



A LOST BOYS PRIDE NOVELLA

# ALL WE ARE

JESSIE WALKER



**ALLWEARE**  
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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

This short story was previously featured in *Worthy: A Pride Anthology*. It has since been expanded by approximately 10k words of new content.

Please note that this novella does not follow a typical story arc. This story takes place in a single day (24 hours), and is more reflective of an extended bonus scene, with snapshots of the day/night told in four POVs: Will and Way's, an established couple from the previous books in this series, and Mason and Jeremy's, whose book *Every Breath After*, is coming next.

In the past, I've described this story as Will and Way's way of handing off the torch. And I stand by that. While this won't be the last we see of them, they will be taking more of a backseat role for a while as the other characters in this series get their time to shine. Starting with Mason and Jeremy's much awaited angsty, epic romance.

For frame of reference as far as timeline goes, this story takes place between the last chapter and Epilogue in *If There's A Way*. While you're certainly welcome to read it as a standalone, certain things will probably make more sense if you read *Where There's A Will* and *If There's A Way* first. You can find a recommended reading order based on order of events on the next page.

**Content Warning:** In this story, there are brief mentions of drug use, addiction, grief, and internalized homophobia/homomisia on account of childhood trauma.

RECOMMENDED  
“SHILOHVERSE” READING  
ORDER

*Where There's A Will*

*If There's A Way*

*All We Are\**

*Still Beating*

*Little Bird Lost\*\**

*Every Breath After* (coming soon!)

...and more to come

\**All We Are* takes place before *Still Beating*, but can be read at just about any point throughout this series following the duet.

\*\**Little Bird Lost* spans across just about all these books, so this too can be read at any point, but it's strongly recommended to read BEFORE *Every Breath After*.

*For my fellow misfits out there.*

*The ones living in the gray areas.*

*The ones who don't fit into little checkboxes.*

*The ones struggling.*

*The ones hiding.*

*The ones questioning.*

*You'll always have a place here, and you don't have to prove a  
damn thing.*

# PLAYLIST

[Listen to Playlist on Spotify.](#)

All Apologies - **Nirvana**

Lucky - **Seven Mary Three**

Devil Like Me - **Rainbow Kitten Surprise**

Don't Let Me Go - **Cigarettes After Sex**

Free Fallin' - **Tom Petty**

Love Like Ghosts - **Lord Huron**

Ready When You Are - **Trapt**

Bleed Out - **Blue October**

Cause of a Scene - **Jake Wesley Rogers**

Boxes (Acoustic) - **The Goo Goo Dolls**

I Know A Place - **MUNA**

Footsteps - **Pearl Jam**

Breathe Into Me - **Red**

Regrets - **Dream on Dreamer**

Linger (Stripped Back) - **Stuck Out**

I Wasted You - **flora cash**

Mud Angel - **Blacklit Canopy**

Dancing On My Own - **Robyn**

Your Decision - **Alice In Chains**

Love to My Cobain - **Jeffree Star**

Hold Me Now - **Red**

Wasteland - **10 Years**

Too Heavy - **The Plot In You**

Dare You to Move - **Switchfoot**

Homeward - **Dermot Kennedy**

Best Of Me - **Sum 41**

Sorry (Acoustic) - **Nothing But Thieves**

All That We Are - **Blue October**



“One day, I’m gonna hold your hand in public, and not feel like I’m dying when I do it.”

WAYLON MCALLISTER, 6 MONTHS AGO

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## WAYLON MCALLISTER

“ABSOLUTELY NOT.”

“But Waylon—”

“No *but Waylons*,” I interject sharply. Not missing a beat, I turn my head and point a finger at Will just as he appears in the open doorway. “You shut the fuck up.”

His brows arch and he holds his hands up, halting mid-step in the threshold. “I didn’t say anything.”

“Your face did.”

His grin widens, dark blue eyes sparkling.

My eyes drop, and my mouth dries, and *fuck* me, if he doesn’t roll his bottom lip between his teeth like the cocky, knowing asshole that he is.

Bastard.

I hear a huff, and when I manage to drag my gaze away from my boyfriend’s stupidly perfect face, I’m not surprised to find an irate Ivy peering up at me, arms crossed, narrowed green eyes blazing.

In one hand, she’s got a long, narrow makeup brush pinched between her fingers, and in the other, clenched in her palm, I know there’s a little palette of rainbow eyeshadow. One she’s currently desperately trying to transfer onto my face.

“No, Ivaiah,” I say deeply.

“You’re no fucking fun. It’s just makeup.”

Tingles spread across my neck, and I mash my teeth at the sudden crawling-out-of-my-skin sensation zipping through my bones, igniting my nerve-endings, until I feel like I might literally explode. And not in the fun, pleasurable way.

It's just makeup.

Yeah...

It should be.

I'm being fucking ridiculous and I know it.

"You guys do realize it's a Pride parade, not a funeral, right?" Will draws.

Ivy and I blink at one another, then turn our heads at the same time to face Will, our bodies following. Just off to the right of him, there's a dresser—*his* dresser, or at least it used to be; I don't know what's in it now—and above it, hanging from the wall, a wide mirror.

I spare it a fleeting glance, taking in the way Ivy and I stand side by side, dressed head to toe in black with hair to match. You can't see my jeans or boots from this angle, nor Ivy's chunky combat boots—sans heels, because for once, she actually decided to be practical—and ripped fishnets and jean shorts, but it's true. We're not exactly dressed for the occasion.

Why she's trying to assault my face with rainbow glitter shit, when she doesn't have a drop of color anywhere on her, except for dark red lipstick, beats the hell out of me.

Scowling, I glance down at Will's shirt, and throw a hand his way. "Speak for yourself. Where'd you come from, Dad Fest '69?"

He coughs and brings a fist to his mouth, eyes blinking rapidly a couple times. Next to me, Ivy snorts. I cut her a sideways glance, catching her rolling her lips together, fighting off a smile.

I'm just about to call her out on it when footsteps sound from the hall, drawing my attention. Will cranes his head around, before stepping out of the way to let Jeremy in.

Warm amber brown eyes sweep over each of us, his steps slowing. “What?” he says suspiciously.

“Nothing,” I chirp at the same time Ivy says, “Finally.”

She stomps over to him and grabs his hand, dragging him over to the bed. I step away, giving them room, and go join Will.

Glancing over my shoulder, I feel something clunk in my chest when I find Jeremy biting back a small smile as Ivy all but shoves him onto the bed. Spreading his thighs for her, she steps between them and clasps his face in her hand, angling it back.

His eyes slide shut, his pale, silvery blond hair flopping back. His Adam’s apple juts out, dipping with a swallow, and then Ivy’s blocking him completely as she brings the makeup brush to his face.

My throat feels thick all of a sudden. I don’t realize how closely Will’s watching me, not until he grabs my upper arm, pulling me toward him.

Our chests bump, and I snap my head forward. We’re practically nose to nose, so I don’t miss how he flits glances between me and the scene behind me, a deep furrow forming between his brows.

Shit.

Without a word, he lowers his hand, tangling our fingers together. His deep blue eyes find mine, but whatever he’s thinking is a mystery to me, hidden by something I can only define as *love*.

In fact, it’s getting a lot harder to see anything else when he looks at me.

Funny how that works.

He jerks his head to the side in a silent gesture to come on, before turning and leading me out of the room. His old bedroom. The room he spent the majority of his childhood in. The room that saw him grow into himself throughout his teenage years.

It's a sad thought, knowing I'll never get to meet all the versions of Will that existed. Ten years' worth of experiences I'll never be part of.

It's ridiculous and absurd and probably super fucking melodramatic. But it's sad, okay? It makes me sad. Fucking sue me.

A frown stitches my brows together as Will's steps lead us toward the end of the hall, where he opens a door to a hidden flight of stairs. Music filters through the hall, coming from downstairs—a muffled heavy rock song I only vaguely recognize, but couldn't put a name to. A voice—Mason's—calls out something, but I can't make out what it is. It's followed by a high-pitched squeal that trails off into an infectious laugh. *Phoebe*.

We're in Philly for the weekend, the whole lot of us, and Will's parents were nice enough to let us all stay in their townhouse while they're off vacationing in the Caribbean. It's my third time here, but this is the first time he's taken me up to the top floor.

The door closes behind us, sealing us in the dark, but it only lasts a second before a lightbulb buzzes to life, swinging over our heads. Will drops his hand from the chain he must've just pulled to turn it on. He reaches past me, not breaking our gazes, and twists the lock on the door with a soft *snick*.

My mouth twists, and my heart gives a mighty thump.

Keeping our hands locked, he flashes me a wink before turning around, and leading me up the stairs.

The floorboards creak under our boots. It's musty, the scent of mothballs and sawdust cloying the stale air. When we reach the top, I pause with my foot on the landing, glancing around as I take in the sparsely furnished attic.

The floor matches the slatted walls and the peaked ceiling bowing over our heads. It tapers to a high enough point that we don't have to crouch so long as we stay toward the center. Boxes line up along the walls, along with other various storage items, like lamp stands, mirrors, and paintings.

At one end of the attic, there's a single window, and in front of it, there's a weathered, blue plaid sofa lit up softly by the early morning light peeking in. On the floor in front of it, a gray rug.

It's a cloudy day so far, but it's supposed to clear up later. No chance of rain. It's mid-June. Not yet summer. So it shouldn't be *too* hot or humid for the parade today.

Will flicks me a quick look over his shoulder, and tips his head toward the couch. With a little tug of my hand, he starts leading me over.

It's quiet, save for the soft thud of our boots padding across the floor, and the muffled sounds coming from outside. Cars whooshing by. An occasional shout, or horn beeping. Heavy bass music thumping from someone's speakers.

Typical sounds one would expect in a city.

Rather than take a seat, Will comes to an abrupt stop and whirls toward me. Releasing my hand, he reaches up and clutches my face in his palms instead, catching me just as I stumble into him.

He ducks his gaze to meet mine head-on, his fingers brushing my neck, the cushiony spots of his thumbs cradling my jaw. "You know I love you, right?"

Wide-eyed, mouth gaping, I stare at him.

A small, knowing smile lifts his face. *Way*, he mouths, his full lips puckering and releasing like a kiss.

And my body just...wilts, stilling. The tension in my shoulders unfurls, my spine releases, and my racing thoughts grind to a stop.

The anxiety I almost forgot was there a moment ago...it retracts, like claws curling back. Sometimes, I get so lost in that restless, itchy, short-tempered feeling, I don't even realize what it is I'm experiencing. As if that is my natural state, and this, relaxed and safe, is not.

Eyes and nose burning from the emotional whiplash, I nod jerkily in his hands. "Of course I do," I whisper roughly. My

eyes dart between his, like it's critical I don't miss even a single glint of emotion in either of those deep, ocean blue eyes.

His smiles turns gentle, if not sad. "Good. Now that that's out of the way..." he says, releasing my cheeks to circle my wrists with his fingers instead. Each digit feels like a hot brand on my skin, a sharp contrast to the chills skittering down my neck and across my shoulders.

Walking backward, his legs hit the couch and he drops to the cushions. Dust motes flutter up around him, dancing and flickering in the pale daylight shining through the window behind him, haloing his messy, dirty blond head of hair.

It should be a fucking crime how perfect he is.

Perfect in this light.

Perfect for me.

So perfect, sometimes it doesn't feel real. *He* doesn't feel real.

But he *is*. *This* is. And by some fucking miracle, he's all mine.

Standing over him, I reach forward, driving my inked fingers through his tawny hair, giving him no choice but to let go of my wrist.

"C'mere," is all he says, his voice no louder than a growled murmur.

I don't have to ask what he means. Not that he even gives me a chance. He brings my other hand to his shoulder, then cups my waist in both his palms, yanking me forward.

I fall onto his lap with an exasperated huff, one he quickly smothers with a bruising kiss.

It should probably be embarrassing how easily I melt into his touch—how fast I cave into the heady sensation of being owned by Will Foster.

Because that's exactly what this is—a claim. A *fuck you* to every voice in my head that tries to make me doubt that this is

anything but real and right. The voices that try to convince me I'm not worthy of feeling this realness, this rightness.

Tucking my knees around his waist, I throw my arms over the back of the couch, gripping the windowsill, caging him in. I groan into his mouth, meeting his kiss with equal intensity, slashing my tongue into his mouth like I could scrape out the reassurances for myself.

*Give it to me, Will.*

*Remind me who I am.*

*Remind me it's okay.*

Warm fingers slip up under my shirt, splaying hotly over my skin, while his other hand comes up to my face, capturing my jaw. He slows our frenzied kisses, sipping lazily at my mouth like we have all the time in the world. Like our family isn't scattered about downstairs.

They have no idea we're up here.

My cock thumps against the seam of my jeans and I grind up against him, seeking friction. Seeking more. Always more.

He slides his hands up higher, fingers bumping over my ribs, and I shudder. A pleased groan slips into my mouth, vibrating my lips and reverberating through my chest. He's so warm against me, all hard edges and sinewy muscle—my equal in almost every way. It leaves no doubt as to who's in my arms right now. A man. *Will*. The guy who never fails to catch me when I stumble.

You'd think after seven months, I'd be desensitized to it. But I'm still just as amazed as ever that I can have this. Have *him*.

Mine.

His lips leave mine to drag hot, open-mouthed kisses to my jaw, then down my neck. Teeth scrape over my skin, and I find his hair with my fingers, burying my blunt nails in his scalp.

“Will,” I moan, throwing my head back as I rub myself on his dick. We're both hard, our cocks straining through our jeans.



“Wanna suck you,” he murmurs against the hollow of my throat.

I gulp, blinking up at the sun glaring back at me, sparking little black dots across my vision.

“Can I?” he asks, pressing a kiss right over my Adam’s apple.

“Please,” I whisper.

He growls against my throat. “Love it when you beg for me.”

I scoff, fighting back a shiver as he moves his fingers to my fly, the heel of his palm dragging against my rigid hard-on. “Fuck off.”

*God, I sound wrecked.* And he didn’t even get his mouth on me yet.

Chuckling against my chin, he lifts up just enough to clamp his teeth on my bottom lip and pull. His fingers pop the button on my jeans, then ease the zipper down. My hips thrust forward of their own volition, prompting blistering heat to creep up my neck.

Will gives a little suck to my lip before pulling away, peering up at me with a mix of amusement and something darker, hotter, filthier.

“That scowl,” he says softly, shaking his head with a slow curve of a smile, “If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you didn’t want this.” His finger dips beneath the waistband of my jeans, stroking over the cotton covering my cock. He hums. “But I do know better, don’t I?”

I grunt at the same time my dick twitches. “You don’t know shit.”

His grin widens. “Lift up.”

Narrowing my eyes on his, I do as he says, but not because he told me to—let’s make that clear—but because my dick is currently being strangled by fabric. It’s chafing, ridiculously uncomfortable, and I’d much rather use it to strangle him instead.

“That’s what I thought,” he whispers, tugging my jeans and boxers down in one go.

My dick springs out, jutting toward him rock-hard and weeping.

He hums, glancing down at my blatant want for him. His tongue swipes maddeningly slow over his bottom lip. “Fuck, baby.”

A thumb drags across my cheek, brushing over my lips. Instinct grips me, and I melt into his palm, pulling the thick, warm digit into my mouth with a deep, unrestrained moan.

“That’s it,” he murmurs, sliding a palm around my ass, squeezing my flesh as I shamelessly thrust my dick at him. “Show me how bad you want this.”

My hand finds his head, nails digging into his scalp with punishing force. I try to grit out his name in warning, but the thumb stroking my tongue makes it impossible to manage anything more than a muffled groan.

I’m on fire—my face, my neck, my chest—and yet my skin pebbles with delicious, spine-tingling chills. For fuck’s sake, he’s barely even *doing* anything, and yet I’m delirious with pleasure. With shameless, hopeless need.

A quiet, sharp inhale expands Will’s chest. His gaze darts between the thumb fucking my mouth and my dick fucking the air between us.

My eyes bore fiercely into his, saying all the things he won’t let me. Begging for what I couldn’t find the words to ask for even if I could talk.

*Touch me, damn it.*

*I want this, I want you, I always fucking want—*

His eyes flare, and he sits taller, bringing his legs in so his thighs rest against my ass and his boots are planted solidly on the carpet. His hand releases my ass to finally, *finally* touch me where I need him, fingers curling around my shaft, squeezing tight, right at the root.

I shudder, and my bicep flexes, taking all my weight as I push my hand into the windowsill behind him. Paint chips off, flaking where my nails bite into the wood.

Growling from deep within my chest, I bury my fingers in his hair, stretching it away from his temple. Wrenching his head back, I curl forward, gunning for that stupid, sexy mouth of his.

He gasps, his thumb sliding free just as I crash our lips together in a biting kiss. It's sloppy. It's wet. His spit-soaked thumb drags along my jaw before he abruptly releases my face and reaches around, clutching my ass and squeezing.

I nip and suck violently at his lips, pushing myself impossibly closer. Like I could find my way inside him so I'll never forget how perfect and right and real this is again.

Moaning, he adjusts his hold on my dick, slipping his fingers under my balls, pressing on some point that has me lurching and hissing against his teeth.

"Shh," he murmurs, brushing a thumb down my crack

"Will," I whimper into his mouth, panting heavily. The vice on my dick is unrelenting, but it only heightens my desperation, feeding into my unfettered need.

Thoughts? What are thoughts. There's only sensation. Only *this*.

"I know, baby, I got you," he says huskily, massaging my clenched hole with his wet thumb, slicking it up and softening me. With his other hand, he releases my dick and gives my nuts a little tap. "Up. Give it to me. Wanna taste you so bad."

A groan rips out of me, but I do as he says. No hesitation whatsoever.

Will's got me. He's always got me.

Releasing his head, I return my fingers to the windowsill, digging the heels of my hands into the blunt edge, holding myself up. He quickly shoves my jeans and boxers down past my knees. With a lot of awkward, messy wiggling, he

manages to fling a boot off somewhere across the room and frees one leg from the fabric shackling my legs together.

He grunts. “Good e-fucking-nough.” Grabbing my ass, he hoists me up, jerking me back to him. A gasp punches out of me as I fall against the window.

My knees sink into the cushions on either side of him, the fabric rough and itchy on my skin. Will wedges himself down, putting his face level with my cock.

“Fuck,” I mutter, panting. My chest heaves, my eyes wide and unseeing as I stare down at the street below. A car whooshes by, and several people linger around the stoop of the house across the street.

A thrum of awareness has my pulse quickening, and my breaths picking up. Blood rushes to my ears, and either my mind is playing tricks on me, or the conversation happening outside is actually that loud. The world seems closer than ever suddenly.

Can they...see me?

“Close the curtains.”

Blinking rapidly, I look down to find Will peeking up at me. *Jesus*. He’s palming my cock, holding it against his cheek. The tip is swollen, red, and leaking, but he makes no move to address it.

“Wh-what?” I stutter out, mildly frustrated. Shaking my head, a frown forms between my brows. “But—”

“Close. The curtains,” he says in a firm, deep tone that leaves no room for argument. He arches a brow, as if daring me to try, making it clear this goes no further until I do as he says.

My lip quivers, and there’s a sudden vice around my throat, squeezing it so tight, I’m surprised I can still breathe.

Whatever he must see on my face has his gaze softening, and he gives me a little nod, as if to say it’s okay, he understands... to which I respond with a jerky one of my own. *Thank you.*

Looking up, I glance around, taking in the pale gray curtain panels hanging on either side of the window. I reach up and quickly yank them toward the middle, cutting off my view of the world beyond, cloaking us in thick gray darkness.

I grip the windowsill once more, the thick fabric of the curtains straining under the force. Looking down, it takes a second for my eyes to adjust, but when they do, the air punches out of me when I find Will smiling up at me.

“That’s better.”

My mouth opens, but he shakes his head.

“You and me. No one else.”

Emotion sears the back of my eyes and I nod. “You and me.”

His mouth twitches. “Always.”

And with that, he turns his face, nuzzling my dick with a low moan that rattles me to my core. My toes curl from within the tight, harsh confines of my leather boot.

“So hot,” he says, dragging his lips up my skin. “So soft.”

I almost snort at that. I’m far from fucking soft right now.

His mouth curves up just as he reaches the tip, his full bottom lip snagging on the gentle flare of flesh. We’re bathed in shadows, yet there’s no mistaking the glimmer of arousal coating my flushed crown, sliding toward his waiting mouth.

Fuck. Me.

“*Mmm*,” he hums against my over-sensitized skin. His tongue pokes out, catching a drop. “Sweet.”

My body jolts, my arms buckling.

He chuckles deeply, the wicked sound of it creeping along my sweltering skin, settling somewhere in my balls. Whatever blood was left in the rest of my body has found a new home, rushing south, gathering where I throb most.

He opens for me, sucking me into his mouth.

A noise more growl than groan crawls its way up my throat, clawing its way through my teeth. The windowsill creaks between my bone-white fingers, the black ink glaring back more prominent than ever.

