

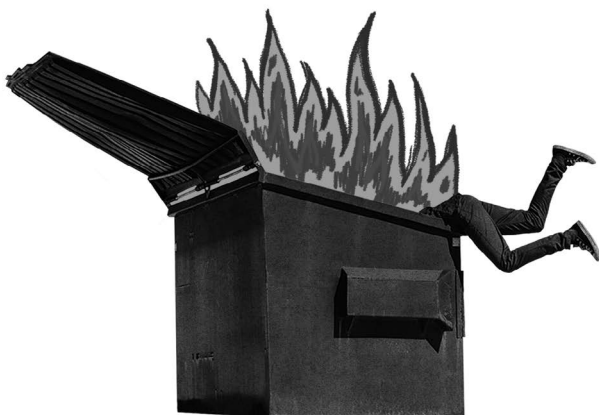
the
FEELING
of



**FALLING
IN LOVE**

MASON DEEVER

author of I WISH YOU ALL THE BEST



ALSO BY MASON DEEVER

I Wish You All the Best

The Ghosts We Keep

the
FEELING
of **FALLING**
IN LOVE

**MASON
DEAVER**

PUSH

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**FOR EVERY TRANS PERSON
WHO EVER BELIEVED THEY
WERE TOO COMPLICATED FOR
A LOVE STORY**

Thursday

APRIL 14

“I love you,” he says.

The sirens in my head start going off. At first I wonder if I’ve heard him right, between the heavy breathing, the sound of our kissing, the soft music he’s got playing. In fact, I’m sure I heard him wrong. Maybe it was a line from the song instead?

But then I pull away from Josh, and he’s staring up at me with those big brown eyes of his, like he’s expecting some kind of answer from me.

That’s when I realize I’m truly in trouble.

And here I thought this was going to be a nice visit, some making out, maybe fooling around before afternoon classes.

But no.

Instead, he’s said those three little words, and he’s waiting for me to say them back. Then we’ll kiss and fall back onto the bed and probably miss class, but it won’t matter because we’re in love! And everything is perfect!

Except it isn’t.

And now I have to have this conversation. So annoying.

“Neil?” He’s still looking at me.

“Okay.”

His face sinks, the smile gone in an instant. “Okay?” he repeats.

“That’s what I said.” I want to get off his lap, but his hands are still on my waist.

“I said ‘I love you,’” he says again. Like I didn’t hear him.

“And I said ‘okay.’” I huff, pulling myself away from him, his hands retreating. He’s always loved touching me, and usually I don’t mind. A hand around my waist or up the back of my shirt, faintly scratching my back while we watch movies. He always gets frustrated because I fall asleep before the movie’s over, but I can also tell he thinks it’s cute. Movie night’s the most we’ve ever allowed this arrangement to veer toward anything resembling us being boyfriends, and that’s only because I get a nice back scratch out of it, or him playing with my hair.

Josh and I laid down the rules firmly when this entire thing started. It was just a bit of stress relief, and that’s all it was ever supposed to be.

We’d both agreed to that.

“What else do you want me to say?” I ask him.

Josh still looks like he’s in shock. “I’d like it if you’d say something besides ‘okay.’”

“Thank you?” It comes out as more of a question than I mean it to.

All I can do is stand there awkwardly while he processes whatever is going on in that head of his. There’s disappointment on his face, anger, sadness, pity—a whole range of emotions he’s forcing himself through over three little words.

“I knew this was a mistake,” Josh whimpers. I don’t want to sound mean or anything, but he’s getting pretty pitiful. “I knew it.”

“If you knew it, then why’d you say it?” I ask him.

“I don’t know.” He hangs his head in shame. “I think part of me was just . . . I guess hoping you’d say it back.”

“Not really, sorry . . .” I tell him. I glance at the Rolex on my

wrist—Oyster Perpetual, the one with the nice black dial. If we don't wrap this up soon, we're both going to be late for class.

I should have known that something was up; I should have felt it. I mean, did I have a gut feeling that something bad like this was going to happen? No, not really, but still, I should have seen it coming.

The only reason I came here is because he asked, because there was an unanswered text from him on my phone telling me to drop by before Classic Lit. I figured, why not? Josh's dorm room was close to the English building, even if it meant that I'd be risking hickeys on my neck for the rest of the day. I imagined some fooling around would make the rest of the day a little more enjoyable.

"I thought . . ." Josh begins to say. Then he backs up and starts again. "You're telling me that you don't feel this? You don't think we have something real?" I think there might actually be tears welling up behind his eyes; they seem wetter than usual.

He reaches up for my hand, but I back away and let it fall.

"We had an agreement, Josh. No feelings, no dating, no emotions. Just fun. Look, I enjoy spending time with you, but that's because we were friends before this entire situation was even an idea. That's how I see us—two friends who happen to have sex every now and then."

