

from your first cigarette to your last dying day

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by [meriwethersays](#)

Summary

No seventeen-year-old really understands, when Section 31 comes knocking, that there's no way out. Winona certainly doesn't. She doesn't know what they see in her application to the Academy that leads a recruiter to approach her outside her dormitory one night, when she's on her way to meet a few friends for a study group—only that they tell her she's singular, that she can do more to protect the Federation as part of Section 31 than she ever could without it, and why doesn't she come along with them now for an interview.

She says yes.

Notes

See end for CW.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

No seventeen-year-old really understands, when Section 31 comes knocking, that there's no way out. Winona certainly doesn't. She doesn't know what they see in her application to the Academy that leads a recruiter to approach her outside her dormitory one night, when she's on her way to meet a few friends for a study group—only that they tell her she's singular, that she can do more to protect the Federation as part of Section 31 than she ever could without it, and why doesn't she come along with them now for an interview, study group can wait.

“You'll still graduate from the Academy.” There are only two notable features to her recruiter: he wears a matte black Starfleet pin, and there's a certain tightness to his posture, a shape of immense energy restrained, that Winona can't help but find exciting. “You'll rise through the ranks at an appropriate—perhaps slightly expedited—pace. No one will ever suspect that you're anything other than an ordinary—perhaps slightly precocious—Starfleet officer.”

“But I won't be an ordinary Starfleet officer?”

“You'll be a Starfleet officer. You'll go into space, if you want.” It had never crossed Winona's mind that she might not. “But sometimes—occasionally, when needed—your missions will be different.” He explains that they'll be secret, dangerous, and she won't ever be able to tell anyone else about them, and with every word he draws a picture for her of a world beyond anything she's imagined.

With all the enthusiasm and poor foresight of a teenager, Winona says yes. She's always been a little wild—sometimes her father would say that he didn't know where she'd gotten it, and there would be a bite to his words if he said it around her mother. Not a lawbreaker but an inveterate rulebreaker. She's spent her whole life looking at the sky and Starfleet always seemed like the best way to get there, but this, being a *spy*—that's even better.

They lull her into a false sense of ease and pleasure. Her first job is simple—attend a fancy party in disguise and slip something into a man's drink without being noticed—and there's a rush to it, putting on the persona of someone else, finding the most subtle way to approach him, or unsubtle when she realizes that will work better. It happens smoothly, no trouble whatsoever, and within a day she's back at the Academy, glowing with her success.

Section 31 trains her in parallel with her Starfleet training, which means that by the time she's learning hand-to-hand combat at the Academy, she already knows how to fall, how to play wounded, how to slip away from someone's hold or lean into it. And it's another game, figuring out how to excel without revealing exactly how much she knows, a complex give-and-take that she enjoys. She goes on more missions, on

weekends, on the breaks between terms, and they're more challenging, mentally and physically and—soon—emotionally.

The first time her actions lead directly to a target's death, she throws up after the mission ends. "It's normal," her handler says. He's an adjunct professor in his late fifties and she suspects, somewhere in the back of her mind, that he's assigned to her because of her poor relationship with her father. "He was a threat to the Federation. Threats like that—do you know how many people would have died if he'd succeeded?"

"Yes," Winona says. Her throat still burns with bile.

"We make the sacrifice by being the ones to do this, so that no one else has to be burdened with the guilt." He pats her shoulder and offers her a mug of tea in a green porcelain mug. It reminds Winona of the mugs at her grandmothers' house. "This will help calm you, if you want it."

She accepts the mug of tea and sips it slowly. She should visit her grandmothers, Winona thinks. Three generations back live in that house, their lives spanning the 22nd century, and her great-great-grandmother is nearly 100 now. They marry young and outlive their husbands, her mother's side of the family, and unlike her mother, the grandmothers always approved of Starfleet. Her grandma was born when the Federation was still in its infancy, and she grew up in that first flush of excitement. "Thanks," she says. "I know the threats have to be eliminated, to protect the Federation." If it tastes a little funny coming out of her mouth, well, that's just the strange tea.

Then Winona makes the critical error of finding her—soulmate. A fresh-faced lieutenant with a sweet smile shows up at the weekly parrises squares game she plays with some of her more violent classmates and asks, "Do you have room for one more?" Winona gets him square in the ribs with an ion mallet and feels a little bad about it—he doesn't play as rough as the rest of them. On the sidelines, he looks at her with innocent eyes and says, "Can you check if I've got any broken ribs?"

