The Wallflower's Guide to Love

by Art3misPlayerOne

Summary

Dan is a brilliant but painfully shy and awkward guitar player in a popular local band who prefers to hide from the spotlight. He's content to lose himself in his playing and avoids friendships and emotional attachments, but an accidental run-in with a mystery boy inspires him to reach out to him through anonymous texts.

Too scared that the boy will be disappointed in the real him, Dan doesn't want to reveal his identity and risk losing their surprising connection. When forced to choose between his anonymity and putting his heart on the line, help from an unexpected friendship pushes him far beyond his comfort zone, but will it be too little too late?
The Boy in the Record Store

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

My intent was to run inside the record store to check if they carried our album. My definition of success for our band is seeing it stocked at the record store I've gone to every Monday for five years. It’s probably the only realistic chance I’ll ever have to share space with Muse.

However, the real issue is no longer the record. My current problem is leaning on the counter at the record store, laughing with the clerk behind it. I guess I shouldn’t call him a problem since that has yet to be determined. He is more of a curiosity. I’m making my 6th pass around the huge store, idly biting my bottom lip as I flip through records I’m not even looking at anymore. I hurry my way along the back wall but walk slower along the aisle that leads to the front counter. I am currently trying to dissect their body language to determine their relationship. Just friends? Clerk and customer? Boyfriends? My fake record examining takes on a new intensity as I try to appear inconspicuous and casual. I try not to stare, but this boy is definitely worth staring at. The closer I get to the end of the aisle, the more of their conversation I can pick up, but only in bits and pieces. It sounds like they're talking about mutual friends. Something about film school maybe? Going to the Bluebird Bar. Wait….what are they saying about the Bluebird? If I can just get a little bit closer….

Abruptly, my attention is drawn back to what I am pretending to do. In my odd quest to get information about the perfect black haired boy, I manage to elbow a stack of records off of a display next to the counter sending them cascading to the floor. Smooth. Considering I had crept up to within about two feet of them, they both jump at the proximity of the noise.

"Sorry..." I mumble, shrugging apologetically at the clerk behind the counter, immediately crouching down to gather up the records. To my shock and horror, the boy also bends down and starts helping me. I allow myself to steal a glance at him, finding myself thrown off entirely by how close he is. I let out a small gasp as he picks that moment to look up and catches me examining him, which I'm not prepared for. His big blue eyes wander over my face, causing me to freeze, but before I can decide what to do, he smiles slightly and looks away. And oh my God! How does he smell so good? I start to lean a little closer to take a deeper breath before I catch myself. Did I just try to sniff a stranger? I can already feel the telltale blush rising up my neck. Suddenly, I feel even more self-conscious about my plain appearance and social ineptitude.

We both stand up, and I casually try to restack the records without causing any more physical damage to the store or psychological damage to myself. I hold out my hands to take his share of the records, ducking my head and not pressing my luck by looking at him again.

"Don't worry about it," the guy behind the counter says dismissively. "It happens all the time. Not my idea to set a display up that close to where people wait in line. Daniel, right? I see you in here all the time."

"Um..yeah," I answer. That's all I can come up with? I open my mouth in an attempt at some small talk so I can buy myself just a few more minutes standing next to the boy, but I end up just nodding awkwardly, and somehow make my way out of the store without any further embarrassment. Clearly a miracle.

I only end up about 10 feet down the sidewalk before I stop and lean against the brick building to try to regroup. I shove my straightened brown hair out of my face and can feel that it’s starting to curl in the humidity. Great. So what did I gather from my shopping trip turned covert stalking mission?
Nothing. Well, I learned that our band’s record isn’t in the store and the clerk’s name is Gavin, but only because he was wearing a nametag. Not like I was able to have a conversation with him or anything. I’m in there every week and had seen him quite a few times, but never paid any attention to him. And then there’s the boy, who I am certain I had never seen before.

I start replaying the entire awkward encounter in my head when I hear the bell on the door chime. I glance up to see the tall stranger walking out the door. Thankfully, he turns the other direction and doesn’t see me still lurking around in front of the store. Against my better judgment, and knowing nothing good could come from it, I casually start to follow him. The trick with following someone was to remain unseen. Despite the scene in the record store, blending in and disappearing in a crowd is something I can do without even trying. Sometimes my high degree of averageness pays off.

After trailing behind him for a few blocks, I finally conclude that he has no fixed destination and is just meandering down the sidewalk, stopping here and there to look in the windows of shops. Aimless wanderers make up most of the crowd on this particular street at midday. Concert venues, bars, restaurants, and specialty shops line both sides of the road for about ten blocks. The people who had come for lunch have moved on, and it is too early for concert attendees to be descending on the bars. The mix of locals and tourists make it even easier to observe and follow him without looking too obvious.

He’s a beautiful boy, but not in a traditional way, which probably helps to justify my fascination. His hair is black and mostly short except for the fringe that falls over his forehead. I can't see his eyes from here, but they are tattooed on my brain from when he had looked at me in the record store. They are pale blue, almost the color of suburban swimming pools, and have flecks of gold and green in them. His clothes are simple, black skinny jeans, a dark short sleeved button up shirt, and a pair of worn gray Converse, but somehow he manages to make the plain appear extraordinary. I’m wearing something similar and am positive I don’t look anything like that.

Much to my dismay, he pulls car keys out of his pocket, which means my impromptu stalking scheme is coming to a quick end. He opens the door of a dark blue car parallel parked along the street. Instead of stopping, I pick up my pace in an attempt to walk past the car before he pulls away, weaving around some slow moving tourists. My luck holds out, and I slow down my pace as I make my approach. My eyes frantically move over both him and the car trying to take in every detail. He's already started the car but is sitting in the driver's seat looking through his phone. A smile spreads across his face as he appears to be reading something and then typing a reply. Who was making him smile like that? I feel an unexpected pang in my heart, wishing it was me. The rest of the car is surprisingly common when compared to the uncommon person in it. My limited view from the sidewalk reveals only a bright yellow hoodie on the back seat and a Starbucks cup wedged into the cup holder in the console.

His hands are back on the steering wheel as he glances over his shoulder, waiting for a break in the traffic so he can pull out. After a few painfully brief seconds, he accelerates out of the spot and drives away, leaving me standing alone on the sidewalk, getting jostled around by the oblivious crowd. I watch as he gets further and further away, eventually turning onto a side street and disappearing altogether.

The feeling of loss is oddly overwhelming. Now what? Very few things in life are important enough to spur me into action, but he is apparently one of them. I turn and jog the four blocks back to the record store, weaving in and out of the bystanders. Once in front of it, I stop, gasping and wheezing. The last time I had run was in gym class during my senior year in high school. That was five years ago and the lack of exercise I've had since has now been made evident by my labored breathing. I make a mental note to add ‘running’ to my long list of things that aren’t in my comfort zone.
I am still gulping in air, but I pull the door open and enter the store for the second time that day. If I don’t do it now, I’ll lose my nerve. With some relief, the first thing I notice is that Jack White’s cover of ‘Love is Blindness’ is now playing on the speakers. The chord progressions automatically line up in my head and I can envision myself playing it back in my living room.

I quickly spot Gavin in the aisle of records labeled ‘alternative’ and start heading in that direction. I walk up to him with my hands in my pockets in what I hope is a casual way. If I were still Catholic, I would’ve gladly done the sign of the cross and said a hail mary on the way over.

"Hey," I venture tentatively. I add small talk to my non-comfort zone list.

“Oh hey, you’re back,” he says in a friendly enough voice. “Did you need help with anything?”

“I’m wondering if you’re going to be carrying the new Mayday album.”

"Oh yeah," he answers. "We had them in stock last week, but they sold out already. People keep coming in and asking about them, but we won’t get any more until Monday."

I try to hide what I’m sure is a shocked look on my face. Sold out already?

“Yeah, if someone doesn’t have tickets by now to the show this weekend, they’ll never get them,” he says as he starts slowly down the aisle again. Not having gotten any of the information that I’m here for, I dutifully follow behind.

“So, are you going then?” I ask, struggling for words to keep the conversation going.

"Yeah, that's why Phil was here earlier. I think you might have been here at the same time he was. He was dropping off my ticket."

A name! He has an actual name! I feel the breath whoosh out of me. My brain goes into overdrive trying to figure out how to keep Gavin talking. Wait, how much time has just passed? Is it still socially acceptable for me to still ask? Why am I so bad at this?

“Umm…uh…” I stammer trying to come up with something quickly before I lose my chance. “Was that your….boyfriend?” Not smooth.

“Phil? Oh, no. He and I went to primary school together when we were kids. I’m dating his cousin Molly,” he answers, thankfully not noticing my nervousness. “Were you asking about Phil because you’re interested in him?”

I feel my face catch on fire and I instantly look down at my shoes.

“I just…um…I just thought he looked familiar,” I blatantly lie.

“His parents got divorced and he moved away with his mom to be closer to family. He just graduated from university and moved back here to be near his dad again. Are you from this part of London? Maybe you recognize him from when he lived here. Phil Lester?”

“No,” I say quickly, my heart jumping into my throat. “I’ve only been here for a few years. I came for school.” My mind is reeling from all of the information and I’m starting to feel panicky. I need to get out of here before I start looking too obvious.

“Well, I better run. It was nice meeting you.”

“Maybe the three of us will run into you at the show on Saturday? He’ll be there.”
"Um. Ok. Thanks," I awkwardly say as I walk away.

Outside, I lean against the same wall I was leaning on earlier to gather my thoughts and regain some composure. I'm amazed how well that went. It almost feels overwhelming. Not only have I somehow managed to have an actual mostly successful conversation with a stranger, but I also found out his name. His full name. And his background. And where he’s going to be on Saturday night. The question is, what am I going to do with all of this information? It's not like I would ever be able just to walk up and start talking to him. Why didn’t I just answer 'yes' when he asked if I was interested in Phil? Everything is complicated.

But only because I seem to have a talent for always making it that way.

Chapter End Notes

I just wanted to leave a note about the upcoming original characters in this story. Because it's an AU, most of the OC's are minor and therefore have no connection to YouTube. I know that with many Phan AU's, the OC's tend to be versions of PJ, Chris, Louise, etc, but my personal preference is to not have actual YouTubers dropped into the middle of a story that isn't canon. I think it takes away from the focus of the story, which is, of course, all of the angst and fluff that is Dan and Phil :)
I've made the drive from the record store to my apartment so many times that I don't even have to think about it. It's like the car somehow knows the way on its own and the only reason I have to be there is to put the key in the ignition. I pull my black backpack out of the passenger seat and throw it over my shoulder, cutting across the yard to my apartment. Impressive from the outside, it's just a house that was split into two rental apartments about 20 years ago. I have the upstairs half and my mostly absent neighbor lives below. I unlock the door and bound up the stairs.

The inside resembles a typical post-college apartment, the contents rating only a few steps higher than finding your furnishings on the curb or a second-hand shop. One look around and even a stranger would be able to figure out where my priorities lay. Against one wall is an enormous plush stone gray couch, my first grown-up furniture purchase, with a simple used side table and lamp next to it. Directly across from it sits a 65” TV balanced precariously on a too small stand. Spread out on the floor between the two is a mass of video games, an Xbox, cords, controllers, a few laptops, and a dozen guitar picks. On the far side of the room are three guitars on stands and a small amp. My wall art consists of a few framed band posters including one of Kanye, which usually inspires more than a little ridicule from anyone who spots it. There are a few potted plants that I've managed to keep alive for about six months, so there's that at least. The entire place walks the thin line between destitution and almost responsible young adult.

The best part of it is that I am the only one who lives here. As soon as I had enough income to fund my own place, I couldn't get away from my old apartment fast enough. My bandmates are good guys for the most part, but sharing a three bedroom 1-bathroom apartment three other guys isn't for the faint of heart. There was noise, chaos, and people running around at all hours of the day and night. Our 5th member, Griffon, the keyboard player, lives in domestic bliss with his long-term girlfriend, Jasmine. Out of the 5 of us, he is the only one who owns real dishes and silverware. I'm not sure if it is because of the girlfriend, or how he got the girlfriend.

When I was living with them, there were girls everywhere. Constantly. They were always lurking around waiting for one of my roommates. People in general make me nervous, but having girls aggressively hit on me while I was trying to make a sandwich for lunch was turning me into a reclus. I found myself locked in my room all of the time, only venturing out for food, the bathroom, or making a break for the front door. Jack and Griff had figured out a few years back why this would cause me to be so uncomfortable, but the others never caught on to why I wasn't as enthused about the Fangirl situation as they were, and I really didn't feel the need to explain it to them.

Lucky for me, ¾ of a journalism degree was good enough for one of the local papers to hire me as a staff writer. Since they let me use a pseudonym, it is the one instance where pretending to be someone else was deemed socially acceptable. I get to work from home most of the time, so it is win-win all around for me. To them, I'm just an email address attached to a tall guy who occasionally shows up for the required staff meetings, but doesn't say anything. Anonymity is oddly important to me. I prefer to blend and fade.

Of course, anonymity isn't too hard when you're incredibly average. The only reason I ever stand out is because of my height, but people lose interest quickly when they realize I usually don't willingly talk to anyone. My wardrobe consists of jeans, t-shirts, and an impressive collection of hoodies. Except for a pair of flip-flops, my limited shoe options only include a few pairs of well-worn Converse. The bane of my existence is my naturally curly hair that I painfully beat into submission every day with a straightener. The only time I wear it curly like that in public is when I'm performing
I'm not trying to fool people into thinking that Daniel the average guy and Daniel the lead singer of Mayfair are two completely different people. It's more of a privacy tactic. I take advantage of the fact that most people in dimly lit bars or concert venues are either drunk, well on their way to being drunk, or just not paying attention. When alcohol is involved, people tend to miss the details. Something simple like straightened hair or a baseball cap is enough to buy me some privacy and keep people from recognizing me on the street. I want to keep my private life private, but don't care about my public life on stage. I'm a writer and a musician, not a rock star. I am under no illusion that I'm something that I'm not and hate when others pretended that I am. I'm also completely aware of all my social failings, which is why self-preservation is so important to me. I guess it's solitary sometimes, but there are worse things than feeling lonely.

I drop my backpack and flop down on the couch, grabbing the remote on the way, turning on the TV strictly for background noise. I'm no closer to deciding what to do about Phil, but knowing his name feels like a security blanket. Even if I never see him again, I still have his name.

If I never see him again.

Even in my head, I hate the sound of that. Always being on the losing end of one-sided crushes is just one of the many reasons I don’t date anymore. I hate that heartsick feeling that comes with wanting someone who either doesn’t want you back or wants you for the wrong reasons, which is why I avoid it at all costs. I’ve successfully avoided these feelings for a while now, but something about Phil is different. It feels like he may be worth the risk.

My sexuality also plays into why I avoid dating. I am gay and 100% fine with it. It has never been an issue with my family, schools, or friends, so maybe that’s why I never felt the need to have an ‘official’ coming out. Being gay is just who I am and I’ve never tried to lie or hide it from anyone, but I also don’t think it’s necessary to make some sort of announcement whenever I meet new people. I just want to play music and live my life quietly, but dating seems to make people think that they have a right to know about anything that happens behind closed doors.

But right now, it’s Phil’s sexuality that I’m wondering about, not mine. Gavin asked me if I was interested in Phil. Does that mean he’s gay or bi? Would he have asked if he wasn’t? It’s times like these I wish that I was better with people and social situations.

Philip Lester. The name keeps floating around in my thoughts. He’ll be at the concert on Saturday, but for some reason, that doesn’t make me feel better. I need him to be more than just a face in the crowd and I have five days to figure out how to make that happen.

The easiest way to find him would just be to Google his name and city to see what comes up. It probably won't be too hard to track down an email or cell phone number. If I can't find him that way, I can always do it at work. As newspaper staff, we have access to additional resources in case we need to find a phone number or address that has to be confirmed for a story. However, I'd prefer not to drag my stalkerish behavior into work.

I yawn and rub my eyes with my fists and try to clear my head. I have over thought every aspect of this day and need to just not think for a while. I waver back and forth between playing the guitar or taking a nap. I notice that my comforter is still on the far end of the couch from last night, but the guitars aren't within reach, so a nap is a clear frontrunner. I stretch my tall frame out on the sofa and hook my foot under the blanket so I can grab it and pull it over me. The talking head on tv drones on about war and bombs and money. I close my eyes and almost instantly fade off, visions of a boy with blue eyes and black hair floating through my head.
My eyes open abruptly, and I’m instantly wide awake and disoriented. I frantically look around the room, which is still dimly lit by the TV, for some sort of disturbance. The tail end of a dream lingers in my head and then disappears. I have a vague feeling it was about Phil, but all of the details are already gone. I reach in my back pocket and take out my phone to check the time: 4:00 am. I guess I didn’t take a nap as much as I just went to bed at 5 pm. I can’t remember the last time I’ve been awake at 4:00 am. There goes my day.

My eyes land on one of the laptops, which kicks off an internal debate. Do I try to find Phil? Well, I think that issue has been decided already. There’s no question that I’m going to try to track down his email address and phone number online. But what happens when I find it? Do I try to contact him? The jury is still out on that one. Doing nothing about it now is a lot easier to swallow than not doing anything once I actually have this information. Having his number or email address and not using it is something that would haunt me for years. I would always wonder ‘what if.’ Not having his phone number is a perfect excuse for inaction, and since I am mostly a man of inaction, putting this into motion terrifies me. It means that there is a very high probability that I am going to have to put myself out there for possible judging or rejection.

In the end, the fear of never seeing him again overrules my social terrors. I reach for the laptop and snap it open. The screen lights up and illuminates me in what I’m sure is a cancer-causing electronic glow. I start to type his name into Google but stop abruptly. Phil probably wasn’t his full name. Do I look under Phil or Philip? I stare at the screen for a minute and finally type P-h-i-l-i-p L-e-s-t-e-r L-o-n-d-o-n into the search engine, savoring every letter. Google politely informs me that there are 632,000 results. It sounds like a lot, but that’s actually better than I thought it would be. I take a deep breath and click on the ‘image’ tab.

And halfway down the page, there he is. Philip Lester. On my laptop. In my living room. I reflexively pull my hands back from the keyboard as if it was suddenly hot. For some unknown reason, I glance around the room to make sure no one is watching what I’m doing, even though I know I’m obviously the only one here. I can feel my heart speed up and my hands getting sweaty. Stop. You are looking up a person on the internet, not shoplifting. Why does it feel like I’m doing something illegal or dirty?

I sit frozen and stare at his photo for a good 5 minutes. It’s just a small photo that must have been taken from a few years ago. He looks slightly different, but there is no doubt in my mind that this is him. His hair is still black, but it’s shaggy and in a completely different style. He’s wearing glasses, but those are the same stunning eyes that all too briefly looked into mine. It was only a few seconds, but I could still describe them to you all the way down to the last detail. I hesitate before clicking on the photo, unsure if I want to find out where it leads me. Just like in the record store, I suddenly find myself in a temporary bubble with him. No one can get in, and I can make it whatever I want it to be. Following the path beyond the photo will only lead me to reality, which is a place I actively avoid at all costs. But it’s Phil. I exhale and click on it.

To my horror, his Facebook page pops up. I desperately pound the ‘back’ button on the laptop. Standing up, I shove the computer off my lap and onto the couch. I bury my hands in my hair and start pacing around the mostly dark living room. Too far. It is just too much. Looking for his phone number online was one thing, but sifting through his entire history is another. And that’s precisely
what would happen if I started scrolling through his social media. I know myself well enough to know that the minute I start learning who he is, I won’t be able to stop. I’ll analyze every photo and comment, and the only thing I’ll accomplish is freaking myself out more than I am already. Consciously turning an unknown into a known is a dangerous undertaking.

Why is he affecting me so much? He’s a stranger that I was in the same room with for 15 minutes. I shouldn’t feel this way, but as far as I try to shove away the emotions that are flooding through my body, I find that I can’t. Is it just those haunting eyes? His voice? I try to dissect and explain away the undeniable pull I’m feeling towards him, but there doesn’t seem to be any logical answer. Maybe because for everyone else, this wouldn’t be considered a problem in the first place.

I turn on the side table lamp and grab the acoustic guitar. I sift through the mess on the floor and snag a black pick before returning to the couch, sitting cross-legged on the center cushion. Aware of what ungodly early time it is, I choose acoustic instead of electric and just cross my fingers and hope the downstairs neighbor either isn’t home or is a deep sleeper. I strum the strings to check that it is in tune, more out of habit than anything else, and play a few random chords. My fingers slide smoothly over the frets, and I begin to play in earnest. Instead of covers, I play my originals. I wrote some of them for the band and others strictly for myself. Each song is etched in my memory so I can completely shut down and just play. My fingers know where to go and the lyrics roll off my tongue without thinking. All of my anxieties and paranoia dissolve until the only thing in my mind is the music, and to my surprise, Phil. Somehow they manage to co-exist serenely in my head.

The minutes turn into hours and daylight has finally found its way into the room. I hear the front door to the downstairs apartment slam and I check the time. 6:00am. I lay my guitar down next to me on the couch before leaning over and picking up my laptop again. When I open it, it’s back on the search results page. My eyes scan the screen and I scroll down and click a different link. A very basic page opens, identifying residents in London with the same last name. I scan the list until I find ‘Philip.’ I look at the address and do a quick search and discover that it is only a mile or so from the record store. There are three phone numbers listed with that address, so I quickly do a reverse number search for the first one. It’s listed as a land line under the name M Lester. I do the same with the second and third numbers and they are both unlisted cell phone numbers, so there are no names associated with them.

I try to think through the possibilities. Could M Lester be Molly? Gavin said he was dating Phil’s cousin Molly. Maybe she and Phil are roommates? Both the second and third numbers could be either his or hers if they are living together. I lean over to the side table and rummage around until I find a pen and paper to scribble down the numbers and corresponding address. I try to think through the best way to narrow down which number is the correct one, but I can’t think of a reasonable option that doesn’t include calling or texting. I’m a little nervous about someone figuring out who I am since my number can be searched too, but it’s much harder to look up a person by their cell number instead of by their name and address, so I feel relatively safe.

It’s still probably too early in the morning for a phone call, or at least that is what I’m telling myself. I pick up my phone and stare at it, quickly typing in one of the numbers and a message before I lose my nerve.

Me: I’m back at the office and I’ve looked everywhere but I still can’t find the keys. I know this is an emergency so text me as soon as you can! I will wait here until I hear from you.

I reread my fake message a dozen times. My goal is to get whoever is at this number to text me back. There’s no guarantee that they will do so, and even if they do, they may not identify themselves. But because my options are limited, I take a deep breath and hit send. Unsure what to do now, I place the phone in the middle of the coffee table and stare at it.
Five minutes later, I realize that staring at it until I get a reply is unwise. I stand up and wander into my room looking for a distraction. It’s still so early and I have no idea what people actually do at this time of day. I spot a towel laying on the floor so I grab it and head to the bathroom. Not only is the shower needed, but it will also kill some time. I twist the knobs, turning on the water so it will have some time to heat up while I brush my teeth. Before I’ve even found the toothpaste, the room is already filled with steam. Despite my immaculate straightening process, I can feel the humidity causing my hair to revert to its naturally curly state.

After a quick shampoo, condition, and all over wash, I close my eyes and stand under the shower head, letting the hot water stream over me. I allow my mind drift off to what it usually does. The random words tumble around in my head and eventually start to form into lyrics. Once satisfied, I repeat them over and over again until I have a chance to write them down. Everything sounds good in the shower so odds are they’ll need some adjustments and changes later. I’m about three verses in when I am shocked out of my trance by the suddenly freezing water. I turn the water off and scramble for my towel, flailing and almost falling in the process. I dry myself off and try to towel most of the water out of my tangled hair. A quick look in the mirror confirms that my dreaded brunette curls are back in full force.

I ditch my towel and dig through the clean pile of laundry. Grabbing jeans, boxers, and a black t-shirt, I stumble down the hall getting dressed as I go. Standing between the living room and kitchen, I debate if I want to check my phone or eat. My stomach growls its response, but there’s no way I can be in the same apartment with that phone unless I look at it first. I grab it off the table but hesitate before clicking the button.

Maybe cereal is a better idea? It’s certainly less stressful than trying to track someone down online. No, no, no. I have to do this.

I run my hand through my hair, forgetting it hasn’t been straightened yet, and it snags on the mass of unruly waves. I groan in frustration and click the button, lighting up the screen.

I missed call

Underneath the notification is the number I texted. I was expecting a text, not a phone call. My heart stops and one of my existential crisis immediately kicks in. Fuck. Why am I like this? In an attempt to not overthink, I quickly put the phone on speaker and hit the play button. A girl’s voice fills the room.

Hi. Um…this is Molly. I think you may have texted me by accident. It sounded like it was urgent so I just wanted to tell you that you had the wrong number.

Molly. I play the message again. Still on the table from last night is my note with the possible phone numbers and addresses on it. I pick up the list and cross one of them out with the pen. Transfixed, I stare at the one remaining number. I desperately try not to get my hopes up. This may not even be his number. And if it is, who was to say he would return a text from someone he doesn’t know? What am I even going to say to him?

The phone suddenly buzzes in my hand and I nearly drop it.

Jack: practice?

Me: when?

Jack: tonight?
Me: sure.

Of all of my bandmates, I am probably closest to Jack, our bass player. He seems to respect my desire to stay out of the limelight and maintain privacy, even if he doesn’t entirely understand it. Plus, he’s a man of few words and that is something I can appreciate. No small talk, no fluff, just say what you need to say and move on. To some extent, Griffon and Greg the same way. They let me live my life the way I want as long as I’m still writing and singing.

Heath is a different story. All five of us lived on the same floor in the dorms during our Freshman year in college and Heath was my randomly assigned roommate. Used to being the center of attention, he was put off when he saw that I also had a guitar. I was more than content with letting him play his guitar and collect all of the adulation he could. He took my silence and preference not to play in front of people to mean that he was the superior musician and I had no problem letting him believe that. I only played at odd times when I knew hardly anyone was around. The only problem with that is that I had to play quietly and cautiously. I couldn’t full out play and lose myself in the noise.

One day after class, I had come back to our room and found the door propped open and Heath and Jack playing guitar and bass. That explained the group of giggly girls out in the hallway. Spurred on by all of the female attention, Heath goaded and prodded, trying to get me to play, a sure way to prove his dominance in front of the girls. I could have done without an audience, but since it had been such a long time since I’d properly played, I finally agreed.

I plugged the guitar into the small amp and put the strap around my body. After a few minutes of tuning while Heath sat smugly in a desk chair, I started to play. Soon, after a few cords, I forgot that they were even there. Four songs later, I was snapped out of my reverie by Jack yelling my name. When I looked up, Jack, Heath, Greg, Griffon, the four girls in the hallway, and 4 or 5 of our neighbors were crowded into the room. I blushed, feeling their stunned stares on me. I tried to stammer out some words, but failed, my shyness winning out.

“Get out. Everyone but Greg, Grif, and Jack,” Heath directed the gathering bystanders, pointing at the door. They slowly ambled out into the hallway. Once the last one had left, he slammed the door, leaving only the five of us. He paced back and forth in the small room, exchanging pointed stares with Jack, while I just shifted around nervously, not having the social skills to understand what was going on.

Heath suddenly stopped and looked at me. I blushed again and looked down. “Dan, why didn’t you say you could do that?”

“Oh…um…I don’t know. I never play in front of people so I figured it really didn’t matter.”

“Can you sing?” Jack inquired. “What about writing?”

“Um…yeah, I guess so.”

“Which one,” Heath interrupted. “Writing or singing?”

“Both,” I mumbled.

“Just as good as you play?”

“Yes.”

Silence. I looked up and saw them just staring at each other until, with a defeated sigh, Heath turned to me. “You’re a front man,” he conceded. “A bizarre one, but you are a front man. And we need
one of those.”

The realization of what they were asking me set in. “Oh...no! I can’t...I wouldn’t...”

“You have to,” Heath insisted. "I can play, but I can’t sing or write. You’re even the better guitar player,” he reluctantly admitted.

“There’s no way I could get on a stage and do this in front of people,” I said, sounding panicked.

“Ok. How about this,” Jack offered. “Just practice with us. Greg’s parents live in town and we’ve been using their basement. See what you think. If anything, it will be a chance for you to at least play somewhere other than the dorms.”

I couldn’t even think of a response.

“Listen,” he added with a crooked grin, “I get that the attention and being in front of people seems to be an issue for you. It’s not for everyone, but it is definitely for Heath. He’ll be more than happy for you to deflect all of the attention towards him instead.”

“I’ll try,” I finally said softly, the words surprising me just as much as they did them.

Chapter End Notes

Everyone like it so far??

Thank you for being my test subjects as I attempt to figure out how to write a full-length book!
As always, all comments, suggestions, and kind criticisms are welcome :)
The Band

Practice is soon. Since receiving Molly’s voicemail, I’ve spent the majority of the day wandering around my apartment trying to figure out what to do. I straightened my hair. I had some cereal. I played Battlefront on the Xbox for a while, but couldn’t concentrate enough to do the game any justice. I’m guessing all of the highly dedicated and skilled 13-year-old boys on my team were cursing my shooting ability. I’m running out of viable ways to procrastinate.

I find myself sitting on the couch again staring at what I am pretty sure is Phil’s cell phone number. If I text him now, I’ll be distracted while I’m at practice. If I don’t, I’ll still be composing dozens of messages in my head the entire time, trying to figure out exactly what to say. Yes, I am sitting here trying to get a strategy in place so I can text someone. I’m relatively sure that this is the actual definition of ‘overthinking.’ I’m like Cameron Frye deciding if he wants to skip school with Ferris or not.

I glance at the time again. Shit.

I shove my phone in my pocket and pack my electric guitar in its case, reluctantly leaving the scrap of paper with Phil's phone number on the table. I zip down the stairs and carefully lay the guitar case flat across the back seat of my car. We are still having our practices at Greg’s parents’ house. It isn’t ideal, but it is free and keeps us from having to rent studio space. The best part, however, is that it is only 10 minutes away. I put my seatbelt on, back out of the parking spot and speed down the parkway.

The practices and shows are the only meaningful social contact I have with the world. When we first started, it was all pretty much unbearable. The easy banter between the four of them was and still is, an unknown skill for me. It was perplexing how they could just find words and go back and forth about so many things without struggling. When I joined in conversations, I was basically drowning in air. Over time, they learned what overwhelmed me and what didn’t. They didn’t try to ask me questions or force me to participate, they just stepped back and let me engage how I wanted. I wondered for a while why they even tolerated me and my extreme awkwardness since there were plenty of people out there who would have loved to be in a band, but what I quickly figured out, was that they had an odd sort of respect for me. When I did talk, it was only ever about the music and they took everything I said very seriously. My suggestions and changes were rarely questioned. All of the words, thoughts, and emotions they had were wasted on random socialization, whereas I funneled it all into the music and lyrics.

I pull into the driveway about 15 minutes late, but I know there is no danger that they’ve already started. Guitar slung over my shoulder, I let myself in the front door and head to the finished basement. I give everyone a half wave and they acknowledge me with nods. I’m half listening to their conversation as I get my guitar out of my case.

“You didn’t have to be such a jackass to her,” Greg scolds.

I know who he is talking to without even looking, because It’s the same conversation they have every week, just about a different girl. At least it sounds like it’s wrapping up as I can hear them shuffling and getting ready for me.

“What? She knew what she was getting herself into. She shouldn’t have presumed that it was anything more than a fling,” Heath shrugs. “I never made any promises.”

Guys in rock bands basically come in two different flavors. The first are the guys who absorb all of
the female attention. They crave it and their egos depend on it. Any chink in their armor of self-confidence can quickly be remedied by any nameless, faceless, pretty girl who is willing. I, on the other hand, am the other flavor. The less fun and gawky flavor. I’m the awkward guy who was dropped into the middle of a somewhat successful band as the lead singer and guitar player against his best judgment. Since day one they were dumbfounded about my reluctance to reap the benefits of being in a lucrative band.

“How do you do it, Dan?”

I turn around at the sound of my name. It’s pretty rare that they ask me my opinion about anything other than music, and from the look on my face, he must have realized that I hadn’t been paying attention.

“How do you do it?” Heath asks again, his voice and face seeming more curious than callous. “How are you not affected by any of the girls?”

“Oh…um….I wouldn’t say that exactly…” I answer, unsure of what to say.

All four of them stop and look at me.

“You mean you’re interested in someone?” Greg says with wide eyes. “Who is it?”

“Oh…um…”

“Wait!” Jack interrupts loudly. “You’re being serious about being into someone?”

“Fuck,” Heath says, giving his amp a kick. “The minute you turn into a lady’s man, I’m screwed.”

“I can guarantee that isn’t going to happen,” I say quietly with a shrug. “Why?” I ask, surprised by my curiosity, I don’t bother to correct his assumption.

“Because you’re the one they all want!” he looks at me incredulously. “I’m the one they settle for once they realize it’s not going to happen with you. They won’t shut up about how great you are. Do you know how creative I have to be to seduce someone when they’re only sleeping with me because of my proximity to you on stage?”

I gape open-mouthed at them as they all nod in agreement. I can feel a burning blush start to crawl up my neck.

“Well, that’s the thing. You’re not going to have to worry about that. It’s a guy.”

There’s a beat of silence and I flinch, waiting.

“Thank god!” Heath says loudly.

“Idiot,” Jack says with an eye roll, throwing an empty soda can at him.

“When we’re on stage on Saturday night, truly look at the crowd this time,” Griffin says kindly. “You’ll see it. Is he going to be there?”

Still speechless, I nod.

“Ok. Well, gentlemen, I guess we need to up our game this weekend to help Dan out with his guy,” Jack says with a grin, as he picks up his bass, ready to play.

Touched by their gesture, I don’t have the heart to tell them that it doesn’t matter because I can’t even
gather up enough courage to text him.
Acknowledging Phil’s presence in the world to the guys made me have a taste of what it’s like to feel infinite. It’s such a simple thing, so I have no idea why I feel this way. I make it home in record time and bound up the stairs with my guitar case. My safe haven feels cramped and claustrophobic, so I hastily grab the scrap of paper with Phil’s phone number off of the table and open the glass door leading out to a small balcony that faces the front of the house. There isn’t even enough room for a chair out here so I just sit on the step. The warm, late evening breeze ruffles through my straightened hair, making the ends curl. I’ve never really noticed how different everything looks from this vantage point and wonder how I’ve not managed to see it before.

I take out my phone and type the number in and then double check to make sure it is correct, despite the fact that I already have it memorized. My fingers hover over the screen, still unsure of what to say. Overthinking seems to be the default setting on my brain and true to form, it kicks into high gear. The glee of admitting Phil exists, even in the smallest way, is being eroded by my own traitorous brain. I try to squash down my inner panic that’s currently seizing my insides, but it bubbles up, insistent and needy. After a brief respite of freedom, the weight of being me now feels even more oppressive, a feat that I thought was impossible. My ‘things that are out of my comfort zone’ list just grew by one item: existing.

What Grif said about looking at the audience this weekend really stuck with me. How am I going to feel if I spot Phil in the crowd? I froze in the store when he looked at me, so will he affect me the same way if I’m on stage? That hadn’t crossed my mind. What if he has a boyfriend or is there with another guy? My list of ‘what if’s’ starts to spiral out of control. I lightly toss my phone into the living room and out of arms reach.

I lean back in the apartment without getting off of my step, looping my finger around the handle on my guitar case and pull it over to me. Performing a similar feat, I’m able to scoot the small amp over, and after plugging in the guitar, I lean back against the door frame and start to play. The volume isn’t blaring, but it’s just loud enough to save me from my intrusive thoughts. I stop briefly to reach up and flip the light switch off so the only light is coming from the streetlights and neighboring houses. I neither want nor need to be sitting in plain view right now. My compulsion to dissolve has come back in full force, so I gladly oblige and fade into the dark.

My fingers touch the strings and seem to act on their own free will. When I play, my body taking over from my brain is my favorite moment. As the songs start to flow, I close my eyes, not even needing to see the strings to play. The additional darkness is welcome and comforting, and I idly wonder if my broken brain is what makes me able to play. If I were carefree and wandering through life without a despondent thought in my head, not unlike Heath, would I still be able to play and write? If someone offered me no strings attached happiness in exchange for the music, I don’t know what I would do. I’m not sure I’d be able to turn down a chance to find out what normal is like.

People are willing to destroy their lives in search of greatness, but I’m willing to give it all up for for a shot at being a regular guy.

All of a sudden, I hear singing in my head. After a brief mental check to make sure I haven’t finally lost my mind for real, I realize that the sound is coming from outside. Even in my panic, I don’t stop strumming which is what allows me to figure out that the voices are singing the lyrics to the song I’m playing. Still shrouded in the darkness, I lean forward a little bit, wondering if I can see where it’s coming from. About two houses down, partially lit by the street lights, are two teenage girls laughing and singing as they’re walking down the sidewalk. I briefly debate if I should stop playing, but I’m
intrigued and continue watching them. They pause walking and singing when they reach my apartment building. They are whispering and giggling, looking around at the houses to try to figure out where the playing is coming from. Hoping that I’m hidden as well as I think I am, I grin and keep playing, amused by their confusion. Giving up, one girl grabs the other’s hand and tugs her along, and after a few paces, they resume their singing. Their voices fade and eventually disappear as they turn at the end of the block, so I stop playing and lay my guitar gently down next to me.

I lean back against the door frame and rest my head. I think about earlier tonight and how interested they were when such a small detail of my life was brought forward. The thought that people would find anything about me fascinating seems so strange. That’s the reason I don’t have social media accounts. Who wants to hear what I’m doing today or see a picture of what I’m eating? I don’t want my stability to balance on how big of an audience I can get on my most recent existential crisis. But would it have to be that way? Are connections with people all or nothing? Or can they be somewhere in the middle? In the end, I guess that line is mine and it’s wherever I want it to be.

I look back in the living room and spot my phone on the floor, the light from outside causing a reflection on its screen and making it visible even in the dark. Not even bothering to stand up, I crawl a few feet in and grab it, before returning to my new safe spot on the balcony. I go to the app store and search for Instagram, clicking the download button when I find it. I am aware that having a social media account shouldn’t be enough to break down the mental state of a 24-year-old guy, but here I am.

After about 30 seconds, Instagram opens, cheerfully greets me, and invites me to make an account. I dutifully enter all of my information and am given a long list of suggestions on with whom I should share a tiny photographic slice of my life. My four bandmates are close to the top of the list, so that is an easy choice. A few local venues. The record store has an account. All of a sudden I realize how small my life bubble is. I’m at a loss for the profile photo. I’d rather not use one of me performing, but that’s the only thing I have from the past five years. I click the camera app to take a selfie, something I swore I would never do. Ever. I look at myself on the screen, barely recognizable with only the closest streetlight to partially light my face. I take the picture and examine it. Good enough. I have no idea what to put for the blurb, so I settle on the truth: Just a guy.

I add it to my profile, but as I’m doing so, I’m already getting notifications. Jack, Heath, Greg, Griffon, and even Jasmine are already following me back. This works quicker than I thought it would. As I sit here, a few more people follow me. When I look at their profiles, I instantly know that they are strangers who also follow the other guys in the band. I didn’t think that far ahead, but I probably should have realized that if the four of them start following a guy with the username danielhowell, that it’s probably the Dan Howell that is also in the band.

All of a sudden it hits me that Phil is most likely on here too. Did I want to go down that rabbit hole? If I was going to inconspicuously follow him, I better do it now before too many more people find me. I search for his name and am quickly able to pick him out from the other random Phils. I debate hitting the follow button but immediately lose my nerve. He has 632 followers, but I’m not sure I have a decent chance of blending in unnoticed.

Against my better judgment, I look at his photos. The first few are of him and a girl with red hair, smiling and posing in an apartment. Molly maybe? The next few are of groups of people at what looks like a college campus. I scroll through quickly, just getting a glimpse of things here and there. It isn’t as intrusive as Facebook, but something still feels wrong about what I’m doing. And I can’t stop. Those blue eyes are the common thread of all of the photos and I just can’t look away from them.

There’s a progression of his hair changing, shaggy emo at first and then eventually shorter until it’s in
his current style with a dark fringe hanging down over his forehead. In some of them, he’s wearing glasses, which causes my heart to flutter and somehow make him look even more amazing. In another one he’s playing Mario Kart and wearing Pikachu pajama pants, which makes me smile since I have the same pair. I imagine what it would be like to just sit on the couch and play video games with him. I take note that there aren’t any photos with anyone who looks like they may be a boyfriend or girlfriend. A few random food and drinks pictures pass by, and after quite a few swipes, I stop scrolling when I see concert pictures. The first image doesn’t have a caption and it’s of him with the same red headed girl in the first few photos. I try to look at the background to identify where they’re at, but it’s a close up so I can’t tell. I scroll to the next one, which is a group shot and I can’t tell in that one either. The caption says ‘Merry Christmas!’ with a little tree emoji next to it. I pause and quickly reevaluate what I’m doing. Was he at our holiday show? We do one every year the weekend before Christmas. Somehow I’ve overlooked the possibility that if he has tickets to next weekend’s show, he had probably been to a previous one too. After taking a deep breath, I scroll again.

The third photo is a picture that someone else must’ve taken. It’s a side profile shot of him in a crowd. Even though the room is dark except for the purple tinted spotlights pointed at the stage, I immediately know it’s the Bluebird. On the left-hand side, partially cut out and slightly fuzzy, is me on stage. My heart speeds up and I can’t look away. Seeing us in the same frame, both exhilarates and overwhelms me. I take a quick screenshot in case I ever need to convince myself later that this photo exists somewhere in the world. I exhale and close out of the app, ignoring my other notifications.

I have been up since 4:00 am and I’ve decided that the day is officially over. I stand up and go back inside, closing the balcony door behind me. I put the guitar on the stand and toss my phone on the table before collapsing on the couch and pulling the comforter over my head, desperately needing the complete darkness. I idly wonder how it would feel to have his blue eyes staring into mine again, or even what it would be like to wake up next to him in the morning.
Free Advice

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Jack: Hey

Jack: Are you awake?

Jack: I want to talk to you.

Me: About what?

Jack: Life stuff.

Me: Are you sure it’s me you want to talk to about that?

Jack: Meet me at the common area in an hour. I’ll bring food.

I yawn, closing the text conversation and checking to see what time it is. 11:00am. A lot later than I want it to be considering I have to spend at least part of the day writing for a work assignment. My back pops as I stand, an uncomfortable reminder that I need to stop sleeping on the couch. I head straight to the bathroom, dropping clothes along the way, and jump into the shower.

The actual washing takes all of 5 minutes, but the part where I stand under the hot water with my eyes closed while pondering the world part adds at least another 20. I can’t imagine what Jack wants to talk to me about that would fall under the category of ‘life stuff,’ considering that ‘life stuff’ is not something that comes naturally to me. But due to a free lunch and my curiosity, it isn’t a hard sell.

I hop out once the water turns cold, toweling off quickly. Catching a glimpse of myself in the mirror, I groan when I spot my curly wet hair. I forgot that I wasn’t going to wash it because I didn’t have time to dry and straighten it before I had to meet Jack. Crabby at the prospect of having to wear a baseball cap, I pick through my dwindling pile of laundered clothes, choosing a clean shirt and a pair of slightly clean black jeans. I recheck the time and grab my hat off of the floor, spontaneously deciding to walk instead of drive.

