



**UNDER  
THE  
SUNSET  
GLOW**



**C.H. YOUNG**



# Under the Sunset Glow

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Author's Note:

While the majority of this book is set in high school, it contains foul language and scenes intended for mature readers, such as underage sexual activities between two consenting individuals.

I am also aware that volleyball is not the most popular sport in the States, but since this is a fictional story set in a fictional world, I feel I have the liberty to make it that way. Boarding schools aren't very common as well, but I'd like to think it is.

# Summary

It happened on a late afternoon. They just rounded the corner that led to a narrow bridge, laughing at something silly Maddison was saying. The last rays of sunset glowed behind Sam, brilliant orange and golden yellows with hints of purples and blues indicating that night was on its way to take over. The effect made Maddison stop and stare. There's something about the twilight that changed Sam's appearance in front of him. And as Sam's laughter died upon noticing Maddison's blatant gawking, the other felt heat rushing to his face and he was forced to look away from the breathtaking sight before him.

Maddison didn't understand it then – why his heart was thumping loud, wanting out of his ribcage, nor was he flushing, hands trembling. He was confused, flustered. This was just Sammy, so why?

They were about to begin high school when Flynn Maddison realized he was in love with Sam Bailey.

# Prologue

Maddison couldn't remember a time when Sam was not there with him.

Every time he looked for Sam, he was there. A steady light, a guide for when Maddison didn't know what to do in his darkest moments. A pillar to lean on when everything seemed to crumble, when nothing went right, when he was frustrated with himself and with all that was surrounding him.

Sam was permanent. Constant.

But even that changed, or at least Maddison knew it was about to change, when he realized he was in love with his best friend.

It happened on a late afternoon, a rather normal one where they were walking home together after club activities like often. They just rounded the corner that led to the narrow bridge, laughing at something silly Maddison said. The last rays of sunset glowed behind Sam, brilliant orange and golden yellows with hints of purples and blues and pinks indicating that night was on its way to take over the day. The effect made Maddison stop and stare. There's something about the twilight that changed Sam's appearance in front of him. And as Sam's laughter died upon noticing Maddison's blatant gawking, the other felt heat rushing to his face and he was forced to look away from the breathtaking sight before him.

When he looked back, the glow was still there, and Maddison didn't understand it then — why his heart was thumping loud, wanting out of his ribcage, nor was he flushing, and his hands trembling. He was confused at first, flustered. This was just Sammy, so why?

He jolted when Sam nudged his shoulder lightly, telling him to quit staring, weirdo. Maddison laughed it

off, coming back with a weak insult that had Sam's arm encircling his neck and his fist on top of Maddison's head.

They went their separate ways when they reached their block, Sam waving as he crossed the street opposite Maddison's house, where his two-story home was, tile roof navy blue and wooden fences white, a sight Sam had been familiar with for as long as he remembered.

"Let's play Smash Brothers after homework," Sam called before jumping over the fences, not bothering to open the kissing gate. Maddison nodded with a wave and a little smile.

Yelling a quick "I'm home", Maddison rushed up to his room, his back pressing his door closed and breathing a sigh of relief in the solitude it provided. Only when he watched Sam enter his house from his bedroom window was he able to breathe properly, heartbeat going back to normal. He placed his cool palms onto his heated cheeks and looked around his cluttered room, canvas and paints scattered all over the floor. An easel stood right beside the window overlooking the front yard; overlooking Sam's room which was adjacent to his own.

When they were little, around seven or eight, they used to take their whiteboards and markers to the windows and talk that way, big, wobbly letters written and silly drawings made for each other when they were past their curfews to play. They now had phones and computers, so the game seemed useless when they could easily communicate with just a couple of taps on a screen. It never failed to make Maddison smile when he remembered that though.

Sitting down on his bed, he breathed yet again another sigh, his hand tapping his pants. He had the urge to paint, his dainty fingers itching to touch his

brushes. Gathering his materials, he sat down in front of the vacant easel and grabbed a blank canvas, mixing paint and preparing water right beside it. He didn't bother changing out of his clothes — he couldn't care less. He needed to do this now. He looked out the window, across the street and at Sam's window. The beige blinds were down, and he was sure his best friend was still downstairs and eating dinner. Sam would most likely do his homework right after, because unlike Maddison, Sam liked to follow his schedule diligently like the athlete he was. Maddison was spontaneous, impulsive. If he needed something, wanted something to be done, he had to do it then and there, no more waiting for later. And right now, he needed to paint, needed to let these confusing emotions out.

He closed his eyes and thought of what he wanted to see on the canvas in front of him. The images his mind conjured were all of Sam's. Beautiful Sam; from the first time they met when the Baileys arrived in the neighborhood; their primary school days, their first summer festival together sans their parents when they were nine; to when Sam decided he wanted to attend the same middle school as Maddison; to the moment he became the volleyball club's ace, the proud smile he offered Maddison when the latter won his first art competition. The moment he cried so hard when their team lost the regional finals, losing their chance at the nationals, Sam's snot and tears staining the front of Maddison's favorite Area51 shirt until he fell asleep. That one time they won and he looked around the crowd for Maddison and waved at him the moment his sight landed on his friend, his eyes twinkling so bright Maddison could see it from where he was standing at the second level of the gymnasium. The glowing look he had under the sunset that afternoon, just a little less than an hour ago.

Maddison opened his eyes, realized what he had to realize, and started painting that very last image. It was

the first painting he had done of Sam. Sam, his best friend, his partner-in-crime, his first love.

They were in the last year of middle school when Maddison Flynn realized he was in love with Samuel Bailey.



# Chapter 1

“Sammy, hurry up!”

Maddison was bouncing on his feet, practically buzzing with excitement as he stood waiting on the Baileys’ porch for his best friend to come out of the door. It was their first day of high school, and though it was a bit early, the opening ceremony not starting until an hour later, Maddison was rushing to get to their new school, where they would be creating new memories and learn a whole new set of things for three years. Hillwood High School was just a fifteen-minute walk away from their houses, but Maddison was eager. A part of him knew it wasn’t because of their new school, but because Sam chose the same high school as he did, so they would still be together for a while.

“Since when are you excited to go to school?” A grumble. Sam walked out the door, and Maddison had to stop his breath from whooshing out loud. It was unfair. No one should be that good-looking in a shirt and dark blue jeans.

“Hey, Sammy. I’m always excited to go to school,” he retaliated, stepping closer to his best friend. “Here, your hoodie is bunched up.”

“Thanks.”

Maddison grinned, admiring his best friend openly. He was wearing the same thing as Maddison, but where Sam’s shirt was black, his was pastel purple under a navy cardigan paired with the lightest color of jeans he owned. Maddison didn’t think he looked as good as Sam did in them. And his light brown slacks hugged his hips and backside in all the right ways and puberty was kind to Sam and it was just so, so unfair.

He wasn’t exactly insecure of himself — in fact he was confident in his looks. A lot of girls in middle school

were proof of how cute he was, to say the least, receiving confession after confession, but of course he rejected them all. He just didn't see the point. Over the summer, he grew taller than Sam, and he started using hair products while his older sister taught him how to use skin care products as well to 'maintain his soft, creamy-white skin'. It was unfair how Sam didn't need to use anything like that but still looked effortlessly beautiful.

"We're going now!" Sam called out as they went down the three steps off the porch, only to be stopped by Sam's mother, who was holding a lunch bag. She handed it to Sam with a soft smile.

"Good luck on your first day, Sam," she said before looking at Maddison with a brighter smile. "My, my, did you grow prettier, Mads?"

Maddison giggled, hand moving to the back of his head. "Thank you, Erica. Taller too!"

"You did, huh. You're taller than Sam now. You can take care of him better now, I bet."

"Of course."

"Doll face, you can't even take care of yourself."

"Uh, rude?" Maddison stuck his tongue out at him, but Sam already turned his back and started walking out of the fence.

"Hey! Wait up." Turning to Sam's mother, he waved, "Bye, Erica."

"Take care, you two."

"Sammy! Wait up."

Sam slowed his pace until Maddison caught up with him, and they walked side by side. The morning was still cool, the flowers still blossoming, and the scent lingered in the air, fresh and soothing. They chatted idly on the way, random things like *'hey do you think our homeroom teacher is nice'* or *'are we even in the same*

*class' and 'of course we are because if we aren't then Sammy will be super sad' added by 'Doll Face, who would even miss you'.*

When they reached the school, students were piling in too, and there were marshals ushering the students to line up by their classes. Maddison hurriedly pulled Sam to the bulletin board, searching for their names.

“Yay! Sammy, we’re classmates,” Maddison exclaimed, relief and more excitement flooding his chest. A year with Sam together, he silently thanked his lucky stars.

“Yay,” Sam mumbled.

“Hey, now! What’s with the lukewarm response?” Maddison pouted, but instead of answering, Sam pulled his hand and led them to where Class 5 was queued. They were joined by other students and they all waited for the principal to welcome them with a speech.

“Say, Sammy, are you still joining the volleyball club?”

“Of course, why do you even ask?”

“Nothing, just making sure.”

“What about you?” Sam asked in return. “Are you still joining the art club?”

“Of course, why do you even ask?” Maddison mimicked, sticking his tongue out playfully. Sam rolled his eyes at him, and then his expression turned serious.

“Are you sure you made the right decision though? Wellspring Academy offered you a scholarship —”

With a sigh, Maddison waved him off. “Sammy, we’ve been over this. Hillwood has an amazing art program and is one of the best in the city. I’m going to be fine. In fact,” he grinned, “I’m going to be the best. Just watch, Sammy, you’ll see.”

“I know, I’m always watching,” Sam replied, and it did things to Maddison’s heart. “It’s just that, I know this school is one of the best, but Wellspring is the best, and I just think you’re wasting the chance to be —”

“Shush, Sammy, it’s starting!” Maddison put his finger to his lip, effectively shutting up his all-knowing best friend when he saw the principal climbing up the podium to start the ceremony.

He knew why he was here, why he chose this second-best school over the most prestigious one in the city. It was not because of the art program, nor the system. No. It was because of Sam himself. If Maddison were to attend Wellspring, he had to move out and be at the boujee boarding school. He’d be away from his family, from Sammy, and he couldn’t bear even just the thought of being separated from his best friend. He didn’t care if he was sacrificing his talent and potential for this. As obsessive as it sounded, he needed to be with Sam, in any way he could.

Maddison was aware that his feelings might remain forever hidden, afraid that if he were to let it out and tell his best friend, he’d be rejected and the other would sever their ties. He might not want to be with Maddison, might be disgusted with him. Sam never gave any indication that he could be gay.

Maddison, over the summer vacation after realizing he felt more for Sam than just friendship, tried his best to forget about the feeling, to dismiss it, but he just couldn’t. Every day it grew, stronger, potent. His sketchbooks were filled with drawings of Sam, paintings inspired by him. It scared Maddison how much he felt for his best friend, and that this feeling might cost him the friendship he very carefully treasured. He reached the decision to never tell Sam then, and just stay by his side, loyal and kind to him, until they were forced to go their own ways. Until then, Maddison would hold on to his feelings while

maintaining the relationship they built and cultivated ever since they were young.

The transition from middle school to high school was a lot easier than Maddison had expected. The classes, albeit more advanced, were not as grueling as their seniors had warned them. The teachers were kind, their classmates familiar as most of the kids at Cherish Grove Middle school ended up attending Hillwood High School. The art club was excited to have the prodigy Maddison Flynn under their wings, welcoming him with heart-warming smiles and praises — they've all seen his art pieces from before. The attention they gave him was that of someone important, like a celebrity, and instead of being overwhelmed, he loved it. Maddison basked in their attention. It was a nice feeling, being acknowledged for something you do, something you're good at.

He was given his own desk in the art club, positioned beside the wall just right beside the door. He wanted the desk beside the window, as there's better lighting there than anywhere in the room, but his seniors were there. He needed to be in sophomore or junior year before he could sit by the window then. Maddison set up his art materials in his desk, an old easel standing to the left of the wooden table. Grabbing one of his many paint brushes and tubes of paint, he began mixing colors in a palette and stared at his blank canvas. He had two hours to spare in this room; he promised Sam they would go home together. Dipping his brush onto the paint, Maddison worked on the one image his fingers itched to draw. Moss green for the eyes, raven black for the hair. He smiled. Another piece of Sam was coming to life through his canvas.

Later, Maddison stood by the brick gate, his foot and back leaning against the wall. The sun was about to set, a beautiful purplish-pinkish sky. It would be nice to paint this. Maybe when he got home, after dinner, he would. He went back to scrolling his Instagram feed,

sucking on a lollipop. Sam was taking too long. Or were they extending their practice because of the upcoming preliminaries? He should ask him so he wouldn't wait here outside, when he could have finished a painting or two in the club room while waiting instead of standing here looking like an idiot.

After a while, when the sky was darkened and blue, Sam arrived. His shirt was ruffled and his necktie untied. His hair was still wet from the shower and he was yawning. Practice must have been awful.

"You look like hell incarnate, Sammy," Maddison greeted cheerfully when he reached him.

"Shut up," Sam all but grumbled, walking ahead of Maddison. The other immediately caught up.

"Come on, I'll get you some hotdogs."

"Thanks. I'm starving." The smile Sam threw in his direction made Maddison's heart do a flip and he looked away, almost a hundred percent sure he was blushing. Damn cute smile dammit.

"Sammy, are you practicing for prelims now?"

"Yeah, actually. In the mornings, too, so I have to be extra early. About that," Sam looked at him. "I wouldn't be able to go to school with you and might not be able to go home with you too."

Maddison pouted, "I can always spend extra time in the club room. Plus I can use the senior class' spot near the window. Six am?"

"Six am," Sam nodded. "That's too early for you though. Classes won't start until eight."

"That's okay. I always love the ambience in the morning. It's peaceful."

"If you say so. But I won't wait for you if you're late."

A scoff. "I'm an early riser."

“Early riser, my ass. Whatever, get me that hot dog.”

“So bossy, Sammy.”

The closer the date of preliminaries approached, the lesser time Sam spent with Maddison. Their practices extended to eight in the evening and Sam forced him to go home without him. Even on weekends, the team had to be in the gym for the whole day. They even had training camps, going to different schools overnight to train with other teams. It was awful. Maddison missed his Sammy, but as petulant as he was, he couldn't complain. It was volleyball, after all. And as Sam's best friend, he must support him.

Even though they were just freshmen, Sam was already part of the starting line-up. He was a dependable wing spiker so Maddison was not even surprised when Sam told him. The coach knew Sam's potential, and he was popular back in middle school too, making a name for himself through his skills. Nothing less from Samuel Bailey.

“You'll come, right?” Sam asked him one time, when practice was cut short because the facilities needed to clean the gyms. He and Maddison were walking home, popsicles in hand.

“Of course! When did I ever miss your games?” Maddison said.

“Yeah, well. That was before. What if you're extra busy now? Exams are coming up...”

Maddison laughed. “Are you worried your lucky charm won't be there, Sammy? Don't worry, I will come! I will even make you a new banner.” With a wink and a grin, Maddison ruffled Sam's hair, making the latter scowl deeply.

“You're not my lucky charm.”

“It’s okay, Sammy. No need to be shy — ow! Ow!” Maddison covered his head to avoid getting smacked by his best friend. “Geez, Sammy. Such a brute.”

“Just make sure to show your sorry excuse of a face at the game, got it?”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll be there with the prettiest banner.”

Suckling on his strawberry-flavored popsicle, Maddison did his best to hide his smile. It thrilled him that Sam wanted him to be there, and even though he was kinda brutal most of the time, he perfectly knew that was just how Sam showed his affection. His best friend was not the best when it came to showing his true feelings and emotions anyway so Maddison understood.

When the day of the games came, Maddison sat in the bleachers along with his schoolmates. He could see Sam from his seat on the second floor, stretching and warming up with his teammates. It was the first official game of the year, and he wondered if Sam was nervous. He had yet to see Maddison in the crowd, but that was okay. Maddison knew he had no choice but see him. He prepared the largest banner he could make so Sam would see him immediately.

It was unfair, he thought, how Sam looked so good in the teal and white volleyball jersey of their school. But Sam always looked good in whatever he wore, in Maddison’s very biased opinion. He was wearing number 10. It was only a matter of time before he got the number 4, the number of the ace, Maddison was sure. Or at least that was how it was in that one show they loved watching together.