She raises an eyebrow. "I'm not exactly a doctor."

"Aw, come on. I bet you've hit enough people to know whether you've broken a rib," he says, and he flashes her a smile. "I'll buy you a drink after."

Winona laughs. "If you want to buy me a drink in exchange for subpar medical advice, I guess I can't refuse. Take your shirt off."

"Of course, part of a standard examination," he says, and his grin gets a little wider.

One of his teammates yells, "Hey, Kirk! Any excuse to get your shirt off, huh?"

"Oh, I'm George," he tells Winona, as she runs her fingers gently along his ribs. "George Kirk."

She looks up into his eyes and starts to say "Winona—" and then her fingers brush across something that must be his soul-mark and oh *fuck*. It's like freefall, like pushing off into open space in EV training, and George is staring back at her starry-eyed. "You look like you're concussed," is all she can think to say. Then she leans in to kiss him and touches his mark again, because why the hell not.

He's from Iowa too, it turns out—Pleasant Plain, even smaller than Riverside—and he's a lieutenant, stationed at the Academy while awaiting reassignment. They have sex that night and he's just as sweet as he seemed, and he looks at her with such trust that she knows no one has ever lied to him, not really. Which means that she can never tell him the truth. Her handler goes to the trouble of reminding her of that anyway, at their next meeting.

"No one said I wouldn't be allowed to fall in love," Winona says. "When my soulmate came along."

"No," her handler says, and he looks at her with something like pity. "But the mission will always have to come first, and you'll never be able to tell him why." Her handler—or at least, his cover identity—has been married and divorced twice. "You know, most people in Section 31 find that their marks disappear fairly rapidly. It's your bad luck that you happened to find him first."

"What about kids?" She's not even sure she wants kids, finds them terrifying little creatures, but she resents rules. He doesn't have kids, as far as she knows.

"If you want. But nothing changes. The mission comes first." He looks a little sympathetic. "If you do, you should marry someone who can always be available to take care of them. A fellow officer who wants to go into space too is the wrong choice."

"It's not exactly a *choice*," she points out and he only shakes his head.

Winona doesn't listen to him—or she does, and it doesn't matter. She and George complete the bond almost immediately because she's stupid and impulsive and she's twenty and after all, the universe destined them to be together, or whatever. Section 31 gives her a female handler, the same age as Winona's grandmother, who's still kind to Winona but has a certain edge of impatience to her. Winona and George get married and then have Sam, because kids are important to George and Winona...doesn't mind. George's parents are happy to care for him when George and Winona are both off-planet. Old Tiberius fixes Winona with a glare that says he thinks she's an unfit mother for abandoning her child and how could his son ever have a soulmate like her.

But she and George fight, all the time. Winona loves George, but sometimes she thinks that everything she loves about him is everything that makes their marriage such a struggle. "I never see you," George says. "We get maybe a month together, if we're lucky, and then you're running off-planet with no notice—I'm trying to be responsible, I choose my postings carefully, and you just—don't care."

"I care," Winona tells him. "I love you, and Sam. This is just how it is." What more can she say about it? Sometimes she wants to tell him the truth, but she knows that he would be angry and he would tell her to leave Section 31, and no one leaves Section 31. She wants to say it's temporary, but it's not, and the lie would be worse.

"Why did you agree to have a kid, if you didn't want to be a mother?" That's a gut-punch, one that makes Winona angry at George in a way that she can't seem to quiet. George knows that it was over the line, whatever invisible line they've drawn around this one crack in their

marriage that can't quite be filled, and he says, "Winona—I just miss you. I want the three of us to be a family, and this—doesn't feel like a family to me."

"There's nothing stopping you from requesting an Earth posting," Winona says, and there's something very cold inside her. "You could be home in Iowa with Sam, and then we'd all be together whenever I'm on-planet."

"How often would that be?" George asks, and he's dodging her point, the obvious one, which is that for all he talks about careful scheduling, he's just as unwilling to give up his career, his dream of being a captain one of these days. "How much time do you spend on Earth?"