With my hands crammed in my pockets, I started the 20-minute walk to my old school. I chose the university because of its journalism program, which is the degree that I almost have. After three years, I was burned out. Between school, the band, and sharing a small apartment with so many people, I needed a temporary break. When there was an opening at the local paper, I applied and got the job, thrilled at the prospect of not only being able to afford to move out but also having a writing job that wasn’t tied to being in an office all day. The intention was to go back to school and finish up my last few credits, but it’s been a year and that hasn’t happened yet. Grif and Jack are still in university, Greg graduated already, and Heath is on a permanent break. I’m not sure what the difference between dropping out and going on a permanent break is, but he insists they aren’t the same thing.

The closer I get, the more crowded the sidewalk becomes. The big houses from my neighborhood fall away to the plain brick apartment buildings mostly rented by undergrads. I cut through a well-worn path between some of the buildings, cross the band practice field, and come out at the top of the large common area. The wide hill slopes down behind the art and music buildings, providing a spot for just about everything you can imagine. On a sunny day like today, it’s pretty packed with students on their lunch break, some eating, others napping or throwing frisbees.
I scan the hill looking for Jack, finally finding him close to the top in front of the music building. I make my way over, avoiding an errant soccer ball and a few screeching sorority girls. Plopping down next to him, he wordlessly hands over a wrapped sandwich and a soda from a deli around the corner. We start eating in silence, enjoying the warm sunshine and the familiar sounds of the campus.

“So what’s up with the guy?"

My instant response is to choke and spit out the big drink of soda that I just took, reasonably sure I resemble a cartoon. I can see him grinning out of the corner of my eye.

“Also, nice hat,” he adds. I acknowledge his statement by flipping him off. “For real though, what’s going on?”

I sigh and look over in his direction. “I’m not sure. Well, nothing, actually. He’s just someone I ran into.”

“Did you talk to him?”

I raise an eyebrow at him. He chuckles, not unkindly. Before I can overthink it, I start telling him everything. The music store, looking him up, the phone message from Molly, Instagram…. all of it.

He sits silently, letting me get all of it out, waiting patiently even when I have to stop and search for words.

“Can I see the picture?” he asks.

I hesitate, scared of what he’s going to say about the potentially high creeper factor of all of this, but I still pull up the photo from the concert and hand my phone to him. He looks at it thoughtfully and then passes it back to me. We sit quietly for a few minutes while he thinks.

“Do you think you may have met him before at one of our shows?”

“No. I would have remembered that.” I feel an instant pain of regret. How many other times had we been in the same room together and crossed paths? All of those shows and I had never once mingled in the crowd afterward with the guys. Is it possible he was right there all along?

“First,” he says finally, “I can appreciate the fact that you’re probably really freaked out right now and completely out of your element with this whole situation. Second, I think you should text him. Normally, I would tell you to find him and introduce yourself, but I know that isn’t going to be an option….and that’s fine,” he adds hurriedly. “And take that hat off. I can’t have a conversation with you if you’re wearing it.”

He grabs the hat before I can react and I quickly bring one of my hands up to my wild hair to try to squish it down. “What should I say?” I ask while trying to grab it back.

“I have no idea,” Jack answers. Seeing my terrified look, he continues, “But sometimes you don’t need to know. Just say hello and see what he says back. Go from there. It’s texting, so you don’t have to have immediate answers. There’s plenty of time to think things through.”

“Heal tell him who I am? About the band, I mean. I don’t want him to be interested in me just because of that. How do I get him to know me first before I drop that bit of information on him?”

“That’s a tough one,” he says after several beats of silence and a deep breath. “And I don’t have an answer for you. However, I will tell you from experience, women don’t like to be lied to,” he says with a smile.
“What about guys?”

“Guys are good at telling lies, but not so great about getting lied to.”

I grin, flopping back on the grass and staring at the sky. Even with my limited experience, I know that one.

“What about Heath and Greg surprised when I said it was a guy I was interested in?”

Jack shrugs. “Not really. To be honest, they always just assumed you were gay, but never said anything to you about it. Heath is relieved since it means you won’t be luring any of the groupies away.”

After a few more minutes of quiet, he turns to me and starts again.

“So actually, there’s something else I wanted to talk to you about,” he adds.

Still laying down, I turn my head and look at him with one hand shielding my eyes from the sun.

“What do you think about working some acoustic songs into our sets?”

I mull the idea over for a few minutes. “What exactly did you have in mind?”

“Well,” Jack says thoughtfully, “Maybe start out with acoustic versions of a couple of covers? Then maybe some of our own stuff if it goes over well. It wasn’t on my short list, but maybe something by MCR or Muse. Or maybe something from The 1975?”

“I think playing a few acoustic tunes isn’t a bad idea as long as we do it right.”

“Would you be comfortable doing it? I know Heath would jump at the chance, but we all know it wouldn’t be as good as what you can do.”

I run the idea through my head a few times, but much to my surprise, it doesn’t seem to strike utter fear in my heart. “I think I can manage. Let me try a few things out and I’ll let you know for sure? I don’t know that I can have something ready for this weekend.”

A big smile spreads across Jack’s face. “Nice! Just let me know what you come up with? It’s ok if it’s not possible for this show, but if we could add it to the one after that it would be great.”

Jack looks at his watch and groans, gathering up our trash. “I’ve gotta get to class. Practice tomorrow night?”

“Yeah. See you then,” I say as he turns to leave.

Just as my mind starts to wander off, I hear him yell back to me. “Dan! Text him!” I grin as I watch him turn and stroll off with his backpack slung over his shoulder, noticing that he must’ve taken my hat along with him, most likely throwing it away with the trash from lunch.

I pull my phone out and open up the Instagram app. 220 notifications since last night. I look through them and the only face I recognize is Gavin from the record store. Smiling, I follow him back. On a whim, I take a picture of the view from where I’m sitting on the hill. Skipping over all of the filters, I post it to my feed. There are a couple of new photos of the few people that I’m following, but it doesn’t look like Phil has posted anything new.

Leaning back on the incline, I watch all of the college students and try to decide if I miss this or not. At the time it all seemed so overwhelming, but now the familiar sounds and sights are almost
soothing to me. Still completely lost on what I should say to Phil, I open up the abandoned text from
last night and stare at his phone number, realizing that it’s the only number I know by heart other
than my own.

I exhale and brush the wild curls back off of my forehead. My fingers hover over the keys.

Me: Phil?

Too simple? Maybe not everything has to be difficult and complicated.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I hit send. For better or worse, I did it. My one act of bravery for
the day. Determined not to dwell obsessively by waiting for a reply, I hop back up and start the
return walk to my apartment so I can get to work.

Chapter End Notes

    Ready for their first conversation?? Eeeeeek!!
Thank you for being patient...they finally talk!

Not wanting to give up the fresh air and warm breeze, I sit tucked into the couch cushions with the balcony door propped open while re-reading the final draft for my assignment. I type a quick email to my editor and attach the column, hoping he won't want any significant changes.

For the first time in 3 and a half hours, I glance at my phone to see if there are any text messages, disappointed when there aren’t. Determined to not mentally go down the drain this time around, I decide to focus on Jack’s idea for adding a few acoustic songs to our sets.

I go to my room and rummage around, looking for my notepad and pen I use to make our set lists. Finding them and making a quick mental reminder to do laundry, I grab my acoustic guitar and reclaim my spot on the balcony step. Making a few notes, I flip through the music on my phone seeing if anything jumps out at me. I put in one earbud and strum along to a few possible candidates, waiting for inspiration to strike.

Starting to drift into the music and sing along softly, trying to find something that fits, my trance is broken by a text notification. I glance down at the alert.

Phil: Yes. Who is this?

I freeze. All of me. Heart, brain, fingers, and music all stop dead.

I set down the guitar and pick up the phone like it’s something that could suddenly bite or burn, and reread those four words over and over again.

Me: an admirer

I chew on my bottom lip and wait. Three flashing dots immediately appear so I know I won’t be waiting long.

Phil: An admirer….like a stalker?

Shit!

Me: No! I just find you interesting.

I sound like such an idiot. I start typing again to try to sound less disturbing, but the three dots are already flashing so I stop and wait again.

Phil: lol…ok, fair enough. Do I know you?

I sit in amazement that he just didn’t call me a creeper and tell me to fuck off.

Me: No, but we’ve been in the same room together at least twice.

Phil: And we talked?
Me: Nope

Phil: You're not a very good admirer

I laugh as I read his last text and immediately start typing again.

Me: Believe me, I know. I'm too shy to admire someone in person. You would have been horrified.

Phil: Do I at least get to know your name?

Me: If we ever get to meet, yes.

Phil: That hardly seems fair. You know my name and who I am, but I don't get to know something about you?

Me: Ask me anything.

Phil: What's your name?

Me: Not that.

Phil: Are you a guy?

Me: Yes

I hold my breath and wait for his answer, knowing there is an unsaid connotation behind that question.

Phil: Good :)

I exhale, relieved.

Phil: How old are you?

Me: 24

Phil: Do you live in London?

Me: Yes

Phil: Do you go to school?

Me: No, not anymore. Do you?

Phil: You're the admirer. Shouldn't you know that?

Me: I think that's probably the difference between an admirer and a stalker.

Phil: Fair enough. I graduated this year. What kind of music do you like?

I pause, feeling like any talk of music might be going into dangerous territory.


Phil: Love all of those! Do you have any guilty pleasure bands?

Me: I may have a secret thing for Harry Styles, but that's entirely off the record.
Phil: I would never admit to it, but I may know all the words to every Britney Spears song. Also, no shame in loving Harry. At the very least he’s nice to look at.

I can’t help but laugh.

Phil: Would I recognize you if I saw you?

I wince at the question. I hope not. More dangerous territory.

Me: Ummm…..I don’t think so.

Phil: That’s not giving me much to work with.

Me: That’s the point. ;)

Phil: It’s not like I’m going to take the information, draw a picture of you, and then randomly ask people if they’ve seen you around before.

Well, he has a point too.

Me: Fine. I’m sort of tall, skinny, and awkward. But that’s all I’m telling you.

Phil: What color are your eyes?

I hesitate before I remember that half of the people in the world have brown eyes. That won’t narrow it down too much.

Me: Brown

Phil: Good. I’m usually attracted to guys with brown eyes for some reason.

I close my eyes and groan as I tip my head back and it hits the doorframe with a thunk. This is absolute torture. What do I say to that? Your blue eyes haunt me in my sleep? Sometimes the truth isn’t the best answer.

Phil: Do you have roommates?

Me: I used to, but now I have my own place.

Phil: I’m not sure I picture myself ever living alone. I moved in with my cousin when I came back to London. Besides, I like having a roommate.

Me: I like the quiet. Living with other people was chaos all the time.

Phil: The quiet scares me.

Me: I feel like we’re playing 20 Questions.

Phil: Well, if we are, I’m losing horribly. Maybe I’d have better luck with Truth or Dare?

My heart stops. Visions of playing Truth or Dare on my bed with him flood my brain.

Phil: Wait. This isn’t Gavin, is it? Like some sort of joke?

I start to type and notice my hands are shaking. Probably because all of the blood has run out of my brain and has left the rest of me nonfunctional.
Me: Nope. I am a very real person.

Phil: You know this is sort of weird right?

Me: I assure you that I’m completely aware of how weird this whole thing is.

Phil: And you’re sure you have the right person?

Me: Yes, you are absolutely the right person.

Phil: Well, there’s a first time for everything I guess

Me: What do you mean?

Phil: I’ve never been anyone’s right person before

I don’t have a response for that. How can words be so beautiful and tragic at the same time?

Phil: I have to run. I’m meeting some friends for dinner that I haven’t seen since I’ve gotten back. So are you a one-time admirer or will you be texting me again?

Me: Well, I guess that depends. Do you want me to?

I hold my breath.

Phil: You have to keep texting until either you tell me who you are or I figure it out on my own. You can’t just disappear, ok?

Me: Ok. But you’ll never figure it out.

Phil: Challenge accepted!

I stare at my phone with a ridiculous smile on my face. Running my fingers through my tangled hair, I read back over the conversation at least five times until I’m confident that it happened. And frankly, even with my lack of anything to compare it to, it went a lot better than I thought it would. Plus, he actually talked to me. Not everyone would return texts from a stranger.

I pop up off the floor and start aimlessly pacing around the apartment. Wandering through my room, I spot the neglected piles of laundry and grab them, dragging them into the laundry room off of the kitchen. After starting the first load, I start tidying up the kitchen and emptying the dishwasher. On a roll, I clean up the mess of electronics spread all over the living room.

I debate texting Jack to tell him what happened but decide against it. I’ll be seeing him tomorrow night at practice so I guess it can wait until then. The idea of texting someone so we can over analyze another text conversation seems like something I should only do if I were a 15-year-old girl.

With motivation to spare and a reasonably clean apartment, I sit back down on the step and lean against the door frame. I scroll through my phone until I find the song I’m looking for.
The Bluebird

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I’m laid out on the couch, staring at the time on my phone again. This has to be one of the longest
days ever. I woke up this morning to a torrential downpour outside and an inbox full of assignments
at work which took up a big chunk of time. For once, I’m anxious to get to practice for reasons other
than to just play. I decided to wait to text Phil back until I’ve had a chance to talk to Jack and see
what he thinks about the conversation. I desperately want to talk to him again, but I’m nervous about
crossing a line and ending up in stalker territory and scaring him away. To my surprise, I find that
he’s easy to talk to and I can’t say that about too many people in my life.

I scrolled through Instagram earlier in the day and saw a few photos that Phil had posted during his
dinner out last night. He was with a group of friends, all holding up ridiculously sized margaritas at a
Mexican restaurant. No one should be allowed to be that handsome. I also noticed that my number of
followers continue to grow despite the fact I’ve only posted one photo, which strikes me as being
really weird. I’ve literally done nothing, but yet people still want to see it.

I can’t take it anymore. I pack up my acoustic and electric guitars in their cases, shoving a few picks
in my pocket. Opening the front door, I walk out and stand on the covered porch, watching the rain
continue to stream down. I pull up the hood of my sweatshirt in a probably useless effort to keep my
hair from looking any worse than it already does. Waiting for a lull in the rain that may never come, I
become mesmerized watching the rivulets of water rushing down the sidewalks and street, forming
huge puddles at each driveway. Giving up, I make a mad dash for my car, juggling my keys and
trying to get two cases into the back seat.

I’m out of the rain and in the dry car, but I’m so soaked it doesn’t even matter. When I start the car,
the windows instantly fog. It takes me a minute, but I finally find the right combination of defroster,
air, and windshield wipers so I can see well enough to drive. I carefully back out of the driveway and
towards the Bluebird. Since it’s the last practice before the show, we always meet at the venue
instead of Greg’s parent’s place. We like to make sure everything is set up the way we want it and
that the sound and lights are decent.

The ordinarily short drive takes twice as long due to the driving rain. When I get there, I pull up as
close to the awning over the back door as I can get, trying to leave space for Greg who has to haul in
a drum kit through this mess. Taking a deep breath, I brace myself for the weather, hop out of the
seat and fumble with the back door, trying to grab the guitar cases as quick as humanly possible. I
slam the car door and hustle underneath the awning. Before I can even knock, Mike, the manager,
shoves open the heavy door and waves me in.

Once out of the storm, he nods at me and throws me a towel.

“You’re early,” he comments.

“Yup. Just restless because of the rain, I guess. We're trying out a few things and I want to see how
they sound.”

“Changing some things up?” he asks as he leans into the bar area and opens a beer, handing it over
to me. I’m not much of a drinker, but for some reason, a beer sounds perfect right now.

“Thanks,” I answer, taking the bottle from him. “Maybe. I’m not sure yet.” Once my cases are dried
off, I drape the towel over a chair and head to the stage.

All of the sound equipment is already here, so I start pulling a few things around and turning them on until I’m satisfied with the layout. After putting a tall stool by the mic, I take out the acoustic guitar and strum it a few times to make sure it's still in tune. I stayed up well past midnight last night trying to narrow down some songs that would translate well into acoustic. Jack said there was no rush, but I took the idea as a challenge.

After a few swallows from the bottle, I get comfortable on the stool and start playing the cords to The 1975’s Robbers, reminding myself of the song’s progression. I don’t have each note fine-tuned yet so I can’t just wholly drift off into the song. Instead, I concentrate on trying to replicate the feelings behind the lyrics the best as I can. The irony of a guy who can barely text someone he likes singing a song about all-consuming and dangerous love isn’t lost on me. I go straight through it twice, but towards the end of my second effort, I’m interrupted by Jack’s voice.

“How do you even do that? You sound just like him,” Jack says from the opposite side of the stage. Startled at the sudden audience, I just catch my balance before almost falling off of the stool. “Are you doing that one this weekend?”

“I haven’t decided yet. What do you think?”

He snort laughs while unpacking his bass. “Everyone is going to lose their minds over that. Including Phil. Are you ever going to text him?”

“I did.”

He stops cold and turns around and peppers me with questions. “Dan! Are you serious? Why didn’t you tell me? What did he say?” I grab my phone, open up the conversation, and pass it over to him. He scrolls through the brief conversation and smiles. “It’s a good start. Are you going to talk to him at the show?”

Our conversation is cut short by the sound of a door slamming open as Heath and Greg pile in, soaking wet and hauling drums. I put my guitar on a stand and follow Jack to help them. We’re met at the door by equally as soaked Grif and Jasmine. Mike is there to hand out more towels and beers.

“Why the acoustic?” Heath asks nodding in my direction after we’re done lugging everything up on stage.

Before I can reply, Jack answers for me. “Remember? I told you we talked about adding a few acoustic songs to our sets?”

“You’ve got something sorted already?” Grif asks.

“Just one thing so far. You can listen to it and tell me if you want to use it this weekend or not.”

Jack laughs softly and shakes his head at me. “You know what, Dan?” he says, gesturing to all of us. “Let’s let Jasmine decide. She can be the female opinion.”

“What? Why am I the decider?” she asks with a confused look from her perch on a chair next to Grif.

“No kidding!” yells Greg from behind the drum kit, still setting up the cymbals. “No offense intended,” he adds as Jasmine gives him a dirty look.

“Trust me. You’ll know when you hear it,” Jack says mysteriously.
I start fidgeting and feeling self-conscious, not used to being the center of a discussion involving so many people. I run my fingers through my hair out of habit, forgetting again that I’m trying to give up on my straightener. Not sure what else to do with my hands, I pick up the guitar and manage my way back up onto the stool. I start strumming softly, also out of habit.

“Why don’t you go ahead and play it while we’re finishing setting up?” Jack says quickly, sensing my growing discomfort. Glancing up from my hands, I shoot him a grateful look. “He’s all yours, Jas.”

I look around, relieved that everyone other than Jasmine has gone back to setting up. She catches my eye and nods her head in encouragement. I exhale a deep breath and fall into the now mostly familiar cords and lyrics.

Once the song is underway, my mind immediately wanders back to Phil. I wonder what it’s going to be like to sing with him in the room. Will I be able to see him from up here? Or more importantly, should I even try to find him in the crowd. Part of me wants to see his face and reaction to the music, but I know it will be harder to focus if I know exactly where he is.

In the whole scheme of life, exactly how weird is this? I mean seriously. It’s not like I have a whole lot of perspective on the subject of dating and love. Plus, what experience I do have wasn’t exactly memorable. A few awkward dates and a short relationship in college. It was even debatable if that relationship was a relationship at all.

Why am I even thinking like this in the first place? So far I’ve had one text conversation with a stranger, albeit a fascinating and beautiful stranger, and I’m already thinking about being in a relationship. I don’t know what it says about me that having one conversation makes me feel like I’m already in over my head.

I guess I know the song better than I thought because before I know it, I snap out of my daydreams and realize that I’ve just played the closing chords. I look up and find that everyone has stopped moving and is staring at me, including Mike who is at the foot of the stage. I can feel a red blush already creeping up my neck, so I clear my throat and look awkwardly down at my hands waiting for someone to say something. It feels like they’ve been staring for 5 minutes at least, but I know realistically it has only been about 10 seconds.

Jack is the first to break the silence. “Well, Jas, what do you think?”

“That’s the hottest thing I’ve ever heard,” she replies breathlessly. Everyone laughs, including Grif who gives her a playful punch on the shoulder.

“Not only are you going to play it, but I can also guarantee that it will get me laid. Dan, I thank you,” Heath says and gives me a dramatic bow. Everyone starts yelling and playfully throwing things in his direction. He ducks and swats away a flying drumstick.

Jack tosses Jasmine a pen and the notebook we use to figure out our set lists and song order for each show. She opens it and starts writing. “I guess it’s unanimous that we’re adding that to the list. What else are we playing, gentlemen?”

Once we get started, I get so caught up with the music and conversation that I don’t even notice my phone vibrating over and over again with new texts.
Ok, so not my best chapter, lol. I'm pushing through some writer's block.

But the good news is that I actually wrote the chapter after this *before* I wrote this one. Don't ask...I have an odd writing process. Lots of Dan and Phil banter is on the way shortly!! It's almost edited and ready to go! <3
I’m on my way home and considering the time of night, I’m sitting at a ridiculously long light. I dig my phone out of my pocket to check my email when I see them. A text from Phil. Actually, many texts from Phil.

Phil: So, what is my favorite mystery boy doing tonight?

Phil: I’m going to be having Chinese takeaway and drinks with Molly and her boyfriend tonight, so I thought I would attempt to try to lure you out of hiding to come to our apartment for dinner.

Phil: We’re ordering right now….this is your last chance!

Phil: So, you missed dinner, but I’m going to read you my fortune cookie anyway.

Phil: “A pleasant surprise is in store for you”

Phil: I wonder if the fortune is talking about you. Are you my “pleasant surprise”? 

Phil: I’m starting to wonder if I’m no longer interesting enough to admire ;)

My heart jumps. Then stops. Then stutters. I check the time and it’s well after 1:00 am. The texts were sent starting around 9:00 pm while I was still at practice. Phil texted me on his own without me sending him one first, which I was not expecting. He said they were having drinks. Maybe he only did it because he had too much to drink? Is it too late to text him back?

A car behind me honks. I shake myself out of my stupor and drive through the green light. I scan my surroundings looking for a place to pull over, eventually finding a small side street. I’m only about a mile from my apartment, but I have to stop. Without thinking, I text the first thing that pops into my head.

Me: You will always be interesting enough to admire

Did I just send that? Oh God. This is bad. I lean forward and lay my head against the steering wheel and groan. Shit. I sit back up and pull back out onto the street. Why did I not just wait until I got home and could think about what to say? Now he’s going to wake up to that.

A few minutes later I pull into the driveway. I grab my guitar cases out of the back seat and squish through the rain-soaked grass to the front porch. Juggling my keys, I finally unlock the door and struggle up the steps with both guitars. I set them down in the living room and throw myself down on the couch without even turning on the lights. My subconscious reminds me not to fall asleep here, but I’m feeling too defeated to listen. I probably deserve to have a sore back after that last text. Just in case, I take my phone off of vibrate so I can hear it if he texts back, but clumsily drop it when it immediately chimes.

Phil: Good. I thought you forgot about me.

Relief floods my entire body.

Me: Never!

I stare at the screen trying to mentally will the three flashing dots to appear. When they don’t, I try to
come up with something reasonable to continue the conversation.

Me: What are you doing up? It’s sort of late.

I sound entirely lame but decide to send it anyway. Simple worked the first time, maybe it will again. I hold my breath and am almost instantly rewarded with the dots.

Phil: I can’t sleep. Why are you still up?

My brain immediately pictures him in his bed in the dark texting me, but I desperately try to block it out when I start to imagine what he’s wearing. I’m so awkward even my random thoughts make me blush.

Me: I was out with some friends and just got home.

Phil: You sound like you’re a bit more social than I am

I laugh loudly when I read this. He has no idea how far off he is.

Me: I wouldn’t say that. It’s my only regular social engagement.

Phil: Tell me something else about you. What’s your favorite food?

Me: Anything that can be delivered. What about you?

Phil: Pretty much whatever Molly is willing to make. I’m a terrible cook. When she’s not around, I eat a lot of cereal.

Phil: What kind of job do you have?

Me: I’m a writer.

Phil: Seriously? Are you Superman?

Me: ????

Phil: Peter Parker was geeky and a writer.

Me: He was a reporter, so no, I am not Superman

Phil: What do you write?

Me: I research and write articles. Some other stuff too. What do you do?

Technically, that was the truth. It just so happens that ‘some other stuff’ was writing music.

Phil: That’s a pretty cool job. I’m impressed. I have a degree in film but work in a bookstore. I haven’t found a real job yet.

I raise my eyebrows at the new information. Phil’s questions are coming quicker now, making me struggle for answers.

Phil: Why won’t you tell me who you are?

Me: I think you’d be disappointed.

Phil: Why? What would disappoint me?
Me: I told you already. I’m really shy and awkward.

Phil: Why do you think I would find either of those things disappointing?

Me: Because they’re disappointing to me.

Phil: Maybe they shouldn’t be.

I stop and reread his last text over and over. Flustered, I try to think of some way to change the subject. I’m overly aware of the minutes that are passing by, but I’m quickly giving up on my ability to hold up my end of the conversation. I’m in over my head.

Phil: What are you doing right now and where are you?

Me: In my apartment talking to you.

Phil: No, describe it with details.

Me: I’m laying down on a grey couch?

Phil: What do you look like?

I’m starting to freak out. This isn’t like the playful banter we had yesterday. The dots come back and I wait for his next message before I say anything else.

Phil: Please don’t be uncomfortable. I only want a mental picture of who is on the other side of the phone. It’s not even really about what you look like as much as it is I want you to open up. You have the advantage here and I’m just trying to even up the playing field. Just please be honest with me and really describe yourself. Give me something. I want to know about you.

Shit. I start typing and the words sort of write themselves.

Me: I have dark hair. I’m 6’2” so I’m kinda tall. My wardrobe is almost exclusively t-shirts, jeans, and hoodies, so that’s what I’m wearing now. I decorate like a guy and have a huge TV and a ton of video games. There are usually clothes everywhere, but I was motivated to do laundry recently, which I absolutely hate doing. My back hurts because I keep falling asleep on my couch, but that’s probably where I’ll sleep again tonight because I’m too lazy to get up and move. Right now, I’m laying down and rolled up in a black and grey comforter. And talking to you in the dark.

I hit send and take a deep breath. That was a lot of words. Before I lose my nerve, I add one more quick thing.

Me: And I love that you said you’re attracted to guys with brown eyes. It gives me a little bit of hope.

Phil: What is your favorite thing?

Me: Music, but please don’t ask me why. I’m not ready to talk about that yet.

Phil: ok.

Me: Think you can fall asleep now?

Phil: Not quite yet

I grin despite myself. Everything about Phil is entirely unexpected.
Phil: I want to know what your voice sounds like.

Oh no. No no no no no. What do I do what do I do what do I do?

Me: How come?

Phil: Please? Just for a few minutes?

Me: I’m horrible on the phone. You think you want to do this, but you really really don’t.

Phil: But I do!

Me: But you don’t.

Phil: We could Facetime instead ;)

Oh my god. What is happening?

Phil: Please? How about this, give me two minutes. You can even set a timer. Just two minutes to say goodnight. Only two tiny little minutes, that’s all! I’m suuuuuure getting to hear you say goodnight would help me sleep better.

I’m sweating. I’m literally sweating through my shirt right now. How did I lose complete control of this entire situation? If I would have known he was going to be like this, would I have still started texting him?

Yes. Absolutely. And as I sit here and think about it some more, I'd probably do just about anything he asked, which is beyond terrifying.

Fuck fuck fuck fuck. I put my phone on speaker and hit the call button before I set it down on the couch next to where I'm laying. Of course, he picks up immediately.

“You called!”

That voice. I wasn’t prepared to hear it again so soon.

“I did. I figured I better before you Facetimed me.”

Crisis averted for now.

“We’ll save that for next time. Hold on a second.”

I hear some rustling and moving around and then it’s quiet again.

“Ok. I’m back. Are you still there?”

“I’m here. What did you do?”

“I closed my door and got into bed. Were you telling the truth about being on the couch in the dark?”

“I was.”

“Good. Are you going to tell me good night?”

“Good night, Phil. I hope this phone call helps you sleep.” I wonder if he can hear the smile in my voice.
“Anything else?”

“What do you mean?”

“When you say goodnight to someone, you’re supposed to wish them sweet dreams.”

“I hope you have sweet dreams tonight.” I take a deep breath and swallow hard. “I really do.”

“Read me a bedtime story?”

“Phil.”

“Ok, ok. I had a feeling you would say no to that. Maybe next time. I just want you to keep talking. I like the way you sound.”

Next time? My heart. I can hear him shift around in bed. His voice is starting to get quieter.

“I like your voice too. It sounds sleepy.”

I curl up and close my eyes, trying to imagine what it would be like if he were here next to me while I told him these things.

“Do you think you’ll ever want to meet me in person?” he asks.

“I do want that. I want that right now, but I just can’t. Not yet.” I feel my eyes start to tear up as the words spill out of my mouth. “I’m sorry, Phil. I really, really am. You have no idea how much I want to come over there and talk to you in person instead of by text or phone.”

“I think our two minutes are up,” Phil says softly.

“Will you be able to sleep now?”

“Yes. I like that I’m the last person you’re going to talk to before you fall asleep.”

“I – I’m glad, Phil.”

“Good night.”

“‘Night.”

The phone goes silent. I lay here for a few minutes before the tears start to fall faster, wishing I could put words to what was in my head. I feel so full and so lonely at the same time. How do you even explain that?

I decide not to mention the phone call to anyone. Something about it seems too personal to share. I need for it just to be mine.
A Female Opinion

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I wake up the next day feeling emotionally hungover and rattled from last night’s conversation. Out of my element, I have no idea where I’m going with this. He asks a lot of questions. Are all guys like this? My internal setting is introvert by default, so maybe it’s a good thing that he talks so much. After last night, I feel like I’m out of words. Groaning and trying to get the kink out of my back, I drag myself up and stretch. No more couch sleeping. I mean it this time.

Looking back, the first part of the plan, finding his number and texting him, had gone surprisingly well. Unfortunately, that was as far as I had gotten with the planning. There is no part two of my plan and I’m at a loss of what I should do now. I thought that if we started texting, I would have some time to leisurely figure out what to do next, but now I'm thinking that I should have thought ahead a little bit. Do I just show up and introduce myself? Tell him who I am in a text? Or in a dreaded Facetime call? Make an announcement at the concert tomorrow? Show up underneath his bedroom window with a boom box like Lloyd Dobler in Say Anything? Blow myself up like in Heathers? Ok. Not that. I’m not doing that. Not even for Phil.

The possibilities are endless and the idea of talking to the guys about this makes me nervous. Granted, they have a lot more experience with dating than I do, but they’re still guys. I need a female opinion. Pondering my very limited options, I start texting.

Me: Hey.

Grif: Hey! Everything ok? You never text.

Me: Yeah. I have a favor to ask. I need to talk to Jasmine about something but don’t have her number.

Grif: Jas? Sure, she’s right here. I’ll give her your number and have her text you.

I sit back and exhale a deep breath while staring at my phone, hoping this isn’t a mistake of gigantic proportions.

Jas: Hi, Dan! It’s Jas. What’s going on?

Me: I need a female opinion about something.

Jas: About your guy?

Me: Maybe.

Me: Sort of.

Me: Well, yes.

Jas: Ok. Why don’t we meet down at the pub on Broadway for a beer? 30 minutes?

I wasn’t planning on a social outing in addition to trying to figure all of this out. On the other hand, an in person conversation might be a little more productive since I need all the help I can get. Plus, like Phil, she never seems at a loss for words. I’m reasonably confident I can depend on her to carry
most of the conversation.

Me: Ok. Thanks. See you then.

Time will tell if this was a smart idea, but I don’t have any other options. After quickly cleaning up and changing clothes, I grab my wallet, keys, and phone and head out the door.

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I walk into the pub and immediately spot Jas already sitting at a bar table looking at something on her phone. We’ve been acquaintances for years through Grif, but this is the first time we’ve ever spent any time alone together. Despite her small size and cute blonde pixie cut, she is a force to be reckoned with. I know I can depend on her for blunt advice, which is what I need right now. I make my way over to her and she looks up and gives me a big smile as I slide onto a bar stool.

“Thanks for doing this,” I say with sincerity. “I hope Grif doesn’t think this is too weird.”

“What? Us having a drink? I think he’s relieved. I keep asking him for details about what is going on with you and the only thing he says is that ‘there is something up with some guy.’ I think guys only want a general overview of other men’s lives. No details needed.”

I smile, knowing that Grif is 100% correct.

The waitress comes over and sets down two beers that she had apparently ordered already before I arrived. After a few sips and minimal small talk, she dives right in with the questions. I had planned on only giving her a general synopsis, but she isn’t going to let me get off that easy, so I end up telling her every detail of the past week. She sits in rapt attention as I tell her about the record store, the conversation with Gavin, how I got all of her information, Instagram and Facebook, and the text conversations, only interrupting to ask for clarifications.

I after I spill every detail, I hand over my phone and let her read all of the texts. I’m glad I took screenshots of the very end of our last text conversation about the phone call before deleting it, so no one else would know about it. We sit in silence, her with her brow furrowed as she scrolls and me nervously tapping my foot as I wait for her to finish. When she's done, she closes out the conversation and slides the phone back across the table to me. She sits quietly thinking for a few moments and I impatiently wait for her to say something.

“First off,” she says with a big smile, “I am excited you’re doing this. However it ends, I hope you don’t regret anything you’ve done. I know what a big leap this is for you and that you’ve probably been going nuts inside your head for the past week.”

I blush at both the compliment and her accurate take on the situation as I look down at my glass, concentrating on what’s left of the beer. When I look back up, she’s gesturing at the server to bring us more drinks.

“So….the texts with Phil. I’m impressed, and don’t take this the wrong way, but also surprised. He’s asking you some tough questions and you’re handling them all really well. I didn’t know you had it in you,” she says with a grin. “My guess is that the guys aren’t going to go so easy on you now that they know you’re tougher than you seem.”

I smile and roll my eyes at her.
“Can I see some of the pictures?”

“Sure,” I say as I grab my phone off the table and pull up his Instagram. For the second time, I slide it back across to her. She pages thoughtfully through the feed, examining each one. I know the minute she gets to the accidental photo of us at the Bluebird together because her eyes suddenly go wide.

“The way I see it,” she continues, putting down the phone, “is that you need to have some sort of endgame in mind. This can’t go on forever and at some point, it’s going to turn into a ‘put up or shut up’ sort of situation. You need to be prepared for when it happens.”

“What are my options?” I ask.

“Well, you may not have any control over it. It could be that you guys agree to meet up somewhere, or maybe he’ll figure out who you are and confront you. It’s also possible that he’ll give you an ultimatum to come clean or he’s out.”

I exhale and take a drink of my fresh beer that has just arrived. “All of those options are scary,” I admit.

“They are,” she says kindly, “Which is why you need to think through all of the possibilities before any of them happen.”

I’m thinking about everything Jas has just laid out when all of a sudden my mouth falls open and all of the color drains out of my face.

“Dan? Are you ok? You’re as white as a sheet…”

“He’s here,” I whisper, locking my eyes on Jas’.

“What? Phil? Now?” She says a bit louder than she needs to. “Where?”

“Stop! Don’t look!” I hiss.

“Seriously? Have we not met before? Of course I’m going to look!”

“Ok…fine. Just be casual about it,” I concede.

“Where is he sitting?”

“To your right. He’s sitting at a table with a girl. He’s wearing a blue t-shirt.”

Jas not so casually looks over to her right and leans forward a get to get a clear look. After about 20 seconds, I kick her swiftly underneath the table to get her attention.

“You’re staring at him!” I mumble at her as I rest my elbows up on the table and put my hands over my face in defeat.

"I can't help it. You're right, he's really cute! Do you know who that is with him?”

“Yeah,” I answer, taking a quick look at the girl with long red hair. “That’s his cousin Molly.”

“Give me your phone,” she commands. “I want to see something.”

I comply and wearily watch her as she swipes and types before shoving the phone back in my direction. Looking at the screen she has open, I almost choke.
Me: Hey, Phil! What are you doing?

“Jas! Oh my God! What did you do? Did you just text him from my phone?” My stomach twists and sinks.

“I texted him to see if he would answer. I want to see his reaction.”

I look at her in horror as she tilts forward to look over at Phil and Molly.

“He’s getting his phone!” Jas hisses at me excitedly, poking me in the arm a few time.

Fuck. Not being able to resist, I lean so I can get a clear view of Phil. Even from this distance, I can see the big smile on his face when he looks at his phone. Jas and I turn and look at each other, my scared eyes locking for an instant with her elated ones. My phone chimes.

Tearing my eyes away from Jas, I look at the message.

Phil: Having lunch with my cousin. What about you?

I feel like I’m going to hyperventilate. Noticing this, Jas leans close and starts talking quickly in a hushed voice. I have no idea what she is saying because my panicked voice is competing with hers to be heard.

“Oh my god oh my god oh my god! Why did you do that? What am I supposed to do now? He is literally sitting right there! He’s going to figure out what…..”

Finally, she reaches across and grabs my face on either side with her hands and orders me to be quiet. Surprised, I suck in a quick breath and stop talking mid-sentence. Glancing over, I notice a few tables of people are looking curiously in our direction.

“Dan! Get a hold of yourself,” she orders. When she’s convinced that I’m not going to do anything stupid, she lets go of my face. “Now, what are you going to say to him?”

With shaking hands, I pick up my phone again. “Having a drink with a friend.” I turn it so Jas can see what I wrote. She reads quickly and nods her head in approval.

Phil: You are such a social butterfly

Phil: So what are you doing this weekend?

I look up for help, but Jas is already leaning across the table and reading Phil’s reply. “Any ideas?”

She goes quiet, a thoughtful look on her face. While she’s thinking, I glance over at Phil as he smiles and laughs at whatever Molly just said. I’m instantly drawn into what he’s doing…the shape of his lips when he talks, his dark hair, perfect pale skin, and of course, those blue eyes.

“Dan,” Jas says, probably not for the first time, while tugging on my shirt sleeve. “I think you should tell Phil you’re going to be at the concert.” I open my mouth to protest, but she cuts off my objection. “Don’t start this with lies. If, and when, he finds out who you are, he’s going to know you lied about not being at the show. Don’t be that guy. You’re just going to have to deal with the fact that he knows you’ll be there too.”

Knowing she was right, I start typing again, choosing my words very carefully.

Me: I’m going to be at the Bluebird tomorrow night. What about you?
Phil: Really? I’m going to be there too! So does this mean we’re going to be there together? Or I guess I should say ‘together,’ as in not just in the same room. Do I get to find out who you are tomorrow?

“Want to answer that one, smarty pants?” I ask, raising an eyebrow. She gives me a dirty look so I start typing on my own.

Me: No, but I’ll buy you a drink.

I wait, but nothing. He’s seen the text, but no reply. I look up hopefully at Jas, but she’s focused on Phil and Molly. Following her gaze, I see them gathering their things. I desperately try to see Phil’s expression, but his back is turned towards me so I can’t tell. Seeing my fallen face, Jas touches my arm so I turn and look at her.

“It’s ok. Just give him some time. What did you say to him?”

I show her the message on my phone.

"Ug. Really?

"Oh my God, Jas! I panicked and didn't know what to say! Is it that bad?"

She shrugs.

“What do I do about tomorrow night?” I ask

“I wish I had an answer. If you want, I can try to do a little recognizance and see if I hear him say anything. Unless he's really close, you probably won’t be able to tell where he is in the crowd from on stage because of the lights, but if you leave your phone by you while you play, I can tell you what’s going on.”

I consider her offer and nod my head. “I really appreciate you doing all of this for me. I got myself into this and now I have no idea what to do. I’m sort of lost.” Digging in my pocket, I pull out my wallet and pay for our drinks.

“And between you and me, if he turns you down after all of this, he’s crazy. Remember that it’s a reflection on him, not you or anything you’ve done. Whatever happens, and I can speak for all of the guys when I say this, please don’t retreat back into your shell. You are amazing. You are awesome. You are extraordinarily talented. Any guy would be lucky to have you.”

“Oh…one more thing!” she says suddenly with a playful grin and a wink as we stand to leave. “Keep your hair like that. Stop straightening it. Don’t tell Grif I said this, but you’re seriously hot with all the curls.”

I choke out a laugh and can feel my face instantly turning a deep shade of red as we walk out of the pub.

Chapter End Notes

As always, thank you for all of the kind words and kudos! I'm so excited that you like it so far! <3
The rain is back. After lunch with Jas, I spent about 3 hours engrossed in video games, and now I’ve been laying on my couch for an additional 3 hours doing little more than staring at the ceiling. I feel so ridiculous. My world should not collapse because one guy didn’t return one text. But yet somehow it does. I have no idea how guys like Heath do it. He’s so good with words that all of the girls believe whatever he says, and sometimes even the things that he omits. It’s like he feels nothing but I feel everything.

I feel so painfully out of place. Why is this all so easy for other people? What happened today is exactly why I prefer to fade into the woodwork. The more you talk to people, the more connections you make, the more you are involved, the higher the chance of feeling how I feel right now. Twenty-four years old and I could count the number of guys I’ve kissed on one hand. I’ve seen my bandmates kiss more girls than that in one night. Not that I was dying to meet any of the guys in the audience anyway. I had tried to mingle after shows when we were just starting out, but guys and girls both always assumed I was like Heath and started off with overtly sexual pickup lines and advances. Frankly, they scare me. Where are the guys who are interested in what kind of books I like and maybe some video game strategy? Unfortunately, they are apparently not in our audiences. Or if they are, they are just as timid and lost in the crowd as I am.

The songs I sing are for a guy who isn’t there. At least that’s what I’ve been thinking this entire time until I saw the Instagram picture of Phil and me together. It made me realize that maybe he was there all along and I didn’t even notice. Which is ironic, since I’m the one who puts so much effort into not being seen.

My phone buzzes and I dive for it. Relief floods me when I see Phil’s name.

Phil: If you’re still going to get me a drink tomorrow, I like sprite with vanilla vodka. It tastes like crème soda.

Me: Are you mad at me?

Phil: I guess a little. ‘I’ll buy you a drink’ just wasn’t the answer I wanted to hear.

Me: I’m sorry. I really am.

Phil: Can I ask you something?

Me: Anything.

Phil: Will you give me a straight answer?

Me: Yes.

Phil: What are you scared of?

Me: Pretty much everything.

Phil: No. seriously. What are you scared of?
Me: I am serious. I’m scared that there is something wrong with me. I’m petrified of being alone the rest of my life, but at the same time, I’m terrified of people and their expectations and my inability to meet them. People expect me to be a certain way and then they’re disappointed when I’m not the way they imagined. It’s like I’m living in a never-ending existential crisis.

Phil: Is that why you don’t want me to meet you tomorrow night?

Me: I want to meet you tomorrow. More than I’ve ever wanted anything. But yes, that’s one of the reasons why. I’m just so bad at this sort of thing. I’m scared I’m going to mess this up, Phil. I really like you.

I stare at my surprise confession.

If he likes me, it needs to be about me, not the version of me on stage. The guy on the couch. The guy playing video games. The guy who is scared of people. I can’t stand the thought of Phil looking at me with a face full of disappointment when he finds out what I’m like when I’m not behind a guitar and microphone. Everyone wants the guy who is the star and center of attention, not the one who is painfully awkward and wants to disappear into the crowd.

