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jeffery self

*PUSH*

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# NOW

I AM NOT A BAD person. I'm not a great person either, but not bad. No matter how it might seem, no matter what I did.

Stupid? Yes.

Desperate? Yes.

Completely and totally lost beyond all belief? Absolutely-damn-lutely.

But not a bad person.

I'm someone who wanted to make a difference. I'm a nobody who wanted to be a somebody.

Up until a few months ago I was just another snarky gay kid from Winston-Salem, North Carolina, watching life through the disconnected Instagram filter of my generation and judging every minute of it. Now I'm in New York City, safely tucked away into yet another dressing room with my name written across the door in bold, joyous letters—the kind of happy letters that should never be associated with the kind of cause we're here to shed light upon. (*Shedding light* is something I've been

asked to do a lot in these past few months, and I'm still not sure what the hell it even means.)

I can hear the crowd of three hundred or so very rich people cheering. Some D-list pop star whose name I can't remember and who recently came out of the closet the day his new album dropped (zero coincidence, I'm *sure*) is singing a song that sounds like a thousand other pop songs I've heard before.

*"Love me for who I am . . . and for who you are . . . and for who we all are and for who they are,"* he sings, including just about everything in his lyrics except a rhyme scheme.

I try not to judge this pop star, but it's hard. Judging pop stars is a part of my DNA, like having green eyes or preferring bubble baths over showers.

There's a rundown order taped to the door listing all of the evening's performers and speakers. One more singer, the cast of Broadway's *Wicked*, and three more speeches before I have to go out and accept the award. Roughly thirty minutes for me to change my mind, to chicken out and allow this whole charade to continue.

I should not be here. I know that now and I knew it before, but I wasn't paying attention. I was so caught up in my anger, in my rage to fix everything. There was too much going on to pay attention until I woke up from the nightmare and realized it was too late. For the first time in my life I've been given something to wake up for, something to accomplish, a reason, a something, a *purpose*. Besides getting the ability to fly or winning a lifetime supply of freshly baked blueberry scones, discovering your purpose in life is one of the greatest things that can happen

to a human being. Or so that's what every teacher, book, movie, television show, motivational speaker, and Bono says.

In the past few months, I have attended so many events like this one. I am as over it as Britney Spears has been on every award show she's performed on since 2004. I can't possibly stand in front of another step and repeat, smiling and claiming that "it gets better." I mean, does it? Sure, I've been flown around the country, getting to rub elbows with the most famous gay people in the world. Sure, everyone calls me a trailblazer. Sure, I saved our house. Sure, I've been interviewed by *Time* and CNN and even got to high-five Kathie Lee Gifford on live television . . . but none of it has been real or earned or right. I have *done* something. I have become a somebody, but by doing so I feel more like a nobody than ever before. So . . . did it get better?

Maybe for me. Not for Christopher.

But I can't think about Christopher.

Except I always think about Christopher.

If he asked me, "What are you doing here?" would I even have an answer other than "I have absolutely no freaking clue"?

Harrison, my manager and media consultant (whatever *that* means), has gone out to complain to someone about there being no Fiji Water in my dressing room. According to Harrison, this is a very big deal. I couldn't care less—I'll drink any water you put in front of me as long as it's clear and doesn't have fish swimming in it. Regardless, it's nice to be alone for a moment.

Harrison has left me with the speech I'm to give, accepting my Leading Change Award. Harrison wrote it for me—it's a good speech, because despite being a genuine mess, Harrison is a good writer. Apparently he used to write speeches for important people like senators and Susan Sarandon. According to Harrison and the *New York Times*, I am now one of these important people. This is the kind of speech that will be interrupted countless times for applause and cheering—the moments are literally written in. This is the kind of speech that will inevitably go online and be posted within hours on every gay blog and liberal media outlet celebrating how much of a hero I am.

*Hero* used to mean very little to me, aside from being a way to describe the hot spandex-clad dudes in comic book movies or Oprah. Nowadays, it's a word I hear a lot.

No one but my best friend, Audrey, knows what's folded up in my pocket, what I've scribbled down on a ripped-out page from my journal. What I stayed up all night last night writing when the guilt got too overwhelming to even consider sleep as an option.

I stare at myself in the mirror. I look way better than I did before all this happened. I'm in a fancy suit, I've got an expensive haircut, and I'm wearing just enough stage makeup to make me look pretty yet still handsome. The baby fat that kept my face in a shape far closer to circular than I've ever been happy about is gone. Harrison has forced me to work out with a personal trainer (a legitimate monster of a woman named Kimberly) and kept me away from carbs as if they were some kind of poison.

I don't recognize myself at all.

I haven't in a very long time.

There's a knock on my dressing room door. "Come in," I say as a stage manager pokes her head in.

"You've got roughly twenty minutes, Marley," she tells me.

I thank her as she closes the door. I take a deep breath.

"You can do this," I say to myself so quietly that I wonder if it's inside my head. "It's going to be okay."

I can't get his face out of my head. Not from that awful night, but from the day in September when I saw him for the very first time and our story didn't have an ending yet.

I've never been one to buy into sappy things like "kismet" or "fate," but for the millisecond when I first laid eyes on Christopher, I did.