to do with you. I could tell you were close to my age, but looked way more innocent. Like life hadn't squashed you yet. I know that's not true now, but at the time, that first impression was of angelic goodness.

Yet, even under that sweetness, I could sense you holding yourself together with something stronger. Like you were more steel than sugar. You were so many contradictions rolled into one that I couldn't keep my eyes from devouring you.

Your face was all fine bones and heart shapes, but your body seemed all lean muscle. Your huge anime eyes were flashing at me with a bit of lightning instead of halos while your thick, curly hair seemed to have a life of its own that you couldn't be bothered to control even though everything else about you screamed self-control. There had been hints of Cam in you, it was what had drawn me, but from that moment on, I swear to my *abuela's* God, *Bella*, you never reminded me of her again.

As my eyes continued to take you in, you seemed to get more and more irate. And, that's what did it. I couldn't help but smile at you then. My very best smile. The smile I reserved for getting what I wanted. A smile I hadn't used in so long it almost tore my

cheeks apart to use it. But, it got the reaction I needed because the lightning in those enormous eyes swallowed by dark lashes faded just a little.

I wanted to smooth out those ruffles of you just a hint more, so I drawled in my Southern accent that I'd never fully acquired in my short stay in Tennessee, "Sorry, darlin', thought you were someone else."

But you, this tiny, fairy-like creature in front of me, were not taking my apology or my sexy smile. You put your hand on your hip daring me to try again. And you continued to flip my entire world as you cast your spell. I'm not sure what you used. Pixie dust. Magic. You name it, but I was gone.

"I heard you were an arrogant jerk, and that you were more likely to try to get my dress off than talk to me, but being an asshole can be a story too, right?"

Your fiery boldness made me chuckle. Your outraged tone and the sassy jut of your hip in that flirty, purple dress were still full of contradictions. You made my head spin with brand new images of jewels and stone and ceramic.

You didn't seem to appreciate my laugh and I tried to tame it. When you turned to flounce away, I couldn't let you. Not yet, so I took two steps and caught your arm.

"Wait," I said trying hard not to grin which only made you angrier, or perhaps it was my hand on your elbow. Your face turned as pink as your shoes as you jerked your arm from me.

"Mr. Carmen, I'd advise you to stop while you're ahead."

"Shit. If this is ahead, I might as well as go all in." And I pulled you to me and kissed your full lips. The moment our mouths touched, desire hit me like a wave onto a cliff.

You stiffened with shock before you relaxed into me, and you astonished me yet again by darting a tongue that tasted like bubblegum against my lips. I graciously responded by opening my mouth and engaging in some tongue tangling of my own. Just as you'd hit me in the pit of my belly with a craving no one else could quench, you shoved me and backed away with a strength that continued to rock my world with the paradoxes that were you.

I staggered and reached for you at the same time. But you escaped.

"Tell Locke he won't be happy with my post." And you stormed away into the night.

As the gallery door clanged shut behind you, metal ringing against metal, all I thought in succession was, *damn. I don't even know her name and shit, Locke does, and he'll be pissed.*

As I turned back to the table of booze and food, I no longer had any desire to drink from the sparkling glasses. Instead, I wanted a pack of Bubblicious.