I feel more than hear his own pleased moan. It vibrates along my length as he uses his hold on my ass to push me deeper into his mouth. Inch by inch I sink into the hot, wet heaven of his mouth, until there's nowhere else for me to go.

His throat pulses around my tip, eyes blinking blearily up at me.

“Will,” I say shakily, arching my back. “Jesus.” It's taking all my restraint right now not to unleash on his throat. It's so tight. So warm.

His blunt nails dig into the swell of my ass, holding me to his face. His cheeks redden, eyes shining bright. Using his hold on my ass, he slides my dick from his mouth, saliva dripping obscenely.

He quickly brings a hand to his mouth, using the excess to coat his fingers, before returning to my crease. Fingertips skate over my hole at the same time his tongue curls around the head of my dick.

He drops a gentle kiss to my tip. “Gonna let me in, baby?”

My entire body vibrates and I give a little nod, biting my lip. I squeeze, clenching against his persistent digit, inhaling deeply. On my exhale, I release.

His lip ticks up, feeling the muscle give beneath his fingertip. “Always so good for me.”

Clamping down on my molars, the tendons in my neck threaten to snap. Dark hair falls over my eyes, swaying as I hang my head, unwilling to take my eyes off his face. Fire licks up my spine, and I welcome it. That punishing pleasure-pain I'm so addicted to.

Will gathers my dick back into his mouth, using just his lips and tongue. A part of me wants to grab myself and guide it where I want it, but I find this is so much better—so much

hotter—watching the way he hungrily, desperately gobbles up my cock, hands-free.

He swallows me inch by inch while simultaneously shoving his finger fully inside me, sinking down knuckle by knuckle.

God fucking damn.

The pressure and heat is unbelievable. The mind-numbing pleasure even more so.

His moan tickles my cock, and sparks collect at my base, drawing my nuts up. With his free hand, he gives my ass a little encouraging slap, and I don't waste another second.

Gripping his hair with one hand, and bracing the other on the window, I start fucking his mouth with short, shallow thrusts. Dark, bottomless eyes glittering up at me with silent challenge.

Gritting my teeth, I shove myself back on his finger. His eyes flare, and then I'm thrusting as deep as I can into his throat.

He gags, tears building at the corners of his eyes. I wait for him to tap out, but he doesn't. If anything, his nails sink deeper into the back of my thigh. So deep, I'm sure there will be marks.

The thought spurs me on, increasing the tempo and intensity of my unabashed assault to his mouth. His throat squeezes around my tip, the walls of his mouth slick and blisteringly hot. I feel the edge of a tooth at my base, scraping over my pubes, and I lurch, my movements turning jerky and wild.

The finger fucking me turns into two, and it stings. Burns so fiercely, my toes cramp from where I curl them so tight, going numb. And yet I ride his fingers like my life depends on it, like the sole purpose of my life could be found in the way he fucks me.

Be it his fingers or cock or tongue. I just need him to fill me.

I just need to be *his*.

A tear streaks down his cheek and I lower my hand, smoothing it with my thumb. Our gazes sear into one another's, hooded, and blackened with desire.

"*F-fuck,*" I chatter into a long, throat-clenching moan. "Will. Damn it. Shit, I'm gonna come. Babe, I'm gonna come," I babble, my voice wrecked and barely recognizable.

He blinks up at me, lashes clotted with tears. He doesn't have to say anything. I can practically hear his filthy thoughts in my head, encouraging me. Praising me. It's almost enough to make me regret the fact that he *can't* speak.

But just as quickly as the thought comes, and I consider pulling out, he somehow manages to twist and curl his fingers, despite how tightly my hole clenches around them, hitting that hot little button inside me that never fails to send me spiraling.

Not taking my eyes off his, I turn my face just enough to bury my mouth into the crook of my arm, muffling my scream.

Tears spring to my eyes, and my hips stutter, grinding and thrusting against his face of their own accord. I tip over the edge, shattering into a million pieces.

It takes everything in me to watch his eyes as I come apart, spilling hotly down his throat. He swallows around me, taking everything I have to give, extracting pleasure from me like this has always been *his* sole purpose.

Shattering me, and devouring every jagged, broken piece I have to give.

I pull out and he gasps, near-choking. Paying no mind to the cum clinging to his lip, or the coughs quaking his chest, or the fingers still lodged in my ass, I dip down, capturing his swollen lips with mine.

We're all moans and heaving, uneven breaths, twitchy limbs and lazy tongues. The lingering taste of me intermingled with something that is just so distinctively Will is a flavor that can't be beat. I strive to lick it all up.



His fingers gently slip from my hole, and I quiver, hating the sudden emptiness. If we had more time, or, hell, lube, I'd have absolutely no qualms about begging him to fuck me, not when I can still feel the phantom fullness of his fingers. Not when I can still taste him combined with my release so pungently on my tongue.

My lips slide from his, dragging wetly over his jaw.

His shoulders tense, and I feel his arm move under me, a hand jamming between my spent cock, and the one still straining through denim beneath me.

“No,” I whisper.

He moans a little protest, and I smile sleepily.

Pulling back, I give him a little shake of my head. His fingers clench into fists on his lap, drawing stark attention to the faint map of veins and muscle branching up his tanned arms.

My mouth waters, my lagging pulse catching a second wind. Not taking my eyes off his, I scoot back, sliding down to rest my knees on the rug. Spreading his legs out on either side of me, I press myself up against him and reach for his fly.

He lowers his chin to track my movements, causing wavy golden hair to spill over his brow. It's dark in here and washed out, but something tells me his cheeks are pink right now.

A slow, wicked grin crawls up my face as I flip the button and unzip him.

Like clockwork, his gaze snaps to my cheek, sparking with equal parts hunger and affection.

Fuck, I love this guy.

Bypassing his black boxer-briefs, I dip my fingers inside, seeking that warm, silky-smooth hardness I can't seem to get enough of these days.

“My turn,” I rasp.

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## WILL FOSTER

YEAH, *this is going to be embarrassingly fast.*

Waylon pulls my dick out just enough to bend down and swipe his tongue at my head, not wasting a second, licking up the sticky moisture clinging there. My boxers are black, but fuck if there's not a huge wet spot from how badly I've been leaking.

I know I say it every time, but damn, I don't think I've ever been so fucking hard and turned on in my life. It's as if every time we have sex, my brain reboots, and it feels new all over again and ungodly overwhelming.

How I managed not to bust a load in my jeans already is a fucking mystery. A miracle if there ever was one.

Because this? This is so much more preferable.

I lift my ass, helping Waylon drag my jeans and boxers down, just enough to pull my balls out.

I take a much-needed breath, feeling instantly better now that my cock isn't being smothered by fabric. No, now it's being smothered by the sweltering heat of Waylon's mouth.

"Fuck, baby," I rasp, finding his hair with my fingers.

His piercing digs into my slit, and my hips jolt, thrusting my cock deeper into his mouth. He hums around me, dark, hooded eyes peering up at my face.

Wetting my lips, I nod. "God, you feel so good. I'm not gonna last."

His lips tighten at the edges, as if he's trying to smile. It's so fucking sexy, seeing him like this, on his knees, mouth stretched wide around my cock. Even sexier? How much he fucking enjoys it.

He already came, but there's no denying the arousal reflecting back at me from those deep, earthy pools of green and gold. They've all but been swallowed by his pupils, and yet with each pulse of desire glaring back at me, they remind me who's still there under the surface.

Way.

*Way, Way, Way.*

He inches his mouth deeper down my cock, taking as much of me as he can. I'm not much bigger than him, but much to his annoyance, I'm way better at deep-throating. *Thank you very much.*

Still, I'm happy to let him practice any time he wants. I'm a nice guy like that.

"Relax that throat for me, baby," I whisper. "Breathe through your nose."

His nostrils flare, eyes shooting fire at me, and I bite back a smile. *Fuck. This guy. He kills me.*

I clasp his cheek with my other hand, caging his head to my dick, knowing he secretly loves it when I do this, stripping him of control. He wants to let go, to not think, and I'm more than happy to be the one to take the reins.

I fuck his mouth with gentle, languid thrusts that I know drive him crazy. Inked, calloused fingers slide up my thighs, over my hips, slipping under my shirt. He digs his nails into my abs, eliciting a sharp gasp, and a punch of my hips.

Surprisingly, he doesn't gag.

Unsurprisingly, that's what fucking does me in.

He increases the suction on my cock so brutally, it's borderline punishing, and yet my eyes roll back, shivers racing down my spine, white-hot pleasure fracturing my vision into a blur.

“W-Way—”

That’s all the warning I’m capable of.

I glare at the ceiling, neck straining with the groan trapped behind my teeth, rattling my throat. My fingers twitch around his hollowed cheeks, feeling the way he literally sucks the cum out of me.

My hips jerk, thrusting unevenly, my ass clenching against the ragged fabric of the sofa.

“*Fuckfuckfuckfuck*—” I hiss through my teeth, before cutting off with a silent gasp up at the ceiling.

Waylon moans around me, and I slide my hands down, fitting them loosely around his neck, chasing his pulsing swallows.

When I’ve finally stopped coming, he pulls back, letting me slip free of his lips. I look down, watching through my lashes as he swipes his tongue over his puffy red lips. His piercing winks out at me and I shudder, remembering how that little steel ball felt dragging over my flesh.

“Jesus,” I mutter.

He chuckles lowly. Climbing to a partial stand, he barely gets upright before I’m reaching forward and grabbing him by the waist, yanking him to me. An *oomph* escapes his lips as he crashes down on top of me.

Turning onto his side, he lifts his head just enough to peer up at me, grinning that deep, dimpled smile that never fails to reach into my chest and squeeze my heart in a vice.

“Hi.”

“Hi,” I breathe.

He lifts a finger, stroking gently down my throat. “You okay?” he says in a deep, raspy voice.

I quirk a brow. “Are you?”

“I’m perfect.”

The way he says it, so simply, so easily and contentedly? Yeah, the fire licking up my throat has got nothing on that. Nothing has ever burned so good, knowing I put that sound in his voice, and that peaceful look on his face.

“Sorry if I—”

“Shut up,” I tell him quietly. “Would’ve stopped you if I wasn’t enjoying it.”

Waylon bunches his face like he’s not quite sure he believes me. “Yeah?”

I roll my eyes. “Yes.” Wrapping my arms fully around him, I hoist him up, giving him no choice but to press his cheek to my chest. I rest mine on his head. He smells like my shampoo and I bury a small smile into his hair.

After a moment, I add ruefully, “As if how fast I fucking came after that wasn’t evidence enough.”

His back shakes with a silent laugh. “Oh, and not me sucking down your cock?”

I still, my eyes widening.

He pushes away from me so he can meet my gaze. I can’t tell if he wants to scowl or laugh. “Jesus, man, don’t look so shocked.”

“I just—” I start to say before slamming my lips together and shaking my head. “It still catches me off guard sometimes,” I tell him truthfully.

Humor and something else, something sharper—bitter—dances in his hazel eyes. “What, that I like cock?” He tucks his bottom lip into his mouth, leans up and says right over mine, “That I like *your* cock?”

Sucking in a sharp breath, I shudder under him, earning myself a low, wicked chuckle. There’s still an air of self-deprecation clinging to him like an unrelenting shadow, but he doesn’t let it swallow him up. If he’s content to ignore it, so am I.

Groaning into a laugh, he glides his mouth down my cheek, pressing his face into the side of my head. “I don’t

know whether to be insulted or proud I still have this effect on you,” he rumbles into my skin.

My fingers bite into his back. “Proud. Definitely proud.”

“That so?”

“Yup.”

He hums, pulling back again to peer up at me.

I search his gaze and run the side of my thumb down his smooth cheek. For a long moment, neither of us say anything.

Waylon’s throat bobs and his eyes dip to my chin for a beat before gazing steadily back at me. “It wasn’t about the makeup. Not really.”

My brows fly up toward my hairline.

His mouth twists with a knowing, self-deprecating smile. “Don’t look so shocked. Your poker face is still shit.”

I wince and wave a hand at the air. “Yeah, but that wasn’t why I—”

“Sucked my dick? Let me suck yours? I know.”

Pursing my lips, I study his expression, looking for any signs he might be lying. Whether it’s to himself or me is irrelevant.

“Just like I know you were struggling with whether or not to still bring it up,” he says pointedly. “So I’m doing it for you.”

My eyes slide shut and I shake my head, pulling him closer to me, giving him no choice but to bury his face under my chin. I tell him, “I really did bring you up here to talk—”

“I know, and now we are.”

I blow out a sigh of relief, grateful he’s taking the reins with this. Because I *was* beginning to wonder if maybe I fucked it all up by not insisting we talk about it first. I just...I kissed him, and like always, nothing else mattered. I just wanted *him*.

*Needed* him.

In any and every way I could get him.

“And whether it was intentional or not,” Waylon goes on, his voice muffled, “point made.”

I grunt at that.

He pulls back just enough to grin up at me, and some of the tension fisting my chest eases up at the sight of it, seeing that he’s genuinely not ticked off about it. “Feel free to remind me anytime.”

Shaking my head, I murmur, “Smart ass.”

He leans up, pressing his lips to mine. “Dick head.”

Huffing a laugh against his mouth, I kiss him back, cupping the back of his head with my palm. “Love it when you talk sweetly to me,” I mumble against his lips, feeling a smile inch up along his face.

I give a little tug of his hair, pulling him back so I can see his eyes. “So, if it wasn’t about the makeup, what was it?”

His eyes narrow. “As if you don’t already know.”

I shrug. “Humor me.”

Sighing, he pushes back completely to sit up. His jeans and boxers are still hanging haphazardly off one leg, his softened cock resting against his thigh. He gives a little shake of his head, his brow furrowing, and he begins righting his clothes to cover himself.

“Way—” I start to say, but he just shakes his head more firmly, silently telling me to give him a second.

Following his lead, I tuck my dick away, zipping and buttoning up my fly.

Concern twinges my chest as I watch him run his inked fingers through his hair, shoving the dark strands back. It doesn’t escape me how fidgety he suddenly appears.

“I feel like an asshole,” he says, cutting me a troubled look. His knee bounces, and I reach out, setting a steadying hand on it. Emotion pinches his eyes, his voice dropping to no

louder than a hush. “There’s nothing wrong with a guy wearing makeup.”

“No, there isn’t,” I say simply.

His lips whiten at the corners.

“But in case you haven’t noticed,” I say, arching a brow, “I’m not a fan of wearing it myself either. Especially if it sparkles.” I shudder in a mock show of horror. “Keep that shit the fuck away from me.”

He huffs a surprised laugh, shaking his head.

I widen my eyes. “I’m serious. I’m pretty sure there’s still traces of it in my hair from last Halloween.”

He rolls his eyes, the tension visibly melting from his body.

I duck my head to meet his gaze. “I get it, okay?”

His eyes dart between mine. “Yeah?”

I swallow thickly. “Yeah. You know, once I decided to come out—like, publicly, I mean; it was never really a secret within my family—I second-guessed everything I did. The way I talked, the way I dressed. What music I listened to. The things I liked to do.” I pause. “At one point I thought I was going to have to quit football, just because people and society got in my head and had me convinced I’d have to change who I was just to be accepted as a gay man.”

Something like anger dances over Waylon’s features, darkening them.

“Not so much by my friends and teammates,” I quickly amend. “Everyone who mattered was pretty great about it, and honestly those who knew me—like really knew me—weren’t even surprised.” I blow out a breath. “But up until college I didn’t really have any queer friends. The ones who were out at my school...” I smile ruefully. “Well, I don’t think they liked me too much.”

Waylon’s frown deepens.



“And the guys I hooked up with, usually from other schools, and even a couple in college before I met Zayne...” I lift a hand to my head, driving my fingers through my hair, tugging my head back to look up at the pitched ceiling. “Well, they had this tendency to sort of be, I don’t know, condescending about it? I don’t know if that’s the right word, but it’s what it felt like. I always got the impression that they seemed to think I was...struggling with accepting my sexuality, and would try to like...help me. They’d constantly reassure me it’s okay and I can be me...as if I wasn’t already being me.” I give him a furrowed look. “Not that their intentions were bad...just misguided. It’s like they thought I was brainwashed by the straights or something, and were trying to deprogram me.” I chuckle weakly.

A hand finds mine, gripping it tightly.

“And I wanted to belong,” I admit quietly before he can say anything. “To both worlds. I just wasn’t sure if either would ever accept me for *me*...unless I started...”—I wave a hand—“you know, conforming to the stereotypes by”—I huff bitterly, and make air quotes—“‘acting gay.’ Hell, even my teammates seemed to want that, which sounds so convoluted but—”

“So they wouldn’t see themselves in you,” Waylon interrupts softly.

I snap my gaze to him.

He shrugs. “It’s why being around Jeremy growing up never really got to me, you know? Not that he’s ever been like...super flamboyant about it—especially back then. But... we were never really alike, and it...it helped.” He scrunches up his face and looks away. “Made it easier to lie to myself.”

Nodding slowly, I say, “That makes sense.” I pause. “Yeah, saying all this out loud now feels very woe is—”

He turns abruptly, shaking his head firmly. “Don’t.” His gaze is fierce as it locks with mine. “Just ’cause you had it easier doesn’t cancel out all the shit you still had to go through.”

A lump builds in the back of my throat, emotions searing my eyes.

His hazel eyes burn just as hotly as he stares at me. “You should’ve never been made to feel like you weren’t enough. That’s on them, not on you, and if you ever try to make light of that again, I’ll—stop smiling like that.” He huffs grumpily.

I reach up with my free hand, cupping his cheek, smudging a thumb over his dimple fighting to peek out.

“I’m trying to threaten you here.”

“What will you do to me?” I murmur.

“Punch you in the face,” he says, his voice cracking when I dig my nails into his nape, just under his ear.

A smile teases my lips. “I’d like to see you try.”

He glares at me, because *of course* he does. “I’ll withhold sex from you.”

A laugh erupts out of me. “Yeah, okay, now that I’d *really* like to see you try.”

He tries to shrug me off him, but I just drag him closer, bringing our lips together. Humming against his flesh, feeling his breaths puff against my lips, I murmur, “Could be fun. Seeing how long you last before you break.” I drop a hand to his crotch, cupping his dick through his jeans. He’s not quite hard, but he does twitch against my palm. My smile grows.

“Asshole,” he grunts, biting my lip.

Humming, I swipe my tongue out, licking his top lip. “Baby.”

Teeth and snark give way to plush lips and lazy tongues, but all too soon the kiss ends, interrupted by the sound of a phone vibrating along the hard floor. I drag my mouth away from Waylon’s and look over my shoulder to where his phone lays on the floor next to the foot of the sofa. I wonder when and how it got over there. The screen is lit for a beat, just long enough to show a text from *Satan*.

**Where are you?????**

Waylon drops his mouth to my neck, groaning.

I give his hip a pat. “Come on before Ivy starts a witch hunt.”

Standing, he runs his inked hands through his black hair, trying to fix some of the mess. I smooth down my black Pink Floyd shirt, smirking when I remember what Waylon said earlier.

Just as we reach the bottom of the stairs, I pause with my hand on the knob and turn toward Waylon. Only inches separate us, his scent and body heat enveloping me like my favorite blanket.

“I know the whole label thing stresses you out,” I say softly.

He stills, some unnamed emotion rippling over his features. The bulb hanging above our heads casts just enough light to show the gold flecks threaded through his hazel eyes.

I wet my lips with my tongue, reach up, and palm his cheek. “And I know you’re still figuring out who you are, what you like...” I trail off, searching his face. “But just remember, there’s no right or wrong way to be queer, okay?”

His eyes crease at the corners and he gives a stilted nod.

I duck my head, meeting his uncertain gaze. “There are no *rules* to being queer. No benchmarks you need to meet. Despite what society might like to say, being queer is as fucking human as you get. It takes more work to try and keep up with the status quo, and meeting *those* demands, than it does to just be...you.” He reaches up to cup my jaw. “You belong. Okay?”

His throat bobs and he gives a small nod.

“All that matters is that you’re you”—my lip curves up—“and you’re mine, and that is fucking worthy of a place in this community.”

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WE FIND everyone gathered in the kitchen.

Well, almost everyone.

Phoebe and Jeremy are missing.

“There you are,” Ivy says, stomping over to us. She grabs Waylon’s hand and drags him over to the couch where she’s got an assortment of rainbow feather boas spilling out of a brown paper shopping bag and other Pride themed accessories she must’ve bought for the parade.

While Ivy’s still dressed in all black, she’s now got a blue, pink, and purple feather boa draped around her neck and a bi flag sticker of the same colors stuck to her left cheek. Glitter shimmers around her eyes that wasn’t there earlier, and when she turns away, the light catches on some she must’ve sprayed into her hair.

I shudder at the thought, already knowing I’ll likely be scrubbing my scalp raw later tonight. There’s just no avoiding it, I suppose.

