

Until Summer

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ISBN-13: 9798575505082

For Everyone Involved in Foster Care

It's hard when you're living and you don't feel much
And you're down and you're hoping that things are
gonna change

Oh, we don't know the roads that we're heading down
But we all know if we're lost, then we'll find a way

We don't know if we leave, will we make it home
But we all know, there's hope and we'll be okay

-The Strumbellas, We Don't Know

2019

Friday, October 11

Her

She was in love.

She hadn't yet said it but what else could she think about the man who sat beside her? They had plans. He had made reservations and bought her a bouquet of roses. He arrived dressed in his sportscoat and smiled big when she opened the door.

She had forgotten. Twice.

The first time was when they made their plans.

"Are you free Friday night?"

"Yes." She forgot about the game.

Then, Friday morning, Robert stepped from the bedroom wearing his jersey. He was number fifteen. It was his first night starting as the varsity quarterback.

"You'll be there, won't you?" he asked with a bashful grin.

"I wouldn't miss it."

That was the second time.

When the doorbell rang at six, she answered wearing

jeans and a Bingham High Football sweatshirt. She saw the roses and Brent's smile. Her eyes grew wide.

"Oh, shoot."

She apologized profusely. The man laughed and told her it was okay.

An hour later, they sat side-by-side in the bleachers with Declan to her left. Brent took her hand and she laid her head on his shoulder. He still wore the sportscoat. When Robert threw a touchdown, Brent was the first to jump up and scream at the top of his lungs.

She gazed at him.

Plans didn't matter. It was about her and the boys. She grinned.

In love.

Him

He sat in the car and watched as she walked through the gate, hand-in-hand with the overdressed man and followed closely by the green-haired boy. He knew he should go in too. Tanner didn't play much but the boy saw when he was there and he had yet to make a game that season.

But he didn't want her to see him.

Not like this.

When was it? Ten months ago? Eleven?

They ran into each other at the coffee shop. It was the first time they had seen each other in years. He bought her

a cup and offered to get her a cranberry muffin as well, though she declined. They sat at a little table in the corner.

“You’re looking well,” she said.

He told her how he had gotten his life together. Rehab had been successful. He had a job that paid the bills and a small apartment for him and his son. It wasn’t much, but it was better than motel hopping and living in cars. She said she was proud of him. She also had a son, the same age as Tanner, as well as a foster son who came to live with them earlier that week. He told her that was great to hear.

“Are you married?” he asked. Then, he realized the question might be too forward. He apologized for asking.

She grinned. “That’s okay, but no. I have the boys and a new job. I’m not sure where I’d fit a relationship. Are you?”

“No.”

It had been almost twenty years. They were different people, at least she was. As he sat with her, he dreamed. Perhaps they could try again, make it work? Perhaps? No. He knew better.

Even so, maybe if he would have asked for her number or asked if he could see her again, things would have been different. He still might have hurt his back but perhaps she could have helped him stay strong.

He knew pain pills were a bad idea. He thought he could manage, but when Tylenol and Aleve didn’t help, he called the number he vowed never to call again. He told himself that he could stay in control, that he could use just enough marijuana to ease the pain and return to work.

When he was better, he would quit.

They screened him before he was ready.

His hands shook as he stood in the bathroom with the tiny plastic cup. He knew what it would mean.

First, he lost his job. Then, they lost the apartment.

“It’s okay,” Tanner said as they loaded their bags into the trunk of the car that would again become their home.

He knew it wasn’t. He saw the disappointment in his son’s eyes and heard the resignation in his voice. He failed the only person who truly loved him. He smoked more to numb his shame. Even when he tried to find a new job, he knew they could see it in his bloodshot eyes. No place wanted to risk hiring an addict, at least no place that would pay enough to support him and his son.

The weed no longer kept his pain at bay. He called the number again and spent what little savings he had on something stronger.

She would see it too.

He knew he should go in. Tanner would be looking for him.