There was the sound of a whistle, and the starting players gathered on each end of the court and bowed before they went to their positions in the middle of the court. Sam was looking at the bleachers, eyes scanning the crowd. Maddison’s heart jumped in his chest and he gave his brightest smile when the player spotted him.



Sam gave him a thumbs up, which he returned, shouting 'good luck, Sammy!' right after, making his best friend look away, hand on his nape. With another whistle, the game began. Maddison was focused as if he was also playing, shouting several '*nice receives*' and '*nice kills*', every time Sam touched the ball. He knew how the game worked by heart, what with Sam insisting on teaching him when they were little. Maddison knew how to play but not very well, just enough to pass gym class, but he knew the rules, the signals, and the violations from watching all of Sam's games and the matches on TV with Sam all the time.

The game went on, with both teams earning a set each. Everyone was on edge, and the cheers on their side of the gym were getting louder and louder. The score was 27–28 in favor of Hillwood and it was the last set. They needed to win to qualify for the next round so this game was important, everyone knew that. The pressure was on, and the players more than anyone were feeling that.

It was the opponent's serve and their team was able to receive it cleanly, the setter tossing to the left where the captain, another wing spiker, hit the ball. Maddison watched as the ball was blocked by two blockers, but their libero was able to save it and get it back for their setter. Maddison's heart was pounding when the setter tossed to Sam. There were three blockers waiting on the other side of the net, but Sam jumped without hesitation and spiked, the sound of his palm hitting the ball resonating across the gym, and getting the ball past the blockers. The other team's libero tried to save the ball with a flying receive but failed. There was a short whistle, and then a longer one. The crowd cheered. Maddison stood and cheered, shouting Sam's name over and over again.

They won.

In the middle of the court, surrounded by his teammates, patting his back and ruffling his hair, Sam looked up to where Maddison was and waved at him, smiling the brightest, his eyes crinkling from excitement and happiness. Maddison waved back, and he was so proud of his best friend his chest was about to burst. On the floor, his banner was lying trampled and forgotten.

Maddison was packing up his things, ready to wait for Sam in front of the school and go home. After the preliminary games, the volleyball team's practice sessions were back to normal club schedules so Maddison and Sam were back to their routine too. Zipping up his backpack and standing up, he almost bumped into his club advisor.

"Flynn," Mr. Reyes said, a gentle smile on his face. "About to go home?"

"Ah yes," Maddison smiled back. "Do you need anything, sir?"

"No, no. I am glad I got to talk to you before you go though. About the competition next month, are you interested in joining?"

"Is that the State Art Competition?"

"It is. The theme for this year's event is Love and Destruction. Pretty interesting if you ask me. I would love for all my students to participate," the teacher said.

Love and Destruction, huh. Of course, Maddison would join. Although he loved painting, it didn't mean he was not competitive. In fact, he was very competitive, always putting his best foot forward, always making sure everything he did was perfect. Sam always told him that if he was an athlete, he would probably be the last to leave the gym because he would be practicing a lot. He never did anything half-assed.

"Oi, what took you so long?" Sam said when Maddison arrived at their meeting place.

“Sorry, Sammy. It was only five minutes, though.”

“What’s the hold-up?”

They walked to their usual route. Usually, it was Maddison chatting about his day but he was quiet for once and it got Sam’s brow raising.

“You okay?” Sam asked.

Maddison nodded. “Hm. Just thinking.”

The other snickered. “When do you ever think?”

“Mean,” he stuck his tongue out. Then a sigh, “The art competition is coming up and I was just thinking of what to paint this time.”

“Oh? Don’t they usually have a theme or something?”

“Yeah, this year it’s ‘Love and Destruction’. I’m not too sure about it.”

“It’s not the first time they decided on something with contrasting things.”

“I know. Just, I don’t know what to paint.”

“Idiot,” Sam grumbled. “You literally knew what the theme is five minutes ago. Don’t pressure yourself.”

“But usually, I know what to do already the moment I hear the prompt. Sammy, what if I’m getting rusty? Oh my gosh, I’m losing my inspirations, oh no no no what if Richard the dick wins this year instead of me?!”

Maddison whined, grabbing Sam’s arm and shaking it repeatedly. The other easily shrugged him off and then, making Maddison whine even more, he snaked his arm over the other’s neck and drilled his fist on his head.

“Ow — OW! Sammy, stop — STOP OH MY —“

“Shut up then, Doll Face.”

Finally free, Maddison pouted and stomped his foot, walking ahead of his best friend like a petulant

child. “You owe me milk bread for being mean!”

Once Sam was done buying a pack of milk bread for Maddison and pretzel for himself, they continued walking home. Maddison couldn't help but think, as he bit into his first piece of milk bread, how he was really spoiled by Sammy because no matter how mean the other acted, he always gave Maddison whatever he asked and needed.

He remembered that time when he was crying over his broken paint brushes which his nephew played with, and how he called Sam panicking on where to get new ones because there was an art exhibit he was participating in that weekend and his pieces were still not finished. It was eight in the evening and they were walking in the city, looking for any art shops that were still open. Maddison was still hiccuping and Sam put his arm around him and consoled him.

In the end, they ordered him new brushes online that arrived the next day and which Sam paid for as a gift to him. Maddison came up with a new painting of Sam that night using his new brushes —one where his best friend as standing under the stars and the city sparkling behind him, a soft smile on his face.

“Oi, Mads. Are you listening?”

“Hm? Sorry, Sammy. What is it?”

Sam narrowed his eyes at him. “I asked when the competition is?”

“Oh,” Maddison said. “A month from now.”

“Plenty of time to think of something then.”

“Hm.”

Sighing, Sam stepped closer and bumped his shoulder against him, smiling gently. “Don't worry about it too much. I know you'll come up with something amazing.”

Maddison was sure he couldn't breathe, but he still managed to respond. "Sammy. You think so?"

"You always do." A pat on the head. Maddison's heart stopped. "Surprise me, Maddison."

Maddison smirked. He definitely would.

On the day of the competition, Maddison was a bundle of nerves. He kept checking his materials, if all his tubes of acrylics were complete, if all the colors he needed were there, if he had enough greens and blacks, if his brushes were all the right sizes. They were to paint on the spot, with five hours as their time limit. It was ridiculous, the time limit. Maddison usually finished a painting in full canvas overnight, with no sleep, or two days if he opted to rest. And these were high schoolers, even though they have more energy than a grown-ass adult, they still needed to rest and shit. He never understood their rules. They had to dry their paint with a freaking hair dryer.

His knee kept jerking up and down in nervousness, his palms sweating. He kept rubbing them dry on his slacks. Beside him, Sam sat quietly. One look at him and Sam scowled, putting a stop to his moving knee by resting and gripping his hand on his kneecap.

"Stop it, you're being ridiculous," Sam hissed.

"I'm fucking nervous, Sammy. Can you see Dicky in front of us? He looks so chill, the fucker." Said fucker was sitting ahead of them, a few rows in front, mop-blond hair visible from across the room. He was wearing his Wellspring Academy uniform, that kind you only see in shows like Gossip Girl, and he seemed oh-so relaxed. A red-head was sitting beside him, chatting animatedly. Maddison scoffed. Dicky looked like a tree with his non-reactions.

"You know there's nothing to be nervous about." Sam's voice was soft and it made Maddison look at him

with narrow eyes.

“Nothing? Silly, Sammy,” Maddison replied with an airy voice. “There’s a lot to be nervous about. Like what if I forgot what picture I should paint, or what color I should use, or the image I wanted won’t come out like what I pictured in my head —“

“Shh,” Sam placed his palm on Maddison’s mouth. “Shut up, you’re so whiny.”

Well, Maddison couldn’t talk now, could he?

“You practiced right?” Sam asked. “You sketched for weeks and painted last night. You didn’t even sleep enough. You think you’re fooling me by pretending to sleep for the first two hours? I knew you went back to your spot on the balcony to paint when you thought I was asleep.”

Maddison removed Sam’s hand from his mouth, sniffing. “Sammy, you were awake?”

Sam spent the night over at Maddison’s because it was Friday and this day was the one Saturday that they didn’t have practice. It was perfect, Maddison thought, because Sammy never missed Maddison’s competition. He always went to accompany Maddison at his events, the way Maddison did at his games.

“Of course I was awake, dumbass. You were moving a lot. I couldn’t sleep.”

“Sorry,” Maddison murmured.

Sam lifted his hands and placed them on both sides of his face, looking straight at him. “Still nervous?” he asked.

Yes, but for a different reason, Maddison thought. Out loud, he said, “Not anymore, no.”

“Good. Better treat me to some ramen after you win,” Sam grinned before letting him go. He was so confident Maddison would win, it made Maddison

confident too. It was always like that with them, believing and trusting each other. They were each other's strength. Maddison never wanted that to change.

His painting indeed won. Sam waited for him for six hours, patient and calm. He hugged Maddison when the winner was announced, took a picture of him on stage when he received his plaque and prize.

"It was a beautiful painting," Sam had said after hugging him.

"You already saw that several times," Maddison said, blushing a little.

"Yes, but not this one. This one is the best. Are you allowed to take it home?"

Maddison shook his head. "It will be displayed in the public gallery along with the other winners."

"I'm proud of you." Sam said that with so much emotion in his eyes that Maddison was sure his face was flaming. He looked at his painting, now displayed on stage on an easel between the second and third placers.

The painting was composed of two half faces in side views. They have no eyes, their bodies starting from their noses and cheeks up to their bare torsos. On the female's head was a beautiful rainforest, a paradise, full of life and colors. On the male's side was a burning city, black and red and orange, the image of destruction. The two were almost kissing, holding each other. The judges said it was the perfect representation of the theme.

"I would love to have that in my room." Maddison looked up and saw Sam also staring with admiration at his painting, and he couldn't help but smile.

"I can always make a replica for Sammy."

"That would be nice."

"Okay," Maddison grinned. He would make it more beautiful for Sam.

“Okay,” Sam grinned back. “Now, that ramen.”

Maddison laughed, dragging him out of the venue and into the late afternoon. Just in time for twilight, his favorite time of the day. Especially when he was with Sam. Because Sam glowed when it's twilight, like he belonged there, orange and pink and purple and blue and he was so beautiful, and Maddison was just so, so helplessly in love.

“Come on, Sammy,” he said when he found his voice, looking away from the beauty beside him. “I’ll treat you to all-you-can-eat ramen because I’m awesome.”

Sam snorted, but it didn't make him less beautiful in Maddison's eyes. “Sure you are, Doll Face. Sure you are.”

Maddison couldn't remember how it began to crumble, everything around him.

Their freshman year went by fast. The volleyball team got into Nationals, but was defeated by a high school from another city after three rounds. Maddison was able to compete at all the art competitions but wasn't able to get to the most prestigious competition because he had chickenpox a week before the scheduled date and Maddison thought it was the most ridiculous thing to ever stop him from doing what he loved.

He and Sam stuck together after those falls, attached to the hips, mourning their losses for a few days, allowing themselves some sulking but they eventually got back to their feet like they always did. They were, after all, each other's strength and pillar.

But not for long, Maddison learned.

Sophomore year arrived and with it came Samuel Bailey's immense popularity. He was already declared Hillwood's ace, a very rare occurrence for a volleyball club as the ace is often a title saved for the third and



fourth years. The team nominated him, however, and Sam had accepted it, humble and honored. The news broke, fast and school-wide, and girls and boys flocked to get the ace's attention. It made Sam adorable, flushed and stuttering, not used to the attention and affection other than Maddison's and his family's.

It should have made Maddison happy. He was proud of Sammy, he really was. But he couldn't always stomp the boiling jealousy he felt, the color so green it made the jades timid, every time a schoolmate pulled Sam to a spot behind their school building, handing him a love letter and a token, head bowed in shyness as they confessed their undying love for Samuel Bailey.

Sam always came back empty-handed, a scowl on his face. It never failed to make Maddison feel relieved.

"Why the frown, Sammy?" He asked one time, during lunch. Sam just got back from another confession. Maddison saw a cute girl looking for Sam just right after class so it must be that.

Said frown got deeper, and Sam grumbled beside him, shoving a piece of octopus sausage in his mouth. "It's always hard to reject them. It makes me feel bad."

Maddison stared at the wide soccer field in front of them. "Why not just accept one of them, then?" He really just wanted to kick himself right then.

A pause. A flock of birds flew above them. Sam turned to him ever so slightly. "You think I should?"

Giving him his practiced smile, fake and awful, Maddison replied, "Why not? Sammy is so popular, girls and gays clamor for you. You should give them a chance too, you know?" Why was he doing this, saying this, he wanted to yell at himself. He was so stupid. Doll Face.

Sam looked down at his lunch box and hummed, as if considering. "Really?"

“Yes, Sammy. Really,” Maddison said, voice stable. Deep inside, he was cracking. “I guess your superb volleyball prowess makes up for your horrible face.”

“Say that again, Doll Face.” He saw Sam lifting his fork and threatened to stab him with it. Maddison laughed. This. At least he wouldn’t lose this, right?

If he did, he wouldn’t know what to do.

But Sam considered it. He actually considered Maddison’s suggestion and Maddison was broken.

It was only the beginning.

Her name was Sato Ayako, a pretty Japanese-American girl in the same year as they were, but in a different class. She had hazel eyes and copper blonde hair, just a couple shades lighter than Maddison’s. Maddison could tell she dyed it because her roots were black some days. She was in their cheerleading team, and that was how she and Sam had gotten close. She was the one who confessed though, and after a game, a very good game that Maddison watched to support his best friend, Sam went to find her amidst the celebration of their win and accepted her confession.

They kissed in the middle of the court and everyone cheered for them. Everyone except Maddison.

She was beautiful, of course she was. The cheerleading team didn’t accept anyone that wasn’t. Fair complexion, bright eyes, gentle voice. She was tall too, or at least tall enough that when Sam hugged her, he could rest his chin on top of her head. Maddison saw him doing that to her once.

It was convenient, really, their relationship. The ace of the volleyball team and the vice captain of the cheerleading squad were dating. A perfect match. The golden couple. They looked so in love.

Maddison hoped not.

He hadn't asked Sam about that yet, afraid of what he might say. Sam had never fallen in love before, as far as Maddison knew. Sammy would tell him if he had. He was so scared of this new development that he started distancing himself from Sam. Not like Sam really noticed. He was busy with his new girlfriend.

They haven't gone to school nor gone home together for weeks now. The usual sleepovers never happened. The texts dwindled down from every ten minutes of every day when they were not with each other to not even once at all. Maddison's paintings were filled with landscapes and other things that didn't include beautiful, intense green eyes and perfectly-tanned skins and gorgeous smiles.

It was hard. Maddison wouldn't allow himself to cry himself to sleep at night, but he was close to his breaking point. He wondered, if he didn't suggest it, if Sam would even be spending the night over at Sato's place tonight? He wondered if they would still be marathoning Maddison's stupid alien documentaries, snuggled in their silly blanket fort and chugging Dr. Pepper while pretending it's beer.

Maddison wondered how in just a snap, they seemed to have lost it all.

And then he realized, it was only him. He was the only one who lost it.

Saturday mornings were for sleeping in, because Friday nights meant staying up and finishing a painting in record time, or rerunning all the Gilmore Girls episodes available online while eating Cheetos.

So why, Maddison thought grudgingly, why were they standing in school grounds, at half-past five in the morning? Maddison yawned. They were headed to the coast for a field trip, visiting beaches and markets and art galleries and Maddison was ready to go back to sleep. The only thing he was looking forward to was the

art galleries, and maybe, of course, sitting beside Sammy on the bus and spending the day beside him. It was tradition. This couldn't be so bad.

But it could. It so could.

"Sammy, over here!" Maddison waved from where he was seated, a huge smile plastered on his face. Sam looked so beautiful in the morning light; Maddison's fingers itched to paint him.

"Mads."

Maddison scooted closer to the window to give Sam more space to sit on, hugging his backpack to his chest. "I'm claiming dibs on the window seat, as always. Oh, and I got us our Lays and Ruffles. Which one do you want first? I say Ruffles." He tapped the seat beside him, gesturing for Sam to sit already.

"Mads." Sam was scowling, not at him, but at the floor. Maddison didn't like this one bit. "I'm sitting with Ayako."

A slice. And then a crumble.

