The Kippens
by DonTheRock

Summary

Newly weds, TJ and Cyrus Kippen, face the challenges of starting their new life together.
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cyrus' POV

Seeing TJ now gives me flashbacks to the first time I saw him in a suit. That was my thirteenth birthday, and I hardly spoke to him. I was too nervous. I remember feeling my breath catch in my chest for a moment when I saw him come up to me, and my pulse started racing. Back then, I thought there was no chance that he'd ever look at me the way I looked at him.

Now, 12 years later, he still makes my heart go wild, but now he's wearing a smoke grey suit with a tie I got him back when we were in post-secondary. He looks different but the same. A few strands of his blonde hair fall over his forehead, for he stopped gelling his hair back. His jaw is more defined, but his smile is still the same. And his eyes, by far my favorite part, still look at me with a certain softness only reserved for me, the way they did when we were thirteen.

Tonight, his vulnerable gaze is tinted with the excitement we both feel. The past twelve years have been anything but smooth, but everything that happened before, none of that even matters anymore, because we're here now, listing to a classic rock song of TJ's choice, while our friends dance around us. My mom and step-dad have been up on their feet since the first song, and they show no signs of slowing down anytime soon.

TJ's sister is what breaks me out of my thoughts as she approaches TJ and I, pulling her girlfriend, Andi along by the hand. They're both dressed up formally, Amber in a puffy, pink cocktail dress, and Andi in a much simpler, yellow bodycon dress. Andi had told me that the two of them went out shopping the day TJ and I sent out the invitations.

"The food was fantastic," Amber tells her brother.

"And the cake: amazing," Andi agrees.

"The baby taters were a good choice," Amber says with a grin.

"It wouldn't be my wedding if there weren't baby taters," I respond.

TJ catches my eye with his and smiles, as though he'd forgotten why we were here and is happy to be reminded.

Behind the girls, I notice Buffy and Marty winding through the dancing people to get to us. They, too, are dressed up for the occasion, Buffy in a purple A-line dress, and Marty in a suit with a white bow tie. Right when they're almost where we are, Marty and Buffy get distracted by Marty's ringing cell phone, and Marty leaves to take the call while Buffy continues the rest of the way to us.

"Sorry about that," Buffy apologizes. "I feel like he's been on the phone all night, but his sister keeps calling. We were coming to tell you that your first dance was adorable."

"Thanks," I respond, blushing a little. "And don't worry about the phone calls. I know babysitting can be stressful sometimes."
"Marty's sister just worries so much," Buffy explains. "She calls for every little thing. Last week, she
called us because she wasn't sure which lullaby to sing to Sabrina before bed."

Sabrina is their daughter and both Buffy's and Marty's first brush with the whole parenting thing.
While pregnant, Buffy had been reading so many parenting books that she's now able to spew any
and every theory on how to raise a kid. Marty, on the other hand, spent the nine months deciding
which sports he was going to put her in once she becomes old enough to walk. At the moment, he's
deciding between lacrosse, hockey and soccer.

"Well, if you ever need a babysitter, Cyrus and I would be happy to watch her every once in a
while," TJ offers.

"Yeah," I agree.

"I might take you up on that," Buffy says.

Looking around at my circle of friends with me, I realize one is missing.

"Where's Jonah?" I ask to whoever knows.

"I saw him with Walker at the dessert table not long ago," Amber replies.

I take a step to the right to get a clear view of where Jonah and Walker still are, laughing and chatting
together by the table of treats.

"I think I'm gonna head over there, too," Amber continues. "I haven't had any dessert yet. You guys
want anything?"

Both TJ and I shake our heads, but Andi nods, replying, "I'll come with you."

As they leave, that's when Marty returns from his phone conversation.

"Is everything okay with Sabrina?" Buffy asks.

Marty nods. "Yeah. Abby just couldn't get her to stop crying, so I talked her through it."

Abby, Marty's sister, is fifteen and awfully inexperienced when it comes to taking care of kids.
Marty's told me how she refused to babysit when she became old enough to, even when asked by the
neighbours. She's only now babysitting because it's her niece, and she figured she could use the extra
cash, but that definitely doesn't mean she's confident in her childcare skills.

All of a sudden, the song playing comes to an end, and the next one starts up. It's a slow song, one I
recognize right away, and it was also our second choice for a first dance song: "All I Want Is You"
by U2. It didn't take the top spot, but, for bringing back memories of dancing in the middle of the
moonlit park after our high school graduation ceremony, it holds a special place in my heart.

Naturally, anyone who has a partner pairs off, while the single people and kids either leave the dance
floor or find friends to sway to the beat with. TJ turns to me and holds out his hand, which I take
simply on impulse, knowing that my hand is significantly better when it is interlinked with his. He
then pulls me in, and my arms find their place on his shoulders, and his on my waist. TJ's eyes are on
me, giving me butterflies the way they did when TJ first held my hand at Andi's party so long ago.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see all four of my parents watching me with my husband, smiles on
their faces. Sometimes I forget how lucky I am to have parents like them, and having them here at
my wedding is a blessing that not everyone is so lucky to have.
"TJ," I say as we rock slowly from side to side, "are you sad that your parents aren't here?"

