

Title: Where The Heart Is

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Rating: General

Characters: Tara, Jax

Warnings/labels: None

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Summary: It's been eleven years since Tara last set foot in Charming. But some things never change.

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"Thanks." Tara gave the driver his money and watched until the taxi's taillights had disappeared around the corner before she turned toward the house. It sat melancholy in the fading twilight of the California evening, its outline against the star-studded sky strange yet familiar at the same time.

Grabbing the handle of her suitcase more firmly, she towed it after her up the driveway, the clatter of its small plastic wheels loud against the cracked pavement. Weeds pushed up through the breaks, accentuating the house's general look of neglect.

Her key still worked; seemed her dad had never had reason to change the locks. Pushing open the door, she scrabbled around for the light switch, but she wasn't very surprised when nothing happened as she flicked it. First thing tomorrow, she noted mentally: call the electric company and get the house back on the grid.

Leaving the suitcase just inside the door, she felt her way toward the kitchen. She hoped the emergency flashlight was still in the cabinet over the sink. She only bumped, painfully, into furniture not being where she remembered three times before she reached the kitchen. It wasn't as dark in there—the light of the moon filtered through the window—and she quickly located the flashlight. The beam that played around once she turned it on was weak: the batteries were clearly old and in need of replacement. She was fairly sure they'd last the night, though. Just another thing to do in the morning, then.

Once she could see again, she grew conscious how the house smelled rank, like it hadn't been aired properly in too long. Crinkling her nose and trying not to sneeze in the dust that danced in the flashlight's beam, she went around cracking open a few windows. Charming might be a backwater town, but that had its advantages: it was something she'd never have dared do in Chicago.

She was tired from the stress of the last weeks, exhausted by the flight from Illinois—she didn't mean the plane trip—and didn't feel up to more exploring in the gloom. While sweet, fresh air made its way into the house, chasing off some of the mustiness, she collected her luggage and, without really thinking about it, made her way down the hall toward the small

room at the end—a room she'd thought she'd left behind for good eleven years ago.

Angling the flashlight beam from where she stood by the doorway, she snorted a laugh. Though her father had obviously used the room for extra storage space and sagging heaps of boxes stood everywhere, nothing had really changed. The small, single bed was still beside the door, though the flowered spread had faded compared with her memory. The desk with the crooked leg propped up with a folded notepad page remained right in front of the window, though barely visible under the clutter her packrat dad had piled up on it. And on the wall was the concert poster announcing the joint Bowie/Nine Inch Nails concert in Mountain View she'd gone to see when she was, what...? Seventeen? Eighteen? A lifetime ago, anyway.

Jax had taken her, she remembered, on the back of his bike, and they hadn't come back till dawn. There'd been hell to pay, but she hadn't regretted the night out.

She sighed; she'd tried hard not to think of Jax ever since she'd seen the opening at St. Thomas and started plotting her return to Charming. But she hadn't been home for five minutes before he'd crept back into her conscious thoughts. *I'm not here for Jax*, she reminded herself: it was over a decade ago; they'd been young, wild and stupid; and undoubtedly he'd moved on, just as she had. She knew she'd broken his heart, though, the way she left, and she regretted *that*.

Pushing the recollections of her youthful sins from her mind, she cleared a space for her suitcase before she went to find a clean sheet to drape over the dusty bed. It'd do for the night; she'd worry about laundry and cleaning and decluttering tomorrow.

Tara was asleep five minutes after she put her head down.

oOo

The rumble was low at first, thrumming softly at the very edge of perception. But it quickly grew louder and she recognized it for what it was almost immediately: Harley motorcycles. More than one, too.

She turned toward the noise even as it became loud enough that she could feel the thunder vibrate in her belly. A handful of riders rolled past her in that tight formation she remembered admiring when she'd been a teenager. Clad in uniform denim and leather, they were hard to match with the names and faces she remembered, though the reaper on their backs left little doubt that the Sons were still a force to be reckoned with in Charming. But—involuntarily, her heart missed a beat—she did know the one in the lead. Dirty-blond hair stuck out from under his helmet, though the blue eyes were hidden behind a pair of sunglasses: Jax.

As she watched, the riders stopped a little further down the street and backed their bikes neatly against the curb, before sliding off. Tara's feet carried her over reflexively.

"Hey."

Jax spun around. His eyes, no longer hidden, widened. "Tara?"

And damned if her heart didn't do another little skip at the way he said her name. "Yeah." She smiled, afraid she was looking more sheepish than she'd like.

His mouth quirked up. "Mom said you were back." His gaze flicked to the grocery bags in her arms. "You stayin'?"

"Yeah," she said a second time. Feeling she owed him a bit more than that, she went on, "Got a job at St. Thomas. Pediatric residency. After my father died...." She shrugged, leaving the rest unsaid. She wasn't about to tell him the real truth, anyway, about how Joshua had scared her enough to send her running. Didn't matter, either. Josh was back in Chicago, and she'd been careful not to leave a trace of where she'd gone.

"So, you're a doctor now, huh?" He scrubbed a hand through his hair, leaving it more tangled than before. "Good for you."

His tone was mild, maybe even a little amused. If she'd expected anger or hostility, after the way she'd left, she didn't find any. Seemed like it had been a long time ago for him as well as her. He looked good, though, she decided, finally having grown into his shoulders, while the blond goatee covering his chin wasn't nearly as patchy as it had been.

Behind him, the other Sons hovered, curiously sizing her up. *Tig*, she remembered, meeting the cold, pale eyes that were now watching her with hawkish distrust. His stare still gave her shivers, and she quickly shifted her gaze. The Scotsman she knew too, his scars hard to forget, though she failed to dig up his name from her memory. The third one was younger and shorter, with lightning bolt tattoos on his shaven head. Must've patched in after she'd been gone, she decided, the vernacular coming back to her unbidden.

"I should—." Jax jerked a thumb across his shoulder.

Tara nodded. "Yeah, me too." She hesitated another moment. "It's good to see you, Jax."

He dipped his head as he stepped aside to let her pass. "You too, Tara. See you round, kay?"

"Sure." Half feeling like she was running a gauntlet, she'd made her way through the cluster of Sons, when Jax called her name again. She twisted around, arching an eyebrow.

He smiled. "Welcome home."

She nodded. Her eyes suddenly stung, even as she felt her mouth curve into the first genuine smile in a long time. It *was* good to be home.

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