“Hey,” Shawn says, appearing next to me. He brings a bottle of water to his lips, tipping his head back to chug it down.

I give a little nod of my chin.

“Everything good?”

Cutting him a sideways glance, I arch a brow.

His mouth twitches. “You were gone for a while. Ivy said Waylon was freaking out.”

Rolling my eyes, I shake my head. “He’s fine. It was nothing. Just Ivy giving him shit and pushing boundaries as usual.”

He nods, accepting this, before walking away. A flash of color in my periphery has me turning to find Waylon standing there, and I freeze when I see what he’s wearing.

Chewing the corner of his lip, he glances down, following my gaze to where a rainbow feather boa hangs loosely down his chest. For a second, I’m no longer here, but standing under

a sea of rippling blue light, with music pulsing against my ears, and bodies undulating around me.

And there's this boy, this beautiful raven-haired boy with eyes like a sunlit forest staring back at me, fiercely, determined, and pained, so, so fucking pained.

That love in his eyes hurts a lot less now.

Something tells me it hurts him less too.

He takes a step closer, putting us toe to toe, and drops his voice so it's just for me. "I might not know who or what I am," he says steadily, carefully, not taking his fervent gaze off mine, "but my boyfriend is gay."

My heart drops somewhere in my stomach, emotion gathering deep inside me, pulling back like a wave.

"And that is something to be fucking proud of."

With that, he drapes another rainbow boa around my neck, tugs it, and pulls me in for a quick, barely there kiss. Our chests and noses and shoes bump, and the heart sitting like a rock in my gut, suddenly lurches up, stuffing itself in my throat, and making it impossible to swallow.

"Way," I murmur a hairsbreadth away from his lips, my voice hitching.

He gives a little shake of his head, lowering his gaze to the little sticker booklet he must've grabbed along with the boas, flipping through the pages. It's mostly just rainbows of various sizes. He plasters one to my cheek, and then I grab the book from him and do the same, but instead I take two tiny rainbows and stick them at the top of his cheekbones, one under each eye. He grins, his dimples sinking in deeply, and the stickers crinkle slightly, but otherwise stay intact.

I open my mouth to say something, when footsteps thudding down the stairs has us turning toward the arched doorway just as Phoebe and Jeremy appear.

My eyes widen faintly, taking in Jeremy's long legs, made to look even longer by how short his black, form-fitting booty shorts are. He's shirtless, with nothing more than a rainbow

feather boa draped around his neck, and there's glitter and rainbow paint smeared over his shoulders and flat chest and stomach, like someone decided to make him a canvas for their finger painting.

One guess as to who's responsible for that, if the smear of blue on Phoebe's face, and stained fingers are anything to go by.

Someone coughs behind me, and Jeremy's gaze narrows, shooting somewhere over my shoulder. His jaw ticks, and his cheeks pinken the faintest bit before he looks away, ducking his gaze. I don't miss the glare he aims at the floor before it disappears behind his arm when he brings his hand up to run his fingers through his pale, silver blond hair.

Phoebe claps her hands together and skips toward the couch, joining Ivy.

Removing my feather boa, I hand it to Waylon and strip off my own shirt, tossing it on the coffee table, before looping the boa back over my head. Hazel eyes meet mine, glinting with something I can't name. Before I have a chance to try and figure it out, he looks away and does the same, so he too is left in nothing but his low-riding black ripped jeans and a rainbow feather boa, putting his expansive ink and nipple piercing on full display.

He arches me a knowing brow when he catches the direction of my stare.

If he's expecting me to flush, he's sorely mistaken.

Dragging my tongue over my lip, I ogle him more intensely. His jaw clenches and he looks away, glaring at some unseen spot. I chuckle, my chest getting all goopy when I notice the flush creeping up his neck.

*God, I love him.*

I have to forcibly drag my gaze away. Glancing over at Jeremy, I catch the small grateful smile he shoots my way. But it's quick to still, then fade when his attention is pulled behind me. He gulps.

Color me not shocked at all when I turn around, following his wide gaze to where Mason now stands shirtless, his dark wash jeans hanging low around his hips. His gaze is downturned, his jaw ticking visibly. His movements are jerky and almost angry as he balls up his shirt, drops it on top of his duffle on the floor, and kicks it all under the end table with his boot.

*Okay then.*

“Phoebe!” a deep voice barks.

We all turn our attention to where Phoebe huffs. “*Fine.*” she says dramatically, releasing the shirt she had started to tug up, letting it fall back down. It’s only then that I notice what she’s wearing—faded ripped jeans tucked into black combat boots, and a black t-shirt with the phases of the moon scrolled across her chest in pale shades of blue giving way to pink then white at the center. Underneath it’s printed in bold: *NOT A PHASE.*

Her messy, dark blonde hair has been gathered up into two knots on top of her head. Space buns. Silver star stickers surround her eyes, making her irises look brighter than ever. And if I’m not mistaken there’s silver glitter in her hair.

My lip twitches with a smile as our gazes meet. She sticks her tongue out at me and crosses her eyes.

*This fucking girl.*

It’s been a couple months since she asked Waylon to tell me about her. To say I was shocked would be an understatement. Not so much because I never even had an inkling—no one ever has even hinted at such; not that there was any reason for it to come up—but because of where she grew up and the fact she was able to start transitioning so young. She just turned fifteen last week, but she’s been living as herself since she was six. Started puberty blockers when she was eleven.

Waylon had known exactly what I was thinking when he told me, calling me out for it immediately. “Didn’t realize being trans was something only you city-folk experience,”

he'd said with that harsh mocking edge to his tone, the one that once upon a time would have had every hackle of mine raised and primed for a fight.

Instead, properly chastised for my ignorance, I apologized and clarified what I really meant. That, more than anything, I was just *relieved*. But also, a little bit confused and a lot worried.

Yes, a lot of Waylon's hang-ups when it comes to being queer and out in Shiloh derive from his dad's abuse. From what he witnessed Jeremy going through as kids. But the town really isn't as bad as it might seem on the surface—not anymore, at least—so long as you know what spaces and kind of people to avoid. It's not ideal, but it's getting there. Slowly, and hopefully, surely.

Still...that's just when it comes to sexuality. For a lot of people, that's easier to come around to, or hell, just flat-out easier to ignore. Being trans, though, or hell, anything other than cis...not so much.

“Ready?”

I'm pulled out of my dismal thoughts by a tug on my hand. I look at Waylon and smile, nodding.

“What are you wearing?” Jeremy blurts out, his voice sharp.

Waylon and I share a frown and look over to where Mason loops a boa around his neck. Unlike ours though, his matches Ivy's in the colors of the bisexual flag.

Waylon cocks his head curiously while Jeremy looks outright livid, balling his fists at his thighs. The others have already headed toward the foyer, so it's just the four of us.

Mason gives Jeremy a pointed look. “You guys took all the rainbow ones. This is the only one left.”

Waylon fidgets with the ends of his boa, and I get the impression he's about to offer up a trade when Mason shrugs and runs his hands through his ashy brown hair. His lip ring catches on a ray of light streaming in through the window,



glittering silver. “What does it matter?” he says gruffly. “Come on before they leave without us.”

With that, he stomps off toward the foyer to catch up with the others.

Jeremy and I share a long, knowing look. Next to me, Waylon frowns. “Why *does* it matter?” he says. Shaking his head, he clearly isn’t waiting for an answer. He turns and walks away.

Once we’re alone, Jeremy blows out a harsh breath. “I’m being stupid,” he mumbles, before striding past me.

“Jeremy.”

“Just forget it.”

I sigh.

I’m just about to follow after him, when something gives me pause, and I find myself drawn over to the couch.

I dip a finger into the brown paper bag, pulling it toward me to peer inside, and take in the array of sticker booklets and random accessories not used. Giving the bag a little shake, I see what’s buried underneath.

A rainbow boa.

Sliding my eyes shut, I shake my head and huff a short, humorless laugh.

What *does* it matter?

It doesn’t, I suppose. Not really.

I catch up with the others outside, locking up behind me. Turning, I take in my little family of misfits. Ivy’s taking a selfie with a scowling Waylon, though I don’t miss the wary happiness glittering in his eyes as he fights a smile.

He’s nervous, anxious, but also excited. It’s his first Pride. Not just out, but ever.

Throat thick, I glance to where Phoebe throws her rainbow boa over Shawn’s neck, being careful to not touch him with anything but the feathers. He’s glowering down at her, his

deep set brows pulled in tight over his eyes. She bats her lashes up at him and I shake my head with a smile.

Just past them, Jeremy's squinting off somewhere down the street, his profile lit up by the sun streaming down, turning his hair a blinding white. Hell, his whole body practically shimmers, seeing as he's basically naked. It's nothing I haven't seen during past Pride events, and definitely won't be the most scandalous outfit we see today, but by the confused, yet troubled look on Mason's face when I glance over and catch him staring, something tells me he's not used to this version of the boy he grew up with.

He must sense eyes on him, because he suddenly jerks his attention my way, his gaze widening when it clashes with mine. I arch a brow and his cheeks flush. He ducks his head and quickly turns away.

*Well fuck.*

I think about the rainbow feather boa buried hidden at the bottom of a bag. No one would think twice seeing him wearing rainbows to a Pride event. Everyone wears rainbows to Pride.

It *shouldn't* mean anything.

But I have a feeling it kind of means everything.

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## WAYLON MCALLISTER

IT'S SO LOUD HERE.

Asphalt chips away under my boots as we make our way down 12th Street. Brick townhouses and row houses of varying shades of brown and burnt sienna close in on us from either side, mottled black around the edges by the glare of the sun bearing down on the city.

It's a little after noon and the festivities have just begun to pick up momentum.

Vendors line up along the sidewalk selling Pride merchandise. Surrounding streets have been closed off, and many cars have been parked elsewhere for the day, allowing the floats and hordes of people swarming in on the neighborhood to pass through easily.

Upbeat music blares from somewhere up ahead, clashing with whoops, yells, and indecipherable chatter, as well as the occasional beeping of horns, and the rhythmic *thuh-thuh-thump* of a steel drum.

It's chaos.

The kind of chaos I've always been drawn to, yet always felt apart from no matter how hard I tried to fit in. Like I was on the outside looking in on a world that should've been mine, and yet never felt quite right.

The kind of chaos that once upon a time would have me feeling more alone than ever, and send me spiraling down a bottle of whiskey, chasing companionship in nameless girls, and doing anything and everything I could to just *feel*

something. Anything other than that restless, itchy *nothingness* clunking around inside me, the one that made me feel like I was crawling out of my skin.

I thought I was broken.

I thought it was *me*.

Someone stumbles into me and I get a whiff of something sour and pungent—beer. My throat clenches, and I shrink away from the group of girls drunkenly skipping and twirling past us, clearly having the time of their lives. Green solo cups wave in the air, sloshing the foamy amber liquid all over the place.

I work at a bar for fuck's sake. The scent of beer is far from *triggering*. But I'm not in a bar right now, and if there's one thing I learned in the last seven months, it's that for whatever fucking reason, shit like that makes a difference.

Changes of setting.

Changes of seasons.

Just when I get used to being sober for one thing, a challenge comes my way, testing my resolve.

A hand grips my bicep, steadying me when I all but jerk away to avoid getting sprayed with the stuff. As if one of the girls could at any moment lunge forward, wrench my mouth open, and pour the stuff down my throat against my will.

Or hell, worse, I'll reach out on reflex alone and steal a sip of the stuff.

Almost did that at work a time or two.

Twisting my head, I have to squint past the glare to make out Will's expression. His mouth curves up, despite the hint of worry tightening the corners of his eyes. He's quick to release his hold on me, like it's a reflex at this point. "You good?"

The tension unfurls from my limbs. Shaking my arms out, I nod. "Yeah." And I find that I mean it. Appreciate it even. My sobriety.

It's not every day that I do, especially in a setting like this where the envy and fear of missing out on the fun feels like nails raking along the edges of my consciousness. Some days, it takes everything in me to keep that voice out. Some days, no matter what I do, it's not enough, and all I can do is hide away in my room and lose myself to a book, to Will, to a game on my phone. Chugging coffee or soda or water...

Whatever it fucking takes until the voice in my head trying to rationalize my addiction once again fades to the background.

Today, though...

Today's a good day.

An *easy* day.

*Thank whoever the fuck is watching out for me for small mercies.*

Will looks like he wants to say something, but then his gaze drops to my cheek and his mouth parts with his inhale. Cheesy as it fucking is, I didn't even realize I was smiling until now. Then again, I've always been able to see myself better through his eyes.

And just like that, the twinge of craving dissipates completely.

Will's not a cure, but he's a hell of great distraction when I need him to be. Not always, but more often than not. Especially when he's gazing at me like he is now, like the mere sight of me smiling his way baffles him. Blows his fucking mind.

Kind of like how he was blowing *my* mind earlier.

My tongue swipes over my lip at the memory, tingles spreading along my spine.

*Fuck, that was so hot.*

Will's deep blue eyes glitter back at me. His throat bobs with a hard swallow, and I just know he's remembering earlier too.

“Goddamn,” I hear him mutter, and my smile twists to the side, refusing to budge, desire blooming hotly in my stomach.

*Goddamn is right.*

I clear my throat and give a little shake of my head, knocking our shoulders together before turning to face forward once more. We haven’t stopped walking, but our steps have slowed enough that people have started to move around us, separating us from the rest of our group.

Or rather, what’s left of it.

Up ahead, I spot Phoebe through a gap in the crowd. She’s gesticulating wildly at something, curls of hair fluttering in the light breeze from where the two knots on top of her head have started to loosen. Tied around her neck, a pale pink, blue, and white flag ripples behind her like a cape—something she bought a couple blocks back.

Next to her, Shawn’s a dark, broad, towering figure standing over her—a shadow pressed up against her light, sharing the space rather than snuffing it out. His head bent down like he’s listening very intently to whatever it is she’s going on about now.

My lips twitch at the sight.

At first, we weren’t sure if we should even bring Phoebe this weekend. She just turned fifteen. Not that this isn’t for people of all ages, but still, we worried how she might deal with being at Pride. We didn’t want her to feel any kind of pressure to be out.

Well, Mason and I worried. Shawn too, though he was the one she looked to when we brought the subject up to her. Like she was looking for his reassurance, or hell, permission. I don’t know. All I know is when Phoebe needs someone’s opinion, Mason and I aren’t the first people she looks towards.

Not that she always listens to Shawn, but it’s different. There’s some kind of mutual, unspoken respect there that Mason and I aren’t privy to. She looks up to him. Values what

he has to say. Whereas with us, we could tell her the sky's blue, and she'll insist it's lime green.

She's been that way since she learned how to talk. Hell, even as a toddler, she was a little spitfire, teetering to the beat of a drum only she could hear, and fuck anyone else who told her she was off-rhythm.

"She looks happy," Will says loud enough for me to hear.

I almost say, "She's always happy," but something stops me. Not that she isn't back home, but it's different today, and Will sees it too. So instead, I just nod, and quietly say, "Yeah."

An ache pinches at my chest when I think about how sad it is that she can't always have this...freedom, I guess you'd call it. My fingers twitch at my sides, seeking to connect with Will's at the reminder of how different it is here.

How open.

How *loud*.

The kind of loud that has me standing taller, smiling more freely, and feeling like I could do anything I set my mind to.

Like holding my boyfriend's hand in public.

*Soon*, I promise myself.

If there's ever a time where I'll be able to confidently claim Will as mine for everyone to see, it's here. At Pride. In the City of Brotherly Love where love and acceptance far outweigh the hate and condemnation I grew up with.

*It's getting better*, a voice reminds me.

And I have to believe it is.

Will and I might not be *out* about our relationship back home—not yet, not really—but we're not exactly hiding it either. Especially at O'Leary's and around those we consider family. And so far, we haven't run into any assholes. Not since my dad, that is.

My eyes linger on Phoebe's profile. Her head's twisted enough for me to make out the big, goofy-ass grin stretched

out across her face as she looks up at Shawn. He's facing forward, shaking his head.

She *is* happy. That's all that matters. Even back home, where very few people know the truth, she's okay. More than okay. And if ever there comes a day where she wants to or feels the need to...I don't know, come out? Be more vocal about it?...She'll have us standing right by her side, supporting her and ready to throw down if anyone tries to give her shit.

No one will ever fuck with that girl, or so help me God.

Someone blows into a fog horn, followed by a loud cat-call, drawing me back to the here and now. Up on the float ahead, two drag queens dressed like slutty fairy godmothers sweep their wands over the crowd, spurring on the excitement. One starts singing into a microphone as the music kicks back on. It's not a song I recognize, but when the beat drops, people go wild. Lights flash. Confetti guns explode on the crowd, raining multi-colored paper on our heads.

I feel more than see Will chuckle next to me. Cutting him a glance, I realize just how close we stand now, our arms brushing with each step forward. If I'm not mistaken the crowd pressing in on all sides has grown even denser.

"Come on," he calls out, jerking his head toward a small break ahead. Following his lead, I trail him step for step.

Just when I start to wonder where the others are, a flash of black moves into the corner of my eye just as we reach Shawn and Phoebe, and I glance over to find Ivy smiling breathlessly. I didn't see where she wandered off to, but by the flush to her cheeks and brightness to her green eyes, I'm assuming she found her way to one of the many vendors selling alcohol.

People make their way around us as our steps slow. I look around her, frowning when I see that she's alone. Leaning toward her ear, I ask loudly, "Where's Mase and Jer?"

She twists her head around so fast, she smacks me with her hair. I sputter and wave it away with my hand, taking a step back,



Her eyes are big and round as she cranes her neck and looks around. She shrugs. “They must’ve fallen back.”

“You’re here!” Phoebe yells out.

Turning, I find her tugging on Will’s hand. He shakes his head, crouches down, and gestures to his shoulders. Phoebe doesn’t waste a second. Shawn spots them as she climbs up on my boyfriend’s shoulders, her long legs hanging down his chest as he pushes to a stand. Next to them, Shawn holds his hands out, his dark brows knitted tightly over his eyes. His face grim.

He looks so fucking worried. It’s kind of hilarious.

I cut a sideways glance to Ivy. “How drunk are you?”

“I’m not.”

I shoot her a disbelieving look.

She rolls her eyes. “Jer and I dropped some Molly earlier. It’s just hitting now is all.”

I stare at her for a long beat.

She gives me a shrug, then grips my shoulder and all but shoves me to my knees.

“Jesus,” I mutter. “Easy.”

Once she’s situated around my head, her chunky black Docs slapping me in the ribs, I easily push to a stand. She’s shorter than Phoebe by a couple inches, despite having three years on her. I reckon she weighs less too. Where Phoebe’s tall and gangly, my cousin is like an angry little elf.

She slaps my head like she heard that, and I laugh under my breath.

Ahead of me, Will’s walking backward with Phoebe’s lanky body bobbing around his head. Shawn glowers, shaking his head. He mutters something I can’t make out, but Will must hear it because he rolls his eyes, turns toward Shawn and gestures at his chest.

Phoebe wraps one arm around Will’s forehead to steady herself, and uses her other arm to reach out toward Shawn. She

wiggles her fingers.

Shawn's harsh features soften and he steps forward, just for Phoebe to reach out and flick him on the forehead. I stifle a laugh at the shocked expression on Shawn's face. I swear though, for a moment, his lips twitch when she pulls back, biting back a grin, amusement flashing through his dark gaze.

Shaking my head, I tighten my hold on Ivy's calves, locking her in place when she starts swaying as I approach the others. People pass by us, sparing amused glances up at the girls now towering over everyone else.

"Onward!" Phoebe shouts over the music and warring laughter and chatter, pointing in the direction of the parade's march toward Center City.

More confetti gets sprayed out over the crowd, floating down on us like snow. I sidle up next to Will, peeking around Ivy's leg to meet his gaze. Just past him, on his other side, Shawn looks around, seemingly taking everything in. Unlike us, he wears a shirt under his boa. It's solid black. And just next to his eye, there's a small rainbow sticker I didn't see earlier.

Fingers bump mine, but quickly retreat. My gaze cuts sharply to Will's, but his attention is directed somewhere up ahead. The glancing touch was clearly an accident, and realizing that has that twinge of restlessness I felt earlier resurfacing.

My throat thickens, and my heart thumps faster than it did a moment ago. I feel a trickle of sweat slide down my neck that has nothing to do with Ivy's body heat.

*Now*, a voice says.

Sucking in a sharp breath, I blink a few times, soaking in the marrow of this moment, silently hyping myself up.

Flags of varying colors, but mostly rainbows, fill up the street all around me. It's all I can see. They flap proudly in the gentle breeze, sunlight pouring through, making it all the more brighter. Colorful.

*I'm safe here.*

The music coming from the float ahead changes up to another song I don't recognize. It has Ivy squeezing my head as I assume she starts waving her hands around. Phoebe does the same, and I tip my head back, squinting up to where they lace their fingers as they start singing along, swaying to the music.