Less and less, these days. She has her Section 31 missions and then she has her role as an actual engineering officer on a Starfleet ship, and she loves to kiss Sam's head and let him grab at her hair with his chubby fingers and she doesn't mind changing diapers or the fact that he clearly loves George more than he loves her. That's just—how it works. "I swore an oath," she tells him, and he looks a little confused, because she swore her oath to Starfleet when she graduated and they were already married then. "George—I love you, but this is—" She can't say *this isn't what I wanted* because there's a part of her that did, that does, and another part of her that wishes maybe she'd never found him in the first place.

It's a monumentally stupid idea to have another child. They're barely caring for the one that they have, but Winona can't help thinking that a kid should have a sibling—she never did—and that when, inevitably, something happens to her, at least they'll have each other, and at least George will have them. Section 31 is surprisingly generous about it. They assign her to the Kelvin for the last two months of her pregnancy with some schematics to decipher—she is, nominally, an engineer—and Winona thinks, all right, maybe this will be a little easier. Captain Robau is a generous man and knows the struggle of a Starfleet marriage, and he gives George more time off than any first officer has ever had. She and George get to sleep in the same bed and she looks at him and strokes the soul-mark and thinks about everything she loves about him. They carefully don't talk about what will happen after their second child is born because it'll only start a fight, and why spoil the time they have together? That's what they always seem to be doing, fighting or not talking about anything important, just to avoid fighting.

But George dies. Winona screams her rage and grief into the emptiness of space, where there is no sound. Her mark flickers out of existence when it happens. George wasn't the one who was supposed to die first. Winona was always going to die first, because George is the steady parent, the steady human, the one who's never broken a man's neck or kidnapped someone or fabricated blackmail material, and Winona is the one who carries illegal weapons and dips behind the Neutral Zone or into Klingon space all too often. George dies, and Winona is in shock and she's a widow at twenty-three years old, with a toddler and an infant and no idea what to do with them.

Section 31 gives her one year. One year to figure out what to do with them, because she can hardly take them with her. "We could fake your death too," her handler offers, "and they would be placed with an appropriate family. We could guarantee that it would be a good one." Winona stares at the woman. Maybe it would be the less selfish option, to make the clean break, when she'll never be able to be around with any regularity. But they're already going to grow up without a father, and whether or not she wanted to have them in the first place, they're hers, and she won't let that lie be told to them.

She would ask her grandmothers to take the boys, but her grandma is very sick and all three of them have moved to Los Angeles for treatment, for the slow inevitable progress of the disease. So much for long life. Tiberius wants nothing to do with her, grieving his son. Instead, Winona finally follows her first handler's advice and marries someone who will take care of the boys. Frank is steady, works at the Riverside shipyard with regular hours, and when Section 31 runs a background check on him, they assure her that he's clean. Frank always liked her in high school, and it's easy enough to slide into that relationship. She and Frank are pragmatic about their situation the way that many Starfleet couples are—in a way that Winona and George never were—and ask each other for discretion rather than fidelity. He'll never leave Iowa. He'll never even leave Riverside. The boys will be safe with him, and Winona will come back when she can, and it will be—as good as it could, at least.

Sometimes when she comes home the boys are sullen, sad, but she can't help blaming it on her absence. Half the time she's away on missions for Section 31 and half the time she's performing the Starfleet duties of the Commander Winona Kirk that never joined Section 31, and it's a fraction of the time, maybe a month or two every year, that she's home. Wouldn't she be sullen, to have such a mother? At least they have Frank, steady Frank to be their stepfather.

When Jim goes to Tarsus, Winona doesn't hear about it; she's on a deep-cover mission to identify and expose the person in a planetary government who's been diverting monthly dilithium shipments. It's only when she emerges, when she's been thoroughly debriefed and is sloughing off the persona she's adopted, that a Section 31 officer she's only ever met once approaches her. "Commander Kirk," she says, and then she explains.

Winona has done many things in the nearly twenty years that she's been with Section 31, and none has ever filled her with such a combination of rage and horror as what's happened to Jim. "You didn't fucking know this was happening?" She spits it at her handler. "I've been undercover for six months, reporting every goddamn week, and no one thought it was worth mentioning?"