It's been, up until this moment, an absolutely perfect setup. He has a single dorm room, so there aren't any roommates to worry about when we want to be together, and he isn't a half-bad kisser either; a little too much tongue, but that's his only real flaw.

When this whole situation started up at the beginning of this

school year, we'd made things clear. This was just a friendly thing, just us hooking up, relieving some tension, and helping each other out. We even had a Pull-Out Clause—Josh came up with the name: If either of us ever started to get serious about another person, we'd call the whole thing off and move on.

This was never supposed to be about love, or feelings, or any junk like that. We're in high school, for fuck's sake. Who falls in love in high school?

And now, with three little words, it's all undone.

"I should probably leave," I say.

"No, wait!" Josh jumps up. "Please, wait!"

I just stare at him, his eyes wide after the outburst. In all the years I've known him, I've never seen him worked up like this. He isn't exactly the loud type. He's scrawny, with a little bit of muscle, and height that comes in handy when he plays basketball.

Maybe after things have calmed down a little, I can help set him up with someone, someone who wants the same things he wants. Let's just hope this other boy doesn't mind the amount of LEGO Star Wars sets that decorate his dorm room. My eyes avoid Josh's and instead focus on this huge thing he calls a Y-wing; it had been a bitch to find because apparently it had been "retired." I had to make an account on some LEGO-selling website just to find it, and we'd spent twelve hours total building the stupid thing.

"I'm sorry," he says softly.

"Josh." I close my eyes, pinching the bridge of my nose. "I've got to get to class."

"Can't I get anything from you?"

"I don't know what you want me to say."

“Anything,”

“I’ve said plenty and you didn’t seem happy with that either, so forgive me if I’m a little confused.” I glance at my watch, calculating the minutes it’ll take to get to Mr. Johnson’s English class. I think I’ve got three, and that’s being generous.

“What if we go back?” Josh asks. “What if we just hit rewind, undo the last few minutes, and pretend like nothing ever happened. I take it back, okay? Seriously. Let’s just forget it.”

Oh, how I’d love for that to happen, to be blasted with some laser that would erase both of our short-term memories. But now that I know the truth, now that I know how Josh really feels about this entire situation, there’s no undoing it. I need to pull the plug.

“Goodbye, Josh. I’ll see you at dinner?”

He’s known me for almost ten years, so he should know I’m not behaving any different than usual. He’s always been one to appreciate my bluntness, my ability to tell the truth.

“You’re joking, right?”

“What? It’s not like we’re broken up. I think it’s better if we go back to just being friends without benefits. Or, like, the sexual benefits.”

I know now I should’ve broken it off sooner. I take in the disappointment on his face, the sour expression, and I let out a low groan.

“Josh,” I say, “let me ask you, what did you really think was going to happen?”

He finally looks up at me again, and he stares, contemplating his words for a bit before he opens his mouth. “I thought . . . I thought that maybe you’d change your mind, or that our ‘rules’ didn’t matter anymore.”

“How do you think that’s going for you?”

Okay, maybe that was a little mean. But I’m getting annoyed, and I don’t want to be late for class.

“You don’t have to be a jerk.”

“I’m not the bad guy here, Josh. You knew what this was.”

“I’m not saying you’re the bad guy,” he tells me. “I was just hoping for a little compassion.”

“I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

His shoulders slump. I’ve never seen him look this defeated. “Yeah . . . sure.”

I grab my backpack off his desk chair and slip out into the hallway as quickly as I can, walking as fast as my short legs will carry me. My mind keeps racing as I try to process everything that’s just happened, and I rub at my forehead to calm the headache I can feel coming on. And of course, Josh just *had* to make his declaration *two* days before we’re supposed to leave for Michael’s wedding. Josh was going to be the buffer between me and my family, the safety net so I could protect myself, but now that’s all gone up in flames.

An entire week spent in Beverly Hills surrounded by the awful people who make up my family. Josh was supposed to be there to save me, to drag me away from my grandparents when they asked about my surgeries, to distract me at the brunches and the rehearsal dinner.

Now I’m going to have to spend a week avoiding both him *and* my family.

That’ll be fun.

Maybe this is my fault? Maybe I gave Josh too much attention, too much time, too much effort?

No. The more I think about it, the more I can see this as his

fault. I never gave him any indication that we could fall in love, that we could possibly be boyfriends, that we'd drive off into the sunset holding hands. Jesus fucking Christ, we're teenagers. It isn't that serious.

This isn't my fault; it can't be.

Unless I'm just too lovable for my own good.

I think the day can't possibly get any worse, and of course it does. Between everything with Josh this morning, two quizzes in my final classes that I'm sure I failed, and being so distracted that I forgot to take notes in biology, I'm ready for this day to just end.

