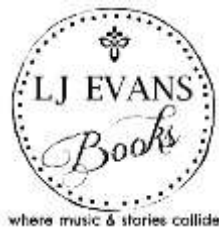


my life as a

Mixtape

LJ EVANS

my life as an album series, volume IV



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Published by LJ Evans Books
www.ljevansbooks.com

Cover Design: © Designed With Grace
Cover Images: © Galina Kovalenko | Dreamstime.com
Editing: Jenn Lockwood Editing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publications in process.

ASIN:
ISBN: 978-1723958847

Printed in the United States

EXCERPT:

TAKE YOUR TIME The Dairy Queen & Stories

*“My heart is pounding but
It’s just a conversation...
You don’t know me
I don’t know you, but I want to.”
—Sam Hunt*

She stood up and went to the edge of the water, looking out at a wooden dock that seemed like it had been there longer than either of us had been alive. As I watched, she started shedding clothes. Shoes first, then yoga pants, and then the t-shirt.

My body responded, watching this gorgeous, slender, model-like red-head strip down to her undies and a tank top. I liked women. Loved sexy-as-hell women. And she was all of that and more.

“What the hell you doing?” I finally choked out, but she didn’t respond. She stepped into the lake and then started swimming out toward the beat-up dock.

After a few strokes, she stopped and turned toward me. Her hair was wet and shiny, and she wore a smile on her face that made the fading sun and the emerging stars all disappear.

“Come on, Monkey Boy.”

“Is it even safe to swim in that?” I asked doubtfully because it was a lake. A green, muddy lake.

“City boy, you afraid of a little bit of mud?” She laughed at me.

What could I say to that? All I could do was strip down to my boxers and hope that I didn’t embarrass myself with the hard-on that I was trying to control.

The water helped. Cold as shit.

She was already pulling herself out of the water onto the dock by the time I was taking my first stroke. Her body glistened in the twilight. She lay down on the dock so that all I could see were toes. Slender. gorgeous toes that I wanted to take a photo of—like I wanted to take a photo of every piece of her.

I pulled myself up, and the dock creaked at my weight. I eyed it warily. She opened her eyes long enough to sneer at me.

“What’s wrong now?”

“Is this thing even safe?”

“Yes. It’s been here for fifteen years or so. We were probably, what...nine or ten...when we hauled it out here. I guess Jake would have been about thirteen.”

“You’re telling me that a bunch of kids made this?”

“I think Blake and his friend, Wade, helped too, and they were even older than Jake, so maybe fifteen? A whole group of us got it out here, and then we anchored it down. It’s been here ever since.”

I was kind of impressed by that. A whole group of kids working together to put a dock out in the middle of a lake that they then proceeded to use until it wasn't needed by them anymore. I bet it was used by a whole new crew of wild teenagers these days.

I lay down on the dock next to her, keeping a safe distance between us. I was pretty damned sure that if even one part of my nearly naked body touched her nearly naked body that I wasn't going to be able to keep myself from kissing the hell out of her. Scratch that, not just kiss her, do a lot more than that to her.

I turned my head back from those thoughts of her body to thoughts of her life.

"You had an interesting childhood growing up here."

"No lakes, and docks, and crazy tomboys in your life?"

"Nah, but there was the ocean, and surfboards, and Derek's band, so I guess we had our own kind of crazy."

"You surfed?"

I nodded.

But talk of surfing made me think of things I didn't want to think about. People I didn't want to think about. To Lita. She was probably why I'd felt such a responsibility to Wynn today. Wynn's mood had echoed my painful experiences with Lita.

My silence seemed to get to Wynn. "Don't feel like you have to expand or anything."

And I didn't.

It kind of made me a jerk, but I wasn't prepared to talk about Lita today. Which just meant I wasn't prepared to talk about growing up at all, because Lita was tied up in those memories. Every single one of them. Today was too good of a day to ruin with Lita's messed up life.

"Can I ask you a question?" I turned so that I was on my side looking down on her. Which was a mistake because she was her gorgeous self, wet and glistening in the summer heat and shadowy light.

"Do you ever stop asking questions?" She gave me a weak smile that was not her real one. It was her on guard one.

"Why'd you leave?" I asked.

"You mean here?"

"Yeah."

"Because you like it here so much?" She teased me.

I nodded. I did like it here. It felt like home. Or like I'd always imagined a home should feel like when my own had never felt that way. I wondered if Lita and I had grown up here, in the countryside, if she would have ended up saner than she was now.

"College," Wynn responded to my question.

"Isn't there one closer than Nashville? And you didn't come back after you graduated. Why not?"

She looked up at the stars that had started to filter into the sky. The crickets started chirping. An owl hooted. She was thinking about a response, and I

wondered for a moment if she'd even answer me. After all, I hadn't answered her unspoken questions about my childhood.

"I guess I thought this place was too small for the future I wanted to have," she said after a long time.

I took that in. Maybe I could understand that. Living where everyone knew everything about you might make you want to run far away. Might make you want to have something for yourself that no one else knew about but you.

"But you're back now?" I prodded.

"Without a future."

I could tell she wanted to take it back as soon as it was out. "Shit. You're only what, twenty-three? Twenty-four? You have a whole life still in front of you."

"Okay. But being *twenty-five*," she emphasized her age like I should have known it, "and already having a divorce under your belt doesn't bode well for any future endeavors."

I turned back to the sky because looking at her was harder than I could have ever expected.

"One mistake doesn't make you a failure," I replied automatically, but truthfully.

She didn't respond, and we just lay there, watching the stars wink into existence in a way I never got to see in L.A. Here, in this part of Tennessee, they were out nightly. And here at the lake, they were stunning. Like her, glimmering...shiny...heart-wrenching.

“Look at it this way,” I told her. “Now you get to have a whole bunch more firsts.”

“What?” she asked. I could feel her looking at me, and I risked turning my head to meet her eyes. They were so pale that it was hard to see them in the darkness that had settled over us as the light disappeared completely.

“You know. First time getting drunk...after the divorce. Well, hell, you already did that.” She smiled weakly, and I continued. “How about first date...after the divorce? First kiss...after the divorce. First time making love...after the divorce. It’s like you get a whole shitload of do-overs now but with more experience than you had when you did those things the first time. You can do them better now than when you did them as a kid.”

She held her breath at my words and stared at me.

Then, she leaned slightly forward and kissed my cheek. Her lips hit my skin and filled me with a scent of berries and lake, and I had to clench my fingers into my fist to prevent myself from pulling her all the way to me and devouring all of her, not just those sweet, full lips.

“Thank you,” she breathed out as she settled back on the dock and stared at the night.

“For what?”

“For trying to make me feel better. For reminding me that there’s more to life than this moment.”

But as soon as she said it, I was struck with a longing

I didn't normally have. A longing to have this particular moment last forever. Because lying on the dock in the dusk with this beautiful creature might be something I could do three hundred and sixty-five days a year. And that was definitely not in any of my plans.