"Oh." A gush of breath slipped past Maddison's lips. "Of course. Of course. Go sit with your Ayako." His voice was so fake and airy, Maddison wanted to stab himself.

"Are you gonna be okay?" Sam's brows were still furrowed. Maddison waved him off, unzipping his backpack and grabbing his headphones.

"Yeah, yeah. Duh. Go away, Sammy. Shoo." He put on his headphones and connected it to his phone, selecting the loudest One OK Rock song he could find.

Sam was saying something before he went to the back of the bus, but Maddison didn't hear him, already far gone with his thoughts.

Tradition, my ass.



## Chapter 2

There were times when Maddison walked home with Sam from school and the latter would turn quiet, not saying a word at all. And that's completely fine with Maddison. Silence was comfortable. Their friendship was such that they didn't feel the need to fill all their moments together with mindless conversations. There were also times when they had endless banter, full of energy despite the tiring hours spent in class and clubs to the point that the two would stop in front of their house and sit on the curb to continue chatting, as if it would be the last time they would get to talk to each other. Moments like that were Maddison's favorite, until their mothers put a full stop on it, yelling that dinner was set or that they needed to get inside and change out of their clothes.

Those were good times. And Maddison liked both the quiet moments or the rowdy ones. Maddison liked it best when he was with his Sammy.

Unlike today.

Today, Sam decided he would walk Ayako to the bus stop and had Maddison go home by himself, even though Maddison waited for him to finish practice — albeit not a completely fruitless wait as he was working on his painting in the art club. Still, he wanted to go home with Sam. It had been a while since they went to or from school and Maddison was getting annoyed with mostly everything.

Sam and Maddison's relationship continued to wither like flowers in fall.

Seasons changed and before they knew it, it was fall. School workload was brutal. Volleyball practice was gruesome and the art club was demanding.

Maddison thought that as their time together dwindled down to null, it would be easier to bury his

feelings at the back of his mind and focus more on his art. But more than anything, Sam was his inspiration. He was there in every color, every shade of green, every stroke of brush on blank canvas.

How he had wished that he could forget his love for Sam the way an eraser could erase a perfect pencil lining.

[Tuesday evening]

21:03 Saaaaammy I finally got the special Blu-Ray of Rogue One with the commentaries!

21:03 Let's go watch it

21:03 Bring popcorn will yaaaaaaaaaaaa

21:04 Hello??????

21:11 sorry can't. I'm over @ ayako's

21:12 :(

21:12 It's school night

21:13 yeah brought my clothes so we can go together to school tom

21:14 Aw okay

21:14 Have fun!

21:15 Goodnight Sammy~

—

[Friday afternoon]

12:24 Sammy, where are you? Come on, lunch?

12:27 Ayako brought me packed lunch

12:27 we're @ the quad tho, feel free to join us

12:28 Nah I already bought something from the cafeteria

12:28 And there's lots of bugs in the quad ew

12:29 We're going home together later right?

12:32 I promised Ayako I'd go with her to the bookshop

12:33 Oh okay then

12:36 next time

12:37 Sure

---

Next time became two weeks later and by that time, Maddison just didn't have the energy to pretend he was happy that he was losing quality time with Sam. Sam never ran out of excuses whenever Maddison wanted to spend time with him, even though Maddison knew those excuses were valid. Sam, after all, was in a relationship. It just frustrated Maddison that all the things they have been doing Pre-Ayako, all those traditions, have been parked somewhere at the very back of Sam's priorities.

He was tired. So he decided to keep his distance. It was him who made excuses when Sam wanted to see him. If Sam noticed, he didn't say anything.

It lasted for another two weeks. And at one point, Maddison gave in and initiated contact with his best friend.

His competition was coming up and it would be held in Wellspring this time. A couple more art club members were chosen to compete with him so he was not going alone but as far as tradition went, Maddison always, always went with Sam to his art competitions.

With determination and swallowed pride, he sent Sam a quick text with the date and venue of the event.

The reply came almost instantly and Maddison opened it with a pounding heart — only for his heart to momentarily stop and break as he read Sam's reply.

Sam wouldn't be able to come; the event was simultaneous with Ayako's cheer dance competition and



he had already promised to go with her.

Maddison bit his lower lip to stop himself from crying, calmly placing his phone on the nightstand before curling down on his bed, wallowing in self-pity.

On the day of the competition, Maddison glumly walked inside the hall with his co-members Kim and Thomas, his backpack full of paints and brushes slung behind him. It was heavy, he realized idly. Sam often carried his stuff for him in these events, wanting Maddison to feel relaxed and comfortable but alas, Sam was not here with him today. Sam was probably carrying his Ayako's stupid luggage with a grumpy scowl on his face.

Sometimes, Maddison wished he had more friends, or at least was able to keep the handful of friends he used to have. He became so dependent on Sam, always spending all his time with him, that he didn't realize he alienated their friends until there was none left.

Shaking off his thoughts, he wandered to where their seat assignments were and to his disappointment, it was closer to Wellspring Academy than he would have liked.

"Flynn."

Maddison huffed before turning around because he definitely recognized that voice. "Well, well. If it isn't Dicky ."

Emotionless as ever, Richard Smith regarded him silently. Then, "I wish you the best today."

Rolling his eyes, Maddison lifted his chin higher and crossed his arms above his chest. "I'm going to represent our city even without your well wishes."

Richard, for his part, looked utterly confused. "Only one artist can represent the prefecture. You know that, right?"

Something snapped inside Maddison. Richard was so confident he was going to win over him that Maddison wanted to punch him in the gut. “I swear to God, Dicky you are so full of it! Sammy, stop me or —”

Maddison stopped. Richard stared at him. His schoolmates cocked their heads to one side. There’s no Sammy here.

Breathing deeply, Maddison turned around and fixed his materials, deciding the conversation was over. Hopefully Richard knew this as him being dismissed and his schoolmates wouldn’t attempt to talk to him. Otherwise they might hear his voice break. He was in pain as it was already.

Maddison lost.

Technically, he was second place. But as he had always said, it’s all or nothing. He wanted to win. Instead, it was Richard in the first place with his stupidly beautiful painting. He couldn’t understand it; he thought his own painting was amazing. One of the panel’s comments said it lacked confidence and soul. That’s the reason he only placed second.

17:35 I lost

17:36 oh mads i’m so sorry

17:36 I wish I was there

17:37 It hurts so bad Sammy

17:37 All those hard work

17:37 only to lose to fucking Dicky

17:38 I’m sorry

17:39 if it’s any consolation, our school lost too. Ayako’s devastated and she hadn’t stopped crying for 30 mins.

17:39 it was heartbreaking to watch

Something inside Maddison snapped.

17:42 Did you honestly think I care?

17:43 what?

17:44 I do not fucking care about your Ayako okay?? I couldn't care less even if she cried her eyes out

17:44 I do not care about her

17:45 okay Mads I get you're upset but you don't have to say things like that

17:46 No, Sammy you need to hear this. I'm tired, alright? I'm tired of her monopolizing your attention, I'm tired of hearing about her and I'm tired seeing you spend all your time with her and I am mad I wish I haven't suggested you started dating Sammy if only I knew this would happen!

17:47 Mads

17:48 Please stop talking to me I don't want to hear from you anymore

17:50 you don't mean that

17:51 come on, I don't understand

17:51 please

17:52 Maddison

—

School was ending soon. Finals were coming up and Maddison was cramming his Math and Science lessons, making sure he knew all the topics that were possibly included in the tests which was every single topic. He hated exams but he wasn't bad at it, he just preferred painting over reading textbooks.

The volleyball team lost to another school in the State. Maddison couldn't be bothered to go to the match but he knew from his classmates.

It was the first time he didn't watch Sam play.

Sam who wasn't talking to him anymore. Maddison knew it was entirely his fault and Sam tried several times to talk to him in person but Maddison was good at avoiding him, even going as far as pretending he was sick to his mother so that she would tell Sam he couldn't see him when his friend went to his house after practice.

Sometimes he saw Sam at school with Ayako and they still looked happy so he guessed he wasn't really needed. But then again, he wondered, when did Sam need him? Wasn't it always Maddison who needed Sam? So it wasn't like Sam lost something when he stopped talking to him.

"Maddison, dear, can you come in here for a minute?" Maddison's mom called from the kitchen and Maddison dropped the remote on the coffee table.

His parents were looking at him expectantly when he reached the kitchen table, smiling.

"What's up?"

"Maddison, you received a letter of invitation this morning. From Wellspring Academy," his mother began.

"We thought you should consider it, buddy," his dad said. "It looks like they saw your potential from the last competition and want you under their art program."

"I didn't even win..."

"No, but they know you are talented enough so they offered you a spot for the next school year."

His mom took a sip of her tea. "I know it's a boarding school, sweetheart. But I think it will be good for you. Lodging is provided and they offered you a scholarship so it's basically free schooling for your junior and senior year. And you know they are affiliated with major art universities, Maddison. Didn't you want to go to one?"

“Yes, mom, but it’s Wellspring.” Maddison would die first before he set foot on that preppy school with their stupid uniform. He would never want to spend twenty-four hours and seven days with his classmates in one boarding school.

“Honey, you should consider it. It’s a huge opportunity.”

“I know that but no, mom, dad, I don’t want to go. I want to finish high school in Hillwood.”

“Fine,” his mom sighed. “We still have a month but after that they expect to hear from us. Whatever your decision is, your dad and I will support you.”

“Thanks.”

Maddison went up to his room after that. He couldn’t think of leaving his current school, his friends, his art club. He couldn’t leave his parents. He couldn’t even dare think of leaving Sam. Not in a million years.

One week before school closed, Sam approached Maddison. The bell just rang, indicating the end of the day and students filed out of the room. Sam was able to catch Maddison by his arm, preventing the other from running away.

“We need to talk,” he said gruffly.

“What? No Ayako this time?” Maddison replied icily.

Sam let go of his arm, scowling at the floor. “We broke up.”

Maddison was startled. “Why?”

“It wasn’t working anymore.”

“I thought you liked her?”

Sam shrugged. “Walk home with me?”

“I see,” Maddison laughed. “Now that you don’t have a girlfriend, you’re going back to me. Jerk move,

Sammy.”

“Look, Mads. I don’t know what happened between us but I want to go back to what we used to be.” And then, softly, “I miss you.”

Maddison looked away, picking up his bag and throwing it over his shoulder. “That’s unfair, Sam.”

“Whatever I did, I’m sorry, Mads. I didn’t want this fallout. I miss you. Mom misses you.”

“Well, I miss you too.” Maddison wanted to kick himself — how was he so soft for this jerk?

“Let’s go? We can eat something at home, if you want?”

“Okay.”

“So what really caused this avoid-Sam-forever game you were playing, Mads?” Sam asked as they were walking home. They were almost to their houses, crossing the long bridge that had a pretty view of the sun setting. Maddison looked at the koi fishes at the river under the bridge. He decided to stop and lean on the wooden railing. The sky was a beautiful combination of orange and purple and pink, but Maddison didn’t look at that. He looked at his favorite subject instead, of dark hair and hazel eyes and tanned skin and cherry lips.

Sam copied his position and Maddison averted his eyes this time.

“I was jealous,” he said, very quietly. He felt like saying everything that he kept to himself. Every single thing.

“Jealous? Of Ayako?”

Maddison nodded.

“Why would you be?” Sam asked, utterly confused.

“Yeah, why would I be, Sammy?” Maddison retorted, smiling bitterly.

“Mads...”

“You aren’t very observant, Sammy. And you are so dense too. How could you not notice?”

“I don’t —”

Maddison stood straight, facing Sam entirely and looking him in the eyes. “No, you don’t. You don’t know how I feel. You don’t know why I’m stewing over this. You don’t know how hard it is for me every time I see you with her, Sammy. You know nothing.”

“Mads —”

Breathing heavily and trying his best to stop the tears from falling even when his eyes were already blurry, Maddison said, “I love you, Sam. For a while now. I’m in love with you.” He watched as Sam’s face changed, his expression going into shock, then confusion, anger, sadness, and sympathy.

“I’m in love with you, Sam. I’m sorry I’m telling you this now but I thought you should hear it from me. I knew in the way you treated me, in the way you cared about me. I knew since that last day of middle school when we were walking home and the sunset colors hit your features and made you look annoyingly beautiful. I couldn’t look away ever since.” Maddison wiped his nose using the sleeve of his coat, looking down at his shoes. This sucked.

Sam looked in pain, as if any second he would throw up. He was pale already. Maddison knew, and yet it still hurt. So much. “Mads. I... I can’t — I’m not —”

“You don’t have to say anything,” Maddison said quickly, his voice cracking. His heart was cracking. “I already know what you’re going to say and I don’t want to hear it. I just wanted to tell you. And now that you know, I’m finally going to move on.” With that, Maddison stepped away from the railing and walked, and then he was running, ignoring Sam’s calls.

When he arrived home, he went straight to the kitchen where his parents were sitting for their late afternoon tea.

“Mom, I want to go to Wellspring next year.”



## Chapter 3

If someone told Maddison he would be studying at Wellspring Academy, he would have laughed at that person's face and called them names because that would just be ridiculous.

But now, as he walked out of his dorm room and off towards the main building of the prestigious academy, he could do nothing but accept his fate. No, this wasn't fate. He refused to believe so. This was all his doing and his decision. The result of his actions. A way to forget and to start anew.

Something he wasn't very good at and something he didn't really want to do.

Why would he want to forget precious years of friendship and bond that were so rare and precious? Why would he move on from someone who exuded colors and dripped hues that made his world rich and vibrant — to the point where he thought, "Ah. If I lost this person, everything would be gray."

But that was how his world was these days.

Gray. Bland. Lifeless.

Because that person couldn't remain his friend.

Granted, Maddison didn't give him much choice, didn't even talk to him; Maddison just upped and left. Either way, that person couldn't accept Maddison's feelings. And Maddison, selfish Maddison, would never accept anything less now that that fact was out in the open.

Settling in at Wellspring was surprisingly easier than Maddison expected. He was given his own room at the nearest dorm in the campus even though supposedly it could occupy two students. The dean said it was because Maddison was under scholarship and a special

transferee case hence provided with utmost comfort, but the dorm monitor, a guy named Hans, said it was because everyone already had their roommates. Maddison thought he didn't mind at all.

One thing he probably minded, as petty as it was, was his desk in the huge art club room, which was right in front of Dicky. He often scoffed at the thought that the person he hated the most, his rival, was now his schoolmate and club-mate. What was worse, Dicky got to have the desk by the window. Sure, the fancy desk lamps Maddison had should be enough to light his work up, but natural light was always better than the artificial ones.

Not that he cared too much. His recent paintings really sucked. He hadn't painted the whole summer, focusing instead on finishing his video games and learning French, something he latched onto randomly. A coping mechanism. So when he got back at the start of the school year, he was all rusty. His paintings were lackluster, dull. He scowled at the color combinations he picked and the images in his mind just couldn't be transferred well into his canvas.

This was exactly what he was thinking about a month later as he sat on his desk, alone in the club room and earphones in, rock music loud in his ears. He was painting some flowers and not doing very good at it when he felt a tap on his shoulder.

Mr. Collins stood behind him, short by height but utterly huge by presence. Maddison wouldn't admit it out loud but this art expert scared the wits out of him.

"Sir." He immediately pulled out his earphones and stood.

"Flynn," the teacher said, staring at Maddison's canvas, his face devoid of emotion. "I have been meaning to speak with you."

“How can I help you, sir?”

“It’s about your work.”

Maddison gulped. Mr. Collins was a short old guy, and even though he was looking up at him, Maddison felt he was being stared down.

“What about it?” He asked, though he already knew.

“Flynn. You were offered a scholarship because of your talent, your skills. You know how hard it is to be in this academy without any recommendation. I sent your name in so you can improve your gift and utilize it well. I don’t just accept students in my art club, Flynn. And I didn’t just accept you. I made sure you get in. So prove to me that you deserve your spot. The works you turned in the past weeks are not up to my standards and I know you can do better than that.”

Mr. Collins picked up a round brush from Maddison’s pile, dipping it into the paint he was using. He looked at Maddison and raised an eyebrow, “May I?”. Without waiting for Maddison’s answer, he dabbed at the canvas for a few moments. This would have pissed him usually — no one got to touch his painting other than himself — but he couldn’t do anything anyway. This was Mr. Collins. When he put the brush down, Maddison’s eyes widened as the flowers were so much more alive than before, and the teacher only worked on it for not even a minute. Did he use magic?

