

Us.

\*\*Trigger warning: references to suicide

For the first time out of the nearly half way done school year, he wasn't late.

In fact, he was *early*.

It had been an anxious walk. Like his body was made up of nothing but nerves.

Lots and *lots* of nerves.

But it wasn't the sound of his alarm that got him here this early.

It was the girl that couldn't care less about the worn backpack she wore every day that looked as if it had seen better days, except there *were* no better days.

It was the boy that, in contrast, couldn't help but stop over and over again to check that his backpack wasn't open.

Myla and Adam.

That's why Elijah was here.

He hadn't felt this motivated in a long time.

He didn't think he was capable of feeling his heart run a marathon in his chest, or of being so focused on what he was walking toward that no one else seemed to exist.

It made him feel both at peace and terrified at the same time.

Getting closer to their lockers, he figured Adam would be one of the few early birds already at school, like the goody two-shoes he was.

He was probably already at his locker.

Myla would be there not long after.

But it turned out he was only half right.

Because when he reached the lockers upstairs, they were both there.

His motivation-powered tank hit a pothole and he couldn't help starting to stall his steps, practically frozen in the middle of the deserted hallway.

He thought he'd have to wait for a while until Myla dragged herself to school as she always did, and until Adam finished organizing his locker for the millionth time, and then maybe that would've given Elijah enough time to think of how he was going to say what should have been said too long ago.

But they were both right *there*.

It suddenly felt so real that he was going to talk to them that it was starting to *not* feel real.

Under the warm glow of the sunlight, they almost looked like ghosts.

Like if he made one wrong move, they'd disappear forever.

Did he miss them that much?

He really did.

Though they never spoke, he *missed* them. Even as he was with his own friends and they were with their own.

*At least their friends don't tell them never to talk to them again*, he thought.

But he paused that thought away and took it in with a sharp breath that made his throat dry, killing a potential "Hi" he was about to utter.

He took in the fact that the thing that small part of him imagined happening, was happening.

He almost always imagined what it'd be like if he just said *something*.  
But that thought had never left the imagination room tucked away in his brain. He never thought of actually doing it.  
He'd made a choice on that day, when he pushed them out of his life when they'd been more than willing to stay.  
So he had to stay away.  
That choice was like a rule that he firmly stuck to.  
But rules were meant to be broken.  
He didn't have all day.  
About six heavy steps later, he found himself being the closest he'd ever been to two people he used to be glued to.  
Adam was organizing his locker, like he figured.  
Myla was just about done with hers, and after shutting it with a force that felt just a little too personal to be directed at an inanimate object, she turned around.  
He could barely understand his own emotions sometimes, but Elijah had no doubt that the jump of Myla's eyebrows and the silent gasp written on her face could be a result of only shock.  
He probably looked no different.  
For a second he didn't know what to do.  
Say *something*, he chided himself internally.  
"Hi."  
Myla blinked. Then, "Hi."  
He wasn't sure what made Adam turn around, too.  
Maybe it was the fact that his locker was only three away from Myla's and he just had to see if the greeting behind him looked as awkward as it sounded.  
(It did.)  
And then Elijah was staring at his wide-eyed face, too.  
He had to force himself to speak a second time. "Uhh, hi."  
"Hi."  
Though even more awkward than he thought it'd be, the moment was happening.  
So he took a deep breath.  
And he told Myla and Adam that he wanted, *needed*, to talk to them.  
They agreed on meeting after school, right where they stood, at the lockers.  
God, it'd been awkward, but Elijah didn't get the sense that they didn't care.  
They'd known each other both never and forever, after all.  
All he'd gotten in response was an "Okay" from Adam and a nod from Myla.  
But Adam's "Okay" was firm.  
And Myla's nod was sharp.  
And there was something in the air, unspoken but strong, and felt by all of them.  
It was something that told them that when that dismissal bell rang at the end of the day, they'd all be at the lockers, right back where they started.

When Myla had turned around to be face to face with none other than Elijah, she'd had two reactions. The first was shock.

He hadn't spoken to them for a whole year.

But now he was. He'd finally pierced that bubble of silence that had stretched itself out over the three of them.

He was finally talking to them again.

But that was also what brought on her second reaction.

Because there was a small part in Myla that felt *angry* that after waiting for one whole year, he decided that it was *now* he needed to talk to them.

That thought had the potential to spread across her suddenly much brighter sky like black, murky ink, clouding her vision until she couldn't see what was most important, the star in her sky.

That she, Elijah and Adam were really going to talk.

Even as she walked to class, it was all she could think about.

And for the first time out of the nearly half way done school year, she wasn't half asleep in class.

Even Elijah seemed to sit a little straighter in his seat in biology, and Adam wasn't taking notes like his life depended on it in history.

Had Elijah always been that attentive in class?

Had Adam always been able to take his time?

Maybe it'd always been that way, and she'd been half asleep too many times to notice.

But now, the agonizingly steady ticking hands of the clock on the wall was *all* she could notice.

It was *watching* her, because it knew she was watching it right back.

With every minute that passed, there was a new anxiety-inducing thought to come with it.

*What's Elijah going to say?*

*Is it good news?*

*Are we really going to be friends again?*

*Or is this all too good to be-*

Her thoughts were trampled by the busy feet making their eager exit out of class.