He considers this for a moment before responding, "No. My parents haven't cared about me since Amber and I left when we were 17. I don't need people like that in my life."

"I care about you," I tell him as though those words have any ability to heal the hurt I know is burnt into him permanently.

"I know," he says. "That's why I married you."

He smiles and locks me in tighter against him. Then he brings his lips down to mine and kisses me softly, sending chills throughout my body. It's more intimate than kissing him in front of an audience after saying our vows. Even though I know people are still watching us now, it feels less like a show for the crowd and more like a game for just the two of us and nobody else.

When our lips part, I recall something that I thought about a lot leading up to today, but it hadn't crossed my mind during the wedding until this moment.

"Now I get to get my name changed on all my IDs," I say.

"I almost forgot about that," TJ responds. "You're not Cyrus Goodman anymore."

"Nope," I say. "It's Cyrus Kippen now."

TJ smiles so wide that his gums are showing. Neither of us seem to be very good at holding back the joy we're feeling, for I, too, am grinning uncontrollably.

"I think that name suits you perfectly," TJ tells me.

"So do I," I agree.

Chapter End Notes

Hello! I just wanted to give y'all a sneak peak of my next book. I won't continue writing it until I'm finished with Last Names, though, so yeah. This is just to hype you guys up. I love y'all! Have a good day!
TJ's POV

Nine years ago

The jingle of sleigh bells lines the quiet of this evening. They dangle from the roof of the treehouse, crisscrossing over with fairy lights that keep the space from being completely dark. I lie on a mountain of fluffy pillows, all assorted colours and patterns. Pinholes of light manage to sneak their way from the sunset sky onto the shaded drawings and photos stuck to the wooden walls with thumbtacks.

My cousins told me they wanted me to see their treehouse, and I figure it's a pretty good excuse to get away from my relatives for a while. They're all so busy talking about the stuff conservative families talk about—all the stuff I'd rather not listen to. When I left, my dad was talking about seeing a First Nations person on the street, and, to sum it up, my dad is more racist than he thinks he is. The worst part of it all is that nobody else seems to realize that except for my sister and I. She's currently somewhere playing with our little cousins, but I came out into the yard after dessert instead.

A rustle of leaves gets my attention, and I sit up from my bed of pillows to see Cyrus rising up from the hole in the floor. He smiles as he finishes climbing the last few rungs of the ladder to enter the treehouse.

"Your cousin, Rosie, sure has a lot of energy," he says with a chuckle. "I wanted to join you sooner, but she wanted to play with me, and I, being the soft boy I am, was incapable of saying no."

I laugh and reach out to wave for Cyrus to come here. He gets the cue and crawls over to lie down with me, snuggling up to my chest while I close my arm around him. It's so calm here with him that I could forget about the family gathering happening right below us. The sound from inside the house is blocked out by the treehouse walls.

"So what did you think of your first Easter dinner?" I ask.

"It was great," Cyrus replies. "There were some uncomfortable points when your aunt decided to bring up politics, and I was struggling to keep from starting a heated debate, but, other than that, it was nice. However, I did miss the certain charm that my own parents bring to family dinners by constantly psychoanalyzing everyone."

"I'm glad I was able to convince my parents to let you come," I say.

"Me too," Cyrus agrees. "However, it is a bit weird when people ask who I am, and I have to say your friend. I haven't had to lie about that for a while."

I let out a sigh and rub his arm. "I'm sorry. I just don't think my parents will be able to take it—the truth."
"I know," Cyrus responds, tilting his head to look at me. "It's okay."

His hand lifts the one I have on his arm and links them together before resting back down. I'm content with this right here. Just us. Nobody has to know. But I suppose it can't stay that way forever.

"This treehouse really is nice," Cyrus says, moving on from our old topic. "I bet Andi would love having a place like this to do her art. It'd be like an Andi Shack but in the sky."

"Yeah. My uncle built it. My dad helped."

"I always wanted one when I was young, but my parents said no."

"Well, you can have one someday," I say, "when you're not living with your parents."

"That's true," he agrees. "But we won't really need a treehouse once we have our own house. The entire place will be our hideout. There won't be any need for one in a tree."

_Ours_. The word makes me smile. I can't imagine my future without Cyrus in it, and it's comforting to know the feeling is mutual.

"Any place we have will be perfect," I whisper, "because it'll be ours."

_Present day_

Wind chimes from the neighbours' homes jingle, and birds echo back to them as they fly back to their nests to call it a day. The sunset casts an orange glow on the yard, which has nothing more than some grass and one tree. We don't exactly have a lot to spend, so we focused our money on the inside. Cyrus opens the door. We've of course been here before to choose the house and recently to move our things in, but this is the first time we're entering as a married couple and not just two dreamers hoping things work out okay.