But he didn’t want her to see.

He drove from the stadium to the nearest park. For a moment, he sat and cried. Then, he prepped his needle for another hit, another attempt to take away his pain.

He deserves better, he thought.

Boys

One boy stood on the field. His hands rested on his hips. He stared through the bars of his facemask, trying to catch his breath.

This is bad.

Injuries were never good but especially not in a game like this. The Bears were down by three in the fourth quarter but they were driving. Then it happened. No one would blame him but he knew it was his fault. The pass was too high. The defender drilled the receiver in the chest. The ball flew away, almost intercepted.

At least that didn't happen.

Robert stared at Tommy who writhed on the field. He closed his eyes and cursed.

Another boy sat on the bench. Oblivious. Distracted.

He kept glancing over his shoulder, scanning the crowd. He said he'd be there. The boy had looked at every face, at least twice.

Another broken promise.

He rested his chin on his fists and sighed.

"Wagner!"

Tanner glanced up. The coach stared at him, frustration in his eyes. He gnawed a wad of sunflower seeds pressed into his cheek. Tanner was the sixth receiver on the depth chart but it was third-and-long and the coach wanted four wideouts on the field. Tommy was hurt. Madison was benched for failing two history tests in a row.

Tanner had been on the team for two years and had yet to catch a pass in a game.

“Get your helmet and get out there.”

The boy gazed at the field for the first time since halftime. He watched as two assistant coaches supported a limping Tommy. Tanner pulled on his helmet and ran onto the turf, giving one last glance at the stands.

In the huddle, Robert called the play. Tanner didn’t remember it and Robert saw the confusion in his eyes.

“Far left. Ten-yard curl route.”

Robert had no intention of throwing him the ball. Ryan was his first read and then A.J. on the slant if Ryan wasn’t open.

Tanner took his position. He was tall but didn’t carry much meat on his limbs. The defender was several inches shorter but thicker.

“You look scared,” the defender taunted. “You should be. I’m the guy who lit up your friend.” The defender smirked and cracked his neck.

Tanner inhaled and blew a deep breath through pursed lips. He positioned his mouthguard and took a side-eyed glance down the line. The ball was snapped. The defender tried to jam Tanner on his release but Tanner’s arms were long enough to keep the other boy off balance, at least until he could slip by. He sprinted ten yards and curled in.

A linebacker had blown through the offensive line. Robert was in trouble, scrambling. Tanner eyed the

opening in the middle of the field and ran toward it. He locked eyes with Robert and held up his hand. Robert saw him, twisted his body, and side-armed the ball off-balance. It came in low. Tanner leaned down and snatched it before it hit the ground.

Had the pass been perfect, he might have been able to run to the endzone. Instead, he stumbled, fell, and rolled.

Still, he gripped the ball tight and had run far enough for the first down. He smiled, hearing the cheers, as he jumped to his feet and joined his other teammates.

Robert grinned. "Tanner, right?"

Tanner nodded.

"Nice play." With the offense huddled around him, Robert called out the next. He pointed at Tanner and said, "Just get open."

* * *

Tanner caught one more pass, an eight-yard gain on second-and-nine. From the five-yard line, Robert ran and dove across the goal line, leaving nine seconds left in the game.

The clock wound down. The Bears won by four.

* * *

They held their breath as they saw Robert take off. If he didn't make it, there wouldn't be time for another play. Two defenders charged after him. He saw them, dove, and stretched out the ball.

Meredith and Brent jumped to their feet, shouting as

loud as anyone, and hugged each other. Even Declan, who hated football, stood and yelled.

“That’s my brother! That’s right!” Declan glanced around speaking to no one in particular because no one paid attention to him. “We share a room! Yeah.”

* * *

Two boys.

One sat at a table at Pizza House, chewing a bite of pepperoni and grinning as his family recounted the evening’s heroics.

Another sat on a bench outside a gate. The parking lot had long been empty when the tan Monte Carlo pulled in. Tanner climbed into the passenger seat and stared out the window.