The dismissal bell had sounded, signifying the end of the day, and the beginning of something she always wanted.

A couple of minutes and more awkward greetings later, it was time to find out.

It was silent, their walk out of the school.

"Hey, *Elijah*."

And then it was broken.

"How about I tell you what I think."

That small angry thing inside of Myla had crawled its way up to the very front of her mind, where she could no longer suppress it.

And it was when Elijah batted his eyelashes cluelessly at her, as if he had no idea what could put such a purely bitter look on her face, that blew the lid off the bottle.

"I think it's unfair how you pushed us away. I think it's unfair how you told us to *never talk to you again*." She looked more sad than anything as she continued. "And I think it's so unfair how of all people, you did this to *us*. And after a year of not noticing our existences, *now* you suddenly need to talk. What could you *possibly* have to say?"

Elijah wasn't great at talking about his feelings. He knew that. He often instead acted so fast that it gave no one time to catch up.

Not even himself.

Maybe that was why he was here.

But he wouldn't need his therapist to help him this time.

Almost anyone would be able to say the two words flashing, *screaming* at him in his mind.

"I'm sorry."

And then he told them everything that went on in his mind since the day he tried to end his life.

He told them how everything changed.

Every moment they spent together didn't feel like hanging out anymore.

It was always about him.

Did he eat enough?

How'd he sleep?

Why was he wearing long sleeves again?

It was all just another way of asking one question.

*Are you going to try to kill yourself again?*

He knew what it was like to have a crushing weight on your back.

He knew it well enough to know that was exactly what he was becoming for them.

"You're the last people I wanted to be a burden to. But that's what I was during *every* moment we were together. Everyone's got to put down a weight *that* heavy at some point."

Elijah didn't know how long the pause lasted for after he spoke. He was too busy staring at the uneven cracks in the sidewalk, unable to look at his old friends.

It was Adam that broke the silence this time.

"You know, you're pretty stupid, Elijah."

That made him look up, confused and slightly offended.

"You don't get it. Do you have *any* idea just how much you mean to us?" Elijah could only stare. So Adam went on. "A burden is defined as being a typically heavy load. Not someone that could make you laugh even after the worst mental breakdown. Not someone who no matter what time you called them at, no matter how tired their voice sounded on the phone, wouldn't stop listening to you until you got everything out. And certainly *not* someone who'd tell you you're smarter than *Albert Einstein* even after you got a fifty on a test."

Elijah was finding it hard to look in Adam's eyes now, because he *remembered* those times.

But it wouldn't get easier.

"He's right." Myla spoke softly, all bitterness from before gone without a trace on her.

"It's *because* you meant so much to us that we always wanted to make sure you were okay, Elijah. What you call a burden, we call someone that made us *happy* by just being himself."

Listening to their words, it was like he was meeting himself for the first time.

He was someone who was reliable, someone who instead of adding weight to their backs, actually took some of it off.

By simply being himself.

Their words seemed to comfort the saddest parts within him.

*You're not a burden.*

*You make us happy.*

*We love you.*

He'd pushed them away, and though they could've done the same, they didn't.

They instead came back to him, not chasing after him in desperation, but with arms outstretched, ready to take him back in when he was ready to take those first steps forward.

Where had he managed to find friends like these?

Elijah knew he wasn't good at talking about his feelings.

But he was starting to realize that he wasn't any better at hearing others express such *sincere* feelings about him so openly either.

Because he found it *really* difficult to lift his tear-stained face to look at them.

Voice as gentle as the new atmosphere around them, Myla coaxed him into looking up.

And so he did, to be met with the gazes of his friends.

Not wide-eyed and awkward like this morning.

He was just looking at *them*.

"Hey, Elijah."

Adam's voice blended into the comfortable silence that had settled over them, now bringing them together rather than keeping them apart.

"Yeah?"

"Your nose is crying."

And at the ridiculousness of such an observation that could only be worded like that by Adam himself, they were laughing.

It suddenly felt so easy. Like it always had been.

"Shut up and come here." Elijah muttered, and they were pulled into a much needed, much overdue embrace.

When they let go, Elijah admitted a confession. "You know, I pulled an all-nighter last night. I thought about you guys."

Myla smiled. "I did, too. I went out for a drive. And I thought about you guys, too."

How could that be? They both pulled all-nighters on the same night?

"Funny thing is," Adam chimed in. "I pulled an all-nighter, too. And you guys were there! You were ghosts."

Elijah gave him a proud ruffle of his hair. "Well, I guess I won't get to call you goody-two-shoes anymore."

Myla looked ready to go off on Elijah for thinking that the top student losing sleep and possibly having gotten high enough to see ghosts was a *good* thing.

"*Elijah.*"

*Let the lecture begin.*

It was a Friday, so there'd be plenty of time for the three of them to walk by the park and talk about the past. They'd talk about the memories, happy and painful, that defined their friendship. Indeed, there was plenty of time.

*Later.*

So, Adam watched with an amused smile as Elijah ran from an annoyed and therefore unpredictable Myla, whom he'd definitely provoked with a sarcastic comment.

*Yup.* Adam thought. *Everything's as it should be.*