We step together into the small bungalow and remove our shoes. Cyrus' face begins as a smile as he wanders into the living room and kitchen. There isn't much more than just the basic furnishings: a couch, a lamp, a coffee table, a dining table and chairs. The walls are a cream colour, although there are quite a few scuff marks tainting them. Cyrus examines every inch of the space, his eyebrows slowly turning up in slight disappointment as he notices the rust on the edges of the sink, the chips in the vertices of the cabinets, and the deep-set stains on the kitchen tiles.

"I forgot about how much work is needed to fix it up," Cyrus says.

"And we can fix it up together," I tell him.

I ring my arms around my husband, and he spins to face me. He brings his own hands up over my shoulders and comes in for a kiss. Electricity sparkles through my body until we part.

"It can all be fixed," I say.

"What about that?" he asks, nodding toward the window.

I don't know what idiot thought to put a window on the side of a house. The only view it has is of the neighbour's exterior wall.
"That will be a bit harder, but look here." I nod to the sink. "A bit of scrubbing and cleaner will get the rust off." I let go of Cyrus' waist and lead him by the hand over to the gash in the cabinets. "Some sanding and a new coat of paint, and this will be gone," I go on. Then I pull him across the tiles to where they meet with the carpet of the hallway to the bedroom. "I don't know how we're going to get these stains off, but we'll figure it out."

Cyrus laughs a little along with me before putting his arms back around me to kiss me again. The energy travels between us, connecting us like magnets. As he kisses me, we make our way further down the hall, and my pulse picks up speed. Our momentum is cut off when the sound of my phone beeping in my pocket splits us apart.

"Damn it," I mutter.

Cyrus lets out a little chuckle at my frustration and lets me go so that I can take out my phone and check the email I just received.

"Sorry. It's from work," I explain.

"It's fine," Cyrus assures me. "We'll have plenty of time for us any night."

He gives me a smile and makes his way back toward the kitchen. I follow him over there and lean against the refrigerator as I scroll through the email. It's short, just some information about work. I'm a first responder, but if you had asked me when I was a teenager if that's what I wanted to be, I certainly wouldn't have said yes. But I've grown up been changed permanently by the things I've seen.

"What's it about?" Cyrus asks.

He goes over to open the cabinet and get out a glass as I reply, "Just more stuff about starting with the new unit tomorrow."

"Are you nervous or excited?" Cyrus asks me.

"A mix of both," I confess.

"You'll be great," he promises. "You always do great."

He takes a step toward the fridge then retreats with a frown to return the cup to the cabinet.

"I forgot that we haven't bought any groceries yet," Cyrus explains with a sigh.

"Tomorrow after I get home from work we can do that," I say.

"I can't," Cyrus respond. "I have a patient scheduled."

Cyrus is a child therapist, and he works from home. He was worried about if his patients will still want to make the drive once he moved out from the apartment he shared with Andi, but they all have said they're okay with it so far. That may change, though, and Cyrus knows that, so he's planned to take on extra patients to make sure he still has enough work if the others decide to stop therapy with him.

"On a Monday evening?" I question.

"Yeah," Cyrus answers. "He's a new one."

"Okay. I'll go on my own."
"Thanks," Cyrus says. "Now how about we have a movie night tonight?"

"We don't have a TV yet," I remind him.

"True, but I have Netflix on my laptop."

"Cool," I respond. "I'll make popcorn." Then I remember, "which we don't have any of."

"Lucky for us," Cyrus starts, "there's a 7-eleven at the end of the block."

He reaches out for my hand and pulls me toward the front door.

Chapter End Notes

Hello! I hope you all like the second chapter. I'm really excited for this story. I'm trying to make it different than my other ones, and I'm liking it so far. Let me know what you think is going to happen throughout the story in the comments. Have a dandy day, and I'll see you in the next chapter.
A Firefighter

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Cyrus' POV

9 Years Ago

"Have you thought about schools?" I ask.

My hand is connected to TJ's, swinging between us as we walk through the gymnasium. Tables have been set up with pamphlets, booklets, and banners for many different universities and colleges. I've never thought about just how many options there are, and, judging by the overwhelmed faces of the swarm of high schoolers around me, neither has anyone else.

"Not really," TJ replies. "I always just figured I'd be a basketball player."

"And I think you can for sure do that," I assure him, "but a realistic plan B is also important."

We approach the table for Shadyside University, and I scan the display. Three people stand behind the booth: one in typical professional wear, one in a nurse outfit, and the other in a blue uniform, which I at first think is a police uniform, but upon closer inspection, I notice that the badge reads "Shadyside Fire Dept."

"Have you ever thought about being a firefighter?" I ask, turning to TJ.

He looks over at the woman in the uniform. She holds a pamphlet about the various programs offered to get a career in emergency services, but TJ doesn't step up to inspect it.

"Nah," TJ replies. "I'll probably do English or philosophy or something along those lines."

"What can you get with a philosophy degree?" I question.

TJ ponders for a moment then answers, "A Philosophy teacher."