Phil: I understand, but we can’t just text forever. I really like you too. I just wish I knew you.

Phil: Besides, you aren’t the only one who gets scared. Can you keep a secret?

Me: of course

Phil: The reason I work in a bookstore is that I turned down two other job offers. When I went to university, I had friends there already, so it felt safe. The offers were in the north and really far away. I was too scared to go by myself so I told everyone I couldn’t find a job and came back to London.

Me: I really do understand that. I was never any good with bravery.

Phil: So what do you think it would be like if we ever met?

Me: I don’t know. You’d probably be repulsed by my averageness.

Phil: I already know you’re not average. What happens if you went through all of the trouble of getting my number and texting me and then when we finally meet you don’t like me and change your mind?

Me: The more we talk, the more I know that isn’t going to happen.

Phil: But what if it does?

Me: It won’t

Phil: But what if it does? I mean, what do you really know about me?

I sigh and think for a minute. What do I know about him so far?

Me: I know you’re a challenge, which is something that I need in my life. You are honest and kind and funny. I love that you talk all the time and always have a million questions to ask me. You have these amazing blue eyes that I can’t wait to see in person again because I’ve never even seen anyone have eyes like yours before. I think about kissing you. A lot. Like probably more than I should. You are nothing like I expected you to be, but somehow the reality is even better.

Phil: You can’t say things like that and expect me to keep waiting! How are you this perfect? :[ <3
Perfect. I’ve definitely never heard that before. Jas was right. I’ve got to figure out how this is going to end, but not for the reasons she said. I’m scared that Phil is building me up in his head to be this amazing sweep-you-of-your-feet-romantic sort of guy, but he has no idea how wrong he is. The more time that passes, the higher his expectations are going to be and the more likely he is going to be disappointed.

Phil: You really think about kissing me?

More territory I know nothing about. How do I talk about this? Is it weird that I think about that?

Me: Yes.

Phil: I think about that too.

Wait...what? He does?

Phil: When we finally meet are you going to kiss me?

Me: Do you want me to kiss you?

Phil: You can't answer a question with another question.

Me: Technically I can. In fact, I just did.

Phil: Now you're just stalling. Answer the question.

Me: What was the question?

Phil: When we finally meet are you going to kiss me?

I stare at the screen and take a deep breath. Think brave thoughts...think brave thoughts...think brave thoughts...

Me: If you're ok with it, yes.

Phil: Of course I am! What else are we going to do?

I can feel myself blush.

Me: Phil!

Phil: No! I mean where are we going to go? Pervert ;)

Phil: Unless you want to tell me what else you'd like to do with me ;)

I rub my eyes. Phil is going to be the end of me. It's quite possible at this point that I may not survive meeting him.

Phil: I don’t know how I feel about being in the same room with you tomorrow. But now that I know that you want to kiss me, I’m going to spend the entire night trying to figure out who you are.

Me: I’ll try not to be a weirdo and stare at you the entire time.

Phil: I wish you would. That’ll make it easy to figure out who you are.
Phil: Have you ever been in love?

Me: no. Have you?

Phil: yes.

I feel my heart and stomach twist. I try to remind myself that I have no right to feel jealous, but yet there it is.

Me: what happened?

Phil: I fell in love with the wrong person.

I reread his text. I pause and try to think how to respond.

Me: What did being in love feel like?

Phil: It was great, until it wasn’t. That probably doesn’t make much sense, does it? Things were either wonderful or horrible. There was never getting to just enjoy normal everyday life with someone that you loved. It was all extremes and nothing in between. I was in love, but not happy. Love isn’t supposed to be easy, but it also wasn’t supposed to be that hard.

Me: Love sounds scary. I’m not sure if I’d be any good at it.

Phil: It is scary sometimes.

Me: I don’t even really understand it.

Phil: You don’t understand love, you just sort of feel and experience it.

Phil: Can I ask one more question?

Grinning, I know that he will always have more than one more question.

Me: As many as you want

Phil: You said people expect you to be a certain way? Why?

Me: I guess I’m just not….typical?

Phil: That’s a good thing, not some sort of tragic flaw.

Me: I wish everyone thought like that.

Phil: I think that way. Sometimes one person is enough.

Tears had been threatening since I got back home, but that was enough to put me over the edge. Why do I have to be this way? What’s wrong with me? It’s not enough that I’m lame anyway but now I’m going to cry all of the time too?

Phil: Are you real?

Me: I am very real. I promise.

After taking a few minutes to get a hold of myself, I wipe away my tears and stare at the last messages. I take a deep breath and click a button before closing my eyes. I wait for a few seconds and then I’m rewarded with the sound of his voice.
“You called without me asking!” Phil says gleefully after answering on the second ring. “I thought you didn’t like phone calls!”

“I don’t, but I’m trying to figure out how this bravery thing works.”

“What made you decide to call?”

“I guess I just…I just wanted to say goodnight and wish you sweet dreams again. You seemed to really like it before.”

“I can’t believe it! Do you know how happy I am right now?”

I’m starting to think being brave is worth it after all.

“I…um…last time we talked you…um…asked me if I would read you a bedtime story. I thought that maybe…if you still wanted to, I mean, or not, or whatever….that maybe I could do that, but only if you wanted…..” I sound like an idiot. Is it possible to take back a phone call?

“Wait. Are you being serious?”

“Umm….do you want me to be being serious right now?”

“You would really read to me while I fell asleep? You would do that for me?”

“Yes, but what would you want me to read? I have a bunch of e-books. What kind of books do you like?”

“Well, I really like video games, so Ready Player One is one of my –“

“Wait!” I interrupt. “That’s one of my favorites too! I actually have a paperback copy of that one. Hold on for a second while I look for it.” I hop up and scan my bookshelf. When I find it, I go back to the couch and make myself comfortable again.

“And you really want me to do this?” I ask hesitantly.

“Yes! I’m in bed with the lights out and you’re on speaker now.”

“So how long should I read for?”

“Ten minutes, maybe? Check after ten and see if I’m still awake.”

I put him on speaker too and open the book. Just as I’m ready to start, he starts talking again.

“If I fall asleep before we talk again, I just want to say thank you for doing this. Oh, and also that I’m looking forward to tomorrow even if we don’t actually meet. If that’s all you can do right now, then I’m ok. I have a feeling you’re worth waiting for.”

“I’m looking forward to it too,” I say softly before I start reading. I’ve read this book so many times, I almost know it by heart. “Chapter One. Everyone my age remembers where they were and what they were doing when they first heard about the contest. I was sitting in my hideout watching cartoons when the news bulletin broke in on my video feed, announcing that James Halliday had died during the night. I’d heard of Halliday, of course. Everyone had. He was the videogame designer responsible for creating the OASIS, a massively multiplayer online game that had gradually evolved into the globally networked virtual reality……”

I finally take a break and look at the time and realize I’ve been reading for about 20 minutes.
“Phil? Are you still awake?” I ask.

I listen, but the only thing I hear is his steady, soft breathing.

“Good night, Phil. Sweet dreams.”

Silence. I close my book and put it on the coffee table before leaning over to click off the light. I get ready to disconnect the call, but then I think better of it. In the dark living room, I lay the phone down beside me and close my eyes. I fall asleep almost instantly, with a sleeping Phil still on the line.

Chapter End Notes

Also, you guys are the absolute best! Thank you for all of your kind words and encouragement!
A Brief Request!

Authors Note: November 1st, 2017

Hi everyone! If you were expecting another chapter, I'm sorry but this isn't it yet! The next one will be posted in a day or so.

What I need is some help! Want a chance to participate in this story?? Now is your chance! I need some suggestions for songs that will be used in future chapters! Without giving too much away, I'm looking for songs that Dan would use to express how he feels about Phil and his current situation. Keeping Dan's black crunchy soul in mind, they don't necessarily have to be love songs, just something that reflects how he's feeling (angst, confused, scared, really liking Phil, etc) right now. Please leave your suggestions in the comments!

Thank you! <3
Fashion Choices and Preparations

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I wake up disoriented and on the couch. Again. The rain ended sometime in the middle of the night and sunshine is streaming in through the windows. As last night starts to come back to me, I grope around on the couch trying to find my phone. To my disappointment, the call with Phil had been disconnected.

Phil didn’t push anymore about meeting me tonight, which is a relief. I’m starting to get overwhelmed about playing in front of him, even though he has no idea I’m going to be the one on stage. Jas was right about trying to figure out how I want this to turn out. After our conversation last night, it’s inevitable that he and I will eventually meet and it’s probably going to need to happen sooner than later. Just not tonight.

What I need to do right now is talk to Jas. And once again, I have no idea if begging for help from your friend’s girlfriend is appropriate or not. On the other hand, I don’t have another girl to ask.

Me: Hi

Grif: Hey! Was Jas able to help you out yesterday?

Me: Yes. I kind of need her help again. I just wanted to make sure you were ok with the two of us talking and hanging out.

Grif: Look, don’t worry about that. We’re both cheering for you. Besides, she’s ecstatic to help. And as long as she’s occupied with you, I get some extra video game time.

Me: I really appreciate it.

She must be sitting next to him again because my phone chimes and her name shows up.

Jas: Did Phil text you back last night???

Me: Yes

Jas: AND???? Was he upset???

I laughed at both her enthusiasm and liberal use of punctuation.

Me: A little bit at first, but it went really well. I still need some help tho.

Jas: Ok. Dan, I’m coming over.

Me: Here? Now?

Jas: You need to be at the Bluebird at 6:30, right?

Me: Yeah

Jas: Ok. Let me get ready and I’ll come over to your place. We can talk and head over there together later.
Me: What about Grif?

Jas: Lol….it was his idea. Trust me, you’re doing him a favor. He’s looking for his Xbox controller right now.

I figure I have a while until she gets here, so I have a quick shower. Nerves are starting to bubble up in my stomach which is unusual for me. At this point, I have perfected blocking out the audience, so I haven’t really gotten nervous about performing in front of people for years.

I stand with my eyes closed under the hot water and try to make my mind go blank, but everything fades away except for Phil. Last night’s conversation with him seeps into my mind and comes back in bits and pieces.

“You really think about kissing me?”
“Yes.”
“I think about that too.”

“You don’t understand love, you just sort of feel and experience it.”

“I really like you too. I just wish I knew you.”

“But now that I know that you want to kiss me, I’m going to spend the entire night trying to figure out who you are.”

When I started this, I was hoping that Phil would return my texts and if I was lucky, I’d get to meet him. But this has turned into something so much more. It feels like talking to him last night upped the stakes. I’ve had plenty of secret crushes over the years, but this has shifted far past anything I’ve ever felt for anyone before. I’m starting to need him and that is a terrifying position to be in.

I get out of the shower and throw on some clothes without giving it too much thought. My guess is that Jas is going to tell me what I’m wearing is wrong anyway. I throw myself down on the couch and start scrolling through my phone until Phil’s name suddenly pops up on my screen.

Phil: I just wanted to thank you for last night. I’m sorry I fell asleep so quickly. I think I was out before you were even done reading the first page.

I smile as I remember how excited he was about me reading to him. I wish I could do that every night. I want to be the guy that makes him that happy every day. My mind starts to drift off to imagining us in bed together snuggled up, reading to him as he falls asleep.

Me: I really liked it too.

Phil: I have to work this morning, so I only have a few minutes. Want to trade random facts?

Me: ?

Phil: I tell you a random fact about myself and then you tell me one about you. I’ll go first.

Phil: My favorite food is waffles.

Me: My favorite color is blue.

Phil: What shade of blue?

I think about the first day I saw him at the record store and those few short seconds that he looked into my eyes.
Me: Light blue

Phil: I have an older brother.

Me: I play League of Legends

Phil: My favorite animal is a lion

Me: Almost all of my clothes are black

Phil: I’m really klutzy

Me: I’m a horrible cook.

Phil: Those are all really good facts!

Phil: I have to go work, but I’d much rather talk to you all day. You’re still going tonight, right?

My stomach drops again as I’m reminded of the concert tonight.

Me: I will absolutely be there.

Phil: Can I text you while we’re there?

Me: Of course!

It almost feels like a lie to not tell him about playing the guitar as one of my random facts since it is what my life orbits around, but it’s too big of a risk. He’ll find out soon enough anyway, I guess. The real question is still how.

Two hours later, Jas is at my door and equipped with plenty of advice. About everything. I’m standing in the middle of my living room while she looks me up and down, deciding if I’m appropriately dressed.

“What else do you have?” she asks, still examining my clothes. “I should have brought some of Grif’s shirts over.”

“Is that your way of saying I need to change clothes?”

“Maybe?”

“Umm. You’ve probably already seen everything I own. I really don’t like to go clothes shopping,” I offer. Ignoring this piece of information, she turns and walks back to my bedroom. I dutifully follow her.

“What’s wrong with what I’m wearing, anyway?”

She scowls and examines me again.

“Fine. I’ll change clothes, but just stop looking at me like that. I’m not a project,” I grumble.

I know I’m a project, but if we could just not say it out loud I’d feel better about it.

As she flings open the closet, I’m suddenly grateful for the fact that not only did I do laundry this week, but I also managed to put away all of the clean clothes. She rifles through all of my shirts, pausing every few seconds to hold up a shirt and then put it back. Finally, she pulls out a black short
sleeve button up and hands it to me.

“This,” she directs. “Put a fitted dark grey t-shirt under it.”

I look blankly into my closet. She sighs loudly and shoves through the clothes again, handing me a fitted shirt.

“Thanks,” I answer weakly.

She nods and turns her back so I can change.

“Ok. What do you think?” I ask.

She turns around and examines me. “Were you going to wear those jeans?”

“Um…yes?”

She starts going through my dresser drawers before holding up a pair of ripped black skinny jeans.

“These,” she says, tossing them over at me before walking out of my room.

“Hey!” I yell after her before she gets too far. When she comes back into the doorway, I toss my phone at her which she deftly catches.

“Read the texts from last night.” She grins and heads back to the living room.

I finish changing pants and hope that converse are appropriate for the new outfit because that’s all I own. There’s no way I’m going to let her drag me out shoe shopping before the show.

I stand in front of the mirror on my dresser and stare at my reflection. To her credit, the outfit does look pretty good, but out of principle, I’ll never tell her that. Knowing a lost cause when I see it, I just let my curls do what they want to do and don’t bother trying to rearrange them. I walk back into the living room and wait for Jas to look up from the phone. When she does, I spin once and hold my arms out, waiting for her to give her approval. She considers me for a second, nods, and then turns back to my phone. I continue to stand and fidget, not sure what to do with myself while she continues to scroll through the messages. Jas glances up at me and motions for me to sit down. I have clearly lost control of the entire situation and am at her mercy at this point.

After what seems like an eternity, she hands my phone back to me. “Dan! He really really likes you!” I exhale with relief, not even realizing I’d been holding my breath.

“There’s actually more to it than that,” I admit. “I called him last night.”

“You did not!” she yells.

“I did.”

She throws her arms around me and is talking so fast I have no idea what she’s saying. “What did you talk about?”

“Oh. Umm…”

She raises her eyebrows at me in surprise. It takes me a minute before I realize what she’s suggesting.

“No! Nothing like that!” I say, a blush instantly coloring my cheeks. “He…uhh…I know this probably sounds really weird to you, but he had joked before about me reading him a bedtime story, so that’s what I did.”
She gives me a blank stare for a full ten seconds before she starts talking again. “Dan, that is one of the sweetest and most romantic things I’ve ever heard! Maybe you don’t need my help after all.”

“I assure you I still need help.”

“Ok. Well, we need a plan. But first, what do you want to accomplish tonight?”

“What?”

“Accomplish. What do you want to happen? Realistically speaking, of course. What is your best case scenario for tonight?”

“Well,” I say slowly, thinking it over, “I need to figure out how to buy Phil a drink without him seeing me doing it. Sprite with vanilla vodka.”

“I think I can take care of that. I can figure out how to get the drinks to him on your behalf. I’ll just need to catch him before he orders anything. He’s going with his cousin, right?”

“Yeah. The one we saw at the pub. And her cousin’s boyfriend, Gavin.”

“Do you want to know where he’s at in the room during the show?”

I sigh and consider the question. “I don’t know. I’m worried that I’ll freeze if I see him while I’m playing, but I don’t want to give up an opportunity to see him either.”

“Valid point. Let’s just play it by ear. Once Phil gets there, I can hang out in the crowd and see where they end up.” Seeing the concerned look on my face, she adds “I’ll wait till we’re sure he’s there before we do that. It won’t be as crowded that early so you might even be able to see him from backstage. I’ll stay at the bar so I can make sure he gets the drink as soon as I spot him.”

I nod my approval to her, reaching in my pocket and passing her $20 to pay for drinks.

“Are you definitely going to sing Robbers?”

“Yeah, I am. I mean, I think so. What do you think?”

“Are thinking about changing your mind? Have you come up with any other new ones yet?”

“Well, I can play just about anything. Do you think that’s the right choice?”

“Only you can answer that.”

“I’m having doubts about the song. The more he and I talk, the more I don’t know if it says what I need it to. It’s about all consuming love, but how can I sing that to him if I’ve never experienced it? It almost feels dishonest.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“I honestly don’t know.”

She’s uncharacteristically quiet for a few minutes before she finally speaks again.

“I know that’s the song you’ve been practicing, but if it’s not right, you shouldn’t do it. Dan, if anyone can come up with something at the last minute and still have it sound beautiful, it’s you.”

“Well, what have I got to lose, right?”
She stops for a second to think, but almost instantly her eyes light up and she grabs me by the shoulders and shakes me. “Dan, that’s it!” she shouts in my face.

“W-w-what?” I answer through all of the jostling around.

“Find out his favorite song. Play it for him on stage. Dedicate it to him. That’s how he finds out who you really are!”

“I don’t think so,” I answer while struggling to get away from her grasp. “I want him to like me regardless of what I do on stage, not because of it. I don’t think a public unveiling is a good idea because it will put both of us on the spot. Also, I’m still hoping he doesn’t recognize me from tonight once we do meet. I want to be able to tell him who I am, not have him figure it out in a crowd of people.”

She sighs dramatically and throws herself back into the couch cushions. “That’s a pretty big gamble.”

“Not really. I mean, I can’t even remember the last time someone recognized me when I was somewhere other than a venue. People might be listening to me sing, but their eyes are on Heath and Greg. They constantly get recognized. But seriously, Jas. Just figuring out the logistics of getting him a drink is making me feel sick. Sing an acoustic solo and dedicate it to him when I don’t even want him to know I’m in a band? Are you insane? I wouldn’t survive it!” The only way I know Jas is still listening is because of the giant eye roll she directs at me. “I trust you to help with the drinks, but please don’t do anything drastic tonight, yeah?”

“Ok,” she answers.

I squint at her, trying to figure out if she’s lying. “Jas, I mean it. Get him the drink and try to let me know where he’s at in the crowd. That’s it. Nothing more.”

“Fine,” she says, pouting.

I feel my phone vibrate and take it out of my pocket.

Grif: How’s it going?

I snap a quick picture of Jas pouting on the couch with her arms crossed in front of her and send it to him.

Grif: lol…looks about right ;)

“Wait! Is that Phil? Did he text you?” Jas asks, perking up.

I grin and toss her the phone.

She looks at the texts from Grif and drops the phone on the coffee table. “I hate band boys,” she says, probably only half joking. I try to refocus on the long night ahead of me and block everything else out, including the disgruntled girl sitting on my couch. I start packing up two of the guitars and stuffing extra picks in my pockets.

Whatever is going to happen will happen. It’s time.

Chapter End Notes
Thank you so much to everyone who suggested songs! The ideas were so good I’m actually adjusting the story a bit to try to figure out a way to work some more of them in! <3

Also, prepare yourself....the next TWO chapters will be about the concert!

As always, thank you so much for reading and commenting :)

The Concert, Part 1

Chapter Notes

This is the first of the two concert chapters. I know everyone has been waiting for this so I hope it doesn't disappoint!

Part 2 will be published this Sunday (Nov 12) so you won't have to wait to find out what happens!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It’s about 6:35 and Jas and I are both in my car on the short drive to the bar. She has been uncharacteristically quiet on the way over and I don’t know how to take her silence. I didn’t get any more texts from Phil today after he left for work and I’m trying to decide if that is a good thing or a bad thing. Maybe he changed his mind about coming tonight? Of course, we did stay up late last night talking. This is just another example of how I have no idea what I’m doing.

“How are you?” she finally asks as we pull into the parking lot.

“Nervous. I’m honestly trying to block all of this out. I’m putting all of my trust in you to handle it,” I say, giving her a shaky grin and climbing out of the car. She gets out of the passenger side and comes over to help carry in one of the guitars.

“Have you decided on what song to sing yet?”

“Not yet,” I admit.

As we open the door, I spot the other guys already here and drinking beers. “You’re late!” Griff says, looping his arm around Jas and pulling her close. “Did she make you change your clothes?”

“Yes,” she answers for me, “but only once. Dan takes direction much better than you do.” She leans in gives him a playful kiss on the cheek.

I walk out on stage and take out the guitars, putting them on stands by the center microphone. The musicians from the opening band are there and have already finished up their sound check. Heath is uncharacteristically early and already tuning up his guitar. Seeing me, he hands over the agreed upon crumpled setlist. I glance over it and then flatten it out and place it on the floor where I’ll be able to see it when I’m playing.

“How are you?” he asks. “I hear you enlisted an expert for some help.”

“I laugh, “Yeah… I put Jas in charge of my love life. I figure my odds were better that way.” I check the time and quickly get to work on my guitars. I can see the front door from where I’m standing and there is already a crowd of people lined up and waiting to get in. I wonder if Phil is out there yet. Spotting Jas and Grif already by the bar, I grin, more grateful than ever for all of their help. After one last look at the set list, I walk off stage and over to the backstage area that is blocked off from the audience where Greg and Jack are standing. Five minutes later, the room starts to fill with people.

“Doing ok?” he asks. “I hear you enlisted an expert for some help.”

I’m only half paying attention to them as I stare at Jas. She has her eyes trained on the crowd as they come in the door. Suddenly, she steps behind the bar and waves over Hugh, one of the regular
bartenders. She starts talking to him animatedly, pausing to show him something on her phone. He
nods in agreement and steps back to continue pouring drinks. My phone vibrates and I grab it out of
my pocket, only to see it is from Jas, not Phil.

Jas: I talked to Hugh and showed him Phil’s picture. There are a lot of people here and I’m afraid I’m
going to miss him. He knows what to do if he spots him or he orders a drink.

I look up and catch her eye from across the room. I give her a half of a wave of thanks and she
smiles back. People are still quickly pouring in and the place is almost full only 10 minutes after the
doors have opened. Out of the corner of my eye, I spot Heath out in the crowd with each arm already
around a giggling girl. Looking at my phone again, I try to will Phil to text me. Giving up, I quickly
type out a quick message to him.

Me: Are you here yet?

Relieved, I immediately see the three blinking dots. I hold my breath and wait.

Phil: Almost. We’re just about to the front of the line. Are you? I’m sort of nervous!

I screenshot the message and text it to Jas. Finding her in the crowd still by the bar, I see her look at
her phone and then get Hugh’s attention. My heart starts pounding as I see her gaze trained on the
door.

Me: Yes, I’m already here. How come you feel nervous?

Phil: Just being in the same room as you. It’s a weird mix of nerves and anticipation.

Me: Why anticipation?

Phil: This probably sounds weird, but I want to see if I can feel that you’re here. It just seems like
when people have a strong enough connection, they can sense the other person without seeing them.
Is that really stupid?

Me: No, not at all. I’m actually sort of wondering the same thing.

I look up and notice Jack and Greg expectantly looking at me. “Well?” Greg asks. “What’s going on,
Dan? Is he here?”

“Yeah,” I answer, turning my attention back to the door. “He’s right outside.” All three of us are
now straining to see over the crowd. Finally, I spot Phil immediately when he and Molly come
through the door. As they weave through the people and towards the bar, Hugh pushes his way out,
intercepting them almost immediately and hands a surprised Phil his drink. Hugh talks quickly as
Phil, Molly, and Gavin press in to hear what he’s saying over all of the noise. Most importantly, Phil
is smiling and sipping his drink. Hugh gives them a nod and makes his way back behind the bar,
stopping briefly on the way to say something to Jas.

Suddenly, the lights dim as Mike takes the stage to introduce the opening band. I struggle to see
where Phil is, but it’s just too dark now. I grab my phone and see a text from Jas.

Jas: Mission accomplished! I don’t know if you were able to see what happened or not. Phil was
surprised but seemed really happy. He asked who you were. Hugh told him he was sworn to
secrecy, but not to worry because you were an amazing guy. Oh…and he’s going to keep giving
Phil free drinks all night.

I can feel my heart speed up. The opening band is playing now, but I still try to search the crowd and
try to catch a glimpse of Phil. Maybe I wouldn’t feel so nervous if I could see his blue eyes just once…

Before I can text Jas back, I finally see Phil, Molly, and Gavin a lot closer to me than I’m expecting. “Dan,” Jack says loud enough to be heard over the music, “isn’t that him right there?” I look at Jack and see him gesturing in Phil’s direction. “He’s looking over here.”

Panicking, I stifle a gasp and turn away, causing me to run right into Heath and one of the girls I spotted him with earlier. “Sorry,” I mumble, somewhat annoyed that he brought one of them back here. Before I can push my way past them, she grabs me by the arm and starts talking.

“I just think you are so amazing!” she shouts in my ear. “It’s so great to get to meet you!” I try to back up slightly, but her grip is too tight. “I really love your hair,” she says, way too close to my ear as she attempts to run her fingers through my curls. I look around her to where Heath is standing and wordlessly implore him to do something.

“Hey,” Heath says loudly in her ear, tugging her closer to him. “This is Dan,” turning to me he adds, “Dan, this is Katie!” I give her a quick half smile as he pulls her along further behind the stage. I turn back around to look for Phil, but he’s gone. I edge closer to where the crowd starts to try to get a better look, but I can’t see far enough into the room anymore.

Giving up, I move back into the semi-darkness and find a chair. I sit down and pull my tangled earbuds and phone out of my pocket, reminding myself I still don’t have a song to sing. Putting the earbuds in, I scroll through my music and hit play. The sounds fill my ears and I lean back in the chair and close my eyes. It’s getting harder and harder to separate Phil from the music. He’s so intertwined in the lyrics now, and for this, I am mad at myself. When it comes down to it, I don’t know him, but yet somehow I have let Phil into the most crucial part of my life. My sanctuary has been invaded and I let it happen. The purity of the music is gone. I turn up the volume and force everything out of my head except for the songs.

After about 20 minutes, I can feel more movement around me as the first group is finishing up. I take a deep breath and open my eyes. Feeling more clear and grounded, I take a quick look at my phone and find a message from Phil.

Phil: Thank you

Me: For?

Phil: For the drink. For just being here. Even if I don’t know who you are, I love just knowing you’re in here with me somewhere.

My heart feels like it’s going faster and stopping at the same time, and suddenly, I know what I’m going to sing. I run the lyrics through my head and every word is a perfect reflection of how I feel about Phil. His text from earlier tonight suddenly creeps back into my conscious thoughts.

It just seems like when people have a strong enough connection, they can sense the other person without seeing them.

And in the middle of all this chaos, I understand exactly what he meant. I can feel that connection, this intangible thing that has somehow linked us together. This. This is the right song.

Before I can respond, Jas comes over and stands close to avoid being heard. “Did you see him?”

“Yeah. I lost him in the crowd, but he’s here. That’s all that matters.”
“Ok. Check your phone right before you go out. I’ll try to tell you where he’s standing.”

"Hey! I figured out the song," I say, handing my earbuds to her, hoping that she agrees. Once she puts them in, I hit play. After a few moments, a smile appears on her face.

"You're right, Dan," she says, shaking her head. "That's the one."

I grab her wrist and pull her back before she can dart off. “Thank you for everything. No one has ever.....I mean it…this…” I start to stammer, grasping for words. She just grins and gives me a quick hug before disappearing back into the sea of people. My thoughts are immediately interrupted by Heath pushing Katie past me and out into the crowd. She is flushed with a huge smile on her face and he is telling her a stream of lies about calling her and seeing her again. If I ever fantasized about being a ‘regular guy,’ seeing that repeat performance every week has soured me on the idea.

The guys are all back behind the stage now getting ready to go on. They are waiting for me, but know to give me some space and not to interrupt. I take a few more minutes alone to try to sort myself out. It’s taking longer than usual to focus and control my thoughts, but there is nothing I want more right now than to lose myself in the music. At this point, it’s the only thing that will clear out my head. I can hear voices behind me screaming, but after a few seconds, they all blend together, causing the crowd to seem like one giant entity instead of individual people. This is what I need so desperately.

I turn and walk towards them. I take my phone out to check it one last time.

Jas: Phil will be to your right center. About 20 people back from the stage. He’s close enough that you’ll probably be able to see him.

That’s what I wanted to hear. With the ringer off, I lay it down on the edge of the stage and wait by the steps with everyone else. Jack catches my eye and nods. Mike sees that I’m there and ready and starts announcing us to the crowd. The room is dark again except for the purplish spotlights moving around the stage. I can see camera flashes coming from the audience. It’s all just a jumble of bodies, lights, and sounds now. Heath leads us into the cacophony and we follow him obediently into the abyss.

The crowd cheers and pushes forward. Heath is talking, but I don’t even hear what he is saying. I pull the guitar strap over my head and fish a pick out of my pocket. I can hear my name being called out by different voices in the undulating mass in front of me. Stepping up to the microphone, I look out into the throng of people and immediately pick out Phil, exactly where Jas said he would be. Despite the fact that everyone in the room is looking in this direction, it’s still a surprise when I see his eyes focused on me. Those blue eyes are the only ones that matter.

Behind me, I hear Greg kick off our first song. I rip my eyes away from Phil and focus foggily on a random spot in the room. My hands and voice know what to do and I freely and thankfully let the experience fill me and take over.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so nervous about these two chapters!!! I really hope it is worth the wait!
The Concert, Part 2

Chapter Notes

So this is the song I ended up choosing for this chapter: https://youtu.be/mcXv4w-cm3U

It’s completely different than the style of music I was originally looking for, but the lyrics were so dead-on to where the storyline is going that I couldn’t pass it up. Thank you to lexilovee for suggesting it! The link above is a version of the song with the lyrics in case you want a refresh before you start reading!

I owe a huge thank you to everyone who suggested songs. Even if Dan doesn’t end up singing them, they actually inspired me to change the course of the story a bit and several of them are getting used in another way in upcoming chapters!

Also, I know everyone has been looking forward to this chapter, but there is still a lot of story left after the concert so I’m hoping everyone sticks around and keeps reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

We're four songs in and I can feel the sweat on my brow and neck starting to bead and drip down. I reach back and grab a bottle of water and take a long drink before wiping my forehead off with the back of my hand. Under the hot lights, the button down shirt Jas put me in is one layer too many so I shrug it off and just wear the t-shirt. I already know the playlist by heart, but I still look down to the piece of paper on the floor to confirm the next song is the one I chose for Phil. Somewhere in the back of my head, I can hear Heath talking and getting the crowd riled up even though I’m mentally blocking out most of his words. At this point, we’ve been together long enough that my brain knows how to pick out the important things he’s saying and ignore the rest. I turn and switch guitars, hearing the audience cheer and yell.

As the lights go down a little bit further, I step to the front, alone, and start to strum the opening chords to Can I Be Him. I glance behind me and see the surprised look on their faces when they realize I’m not playing the song we had planned on. I force myself to look directly at Phil, just like I did in the record store the first time I saw him.

There are a million songs that remind me of him, but I wanted to sing one that reflects how I want him to feel about me when he finds out who I am. That’s why this is the one.

I swear that every word you sing, you wrote them for me
Like it was a private show, but I know you never saw me

I can’t tell from this distance if he realizes that it’s him I’m looking at. His eyes flicker from side to side and then back to mine, making me notice Molly and Gavin standing and singing along on either side of him.

When the lights come on and I'm on my own
Will you be there to sing it again?

I know I shouldn’t be looking at him, but it’s so hard to look away. The last thing I want is for him to make the connection and realize who am I like this. I wait for a look of understanding to wash across his face, but to my relief, it never comes. I think I might be safe.
Could I be the one you talk about in all your stories  
Can I be him?

Somehow, Phil has woven his way into all of this. It feels like I’ve handed the keys to my life and mental well-being over to a stranger. I rip my eyes off of his and refocus on the back of the room.

I heard there was someone but I know he don't deserve you  
If you were mine I'd never let anyone hurt you,  
oo no I wanna dry those tears, kiss those lips

My heart can feel his pull from the stage and knowing he’s still looking at me is almost unbearable. I have never been so scared and so drawn to anyone in my entire life, and it absolutely scares the shit out of me.

It's all that I've been thinking about  
'Cause a light came on when I heard that song and I want you to sing it again

At this point, there is no way that he even can live up to the imaginary expectations I’ve already placed on him. I have this storybook fantasy in my head of who he is, but no one could possibly be that perfect. I feel like I’ve set him up to fail before I’ve spoken a single word to him in person. All of this emotion and fear, and he’s not even not mine.

The words roll off my tongue so smoothly that it's as if I wrote them myself. Another verse, another chorus, and the song is suddenly over. I can hear the crowd going crazy and people yelling my name again, but somehow it’s muted and sounds like it’s very far away. I take a big step backward and exhale a huge breath. Leaning over to switch out the guitars again, Jack is abruptly next to me with a big grin spread across his face. He pushes his bass out of the way and throws his arm around me and slaps me on the back a few times.

“That was unbelievable. Please tell me you learned five more songs like that since yesterday,” he says, leaning in close so the microphones don’t pick up the conversation. “When did you decide to change songs?”

“About five minutes ago. This is the one I wanted him to hear.” Feeling overwhelmed, I look up and briefly catch his eye and give him half of a smile.

“You good?” he asks with concern in his eyes.

“Yeah…I think so,” I nod back.

The rest of the night goes by in a blur and then is quickly over. I fold back in on myself again, favoring self-preservation over risk. I never look back up at him again. I’m shut off at this point and I have no idea if he is looking at me or if he’s even still there. We sounded great and the crowd seemed to love every minute of it. Drained, I set my guitar down and walk back down the steps to the backstage area. About 20 feet to my right, there is a mass of girls waiting, crowded against the barrier that separates this space from the audience. Heath will be overjoyed to see that.

Jas is waiting right there for me with a look on her face that I don’t understand. I pat my pockets, looking for my phone and then realize that I didn’t pick it up from where I left it on the edge of the stage by the steps. I turn to go back and get it, but Jas puts her hand on my arm to stop me.

“Dan,” she says in a subdued voice, moving closer to me.

I stop and look at her, noticing for the first time that she’s already holding my phone.
“I need to talk to you.”

Heath and Greg push past us on the way out to the public area of the venue, with Heath giving me a wink and mouthing the words ‘thank you’. I just shake my head and roll my eyes, turning my attention back to Jas, taking in her apologetic expression, but saying nothing.

“After the show started, I moved to go stand close to Phil and could overhear him talking with Molly and Gavin about trying to figure out who you were. He was texting you, but you weren’t answering.”

Still silent, I stand and wait for her to continue her story.

“When you didn’t text back, Molly started saying ‘I told you so’ over and over again. She kept telling Phil that his secret admirer was someone in the band and that’s why his texts weren’t being returned once the concert started. Everything you sent him this evening was before you guys went on stage.”

My heart starts pounding. “So what did you do, Jas? What happened?”

“I…I came back here and got your phone.”

“And??” I question, fear building up in my chest.

“I answered his texts.”

“You texted him? As me? With my phone?” I say way louder than I mean to. I hold out my hand and she passes me the phone. I open the texts, noticing that there’s a new one in addition to the ones Jas both read and wrote.

Phil: Ahhhh! There they are! I’m so excited!!

I grin, knowing that he must have sent that as we went on stage, shortly after Jas texted his location to me.

Phil: Can you see me from where you’re at? I want to know how close you are.

Yes, I can absolutely see you.

Phil: They’re playing some of my favorite songs!

Phil: My friends keep telling me they think they know who you are. I wish you would text me back. Are you still here?

I hold my breath as I read Jas’ first text to him.

Me: Hi. Sorry about that! I didn’t feel my phone vibrate.

I glance up at Jas, who is nervously standing next to me chewing on her fingernail while I read.

Phil: Ha! I told them they were crazy. They said you were someone in the band.

Me: Oh. Are you disappointed that I’m not?

My blood runs cold, not wanting to see the answer. I would never have been brave enough to ask him that.
Phil: No, more relieved. Musicians have too many temptations. I would worry I could never trust you if you were in a band.

The rush of pain that floods my heart is excruciating. Did I never even have a chance with him?

There’s a new text that was just sent about 5 minutes ago.

Phil: Did you have a good time?

I sigh and desperately try to beat down all of the emotions welling up inside of me.

Me: I did. It was wonderful to see you!

Putting the phone down, I bury my face in my hands and try to figure out what just happened.

After a few minutes like that, I turn away from Jas, not even caring that she is still standing there waiting for me to say something. Once again, I have no words. I climb the few steps and grab my guitars off of the stage. Once I’m visible to the crowd, I can hear a few girls behind me calling my name, but I don’t even acknowledge them. The next thing I know, Jas is next to me tugging me down to sit on the floor at the corner of the stage with her, mostly hidden from the lingering crowd. She has the guitar cases and clicks them open for me.

“Are you ok?”

“You really have to ask? You saw what he said. No. I’m not ok.”

“What are you going to do, Dan?” she asks, finally breaking the silence.

“Nothing. What can I do? Give up the band? I can’t do that….I need this, Jas.” She starts talking again, but I cut her off and continue. “All of this is because of guys like that,” I say, nodding in the direction of Heath and Greg who are currently surrounded by girls. “They’re the reason I can’t have any sort of honest relationship with someone. No guy that I would want to be with would tolerate all of this,” I say gesturing around the venue. “Why would anyone decide to be with someone knowing that they would have to sit back and watch as people desperately threw themselves at the person they love over and over again? If the tables were turned, that would drive me mad.”

“I made that decision,” she says softly.

I look up into her sympathetic face. “But that’s different,” I argue. “You and Grif were together before we started playing. You guys went into this with something solid.”

“We did, but in the end, it’s all based on trust and commitment. Look at Greg. He was dating someone but cheated on her when you guys started getting successful. And God knows Heath is only faithful in 10-minute increments. But, Dan,” she says with emphasis, “I know you well enough to know that there is no possible way you would behave like that. Regardless if you were playing in a band or not, you just aren’t that guy. Heath and Greg are, but you aren’t. And neither is Grif. I know this. You deserve at least a chance from Phil to prove that he can trust you.”

“But he said…”

“I don’t care,” she interrupts. “Show Phil that you’re different, Dan. You are different in the best possible ways. If he didn’t see that in you already, he never would have texted you back in the first place. I think this is the real thing, Dan. You can’t just walk away now.”

I think this over while the two of us continue to pack up the guitars in silence.
“Are you mad at me for taking your phone and texting him?” she asks.

“No,” I answer immediately. “What you did was probably the best option. I should be thanking you.”

“Jas!”

She looks up and a huge smile crosses her face. She jumps up and skips down the four steps and flings herself into Grif’s waiting hug. He grins down at her and gives her a soft kiss while they embrace. As they whisper to each other, I turn away, feeling like I’m intruding on a private moment. Out of the corner of my eye, I see him tugging her away so they can go home.

I take one more look at my phone.

Phil: I really want to talk to you tonight. Will you text me? Or maybe even call?

I stare at the message for a minute, but when the tears start to well up, I shove the phone in my pocket without answering. I’ve never hurt this bad over someone’s words before. It was the worst possible thing that he could have said. Standing up and grabbing my cases, I head off towards the back door. When I get there, Jas is on her way back in.

“Hey,” I just want to tell you that the coast is pretty clear out back if you want to make a run for your car. Most of the girls are still inside waiting for Greg and Heath. I catch her eyes and like she’s reading my mind, she adds “It looks like Phil left already, I don’t see him in here or outside.”

Stepping outside, I make a beeline for my car. I feel my phone vibrate a few more times but just ignore it. When I get into my car, it rings. There’s only one person who it could be.

Finally letting the tears fall, I turn up the radio to drown out the sound of my ringing phone and drive away.

Chapter End Notes

I know this is the chapter everyone has been waiting for, so I’m super excited to hear what you all think!
I wake up in my bed instead of on the couch for the first time in a while and my back and neck are thanking me for it. My eyes close again as I try to determine if I can extend the oblivion that comes with sleep just a little bit longer, but unfortunately, my mind is already spinning. By the angle the sun is coming into the room, I’m guessing it’s around noon. I’m content to guess, because picking up my phone and confirming it also means facing the texts Phil sent last night that I never opened. I haven’t checked since I left the Bluebird and I frankly don’t know if my heart is ready to relive any of it just yet. Or ever.

The thought of trying to sell my life to Phil, who apparently doesn’t want to date someone in the public eye, intimidates the hell out of me. What argument can I use with him when the guy standing next to me on stage is the perfect example of why Phil won’t want to be with me? Considering his fears are entirely founded, I’m not sure that it’s an obstacle that I can overcome. I rub my fists in my eyes, but somehow last night still exists. I grope around on my nightstand for my phone. I might as well face whatever messages are there sooner than later.

There are four texts and a call from Phil that were sent last night and another one from this morning, plus a couple more from Jas.

Phil: We just left and are on our way to get some food.

Phil: Are you still at the Bluebird?

One missed call from Phil Lester.

Phil: Are you home yet?

Phil: If you’re awake, can you text me back?

Jas: Are you still awake?

Jas: Let me know when you get up today

Phil: Good morning. Is everything ok?

I debate which of them I want to face first. His texts are breaking my heart and considering Jas will probably do all of the talking, I start with her.

Me: I’m awake.
Before giving her a chance to answer, I drag myself out of bed and into the bathroom for a quick shower. I try to block everything out of my mind, but Jas’ words from last night still echo in my head: You deserve at least a chance from him to prove that he can trust you. How do I get him to give me a chance? Plus, to even get to that point, I’m going to have to tell him who I am. How did things go so wrong so fast? Everything was fine yesterday.

Out of the shower and dry, I wander out of the bathroom with just a towel wrapped around my waist.

“Dan!”

I grab the towel a little tighter and yelp loudly as I stumble and almost fall from the shock of hearing a woman’s voice in my apartment. I whip around to see Jas standing just inside the front door.

“What the hell, Jas! How did you even get in here?” I yell, still shaking.

“Grif and I have your spare key,” she says as if I’m a complete idiot for asking.

“That’s for emergencies involving dead bodies or fires! Not to just show up and creep around while I’m naked!” I stomp into my room to get dressed, slamming the bedroom door and leaving her standing there by herself. At least my phone is still laying on my bed and not in there with her. I slam drawers and yank clothes out of the closet, cursing under my breath the entire time. Jerking the door open and letting it bang against the wall, I march down the hall in a ratty t-shirt and sweatpants, still plenty pissed off.

In the living room, I find her sitting on the couch flipping through tv stations. “Why are you here?” I spit.

“I asked you to tell me when you woke up. And you did. So I came over,” she answers, completely ignoring my bad mood.

“Instead of just returning the text like a normal person?” I mutter under my breath. “How did you even get over here so quick?”