“Send me another eight by eleven painting tomorrow. I want something new from you.” The teacher began walking out of the room, and Maddison was about to let out a breath when he spoke again. “This time I want something...inspired.”

He was out of the room before Maddison could even speak, and the brunette slumped down his chair when he was alone again.

“Fuck,” he muttered under his breath. He felt like he received the worst scolding ever, even though his teacher never once raised his voice. He stared at the yellow flowers on his canvas. Just a minute and then this? Just how good was Mr. Collins?

Maddison was pulling up Google when footsteps echoed in the room once again. When he looked up, it was the last person he wanted to see.

“Flynn.”

Maddison crinkled his nose. “What, Dicky?”

Dicky blinked at him. “It’s Richard.”

God, he’s so annoying. “I know that. Dicky.”

Dicky shrugged, then in a deadpan voice, he said, “I heard your conversation with Mr. Collins.”

“My, my, what an eavesdropper.”

“I didn’t mean to. I’m here to get my supplies.”

“Sure, sure.” Maddison waved him off, tapping on his phone.

“Look, Flynn. I know you think I am socially inept —”

“I don’t think that.”

“— and maybe I am but I just thought I could help you get back from your slump.”

“I am not in a slump!”

Dicky merely raised an eyebrow.

Maddison sighed. “Alright, fine. Maybe I am. But what is it to you?”

“Well, for one, I am the president of the art club and I have the responsibility to take care of my members and make sure everyone is doing their work okay.”

“You don’t have to.”

As if not hearing what Maddison just said, Dicky opened a drawer under his own desk. He then handed Maddison a watercolor palette.

“Take this. I have an extra set back at the dorm.”

Maddison just stared at the palette. It’s a pretty one but Maddison just stared at it.

“I have cold pressed sheets if you need them.”

“I don’t...” Maddison scowled. “I don’t use watercolor.”

Dicky gave him the smallest of smiles and Maddison was bewildered. “You should try it. I think it’s easier to manipulate than acrylic and it’s relaxing to use. There are tons of watercolor tutorials on Youtube if you don’t know how to use it.”

Maddison wanted to ask him how he knew Youtube since he seemed like he was from the stone age but didn’t. Instead he said, “I know how to use it. It’s just not my medium.”

“It’s always nice to try something new, Flynn.”

And with that, Dicky left him, alone again but this time with a new watercolor palette.

When he got back to his room, his backpack felt heavy with his new paints and sheets of watercolor paper. He refused to ask Dicky for some so he went to the nearest art store and bought the materials.

Sitting by the window, he set up his little studio, turning on his lights and filling up cups with water. He stared at the palette again. He never liked watercolor. It was fun back in elementary but ever since he discovered the beauty of oil and acrylic paint, he stopped using it. Watercolor dried faster, and for Maddison, it was harder to manipulate. But he could try again. Maybe Dicky was right. It wouldn’t hurt to try something new.

He could paint flowers again. Or a landscape. Twilight, perhaps...

No, he knew what he was going to paint. Just because he was moving on didn't mean he'd stop using his muse as his inspiration.

An hour later, Maddison decided he liked watercolor again. Maddison also decided that yes, he was, without a doubt, still very much in love with his best friend.

Staring at Sam's figure by the bridge and against the twilight of his painting, Maddison sniffed and rubbed his eyes at his long sleeve. He missed him. So fucking much. And great, there's a big lump in his throat and he wanted nothing more than to get on that train and go home and cross that street to knock at the Baileys' residence and hug the life out of his best friend. Maddison's vision blurred and he was surrounded by intense longing.

Why did he have to suffer like this? He wished he didn't fall in love with the only person he considered his best friend. He wished they were young again so he didn't know things like crush or love or jealousy. He wished he didn't tell Sam that it was alright to accept one of the girls' confessions. He was so dumb. Letting his feelings for Sam ruled over his emotions was dumb.

He wiped his face and grabbed his phone. Going through his messages, Maddison felt awful. There were about fifty messages from Sam from the day he left his house. The unanswered texts and missed calls lasted for a week until it stopped. When it did stop, Maddison had bawled his eyes out because he knew Sam finally gave up and it was all Maddison's fault.

He didn't tell Sam he was going to Wellspring and based on the texts, he had only found out through Maddison's mother, who then contacted Maddison, confused as to why Sam didn't know about his decision.

Maddison didn't receive anything from Sam after that week. No contacts were made. Maddison was lonely and upset and feeling guilty but he did it so he could move on. As futuristic as it was, Maddison couldn't accept seeing Sam with another girl, getting married and having children while he stood at the sideline, watching and waiting for Sam to give him scraps of his attention because by then Sam's focus wouldn't be on Maddison any longer. And Maddison was too selfish to stick around and let that happen.

The last thing he knew about Sam was the practice match Hillwood had with Wellspring. Sam was the captain now and Maddison wanted to congratulate him but he couldn't face him. Hillwood went to Wellspring for the match but he didn't see the game, although he'd gathered from his classmates that they lost the match despite their captain and ace's nonstop scoring. Wellspring was just too strong.

He took a deep breath to steady himself and hid the painting under his desk, deciding to start on a new one because he couldn't just submit it to Mr. Collins. It was too...intimate and personal and only for Maddison's eyes. He picked up his round brush and began a landscape the same color as Sam's emerald eyes.

"Much better."

Those were the only words the teacher said when Maddison handed him the painting the next day. He used watercolor again and while Mr. Collins raised a brow, he didn't say anything and Maddison sighed in relief.

"Thanks."

Dicky — no, Maddison thought, he should stop being petty and start growing up. So, Richard, who was sitting in front of a large easel, looked up at him and stared. Maddison wanted to scoff. He just thanked him, he didn't tell him he killed a person. No need to look like that.

Richard coughed, reaching for the palette Maddison was handing him. Then, “You’re welcome. Did you like the watercolor palette?”

“Yeah.”

“I can tell you where to buy them if you like. Or I can just lend you mine. I have plenty of supplies.”

Maddison said, “No, just tell me where the shop is.”

He told him the name of the store. “It’s at the city center two stations from here.”

“Okay. Great.”

“Do you want to come with me?” Richard, out of nowhere, offered.

“Huh?” Maddison said, dumbfounded.

“I’m going there to pick up some titanium whites and half pans. Do you want to come with me?”

Maddison stared at the blank face. He wanted to decline. This was ridiculous. Him? Getting chummy with Dicky ? Sammy would laugh —

“Sure,” Maddison blurted out before he even finished his thoughts. “Sure. Just let me get my things.”

Trying his very best to focus on putting his stuff inside his backpack and ignoring the stares from his club mates — they must have found it weird that he was being civil with their president, himself included — Maddison left the room with a nod towards Richard, hoping the guy would follow and get this over with.



## Chapter 4

Life at Wellspring was surprisingly boring, Maddison thought as he juggled his arduous academic obligations, club activities, and broken heart.

Granted, that last one he should have been over with now that he was almost halfway through his last year in high school; especially considering his purpose in transferring to a new school was that very thing, but unfortunately for him, absence made the heart grow fonder. What he thought would be the solution to his problem just became the reason said problem became bigger and bigger to the point where he could barely keep his feelings under control.

Maddison hated that he was trapped in this sort of hyperawareness — he was privy to every emotion, to every movement he did that indicated he still felt for his (ex?) best friend. Every stroke of brush, every milk bread consumed, every Calculus problem unsolved (because he may have looked like a dumb brute, but Sam was a math genius, had helped Maddison countless of times when he struggled with numeric). He wanted to focus on the more important things: passing his exams, getting better at painting, and preparing for college. That's what his brain was telling him. But his heart had other plans. Maddison hated it.

After staring at his textbook for fifteen minutes without comprehending what was in it, he decided enough was enough. Pulling out his easel towards the middle of his dorm room and grabbing a stool, Maddison sat down and began mixing acrylic paints, a canvas with a half-finished painting already set up. He painted mindlessly, as he often did when doing abstract pieces — this time with random shapeless flowers for the foreground and lopsided buildings as his backdrop. It was relaxing because he was painting for no one but

himself. Sometimes he got frustrated when it was for a club submission or conceptualization for an upcoming competition because something was expected from him, but this time was different. He had not done a piece for himself in a while — the last time was when he did a watercolor portrait of —

Cutting that particular train of thought before he burst in yet again another teary self-pitying episode, Maddison squeezed some more paint on his palette. He was running out of titanium white again — he often was. He should have gone to the art store. The monthly stipend the academy sent to him wasn't due to come till the end of the month and he was left to budget a quarter of the allowance provided by his parents for five more days. Art supplies were truly expensive and Maddison wondered idly why he wanted to make his life miserable with his choices.

His last visit to the art shop was only two weeks ago but already his supplies were depleting. Grunting some, Maddison deliberated if it was acceptable to ask Richard for a tube since that guy never seemed to run out of materials but decided against it immediately. He didn't want to owe the guy any more favors than he already had.

Their first trip to the art store that one day was anticlimactic. Maddison was even surprised of how boring a company Richard was but he did reluctantly agree that it was at least a tiniest bit fun. Richard was quiet in nature and he did not try to make small talks with Maddison, seemingly comfortable with silence. It somewhat irked Maddison, who loved conversations and craved attention, but given the mood he was in at that time, he decided that he liked the silence.

They ran several errands together after that, sometimes even going to the city center not just to get their usual hoards but for other stuff too. They often visit mini-marts to buy foods that were not available in their

cafeteria. There was a Korean convenience store one block away from the art store that they went to, and Maddison used half of his money to buy junk foods and developed a liking toward choco pies. It was a benefit of living on his own. He never had that kind of freedom before; he was scolded for eating junk foods by his parents and Sammy was such a health freak —

“Dammit!” Maddison hissed as his upper stroke went a little too heavy on the canvas and the yellow ochre bled unflatteringly on the electric pink peony drying beside it.

He dropped his palette, making a colorful mess on his beige carpet before flopping down on his bed. The view outside was of the school garden, full of red and orange and yellow with random bursts of holly green. Autumn colors. It was so beautiful and relaxing. The season was almost over if the leaves on the ground and the bare trees were any indication.

Maddison dreaded the upcoming winter. He was still undecided whether he would go back home or stay in this boarding school for Christmas break. He never spent the holidays away from home but maybe this year he would, if only to avoid seeing the people over there. His mother might throw a fit.

The thought of his mother made Maddison pick up his phone, unlocking it to browse the unreplied messages — three from his mom, one from his dad, and one from Bailey-san’s, all checking in to see how Maddison was doing. The last message did something to his heart. He neglected so many things back home in order to move on, almost everything except his parents. Because of his selfishness, he forgot that not only his parents and that one friend he left were the only people who cared about him. Seeing Sam’s mother asking how he was doing so far away from home unnerved him, guilted him through and through. He should have properly said goodbye to them too. It was only polite. But

because he only thought of himself, he forgot. But did he really forget, or did he decide that they were not important enough for him to bid farewell to, even when that farewell was just temporary?

With a heavy heart, he dialed his mother's number and waited a couple of rings before he got an answer.

"Maddison?" His mom's excitement was evident over the phone. God, he should have called more often.

"Hi, mom. How are you and dad?"

"Oh, Maddison. We're doing good, better now that you have called. Your dad just left for a business trip but he'd be delighted you called. How are you, dear? We miss you terribly. Your sister's been asking about you too."

Maddison's grip tightened on the phone. Call more often, Maddison, he mentally chided himself. "I miss you guys too. I'm doing good. Just about to finish another piece."

"That's wonderful, Maddison. You must have done a lot more paintings now that we're not there to bother you. We can't wait to see them."

"I'll send you some pictures, mom."

The conversation went longer than Maddison planned, but he did not mind at all because he missed her. The guilt grew heavier. Maddison felt like crying, and even more when his mom mentioned Sam.

"He had dinner with us last night. I invited him over because his parents are away for a work trip for the week. Can't believe that boy grew taller again. I think he is almost as tall as you."

"I doubt it, mom," Maddison said, voice small.

"Sam misses you too, dear. He said you rarely talk these days. You're so busy you can't make time for your best friend?"

He tried his best to talk over the lump forming in his throat and blocking his airways. Sam was lying. They did not rarely talk these days because they never talk at all. “He was busy as well with volleyball, mom, being the captain and all.”

“Oh, yes. He did mention that. That kid, he has come a long way now...”

His mom blabbered on and on about Sam, which she usually did, because he and Sam could have switched places and their parents would never notice. Sam’s parents doted more on Maddison instead of Sam and vice versa. He let his mother talk until everything got too much. He didn’t need to know about how Sam was doing well and how successful he was and how the university reps were scouting for him. He didn’t need to know anything about him at all.

“Mom,” he said when his mother began wondering out loud why Sam hadn’t brought any girl home just yet since that pretty girl last year. He didn’t really need to know. “I have to go now, mom. I have to meet my club mates in a few for a meeting.”

It was Saturday and the art club only met every school day. But he needed to stop hearing about his best friend.

“Okay, Maddison. Call us again when you’re not busy, alright dear? And call Sam too. I know something happened between the two of you but don’t let it be your fall out. You two are such great friends.”

He pressed his palm against his eye, hard. “Sure, mom. Say hi to dad for me.”

“Take care, dear. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

He hung up, tossed his phone to the foot of his bed and groaned, bumping his head on his window as he fell a little to his side. He welcomed the tiny pain on his

temple, distracting him enough so he wouldn't cry. Must Sam lie to his parents to make them believe they were okay? The last time they talked in person was the end of the previous school year, Maddison's confession. And he never received any text or call from Sam after he ignored him. He wasn't planning on communicating with him either, because what was the purpose of transferring if he was just going to talk to him after? His main goal was to extinguish any sort of feelings he had for his best friend and he had not even achieved it yet, so why add fuel to the fire once again? Their friendship was better off crumbling instead of it blooming again but suffering because Maddison couldn't keep his emotions to himself.

—

"Hey, hey, any souvenirs you guys want me to get for you?" Tan loudly asked as he sat beside Richard, the contents on his tray jumping the tiniest bit as he slammed it on their table at the cafeteria. His red head was bright against the bleak white cafeteria wall. Maddison looked at him in question while Richard shook his head.

"I'm okay with anything, Tan."

"Ehh, Smith. You're no fun. What if I bring you a wooden dick?"

"Whatever floats your boat," Richard shrugged as he continued eating which made Tan laugh even more.

"Did you know, that idiom can mean two things? 'Whatever makes you happy' and 'whatever stimulates you', I read it in Quora once...the origin of this saying is crazy. Basically, it says there that the man is in a boat and the boat is the woman's..."

Maddison half-listened to Tan talking as he picked on his food, the after effects of his final exams catching up to him, exhausting him out of his wits. All he wanted

was to go to bed and maybe sleep for seventy-two hours to make up for the all-nighters he pulled. He was thankful that he had Tan in his little circle of...friends.

Tan Sullivan, with his eccentric red hair and quirky movements, made up for Richard's silence. The two were sort of a package deal, like a buy one, get one free even if he didn't ask for it. They were apparently metaphorically attached to the hips, and even though Tan didn't have any club, he was a permanent fixture in the art club room, especially when Mr. Collins was not around. It surprised Maddison that he and Tan got along just fine. Tan made the awkward silence between Maddison and Richard unlikely to happen when he was around.

"Where are you going?"

Tan's eyes sparkled, like they frequently did when Maddison took interest in anything he had to say. "Maldives. My parents decided they hated winter this year so we are going to the beach for the holidays."

"That's really nice. Take lots of pictures of the view for me please?" Maddison said.

"For reference, right? Of course." The other boy yelled excitedly, and then he was bumping his shoulder against Richard's. "You too? You need references too, right, Mr. Artist?"

Maddison wondered back then if these two were together, but when he asked Tan, the latter just laughed at him like a maniac and said that was impossible because Tan only saw Richard as a little brother he liked to tease endlessly, even though they were the same age. That was also the time Maddison heard from Tan that Richard had a crush on a sophomore named Miller Jones, that talented impressionist painter from their art club.

“He has a crush?!” Maddison had asked, incredulous.