I chuckle, and he grins, taking a step forward to continue on to the next table, but I stay in my place, making him swing back to where he was. I let go of his hand to go up and look at the pamphlets on the table, picking up one that lists all the different programs the school offers.

"They have several different social work, counselling, and Psychology programs," I tell TJ.

"Are you planning to be a therapist like your parents?" he asks me.

"I'm considering it," I say. "I've been told I'm good at reading people."

I set the pamphlet down on the table and step back to take TJ's hand again. When I look at him now, he's smiling softly down at me.

"You'd make a great therapist or counsellor or whatever you want to be," he says.
I give him a smile in return and start walking with him again. We don't get far before I spot Jonah and Walker laughing together a small distance away from us. They don't seem to be too focused on the post-secondary fair, but more on each other as they giggle together, standing about as close as TJ and I used to stand back when we were in middle school. I call out to them, and Jonah's head snaps over to see me. At my wave, the two boys come over.

"Hey," I say. "What schools are you looking at?"

"I'm not sure," Jonah answers. "I'm just looking at places where I can study music."

"I'm looking at Utah Valley University," Walker says. "It offers a lot of various art degrees."

"Yeah, that's the one Andi's applying to," I say.

"Really?" Jonah says in bubbly surprise.

"Jonah," I respond, "she's your girlfriend. You didn't know that?"

Jonah glances to Walker. I can see the confusion appear on his face as though I just brought up a fact he'd forgotten. Walker doesn't have an apparent reaction, but he seems to be communicating silently with Jonah, saying something I don't have authorization to hear.

Jonah lets out a shy laugh, "I guess I have a bad memory," he says. Almost immediately after, he changes the subject, pointing off to the right. "Hey, Walker, that table has snacks!"

He grabs Walker's hand, showing an impulse I'm oh so familiar with, before realizing what he's done and letting go. A red blush powders both Jonah and Walker's faces as Jonah gets flustered and motions for Walker to follow him away from TJ and me.

When they've left, TJ tilts his head down to get closer to my ear and whispers, "When do you think he's going to accept his feelings and tell Andi the truth?"

I turn to him, smirking, "Probably around the same time Andi accepts her feelings for Amber and tells Jonah the truth."

TJ's POV

Present day

I step into the station and immediately smell pizza. Where the scent wafts from, I can't tell. There's nobody on the bottom floor, just the three red firetrucks and a hole where I assume one must usually be. As I step further in, I begin to hear talking coming from the second floor. A spiral staircase leads up to the balcony that overlooks the rest of the station and has access to six fire poles. Following the sound of the voices, I make my way up the stairs. At the top, about fifteen or so people sit around a long table, sharing slices from a tall stack of pizza boxes. They don't notice me at first, not until I approach their table.

The tallest one, a man with a slightly crooked nose and a stubbly chin, stands up when he sees me. Everyone else turns their sight to follow his, painting smiles on their faces.
"You must be the new guy," says the man. "Thelonious, right?"

"TJ," I correct him. "And you must be the captain."

"Call me Flax," he replies. Then he gestures to a nearby table with only three chairs left at it. "Pull up and chair and take a seat."

Feeling the nerves of being new drain out of me, I drag a chair up to the corner space, between two guys I don't know. After a quick round of names, the conversation resumes on the far side of the table, and a new one starts among the people near me.

"So, TJ," starts the woman across from me, Copper, "you seem pretty young. You fresh out of school?"

"No, I was actually with the 14 before coming here to the 33," I answer. "I'm 25."

"And married?" Paul, the man to my left, says, noticing my silicone wedding band.

"Eh, how many years?" Another man, Hunt, asks.

"Three days," I reply.

That gets me grins of surprise from the whole end of the table, followed by a stream of congratulations. Jesse, the guy to my right, gives my shoulder a pat.

"Welcome to the married life," he says while chewing a bite of his pizza. "What's her name?"

"Whose?" I reflect, unsure of what he's asking.

"Your wife's," Jesse clarifies.

"Uh, well, I don't have one of those, but my husband's name is Cyrus."

A short silence falls on the table as my new team processes the information, but Jesse adjusts quickly to respond.

"Oh, cool," he says. "What does he do?"

"He's a child therapist," I answer.

"That's what my nephew is," Copper says.

All of a sudden, the bell blares, sparking us all onto our feet. Instantly, Captain Flax starts bellowing orders, giving almost everyone a task. All the mentioned names rush to propel themselves down the fire poles. By the time he's finished giving orders, mine is the only name left uncalled.

"Uh, Captain," I call, hurrying up to the giant man. He looks down at me as I ask, "What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to watch the station," he answers.

"You want me to stay here?" I say. The excitement that came from joining the team for pizza sinks in an instant.

"It's nothing personal," he insists. "We just have this team dynamic worked out, and it'd just be easier if you just sat this one out."
He gives my back a hard pat before walking off toward the fire poles.