“I was at a shop down the street,” she answers with a shrug.

Realizing that I have no control over the current situation, I give in and plop down on the other end of the couch, shoving the wet and dripping curls off of my forehead. I catch her evaluating my clothes out of the corner of her eye.

“I swear to god, Jas, if you say anything about what I’m wearing I’m kicking you out. You still haven’t told me why you’re even here?” I brace myself for whatever her answer is going to be.

“Helping you get Phil.”

I groan and cover my face with my hands. “I have a feeling that’s a lost cause.”

“Did he text you anymore last night?”

“Yeah.”

“And?”

I shrug. “I didn’t text him back yet. He called too.” When Jas doesn’t say anything, I let my hands fall away from my face and look at her. To my surprise, it’s her turn to look angry.
“What are you doing, Dan? Why would you ignore him like that?”

I shrug helplessly, eyes wide.

“First off, you’re an idiot. I’ve seen his texts to you. He likes you. A lot. You’re just going to give up and walk away because of some offhand comment he made? Dan, he has no idea he even did anything to upset you. How confused and hurt do you think he feels right now because you didn’t return his call or texts? You’re better than that.”

As if on cue, my phone chimes.

Phil: As far as admirers go, I’m only rating you as a C+

“Is that Phil?” she asks. “If it is, you need to answer him. If you need some time to sort yourself out, that’s fine, but at least tell him that you’ll text him back later. Don’t just keep treating him like that.”

She’s right. I sigh and stare at his message before I start to type.

Me: I probably deserve that grade today. I’m sorry I didn’t text you back last night or earlier today. I was so tired I just came home and didn’t check my phone.

I hate lying like this, but how do I say ‘hey, remember when you said you would never date anyone in a band? Well, guess what.’

Me: I slept in and now I’m dealing with a friend.

Phil: ‘dealing with a friend’? That doesn’t sound very positive.

Me: It isn’t. She broke into my apartment.

Phil: It appears you may have an admirer too

Me: Nooooo. She’s a friend’s girlfriend who’s helping me with something. She’s just….enthusiastic.

Phil: What’s she helping you with?

I think for a minute before I answer.

Me: A project. It’s a long story. Can I text you back later when she’s gone? She’s sitting here staring at me while I talk to you.

Phil: Of course! *hugs*

I smile wistfully at his virtual hug.

Me: Hugs to you too :]

That single text is enough to give my mind permission to start wondering what it would feel like to hug him. I would definitely want one of those lingering hugs where you both hold each other for a while, not the kind that’s just quick before you both pull away. Hugs are always awkward because who’s supposed to step away first? It would have to be him. I don’t think I’d be able to let go once I had him pulled up against me like that. I bet he smells like shampoo. He has such nice hair. Uggg! I’m so weird! Why do I want to know how his hair smells?

“Dan!”
“What?” I say too loudly. Startled out of my daydream, I feel a blush rise in my cheeks.

“Your face is all red. What were you just thinking about?”

“Nothing,” I say quickly. I glance at her and she’s looking at me like she doesn’t believe me.

“Lloyd Dobler,” Jas says suddenly. For a second I think she’s commenting on something on tv, but then I notice she is looking straight at me.

“Excuse me?”

“Lloyd Dobler,” she repeats. “You know…from the movie Say Anything.”

I shrug and shake my head.

“Are you serious?” she asks, giving me a look somewhere between pure shock and disgust. “This is going to be harder than I thought.”

I ignore her last snarky observation in an effort to get through the conversation. “Who’s Lloyd Dobler? Is this another one of your romantic comedies?”

She shifts her body so she’s sitting sideways on the couch and facing me. “He’s only in one of the most iconic movie scenes of all time!” she answers seriously. “You know….Lloyd standing beneath Diane’s bedroom window holding up a boombox playing ‘In Your Eyes’ to try to win her back?”

“Oh yeah,” I’ve seen that clip before.

“You need more than just the clip. You need to watch the whole movie. Repeatedly,” she says with a raised eyebrow. “You need to be Lloyd Dobler.”

I give her a doubtful look. “I don’t own a boom box. Or a cassette tape. Can you even buy those anymore?”

“Dan. You aren’t getting it. He uses music to win back the girl. He proves to her that despite how different they are, they can still fit into each other's lives. Isn't that what you need to prove to Phil? Are you getting the connection here?” she asks, getting more and more excited.

Apparently, we’ve been spending too much time together because it does sort of make sense. Before I can respond, she's already up and heading towards the door to leave.

“Wait!” I call after her. “So what am I supposed to do?”

“Download the movie and watch it. Then watch it some more and text me when you’re done. Oh, and don’t get up….I’ll lock the door on my way out,” she says with a cheeky grin while holding up the spare key.

I sit in the silence that Jas left behind. I can’t decide if I should thank her or change the locks. Either way, it looks like my Sunday plans are set. I pick up my laptop and start searching for the movie.

Chapter End Notes

As a side note, if you aren't familiar with the movie scene mentioned in this chapter, go
Google 'lloyd dobler boombox' and about zillion pictures of that scene will pop up. I'm a sucker for a good rom com :)}
I’ll reluctantly admit that it’s a good movie. And somehow, as infuriating as she is, Jas is correct about the plotline applying to my situation. The issue is that I still have no idea what she’s expecting me to do. I’m worried that she has some sort of sitcom worthy stunt involving public humiliation in mind. I’ve reached my fill of crazy capers for the week. No more.

I pick up my phone to tell her my movie watching assignment is complete but grin when I notice that there’s a text from Phil.

Phil: I know you’re in the middle of something with your friend, and I don’t expect you to answer right now, but I just wanted to tell you I’ve been thinking about you a lot today.

I take a deep breath and close my eyes. Maybe public humiliation wouldn’t be that bad.

Me: I’ve been thinking about you today too.

That’s the understatement of the year.

Phil: So what kind of project were the two of you working on?

Me: I guess you could call it a self-improvement project.

Phil: Sounds intriguing.

Me: The jury is still out on that.

Phil: Do I get to find out if the project is a success?

Me: You’ll be the first to know. I promise.

Phil: Wait, your project depends on help from someone who breaks and enters?

Me: Ok, it sounds like a bad idea when you say it like that!

Jas: Are you not done yet?

I groan and drop my head back on the couch cushion.

Me: Yes, I just finished.

Jas: So???? What are you going to do?

My mouth drops open in surprise.

Me: What am I going to do? I thought you had something all figured out? Isn’t that why you had me watch that movie?

Jas: I wanted you to watch it because I thought it might inspire some ideas. You didn’t come up with anything?

Ignoring her question, I angrily stand up and start to pace around the room, running my hands...
through my unruly hair. What does she want from me? She’s expecting too much. If I could figure out what to do, I wouldn’t be asking for her help in the first place.

Between the apartment break-in and Lloyd Dobler, there has been a bit too much Jas in my life today. Needing a break before I can deal with her again, I open the balcony door and grab a laptop before sitting down on the step. Pulling up YouTube, I scroll through new videos from my subscribed channels. The vast majority of them are gaming videos and recordings of live concerts. I watch bits and pieces of GTAV videos from my favorite channel and then switch over to clips from some recent music festivals. The comment sections on YouTube tend to be overly harsh and I stay away from them for the most part, but today I start glancing through them out of curiosity.

As I’m lazily paging through comments, all of a sudden it hits me. I know what I’m going to do. I’m going to be Lloyd Dobler and make a grand musical gesture. God, I hate it when Jas is right. How does she know all of this stuff?

I scramble for my phone and start typing quickly.

Me: Do you ever go on YouTube?

Phil: Of course

Me: How often?

Phil: I don’t know. Several times during the day. More on the weekends.

Me: What do you watch?

Phil: Music mostly. Some vloggers. Why?

Me: Just wondering.

Phil: Are you on there a lot?

Never in a million years will I admit to him how many hours a day I spend on YouTube.

Me: Sometimes.

Before I lose my nerve, I make a new YouTube channel, completely separate from my own. In the About section, I pause to think for a minute before I start typing. I decide that blatant honesty is probably my best option:

*I’m making this playlist for a boy named Phil who lives in London. I’m not brave enough to talk to him in person and let him know who I am, so I started texting him and, by some miracle, he has been texting me back. I’m hoping he finds this page and listens to these songs so he’ll understand how I feel.*

*This channel is my grand musical gesture to him. If it were 1989, this would be a mixtape and boom box underneath his window.*

I can hear my cell phone buzzing with text messages. I’m fairly certain that Jas is having a temper tantrum because I’m not answering them. Part of me wants to keep her waiting, but curiosity and human decency win out and I grab the phone.

Jas: Well????

Jas: Aren’t you going to tell me what you’re going to do?
Jas: Or do you need some ideas?

Jas: I actually lied about not having any. I just wanted to see if you came up with anything on your own. I have suggestions if you want to hear them!

Jas: Daaaaaaniel!

Jas: What is going on over there?

Jas: Will you PLEASE text me back?

Jas: Do I have to just come over there again?

Griff: She’s not coming over. I took the key back. Sorry about that.

Jas: I can’t help unless I know what is going on!!!

The next five texts are a combination of sad, crying, and angry emojis. I decide to put Jas out of her misery and apparently save Griff from his.

Me: I’m working on an idea. Give me a little bit. I’ll text you tomorrow because I’m going to need your help with something.

Jas: Yea!!! I’m so excited!!!

Hoping that’s the end of the conversation, I set the phone aside and start choosing songs for Phil’s playlist.

****

I toss and turn in the dark. My mind is spinning about what I’m trying to do, second guessing every song that I’ve chosen so far. There’s a little voice in my head that keeps telling me that I’m never going to be able to pull this off. Or what if it isn’t a good idea after all and he thinks it’s dumb? And most importantly, how is he ever going to see it? I can’t just put some songs on it and send him a link. There’s no romance or anything special in that. It’s not enough.

I kick my comforter off and onto the floor of my bedroom before flipping my pillow over to the cool side for about the tenth time, idly wondering how long I’ve been laying here like this. I frown as my phone buzzes, figuring it must be around 2 or 3 am.

Phil.

I eagerly click on the notification before letting out a small gasp. Phil didn’t send a text, he sent a picture. My heart beats quicker as I stare at it, completely mesmerized. The room he’s in is dark except for the glow from his laptop which is casting a soft light across his face. I can see his collarbones and part of one shoulder, but the rest of his body is covered by a patterned comforter that’s wrapped around him. His black hair falls across his forehead, the contrast making his pale skin look almost ethereal. But even in that low light, I can still see the jewel blue color of his eyes. How is it possible for someone to look like this?

I squint and zoom in, trying to see where he’s at. Living room? Bedroom? Wait, is this a picture of him in bed? Is he not wearing a shirt?

I’m staring so intently at the screen that I jump and almost drop the phone when another notification appears.
Phil: Are you awake?

Me: I am actually. I can’t fall asleep.

Phil: Me either.

I take a deep breath and quickly type out my next message.

Me: I love the picture. You look absolutely beautiful like that.

Wait. What did I just send? Oh God. I must be delirious due to lack of sleep. Did I just call him beautiful? I sound like an idiot. Who calls another guy beautiful?

My phone buzzes and I briefly consider just throwing it out the window. And moving. To another country.

Phil: You’re making me blush!

Phil: (but feel free to keep saying that!)

My mouth drops open and I go completely blank. I have no idea what to say. He actually liked that I told him he was beautiful?

Phil: I wish you could send a picture too.

Me: I will. Soon. By the end of this week, you’ll know when we’re going to meet.

What did I just do? I have no idea why I just said that. I quickly think about my plan and do some calculations. I have no clue as to how long this will all take, but I just stupidly gave myself a deadline.

Phil: Really?? Promise?

Me: Yes. Absolutely.

I really need to stop talking.

Phil: <3

Phil: Can I tell you something? You’re probably going to think it’s dumb.

Me: I could never think anything you have to say is dumb.

Phil: I know this sounds really stupid and needy, but I was worried that maybe you changed your mind about me when I didn’t hear back from you last night or this morning.

It’s at this moment it hits me how emotionally involved Phil is in this too. Jas was right. He really does like me. He’s not just humoring me, he’s in this as much as I am.

Me: I’m so sorry about that. The end of my evening didn’t turn out as expected so I was in a bad mood. I just wanted to go home and go to bed, but I should have at least told you that.

Phil: Don’t apologize. You don’t owe me any explanations. I mean, it’s not like we’re really together or anything.

Me: Well, I guess not technically, but we are something, Phil. You matter to me. A lot.
Phil: You matter to me too. I wish we were having this conversation in person.

Phil: Molly keeps telling me I shouldn’t get my heart any more involved in this until we meet face to face.

Me: How come?

Phil: It’s silly. I just get so caught up in my own head sometimes. I have this crazy hope that we’re going to meet and it’s going to be this super romantic fairytale magical moment and we’re going to fall in love with each other and be boyfriends and live happily ever after. She thinks I’m not based in reality.

That makes two of us, I guess.

Me: I can call you Cinderella if you’d like ;)

Phil: I’d make a lousy Cinderella. I’m afraid of mice and can’t walk in heels. Instead of losing a shoe I would probably just fall down the steps instead. Prince Charming would be embarrassed and pretend he didn’t know me.

I laugh loudly at his version of an awkward fairytale. Wait, how does he know he can’t walk in heels? I’m about to suggest that he’s more of a Snow White, but stop when I see what pops up on my screen.

Another picture.

It’s still mostly dark, but this time he’s almost entirely cocooned up in the blanket. I can only see his black fringe and eyes, but it feels like he’s everywhere. My mind, my room, in my bed, it all feels like it’s full of him.

Would he mind if I called him stunning?

Me: Where are you?

Phil: In bed.

I stare at the photo some more, not bothering to even try and stop the thoughts that are filling my head right now.

All of a sudden, I have an idea. I scramble over the edge of my bed and grab my comforter and wrap it up over my head and around my body just like Phil did. I arrange it so the only thing you can see is my eyes, taking care to tuck all of my curls up so they won’t show. I hold my phone up and look at myself on the screen. There is just enough light coming in from the hallway that he’ll be able to see my eyes, the blanket, and nothing else. I snap the photo and examine it, smiling when I realize that it’s almost identical to the one he sent.

Well, sort of, as long as you don’t take into consideration that Phil is incredibly gorgeous and I’m plain looking at best.

I take a deep breath and hit send. I bite my lip and nervously wait for a reply.

Two minutes go by, and I start to panic.

Three minutes.

Four minutes.
Just as I’m about to send an apology text, I see the three flashing dots.

Phil: I’m speechless. Your eyes! You have the most beautiful eyes I’ve ever seen!

I snort laugh, which quickly turns into a bout of hysterical laughing. Phil, beautiful, handsome, perfect Phil with his stunning pale blue eyes thinks my dirt brown eyes are anything other than ordinary? It’s my turn to be speechless.

I finally get ahold of myself and start to type, but Phil has already sent another message.

Phil: You feel real now.

Sitting in silence, I stare at those four words.

Everything feels real.

Chapter End Notes

So now you know part of Dan's big plan! How he plans on getting Phil to find the playlist will be in the next chapter!

So far, this has been one of my favorite chapters to write and I hope you enjoyed it too!!

<3
I’ve been trying to focus on work all morning with only a moderate amount of success. I had hoped my slow work week would continue so I could keep working on Phil’s song list and put my idea into action, but instead, I found three urgent assignments waiting in my work email. I’m slowly sinking into the crack between the couch cushions from sitting in the same spot for so long. I’m just proofreading the last article before I send it on to the managing editors. After another 10 minutes of painstaking rereading, I hit send, crossing my fingers there won’t be any extensive rewrites. With that out of the way, my attention turns back to Phil.

As tired as I am this morning, those pictures and texts last night make it completely worth it. But more than ever, I need to find a way to bring this all together. I told him he would find out by Saturday how we were going to meet and I can’t go back on my word. This means I only have four more days to make the playlist, put it out into the world, and trust that social media will make sure that the entire city of London will see it by then. No pressure. None at all. Searching through the couch cushions, I find my phone. Only one text from Jas, which sort of surprises me considering her usual lack of restraint.

Jas: You’re killing me. Like with actual death and everything. Where are you????

Me: Can you do something for me?

Jas: YES!!!!

Me: Do you know if the show on Saturday night was recorded? If it was, can you get me a copy of it?

Jas: I think Mike still tapes all of the shows. I’ll find out.

Me: Thanks!

With Jas occupied with a task, I log in to YouTube, looking at the playlist I started yesterday. Even after staying up late last night, I had only picked out five songs:

Undisclosed Desires – Muse
I’ll Follow You Into the Dark – Death Cab for Cutie
Love is Blindness – Jack White
Sometimes – My Bloody Valentine
Learn to Fly – Foo Fighters

I’m already struggling and overthinking everything. I poured over every lyric of every song that I put on the list, which was why I wasn’t making significant progress. I desperately need Jas to find a recording of that performance and wish I would have thought to ask someone to record it. I hate to say it, but I need Jas here to walk me through this project. I’m a musician for crying out loud, how can I not come up with any appropriate songs? On the other hand, I’m not sure why I’m surprised. Not being able to express my emotions isn’t a new thing.

As if she senses my distress, my phone chimes.

Jas: I called him. He’s got it and is giving us a copy.
Me: Perfect. Can you get it and come over here?

Jas: Yeah. I don’t have my key though so you’ll have to let me in. I’ll be there in 20.

I laugh and roll my eyes involuntarily at her last text. With 20 minutes to kill, I shut the laptop and struggle to get out of the couch crack. Taking the computer with me, I unlock the front door so Jas can make her grand entrance, grab my guitar, and open the balcony door and sit down. My random strumming turns into Undisclosed Desires. Quietly, I mumble the lyrics along as I play, having accidentally memorized them while I was over analyzing it last night. On a whim, I suddenly stop playing and grab my phone.

Do I acknowledge our conversation last night? Say something about the pictures? I try to think of something meaningful, but honestly, I just want him to answer my texts because I love how it feels when I know he’s thinking about me.

Me: What’s your favorite non-alcoholic drink?

I’m surprised by his quick reply.

Phil: Ribena

I shake my head and laugh at his answer.

Me: What flavor?

Phil: Berry.

I crinkle my nose. Ok. So Phil isn’t entirely perfect.

Me: Sorry. That is incorrect. The only acceptable answer is Mango. What about your favorite books?

Phil: Well, you already know I love Ready Player One. The Great Gatsby. Oh, and Ender’s Game.

Me: Favorite color?

Phil: Green. No, blue. No…it’s green.

Me: Tell me a random fact.

Phil: Did you know that a Venus flytrap can eat a whole cheeseburger?

Me: That’s actually a really impressive fact. It’s also the most random thing I’ve ever heard anyone say.

Phil: It’s funny that you say that because people comment all the time that I’m really random. I usually can’t come up with stuff that quickly, but I’m at work and drinking a Snapple. That’s the fact under the lid

As if to prove his point, he texts me a photo of the Snapple lid.

Phil: Gotta run! Customers!

Not being able to resist, I scroll up through our texts from last night, reliving each one and gazing at the photos. There is no way possible for me to look at these and not have inappropriate thoughts. Wait, if we date, will they still be considered inappropriate? Or are those normal thoughts for couples? I really wish I knew about relationship rules. Is there a book with relationship directions? I
guess I could go to the bookstore and see. Except Phil works at the bookstore and he would see me buying it. Mortifying. I would literally die of embarrassment right in front of him. I guess dying an embarrassing death in front of Phil is my backup plan in case I can’t get this all done in time.

If anything, this entire mess has taught me the importance of having a solid back up plan.

I’m jolted out of my post texting bliss by the slam of a car door and Jas calling my name from down below. I grin and wave at her from my balcony spot. She responds by squealing and bouncing up onto the porch. I hear the downstairs door slam and her frantic footsteps coming up the stairs, pausing briefly before my door flies open.

She plops herself down on the floor next to me since the step is only big enough for one. Dropping her purse, she flings her arms around me in an exuberant hug.

“Here, here, here!” she cries, practically bouncing around as she fumbles in her huge purse for the USB drive. “Now tell me what we’re doing!”

“Well, you asked me how I want this to end, and I think I know. All I want is a fair chance. If I can get that, then I’ll be happy even if it doesn’t work out. Ok. That’s a lie. I’ll be devastated. He said he would never date a guy in a band, but I’m going to make him give me a chance.”

“How?”

“Public opinion.”

She gives me a blank stare. I’m more amazed that for once she is quiet. I trade the guitar for the laptop, open it up to the YouTube channel, and pass it over to her. She sits quietly as her eyes run over the site before she starts peppering me with questions.

“Are you going to add more songs?”

“Yes.”

“What songs are you going to use?”

“Not sure yet.”

“Are you putting the entire Bluebird show on here?”

“No, just the acoustic song.”

“You need a profile picture and channel art.”

“I know.”

“Are you going to just text Phil the link?”

“No.”

My last answer makes her look up.

“This is why I need your help.”

“You want me to give it to him?” she asks, looking confused.

“No, I want everyone to.”
I’m rewarded with more silence. For once, I feel slightly superior.

“I want you to tell my story. Post the link to this channel on every social media account you have and tell everyone to share it. You have like a thousand people following you. Eventually, it will make its way back to him.”

Understanding starts to wash over Jas’ face. “Everyone is going to share the posts and leave comments trying to figure out who the secret admirer is. There are a lot of people named Phil in London, but I’m guessing our social circles probably overlap. People who know him will tag him once they see this to see if it’s referring to him or not. He’ll start getting notifications from YouTube, Instagram, Facebook…,” she trails off, deep in thought. “He’ll have to give you a chance when half of the city is cheering for the two of you.”

While she quietly mulls over the plan, I reach over and grab the forgotten USB drive from her hand and take the laptop back. I make a quick copy of the original file just in case something tragic happens to the original during the editing process. That was a lesson learned the hard way a few years back with some video editing homework. I open the file to check out the quality of the recording, but I can’t focus. I’ve never seen Jas be this quiet for so long and her silence is starting to worry me.

“Well?” I say, breaking the silence.

“What?” she says, somewhat startled.

“What do you mean ‘what’?” I ask, clearly exasperated. “What do you think I’m talking about?”

“Sorry,” she answers, shaking her head and turning her attention back to me.

“Well, I think the idea is brilliant. I’m sort of disappointed I didn’t come up with it myself. Are you sure you’re ready for this? It’s not just a grand gesture for Phil. This is going to put you in the spotlight too. People are going to want to know who you are.”

“I thought about that, but I need to do this. I’ll be ok,” I say quietly.

She carefully scrutinizes me. “Are you? You don’t look ok, Dan.”

“I just…how do I know if this is the right thing to do?”

“Well, there are probably several ways to handle this, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that one way is better than another. You just have to go with your gut and make a decision.”

“And if that decision is wrong?”

“Then you learn from it.”

“But Jas, if I make the wrong decision, then this is over. It’s all or nothing. I’m sure I’ll learn something from the mistake, but it won’t matter because my one chance with Phil will be gone.”

“The only other option is to not decide at all, and then you are guaranteed to lose him because he isn’t going to wait forever. Trying and failing is better than just giving up.”

“I just don’t want it all to go away. The texts. The pictures. Everything. I need him,” I admit with a shaky voice. "If this doesn't work out, it's not like I could go out in the world and start dating. Everyone would be less than Phil."
“Wait…pictures? What pictures?”

I pick up my phone and show her the first picture he sent last night.

“Oh my god, Dan. Phil is really hot!”

“I know!” I groan and hide my face in my hands.

“He works at that little bookstore, right? How do you control yourself from just showing up down there and jumping him?”

“Stop talking,” I plead, my voice muffled as I continue to hide my face.

“I've never seen anyone with eyes like that! Have you noticed how blue his eyes are?”

I snort laugh from behind my hands. "Yeah. I've noticed."

“Do you think he’s a good kisser?”

“Stop!”

“When you find out will you tell me? How can he not be a good kisser? I mean, seriously! Look at him!”

“Just kill me.”

“Wait….Dan, have you been thinking about kissing him?”

Silence.

“Maybe?” I answer, peeking out from behind my fingers.

Her face lights up and she folds me into another huge hug, knocking the laptop on the floor. “I am so proud of you! It's like you're a real person now!” she cheers. “Alright…let’s get to work!”

Chapter End Notes

So this is it for Dan! He has four days to bring everything together...can he do it???

Also, the next update would usually be on November 23rd, but that's Thanksgiving (in the USA), so it will probably either be the day after or just be on the 26th when the next update would happen. I feel like most of my readers will be eating turkey that day instead of reading :)
What Does an Existential Crisis Sound Like?

Chapter Notes

The majority of this chapter is Dan and Phil talking. That wasn't what I planned, but the conversation just sort of wrote itself :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I’m so tired I can barely keep my eyes open. Two nights of no sleep has caught up with me. Yesterday, Jas and I debated songs and cover art well into the evening. Most of that time was spent by her trying to talk me out of the few songs I had already chosen. We had argued over everything from the photos to the songs on the list, and eventually even over the toppings of the pizza we ordered. Essentially, the only thing we accomplished in all that time was editing the concert clip of Can I Be Him and uploading it to the YouTube channel. She had finally flounced out of my apartment around 10:30 last night because she had to get up early for work today. Despite the fact I knew I would have to do the same, I still stayed up long after she left.

For the YouTube channel art, she wanted to use an unpublished picture of my Converse and guitar from a photo shoot the band did last year because she felt it was iconic. If it’s ‘iconic,’ doesn’t that mean people could recognize it? It needs to be something personal. Plus, Phil still doesn’t know I play guitar, and this probably isn’t the best way for him to find out. I flip through the photos on my computer trying to find something that makes sense. There was one taken in the same photo shoot where the photographer had stood in the middle of the street looking straight ahead with the buildings on either side of him stretching far down the block. From that angle, you could see the Bluebird, the record store, and the pub where Jas and I ate lunch at last week. It contains all three places I had ever seen Phil at, but the only person who knows that is Jas. I trust her, if for no other reason than she has almost as much emotionally invested in this as I do. I upload the photo and continue to ponder the profile picture.

It suddenly hits me….the random fact text from Phil. I had synced my phone earlier, so the picture should be on my computer. After a few minutes of searching, I find the photo of Phil’s Snapple bottle lid with the Venus flytrap fact under it and upload it to the area where my picture would typically go. That way he won’t doubt that this is for him and not some other random Phil. Two problems solved, now I need to figure out a few more songs.

Instead of traditional love songs, I’m trying to choose songs because they have personal meaning behind them, but without being too obvious. Love is Blindness was playing in the record store when I saw Phil for the first time, and as an added bonus, it’s in the movie version of The Great Gatsby, which I now know is one of his favorite books. Undisclosed Desires is about making sure the person that you love is who they say they are, which at least in my case, is pretty appropriate. I Will Follow You Into the Dark is about the transcendental power of love, even in death. Learn to Fly is about looking for a muse for inspiration. I guess that’s sort of what I’ve been doing. Without knowing it, Phil has inspired me to do so much already even though we haven’t even met. Phil has become my muse.

The My Bloody Valentine song is the one that hits closest to home. It’s about trying to understand how come the person you love doesn’t love you back, and in the end, choosing to not be in a relationship to avoid being hurt is the better option. Yup. No love songs here. I’m going for blatant
These, along with the Can I Be Him performance, make six songs. I wasn’t expecting that it would be so hard to just pick out some songs, but I seem to have developed decision paralysis. The fear of him being disappointed when he finally meets me is still first and foremost in my mind. I feel like if I fill this list with dozens of sappy love songs like Jas suggested, it will get his hopes up when the reality of it is that I have no idea what I’m doing. I’m just not a love song sort of guy, and I feel like I’m drowning in them right now.

I shove the computer aside and lay down on the couch with my arm over my eyes to block out the light. Maybe this is it. This is the way my life is and I’m just not capable of more. I’m wondering how mad Jas is at me right now. I’m reasonably certain that she gets her way most of the time and isn’t used to someone questioning and shooting down all of her ideas. I have one person trying to help me and I show my appreciation by arguing with all of her suggestions. Maybe she was right though and I’m overthinking all of this. I do have a habit of creating my own complications.

I pick up my phone and consider texting Jas, but decide against it. I can’t stand the thought of her being disappointed in me too. How do people do this all the time? Every interaction a person has with someone else has the potential to completely knock down your house of cards. One wrong word, one wrong comment, and the whole friendship is gone. I’m not like the rest of the world and the truth of the matter is, I probably never will be. Envy rolls through me every time I see people successfully navigate their complicated web of friends, family, and significant others. When you’re the type of person who has to think and measure every word out of your mouth, you don’t get the luxury of casual conversations.

Hearing a chime, I take my arm off of my eyes and fumble for my phone, expecting it to be Jas. I’m hoping she has cooled off and is ready for my long string of awkward apologies. But it’s not her.

Phil: Hi

Typically, my hopes would be soaring at the sight of his name, but at this point, I feel so discouraged and exhausted that it barely even affects me. It’s only 9:00 in the evening, but I’m struggling to stay awake and make some progress on the songs for the channel. I’m running out of time.

Me: Hi

Phil: What are you doing right now?

I exhale loudly and shake my head, debating if I even want to answer him.

Me: Having an existential crisis.

Phil: Where are you?

Me: In my apartment

Phil: I mean where in your apartment?

I doubt my mental capacity to handle another detail driven conversation at this point. Against my better judgment, I answer him anyway.

Me: On the couch

Phil: What music are you listening to?
Me: Nothing right now

Phil: Then you’re fine.

Ummmm….what? Before I can even respond, there is another text.

Phil: It’s only a proper existential crisis if you are lying face down in the hallway listening to My Chemical Romance or the Cure. It doesn’t sound like you’re doing either of those things. You’re fine.

I try to stop myself from smiling at his odd sense of humor but fail miserably.

Me: I’m not even sure what to say to that. What does a hallway floor and those two bands have to do with anything?

Phil: Sitting on the couch in silence usually means someone is questioning their life choices. For it to be considered an actual crisis, it needs to involve the floor and music that inspires utter and total despair.

Me: So let’s say I am questioning my life choices. What should I be listening to?

Phil: Fall out Boy

Me: OK then, what if I was listening to Nine Inch Nails?

Phil: Then we would have to call some sort of helpline.

I laugh and shake my head.

Me: point taken

Phil: So what is this crisis about?

I stop and try to choose my words carefully.

Me: How do you know if a decision is the right one?

Phil: You don’t. You just have to look at what’s in front of you and make the best choice that you can.

Me: What if the stakes are high and I don’t make the right choice?

Phil: Sometimes right and wrong are subjective. I’ve been told that a lot of the choices I’ve made are wrong, but I made the choices that were right for me. The key is not to doubt them once you’ve made them.

His simple and honest revelation makes my heart seize. He’s right. I was starting to doubt my choices, but the truth of the matter is I’m just different from other people. I need to keep pushing forward.

Phil: I usually come across as a hearts and flowers sort of guy, but that’s not 100% accurate. I’m a sucker for romance, but I’m actually sort of a cynic when it comes to love. There are so many different ways to show someone how you feel about them, and I guess I feel like it’s a cop-out when people just show up with chocolates and flowers. Thought and originality count for a lot. It shows that you’re interested in knowing the person. Molly tells me I have a dark and crunchy soul, but maybe she only thinks that because Gavin shows up at least once a week with flowers and
chocolates.

Phil: You got quiet all of a sudden. Does any of this help?

Me: Yes. More than I can even express to you right now.

Phil: Well, maybe you can express it when we meet.

Me: I will. I promise.

Phil: You know the best way to express how grateful you are?

Me: How?

Phil: Kisses.

Me: You say that now, but what if I’m a bad kisser?

Phil: I don't care.

Me: What if you’re a bad kisser?

Phil: I’m not ;)

Oh god. Why does he say things like that? I can’t think now. Well, I can, just not about what I should be thinking about.

Phil: Whatcha thinking about?

Me: Seriously?! You know exactly what I’m thinking about right now!

Phil: So every time I talk about kissing, you automatically think about kissing me?

Any answer other than yes would be a blatant lie, but I almost feel like this is a trap.

Me: Yes.

Phil: So what happens if I talk about you taking my shirt off?

This boy will be the end of me. I can actually feel myself blushing. I don’t even know how to answer. What would happen if Phil talks about me taking his shirt off? Yikes. There’s no way in hell I’m going to tell him what I would likely end up doing later when we were done texting.

I drop the phone on the couch without answering and pick up the computer instead. Songs. Looking for songs. Only thinking about songs. Nothing else. Just looking through YouTube for appropriate music for the playlist. Not thinking about taking Phil’s shirt off. Or the picture he sent where he wasn’t wearing a shirt. Did he take his shirt off just for that picture or did he already have it off because he was in bed?

I hear my phone buzz with another text.

SONGS. ONLY THINKING ABOUT SONGS. I continue to scroll through YouTube frantically. Wait. Ok. There’s a song I can use. I can’t possibly think of more appropriate lyrics. See? I’m getting things done and not thinking about half-naked Phil.

I click a button and add Britney Spears’ Toxic to the playlist just as my phone buzzes again. Not
I finally pick it up and read his texts.

Phil: Come on…..you really aren’t going to answer that?

Phil: OK, let me help you out a little bit. Imagine that you’re standing in my bedroom, our arms are around each other and your body is pressed up next to mine. We’re kissing with these slow, lazy, amazing kisses. You slide your hands up from my hips to underneath the back of my shirt so you can feel my bare skin. Your hands travel up higher, taking my shirt with it. We break the kiss just long enough for you to pull it over my head and drop it on the floor.

Oh my god oh my god oh my god oh my god oh my god oh my god oh my god oh my god. Is it possible for someone’s entire body to blush? Why do I feel so warm? And why am I shaking? Is this what a stroke feels like?

Phil: Are you uncomfortable? Do you want me to stop?

Me: NO!

Me: I mean yes

It actually physically hurts to tell him to stop talking about this.

Me: I mean not really.

Me: I’m right in the middle of something

Phil: It’s more important than finding out what comes next after you start taking my clothes off?

Am I weeping? Why am I about to start weeping? Can someone have a heart attack this soon after a stroke?

Me: Remember that project I told you I was working on? I have to have it done by tomorrow.

Phil: Are you ever going to tell me what that project is about?

Me: Phil, I can honestly say that I can’t wait until you find out about this project. But for that to happen, I have to stop thinking about you naked and finish it.

Phil: You’re really thinking about me naked?

Me: Every second of the day for the past week.

Phil: Then my job here is done. Finish up your project and get some sleep. Talk tomorrow?

Me: Absolutely

Me: Good night, Phil

Phil: Good night, secret admirer :]

I look back over the songs I had so painstakingly picked out to express my feelings. They aren’t even really about love, but instead, they describe loneliness and heartache, feelings which I can actually relate to. They represent me far better than the sappy ballads that Jas was pushing on me.

Well, except for the Britney song. That’s not about heartache. For the rest of my life that song will probably make me think of Phil every time I hear it.
I stifle a yawn and grab the laptop again, restarting my quest for the perfect songs.

Chapter End Notes

Happy turkey day to everyone in the U.S.! Hopefully, everyone is having a good holiday and not letting their families drive them crazy! :)

As always, I hope this chapter was worth the wait! <3
The List and the Angry Friend

Chapter Notes

So as I wrote this chapter, it crossed my mind that maybe not everyone knows about Snapple and Snapple facts. It’s sold in the US, but I’m not sure if it’s sold in other countries or not. Snapple is a bottled iced tea that has a random ‘Snapple fact’ printed under each lid. The list of every Snapple fact is actually on their website so the facts listed in this story are actually real. :] https://www.snapple.com/real-facts

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Dan! What the hell is all of this?” Jas screeches into the phone.

This is such a bad way to wake up. I’m not a phone call person and never answer it when it rings. Voice mail specifically exists for people like me. I have no idea why I answered when she called, but I’m instantly regretting it. Disoriented and holding the phone away from my ear, I check the time. It’s already noon.

“Jas! I ….”

“It’s really hard to help you!”

Shit. It almost sounds like she’s getting ready to cry. I’m in uncharted territory.

“And I am so grateful for all of your help, Jas!” I insist, trying to figure out what’s going on. “I can’t do this without you!” I throw in for good measure. I wish I knew what we were talking about. This is worse than trying to figure out Phil.

“You really mean that?” she replies with a sniffle.

“Yes! Absolutely!” I’m not sure, but I think I can hear Grif laughing in the background.

“Then why did you do that??” she cries.

Still foggy with sleep, I sift through my head and try to figure out what I could have possibly done to piss her off to this magnitude. I may not know a lot about women, but I do know that if I don’t figure it out in the next few seconds, she’s going to start screaming again.

“Can you….maybe remind me what I did?” I can only pick up a few words from her ensuing rant. From what I gather, she is upset at my song selections that I made late last night. I guess she looked up the playlist this morning to see what I had added. At this point, I’m also positive that Grif is laughing.

“Jas…Ja….stop….let me…..I can….explain if you….” I spit out as I try to interject. Eventually, I just sit quietly and let her finish. When it seems she is finally out of things to say, I attempt to explain.

“Jas, I can’t do it. I can’t post a bunch of Top 40 love songs and be sincere about it. In what universe would I ever express my love with a Celine Dion song? That’s not me, and the more I talk to Phil, that’s not him either. He’s different.”
Silence. I worry when she gets quiet like that. Not knowing what she’s thinking is way worse than yelling. While I have the chance, I take screenshots of parts of my text conversation with Phil from last night and send it to Jas. I wait on the line for her to read it.

Minutes pass before she finally speaks again. “It’s your call. You’re the one putting yourself out there and I respect that.”

“Will you still help me?”

“Absolutely,” she says immediately. “I just….are you 100% sure about this?”

“Of course not!” I say loudly. “When have I ever been sure about anything having to do with romance?” Her sigh is loud enough for me to hear over the phone.

“Dan!”

“Jas!”

“Fine. Let me know when you're done and I’ll take it from there.”

I awkwardly agree and say my goodbyes, vowing to never answer the phone again. Immediately after I end the call, however, I get a text.

Grif: Dan! Did you just win an argument with her??

Nothing good could come from me answering that. Ignoring his comment, I toss the phone down and go back to my laptop. My stomach is starting to twist knowing that this plan has gone just about as far as I can take it and that soon it will be out of my hands and into Jas’. I trust her completely, but this entire thing has pushed me far beyond the edge of any comfort zone that I’ve ever had. Not only am I putting my heart on the line in public, but I’m also putting my musical taste on the block for judgment. Despite my original intent, these songs aren’t an attempt to make Phil interested in me as much as they are just me presenting a piece of myself to him. I want him to begin to know me and this is the only way I know how. I just need him to give me a chance and I hope this is enough to do it.

I focus on the screen and go through each song on the list one last time:

Undisclosed Desires – Muse
I’ll Follow You Into the Dark – Death Cab for Cutie
Love is Blindness – Jack White
Sometimes – My Bloody Valentine
Learn to Fly – Foo Fighters
Can I Be Him – James Arthur
Toxic – Britney Spears
Pictures of You – The Cure
Killing Moon - Echo and the Bunnymen
Black - Pearl Jam
I’m Not Okay – My Chemical Romance
The Cure - Boys Don’t Cry
Life of the Party - All Time Low
Fall Out Boy - Alone Together
Half the World Away – Aurora
Sick of Losing Soulmates -Dodie
7 Hours Ago -Honeywater
Heartless – Kanye West
Work Song – Hozier
Idle Worship – Paramore
Help – Papa Roach
Oh, It Is Love - Hellogoodbye
Easier to Lie - Aqualung
NIN - Hurt

As an afterthought, I make sure to add the NIN song since he had mentioned them last night. It really is the crowning glory of all depressing music. It’s the soundtrack of existential crises everywhere.

This is a collection of love, loss, and sorrow, which are all interconnected. Very rarely can you have one without the others. All of these songs aren’t just music and lyrics to me, they are defining moments. I didn’t choose any of them based on wanting to show off my knowledge of music or because they were the best representation of a particular artist. I wanted the iconic songs, the ones that resonate with me. The stuff I sing in the shower and the car. The more people that are drawn into the playlist, the more times it will get shared. At least that is what I’m hoping.

Is this it? I’ve gone over the page time and time again. There’s nothing else I can do except send it out into the world.

I take a deep breath and pick up my phone. I open up my text conversation with Jas to let her know the list is finished and I’m ready for her to post it. My fingers hover over the keypad, my heart and head both pounding.

But I can’t do it. I can’t do this.

I close the laptop and stand up, pacing nervously around the room. I’m just not ready. The walls are closing in and the anxiety is starting to well up inside of me. I grab my wallet and keys and jog down the steps and out the front door, walking quickly away from my apartment and the list I’ve been staring at for the past 24 hours.

I have no idea where I’m going, but the fresh air fills my lungs and I gulp it in greedily, trying to stop the impending panic attack. What if Phil isn't worth it? No, there's no question that he’s absolutely worth it. That’s not what is stopping me. What I’m really worried about is that I’m not worth it. Do I really deserve to be with someone like Phil?

What do I really have to offer him? I’m painfully average in every way that matters. I have weird curly hair and a dimple. Seriously, that’s a good look for little kids, but not for an adult. I pretty much just work, play video games, surf the internet, and do band related stuff. Why would anyone willingly sign up for that?

After walking in silence for about 15 minutes, I make my past the dorms and cut through the campus of my old university. I feel a pang of nostalgia as I watch the students on their way to classes. How different would my life be right now if I had been a little braver back then? Maybe I would have met Phil years ago while he was at one of our concerts instead of just being a coward and hiding behind texts.

Ahead of me, I spot two guys about my age holding hands and walking. Even from this distance, I can tell that they are either in love or quickly working their way towards it. Their fingers are woven together and every few steps, they shyly glance at each other and smile. Phil said he had been in love before and I wonder if this is what it looked like. I hate thinking of him loving someone other than me. I shake my head and look away from them, shocked and surprised at my last thought.
Looking around, I realize that I’ve made it all the way down by the Bluebird. I know I need to turn around and go the other direction, but curiosity is pulling me further down the sidewalk. I pass the record store and know that’s as far as I should go. Maybe I could go in and browse around before walking back home again. That would be the smart thing to do. But I don’t. I walk down to the next block, my heart urging me to keep going. Looming just five storefronts down is the bookstore. Phil’s bookstore.

Before I know it, I’m in front of the café that is next door to it. I quickly slip inside, realizing that I have no idea what I was planning to do once I made it down here. I can’t go in, that is entirely out of the question. Phil would notice a 6 ft tall stranger lurking around and staring at him.

I walk up to the counter to order an iced coffee, but then notice the cooler of bottled drinks. I smile when I realize that along with the sodas and juices, there are also bottles of Snapple. This is probably where Phil bought his bottle with the venus flytrap fact underneath the lid. Forgetting about the coffee, I look at the flavors and grab a Peach Snapple.

After paying for it, I unscrew the lid and look at the fact: *Spiny lobsters migrate in groups of 50 or more, forming a conga line on the ocean floor.* I take a picture of it with my phone and text it to Phil.

I venture outside again and take the last few tentative steps before I’m at the bookstore. Standing at the spot where the café and bookstore meet, I lean forward so I can see into the large picture windows. It doesn’t take long to spot Phil behind the counter, talking to a customer while they pay for their books. My heart feels like it’s filling. I watch him put her books in a bag and as she walks towards the front door, stepping back when she exits so I don’t look like a creeper just hanging out on the street with a Snapple bottle. After she’s gone, I return to my spot by the edge of the window. He takes out his phone and looks at it, a big smile spreading across his face. He taps out a message and then puts it down. A split second later, my phone buzzes in my pocket.