My stomach isn't helping either, growling low enough for the people around me to hear. If Josh hadn't dragged me to his room, I would've had time to eat lunch. Now I'm starving, and it'll be hours before the dining hall is open for dinner.

The iced coffee I bought from the campus café this morning is definitely gone. I'm already plotting on how to get back to the dorm and grab the box of granola bars hidden under my bed before Fowler gets there and forces me to *small talk*.

God, that's one more thing snatched away from me. Josh has one of the rare single rooms on campus, which means it's been a safe haven, a sanctuary where I can use the spare key he gave me to be alone if needed. Alone, and—most important—away from the annoying little Goody Two-shoes I'm forced to share this space with.

And now that's gone.

Fan-fucking-tastic.

The final bell rings, and I'm the first out of the classroom. Political science is in the Henry building across campus from

my dorm, so it takes some time to get back there, but if I'm not mistaken, Fowler should be at the music club until five or six, so perhaps I'm in the clear for the next few hours.

When I get to my door, I reach into my pocket, looking for my key ring, except it isn't there.

I dig into my other pocket. Just my phone.

Wallet in the back right pocket. The back left pocket is empty like always.

Okay, Neil, don't panic. Don't worry because you always have your key in your right pocket, because that's where it always is and now it isn't for some reason. You probably just left it in your backpack, put it in one of the pockets.

Except it isn't there.

Even after emptying my entire backpack on the floor, there isn't a single key to be found.

I slowly bang my head against the door. How long will it take to concuss myself? I've seen guys in football games get smacked a lot harder and be . . . okay-ish? Maybe I should just do it harder? That'll give me an excuse not to go to the wedding this weekend.

Except when I go to smack my head again, the door opens and I stumble forward and trip, actually hitting my head on the floor before I can catch myself. The result is a sharp pain, and an instant headache that no amount of rolling over or rubbing my forehead will make go away. I open my eyes slowly, ignoring the pain, and I see Wyatt Fowler staring up at me. Or rather, down at me.

"Thank you," I say quietly.

"You were banging on the door."

"I lost my keys."

Wyatt looks at my nightstand and pulls something off of it. “Here they are.” He tosses them toward me, but I make no effort to catch them, letting them hit my stomach with a jingle.

I pick myself up.

Wyatt’s mostly dressed in his school uniform; the obviously secondhand blazer has been thrown casually on his bed to be hung up later. I suppose the music club is off if he’s here already. I throw my bag on the floor and fall face-first onto my bed, relishing the feeling of the plush comforter. And then I let out the loudest groan possible.

“Yeah?”

I don’t answer him.

“Rough day?”

“Stop talking,” I moan, my voice muffled.

“Did something happen?”

“It’s none of your business.”

“Whatever you say,” Wyatt drawls out. I don’t know where Wyatt was born exactly, but I do know he’s from North Carolina. He’s said as much himself. And even if he hadn’t, his accent alone would’ve told me he’s as southern as the biscuits and gravy that seem to be on nearly every breakfast menu in Charlotte. His words are slow except when they aren’t, when he mumbles so much that I can’t understand a word he says.

“Just stop talking,” I beg him again.

Wyatt whistles, turning up the same indie bullshit that he’s always listening to or playing on his guitar.

“Turn that down,” I tell him.

He ignores me.

“Hey, I said turn it down. Didn’t you hear me?”

“I did,” he says. “What I didn’t hear was a ‘please.’”

“I’m not going to beg you to turn the music down.” I turn my head so I can see the smug smile on his face and that stupid gap between his two front teeth.

“It’s not begging,” he says. “It’s called having manners.”

“Whatever.” I’m not going to fight with him over this. I just want to sleep. I don’t even remember when I decided that a nap would fix the things wrong with today, but I’m deciding that now. Except the bass is kicking in on his song, and a beat comes in and it’s super noisy, so I stand up fast and walk over to where Wyatt’s ancient iPhone is sitting on the shelf (I mean, it still has a home button, come on) and I turn off the music.

“Hey!” he protests.

“I asked nicely.” I get back in bed.

“That’s the one thing you didn’t do.” He goes over and turns the music back on.

“I was trying to nap.”

“What’s up with you today?” he asks. “You never talk to me this much.”

“You’re lucky I’m acknowledging you at all,” I mumble back into my pillow. “I’m just in a bad mood.”

“Well, I don’t know what caused your foul mood, but it isn’t my fault, even if my last name *is* Fowler.”

My God.

The worst part is that I know he’s right. But it’s the fact that he’s right, and the way he’s being so earnest and sincere about everything, that’s driving me up the wall. That’s what I can’t stand about Wyatt, he’s just so . . .

Good.

He’s always asking me how my day was, if I did well on my exams or assignments. He asks me where I’m going when I’m

leaving and *tells me to be safe*. And even though I never, ever ask, he tells me where *he's* going and if he'll be back late.