Tan’s eyes gleamed with mirth when he said, “Our boy Richard has been throwing heart eyes at that kid ever since he entered the club last year. He just didn’t know how to properly ask him out because that pretty kid is so aloof, you know? Plus, Miracle Boy is shy.”

Maddison did not know which was funnier then: Richard having a heart eyes or Tan calling him Miracle Boy. To this day, he still didn’t know where he got the nickname from.)

Richard scowled at his rice. “I guess.”

“I heard the sunsets can get so colorful in Maldives. I’ll send one to you guys on the group chat. Every day while I’m there.”

“Thank you, Tan,” Richard said sincerely. Turning to Maddison then, “What about you, Flynn?”

“What about me?”

Tan asked, “Are you going back home or are you staying here?”

Maddison wrinkled his nose. “I haven’t decided yet.”

“Well, if you stay here it wouldn’t be so bad. There’s a Christmas party on the 24th at the common area, and everyone who doesn’t go home celebrates their Christmas there. It runs until the wee hours of the 25th and the school provides budget for food and drinks. But the real fun starts when the clock strikes 1 o’clock. Unlimited booze and lots of parties while the guardians go to bed!”

“Booze?” Maddison asked rather loudly.

“Shh!” Tan hushed him, looking around to make sure there were no faculty members around. “Underage, remember?”



“Yeah,” Maddison whispered, “Exactly why... Booze?”

“The seniors manage to sneak them in every year!”

Maddison rolled his eyes. He still had not decided what he was going to do for the holidays but the choice was getting easier as the dates approached. He wanted nothing to do with his hometown if he was going to see Sam, even if it meant not seeing his parents for Christmas. Selfish. Selfish. How selfish.

When he was finally back to his room, napping was the first best thing he thought of and he did just that, and when he woke up it was dark outside. Seven o'clock. He had a few texts from his mother. Squinting against the sudden brightness of his phone screen, he read the messages and got a head rush from abruptly sitting up. The messages said his dad had another business trip in Minnesota on the 22nd extending until the 5th of January next year and his mom was asking if he was going home for the break so that his father could arrange to include him on his trip. His sister would be spending the holidays with her boyfriend's family. Maddison typed a reply. It was perfect.

A minute after sending his text, his phone rang and his mother's voice colored with worry over the receiver.

“Honey, are you sure? You know I can stay at home with you if you're coming back.”

“No!” Maddison exclaimed, and then, calmer, “No, mom. I will be fine. You and dad enjoy the vacation, okay? It's been a while since you last went to one.”

He could almost hear his mother blushing on the other line. “Well, it's not much of a vacation because your dad will be working on most of it. But are you really sure?”

“One hundred percent.”

“Alright,” his mother sighed. “I will tell the Baileys about our plan so they can take you in if ever you decide to go home.”

“Mom. You’ll just bother them.” Maddison hadn’t considered that.

“Nonsense. You know they are always happy to see you, Maddison. Besides, it will ease me to know you’re with them while we’re away. Sam loves taking care of you.”

Goddammit. Maddison grumbled his assent.

“Your dad and I are going to be sad you won’t be there with us this Christmas, honey. But I guess we should start practicing, no? Soon, you will be in university and we will see you even less and — ”

“Okay, mom. I will miss you guys too. Don’t start crying on me please.”

His mom laughed and Maddison felt himself smile. They said their goodbyes and his mother made him promise to check in as often as possible.

Maddison sighed when the call was finally done. He genuinely hoped his parents would enjoy their holidays and while he was relieved that he found the perfect excuse not to go home, he was quite sad that he would not be seeing them until next year.

A little more than a week before Christmas. He still hadn’t done his Christmas shopping. Maybe he should get to it before his parents left and have their presents shipped before the holiday rush. He also needed to buy something for Richard and Tan. And he saw a funny-looking Godzilla mug the other day at the city center that he was sure Sammy would like —

Burying his face on his pillow, he wailed and whined as he stomped his feet up and down his mattress.

21 DECEMBER

14:36: hello

14:36: ur parents are leaving tomorrow

14:37: heard u'll be spending xmas at the boarding school

14:40: mom said u can come here to spend xmas instead

14:41: she didn't want u to spend the holiday alone in ur dorm

14:47: I don't want u to spend the holiday locked up in ur room alone either

14:50: thank u for the present btw. using it now

14:51: maddison

14:51: please

14:56: when are u going to talk to me again?

—

22 DECEMBER

09:23: ur parents just left

09:25: mom and dad are still expecting u

09:26 are u coming home?

22:08: did u get my present?

22:09: sent it the other day

22:12: just worried it got lost

22:12: do u like it?

—

23 DECEMBER

13:04: it's snowing

13:05: don't slip

23:40: mads

23:57: come on mads

—

24 DECEMBER

01:26: merry xmas

11:18: mom made pudding

12:35: dad said we can have a little wine if you  
come home

16:42: fuck, maddison

16:43: i can't do this anymore

The loud music was not helping Maddison sleep away his headache. Electric bass was in time with the throbbing of his temple and Maddison wanted to go down to the party just so he could yell at every one to please keep fucking quiet because he was suffering. He was angry, frustrated. At himself. At Sam.

The messages were unexpected. Unwelcomed.

He dared text Maddison for days and expected a reply from him when he knew the situation they were in? He dared say he could not do it anymore right after four days of messaging him consistently, making Maddison jump every time his phone dinged. Maddison almost hid his phone under his bed but it was ridiculous because he knew it was there and every time a text appeared he would check it like the lovestruck person he was. Maddison was angry he could not stop the tears from flowing the moment he read that last text.

The initial plan was to celebrate the holiday with his schoolmates at the basement, just like Tan suggested, so that he would feel less lonely, especially now that the former and Richard left for their own vacations. Maddison decided it would be healthy to mingle with

other people aside from the two and the Christmas party was the perfect opportunity for that.

But after the texts from Sam, he deflated back to his old self, the one who couldn't feel anything but emptiness and loss, the one who couldn't paint, the one who didn't know how to communicate. He thought for a moment to message Richard and Tan in their group chat and tell them what was going on, but the two had no idea about him and Sam so he decided to wallow in pain. Alone. Like the usual.

Was Sam playing with him? After months of no interaction, out of nowhere, he was texting Maddison again as if nothing happened? And then he got mad because Maddison did not answer him? His best friend was so full of shit and Maddison was angry.

His pettiness overflowing now, he couldn't help but think Sam only messaged him again because his parents were pestering him. That's it. That's most likely it. He wanted nothing to do with Maddison the moment Maddison ignored countless texts from him when Maddison left.

On top of the heavy bass and cheers he was hearing downstairs and the loud thumping of his head, Maddison heard his stomach grumble. It was half-past eight and he ought to eat now. He thought of going down to get some food wasn't fun and he hated the thought of human contact at the moment. God, didn't he wish he were an alien instead and coffee as a diet was enough to get him by.

Ransacking his little pantry and fridge, he found a day-old loaf, a box of milk and cup noodles, sat on his desk and began eating. The food wasn't so bad, but it was bad because it was his Christmas eve meal. He should have at least opted for a pizza delivery given he could afford it with the extra allowance he got from his parents, but then again, human contact.

He was done eating in a few minutes and, resolving into sleeping early since his mind was not properly functioning for a Yuletide celebration anyway, he showered and brushed his teeth, ready to go to bed by 9:15 in the evening. Pathetic.

Just as he was about to turn off his lights and bury himself in the comfort of his blankets, loud knocks were heard outside his door and he grumbled to himself and huffed as he slid his slippers back on. If his schoolmates were to convince him to go down to the party, he was willing to give them a sack on their balls as a Christmas present. He was just not in the mood.

“What — ”

Pulling the door open, Maddison stopped whatever he was saying and stared. Stared. And stared some more. His eyes were wide and he was certain his jaw was slacked open. Splashes of ebony and forest green hit his eyes and his knees shook, one hand on the doorknob, knuckles white, the other in a fist as he tried and failed to control his swirling emotions, his loud heart, his tears.

“Hi, Mads.”

Maddison let out a whoosh of breath.

Sam stood in front of him. Watching, waiting. Waiting to see if Maddison would move first? He was bound to wait forever then, as Maddison couldn't so much as swallow.

Was he this weak for him? One moment he was angry at him and the next he wanted nothing more than to throw himself at Sam and hug him tight? But he couldn't. Oh, Maddison couldn't. Couldn't move. Couldn't speak. Couldn't.

Maddison watched, struggling, as Sam licked his lips nervously, red, very red, from the cold, it must have been. His grip on the strap of his backpack was tight,

Maddison could tell, among other things he could tell. Hair longer, eyes so green yet dark, cheeks flushed. Taller. Oh, he did grow taller, but still a couple inches shorter than Maddison. He had his other hand inside his coat pocket and his eyes darted from Maddison to his dorm room and then back to Maddison.

“Merry Christmas?” He said, but it came out more as a question than a greeting. Maddison sniffed. “Can I come in?”

That seemed to undo Maddison from his current stupor, blurting, “Why are you here?”

The tone was flat, a little broken. His eyes never left Sam. The other fidgeted where he stood.

“You were not answering my messages. May I come in, Mads?”

“I don’t want to see you.”

A flash of anger, and then Sam was sighing. “I need to talk to you. Please.” He said it with so much sincerity, Maddison could feel another bout of headache rushing in. He slid the door open, wider, and gestured for Sam to go in.

Motioning for Sam to sit on a chair in the corner just beside his desk, he turned his back so that he was facing his pantry again. He didn’t know what was going on, nor what was about to happen. Was Sam here to tell him to forget what happened last time and demand his friendship back? Was he here for closure? Was he here to emphasize again that his feelings for Maddison were purely platonic? As if Maddison didn’t know that already?

“I don’t have tea, but I have coffee,” he said.

He could hear Sam’s frown when he said, “Just water is fine.” Health freak.

Maddison got him a cup of warm water before turning up the heater. It was freezing outside. He hated

that he had to sit on his own bed gingerly, Sam just a bit to his left. He didn't know what to do with himself.

"I brought some food. Mom insisted." Sam said after taking off his coat and placing them beside his backpack on the floor, leaving him on a gray shirt that was a little tight on his chest. Maddison wanted to look away, but before he did, Sam handed him containers and Maddison took it awkwardly, then awkwardly stood to open them on the desk, only a foot or so away from Sam. He awkwardly arranged the food inside the fridge before sitting back on the mattress.

"You're not going to eat them?"

Maddison shook his head. "Thanks. I just ate." He was sure the food was delicious but for pride, he was not going to eat them. Not when Sam was still here.

"Oh."

The whole situation screamed awkward and Maddison hated everything about it. His bed sheet was suddenly the most interesting thing in the world given how intently he studied it.

Sam cleared his throat. "Mom...and dad. They miss you."

Maddison was silent.

And then, "I miss you."

He looked up at him so fast he almost got a whiplash. But those words made Maddison angry again. He glared at Sam.

"It's true," said the other.

"Bullshit," Maddison hissed, then demanded, "What are you doing here?"

"I came here to see you." Obviously.

Maddison dragged his hand down his face, hard. Frustrated, he could only shake his head minutely.



Silence. Again.

“You’re free to leave anytime,” said Maddison. He made to lie down but Sam’s voice stopped him.

He said, “Mads. Please.”

Maddison all but raised his eyebrow.

“I don’t understand how to deal with you when you’re like this. You were never like this. Can we please just talk?” Desperate, equally frustrated, Sam’s gaze burned on Maddison’s.

“What do we need to talk about, Sammy?” He said the name sarcastically that Sam flinched. Good.

“We have so much to talk about, Mads. It’s been months since we last talked. You exude so much hostility about you right now. You weren’t usually like this and I hate that you’re like this. And to think that maybe it’s because of me makes me so angry with myself. I also can’t comprehend — what happened to us?”

“Do you really need me to remind you, then, Sam? Or do you have selective memory and can’t remember what exactly happened to us?”

“No, it’s not that — “

“What, then?” Maddison said, voice a little higher. He was shaking again. He did not know why he was like this too. He was angry and sad and upset. Here was his best friend, visiting him, seeing him after months, but he was just pushing him away.

“You know exactly what happened, why we can’t be friends again. It’s hard for me, this is hard for me. Why are you even here? I was doing great until you messaged me days ago. You didn’t have to ruin it for me. I was doing fine. I was doing just fine.” A sob. His whole body wracked with it and nothing was more humiliating than this. His tears were coming back and he tried his best to stop them from falling.

A second later and there were arms around his shoulders, his face buried to a strong chest, the smell of spring and warmth. So much warmth. He could hear the heavy, steady thuds of a heart beating over his loud cries and he held on to Sam's shirt.

God, he loved him. So much.

"Sammy — please."

"What is it, Mads?" Sam's hand was up on his head, fingering brown locks while his other hand rubbed random patterns to calm him down. It was not helping.

"Please, Sammy. Let me be. Please."

"What?"

Maddison's fingers tighten on the front of the other's shirt, despite himself. "Please. Leave me alone. I...I can't do this. Please."

The hands around him stopped, and Maddison thought, finally, and no, don't stop. He was torn. Complete. Lost. Found.

And then the arms were back, embracing him tighter. "No."

And Maddison was back to crying hard.

"Sammy," he managed to say. Then a little later, "If you leave now, I promise I will do better." A hiccup, then, "We can be friends again. I just need time. Please. Just give me time. Promise. I'll forget. I'll move on."

He felt Sam shaking his head against Maddison's shoulder. The tears were not stopping, it was mortifying. "I can't. I can't do that, Mads. Don't do that. I miss you."

"I can't be friends with you." Being friends with Sam meant eternal suffering for Maddison. Suffering as they grew old and seeing Sam settle down. A family, kids. A pretty house and a pretty wife. Maddison watching from

the sideline as his best friend kissed her hello and goodbye. He couldn't. Couldn't couldn't couldn't.

"Don't want to be friends with you." Muffled against Maddison's shirt. "I don't want to be just friends with you, Maddison."

"I'm sorry." Maddison felt like an idiot for crying harder.

"No, you don't understand." Sam pushed him away so he could look at Maddison's face, tear-stained cheeks and puffy eyes and snotty nose. He glanced at Sam's shirt; there was a wet mark on his chest. He had always been an ugly crier and Sam teased him endlessly about it. But now Sam didn't look like he was going to tease him.

Sam's hands went up to hold his face, his thumbs brushing Maddison's tears away from his reddened cheeks. Sam's expression was serious, his brows furrowed, the familiar v-shaped premature wrinkle appearing between his eyebrows, lines Maddison had traced countless times before. His eyes glistened a bit, and he was biting his lower lip hard. Was he about to cry? Maddison wondered at the back of his mind.

Breathing in deep, then out, Sam repeated, "I don't want to be just friends with you. Will you listen as to why?" He searched Maddison's eyes, and Maddison could only nod.

He already knew what Sam was about to say. It was nothing he didn't know before. He thought, this was it. This was how he was going to lose Sam forever.

Sam began, "When you confessed, I didn't know what to do. I was stunned. I felt so many things at once and I was overwhelmed. And before I could respond, you were running away and you refused to talk and I got really distraught because I didn't know what or how

exactly to feel. When you said you love me — ”  
Maddison flinched. A pause.

Then Sam continued, “When you said you love me, the initial feeling I had was joy. Then I got afraid. Confused. Then angry, because you kept it for so long. I didn’t understand why that made me angry so I got confused again and it felt like every single emotion was battling inside me. It wasn’t until I learned from your mom that you went to Wellspring that I felt something else.”

Maddison had stopped crying. He was listening intently, but he couldn’t look Sammy in the eye. He didn’t know where he was going with this.

“I texted you a lot, I thought you got annoyed that’s why you weren’t replying at all. But then it dawned on me: you needed space. You needed time. So, I gave you those things. At that time, I still haven’t figured it out completely. I focused all my energy in club and school. I made sure to train hard. Then we had a match with Wellspring and I thought it was finally time to see you again and I promised myself that I would talk to you then. I kept searching for you in the crowd. I was hoping I would bump into you when I went for a quick walk around the gym’s garden an hour before the warmups. I was starting to worry because you weren’t there. Were you sick? Were you away? Out of town for a competition? I didn’t know. We were so out of loop with each other, I wasn’t used to it. I used to memorize your daily schedule, you know?” Maddison rubbed an eye dry before glancing up at Sam, and the other let out a small smile.

