

Release Me

Through the slits in my eyes I could see the crumpled chip bags and discarded cups of our early evening feast. Three figures lay sprawled throughout the small room, arms and legs twined together like a pair of tangled headphones. It was quiet; save for the occasional snoring of the cat.

I told myself that it was the ache in my muscles keeping me awake as I lay there curled up around a pillow, watching the flashing lights of my phone send a morse code message to the glowstars in the ceiling. My back was stiff and my shoulders tense, ribs creating little shockwaves of pain whenever I inhaled too deeply. I was uncomfortable. (To say the least.)

Shifting as quietly as possible, careful to make sure the blankets didn't fall off the bed, I rolled over to see her pale eyes gazing up at me. A smile tugged at the corner of her lips and I couldn't help but let my head fall towards hers until there was only just enough room between us to breathe.

"How long have you been awake?" Her voice was softer than usual, as though she were afraid to disrupt the peace of early morning.

I gave the pillow a small squeeze and managed to keep my voice low as I replied, "Take a guess."

"Yeah." A sigh escaped her lips, "I thought that might be the case."

We fell into silence, listening to the birds beginning their pre-dawn chorus outside. I wanted so badly to reach out and take her hand, but I knew I couldn't. Not until we'd had the conversation I'd been putting off for the past week. But was I supposed to just... Tell her? Or would leading up to it be better? I'd run so many scenarios through my head and nothing felt *right*.

"Do you want to go watch the sunrise?" Her question broke into my thoughts and a blush crept up my neck when I realised I'd been staring.

"Yes."

"Come on then," She pushed herself into a sitting position, kicked the covers off, and offered me her hand. I took it, against my better judgement, and tried not to wince when my whole body

protested at the action of her helping me up. I expected her to let go once I was on my feet, but instead she began to lead me to the door. We carefully picked our way through piles of blankets, bodies and belongings, the dim light from the crack in the curtains guiding our way.

We managed to ease the door open with only the smallest creak, sneaking out into the corridor beyond. The rest of the house wasn't exactly warm, but the blanket draped over my shoulders made up for the chill creeping into my toes. She sat me on the rug in front of the window in the lounge and finally let go of my hand.

"I'm going to make myself a drink, you want anything?" I simply shook my head in reply, focusing my eyes on the landscape outside as I listened to her quiet footsteps walk away.

It wasn't long before she returned with a mug steaming in her hand like a miniature volcano. I watched her in the window as she sat behind me, scooting closer and closer until her legs lay either side of mine.

She wrapped her arms around me and let me sip from her cup of cocoa. It was creamy and warm, and not at all like the watery stuff my mum makes. The tip of the sun started to poke above the horizon, bleeding colour into the sky like a box of melting crayons, but I couldn't take my eyes off our faint reflection in the window.

I felt her trace a finger around the outline of a yellowing bruise on my wrist, her touch cool and soothing. A frown etched itself into her features as she spared glance of her own at our reflection to take stock of the scabs on my chin and my swollen black eye.

"Lacie... Do you ever feel like coming out painted a giant target on your back?" Her hand stilled. I was afraid she would be able to feel my pulse hammering against my skin - I hadn't told them much about what happened. There was no way she wouldn't piece it together now...

She placed her mug on the floor and slipped her hands into mine, thumbs tracing patterns over my knuckles. "Yeah. But then I remember how awful being in the closet was for me, and that I have people who love and support me for who I am."

I let myself get lost in the feeling of her breath on my cheek. The sky had become infinitely lighter though my heart still felt so heavy. I couldn't carry that burden forever. I took a breath in, opened my mouth, and set free the words I'd been agonizing over.

“I think I’m gay.”

She offered a gentle squeeze of comfort and replied, “You are still valid, no matter what.”

I was too tired to feel much, but that didn’t stop a few tears of relief from trailing down my cheeks. I’d known she would accept me, but saying it out loud was still so goddamn hard. Almost as hard as saying-

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Part of me said there was no way she meant it in the way I so desperately hoped she did, but now wasn’t the time to have that conversation. I had to take things one at a time.

I closed my eyes and let the light of a new day wash over me, seeping warmth into my skin. I felt safe, tucked into her gentle embrace, and I could feel my whole body relaxing. My exhaustion was overwhelming and finally I was able to succumb to the peaceful calm of sleep.