No one says sorry, or even what she knows they're thinking, which is that of course no one told her because it would have led to her aborting her mission and that would have been unacceptable. But they do give her a fast shuttle that day to the starbase hospital where Jim has been evacuated, faster than anyone in Starfleet proper knows about, and she's there within a few days of his arrival. She knows exactly where he is before she arrives, and no one stands in her way as she goes directly to his room. It's been nine months since she last saw him and he's thin, so thin, and for a moment he stares at her like he doesn't recognize her. Then he's launching himself out of bed and she grabs him in her arms and holds him tight, all his bony angles pressed against her. She can feel his body shaking with sobs, with choked breaths, and when he lifts his head from her shoulder, he leaves a damp patch on her uniform there.

They shuffle awkwardly back to his hospital bed, and when he sits down, she sits beside him and keeps her arm around him. She should be softer, she thinks, gentle and comforting, but there's only sharp rage inside her. "You survived," she tells him, instead of you're okay, which would be a laughable lie. "You survived."

"Mom," he says, and it's the first time he's spoken since she got there. "Mom, I—"

Winona knows what he's going to say. "You did what you had to do." She doesn't know if that's the absolution he needs. "I'm proud of you." She never wanted her son to have to kill someone, but he did what had to be done, that he was able to. She hasn't cried in a long time, not since George died, but when she sees the way that Jim's soul-mark has changed, she does. Later, when Jim is asleep again—he sleeps a lot, which she supposes is good, but he has nightmares—she reads the full Section 31 report on the Tarsus IV massacre. Two months of ordinary colony-building and then a fungus ravaged the crops, the food supplies, and Kodos took it into his head to reduce the population dramatically, instantly, by executing four thousand of the—least valuable people.

Section 31 says it wasn't exactly a successful rapid execution. The report documents eight weeks of attempts by Kodos's soldiers to hunt down and kill everyone—and there were thousands—who escaped the initial execution. People ran and hid. Jim, the report notes, was not marked for death, but ran into the woods with a group of children who had been and is believed to have kept them all alive for all those weeks. Winona skims over the names of the children, makes note of them for future reference.

Jim is suspected of having been involved in sporadic raids on the governor's residence, on the soldiers' barracks, on the food stores. The report sounds a little impressed. A few days before Federation relief ships arrived, the governor's residence was burned to the ground. A body believed to be that of Kodos was located inside. But Section 31 notes that the combination of accelerants used to destroy the residence has corrupted even its substantial ability to perform DNA testing and confirm that death. Winona looks at that careful recipe for arson, sees the clever use of fertilizer, and thinks that Jim's only mistake was including the lamoth crystals.

Then, at the end, the report notes that Kodos is believed to have been acting on the orders of another man. That perhaps the fungus was not a natural disaster, but had been intentionally seeded to justify Kodos's actions in the form of eugenic manipulation. Winona knows that she's being manipulated too even as she reads it. With Kodos dead, she would have no target for her rage, but for this man Karidian that Section 31 suspects of involvement.

Winona takes Jim home after another week in the hospital. Sam has moved out, but he comes home to help take care of Jim, help coax him to eat and see a counselor and sleep in his room to keep the nightmares away. Her handlers check in, to put it generously, after a month. "We need you back, Winona," they say. "We have leads on Karidian." There's fire in her blood, hate in her heart, but she puts them off, over and over, while Jim has screaming nightmares about Kodos surviving, while he hoards food and sleeps with a battered knife under his pillow. She takes the knife and leaves him a better one. Her handlers inspire Starfleet to comm her and offer Winona her own ship, a ship built with experimental technology that will take her away for missions and bring her back even faster.

Jim overhears. He must, because he confronts her and says, "You have to go." His eyes are pained and old-man weary and he tells her, "The nightmares are getting better—I know Kodos is dead. My counselor says I'm making good progress. You should go. I'll have Sam. And Frank," he adds, and the way he speaks Frank's name makes Winona twitchy.

She calls her handler. "Is Frank taking good care of the kids?" she asks.

Her handler knows what this is about and she knows what to tell Winona. "He's an excellent guardian," her handler says. "They're safe with him." Would they ever tell her, if he wasn't?

Winona puts off leaving for two more weeks, and then she gets two messages at the same time—Section 31 has a strong lead on Karidian, and Admiral Terral says she either accepts the ship or gives it up. "Will you boys be okay if I go away again for a little while?" she asks at dinner. Jim, she sees, is eating a full plate of food.

"Of course, Mom," Jim says, with an exaggerated eyeroll. Sam is a moment behind him and Frank nods.