I'm about to get up to turn his music off again when I'm saved by my phone. Or, rather, Wyatt is saved by my phone. Samuel's calling.

"What?"

"Whoa, sounds like someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed." He laughs, and I can perfectly picture the way his mouth stretches into a smile while he does it. I wish I were there to smack the look off his face.

"What do you want, Samuel?"

"I was just calling you to see what's up."

"I'm in my room." I peer over at Wyatt, realizing for the first time that he's got an open suitcase on his bed. He's walking over to his closet now, grabbing one of the dozens of flannel shirts or worn-out band T-shirts he wears when we aren't required to be in uniform. The one he's holding has a picture of some blond lady on the back with the words TINY HOT TOPIC BITCH written on the front. Even after almost a year it's always funny seeing him outside of his uniform in this weird grunge guitar-kid aesthetic. The boy even wears *earrings*, tiny little hoops in his ears that he puts in every day so the holes won't close.

Samuel mutters to someone off the call before he comes back to me. "We're heading to the bridge; you want to come?"

"No."

The chances of Josh being there are way too high.

"Why not? One last hurrah before spring break. Josh isn't going to be there," he adds, like he's reading my mind.

I almost end the call there.

“Why would you say that? What difference does it make if Josh is or isn’t there?”

“You two had a fight, didn’t you?”

“Who told you that?”

“Let’s see . . .” Samuel does a little *tut, tut, tut*. “I heard it from Julien, who heard it from Hoon, who heard it from Mark, who heard straight from Josh that you’d broken up.”

I guess they had enough sense to not talk about it in our group chat.

“We didn’t ‘break up.’ You can’t break up if you’re not dating.” I realize I might be saying too much in front of Fowler, but he doesn’t even turn around.

“Well, the posts Josh is making on Insta and Snapchat sure make it look like a breakup.”

I pause.

“What?”

“Go check his stories—it’s kind of sad. I feel bad for the guy.”

“It wasn’t a breakup; you shouldn’t feel sorry for him!”

“Whatever. Just come down.”

“I’m good.”

Before Samuel can say anything else, I end the call, and a moment later I get a text from him.

SAMUEL: 😊

I ignore him and wonder if I should start packing now or if I can wait until tonight. I can’t imagine what the wedding will be like without Josh there; then again, I really won’t have to, because he’ll still be there, sitting across from me.

I wonder how mad Michael would be if I backed out of being

a groomsman. It's not like we even talk that much. He doesn't text, doesn't call. He likes my Instagram posts every now and then and we see each other at holidays.

You'd probably never guess we're brothers.

He looks so much like Dad.

And I . . . well, pre-testosterone, I looked a lot like Mom. But then my shoulders got broader, my jaw filled out, and I started growing facial hair, no matter how sparse it looks. So now I don't look like her either.

If only 23andMe had some kind of service to wipe the rest of her DNA out of my gene pool.

I can't go to this wedding alone. I can't spend a week in Beverly Hills with Mom and Michael and them bickering with each other, and suits and family meals and parties, and Nana and Grandpa, who will most definitely ask me if I've "switched back to being a girl" or "gotten the down-there surgery."

I'd rather pull out each of my teeth individually. I won't be able to put up with Mother reminding me every chance she gets that I *ruined everything*, or the comments that my family will make about me behind my back.

I let out another groan before standing up and grabbing my suitcase out of my closet. Pants, shirts, underwear, socks, shoes—they all get stuffed inside, so stuffed I can't actually close the damn thing.

I pull the zipper, but it doesn't budge, because of course it doesn't.

"You've packed it too tight," Wyatt observes.

I step into his line of sight and pull the zipper again, and again, and again. It moves half an inch at a time, before it gets impossibly snagged.

“You’re going to tear the zipper,” he says. “If you packed neater, you wouldn’t have this problem.”

“*If you packed neater, you wouldn’t have this problem.*” I mock the drawl of his accent. “I don’t need your help.”

“Clearly.”

I pull the suitcase onto the floor, sitting on top of it with all two hundred and twenty pounds of myself on top, pulling at it.

I pull, and I pull, and I pull, and suddenly I’m falling back toward my bed. My head hits the side of my mattress as I stumble, feeling the hardwood floor underneath my butt.

The reality of what happened only occurs to me when I’m sitting there, staring at the torn zipper, part still attached to the frayed teeth of the track and part in my hand.

“Fuck me.”

“I told you.”

“Just stop,” I tell him. “Please, for the love of God, just stop.”

I throw the zipper head down on the floor and pull my knees to my chest, hiding my face. Why won’t this day just end? Why? It started off so well too: I got my iced coffee, the weather was nice, I took the long way to chemistry, Samuel wasn’t a complete idiot and actually made me laugh a few times, and Hoon and I got some work on our Classic Lit project done.

