

# Letting Go



C. J. ANTHONY

2013 M/M Goodreads Group Love Has No Boundaries Story

# Love Has No Boundaries

*An M/M Romance series*

## LETTING GO

**By C. J. Anthony**

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

### What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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## Photo Description

The photo is very crisp and detailed, shot in black and white—super zoomed-in close-up shot of a hand, palm facing the camera. The palm is scarred and rough, meant to make a statement, to show struggle. There are black words written across the palm—“*It’s time to let go... (it will be okay)*”

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*This past year has not been easy for me. Every time I try to pick myself up, another setback blindsides me. I need to learn to let go and start again. I just don’t know if I can.*

*Sincerely,*

*Lynn*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** hurt/comfort, grief, homophobia, suicide, depression, religion, young adults

**Word count:** 20,372

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The last time I saw him he was looking at me with that big silly grin on his face, his eyes lit up and shimmering like the lights on a Christmas tree. He laughed as he tilted his head back and he looked so free. The lights from a passing car washed an ethereal glow over him and he looked like an angel, which he was. He was my angel. For that wondrous moment in our lives, he was my angel.

Two seconds later I turned my eyes back to the road and saw that the bright lights glaring at us were not from a passing car in the other lane. There were two headlights weaving and swerving in our lane and headed straight for us. Everything turned to slow motion as the light grew brighter and brighter, blinding me... Through the fog I could hear him calling me, saying my name but he sounded so far away.

\*\*\*\*

That was the last moment I was conscious. Six days later I woke up to more bright lights—on the ceiling above me, in a hospital room. My vision was blurry, and I kept blinking until it cleared, and I could make out the shapes and colors around me.

My parents were there, towering above the bed, both of their faces sagging in relief. My mother's face was wet from the tears flowing down her cheeks.

"Sammy, oh Heavenly Father, thank you!" She closed her eyes momentarily and made the sign of the cross against her bosom. She had Grandma Maria's rosary beads clutched in her hand.

"Sammy, can you hear us baby?" She smiled down at me as her lip trembled.

*Yes*, my brain answered, but I didn't hear the sound come out. I stared at my parents as they looked down at me expectantly. Another person entered the frame, my older sister Emily—Emmy, I remembered I called her Emmy.

“Hey spaz, about time! Welcome back.”

Mom, Dad, Emily. My family. Slowly, like the rusted gears of a clock that had been sitting dormant for too long, I felt my brain starting to function, information beginning to filter through. I was lying in a bed. I was in a hospital. Something had happened... but I didn't know what. I tried to raise my arm and intense pain immediately shot through my shoulder. *Ow*.

I looked up again at my family. Mom, Dad, Emmy... someone important was missing. *He* was missing. His smiling face flashed through my brain. Where was he?

I moved my lips but no sound came out because my throat was so dry and scratchy. I licked my lips and tried again, finally getting a very raspy noise out.

“Dustin?”

With just that one word, the faces around me shifted dramatically. Mother's eyes widened and her lips came together in a firm, hard line. My Father's large bushy brows lowered, and his jaw visibly clenched as he grit his teeth. Both of them jerked away, their posture ramrod straight. A look passed between them and I didn't understand why they looked so hard and so cross. My sister leaned over the bed into my eyesight, her eyes growing wet as she placed her cool hand on mine.

“Sam—”

She didn't get to finish whatever she was about to say, because the room was invaded by a doctor and nurses and orderlies. One of the doctors—a man with distinguished gray hair—spoke to me and told me his name, Dr. Cannon. He yanked at my eyelids, one at a time, and shone a God-awful bright light into them. He asked if I knew where I was. That was easy—Yes. Hmmm... Or not so easy. I finally had to shake my head no. I tried reaching through my mind, but anything past a few minutes ago was fuzzy. I swear I saw dark shapes of memories but when I tried to form them into coherent pictures they just seemed to be too far out of reach. It was frustrating.

The doctor spoke again. “You're at St. Mark's Memorial Hospital. You were in a car accident, Sam, and you're going to be okay but we need to run

some tests now that you're awake. This is Mike and Sally and they're going to take you—"

He kept talking but I didn't hear anything after that, I was too busy trying to comprehend his words. A car accident?

A man and a woman, both in scrubs—Mike and Sally, I presumed—started wheeling my bed and me out of the room. A hospital bed doesn't exactly move very fast, but the slow rolling movement, combined with the harsh, bright, blinding hallway lights above me, was enough to bring everything back, bits and images storming through my brain at warp speed. Dustin and I, in the car. It was late, very late, and very dark. But there was light, too bright. Lights of another car coming toward us.

*Holy shit. We were in an accident. Dustin and me. Where was he? He wasn't in the room with my family? Oh God no, please let him be okay, please.*

My sister had wanted to tell me something in my room—it had to be about Dustin. I tried to sit up but the female nurse—Sally—gently pushed me back down and told me I had to lie still. The bed had stopped moving and we were now in some room with a big machine.

For the next millennia, it felt like, I was scanned and poked and prodded. Blood drawn, questions asked. I kept raising my head, trying to move. All I remember thinking was that I had to go find Dusty.

When they finally wheeled me back into my room, my sister was the only one there.

Once Mike and Sally had the bed settled back in place, and me all hooked back up to the machines and IVs, they left us alone.

My eyes immediately searched out my sister's. She looked tired, big dark circles under her eyes. They told me I had been out for six days. I suppose it had been trying on her and Mom and Dad, not knowing if or when I would wake up.

"Mom and Dad went to the cafeteria." She paused to smile. "It's so good to see you awake again."



I was glad to be awake, too, but I only had one thing on my mind right now.

“Dustin? Is he okay? Did he—”

“He survived the accident, barely a scratch.”

I let out a huge breath and my heart jumped in relief. Except... her face was pale. And as I looked at into her sad, subdued eyes, I knew. Something wasn't right.

My head reeled at the words she spoke next, words that broke me into a million little shards of hurt.

We were hit by a drunk driver who had crossed the center line. Most of the impact was on my side of the car. I got banged around pretty bad, so much that I was out cold from the head impact for a week. There were other injuries, I had emergency surgery and lost my spleen. The drunk driver had been thrown from his car and died instantly. That left Dustin as the only survivor of the accident who was able to answer questions about what had happened. He had some whiplash and bruises and a few cuts but was otherwise okay. The ambulance let him come to the hospital with me, but once there, after they whisked me off, he was left to face everyone—the police, his parents, my parents. The police took down his statement and from the scene it was pretty evident that it wasn't our fault. But there were still routine questions—like where had we been this evening, had we been drinking—especially after he saw the stamp on Dustin's hand. We hadn't had a drop of alcohol, but he did have to confess to our fake I.D.s... and where we'd been.

*Dammit*, I wish I could have been there with him, that he didn't have to do that alone. The two people Dustin always feared most of finding out he was gay were his parents, his strictly devout Catholic parents. And right there, in the hospital waiting room, in front of our parents, he'd had to tell that police officer, that we were coming home from Atlantic City, from Prohibition, a bar. I didn't fault him for telling the truth; he had to be honest in front of the police. And our parents thought we were spending the night at another friend's house, so even if the officer hadn't asked, the first question from their lips once he left would have been what were we doing on Highway 30? The name

Prohibition did not scream “gay bar,” so in any other situation we might have been able to lie about the type of place it was, but one look at Dustin—straight-laced, boy-next-door-in-jeans-and-polo-shirts-Dustin—in his tight purple T-shirt with glitter still stuck all over it, eyes lined in eyeliner and hair gelled into messy spikes all over, not to mention the rainbow stamp on his hand, and they wouldn’t have to guess we’d been to a gay club.

Our parents—God-fearing, dutiful members of St. Francis Catholic Church, friends who worked side-by-side at the Church Bingo night and prayed together in the same pews every Sunday, rain or shine—created such a ruckus in the hospital, a security guard had to be called. Dustin’s father blamed me as the “gay” influence on Dustin, which got my father riled up. He blamed Dustin not only as the sinful influence on me, but heaped *all* of the fault for my lying in a hospital bed on Dustin. Had Dustin not forced me to go to that wretched place, I would be healthy and awake right now instead of fighting for my life. The security guard escorted Mr. and Mrs. McIntire and Dustin out of the hospital, while Dustin begged to see me. But no one let him.

Father Joe came to Dustin’s house and performed the equivalent of some sort of exorcism—except instead of trying to drive out the demons and sin from Dusty’s soul, they were trying to drive out the vile, dirty, gay parts. Which I suppose in the church’s—and in our parents’ eyes—were one and the same. The Catholic Church was pretty clear on homosexuality—it was unnatural and an abomination.

The McIntire’s, believing in their God and Father Joe, assumed that all would now be okay with their son, that the gay was gone and Dustin would go back to being their good little son. As an added precaution, however, they forbade Dustin to ever see me again.

I bit my lip to hold back a groan. I couldn’t believe we would not be allowed to see each other, but if that was how it had to be until we turned eighteen and could leave, then we would just have to work with it. There was still school, we could see each other there and maybe we could sneak in some time—

“Sam,” Emmy interrupted my thoughts. She laid a hand on my arm and squeezed gently. “He snuck into your hospital room that night. Dad came in and caught him holding your hand and kissing your forehead.” She sighed. “He made a big scene and dragged Dustin out of here and took him back to his house.

“Dustin’s parents gave him an ultimatum. He could either move out of their house or go to some strict military-style boarding school out of state.”

*Oh hell no.* “He let his father send him to boarding school didn’t he?” I rasped. Dustin had always feared his father. The man ruled his family with a heavy, tyrannical hand and no one dared challenge him.

Emmy ducked her head, casting her eyes downward as she shook her head.

When she looked me in the eyes again, hers were damp and watery. “Sammie...” She paused to swallow and my gaze was frozen on her neck, watching the movement of throat muscles. Fear flowed through me like ice water, and later I would look back and wish I could just push the pause button at that moment, and never have to hear the words she spoke next.

“They found him the next morning, in the garage. With the car still running.”

The ice water turned into solid pinpricks, shards of frozen ice slicing every piece of me. I opened my mouth to take a breath but there was a heavy weight on my chest crushing me, slamming me and keeping any air from getting in, making me gasp and pant. No! No, no, no, no, no!! A voice was screaming the words in my head. It didn’t even register that the voice was mine and I was screaming out loud. I kept trying to sit up, the bed rails clanking and rattling as I gripped them, my whole body shaking uncontrollably.

I was vaguely aware of Emmy putting the rail down and climbing into bed next to me, gathering me in her arms. She was murmuring something but I couldn’t understand the words.