I quickly grab it and see that there are two texts.

Phil: You win. Conga line lobsters are way better than hamburger eating venus fly traps.

Phil: Hey, what flavor Snapple do you have?

Me: Peach

Phil: Good choice! That’s my favorite!

Needing to see him again, I look at the counter, but he’s gone. I glance around and spot him at a bookshelf only about five feet away from where I’m standing. Stepping backward and away from the window, I say a silent prayer that he didn’t see me. After a few minutes, I peek again, and this time I see him as he walks across the store and back behind the counter.

I breathe a sigh of relief and then entirely give in to my stalker tendencies, taking a minute to just look at him. He’s leaning forward with his elbows on the counter while he reads a book. He’s wearing a black t-shirt with a red and black plaid flannel over it. His dark hair is hanging forward and blocking me from seeing his eyes. Not being able to resist, I type out another text and then wait.

Me: What are you doing right now?

A few seconds later, I see him pick up his phone to answer.

Phil: I’m actually at work, but talking about peach Snapple is making me thirsty so I’m going to take a quick break and go next door to get one.
I look up, and he’s gone. Shit! I gasp and take off scrambling down the street, stopping when I round the building at the end of the block. Peeking around the corner, I see the front door of the bookstore open and Phil walks out and then into the café. I wait, not able to pass up the opportunity to see him one more time. A few minutes pass and he leaves, holding a bottle. He leans up against the wall in the same spot I had just been standing in.

He opens the Snapple and looks at the fact under the lid before he even takes a drink. Smiling again, he juggles the bottle and lid as he takes out his phone and snaps a picture of the fact. I feel my phone buzz but ignore it for the time being, choosing instead to just look at him.

I watch him take a long drink before leaning his head back against the wall and closing his eyes. He’s standing in a sunny spot and he tilts his head up towards the sun as if warming himself. I watch in fascination as he stands like that for about a minute before opening his eyes and heading back into the bookstore. Even from this distance, I feel his absence as soon as he’s out of sight.

I pull my phone out of my pocket and look at the photo of the Snapple lid, smiling when I see the fact and the text: *There are over 2,000 species of cactuses.*

Phil: This one is so appropriate! I love cacti!

I tuck this tidbit of information about Phil away in my head. Standing in silence, I scroll through our text conversations just as I had so many times already. I stop when one message in particular catches my eye. It was from the night he sent me those two photos of himself in bed.

*You feel real now.*

Every ounce of potential heartbreak is worth the risk. Phil is worth it. He’s worth everything.

I type out a quick text to Jas before putting my phone in my pocket and starting the walk home.

Me: The playlist is done and it’s all up to you now. I’m ready.

Chapter End Notes

Hi everyone! So, while you're all waiting for the next update, I'm going to throw out a few completed book recommendations for you in case anyone is interested:

1 - Love is Blind by mollieblack: This is one of my favorite fluffy phan stories of all time! It's a highschool AU where Dan is blind and he and Phil fall in love with each other.

2 - A Taste of Myrrh by imsorryimlate: If you're into smut with a fantastic storyline, this is the book for you! I was sort of meh on the idea of a story where Phil is a priest, but I couldn't put it down. I stayed up till 2 am one night and finished the entire thing in one sitting.

3 - If you haven't read 24 Hours yet (yes, shameless self-promotion) go check it out. It's finished so no waiting for updates :)

Just as an FYI, I don't know either of these writers other than just from commenting on their stories so I'm not getting anything out of this other than just passing along something I thought others might enjoy reading :)
Also, I wrote a lot over the holiday weekend so the next chapter is already around 4,000 words. If you like long chapters, get ready for Thursday's update!
The Day Before

Chapter Notes

PREPARE YOURSELF!!!

In the notes at the end of this chapter, I'm putting in a very small excerpt from the next chapter!

If you do not want to know what happens next, do NOT read it because it's a spoiler!!!

Also, don't be a cheater. Don't skip ahead. Read this chapter first ;)

The rest of yesterday crept by at a snail’s pace. I looked at my phone constantly to see if I had missed any texts or calls. I played video games, learned some new songs, and randomly paced around before finally going to bed early at 9 pm. What was Jas doing? The more time that passes, the more panicky I get. Shouldn’t something have happened by now? I told her I trusted her, but the not knowing is driving me mad.

Me: Hey. What’s going on?

Jas: Not much. What’s up with you?

I roll my eyes and curse under my breath.

Me: Have you done anything yet?

Jas: Not yet. It makes more sense for me to start posting earlier in the day than late at night. It’s going on Facebook this morning so you’ll be able to watch comments on there. I want to see how far it goes before I put it on anything else. You may be surprised how fast things spread on Facebook alone. I’m at work now, but promise I’ll keep you updated.

For the first time in my life I wish I had a Facebook account. I sit on the couch nervously tapping my foot, trying to decide what to do. Groaning, I grab the laptop and search for Jas on Facebook. Remembering my panic when I saw Phil’s social life laid out in front of me, I remind myself that the last time I searched for someone on here it didn’t go so well. I type in Jas’ name and hope for the best.

Luckily, not only was her page easy to find, but it’s public so I can see everything without having to make myself an account and friend her. I idly wonder what ‘it’s going on Facebook this morning’ means in Jas’ world. Ten minutes? An hour? I kill some time browsing through her posts and pictures. There are tons of photos of her with Grif and the rest of the guys. I spot a few with me, but I’m not in any that weren’t posed group shots of the band. She drives me insane, but the past two weeks scheming and planning with Jas was the most fun I’ve had in a long time. It’s so hard for me to connect with people, but it was much easier with her since she just sort of took over everything and decided that we were going to do this together. Except for the breaking into my apartment while I was naked part. That was bad and somewhat mortifying.
I refresh the page, and there it is. A new post from Jas:

*You have to see what I found on YouTube! It’s a playlist for a guy from a secret admirer! His name is Phil and he’s from London. Does anyone know who he is???? We need to find him! I love romance!!*

I laugh and bury my face in my hands. In complete disbelief, my entire game plan boils down to Jas’ social media strategy. My phone buzzes so I pick it up to let her know I saw her post, but my eyes widen when I see it’s Phil instead. Did he see it already? How is that even possible? Wait, it’s not possible. I’ve got to get a hold of myself.

Phil: Good morning, mystery admirer

Me: Hi. You’re up early. What’s going on?

Does that sound casual enough? I’ve lost all perspective. I’m actually shaking. I just want to send him the link and see what happens, but I resist. I need to stick to the plan.

Phil: 9 am isn’t too early. I’m at the Café next to the bookstore having a bagel before my shift starts.

Me: I love bagels. I think I could live on chocolate chip bagels.

Phil: Me too. Well, you’re welcome to come down here and join me for one ;]

Me: Someday I’ll bring you a bagel and we’ll have intellectual discussions about art and music together.

Part of me wants to drive down there right now. I start to daydream what it would be like to walk with him hand and hand to a café and browse around in a bookstore together.

Phil: You think that day will come anytime soon? I keep thinking you’re going to randomly show up somewhere and introduce yourself to me. Every time someone comes into the store I look up to see if it’s you. Not that I would recognize you though.

My heart breaks into a million pieces when I read his last text. Phil has no idea how close that came to happening yesterday. We were feet apart and he didn’t even know it. I’ve been so focused on how this is affecting me, I haven’t taken a lot of time to consider what he’s is going through. The thought of Phil waiting for me over and over again is almost too much to bear. Even if this social media blitz doesn’t work out, I’ll just have to come clean for both of our sakes.

Me: It won’t be long. That day is coming soon.

Phil: Is it weird that I like talking to you this much?

Every word he types today is killing me. Not telling him who I am makes me feel like I’m flat out lying to him at this point.

Me: Not at all. I love talking to you too.

Me: Are you ok? You seem sort of down.

Phil: Yeah, I’m feeling sort of blah today.

Me: Can I ask why?

Phil: It’s dumb really. I guess I’ve been feeling sort of lonely. Molly and Gavin have been spending
more time together lately so I’ve had a lot more time to myself. At first I thought that would be a good thing, but apparently not. I’m still hanging out with other friends, but it just isn’t the same. And talking to you, of course.

I think back to the last time I had a best friend. I had a few friends when I was younger, but I didn’t have my first best friend until Jack and I were roommates in university. Can I still even call him that since we really only see each other during band practice or performances? Wait, does this mean Jas is my best friend? That’s such a weird and unsettling thought.

Me: I understand more than you realize

Phil: Tell me something about you.

At this point, I think I’d answer anything he wants me to. Well, almost anything.

Me: Like what?

Phil: I told you about my family, but what about yours? Do you have brothers and sisters? What about your parents?

Me: I have an older brother. My parents are both teachers.

Phil: What’s your brother like? Are you close?

Me: Not really. He’s two years older than me, but we really don’t have much in common. He played football and basketball in high school. He didn’t know how to spend time with anyone who didn’t like sports or be around boys who liked other boys. I think I just made him uncomfortable.

I pause while I take all of this in. There have a million questions I want to ask him too, but don’t know where to start.

Phil: Why me?

Me: ?

Phil: Why did you pick me when you don’t even know me?

Me: Because you’re different. I know that sounds like the biggest cliché in the world, but it’s true. You are the most gorgeous guy I’ve ever seen, but it’s not just that. There’s something about your voice. About the way you walk. Your laugh. You’re mesmerizing. Especially your eyes. This is actually the bravest thing I’ve ever done, and it’s all for you.

I stare at the screen, silently willing him to send a response. His shift starts soon so I know the conversation is coming to an end.

Phil: You said that one of the reasons you’re doing this is because you think I’d be disappointed in you if you just came up and introduced yourself, but what happens if you’re disappointed in me?

Me: I know that isn’t going to be an option.

Silence.

Phil: What are you doing with yourself today?

Me: Probably working most of the day.
And staring at Jas’ Facebook page.

Phil: I have to go, but can I text you tonight? Or maybe call?

Me: Always.

I wait to see if he says anything else, but there are no more texts. It’s all I can do to keep myself from walking out that door and driving to the bookstore. There’s something about the conversation that has sent me crashing down from my giddiness about seeing Jas’ Facebook post to a much more somber mood. All of a sudden, it seems insignificant.

My phone buzzes, but I ignore it knowing that it’s Jas. I open my work email and start sifting through today’s work, thankful for what looks like enough assignments to fill most of my day.

*****

My melancholy mindset stuck with me through the entire afternoon and into the evening. I’ve pushed through all of my work for today and already started with a few things I hadn’t planned on addressing until tomorrow. I’ve been sitting on the balcony step with my guitar for the past 30 minutes, just trying to clear my head and randomly play bits and pieces of the songs playing through my headphones.

Suddenly, I snap out of my fog when I become aware of someone screaming my name. I look down at the driveway and see Jas jumping up and down and waving her arms trying to get my attention. Pushing the headphones down so they’re around my neck, I can hear the insanely loud volume of her shouting. I wave at her and glance around, half expecting to see neighbors looking out their windows at the commotion.

“Dan! Why haven’t you been replying to texts??” she wails up at me.

“Stop yelling and just come up here!” I call down to her.

She sprints for the porch so I go back in and look for my phone. I hear her behind me as she breathlessly runs up the steps and slams open the door before I’ve even made much progress in my search. She starts chattering so fast that I don’t even try to understand her. I finally fish my phone out of the couch crack and then turn around to face her.

“What?” I ask.

She grumbles and throws her arms up in the air when she realizes I haven’t heard anything she’s said.

“Just check your messages!”

I plop down on the floor and lean back against the couch. I look at the home screen and my eyes widen. 52 text messages. I don’t even know 52 people.

“52. Are all of these from you?”

She looks thoughtful for a minute and then shakes her head no. I brace myself and click on the text icon. I scan through who they are from but feel disappointed that none are from Phil. If he’s still at work and something monumental happened, it’s possible he hasn’t heard about it yet. I’m not sure I even want to read this many messages. Most are from Jas. There are a couple from Jack and quite a few from Grif, most likely telling me to return Jas’ texts before she shows up at my apartment again. Obviously, I missed those too.
“Jas, can you just sum up what’s going on? That might be easier.”

Her face lights up, glad to be able to start talking again. “Ok, so you saw the Facebook post this morning, yeah?”

“I did, but nothing afterward. Did anyone see it or say anything?”

She sits down on the floor and I join her as she pulls up her Facebook page on her phone and then hands it to me. I stare at it for a minute and then look back up at her in disbelief. She grins back at me and then gestures for me to keep looking. Since 9 am this morning, there are 83 comments and 174 shares. I read through the comments, mostly by her girlfriends, and they all are positive. Some of them are asking Jas if they know who the secret admirer is, but she’s telling them that she just ran across the YouTube page while searching for a song. However, the vast majority of the conversations are people trying to identify Phil. I look through the people they have tagged, but none of them are him…yet.

“Grif shared the post also and I know he got even more shares than I did, but he also has a lot more followers. I posted it on Twitter and it got more than twice that number of retweets.”

She’s looking at me expectantly, waiting for me to say something.

“Wait….does Phil follow Grif on Facebook? I know he follows the band on Instagram.”

Jas takes her phone back and I wait as she types, clicks, and scrolls. “No, I don’t see him on here. Wait…..”

I sit quietly as her eyes flicker over the screen as she scrolls again for what seems like a lifetime.

“Isn’t this Molly?” she asks, turning her phone for me to see.

“Yes,” I say immediately.

“Ok. Molly follows Grif.”

The weight of this information slowly sinks in. “Molly is going to see that. She’s going to know who it’s for, isn’t she?” I’m not sure why I’m even asking when I already know the answer to my question.

Jas nods, but says nothing.

“I wasn’t expecting this to happen so quickly. I figured it would take at least a week to make its way back to him. I thought….I thought I would have more time.”

“Well, this is it. Let’s firm up a plan for you to meet Phil,” she says gently. “I know you’re really nervous, but I think it’s time to figure this out.”

My brain is spinning. I need to figure out where and how we’re going to meet face to face. I glance at the time, knowing that Phil said he would text me again tonight. What if Phil has already talked to Molly? Or any of the other hundreds of people who have seen or shared the posts by now. And if he hasn’t, do I just not say anything about it? It also occurs to me that I need to look at the YouTube page to see if people are commenting.

All of a sudden I feel Jas’ hand touch my arm. My eyes flicker up and find hers. “You can do this, Dan,” she says softly. Completely overwhelmed, I turn away from her so she doesn’t see the tears filling up my eyes. We sit on the floor like that for a few minutes before I’m able to compose myself.
and look back in her direction.

“Talk to me. One thing at a time,” she says in a kind but firm voice.

“What about the YouTube channel? Have you looked at it?” I ask.

“Oh,” she says in a surprised voice. “I didn’t realize you hadn’t checked it yet.” She looks around the room and spots a laptop behind her on the couch. She hands it over to me and waits for me to log on and pull up the page.

My eyebrows raise when I see that there are already over 700 views and at least 300 comments. I scan through them and it looks like they’re mostly positive also. When I look a little closer, I notice that while there are some that are random, most of the comments are actually a conversation back and forth between all of these strangers. They are debating everything from my identity and the songs themselves, to whether or not any of them know Phil. At least there’s that. I’m not sure what I was expecting, but I feel like a weight has been partially lifted. I look back up at her and nod.

“Oh,” she says with a smile. “What else?”

“We texted for a while this morning and Phil said he would text me later tonight so we could keep talking. What do I say? Do I bring all of this up?” I ask, gesturing to the laptop.

“No. I think you need to wait it out until someone tells him about it or he finds it on his own, which frankly is going to happen sooner than later. I’d be surprised if he doesn’t see it by the end of the day. There really isn’t any point in trying to step in and tell him about it now. I still think it’s a good plan and you need to go ahead and let it play out. I just don’t see any way that he won’t eventually see it.”

I just sit silently, fidgeting with my shoelace.

“You need to make a decision about meeting him,” Jas says again, trying to restart the subject and urge me into action. “What are you going to say tonight if he found out about the YouTube page? You have to have a plan.”

I finally reach my breaking point. “What am I going to say to Phil? It’s not that simple, Jas!” I shout. “I can’t say anything to him, remember? That’s why I’m doing all of this! If I could have just opened my mouth and had a normal conversation with him that first day I saw him in the record store, we wouldn’t have to go through this mess! But instead, I have to drag half of the city onto social media sites that, incidentally, I don’t even use, and have them tell Phil about me? Who has to do that? I don’t want a plan. I want to be normal!” Already ashamed at my outburst, I don’t try to hide the emotion this time. I uselessly wipe my face with my hands, fresh tears quickly replacing the ones I just brushed away.

After my tears taper off into sniffling hiccups, I finally get enough courage to peek at Jas out of the corner of my eye. The last thing I want to do is face her after I just yelled at her. Any other person probably would have stomped out the door, but somehow I’ve managed to put my life in the hands of the single most stubborn person in the entire world. I have no idea what to say, so I just sit here, fairly confident that she’ll start talking again and put me out of my awkward post crying misery. Of course, I’m not disappointed.

“Dan,” she says in a steady voice. “You need to rethink your definition of the word ‘normal.’”

Caught by surprise, I look back up and meet her eyes.

“Who do you know that meets the textbook definition of normal? Not me, that’s for sure. Dan, I’ve
completely hijacked the last two weeks of your life. I broke into your apartment while you were in
the shower. Then I texted you like 50 times when you wouldn’t talk to me. You don’t have to tell me
that that’s not normal. What about Heath? It’s not normal for someone to be that terrified of
commitment. And the other guys? You lived with them so surely you know that they don’t fall under
the definition of ‘normal’ either.”

She has some good points.

“There’s Phil,” she says, giving me a playful punch in the shoulder. “My guess is that he’s a little
different too. If he wasn’t, you wouldn’t have spent some much time on this. No one goes to the
lengths you have for someone who is plain and normal. Grand gestures are not inspired by people
who are ordinary.”

“And you,” she continues. “Dan, you are so far from being normal, which is exactly what makes you
extraordinary. You are amazing with words.” She holds up her hand to stop me from objecting. “Just
because you write them and sing them instead of saying them doesn’t diminish either their meaning
or your talent. Plus, you are hands down the best guitar player I’ve ever seen. I can speak for the
guys when I say that it’s absolutely mesmerizing to watch you play. You are so quirky and awkward
in the best ways possible. You’ve got to reconsider the way you look at yourself.”

I clear my throat and wipe away a few lingering tears with the sleeve of my hoodie. My face is warm
and pink due to her string of compliments, which I guess is better than being pink from crying like an
idiot. Suddenly, I feel like a total ass for yelling at her. I know she’s right about some of the things
she is saying. I do need to try looking at myself a little differently, but right now, my top concern is
figuring out my plan for meeting Phil in person.

“I… I’m…. sorry about…” I stammer, still not able to look her in the eye.

“Stop.”

I open my mouth to protest, but the look on her face convinces me otherwise, so I just nod at her,
ready to change the subject. “So, any ideas?”

Her face lights up, which I knew it would. She’s been waiting for me to give in and come up with a
plan for days now. She’s right, especially considering today’s events. It’s time. I stifle a laugh as I
watch her bouncing around with excitement, desperately not wanting to hurt her feelings any more
than I already have.

“Well,” she starts with enthusiasm, “You’ve got a couple of options. The first choice you need to
make is if you want the meeting to happen in a public place with other people around or someplace a
little more private. Either way, you’re going to have the advantage since you know what he looks
like and are going to have to be the one to approach him.”

I idly chew on my bottom lip as I think it over. As ridiculous as it sounds, I hadn’t considered the fact
that I was going to be the one to approach him as opposed to the other way around.

“What about the record store? Or maybe the café next to his bookstore?” I ask.

She pauses for a few minutes to consider the choices. “Well, the café around mid-morning would
work well. The early morning rush would be over, so it wouldn’t be crowded, but at the same time
there’d still be some people around. Plus, it’s only a few blocks down from the record store. If things
go well, you could always walk down to the record store. It would give you guys some good
conversation starters at least.”
I nod absently at her as I yawn. The mental exhaustion is starting to turn into physical exhaustion. I pick up my phone to check the time, surprised that it’s only 10 pm since it feels so much later. It also hits me that Phil never texted like he said he would. Next to me, Jas stands up and stretches.

“I think that’s good enough for tonight,” she says, looking as sleepy as I feel. “It sounds like we may have figured some things out,” she adds with a smile.

I grin back. “Thank you,” I call to her as she makes her way to the door.

I pull myself up onto the couch as soon as the door shuts behind her. I tuck my phone underneath my pillow so I can hear it if and when Phil texts. Flipping on the TV, I close my eyes while I listen and wait for him.

Chapter End Notes

HERE IT IS!!! CHAPTER 22 PREVIEW!!!

This is a SHORT excerpt from the next chapter!

If you do not want to know what happens next, do NOT read it because it's a spoiler!!!

******************************************************************************

Phil: I’m absolutely blown away. I love this, and I can’t wrap my mind around the fact that someone did this for me. There are these amazing songs and texts and no person to go with them because you still feel so far away. It’s like you get a little bit closer with each new thing I learn about you, but you’re never quite within arm’s reach. You can only know someone up to a certain point like this before you need more. I need to see how you look at me. I need to know how it feels to have you next to me. I need…you.

Typing these 5 words is hands down the bravest thing I’ve ever done:

Me: Are you ready to meet?

Phil: You know I am!

Me: How about today?
The Big Day, Part 1

Chapter Notes

In case you didn't notice, I set the final chapter number at 30. This may or may not be 100% accurate and could change slightly, but it's my best guess right now and should be fairly close :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

I wake up with a start, sunlight streaming into the room through the windows and balcony door, forgotten and left open the night before. Disoriented, I page through the events from yesterday to try and provide a context to explain my confused state. Suddenly, I remember that I fell asleep waiting for a text or phone call from Phil that never came. My stomach sinks as my brain starts listing reasons why Phil didn’t text when he said he would. First and foremost on the list is that he saw the social media posts, freaked out, and never wants to talk to me again. Anxious to put myself out of my misery, I grab my phone.

But to my absolute surprise, there are texts. Several of them. The first one was sent at 10:30 last night. I just missed him.

Phil: Are you still awake?

Phil: I completely lost track of time. Molly and I went out for a late dinner and just got home. My phone died while we were out so I couldn’t let you know until I found my charger.

Phil: I was really hoping to talk to you.

A sense of relief washes over me. OK, Dan, that’s reasonable. No need for panic, I tell myself. Plus, he actually wanted to talk to me. This is all good news, and everything is fine. I move to the next message which was from about an hour later.

Phil: I’m speechless right now.

Phil: Did you make a YouTube channel for me?

I take a deep breath and my hands start to shake as soon as I read his words. Despite what Jas said, I honestly thought it would take longer for it to get back to him. It only took 12 hours. I’m not ready, but that no longer matters. This is going to happen regardless if I’m ready or not, and odds are, it’s going to happen really soon.

Phil: Seriously. You can’t do something like that and then not answer your texts.

My heart pounds so loud I can hear it in my head. I don’t know what to do. Text Phil? Text Jas? Maybe I should just call him? No…nothing good could come from me making a phone call. This is a proven fact. I reread the texts a few more times and take a deep breath. They're all are from late last night, so maybe he isn’t even awake yet?

Me: Hey, I’m sorry I missed your messages last night. I fell asleep early and didn’t hear my phone.

Simple. Truthful. This will be fine. This will be fine. I can do this. Maybe. Probably. This will be
fine. I’m fine. He’s probably still sleeping so I still have time to think about how to handle this and talk to Jas before he replies. This is all entirely fine.

Phil: Sooooo…..

I’m not fine. In a panic I grab the laptop and pull up the YouTube channel, regretting that I didn’t recheck it before I fell asleep last night. I’m not sure how it’s possible, but the number of views and subscribers has doubled overnight. I scan through comments to make sure nothing tragic has happened. It doesn’t look like there is anything overly negative, so at least I’m safe there. I need Jas. Quick.

Me: Jas! Phil knows! Help! I don’t know what to do!!

My brain spins out of control knowing I have to come up with something to say to Phil, which is clearly not my strong suit. I hastily type out a message to him.

Me: So you saw that?

I groan, knowing I sound like a total idiot. But idiot or not, the ball is back in his court. What do you say to someone after a grand musical gesture? I wonder if I could Google that. Wait, no. Focus.

Phil: Well, that’s one way of putting it. When we got home and I plugged my phone into the charger, I immediately texted you. After that, I noticed that I had other texts. A lot of them. And Facebook notifications. Again, a lot of them.

Phil is holding his cards pretty close. I can’t tell if he’s happy or completely freaked out or upset. I’m desperately trying to be as vague as possible until I can figure it out, but he isn’t giving me too much to go by. Luckily for me, he doesn’t wait for me to respond before continuing.

Phil: Everyone was either tagging me in something or sending me links. I guess people were sending them to Molly also because just as I was trying to figure out what was going on, she started screaming and yelling for me to come into her room. She had the YouTube page open on her laptop.

Me: So what did you think?

Moment of truth. I hold my breath.

Phil: Well, at first I thought she was full of shit.

I exhale into a laugh.

Phil: She kept telling me that you made a playlist for me, but I didn’t believe her. I tried texting you, but when you didn’t answer, she made me look at it. I could tell right away it was from you because you posted the picture of the Snapple fact I sent you. Is this really happening? I still can’t wrap my mind around it. Did you do this?

Me: That depends. If you liked it, then yes, it was me.

Me: Did you listen to any of the songs?

Phil: All of them. We stayed up until 3 am listening to everything. How did you get the recording of the song from the concert we were at? Do you know someone from the band? That’s one of my favorite songs and I didn’t think it was possible for anyone to make it sound better than the original.

My breath quickens. Here’s where things start getting a little sticky. I don’t want to lie to Phil, so I
ignore his last question and answer the first. However, somewhere in the back of my head, my brain is reminding me that lying by omission exists. I used to not believe that was a real thing, you either told a lie or you didn’t. Now I understand exactly how real it is.

Me: I know someone who works there and he recorded the show. He let me have a copy.

Me: So what does Molly think about all of this?

Phil: Well, she says it’s either the beginning of the most beautiful romance in history, or you’re a psychopath. Fingers crossed it’s the first option!

Me: Psychopath is a bit harsh. I prefer to call myself ‘quirky.’

Phil: Isn’t Sherlock Holmes a psychopath?

Me: Sociopath. Two incredibly different things ;)

Phil: Good to know. It just so happens that I have a thing for non-psychopath quirky guys with beautiful brown eyes ;)

Me: And you really like the playlist? I was worried about my song choices. I know they aren’t for everybody.

Phil: I’m blown away. I love this, and I can’t comprehend the fact that someone did this for me. There are these beautiful songs and texts, but no person to go with them because you still feel so far away. It’s like you get a little bit closer with each new thing I learn about you, but you’re never wholly within arm’s reach. You can only know someone up to a certain point like this before you need more. I need to see how you look at me. I need to know how it feels to have you next to me. I need…you.

Typing these five words is hands down the bravest thing I’ve ever done:

Me: Are you ready to meet?

Phil: You know I am!

Me: How about today?

Phil: Are you serious? You can’t joke about this.

What am I doing? Nope. Not ready at all. Beyond scared. God. Where is Jas? Why hasn’t she texted me back? I can’t believe she’s choosing this very minute to give up being on her phone 24/7.

Me: Meet me at the cafe by your bookstore? 11:00?

Ok. Now that was the bravest thing I’ve ever done.

Phil: And you’ll really be there?

Somehow it tears my heart in half that we’re scared of the exact same things. Or maybe we’re just broken in the same ways.

Me: Yes, I promise.

Phil: And this is actually happening? Is today really the day?
Me: Today is the day :]

Phil: I can’t believe you’re going to be in front of me in an hour and a half! Everything is finally going to be real.

An hour and a half? I check my watch. 9:30 am. Shit. I jump off the couch and tear down the hall to my room, still carrying my phone just in case he texts again or I finally hear from Jas. As I’m stripping off my clothes, I send Jas one more message.

Me: We’re meeting at 11:00 this morning at the Café. Where are you???

I have no idea what I want Jas to do with that information, but she’s been my sidekick through this whole process so it seems relevant that she knows the latest development. I am suddenly beyond grateful that she pushed me to figure out a plan in advance.

I hop down the hall towards the bathroom, still trying to struggle out of my skinny jeans. I make a mental note not to fall asleep without changing clothes ever again. Kicking and flailing, I turn the shower on so the water has time to heat up. Looking in the fogging bathroom mirror, I take stock of my reflection, relieved that I had washed my hair and shaved yesterday morning. A quick shower should be good enough. I pull the curtain aside and jump in only to immediately press myself up against the shower wall, cursing at the scalding hot water. Leaning precariously, trying to avoid getting my hair wet and burning myself even worse than I already have, I grope around until I’m able to adjust the temperature. Satisfied that I’m not going to burn or freeze, I grab the body wash and rush through my shower. After about 5 minutes of frantic washing, I hop back out onto the bathmat, spinning around trying to find the towel that I apparently forgot. I jog across the hall to my room, dripping puddles along the way.

Phil: What are you going to be wearing? How will I know for sure it’s you?

Until this very minute, I didn’t care about fashion. Jeans, t-shirts, and hoodies are both comfortable and functional, which means they meet my only two requirements for clothing. Plus, if everything is black, white, or denim, it always matches. Is meeting Phil something that calls for a button up shirt? I dig around in my closet until I find the black short sleeve button up that I wore at the show last week, but now it’s wadded up and wrinkled. If I owned an iron, it might be an option. Starting to panic, I grab a basic black t-shirt and a pair of clean jeans.

Me: I’ll be the boy with the brown eyes wearing a black t-shirt.

I examine myself in the dresser mirror. Due to my limited options, I only look slightly less rumpled than I usually do. After finding my shoes, I am officially ready. It seems like that getting ready for something so monumental should take more than 30 minutes, but on the other hand, this still took about 15 minutes longer than my regular daily routine.

It’s 10:15. Forty-five minutes left. I check my phone and there are messages from both Jas and Phil. I read Phil’s first and start to feel sick.

Phil: And you 100% promise you’ll be there? I’m scared and starting to freak out about meeting. I guess I wasn’t expecting it to happen today :[

Me: Wait, are you changing your mind?

I feel a pang of guilt for taking things this far. I sit and stare at the phone, waiting for the flashing dots to show up. What does he mean by ‘freaking out’? Oh my god oh my god oh my god. What do I say to him? After about two minutes with no answer, I can’t wait any longer and start frantically typing
Me: I’m a little scared too, but that doesn’t matter anymore. What matters is us. Phil, these past two weeks have had some of the best, most frustrating, and rewarding experiences of my life. Remember when you said you’d make a lousy Cinderella? You would actually be an incredible Cinderella because this time with you has been like a fairy tale to me. Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined someone like you exists in the world, Phil. This is just the beginning of our story together.

That is such a huge understatement. Saying that I’m ‘a little scared’ doesn’t come close to describing all of the horrible scenarios swirling around in my head right now. I hold my breath and find myself staring at my phone again.

Phil: You just made me cry!

Me: Good tears, I hope?

Phil: Yes, very very good tears. But how come you’re scared at all? You already have the advantage of knowing who I am.

Me: Well, we’ll be on even ground in about 35 minutes ;]

Me: And you’ll be there?

Phil: Yes, I’ll be there ;]

Thank god. One crisis averted. I close the conversation with Phil and switch over to Jas’ texts, hoping she has some encouraging words.

Jas: Today??? This morning!!!!

Jas: Ahhhhh!!! I’m at work!

Me: Good.

Jas: But I want to be there to see this!

Me: God no! The last thing I need right now is an audience.

Jas: That’s not fair! I helped and I should get to see what happens! Are you going anywhere else?

Me: I don’t know. Maybe if he doesn’t hate me? Right now I just have to survive this first.

Jas: Make an effort to remember every detail. I mean EVERY single one so you can tell me tomorrow.

Me: Jas, I’m not going to take notes or reenact it for you if that’s what you’re wanting.

Jas: No! Well, maybe.

Jas: There’s one more thing, and I probably shouldn’t be telling you this right now, but I’m going to anyway because I think you need to know. All of the subscribers and comments on the YouTube page aren’t just about you and Phil. That video from the concert is blowing up. Grif was the only person I told about the YouTube channel because I figured you wouldn’t mind, but when he got up this morning, the band had more than 500 new Instagram followers. The number has been climbing all day, on Jack, Heath, and Greg’s personal sites too. By a lot.
Me: So they all know about it now?

Jas: Yup. Somehow you managed to pull off the texting a stranger thing and get the band a ton of free publicity in one big swoop. It’s actually pretty impressive.

I didn’t think about that. It never crossed my mind that posting the performance video would drag everyone else into this. It’s going to make things a little bit more complicated since Phil doesn’t want to date a band guy in the first place.

Jas: We’ll all deal with the rest of it later. And if it makes you feel any better, when the rest of the guys found out about the channel, they went nuts. They’re all cheering for you.

Jas: Go be awesome. Go get the boy.

Me: I'll try

Jas: NO. THERE IS NO TRY, ONLY DO!

I laugh as I shove the phone back in my pocket. Twenty-five minutes left. Knowing that there is no way I’m going to be able just to sit here and wait, I pocket my keys and wallet and head to my car.

Chapter End Notes

My intention was that Phil finding the playlist and the two of them finally meeting would be one big chapter. However, I’ve had a rough week and it just didn't turn out that way so I ended up splitting it into two chapters instead so I would be able to go ahead and post today. I know everyone has been waiting for this moment so I hope you aren't too disappointed. :(
Chapter Summary

As a thank you to my lovely readers, here it is.

They finally meet.

And posted a day early even :)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s 10:47 exactly and I’m sitting in my car, parallel parked about two shops down from the café. Thirteen minutes to go. My heart is practically beating out of my chest. I keep straining to look up and down the block to see if I can spot Phil.

This is it. Will he recognize who I am from the band or not? I know I look entirely different when I’m not on stage so most people don’t realize it’s me, but these past two weeks have proven that Phil is definitely not most people. The video of me on YouTube was taken from the back of the club, so even though he’s watched it, it’s still next to impossible to see me clearly since the room was so dark. In my mind, the best case scenario is that he won’t recognize me, and with any luck, our texting connection will translate over to real life as will my grand YouTube romantic gesture. Hopefully, that will be enough so when I tell him about the band, it won’t matter. I can do this.

But what if he hates me? What if we see each other for the first time and he’s disappointed in how I look? Or what if I’m quiet and awkward and can’t get any words out? There are so many ways this can go wrong that have nothing to do with me being in a band.

I look up, and there he is walking down the sidewalk to the café. I can’t get over how beautiful he is. It’s so hard to wrap my mind around the fact that he is the guy on the other side of those texts. A wave of sorrow washes over me as I watch him enter the café. Whatever happens when we meet, everything we’ve had up to this point is gone. For better or worse, it won’t ever be the same once I walk through that door. This realization absolutely guts me. These past two weeks woke me up and made me feel alive again and I don’t want to lose that. I had been a ghost among the living until I saw Phil for the first time.

10:55. Five minutes left. It’s time. I open my car door and step outside into the sunshine. I step up on the sidewalk and slowly start taking steps, feeling like I’m walking through glue. I so badly want to hang on to what we have now that my mind briefly tries to convince me to turn around and walk away from the whole thing. But that isn’t an option. The idea of leaving him in there waiting is unthinkable, so I continue forward even though my brain is commanding me to retreat.

I stop at the glass café door and wrap my fingers around the handle. My eyes immediately find Phil before I can even open it. He’s sitting at a table in front by the window. I watch as he reaches up with his left hand and pushes his fringe back off his forehead. His phone is on the table in front of him and he’s slowly scrolling as he reads. I haven’t been this close to him since that day in the record store. One last deep breath as I push the door open.
I step in and Phil instantly looks up at me with those wide blue hopeful eyes and I absolutely melt. If my heart didn’t belong to him before, there’s no questioning that it’s all his now. One look from him and knowing it’s me he’s waiting for is all it takes. When I give him a grin and take a few more tentative steps toward his table, a look of understanding washes over his face and he smiles at me, causing my entire body to heat up. He immediately stands and quickly closes the short distance between us, throwing his arms around my neck. I wrap my arms around him in a hug and consider never letting go. I’m pretty sure I could spend my entire life like this.

When we finally step apart, I pull out the chair across from Phil and sit down, my senses almost too overwhelmed now that we’re this close. His hair looks so shiny and soft, and I have to make a conscious effort not to reach out and run my fingers through it. And finally, those eyes. I could stare into those blue eyes forever. I can smell that same intoxicating scent I remember from that first day. How is it possible that he feels so familiar? I know I’m probably weird for staring at him this long, but now that he’s in front of me, I can’t bring myself to look away.

“Hi,” I say, overwhelmed by my own awkwardness.

We lock eyes, and both try and fail to not break out in a flood of nervous laughter. I can’t help but think about how absurd this whole thing is, us, sitting across from each other, not talking, but laughing.

Once our giggles die down, Phil gifts me with the most radiant smile I’ve ever seen. His eyes are lit up and his cheeks are pink and flushed from laughter.

“So, mystery admirer, do I finally get to know your name?” he asks.

“Dan,” I answer. “My name is Dan.”

“Dan,” he repeats with a thoughtful look on his face. “I like that. It sounds right. Well, Dan, I have a confession to make.”

I raise an eyebrow and wait for him to continue as he takes a deep breath.

“I was petrified that you wouldn’t show up,” he continues nervously. “Molly is camped out in the bookstore next door. That way if you were a no-show or a weirdo she would be there to console me.”

“That’s actually really smart. I was terrified too, but I had to beg a friend of mine not to show up.”

He covers his mouth and giggles. Seeing him laugh like that is probably the best thing I’ve ever seen in my entire life. I’m usually pretty adamant about having personal space, but I cross my arms and rest them on the table before scooting my chair a little closer. The table is small, but the two feet of distance between us is just too far. My heart is happy when he mirrors my actions.

“It wasn’t the friend who broke into your apartment, was it?”

“Actually, yes.”

“Good call then.”

There’s a short comfortable silence as we both sit for a minute looking at each other and grinning like fools. I still can’t believe I’m sitting here in front of Phil. It’s the most surreal moment I’ve ever had.

“Well,” he says, narrowing his eyes at me, “do you make a habit of making YouTube channels for people you want to meet?”
“Oh my God,” I say, burying my face in my hands. “I generally don’t pay attention to social media. I only have an Instagram account and I just got that two weeks ago. When I made that channel, I had no idea how fast it would spread and how many people would see it.”

He laughs again. “What did you think would happen?”

“Not that! I made the channel and my friend put it on her Facebook page and then her boyfriend shared it on his. What I thought would happen is that a few people would see it and after a while it would hopefully make its way back to you. I had no idea it would take less than 12 hours. I figured I’d have a week at least.”

He grins and shakes his head. “You really don’t have any idea how social media or YouTube works, do you?”

“Apparently not. But it worked so I may have to stop resisting and embrace it.”

“Amazing choice of songs though. I love all of them! If I were going to text a stranger and then make a grand musical gesture I would have picked the exact same ones,” Phil teases.

“I am so relieved to hear that, you have no idea. I guess you’ve figured out that I am pretty much out of my element right now so I overthought each song. I’d be embarrassed to tell you how long it took me to pick them out.”

“Why do you say that?” he asks, leaning forward just a tiny bit closer, throwing off my train of thought.

“I’ve always just been sort of shy, plus I’ve hardly had any experience with anything involving romance.”

“I find that hard to believe. When was your last boyfriend? Or…uh…girlfriend?”

I chew on my bottom lip while I try to figure out how to answer. “Um, well, a few years ago? And no girlfriends ever.”

A look of shock crosses his face. “You’re totally just exaggerating. That’s impossible! You’re cute and funny and have fantastic taste in music.”

Wait, did he just say I was cute?

Phil thinks I’m cute?

“How did you meet him?”

Yikes. I can’t tell Phil that I met him in a bar while we were playing. And by ‘met him in a bar’ I mean that he approached me because I was in the band. We were together for about a month before he broke up with me because I couldn’t be what he wanted me to be. I’m not ready to explain that to Phil.

Phil takes my silence to mean that I’m getting uncomfortable, which I am. I look back up at him and he’s looking at me with his head cocked to the side. His hand slides the short distance across the table and he puts it on top of mine. Hopefully he doesn’t notice my breath hitch when our skin touches.

“I’m sorry,” he says with concern. “You’ve told me a few times over the past few weeks that you’re out of your comfort zone. I shouldn’t be pushing you so hard. I just can’t wrap my mind around other people not seeing how perfect you are.”
He starts to pull his hand back, but without thinking, I unconsciously put mine on his to stop him. His eyes flicker up to mine and he smiles shyly. We sit like that for a minute, before he picks up his phone with his other hand and taps a few buttons. “I know I ask a lot of questions, but I’m guessing you probably want to actually know stuff about me too,” he says while wrinkling his nose. “Here,” he says, sliding it across the table.

I take his phone and look at what he pulled up on the screen. I scroll slowly and look at picture after picture. Some are intricate pen and ink drawings, others are big paintings of figures, each one more perfect than the next.

“These are incredible. Did you do all of them? How come you didn’t say you could do this?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. I love painting and drawing, but I’m not confident enough to share it with other people I guess. I’m sort of always second guessing everything I make. I have degrees in film and English since the employment odds are a little higher than with art. Which doesn’t really explain why I work in a bookstore I guess,” he mentions with a frown. “What about you? You said music was your favorite thing. Do you play any instruments?"

My heart speeds up. There’s no way I can avoid the question other than with telling him a flat-out lie. This entire time I’m having an internal debate. When do I tell him about the band? Sooner or later? Maybe I can sort of just ease him into it gradually?

“I actually play the guitar.”

His face lights up. “Really? That’s pretty cool! I tried taking lessons once but I was horrible at it. Are you any good?”

“I do ok.”

“Will you play for me sometime?”

I already have.

“I would love to.”

“I have a question for you,” he says, starting to lightly rub his thumb in circles over the back of my hand. “Did you tell anyone about texting me?”

“I told a friend that I was thinking about doing it and he thought it was a good idea. After you and I talked a few times, I had to get a female second opinion. How about you?”

“I told Molly. She wanted to see the texts after that first conversation, but I didn’t show her any after that. I think she was worried and trying to decide if you were a crazy person. I guess that explains why she’s loitering around next door right now. Her boyfriend Gavin knows about it too, but he’s never seen any of the texts.”

Curiosity gets the best of me. “How come you didn’t tell people?”

“Because it seemed too good to be true, I guess. It was like something out of a movie. If I would have told everyone and then had you stand me up today or found out it was just some sort of joke, I’d never live it down. I figure if I’m going to look stupid, I’d rather not do it in front of a crowd,” he admits with a small smile. “Plus, I think Molly would have hunted you down if either of those things had happened.”

I grin. “If I had done that I would’ve deserved it.”
After a few beats of silence, he starts talking again. I like the fact that he talks so much. I guess it sort of balances out my lack of words.

“Molly really liked the songs you chose. I’m extra impressed that you went to the effort of getting that performance from the concert.”

“It’s a great song,” I acquiesced. If only he knew why I chose it. “What’s your favorite song on the list?”

“I’ve always loved Pictures of You,” he answers. “There’s just so much sadness and longing in it.”