The next day she hugs her sons goodbye, holds them tight to her in a three-way hug, and then gives Frank an obligatory kiss goodbye. "Take care of each other," she says, and then she disappears into the search for Karidian.

The lead takes her from planet to planet, from one nasty little eugenicist sect to another, and never has she appreciated more her pale skin and blonde hair, her youthful face, because she may be thirty-six but these groups always want more women who like her as broodmares for their perfect societies. It's the only time she's ever been glad to have her mother's heritage so completely erased from her appearance. She loses all sense of time.

She marries five different men in the course of her hunt, gets what information she can from them and then hands them off to Section 31's experimental mind-probe division. Winona uses every skill she has to make her way closer and closer to Karidian, until she finds him on a chilly night in a smoky industrial district on a planet she's never heard of.

Winona smiles and simpers and breaks fingers and kneecaps to get in the same room with him. He looks like the pinnacle of his own Human eugenic dream, tall and blond-haired and blue-eyed and Winona has seen so many men that look like some variation of him, in the last however many months, that it's like looking at a vision of all of them at once. There's murder in her heart when he tells the guards to leave them, with a significant glance at each, and when the doors close, it's all she can do not to snap his neck there and then. But no, she knocks him down and he only realizes what's really happening after he's eagerly taken off his pants—when she kicks his legs apart and takes out her phaser. "What the fuck are you doing?" he demands. "What the fuck—"

She wrinkles her nose as she looks down at him and adjusts the setting on her phaser. "Karidian?" she asks.

"What do you want?"

Winona shakes her head. "Did anyone ever tell you, Karidian, that you shouldn't ask questions you don't want the answers to?"

* * * * *

"You castrated him?" Her latest handler looks up from the report. "Kirk—"

"Well, I thought about putting out his eyes," Winona says honestly. "But I thought you might need him to identify something visually." Now

that the hunt is over—now that Karidian is safely in Section 31 custody for extended interrogation and eventual death—she’s starting to look around and wonder just exactly how long she’s been out of touch. “Believe me, I wanted to kill him.”

“His—” Her handler looks faintly nauseous. He’s new.

She almost wants to ask what year it is, but that seems like a terrifying question because she thinks it might have been over a year that she’s been hunting Karidian. “Has anything happened at home while I’ve been gone?” Maybe it shouldn’t be so easy for her to switch over, but she’s grown very good at compartmentalizing these days.

The handler seems uneasy. “Kirk—it’s been over two years.”

“Jesus fucking Christ.” Winona’s dead grandmothers would’ve smacked her for using language like that, but Winona is too stunned to come up with anything else. It shouldn’t be a surprise to her, not when she thinks back to the number of weekly check-ins she had with her endless rotation of handlers, but she still can’t fathom it. “Do my kids know I’m not dead?”

“Unexpected deep-space mission,” the handler recites. “Called away rapidly, couldn’t be helped, not sure when you’ll be back.”

“I have to contact them,” Winona says. “Now, I have to contact them now.”

“They’ll be notified that your ship is on its way back. You can call them in a week.” The handler must see some kind of apocalyptic anger in Winona’s eyes because he adds, “Kirk, if you could see yourself right now, you wouldn’t let yourself anywhere near a holocomm, let alone a kid. One week.”

“I want to go back to Earth.”

“Your ship is waiting. In a week, you can call and tell them you’ll be back in another week. After that, you’ll have a month’s leave.” At Winona’s expression, he adds, “You know, you’re a Starfleet officer too. You have to keep up appearances.” He looks like he’s about to say something more, and then remembers that she castrated a man less than 24 hours ago and decides not to.

When she calls, Jim answers and then stares at her. “Mom?” He has a black eye and one lip is puffy. “They told us you were coming back, but —”

“The ship is going to drop me off in Chicago in a week,” she says, trying to keep the anger out of her voice. “I’ll have a month of leave. Who hurt you, Jim?”

He shakes his head and laughs a little humorlessly. “What, this? It’s nothing, I just got in a fight.”

“A fight—you’re too young to get into fights like that!”

“I’m sixteen,” Jim says, and his voice is tight with anger, and damnit, she knows that anger, she’s heard it in her own voice. “I know you might’ve forgotten about a couple birthdays, while you were out there—”

Jesus, sixteen, he’s only a year younger than she was when she went to Starfleet and signed up for...this. “Sixteen is too young,” she snaps, instead of trying to explain that yes, she forgot about his birthdays, but it’s because she was hunting down the man who caused him so much pain. “You should go get it fixed up.”