Then Josh had to go and ruin it with three little words.

This is all his fault.

Everything.

“Don’t worry, you can fix this easy,” Wyatt says, picking up the broken-off part of the zipper.

“Leave it.”

“I’ve got my sewing kit—”

“I said leave it!” I shout, cutting him off. Then I stand up,

making the split-second decision to grab my phone and slip my shoes back on.

“Where are you going?” Wyatt asks.

“Out.”

“Out where?”

“Out,” I say, pulling the door loudly shut. I walk past my classmates, taking out my phone and dialing Samuel back.

“Hey—”

“I’ll meet you at the bridge,” I say before he can get another word out. And then I end the call.

I promise I don’t make it a habit of hanging out underneath old bridges that no one uses.

I swear.

Hoon found this place first, near the south side of campus where no one really goes because it’s so out of the way. Mark bought a couch from a thrift store and dragged it down here with Samuel, and Julien was always ready to provide something new to drink, typically stolen from his father’s liquor cabinet.

Just like that, we had our own little clubhouse, perfect for two white gay trans boys (Samuel and myself), a bisexual Korean boy (Hoon), a Black bi boy (Julien), a Black kid who was supposed to be our token straight but is now going through his own adventure with his sexuality and gender (Mark), and a cis gay white boy (Joshua).

We’re like our own gay Power Rangers, minus the color-coordinated rainbow suits.

“There he is!” Samuel shouts as I trudge down the steep dirt hill that we use as a walkway.

“Here I am,” I say, making my way toward them. They’ve got

a fire going even though the sun is still out. Samuel and Julien are occupying the couch. Hoon brought the camping chairs from his room because, like me, he doesn't trust a couch that lives outside. "Where's Mark?" I ask when I notice that we're down a person.

Or two people, I guess.

"He left early with his parents," Hoon says.

Julien hands me a beer out of a bag that looks like it's from the CVS down the street. So that's new.

"No bourbon?" I ask.

"Dad was catching on," he says. "Gotta be careful. He won't miss his cheap beers, though." Julien's parents live in Charlotte, so he typically goes home on the weekends, always bringing back goodies for us.

"Sure." I open the can and take a sip, my mouth twisting at the bitterness. "This is awful."

"Big baby," Julien chides. "Don't like it, don't waste it." He holds out his hand to take the beer away from me, but I snatch it back.

"No way, I need this after the day I've had."

"Oh yeah, we heard about—" Hoon starts to say, but I cut him off.

"Don't mention Josh. This is a Josh-free zone tonight. I don't want to think about him, I don't want to talk about him, I don't even want to hear his name anymore. No more of that." I take my seat next to Hoon in the empty camping chair.

Suddenly, things get quiet, with nothing but the crack of the fire and some far-off cicadas making a racket. The guys are making a tremendous effort to not look at me. I can see where this is going from a mile away.

“So anyway.” Samuel leans forward. “What happened between you two?”

“I told you not to say his name.”

“Technically he didn’t,” Hoon cuts in.

I give Hoon a glare before I go back to my drink. I don’t even really like alcohol in most forms—I don’t think any of us do—it’s just become a ritual of sorts. “Whatever. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Are things going to get awkward now?” Hoon asks. His face is already flushed from however much he drank before I got here.

“I don’t know, Hoon—why don’t you ask Josh? He’s the one who broke the rules.”

“The rules?” Julien asks.

I don’t answer him. Things get quiet again, and suddenly I wish I hadn’t come here.

“Where is Josh?” Hoon asks.

I stare at him.

“In his room,” Julien says. “I checked on him earlier, but he said he wanted to be totally alone. I think you really broke his heart, Neil.”

“He’ll get over it,” I say. End of subject.

Only, Julien doesn’t take the cue. He asks, “Did you see his posts? They’re pretty depressing.”

Ugh, I guess I should see what they’re talking about. I go to Josh’s Snapchat to look at the stories he’s sharing. Broken-heart emojis, Olivia Rodrigo lyrics that imply that, while I didn’t cheat, I still betrayed him somehow, a slide saying “i don’t want to talk about it.”

“In all lowercase too,” I say. “That’s when you know it’s serious.”

So melodramatic.

“You could probably be nicer about this whole thing,” Julien adds. I’m starting to think he’s enjoying this.

“What am I supposed to do?” I ask all of them. “This was just a hookup, friends with benefits. When this whole thing started, we agreed that we’d tell each other if feelings were getting involved, and that if that happened, we’d stop it.”

This time it’s Hoon who says, after a beat of silence, “Yeah, but . . . you made him cry.”

