

*the*  
**FEELING**  
*of* **FALLING**  
**IN LOVE**

**MASON  
DEAVER**

***PUSH***

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# Thursday

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“I love you,” he says.

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

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

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

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

But no.

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

Except it isn’t.

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

“Neil?” He’s still looking at me.

“Okay.”

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

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

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

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

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

We’d both agreed to that.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

When this whole situation started up at the beginning of this

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

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

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

"I should probably leave," I say.

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

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

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

"I'm sorry," he says softly.

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

"Can't I get anything from you?"

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

“Anything,”

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

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

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

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

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

“You’re joking, right?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You don’t have to be a jerk.”

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

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

“I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

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

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

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

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

That’ll be fun.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And now that's gone.

Fan-fucking-tastic.

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

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

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

I dig into my other pocket. Just my phone.

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

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

Except it isn't there.

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

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

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

"Thank you," I say quietly.

"You were banging on the door."

"I lost my keys."