I don’t know how long I wailed or how long she held me. If her quiet voice eventually soothed me or if my hurt and tired body just ran out of steam. I just remember waking up later to a darkened, quiet room. I was alone, but I was

glad. I didn't want to see anyone. No one except Dustin—oh God please, I wanted to see Dustin again. I wanted him to walk in that door and smile at me and hold me and tell me that this was just a stupid dream, that everything was going to be okay. 'Cause he and I were together—forever, like we'd always promised. Yeah, we were young, and maybe he was my first love. But I was convinced he would be my first and only. I loved him, so fucking much, he was everything to me. He made me smile and laugh when I was sad, he settled me when I was nervous or scared, he grounded me. But best of all he loved me back just as much as I loved him.

My whole body warmed when I saw him, it was like he lit something alive inside of me. And when he touched me—oh God, when he touched me. It didn't matter if it was just a light brush of his fingers against my arm or my face, or if it was the harder grip of his hands as they roamed my body and touched my naked skin with want and need and desire. My whole body responded every time, as if I was a puppet and he controlled the strings.

Except... he wasn't here. The clock ticked, the silence stretched, but no matter how long I waited he wasn't walking in that door again. Ever.

I was a jumbled mess for days. Stuck in the hospital, I couldn't do anything, I couldn't go anywhere. Then again, where was I going to go? Dustin was gone. There wasn't even a grave to go visit. Emmy said his parents had cremated him, but I didn't know what they'd done with his ashes. Being gay and then taking his own life, his parents refused to place him in the family plot in the Catholic cemetery. They felt he had only brought shame to their family name.

When she told me that, they almost had to sedate me again. I raged. I wanted to go over to their house and beat the crap out of Dustin's father. I knew at that moment why people killed. I know that sounds harsh, and I've never ever been that angry with any one person before or since. I just couldn't believe a parent could be so cruel to his own child. Not to mention, I blamed him for Dustin's death. It was completely his fault that Dustin was no longer here, that Dustin had felt so abandoned and unloved that he had felt it better to be dead.

I shivered and white-knuckled the sheets, the extent of the energy my body would let me expend. Otherwise, I *would* have bounded out of that hospital bed and over to Dustin's house. I just wasn't physically able to. Everything still hurt, although I was supposedly healing well. All I could do was lie there and let everything just roll through my brain: the grief—at Dustin being gone; the agony and desperation—that I was not there for Dustin, that I had been unable to help him or stand with him to face his parents, that I could not hold him and tell him how much I loved him, and that everything was going to be all right; and the anger and rage—at Dustin's parents, but horrifyingly also at Dustin himself. I was mad that he had just chosen to give up. That he didn't want to fight, for himself or for us or for me.

I was angry at him for leaving me. *Why Dustin, why? I thought you loved me?*

In all my grief over Dustin, I had almost forgotten about my own parents. My father was not the tyrant Dustin's father was, but he—and my mother—was just as religious. I had been nearly as fearful of them finding out I was gay as Dustin was with his parents. It took a couple days before the haze lifted enough for me to realize that neither of them had said anything to me about being gay.

They both visited every day. My mother was overjoyed that I was going to be okay and prayed her thanks devoutly to God and Jesus and the Virgin Mary that I was still with them. She would try to smile and talk about the weather, or fluff my pillow or lightly brush my hair out of my eyes while complaining about the hospital food they gave me and just wait 'til I got home, she would make all of my favorites. She was busy smoothing my blanket and trying to tuck it into the side of the mattress when she said this, but I noticed her smile looked tight and she wouldn't meet my eyes.

Dad never said much when they came by, it almost seemed as if my mother forced him there. He always sat in one of the hard plastic visitor chairs, looking uncomfortable. He would tug at his collar and shift his body around in the chair. He occasionally asked how I was doing, but that was about it. And he never really smiled. His eyes didn't meet mine too often either.

Finally they came to visit me one afternoon and I was able to tell them that the doctor was releasing me. I could come home tomorrow. The reactions I got were not exactly what I was expecting.

Both of their faces kind of blanched and their mouths drew tight, in fact they looked the same as they had the day I woke up, when I asked for Dustin.

They sat down, side by side in the chairs at the foot of my bed. They didn't pull the chairs up close to the side of my bed, my mother didn't smile and reach out to hold my hand and tell me how thrilled she was that I would be coming home. No, they just sat there in an eerie silence, my mother looking nervously at my father, while he turned to me and cleared his throat.

"Sam, did you know Dustin was..." His jaw clenched and his face got red and I could see the fight in him to get the next word out of his mouth. "...homosexual?"

My heart sank and I got cold.

"Son, you better answer me."

Mom leaned toward Dad and grasped his arm, "Ed," came out of her mouth in a murmur to calm him, but I still heard it.

"Yes." The word slipped quietly from my lips into the empty air.

I saw his chest rise and fall with a deep breath, and my mother squeezed his arm tighter.

"He said you boys had gone to Atlantic City, to a... men's bar over there." Men's bar—God forbid he utter the word "gay".

"Did he force you to go with him? To drive him?"

My father stared me straight in the eye, his gaze hard. I knew what he was really asking me with that question, what he really wanted to know. And I knew what answer he wanted to hear. But Dustin's face filled my mind and I couldn't lie. He had had to face telling the truth all alone, I couldn't dishonor his memory by not being just as truthful. I wouldn't.

"No."

Mom gasped and Dad's knuckles turned so white, I feared he was going to break the plastic arms of the chair in two. The room was silent as he shook his head and clenched his jaw again.

The next day, though, they were there to pick me up. On the way home we passed our street and kept going, to the highway. I asked why we weren't turning in, where were we going? My parents would only say that I needed more rehab and recuperation and was going someplace that would help me. I knew sometimes in the hospital I was a little fuzzy or distracted, but as I reviewed the last several days, I didn't remember the doctor saying anything about needing rehab. Two hours later we pulled up in front of a drab, gray building. They walked me inside and handed me and a duffel bag that I guessed they must have brought with them, over to these two men dressed in white scrubs. Mom broke down and made the sign of the cross against her body before giving me a hug and kiss. Then Dad grabbed her hand and tugged her out the front doors as tears ran down her face.

I was taken to a very austere room that was one step above a hospital room. No, actually the hospital room was better, at least it had TV and some color—a green plastic pitcher and water cup, ice-blue curtains and a whiteboard with blue and green and red written names of my nurse and doctor, and contact phone numbers. But this room had drab, light-gray walls. There was a small twin bed with a gray blanket folded back to reveal crisp white sheets and a white pillow. Next to it was a gray nightstand with a small white table lamp. Against one wall, directly across from the foot of the bed was a small bookshelf about three feet high. On the shelves were some books and on top of it lay some pamphlets, fanned out. The walls were empty of any decoration except for the wall clock above the doorway and one lone item hanging above the shelving unit—a large bronze-colored crucifix of Jesus in such explicit detail, it felt as if he was staring down at me.

Growing up with such a strong Catholic upbringing, that didn't really register as unusual with me at that moment, as we had them hanging in many different rooms of our house at home. They were all over our church and school and there were certainly many Catholic and Christian-based hospitals around the area that displayed them.

I didn't really have time to ponder the wall art, anyway, as the orderlies very swiftly patted me down and made me empty my pockets. I didn't have much on me, but they took my watch and my wallet. I yelled and grabbed for it and one of the orderlies immediately locked his big thick arms through mine, forcibly restraining me. I tried kicking to get away but I was still so frail from the hospital stay—I just didn't have enough strength against someone like him. So I used the only force I had, my voice. I bellowed louder. I didn't understand why they needed to take my wallet. And then I felt a pinprick in my arm and my vision got wavy, and my muscles grew heavy. The other voices faded fast, as I felt like I was falling into a deep, dark well.

I woke up, I don't know how much later, to a darkened room. It was déjà vu all over again, much like the night in the hospital when Emmy had told me about Dustin. For a brief moment I hoped that maybe everything since that night had been a dream and really I was waking up back in the hospital. But as my eyes adjusted to the darkness and I glanced around the strange room, reality came back and I realized every horrible thing had actually happened. I was sprawled out on the bed, on top of the sheets and blanket, and as I remembered the men taking my wallet again, I started to cry.

I didn't care about anything in there, they could have the money, what little there was. But the wallet held the most important thing left in my life—my only picture of Dustin and I together. There were actually two small pics of us, from one of those photo booths that you squeeze into with your best friend or your boyfriend—or your best friend who was your boyfriend—and make silly faces.

We had gone to the state fair last summer and were just sauntering along slowly, letting our corn dogs and onion rings digest, when Dustin grabbed my arm and pulled me with him towards something he was very excited about. The photo booth. I was laughing as the two of us tried to climb into the tiny space. And then very quickly I wasn't laughing anymore as I felt our warm bodies pressed together. As the first click of the camera went off, he turned and captured my lips with his. It was quick and light but I felt it down to my toes. He pulled away and the shy look of adoration and love in his eyes made me smile uncontrollably.



When the machine spit the pictures out we tore them in half, two pictures for both of us. Though minutely different because of the quick camera shutter, we each had a picture of that kiss and that moment after, when we both were grinning at each other, giddy in our happiness. Those pictures captured one of the brief moments of freedom in our relationship—hidden from the rest of the world by that curtain, we could be together and kiss each other and in the time space of four quick clicks of the camera, just be ourselves.

I lay there in the dark, the occasional tear dripping down my face, and a persistent, sharp, stabbing pain in my heart.

I was still awake the next morning when two different orderlies came in to wake me—a man and a woman. They were not as mean as the ones from last night. The man carried a breakfast tray with oatmeal and the woman gave me a T-shirt and sweatpants. I had one hour to eat and shower and change before one of them would come back to get me. Apparently I had my first appointment with the staff doctor.

Forty minutes later I had completed my assigned tasks and was stuck sitting on my bed staring at the blank walls. There wasn't even a window so that I could look outside. Alone with nothing to occupy me, my thoughts wandered to too many hurtful places—Dustin, my parents—so I shut that down immediately. I could hear noises outside in the hall. Murmured voices, hurried footsteps. I paced the room and stopped in front of the bookcase. The few books on the bookcase weren't too surprising—there was of course, a bible, and the rest were religious as well. A book of inspirational poems and essays, a biography of the Pope. I flipped through the pamphlets and there were more of the same as the books—religious themes, like *“Let God into Your Life,”* *“Jesus Walks Beside You.”* But my hand froze as I picked up the last one—*“Fighting Homosexual Temptations to Find True Truth in God.”*

My heart started pounding. Why was this here? I crouched down and started taking a better look at the book titles. The book of inspirational poems was for Gay and Lesbians and flipping through it, the words of every poem were basically about fighting those sinful urges and turning to God. The loud bang echoed in the room as I let go and gravity forced the book to the floor.

My parents said I needed rehab, and I thought that meant I wasn't physically ready to come home yet. So what kind of place was this... why were these books in my room? What—?