I sit on the knowledge for a bit, a churning in my stomach stirring up every second I sit here. Then I say, “Okay, I’m leaving. I didn’t come here to be put on trial.” I leave my beer on the ground and start to walk away. If they want to make this such a huge deal, then they can do it without me here.

“No, wait . . .” Samuel stands up, racing over to grab my hand. This close up, I can see the peach fuzz on his face. “We were just talking. Don’t be a party pooper.”

Samuel most certainly isn’t drunk yet, but I can’t even tell if he’s tipsy or not. He’s almost always this bubbly, hyper, chaotic energy that’s honestly very exhausting on the best of days.

Then again, he’s one of six people at this school who go out of their way to talk to me. (Well . . . five people now.) I should probably do what I can to hang on to the friends I still have.

“No more Josh talk,” I warn, looking at him and then the rest of the boys.

“Yeah, of course. No more.” Samuel mimes zipping his mouth closed and throwing away the key.

The rest of the boys nod, except for Hoon, who also zips his lips shut.

“Okay.” I take my seat again and sip on my beer, which is slowly getting better. Julien then pulls out a small Bluetooth

speaker and blasts some music out of it, and we sit there. Just like that, the night has gotten back to normal. Samuel starts watching TikToks on his phone and convinces Hoon to join him on the couch, because Hoon is 100% whipped for Samuel; Julien starts doing his own karaoke; and after being down here for a good hour and a half, Hoon pulls UNO cards out of his bag and starts shuffling them carefully.

I'm out first, emptying my hand in a cruel move that leaves Julien with six freshly drawn cards in his hand.

"No stacking!" he shouts.

"No one said we couldn't stack." I laugh, opening my second beer can of the night.

We prefer to play for as long as we can instead of ending it at the first person out, which means the game lasts for another hour and comes right down to Hoon and Julien.

I don't know when things get so hot, but at some point, I unbutton the top few buttons of my shirt and roll up my sleeves. I feel queasy too. Probably should've eaten something before I came here.

"You look like you're thinking," Samuel says. He's definitely tipsy by now.

"Do not," I say. We've moved to the couch, not even caring about the mold or bugs.

"Yeah, you do." Samuel leans in. "You're getting that crease right there." His finger traces the skin between my brows.

"Stop." I pull away from him.

"You're going to get wrinkles!"

"And you're going to get smacked," I tell him.

Samuel holds his hands out defensively. "Whoa, okay, okay. Enough of that. No need to get upset."

“I’m not upset.”

“Yeah, you are.” Samuel scoots closer to me. “How are you going to handle this wedding? Josh is still going, right?”

“I don’t know. His brother is Michael’s best man, so of course Josh and his parents were also invited.”

“You’re going solo? That won’t be much fun.”

“Well, I don’t exactly have time to find a date,” I say. Nor would I want to if I did have the time.

“You know.” Samuel wraps an arm around my shoulder. The only time he can get away with something like that is when he’s drunk. “If I wasn’t going with my parents back to New York, I’d totally go with you.”

“As if I’d want to drag you along.”

“How dare you!” he says with a sloppy smile. “I’m a catch!”

It’s not that I wouldn’t want Samuel to come with me. He’d probably provide a good relief from my family, or at least be able to keep me distracted. But there’s no way in hell I’d subject him to that. Of course, they may be kinder about being trans to a stranger, but still, I’d rather not risk it.

“You could ask one of the boys.”

“Like Hoon?” I tease.

And Samuel blushes right on cue. I should probably feel bad about making fun of his crush, but I swear, it’s so obvious the two of them are in love with each other, but they just won’t do anything about it. It’s frustrating. Especially when I’m the one Samuel comes crying to about it.

“They’re all busy,” I say. “Besides, I’m not subjecting them to my family.”

“What about your roommate?” Samuel asks, his voice a

little quieter due to his embarrassment. “I bet he’d help you out. Wyatt’s a nice guy, charming, funny.”

“Words used to describe most serial killers,” I say. “And since when do *you* have such a boner for Fowler?”

Samuel sits for a beat. “You’re being a jerk again.”

“No, I’m not. Wait—*again*?”

Samuel leans in even closer. “You’re being a jerk to Josh too.”

“I don’t want to have this conversation.”

“But you gotta. You can’t just dump him.”

“I didn’t dump him! We weren’t dating!”

Samuel blows a raspberry. “You could’ve fooled me.”

What is that even supposed to mean? I hardly let Josh touch me when we were out in public, and I sure as hell didn’t touch him. How could anyone read into that? Unless Josh was telling them what we did behind closed doors . . .

I swear to God.

“I’m leaving.” I stand up a little too quickly, wobbling my way away from Samuel.

“Wait, Neil! Come back!” he whines. “I didn’t mean it!”

When I start to walk, it feels like I’ve got concrete shoes on. My feet feel so heavy, and I only make it five steps before I stumble and try to catch myself. Except I don’t, and I land right in the dirt.