“Agreed,” I say, not being able to look away from his blue eyes. “I guess I’m sort of fascinated with the concept behind the lyrics, of loving the version of a person you’ve made up in your head instead of how they are in real life.”

“Do you think that’s what we did? Are we just made up people to each other?” Phil asks.

“I wondered that too, which is why I chose that song. But I’m hoping that finally meeting in person will prove that isn’t what we’re doing.”

“What’s your favorite?

“Probably I Will Follow You Into the Dark. I like the idea of love being powerful enough to overcome death. Maybe it’s because I’ve never been in love before and it’s such an unknown. I always wondered what it would feel like to be so in love with another person to the point that you fear nothing, not even death.”

Phil sits quietly, considering my words.

“Do you think it’s unrealistic to expect to find that kind of love?” he finally asks.

I sigh. “I honestly don’t know. But I guess I’d like to believe that it’s possible for two people to be the center of each other’s universe. I like the idea of it at least, the pursuit of blind unconditional love, the all or nothing.”

“Part of me wishes you would have found me in the crowd that night,” Phil says suddenly.

My breath catches. “Why do you say that?”

“Even though you flat out told me it wasn’t going to happen, I got this totally over-romanticized image in my head of you finding me in the crowd and surprising me. That was my own fault. I should have listened to you instead of setting myself up like that. Plus, Molly was trying really hard to figure out who you were that night so that wasn’t helping things.”

This is probably as good of an opportunity as I’m going to get. I can just explain to him that it was easy to get that recording because I’m the one singing in it. I can tell him how I played that song just for him and Molly was right, I was looking at him while I sang it.

I open my mouth to start explaining, but my bravery retreats and my mind goes back to the original plan that Jas helped me come up with. “Do you want to go for a walk? Maybe go down towards the record store?”

“Ok,” he says excitedly. “But before we go I’m going to text Molly to tell her where we’re going and that everything is alright. If she comes over here and we’re gone she’s going to assume I was abducted.”
My stomach sinks at the lost opportunity. I should have just told him.

He picks up his phone and starts texting back and forth with Molly. I take advantage of the break to try to regroup. I check my phone and am no longer shocked when I see that about a dozen texts are waiting for me.

Jas: Well??????????

Jas: What’s he like??

Jas: I guess it’s going ok since you haven’t texted me back?

Jas: I can’t believe I’m not there for this! I hate having a job!

Jas: !!!!!!!!!!

Grif: Hey. I know you’re busy but when you get a chance will you text Jas. She’s making me crazy. She wants me to skip class to go check on you. I’m sure she’s blowing up your phone too. Sorry about that.

I snort laugh at Grif’s text. Phil looks up at me and grins, raising an eyebrow before going back to his phone.

“Sorry. Just a funny text.”

Jas: So what’s happening?

Jas: Are you still at the café?

Jas: WAIT! Are you not answering because you guys are kissing????

Jas: I really hope that’s it. :]

Jas: Is he a good kisser?

Me: STOP!

Me: Jas, things are fine. Great actually. We’re just getting ready to leave the café and take a walk. I’ll text you later.

As soon as I put my phone in my pocket, I can feel it vibrating but decide not to check the message. I’m confident in my assumption that it is Jas. I only really text two people, one of them is her and the other is sitting right in front of me.

Once Phil’s done chatting with Molly, he stands up from the table with a satisfied smile. “Ok, Molly is happy. Ready?” he asks, holding out his hand to me.

I stand up and take his hand, letting him intertwine our fingers together, gladly following as he tugs me through the café and out the door. The warm sun hits us as we walk hand in hand down the sidewalk. For once, I don’t want to overthink or question things, I just want to enjoy it. I want to be happy with Phil.

Chapter End Notes
I hope the long-awaited meeting chapter was worth the wait!

And incidentally, the next chapter is my favorite in the entire book :)
I'll just leave my favorite chapter right here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Let’s go the long way,” Phil says. “Through the park and around the lake.”

I’m so incredibly happy at this point I would agree with pretty much anything as long as Phil is the one who suggests it. We cross the street at the corner and quietly walk the single block down to the park. Not only are we holding hands, but we’re walking just about as close together as we possibly can, arms touching all the way up to our shoulders. We step off the main sidewalk and take one of the winding paths that lead towards the lake. It’s a beautiful day so we are just two of many who had the same idea to head to the park and enjoy the warmth. We’re both walking along in a hazy blissed out cloud. Neither one of us is talking, but we keep trading infatuated glances back and forth and squeezing each other’s hand.

“Can I ask you something?” Phil asks, breaking the comfortable silence.

“Of course.”

“Why did you pick Toxic as one of the songs?”

I am caught so off guard by the question that my face instantly turns bright red and I have no hope of hiding it from him.

“Oh my god! You’re blushing! Now I have to know!” he cries gleefully.

“It’s just a random song!” I insist.

“You’re blushing too much for it to be random! Tell me!”

I’m trying to think of the best way to answer when I suddenly realize that Phil’s face is a lot closer to mine. I glance over and he’s looking at me and batting his eyelashes sweetly. Did his eyes just get bigger and bluer? How is that even possible? My breath quickens and I find my eyes flickering down to his lips.

“Pretty please, Dan?” he asks, his voice lower and right next to my ear. It almost makes my eyes roll back in my head and I’m starting to feel dizzy.

“It’s because of one of your texts!” I blurt out.

“Really? Which one?” he asks happily.

I blink a few times and shake my head. I was never going to admit to that. How did he do that? What just happened? I look over at him and he looks quite pleased with himself.

“Well, um, remember that night you talked about wondering if I was a good kisser or not?”
“Very well,” he answers.

“And then you described me taking your shirt off?”

“Oh, you remember that?” he asks innocently.

“You could say that,” I answer, feeling myself blush again. “It’s tattooed on my brain for the rest of my life, thank you very much.”

“That was a terrific conversation.”

“Well, I was trying to pick out songs for your playlist until you came along and started putting dirty thoughts into my head.”

“Wait, was my playlist the big secret project you were working on?”

“Yup. I told you you’d find out about it.”

He looks at me and a huge smile spreads across his face as he shakes his head.

“What?” I ask.

“Nothing,” he shrugs.

“Come on, please tell me,” I beg, curiosity getting the better of me.

“I was just thinking about the lyrics to that song. If I had known that’s how you felt, I would have described something a lot better than you just taking my shirt off.”

“Phil!”

“What? You asked!” he says, laughing.

If there’s one thing I’ve learned about Phil at this point, it’s that I shouldn’t be surprised at anything he says.

We’ve made our way further into the park and are walking around the edge of the lake. The trees lining the path are all finally starting to take on their fall colors and an occasional red leaf floats down around us. Fewer people are going in this direction, so there are no longer joggers and bike riders whizzing past us. The sky is cloudless today and is the second most beautiful color blue I’ve ever seen. But our surroundings still pale in comparison to Phil, and I can’t imagine I’d ever be able to get used to seeing him next to me.

As we continue along, he untangles his fingers from mine and steps slightly to the side so he’s partially walking behind me with his hand lightly on my lower back. I try to twist around to figure out what’s going on.

“Phil?”

“Sorry. Ducks,” he says as if I should understand.

“Ducks?” I look ahead of us and about a dozen ducks are loitering around on the path next to the water.

“Phil? Are you scared of ducks?”
“No,” he answers meekly. “Not specifically. Just wildlife in general.”

I try not to laugh but fail. “What does that mean, ‘wildlife in general’?”

“I have bad luck with wild animals!”

“We’re you mugged by a duck as a child, Phil?” I ask, still trying to choke down hysterical laughter.

“No,” he answers defensively, “but I have been bitten by squirrels. It really hurts!”

“Wait. Squirrels? As in you’ve gotten attacked by a squirrel more than once?”

“Maybe. Well, yes.”

Luckily for Phil, I laugh so hard the ducks get spooked and scoot into the lake and swim away. The visibly relieved look on his face does nothing to stop my laughter.

“Well, there is a lot about me that you still need to learn and we have to start somewhere. You might as well find out about my fear of wildlife now and not when you surprise me by whisking me away on safari vacation sometime.”

“I will tuck it away with all of the rest of the Phil facts,” I promise.

“Now that you know an incredibly embarrassing fact about me, you have to tell me one about you so it will even out.”

“The only thing I’ve got that can come remotely close to competing with that is being scared of the dark,” I say. “Other than a fear of life in general, of course.”

“But at least that’s somewhat of a reasonable fear. Both of them are, actually,” he says. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“You said before that this entire process was really terrifying. Why did you keep going if you were so scared? Why didn’t you stop?”

I take a deep breath and try to figure out the right way to explain it to him. I’m not sure how to sum up the amount of anxiety I’ve been drowning in over the past two weeks and how I was just as scared of this working out as I was of it failing.

“It’s like someone who’s afraid to fly getting on a plane. If they are going somewhere they don’t want to go to, they’re in agony the entire flight. But if they’re on the way to a place they’ve only dreamt about, the fear is manageable because what is on the other side of the flight is worth being scared for. Every time we talked, each text you sent, I was more and more sure that you were worth pushing through the fear.”

“Now that you’ve met me, do you still think it was worth it?” he asks quietly.

“Without a doubt, I know you’re worth it.”

When he doesn’t say anything, I glance over at him, but can’t read the expression on his face. I start to wonder if maybe I said the wrong thing.

“So, I have a confession to make and I’m not sure how to say it,” Phil says turning his head towards me.
“O-Ok,” I say, surprised by his serious tone.

“I actually….I actually recognize you,” Phil says hesitantly. “It doesn’t feel right not to tell you that.”

Multiple emotions well up inside of me all at once and I don’t know which one to go by. I try to hide the disappointment that’s clouding over my face. This used to be my worst case scenario, but at this point why should I care if he recognizes me from the band? After meeting him, it doesn’t matter to me anymore. He isn’t some random guy who wants to date me for all of the wrong reasons. He’s Phil. I want to be with him, the good, the bad, everything, and I hope he feels the same way about me. What I suspected all along, I now know without a doubt. I’m falling in love with him. Very little other than that matters at this point.

“Oh, um, you do? From where?” I know that’s a stupid question since the answer is obvious, but I guess I just need to hear him say it.

“From two weeks ago when we were both in the record store.”

My entire world stops. I struggle to try to find words, but I’m at a loss. It never occurred to me once that he would remember that brief encounter that so quickly became the center of my world.

When I don’t say anything, he continues talking.

“I was there dropping off some tickets to Molly’s boyfriend Gavin. I helped you pick up those records, but you left before I could say anything to you,” he explains.

“I can’t believe you remember that,” I finally stammer.

His eyes grow wide with surprise. “Remember it? I was so close to you, and when you looked up, I couldn’t even catch my breath. It all happened so fast and I only saw your face for a few seconds, but I couldn’t get you out of my head,” he says, suddenly shy.

“I wasn’t even sure I would recognize you if I saw you again, but when you walked into the café, I immediately knew it was you. I didn’t say anything to Gavin, but I told Molly about the cute guy at the record store and swore her to secrecy because I felt sort of silly. She made fun of me and said I should have run out of the door and chased you down the street.”

“You should have. I was actually still standing outside and saw you when you left,” I say softly, still in shock.

He stops walking suddenly and turns to face me. “You were still there?”

“When you left, you walked away from me so you didn’t notice.”

“I don’t understand. Dan, why didn’t you come after me If you wanted to meet me so bad?”

I stand quietly for a few moments, trying to decide how much of the embarrassing truth I want to risk telling him. It’s just another thing I have to come clean on today. I guess we’re probably at the point of full disclosure so I might as well admit what I did even though I feel sort of ashamed and pathetic that I did it in the first place. I want him to see the real me and here it is, in all of its awkward glory.

“Dan?” he says, still waiting for an answer. “Why didn’t you come after me?”

“I did,” I say quickly, shoving my hands in my pockets and gazing down at my shoes.

In the silence that follows, I’m unable to do anything other than just stand here and wait. I feel Phil’s body next to mine and then his hand on my wrist, tugging my hand out of my pocket and
intertwining our fingers again. He puts his free hand under my chin and gently lifts up my face so I’m looking at him. Having his hand on my face like that sends sparks through my body. He’s standing closer now that we’ve stopped walking and the first thing that floats into my thoughts are those texts we sent back and forth about kissing. Even though he hasn’t said anything, I know from the expectant look in his eyes he’s waiting for me to elaborate on my answer. I start talking, the words quickly tumbling out of my mouth.

“I was just so caught off guard in the store. After I left, I knew I should do something, but I didn’t know what, so when you walked out the door, I sort of panicked and just followed you.”

I try to look away, but his fingers gently turn my head so I’m looking into his eyes again so I keep babbling.

“I wasn’t brave enough to talk to you. I wanted to – God I wanted to- but I just couldn’t. You were so heart stoppingly beautiful. Your eyes, your laugh, everything, I could barely even breath when we were standing so close to each other in the store. I didn’t think you would ever talk to a guy like me, but at the same time, I couldn’t handle the thought of never seeing you again. So I just followed about half a block behind you down the sidewalk. I knew I would never be able to say anything to you, even just to ask your name, so that’s the only thing I could do, just follow you so I could see you for even just a few more minutes.”

“How did you find out my name?” Phil asks, voice barely above a whisper.

“I went back to the store and started a random conversation with Gavin. I lied and said I thought you looked familiar so he would tell me your name without becoming suspicious.”

We’re still standing motionless, facing each other with our fingers linked and his hand on my cheek. We’re almost the same height so our eyes easily lock together. I’m suddenly aware that somehow the distance between us has closed and we’re only a few inches away from each other. The sound of the people around us had all but faded out of my consciousness. The only things I can see and feel right now are those extraordinary eyes staring into mine and his hands on my skin. My brain is whirling and demanding that I run, but as long as he’s looking at me like that, I’m frozen in place.

He steps forward and before I even have a chance to react, his lips press against mine in a soft kiss. He pulls back slightly and my hand instinctively moves to his lower back, pulling him forward and back into the kiss. His hand slides down from my face and settles on my chest. My eyes automatically close and my heart feels like its expanding. It’s like this is what I’ve been waiting for my entire life. If everyone gets one perfect moment, this is mine. Far too soon, he breaks away and gives me an unsure look.

“I hope it was ok that I did that,” he says, biting his bottom lip and looking worried.

Struck speechless, I vigorously nod my head.

"You never ever have to ask if doing that is alright. The answer will always be yes no matter what," I say when I regain the ability to talk.

He giggles and leans forward and gives me another quick kiss. He starts to walk again, pulling my hand to snap me out of my post-kissing daze. I obediently fall into step beside him as we continue our slow walk.

My head is reeling. I can’t wrap my mind around the discovery that the run-in at the record store had meant as much to him as it did to me. And now, not only have we finally met, I’ve just had the best kiss in my entire life. I never understood how people put their hearts on the line the way they do, but
now I get it. It’s worth the risk to get a chance to feel something like this.

We walk in silence for a few minutes before he looks over at me thoughtfully. “So, now what?”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Us,” he says, cocking his head to the side.

I can’t help but smile at the previously improbable thought of there ever being an actual ‘us.’

“I don’t know. What do you think?”

“Are you ever going to ask me to go on a date with you?”

I blush at both the directness of his question and my own inability to figure out what I’m supposed to be doing.

“That depends. Would you say yes?” I choke out.

“Of course!”

Now on the far side of the lake, we’ve walked almost the entire way around the park. I idly wonder if I can just cancel the rest of my life and hang out here with Phil for the next few years or so.

“Well?” he asks.

“Well what?

“That didn’t count. I’m still waiting for you to ask me out, you spork!” He throws his arm up in frustration.

“Oh, you meant right now? Ok. Um. Would you like to go out on a date with me sometime?”

“Yes!” he answers dramatically. “I would love to go out on a date with you.”

“So does this mean you aren’t disappointed in me?” I ask with a sideways smile.

“Dan, I’m not disappointed. I was hoping it would be you. You were who I wanted all along.”

This time I’m the one who stops walking. Phil turns around with a questioning look and I tug him back into me with our still interlocked fingers. Somehow I stop smiling long enough to lean forward and connect my lips with his.

For the first time, I am not afraid.

Chapter End Notes

We’re working our way down to the final chapters.

Brace yourself......

<3
Despite our slow meandering pace, we made our way through the park quicker than I wanted. Along the way, we stopped several times because Phil was insistent on taking a few pictures. I wasn’t a camera guy, and I definitely wasn’t someone who takes selfies, but he was giggling and laughing as he pulled me close to take our picture so I could hardly say no. I was enjoying being in our little private cocoon and wanted to extend that time as long as possible.

Walking along the sidewalk the short distance to the record store, I find myself never wanting to say goodbye to him. We didn’t make any plans past this, and I don’t want to let him out of my sight without knowing when I’ll see him next. I’ve already made that mistake once. I’m guessing that’s considered needy, but I honestly don’t care.

“Would you like to do anything after this? I ask.

“You mean you aren’t sick of me yet?”

“I don’t think you’ll ever have to worry about that,” I wink at him. “We can go get something to eat? Or pizza and Netflix?”

“That sounds good. What are you watching on Netflix right now? Do you watch Stranger Things?”

“I do.”

“So here’s a very important question for you. Are you pro-Steve or anti-Steve? Everyone is one or the other.”

I laugh at his question, but he is sort of right. There is no middle ground when it comes to Steve. “Well, I was anti-Steve after the first season, but now I’m pro.”

“I am too, but I hate myself for it. Maybe it’s just a fascination with his hair? Maybe if you grew your hair out a bit and used a bunch of hairspray we could make yours like that,” he observes.

Phil lets go of my hand and starts to run his fingers through my hair. He’s still talking, but I have no idea what he’s saying because my entire world has narrowed down to the sensation of him twirling my curls around his fingers, with the occasional light brush of his thumb against my ear.

“Dan!”

“What?” I say loudly, startled.

“Have you heard anything I’ve said?”

“Not a word. If you want me to listen, you can’t touch me like that while you’re talking.”
He laughs and tries to pull his hand away, but I grab his wrist to stop him. “It’s ok. We can just walk quietly for a while so you can do that some more.” He humors me with a few more minutes of his fingers threading through my hair before he stops, causing me to put on my best pouting face.

“More later. I promise,” he says, leaning over and kissing my cheek. “We’re here.”

I feel a little sad that our time alone together is over, but at least we have plans for when we’re done. I open the door and step aside so he can enter first. Despite being in a public place, we’re still completely focused on each other. He links his arm through mine as we walk aimlessly through the aisles, flipping through the records. I hadn’t been back since the day I saw him here and it almost feels like a brand new store, like I’m seeing everything differently now. Instead of just being a record store, it will always be the place where I saw Phil for the first time.

I hear a noise and glance up before doing a quick double take. About four rows over, Jas is hopping up and down and trying desperately to stifle her excited squeals. She must have gotten here before us. I have a distant memory of ignoring her text messages and instantly regret that decision. I glance at Phil, but so far he’s still oblivious to my panic. My eyes widen and I shake my head side to side at Jas and gesture for her to go away. I continue walking with Phil close by, but my eyes are still focused on Jas.

My brain goes into panic mode, trying to figure out how to introduce Phil to Jas which is clearly going to have to happen whether I want it to or not.

“So, um, do you remember my friend’s girlfriend that I told you about? The one who has been helping out by giving a female opinion on all of this?” I’m gently trying to angle Phil so Jas is no longer in his direct line of sight if he looks up.

He glances up at me with a smile. “The one who broke into your apartment?”

“Yup. That’s the one.”

“What about her?” he says absently as we continue to walk.

“She’s here.”

“Really? Where? Can I meet her?” Phil’s head pops up immediately and he starts peering around the store.

“You really don’t have to do that. We can actually just leave if you want.” I cross my fingers.

He finally leans around me to get a better view. As soon as he looks in Jas’ general direction, she takes it as an invitation to come over and join us.

Nope. This is happening.

“Whatever happens, I’m sorry,” I lean over and whisper to Phil, only half joking.

I barely get the words out when Jas is suddenly right there between us. She bumps me out of the way and flings her arms around a startled Phil. I can’t help but smile as I see his surprised blue eyes peeking over Jas’ shoulder at me.

“It is so incredible to finally meet you!” Jas gushes.

“Why are you here?” I ask, hoping I don’t sound as aggravated as I feel.
“Lunch break!” she answers cheerfully.

“That’s……great.”

“So,” she says, followed by a dramatic pause, “how are things going?” Her eyes flicker back and forth between us, noticing that Phil is back beside me, touching my arm.

Before either of us can answer, we hear laughter and chatter from the back of the store. Phil’s face lights up when he sees that it’s Molly and Gavin walking in through the staff entrance. I completely forgot that Phil had texted her to tell her where we were coming here. I’m assuming she’s here for the same fact-finding mission as Jas. I start to fidget and feel a little nervous. The more people involved, the greater chance this will go downhill fast.

“Oh, here’s Molly! Come on, I want you to meet her.”

Phil lets go of my arm and happily heads over to Molly with Jas and I trailing behind. I give Jas a worried look and she reaches over and briefly squeezes my shoulder as a sign of reassurance.

Gavin is shoving some boxes in through the back door, so Molly reaches us first.

“So, this is Dan!” Phil says to Molly who looks equally as excited.

Before I can even say hello or respond, Gavin appears next to Molly and interrupts.

“Hey! You were right” he says cheerfully, elbowing Molly. “It really was him.”

Fear seizes me when I see the confused look on both Phil and Molly’s faces. I feel like I just got punched in the stomach. This is how it’s going to happen. In front of everybody. Phil was not supposed to find out this way.

“I see you in here a lot and we chatted last week, but we’ve never actually been introduced. I’m a huge fan of yours, Dan.”

“Nice to meet you,” I mumble back, but my eyes are now trained on Phil. I glance quickly up at Jas, who, for once, has nothing to say. She nervously looks back and forth between Phil and I, while Gavin and Molly stand completely forgotten by me at this point.

“Wait….you know Dan?” Phil says in Gavin’s general direction. “How?”

Desperate for Gavin not to answer him, I put my hand on Phil’s waist and turn him towards me to get his attention. “There’s actually more that I haven’t told you yet. Can we talk alone for a second?” I can see Gavin whispering something to Molly out of the corner of my eye and I know that I’m running out of time.

Before Phil can answer, Molly puts her hand over her mouth in surprise. Phil starts to follow me as I take a step away, but stops when he sees Molly’s shocked expression.

“It is him!” Molly says in surprise.

“Yeah…he’s the guy I told you about,” Phil says. “I saw him in here but he left before we could talk. It turns out he was the mystery admirer.”

Phil turns and looks at me, smiling shyly and stepping a little bit closer. I try to memorize the look on his face, not knowing if I’m going to see it again once all of this comes spilling out. It’s happening and there’s no way I can stop it or go back at this point. I look up at Jas and attempt to wordlessly beg her for help, but she looks as helpless as I feel.
“No, it’s not,” Molly insists.

Confusion clouds Phil’s face again. “Yes, it is. Molly, what are you talking about?”

The Molly and Phil stare at each other while the rest of us all exchange unsure looks.

I start to open my mouth to try to explain, but Gavin beats me to it.

“Phil, you’re talking about that day you came in to give me the tickets, right?”

“Yes,” he says, starting to get frustrated. “Dan was here that day.”

“Right,” Gavin continues. “Are you saying he’s the one who’s been sending you texts for the past few weeks?”

“Yes,” he replies. “Dan is the mystery admirer.”

“Ok. Right. But don’t you recognize him from somewhere else?”

I can see the confusion still on Phil’s face.

“He was there on Saturday night at the concert…..” Gavin leads, trying to get him to understand.

“I know. But we didn’t talk or see each other that night.”

“Yes, you did. Remember when Molly kept saying he was looking at you while he was singing?”

And there it is. I stand and wait, never taking my eyes off of Phil, terrified.

He stands quietly for a moment, thinking. I can see the moment when he finally makes the connection, suddenly looking at me, hurt written all over his face. I feel physically ill.

Jas spots it too and immediately steps forward and gently guides Gavin and Molly to a spot a few feet away from us. I can see the three of them huddled together whispering and taking turns staring at us.

“Dan? It’s true isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Were you planning on ever telling me that?” Phil asks stiffly.

“Yes, of course. I just didn’t have a chance yet,” I respond with a shaky voice.

“You didn’t have a chance? Are you being serious?”

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. I try to give him an explanation, but the words can’t seem to put themselves together.

“This is clearly such a big part of your life, Dan, and you purposefully hid it from me. I trusted you and gave you a true unedited view of my life even though you were a perfect stranger, but you only gave me the bits and pieces you wanted me to see.” Tears are threatening to spill from his eyes.

“I can explain. Please, let’s go somewhere where we can talk and I can tell you why I didn’t tell you!” Even I can hear the panic in my voice at this point.

“You could have told me when we talked about music, or in any of the other hundreds of texts we
sent each other. If you didn’t want to do it over text, you could have said something in the café when you told me you played guitar or on the walk over here. You could have said something when I was at the concert!”

Phil stops suddenly, an expression on his face I don’t understand. Even Gavin, Molly, and Jas grow quiet, all eyes and ears are on Phil. A feeling of dread settles over me.

“Dan,” he says, turning to face me fully. “You played guitar and sang that entire concert, correct?”

“Yes,” I quietly answer.

“Then how did I get texts from you during the concert while you were on stage? Who sent me those texts, Dan?”

Fuck.

I immediately look at Jas, who looks back at me with wide scared eyes as Phil follows my gaze. He silently looks back and forth between us and I finally recognize the expression that I previously couldn’t place. It’s anger. Pure anger.

“Did she send me those texts?” Phil asks, pointing at Jas. “Wait, did she send all of the texts?”

“No!” I say loudly, shaking my head frantically.

“She didn’t. Only the ones during the concert. Everything else was from me.”

“Well, Jas,” Phil says as he turns toward her. “Do you remember what I said during that conversation?”

“Yes,” Jas whispers. I know how bad this is when I notice that there are also tears in Jas’ eyes.

Phil faces me again and stares at me angrily. “I said I was glad that you weren’t in a band because I didn’t think I could trust you if you were.”

“I can explain this,” Jas says, taking a few steps toward Phil. “It’s not how it looks.”

“Did you write those texts? Were those your words?” The tears are flowing freely down Phil’s face at this point. It breaks my heart to stand here and watch this. I want to put my arms around him and fix it, but I don’t know how.

“Um, yes,” Jas answers. She tries to keep talking, but Phil cuts her off.

“Well, then it’s exactly how it looks.”

Phil turns and walks toward the front of the store, leaving the four of us behind in shocked silence. I stand frozen as he pushes through the door and disappears into the crowd. Jas is the first to move, jogging to the door with Molly close behind, leaving Gavin and I standing alone as they rush out after him.

Feeling dizzy, I lean against the closest wall and close my eyes.

I feel Gavin next to me, but I don’t care. Whenever he doesn’t start talking, I’m grateful. I relive the past few hours in my head, making note of all the places I went wrong. But at the same time, I know that if I was open from the beginning about it, I would have always wondered if it was really me he wanted. It would have driven me mad.

I open my eyes and blink at the bright fluorescent lights. Gavin is still standing next to me silently
with a neutral expression on his face.

“So do you think I’m an asshole too?” I ask sarcastically.

He glances over at me. “No. I think I sort of get it.”

My eyebrows raise in surprise. That definitely isn’t the answer I expected.

“Really?” I say in a disbelieving tone.

“Well, when I started working here, I recognized you immediately.”

“Great,” I moan. “That doesn’t help.”

“No, I mean I wanted to say something to you, but the other employees told me not to. They said you come in here all the time, but you really want your privacy and don’t want to talk to anyone about the band.”

He pauses before he continues on. “At first I thought you were crazy. Why would you work that hard just to not want anyone to know who you are? That didn’t make sense to me. Then I noticed that people would come in and talk about you, especially the first few days after shows. You would be in here and they wouldn’t even realize it. You just seemed sort of quiet and wanted to keep to yourself. I guess it would be pretty weird to constantly have strangers walking up to you and acting like they knew you just because they saw you perform.”

I nod at him, not saying anything. Maybe he really does get it.

After a few more minutes of silence, I turn to him. “I wasn’t trying to deceive Phil, I swear I wasn’t. The thing is that I can’t even get to know anyone. Once they figure out who I am they only care about the band and what they can get out of it. I just wanted a chance for Phil to get to know me first. I needed to know that if he liked me, it was for the right reasons.”

“For what it’s worth, I hope you guys work it out,” he says sympathetically.

I take a huge breath and exhale loudly. “What do you think is going on? Do you think Jas and Molly caught him? God, I bet Molly hates me right now.”

I step away from the wall, running my hand through my hair as I start to pace around.

“All of those texts were from me except for the ones during the show,” I continue telling him while walking. “I left my phone at the side of the stage and had no idea Jas had done that until later that night. She overheard Molly telling Phil that she thought I was the secret admirer because the texts he was sending me didn’t get returned once the band started playing. Jas panicked and got my phone to return some of them so he wouldn’t find out. I just wasn’t ready for him to know yet. I needed more time!”

“Listen,” Gavin starts, pushing his shaggy brown hair out of his eyes, “I wish I would have known Phil was interested in you when he saw you in here. I had no idea. I guess he told Molly that he saw a cute guy in the store, but neither one said anything to me.”

I shake my head and wave him away. “It’s not your fault, it’s mine. I should have just told him earlier today. I’m the one who completely fucked everything up.”

“So now what?” I ask him. “Are they coming back? Should I go after them too?”
“Man, I have no idea. I’m just thankful to have Molly. I know nothing about women.”

I stop and laugh, finding comfort in the fact that he is as clueless as I am.

“Ok, I’m going to go outside and look around for them.”

“Hey,” Gavin says, catching me before I walk away. “What’s your phone number? I’ll text you if I hear anything.” Relieved and thankful for any help I can get, I take his phone from his outstretched hand and tap in my name and number.

“Thank you,” I say over my shoulder as I head for the door. “I really appreciate it.”

As soon as I’m outside, I check my phone and my stomach seizes. There are four text messages from Phil. I open them as fast as I can but fight back tears when I see that he has sent me four of the photos he took earlier on the way over here. I check the time stamp and see that they were sent about an hour ago, about the time we arrived at the record store. I look at each individual photo, my heart cracking a little more with each one. The first is of me, sort of blurred because I was laughing and trying to turn away from his onslaught of picture taking. The next one is a selfie of us squished together by the lake, happy smiles on our faces. The third is one I took of him with his phone. At some point, he had found some wild yellow daisies and put a few of them in his hair. The last is another he took of the both of us, him giving me a kiss on the cheek right before we left the park.

There are no new texts from either him or Jas since they left. Maybe that’s a good thing? Maybe Jas didn’t text because they’re still talking to him? It’s not like Jas to not say anything though. I glance both ways down the sidewalk, not sure what I’m looking for. The odds that they’re just going to be standing there are pretty slim.

I can’t believe it could actually end like this. Me standing in front of the record store, alone again.

Chapter End Notes

I'm really curious to hear everyone's thoughts and feelings on this chapter!

Also, I would love to get some suggestions on what I should write next. I started a series of super short phan one-shots, but literally only did one, so I'm thinking about picking that up again. I may need to do a few simple/short things while I recover a bit from this book. When it's all said and done, it's going to be around 170 pages which is the longest thing I've ever written!

And I absolutely love all of you for sticking around and following the story for this long! I am completely overwhelmed by all of your positive comments and responses!!

<3
Molly

Chapter Notes

A much quieter and calmer chapter than the last one. Hope you guys like it!

Me: Jas, is everything ok? Why aren’t you answering?

Me: Where are you? Did you find Phil?

I lean against the building and stare at the phone, praying for Jas to text me back. I continuously scan the faces in the crowd, searching for the only one that matters right now. I take note that this is precisely where I was standing two weeks ago after that awkward first encounter with Phil. Usually, I enjoy irony, but this time it feels overly cruel. I would give anything to have that day back. If I could do it all over, I would chase Phil down the street screaming and never let him get away.

Me: I swear, Jas. Please tell me what’s going on!

Me: What should I do?

Nothing. No response.

I tip my head back, letting it thud softly against the wall. I keep looking at my phone to check the time and for texts. They’ve been gone for about 30 minutes. Jas has zero restraint when it comes to this sort of stuff, so I just can’t believe I haven’t heard anything from her yet. Either they’re still talking, which is probably a good thing, or something went terribly wrong and she doesn’t know how to tell me. I glance up and do a double take when I spot Molly with her distinctive red hair walking towards me. I stand up a little straighter and try to look around the crowd to see if Jas and Phil are with her, but to my dismay, she’s by herself. I know it was a long shot to think that Phil would willingly come back right now, especially if he knew I was still here.

I half expect her to ignore me and go straight inside to Gavin, but to my surprise, she walks directly over to me. She stands in front of me and looks me up and down with her bright green eyes like she’s trying to determine my worthiness. Typically, I would probably start to feel uncomfortable at her blatant examination, but not today. The only thing I care about right now is Phil. With a satisfied look on her face, she tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear and takes a deep breath.

“So, I guess we never did have a proper introduction earlier,” she starts. “My name is Molly.”

“Hi, Molly. I’m Dan.”

A huge smile spreads across her face. “That’s what I hear.”

I ignore her comment, desperately just wanting her to give me some information about what’s going on. I feel so tired right now. I know I should be trying to plead my case to her, but it’s taking everything I’ve got not just to beg her to help me. As I open my mouth to start asking questions, she interrupts me.

“Come on, let’s not just stand here. Walk with me.” She turns and starts walking down the sidewalk, away from all the busy shops and restaurants. I willingly follow her, anxious to find out what
happened after she and Jas ran after Phil. The lack of information is making my patience wear thin.

“Molly, can you please just tell me what’s going on? Where is Phil? Is he ok? What happened when you guys left the store?”

“We caught up to him in a few blocks. The three of us only talked together for about 5 minutes before he took off on his own, so I honestly didn’t get too much out of him.”

I exhale a loud and frustrated sigh, running both hands through my hair. That’s not what I wanted to hear. I feel physical pain thinking about Phil wandering around aimlessly, hurting because I’m such an idiot. I should have just gotten over myself and told him. I made it about me when it should have been about him all along.

Molly looks at me and raises an eyebrow. “So here’s the thing,” she starts. “Phil likes you. A lot. He’s done nothing but talk about you for the past two weeks. It’s been such a long time since he’s had feelings for anyone and it has been great seeing him so happy. If you guys can work through this, I think it’s going to be a good thing for him.”

I feel a little glimmer of hope.

“However….”

Ugh. That’s never good.

“He’s really hurt right now. He wants a couple of days to think.”

Days? I can’t wait days. I think about the long hours of being by myself, waiting for him to text or call. Days of not knowing. I don’t even think I can last another hour without hearing from him.

“Can I at least talk to him? I want to explain why I didn’t tell him about the band. If he would just hear me out…..” I trail off.

“Listen,” Molly says with a kind smile. “If you tell anyone this, I’ll deny it, but I can understand why you made that choice. Jas explained the whole thing to me after we talked to Phil.” She pauses for a few seconds and then continues. “Can you show me the texts that Jas sent from your phone at the concert? It’s not that I don’t think you’re a good guy, but if I’m going to go to bat for you with my best friend, I want to make sure you and Jas are telling me everything. I need to know it’s the truth.”

I scramble around in my pocket trying to grab my phone. I pull up our conversations and scroll back to last week. When I find the date of the concert, I hand the phone over to Molly. We both stop walking while she reads through the texts, and after a few minutes, she nods and gives it back to me.

“I swear to you I didn’t know Jas was going to do that. She told me after the show and I just felt sick about it. She’s a good person, Molly. She was just trying to help.” I take a few big gulps of air and try not to cry. Not only are things screwed up with Phil, I can only imagine how bad Jas feels right now. This isn’t her fault. All of the blame is mine for putting her in a position where she would have to do something like that.

We continue walking quietly, and for one of the first times in my life, I want to keep talking. I have no idea if I’ll see her again and want to know everything I possibly can in hopes of getting clues on how I can fix this. This may be my only chance.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” Molly answers with a shrug.
“At the concert, you told Phil that you thought I was the secret admirer. How could you have possibly known that?”

“My older brother played in several cover bands when he was in college. He would be the first to tell you they weren’t any good,” she says with a half smile. “He and I went to one of your concerts together a few years ago and I asked him why you looked off into the distance when you played instead of looking at the audience. He said that sometimes if a musician is really into the music, they sort of just go into their own world and tune the rest out.”

“That’s true.”

“Well,” she continues, “I’ve been to like 5 of your shows and I’ve never seen you actually look at the audience until last Saturday night. Dan, at some point in their lives, everyone wants to be looked at the way you were looking at Phil.”

I say nothing, weighing her observation.

“He’s just….I don’t know, different,” I finally say. “I’ve never met anyone like him before. That’s why I did this. I know virtually nothing about love and dating, but even I know finding someone like Phil is a once in a lifetime thing. I couldn’t just let him walk away. And it's why I can’t let him walk away now.”

“Yes, he is,” Molly says with a big smile. “He used to hate that he was so quirky, you know? He just wanted to fit in with everyone else. Once he embraced it instead of trying to change to please everyone else, he was a lot happier with life.”

We walk in silence for a few more minutes, making our way back around the block to our original starting point.

“Of all the ways I pictured today turning out, what happened was actually worse than any worst case scenario that I imagined.”

“What was your best case scenario?”

I smile as I think over all of the imaginary scenes that have run through my head over the past two weeks, but in the end, the real Phil was still far better than any fantasy than I came up with.

“It’s what actually happened. It was the look on his face when he saw me for the first time. It’s what it felt like to kiss him. Even if I only got him for a few hours, it’s still worth all the pain I’m going through now.”

She’s quiet for a minute before she stops in the middle of the sidewalk and gets out her phone. I watch as she scrolls and then holds it out to me.

“I want you to read something.”

I reach out to take the phone but hesitate. I’m not sure my heart can handle any more bad news today.

“It’s ok,” she says gently. “It’s from when he texted me from the cafe to tell me the two of you were going to the park. I thought you might want to see what he said.”

It feels wrong to read a private conversation between the two of them that wasn’t meant for my eyes, but I can’t resist.
Phil: You aren’t going to believe this!

Molly: What? Is he there? Is everything ok?

Phil: It’s him!

Molly: Who?

Phil: Remember a few weeks ago when I told you I saw the most gorgeous guy in the entire world at the record store while I was dropping off those tickets?

Molly: !!!!!!

Phil: I can’t believe this! Molly, he’s absolutely wonderful! He’s funny and awkward and beautiful and exactly like how I imagined!

Molly: So what’s his name?

Phil: His name is Dan. <3

Phil: I just wanted to let you know we’re going for a walk in the park and then to the record store so you wouldn’t worry. I’m so happy right now! This is actually happening!

I read it twice before I hand the phone back to her.

“Why are you showing me this?” I ask through fresh tears.

“Because you look like you could use some hope. He wants this, Dan. He wants you. You need to hang on to that and not give up.”

“I was worried about the same thing, you know. I was afraid that he was just humoring me and going along with it just out of curiosity so he could find out who I was. Finding out that Phil returned my feelings was…..” I trail off, still wiping away tears. “I can’t believe this might be over. Now what?”

“I honestly don’t know. Phil didn’t want to talk to us. I think he went back to our apartment.”
“What about Jas? I keep trying to text her, but she’s not returning any of them, which is unlike her.”

“When Phil left, Jas was really upset. She feels like this entire thing is her fault. Partially because of the texts at the concert and partially because she pushed you so hard.”

I didn’t know I could feel any worse. “I need to find her. None of this is her fault. Yeah, she did push me, but that’s not a bad thing. I guess that’s something I’ve needed for a while.”

“I’m going to go check on Phil now that he’s had some time to digest all of this,” Molly says.

“Should I text him?”

She holds out her hand and gestures for me to give her my phone. She puts her number in it and then texts herself so she would have mine also. “I’ll let you know. Don’t text him until you hear from me, OK? I want to get a feel for what kind of headspace he’s in.”

“Can you tell him you talked to me? Please let him know how sorry I am.”

“I will, but I can’t promise you he’s going to be open to listening right now, Dan. The best I can do is try.”

I nod in agreement. “Thank you, Molly. For all of this…for listening. I really appreciate it,” I say to her, feeling a bit awkward.

“You can do this, Dan. Please don’t give up on him, ok?” She smiles at me as she walks off. “I really am cheering for you two,” she calls back over her shoulder. I stand and watch her until she veers off and gets into her car. Having a strange feeling of déjà vu as I watch her drive off and down the block, I turn in the opposite direction and start the familiar and lonely walk back towards my apartment.
I flop down on the couch, emptying my pockets and dropping all of their contents onto the floor. Grabbing my laptop, I look up Phil’s playlist on YouTube and notice that the views and comments are well into the thousands. I scan the comments and see that people are asking if Phil has been found and how things turned out. I groan, knowing that this is going to be another thing I’m going to have to deal with. I’m tempted to put an update about us meeting, but there’s a good chance that will only make it worse.

Phil is supposed to be here right now. We were going to go to the record store and come back here, but instead, everything got turned upside down. Because I’m a glutton for punishment, I can’t help but close my eyes and picture the way the rest of the night was supposed to turn out. I think about us just hanging out and eating pizza while watching Netflix. I idly wonder what shows he likes. He seems like a Stranger Things sort of guy. Or maybe Supernatural. I imagine us spooned together on the couch under a blanket. He would be the big spoon of course.

All of a sudden, I hear a soft knock at the door. Before I can get up and answer it, the door slowly opens and Jas steps into the living room. Her face is puffy and tear-stained, and she has her sleeves stretched and pulled down over her hands.

“Jas! Oh my God! Are you ok?” I shout, quickly standing up and running over to her. I freeze when I’m in front of her, not knowing if I should hug her, give her space, or talk to her. She drags herself past me and drops down onto the couch. Still unsure of how to act, I follow and sit on the floor in front of her. She leans forward and crosses her arms and put her elbows on her knees.

“Dan, I am so sorry about this,” she says with her bottom lip already quivering. “I never should have sent those texts to Phil from your phone like that. I should have just let you deal with it after the show.”

“Jas, none of this is your fault,” I insist. “I never would have gotten this far without you.”

“But now he’s mad and…and…” is all she manages to get out before the tears spill from her eyes. “I just felt so helpless standing there in the record store. I could see what was about to happen, and I wanted to stop it, but I just didn’t know how.”

“I didn’t either. Yes, Phil is mad, but I need you to help me get through this and fix it,” I say hopefully. Her tears don’t stop and I start to get panicky. I need to get her focused on something else.

“So what did Phil say when you and Molly caught up to him?”


“You did?”

“Yes. I was scared that she was going to be furious at us, but she was actually really nice. Molly said you guys talked after Phil left and you explained the whole thing to her. She hopes things work out between Phil and I.”

“She did?” The tears slow and she starts to sniffle. I cringe as she wipes her nose with her sleeve. While I’m giving her a minute to compose herself, my phone, still laying on the floor, buzzes to life.
Momentarily, I forget all about Jas and dive for it.

Molly!

Molly: Hey. Are you there?

“Who is it?” Jas questions. “Is it Phil?”

“No. Molly.”

Me: Yes! What’s going on?

Molly: So here’s the deal. Phil didn’t want to hear what I had to say, but I made him listen to me anyway. I talked to him about the texts that Jas sent from your phone. I told him that it wasn’t some sort of trick or you being dishonest, you didn’t know about it until after it happened. I explained that Jas was just trying to help her friend.