I grin and look down, colliding with my favorite set of blue eyes.

He wags his brows and it's like time stops, the world around us fading away, leaving just the two of us.

*Now, now, now—*

And in the light of day, for the world to see, I find my boyfriend's hand and lace our fingers together.

Our steps stutter right along with the heart in my chest, slamming against my ribs.

*I did it.*

His words from earlier replay through my head.

*"All that matters is that you're you and you're mine, and that is worthy of a place in this community."*

Emotion sears the back of my eyes. It's so simple, so fucking silly, holding this boy's hand. And yet it feels so big.

I realize it's not just the guy standing next to me I see. It's me too. The boy I was all those years ago. All the versions of who *I* was growing up. The one who hid in the shadows, waiting and wishing for a day he didn't have to hide. A day he didn't fear who he was.

*You can come out now, I tell him. You're safe here.*

*And this guy holding your hand right now, the one gazing back at you like you hold the entire universe in your palm?*

*Well, he's been waiting for you.*

*And he'll never let you fall.*

My palm is sweaty against Will's, and I clutch him with a death-grip. But it's okay, it's okay. *I'm okay.*

Better than okay.

I might not yet have the guts to love this boy out loud back home, but I have today—*we* have today. We have this city. We have this community.

I'm not broken.

I'm not alone.

And one day...one day we'll have this in Shiloh too. I just *know* it.

But until then, I'll cherish what I can, when I can, knowing that no matter what, this guy with the ocean blue eyes and insufferable grin will be here. Waiting for me. Loving me.

Reminding me who I am and that I'm fucking worthy.

Not just of a place in this community.

But of a place at his side, holding his hand, proudly.

*One, two, three*, I count silently.

And this time, I don't let go.

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## JEREMY MONTGOMERY

MASON WYATT IS GOING to be the death of me.

I knew it when I was six, the first time he stood up for me when some boys at school were giving me shit. It was the first time he said my name. Not JJ, but Jeremy. No one called me Jeremy back then. Not even teachers.

And I know it now, as certainly as I did back then, watching him stride down 12th Street, head held high, a pink, blue, and purple boa draped loosely around his neck, the ends fluttering in the soft breeze. A clear blue sky and sparkling chrome cityscape stretched out around him.

He has to know the statement he's making...

Right?

I mean, he's clueless sometimes, but he can't be *that* clueless.

"You're staring again," he says, not taking his eyes off what's going on around us. Flags of varying colors wave proudly in the air. Upbeat music blasts from speakers. People cheer. There's so much noise and life and happiness, and yet all that exists for me in this moment is the oblivious guy walking proudly at my side, mere inches away.

It would take nothing at all to reach out and tangle our fingers together.

And I think that's what hurts most of all, the fact that it's such a simple thing, and yet it weighs down on me as heavy as if it were the entire universe pressing down on my shoulders.

“People are going to assume things,” I say tightly under my breath, just loud enough for him to hear.

He slants me a sideways look. “So?”

I widen my eyes and wave a hand at him. “They’re going to think you’re bi.”

His brows flit up. “*So?*” He shrugs and looks away. “Let ’em think what they want. What does it matter?”

Gritting my teeth, I clench my hands together and face forward once more. I don’t see the others. We’re farther behind than I thought.

Last I saw them, Will and Waylon were tailing the others, walking so close together, closer than Mason and I are now, and yet even they weren’t touching. Waylon’s shoulders were hunched, telling me he was being extra careful not to bridge the gap.

It makes me sad, but I get it too, even if this is one of the safest places to be.

Hell, I feel so safe that I’m practically naked with the boy I’ve been crushing on hopelessly and pathetically for basically my entire life. Something I’d never have the balls to do anywhere else or at any other time.

Okay, so the Molly might’ve had a little to do with it. Unfortunately, it’s taking forever to kick in fully, so I’m not feeling as confident as I was hoping I’d feel once we joined the march. It doesn’t help that Mason’s skin is so close to mine that even out here in the faint breeze, I can feel his body heat radiating against mine as if he *was* touching me.

I’ve tried to get away from him, but every time I do, he somehow finds a way to catch up with me... or slow down to join me at the rear, like now. He’s apparently made it his mission to be attached to my hip today, and it’s annoying to say the least.

“You’re in a mood today,” he says easily, like we’re talking about something as innocuous as the weather or my preference for cinnamon gum over peppermint. “I figured you’d be happier to be here.”

“I am happy,” I growl.

He cuts me an amused look. “Yeah, you sound it.”

Scowling, I will myself to relax. I’m well aware I’m being ridiculous.

“JJ,” he says softly.

“Don’t call me that,” I say reflexively.

He sighs. “Jeremy.”

*Don’t call me that either.*

See? Very, very ridiculous.

“So is this really how it’s going to be now?”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I don’t realize my steps have picked up speed until a hand shoots out, clutching mine and squeezing, halting me in place, right along with that stupid organ in my chest that can’t seem to get the memo it should be fluttering for literally *anyone* but him.

Whirling toward him, I rip my hand from his and glare at him. “What?” The word wrenches out of me, shocking both of us with its intensity. He rears back, eyes wide.

I stare at him, lips pursed, begging him with my eyes to just drop it.

People grumble and roll their eyes as they have to step around us. Hell, we stopped dead center in the street in the middle of a fucking parade. People pass by on either side of us, and yet with the way we stare at each other right now, it’s as if no one else exists here but us.

The whole city could be on fire for all I care.

Mason’s throat dips with his hard swallow.

“We’re gonna get left behind.”

“So what? We’ll find them at the end.”

I give a little shake of my head and start to continue walking, but he reaches out, grabbing my shoulder this time,

and stopping me. “You promised me we’d be okay. That you could—”

I drop my hands at my side and cut him a searing look. “Yeah, and I said I need *time*.”

His eyes tighten. “It’s been months.” I see more than hear the words, the way his lips frame each syllable. The way that stupid lip ring winks back at me.

*Months for you.* I scoff, the bitterness gnawing at my insides.

He has no clue. No fucking clue at all. And I know it’s mostly my fault. I should’ve been completely honest with him when I had the chance. But no, instead I took the coward’s way out and just gave him a little bit of my truth. Just enough to get him to listen and respect my wishes.

It’s been four months. By all accounts, it *should* have been enough time. More than enough time. So I guess I can’t blame him for thinking shit’s all fine and dandy now.

If anything, I’m just pissed off with myself.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

“Stop apologizing,” I beg, my voice cracking. I wave a hand at our surroundings. “All you’ve done for the greater part of this year is fucking apologize.”

“I’m—”

I glare at him and he bites his lip, sucking his lip ring into his mouth.

Stifling a groan, I tear my gaze away, looking at everything and nothing, least of all him. “Come on,” I mutter, and start walking again.

He’s quick to catch up to me, but this time he keeps a good foot between us, though it doesn’t escape my notice how determined he is to stick close.

“Why are you so intent on shadowing me?” I ask, keeping my gaze trained ahead. I see a familiar set of space buns



appear, higher than they should be, silhouetted black by the sun.

*There they are.*

I squint, trying to see whose shoulders Phoebe sits on.

“I’m...not.”

I snort side-stepping a couple of women trying to take a selfie. “Could’ve fooled me.” Our arms bump and he mumbles an apology. I just shake my head, ignoring the tingles spreading over my skin.

“I just...I don’t want to lose you, okay?”

I snap my head around, eyes wide. So caught off guard, I’m not looking where I’m going and I trip over someone’s foot. Mason lurches forward, grabbing my arm and steadying me just before I eat pavement.

“Christ,” he mutters. “Careful.” He shakes his head. “You know what I meant,” he grumbles.

*Except I don’t.* Rolling my eyes, I go to pull away from him, when someone slams into my back, shoving me right up against him, bare chest to bare chest.

*Fuuuccckkkkk.*

I suck in a sharp breath, my whole body turning rigid. My shoulders. Hell, my nipples. Lower...

Of all times to be wearing booty shorts that leave nothing to the imagination.

A shiver races through me, and everything feels so *loud* suddenly, and looks so bright. I feel like I’m vibrating with sensation.

*Oh, right. The Molly.*

I pivot away so the only thing touching me are the fingers digging into my arm. If I’m not mistaken, his grip has tightened. So tight, I wonder if he’ll leave marks. Not in a bad way, but in a...

Well, I don't know what kind of way, but given that all the blood in my body seems to be rushing and gathering south, leaving me light-headed, it's not in any way that is good for me.

"Mason," I grit out in warning.

"Jeremy."

I lift my gaze, peering at him through my lashes. He's got to have the palest of blue eyes I've ever seen in real life. Eyes that will never fail to steal my breath every time they're turned my way.

*It's not fucking fair.*

Once again we're frozen in a standstill in the middle of a crowd of strangers, and yet I can't find it in me to care. Not yet.

One second passes.

Two seconds.

It's just Mason and me and nothing and no one outside of us exists. Time ceases, just like all the other times that came before, where we found ourselves locked like this. I hold my breath, count the seconds that pass by all too quickly, wishing I could stretch them out to infinity. Even if it means never breathing again.

Mason's chest isn't moving, and I wonder if he feels it too. If he can't help himself but try to prevent the inevitable.

His eyes search mine, devouring them, and I let myself pretend it's me he's consuming, and not the ghost lingering between us.

*Izzy.*

He doesn't say it this time, but I hear it nonetheless. I feel the echo of her name spilling from his lips like a hammer against my heart, shattering through my drug-induced haze, and snuffing out what little bit of euphoria I managed to scrounge up.

I can't do this again. I can't watch the moment it hits him, fracturing those icy pools of blue into a million shards I'll never have a chance of gluing back together.

I've had to watch him break so many times, and knowing I'm partially the cause never gets easier.

Knowing I only ever make it worse kills me.

"Jeremy." He says my name, but all I hear is *hers*.

*God, I should've never agreed to this trip.*

I drop my gaze. "Come on," I mumble. This time, he doesn't stop me when I tear myself away. I know it kills him too, the second he remembers the eyes he's staring into aren't the ones he wants them to be. I'm not surprised in the least that he lets me go.

If only we could remember this feeling always. Maybe then we'd be able to stop torturing ourselves and leave our friendship in the past where it should remain. By all accounts that would be the smart thing to do. But, unfortunately, when it comes to Mason, I've never been that smart. Maybe leaving the country will finally do the trick.

The plan was to avoid him until I came back from Europe next winter, but I don't head out for another month and a half, and saying no to this weekend all because of my hang-ups over a boy felt pathetic. And wrong. I always hoped for the day I'd get to share something like this with him, with my friends from my life in Shiloh.

Hell, up until this last year, I never even thought it would be something we'd do together. I figured it would only be something reserved for the life I have while I'm away at college.

How could I possibly have turned this down?

We're silent as we weave our way through the crowd to catch up with the others. I'm not surprised to discover that Will's the one carrying Phoebe on his shoulders. Next to him, Ivy sits on Waylon's shoulders, arms spread out, head tipped back, black hair cascading down her back. Shawn keeps pace

next to them, darting glares at anybody who dares to get too close. I don't even think he realizes he does it.

"Look," Mason murmurs just loud enough for me to hear. Again, he's standing so close his elbow brushes mine. I spare him a fleeting glance before following the direction of his gaze.

My lip curves up, my turmoil over the guy standing next to me fading to the background, if only for a moment.

Because Waylon's holding Will's hand.

And that's a pretty fucking big deal.

If this was one of my comic books, this would be the final scene. The final block. It would show me reaching out and taking Mason's fingers in mine, lacing them together. It would be simple. Easy. Just like it's always been for us.

There's just one glaring issue. A plot hole in our narrative I just can't seem to claw my way out of.

Mason Wyatt was never mine to have.

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## MASON WYATT

I FUCKED UP.

I know this—I’ve known it for some time now—and yet the harder I try to unfuck things, the more fucked it all gets.

*Damned if I do, damned if I don’t...* Just slap that on my headstone when I’m good and gone, and call it a day. No amount of angsty ballads could explain my life any better if I tried.

A throat clears, followed by a dragged out, “Sooooo.”

My head snaps up, and I frown when I find my sister aiming an arched look down at my plate. Following her gaze, I grimace, and quickly remove my fingers from the mess I made, ketchup and mashed fries clinging to my digits.

*Fuck, how long was I spacing for?*

Feels like I’ve been wading through a heavy fog since the parade ended, and that was hours ago.

I pull out a wad of napkins from the dispenser, quickly cleaning my hand. My gaze flits to Shawn, and I’m not surprised to find him watching me over his drink. If anyone else looked at him right now—took in that deep-set, furrowed brow, the tension in his jaw, and the hard glint to his brown eyes—they’d probably think he was annoyed or pissed off.

But I know him better than that.

His intensity speaks to how much he cares. You just have to know how to read him, and pray you never end up on the wrong side of that tightly-coiled restraint.

A glance at their plates shows they've already finished. A glance to mine confirms I've been zoned out for longer than I thought.

My burger has a single bite taken out. I barely even remember doing that. Once we sat down, ordered, and Phoebe started showing Shawn something on her phone, my mind drifted.

Clearly to another galaxy.

Picking up my barely eaten burger, I take a big bite, forcing it down, even if eating is the last thing I want to be doing right now.

A bell rings behind me, followed by a clamor of chatter as another group enters the diner. At Phoebe's insistence, after splitting up from the others, the three of us hit up Silk Street for a late night dinner—even though we ate at the festival just a couple of hours ago. Really, she just didn't want to go back to Will's parents' house just yet.

I know the feeling.

If there's one thing my sister and I have in common, it's our fear of missing out. FOMO, as she likes to call it. That heavy, borderline unbearable feeling that comes with realizing and accepting there's a whole other path laid out, one you'll never get to see. Melodramatic? Maybe. But it is what it is. If you get it, you get it.

And knowing the others are at some gay club, dancing and drinking...

My knee bobs under the table.

Okay, so they're not *all* drinking.

Though knowing Will, he's probably not either out of respect for Waylon. If anything, those two tagged along to keep an eye on Ivy and Jeremy, who have been drinking on and off since the parade ended.

And apparently rolling on Molly, something Ivy let slip back at the park.

As if summoned, a familiar pair of amber eyes flashes across my mind's eye, glazed, pupils expanded. Lips curved up in a dazed smile he flashed my way through the crowd. Cheeks flushed as he rolled his body to the music.

*And here I thought he was just genuinely happy...*

The memory from earlier suddenly darkens, turning into something else. Something manufactured.

I imagine him now. In the club.

It's all dark with packed bodies and pulsing lights. And he's no longer dancing and waving his hands to live music, his silhouette blurred by sunlight, friends on either side of him.

But grinding his near-naked body against strange men with wandering hands, who want one thing and one thing only.

The bite of burger I was chewing turns to sand, and I force a hard swallow before reaching for my water.

*He can handle himself.*

Fuck, how many times have I said that over the years? How many times did I stand up for him to Izzy—insist she give him more credit, when she got all smothering and worried—and he has no idea.

*But she's not here...*

*Someone has to protect him.*

A new voice pipes up. *Is that what we're going with?*

I set my burger down, rattling the plate, and take another gulp of my water, washing down the bile threatening to rise.

“You okay?” Shawn asks just loud enough to be heard over the din of the crowded diner.

*Nope, going out of my mind. But what else is new?*

But all I say is, “Yep.”

I can feel them both watching me, but I pretend I don't notice, turning to look out the window overlooking our booth instead.

It's almost completely dark outside now, and a quick tap and glance at my phone lying face-up on the table shows it's pushing nine.

I don't miss the fact I have no new messages waiting for me.

I lock it and shove it off to the side, feeling my knee start to bob again under the table.

The parade ended hours ago, and we spent the rest of the day at the Pride festival going on at Cret Park, eating and hanging out and listening to live music until night started falling and we parted ways. Jeremy, Ivy, Will, and Waylon heading off to the Gayborhood to check out some nightclub.

*We should've stuck together.*

*All of us.*

*Anything could fucking happen.*

I bounce my knee harder, faster. My chest squeezes, pulse quickening. That ugly thing in the recesses of my mind slithers forward, shining light on memories I'd much rather never face again.

Reliving it doesn't change anything.

Doesn't erase what happened.

And it most certainly does not bring her back, or change what could and will happen to everyone else I care about—be it tomorrow, next week, in five years, or fifty.

Loss—it's a part of life I'll never be able to escape. And nothing short of taking myself out first will save me from that fate.

Cracking my neck, I look around, hyper-focusing on each sound and sight my senses gather. I inhale, count to five, and then I exhale.

*Breathe. Just breathe.*

And I do just that.

I go to take another sip of water.



“He’s fine.”

My fingers twitch, and I miss my mouth, icy water dribbling down my chin. Quickly setting the glass down, I wipe my face with the back of my arm.

Shawn meets my wide gaze with a look I can’t place, and I feel my heart skitter to a stop. “What did you say?”

“I said they’re fine.”

*No you didn’t.*

Or maybe he did.

I’m fucking losing my mind.

Music kicks on, filling the crowded space, and warring with the rest of the noise. It’s Pearl Jam, from the sounds of it. One of their older, less known hits. Can’t remember the name.

*Jeremy would know.*

Shawn’s eyes drift down to my neck, and something moves across his expression, there and gone too quick for me to grab. I follow his gaze with my hand, feeling around, not surprised to find another rogue feather.

Blue this time.

I roll it up in a napkin.

I lost the feather boa hours ago—and by lost, I mean I conveniently left it in the bathrooms at the park after one too many guys hit on me.

I felt bad. And I suddenly got what Jeremy meant earlier, when we were walking in the parade. I suddenly felt like a liar for wearing it. Like I had no right. It’s just a symbol—three colors that mean nothing on their own—and yet what right do I have to overstep like that, and invade a space that isn’t mine?

*Sure about that?*

Clenching my teeth, I slam down a steel wall on that line of thinking.

*It doesn’t fucking matter. None of it does.*

I look down at the table, chewing my lip ring as I run my fingers through my hair.

“What if something happens?” I whisper gruffly, before I can stop myself.

In the corner of my eye, Shawn nods. “It could.”

My nostrils flare and I glare up at him through my lashes. “Not fucking helpful.”

He watches me expectantly. Waiting...

For what, I have no idea.

Next to him, Phoebe starts to fidget, growing restless.

“Mase—“ she starts to say, when our waiter returns—a young guy, probably sixteen or seventeen at best—putting a much appreciated halt to our conversation.

I blow out a sigh of relief as he grabs Shawn and Phoebe’s dishes first. He glances at mine. My burger’s half-eaten and drowning in the ketchup and potato soup I made. “You still working on that?”

I give a short shake of my head, handing it to him. “You can take it. Thanks.”

He nods, stacking it on top of the others. “Anything else I can get you guys? Dessert? Coffee?”

“Nah, we’re good man.”

Setting the plates on the table, he pulls out his order pad and jots something down, before handing it to me. “Just take this to the counter when you’re ready to pay. No rush. Have a great rest of your night.”

The three of us murmur back our *thanks* and *you too*.

He goes to turn, but pauses, and looks over to Phoebe. “Love the shirt by the way.”

Phoebe sits up straight, eyes rounding. And then she flashes him one of her mega-watt smiles, the kind that showcases the little dimple in her cheek and crinkles her gray-blue eyes. “Thank you!”

My gaze darts over just in time to catch the waiter's wink before he walks away.

Brows raised, I look to Shawn to see what he makes of this, my mouth ticking up in the beginnings of a smile. But he's already staring down at Phoebe, brow furrowed in blatant concern.

My gaze snaps to my sister and something wilts in my chest, stealing my amusement as fast as it came.

Just like that, everything else falls away, taking my anxiety from a moment ago with it.

She's blinking at the table, gaze far-off, her smile dimming just as fast as it came. She's always been so expressive, to the point that even the least empathetic person could likely read her from a mile away.

I can practically feel her tumbling off the edge of whatever high she just felt. No jutting rocks to grab to to slow her down.

"Shawn," I say. I jerk my chin at him, and slide him my wallet. He rolls his eyes, shoves it off, grabs the bill, and heads for the counter to pay, digging out his own wallet in the process.

Wetting my lips, I suck my lip ring, fiddling with it as I drag my gaze back to Phoebe.

"Hey, Squirt."

She swallows a couple times before finally meeting my gaze. She smiles, but there's a shakiness to it that absolutely guts me.

"It's okay," I say, though I'm not really sure what I'm referring to. The fact it's okay a boy complimented her. That he outright drew attention to the fact he's assuming the shirt means she's trans and made it known he's okay with it. To the fact his cheeks burned red after that, clearly betraying his attraction to her.

He was shooting her curious looks since we got here and he came over to take drink orders. I don't know if she caught that, but I did. Shawn too, I'd bet.

And as much as the overprotective big brother part of me wants to pounce on the kid...

Figuring out and fixing what put that look on my little sister's face is all that matters right now.