Shit.

Samuel laughs a bit before he walks over to me, hoisting me up by my arms. “Come on, let’s get you back to your room.”

“I’m fine. I can do it alone.” Does my voice always sound this way? Suddenly my tongue feels very slippery.

“You’re drunk,” Samuel says.

“You’re drunk too.”

“Yeah, but I’m less drunk.”

I look past him toward the rest of the boys. “Bye, guys!” I wave to the others still sitting around the milk box. “Have a good spring break!”

Samuel wraps one of my arms around his shoulder, and we make our way up the steep dirt path. I trip again, getting my shirt even dirtier. These stains are going to take so much to get out.

Once we’re on flat ground, it’s an easier walk, even with the uneven brick walkways all over campus. It shouldn’t be a long walk, but it feels like it takes forever.

“Come on, Neil. You’ve got to help me here.”

“Don’t want to,” I say. Because that’s the truth. I don’t want to walk, and I don’t want to go back to my dorm room. I don’t want to go to the wedding. I want to go somewhere far away, a cabin in the middle of nowhere with no one around. No Samuel, no Hoon or Julien or Mark.

No Fowler.

And no Josh.

“You had like three beers, you lightweight.”

“I didn’t eat lunch.” Or dinner, for that matter.

“That explains it. Do you have your keys?” Samuel asks me.

“I dunno.” Did I grab them?

“Check your pockets.”

“You do it.”

Samuel grunts, leaning me against the wall and running his hands along my pants pockets.

“Don’t touch my butt.” I push him away.

“Believe me when I say I want that even less than you do.” He stares me up and down. “You forgot your keys?”

“Probably,” I grumble.

“Fine.” Samuel knocks on the door to my room loudly, again and again and again.

“Shhhh.” I bat his hand away. “You’ll wake the RA up.”

“It’s eight thirty.”

I hear footsteps through the wood, and Wyatt unlocks the door, opening it slowly. “Yes?”

“Yes?” I mock his accent. “Why do you talk like that?”

I see his expression turn to disappointment.

“He’s your problem now.” Samuel wrangles himself out from under my arm and waves. “Bye, Neil. Have fun at the wedding.”

“Wait, you can’t just leave him here! Seriously?” Wyatt calls out, but Samuel is already down the hall with a spring in his step, his strawberry-blond hair bouncing while he moves. Then Wyatt turns to me. “You look awful.”

“Shut up.”

“You smell awful too.” He looks at my shirt. “And you’re filthy. Go take a shower.”

“You’re not my mom,” I say, stumbling into the room.

“You need to shower; you can’t go to bed sweaty and covered in dirt.” Wyatt claps his hands together. “Where is your shower bag?”

I point to my closet.

“Come on,” he says after he finds it.

“Where are we going?”

“To the showers, before curfew.”

“You don’t have to come with me,” I say, trying my best to

stand back up. All I end up doing, though, is wobbling some more. Wyatt has to catch me. "I'm a big boy. I can do it."

"I'm more worried about me. Do you know how much trouble I'll get in if you drown yourself or fall down the stairs?"

"That's not going to happen." I wrestle his hands off my shoulders, but even though I told him not to, he follows me anyway. I slide against the wall a few times, catching myself before I fall to the floor.

"How much did you have?" he asks.

"Two beers."

"Wow . . . you really can't handle your alcohol."

"Right? You'd think with the amount of gin and vodka my mother ingests I'd have developed some kind of natural immunity."

"That's not how genetics works," Wyatt tells me, forcing me to stand up straight.

"It was a joke," I say bluntly.

"Forgive me. I'm not used to you making those."

It feels like it takes forever for us to make the few yards to the communal bathroom that all the boys on this floor share. Wyatt brings me to the shower area, stalls on each side of the room with a long bench running down the middle like a locker room.

Just like everything about Steerfield, it seems like the school never got past the original architecture from when it was built in the 1800s.

"Here, go shower." Wyatt shoves the shower bag and towel in my arms.

"Not going to hold my hand while I'm in there?"

Wyatt smirks, his eyebrows hidden by his hair. "Not unless you want me to."

I feel heat behind my ears. “Shut up.”

I step past the first curtain into the small changing room where I can leave my filthy uniform as I strip down. I’m trying hard not to think about the idea that Wyatt is so close by, a thick piece of nylon protecting him from seeing me naked. I almost shower in my clothes, just so I don’t have to look at myself, but then Wyatt would yell at me, so I step out of where my pants and shoes and underwear are pooled around my ankles and turn the water almost as hot as it’ll go, the steam radiating off my body instantly.

I can’t resist the urge to stand right under the stream of water, letting it run off me as I scrub at my face with nothing, knowing that it’s just going to dry me out.