Me: And???

“What’s she saying?” Jas says, leaning forward and tugging on my sleeve. I respond by swatting at her until she lets go.

“Wait for a second.”

Molly: He wanted to know if I believed that. I told him that I saw the texts for myself and yes, I do think the two of you are telling the truth.

I exhale a huge sigh of relief.

Me: So he isn’t mad anymore?

Molly: Well, I wouldn’t exactly say that. He didn’t outright admit it, but I think he gets that the texts were just a misunderstanding. However, not telling him about being in the band when you had several chances is still a thing.

“Let me see!” Jas insists, grabbing for my phone. I frown at her and hold it out of her reach.

“You don’t get to touch my phone anymore, remember?”

“Fine!”

She leans back on the cushions and tucks her hands back into her sleeves, pouting and biting her bottom lip. When I’m sure she’s going to sit quietly and behave, I turn my attention back to my phone.

Me: So what should I do? Do you think he’ll talk to me if I call him?

Molly: Gavin told me about your conversation with him. We both understand why you did it, but we aren’t the ones you need to convince. We can’t help you with this part. It needs to come from you. I have a good feeling about you and Phil being able to work things out, but you need to make him understand why you didn’t tell him and why he should trust you again.

I glance up at Jas, still sitting silently on the couch. She keeps peering back and forth between me and the phone, looking like she’s about 10 seconds from exploding.

Me: Ok. Well, I guess that’s what I’ll have to do then.
I reread the text after I send it. I sound way braver than I feel.

Molly: Let me know what you have planned, and I’ll do my best to help if I can, okay?

Me: Thank you so much, Molly. You have no idea what this means to me.

I tip backward on the floor and drop my phone next to me. Instantly, I recall my discussion with Phil about how to determine if you are having an existential crisis or just questioning life decisions. If he were here, he would tell me Jas is questioning her life decisions because she’s on the couch and since I was already on the floor, I only needed to turn on Nine Inch Nails to make the existential crisis official. I smile because Phil’s theory appears to be surprisingly accurate.

“Dan….Dan….are you listening to me?” I’m snapped back from my brief daydream by the sound of Jas’ voice. Apparently, she’s been trying to get my attention because she’s also nudging my leg with her foot.

“Are you going to tell me what’s going on or are you just going to keep laying there?” she says, quickly getting crabby.

“The short version of the story is that Molly thinks that Phil will get past the texts that you sent, but the….”

“Yay!” Jas squeals, bouncing around on the couch.

I roll my eyes and continue. “But the bigger issue is Phil not trusting me after I didn’t tell him about being in the band. He feels that I’ve been dishonest. And I can’t say that he’s wrong.”

Jas immediately starts chattering about all the different ways I can win him back. Once again, I block her out. I’m glad she understands that I’m not mad at her about her part in this, and even though I’m going to need her help in the next few days, I feel so tired right now. I need some time to be alone, but I have no idea how to get her out of here without hurting her feelings. I’m fairly certain she’s going to start quizzing me on the details of today and giving me all of her ideas on what I should do, so I quickly grab my phone.

Me: Hey. You aren’t looking for Jas, are you?

Grif: No. Why?

Grif: Oh, wait. Sorry.

Almost instantly, I hear Jas’ text notification beep on her phone. I lay on the floor, enjoying the sudden silence. I smile to myself as I listen to her stand up.

“Hey, I have to go,” she sighs apologetically. “Grif needs me back at home. Can we figure all of this out tomorrow?”

“Yup,” I say, waving goodbye from the floor. She steps over me and hurries out the front door. I have no idea what Grif said to her, but I probably owe him a drink. Struggling, I haul myself up onto the now vacant couch because making it to my bedroom is out of the question. The fact I even made it off of the floor feels like a significant accomplishment at this point.

I feel a little bit guilty about texting Grif, but my head is full and I can’t possibly handle any more feelings. My brain and body are both begging for numbness right now. I don’t want to figure anything out, make a plan of any kind, or discuss any sort of options. Instead of expressing feelings and emotions, I happily shove them down deep inside of myself. There will be time tomorrow for
words and thoughts, but not tonight. I crave the familiar blanket of solitude.

Today was both the best and worst day of my entire life. Until I met Phil, every day of my existence up to this point had been lived in varying shades of grey. Today, I got a glimpse of what it would be like to live a technicolor life and I don’t want to go back to what I had before.

I reach behind me and flick off the light. Something is comforting about the pitch black of the room. I’ve gotten in the habit of sleeping with the tv on, but not tonight. My head is a scrambled mess and I need the quiet and darkness.

I don’t even pretend that I’m going to fall asleep anytime soon because I can’t fight off the what-ifs. If I had just been a little braver and told Phil when we were in the park, would he be here with me right now? My mind wanders back to my earlier thoughts on what would’ve happened if he had come over as planned. Instead of laying here by myself, maybe we’d be together on the couch with our arms wrapped around each other. What I wouldn’t give to be kissing him right now.

I’m snapped out of my daydream by the shrill ring of my cell phone. Reaching down and scrambling to grab it off the floor, my mouth drops open when I see who it is.

Phil.

“Hello? Phil?”

Silence.

“Are you there?”

More silence and then the call disconnects.

I’m breathing heavily and staring at the phone. Did he mean to call me or was it an accident? Or maybe he called but changed his mind? Do I call back?

It rings again and I immediately answer.

“Phil. Are you there?” If he is, I know he can hear the desperation in my voice. It’s silent again, but then he finally speaks.

“I’m mad at you.”

I exhale in relief when I hear his voice.

“I know and I deserve it right now. I’m so - ”

He cuts me off before I can finish.

“Please don’t apologize. I know this sounds mean, but I’m not ready to hear it yet.”

Yet. That’s good, right? That implies that at some point he will be ready.

“Ok,” I say softly. I’m frozen in place, scared that if I talk to loud or say the wrong thing, he’ll regret calling and hang up. I just want him to keep talking so I can hear his voice.

Silence.

“I hate that I let myself need you,” he says with his voice barely above a whisper.
I bite my tongue to keep another unwanted apology from spilling out.

“I just want to sleep,” he says. “I’m used to us texting or talking right before bed. I can’t sleep without you, Dan.”

I try to keep calm and level headed, but hearing him say that causes all of the emotions from today to come bubbling up. Tears are falling again and I know he can hear me crying. Before long, I can hear him sniffling too.

“What can I do to help you sleep?” I want to beg him to let me come over and see him, but even I know that’s a bad idea if he isn’t ready for that.

“I know this is a lot to ask, but will you read to me again?”

“Yes, of course!” I kick frantically at the blanket covering me and try to get off the couch, causing me to drop the phone and slip off onto the floor with a thud. Struggling, I free myself from the cover and grab at the phone.

“This doesn’t mean I’m still not mad at you,” Phil says quietly.

“I know. It’s ok,” I promise as I run into my bedroom and flip on the lamp to look for the book.

Where is it where is it where is it where is it where is it where is it? I’m on the ground throwing clothes around as I continue my search.

“I’m ready whenever you are,” he says.

“Hold on, I’m just getting comfortable,” I say groping around underneath the bed. My fingers close around a book and I pray it’s the right one. I breathe a sigh of relief when I spot the familiar Ready Player One cover. Instead of going back out to the couch, I curl up on my bed.

“Phil?”

“Yes?”

“Just…thank you. I know you’re mad, but thank you for calling. I need you too.”

Before he can say anything, I start reading the book where I left off the last time. After about 20 minutes, I stop and listen. I whisper his name softly, but the only thing I can hear is his steady breathing as he sleeps. Closing the book, I lean over and turn the light off before I lay the phone down next to me on the bed. I can’t bring myself to disconnect the call even though he’s sound asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Three. More. Chapters!!!!!
When A Plan Comes Together

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

My eyes open and for a few brief moments, I am OK. As the morning brain fog clears, yesterday spills back into my consciousness and my brief respite is gone. Because I’m a glutton for punishment, I mentally replay everything that happened. I’m still somewhat astonished by exactly how much can go so right and so wrong in such a short period of time. Until movement becomes an option, I’m just going to lay here staring at the ceiling. I try to imagine a time in the future where I’m not tired, but just can’t picture it. I briefly toy with the idea of just staying right here all day and not moving, but as tempting as that is, I need to take on the monumental task of trying to fix what I broke.

But like Molly said, there is still hope. Phil talked to me. He called. He said he needed me, and that little glimmer is enough to keep me from giving up. Remembering the call last night, I grab my phone, but just like the last time we did this, the call had disconnected sometime in the night.

It’s also a small miracle that I only have one text message and it’s not even from Jas.

Grif: Just a heads up, unless you tell me different, I’m going to try to keep Jas occupied with other stuff so you can have some peace and quiet today. She’s wound up like a top with all of these ideas of how you’re going to win over Phil. I also ‘misplaced’ her phone, but I don’t know how long that’s going to last.

Me: Thanks. I really do appreciate her help. I would never have gotten this far without her, but I think I need to figure out some of this on my own.

Grif: Well, you’ve gotten more than enough of the female opinion on the whole thing. Do you want the guy perspective?

Me: Sure.

God knows it couldn’t hurt.

Grif: The way I see it, Jas is making this too complicated. It’s more simple than you think. I know expressing yourself verbally is a struggle for you sometimes, but I also know you have an incredibly rare talent when it comes to writing. We wouldn’t be where we’re at today if it wasn’t for your songwriting ability. Write down what you want to say and give it to him. He loved the song you sang for him, so learn another one and do it again. Do what you know. Do what you do best.

That is shockingly good advice.

Me: I think I can do both of those things. Thank you, Grif. For everything.

Was it as simple as a love letter and a song? I’ve written more songs than I can count, but I’ve never written a love letter. They are similar enough I suppose, full of emotion and written from the heart. I know that I want to tell him things that I’ll never be able to actually to say in person, but writing all of it down might be the perfect solution. Do guys even like love letters? Is that too old-fashioned? Sending it in an email seems impersonal and not very romantic, so that pretty much leaves an actual letter as the only option. Besides, it’s not like I have a lot to lose at this point.

I look at the time and am surprised that it’s only 9 am. If I’m going to pull all this off in a day, I need
to get started sooner than later. My body protests and it takes every ounce of effort I have to sit up. First things first, I need to ask someone a favor.

Me: I don’t suppose you’d be willing to do a favor for me, would you?

I can probably figure something out without her help, but if she’s willing, it will make things a lot easier.

Molly: Maybe. What did you have in mind?

Me: I want to come over and see Phil tonight. Is there any way you can make sure he’s there?

Molly: I think I can manage that. What time?

Ug. I hadn’t thought of that. How long does it take to write a love letter and learn a song? I wasn’t too worried about the song but had no idea if I was even capable of writing a decent letter.

Me: Around 8:00?

Me: How is he?

Molly: 8:00 should be fine. Oddly quiet. He moped around in his pajamas the entire night. I went to bed at about midnight and he was still up, so I’m guessing he’ll be sleeping for a while.

Me: He didn’t say anything else at all?

Molly: Not really. I tried to steer the conversation towards you a few times, but he would just change the subject. I wish I could tell you something, but I have no idea where his head is right now.

Me: He called me last night.

Molly: What? No! What did he say?

Me: He was still mad and wouldn’t let me apologize. He wanted me to read to him again because he couldn’t sleep.

Molly: Wait…again? Are you serious? You do stuff like that for him? Dan, that is probably the best thing I’ve ever heard. I’ll make sure he’s here at 8. Let me know what else you need me to do. I’m officially on Team Dan.

Me: I really hope I can fix this, Molly. Thank you for your help.

Molly: No problem. I’ll text you our address.

Tossing down the phone, I head to my room. I glance up at the mirror and confirm what I already know. Even though my brain feels fuzzy, I can still tell I look like an absolute wreck. I idly wonder if I can salvage my hair, but when I can’t even get my fingers through it because of all of the knots, I know that’s also a lost cause. Half-heartedly picking around in my closet, I grab the usual t-shirt and jeans.

I run the water in the shower as hot as I can handle before stepping in. Standing under the spray with my eyes closed, the steam billows out and fills up the small bathroom. My soaking wet hair hangs down in my face, water dripping from the damp ringlets. I blindly reach around for the shampoo with my eyes still clenched shut. As I wash I run what I need to do through my head. Thanks to Molly, I had a place and time set up to see Phil. At least having that accomplished gives me a small sense of relief. It all comes down to a letter and a song. I’m confident in my ability to learn a song, so the wild
I know how heartbroken I feel right now, and I wonder how people who date regularly deal with it. Do they just get numb to it, or is it this bad every time? If this is over, if after all of this I only get a such a short period of time with him, I can’t see myself doing it again for anyone else. I know Jack encouraged me to not go back in my shell even if things didn’t work out with Phil, but I don’t think that’s going to be an option, not now that I know how horrible endings can feel. Good things can happen from bravery and courage, but the risks are just too high. At least they are for me. Maybe I’m not meant for love. Or perhaps I’m just not meant for someone as perfect as Phil.

The scalding water that’s pouring over me starts to turn chilly, so I reach back and turn it off. I stand in place for a few more minutes, eyes still closed with the steam in the air slowly fading away. It isn’t until I start shivering and getting goosebumps that I finally step out of the shower and wrap up in my towel. Every motion and step makes me feel like I’m walking through syrup. It’s like my body is rejecting all of my attempts at movement and forward motion.

After drying off, I halfheartedly get dressed. Should I feel like this? Shouldn’t I be energized or at least excited about getting a chance to redeem myself? I think it’s because I don’t want to get my hopes up again. If I don’t see myself succeeding, then failure won’t be such a disappointment. I’m relatively sure that’s the wrong attitude to have, but I’m not entirely sure how to get myself out of that mindset considering how bad I’m hurting at the moment. Indifference doesn’t feel good, but it doesn’t feel bad. I guess that’s the entire point of it.

I search around my room looking for some paper, a pen, and an envelope. It seems like my only choices are from my worn set list notebook or plain white printer paper. I decide on the plain paper figuring that a love letter shouldn’t look like it’s been stepped on or have had beer spilled on it.

Taking them with me, I open the door and sit on the balcony step. Leaning back against the door frame, I close my eyes and tip my head up towards the warm sun. The only thing that will save me now is blatant honesty. I look at the blank white sheet and start to write, with an open heart and without fear.

Phil,

I’m not really sure how to start writing this. For once in my life, I feel like I have too many words.

I’m so sorry about how monumentally bad I handled all of this. I hurt you and that was never my intent. I know how angry you are at me right now, but I just want a chance to explain why I did what I did and I hope you’ll at least hear me out. There were so many times that I opened my mouth to tell you but lost my nerve because I just wanted a few more days, or even hours, with things the way they were. I was just having such a good time talking to you and getting to know you, and somehow, you were even better in person than in my wildest dreams. I didn’t want it to end and I knew if I told you, there was a chance that would happen. You’re hurting right now because I was selfish, and there are no words to describe how sorry I am.

I just want to sing and play and write, but people don’t understand that. I don’t do it for the attention, nor do I even want any attention…on stage or off, because I’m not that guy. I just can’t be what people want me to be. They want someone who is outgoing and can talk to the audience. They want the guy who is a superstar, the guy who is exciting and charming and the center of attention. They all want to be the person that can get the guy in the band that everyone wants. But the thing is, if they knew anything about me, I can guarantee they wouldn’t want me. In the few times I’ve talked to fans, I can see just how disappointed they are. And honestly, with time, I stopped caring if they were or weren’t, so I just let them become nameless, faceless people in a crowd.
And then there was you. The thought of seeing you look at me and be disappointed became my worst fear. Somehow, I manage to find the one guy who couldn’t care less that I’m in a band, which is a wonderful thing. But the catch is, how do I get you to know me without letting you know about everything else? And that’s what I tried to do. I wanted you to want me. Just me. No one has ever wanted that before. And if you knew about the band first, then I would always wonder if that was the only reason you were with me.

Phil, that song at the concert was for you. I made a lucky guess that it was one of your favorites. Molly was absolutely right; I was looking straight at you. I was too scared that night to meet you, but it felt so good just to even be in the same room, just to have you looking back at me. For a few minutes, I could pretend it was all real. I let myself imagine that after the show you would come up to me and wrap your arms around me and kiss me. You would tell me how happy you were that I played all of the songs you picked out. The fantasy felt real enough that I could almost reach out and touch it, but then I remembered that it would never happen because I wasn’t even able to look you in the eye and tell you that the person on the stage is the same person who was sending you those texts.

If you let me try again, I promise that you’ll always be able to trust me. I know I made some awful decisions, and I am so so sorry. Please just give me a chance to make this real for both of us.

Dan

PS I also promise to bring you bagels and peach Snapple whenever you want them.

I exhale loudly and feel dizzy like I was holding my breath the entire time. My eyes crawl over the page, looking for anything that needs to be changed, added, or taken out. Starting to doubt my words, I stop reading and fold it up. If I start second guessing now, I’ll be staring at it all day and finding fault. Shuffling it into the envelope, I write his name on it. For better or worse, it’s done, leaving the song as the last piece of the puzzle.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry the chapter is a day late, but the holidays catch up with us sometimes!

I hope you like it! Merry Christmas!! <3
This was supposed to be the easy part. I pull one of my earbuds out in frustration and continue scrolling through songs trying to decide on the perfect one to play. Oh my god. Why is this so hard? I feel like I’ve spent the majority of the past two weeks in an endless YouTube hole. My frustration is compounded by the song list I made for Phil. At this point, it’s entirely out of control with all of the comments people are leaving and I have no idea what to do with it. It’s not that what people are saying is bad, there are just so many comments. Is Phil reading what all of these strangers are saying? Or has he even looked at it since he left me in the record store? I try to focus and pull myself together.

Maybe something would come to me while I was there and we’re talking? That is if he’ll talk to me at all. If he kicks me out, it won’t matter if I have a song picked out to play or not.

In a complete panic, I realize that I’m out of time. How have I lost this entire day? I have another quick stop on the way and if I don’t leave now, I’m never going to have enough time to do that and make it to their apartment by 8:00. Rattled, I put my acoustic guitar back into its case and shove a few picks in my pocket. I jog down the stairs and out to my car, putting the guitar in the back and jumping into the driver’s seat. I type in the address Molly texted me and impatiently wait for the directions to pull up. I had already looked it up earlier and knew it by heart, but better safe than sorry. Now was not the time for wrong turns.

After a quick 5-minute drive, I pull off a questionable parallel parking job and hop out of my car. Glancing at the time on my phone, I sprint into a store and up to the counter, thankful I am the only one in line. When the clerk hands me my items in a bag, I quickly pay for them and dart back to my car and maneuver out onto the road.

Driving in silence, I follow unneeded directions from my phone as they are read off by an electronic voice. A short time later, I pull up to the address that Molly gave me. It’s a big brick house similar to mine, only theirs is divided up into four apartments, two upstairs and two downstairs. I decide to not park directly in front of the house, but instead pull to the curb one building down, my car partially blocked from their view by a gigantic tree. Letter, guitar, gift, letter, guitar, gift. I keep repeating those things in my head for some reason as if I’m going to forget why I’m here or what I’m doing.

It’s 8:00 on the dot so I don’t have any time to try to compose myself. I sit staring at my phone and slowly start typing out my text to Molly.

Me: I’m here. Are you ready?

Molly: Yes! But the real question is, are you?

Well, that did nothing to calm my nerves. Before I can answer, I see Molly walk out of their front door, look around, and then casually walk toward my car. When she gets to the driver’s side, I roll the window all the way down. She leans forward with a big smile and puts her hands on my car door, but when she sees my face, her smile falters.

“Hey, Dan, are you OK?”

“Don’t be,” she says kindly, but then adds, “Sorry. I guess that’s a dumb thing to say. It’s not like if I say that it’s going to help you be less nervous.”

I reach over to the passenger seat, grabbing the letter and bag and hand it over to her.

“What’s in the bag?” she asks with raised eyebrows, taking both items from my hand.

“It’s just…he’ll understand it.” I hope.

Molly shrugs. “OK. Well, I’ll send you a text once he reads it. Good luck!” She turns and jogs back up to the porch and in their front door.

Feeling sort of sick, my stomach twists around. Being the over-thinker that I am, I try to calculate in my head about how long it will take Phil to read the letter. Five minutes? More, less? But then that doesn’t necessarily mean anything though. He would probably talk to Molly first, especially when he realizes that no one knocked on the door, yet Molly all of a sudden has a letter and a gift. He’s going to want to know how that happened, which means Molly isn’t going to just text me the second Phil is done reading. I try to calm myself down, now realizing I may be out here waiting for a bit.

I guess now would be a good time to try to figure out a song, because as of this exact moment, I still have no idea what I’m going to play. I briefly consider just leaving the guitar in the car and skipping that part of the plan, but quickly veto that idea. I need something with some sort of significance but am drawing a blank. I guess I could play Can I Be Him again, but it wouldn’t have the same impact as it did the first time I played it for him on stage. I need something else.

I reach forward to turn the radio on to help me find some musical inspiration, but then think better of it since I don’t want to be distracted and miss Molly’s text. However, I guess that would probably be difficult considering I’m just sitting here staring at my phone. I open up my photos and look at the four pictures that Phil sent me from that little window of bliss we had between meeting in the café and Gavin’s realization in the record store. I’m sort of glad he sent them because at this point if I didn’t have visual proof, I may not even believe that something that monumental ever happened to me.

It’s been 10 minutes. Phil has to be done reading, right?

As if it’s answering me, my phone suddenly chimes, surprising me enough that I bang my knee against the steering wheel which causes the phone to tumble off of my lap and onto the floor. I curse while I rub my knee with one hand and grope around by my feet for the phone with the other. My fingers wrap around it, but I’m so nervous it slips out of my hand and falls to the ground again. I am so grateful that they can’t see me from the house right now, flailing around in my car like a crazy person.

Molly: Ok. It’s all you now.

I chew my bottom lip as I read the text over and over, wishing Molly would have given me some sort of clue of how things went. I was nervous before, but now the realization that I’m going in totally blind really hits me. Gathering my nerve, I step out into the muggy evening air. Opening the back door, I take my guitar out of the case, leaving the bulky case behind on the seat. I walk around the car and up onto the sidewalk. I take a few tentative steps, before forcing myself to walk up the front steps and onto the porch.

Before I can knock, Molly opens up the door, surprising me enough that I yelp and almost drop my guitar. She smiles and steps to the side so I can come in. I look around and notice that their apartment is leaps and bounds nicer than mine. It’s only slightly larger, but it’s filled with bright furniture and
“He’s in his room,” Molly tells me. “It’s the one at the end of the hallway,” she says, gesturing to the hall leading away from the living room. Unbelievably nervous at the idea of being in his bedroom, I fight back the inevitable blush creeping up my neck. I almost ask if maybe Phil could come out to the living room instead.

“So what did Phil say?” I ask, partially because I’m stalling but also because I really want to know his reaction before I see him. If he’s angry and going to throw something at me as soon as I walk in the door, I at least want to know it’s coming.

Molly frowns slightly and shakes her head. “He’s still really closed mouth about all of this. When I handed him the envelope and bag, he read the letter and teared up a little bit. He asked me where I got it, and I told him you gave it to me. After that, he just went into his room and closed the door.”

Seeing the concerned look on my face, she hastily adds, “But that’s just how Phil is, so don’t read too much into it. He likes to really think big things through before he’ll talk to anyone about them.” I nod at her, but her explanation doesn’t wholly assuage my nervousness. Molly reaches over and squeezes my arm, causing me to look up at her.

“It’ll be ok,” she says kindly before giving me a gentle nudge towards Phil’s room. I take a deep breath and walk to the hallway, passing the bathroom and Molly’s room, coming to a stop at the last door. I stare at it for a minute, gathering up all of my courage before I finally lightly knock.

“Come in.”

My heart was already pounding, but it goes into overdrive at the sound of Phil’s voice. I open his door just wide enough for me to fit through and take a small, tentative step into the room. Assuming it couldn’t be anyone but Molly, he doesn’t look up to see who it is. Wearing a pair of grey sweatpants and a blue t-shirt, sitting cross-legged on his bed and leaning back against the wall. Next to him on the bed is the unfolded letter and the crumpled bag with the bottle of peach Snapple and remaining half of the chocolate chip bagel I brought him. He looks adorable as he’s trying to chew a huge mouthful of bagel and I can’t hide my amusement. When he finally does glance up, his blue eyes get large as he does a double take when he sees that it’s me. As he struggles to chew and swallow the bite, I let myself smile.

“Hi,” he finally says meekly. “You can sit down if you want,” he says motioning to the chair next to the bed. I nervously walk over and sit down on the soft stuffed chair, propping my guitar up against the arm.

All of the feelings I had while walking hand in hand by the river with him come rushing back to me. Just being this close to Phil again makes my entire body feel like it’s awake. It also makes me realize exactly what is at stake. Whatever questions I had about whether love was really worth all of the pain have suddenly been answered by something as simple as his proximity. Yes. It was worth the pain. I know this now. All along, the answer had been that simple. These are the feelings you go all-in for.

My eyes flicker up to his. He’s still sitting in the same spot, his head cocked to the side and eyes already curiously examining me. I blush when I realize I had drifted off and he’s probably been watching me the entire time.

“You remembered about the bagel,” he says with a small smile.

“Of course.” I look down at my shoes, fighting back a sudden wave of shyness. I turn in the chair so I am fully facing him, my knees touching the edge of his mattress, and bring my eyes back up again.
“Phil, I’m so sorry,” my voice quivering slightly. “I just….” I trail off, overwhelmed by emotion. He scoots forward until he’s within arm’s reach and sets his hand down on my arm. My breath hitches at his touch.

“You could have told me at any point,” he says, picking up my letter.

“I wanted to. You have no idea how much I wanted to, but I was just so scared and then things just got out of hand…” I pause, struggling for words.

“I know you’re sorry that I’m hurting, but I don’t need you to be sorry. I need you to understand why this hurt me so badly.”

I open my mouth to talk but stop when I see the look on his face.

This time, it’s his voice that is trembling. “I fell for you,” he says plainly. “I’m a cynic when it comes to love, but I swore that the next time I had feelings for someone, I would find out everything about them. Everything. I figured if I had all of the information, I could make an actual intelligent decision instead of just thinking with my heart and then having it get crushed again.” He pauses and pulls his eyes away from mine, taking a deep breath before he continues.

“So what did I do? I fell for someone that not only did I know nothing about, but I also met him because he was sending me anonymous texts. Do you understand how ridiculous that is?”

“I am completely aware of how ridiculous it sounds,” I say with a half smile. “You aren’t the only one who thinks that.”

“I put all of my trust in someone I didn’t even know. Dan, you have no idea how badly I wanted to believe that the person on the other side of those texts felt the same way about me. That instead of always being suspicious, I could finally trust someone to be who they said they were. And when I met you in person, I was ecstatic because you were the exact same person you were in the texts. It wasn’t just someone presenting an image, you were a real person! And then when Gavin recognized you, I wasn’t just confused and hurt, I was embarrassed. I felt so stupid.”

Tears start to roll down his cheeks and I can’t stand it anymore. Saying nothing, I get out of the chair and sit next to him on the bed, putting my arm around him and pulling him into me. He doesn’t resist and puts his head down on my shoulder, and with my free hand, I brush the tears from his cheeks. Even though we are about the same size, he seems so small and fragile all of a sudden. We sit quietly with him folded up next to me until his sniffling slows and finally stops.

“I wanted to stay mad at you,” he carries on, “but I couldn’t be mad once I read your letter and I understood why you kept that from me. You need to know that someone wants to be with you for the right reasons and I respect that.”

I’m terrified to ask the one thing I need an answer to, but there isn’t a way around it. The worst answer he could give me is ‘it’s over.’ The second worst would be ‘I don’t know.’

“So now what do we do?” I cautiously ask.

I feel him sigh and pull away from me a little bit, lifting his head off of my shoulder. His eyes are puffy and his cheeks are flushed and pink. My heart aches just looking at him.

“It’s not like I could even get you out of my head if I tried. I can’t even have the volume or vibrate on on my phone. I’m getting tagged on Facebook nonstop at this point. And don’t even get me started on YouTube. I started getting notifications from that today too so I’m guessing I’ve been outed on there also.”
I look up at him guiltily, but he’s peering back at me with a smirk on his face.

“Turn them off!” I joke back at him.

“I can’t! I’ll miss all of my live show notifications!”

I roll my eyes and grab my phone. “I don’t know if this will fix it or make I worse, but let me try something.” I open my YouTube app and stop to think for a minute. I take some time to change a few things, hoping it works.

“What did you do? You didn’t take it down did you?” Phil asks with concern in his voice. “I may still listen to those songs every day. Or several times a day. Or you know, whatever.”

Before I can stop myself, I start laughing. He responds by chucking a pillow at me. I lazily toss it back in his direction, but when I glance up, I catch him staring at me. I hold his gaze and we sit in silence like that for a few seconds. I’m fully aware that he didn’t answer the question I so desperately need him to answer, but I’m not sure if it’s ok for me to ask again. Before I get a chance to bring it up again, he catches me off-guard with a question of his own.

“Why did you bring your guitar?” he asks, noticing it for the first time.

Shit. I still have nothing.

“I was going to play a song for you too.”

“Was?” he questions. “You changed your mind?”

“Not exactly.”

“Can I hear it?”

“Well, that’s the thing,” I say sheepishly. “I never decided on which one to play.”

“That’s going to drop your ‘mystery admirer’ score again,” he says.

“I hope not. I imagine my grade is near failing at this point,” I comment as I nervously run my hand through my hair, trying to hide a small smile. “Is there any song you want to hear?”

He smiles wide and tilts his head. “No, you don’t get off that easy. Apparently, your plan was a letter, a bagel, and a song. You’re on the verge of winning me back with your writing and bagel buying abilities, but I want my song.”

Wait….I am?

He sits back with a satisfied look on his face and takes a bite of the remaining half of the bagel.

I lean forward and grab my guitar, going into full panic mode on the inside, hoping he can’t tell just how frantic my thoughts are right now. I adjust myself on his bed so I’m leaning with my back against the headboard and my legs crossed to help support the guitar in my lap. I pull a pick out of my pocket and busy myself with pretending to tune an already tuned guitar.

It also buys me just enough time, because I finally figure out what I’m going to do.
One more chapter to go and it will be out in about a week! Is everyone ready????
I open my mouth to say something, but I’m cut off by a knock on the door.

“Come in,” Phil calls across the room. Molly cracks the door open just wide enough to partially step into the bedroom, her face bright and hopeful.

“So does this mean everything is worked out?” she asks, her voice teetering on the edge of excitement. I peek over at Phil, curious to hear his answer.

He pauses and looks thoughtful. “Not quite yet. We’re still talking.”

Molly looks confused, “But I just…” glancing at her phone.

Immediately realizing what she is looking at, I wildly shake my head back and forth at Molly and give her a pleading look. Luckily for me, she understands and says nothing more about it.

“Ok, well, I’ll leave you alone then. Good luck,” she says with a wink as she closes the door behind her. As soon as she’s gone, Phil turns back to me expectantly.

When I don’t say anything right away, he impatiently pokes at my knee and peers up at me with those giant, beautiful blue eyes. I know I should stop, but I can’t bring myself to look away from them even though I know there is some sort of social etiquette rule I’m breaking by just blatantly staring at him like this. My mind starts to drift even further, trying to remember what his lips felt like during that first walk by the lake.

My daydream breaks when I realize he’s poking at me again. “Dan! Are you still in there somewhere?” he asks with a laugh. I blink hard a few times, trying to refocus.

Suddenly looking annoyed, Phil grabs his phone with a frown. “I don’t think it helped when you made changes to the YouTube channel. I’m still getting all of these notifications.”

“You know what? No phones for now,” I say decisively. I take Phil’s phone from his hand and mine out of my pocket. I glance around before finally opening his nightstand drawer and dropping them inside. “You still want your song, right?”

“Yes, please,” he says sweetly. The sound of his voice threatens to sink me back into my daydream.
“Did you figure out what you want to play?”

“I did. I know we don’t really have much history together yet, but I didn’t just want to play you some song. I wanted it to be something with meaning.” I start idly strumming, a nervous habit. “Do you remember that afternoon you texted me when you were at work? It was when you sent me that picture of the Snapple fact from your tea.”

“Of course!”

“Well, this is the song I was learning how to play when you sent me that text. I was trying to decide what I was going to put on your song list. It’s also the same day that Jas helped me get the recording of the song I sang for you at the concert.”

Phil sits quietly, giving away nothing, so I start to play.

I don’t know Undisclosed Desires very well. I haven’t played it since that night, but the words and chords come back to me as I get further into the song. I’m tempted to look up at him, but since it isn’t familiar enough to me yet, I have to concentrate on what I’m doing.

It was much easier to sing to Phil when I was on stage. At this point in my life, I can play an entire concert without thinking twice about it. Even when he was there, it was easy to tell myself he was just someone in the crowd. But right now, there is no way that strategy will work again. Not here, not in his bedroom. Not with him sitting a few feet away from me, both of us on his bed. And definitely not when I can smell his intoxicating scent and feel it when his eyes are on me, making me fight for every note.

I’m about halfway through the song, when I realize that Phil has shifted around on the bed so he’s directly facing me. His legs are crossed in front of him just like mine, and we’re now so close that our knees are against each other. Rattled by his touch and proximity, I lose my concentration and miss a chord, causing me to stop playing. I peek up at him, but I can’t read his face. He’s sort of smiling, but at the same time looks kind of shy all of a sudden. Having him this close sends chills through my entire body. Even if my eyes were closed, my heart would know that he is still here.

We sit in silence for a minute before he finally speaks.

“Why did you pick that song to play for me at your show?”

“Because of the lyrics,” I answer immediately.

“They remind you of me?”

“No. They’re how I wanted you to see me once you found out about the band.”

Before I can even react, he leans forward and closes the already shrinking distance between us, pressing his lips to mine in an all too short kiss.

“I could never get the lyrics out of my head,” Phil says quietly, pulling away. “In the end, those words are part of what convinced me to give this another try. It’s like you knew I would need to hear them someday. I want to be with you, Dan.”

Not quite believing it, I wait for him to say ‘but’ and continue talking. When he doesn’t, his words start to sink in. The song entirely is forgotten and I move my guitar off of my lap.

“You aren’t mad anymore?” I ask, my eyes fluttering back and forth between his eyes and lips.
Phil answers by leaning in for another kiss, this one deeper than the first.

I’m almost too much in shock to kiss him back. Almost. Every single bit of pain and anxiety from the past few days has just become worth it. I was so scared this would never happen again that the relief floods through my body.

However, because I am me, paranoia starts to creep in as one kiss turns into several heated kisses. Phil had talked about being in love once before, which meant he was already eons ahead of me in experience with relationships. We never discussed my dating life, or rather lack of it, so I have no idea what assumptions he’s made. I think it’s safe to say that the vast majority of 24 year old guys are far ahead of where I am. Once again, I’m scared of being a disappointment to him.

His hands have moved, with one of them on the back of my neck, gradually pulling me closer, and the other on my knee. My overthinking takes a temporary leave as Phil pulls himself up onto my lap with his legs folded on either side of mine. Surprised, I wrap my arms around him and rest my hands on his lower back. He brings one hand up and tilts my head back slightly as his kisses slowly move from my mouth and work their way down my neck. Every touch feels amazing, but at the same time overwhelming. I pull back from his insistent lips and avert my eyes.

“Are you ok?” he asks as he leans to his left, trying to put himself back in my line of sight.

“Yes, of course. I mean…um…I just don’t…” I stutter before finally trailing off, completely unsure of how to express my worries to him without sounding like a total idiot. Usually, when people detect panic and awkwardness in others, they change the subject and move on. Not Phil. I can feel his eyes on me still, waiting for an actual answer with actual words. “I’m just nervous. I don’t have a lot of experience with…this,” I finally answer gesturing between the two of us.

“Oh. Ok,” Phil says back nonchalantly as if the person whom he was just kissing on his bed isn’t dying of awkwardness right in front of him. “We can take things as slow as you want,” he says, leaning in and placing a single kiss on my cheek. And with that, he changes the subject, which is what I was hoping would happen in the first place before I was forced to spill my embarrassing confession.

“Hey, I want to text Molly and tell her the good news,” Phil says as he slides off my lap and starts looking around for his phone.

“You don’t want to just walk out in the living room and tell her?”

“No, I’m not ready to see the rest of the world yet. I like it in here with just us.”

I really can’t argue with that logic. Remembering that I confiscated both of our phones earlier, I reach over and open the drawer and grab them both. When Phil sees his screen, his mouth drops open in surprise.

“What you did earlier on the YouTube page didn’t work. I have over a hundred more notifications. That’s way more than I was getting before,” he says with the shock apparent in his voice.

“Huh. Sorry about that.” I am so not sorry. “What are the notifications about?”

I can tell the instant he notices the changes I made to the profile picture and the About section because his blue eyes widen dramatically.

I left the old About text there, but added an update above it:
Update: I’m completely overwhelmed with all of your help and messages of support! Because of you, the correct Phil saw the playlist within 24 hours of it getting posted. As you can see from the profile picture, this led to us meeting in real life! It turns out he may have a crush on me too because when I officially asked him out, he said YES! A few of you have figured this one out already, but my name is Dan and I’m the awkward guy singing in one of the videos. As I’m writing this, I am sitting next to Phil and getting ready to play him another song. Thanks to all of you for going on this journey with us. Just remember, sometimes 20 seconds of insane courage is all you need to make your life extraordinary.

And instead of the Snapple cap photo, there was the picture that Phil took of us snuggled together while walking through the park.

“You used the picture I took,” he says softly.

“I did. I love that one.”

He tilts his head for a second as he looks thoughtfully at the screen. “Wait, when did you make all of these changes? Did Jas make them for you while you were here?”

“God no!” I say with a laugh. “She’s not allowed anywhere near my phone, laptop, or logins and passwords at this point. I did that myself earlier when you were complaining about the notifications.”

“You did this earlier before we decided to be together? That’s a pretty confident move.”

“Knowing you were still undecided made me go all in. All I’ve ever wanted is a chance. You told me you still needed me and that’s all I needed to hear. I had to think positive and believe that you wanting me was the only possible outcome.”

“And if I would have said I didn’t want to be with you?”

I pause for a few seconds before I answer. “Then I would be here tomorrow with a song and another bagel.”

He laughs but then grows suddenly quiet. “Dan, you just outed yourself on the channel too. They all know who you are now. Are you going to be able to handle all of that?”

“That was going to happen sooner or later anyway, so I decided just to go ahead and put it out there. Jas said that yesterday all of the band’s social media accounts exploded because of fans recognizing us in that video on the list. If people figured that out, it was only a matter of time before they made the connection that I was the one behind that page.”

“Have you talked to Jas today? Does she know you’re over here?” he asks.

I must have a guilty look on my face because he puts his phone down and concentrates on me again. “Dan? Where is Jas at?”

I look down at my phone for the first time since I hid it in the drawer with Phil’s. There are about a dozen texts from Jas and one from Grif. “Well, her boyfriend Grif thought I might need a bit of a break from her help. He told me this morning he was going to hide her phone and try to keep her occupied all day. It looks like she started texting around 9 pm. That’s longer than I thought Grif would be able to keep her managed.”

“Did you read her texts?”

“Not yet. Come here, you can read them with me,” I say as I scoot over to make room. He scrambles
over and sits down leaning against the headboard next to me. I open my phone and hold it between us, hoping that there isn’t anything mortifyingly embarrassing in the texts.

Jas: Dan!!!

Grif: Couldn’t hold her off any longer. I hope I bought you enough time. Also, practice on Wednesday for the Saturday night show? Usual place and time.

Jas: I was going to stop by and see you but Grif had all of this stuff he wanted to do today and we just got back. I’m so sorry I deserted you! Plus, I lost my phone! He just finally found it!

Jas: I can’t believe there aren’t any texts from you.

Jas: Did you talk to Phil again?

Jas: Do you know what you’re going to do yet?

Jas: I need to know what’s going on.

Jas: I still feel so sorry for everything! I want to help you fix it!

Jas: Also, I can’t find the spare key again or else I would just drop by.

Jas: Wait…are you with Phil right now? Is that why you aren’t answering?

Jas: Ahhhhhh! I can’t stand this. Text me back!!!!

“She’s quite a friend,” Phil asks, stifling a giggle. “What are you going to tell her?”

Me: Jas, everything is fine. I’ll text you tomorrow and let you know what happened.

Me: Hey Grif. Thanks for helping me out today. See you on Wednesday.

Jas: Dan, I swear you better tell me what’s going on right this minute or I’m going to lose my mind!

I click the button and the screen goes blank. “She really is cool. I know you’re just seeing a lot of crazy right now, but once you get to know her, it’s sort of impossible not to like her. What about Molly?”

“Oh! I totally forgot!” He quickly types into his phone and sets it down, turning his attention back to me. Before I can say anything, I hear Molly squeal from the living room.

“Well, it looks like everyone is happy we figured things out,” I say with a shrug. I look over at Phil and catch the tail end of a big yawn. “Sleepy?” I ask. “It’s not that late.”

“I know, but I haven’t slept well for the past few days,” he answers. I instantly feel guilty. Seeing the look on my face, he quickly adds, “but that’s not your fault.”

It’s kind of him to say that, but I don’t believe it. “Do you want me to go so you can get some rest? Maybe we can do something tomorrow?”

“I don’t want you to go yet. Will you stay with me for a little bit longer? Just until I fall asleep?”

Oh my god. How could I ever turn that down?

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“I don’t want you to go yet. Will you stay with me for a little bit longer? Just until I fall asleep?”

Oh my god. How could I ever turn that down? “Of course!”

He gives me a sleepy smile as he scoots off of the bed. He picks up the remote from the nightstand
and turns the tv on to an old Buffy repeat as he walks over to the wall switch and flicks off the overhead light. With the room only lit with the glow from the tv, he comes back and carefully takes my guitar and leans it up against the chair again. Climbing back in bed, he grabs the blankets and tugs them down.

“Lay down with me?” he says, somewhere between a suggestion and a question.

“Um, Ok,” I say in a shaky voice. My awkwardness comes back in full force as I try to figure out what exactly it is I should be doing. I lean away so he can adjust the pillows before he snuggles down into the bed, facing me. He glances up as I still sit, leaning against the headboard, and I’m guessing he’s waiting for me to lay down next to him. I stretch out on my side and put my head on the other pillow while he flips the blankets up over us both.

I know that this isn’t a big deal, laying down in bed with someone, but I feel so unsure of myself. I leave about a foot of space between us not because I want it there, but because I have no idea what he’s expecting.

Phil looks back at me again. “Everything OK?” he asks.

“Um, yeah, I think so,” I somehow manage to get out. I’m so glad it’s almost dark so he can’t see me blushing. Looking anywhere but at him, I can still feel his eyes on me.

“It’s fine,” he says softly. “Come over a little closer.”

Grateful for some sort of direction, I do what he says, noticing our heads are sharing the same pillow now. As soon as I do, he scoots forward a little bit, but not so close that he’s pressed up against me. “Is that ok?”

I nod, hoping he can still see in the dim light of the room.

“Put your arm around me,” he says, already sounding sleepy.

I do what he says, my hand sliding around his waist.

“Better?” he asks, voice barely above a whisper.