I stand, dumbfounded, not sure how to feel. I guess it makes sense. I did just get here. But I was also hoping to be a part of the team today, and this feels like being stuck outside some glass clubhouse they're all in.

Copper's voice catches my attention as she passes by. "Welcome to being the new guy."

Chapter End Notes

Happy Halloween! Yeah, that's basically it. I love you all, so have a good night!
Parents

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Cyrus' POV

8 Years Ago

TJ paces the carpet of my room, while I sit cross-legged on my bed, watching him carefully. His anxiety is so prominent he practically glows with it, muting the red of my walls with a darkness that chokes the light out of the room. This is an example of one of the few times when I wish I wasn't so connected to him, for his fear stings my body, trapping my muscles in stiffness that I can't break. I rarely see him like this, but this is a situation he's never been in before—and it's one he's willingly putting himself in. He wants to come out to his parents.

"Maybe this is a mistake," TJ says, making a complete one-eighty from where he previously was on this idea. "Amber hasn't told mom and dad. Maybe she has a good reason."

"Maybe," I say.

"But I'm not her, right?"

"Right."

"And If I want to tell them, then I can. But how?"

"TJ," I say, interrupting his train of thought. "I know you, and I know that you can do anything if you believe you can. You are the bravest person I know."

TJ stops his pacing and just stands there in the middle of the room. However, his eyes wander around the space aimlessly like bumblebees.

"I'm scared," he utters, releasing a heavy breath with the words.

At that, I undo my legs from their position and stand up off the bed. His hand stops shaking as soon as I touch it and take it in mine, and he looks me in the eye.

"You don't have to do this if you don't want to," I remind him. "Don't come out if you're not sure it's safe."

TJ takes his other hand and closes it over mine. Then he gives me a small smile.

"I'm gonna do it," he says. "Right now."

He drops my hand and starts toward my bedroom door, but my voice catches him on the way out, causing him to look back and listen to me say, "TJ."

I keep my eyes firmly on his, letting my racing heartbeat drown out the sound of the subtle air blowing through the vents on the floor.
"No matter what happens," I tell him, "I love you."

His face melts into a soft smile as he responds, "I love you too."

Then he leaves, not using enough force to close the door fully, so there's still a sliver of silent space between it and the doorframe.

Present Day

After hearing the doorbell, I open up the door to meet my new patient with a smile. What I see is not unusual. A boy stands with his arms crossed, eyes down on the ground. His father has his hand on the boy's shoulder, and he extends his free one out to shake mine.

"Hi," I say. The 13 year-old doesn't look at me, but his dad gives me a smile. "I'm Dr. Cyrus Kippen."

"Hi," the man says. "I'm Ron, and this is Jamie, my son."

Ron shakes Jamie's shoulder, and the boy gets the hint and drops his arms.

"Hi," he mutters.

"Okay, well," his dad huffs, "I'll leave him to you."

Ron gives his son a pat on his shoulder before stepping down the porch steps and back to his car, leaving Jamie standing outside alone. I know from experience that it often takes a while for the kids to warm up to me, so Jamie's hesitation is expected, but it still saddens me to see him so nervous.

"Come on in," I say.

Surprisingly, he does so right away, and I gently close the door behind him. The boy takes off his shoes and starts scanning my home.

"So how are you?" I ask him, trying to sound as kind as possible without sounding like I'm talking to a child, knowing that would only cause him to feel disrespected.

He shrugs in response.

"Okay, well, why don't you follow me down the hall to my office—"

"Why is it so empty?" Jamie interrupts.

He wanders into the living room, looking around at the bare space. There's still no television, but there are a few pillows on the couch which Andi sewed and designed for TJ and I as a wedding gift. I can tell he's stalling, hoping to waste as much time as he can before starting his therapy session, but I want him to feel comfortable, so I play along.

"I just moved in," I answer.

He looks around, walking into the kitchen to examine the space. He freezes in his place when his sight falls on the framed photo on the wall. It's one of TJ and my wedding pictures. In it, we're dressed in our suits and facing each other with our foreheads together in front of a background of
blurry foliage.

"Who's this?" Jamie asks, turning to meet my eyes for the first time.

"That's my husband," I reply.

The boy returns his gaze to the photo, waiting for a minute before responding, "You have a husband?"

"Yes," I confirm.

Jamie doesn't move. He just stands there, and I can see his hands trembling as he stares at the image. Now I think I know why he's here, though I do wonder if his dad knows why he's here or if he just thinks he's troubled, maybe depressed or anxious. But all of that remains yet to be uncovered.

"Are you ready to come to the office now?" I ask after a moment of nothing.

Jamie turns away from the photo and gives me a gesture that is so simple yet lets me know that I've earned some bit of his trust: he nods.

The lightbulbs in the house work hard to combat the blackness of the night, but they do a poor impersonation of daylight, pasting a yellow coating on every wall and object within them. Having just finished with Jamie, I'm now busy writing a list of groceries to buy. I'm surprised TJ's not home yet, and when I hear the home phone ring, I think it must be him, but the number that appears on the screen is one I don't recognize, so I let it go to voicemail. But the message that sounds out over the speaker isn't a telemarketer as I expected, and I drop my pencil to listen to the voices which I haven't heard since I was 17.