But Wyatt was right—this does feel good, so I really don’t care.

For a bit at least, and then I start to trace my hands down my chest. I started on blockers *just* too late to avoid wearing binders or getting top surgery. I remember my doctors recommending me cream, saying that my scars would eventually fade on their own, but the cream would help. It did help at first, with how tender everything felt, but eventually, when I felt healed, I stopped using it. I don’t really know why, maybe because I like my scars. I like showing them off . . . at least to myself.

Then lower, there’s my stomach that hangs over my waist, and stretch marks on my hips. These parts of myself that I’m expected to hate so much, that are so ugly to other people whose opinions of my body shouldn’t matter.

And they don’t.

At least Josh appreciated them. The way his hands moved, it seemed like he couldn’t get enough of my chest, and he never cared about my weight.

“You okay in there?” Wyatt’s voice echoes off the tiled walls.

“Yes,” I say. I reach toward the knob, turning off the water. I stand there for a bit longer, my soaked hair hanging on my forehead. I towel off, slip back into my clothes, and pull back the shower curtain.

“Better now?” Wyatt asks me.

That’s when I feel it, the sudden heat in my stomach and the rise of the bile at the back of my throat.

“I’m going to vomit,” I say.

“What?”

And then I empty what little contents are in my stomach all over Wyatt’s shoes.

“I’ll buy you a new pair,” I say as Wyatt tucks me into bed, pulling my sheets up to hide my shame. I don’t want to see the look on his face.

“It’s fine,” Wyatt says, though he sounds exhausted.

“Why do you even wear those things?” I ask him, peering over at the freshly scrubbed lime-green Crocs at the foot of his bed.

Seriously. Lime. Green. Crocs.

My vomit did them so many favors.

“Have you seen our classmates?” he replied. “I don’t trust any of them to treat their athlete’s foot properly.”

“Fair enough.” I turn over. “I’ll still buy you a new pair.”

“It’s fine.”

I know that it isn’t; I can tell from the tone of his voice. And how am I ever going to live down Fowler having to take care of me while I was drunk? He’ll never let me forget it, but he’ll never actually use it against me because he’s too nice. He’ll just let the guilt hang there.

“This day has fucking sucked,” I say, not caring one bit if Wyatt is paying attention.

“You’re telling me.”

“It’s all Josh’s fault.”

“Is it?”

“Yes.”

“Are you so sure?” Wyatt’s voice is quiet.

“Yeah.”

“Did you two break up?”

“I’m so sick of being asked that,” I mumble.

“Okay, forget that I said anything. You’re right. Josh totally ruined your day.”

I should probably find it patronizing, but right now I don’t think I could even pretend to care. “Thanks.”

I hear Wyatt snicker, and the thud of him putting something on his desk. “For what?”

He wants me to thank him for taking me to the shower, for making sure I brushed my teeth three or four times, for cleaning up the mess I made.

He wants the moral high ground.

People like him like it there.

“For agreeing with me,” I say.

He laughs again. “Good night, Kearney.”

“Night, Fowler.”

I lie there for just a little bit longer, my breath slowing, the alcohol finally wearing off a degree, the rancid taste in my mouth barely detectable thanks to the mint flavor of the toothpaste and mouthwash I used.

“I want a do-over,” I grumble. Like one of those movies where the main character gets to live the same day over and

over again. Josh made me watch one of those. *Happy Death Day*, that's what I want. Just without all the killing.

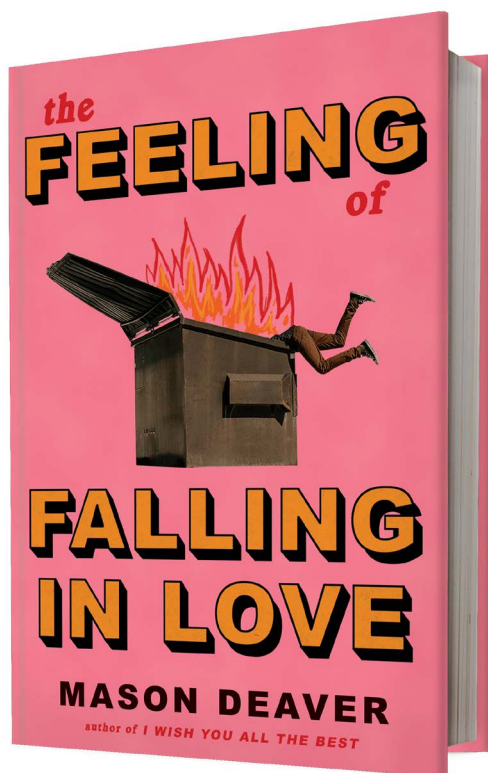
Well . . .

Maybe a little killing.

I want a do-over . . .

But no one will give me one.

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