Phoebe looks around, her cheeks darkening, gaze lost, and I know that look—even if it's been years since I last saw it, I *know* it. "Sorry...I just..." Her voice softens, fading, and she shakes her head. "I don't know what just happened."

"It's okay," I repeat, sharper this time. "You have nothing to explain or be sorry for."

Her pale gray-blue eyes meet mine.

I give her an encouraging nod, infusing as much sincerity in my expression as I can so she knows I mean it.

And then she blurts, "I got asked out on a date last week."

My eyes widen.

That's...not what I was expecting.

She hunches her shoulders, and starts picking at a napkin on the table, tearing it up. "A friend of the guy Hollie's crushing on."

"How old is he?"

She rolls her eyes. "Sixteen."

I shake my head. "You're too young."

She glares at me.

*Shit. Didn't mean to say that out loud.*

Still, while I should probably feel bad, I don't. I'd much rather her pissed off at me than looking all crushed and lost like she was a second ago.

"Seriously? You're one to talk."

I open my mouth, but she cuts me off.

"And if you say it's because I'm a girl, I'll sic Ivy on you." She flashes a tight grin.

I hold up my hands. “I was just going to say, it’s because you’re my sister. This is all sort of...new territory for me.”

She makes a soft noise of acknowledgment at that. “Well, get used to it.”

Blowing out a long breath, I nod.

*Right. Easy fuckin’ peasy.*

Shifting on my seat, I work my jaw, debating how to go about this. I low-key regret sending Shawn away now. He’s much better at dealing with this shit. I’m the pushover. The good cop. I’m the one she bats those big puppy dog eyes at, and before I know it I’m handing over the keys to my truck to a fifteen year old.

Okay, not really. But I’m far more likely to cave to her wild whims and impulses, versus the hard ass that is Shawn. He’s not driven by a guilty, people-pleasing complex.

Hell, even Waylon has no problem reasoning with Phoebe. Hearing her out, and talking her down. He’s very much of the *do as I say, not what I do* mentality, and for whatever reason she respects him for it.

We all deal with our abandonment issues differently, clearly.

Shawn repels, Waylon acts out, and I cling desperately.

It’s just how we were built.

“Well,” I say carefully, knowing I need to wade through these unfamiliar waters delicately, “it’s not like this kid proposed. He liked your shirt, and clearly thought you were pret—”

“I turned him down.” She waves a hand. “Kyle, I mean. The boy from back home. I said no to going out with him.”

“Okay...” My eyes narrow on hers.

Her lips purse and she stares at me with that annoyed, exasperated look of hers that tells me I’m missing something big here.

“He doesn’t know,” she grits out. Her face reddens, and my gaze widens, comprehension barreling over me.

*Right.*

“I just...” She clamps down on her molars, jaw hardening. Then, “If the waiter asked me out, I could say yes.” She waves at her chest. “My shirt is basically a neon sign, broadcasting it to anyone and everyone, and...and it’s okay. Here. But I don’t live here, so obviously I can’t...I can’t...” She pauses, shaking her head. She starts ripping at her napkin with more gusto. “It’s just...it was so much easier before, you know?”

“Before?”

She shrugs, her eyes glistening through her bitter smile. “When I was a kid.”

Sucking in my cheek, I nod. “Yeah...growing up is a bitch like that, huh?”

Her fingers still on the ripped napkin. They tremble faintly. I wonder if I said the wrong thing.

“Look, I know I can’t relate to what you’re going through. I don’t mean to minimize it, or anythi—”

“I know,” she whispers near soundlessly.

“I just—I love you and I’m here for you, whatever you need. You’re my baby sister, you always have been and that will never change. Ever.”

Her reddened eyes fill when they meet mine. “I know,” she says strongly.

I search her gray-blue eyes. “It won’t be like this forever. Jeremy got out of that town, you could too.”

He brow creases. “You mean college.”

I nod.

“But...”

“If I could, I’d keep you a kid forever, and keep you close.” I smile sadly. “But that’s not realistic. And as much as

letting you go will kill me, I'd rather die than watch that town suffocate you."

Her eyes widen, cheeks reddening.

"Living in fear is no way to live."

She watches me for a long moment.

Then, nodding, she clears her throat and looks away. "It's whatever. I have no interest in dating right now anyway. The guys at school are stupid and immature and only care about one thing."

I wince.

"So it's bearable right now. It just...this weekend showed me what it could be like, you know?" Her gaze flits to mine, and she shrugs. "I had a *what if* moment, that's all."

Nodding, I say, "I get it." I wave a hand. "Well, I don't get it, but—"

She chuckles, and the tension in my chest eases. "I know."

A long moment passes. A glance over her head shows Shawn waiting at the counter. I frown, wondering if he's waiting for us to join him, not wanting to intrude.

Phoebe groans suddenly, shoving the pile of ripped up napkin away. "Ugh, I don't know..."

"What?" I press gently.

"Sometimes I just feel so torn," she rushes out. "Like on one hand I should be embracing my identity—my transness—being proud of who I am... and on the other..." She lifts her head. "I'm just so... relieved I get to live comfortably and keep it to myself." Her brow knits. "Like why *does* it have to be a statement? I pass. No one knows when they look at me. I'm safe and happy like this..."

She refocuses her attention on me. "But I feel like I'm... letting my community down or something by hiding it."

"Phee..." I shake my head.

“I know. It’s very woe is me. First world problems, right?” she says bitterly.

I scowl at that. “No. Not at all.” I huff a sigh, running my hand through my hair, trying to figure out how to word this. “You’re fifteen. You live in a small, backward town made up mostly of old hyper-conservative white men who’d probably instate a law banning queers if they could. They do the bare minimum as it is by tolerating it, and that’s only because we have places like O’Leary’s and Chickie’s, and families who support the shit out of us, who won’t tolerate *them*.”

I meet her gaze, and as much as it kills me to spell this out, I know I have to. “I don’t want to scare you, Phoebe. But I am *terrified* for you. I know, I know it’s probably way different at school. Maybe more accepting than it was when I was your age. But—”

“There are definitely kids at school...boys...girls too... who would not be okay with it if they knew,” she interrupts softly. “Being gay or bi or whatever is one thing. But this... no.”

A cramp ignites my stomach, fear momentarily stealing my breath.

“So I know it’s not safe. I just...” She shrugs. “I feel bad. I feel like I should be braver, or something.”

“You *are* brave. You have no idea how brave. Don’t let anyone ever, *ever* fucking tell you otherwise. To put your safety first is not weak, or cowardice.”

She smiles ruefully. “Yeah?”

“Absolutely.”

She pushes her lips out like a duck. “Soooo...dating is out while I’m still in school then.”

I wince, shaking my head. “I didn’t say that. I just—”

“It’s okay. Like I said. I’m not really interested. Plus, I have Hollie.”

“Yes you do.” Her best friend is the only one outside of the six of us, our parents, and Gavin and Linda who know the



truth.

“And there are, like, online forums and stuff. I can talk to others on there who get it, you know?”

“Just be careful.”

She rolls her eyes. “I know.” A beat passes, and she grows serious once more. “Thanks for listening, Crush.”

I flash her a small smile. “Anytime, Squirt.”

Behind her Shawn starts walking back our way, and in his hand is a white styrofoam to-go cup.

*Ah.* That explains the hold up.

A milkshake, I’m assuming. And if I had to bet, chocolate.

I start sliding out of the booth, when Phoebe says, “You said us.”

Blinking into a frown, I grab my wallet and phone, pocketing both. “What?”

Phoebe’s watching me, her lips twitching with a smile. And there’s a glint in her eye that has my hackles rising. “Before, when you were talking about how we have safe spaces and our family to support us. You said us, not you.”

I still.

My mouth opens, closes, and I fumble for words. “That’s not— I didn’t—”

Her eyes sparkle with amusement.

“I’m not gay,” I mutter faintly.

She slides out of the booth, coming to a stand. She’s tall for her age—on a few inches shy of six feet. She pats my shoulder, and singsongs, “Never said you were.”

Shawn finally reaches us, after having to wait for a group to pass.

Phoebe lights up when he thrusts the drink in front of her along with a wrapped straw.

She looks up at him, gray-blue eyes sparkling.

Shawn's mouth twitches, and he flicks her forehead, before turning to me. "You guys ready?"

I nod mutely, my mind racing.

*You said us.*

Phoebe throws me a wink over her shoulder before leading us back out the way we came in, passing the packed counter and booths along the front windows.

"She okay?" Shawn mutters, hanging back enough so she doesn't overhear us.

I nod. "Yeah. She's fine."

He cuts me a long sideways look. "Are you?"

"Huh?"

He frowns. "Are you okay? You look like someone just told you Superman is better than Batman."

I bark out a laugh and wave him ahead. "Fuck off. I'm fine. Catch up to her before she makes a run for it."

He sighs, shaking his head, and quickens his strides. He knows as well as I do that that's a very likely possibility.

Balmy summer night air greets us when we get outside, along with the whoosh of passing cars along the road. Music blasts from a car nearby, and there are a group of rowdy guys down the block roughhousing as they make their way toward Silk Street.

The place doubles as a diner and nightclub, and I think there's even a beer garden out back.

Shawn pulls out a pack of smokes.

"Thought you were trying to quit," Phoebe chirps as he lights up.

I grin, and cock my head. "Yeah, Shawnie. Thought you were trying to quit."

Cigarette perched between his lips, cherry burning bright red, he flips us both off. Phoebe pretends to swoon and I pretend to catch it like a kiss.

“Fucking hate both of you,” he grumbles through a cloud of smoke.

Phoebe and I share a knowing grin. “Sure you do,” I say at the same time she says, “Uh huh. Totally.”

I’m glad to see her mood’s improved. It’s not often, or ever, really, that we talk about her being trans. There was never really any need to, unless she brought it up of course.

Which she never does...

Not since we were kids and she first started coming to terms with it and began her transition.

Not until tonight.

But she’s growing up.

The world’s fucked.

And as much as I wish I could bubble wrap her, keep her blissfully ignorant...

I’m not stupid.

That notion went to hell a long time ago, probably around the time she walked into me convulsing on the floor from an overdose when she was only twelve.

That familiar festering ache inside me when I think about that time in my life creeps forward, and I let it have its moment.

No use shoving it away. It will always be there, and it’s the least I fucking deserve. Feeling it...

We start walking in the direction of Will’s parents house, my mind continuing to drift, mood plummeting once more.

Shawn and Phoebe hang back a bit, talking amongst themselves, content to leave me be, at least for the moment.

More guilt stacks on with each block we pass, spurring my thoughts into a familiar frenzy, as our conversation in the diner replays through my head.

*Did I fuck it all up?*

*Did I miss something?*

*Should I have checked in with her more?*

*Am I failing at this... again?*

We stop at the intersection and wait to be signaled to cross.  
And I let my eyes fall shut, just for a moment.

One breath in.

One breath out.

Inhale...

Hold it.

*“Beating yourself up over it won’t erase what happened.”*

My chest squeezes at the voice in my head.

I remember the conversation like it was yesterday, even being as out of my mind with regret and grief and withdrawal as I was...

It’s a memory that stands out vivid and bright—my first glimpse of the sun after what felt like an eternity clawing my way up to from the bottom of a black, timeless sea.

I was in the hospital.

It was just under a year after Izzy disappeared.

I was sober for the first time in months, and Jeremy was sitting at my bedside, eyes red and cheeks hollow.

*“Give yourself ten seconds. Feel the burn...”*

Wetting my lips, I do just that now.

Physically, I’m in Philly.

Mentally, I’m standing across from the one person who’s kept me afloat all these years, who’s seen the ugliest, most broken pieces of me, and yet...

*Fell in love with me.*

Pain sears my chest, and the Jeremy in my head nods.

His lips don’t move, but his words from so long ago echo clearly through my head.

*“Whatever it takes... you tell yourself whatever it takes to survive.”*

And so that’s what I did.

For years.

Until one cold rainy day last September, when I realized I was no longer hanging on to her...

But hanging on because of him.

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## WILL FOSTER

WHITE STROBE LIGHTS spear the dark night club, converging on the center of the dance floor.

Upbeat music blares from the speakers, the heavy reverb vibrating my chest, and making it feel like the floor is shaking.

Next to me, Waylon folds his arms over the banister separating us from the dance floor, eyes narrowed thoughtfully on some unseen spot in the crowd. I follow his gaze to where a couple dudes grind up against each other, making out.

My lip ticks up as I'm suddenly thrown back to a night similar to this one, only instead of rainbows, it was skeletons and black and orange streamers, and I was very much on a mission to get drunk off my ass so I could forget about the guy at my side.

Except that's not what happened.

As if prompted by my trip down memory lane, the lights dim briefly to a soft shade of blue. It doesn't ripple like it did that night so many months ago, giving the impression we were underwater.

No, instead this time its flashes and swinging rays of light, pulsing with the beat of the music.

Still, in my mind's eye, it's water I see, and in my head, it's a softer, slower, gentler song playing out as the world seems to come to a standstill. Confetti explodes from somewhere in the dark rafters above, just like that night, only this time it's metallic, catching on the changing colors of light.

A hand brushes my arm and I turn, my heart thumping at the soft, knowing smile gracing Waylon's face. Like that night, he wears a feather boa, but this one is rainbow, where last time it was pink.

And just like then, he leans forward, putting us nose to nose. Chest to chest.

Feathers tickle my skin, skating across a hard nipple. His boa or mine, I have no idea.

I suck in a breath. It's dark, but still, we're in public.

"You thinking what I am?" he says loud enough to be heard over the sounds of the night club.

Swallowing tightly, I gaze steadily back at him and nod.

His lip curves up, the divot in his cheek sinking in deeply. *Fuck. Me.*

His eyes flare with heat.

I suppose I shouldn't be surprised when he bridges the gap between us, cupping my cheeks, and slotting his lips against mine. In a darkened night club—one smack-dab in the middle of the gayest block in Philly—it's easy to lose yourself to the anonymity. Easy to forget what exists outside of these walls. Easy to just feel and *be*.

His mouth tastes sweet like the cranberry seltzer Ivy got him earlier. I swipe my tongue out, unable to keep myself from wanting more. Always more.

He hums, and I feel it reverberate in my chest, not unlike the music pulsing around us.

My hands find his waist and I tug him closer to me. He's hard in his jeans, and I shift, pressing our lengths right up against each other. His blunt fingers dig into my scalp, guiding my head where he wants it so he can have better access to my lips.

Our teeth clack. Our tongues tangle. His nose piercing digs into my cheek.

All too soon, our kiss slows, until we're nothing more than grazing, featherlight touches and shared puffs of breaths.

Using his firm hold on my hair, he tugs my head back, peering up at me with hooded eyes. His tongue pokes out, swiping over his full, spit-slick lip. I catch a wink of metal and my grip on his waist tightens.

*God, I love his piercings.*

He smirks at me knowingly. "You think they'll care if we dip out early?"

I cast a glance toward the bar where Jeremy throws back a shot. Next to him, Ivy sips on a bottle of water. She's only nineteen, and while she does have a fake, she decided not to use it tonight. She wears a purple wristband, indicating she's underage.

Not taking my gaze off them, I lean forward, and say right up against Waylon's ear. "Why, you have something better in mind?"

I sense more than see his eye roll as his fingers release my hair, and his palm slides around the back of my neck. He nips at my jaw. "What the fuck do you think?"

Chuckling, I press my lips to his temple. "I've been dying to get inside you since this morning."

A noise not unlike a growl slips from his lips, vibrating hotly over my skin. "But you were inside me."

My grin widens, my cheek pressed tightly against his. "That was my fingers, baby. I'm talking about my cock."

This time, his entire body jerks against me. We're pressed together so tightly, I feel the way his dick twitches through the confines of denim.

*Yeah, definitely time to call it a night.*

Shawn, Mason, and Phoebe went to a diner to grab something to eat, seeing as Phoebe's *really* underage, while the rest of us decided to come here at Ivy's insistence. It's been over an hour since we got here, and while it hasn't been a total



bust, I can definitely say the idea of going clubbing was more fun than the reality.

Waylon encouraged me to drink when we first got inside, but I wasn't feeling it. Having a beer here and there back home, or more if it was just me and Jeremy hanging out, is one thing. But at a club with my boyfriend where we're surrounded by drunk people?

Yeah, no thanks. Waylon can say it's okay all he wants, but it doesn't feel okay to *me*.

It's not like I'm missing anything by drinking water instead, but it's definitely not as fun as it would be if I had a good buzz going on. Being sober and surrounded by a bunch of sweaty, drunk strangers isn't exactly my idea of a fun time. And I know it's got to be even less fun for Waylon, even if he's determined to be able to still do these things sober.

I can't say I get it, but I respect his need to figure out his limits on his own.

"Come on," I say loudly, gripping his hand and guiding him in the direction of the exit.

Waylon calls out, "Should we tell them we're leaving?"

I spare a quick glance toward the bar. Ivy's talking to some girl, seemingly content. But next to her, Jeremy's frowning down at his phone.

*Shit.*

I look to Waylon and hold up a finger. He nods, and I release his hand so I can make my way over.

"Hey," I call out when I'm close enough.

Jeremy's head snaps up.

Stepping up next to him so he can hear me, I jerk my head to the side. "Waylon and I were gonna head out, but if—"

Shaking his head, he cuts me off, "No, no, you guys do your thing. We'll be fine."

My mouth opens, closes.

He huffs, pocketing his phone. Leveling me with a knowing look, he all but yells to be heard over the thumping bass, “Don’t do that. Ivy’s a big girl. I’m a big boy. We—”

“That’s not—” This time I’m the one cutting off my words.

Jeremy’s mouth tightens. His gaze moves past me to where I feel Waylon standing a little way’s back, waiting for me.

I lean forward so my words are only for Jeremy. “Are you okay?”

His jaw tightens and he gives a stiff nod. “I’m fine.”

“Sure about that?”

Jeremy shrugs. “I dropped some Molly this morning. Just coming down from it now. I’ll be fine.”

*That’s one too many fines in such a short period of time.*

Frowning, I think back on earlier. I knew Ivy was feeling pretty good, but other than a couple hours where Jeremy genuinely seemed to be enjoying himself, he’s been distant for most of the day. Not that I saw him much during the parade. He and Mason fell back pretty far, and we didn’t see them until the end.

Actually, now that I think about it, it was only *after* that, when he seemed to perk up a bit. I assume that’s when the drugs must’ve hit him.

I try not to worry. He’s not Waylon or Mason or Shawn.

I guess it’s just something I think about more now, what with being surrounded by addicts. It’s impossible not to wonder where the line is between recreation and dependence.

Casting a quick glance over my shoulder, I find Waylon staring down at his phone. His thumbs fly across the screen. Perhaps he’s texting the others to see where they’re at. Not that them being back at my parents’ house will stop us—I’ll just take him back up to the attic where no one can hear us—but knowing Waylon, he wants to get an idea of what to prepare for.

“Seriously, man,” Jeremy shouts, “get outta here. Don’t worry about us.”

I meet him head-on once more, studying his brown eyes. “Okay, if you’re sure.”

Not for the first time, I want to pry, but I remember what he said when we last talked about what’s been going on with him and Mason.

*“I want to tell you more, but no one else can know. I won’t put you in that position.”*

I blow out a sharp breath and nod a couple times, knowing it’s for the best, as much as it sucks. I want to be there for Jeremy. He’s my friend—maybe even my best friend apart from the guy waiting for me.

But knowing Jeremy’s been pining after Mason for years is one thing. It’s not my story to tell after all. Waylon would understand that.

But if something actually happened between them—hell, I *know* something happened; I just don’t know what—well, there’s no way I could keep something like that from my boyfriend.

Jeremy’s eyes pinch at the corners, and I get the feeling he knows what I’m thinking. I give him a tight, understanding smile in return, silently conveying with my eyes how much this sucks that I can’t be there for him with this.

He gives a little shake of his head, telling me it’s okay. He gets it. He respects it. It just is what it is.

We say our goodbyes, and I make my way back toward Waylon.

His brows lift toward his hairline “Ready?”

Nodding, I follow him as he starts pushing his way through the throng of people. I spare one last glance over my shoulder, some of the tension in my chest unfurling when I find Jeremy smiling up at a rugged looking guy in a muscle tee. The guy waves down the bartender, lifting two fingers.

Shaking my head, I smile and look away.

*Yeah, he'll be just fine.*

Once outside, the doors close behind us, stealing away the sound. My ears ring in the sudden quiet, and the night air on my skin feels like heaven compared to the sweltering heat we just escaped. Waylon's pale, inked skin glistens with a fine sheen of sweat. His dark hair sticks to his temples.

"Come on," he says, reaching for my hand like it's nothing, and all thoughts of Mason and Jeremy disappear, and all that remains now is this moment.

The street isn't empty. Street lamps and LED signs from nearby windows light up our surroundings, making the asphalt glitter.

Like inside the shadows of the club, there is anonymity out here too, but it's different. The people passing by us can see us, but they don't know us.

They don't know what it fucking took to get here.