The nurse entered the room and said she was there to take me to the doctor now. My gut told me to plant my feet, to refuse to go with her. But somehow my body moved on autopilot to follow her.

We walked forever, down two long halls before reaching a door. *Dr. Westman* was the name on the doorplate. The nurse knocked twice, quickly, then opened the door and held it with her arm to let me pass.

“Thank you, Lucy.” The voice of the doctor was strong but warm in tone.

I paused in the hallway, not moving. An older man, graying short hair, white coat over a shirt and tie stood from behind the desk. He smiled at me and motioned with his hand.

“Come in, Sam.” When I still didn't move he motioned again. “It's okay, Sam, come on in and have a seat.”

Numbly I moved forward and sat in one of the chairs in front of his desk.

He sat back down, opened a manila folder in front of him and began scanning whatever papers were inside. He started reading some of the information out loud, basically recapping the accident and how I'd ended up in the hospital.

When he was done he closed it, picked up a yellow notepad and pen, and started writing. Then the horrible, vile interrogation began. The bile rose in my throat with every answer I had to bite out.

How long had I known Dustin, where and how did we meet, why had we gone to Atlantic City that night, why hadn't we told anyone, when did I start feeling differently about Dustin, when did I start feeling sexual urges toward him? Did Dustin do or say anything to entice me or influence me?

“Dustin didn't do or say anything to turn me gay! I've known I was gay since I was ten! I was born this way!” I finally shouted out, shaking with rage and trying to hold back the tears.

The doctor's eyebrows knit together and I could tell he was trying to keep his face impassive but it was clear he had issues with my outburst.

“Son, that is not true. God created you in his image, he creates all of us in his image. Therefore he did not create you as a homosexual. It is not part of his natural plan for you. You have simply been led astray, allowed certain temptations to guide you more than your love of God. You were not born that way. An alcoholic is not born an alcoholic. An alcoholic is simply someone too weak to resist the temptation of the bottle.”

His demeanor changed slightly, it was almost as if he turned a dial and shifted from judge into caring, concerned doctor mode. He did it so easily, so smoothly, it was almost robotic.

“But an alcoholic can fight. They can get sober and learn to reject the temptation of drink. And you can too, Sam. There are lots of men and boys like you doing it every day. But they can't do it alone. They need help to see the error of their ways and understand why this has happened to them, they need guidance as they find their way back. That is why we are here, to help you, Sam.”

I didn't even know what to say, my throat was dry and no words could come out. My brain was buzzing and my body didn't feel my own. Was I really here? Did I really hear the words he just said to me? Or was this all some kind of horrible nightmare? Please tell me I was going to wake up any second.

But I didn't wake up. Or rather I did wake up, every day, hoping that when I opened my eyes I would be back at home, in my own bedroom. Hell, I even began to hope I'd wake up back in that hospital room. But no... every day was the same—those hideous gray walls, me still in this hideous hellhole.

The place was full of boys like me, and we had routines to follow every day—group therapy sessions, videos and testimonies from real men who “had turned away from the sin and were happily straight now.” In the afternoon there was usually a session with the good doctor. He had diplomas hanging on his wall, proclaiming he really was a doctor of medicine or some kind of therapist but I refused to believe it. I was no medical expert but I didn't think

doctors were supposed to appoint themselves judge and jury of your feelings and your heart; they weren't supposed to tell you that you were wrong and immoral and sick. Oh, the doctor never quite said those things in so many words but that was certainly what he tried to impress upon me. He just went about it in that slick robotic way of his.

I struggled at first with the whole situation before I finally decided to say as little as possible and to seem completely compliant, the thought being if I just played along, the sooner I would appear "cured," and the sooner I could get out of here. So I locked my emotions away all day and then at night, in the darkness, I cried into my pillow every night. I missed my old life so much. I missed Dustin.

"Playing along" was also made a little easier because of the drugs they gave us. Morning and lunchtime, pretty blue and white pills that left a nice fog in my brain that was hard to fight off. It was much easier to just let it envelop you and comfort me. It allowed the pain of what had happened to me and why I was there to get pushed to the back corner of my brain. It was the only good thing about the whole situation, and the only thing I looked forward to every day.

But the fog couldn't keep everything out.

In the group therapy sessions where we were supposed to "share our stories and our feelings," I never said a word. So, one day, the therapist or counselor or whoever the fuck this person was who was in charge of the meeting, decided they would share my story for me, since I refused. This pissed me off royally, but I gritted my teeth a little more and stayed silent.

Our "group" was a motley set. There were a few of us who said little during the meetings and were hard to read. There were those who it was easy to tell were still shell-shocked that they were here. There were those who were on the fence and trying to decide if this hogwash they were feeding us was true. And then there was Jonathon and Michael. They had drunk the Kool-Aid and come out the other side, actually believing that their homosexuality was just a mistake on their parts, a shameful detour, and now with God's help they were going to be normal, productive heterosexual men.

When the counselor got to the part of my story about Dustin's suicide, I very nearly walked out of the room because I really didn't want to listen to it all over again. Then that snot, Jonathon, broke in and started spouting off about how Dustin had let his sin overtake him, had given into the darkness and chosen to follow Satan rather than God. That this is how perversion takes over and destroys our mind and body and soul when we are weak.

I don't even remember anything I consciously did after that. Just the feeling of rage exploding in me and carrying me across the room, the feeling of skin hitting skin. Something—his jaw or his nose—cracking under my knuckles, as my biceps screamed with the repetitive movement. *Pound, pound, pound.* In the background I heard voices yelling, felt hands and arms grabbing for me, but nothing could stop me.

And then... there was just blackness. I don't know how long I was out. I was awakened by someone shaking my shoulder, and a faraway voice telling me I needed to wake up and something about my parents. I blinked a few times and tried to sit up but couldn't lift my arms—no matter how many times I tried, I kept meeting resistance. When I looked down I saw the problem. I wasn't in my normal room, I was in a hospital-like bed with rails, and my wrists were cuffed to the rails. They'd not only knocked me out, they'd put me in fucking restraints.

The orderly unlocked me, and I had to get up and change clothes and was then dragged down the hall. Still groggy from the shit they gave me, it was hard to do anything but shuffle along.

I ended up in Dr. Westman's office, and my parents were there, each sitting in a chair, with a third one empty and waiting for me. Mom was crying again and Dad was so angry he was red.

“Sam, after today's incident, I thought your parents needed to be called—”

But the doctor never got to finish, as my dad nearly jumped out of his chair.

“Who are you, Sam? What the hell has possessed you and taken over my son? Violence and hitting now? Rebuffing the word of God and everyone here

who is trying to help you? We raised you to be a decent, moral boy. Where is this sick perversion coming from in you?"

"Ed—" My mother's voice tearfully broke in.

"No, Mary. This is it." He turned to me again and pointed his finger at me. "Enough of this, Samuel. I will not have a homosexual for a son and I will not allow one in my home. You either start listening to these people and get yourself right with God and the law and start acting normal again or don't come home."

They stood and walked out, my mother never even looking at me. I hadn't even had a chance to say anything, not even a good-bye.

The doctor was looking at me disapprovingly. "Your actions affect others, Sam. Your selfishness is hurting your parents and destroying your family. Is that what you want? Is that what God would want you to do?"

The nurse came in again then, and walked me back. I was allowed back into my room at least. But I was not allowed to leave my room the rest of the day and night and had to take all my meals in my room. Which was fine with me; I was tired, so very tired. And it wasn't the aftereffects of whatever they'd knocked me out with. I was simply bone-weary tired. I'd always known my parents would not react well to my being gay, but this... this was just worse than I ever could have dreamed. They didn't want me anymore. Because I knew, no matter how long I stayed in this God-forsaken place that I was not going to change. I was who I was.

And now I was completely alone. Dustin was gone and now my parents were too. I curled up on the awful bed and wept as my body shook. *Dustin, oh Dustin, I need you. I need you so bad.* As if he had heard me, his face filled my mind, his smiling, sunny face and I cried even harder.

By the time my eyes were sore and there were no tears left in me to shed, I had decided on a plan. I felt empty and numb and the more I searched I saw no reason for any other options.

For the next week I saved all of the sleeping pills they would make us take at night. I didn't know how many it would take but once I had a good handful, I took them. All.

I felt a calm come over me as I swallowed the last one. I filled my mind with Dustin's smiling face as I fell under.

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Unfortunately, I hadn't saved enough of the pills and I didn't die. Instead, I woke up in another hospital room, with my sister again sitting at my bedside. But my suicide attempt did get me sprung from that awful place. Turned out my parents hadn't told my sister where I was either, they'd told her the same thing they'd told me—that I was at a rehab facility for my injuries. Once she found out what kind of “facility” it really was, she came and got me out of there.

Because of the suicide attempt, I was moved to another hospital for a required number of days for a psych evaluation. Once the doctors there talked with me and discovered what facility I had been in and why I had taken the pills, they released me. My parents never came to see me, they just sent over a letter that basically gave their permission for me to stay in my sister's care until I turned eighteen in a few months. She lived in New York City with her husband and two little girls, and took me home with her without a second thought.

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Although I was grateful to my sister, I still hadn't spoken a word to her or anyone since I left the hospital.

“You don't have to worry, I'm not going to try and kill myself again.”

She stopped in place as she was setting a magazine down on the coffee table. We were only three days into the new arrangement and I couldn't take any more of her hovering. Other than at night when I slept, I was never left alone. She made sure she was constantly breezing through whatever room I was in, cleaning this or moving that or the most popular—“looking for something she'd misplaced.”

I looked over at her. “I promise.”

Her whole body sagged as she came over and sat down next to me on the couch. Her gentle but tired eyes looked into mine. Reaching over to brush the front of my hair out of my eyes, she smiled weakly.

“You scared the crap out of me, you know that?”

“I’m sorry.” My voice was flat and emotionless, but I hoped she would believe me.

She sighed. “I’m sorry that I didn’t check into that place or come to see you sooner. I should have known better than to trust Mom and Dad. Even with our history with them, I can’t believe they were capable of such a thing.” Her husband, Dave, was Jewish, so Emmy had been partially estranged from them from the moment she announced her engagement. Her eyes got misty as she shook her head sharply.

She grasped my face in her hands and forced me to look at her again. “There is absolutely nothing wrong with you, you got that? You forget whatever crap they tried to put in your head at that place. You are beautiful and smart and a good person. I don’t care if you’re gay or straight or blue or purple, you’re my brother and I will always love you, understand?”

I nodded as much as I could. “My cheeks hurt.”

She narrowed her eyes at me but let go with a smile, smacking me on the leg.

But she didn’t leave, she stayed there beside me for a few more minutes.

“You know, Sammy, that you need help right?” Her voice was quiet and my stomach started to churn.