He laughs at that and says, “See you in a week, Mom,” and ends the call.

Winona wants to tell him. A sanitized version, of course, but she wants to tell him about Section 31—she wants to warn him and she wants him to understand. She thinks he’s like her, angry at the world and reckless, and unlike her he’s got good reason to be. After surviving Tarsus, she thinks, how could anything else seem very intimidating?

When she goes home, Frank isn’t there—Jim rattles off some obvious lie about Frank having to go visit sick family, and Winona can’t bring herself to care about not seeing Frank. She’s too tired from the last two years to care about very much, beyond the fact that Jim and Sam are both safe. Sam is off at the Academy, studying xenobiology, so it’s only her and Jim in the farmhouse, living in their separate rooms and passing by each other and sometimes interacting—she tries to make dinner and he says “I already ate,” she suggests that they take bikes out and Jim looks a little scornful and says “I could smoke you on the bike I’ve got.” They do race and she drives dirty, but he still beats her—her old PX70 is no match for whatever flashy new thing he’s got, and how did he get it anyway?

“Your dad used to put me on the back of this motorcycle and drive me around,” she says, when Jim seems to have his guard down. “It made me crazy. I told him once that he should sit on the back and let me drive.”

“Oh yeah?” Jim is wary but sometimes willing to hear her stories about George. “Did he ever?”

“Only once, he told me I drove like a bat out of hell and he’d be putting his life at risk if he rode with me like that.” She’d been knocked up with Jim at the time, though neither of them had known it.

“You do drive like a bat out of hell,” Jim tells her, and he smiles a little. She wonders who taught him how to ride a bike while she was out destroying men to find Karidian. She wishes she’d been the one to do it.

They only have a month together, a month for Winona to try to learn this teenage boy who’s sprouted from that traumatized child that came home from Tarsus. He knows she has to leave again, grows more and more silent, until the very last night, when he shows up late to eat a dinner she’s replicated, and she can’t exactly get annoyed when she only had to press a few buttons to produce it. She knows he’s stopped going to school. She knows it won’t make a difference if she tries to persuade him to go back. “Hey,” she says, when he’s finally stuffing a pile of spaghetti into his mouth and can’t immediately talk back. “I don’t know what you want to do with your life, and I don’t think you

know, but don't—sign up for anything you can't get out of.”

He squints at her and gulps down the spaghetti. “Is this your way of telling me not to join Starfleet?”

“Hm? No.” It hadn't occurred to her, even. She doesn't know him well enough to know whether he'd want to join Starfleet, and what does that say about her? “No, just—there are things you can't take back. Always make sure you've got an exit route.” She's being too oblique, trying to tell him not to sign on if Section 31 comes calling, but she can't say what she wants to.

Jim's face just—closes. Whatever tentative camaraderie they've built disappears. “You always have an exit route, don't you,” he says, and shoves his chair back from the table. Winona could order him to sit back down, could tell him not to talk to her that way, but who's she to say that kind of thing? She wishes Frank were here. He must be able to calm Jim.

“Jim,” she says helplessly, but he shakes his head and leaves the kitchen. He doesn't show up to say goodbye when she catches her shuttle back up into space.

Their relationship is stilted, at best, from then on. She doesn't know how to make it up to him, so she sends him meaningless messages, holocards from the worlds they stop at, ship schematics with coded messages inside that say dumb things like *took you long enough to figure this out*. She's never bold enough to code one that just says *I love you*, even though she signs all her messages *Love, Mom*, like that will make up for it. It must take a lot of bravery to be a real parent, she thinks. He sends messages back, math puzzles, holos of the neighbors' cows, and she tells him, *I broke my arm falling off one of those cows when I tried to ride it as a kid*.

I broke my arm falling off the roof, he writes, no more context, and she spends forty-five minutes running down hospital records before she discovers that he doesn't mean now, he means years ago. That leaves a yawning pit in her stomach, the idea that Frank didn't even tell her when Jim broke his arm. *I'm in jail, don't worry*, he sends the day after she starts another six-month assignment, and then, in a message whose bitterness curdles in Winona's mouth, *I'm out of jail*, the day she gets back. What can she say? That she was out of communication for six months, when there's no good reason for it that she could tell him?