They look at us and all they probably see are two guys holding hands, grinning at each other like love-sick dorks. Like it's the easiest thing in the world.

Music trickles from open windows, combatting the whooshing of distant cars.

I grew up here. Walked these streets too many times to count. And yet, it feels different tonight. New and shiny and bright.

"I like this, City Boy," Waylon says, squeezing my palm.

I sidle up closer, sandwiching our arms together, and I tell him simply, "Me too, Rockstar. Me too."

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## JEREMY MONTGOMERY

SMOKE PAVES a fiery path down my throat, filling my lungs. I suck in as much as I can and hold it, tipping my head back against the cushion to gaze up at the starless night sky.

Lowering the blunt to my side, I slowly let some of the thick white smoke trickle out from my nose, watching the way it forms a cloud around my head, before disappearing into the night.

The old Trapt song that's been playing softly from my AirPods gives way to the next in the queue. The opening chords to "Regrets" by Dream on Dreamer filters into my ears, mingling with the distant rush of passing cars and chirps of crickets.

Out here in Will's parents' backyard, with music muffling the late-night sounds of the city, I can almost pretend I'm back home, sitting on the roof outside my bedroom with nothing but music, the stars, and my sketchbook to keep me company.

My bare toes curl into the scratchy lounge chair cushion. My skin tingles, and my head feels fuzzy. My mouth chalky. The music feels *more*, and I know it's the weed starting to work its magic.

Tucking my legs up to my chest, I grip the coiled edge of my sketchbook with my free hand, keeping it from falling. A graphite pencil balances between my pale fingers.

*That's better*, I think, a sleepy grin teasing my lips, my eyes drifting shut.

I don't smoke often, but I have a script for medicinal use for when I need it, like tonight. My anxiety's been shit, hence why I'm still awake. I know it's at least partially from the Molly. I always crash hard from the stuff—in an antsy, depressed sort of way—which is why I typically steer clear from anything that isn't alcohol and weed.

But when Ivy waved a little baggy in my face this morning, a wicked grin playing at her ruby-red lips, I couldn't resist.

I just wanted to feel *good*, even if it was just for a couple hours, despite knowing what would come after.

Was it worth it?

I'd like to think so.

I did end up having fun today once we reunited with the others at the end of the march, and I was able to use the others as a much-needed buffer between Mason and me. By then the drugs had kicked in, and all my issues seemed to just...fade away.

I just wish my reprieve would've lasted a little bit longer. Say, like, for forever.

The crash I've been dealing with is a stark reminder why it's better to just live with my demons rather than try to drown them out. They only come back stronger than ever once they find their way back in.

*Is this what it was like for Mason?*

The thought comes unbidden and my eyes fly open.

I shake my head at the voice in my head. *No, no, this is exactly why we're not the same.*

See, I don't crave another hit just to ward off the inevitable. Instead I just regret ever trying to escape it to begin with. Running from the pain doesn't do me any favors. It'll just gut me that much harder when I return to earth.

Denial has never been a friend of mine.

Yawning, I reach over and tap the lockscreen on my phone.

1:32.

It's been a little over an hour since Ivy and I got back from the club. The house was dark and quiet when we let ourselves in, telling us everyone was already in bed. A quick glance in the darkened living room as we crept toward the stairs showed Mason and Shawn fast asleep on the L-shaped sectional.

While Ivy went straight to bed once we got upstairs, joining Phoebe in Will's parents room, I opted for a shower first before joining them, needing to scrub off all the glitter and grime and sweat from all the bodies pressed up against me back at the club.

Only once I was done, rather than find space on the bed, I grabbed my stuff and came out here instead, relieved to have some alone time to decompress.

I return my pencil to the sketchbook in front of me as my mind drifts back to the dude I hooked up with earlier at the club.

We didn't do much. Just a quick exchange of hand jobs in one of the darkened corridors by the bathrooms. He invited me home with him after, but at that point, I was coming down hard from my climax, and just wanted to get away. I just wanted to be alone.

What little buzz I managed to get from the alcohol had all but fizzled out with my orgasm.

It helped having a valid excuse to give the guy whose name I can't even fucking remember—if I even got it at all. Like hell was I leaving Ivy alone. I already felt like shit for abandoning her, albeit briefly, all in a shallow effort to get out of my head.

Scooting down in the lounge, I bring the blunt back to my lips and take another long hit. Tucking my knees up, I balance my sketchbook against my thighs, and reach over for my phone, tapping the volume button along the side until the music is all I hear.

My surroundings fade into the background as everything becomes sensation for me. The pencil gripped tightly between

my fingers, the graphite point scratching sharp lines along the white paper. More smoke fills my lungs, before skating over my lips as I release it into the night.

My body feels heavy yet weightless in that way only weed can make it feel. My thoughts muffled; still there, but not as loud and domineering as they were prior to coming out here.

I start shading, loving the way it feels brushing the edge of the pencil along the paper, watching the way the shadows fill up, giving the sketch definition. Watching the scene depicted before me come to life.

A jagged, pointed city skyline.

A crowded street full of faceless bodies. No details whatsoever. Just curved outlines.

And in the center, two completely blacked out figures standing side by side. I make it so it looks like they can either be staring at me, or facing away, staring somewhere in the distance. A trick of the light meant to evoke different interpretations.

They don't touch. Their balled up hands hang loosely at their sides. Over the one figure's head, I draw a cloud—a thought bubble.

But when I go to write something in it, I pause, my mind blanking over.

*What's going through your head?* I wonder.

Awareness prickles along the back of my neck and I blink, slowly lifting my gaze off the paper to stare into the long, narrow fenced in yard stretched out before me.

My fingers twitch along the pencil, and a lump forms in my throat. I don't know how I know he's there, but it's always been like this.

Whether it's in a room of fifty people, or late at night, outside, alone, somehow I always sense when he's near. Like every nerve-ending of mine has been tuned in to when he enters a room, and isn't that the most cheesy, stereotypical thing you've ever heard?



I quickly bring the blunt to my lips and take one last hit, steeling myself for whatever's coming.

This time, I blow the smoke out harshly. Too harshly. Wincing, I turn and muffle a cough into the crook of my arm.

With the hand holding the blunt, I reach up and pop out one of the earbuds, tucking it in my fist. "You gonna come sit, or just continue to stand there awkwardly gawking at me?" I say in a raspy voice no louder than a whisper. But I know he hears me.

Waving the smoke away, I sit up, lean over, and stub the cherry out in the grass. I pinch the end and set it down on the table next to me along with my phone, saving it for tomorrow.

"You didn't have to put it out," Mason says quietly, his feet crunching softly over the grass as he draws near.

Shrugging, I watch from the corner of my eye as he rounds the lounge.

*Fucking hell.* He's shirtless, because of course he is. And he's wearing gray sweatpants to boot.

*Kill me now, please.*

"It's fine," I say roughly, tracking his movements. "I'm done."

He grunts softly at that, not looking at me. Hands stuffed in his pockets, he looks around the backyard, taking it all in. He's bathed in shadows, save for where the moonlight slants down his profile and his upper back, drawing stark attention to his chiseled jawline, and the muscle that bulges when he hunches his shoulders.

I sigh.

"Can't sleep?" I say after a long moment.

He twists his head just enough to level me with a pointed look, as if to say, *Really?*

"What?"

He huffs something like a laugh and lifts a hand, wiping it over his mouth, turning to face the yard once more. "Nothing.

Just... You're asking me that, yet you're the one out here pulling an all-nighter. Did you try to sleep at all?"

Shrugging, I tighten my grip on my sketchbook. Rolling my thumb over the coiled binding, if only to give myself something to do, I say, "Ivy snores." *Barely.*

This time it's definitely a laugh—short and raspy, more like a startled cough than anything. It's my favorite Mason laugh. There's just something about catching him off guard that never fails to warm my insides.

*Ugh, do you hear yourself?*

"Don't let her hear you say that," he says dryly. A beat passes, then, "And I told you, you could have the couch. I don't mind sleeping on the floor."

Clearing my throat, I say, "It's fine. It's just one more night. I really don't mind." And I mean it. Will's parents' king size bed provides plenty of room for Ivy, Phoebe, and I.

Sure, it's not ideal. Ivy's a notorious blanket hog, and Phoebe sleeps like a hyperextended starfish. But when faced with the choice between fighting for a sliver of mattress or sleeping inches away from a half-naked Mason... Well, it was a no-brainer.

The pencil still wedged between my fingers creaks with how rigid my hold is. Easing my grip, I let it roll toward my stomach and flex my fingers, working out some of the stiffness.

"You working on a proj—"

"You should go back inside."

Mason stills, straightening, his shoulders drooping.

*Shit.* I didn't mean to blurt it out like that.

Cringing, I rub my fist over my sternum. He hangs his head, staring down at his hands, and a sinking feeling forms in my chest, speeding up my pulse.

*Double shit.*

"Mason," I say quietly, my voice cracking.

“I hate this.”

Throat tight, all I can do is stare at him.

Whirling suddenly, he spears me right in the fucking heart with those painfully beautiful ice-blue eyes. “Can’t we just...” He waves a shaky hand. “Forget. For one night, please?”

There’s a sort of desperate air to him, unmistakable and nauseatingly familiar. I didn’t notice it when he first walked out, but now...

Hell, he reeks of it.

“I know I have no fucking right, I never did—I see that now, and I’m sorry, I’m so goddamn sorry, J-Jeremy. This is all my fault, and I know you’re sick of my apologizing, but I—I don’t know what else to say to you to make this better.”

That pit in my chest sinks even lower, caving in on itself with every broken utterance slipping from his lips.

A silent plea shines back at me from that bottomless gaze. “I miss you.”

What little repairs I’ve done to my heart give out, just like that. The poorly, hastily stitched seams to put myself back together pop open, my heart too big, too desperate to be contained.

“I need you,” he says brokenly.

I hear what he’s not saying—what he’s asking for without so many words.

*I promised myself*, I think dimly, but even the voice in my head carries no fight. I already know this is a losing battle.

“I miss my friend,” he whispers, his lips hardly moving, reddened eyes boring into me.

I flinch. He sees it. I don’t even care.

He already knows. There’s no use trying to bury it anyway.

Maybe if he sees how much those words break me open, he’ll stop. He’ll leave me alone.

He squeezes his eyes shut. Fists balling at his sides. Tipping his head back, he blinks up at the sky, glaring fiercely into the stars like they've personally offended him.

"Fuck you," I mutter.

Even from this angle, there's no missing the wince that pinches his features.

*Good.*

Nodding strongly, he says, "I deserve that."

Huffing through my nose, I tear my gaze away, staring unseeingly at the distant flurry of city lights peeking over surrounding rooftops.

"Fuck, I deserve a hell of a lot worse than that."

My throat clenches, eyes burning.

"Forget it. You're right. I'll just..." His words trail off, and in the corner of my eye, I see him start heading past me, aiming for the sliding glass doors from which he came.

Before I can think better of it, I whip my head around and snap my arm out, catching his wrist in my hand. I'm distantly aware of the pencil rolling off me, tumbling to the grass. My sketchbook slides, but snags on the arm of the lounge.

Mason freezes mid-step, his gaze snapping down to where I touch him.

Gulping, I wet my lips and lift my chin, summoning an air of confidence I in no way feel. "Don't. Just...don't."

"Jer—"

"Shut up," I mumble. Scooting over, I give his wrist a little tug, dragging him toward me. "Don't say a fucking word. Just...get over here."

I watch as the breath visibly leaves him, surging from his lips in a gust I feel rush across my face when he bends down. He smells faintly of toothpaste and something that is distinctly him.

The lounge chair is one of those wide, two-person ones, with a wicker frame and a deep red cushion that is surprisingly very plush and comfortable.

Mason eyes flick to mine when he pauses crouched over me. His pale eyes dart between mine nervously, and he sucks furiously on his lip ring in a horribly distracting way. Beyond all that though, there's something else. Something like gratitude. And like a reflex, the tension in my chest eases at the sight.

Knowing this helps him...knowing he needs me...

This is why drugs and drinking never really held much appeal.

Because making Mason Wyatt happy has and will always be the fix I can't resist, even if it's at the cost of my own wellbeing.

No other crash holds a candle to this. It's the only high I can't stop chasing, despite how much it fucking flays me open.

"Are you sure?"

Clamping down on my molars, I nod stiffly. Releasing him, I scoot as far away from him as I can as he joins me on the lounge chair.

"Grab my pencil," I say stiffly.

Nodding, he reaches over, plucking it off the grass. When he hands it to me, our fingers brush, and our gazes snap together. I suck in a breath, realizing just how close we are now.

This lounge might fit two grown adults, but it's clearly meant to be shared by couples. Those who are comfortable sharing space. It's *intimate*.

*It never used to be this complicated.*

Then again, before we had other things on our mind. It was less about my feelings, and more about finding an anchor in the storm of our grief.

But now?

Now my feelings for him are front and center, like a gaping, jagged hole we can't possibly walk around. Even Izzy's ghost steers fucking clear. Well, at least for me. Can't say the same for him.

Hell, for all I know, my feelings for him are nothing more than a nuisance. The thing keeping him from seeking what he had no problem seeking out before.

And to think, he doesn't even know the fucking half of it. If he did...

Well, shit, he'd probably avoid me completely.

*Isn't that what you want?*

"J?" he says warily.

My gaze drops to my lap. Whereas Mason's dressed in too-revealing heather gray sweats that I have to consciously ignore, I'm grateful I'm wearing black joggers. I'm also grateful I put on a shirt too—a black Flyleaf tee, sleeves rolled up toward my shoulders.

Yet I still feel exposed.

Naked.

Bare in a way I'm not used to around him.

But I know that has nothing to do with clothes.

"Here," I murmur, handing him the earbud I all but forgot I held clenched in my fist. It's slick with my sweat, but he doesn't seem to mind as he slips it into his left ear.

It's only now that I remember there's still music playing, albeit softly. Grabbing my phone, I unlock the screen and pull up Spotify. Finding the playlist I want, I hit shuffle.

The intro to "Dare You to Move" by Switchfoot kicks on, filtering into my right ear. Snorting softly, I crank the volume up a bit.

"You can change it if you want," Mason says, humor evident in his deep, raspy voice.

I cut him a knowing look. “It’s fine.” A beat passes, and I fight a smirk. “We can listen to your Jesus thumping music.”

He rolls his eyes. “It’s a good song. It can be open to interpretation.”

“Mhm,” I say distractedly, flipping to a blank page in my sketchbook.

“It makes me feel good.”

“Okay.”

“It’s...nostalgic. Reminds me of better times.”

Sucking in a cheek, I rest my thumb on the page and tilt my head, peeking over at him through my silver-blond hair. “Izzy liked it too.”

His jaw tightens, and his eyes bore into mine. “Yeah...” His brow furrows, and something passes through his pale eyes, there and gone before I can make sense of it. He drops his gaze, clears his throat and reclines back.

Cracking my neck, I join him, scooting down so I can curl into a ball again and rest my sketchbook against my thighs without straining my neck.

Since I’m expecting it this time, I don’t outwardly react when our shoulders knock, bare arms pressed against each other. He’s warm and sleep-soft; nowhere near as furnace-level hot as he was when I got plastered up against his hard, toned body this afternoon.

He yawns into his fist and wiggles around, trying to get more comfortable.

I give a little shake of my head, not taking my eyes off the blank paper. “C’mere.” Not waiting for a response, I reach down with the hand not holding the pencil and find his arm, dragging it over my midsection, several inches above where I rest my sketchbook.

And just like that, any hesitation he had a second ago slips away.

It's been months since we cuddled like this—not since before I confessed my feelings for him. Not since before...*that night*, the one last fall, the night we don't talk about, the night that changed fucking everything.

The night he keeps apologizing for, when I'd give anything to just forget.

And while everything still hangs heavily over us, it's got nothing on our muscle memory as we finally cave into what we've both been craving all these months.

Mason rolls onto his side, facing me, scooting over so he's pressed up right alongside me. He tucks his head in the spot between my shoulder and neck, his breaths hot little pants against the skin peeking out above my collar.

The tatted arm slung over my middle is a familiar, grounding comfort, and I find myself breathing a little easier.

That is until his hand slides under my shirt, cupping my bare waist.

I suck in a sharp breath and my hand jerks, drawing a jagged slash across the page.

Mason stiffens, and mutters, "Sorry." He goes to retreat, but I stop him, pressing my hand over his, feeling the grooves of his knuckles through my thin shirt.

"It's fine."

It's a long beat before he exhales, the tension melting from his bones. He burrows his face deeper into the crook of my neck, and I fight a shudder when I feel the distinctive metal of his lip piercing brushing my collarbone. The rasp of his late-night stubble.

"Thank you."

Throat tight, it takes everything in me to get the words out. "This is the last time."

Mason stills. While I've told myself this very same thing every time we've done this, this is the first time I've said it out loud to him.



A long beat passes and I don't think he'll respond. My fingers tremble. "Mas—"

"I know."

The words are spoken softly, but resigned. Like maybe he too is promising himself the same thing I've been promising myself all these years.

*Has he been lying to himself all this time too?* I can't help but wonder, but I immediately shove that thought away.

No, no, definitely not. It probably never even occurred to him how fucked up this is. Why would he, when up until nine months ago, things were completely platonic between us? Friends comfort friends...

Right?

"Okay," is all I say.

"Okay," is all he says back.

Seconds give way to minutes, and I lose myself to drawing once more. Music continues to play in our ears, and I find myself silently mouthing the words.

Just when I think he might've fallen asleep, I sense him watching me, and my pencil slows to a stop on the page. Pressing my lips together, I flick my eyes down, arching a brow when I find Mason peering up at me through sleepy pale blue eyes.

His lip twitches, and something...fond passes over his expression, softening his sleepy features impossibly more. My heart gives a heavy thump in my chest and my mouth dries.

As if they have a mind of their own, my eyes linger on that slightly curved mouth, and a flash of a memory surges to the surface.

My lips tingle, as if remembering what it felt like to finally be pressed up against the mouth I've been silently craving since I was fourteen fucking years old.

The memory tastes like vodka.

Like rain.

Like betrayal and heartache and *what if, what if, what if.*

I tear my gaze away and look down at what I've been drawing, turning my focus onto something far less hopeless.

Not wanting to waste the page, I used the accidental mark across the page to my advantage, and started drawing a messy, stitched up heart that spills blood where the seams have ripped, using that jagged line as the massive tear bisecting through the middle. Threads coming undone around the edges.

"Go to sleep, Mason," I murmur, bringing my pencil back to the page, turning my focus on shading in the crack.

"This is gonna be the last time I see you, isn't it?"

My fingers still, and I slowly turn my head until I collide with his sad, heavily lidded gaze.

Brow knitting, I frown. "I won't be in Europe forever."

*And there's still a whole month and a half before I actually leave...*

But I don't say that, because he's not wrong.

The plan is to make my departure as uneventful as possible. I already made Ivy and my parents promise not to throw me any going away parties. They can come see me off in Allentown. I'm not going back to Shiloh. Not for a while.

I'm done pretending like it doesn't kill me every time I see that fucking bridge, or drive past my parents' boarded up house or the school, or walk into Chickie's or O'Leary's.

I'm just...done.

Will knows the score, and he said he's happy to run interference if I need it. If I could, I'd hop on the first flight out tomorrow.

Mason swallows. "Promise?"

I open my mouth, close it, unsure what to even say to that.

"Promise me you'll come home." His voice breaks the slightest bit, pain and something else—something far deeper—shining back at me through his glimmering eyes.

Fear.

My jaw quivers, chills skating down my arms, and before I can stop myself, I give a jerky nod.

Despite my better judgment.

Despite knowing promises like this are pointless at best, and heartbreaking at worst.

Despite knowing there's no fucking guarantee I *will* ever see him again.

Bad shit happens. Life is unpredictable at best, and downright cruel at worst.

He knows this.

I know this.

But *fuck*, if I can stand that terrified look in his eyes. Not when I know just how deep his fears run, how intricately woven in they are.

Our anxieties feed off each other. They always have. Since we were kids. And yet, for whatever reason, it's in each other we find solace.

So, clenching my teeth until I fear they might crack, I nod again.

I can't stop.

Nor can I stop myself from reaching over and cupping his cheek, being mindful of the pencil poking out from between my pale, trembling fingers.

"I promise," I utter with quiet force.

Tears shimmer in his eyes and he nods against my palm, twisting his head, molding his jaw against my flesh. He squeezes his eyes shut.

Only then, when he's not looking, do I cut my gaze heavenward, blinking rapidly against the tears threatening to spill.

Europe can't come fast enough...

Yet something tells me, no amount of time or distance will ever be enough.

It will always be Mason for me...

But he will always be *hers*. Izzy's. My twin sister's. My *dead* twin sister's.

Because it doesn't matter that she's no longer here. He's still hers, and always will be. At least when it comes to the two of us, and the way *I* need him.

I have no doubt that one day he will be able to move on. It just won't be, and can't ever be, with me.