"TJ," crackles a woman's voice, "it's your mother. I know your dad and I haven't spoken to you in a long time, but we realized that we were wrong to give up on you. We should've tried harder rather than get mad. Could you call us back please?"

I stand with my mouth agape. How did they even get our number? What do they want from TJ?

Suddenly, the front door knob twists, and in comes my husband. After kicking off his shoes and hanging his coat on the rack, he comes over to greet me in the kitchen. My shocked face changes to a smile, and he approaches and wraps his arms around me to pull me in to a gentle kiss.

"How was your first day with the new unit?" I ask as he lets me go.

"Well, I didn't step foot out of the station," he says.

"What?"

"It's because I'm new," he explains, his eyes flicking downward. "I'm sure tomorrow will be better."

TJ frowns. He's already not feeling too great, so I'm hesitant to bring up the call from his parents, but TJ notices my expression of contemplation and questions me on it.

"Everything okay?"

"Well," I start, "your parents called."

He takes a step back, clearly not sure how to take in this information. Then he shakes his head.
"No," he says. "It can't be them. I've been dead to them for eight years."

"Listen for yourself," I say, gesturing to the answering machine.

TJ goes over immediately, eager to prove me wrong, but the reality turns him to stone as soon as he presses play. He stays motionless after it's finished playing, and I go over to put my hand on his shoulder. He brings his own up to touch mine and laces our fingers together. Then he brings our hands down to hang between us.

"I don't get it," he says. "Why are they calling now? It's been eight fucking years, and they call now?"

His grip on my hand is tight, probably due to the stress he's feeling right now, and I withstand it because I know he needs a strong support.

"Try not to worry about it," I say gently. "Nothing they do or say now can take away the life you have," I remind him. "Take a breath."

He draws in a lungful of air, letting it out in one long puff. His grip relaxes a little as the tension in his muscles releases.

"I wonder if Amber got a call too," TJ says.

"You can find out tomorrow," I tell him. "For now, you should focus on getting a good sleep."

He nods and lets my hand fall. He takes a step toward the hallway before turning back ask me, "You coming?"

"In a minute," I reply. "I'm just gonna finish up this grocery list."

His eyes flick over to where the pencil and notepad sit on the countertop.

"Sorry, I couldn't get those tonight," he says.

"Don't apologize," I say. "It's okay."

He smiles and starts to turn around, but he looks back once more as I speak again.

"TJ," I say, "I love you."

"I know," he says with a smile. "You married me." He lets the words float for a second before adding, "I love you too."

"I know," I respond, echoing back what he just said. "You married me."

Chapter End Notes

I think this is really cute. I hope y'all like the story so far, and there's a lot of just interesting things to come. I like where it's going. Anyway, if you haven't already done so, make sure to check out my new Ambi story, Control. It's going to be pretty different (in a good way) from what I'm written so far, and I'm excited to push the boundaries on my writing abilities. Thank you so much for reading. Happy daylight savings, and have
a good night!
"You're lucky," Amber states.

Her eyes are firm on the road, staring into the darkness of the country roads beyond the range of the headlights. Every once in a while, a streetlight glows down on us like a heating element in a toaster, but it does nothing to fight the cold air. I see another car's headlights fly past us light fireflies before drenching us back in the stillness of 1:24 a.m.

I keep my eyes turned out the window. Although she's not my mom, she likes to think she knows better than me, and it kills me—especially when I know she's right.

"I don't understand why you started hanging out with Reed and Lester again—"

"Because, Amber—" I cut her off, my voice cracking into a squeak. I pause, trying not to let myself cry, but my headache pounds on my skull, screaming at me to let everything out that I'm trying to contain. "I'm . . . It's hard."

She looks at me softer now, realizing that this isn't some act of rebellion but just misdirection. I know Reed and Lester aren't the best, and Reed certainly isn't much different now than he was when we were 13. Now that he's 18, it's even easier for him to do stupid stuff.

"I just don't want to pick up my phone next time to hear someone telling me you were shot and not someone's property."


Glancing between me and the road, she reaches out to touch my hand in an attempt to calm me.

"It'll get easier," she promises.

She gives me a smile, and I try to smile back, but I just can't get past my mood.

What happens next comes in a blur. I look back to the road, but it's not the road we're headed toward. Within milliseconds, I hear the crumple of the hood of the car as it collides with a tree trunk, the shatter of glass spikes my ears as the airbag steals my vision, and my sister's scream stings the air, ringing even after her voice is gone.

The airbag releases, and I look over to my sister in the driver's seat. Her eyes are closed, and her head is bleeding from a large gash right above her eyebrow. I outstretch my arm to give her a light shake, noticing that my own hand is dripping red as well, but I can't feel it.
"Amber!" I shout, but I get no response.