“You tried to kill yourself, and I know part of it was being stuck in that awful place... but you’ve been through so much, Sam, in such a short period of time. More than most people should. The doctors from the hospital gave me some names and numbers of people they recommend. You need to talk to someone, honey.”



I closed my eyes and shuddered at the thought. My hearty, forceful “no” was ready to slip out—

“Dustin wouldn’t want to see you like this, sweetie. He would want you to go on, to live.”

I blew a big breath out and my shoulders sagged. I had no answer to give to her words.

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I repeated her words to myself many times over the next six months, when things got too hard to deal with and I wanted to give up. It was those words and the thoughts of Dustin that pushed me through the rough times.

I picked one of the psychiatrists from the list the hospital had given my sister and told her to make an appointment. After my last experience, it was like moving lead balloons to get my feet moving through his door. But thankfully he was nothing like Dr. Westman. Dr. Levinson really was caring and thoughtful and smart, and came with none of the religious baggage or rhetoric. And he was also very patient, because I still had a hard time sharing my feelings. I still refused to talk much about Dustin or his death, and every time the doc tried, he was met with silence. So he would switch tactics and focus on my present. What had I done that week, had anything happened to make me sad or mad or happy? I still had to take some antidepressants too, in the beginning, but these were different than the ones I’d been given at the facility. There was no fog this time, just a little less sadness. I still felt numb most of the time, but it wasn’t from the meds, and I didn’t dip into any thoughts of suicide again.

I’d promised Emmy, after all. And secretly, in my heart, I promised Dustin. So I did all the things I was supposed to, went to all my doctor’s appointments. Dr. Levinson gave me a new goal each week. We started slow—the first assignment was to leave the apartment once during the week for something other than a doctor’s appointment. Then it was going out for a whole day to the zoo with Emily and the girls. Eventually I even got a job—just bussing tables and washing dishes at a little bistro nearby—but it was another step to regaining a normal life. Emmy made a big deal, baking me a cake.

I still hadn't talked about Dustin though, and I still thought of him all the time. But other than that, I thought things were going pretty well. And then Dr. Levinson dropped a new bomb.

He'd just asked me for the thousandth time about Dustin. When I didn't say anything he asked a few more rapid-fire questions about other subjects I didn't want to discuss—including my parents, whom I hadn't had any contact with since that "meeting" at the facility when they walked out on me.

After I remained silent, he sighed and sat up in his chair and started fishing around in his desk papers for something. Finally he held out a card to me.

"Okay, Sam, we're going to try something else. You and I will continue to meet once a week as usual, but I want you to start attending this group meeting once a week as well." I opened my mouth but he held up his hands before I could speak.

"I know, Sam, I know you had a bad experience with group therapy before, but I promise you this will be nothing like that one. This is a group of young gay men, like yourself. They're all working through some tough times too and I think it would do you some good to attend and meet others your own age. Maybe you'll feel like opening up to them. The counselor who runs the group, Nick, is a wonderful young man. I think you'll like him." He paused to look me directly in the eye as he held the card that I still hadn't taken from him. "You've made some great progress, Sam, but unless you work through your feelings about Dustin and the accident and your parents, you will never be able to move forward."

As I walked home from my appointment with that damn card in my pocket, I fought with the idea of going. *No—no way.*

Three days later I found myself standing in front of the closed door to the room where this group was supposed to meet. I still didn't want to be here. But I knew Doc Levinson would find out if I didn't show. And my sister had found the card in my jeans pocket when she did laundry. She immediately got on my case and would have walked me to the door herself if I hadn't managed to convince her I would go. So I'd decided to come with the same attitude I'd had

back at the facility—I would come, I would listen, but I wasn't going to open my mouth.

“The door's unlocked, you can go in.”

My whole body jerked. The voice behind me was so close I could feel the hot breath on my shoulder. As I turned, there was a guy behind me, holding his hand up and giving me a concerned look.

“Whoa, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you. You were just standing there, I thought maybe you might have thought the door was locked.”

We stood there for a moment, staring at each other. He looked a little older than me, a half a head taller, brilliant blue eyes and short brown hair, with a little scruff on his face. Enough that it was hard to tell if he was trying to start a beard, or if it was purposely that way. He smiled and seemed perfectly at ease.

“I'm Nick.” He held out his hand. Great, the doc had said the group was run by someone named Nick, so this must be the guy. No getting out of it now.

I held out my hand and he clasped it firmly. His skin felt so warm, it took me a minute to let go. I suddenly realized I hadn't been touched by anyone who wasn't family or a doctor or nurse since... well since before the accident. I told myself that was why my hand still glowed with his heat, even though we were no longer touching.

“Are you, Sam?” When I nodded, he did too. “Dr. Levinson said he hoped you'd be joining us. Welcome.”

The door opened then and a Hispanic-looking kid poked his head out. “There you are, Nick, we been waiting!”

“I'm here, Carlos, ready to go, just give us a minute okay? Tell the others to sit tight and we'll be in.”

Carlos disappeared again behind the closed door.

Nick flashed a small smile again. “Shall we go in?”

When I still didn't move, Nick didn't either. Instead, he stood there patiently with me, as if he had all the time in the world. “I know it's probably

uncomfortable joining a new group, but they're all good guys. It's your first time, I promise you don't have to say a word, you can just sit and observe until you're ready."

There was something about him—from his words to his demeanor—that calmed me. I reached forward and opened the door and we walked in together.

True to his word he didn't make me speak. He did introduce me to the rest of the group by just my first name, but didn't say why I was there or give away my story.

For three weeks I went, I sat, I didn't say a word. Nick would smile at me when I came in and would watch me periodically during the meetings.

Week four, the meeting was over and everyone was leaving, as usual.

"Sam, hold up a second. Will you help me stack the chairs up?"

I nodded and started grabbing chairs. We worked for the next few minutes in silence except for the sounds of chairs scraping against the floor.

"I'm glad to see you every week, Sam. Are you enjoying the meetings?"

I shrugged my shoulders. Nick chuckled. "Well, maybe enjoy is the wrong word. I know a lot of tough things get discussed—everyone's been through some rough times."

The last chair got put in place. I figured I could finally go now, but I felt like a kid in school, like I needed to be dismissed. Nick turned to get his stuff from the desk in the corner.

"Thanks, Sam," he threw over his shoulder. "See you next week."

"Sure." That was the first word I'd spoken the entire time I'd been coming here, other than my name that first night.

The next week, Nick asked me to help with the chairs again. When we were done, I turned to go.

"Hey, Sam, I usually get a cup of coffee and walk through the park after I'm done here. Why don't you join me?"

I froze but didn't say anything. He grabbed his backpack and turned to look at me.

“Or do you have someplace else to be?” He grinned. “I guess I should have asked that first.”

Shit. I looked at him, he was so... nice. Just so genuine, no agenda. Actually he was like that during the meetings too, he didn't act like any of the doctors I'd been to. Definitely not like Asshole Westman. And not even like Dr. Levinson—who was easier to talk to, but still had the stiff doctor persona going on. Nick was more like... a friend, the guy next-door. I wondered if he even had any kind of training for this. Regardless, he was good at it, good with the guys. I was still wary though, about why he was asking me.

“Sam?” Hearing his voice again made me realize I'd been standing there too long, lost in my brain. He was expecting an answer, and now I was caught off guard. I should have just told him I had to go to work. Or had to babysit the girls for Emmy. Or... any of a million excuses. But nothing was coming. So I just nodded.

“Okay, you'll come? Great. The place around the corner has the best coffee.”

He continued talking as I followed him. About the coffee, the weather, insignificant stuff. I watched him as we walked. He was more filled out than me, but he looked fit, not overly muscled or anything. His height helped him be more lean than stocky, and he was wearing his usual button-down shirt tucked into khakis with a tie. And his eyes lit up as he gestured and talked. He looked so happy, so... normal. He'd obviously never had any of the problems any of us in the group had. Hell, he was probably straight, had a happy little home life with a wife and kid at home.

We each got a drink and then headed through Central Park, sitting down on an empty bench. Nick grew quiet and we drank our coffees and looked out at the park and the trees, and grass and the people walking by. The children playing, the dogs barking as their owners walked them.

I was a little surprised Nick had suddenly gotten so quiet. He loosened his tie and leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. A shadow crossed his face.

“It’s been five years and sometimes it feels like yesterday.” Nick’s voice just floated out abruptly into the silence. He was looking straight ahead, staring out into space.

He turned to glance at me. “I’ve shared my story with the group before but being new, you obviously don’t know. And as hard as it is to talk about, I know sometimes it’s easier to know someone has been in your shoes.”

Fuck. I should have listened to my instincts. I knew he was being too “nice”. This was all some ruse to get me to spill my guts. I shifted on the seat, ready to jump up and walk away, when he started in again.

“I was twenty, he was eighteen.” Nick smiled, but he wasn’t here with me, he was lost in some memory. “We met my senior year of high school and everyone thought we were best friends. And we were. But we were so much more. First kisses, first boyfriends, the whole nine yards. No one knew because we weren’t out—too scared to come out to our parents.

“Things were perfect, I loved him so much.” Nick sighed and ran his hand through his short hair. “But something changed in him once I went away to college. We emailed or called every day. The more time that passed, though, the more he started to seem different. He was not the happy-go-lucky boy I’d fallen in love with. His voice was always low and sad, all he talked about was how bad school was, how much he missed me and how nothing was the same without me there. I tried to tell him he just needed to hang in there—he’d be out of school soon and he could join me at college and we could be together again. But he fell so deep and so fast, before I really realized he was in trouble. I can look back now and know that he was depressed with bipolar tendencies. I didn’t see it when we were together, he was just a really boisterously happy kid, and yeah, maybe having me around grounded him a bit, kept the bad days away. But then I left and he had no tether to hang onto. I don’t think his family knew either—it happened so fast, they probably just chalked it up to moody teenager stuff.

“It was a week ’til spring break. I had been reassuring him for weeks that I would be home soon, that we’d have a whole week together, things would be great, and that I couldn’t wait to see him. I told him all the time how much I loved him and how much I missed him. I’d been at the library with a study group finishing up a project for class the next day. A couple of the others wanted to go out to celebrate so we went to a local coffeehouse that had an open mike night. It was late when I got home and I just fell into bed without checking my phone. The next morning its loud ringing woke me. It was my mom, telling me...” His voice broke and he had to take a deep breath before continuing. “Josh had hung himself the night before. When I looked at my phone again, I saw there was a missed call from him the night before. He hadn’t even left a message.