Moments on top of moments flash through my head. All the pain and grief we've suffered these last five years. Anguish that has chiseled a home in each of our chests—a black desert place that will never flourish or be filled again. A stain on our souls we'll never be rid of, even if it gets a little easier with time to ignore.

Moments where I had to watch this boy I love mourn the loss of someone I know—deep down—he'd trade me for in a heartbeat if given the chance.

And I can't even fucking blame him.

I can't blame any of them.

Because it's true, it's true, and *God*, do I wish I had the power to go back and switch places with her.

It would've been so much easier for everyone if it had been me...

But it wasn't.

And this is all we are left with.

The ashes of our grief.

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## MASON WYATT

I WAKE up shivering to the sounds of birds chirping.

Morning dew clings heavily to the air, making my chilly skin feel sticky all over.

Rolling over, I stretch my arm out and still when I register the scratchy material of the lounge seat, reminding me where I am.

*Jeremy.*

My eyes pop open, and I feel something stutter in my chest when I find the spot next to me empty. It's quickly followed by a sinking feeling in my stomach, when I remember the promise I forced out of him last night.

Slowly pushing up on my elbow, I glance down through slitted eyes, frowning when I see that a thin navy blue blanket covers my lower half.

*Did he do that?*

Looking around, I blink, letting my eyes adjust to the early dawn light. Half the sky is still purple, while the other bright and glaring.

I yawn and sit up, cracking my stiff back with a wince.

Gathering the blanket, I push off from the lounge, and pad barefoot back toward the house.

I quietly slide the doors open, peeking around, half expecting to find someone up, waiting for me. Like I'm a teenager all over again, creeping back into my parent's house

after having snuck out to go see Izzy, or hang out with Waylon, or go to a party.

A pipe creaks from somewhere above, telling me a shower's going. But otherwise it's silent.

The clock on the stove reads 6:46.

*Waylon, probably.*

Clamping down on my chattering teeth, I poke my head in the other room. Something like relief eases my chest when I spot Shawn almost exactly as I left him late last night, sprawled out on his back, an arm thrown across his face, and a heavy gray blanket bunched up around his waist.

Unlike me, he's wearing a shirt.

He rarely goes without one, but particular when he's sleeping. It could be 100 degrees out, and he'd still be dressed head to toe.

Back when he first moved in with Mom, Phoebe, and me, he couldn't even sleep without the door being locked. So the fact he's passed out on a couch in a house he's never been before says a lot about how far he's come, even if some things remain the same.

Clearing my throat softly, I round the coffee table, and crawl back to the side of the sectional I abandoned last night when I couldn't sleep.

I didn't know Jeremy was awake, much less outside. I heard them when they got back, but pretended to be sleeping. Not long after they disappeared upstairs, I *did* pass out...

But it didn't last long.

I probably spent a good ten minutes in the kitchen last night just standing there in front of the sliding glass doors, watching smoke bloom up in the night, fighting with myself.

Going out there was definitely not the right thing to do. Far from it.

But I did it anyway.

Because I couldn't help myself.

Because I couldn't stand the idea of my last interaction with Jeremy, until who the fuck knows when, being our conversation during the parade yesterday. Not that much was even said, other than confirmation that he wanted nothing to do with me.

But I saw the look on his face when I stared into his eyes and said his name.

Hell, it was that shattered, then rapidly shuttered look in his eye that ate at me all throughout the afternoon and deep into the night.

*Yeah, and how did you try and make that better? a mocking voice pipes up. By bullying him to hold you and making him promise you something he most certainly can't keep.*

*Nor should he even try...* I silently add pitifully.

I bring the thick blanket I used on the couch last night up to my shoulders, and roll toward the cushions, putting my back to the room. Still shivering, I hunker down, trying to keep my teeth-chattering to a minimum.

With the other blanket, the thin one Jeremy must've left me with, gotten from who knows where...

I bring it up to my chest. My face. I hug it to me pathetically.

"He's gone."

Everything in me stills at deep, scratchy voice ringing out.

"Just thought you should know. He left about a half hour ago."

Blinking rapidly, I try to swallow through the lump wedged in my throat.

The other side of the sectional creaks with Shawn's movements. I hear him sitting up, but I stay as I am, even though we both know I'm wide awake and listening.

"Your phone vibrated not too long after."

With that, he stands, and I hear his feet move across the room, fading away.

Releasing a shuddery breath, I sit up on my elbow, and twist around to reach for my phone on the end table. With a trembling hand that I blame on the morning chill, I scoop it up, and drop back down on the couch.

Bringing it up to my face, I tap the screen.

It's a Snapchat notification from Jeremy.

Frowning, I open the app, and let my thumb hover over the unopened image.

We...don't talk on this app. Hell, I forgot I still had it downloaded on my phone. It's been years since I used it.

I swallow tightly.

*Just do it.*

I don't know what I was expecting, but a snap of a bus ticket to Allentown was not it.

I stare, unblinking, until it expires. Chewing my lip ring, I consider how or even if I should respond.

Upstairs, a door opens, and footsteps draw toward the steps.

Waylon appears around the corner, freshly showered and changed, dark brows spiking when he catches me looking over my shoulder.

"Morning," he rasps.

"Morning," I murmur.

His mouth ticks up, sinking a dimple in, before he ducks his head and turns around, heading for the kitchen.

I wait, straining my ears, picking up quiet, muffled talking. Then there's the gasp and snick of a door, telling me Shawn and Waylon stepped outside for a smoke.

Giving up on my half-assed attempt to get back to sleep, I shove the blanket off and sit up, swinging my legs around. I rest my elbows on my thighs, head buried in my free hand. I



tug and finger-comb at my messy hair, gnawing on my lip ring.

*He took a bus home.*

It stings that he snuck out like that—that he felt like he needed to—but I’m not even surprised. How we left things last night...

My swallow goes down slow and painful.

“It’s fine,” I murmur to myself.

Pushing to a stand, I dig out a sweatshirt from my bag and throw it on, leaving the hood up. I grab my phone, shove it in my pocket, and head for the kitchen. The coffee pot’s steaming and sputtering as I bypass the counters for the door, and join the others outside.

Waylon turns his head. “Hey.”

“Hey.”

Shawn gives me a nod in acknowledgement.

“Sleep okay?” Waylon asks.

My mind flashes to last night, and it’s a physical struggle not to look over at the vacant lounge chair. Like I’m revisiting the scene of a crime or something.

“Yeah,” I say, my pulse speeding up.

As if he senses it, Shawn offers his pack of smokes, and I gratefully grab one. Waylon arches a brow, but doesn’t say anything, just hands me his lighter. Maybe he feels it too. This...restless, worried energy thrumming under my skin.

I don’t smoke much, if at all. I’ve got enough vices to worry about. But the occasional cigarette here and there, especially when I’m craving something far more dangerous, can’t hurt.

“The others still sleeping?” I say tightly, holding smoke in.

Waylon nods. “I know Will is, and I assume the others are too.”

“How was the club?”

He shrugs, flicking me a knowing glance. “Not like it used to be. But it’s okay.”

I smile sadly. “Yeah, being sober takes a lot of the fun out of those kinds of places.”

Nodding, he brings his cigarette to his lips, taking a deep drag. Tipping his head back, he releases it, and says, “Yeah, but I don’t find myself missing it as much as I thought I would.”

“That’s ‘cause you’re in a relationship.”

He barks a short laugh at that. “True.” He slides me a look. “I think I’m just...over it. I had my fun, you know? ’til one day, it wasn’t fun anymore, and yet...I kept doing it.” He shakes his head. “I don’t miss that feeling, and I don’t think it’s possible to go back to how it was when it was all new and shiny, and alcohol wasn’t this....” He waves a hand, trailing off, face bunching with bitterness. “Thing.”

“Yeah,” I say, knowing exactly what he means. Alcohol is not my poison of choice, but I stay away from it for a reason. It might as well be the slide that leads right into a needle-filled ball pit.

I glance to Shawn.

No, I didn’t get that far, not as far as him...

But addiction is nothing if not a one-way trip south, with a very steep, jagged climb back up. Not everyone finds a way out of the pit. Not everyone survives the journey back to the top.

And as I learned the hard and swift way last year, not everyone stays on top.

“Anyway,” Waylon says, before changing the subject to what we got up to last night. Shawn chimes in at some point, and we shoot the shit, finishing out cigarettes before heading back in.

Shawn grabs some mugs, and starts pouring out coffees.

Waylon grabs the milk and sugar, before joining me at my side, where I lean up against the island, forgoing taking a seat

on one of the stools.

I study him for a long moment. His profile is relaxed, jaw smooth, like he might've shaved it earlier. His black hair's still damp, drying into a wavy mess over his brow.

In the morning light spearing through the windows, his nose ring glints.

He got that last year.

Back when I was in rehab, and he was holed up at some motel, hiding from his dad, from Will, from the world...

From himself.

Like with Jeremy, with Phoebe, with just about everyone in my life, that familiar remorse rises up, turning my stomach.

*I wasn't there for him.*

*But you are now,* a voice reminds me.

This time, it's Izzy's. Or the distorted, forgotten version of it. It's soft, gentle even. Softer and far more gentle than how she spoke when she was alive, but I suppose that's just how this sort of thing goes.

Swallowing, I look down, rolling my lip ring around.

And then I glance up at one of my oldest friends—my brother, and I ask roughly, “Did you have fun yesterday?”

He snaps his hazel gaze to me, and smiles. And it's the kind of smile that not only sinks in his cheeks, but reaches his eyes in a way I'm still so unaccustomed to. How I went years not seeing just how badly he was suffering...

I have no idea.

*How much else have I missed, being so absorbed in my own shit?*

“Yeah,” he says nodding. He bites his lip like he's trying to contain it—how...happy he is. “It was...it was a good day.”

I smile back. “Good. You deserve it.”

Waylon rolls his eyes at that, but I don't miss the slight hint of color creeping up his neck when he hangs his head,

diverts his gaze.

And then as if summoned, the main source of this newfound peace of his appears in the threshold, looking like he literally just crawled out of bed. Which I suppose he did.

And the guy at my side...

Well, someone might as well have taken a cattle prod to his spine.

Will hardly seems to notice, trapped in a yawn. He glances toward the coffee pot through squinted eyes.

Shawn sets two mug brimming with black coffee in front of Waylon and I.

“Come here,” Waylon says, pouring a shit ton of cream into his before sliding it toward a staggering Will.

In my periphery, Shawn shakes his head, and turns back to the coffee pot.

Will plops down on the stool next to where Waylon stands. Waylon draws up close to him and shoves the mug under his face. “Here you go, Princess.”

I cough back a laugh, bringing my fist to my mouth.

A fresh mug of black coffee appears in front of Waylon, just as Will scowls up at his boyfriend. “Who you calling Princess, Princess?” he grumbles, lifting his mug to his mouth.

Waylon buries his fingers in Will’s sleep-rumpled tawny hair, and I stifle a small smile, hiding it behind my own mug.

Feeling eyes on me, I turn to find Shawn watching me, and swallow the small sip of scalding black coffee.

Something unspoken and heavy passes between us. A sort of grave knowingness that exists separate from the guys next to us, who are lost in their own bubble, content.

We’re happy for them. Unbelievably happy. Those two have been through far too much shit to get where they are, and I know without a doubt Shawn and I would be the first to stand in front of them if any new threat came their way.

But sometimes...

Sometimes it feels like...like it's not over. Like something is coming. Something big. Life-altering.

Good or bad, though...

Well that remains to be seen.

*But I hope good. We deserve some good.*

"You could've slept in," I hear Waylon say dryly. I don't hear Will's response, but a moment later I hear more footsteps from upstairs—two sets—and my chest twinges at the reminder Jeremy left.

I clear my throat. "Jer took off early. Caught the bus back to Allentown." It's summer break, but since he moved from dorms to off-campus housing, he stays year-round.

Waylon turns toward me, frowning. "What? Why?"

Will lifts his head, meeting my gaze. He drags his attention to his boyfriend. "Yeah, I woke up to a text from him. He said he got a call from his landlord. Something about a leaky pipe." He shrugs.

Waylon's frown deepens. "Seriously?"

I still.

*Shit. Will wouldn't fucking lie to him, would he?*

*And why...*

Will's tired blue gaze finds mine when he says, "I don't know, that's just what he told me."

*Oh.*

Jeremy lied to *him*... and he knows it.

He also seems to know *why*...

*But how much does he know?* That's the question.

Clearing my throat, I pick up my coffee, and say, "Gonna go grab a shower."

"Hey, Mase," Waylon says just as I reach the hallway.

I look over my shoulder. “Yeah?”

“He’ll come around.”

Throat thick, all I can do is nod.

It’s funny. Not even a whole year ago, I was the one hanging onto every little crumb of hope I could find with a death grip, while unbeknownst to me, my best friend had all but given up completely.

Yet here we are.

Leaving them to their coffee, I round the steps and head for my bag in the living room. My gaze catches on the thin blue blanket rumped on the couch, and my steps falter.

*“Promise me...”*

I press a hand to my chest.

*“Promise me you’ll come home.”*

*“I promise.”*

I exhale shakily, my lip ticking up, as it hits me. Barrels over me. Why he sent me that pic...

In three quick strides, I approach the couch, and pull out my phone. Bringing up Snapchat, I lift the phone, and aim the camera at the rumped blanket. *Click.*

I eye the screen, debating if I should type out a message with it.

*Thank you?*

Inhaling through my nose, I give my head a little shake, and hit send.

That’s not what this is about. Not at all.

He’ll understand.

*If he opens it...*

I stare and I stare as seconds pass.

Waiting...

For what, I'm not sure. It's not like I expect him to respond.

I guess I just want a sign?

Something to assure me not all hope is lost...

That our friendship can be salvaged.

That we're not fucked beyond repair.

"Come on," I mutter, staring at the screen. It dims, and I hit it, keeping it from locking. "Come on, JJ. Don't give up on me. Not yet. I'll fix this, I swear I'll fix this."

Movement—swift and subtle.

I blink, ensuring I'm not just seeing what I want to see, as minor as it is.

The icon next to his name, colored in a second ago, is hollow.

*He opened it.*

A rush of air leaves me, and I tip my head back, saying a silent thanks to the universe.

It's not much, and it's no guarantee this means anything going forward. He wants space. He's made that clear. And he's going to get it, even if it kills me.

But this gesture...small that is be...

It's *something*. I feel it in my bones.

An olive branch of sorts.

Locking my phone, I toss it in my bag, and throw the strap over my shoulder. I'm just about to round the corner and head upstairs, when the chatter from the other room drops suddenly.

I pause with my hand on the railing, staring straight ahead, a spark of awareness needling at the back of my mind. And I can't help but think back on that moment in the kitchen, sharing that look with Shawn, and feeling I was on the cusp.

Of falling...

Of flying...

Years from now, when I'm old and gray, I'll think back to this time—this very morning, this very second...

It'll be one of several pivotal moments I'll look back on, peppered throughout the years—spikes in my timeline—ones that forever altered the trajectory of my life.

The first one was the day my mom told me Dad was never coming back.

The second, the day I started a brand new school, and met the friends—the family—that I would carry with me for the rest of my life. People who would carry *me*.

And the third time...

The last time...

It was a late-night, distressed phone call, from my girlfriend's twin brother, shattering life as I knew it into pieces that would never fit right again.

Little do I know now, that someday, over a year from now, there will be another big moment that takes us full-circle. An impossible moment. A moment that...shatters everything all over again, throwing our world once more upside down...

But we're not there yet.

We're here.

*I'm* here...

“Holy shit,” Ivy says. And then she keeps saying it. “Holyshitholyshitholyshit.”

And then Phoebe's squealing.

Will's laughing—a deep, knowing chuckle.

But Shawn and Waylon...

They're suspiciously silent.

And as if there's a tether connecting each of them to me, I find my feet carrying me back toward the kitchen.

All five of them are gathered around the island, looking down at their phones.



“What happened?” I say, hovering in the threshold. There’s a weird sort of hollow, yet fluttery sensation filling me that reminds me of the rush I’d get from Percocet when I first started using.

I feel like I’m buzzing out of my skin, yet I’m utterly still.

Ivy looks up at me, beaming. “It’s out.”

My brows knit, and I shake my head. “What?”

It’s Waylon who turns to me first, his lips parted, cheeks pale. He looks...worried, but relieved too. *He’s in shock...*

He lifts his shoulder, a disbelieving smile twitching along his lips. “They know who we are.”

It takes a solid beat for me to process what he’s saying.

And then it all washes over me.

The Lost Boys.

Our anonymous account.

Who we really are under the ski masks...

Shawn has his head in his hands, and Phoebe’s bouncing on her toes next to him. Ivy’s gaze is lasered on her phone, devouring whatever it is that just blew our morning up.

Will’s cupping Way’s cheeks, grinning down at him. But I don’t miss the way he’s nodding, almost like he’s reassuring him.

I turn to my left—

But no one’s there.

My phone vibrates—I hear it buzzing from inside my bag.

Pulling it out, my eyes widen as I see all the notifications pouring in.

*Oh shit.*

Bile rushes up my throat.

And then I see it.

Popping up in between all the chaos, there's suddenly a new Snapchat notification, there and gone so fast I could've easily missed it before getting lost in the onslaught.

My thumbs fumble over the screen in my haste to pull up the app.

A roar fills my ears, and I ignore everything else save for Jeremy's emboldened name, and the tiny words underneath saying *Tap to view*.

I swallow thickly and click it.

It's a shot of the Philly skyline through a glaring bus window. I can just make out his silvery blond hair, and the slope of his jaw in the reflection.

My mouth kicks up, a quiet huff of laughter escaping me.

It's nothing. Nothing at all.

Yet, it's everything I could ask for in this moment.

*He knows*, I realize, feeling something settle inside me.

The message expires and I lift my head. Holding up the phone, I take a picture of everyone in this moment, screenshotting it before sending it his way.

"Mason!" Phoebe screeches, running toward me.

I catch her lanky body, and spin her around, gripping my phone tightly so as to not to send it flying.

We knew this day would come eventually, sooner rather than later. But it's one thing to expect it, another to live it.

I wonder who spilled the beans.

My phone starts ringing, but I ignore it, squeezing my sister to me.

Phoebe pulls back, and I lower her back down. She's beaming at me. "Are you relieved?"

I stare down at her wide-eyed, unsure how to respond.

"It's okay, Mase," she says, gray-blue eyes twinkling knowingly. And I think back to last night, our talk, reassuring

her whatever it is—whatever it is she’s thinking or feeling—  
it’s okay.

Eyes burning, I nod jerkily.

*Yeah...it is.*

*This is...*

*Everything.*

My lips rise of their own volition, and my heart’s  
pounding, and despite how scared shitless I am, I look over her  
shoulder, and meet the gazes of my brothers.

Moments stacked on moments from these last few years—  
writing and playing and taking chances, putting ourselves out  
there, dipping our toes in the proverbial ocean...

They play through my head like a flip book.

All we’ve been.

All we are.

And who we will become.

We all seem to be collectively holding out breaths, at a  
loss. They stare at me expectantly, and I nod.

*It’s okay, it’s okay...*

*It’s all going to be okay.*

I inhale.

I count to five.

*Exhale...*

Then—

I grin. “Well shit, guys.”

**THE END**

**...for now**

## AFTERWORD

Thank you for reading, whether this is your first or second or maybe even third time. I hope you enjoyed not only more Will and Way scenes, but the little glimpse into Jeremy's head, as well as Mason's now too.

Now buckle up and get comfy, because it's that time of the book where I just ramble on and on for pages.

Until now, barring Mason's chapter in *If There's A Way*, we haven't really gotten his perspective on everything that's happened and been alluded to regarding Jeremy, Izzy... who *he* is, as an individual.

Including Mason's POV in this novella was always the plan. I actually had two whole scenes written for him back when I was originally writing this piece for Worthy. Unfortunately I had to scrap them (don't worry, I'll be recycling a lot of it in *EBA*, because I love it). There was just no way I could keep this story within the word count parameters and do his character justice. So cutting him out completely was my best option.

Holding off on publishing this as a novella once I had the rights back was wholly dependent on whether or not I wanted to re-step onto the landmine that is Mason Wyatt. Once he's loose, he's hard to rein in. But I was determined to make it work, if only to really show you that we've only scraped the surface of his and Jeremy's years-in-the-making love story.

Obviously, I want to save the big stuff for their novel, which I'm working on now... but finding a good balance can

be tricky. I want you fiending for more, of course, yes. But I also don't want to be so vague, that it's just crap storytelling.

Focusing on his relationships outside of Jeremy this time around helped a lot. Once I realized I could easily work in the diner scene with Mason, Shawn, and Phoebe—a dynamic I've been itching to write for a while now, and know some of you will be happy to finally get a glimpse of—and shed some light on some struggles you'll be seeing in the next couple books... I knew this could work. Mason is the way he is for a reason... He treats Jeremy the way he does for a reason. And it's messy, and doesn't always paint him in a good light. But it's all leading somewhere.