“We lost. And everyone was down when I herded my teammates back to the bus. I was disappointed, not only because we lost but mostly because you weren’t there. Just when I thought I wouldn’t see you, I found you walking across the street. You were wearing your Wellspring gym uniform and I wanted to burn your posh

purple jacket.” Sam chuckled, voice deep and rich. Maddison felt breathless.

“I called you several times but you were wearing your headphones. You didn’t hear me as you crossed the street, closer to me. You turned in a different direction, but before that I was able to see a glimpse of your face, much closer this time, and my heart broke. You were so thin, Maddison! What were you doing to yourself? Your cheeks were hollowed, you were so pale, there were dark circles under your eyes and your hair — your hair was unruly. You looked awful, I thought you were sick. I was about to run to you but then my coach called for me to get on the bus and that was when the guilt rushed in. I did that, I thought. You were like that because of me. My heart was throbbing because I wanted to hug you and I wanted to feed you lots of good food and take care of you until you were back to my old, dumbass Mads and that’s when I stopped. Because I called you mine inside my head which was ridiculous but it felt right — shit, it’s embarrassing.”

Maddison let out another breath, laughing a little. He swiped at the snot trickling down his nose. Gross.

“Sammy, get to the point please.” He watched as Sam’s cheeks flushed.

“Right, so,” Sam cleared his throat. “After that I went on to reflect on my feelings and my life — ”

“Did you go to a shrine?” Maddison asked, eyes glinting.

“No, dork! Shut up.” His scowl deepened. Then, “I think, to make this short, I want to say that you aren’t the only one feeling these things and that I may have felt these before, too. Even before you confessed, but I decided to ignore it because I thought us being friends was enough but it was apparently not for you, and now it wasn’t enough for me too and I want something else and I’m sure you do too and if you would still have me? I

know I should apologize and I really am sorry for putting you through this emotional shit and it's hard. So, what I'm really saying is that if you still feel for me what I feel for you then I think it's a good idea that we — ”

“Jesus, Sammy, just say you love me too!”

If Sam was the only one blushing a moment ago, now Maddison was too.

“Well,” said Sam.

“Well?” Maddison fought to keep his blush in check.

“You're right,” Sam said. “I'm that, Doll Face.”

Maddison hit him with a pillow, but Sam was an athlete and had fast reflexes, so he was able to catch the pillow, tossed it away and in one motion had his arms around Maddison again. Maddison could melt then and there.

Whispering against Maddison's ear, Sam's voice was lower, huskier, full of emotions. “I love you. I'm so sorry I'm late. I'm so sorry you had to go through all that alone. I'm in love with you too, Maddison. It's not the same without you. I was miserable when you left.”

Maddison's shoulders shook again, and he couldn't help himself this time, he pulled away from Sam only to crawl up the other's lap and bury his face on the nook between his shoulder and neck.

“Don't cry, please,” said Sam.

“These are happy tears.” Muffled and breathless.

A kiss on his temple. Another whispered I love you.

Jesus, he felt like he was floating.

“Should we go and sleep? All that crying must have been exhausting,” Sam asked after a while, when Maddison was done crying and Sam's shirt was soaking wet.

“No, I want to stay awake. A little longer.”

“Alright.”

“Come on, let’s lie down.” He easily lifted Maddison off his lap, as if Maddison weighed nothing. Maddison could only stare as Sam went under the covers and lifted one side, indicating for Maddison to follow.

“Are we going to have sex?” Maddison asked. Then, realizing what he said, balked.

Sam choked. “W-what?”

“Ha ha, just kidding?”

“You dork!”

“Sorry.” Maddison went under the sheets, covering himself from head to toe. Then, shyly, he peeked out of it, exposing only his eyes. Sam’s gaze was heavy on him, he discovered. Swallowed. Feeling his face warming, he murmured, “We haven’t even kissed yet.”

Sam’s eyes widened, then narrowed. Maddison’s heart was beating fast and before he knew it, he was being pressed on the mattress with Sam on top of him, hovering over his face, arms on either side of his head. Maddison gulped. Holy shit.

Their noses were touching, and Maddison’s eyes were almost double-crossed but he couldn’t stop looking at the minute greens of Sam’s eyes, almost gone with how dark they’ve become. If Maddison moved ever so slightly, their lips would touch, finally. Finally —

“I’ve imagined this so many times before,” Sam said. Then, “May I kiss you?”

Trying not to sound desperate, Maddison said, “Please.”

There was a pull, then they were kissing. And god, was it glorious. Heady. Maddison never felt anything like it. Were there fireworks? Angels singing? Flowers in the

background? No, there were none. But it was extraordinary. It was more than those things.

More. More, Maddison wanted more. Sam licked his lower lip, making Maddison gasp and then their tongues were touching. Warm. Hot. Maddison was feverish. He was pushing and Sam was pushing and it felt good, so good. Maddison pulled on Sam's hair and Sam groaned, angling his head to the side to kiss Maddison better, oh god it was so much better. And Maddison was gasping, panting, Sam was pulling away from him only to come back and nip at his jaw, down his neck, licking the soft skin there then back at his lips again.

"Sam," said Maddison. Sam gave him a peck. Then another. And another. To his cheek, his jaw, the back of his ear. Maddison bucked up his hips against his and Sam let out a groan, deep and vibrating and sending shivers down Maddison's spine. It did something to him. Something. Maddison needed. Oh, Maddison needed.

"Sam," he said again. Gasp. "Sam."

"What is it?" Sam murmured, busying himself on Maddison's neck.

"I need — please."

"What is it?"

Maddison whined, rocked his hips again. "Please."

Then the warmth was gone. Sam was gone. Maddison looked to his side and Sam was seated to his left, a handspan away, breathing heavily. Staring at him. "What —" His voice broke.

"Sammy..."

Sam closed his eyes. "Maddison, no."

"Why not?" Maddison heard himself whine. He's embarrassing himself.



“Because.”

“Because?”

“It’s not right...?”

“Bullshit, Sammy.”

“No, no. It’s right. I just. Are you sure?”

“Are you not?”

Sam glared at him. “Don’t think I want this less than you do, Maddison.”

“Then why?”

Sighing, Sam ran his fingers through his dark hair. It didn’t help Maddison’s predicament. Sam leaned in and kissed his cheek. “Because I want to do this right.”

“What?”

Blushing, the other said, “We don’t have anything. At the moment. And we need those things. I think. If we’re doing this.” He coughed.

“Oh,” was all Maddison said, finally understanding.

“Let’s go to sleep.”

“What, no!” Maddison exclaimed. He didn’t want this night to end, and if he slept he’s going to do just that. End the night.

Sam laughed. “Talk then.”

“Yes, talk. Then kiss. Some more.”

“That too.” Sam said, “And if you still think it’s a good idea. We can do it tomorrow.”

Maddison’s eyes widened, then he grinned. “It? You mean – “

“Yes, that, yes. Geez, you’re embarrassing.”

Maddison laughed, and it was a happy sound he almost surprised himself. But not really. With Sam here

with him, happy was just right. Understatement.

“You haven’t told me if you liked my Christmas present for you,” said Sam.

Humming and smiling cheekily, he nodded. He wasn’t thinking of the new artist grade paint set he got the other day. There was nothing to think about except the person beside him.

This. This was the most perfect gift in the world, Maddison thought.

## Chapter 5

Even before he opened his eyes, Maddison knew he was already awake.

It was cold. The winter morning was extreme despite the heavy thermal blanket protecting his body but it didn't deter him at all. He was happy. The blissfulness was bound to overwhelm him anytime soon but he couldn't care less.

Last night was such a dream. And he was living it. He couldn't believe he got lucky — was it because he had been somewhat kinder to people around him the past months, kinder even to himself? Even though he had a momentary lapse the past days because of the text messages, he had been taking care of himself well, compared to the first months living on his own. He even took the initiative to call his parents first. Was this a holiday blessing? Did he deserve this happiness? He couldn't decide.

But Maddison was innately a selfish person so he would bask in this happiness. After years of suffering in silence, Maddison was genuinely happy. A breath of the freshest air.

He smiled, his eyelashes fluttering as he finally opened his eyes, his body facing the window. It was gloomy outside — a drizzly Christmas morning. The rain seemed to have overtaken the snow overnight and instead of snowflakes, raindrops splattered his window. Gray morning light peaked into the blinds, enough so his dim room could be seen without the fluorescent in the ceiling. The weather outside greatly contrasted with how warm Maddison was feeling.

He turned to his other side, and froze.

It was way past midnight when they decided to sleep. They talked a lot last night; catching up on things

they missed about each other — play by play matches, descriptions of new pieces and series, the shows they'd watched without the other, albums they discovered on their own; old friends in Hillwood and new ones in Wellspring; their parents; room renovations; the tiniest, most insignificant things. It filled Maddison's heart to the brim, seconds from bursting. And the kisses and touches they shared were beyond what Maddison had imagined them to be. They were too much yet not enough. Maddison would always, always want so much more.

Last night was such a dream.

It was a nightmare.

Because Sam was not there. He was never there.

It took a while before his brain could process it. Sam wasn't there. The space beside Maddison, where Sam laid just last night, strong arm over Maddison's waist as he kissed Maddison goodnight, was cold. Empty.

He couldn't move, at first.

He was imagining it. He had finally gotten insane and conjured Sam out of his imagination. How could he let himself lose his wits and allowed his imagination to run wild, he couldn't explain to himself. The overwhelming joy he felt minutes ago was now rendered pointless. He felt horrified at himself.

Did he really think Sam would come running to him on a cold, winter night just to confess his love for him? Did he really believe Sam would ever, ever reciprocate his feelings? Maddison might be a fool, but his friend was not. Sam would never see him as more than that, a friend. Maddison was an idiot.

He didn't realize he stopped breathing until his chest tightened and he struggled to gasp through his mouth, tears falling on the bridge of his nose down to his temple, soaking the pillow. His grip on the sheet tensed

as he forced himself to take deep breaths, eyes wide in disbelief and mouth open in silent cries.

When he thought his breathing somewhat normalized, he sat up and hugged his knees. Trying his best to stop the buzzing in his ears and the panic from rising up again, he placed his forehead on top of his knees, closed his eyes and counted to ten. He tried his best but it was futile.

Body rocking from his cries that were getting louder and louder, Maddison was fighting to get control over his tears and his breaths. He couldn't hear himself over the sound of his heart breaking. Again. And again. And again.

Everything felt real. Last night felt real. Sammy's voice and Sammy's warmth. All the stories he told Maddison. How did Maddison even begin to come up with all those? None of those things were real. Maddison never felt more pathetic. He sobbed harder, tears and spits and snot all over his face but he couldn't care less — he was loud and shaking, he was cold and heartbroken.

Even after ten minutes that felt like hours, Maddison hadn't stopped crying, his voice raw and his hair messy, scalp aching from all his pulling. His chest heaved as he looked outside the window, at the rain as it continued to pour, wind howling. A storm. It was perfect for what he was feeling.

He almost didn't hear the door opening, the rain and his cries a little deafening for his ears. When he turned, everything stopped. His breathing, his tears. His heart.

"Mads? What...?" Sam.

Sam. Sam was standing there, by Maddison's door, umbrella in one hand, wet brown bags hugged against his chest in the other. The door clicked close behind him.

Before Maddison could even comprehend what was happening, Sam was running towards him, umbrella and bags dropped to the floor. Calloused hands cupped Maddison's cheeks and intense green eyes searched his face. He felt a thumb brushed against wet cheek. Maddison was struggling to breathe again.

"Maddison? What's going on?" Sam said. He looked so real. Maddison stared at him. Even in apparition, Sam was beautiful, despite the worry lines forming on his forehead. "Why are you crying?"

"Sammy," Maddison croaked.

"Don't cry," Sam said in a hushed tone very much unlike himself, before getting on the bed and wrapping his arms around Maddison's shaking body. Maddison pressed his face on his neck. "Don't cry."

"You're so warm, Sammy," Maddison said, words muffled by Sam's shoulder. "And I'm so pathetic. Depending on my imagination like this." Another sob.

"What are you talking about?" Sam started to pull away but Maddison hugged him tighter, not wanting to face him. He didn't want to embarrass himself further in front of Sam — even if he was just a hallucination.

"No. Please don't," Maddison said. "Even in my imagination, you're so warm."

"Maddison, what are you saying?" Sam asked again, and when he pulled away this time he successfully managed to do so. Was he supposed to be this strong? He was gripping Maddison's shoulders and looking at him, demanding his answer.

Maddison shook his head.

"Oi, dork, you're scaring me. What's wrong?"

"You're not real," Maddison hiccuped, then pouted. He wiped a stray tear that fell on his cheek. "If I let go, you might disappear again."

“What?”

“Don’t look so confused, Sammy! Even your apparition’s dumb.”

Something seemed to click and understanding washed over Sam’s expression, so when he brought Maddison against him again, Maddison wheezed, his breath knocked out of his chest.

“I’m here, you dumbass. What the hell were you thinking?” And then, softly, “I’m here.”

“You’re here?” Even to his own ears, Maddison knew he sounded like a loser. “You’re for real?”

Sam chuckled, “Yes. Seriously, Mads. I know you have the wildest imagination but conjuring people is way out of your league.”

Maddison gasped in awe. Sam was here. He was real and Maddison was not imagining it, none of what happened last night was a dream. It was real. “You love me? It wasn’t a dream?”

He knew Sam was blushing even without seeing his face. “Yes, Mads. I said it so many times last night. How dare you think it was just a dream?”

“Because it was too good to be true.”

“Well, believe it.”

Just like that, Maddison was content again. Happiness came back and he hugged Sam tighter. And, just like that, Maddison was also suddenly flooded with embarrassment. All that crying.

“I really am a dumbass.”

Sam snorted. “Yeah, well, you’re my dumbass.”

“Sammy,” Maddison whined.

“What?”

“Nothing. Just,” A smile, shy but there. Maddison couldn’t resist squeezing Sam. “I’m so happy.”

Sam chuckled, a deep tune that always made Maddison’s stomach flutter. He felt the press of a pair of lips on his temple and he wondered again how in the world this was happening to him.

“Do you want to go back to sleep?” Sam asked after a while of them locked in each other’s arms. He was running his fingers through Maddison’s hair, comforting him when he hiccupped once in a while, the after effects of crying.

Maddison shook his head. “I’m fine. But Sammy,” pulling away to look at the other’s face, giving him a questioning look. “Where’ve you been?”

“The convenience store,” he answered matter of factly. A scowl suddenly appeared on Sam’s face and then he was hitting Maddison’s head. “You irresponsible dumbass! I woke up and thought I’d prepare us something to eat but all I saw in your cupboard were cup noodles and instant ramen. And your fridge. Really, Maddison? Boxes of chocolate milk and energy drinks? How old are you? No wonder you’re so fucking thin. Is that all you eat — “

“Sammy!” Maddison whined, pouting and covering his ears for full effect. “You’re not my mom. You’re my — you’re my boyfriend! Or something...”

Sam blushed. And gods, he was gorgeous. Maddison’s fingers itched for his canvas.

“Yeah, well. I’m your,” A cough. “Your boyfriend. So I have to assume responsibility somehow. Dumbass.”

“You could have done it a bit more sweetly.”

“Shut up. I got you groceries, Mads. You gotta pay me for it.”

Maddison grinned, “Can I kiss you instead?”



The flushing intensifies.

“I guess,” Sam mumbled.

Maddison cupped his face before planting a kiss on the tip of his nose, then his cheek, the other one, before kissing Sam’s lips softly. “Thank you, Sam.”

Sam’s expression had softened and he returned his smile. “Anything for you. Anything, Maddison.”

“Right,” Maddison let go of his face and stood up, heading towards the groceries left by the door, and picking up the dripping umbrella from the floor and placing it on the rack. He didn’t think he could handle Sam’s intense gaze directed at him this early in the morning, especially after an emotional breakdown. so he needed a distraction.

He brought the grocery bags to his desk before sorting them. Sam offered to cook them eggs and fried rice at Maddison’s kitchenette, yelling at Maddison for having obviously unused pots and pans and kitchen utensils. He also pulled the containers he brought last night.

While Sam had gotten him snacks like chips and chocolate bars, most of the things he got were nutritional and were easy to cook. He bought him boxes of cereals and milk because Maddison was ‘a mess in the morning and shouldn’t be left alone by the stove’, to which Maddison couldn’t agree more.