You must've been running the place by the time you got out seems weak when she sends it, and then she sends a series of holo-cards from strange planets that she later realizes must seem like taunting, like saying *I'm out visiting all these worlds and I didn't bother to respond*.

I'm pretty busy, he says. *Might have slower response times*. He sends it encoded into a holo-card of the George Kirk Memorial Shipyards and she wonders if he meant it to hurt her heart like it does. It doesn't matter. Her ship is the Curie when they're in Federation territory and operating under the Starfleet flag, but it takes so many different names, the Belladonna and the Delahaye and the Dieu-le-Veut, just as she and her crew slip in and out of different personas. They steal secrets, technology, even a few slaves when their paths cross. All their transmissions have to be routed through separate Federation comm relays before they can be transmitted on—same with incoming transmissions—and half the time she doesn't get the message from Jim until she's already sent one of her own. It must seem like she doesn't give the slightest shit about him.

There's a very long period of silence, nearly a year, and she would go back to Earth if she could but they're trying to steal a Romulan cloaking device and it's not exactly a good time to be skipping back to the Federation. It feels like a long time before she gets a message from Jim that says only, *I joined Starfleet*.

“Tell me you didn't recruit him,” she says to her handler, after she's turned in the components of the device. “Tell me that my son is not a part of Section 31.”

Her handler turns pale. “Not to my knowledge,” he stammers. He's really never gotten over that castration of Karidian. “But I'll confirm.” A day later, he confirms it, and so Winona sends her message on to Jim, *don't burn the place down before I have a chance to see you graduate*. She's going to go to his graduation, she tells herself. No matter what, she'll go to it.

It's sheer bad luck that she's in Earth orbit when Frank dies. She wishes she hadn't found out until well afterward. She's come to suspect, over the years, that he might not have been the father she'd hoped to have selected for her sons, that perhaps Section 31 was lying to her when they said that things were fine. But here, in Earth orbit, she has to go through certain motions. Alert Jim, who's only just finished his first year at the Academy; send a message to Sam, posted on the Soval; and go back to Iowa for a performance as the grieving widow.

The weekend is a shitshow from start to finish. She can't actually remember the last time she saw Frank—maybe after Jim came home from Tarsus? She never thought much about him when she was off-world and she never cared that much about him when she was on-world; theirs was a marriage of complete convenience, so she doesn't exactly have a speech to give. Neither of them was even nominally religious, but he gets a Christian funeral because it means that the pastor will do all the talking and all she has to do is nod a couple times and look sad.

Sam is rigid, so stiff that when she hugs him, it takes him too long to soften enough to hug her back. His hair is cut short in the Vulcan style and when he speaks, she can hear him trying to suppress emotion in his voice. She's known enough Vulcans to know a Human trying to adopt their manners. And Jim—Jim is boneless, loose, drunk from before he arrives to at least the moment that he boards the shuttle back to San Francisco. There's a very uncomfortable girl with him, a blonde cadet who can't be more than nineteen and can't possibly have known what she was signing up for when she agreed to come with him. Winona catches them in various states of undress at least five times that weekend, once almost entirely naked together in the coat closet at the church, and she should say “Show a little respect,” but why? She didn't respect Frank, and if Jim wants to throw it in her face that Frank was never a fit parent, that the man she chose to be his guardian all these years was the wrong choice—well, she can't help thinking that's his right. When he isn't fucking his classmate in a coat closet, Jim is wildly exaggerated, laughing aloud at several moments in the funeral sermon, shaking hands with the few people who came and exclaiming, “Thank you for coming!” and once, only once, looking Winona straight in the eyes and saying, “I'm so sorry for your loss,” with a vicious twist to the words. A few times, Sam goes to him and puts a hand on his arm, speaks quietly into his ear, and every time, Jim shrugs him off almost violently.

He leaves without speaking more than a few sentences to Winona and doesn't let her hug him. The cadet, whose name he never speaks aloud, looks back at Winona with an apologetic face and Winona just shakes her head to say *It's not your fault*. The monumental nature of her failure

as a mother has never been more apparent to her. She doesn't blame George for the kids, but how she hates him for dying on her.