“I skipped classes the next week; and I drove home as soon as I got off the phone with Mom. I don’t even remember the drive, I was probably lucky I didn’t get into an accident myself. By the time I got home more shit had hit the fan. His family, trying to find a reason for what he’d done, had been going through his room. They found pictures of us together, notes I’d written him. They were angry, and they blamed his whole suicide on me. I was so distraught myself I couldn’t even argue. *I* blamed myself. If I had gotten his call the night before maybe he wouldn’t have killed himself, maybe I could have stopped him. If I hadn’t left to go off to college, if—” Nick shook his head. “I was a mess for a long time, had to take a whole semester off from school. Eventually, with a lot of help, I was finally able to accept the fact that it wasn’t my fault. Josh was sick and all the things I was blaming myself for were all just big what-ifs—I could have stayed home from college, I could have been with him twenty-four seven and he still might have taken his life.”

There was pain in his eyes and his face aged ten years while he spoke. I could feel his eyes on me until I lifted my head to look at him.

“Sam, I couldn’t talk about it for months, with anyone. But once I finally did... it helped. A lot. I think if I hadn’t, I would still be stuck in that painful limbo. I still think about Josh all the time, I haven’t forgotten him and I never will. But those of us who are left behind—we can’t just stop living too. We

need to heal and live on even more than ever... live for them because they can't."

He tipped his Styrofoam cup up to let the last sip of coffee slide down his throat before he stood and swung his backpack over his shoulder. "I get why you might not want to talk in front of the group and that's okay, Sam. But if you ever do feel ready to talk, I'm usually here after the meeting every week."

And then he turned and walked away.

I don't know how long I sat on that bench. I didn't move until my phone rang with a call from my sister, looking for me because it was so late. I was shocked by his story—apparently my vision of him and the wife and kid at home was completely wrong. I felt sad for him. But I also felt angry at him. I felt angry that I'd been played, that the whole thing was just some attempt to get me to spill my feelings. I felt angry that he was another someone trying to tell me what I needed. Just because he'd been through a horrible experience and "healed" himself by talking to someone didn't mean that was what I needed. I was doing fine, I was working, I was meeting all the goals Dr. Levinson gave me. I was playing by everyone's rules, what more did they want of me?

I stopped going to the group meetings. But unfortunately I couldn't stop thinking about Nick and what he told me. The anti-depressants I took kept my mood on a pretty even keel—I could keep the bad out. Except now. Ever since that night in the park with Nick, I'd been having nightmares. Every night, I would wake up sweating, my heart pounding. It was usually the same every time—I was in the car with Dustin, he smiled, the light from the other car, horrible sounds of crunching metal and glass shattering and screaming, loud, blood-curdling screaming that never stopped. Once the screaming started I couldn't see Dustin anymore, instead the face that would appear was Nick's. And that was when I would wake up.

After two weeks of this, I felt like a zombie, my body and mind just felt beat to hell and I was exhausted. It had been almost eight months since the accident, since Dustin died and my parents threw me away. I was tired of the weight of everything that had happened, I was tired of carrying it around day



after day after day. I finally hit rock bottom and realized that something needed to change.

I felt so weary that I don't even know how I made my body move, but four days later I found myself at the park. Nick was sitting on his bench, sipping coffee and relaxing, looking out across the park.

I stopped as I reached the bench and Nick looked up at me and smiled.

“Well hello, stranger.” He motioned to the empty space next to him and I sat. “I've missed seeing you in group. Carlos and Max asked where you were.”

“I was the one that wanted to go to Atlantic City. I was the one that convinced Dustin to go.” Blurted into the air, finally, were the words I had not told anyone, not even Emmy.

“He didn't want to, he thought it would be too much trouble to arrange, that we'd get caught. But I kept pushing him until he agreed. I should have listened to him, I shouldn't have pushed, I just wanted us to have some time alone, but if we hadn't gone we wouldn't have been in the car, we wouldn't have been in the accident, he wouldn't have...” A loud sob broke free as I finally stopped for air and my body started shaking. “He would still be here! It was my fault, everything was my fault!”

I curled in on myself, as I completely fell apart. I was barely aware of two arms wrapping around me and pulling me closer. I cried for what felt like hours until the warmth of Nick's body and the steady sound of his heartbeat and the soothing sounds of his voice finally calmed me.

“Sam, it was an accident. A misfortunate turn of events. Dustin made his own decisions—he didn't do anything he didn't want to do. He chose to get in that car with you because he wanted to be with you. And he made his own decision to end his life. There was nothing you could have done about that. It's not your fault, Sam, it's not your fault.”

He kept whispering those words to me as he continued to hold me. And eventually I started to believe them. His warmth, his kindness, made me feel so safe. And saying those words finally allowed me to release the burden I felt.

I still had a lot of work to do, but that was a breakthrough moment. Instead of going back to group, I met with Nick at the bench every week. I started bringing the coffee and would be there waiting for him. He never pushed me to talk about anything in particular, in fact it was more like having a conversation with a friend. We would talk about the weather, the park, how my week had been. I'd tell him funny stories about my coworkers at the bistro or about something my nieces had done. And when I felt the urge I would talk about Dustin. Or about my parents. I hadn't even realized how much I had buried my feelings for what they'd done—how they'd treated me and the things they'd said to me.

I also realized that I hadn't had a friend, well, since Dustin. Nick was so easy to talk to. We started swapping music—he was only twenty-five so he still had some cool bands he could turn me on to. I started really looking forward to Wednesdays, the day I got to hang with him. And the rest of the week I often found him popping up in my thoughts, whenever I'd see something I thought he would like or get a laugh over. We had even swapped phone numbers and would text each other periodically during the week.

“Samuel Sebastian Morelli!” I was walking through the house listening to the latest new MP3s Nick had given me, but even over my headphones I heard the loud exclamation from my sister. I turned to find her staring at me with her mouth open and tears in her eyes. She walked over and touched my cheek with her palm.

“You smiled. Oh baby, you smiled! I've been waiting so long to see one of those on your face again.”

I wasn't even conscious that I was smiling. Or that it had been so long.

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It was Wednesday evening, and I was sitting beside Nick, coffee in hand.

“I nearly had my sister in tears today.”

Concern flashed across his face.

“Apparently I smiled.” His eyebrow crooked up and he smirked. “I guess I haven't done that in a long time,” I finished softly.

His smirk froze, then turned into a genuine smile. “Well, then I guess you’re on the road to recovery. How does it feel?”

I shrugged. “Good, I guess. I didn’t even realize I was smiling.”

“You *are* making progress. Congratulations.”

“What if... what if I forget him? What if I get so wrapped up in moving on and living life that I forget all about him?” My voice sounded small in the chilly evening air.

“You will never forget him, Sam. He will always be right there in your memories and in your heart.” Nick briefly touched my forehead and then placed his palm on my chest to emphasize his point. I felt the warmth of his hand spread across my entire chest. He glanced up from his hand to my eyes and we shared a quiet moment. My heart skipped a beat just as he drew his hand away and cleared his throat. His eyes shifted quickly back to the park.

“So what had you smiling? Did you come across another pic of Ryan Reynolds?”

I’d mentioned once I thought he was hot and Nick never let me forget it. “I was listening to one of those songs you gave me.”

His head swiveled towards me and his lips quirked upward. His eyes looked sad, though.

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I was still seeing Dr. Levinson once a week and the tasks he was giving me were getting harder and more uncomfortable. He said this meant I was doing well. I wasn’t so sure and sometimes I almost wanted to go back to the time before I had started talking to Nick. Doc was not happy that I’d stopped going to group but thrilled when I started talking to Nick. I told him about the smile and my sister’s reaction and he gave me the same congratulations Nick had.

“I’m very proud of you, Sam. That’s wonderful.” I just squirmed in my seat, glad, but thinking one smile was being praised a little too much.

“I think it might be time for The Big Test.”

“Wait a minute, I’ve already got my test for this week, remember? My sister and her family are going out of town this weekend and my goal was to stay home alone by myself the whole weekend.”

“True, and next week we’re not meeting because I’ll be out of town. So for this next test you will have two weeks to accomplish it.”

I scowled.

“I think it’s time you get back to doing things you used to enjoy doing—things you did with Dustin. Go to places like the places you used to go to with Dustin. You can start small—maybe it’s a movie you saw together, maybe it’s a restaurant similar to one you both used to eat at. I think that will be enough to aim for this time.”

“*This* time? How much more is there? How many more hoops do I have to jump through before I get the graduation certificate that says I passed?” My voice was loud but I was angry. I’d been seeing Dr. Levinson for months and I was tired of the shenanigans. No matter how much I knew some of them had helped me, I just wanted to know when the games would end.

His voice was equally as strong as mine when he answered my question. “You ‘pass’ when you can take yourself back to the last time in your life you felt joy with Dustin. Before the two of you got in that car.”

The last time I’d felt joy with Dustin was dancing in that club. And there was no way in hell I would ever step foot in any place like that again.

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My sister and her husband and my nieces packed the SUV and left Friday afternoon. They were going upstate to visit Dave’s parents for the weekend. Emmy was waffling, and it nearly took Dave throwing her over his shoulder and buckling her in the SUV to get her to leave. She kept looking at me worriedly and asking if I was okay. I knew what she was thinking in the back of her mind, what her fear was. But I was okay now. Mostly. Definitely not contemplating suicide ever again.

I felt horrible now that I'd ever put my sister through all that; leaving her with the niggling little worry that I knew would be in the back of her mind all weekend, interrupting what should be happy family time for her.

But that was in the past and there was nothing I could do now to fix it. The only thing I could do was try to make up for it whenever I could. Nick had taught me that.

Nick. I sat down on the couch and flipped through the channels, stopping briefly to text him about something ridiculous I saw on one of the infomercial channels. Normally he texted me right back but my phone was silent.

In fact the whole house was silent. It had been a long time since I'd been in a space by myself, totally alone. I started roaming around, trying to find things to do. Trying to keep my mind occupied.

By Saturday I was going nuts. The weather was beautiful so I left and spent the day walking around the city. At one point I passed a theater that was showing an Iron Man marathon, including the new one that had just come out, *Iron Man 3*. Dustin and I had gone together to see both of the first two movies. I remembered Doctor Levinson's test and before I thought twice about it I had tickets and was in the theater looking for a seat. My breathing was fast and my palms were sweaty but I was okay.

There were a few times I almost walked out. I remembered every detail of seeing the movies with Dustin, the parts where he laughed, the parts he raved about afterwards. It hurt in my chest, and my eyes got wet but I was determined to get through this. I took some deep breaths and concentrated on the movies and eventually the pain subsided and the tears didn't fall.

My feelings were all over the place when I got out of the theater. I was a little sad but I also felt like another weight was gone from my shoulders. I had managed to relive memories and think of Dustin but not fall apart.

And then there was the part of me that said I shouldn't feel so happy about that. But the other part of me, the part that had been drowning for so long, needed to breathe.