He got to the toiletries, a little embarrassed that Sam thought the need to pick up a couple of bathroom stuff for him. When he reached for a small separate package, his ears burned and he let out a squeak.

“Sammy!”

“What?”

“What?” Maddison said, lifting the things from the package and showing them to Sam, not able to look the

other in the eye. He was sure his best friend was as red in the face as he was at the moment. The bottle of lube and box of condoms seemed to be glinting under the fluorescent.

“I — I thought we might need them. Since last night, you — ” Sam scratched his head with the hand not holding the wooden spoon. “You kind of implied that you — um — with me. So I thought. You know. Just to be safe...”

So many unfinished sentences, but Maddison understood him very well. Last night was overwhelming for both of them and Maddison was thankful Sam was still in his right mind to stop Maddison’s advances when things got a little...intense.

Maddison turned around and towards his bedside table, opening the drawer. “Um. I’m just going to keep these here. For now. Since we shouldn’t. For now.”

“Yeah. Okay. Right.”

Breakfast was a silent affair, probably because of the incident but after that they cleaned up and huddled under the covers of Maddison’s bed, enjoying each other’s warmth as the storm outside continued to wreak havoc in the streets.

“We could watch something?” Maddison suggested and grabbed his laptop, pulling up Netflix.

“Netflix and chill?” Sam joked. He easily dodged the pillow thrown at his face by Maddison while laughing. “You were very eager last night.”

“I was emotional, okay?” He clicked on a random movie.

“Just so you know,” Sam said, and then a little more quietly, “I’d like to, as well. With you. I’m just. Scared. I’ve never done it before.”

“Me neither. But Sammy,” Maddison looked at him under his lashes. “You think it’s any different? With a boy?”

“I don’t know.”

“It couldn’t have, right? The things you did with Ayako are the same, just um — “

Sam faced him sharply, wide-eyed. “I’ve never. With her. Or anyone.”

Maddison gulped. “Never?”

Sam shook his head.

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“But why?”

“I just. I didn’t feel that deeply for her, you know? To the point that I would want to do it with her.”

“But you love her.”

“Honestly, I wasn’t sure then if I did. But…”

“Yes?”

Sam locked his eyes on Maddison. “But now, I am. I didn’t love her. The things I felt for her were nothing compared to the things I feel for you.”

“Sam…”

“Can I kiss you?”

“Please.”

Sam reached for him the same time he scooted closer, their bodies fitting together under the warm blanket. There was a hand on Maddison’s cheek, gentle and calloused and warm, and when their lips met Maddison could have sworn he felt sparks fly, or there was a fire, ignited when Sam swiped his tongue on Maddison’s lower lip that made Maddison gasp. Sam

pushed him on his back, with his forearms on either side of Maddison's head, and Maddison's hands grasped the front of Sam's shirt, his tongue meeting Sam's as they deepened the kiss.

Time was nonexistent as they kissed, hands all over each other's bodies. Sam's shirt was the first to go, the blanket already kicked out of the way and on the floor. Maddison needed Sam's lips on his like he needed air, and he should have been embarrassed at the way he whimpered and moaned when the only thing Sam had done to him was kiss and touch him.

After a while, Sam pulled away panting, his green eyes dark and his lips swollen red and slick with spit. He kissed Maddison's nose before moving lower and tracing his jaw with his lips, peppering open-mouthed kisses. He sucked on a tender spot right below Maddison's neck, and then the skin where his neck and shoulder met. Maddison closed his eyes and enjoyed the feeling. He idly wondered why Sam was so skilled at this, and promptly discarded the thought.

"Oh god," Maddison moaned when Sam lightly bit him before licking and soothing the skin, and he was mortified at how his back arched, hips automatically pushing up to meet Sam's. Maddison was hard and it was so obvious as his pajamas were tented, but he felt Sam's own erection against him and couldn't help but blush and bit his lip. "Sammy..."

"What do you want, Maddison?" Sam asked, stopping his attempt to mark Maddison's collarbone and meeting his eyes.

Maddison gulped. Sam was so beautiful.

With him shirtless on top of Maddison, his hand underneath his shirt and fingertips running along Maddison's skin in the softest way, inducing goosebumps where his fingers went, he was the most

beautiful person Maddison had ever met. He was in awe of Sam.

“You, Sam. I want you.” Maddison didn’t wait for his reply and grabbed Sam’s face, kissing him because he couldn’t get enough. Sam kissed him back like he felt the same. And maybe, most likely, definitely, he did.

Sam grunted and lowered his hips, grinding against Maddison in the most delicious way possible. Maddison’s fingers found purchase on Sam’s hair, pulling him in for a deeper kiss as Sam worked their clothed erections together. Too soon, Sam lifted his face and pulled back, sitting on top of Maddison’s thighs. He then grabbed Maddison’s arm to make him sit up and face him before lifting Maddison’s shirt off him and kissing his collarbone and his chest, and then up to Maddison’s neck as he whispered how beautiful Maddison was and how much he wanted him.

Then Maddison was on his back again, with Sam kissing his way down until he reached one of Maddison’s nipple, sucking and licking it lightly and driving Maddison insane as the bud hardened, wet with Sam’s spit. Sam did the same to the other nipple and Maddison bit the side of his palm to muffle his moans.

“Sammy,” Maddison gasped, grabbing Sam’s hair again. “Stop stop stop. Sammy, I want you.”

You have me.”

“No,” Maddison whined. “Please. I — ” Growing impatient, Maddison sat up and wriggled out of his pajamas, taking his underwear with it. His face burned but he didn’t care. He just wanted more. Sam seemed to understand and immediately took off his own pants and Maddison bit back another moan because oh god Sam’s naked before him and oh god he was beautiful.

“Shit, Maddison. You’re making me crazy. Lie back down,” Sam said and followed Maddison, covering his

entire naked body with his. Their dicks rubbed against one another and it was the hottest thing Maddison ever experienced. Sam reached down and circled his huge hand around them, and this time Maddison couldn't hold back the loud moans escaping him. He moved his hips in time with Sam's hand, their precum making it easy for Sam to slide up and down them.

"Sam," Maddison said, sucking on Sam's earlobe. "Not gonna last, Sam."

Sam grunted, his hand moving faster. It's warm. It's too warm. As if it wasn't Christmas Day and there wasn't a storm outside. Maddison was burning and he was mumbling incoherently in Sam's ear. The room was filled with the sounds of wet skin on wet skin, moans and whimpers and panting.

Maddison reached his climax first, biting on Sam's shoulder as his vision turned black for a hot second and releasing on Sam's hand. He felt Sam shiver above him, his hips stuttering before he shouted, thick ribbons of release shooting off him and into his hand and their stomachs. There was a second before Sam exhaled and slumped down heavily on Maddison. It was sticky between them, and his body and Sam's were slicked with sweat, but for a moment it was peaceful. It was perfect. Maddison felt so light and happy and warm. He always was when he was with Sam.

Sam moved first, rolling beside him after kissing his cheek. "We should clean up."

Maddison just smiled, feeling drunk, and just hummed.

Sam chuckled. "This finally shut you up? I should have done this sooner if I knew."

Pouting, Maddison leaned closer, burying his face on Sam's shoulder. "I can't move, Sammy." That earned him another laugh, and a kiss on top of his head.

“I’ll be right back.” Sam climbed out of the bed but Maddison snagged his wrist.

“Where are you going?” He knew he sounded whiny but he didn’t care. He didn’t want Sam to leave or move yet.

“I’m going to the bathroom to get something to clean you up, Doll Face.”

“Oi,” Maddison said as Sam walked to the bathroom. “You’re not allowed to call me that anymore. Have a little respect toward your boyfriend, Sammy.”

“Yeah, yeah, Doll Face,” Sam said as he came back with a wet cloth and wiped the sticky mess on Maddison’s stomach and chest. After a minute of taking care of himself, Sam was back and picked up Maddison’s blanket, covering Maddison with it before sliding under the sheet and pulling Maddison close to him. Maddison couldn’t resist and snuck a quick kiss.

“We didn’t use your supplies, Sammy,” he teased.

Sam coughed. “I — Did you... Do you want — I thought... I didn’t...”

Maddison laughed, “I’m just kidding, Sammy. You should have seen your face.”

Sam growled and pinched Maddison’s side, which then evolved into a tickle fight that Maddison quickly lost.

“Okay, okay. Enough.” Maddison giggled and gasped. “You won.”

He got a cocky smirk for his trouble and god, Maddison couldn’t help but kiss him again. “Maybe next time, Sammy. When we’re both ready.”

“That sounds good. Next time.” Sam pressed a kiss on his forehead. “Should we nap? Or do you want to continue watching movies?”

“As long as Sammy doesn’t jump me again,” he sing-songed.

“You did it first, dork,” Sam said as he grabbed the laptop that was hanging precariously on the edge of the bed. They didn’t even remember to move it to a safer place before they started attacking each other.

After choosing a movie, they snuggled close, not bothered by their nakedness although in Maddison’s mind he was thinking of frogs, granny underwears, and yucky mud so he didn’t accidentally get a hard-on especially with how close he was to Sam and his dick was lightly pressed to the side of Sam’s hip.

Sam apparently didn’t mind when Maddison moved and felt Sam’s dick resting hard between his thighs, and he didn’t mind when it was Maddison’s hand that reached down to grasp and jerked them off as they kissed and licked at each other. At least this time they remembered to move the laptop on the floor before they got too carried away.

And if it was all they did on Christmas Day, then it’s nobody’s business but theirs, because finally, finally, they had each other and they were not letting go.



# Epilogue

Maddison was locking up the gallery's main entrance when he felt strong arms wrapping around his waist, and he leaned back on the broad chest as Sam kissed his temple hello. He smiled and turned, meeting Sam's lips for a quick kiss.

"Hi."

Sam grinned. "Hi. Ready to go?"

"Yes."

Sam took his hand and together they walked to the train station, heading to their old high school — Hillwood — to support the boys volleyball team in their first home game of the school year. Even after ten years after they graduated high school, Sam and Maddison made it a point to go to at least a few of their games. Sam had made it to professional volleyball, and was making it a goal to join the national team eventually. He traveled a lot because of it, but he made sure to come home every week to their townhouse to be with Maddison and Mr. Socks, their calico cat.

Maddison owned an art gallery in the middle of the city, hosting local artists for art shows, holding workshops, and sometimes having his own shows for a new collection. He loved what he did and it was surprisingly lucrative despite how much he doubted it to be when he was starting. He even let Richard have shows in there as well. He was happy to have maintained friendship with him and Tan after all these years.

"How's your day?" Sam asked.

"It was fine. I got a call from Mr. Collins asking for a piece I had from my previous collection. Said he was redecorating and my painting would look great right on

top of his toilet,” Maddison grumbled, even though he knew Mr. Collins liked his art just fine.

Sam laughed, “As long as he was paying.”

“Yeah, I’m charging him three times higher than usual just for that quip,” Maddison grinned. “How’s your day?”

“Great. It was boring without you at home.”

Sam had his day off and was staying home all day with Mr. Socks. He was probably reviewing old volleyball games, ever so dedicated to his craft even on his rest days.

“I cooked lasagna, by the way. It’s in the fridge and we can heat it up when we get home.”

“Is it any good?”

“Of course it is.”

“We can always order takeout if it turns out awful,” Maddison teased, earning a pinch on his cheek. Sam was good at cooking, and most often it was Maddison who ruined meals, but he was trying his best.

It took Maddison a while to believe that Sam loved him back, and that they were actually dating. When they told their families, they all laughed and asked them what took so long, and that they already knew that the two of them would eventually end up together. It made Maddison realize that maybe, after all, they really were meant to be.

It was smooth-sailing after that.

They graduated from separate high schools and entered different universities. It worked out alright because they were in the same city, and shared an apartment in the middle of the two locations. It had already been years of domesticity for them and Maddison loved every minute of it.

The train ride only took fifteen minutes and then they were walking down the familiar path to their old school. It was half-past five, and the sun was starting to set, leaving in its wake pretty colors that Maddison was always delighted to see. He was smiling as they got to the bridge. That bridge. The one he was on when he realized he was in love with his best friend. He squeezed Sam's hand and felt him squeeze back.

"Mads," Sam said just as they reached the middle of the bridge. They stopped walking and Sam pulled him closer, kissing him and then brushing his brown hair away from his face. He never got past Maddison's height, always three inches shorter than he was and it was often the subject of his grievances against Maddison. He made it up with his bulk though, all muscles and strength.

"What, Sammy?"

There was a twinkle in Sam's eyes Maddison couldn't interpret, which was odd because he was usually great at reading Sam. The orange and purple skies hit his face just right, making him look even more beautiful than usual. Sam always looked his best under twilight.

"I love you," Sam said, voice throaty and... nervous?

"I love you, too," Maddison replied automatically. "You're being weird."

"No, I'm not," he said. "I just. Mads." He took Maddison's face between his hands. "You know this is it for me, right? You and me? This is forever, right?"

Maddison's heart skipped a beat. "Of course."

"Then, would you say yes if I asked you to marry me?"

"Are you asking now?"

“Yes.”

Maddison pouted, “Then ask me properly, Sammy.”

Sam smiled, one hand now in his pocket. He took something out of it and let go of Maddison. Maddison’s breath hitched as his boyfriend went down on one knee, looking up at him with pretty jade eyes and a brilliant, albeit shaky, smile. He presented the ring inside the black velvet box, the little diamond rock glinting. It was a simple white gold band with the diamond encrusted on the center. It was perfect. “Maddison Flynn, will you please marry me?”

Kneeling to meet Sam, Maddison nodded until he was kissing Sam, and then said against his lips, “Yes.”

They kissed once more, Sam pulling Maddison tight against him, closer and closer. They were both sitting on the ground, their lips in an endless lock, and if there were passersby, they couldn’t have cared less. This was their moment and no one was taking this away from them.

After what seemed like a lifetime, they finally pulled away and Sam helped Maddison stand.

“Give me my ring please.”

Sam grinned as he took the ring off the box and slid it on Maddison’s left ring finger. He kissed it once it was on and took Maddison’s hand before starting to walk once again “Thank you, Mads.”

“Thank you. You make me happy, Sam.”

“You’re my world, Mads.”

“Sammy, you’re a sap.” And then he stopped them in their tracks. “Wait, we didn’t take a picture.”

Sam pulled out his phone and snapped a quick selfie of them two.

“That’s not enough. Hey, come back.”

“Or you can just paint it. That’d be prettier.”

“I’ll make it the prettiest for Sammy.”

“I know you will.”

Sam put his arm around his waist as they started walking again. “I can’t wait.”

“Can’t wait to what?” Maddison asked.

“To start the rest of our lives together.”

The End

# Coming soon

## Lights, Camera: Backstage Pass

2023

Excerpt

EVAN was a having a bad day.

Or a bad week, but today was particularly a bad day.

He was on his fourth — fifth? — tequila shot and the buzzing in his head was starting to bother him and his sense of sight, but he couldn't stop himself from drinking. Evan was doubtful at first, but after a glass of martini and shots of this divine tequila, he now understood his best friend Dorian's love for drinks, or really, slight alcohol addiction. It was burning him up, in a really good way, and he wanted more of it, because it also made the day's events to be somewhat of a blur.

Evan licked his palm wet, putting some salt on it before licking it again and taking another shot, following it up with a suck on a lemon wedge. The fuzzy feeling was overwhelming and he smiled to himself. He would never turn down Dee's invitations to go drinking with him again, he thought as he placed the glass in perfect alignment with the other glasses.

He blearily looked around at the place, this hole-in-the-wall, dingy bar he found a few blocks away from their office, the dim lights easy on his dazed eyes as he adjusted his prescription glasses that slid down his nose after the drink. Evan was looking for something to eat, something greasy and affordable, so he could wallow in pain and sorrow for what just happened at work, when he found the bar. He didn't realize he was walking mindlessly and he was unfamiliar with the place, but it drew him in, especially when he saw the hood of a

vintage car hanging on the ceiling right on top of the bar counter. It was illuminated with red and yellow lights and Evan thought it was cool so he walked in and sat on one of the six stools below it. The bar was small, with only six steel table stands and ten wooden tables that sat four, or five if the people there were willing enough to scoot close and squeeze in. Most of the tables were already occupied as it was a Friday night. There was a huge mirror on the left wall that tricked the eye into believing the place was bigger than it really was, and the wood flooring was full of old stains but was otherwise shiny and waxed.