From this angle, his face is mostly just shadows, lit by the flickering light from the tv. With the stress of the past few days now draining out of my body, I also start to relax and feel myself begin to drift off, but I fight the sleep that threatens to pull me under. This is one of those moments that you look back on and remember every little detail; the smell of his shampoo, the feel of our skin touching, the steady rise and fall of his breath, seeing the last bit of blue before his eyes close. I reach up and touch his hair, running my fingers through it, pushing back his fringe before lightly stroking his cheek. He smiles and nuzzles his face into my hand. I can sleep tomorrow, but right now, this is everything.

I’m entirely torn right now. I told Phil I would stay until he fell asleep, but now that he’s drifted off, there is no place I’d rather be other than where I am right now. Part of me wants to stay the night and find out what it’s like to wake up in the morning next to him. Despite the fact that we’re hardly even touching, it seems strange to share something this intimate so soon. For so many years, I’ve watched people confuse sex for intimacy, but to me, who you choose to fall asleep next to and wake up with is far more intimate than having sex. I want to experience all of our firsts under the best possible circumstances.

Reluctantly, I push aside the covers and start to crawl out of bed slowly to avoid waking him up. I look back at Phil’s sleeping form and my heart beats a little faster. It almost feels wrong to have him wake up by himself. As if he senses my thoughts, his eyes flutter back open and then he frowns
when he realizes I’m not lying next to him anymore.

“Come back,” he says as he reaches out and grabs a handful of my shirt.

“Are you sure you want me to stay here?”

“Please, Dan. Stay with me?”

I bite my bottom lip and try to decide what the right thing to do is in this situation. My willpower falters when Phil props himself up on one arm so we’re face to face.

“Please,” he says again softly before he connects our lips in a slow kiss.

“Hold on for just a second, OK? I’ll be right back.” He slides back down under the covers with a big smile on his face as I climb out of bed.

With one last glance at him, I open the bedroom door a little bit and step out into the bright light of the hallway, closing it quietly behind me. I stand for a few seconds with my hand still on the doorknob, savoring the moment. I turn and walk into the living room, hoping Molly is awake. I spot her sitting on the couch wearing pajamas with her red hair tucked up into two buns. Her face immediately lights up when she sees me.

“Did Phil fall asleep?”

“Yeah, about five minutes after he laid down,” I answer with a grin.

“So I saw what you put on YouTube,” she says. “I didn’t realize Phil hadn’t seen it yet. Did it work? Did he like it?”

I smile and nod.

“So is it official? You guy are together?”

“Yeah,” I answer through a big grin.

“I am so excited to hear that!” she cheers. “Oh! You may want to text Jas. She keeps texting me looking for you and wanting to know what’s going on.”

“Of course she is,” I say while rolling my eyes.

I stand awkwardly for a minute trying to organize my thoughts. “I just wanted to thank you. Anyone else would have just told me to fuck off after what happened in the record store. I owe you a lot for helping me.”

“You don’t owe me anything. I just want to see Phil happy. He deserves it, and so do you, Dan.”

"Thanks," I say, her compliment suddenly making me shy.

“So what are you doing out here talking to me anyway?” she asks. “Aren’t you staying?”

The past two weeks suddenly flicker through my brain, all of the texts, singing for him at the Bluebird, reading to him until he fell asleep. It’s all there, from the first time our eyes locked at the record store all the way until we were in bed together a few minutes ago. I remember how happy I was when we were walking through the park. Our first kiss and every kiss after that one. It was easy. It was better than anything I could have ever dreamed. But there are also glimpses of all of the pain I caused us both and I worry about hurting him again, not to mention all of the fear. I want it all
burned into my memory, both the good and the bad because I don’t want to forget a second of anything that’s led me up to this point. And then I think about Phil lying in bed, just 20 short feet away, waiting for me, wanting me next to him, needing me as much as I need him, which really only leaves one option.

“Yeah,” I answer her with a smile. “I’m staying.”

Chapter End Notes

We made it! What started as an attempt to learn how to write a longer story, turned into a 175 page full-length book. For everyone who made the journey with me, I can't thank you enough. I originally tried posting stories on Wattpad, but literally no one would read or comment on them. I figured I just wasn't very good at writing so I decided to quit, but a friend suggested that I try AO3 instead. I was stunned when people not only started reading what I wrote, but they were *invested* in the stories. When I say that every kudo and comment means the world to me, I truly mean it. Had I not posted 24 Hours on AO3 and gotten such a good reception, Wallflower would not exist.

If you didn't read the note at the beginning of the chapter, please notice that the chapter count now goes up to 33! This is because there are going to be three epilogues! They won't really be a continuation of the storyline, but just scenes that take place in the future after Wallflower has concluded. I thought you guys may want to see how their relationship progresses :) Stay subscribed so you won't miss them!!

Thank you for making this the most rewarding writing experience ever. I couldn't have done it without all of your support and encouragement and I am forever grateful for each one of you!
Epilogue One: One Month Later

Chapter Notes

Thank you for being patient, but the time has finally come....the first epilogue is ready!!

The first one takes place a month after the original story ends and is meant to be a glimpse into their lives now that they are together. This is also the first time that you will hear part of the story from Phil's POV.

I hope you like it!!

Phil POV

I never had the heart to tell Dan that I meant what I said about never wanting to date anyone in a band and this is one of the reasons why. Despite coming across as being a secure person, I’m panicking. As Jas and I stand in the crowd and watch them play, the drunken girls standing behind us start talking about Dan. I try not to listen, but they're so loud I can’t help but hear the lewd things they're saying. Before I can even react, Jas leans in and tells me not to let it get to me, which is much easier said than done. It makes me feel better for a while, but when it continues, the comments start to border on the obscene.

Clearly hearing the same conversation and sensing my discomfort, Jas pulls me away from them and towards a quieter spot.

“I know it's hard, but you have to learn to ignore stuff like that,” she says. "Just remember that it has nothing to do with you and Dan."

I nod in agreement, but it’s far too late to keep them from getting to me. To say that their words have affected me is an understatement. Hearing people talk about Dan that way really shakes me up. It also makes me feel guilty for being so upset when he hid being in the band from me. If I didn’t fully understand his reasoning then, I definitely do now.

“Phil, look at me.”

I glance up at her but then avert my eyes, not wanting her to see the tears building up in them. She doesn’t say anything else, so once I get my emotions under control, I look up to find her eyes again.

“He loves you.”

My heart stops. “Jas, don’t…”

“I’m serious. I know it’s hard to do, but you have to just block out people like that. They will always be there, but what they’re saying will never change how Dan feels about you. It may take him a while to be able to say it, but he loves you, Phil. Don’t think for a second that he would throw that away, ok?”

“How do you…I mean…did he tell you…?”

She kindly smiles at my stuttering. “Yes, he did.”
“But why did he tell you and not me?”

“He’s scared. I think he’s still trying to accept the fact that the two of you are a permanent thing. He’s never had that before. Part of him is afraid that if he says it, you’ll not feel the same way, or worst case scenario, leave.”

We stand quietly and watch them play. Everything about Dan is perfect to me and just watching him makes me feel whole in a way I never have before. For the past month, I’ve had to remind myself that this is real and not a fairy tale.

“What?” I answer, startled out of my daydream.

“Do you love him?”

“Yes.” I say it immediately and without hesitation. Of all the things in the world, that is the one thing I’m 100% sure of. Suddenly, I find myself almost toppling over as Jas throws her arms around me and practically tackles me to the ground. I glance up at the stage and catch Dan watching us as I struggle to regain my balance.

After the last song is over, I loop my arm through Jas’s as she pushes her way through the crowd and toward the backstage area. People are giving her sour looks, but she doesn’t seem to notice or care. She’s happily chatting at me as we go, although I can’t hear a word she’s saying over the crowd. This is only the second show I’ve been to since Dan and I have been together, so I’m pretty much just following her lead.

I’m not going to lie, going to Dan’s shows is a surreal experience. I still can’t get over the fact that the guy on the stage is mine. Is that right to say? He’s ‘mine’? Since I’m so tall, I can see over the crowd and spot Dan talking with Jack and Grif. My heart speeds up just at the site of him and I suddenly wish these people would get out of our way so I can get to him. Yes, he’s definitely mine.

I can see him looking out into the crowd, his eyes flickering back and forth. I can’t wipe the smile off of my face because I know it’s me he’s looking for. Butterflies fill my stomach when his eyes lock with mine and he gives me a bashful grin. Why is it taking so long to get over there? I hear Jas sigh in exasperation and know she must be thinking the same thing.

After what seems like a lifetime, we finally make it to where the security guy is standing and he waves Jas and me past the barrier. Dan has moved closer to the crowd, so the noise has become exponentially louder. He’s right there waiting and envelopes me in an embrace, burying his face into my neck. I can hear the people behind me yelling for him, but I block it all out.

“I was wondering where you were,” he says softly in my ear.

He loves me.

Dan POV

This is weird. Sort of. Well, it’s actually pretty cool. But I don’t know what I’m doing. It’s kind of the best thing in the entire world though. Although I guess everything new is going to feel a little strange for a while. Is it that what this feels like? No, not strange. Unbelievable. That’s what it is. Unbelievable and perfect and scary.
My mind has been a tornado of emotions for the past month. It’s like trying a new life on for size and then finding out it’s the perfect fit and the best possible life you could ever hope for. The initial few weeks after we got together, I was a nervous wreck. I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop and Phil to wise up and change his mind, but he made it his mission to prove to me that what we had was real.

I put my guitar down and leave the stage with the rest of the guys, but instead of grabbing my things and taking off, I just hang out and wait. They’re rehashing the performance, but I’m only half listening. This is the second show we’ve played since Phil and I have been together and I’m anxiously waiting for him. After the first one, he was right here waiting for me when we were done, so my mind is making wild assumptions about why he isn’t here already. I try to take deep breaths and just relax when my brain assumes the worst, but that’s a hard habit to break after 24 years of overthinking every little thing.

Finally, I spot him in the crowd making his way towards me with Jas leading the way. I break away from my conversation with Jack and Grif and walk closer to the edge of the crowd, causing fans to start yelling. As soon as he’s past the guard, I wrap my arms around him.

“I was wondering where you were,” I say softly in his ear.

“We got stuck in the back of the room,”

“What’s up with Jas? Did she try to tackle you earlier?”

“Oh, um. Nothing. You know how she is,” Phil says with a shrug.

“Are you sure?” I ask, unconvinced as I watch her bounce around by Grif, words tumbling from her mouth while he watches in amusement. “She seems more wound up than usual.”

“I’m sure,” he says quickly. “Hey, I don’t suppose I can talk you into going home, can I?”

“Yes,” I say without thinking. My solitary existence came to a screeching halt once Jas and Phil both made a crash landing into my life, so I will always jump at any time to spend alone with him. Between the two of them, they’re always coercing me into some sort of outing or social engagement. Much to my surprise, I actually enjoy it, but it’s exhausting. “Your place or mine?”

“Yours. I want some alone time with you,” he answers.

That’s all I needed to hear. “Ok. Let’s go.”

“Go get your guitar,” Phil says, laughing and giving me a push towards the stage.

“Um, ok,” I say, moving as fast as I can. Once I’m done, I turn around to find Phil and Jas standing close together and rapidly talking. I’m thankful they’ve gotten to be such good friends, but on the other hand, Jas now has a helper for all of her grand schemes and plans.

“Ready?” I ask him, noting how they both jump slightly as I approach.

“Yes,” he says sweetly. If I was worried, it doesn’t matter because the sound of his voice causes me to melt every time. I catch Jas giving him a look as we make our way to the back door of the venue, but I honestly don’t care. All that matters is that Phil is trailing after me with our fingers intertwined.

In the car on the short drive back to my place, I can see him peeking at me out of the corner of my eye, and between that and all of his secret conversations with Jas, I know something is up. I almost want to ask about it, but I have a feeling that I’ll find out about whatever it is eventually anyway.
When we arrive home, Phil has his arms around me and his lips on my neck as soon as I put my guitar down. I’m not sure what brought on this sudden burst of affection, but I’m not complaining. However, when his hands find their way under my shirt, I realize that I’m a sweaty gross mess from playing for over two hours.

“Wait,” I say, trying to shuffle away from him. “Let me take a shower first.”

“No,” he pouts.

I grab his hand and tug him down to my room while I look around for some clothes to change into. He’s still frowning so I give him a few quick kisses until he stops. “Ten minutes?”

He gives me a dramatic sigh before finally agreeing.

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I walk out of the bathroom wearing only a pair of sweatpants but stop in the doorway of my bedroom when I see Phil curled up on my bed. The lights are out but I can see him clearly as the light from the tv flickers over him. He’s wearing a pair of my plaid flannel pajama bottoms and my favorite black sweatshirt. Of course, it’s only my favorite because he looks so adorable when he’s in it. He glances up and catches me looking at him so he smiles and pulls the blankets back so I can come snuggle in bed with him. Sliding under the covers, I spoon behind him with my chest pressed against his back and arm around his waist.

“Hey, so what was going on with Jas tonight?”

I feel him flinch slightly next to me, which only makes me more curious.

“Phil?” I ask, propping myself up on one elbow.

“It’s really nothing.”

“I don’t think you’re telling the truth,” I say with a grin and then watch in amusement as he shoves his face into a pillow.

“I don’t want to talk about it!” he yells with his voice muffled by the pillow.

“Come on. Now I need to know,” I insist, tugging on the back of his t-shirt.

Something happened tonight with Phil and Jas, and I’m determined to figure out what. I stare at his silent form facing away from me and decide to fight fire with fire. When he does this to me, it works like a charm so maybe it will work on him too. I have no idea what I’m doing, but it’s worth a shot.

I lean forward and start kissing his neck. He doesn’t move at first, but then I feel a shiver run through his body and I know I’m on the right track. I put my hand on his hip and slide my hand up underneath his shirt.

“Dan, this isn’t fair,” he whines.

“You do this all the time when you want something,” I remind him as I pull him over onto his back and sit on top of him, straddling his waist.

“Now it’s really not fair! Why do you want to know so bad?”

“I want to know because you won’t tell me!” I answer laughing. I watch as Phil looks around frantically trying to figure a way out of his predicament.
This time, I lean down and lightly press my lips to his. After a few soft kisses, he stills and stops trying to wiggle away. He’s hesitant at first, but as my kisses grow more insistent, he puts his hands around me and pulls me even closer. I tilt his head to the side and start laying kisses down his neck again.

“Tell me,” I urge, nibbling on his ear.

“No.

“Just tell me.”

“I love you, Dan.”

My breath catches and I freeze. I doubt he said what I think he did, but then I realize he’s stopped moving also. I pull away just far enough so I can see his face. His blue eyes are open wide and stare intently into mine.

“Phil?”

“Yes?”

“Did you… I mean… are you…” My words seem to be tumbling out of my mouth in no particular order. I take a deep breath and try again. “Phil… do you mean that?”

“Yes,” he answers without faltering. “I love you.”

My heart is pounding so hard in my chest that I’m sure he can hear it. I keep staring into his eyes, looking intently for any doubt or uncertainty but see none.

“I love you, too,” I whisper back, letting the tears build up and spill out of the corner of my eyes. I wrap my arms around him and nuzzle my face into his neck. Phil kisses my forehead and holds me tight while rubbing little circles into my back. It’s the perfect moment I’ve always dreamt about and wish that for just once, we could stop time.

“Promise me something?” I add.

“Anything.”

“Never take it back.”

“Dan,” he says, past his own tears. “Never. I promise. It’s always going to be us.”
Phil POV

“Oh my god. What have I done?”

I’m driving home after I’ve made what could be the biggest mistake of my life. I wanted to make a big romantic gesture like Dan did for me with the YouTube playlist. This seemed like a good idea at the time, but the closer I get to my apartment, the realization of what I’ve done sinks in. It’s not something I can undo, so I’m just going to have to live with the consequences.

What’s Dan going to say? Is he going to be just disappointed or angry? I guess there is still a chance he may like it, but any hope I once had is quickly fading. I really need to learn to stop and think things through before making big decisions.

I park my car and drag myself inside. As soon as I’m in the door I flop face first into Molly’s overstuffed sofa. Maybe if I just lay like this for a few days, any questionable decisions I might have made will reverse themselves.

“Phil?”

I glance up at Molly briefly before burying my face in the decorative pillows again.

“Did you see it?” she asks.

“Yes.”

“What did you think? Are you going to get it?”

“Yes.”

“Phil! I’m so happy for you guys! Is Dan excited?”

“I don’t know.” I wait for her flood of questions, but the longer it takes her to say something, the more I know that what I’ve done is questionable at best.

“Phil. What did you do?”
I really don’t want to answer that question, so I just moan miserably into the cushions.

“I got it without telling him first.” I wince as I wait for her reaction.

“Phil! You didn't even have him come with you? Why would you do something like that?”

“I have no idea why I do these things, Molly!” I wail. “Do you think he’s going to be really upset?”

“I would be.”

“Molly!”

“Well, you asked. Now what are you going to do?”

“If I knew that I wouldn’t be trying to fade into the sofa right now.”

“Phil, don’t mess this up with Dan.”

I groan even louder. “I’m trying not to! I promise!”

The cushion shifts as she sits down next to me and pats my back.

“It’s Dan we’re talking about here, Phil. You need to figure out some sort of spectacular plan and make this work.”

“And if I can’t?”

“You don’t have a choice,” she says before slapping me on the back of the head and walking away.

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**Dan POV**

“Phil.”

“Yes?”

“Are you sure you know what you’re doing?”

“No.”

“Phil!”

“Dan! I’m just kidding. We’re almost there.”

“I still don’t understand why I’m wearing this blindfold.”

“I told you. I want this to be a surprise.”

“Well,” I say, “being blindfolded and shoved into a car by your boyfriend is surprise enough. I’m not sure I can handle any more surprises.”

“I love you,” Phil says sweetly.
“I love you too,” I say, trying to hide my smile. It didn’t take Phil long to figure out that saying those three little words could get me to agree to just about anything. Apparently, that includes putting a blindfold on me and driving me in circles around the city to keep me from figuring out where we’re going.

I feel the car take a sharp turn and then stop before he turns it off, but he then he gets uncharacteristically quiet.

“Phil? Is everything ok?”

“Yeah,” he says nervously. “I’m sort of scared now you aren’t going to like it or get mad.”

“Phil, if you had anything to do with it then I’m sure it’s going to be a wonderful surprise. Can I please see whatever it is?”

“Ok,” he says after a long pause. I hear him get out of the car and come around to my side and open the door. He takes my hands and tries to guide me out of the car, but not before I thump my head trying to stand up.

“Oh! I’m sorry!” Phil cries, pulling me over and kissing the top of my head through my brunette curls.

“It’s ok, but maybe you can take the blindfold off now?”

“Nope!” he says happily, already forgetting about my aching head. “We’re almost there!”

He holds both of my hands and guides me across a sidewalk. I can hear people talking and walking around us and I can only imagine what they think of one guy leading another one in a blindfold around London. We quickly come to a stop and he releases my hands. There is a rustling noise before I hear the sound of keys jingling together and then the squeak of an opening door.

“Now, this is the tricky part,” he mumbles.

“Wait, what did you say?” I ask, starting to feel panicky.

“Nothing,” he says. “There are just a few more steps.”

“Phil, please just let me take the blindfold off so I don’t fall, yeah?”

“Just a little bit further,” he says again.

Before I can protest, I feel his lips on mine and his fingers stroking my cheek. Phil kissing me will never get old. Each time feels just as good as that first kiss felt almost a year ago.

“There’s one step and then you can take a few steps forward.”

Following his direction, I lift my foot and tap around in front of me until I feel something substantial under it and does as he says. He lets go of me again and I hear a door shut behind us, blocking out the sounds from the busy sidewalk.

“Now, there are a few more steps.”

“How many is a few?” I ask suspiciously.

“Ummm….about 20?”
“Phil.”

“It’ll be fine,” he chirps. “We’re almost there!”

I groan. “I don’t think I believe you anymore.”

“I mean it for real this time. Come on. I’ll help you.”

I feel his hands on my arm and lower back. He shuffles me forward to the first step and then carefully guides and talks me up each one. With each direction, I can hear the excitement growing in his voice and it’s hard for me not to start to feel it too.

“Last step,” he says softly.

He guides me about forward and then releases me. I can tell from the echoes our footsteps are making that we’re in an empty room with hardwood floors.

“Phil?”

“I’m worried you won’t like it and will be upset with me.”

My heart breaks a little at the sadness in his voice. “Please take the blindfold off? I want to see it.” I reach forward to comfort him, but he’s already stepped away and I’m just grabbing at air. There is silence for a few seconds and then I hear his footsteps and feel his hands on my face, then the blindfold being pulled away from my eyes.

At first, the only thing I can see is blinding light. Gradually, blinking furiously as my eyes adjust, I see a plain white wall directly in front of me. Confused, I frown slightly before I start looking around, but there’s just an empty room with nothing in it. I have no idea what it is he wanted to show me. There are windows along one wall and I walk over to them and look down at the unfamiliar street below. The first thing I notice is the large size of what appears to be a living room. I walk past Phil who is standing at the top of the steps, silently observing me. Maybe I’m supposed to find the surprise? I walk through a doorway and step into a beautiful kitchen with an island in the middle. It all looks so different compared to my tiny, plain apartment.

I can see Phil out of the corner of my eye as he follows behind me when I walk down a hallway. I push open a door and click on the light, revealing a sizable light blue bathroom with double sinks and a bathtub big enough that I might actually be able to fit into. I continue down the hallway and through the last doorway. Stepping into the bedroom, my eyes go between the two tall windows and the large walk-in closet. I can’t imagine ever having enough clothes or shoes to fill a space that big.

Turning around, I walk past Phil again and back to the living room. Against the far wall is another doorway that I missed the first time leading to what looks like a small den. I stand in the middle of the bright living room and take all of it in.

“Well?” Phil asks. “What do you think?”

“I think it’s a beautiful apartment, but I don’t understand why we’re here?”

“But you do like it?”

“Well, yes. It’s probably the nicest apartment I’ve ever been in. None of the guys have a place this nice.”

I look up to see a relieved look pass across his face. “So you aren’t mad then?”
“How could I be mad when I don’t even understand what’s going on?” I joke, still bewildered.

“Would you want to live here with me?”

I roll my eyes and slide my arms around him. “I really hope we do have a place like this someday. I know how bad we both want that, but we have to be patient for just a little while longer.”

“Dan, it’s ours.”

“What…how?”

“I signed the lease yesterday.”

“I don’t understand. How is that possible?”

“I was walking by and saw that it was for rent so I called the estate agent and they showed it to me,” he explains, his words tumbling out quickly. “I loved it so much and I knew you would too. I didn’t want anyone else to get it, so I went ahead and signed the paperwork without you.”

I hear his words, but they haven’t fully registered yet. I walk around in a slow circle, looking around the apartment with its pristine white walls, tall ceilings, and big windows.

“You signed the paperwork already? On your own?”

“Yes,” he winces.

“This is ours?” I ask, still gaping and looking around at the beautiful apartment. “But what about Molly? You can’t desert her.”

We had casually been talking about moving in together for the past few months. We knew it wouldn’t happen for a while since Phil and Molly already have a place together and him moving in with me was out of the question since it’s barely big enough for just myself. It made sense since because we spend almost all of our nights together anyway either at his apartment or mine, but there was no way he could just move out and leave her without someone to share the expenses.

“Gavin is moving in with her,” he says with a smile. “So what do you think? Will you move in with me?”

My mouth falls open in surprise as his news finally sinks in. This is ours. Our first place together.

I gaze around one more time, but this time see something entirely different. Instead of empty space, I see a room full of our things and us snuggling up on the couch, probably watching Buffy or an anime. The kitchen isn’t just a kitchen, but a place that has enough cabinets to hold Phil’s never-ending boxes of cereal and where I could attempt to cook dinner for the two of us after we got home from work. This is the place where we will celebrate our holidays together and invite our friends and family over. This is the place where we will finally have our own bedroom together, and a closet big enough to hold all of our things.

“Dan? You aren’t saying anything.” Phil turns to look at me and his face falls. “You’re crying. You don’t like it?”

“I love it,” I say quickly. “It’s perfect.”

“Happy tears, then?”

I try to answer, but I’m so overwhelmed with emotion I can only nod. The next thing I know, he’s
wiping tears from my cheeks and wrapping his arms around me.

“‘I was so scared you were going to be mad,” he says, breathing out a sigh of relief.

“Why would I be mad?”

“Because I didn’t tell you about it. I just got really excited when I saw it and signed the papers and put down a deposit. I should have brought you here so we could’ve made the decision together.”

I lean in and kiss him until the worry leaves his face. “Well, let the record show that if you ever want to rent a beautiful apartment for us to live happily ever after in, I’m good with it.”

“You’ve really thought about that then?” Phil asks between the kisses. “Happily ever after?”

I freeze and can feel a red blush creeping up my neck and into my cheeks. I understand what he’s implying and it’s a much bigger thing than just moving in together. I have thought about it, but I desperately try not to. It terrifies me to have a dream that big even if it’s something I want more than anything. I stare down at my shoes and try to come up with words that come close to describing how I feel right now. "Phil...I...."

He shushes me and tips my face back to his. “You don’t have to talk about that now if you aren’t ready, ok? You don’t have to say anything, but I do want to be totally honest with you, Dan. I never want you to wonder or question how I feel about you or what my intentions are. And yes, I do think about…happily ever after. A lot. I was thinking about it when I got this apartment. I know this is all we can afford for now, but the next place we live in, I want that to be our forever home.

“When can we move in?” I finally stammer.

“Go pack a box,” he says around the kisses he’s started pressing on my lips and cheek.

“Are you serious? We can move in now?”

“Mm-hmm,” he says against my neck.

“Does Molly know about this place?”

“She does,” he answers while his fingers thread through my curls.

“But when is Gavin moving in with her?”

“He literally has all of his things packed and is waiting for me to move,” he mumbles as he nibbles my ear. “Remind me why again why you’re talking about boxes and Molly when you could be thanking me.”

Oh.

All of a sudden I become more aware of what Phil is doing. While I’ve been babbling and asking questions, he’s somehow managed to steer me backward and has me pressed up against the living room wall. Apparently, our living room wall.

I put my hands on either side of his face and guide his lips to mine. Just when I think I can’t be more in love with him, he figures out a way to make that happen. I thought at some point we would get past that stage when you’re first dating and you have butterflies in your stomach every time you think about the other person, but even after a year, that has yet to happen for either of us.

“I have another surprise for you,” he says close to my ear.
“Phil, I keep telling you that sex up against a wall isn’t classified as a ‘surprise.’”

He gasps in fake indignation. “Close your eyes,” he instructs.

“Making me close my eyes still doesn’t make it a surprise!”

“Dan! It’s an actual surprise! Now close your eyes.”

“No, no, no. No more wandering around with a blindfold on.”

“There’s no blindfold this time! Just close your eyes and hold out your hand.”

With a sigh, I do as he says. After a few brief moments, I feel him press something cold into my hand. I open my eyes and look down to find a shiny new key. I stare at it before it finally hits me that it’s the key to our apartment. I look up and directly into Phil’s blue eyes. Those same blue eyes that I looked in at the record store almost exactly a year ago, and now the same blue eyes I’m going to wake up with and fall asleep next to every day.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, the next chapter is the last one for real this time! No more surprise epilogue announcements!
Epilogue: Three Years Later

Chapter Notes

The third and final epilogue....we've finally reached the end!

Brace yourself for some fluffy fluff piled on top of some more fluff.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Phil POV

I stand in the living room of the apartment Dan and I have lived in together for the past two years. Sloppily labeled boxes are piled everywhere and the furniture is either taken apart or has been drug to the living room. Without Dan here, it doesn’t really feel like home anymore. After one last look, I walk down the stairs of our apartment, huge suitcase thumping down each step behind me.

Waiting impatiently for a taxi, I check the time nervously as the minutes tick away. It’s only 4:00, but I can’t stand one more minute by myself. Finally, the taxi shows up and I hurriedly give the driver the address of the hotel. I stare out of the window as the familiar neighborhood speeds past. There are so many good memories here.

We make good time and pull up in front of the hotel at 4:30. As I pay the driver, a bellhop rushes over to the cab, takes my suitcase, and guides me inside to the front desk. After getting the keycard, I gaze around the ornate lobby on the way to the elevator. It’s a lot fancier than I’m used to, but it’s only for one night anyway.

Once in the room, I’m relieved that the items I arranged to have delivered have already arrived. Filled with nervous energy, I plop down on the huge king sized bed and flip through tv channels, looking for something to distract me.

Giving up, I grab one of the fancy hotel robes and my toiletries and head to the bathroom for a shower. The hot water soothes me, but there is nothing in the world that can take my mind completely off of Dan. I wonder how he’s doing. I’ve sent him several texts today, but didn’t get any responses. I keep telling myself that he probably doesn’t even have his phone on him, but there are other possible reasons he hasn’t texted back and none of them are good. I stand there in the shower with my thoughts lingering on him until the water starts to run cold.

After wrapping myself in the plush robe, I dig through my bag for my dryer, straightener, and product so I can get to work on my hair. Thirty minutes later, I’m still not satisfied, but it will have to do for now. Right now, my priority is getting dressed and trying to track Dan down to ease my mind. I know I’m probably overreacting, but I can’t go much longer without finding him and making sure he’s alright.

Smoothing down my clothes and taking one more quick look in the mirror, I head back downstairs to the first floor. My stomach is tied up in knots and I have to know what’s going on. I wander around feeling entirely out of place until I finally find the room I’m looking for.

With a deep breath, I knock on the door.
“Who is it?” a female voice answers.

“It’s me.”

“Go away!” she shouts.

“Please? Can you at least tell me if everything is ok?”

My stomach twists again when she doesn’t answer.

“Can you at least tell me if Dan is in there?”

“No!” she repeats loudly.

“No as in ‘he’s not in there’ or no as in ‘you aren’t going to tell me?’”

“Just go away! You can see him later.”

Feeling defeated, I walk away from the room and wander aimlessly around the huge lobby. After about ten minutes, I can’t take it anymore. I make my way back to the room and knock again.

Dan POV

Somewhere behind me, I can hear knocking, which if earlier events repeat themselves, will be followed shortly by yelling.

“Jas! Come on!”

“No!”

“Please? Just for a minute?”

“No!”

“Does he even have his phone? Did he get my texts?”

“Philip! You can tell him at 7:00!”

I quietly snort laugh. Phil hates it when Jas calls him by his full name.

“Jas, I’ll talk to him,” I say over my shoulder.

“Dan, no!” she whines.

“Dan? Are you in there? Is that you?” Phil’s muffled voice shouts from behind the door.

“Give us a few minutes, yeah?” I say to Jas and watch as she pouts and stalks away to leave through the door leading to the patio.

I walk towards Phil’s voice and stand as close as I can to the crack around the door.

“Hi,” I say meekly, hoping it’s loud enough for him to hear.

“Thank god,” he says before I hear a soft thud against the door. “I was starting to think you weren’t actually here.”
“Of course I am. Where else would I be?”

“I don’t know. I was just starting to get nervous that you didn’t show up and Jas was trying to hide the fact that you weren’t here. Are you dressed yet?”

“No, not yet,” I answer as I look across at the crisp black tuxedo hanging up on the rack. “Are you?”

“Yes. I look quite handsome. I’d send you a picture, but apparently Jas took your phone so we couldn’t talk. I understand not seeing each other on the day of our wedding, but I thought I would at least get to talk to you.”

“I know. I miss you, Phil.”

There’s a long pause before he finally speaks again. “Dan, open the door just a little bit. I want to hear your voice without a door in between us. I promise I won’t look.”

I bite my bottom lip and glance around to see if Jas has come back yet before I click the lock and open the door about an inch. I know she’ll go into full crazy mode if she catches me doing this.

“Hi,” he says softly and I can feel tears well in my eyes just at the sound of him. “Are you Ok?”

“I missed you last night. We’ve only spent a few nights apart since we’ve met. I couldn’t sleep.”

“I know. I couldn’t either. After today we never have to do that again.”

“I love you, Phil.”

“I love you too, bear. Are you sure you’re alright? You don’t sound alright.”

“Yeah,” I answer with a shaky voice. “I’m just scared. What if I mess up the vows?”

“I’ll remind you what they are. I memorized yours too.”

“What if I fall walking down the aisle? Why did I agree to that? You get to just stand up front and wait for me!”

“I’ll catch you.”

I stand quietly and try to talk myself into relaxing, taking deep cleansing breaths. My eyes shut and I try to picture what we’re getting ready to do.


“Dan, it looks so beautiful. I can’t wait to see the look on your face when you finally get to see all of it. There are flowers everywhere! The end of each row of seats has a bunch of flowers with trailing ribbons. When you walk down the aisle, you’re practically going to be surrounded by flowers! There’s a big archway up front where we’ll be standing and it’s covered with peach and pink roses and greenery. Oh! And there are so many candles! I don’t remember talking to the planner about candles, but they look and smell so good!”

“I wanted to surprise you! I know how much you love candles.”

“You’re the best almost-husband ever!”

“Are there people here yet?” I finally ask quietly.
“Yes, all of the parents are here already. My mum has already cried four times and your mum keeps trying to tell people where to sit.”

I laugh at the thought of that. We both probably could have predicted that happening. I hiccup and swipe away the tears, not wanting to look puffy and red when he finally does see me.

“Are you nervous about being in front of everybody?”

“Yeah, that’s part of it.”

“Is Jas still gone? Open the door a little bit further,” he says.

I pull it open another few inches and it’s just enough for Phil to get his hand and lower arm in. I immediately weave my fingers between his, smiling when I realize I can see the edge of his white shirt and black sleeve of his tuxedo.

“Remember how you were on stage before we met?”

“Yes,” I sniffle, thinking back to all of those years ago.

“You were able to block all of those people out. You can do it again.”

“But Phil, these are all of our family and friends. It’s different. God, why did we let our parents invite so many people?”

Phil grows quiet for a minute as he thinks.

“I don’t care,” he says firmly. “This isn’t about them. It’s about us. We can focus on everyone else at the reception, but the ceremony is about you and me, Ok?”

“It’s just…a lot,” I finally whisper, tightening my grip on his hand.

“I know,” he answers softly. “We also probably should have spread two big life events out a bit more instead of trying to do them both at once. It is a lot, isn’t it?” There’s a big pause before he starts again. “Dan, you don’t…regret any of this, do you?”

“No!” I answer immediately. “I mean, it’s not like we tried to make it all happen at once. We were just going to start casually looking at houses. I don’t think either one of us expected to find the perfect one on the first day. Or have the closing end up being two days before the wedding.”

“It seemed really strange walking out of our apartment this morning and knowing we’re never going to be in there again,” Phil says sadly. “But how great is it going to be when we come back home from our honeymoon?”

I wish he could see the big smile on my face right now. When the closing was scheduled, we both started to panic. The reality settled in quickly once we sat down to try to work out exactly how we were going to get married, go on a honeymoon, pack, and move all in the same week. The lease was up on our apartment, so we couldn’t put off moving until we got back from our trip. Unfortunately, something was going to have to get canceled, and that was our honeymoon.

When our families found out, they said we would do no such thing. We were instructed to pack everything up and they would move it all out of our apartment and into our new house while we were on our two-week trip. They already paid for the wedding and this was too much to expect them to do. We tried to talk them out of it, but we were overruled. And now, everything we own is either in a box waiting to go to our new home or in a suitcase waiting to go on vacation. When we come
back, we’ll be stepping into our new house and a new life.

“You’re right, Phil. I just need to remember that this is about us.”

“Dan? Do you trust me?”

“You know I do. I love you.”

“How fast can you get dressed?”

“Umm, I don’t know. I’ve never worn a tuxedo before.”

“Put it on. I’ll be back in 10 minutes, ok?”

He tugs his hand out of mine and I start to feel panicky. “Phil? What’s going on?”

“Trust me. I’ll be right back!”

I pull the door shut and walk over to the tuxedo, eyeing it warily before trying to figure out how to put it on without turning it into a wadded up wrinkly mess. When I think I have it on correctly, I can’t figure out what to do with myself. I try to sit down, but the shirt starts to untuck itself so instead I just stand awkwardly in front of the mirror, trying to get my hair to stay in place. Where is Phil? Surely it’s been more than 10 minutes, I think to myself.

Just as I’m starting to freak out, there’s a knock at the door and a pause before Molly opens it and steps in. When she sees me, she smiles as tears start to pool up in her eyes.

“If you cry it’s going to make me cry too,” I say with a shaky voice.

“I know, I’m sorry. I can’t help it! I’m so happy for you guys!”

“Where’s Phil? He said he was coming back. Is everything ok?”

“Phil is fine,” she says smiling knowingly at me. “I’m actually here to take you to him, but first, you need to be wearing this.” I stand still as she pins a boutonniere made from a purple orchid to the lapel of my tuxedo. Once she’s happy with how it looks, she turns and heads towards the patio door.

“Wait, I’m not supposed to see him before the wedding. There’s still another 45 minutes before the ceremony.”

“Screw tradition! Come on, Phil is waiting for you.”

I stand in place for a second debating what to do before I follow her, somewhat scared of what Jas is going to do when she finds out I’ve broken out of the room. We walk silently down a small winding path leading to a private garden area, far out of view of the hotel and guests.

Any hope I had of not sobbing through the entire ceremony go out the window as soon as I see him in the tuxedo we painstakingly picked out. He hasn’t spotted me yet, so I just look at him in amazement. Even after three years, I still can’t believe he’s mine. I’m so caught up that I fail to notice what’s going on around me and the fact that Phil isn’t alone. I start walking towards him, but Molly puts her hand on my arm to stop me.

“Just stay here, I’ll go get him,” she says as she walks away.

Confused, I stand and watch as she approaches him and leans in to talk to him. He smiles and nods to her before turning in my direction. At this point, I have no idea what’s going on, but the only thing
that matters is that Phil is here. Nervous energy is building up inside of me the closer he gets. When he finally reaches me, I throw my arms around him and pull him close, relieved to be with him.

“\textquote{I hate tradition,}” I mumble in his ear. “\textquote{I don’t like being away from you.}”

“\textquote{Me too. That’s why we’re doing something different.}”

“What’s going on?”

“We’re getting married.”

“Phil, I know that. There are almost 250 people here that also know that.”

“No, we’re getting married right now.”

“But I don’t understand. All of the people, everything we’ve planned…. I trail off, gesturing in the direction of the hotel.

I finally look past him and realize that Molly, Jas, Griff, and the guys from the band are all looking back at us expectantly. “Everything got so complicated,” he explained. “We somehow went from a small ceremony to a giant wedding, a new house, moving, and all of the stress that comes along with it.”

It finally starts to dawn on me what is happening.

“Dan, marry me. That’s the wedding for them, but let’s get married like this first. This can be the one for us.”

Speechless, I take his face in my hands and kiss him. “Yes,” I answer simply. “Of course I’ll marry you twice.”

An enormous smile spreads across his face as he gives me another quick kiss and pulls me by the hand over to our friends, who all cheer when they realize the pre-wedding marriage is on.

“Yes,” I answer simply. “Of course I’ll marry you twice.”

“\textquote{We are gathered here today – }”

“Grif! Not the whole ceremony. We need the abbreviated version!” Jas directs him, poking him sharply in the side.

“\textquote{Ok..ummm…..}” he starts. “Dan, do you take Phil to be your lawfully wedded husband? Do you promise to always remember to buy cereal at the grocery store, water all the plants when Phil forgets, laugh at all of his bad puns, learn how to play all of his favorite songs, and promise to always love him?”
“I do.”

“Phil, do you take Dan to be your lawfully wedded husband? Do you promise to always go to his shows, not complain about how much time he spends on YouTube, stop him from straightening his hair, stop trying to bring home stray dogs, and promise to always love him?

“I do.”

Phil and I exchange amused looks. Although our real vows are more sophisticated, I have a feeling that these are the ones we will always remember.

“Ok,” Grif continues. “Now, who has the rings?”

We stare at each other blankly. “Wait,” I say. “We don’t have the rings!”

“We can’t use them anyway. Everyone will know something is up if we’re already wearing rings. Any ideas?” Phil asks, turning and looking around at our guests.

Jas immediately starts rummaging around in her purse frantically, finally pulling out a black sharpie marker and triumphantly handing it over to Phil. I get ready to object, but it really isn’t a bad idea. I look up at Phil, and he grins before pulling the lid off of the marker. He concentrates as he takes my left hand and carefully draws a thin black line around my ring finger. Satisfied with his work, he hands me the marker. Biting my bottom lip, I try to do the same, my results a little shakier than his. I shrug apologetically before giving the marker back to Jas.

“Alright…that works! I now pronounce you husband and husband. You may now kiss the groom!”

There are snickers as we both pretty much lunge at each other. “Oh my god, we’re married!” I say excitedly between kisses. “I can’t believe we did this!” I know we’re supposed to be back at the hotel by now, but we can’t seem to stop kissing. I mean, it’s not like they can start without us anyway, right?

“Wait!” Molly yells. “We need to take pictures!”

Everyone grabs their phones and start taking pictures. Some are random, some are more serious, but somehow, the vast majority are combinations of us in group selfies. And just like Grif’s spontaneous vows, these are the photos I’m probably going to treasure the most.

“Oh my god! The ceremony starts in five minutes!” Phil gasps.

We all take off down the path leading back to the hotel. We burst through the doors to find two near hysterical families frantically looking for us. Phil grabs me and we share one more brief kiss before someone starts to pull him up to the front of the ballroom to wait for me. When he gets a few steps away, he stops and comes back.

“Don’t be nervous, ok?” he whispers in my ear. I nod, but apparently he isn’t convinced. “Just think about the past three years. Everything we’ve done has been done one step at a time. The first text, the first phone call, the first kiss, our first apartment, when we got engaged. This is just another step in a lifetime of steps for us, Dan. There are so many more for us to take, but first, we have to do this one. Plus,” he adds with a wink, “we’re already married.”

The only thing I can do is nod at him. Apparently he’s confident that I’m ok because with one final smile, he turns and opens the doors up just enough for him to slip through.

“Just a few more minutes for everyone to get into place. Are you ready?” the wedding planner asks
“Yeah, just tell me when.”

Phil’s words are still lingering in my head. He’s absolutely right. There’s so much ahead of us. Twenty-four hours from now, we’ll be sitting on the beach, drinking rum drinks out of coconuts, which oddly enough, was Phil’s number one vacation requirement. Two weeks from now, we’ll be walking into our forever home and unpacking. I also assume that we’ll be picking out a dog at the shelter the next day, which I have a feeling is why Phil was in such a hurry to get a house in the first place. The rest of our lives are waiting for us, and it all starts with today.

The planner is standing at the doors and looks at me questioningly.

“I’m ready.”

He and his assistant pull the big doors open I momentarily freeze when I see inside the ballroom for the first time. It’s just like Phil described, the flowers, the candles, everything we’ve picked out is perfectly in place. Overwhelmed, I look down, but then I catch a glimpse of the ring that Phil drew with sharpie around my finger.

With a deep breath and my eyes focused back on Phil, I take my first step down the aisle.

Chapter End Notes

There is a new story called 'Haunted' on the way!

I need a break from complicated plots and angst, so this one will be around 8 or 9 chapters and very light reading. It's sort of a ghost story, but not exactly, so keep your eyes open for it!

Thank you again for being such great and supportive readers! I really hope that you all enjoyed this last epilogue and feel it's a fitting ending to a very long Dan and Phil journey!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!