As I rounded the corner, a poster tacked onto the building caught my eye. It was for a nearby club. A gay club, by the picture of the half-naked boy depicted on it. My heart started beating, remembering the club in Atlantic City—there had been go-go boys there who looked just like the guy on the poster. I remember one of them dancing briefly with Dustin. All the memories of that night just flooded my head as it started pounding in pain. And running over the images like some bad movie voiceover, I heard Doctor Levinson’s voice, repeating his last words to me. *Take yourself back to the last time in your life you felt joy with Dustin.*

I practically ran back home. I felt like I would only feel safe and at peace once I was within the four walls of the apartment with the door shut tight behind me. Except... I was buzzing with too much energy. I paced around the empty apartment for a while. I pulled the dog-eared photo of Dustin and me out of my wallet, remembering the night I told him we should go to Atlantic City, a decision that ended up turning my entire world upside down. “I’m sorry, Dusty,” I whispered to the photo. “I’m so sorry, baby.” I’d told myself there was no way in hell I would go back to one of those places again. But as I sat here, alone in an empty apartment, hyperventilating and paralyzed by the past, I realized I was nearly crawling out of my skin. I was a mess. And sadly, I finally realized I couldn’t continue living my life this way. Something had to give. I needed to move on. Glancing one more time at the photo, I put it away and made another decision that was going to turn my world upside-down all over again.

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My mind was so focused that it wasn’t until I found myself across the street from the bar, looking at the bouncer checking people’s IDs, that I realized I was too young to get in. My fake ID had been confiscated the night of the accident, and although I was eighteen now, the club was twenty-one and over. Shit. I stood there for a while watching and trying to figure out what to do now. I knew if I went home now I’d lose my courage and never come back. I had to get in to that club. Eventually I noticed a side door to the club that opened into a darkened alley. Guys would come out, usually in pairs, most

would head back into the deeper shadows of the alley, but some would head back to the street and off into the night.

My heart was racing and my breathing was fast, but I tried to look casual. I walked about a block down, then crossed the street and carefully made my way down to the alley-side of the bar. Making sure the bouncer wasn't looking, I ducked down the alley. I knew this could be dangerous but I tried to stay calm. Luckily I only had to hang by the door a few minutes before it opened. Two guys walked out, their hands so busy groping each other, they didn't even notice me. I quickly grabbed the door before it shut behind them and slipped in.

Just as I hoped there was no bouncer watching the door. The place was so packed I easily blended into the throngs of men.

Immediately I began to second-guess my great idea. The pounding beat felt like it shook my whole body. The heat and the claustrophobia from the crush of bodies felt like it was going to overwhelm me. I thought maybe it would just be better if I turned and ran right back out the door. But then a pathway seemed to part through the crowd, enough room for me to make it to one of the bars off to the side of the dance floor. There was a blast of air conditioning coming down from a vent above me and I took big gulps of the cold crisp air and felt my heart rate slow a bit.

I'd done it. As I looked out over the crowd I remembered that night with Dustin. He had dragged his feet about going, but once he had entered the club it was like a whole new Dustin was born. His eyes lit up and his mouth dropped open and he stared all around—for about five seconds. And then he was pulling me on to the dance floor and we became a part of the moving mass of people. Well, not just people—they were men and boys just like us. Gay men and boys dancing with each other, touching each other, kissing and groping each other. With no fear of anyone seeing them. I remember Dustin smiling and laughing so much that night, throwing his head back as glitter rained down on us. It was easily the best night we'd ever spent together and Dustin was the happiest I had ever seen him.

He was happy.

No matter what happened later, I had made Dustin happy. For one night, he was happy.

And at that moment of clarity I felt the shackles leave me, the last of the weight of grief.

Accomplishing what I had come here to do, I took one more look around before I left. My first thought was Nick and how I couldn't wait to tell him what I'd done. He would be so proud—

I stopped and stared at the person I saw across the room. It looked like... it was! It was Nick! I couldn't believe it. He was standing with a couple of other guys, talking to them. He looked incredible, in tight dark-wash jeans and a black button-down, much like what he wore on Wednesdays, except this one had a few more buttons undone so a portion of his chest peeked out.

I was surprised to see him here, well, maybe I shouldn't be. I mean I knew he was gay and I'd never asked whether he had a boyfriend or partner. He surely didn't go home every Wednesday night and stay locked up there until the next Wednesday. I realized that as much as I considered him my friend, and we talked about so many things, he'd never really mentioned much about his personal life.

He didn't see me, so I just stood there for a while and watched him. He seemed pretty chatty with the two guys standing with him so I guessed that they must be friends of his. Then another big, beefy guy sidled up next to Nick. This guy was *not* a friend, I surmised, as he bent down to whisper in Nick's ear. He was looking Nick up and down and practically salivating like Nick was a side of beef. One of his hands had moved out of sight, trailing down Nick's back I assumed, as he did his head-to-toe once-over of Nick's body. I felt the frown forming on my face and a surge of energy bolt through me. It was a strange sensation. I hadn't felt anything like it since some guy had approached Dustin that night at the club... *oh God. Was I jealous?*

Thank God Nick managed to fend off the big guy, apparently getting him to understand he wasn't interested. I decided I'd better stop snooping and get the heck out of here, but right at that exact moment, Nick saw me. He frowned



and said something to one of his buddies before walking as fast as he could over to me.

“Sam? Sam, what are you doing here? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Really good actually.”

“How did you get in here? You’re not twenty-one!”

“I snuck in.”

“You—” He stopped and just shook his head. Then he grabbed my arm and started pulling me outside. The din of the club faded as the door shut behind us.

“Sam, what the heck are you doing in a place like this? Are you okay? Did you drink anything?”

“I’m fine! No I didn’t drink anything, I wasn’t planning to, and I was actually just getting ready to leave!”

A breeze blew up and I shivered a little. The anger finally dissipated from his face. He sighed.

“How did you get here?”

“I walked. My sister’s place isn’t that far.”

“All right. C’mon, I’ll walk with you, make sure you get home okay.”

As we walked I told him everything that had happened—what Dr. Levinson had suggested, how I’d gone to the movies and why I’d ended up at the bar.

By the time I finished we were in front of the door to my sister’s apartment. Nick had followed me all the way into the building, and up to our floor. There was silence as we just stood there awkwardly. Suddenly I took a deep breath and found myself inviting him in. I braced myself for the “sorry I can’t,” figuring he’d want to get back to his friends.

“Sure I can come in for a few minutes.” He looked hesitant but he followed me inside.

I locked the door and turned on lights and offered him something to drink, which he declined. As we both sat in on the sofa, Nick finally looked over at me with a slight but proud smile. “So you’re really okay with everything that happened tonight? Sam, that’s just wonderful.” He bent his head and cast his eyes downward. “I guess we don’t need to continue our private meetings then. You don’t need me anymore.”

His words churned something up in me so strong it was like a hurricane-force wind building in me. He was so wrong, I did need him and until that very moment even I hadn’t realized how much. I had broken through so many obstacles today, might as well barrel on through another one. *Forgive me, Dusty.*

We were sitting close to each other on the sofa. Moving quickly, before I could change my mind, I reached up and cupped my fingers under his chin and tilted his head around to face mine. We were only inches apart, so close I could feel his breath. His lips started to move as if he were going to speak so I moved fast before he could protest.

I pressed my lips against his forcefully. His mouth yielded and for a brief moment we were actually kissing, before he grabbed my arms and pushed me away.

“Sam!” His voice was thick and hoarse. “What...? We can’t—”

I felt so jittery and my skin was tingling like a live wire that was sparking and needed to be put out. I was buzzing so much from everything that had happened today that I couldn’t hear his words. Or maybe I didn’t want to.

Instead I lunged for him again, practically ending up in his lap. This time I wrapped my arms around his neck as I kissed him, brushing my fingertips through the soft short bristles of his hair. He moaned this time and moved his lips more, caressing mine. I could feel his muscles twitching, under the thin fabric of his shirt. He broke away again but less forcefully this time. His chest was heaving.

“Stop, Sam. Please.”

“I don’t want to.”

He closed his eyes and let his head fall back against the headrest.

“Sam...” The strain was showing in his voice.

“I don’t think you want me to either.”

He opened his eyes and touched my face, trailing down to my lips.

“I don’t.” It was a faint whisper, as if that were all the energy he could expend.

I was teetering on the edge myself and all I wanted to do was jump.

The next kiss finally cracked the last of Nick’s resolve as he finally met me with equal force. I climbed into his lap and he put his arms around me and we were clutching and grasping and panting and moving against each other.

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It didn’t take long for us to fumble our way to my bedroom. It felt so amazing to be touched by someone again, to feel the heat of someone against me. Every single thought of the last year was pushed out of my head as I let myself drown in heat and skin and sensation.

As we fell on the bed, clothes starting coming off. I felt Nick pause again, when I reached for the button of his jeans. He was holding himself above me and I saw his arms shake slightly. But hearing the hiss from his lips when I reached in and touched him, and the heat in his eyes as he whimpered, emboldened me.

I was so caught up, that I didn’t think about where we were heading. When he reached for my jeans he stopped. “Tell me to stop and I will, Sam.”

“Don’t stop, please.” I could hear the whine in my voice. But I was so gone, I wasn’t thinking.

Eventually Nick left the bed and I heard some cloth rustling. When he came back he tossed a condom and lube packet on the bed. My heart was beating so fast. I wanted this so much and yet I was so nervous. Dustin and I had done a lot of things together but we had never made it this far.

I grasped his wrist and he looked down at me. “I... I haven’t... I’ve never—”

Nick’s eyebrows rose. “Shit, Sam.” He sat the lube back down. “We don’t have to, it’s okay.”

“No!” My voice startled us both. “I do. I want to... with you.” I picked up the foil packet and tried to control the shaking in my hand.

“You’re really sure, Sam?” His voice was quiet as he looked honestly into my eyes.

I nodded.

He grabbed the lube and the next thing I felt was his slick, wet finger slowly entering me. I took a deep breath and let it out and squirmed. I had fingered myself before and was aware of how good it could feel.

Then one finger was gone and there were two, then three. I bit back a groan and tried to keep breathing. I’d never tried three fingers. The nerve endings down there were protesting and I was breaking out into a sweat. It felt mostly uncomfortable but still bearable, if I tried to make my mind concentrate on something else.

I let out a big breath when his fingers disappeared. I heard the rip of the foil packet.

“Sam.” I felt his fingertips lightly touch my hair and trail down my cheek, but I couldn’t see him. It was then I realized I was concentrating so much, I’d closed my eyes.

As I opened them and looked up at him, he traced his finger across my lips. “So beautiful,” he whispered.