When I think of Mason and Jeremy, I think of them like a hedge maze. (I like mazes, ok?) These two characters entered from the same place, but they got separated. Reuniting in the middle will take a bit. They have about 15 years worth of turns and twists and crannies to explore. Obstacles to overcome. Demons to slay. And their individual maze is just one in an even *bigger* maze...

Does your head hurt yet? Welcome to my brain :)

So let's let them breathe, yeah? They'll get there. They all will. And they will be better for it. These books are so much more than a romance. I won't rush the journey. And for those of you who've stuck around, and continue to trust my process — thank you. I appreciate it more than you know. I know I've been dragging my feet with Mason and Jeremy's book, and trust me it eats at me at times (see also: a lot)... I know I'm slower than a lot of indie authors these days, and I know I've set timeline goals that I ultimately could not meet. It just wasn't the right time for them—wasn't the right time for *me*... and I have to remind myself of that daily in order to keep sane, and basically not throw my career out the window.

Because at the end of the day, I *have* to write for me first, you second, and I have to do it at a pace that doesn't burn me out and make me hate writing. It's the only way I'll be able to keep doing what I do, and *loving* what I do. And the only way I'll be able to keep delivering books at a quality I'm at least 95% satisfied with.

As for the final chapter in this story and storylines outside of the romance... I didn't expect to end it with the Lost Boys being "unmasked." However, I realized the status of their band was not addressed at all leading up this point in the story. And if you read *If There's A Way*, as I'm assuming you did, you know that by August, the secret is out and they're heading for LA to record.

So it just...made sense. Another sort of "loose end" leftover from the duet (like Waylon's promise to Will).

If you read *Still Beating*, you'll also notice that I answered one little Mason-Jeremy related mystery from that. I won't spoil it here, in case some of you are just reading this series now, and are reading it in the new order, but feel free to talk about it in the discussion thread in my reader group on Facebook, The Black Sheep.

Lastly, of course I can't leave you without talking a little about the couple that started it all: Will and Way. The second I was asked to be a part of a Pride Anthology, that little promise Waylon made to Will popped into my head and I knew I needed to write it. I was always planning on writing a Pride bonus scene to show this big little moment of theirs, so I figured what better time than this to do it and sort of use it to wrap up their time in the spotlight officially. (For a long while at least.)

It was definitely bittersweet writing this story in particular, because I wrote it right after I finished *Little Bird Lost*. Again, I'm not going to spoil anything here for those just starting this series. However, I will say that I sort of had to 'go back in time' with this one... and, well, IYKYK. (Also, did I psyche you there at the end? LOL. They've got a while before \*that\* happens, but wouldn't have that been wild?)

Again, thank you for reading, and for loving this little sad, dark world of mine, as it slowly, but surely is brought into the light. The series really is like one big healing journey, for me, for you, for whoever resonates. All these added glimpses into their lives wouldn't probably exist if it weren't for your love and support over the years. Thank you for making it so I get to

spend time with these characters I probably wouldn't have spent otherwise. It's as much a gift to me, as it is to you.

See you guys next, back in Shiloh. We're finally going home!

XX

Jessie

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank YOU most of all, for picking up and reading this book. Whether you're new here to my work, or have been around since the beginning, and everyone in between. I couldn't do any of this without you. Love you all.

Heather, for being the best editor, cheerleader, and friend I could ask for. Thanks for the help with the blurb and all rounds of edits that went into this to accommodate for Mason's chaos.

My betas who read the first version of this—Kayla, Nat, Tasha, Gloria, and Amy. I totally went rogue on you with the added Mason content. Oops.

Kayla, for holding down the fort while I'm in my cave. You're the best, and I'm so glad to have you as a friend. Keep it up with those polls! Make the people suffer.

My ST, the Wailers. I up and disappear on y'all a lot, but you're always there when I need you, and I appreciate you all to no end.

Last but not least—music. I don't typically listen when I write, but music is truly what fuels this series. Writing these character—musicians, in particular—made me fall in love with music in a way I never was before. I appreciate it in a way I didn't think I could. So shout out to fucking music. I get it now.

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[Content Warnings](#)

# CHAPTER ONE

NOLAN

A STORM IS MOVING IN.

Here on the island, they pass by pretty quickly.

But they can be brutal. Devastating.

I sit under a cluster of palm trees with my denim-clad legs kicked out in front of me, feet bare, toes half-buried in the sand. It seems softer back here in the shade. Silky. Cool. Untouched by the sun. I cup the sand in my hands, glance down, and watch it slip through my fingers.

Thunder rolls closer now than it was moments ago, mingling with the sound of the waves crashing against the cliffs, slamming onto the beach. A strong breeze blows through, and the palm trees draped above me brush together, swaying, emerald green against the bruised sky. In the distance, the hazy, butter-yellow sun disappears between a thick swath of storm clouds.

I'm alone, just how I prefer it. How I always have, but especially here.

Well, with the exception of Abby of course.

My chest tightens at the reminder.

I'd take never being alone again, if it meant having her at my side.

More thunder rumbles, quiet but lingering. A drop of moisture hits my foot and I look up, squinting through the fronds as more raindrops slip through, the palm trees unable to hold the water any better than I could hold the sand.

Somewhere far away, past the trees and rocky knolls hiding this little hidden cove, a voice calls out, followed by laughter. Genuine laughter. On this side of the island, it's not often you hear such a sound. Not when there's this pervasive sort of heaviness pressing down around us, like a black cloud we can't seem to escape.

That's rehab for you.

Even on the sunniest of days, there's blackness hovering in the horizon, just out of sight, waiting for you to forget it's there.

Not for the first time, I wonder what it's like on the other side of the island. The resort side, where rich pricks and nepo babies go to hide and decompress from whatever fuck ups led them to the remote, luxurious Black Diamond Resort and Spa. Be it scandal, crime, or whatever else they're running from.

Difference is, their baggage gets them a private vacation. Mine gets me mandatory bi-weekly therapy at the Black Diamond Recovery Center, a for-profit inpatient rehabilitation and mental health facility found at the bottom of page three in the brochure.

But something tells me I'd be even more miserable over there in the land of sunshine and smiles.

More alone than even I could bear.

The wind starts picking up, and as much as I want to stay out here and watch Mother Nature unleash her wrath upon the ocean, I should probably head back. Out in the middle of the Pacific, with a cell phone about as useless as my first Nokia flip-phone, all we have to rely on for simple luxuries like weather forecasts and news from the outside are the powers that be running this pretentious little island oasis.

Dusting sand off my lap, I'm about to push myself to a stand when I hear it.

A branch snapping.

Easing back down, I turn my head, squinting through the sheet of rain blowing through just in time to catch the figure storming through the trees.

In all the times I've been down here since I discovered this little hideaway, I've yet to run into another soul. I'm not stupid enough to think no one else knows about this place, but it was nice while it lasted, pretending it was just mine.



It's a man by the looks of it. Younger than me. He carries himself with an almost boyish, stubborn sort of deliberateness. *Stompy*.

I hold very still so as not to startle him. It's clear he's upset. Distracted. His dark, wet head hangs forward, gaze aimed at the ground, hands balled into fists at his sides.

Unlike me in my jeans and work boots, he's dressed far more appropriately for this climate.

Khaki shorts.

Pale green linen shirt left untucked.

Brown leather flip-flops.

It's pouring buckets now and I blink away the drops falling on my face.

I know I should say something—alert him to my presence—but there's something about his demeanor, a frenetic sort of energy radiating from his quickening steps, that keeps me silent.

Even when he passes by, rushing past my line of sight a mere ten feet away from where I sit half-hidden, sheltered under the palms, I remain frozen.

Low, indistinguishable mutterings reach my ear, carried by the wind. I cock my head, straining to make out what he's saying, but it's no use.

I glance back the way he came, craning my head to see if anyone followed, say like his therapist, or one of the counselors. A friend. Anyone.

It's obvious he's in great distress, and yet somehow he's alone out here. He can't be going through withdrawal—those in detox are in what they call Level Red, and are basically under constant supervision in the medical ward. It works the same for those here for mental health reasons. The greater a threat they are to themselves, the less freedom they get.

And yet...

He comes to a sudden stop when he runs out of beach at the base of the cliffs.

Looming up ahead of him, there's a steep, but climbable path that I imagine leads right up to the top. Rocks jut out from grassy, weed patches, spread out thinly before growing more dense the higher and steeper you get.

Not that I've tried climbing it—there's a chain barrier, with a sign hanging in the middle that reads *Do Not Enter*—but from sight alone, I know it's got to be doable.

He must think so too, because he charges forward and easily throws a leg over the chain, flat-out ignoring the written warning.

I frown. *What the hell is he doing?*

“Hey!” I call out, shooting to a stand. A cloud of sand kicks out from under me, dousing my boots and socks where I had set them to the side, but I pay it no notice.

With my gaze squinted and locked ahead, I abandon the meager coverage the palm trees provided, barely aware of the rain and wind slapping my face, tossing my chin-length hair around every which way.

All I see and know is the guy whirling around, stumbling back in shock, hand splayed over his heaving chest. Dark wet hair swept over his forehead. Big, brown eyes boring right through me.

“What are you doing?” I have to shout to be heard over the crashing waves. I lick my lips, catching salt-tinged rainwater on my tongue. Jogging toward him, I throw a hand out toward the barrier separating us. “Didn't you read the sign?”

He continues to stare right through me, making me wonder if he even heard me.

My steps slow as I reach the path. Keeping to my side of the barrier, I shake my head, squinting through the rain. “Did you hear me?”

Still nothing.

My gaze drops, sweeping over him.

I was right. He is young. But younger than I actually anticipated. *Is he even eighteen?* He has to be. He wouldn't be here if he wasn't, but still, it's jarring.

He's just a fucking kid. What the hell is he doing in a place like this?

*No older than you during your first stint,* a voice reminds me.

Lightning cracks, echoing jaggedly off the cliffs, spider-webbing the dark gray sky with white seams of light. I see it reflected in his eyes. So dark right now, they look nearly black.

I shove my wet hair back, slicking it off my face. "We shouldn't be out here," I say loudly. A strong gust of wind blows through, rattling the chain, spraying us with seafoam.

His jaw clenches and he turns his head, craning his neck to look up the cliff. I follow his troubled, longing gaze, a prickle of unease dancing along my spine, twisting my gut.

*Wait, was he...*

My gaze snaps back to the kid's face. Wetness clings to his long, inky lashes. It reminds me of something Mel said once long ago, about how unfair it is that boys always have the prettiest of eye lashes.

Throat thick for reasons I can't quite explain, I drop my gaze. His shirt is completely soaked through, the thin fabric plastered to his chest. His arms are rangy. Neck elongated, elegant, made more so by the natural tapered point of his chin, and upturned nose.

And he's pale, like he hasn't spent much time in the sun. It's currently cast in a sort of dusky shade of violet, compliments of the ocean and storm grays.

Despite his current state, there's a notable air of superiority to him. A refinedness that I'm well acquainted with, having married into such.

I know his kind.

“Get back to your room, kid,” I say gruffly, shaking my head, about to turn away.

“I’m not a kid.” The words come out gritted, his voice raspy.

I pause. Cocking my head, I duck my gaze just enough to peer back at him from the corners of my eyes.

He stands taller, firmer. “I’m eighteen.” His expression is grave, like it’s something terminal. And I suppose it is. Becoming an adult. Next stop up *is* a grave.

Ignoring the itchy feeling at the pit of my stomach, I arch him an unimpressed brow.

He huffs, glaring at me. It doesn’t last though. Maybe a second at most before he’s diverting his attention to some unseen spot on the ground.

“What are you doing out here?” I ask again, exhaustion softening some of the natural harshness in my voice.

He shrugs. “Needed air. Figured I’d go for a walk. Maybe a swim.”

I blink. “A swim,” I repeat skeptically.

Again, I find my gaze following up the path toward the distant, shadowed jut of the cliff. If he was already up there, I don’t think I’d be able to see him from down here.

“It’s storming,” I say blankly.

“It’s already passing.”

I narrow my eyes, returning my sights to him.

He’s not...wrong. The rain is starting to slow, and time between flashes of light and thunder seem to be increasing by the second.

He tips his chin up at me, jaw clenched, neck tendons straining. There’s a challenge in his eyes, but it doesn’t feel directed at me.

Sighing, I gesture at the sign between us. “You’re not supposed to go up there. It’s dangerous,” I say tiredly.

His brow furrows and he glances down, staring at the chain dividing us—the wooden sign flapping in the breeze. He studies it like he’s never seen such a thing before.

“Oh,” he whispers so faintly that I see it more than hear it—the syllable pursing his rain-damp lips.

He’s a good-looking kid. I can’t not notice that. But not so much because of his soft, nearly perfect symmetrical features that I imagine most models would envy, but rather the way he wears them.

There’s a sort of careless ease to him, to the way he stands and carries himself, and turns his nose up at me like I’m less than. He looks clean, polished, and privileged as fuck, and those kind of people are almost always inhumanly pretty. Man, woman, everyone.

My old man used to joke about how the wealthy spike their morning coffees with the elixir of beauty. Money gets you everywhere, but beauty makes you stand out—it makes you feel like you belong, he’d told me. What’s wealth matter if you’re alone at the end of the day? Even youth has nothing on beauty. Beauty can withstand anything, even aging. Even if it is just at face-value.

Movement has my attention shifting to the kid’s hands. They still hang at his sides, but no longer in fists. He taps his fingers together—thumb to pointer, then thumb to middle finger, then his ring finger, then his pinkie. And then he does it all again. Over and over and over again like some nervous tic.

Something twinges in my chest, spreading a tightness up my throat.

I don’t like it.

I don’t like this.

I came out here to be alone, and now here’s this kid invading my space, having what looks like some kind of silent temper tantrum. I can only hope after today, should he choose to wander out to this hidden cove, it’s when I’m not here.

At least when I’m alone, I can almost pretend I’m back home in the backwoods of Vermont, surrounded by endless

evergreens and sprawling mountains. With miles separating me from the next neighbor, and no one but bears to sneak up on me.

*And Abby. I'd have Abby.*

Silence stretches out between us, intensifying the ache in my chest. Save for the waves rolling into the beach, slamming up against the rocks, and the low crackles of thunder fading into the distance, it's quiet. So quiet, I can almost imagine there's no one else here. That there aren't people screaming and writhing in detox hell just beyond the tree line.

That there isn't a resort on the other side of the jungles and mountains behind us, full of rich, fortunate pricks having the times of their lives, while the less fortunate over here have to suffer in exile to prove a point.

That my daughter isn't thousands of miles away, forgetting me with each passing day I'm not there.

"Where are you going?"

"Back inside," I grumble, putting my back to him once more, trusting he won't be so stupid as to actually try and climb the cliff. The rain has all but completely stopped, but the water is still pretty choppy, and there's no telling what the hell is up there anyway.

Maybe it's not dangerous at all. Maybe it's just out-of-bounds to island guests. Maybe it leads to where the staff stay. Who knows?

"W-wait!" he stutters out, and I hear the chain rattle, like maybe he grabbed it to climb over. I don't look back, but I sense him jogging after me, hear his flip-flops flapping through the sand.

Shaking my head, I glare straight ahead and quickly collect my shoes and socks.

*I don't fucking need this shit.*

"Hey!" he pants. "Wait!"

I stop and whirl on him.

This time, he's a lot closer. He rears back, stumbling, eyes wide.

Nose flared, I curl my lip up. "What?" I bite out.

His lips slam together, his throat bobbing with his heavy gulp. A flush creeps up his neck, spreading over his cheeks.

I bug my eyes at him, silently urging him out with it.

His gaze dips to my chest, and he seems to pause, like something's caught him off guard. His dark brows knit, lips pursing. He looks...confused.

Frowning, I drop my gaze, not understanding what it is that snagged his attention and put that look on his face.

My tattoos?

My thin white V-neck is completely soaked through from the rain. It clings to my torso, putting my ink on full display.

It's nothing crazy—not like I'm covered head to toe. Just a nice shoulder piece in the American traditional style that extends from my right forearm to up and over my pec. At the top, near my collarbone and extending over my shoulder up my neck, constellations peek out from between thick clouds. Down my arm, a woodsy scene backdropped by rolling mountains. All in shades of black and gray.

I have other pieces, but this is probably my favorite apart from the date scrolled across my heart just next to where this ends. I started this piece at eighteen, and have been getting it slowly filled in the years since whenever the mood struck, waiting for the day it finally felt finished.

I thought the date of my daughter's birth would've been it. Like that's what I was waiting for all along to say, *There. It's done.*

But there's still something missing. I just haven't figured out what yet, or been inspired to even try.

A throat clears and I peer up through my lashes.

The kid stands a little taller, putting him only a few inches shorter than me at his full height. He lifts his chin haughtily,

looking off pointedly at some spot in the horizon. Features tense.

The sun hidden only moments ago peeks out from where the storm clouds have begun to dissipate, cutting a ray of light over the boy's face, turning his brown eyes a molten gold.

My lip curls, and a humorless laugh rumbles my chest. *Right.*

His head snaps forward, eyes wide, cheeks ruddier than they were a moment ago. "What?"

Shaking my head, I turn away. "Typical," I mutter.

It's not the first time I've gotten a reaction like this, all just because of my ink. Though you'd think the younger generation would have more appreciation.

*Jesus, way to make yourself sound ancient.*

I'm only thirty-two. Emphasis on *only*. I'm hardly an old man.

But these days I feel a lot older. And a lot more jaded than I probably should be. And I look at this kid and all I feel is fucking exhausted.

And pissed off.

At him. At me. At Mel. At the universe.

"What the hell does that mean?" he says quietly with a hint of a growl.

Somewhat surprised by the attitude, though I'm not really sure why, my brows draw up. I rock back on my heel and turn just enough to cut him with a knowing look.

He's quick to compose his little snarl, taking on an air of snootiness. He blinks rapidly, giving his head a little jerk, almost like he's trying to shake out the redness from his cheeks. Like he's a fucking Etch A Sketch.

Spoiler alert: it doesn't work.

Movement draws my attention downward to where he's again tapping his fingers together, faster now.



I frown.

*What the hell is up with this kid?*

“You jonesing or something?”

“Huh?” he mutters, blinking all doe-eyed up at me. His fingers still.

My brow arches significantly more. I gesture at him. “You tweakin’? Withdrawing? You know—” And like the prick I am, I bring a finger to my nose and sniff. “—looking for a little fix. That why you out here, kid? ’cause newsflash, you ain’t gonna find it. Not here.”

*Though I’m sure some have found a way to sneak in contraband.*

But I don’t tell him that.

His brows slam down over his eyes and he gives a stilted, but firm shake of his head. Fingers curling into fists. “What? No, no I’m not— That’s not—”

Scoffing, I wave him off. “Yeah, okay, sure, and I’m only here ’cause I wanted to work on my tan.”

Again I go to turn away when he stops me.

“I’m not an addict.”

There’s something in his voice that gives me pause.

“Sorry,” I mutter. I peer over at him, giving him a quick once-over. “Forgot there’s other reasons to be here.”

He frowns, his lips forming a little pout that makes him look even younger. More innocent. Less stuck-up and more just...out of place.

Again, I find my gaze shifting past him to where the rocky cliffs loom over the beach, dark and ominous. It’s still fairly cloudy, but the sun hits them just right, bathing the jagged edges in shadows.

*A walk. A swim.*

*He wanted to go for a swim.*

*But...the ocean's right there, lapping at the sand mere feet away.*

As if he senses the direction of my thoughts, he stiffens. "I —"

His breath hitches, stealing whatever it is he wanted to say.

Our gazes collide, snapping together, and something heavy and knowing passes through us. He searches my eyes like he's looking for something, or maybe trying to explain himself. Silently and desperately.

He looks lost.

Defeated.

And it tugs on something inside of me I'd much rather ignore. Something that has me searching right back, seeking... something out, something I can't put a name to.

In this moment, brief and fleeting as it is, he's not just some kid, not some stranger.

And I'm not some jaded alcoholic, fourteen years his senior, pissed off at the goddamn world.

We're just two lost souls, trapped in this hell masquerading as paradise, banished from the outside world, looking for a way out.

He sees me, and I see him, and it's...

It's—

I whirl around, storm away, hands white-knuckling my shoes, sand kicking up at my feet.

All I can hear is the whoosh of waves clashing with the blood roaring in my ears.

I feel him staring after me.

This time, he doesn't stop me.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jessie Walker is an indie author based out of Scranton, Pennsylvania, where she lives with her long-time partner and fur-spawn. Drawn to all things dark and twisted, nitty and gritty, she likes to pretend she's not the hopeless romantic at heart that she is. When she's not drudging away at a keyboard, there's a very good chance you'll find her vegged out on her couch, listening to sad '90s grunge, and dreamin' up all the ways she can make her readers suffer (just so she could put them back together again).