After the funeral, a town official sends her a message asking if she would like them to do anything to preserve the house. Of course, the house. It's the Kirk house now, never mind that it was Winona's grandmothers' house, never mind that the only Kirk who's ever really lived there is Jim Kirk, who would probably burn the place down if he could. Preserve it, she tells them. Cover the whole thing in stasis fields. She'll deal with it later, in a few years. If she lets them think that it's because she's a grieving widow, well, good enough.

It's not that she's done with Earth, exactly. She sends Jim a few tentative messages, just to see if there's any hope of some kind of ongoing relationship. He responds, though she doesn't know if that means he feels guilty about his behavior at the funeral or just wants to forget the entire thing. He sends her the silliest tourist holo-cards from San Francisco that he can find, and she does the same from every planet that she visits as the Curie. Once, only once, does she start to purchase one on a planet when her ship is traveling as the Dieu-le-Veut, and then she remembers in horror and cancels the message. Section 31 would have received it first, of course, and reviewed it and deleted it, but even the fact that she nearly made the error—

Jim doesn't send it to her, but she finds out his scheduled Starfleet graduation date. "I'm going," she tells her handler.

"We'll certainly make every effort—"

"Section 31 will make it happen or I'll leave."

He squirms in his chair. Winona wonders if he's a handler because he doesn't have the stomach for fieldwork. "Kirk, that's not—"

"I know what you did," she says, and lets him squirm and wonder which of the many terrible things that Section 31 has done to her she's referring to. "I know. Section 31 owes me this. It owes Jim this." It owes Jim, for lying to her about what kind of stepfather Frank would be, for letting him be sent to Tarsus in the first place, for forcing her to put Section 31 ahead of Jim every single time there's been the slightest conflict. "And you know me," she says. "If you can't give me this, I will happily die burning Section 31 to the ground."

They promise that she'll be able to attend the graduation.

Then—then comes the death of Vulcan and the coronation of James T. Kirk. It burns in her throat, that now it will look like she came to this graduation, this award ceremony, only because he's finally accomplished something worthy of her recognition. Winona knows Jim at least that much, to know how he'll see it. But she goes anyway, keeps the Curie in Earth orbit, and she hopes that he looks up her flight plan filed with Starfleet and sees that she was always going to be here.

After the ceremony, she goes to him and she hugs him, holds him tight and inhales that particular chemical smell of a freshly-replicated Starfleet uniform. He's taller than she is now, taller than he was the last time she hugged him nearly seven years ago, and he puts his arms around her and says, "Hey, Mom."

She pulls back and looks at him, cups his face in her hands and sees her child, a boy who's all hers beneath that exterior that resembles George so strongly. She has no right to him, she knows, and her eyes are blurry with tears. "I'm so proud of you," she says.

"Don't cry, it's terrifying," Jim says.

Winona laughs and blots the tears on the sleeve of her uniform. "Everybody's crying."

"Yeah, but everybody isn't you." He sounds like a kid, she thinks, and she straightens her back and pulls herself back into the right shape. He watches her do it with something strange in his eyes, and maybe she's never let herself make the switch so quickly in front of him before.

"Do you have time for dinner?" she asks.

Jim glances over at a couple of his friends who are beckoning to him, then back at her. "Yeah, okay," he says. "There are some restaurants—"

Winona wants to tell him the truth. She comes so close so many times, that night. "Have you encountered the Tal'Shiar?" she asks him. "The Romulan intelligence service." When he shakes his head, she dares to say, "Watch out for them. Intelligence services are—always dangerous. Even the ones on our side." But Jim is five drinks deep, and he only nods and says something with a lot of bravado and the moment is gone.

She doesn't hear from him beyond the occasional holo-card for nearly two years, until she comes back from a mission to discover a holo message from him. "Hey, Mom," he says, and then gestures at someone. His Vulcan XO, Spock, enters the field of view. "So it turns out Spock and I are soulmates, and we were thinking that maybe we should have some kind of Earth wedding?" Spock looks deeply pained, as much as a Vulcan ever does. "At the house, maybe? I want to make sure we do it sometime you can come, so—let me know. Love you." She can see Spock starting to say something as the holo message ends.

At the wedding, Winona vows, she's going to tell him the truth.

End Notes

References to Tarsus IV and suspected child abuse, as well as plenty of offscreen (and a little onscreen) violence.

Winona Kirk's apparent absence from Jim's life has always bothered me. This was the explanation that made the most sense to me. It was supposed to be about 500 words.

Title from "When You're a Jet" from West Side Story.

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