“I need you to say it, Sam, tell me you’re okay with this, please.” I could see everything he was feeling in his pleading eyes—the vulnerability, the need, the hungry desire he was trying so hard to restrain. But I saw it, and at the moment I needed to feel it, I needed to feel him.

I swallowed and wet my lips. “Yes.”

“I’ll go slow,” he whispered.

I felt him, the tip of him nudged me down there, and then suddenly he was in. It felt like I was splitting in half, the pain so strong, that I couldn't help but cry out. This was not like his fingers at all. It was sharp and intense, and it felt like I couldn't stretch any further. My breaths were shallow and I gulped for air. Tears pricked the corners of my eyes.

“Sam. Sam... Sam, look at me. Please.”

My heart was hammering as I raised my eyes to meet his. He was leaning over me, holding up my legs with each strong arm. He had stilled and we were stuck, suspended in this moment with him unmoving inside of me, and my body screaming at the intrusion.

His chest was heaving and there was a bead of sweat trickling down the veins standing out on his neck. That desire was still restrained but I could see the effort it was taking him.

A tear finally escaped me and dripped down my temple.

Nick shook his head. “No, I'm not hurting you.” He started to pull out slowly, which was nearly as painful as it had been getting him there.

I grabbed his arms, hard, to stop him. I wondered later if I'd left bruises, I remembered gripping him so tightly.

“No! No. Please! Please...” My voice faded off, ragged and shaky, as I looked directly into his eyes, hoping he would see how much I wanted this. I had wanted to feel something again, and even if it was pain, I wanted to feel it. I needed it.

We were both breathing heavily as we paused again. Nick finally sighed.

“Okay. Okay, Sam. Look right here, keep your eyes on mine.”

I darted my eyes up to his again.

“That's it, just concentrate on me.” His eyes were so kind and so very blue. I imagined they were an ocean, surrounding me, calming me.

“Take deep breaths and then let them out, one at a time. That's good. You're doing great, Sam.”

I guess I was breathing, I didn't know. His voice had a hypnotic, soothing effect and my body moved on autopilot as I stayed fixated on his eyes. He never took his gaze from mine. We were locked in this moment together and I knew he would catch me, no matter what happened.

"I promise it gets better, Sam. Just hold on," He spoke softly.

I don't know if it was a few seconds or minutes or hours that we waited there together. At some point Nick finally nudged forward again, slowly. I steeled myself but here was no pain anymore, just a bit of an ache from feeling stretched so tight.

"Are you okay, Sam?"

I nodded honestly. If this was the worst it got, from here on out I could handle it, for him.

And then I screamed. Some unknown sound came out of me and my hips jerked upward as another sensation exploded down there and quickly radiated throughout my whole body. This was not pain, however, no this was... indescribable. I couldn't even form words to explain how amazing it felt.

My eyes widened in wonder as I stared back at Nick. I felt him let out a large breath and he smiled down at me.

"Better, now?" he grinned cheekily.

I didn't have time for words, I just wanted... more. Of that.

I shifted my hips, trying to get more of him inside me, deeper. He groaned and his eyes fluttered shut. When they snapped open again, I saw the raw desire with no limits this time.

"Sam," he rasped. Moving quickly, he shifted my legs forward even further, until I was folded up in half and his face was mere inches from me. He thrust inside me, sharper, harder, and buried himself in me. All I could do is gasp as the sparks shot throughout me. I was lost and floating and on such a high. But not because of anything chemical, this was natural and so, so amazing.

Nick and I rocked together, finding a push-pull rhythm that just kept intensifying and building. We climbed higher and higher with every movement, and I didn't know how much further we could go before we just exploded from the intensity.

And then I did. I wasn't even touching myself. I was pressed so tightly against his body, the heat and the sweat and the friction of his skin against mine was apparently all I needed. I wanted to hold back, to keep this feeling forever, but I had no control over my body at that point. I wasn't even sure what I was doing, I groaned and yelled and blindly clawed at Nick, just trying to hold on to him as I fell apart into a million pieces.

Eventually I became aware of Nick panting in my ear. "Oh Jesus, look at you. Oh, Sam... Sam... Sam." He pressed his forehead against mine, and squeezed his eyes shut as I felt him thrust and thrust and jerk and until he came. Inside me.

His hips stilled but his chest was heaving, as he gasped for every breath. I reached my hand up and trailed my fingers gently up his chest, stopping over his heart. I flattened my palm out so I could feel the pounding beat against my hand.

With my other hand, I brushed my fingertips against his eyelids. He opened his eyes and we just stared into each other's eyes silently, neither of us capable of words.

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I got the best night's sleep I'd had in a very long time. No nightmares, no drug-induced fog, just peaceful, restful sleep. What finally woke me up was the missing warm weight I had been curled up next to. At first I thought maybe he'd left, until I heard sounds in the living room.

Blindly grabbing a T-shirt and boxers, I dressed awkwardly as I hurried down the hall. He was standing by the large glass windows, barefoot, jeans on, shirt on but unbuttoned. His forearm was stretched upward against the window and he was leaning his forehead against it as he stared out at the city below. It was early, still dusky outside, but with the beginning rays of the sun peeking

up over the horizon. One of the rays came through the window at just the right angle to illuminate part of his face. Partially glowing in light and partially in shadow, my breath caught at how stunning he was. His face looked tired and drawn though, and the half-light only emphasized it more, the dark circles prominent under his eyes.

He moved away from the window and saw me as he turned. “Sam,” he breathed as he spoke my name and it almost came out like a sigh. “I’m glad you’re up,” he said as he sagged down onto the sofa.

I didn’t know what I was supposed to do; I didn’t know what happened next after sleeping with someone, so I padded over and sat down next to him. The air in the room felt awkward and strained, completely different than the connection we’d had the night before. He’d picked up one of his shoes but hadn’t made the move to put in on yet, fiddling with it in his hand instead as he stared down at the floor. My stomach started to twist as I got the impression he was going to bolt.

He looked over at me and there was concern in his eyes as he reached up and smoothed my hair before drifting to caress my cheek. “Are you okay, Sam? Do you... hurt?”

I shifted a bit on the soft cushions. “A little sore, I guess.”

The lines above his brow eased as he nodded. “That will go away soon.”

“Were you leaving?” My voice broke on the last word, even though I was trying to be calm and cool.

“Yes.” More emotion must have broken through on my face, because his hand shot out and grasped my forearm. “But not before I talked to you, Sam, I swear. I was waiting for you to wake up.”

He wanted to talk. Between him and Dr. Levinson I’d had enough talking to last a lifetime. This didn’t sound good.

“I’m so sorry, Sam, for letting things go as far as they did last night.”

Yep. Not good. I pulled my arm away, and he stared at his empty hand.



“I didn’t mean...” He let out a growl of frustration as he hung his head in his hands. He continued talking in that position. “Oh, Sam, last night... was amazing and beautiful and sexy and even better than I ever imagined with you.”

Finally he turned to look at me with watery eyes. “I’ve wanted to be with you, Sam, practically since the day you came to the first group meeting. There was just something that drew me to you, and little by little, it just got stronger every time we met. I was handling it, I was proud of how professional I had stayed... until you kissed me last night. I should have left immediately, I should have gotten up and walked out that door—but I didn’t. I couldn’t.”

“This is just all kinds of wrong, Sam, I’m a trained counselor—I’m supposed to *help* you, not take advantage of you.”

“But you’re not my counselor, I quit your group months ago! And you didn’t take advantage of me, I kissed you first.”

He smiled sadly. “I know, that’s how I gave myself permission. I kept telling myself if you wanted it too, it was okay. But it’s still wrong, Sam. Or at least our timing is wrong. You’re just starting to get your life back in order. Your emotions are all over the place. What you think you need now might not be what you want a month from now.

“And the last thing I want to do is hurt you or complicate your life even more.”

My first instinct was to argue with him. I didn’t need anyone telling me what I was or wasn’t ready for, or what I did or didn’t want. But... a lot *had* happened in the last twenty-four hours and I *was* buzzing with all kinds of frenetic energy last night. So instead I sat there, silent.

“I’m quitting the counseling center. I broke a major rule of the job last night and it wouldn’t be right of me to stay. I know you weren’t part of the group anymore, but I just think it’s best. Just in case anyone finds out. But I’m not going anywhere, I promise. When you’re ready, if you still want this, just say the word and I’ll be there. No matter if it’s next month or next year.”

He slipped his shoes on and stood. Our eyes locked as he looked down at me, and his leg twitched, like his body didn't know what to do next.

Finally he crouched down in front of me, wrapped his hand around the back of my neck and pulled me forward for a kiss. It was quick, just a brief touch, and yet it lit up every nerve ending I had. I strained forward to deepen the kiss, but he pulled his lips away, just enough to sever the connection. His forehead leaned into mine and his eyes fluttered shut briefly as we breathed in and out.

And then he stood up quickly and was gone, the click of the door latching behind him echoing in the stillness.

I sat there, unmoving, for I don't know how long. The sun was already well up and starting its day. I tried to process all that had just happened since I sat here on this same couch yesterday morning. When exactly had my feelings changed toward Nick? I didn't know. What had possessed me to kiss him like that last night? I remembered that in the moment... it just seemed right, natural. But why was I so pushy with him? Oh my God, just like Dustin, again, this was all my fault. Now he was losing his job and I was losing the only friend I had. Again.

I went back to bed and curled up under the blankets. I could still smell him on the pillow and I fell asleep with it next to me.

I slept for hours. When I woke up, I showered and dressed, got something to eat. I felt calmer than I did earlier. I kept waiting for the breakdown, kept waiting to fall down into that deep dark hole again but I never really did. The truth was, as I ran through Nick's words with a clearer head now, I could understand where he was coming from. Didn't mean I liked it, because I missed Nick. But I also still missed Dustin, and I had been trying to ignore the little ache in my chest and the voice in my head that was telling me I had betrayed Dustin by sleeping with someone else. I broke out into a cold sweat every time I heard that voice and I knew if I listened to it, if I allowed it to get louder, I would fall into that black hole of depression again.

I felt like I was stuck in limbo, a kind of purgatory—Dustin was the one who had died but I was the one who couldn't move on. I don't know how

many times I pulled those tiny pictures out of my wallet and stared at the two of us. And then two minutes later I'd be thinking of Nick again, wondering what he was doing. The voice from the other side of my brain would speak up and all the guilt would pour out—*how could you do this to him, he was the most honest, upstanding person you knew and you made him break rules and quit his job. Because of one kiss? Because you couldn't control yourself?*

To avoid all of these thoughts and feelings overwhelming me, I did what Doc Levinson had taught me—I focused on simple day-to-day things. I got up, got dressed, went to work. Came home, played with my nieces or helped my sister. I got a few strange looks from her and I know she wanted to ask what was up with me—it wasn't every day I offered to do the laundry or run the vacuum. Heck, I even cleaned my room. But I think she figured cleaning and doing chores was better than other activities I could be doing. I just wanted to keep busy.