I can hear the blood pulsing through my skull, and I search for the training I've had since I was a kid on what to do in situations like this. My phone's screen is so bright it hurts my head, and my fingers have been jolted so much that it's hard to get them to follow orders from my brain, but I manage to type the numbers: 911.

I'm sure it's longer than a minute, but it all seems to happen to fast. I hear sirens approaching, and the flash of lights colours everything around me. Then the voices come, the voices I will never forget. These are the voices that will echo in my mind whenever I look at my sister again. They are the reason she will be alive tomorrow. These are what angels sound like, whether you believe in heaven or not. And from this moment on, I know I want to be one of those voices for someone else—the sound of hope that they will be able to see another sunrise.

Present Day

"Nice place," Amber says as she steps into my house. "When are you gonna get the rest of it?"

She laughs, but I just shake my head at the joke.

"If you want to buy me some furniture, that'd be great," I respond with a chuckle.

She drapes her jacket over the coatrack and passes by me toward the kitchen. She stops and spins around in the space to get a full look at it.

"You weren't kidding when you said you need to go shopping," she says. "You don't even have a kettle?"

"Nope."

She shakes her head in fake disappointment then pulls out a chair to sit down at the table. I join her, taking the other end of the structure.

"So," she says, "I do believe you had a different reason for inviting me over—as much as I'm sure you love me judging your place."

"I do," I say. "I wanted to ask you about something. I got a call from Mom and Dad yesterday."

"You too, huh?" she says bitterly. "Yeah, I deleted the message as soon as I heard who it was from."

"You weren't curious?" I ask. "About what they had to say?"

"TJ, they threw us both out without a second thought. We weren't their kids unless we were straight. I spent years dwelling on that fact. They stole so much of my life already, and I'm not going to let them take any more of it."

I focus down at my hands on the table, considering what she's saying. As much pain as they caused me, I want to believe that they might want to make it right. There's no way they can be just heartless. Anyone, even the coldest people on this earth, feel guilt. Is it that strange for me to think my parents might feel guilty and want to make things right?

"I think I'm going to give them a chance," I say. "If they want to apologize, I should at least hear
what they have to say."

I can tell by Amber's face that she doesn't agree with me, but she doesn't say so.

"You're a grown adult who can make his own decisions," she says. "I'm not in charge of you anymore."

"Even when you were in charge of me, it's not like I ever listened to you," I say with a grin.

"True," she concurs.

We share a chuckle, going silent when it fades, surly both caught up in the memories of when it was just the two of us trying to win at life.

"Thank you," I say, causing her to turn her eyes back up to me. "I don't think I said that enough. You didn't have to leave with me, but you did. You've always been there for me."

She gives me a gentle smile. "I'm your big sister. I would never not be there for you."

Chapter End Notes

Here's another chapter! That's all I'm gonna say, because I want to get working on the next chapter. I love you all. Good night!
"You're still unpacking?" Buffy questions. "How much stuff do you have?"

The girl peaks over my shoulder, trying to sneak a peak at what I'm looking at. I knew when I agreed to share a dorm with her that the next few years at Shadyside University would be a lot of her getting even more into my life than she already was, and even though I would usually not care, I know that she will certainly have an opinion about this, me staring at an old photo of TJ and me from back when we were in high school. It's the last good photo we took together, a selfie of us on his couch, my chin on his shoulder, eyes gazing up at his lips. He kissed me after that. I remember it. I remember everything about him—his seafoam green eyes, the slight crookedness of his smile, the way he touched me so delicately like a treasure he couldn't bear to lose. It's ironic thinking about that now.

Although I press the photo against my chest in an attempt to block it from Buffy's view, she's already seen it, and she immediately goes into overprotective best friend mode.

"No, Cyrus, don't do this to yourself," she orders. "Get rid of that."

I can't even respond. I know she's right. I know that it's not healthy for me to be holding on to this picture. It only makes me miss him more.

"I've never tried it for myself, but Kaitlin's told me that when she breaks up with a boy, she takes every old photo she has of them and burns them in a fire pit," Buffy illustrates.

"I'm not burning this," I reply in a heartbeat. No matter how much I need to forget about TJ and move on, I refuse to do something so permanent, so tragical, to this piece of paper which depicts who held my heart for the past five years. He still holds it, even though he tried to give it back.

"Fine," Buffy huffs. "Then just give it to me. I'll keep it safe and away from you so that you can move on."

Reluctantly, I hold out the photo, and Buffy swipes it away so fast I have no time to change my mind. She walks it over to her dresser and pulls out a little, wooden box then tucks it into there. I frown at her from where I'm kneeling next to my suitcase on the carpet, not purposefully wanting to give her this expression. I just can't hide my sadness.

"You'll be okay," Buffy assures me. "You'll meet someone else in no time, and pretty soon you'll forget he ever existed."

I know that's supposed to be comforting, but it's not. I don't want to forget him. I don't want to move on from him. I want him back. But he doesn't want me.
"You know he's hanging out with Reed and Lester again now?" I mention.