Evan looked back to his drinks and found that he had finished his martini and only had one shot left so he grabbed the menu, looking for something good and something new to try. His stomach was rumbling, probably because he didn't get that greasy food he was craving after walking aimlessly for hours when he was dismissed from the office, but he was also feeling thirsty, so maybe that should come first.

He was dimly aware of someone occupying the seat beside his, but he barely registered it when his throat tightened and his heart pounded as the thought of him getting sacked from work this afternoon came back with a vengeance, and he could feel his eyes welling up with hot tears as he imagined how heartbroken Dee would be for him, and for them, once Evan told his best friend they'll be running out of money sometime in the next month.

Swallowing hard and blinking away the tears before they even fell down, Evan focused his gaze on the menu, inhaling deeply through his nose and exhaling through his mouth to calm himself as he read the backside of the single-page cardboard where the special drinks were listed down. He almost laughed out loud with what he just saw when he heard the deep rumble of the person ordering beside him as the middle-aged

bartender talked to them, before walking over to Evan with a kind, albeit amused, smile.

“How we doin’, kid?”

“Good, good! Can I get another one of these please?” He asked cheerfully, pointing to his empty glasses — except for one more tequila shot, and if Evan slurred a bit, no one should care but him. And then he remembered the funny thing on the menu and waved it frantically to the middle-aged, African-American man with the kind eyes and permanent grin, whose name was Lamar, according to his name tag. “Ooh, and what is this? Is this for real? Look!”

Lamar took the laminated paper from him and leaned over so they could both check what Evan was referring to. He jabbed his finger on the item on the menu, giggling. “It says here: Blowjob \$12. Blue Balls? This is a drink, right? Tell me it is.” He could feel the heat on his cheeks as the stout man laughed. He also tried his best to ignore the judgmental gaze of the person sitting beside him which he could see from his peripheral vision.

“Of course it is a drink,” Lamar said.

“Wew. Okay, then please refill my martini and I’ll have another tequila shot. And please let me try that blowjob,” Evan said, a tiny bit mortified when a giggle came out of his mouth.

Shaking his head, Lamar just shrugged and put in his order. “As long as you can get yourself home, kiddo.”

“Not a kid,” Evan muttered. He knew he still could pass as a teenager, what with his lanky built, and his, as his best friend Dee put it, baby face, but he was twenty-seven this year, and even though he tried to dress up as mature as he could and tried to tame his crazy dark curls, he still got carded whenever he watched an R-



rated movie or ordered a drink. Lamar should know; he asked for his ID when he first got here.

He wondered how he would make himself more mature and presentable for when he needed to go to interviews, but quickly deflated when he remembered the minimal job listing he found online while he was wandering around the city this afternoon. There seemed to be a shortage of openings for editors, which was ridiculous because the number of typographical and grammatical errors he had spotted when he was online was astronomical and people with web content obviously needed a proofreader for it. He saw a couple of opportunities for home-based freelancing and he would be looking into that this weekend, although the internet subscription in the apartment he and Dee was sharing wasn't the best for working from home, and his laptop was as ancient as a tyrannosaurus fossil, but he would cross the bridge when he got there. Evan just wanted to have some good news when he told Dee that he was jobless starting Monday. It was just his luck that Dee was spending his weekend with his mother in Diamond Bar so Evan had two more days to find a job.

Evan knew he was being ridiculous. His friend would never fault him for getting laid off. Hell, he didn't want Evan to worry about him or even take care of him. But Evan knew how passionate Dee was in his art, and art making was expensive yet could make so little money especially for someone like Dee who was so talented but didn't have the right exposures or the perfect opportunities to showcase his work. Dee helped with what he could sell from his daily commissions doing caricatures and portraits in the streets, and when he got lucky, from when a small-time gallery needed his help for a show. It wasn't enough, Evan knew. Dee especially knew. There were days when Dee got zero commissions and times he couldn't give his share of the rent for the month, but Evan never minded. He wanted to support

Dee the way Dee and his mom supported Evan when he struggled to make his way through community college.

He thought of his asshole of an ex, Tyler, and how he lied to his co-workers at their company party on Sunday that Evan graduated from UCLA because he was embarrassed that Evan was a product of the local community college. God, was he glad he didn't invest as much time on that little shit as he wanted to, or like how he did on his short list of asshole ex-boyfriends. Evan was shit when it came to finding the right man. He looked down at the napkin he didn't realize he was folding in square, and he squinted down to make sure all the corners were aligned when he heard a chuckle from the person beside him.

Evan looked to his left, and paused.

Sweet baby Jesus, was this man a god.

The man turned in his seat and looked at him, raising a golden brow. At least it seemed golden under the dim lights. "What are you looking at?" He asked Evan in that deep voice he heard earlier. It was familiar, and Evan wondered if this guy narrated audiobooks, and if so, did he do gay romances?

Evan squeaked, his face heating up at the thought. This guy was a gay's wet dream come true, with his broad shoulders and large pecs that stretched his black T-shirt, the sleeves fitted around bulging biceps. Evan's eyes darted to his veiny, hairy forearms, a weakness of his, down to those big, gorgeous hands. He had a brief flash of how those hands would look like holding Evan's tiny waist — his fingers would probably meet in the middle.

Evan breathed out, stopping himself from looking further down and forcing his eyes up to the man's perfect face. He might be drunk, but he could tell this guy's one of the most gorgeous people he had ever seen in his entire life. The baby blues were the first thing he had

noted, and then his sharp jawline. His lower lip was fuller than the other but oh so red, surrounded by a well-trimmed scruff, although Evan personally could do without his weird 70s pornstache. He was wearing a Dodgers cap, but Evan could see a tight bun behind his head. It was odd, that he thought he had seen this guy before but couldn't place where exactly. And Evan would surely remember him, especially with the mustache. Especially with how hot he was.

"What?" The man asked again. He had probably decided that Evan had stared enough, and probably drooled enough; Evan didn't — he subtly checked.

"Nothing," Evan said. And then he remembered why he looked at the man. "You — you were laughing. What's so funny?"

"You," Pornstache dude said.

"Me?" Evan exclaimed. "No, no. I'm not. I don't think I am." He frowned. "Or am I? Yeah, my life's kinda funny right now."

Sighing, he decided to take another shot as the pleasant buzzing in his head was starting to wane. Lick, sip, suck. That's how it was done, as Dee had said.

When he looked at the guy again, he saw his blue eyes were now darker and his lips were pursed. Evan thought he looked a bit strained.

"You okay?"

The guy nodded.

"Oh, good. I thought for a second you were in pain." The burn was back, and he could feel his brain-to-mouth filter trying hard to catch up with him. "Don't want that for you. You should at least have a good time, at least one of us should." The man looked at him questioningly, so Evan rallied. "You see, today was a mess. It sucked." Evan was probably pouting but he couldn't care less, pushing the glass back to its proper place with the tip of

his finger. “Actually, this week sucked. Sunday, I found out my ex-boyfriend was a lying piece of garbage; Monday, Dee and I ran out of instant coffee; Tuesday, that stray cat from the second floor scratched me.” He paused to show the man the faint red lines on the back of his hand. “And Wednesday, I forgot it was my turn to bring down our trash so now the apartment smells; on Thursday...wait, Thursday was actually good because my favorite comic was updated. And today, oh goodness, today, Cruella de Vil decided to strike and announced that ten of us in the editorial team are laid off and today is our last day because the company doesn’t need us anymore. I mean, who does that?” Evan said, aware that his voice was raised a bit but couldn’t help the bewildered, helpless tone he let out. Also, was he oversharing? He didn’t think he was. He was just striking up a conversation with a hot guy. That’s normal.

The guy stared at him, and his eyes looked like they were twinkling now. Evan thought he had the most expressive eyes.

He seemed interested in what Evan had to say, so Evan decided to continue, not to mention it felt good to let out all these things to a stranger who he would never have to see again. Although that kind of made him sad because it wouldn’t hurt to meet this guy again. Evan sighed. “So of course, they are giving us severance pay, but that could only last a month or two. Do you know how expensive it is to live in LA? God, Dee is going to be upset. Dee is my best friend. Dee as in Dorian. As in Dorian Gray? Do you know him?” Evan asked, his filter way out of the door by now and he was rambling but he couldn’t stop.

Where did this talkative version of himself come from and really, he hoped he would make an appearance when he interviewed for job openings. And then he remembered something. “Oh gosh, I haven’t told you my name! I’m Evan. Dee calls me Ev, but don’t call me that!

It's a special name and only special people get to call me that. I don't know where Evan came from but it's been my name since forever. What's your name?" Evan blinked up at Henry, hoping the guy didn't think he was a babbling buffoon, although he probably was. And then he grinned as he leaned a bit forward, "You really do have the prettiest blue eyes — "

Lamar walked by them and slid their orders on the counter, stopping Evan from talking, which was probably for the best. He placed a grilled cheese sandwich in front of the guy and Evan's stomach grumbled from the smell, but his attention was soon pulled by the tasty-looking drink Lamar handed him.

"Ooh, so this is a blowjob? Thanks!"

"Enjoy, you guys." Lamar smiled at them before tending to the other patrons. Evan arranged the drinks and made sure the martini glass was placed center on the napkin before lifting the Blowjob shot glass and carefully licking at the whip cream. He smiled widely as the sweetness exploded in his mouth.

"I've never had a Blowjob before," he said and then flushed when he glanced quickly at the man beside him, only to find him already looking at Evan intently. "Well, I've had the real thing before but not the real drink? You get it?" Gee, he was embarrassing.

The guy just nodded, and when Evan turned back to the drink and was about to take a sip, cautious not to smother his nose with whip cream, the guy grabbed his wrist. Evan looked down at the hand around him, his skin too pale in comparison to the man's tanned glow. His touch was warm and his palm was rough and calloused, but Evan didn't want him to let go.

"Wait," the guy said, and he was looking at Evan a little too intensely. It was not helping Evan's dazed state.

"What?"

“That’s not how you do it.”

Evan licked his lip. “Oh god, your voice. Why haven’t you been talking? You should talk more. Your voice is so…” His voice trailed as he stared at the man. Or the man’s mouth. He wasn’t sure anymore.

“You were telling a story.”

“Right,” Evan nodded, feeling dizzy when he did. He looked down and remembered he had a drink in his hand, so he turned back to the man and proffered the glass to him. “How should I drink it?”

“Place it back on the counter.” It wasn’t a suggestion. More like an order, and it made Evan hotter than the drinks he had.

Evan gently placed the drink on the surface, looking up at the guy and waiting for further instructions.

“It’s called a Blowjob for a reason,” he said, and Evan noticed his voice thickened a bit. “Hands on your back. You put your lips around the glass, grip it tightly with your mouth, and then tip your head back. And then, you swallow. Easy enough?”

Yup, Evan’s definitely as red as the lights above him now. He gulped and put his arms behind him, his right hand holding his left hand tight, and then, before he hesitated, he leaned down, wrapped his lips around the glass, making sure the whip cream went in cleanly, before sucking in and then tipping his head back, closing his eyes as the lights blinded him for a moment. He swallowed, grabbing the glass and pulling it out with an embarrassingly loud pop, licking the remains of the cream while humming. It was strong, yet so sweet and delicious, and Evan could definitely say he enjoyed this blowjob more than he ever did before.

He smiled, fixing his glasses again. “That was so good.”

The man turned away and bit into his sandwich, and it must be a good sandwich because he finished it easily in a few bites before downing a glass of amber liquid. Whiskey?

Evan's feeling more drunk now and he wondered if it was time to call it a night. He did have a long commute back home and he might have to spare a few bucks for a cab if he wanted to get back safely and with all of his belongings still with him.

"Henry."

Evan looked at him, brows raised. He was surprised the man was talking again.

"You asked what my name was earlier."

"Ah," Evan exclaimed, all thoughts of going home forgotten. "Nice to meet you, Henry! I forgot I was telling you a story. Where was I?"

"Dorian is your best friend and he's the only one allowed to call you Ev."

"Right, there. So, Dee and I are roommates. Rent in LA is expensive but we make do but oftentimes I had to cover for our expenses because Dee is a street artist and there's not much money in that, but he loves making art and is so good at it too so I want to help him. The severance pay can cover us a bit, but I need to get a new job soon because there are other bills and food to think about." Evan slumped in his seat. He should be embarrassed telling his situation to this man, but eh. "It's almost summer, and the fresh grads will be out looking for jobs too and the competition will be tougher. I tried looking for new jobs earlier and wasn't very successful." He grinned at Henry. "That's why I decided to just go in here, spend what little spare cash I still have and get wasted because this is stressing me out and drinking seems to be the right thing to do at the moment. What about you? What brings you here?"

Henry lifted a shoulder. “Bad day at work.” He looked like he wanted to say more, but decided against it.

“You too, huh?” Evan pouted, and before he knew it, Henry was moving, thumbing at Evan’s lower lip and pressing it softly. Evan’s lips parted and he gasped, looking up at Henry’s eyes. Something shifted in the air and Evan felt a different kind of heat, not because of the Blowjob, but because of Henry’s touch. Why was this beautiful person paying attention to him and why was he touching Evan? Henry was looking at him like he wanted something from Evan, like he wanted to —

Evan was hot, too hot, and his tummy felt weird, and now he was feeling cold all over. And oh no, his face crumpled as a sudden wave of nausea hit him and he shuddered and heaved.

Evan’s body lurched forward, out of his control, and then he was holding on to Henry’s shoulders as, horrifyingly, mortifyingly, he retched and threw up on Henry’s shirt and jeans, emptying his stomach on the man.

Jesus, he felt so awful.

He vaguely heard Lamar walking toward them and saying, “I should take a picture and sell it to TMZ.” Evan didn’t know how TMZ would be interested in pictures of him throwing up, but go off, he guessed. He laid his head on Henry’s chest, and any other time, he would have enjoyed this but right now it just felt good to lean his clammy forehead on something.

“You wouldn’t dare,” Henry grumbled and Evan could hear his voice vibrate through his chest. “Ugh, disgusting. Do you know where he lives so we can send him home?”

“Nah, man. First time I see the kid tonight. Can you check his wallet?”



Something cold touched the back of his neck and his cheeks and mouth — a wet cloth — and it felt so good that he hummed and moaned. He felt a hand copping a feel on his back pockets. He blanked out and didn't hear the rest of Lamar and Henry's conversation, and when he came to, Henry was supporting him outside, his arm around Evan's waist. Standing up, he could only reach Henry's shoulders, but if he tiptoed, maybe he could talk to Henry face-to-face? He wanted to tell Henry that he could go home on his own, that he wasn't a kid, and he needed to pay for his drinks, and he was sure he did tell him. But Henry didn't seem to understand what he was saying.

Another wave of nausea hit him and then he slipped out of Henry's arm, stumbling onto the bushes and throwing up some more. He was so icky and he knew he smelled like a dead animal. He was aware of Henry carrying him somewhere and then they were in what smelled like a car, and it was cool inside which eased the headache Evan was beginning to feel. He heard another man's voice and wondered if he was being abducted, but Henry seemed to be a nice guy, if a bit quiet, so that probably wasn't the case.

He sat with his head on Henry's shoulder and let the darkness take him as the car drove away from the bar and lulled him to sleep.

Fuck this. He was never drinking again.

# Thank you

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And lastly, many thanks to you, the reader, who picked this story up and gave it a chance. This is my debut novella and it would mean the world to me if you leave a rating and/or a review.

Till next time!

## About the author

C.H. Young is a proofreader by profession, writer at heart, but for the love of all that is holy, could not edit her own work if her life depended on it, is obsessed with hyphenating compound adjectives, and ensures she utilizes the Oxford comma properly. She has been writing original stories since elementary days, moved to MM fanfics while in Uni, and has an unhealthy number of open tabs of AO3 in her browsers prior to discovering the hidden gems of the MM romances section of Kindle. Now her TBR is as endless as any self-proclaimed bookworm out there. In her spare time, she loves torturing herself by painting landscapes and flowers using watercolor, or her underused Procreate. She also loves playing with her dog who acts like an obnoxious cat, and her rescue cat who acts like a golden retriever mixed with chihuahua.

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