

What This Means

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Summary

It turns out that the middle of the emergency room at six o'clock in the morning is probably not the best place to have a life-changing revelation.

It's half-past six in the morning in California, which means it's... Jess does the math in her head, automatic after two years overseas. Early afternoon back home. She turns the phone over in her hands, then dials the number automatically from memory.

"Tony?" she says when the call connects. "It's Jess. I've kinda got a problem?"

The seats in the emergency room are hard plastic, but Jess is too keyed up to sit anyways. She paces the room, stopping at a table to flip through magazines, then shifting to glance at the nurses' station, before making a circuit around the room again. Rinse, repeat.

She's the only one in the room at this hour. The sun hasn't even risen yet, and the sky is only just starting to turn gray on the horizon. Jess plays with the mostly full cup in her hands, lukewarm tea that she only got because she's British, and tea is what Brits do in a crisis. She's too nervous to leave the room to get more; it would give her something to do, but the risk of missing the doctor when he finally comes out isn't worth the temporary alleviation of boredom.

The last thing Jules had said to her before a nurse with a wheelchair had brought her back was, "Don't call my parents yet? My mum would freak, and it might be nothing, right?"

Jess had forced a smile and nodded, said, "sure" and tried to sound reassuring. She'd avoided looking directly at Jules.

The thing is, Jess realizes as she wears a hole in the emergency room carpet, the thing is that she's pretty sure she can't stay in America without Jules. She's not sure what that means, but it's a fact that's lodged in the middle of her chest, right next to her heart.

Five o'clock AM in the flat is pretty typical; Jess wakes up first, lying in bed until she hears Jules curse and stumble to her feet in the room next door. Then she sits up and stretches her arms above her head, ties her hair back as she abandons the warmth of her blankets.

They're out the door by 5:30 every morning, rain or shine. It's mandatory during soccer season, when their coach wants them on the field by six for training, and they keep the tradition during the off-season as well.

That morning hadn't been any different. They'd exchanged sleepy "good morning"s and matched pace out the door and onto the sidewalk. Jules had taken the lead when they had reached the entrance to the park, and Jess had fallen in easily behind her.

Jules had run that path a hundred times since they'd moved to Santa Clara, but a storm had blown through the night before, and neither of them had seen the tree limb on the ground, half buried beneath mud and invisible in the predawn light.

Jess heard a snap, a cry of pain, and then Jules was on the ground. All Jess can remember is the look on her face, skin white and cheeks damp with tears of pain. The scream as she'd tried to stand and put weight on her ankle, only Jess' support keeping her from falling again.

The ambulance hadn't put its lights on. Jules had said, "Figures, the first time I ride in an ambulance and I don't even get a siren," trying to joke through the obvious pain.

Jess had held her hand and thought everything that neither of them would voice aloud.

What if Jules' ankle was broken?

What if she couldn't play soccer anymore?

What would happen if she lost her scholarship?

Would she have to go home?

And then, standing in the middle of the emergency room, watching a nurse wheel Jules back to an exam room, another question hit Jess:

How would she survive in Santa Clara without Jules at her side?

"Jess?" Tony sounds surprised; he knows the call is long distance, and he's probably doing the same math that Jess did a moment before. "What's going on?"

"I'm, um, in the hospital?" Jess winces, scrubbing her free hand over her face. "I mean, I'm not. I'm okay," she rushes to reassure. "It's Jules."

Tony's silent for a moment. "Is she okay?"

"I don't know," Jess says. "It's her ankle, she tripped while we were running, and I heard a snap, and I just..." she trails off. All she can think about suddenly is Joe. Joe who she loved but was never in love with, with his knee injury that prevented him from fulfilling his dream of playing. "What if she can't play anymore?"

"Oh, Jess," Tony says. "I'm sure Jules will be fine. Athletes get injured all the time, yeah? Remember when Beckham broke his foot, he was out for most of a season, but he came back better than ever."

Jess bites her lip. She knows it's true, logically, but her mind won't let her accept that. "Tony," she whispers. "If she loses her scholarship and has to go home because she can't play anymore, I don't think I'll be able to stay without her. What does that mean?"

Tony exhales into the phone. "Jess, she's your best friend," he says.

"And Joe was my boyfriend, but I wouldn't give up my dream of playing football for him," Jess says. She closes her eyes and says the words that have been sitting in her chest since she watched Jules get taken into the ER. "I'd give it up for Jules, though."

"Oh, Jess," Tony says again, but this time it sounds like understanding.

The sun is up by the time a nurse finally comes out, and Jess has collapsed into a chair, the adrenaline fading after hours of nothing to fuel it.

There are other people in the waiting room by now, but Jess is on her feet before he can even call a name.

"Is she okay?" Jess asks.

The nurse holds up a hand, clearly taken aback. "Are you the family for Ms. Paxton?"

"There's no one else here for her," Jess says quickly. "We're students here, on scholarship, her family's in England. I'm her best mate though, we're roommates. Is she alright? Is her ankle broken?" The words are a blur, but Jess can't stop talking.

"Ms. Paxton asked that you be brought back to her room," the nurse says. "I haven't seen her chart, so I don't know anything about your friends' status, but I'll take you back to her."

"Oh." Jess rocks back on her heels, deflated.

The nurse clearly isn't sure what to make of her, and he keeps glancing over at Jess as he leads her down the hall. Jess can imagine what she looks like, muddy trainers and worn sweats, barely containing herself to walk like a normal person down the hallway.

The door is open and Jules is sitting on a bed, leg stretched out in front of her. Jess abandons the nurse and dashes forward into Jules' open arms.

"Are you okay?" Jess asks, the question buried in Jules' hair.

"They had to wait for the swelling to go down to get a good x-ray," Jules says. She seems cheerful enough, and Jess relaxes her hold enough to pull back so she can see Jules' face. "You should have seen it, the entire ankle was like a balloon!"

The ankle in question is currently wrapped in a bandage, but no cast.

"A sprain," Jules says, confirming what Jess sees. "A bad one. I'm off my foot for a week, and no running or playing for at least another week after that, and the muscles are gonna be stiff and sore for a good while, but I'll be fine by the time the season starts."

The relief must show on Jess' face, because Jules suddenly pulls her close so that they're hugging again.

"I was worried," Jess says quietly. "All I could think was the worst, that if you couldn't play anymore they'd take your scholarship away, and you'd have to go home."

"Oh, Jess," Jules says.

The next words are so quiet that Jules only barely catches them. “I would have come with you though,” Jess whispers.

“Hm?” Jules asks, stroking that back of Jess’ head soothingly.

“If you had to go home. I would have come with you.”

With anyone else, Jess would have had to explain herself, but Jules has always seemed to get her better than anyone. “I won’t leave you,” she says.

“Good,” Jess says, “because I’m pretty sure I can’t leave you, either.”

“I don’t know what this is,” Jess says into the phone. “I don’t know what this means.”

She can hear the smile in Tony’s voice. “I’m pretty sure that’s love,” he says.

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