Buffy raises her eyebrows at me. "How do you know that?"

"I—" I sigh. "I saw it on his Instapic."

She instantly holds out her open palm, saying, "Give me your phone."

I do as asked, unlocking it for her. I know exactly what she's doing, and I know it's only best for me.

"There," she says as she passes me back the device. "You are not following him anymore."

I look at the screen, curious more than anything about what the blue bar by his name says. A throb hits my chest when I see that it says "follow back" rather than just "follow." He's still following me. But only digitally. In person, he hasn't spoken to me in a month.

I'm not sure if it's for myself or for him—to give myself an extra guard or to force him to let me go—but I tap the three dots in the top right corner of his profile page. The options pop up, and I press the one I never once imagined I'd press on his profile. I press "block."

Present Day

By the time Jamie and I are finished with his session, TJ is already home. When Jamie exits my office and sees my husband sitting on the couch with his feet up on the coffee table, he bolts in his direction. I've never seen him so excited before. He skids to a stop in front of TJ, and TJ looks up from his phone.

"Hi," Jamie says.

"Hi," TJ responds.

He flicks his eyes over to me, silently wondering what's going on, but I just shrug, not knowing the answer.

"You're Cyrus' husband?" Jamie asks.

"I am," TJ answers, a smile spreading on his face.

"I'm Jamie."

The boy sticks out his hand, and TJ politely takes it to shake.

"Nice to meet you, Jamie. I'm TJ."

Jamie grins wide looking at TJ, but responds after a moment, "Unfortunately, my dad is waiting for me outside, but I'm ecstatic that I had the opportunity to make your acquaintance."

TJ and I share a glance, both surprised by the 13 year-old's vocabulary.

Jamie heads toward the door, giving TJ and I one last wave before stepping out to the street. I close the door behind him, and TJ stands up to come over to me.
"He's interesting," TJ says, "a ball of energy."

"He wasn't that way the first time I met him," I respond, "but he seems to have become more comfortable with me, and apparently you too."

TJ puts his arm around me to give me a little side hug. Then he moves on to a new topic.

"Do you want to go out for dinner tonight?" he asks me.

"Actually," I say, "I promised Buffy we'd watch Sabrina. She and Marty are having a date night, and they needed a babysitter."

"You said I'd babysit?" he says with a laugh. "And they agreed? They're entrusting me with their kid's life?"

"I think Marty's hoping if she spends enough time around you, she might become a star basketball player," I joke. "Between you and Buffy, I think it would be inevitable."

"Well, if that's the goal, then how can I say no," TJ replies.

"Wonderful." I get on my tiptoes to kiss his cheek then say, "They expect us there in fifteen minutes."

"Fifteen minutes?" TJ echoes.

"Yes," I confirm. "So let's go."

TJ looks taken aback by the short notice, and I can't help but chuckle a little at that as I reach for my coat.

Buffy and Marty live in a quaint, two-story house with plenty of character. Arabian-style tiles coat the kitchen floor, and white cabinets with funky, floral edges hold their items. Now that Sabrina is in bed, TJ is busy washing the dishes, which are all colourful plastic plates and cups to avoid being broken by the baby. After spending the evening playing and entertaining her, TJ and I are both a little tired. I can't imagine how Buffy and Marty must feel all the time.

"Has everything else been cleaned up?" I ask.

"I think so," TJ responds.

"Great," I say. "Then I'm gonna go check on Sabrina."

TJ glances back at me with a grin. "Man, you just can't leave that baby alone, eh?"

"She's so cute," I reason.

He lets out a breathy chuckle and turns back to his work. I go toward the stairs to head up to Sabrina's room. A tiny elephant-shaped nightlight illuminates the pale blue wall in a small ring of light by the floor. On the far end of the room, a crib sits in the shadows, and I quietly go over to see the baby lying soundless in it. She's not crying anymore like she was when I left her to go to sleep. Now she's motionless like a little doll, and I can't help but feel a little jealous of my friends who have been blessed with the opportunity to raise this little girl.

Suddenly, I feel a pair of arms wrap around me, and a warm kiss is pressed to my head. My eyes stay
on the tiny human in the crib, but my body softens in TJ's embrace. In the quiet of the moment, a thought comes to my head.

"TJ," I say, "have you thought about having kids someday?"

TJ and I sway together gently as we stand, and his voice comes in a whisper.

"I think that's something I want at some point in my life," he replies.

"Me too," I agree.

"I'm glad we're on the same page." He waits for a moment before adding, "You're going to be an amazing dad."

In response, I don't say anything. Instead, I spin to face him and bring my lips to his. We stay together, letting our kiss fill the silence with its own music, a song that can't be heard but can be felt louder than any sound produced by the Earth alone. We are something greater than the physical universe.

Chapter End Notes

None of you were wondering why TJ was so upset in last chapter's flashback, eh? Well, it wasn't because of his parents. Uh, thanks for reading. I love you all. Let me know your opinion on, I don't know, Christmas carols before December.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!