I knew when the doc got back from his vacation, though, that I was going to have to face the music. Well, most of the music. I told him I'd met someone, but I sure as hell didn't say it was Nick.

“So how have you been, Sam?”

By the time I finished recounting all that had happened in just that one weekend, he had stopped writing on his pad and was looking at me over the rim of his glasses, with eyebrows raised. If he wasn't in professional mode, I could imagine a “holy shit,” escaping his mouth right about now.

“Good God, Sam, I suggested the movie as a baby step, I never expected you to jump in the deep end of the pool, clothes and all.”

I just stared back at him as he turned his attention back to his pad and tried to resume his scribbling. “I think I'll need a whole page for this.” Then he changed his mind and stopped, putting the pen down and leaning back in his chair instead.

“So how did you feel about all of this?”

Ugh, these doctors, always with the “how did you feel?” But my mouth opened and I found myself relaying everything that had been bouncing around

in my brain for the past two weeks. When I was done, I couldn't believe how good it felt to get all of that out.

“Sam, all of those feelings you're having are normal. Dustin will always be in your thoughts, and in your memories. It's natural to miss him and be sad and regretful. You're the one left behind and you can either choose to bury yourself in a grave of your own making by suspending your life in grief and loneliness, or you can choose to get up and go on and live your life. All the sessions we've had? All the tests I've been giving you? Have all been one more step up and out of that grave. I've done this a long time, Sam, and trust me, if you wanted to stay stuck in that grave of grief you would have done it. I cannot pull someone out by my will alone, they need to do it all on their own. And believe me, I have had patients who just can't or won't do it. You may think you're still in limbo, but you're not.”

He smiled gently at me. “Do you like this new man? Do you want to be with him?”

At the question, visions of Nick flooded my brain—of him smiling at me in the sunshine, of the fire in his eyes as he moved inside me, of the gentle look of adoration that shone from him after we made love. I could feel his skin and his touch and smell his scent. And I remembered how warm and safe I felt in his arms. Even that very second time we met at our bench, when I broke down and he wrapped me up in him and held me.

“Yes,” slipped quietly out of my mouth before I even contemplated it.

Doc Levinson was quiet, letting me process what I had just said.

“Will Dusty ever forgive me?” I croaked around the lump in my throat, blinking my eyes to hold in the wetness.

Doc leaned forward, resting his elbows on his desk. “If the tables were turned, Sam, if you were the one who was gone and Dustin was the one who was left behind and you knew you could never be with him again, would you want him to be alone forever? Or would you want him to find someone else who could love him as much as you had?”

I frowned for a minute, trying to envision Dustin in my place. I'd always hated seeing him sad, and would try anything to cheer him up. I couldn't imagine seeing him that way forever, it would crush me. I would want him to be happy. It would hurt, but if it couldn't be me, then I would want him to find someone who could make him smile again.

I couldn't speak so I nodded.

Doc smiled and tipped his head towards me. "There's your answer," he said quietly.

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Two days later I came home after work to a sea of large cardboard boxes in the living room.

"What is all this?"

My sister whispered something to my nieces and they ran off to their rooms. Emmy walked over to me, as I checked out the return address. They were from Mom and Dad. To me.

She draped an arm on top of a box and sighed. "I'm sorry, Sam. I've been trying for months to talk to Mom and Dad, to change their warped views, but they won't budge. I think Mom wants to, I really do think she misses you... but between Dad and their priest influencing her, she is just as immovable as they are.

"Every time I call, they ask if you have gone to confession yet and I always argue that you have done nothing to warrant confession. Last week they called me and when I said the same thing, they said they were done, they were cleaning out your room and sending your stuff."

She came over and put her arm around me and squeezed. I couldn't really say I felt any emotion as I numbly stared at the boxes. I always knew how they felt about homosexuality, so even when I lived at home I think I always knew something like this was going to happen someday.

"Well... at least they didn't just throw it all out, I guess."

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I spent the whole next day unpacking the remains of who I used to be. That's exactly how I looked at it—I felt like I was a different person than the one I was a year ago. I pitched a lot of stuff I had no more use for, or felt no connection with anymore. The clothes I kept. I almost threw away the rosary I'd been given at my confirmation, but at the last minute kept it. I can't really say I felt very strong in my Catholic faith these days, but maybe someday I'd change my mind.

I kept my school yearbooks and some other mementos, notes and pictures of school friends. I kept all my CD's and as I flipped through them I realized I was making a mental list of ones to share with Nick.

My laptop was also included in the sea of boxes. I wondered if my parents had looked through any of my computer files. Specifically, if they'd found my porn stash. Probably not, or else they would have burned the whole machine.

I sat down that night and plugged the laptop in and started it up. It chimed and the screen lit up. It still worked. Everything on the desktop seemed in order. I clicked on the hard drive icon, flipped through the list of files... yep, porn was still there. All my MP3s. Searching through all of the files on the computer—even the games I'd loved to play—felt like looking at someone else's files. Everything felt like a lifetime ago, and I felt like I'd aged a hundred years since. There was a folder labeled "school", and I opened it and scrolled through all of the files—reports and papers for classes long over. It suddenly hit me that I hadn't graduated high school. I had been stuck in that stupid asylum my parents put me in. I almost freaked out for a minute but calmed myself down. My parents made me miss my own graduation. And how had I not even thought about it until now? I guess having to rebuild my life was a little more pressing. I guess I'd have to look into getting my GED. Especially so I could start applying to college.

That word—college—stopped me in my tracks. It just popped up in my head without any thought, just as I came across the folder of files labeled "college". All my essays and applications I'd sent in. I didn't even know if I'd been accepted at any of them. My parents didn't send any of my mail in the boxes. I suppose I'd have to start all over again, beginning with the GED. I

was just surprised that I didn't even agonize over the decision; I just assumed I would go to college. Another step forward in moving on, I guess.

I closed out the computer window and decided to open my Internet browser. It took a few seconds—all the tabs I had open the last time I'd been on this computer were still open and it took a while to load. Suddenly my heart stopped at the page that popped up on the screen. I swallowed hard and took a breath. It was Dusty's Tumblr page. He used a screen name and it was his one private place he said that he could post anything he wanted, where no one knew it was him. He posted a lot of funny and serious quotes and funny GIFS, but there were also lots of gay-themed items too—photos of men kissing, posts by other LGBT teens about coming out from a Tumblr he followed. I remember many nights he'd call me to tell me to read what he'd just reposted from that Tumblr—usually a post about a girl or boy who had struggled in the closet for so long and then finally moved out or went to college or whatever and now they were out and proud and so happy. He always re-blogged those the most often, because they were his inspirations. He was just counting the days until he too could do that—be himself and be out. My chest hurt, knowing that Dustin would never get a chance to live that life he had been waiting so desperately for.

I couldn't look anymore and was just hovering over the button to close the whole browser down, when I glanced at the top image on the page. I stopped. I leaned closer to look at the date and time of the posting. I hadn't seen this post before—the time and date showed that he had apparently posted it a few minutes before I'd picked him up that last night.

It was an artsy photograph, shot in black and white. A super zoomed-in close-up shot of a hand, palm facing the camera. The palm looked scarred and rough, meant to make a statement, to show struggle maybe? There were black words written across the palm—*“It's time to let go... (it will be okay)”*

The screen blurred and eventually I realized it was because of the tears in my eyes. A sharp chill trickled over my whole body. I gently closed the screen of the laptop and sat there in the semidarkness on my bed, lost in my brain again. It felt like he was speaking to me from the grave and I shivered again. I

knew that was silly, that couldn't happen, right? But to find this from him... a year later, right when I needed it the most? I wondered what part of this picture had spoken to him, what had made him click the button to post it to his own page? What was going through his mind when he saw this? *Did you know Dusty? Did you know any of this year would happen when you posted it?*

Eventually I wiped my hand over my wet face and crawled into bed, exhausted but still not finding sleep. My mind was still overloaded and I was awake for hours. Until, finally, everything cleared and I knew what I would do tomorrow. What I *could* do now. *Thank you Dusty, I will always love you*, I sent silently out into the universe, hoping maybe he heard me wherever he was.

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The next day I was surprisingly calm. I forced myself to shower and get dressed and eat breakfast. I should have been too nervous to eat anything, but instead I found that I was ravenous, eating seconds of everything.

Finally, when I felt it was an appropriate hour and not too early, I sent a text.

*I'm ready. Meet me at noon.*

I didn't think I needed to say where, he would know. I spent the remaining hours carting all the empty boxes and trash bags to the trash room downstairs. I felt lighter and freer with each bag and pile of cardboard that I left there.

I got back on the computer and when Dusty's page came up, I just smiled, bookmarked it, and then clicked on the corner and it disappeared. Then I went along and closed or bookmarked all the tabs I had open, until I was left with a clean browser page. I typed "How to get your GED" into the search field and hit the Go button.

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When it was time, I forced myself to walk steadily and slowly to my destination, even though I wanted to run. With each step my heart got a little faster, hoping he would show. Hoping that he hadn't changed his mind or given up on me.



But as I turned the corner, I saw him from behind, already waiting at our bench. Restraint disappeared as my legs took off on their own.

When I came to a stop in front of him, Nick's eyes flicked up to me. There was a subdued hope in them as he looked at me with a slow, hesitant smile. The smile on my face pulled at my muscles so much I feared I was stretching them beyond their limits. But I couldn't help it. He stood up and I didn't waste any more time, I threw my arms around his neck and pulled him down just enough so my lips could meet his. It only took a second before I felt those strong arms wrap tightly around me. I was safe again and I knew Dusty was right—everything was going to be okay.

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*C. J. Anthony started reading and writing at an early age. She attributes her love of reading and romance to her mother who not only taught her to read but also made countless trips to the library lugging piles of books home for her to read. She loved getting lost in the people and places and adventures she found in books like the Little House on the Prairie™ series, Nancy Drew™, Trixie Belden™, just to name a few. It wasn't a far jump to start writing her own stories, early childhood tales about flower families and travelling to the moon with her best friend.*

*Writing, however, quickly fell by the wayside as she grew up and turned to other creative pursuits. Recently she was inspired to try writing again, this time with beautiful men in love speaking to her and wanting their stories to be told. C. J. has always been a hopeless romantic, believing in true love and soul mates, and HEAs, even if there is a little angst and pain along the way—life is never perfect, after all, but everyone deserves a happy ending and someone there to catch them when they fall.*

*When she's not writing—or trying to find time to write—she spends most of her time juggling a day job and freelance design work on the side, enjoying music, movies, spending time with friends and, of course, reading.*

## Contact Info

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