“I’m sorry,” Daniel said.

“It’s okay.”

“Did we win?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you play?”

“No,” the boy lied.

Daniel patted Tanner’s knee. “Maybe next game. I’ll be there for it. I promise.”

Monday, October 14

Her

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Meredith muttered under her breath as she stepped into the room.

The two halves were a tale of two boys. The right side was Robert’s, her fifteen-year-old foster son. It was immaculate. The only clutter was a single stray sock at the foot of his bed and a sloppy pile of books on his desk. Even the five pairs of shoes lined in a row under his mattress had their laces neatly tucked inside. Robert’s bed looked as if he had made it, somehow crawled under the blankets, and not moved an inch in his sleep.

The left half was Declan’s, her fourteen-year-old biological son. Piles of clothes littered the floor with shoes strewn about. There were books and papers crammed under his bed, which she was sure included his homework from last week that he claimed he couldn’t find. Bowls, spoons, and cups sat on his desk. How many times had she told him not to bring food into the bedroom? He slept facedown, his sheets crumpled under his arm, and one leg, somehow, ran up the wall.

Cleaning was added to his after-school agenda.

He would roll his eyes and complain. She would threaten to take away his Xbox for a week. He would mutter under his breath words that, if she heard, would cause him to be grounded for the rest of the year. She would threaten to give the Xbox to Goodwill. He would

roll his eyes and storm off.

But the room would be clean. At least for a day.

That was her secondary concern, however. They should have been awake fifteen minutes ago. From somewhere on Declan's side she heard the muffled sound of an alarm. She sighed.

"Boys!"

Robert opened his eyes, glanced her way, sat up, and stretched. Declan didn't move.

Meredith picked up a balled, dirty sock from the floor, immediately regretted her decision, and threw it at her son. "Deck, come on! Wake up! We're going to be late."

Declan turned his head and mumbled incoherent words. Robert stood at his closet with a bright red polo in one hand as he searched for pants and decided on dark denim jeans. Meredith shook her head as she waded through Declan's mess, being careful to avoid the landmines of shoes and Hot Wheels.

When's the last time he even played with those?

"Declan, wake up," she said as she reached under his pillow. At the sound of his phone's alarm, his eyes shot open and he rolled onto his back. Meredith shut off the alarm and held up the phone. "If you want this, you'll be in the kitchen in five minutes, dressed."

Robert had disappeared into the bathroom by the time she made it out of her son's chaos.

Most mornings the boys ate cereal or oatmeal for breakfast. On the weekends, they would make pancakes or

waffles. On special occasions, Meredith made homemade cinnamon rolls using her grandma's recipe. There was no time that morning for a bowl of cereal, so she placed granola bars and bananas on the table.

Two minutes passed. Robert stepped into the kitchen with his backpack already around his shoulders. He saw the food and smiled.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. I'm sorry there's not time for something else."

He shrugged and bit a hunk of granola.

"Why don't you wait in the car? We'll be out in a moment."

Another minute passed. Declan stumbled from his room wearing black shorts and a single tube sock. They were the clothes he had slept in. His bright green hair was a tangled mess. She didn't understand why he always wanted to dye his hair. She thought he looked handsome with his natural blond, but it was his thing and teenage boys rarely cared about the fashion advice of their mothers. He scratched his left thigh, yawned loudly, and mumbled, "Morning."

Meredith buried her face in her hands as Declan ambled toward the coffee pot and poured himself a cup. "You're a mess."

He glanced at his mother. A grin spread across his freckled face, showing off the single dimple on his right cheek. "But an adorable mess."

Meredith rolled her eyes. “I’ll be in the car. You have one minute.”

Two minutes later, Declan ran from the house in the same shorts and sock. He added a light blue t-shirt she was sure she had seen on the floor and an ankle sock on his bare foot. He carried his backpack in one hand and shoes in the other.

At least those match.

His teeth held the wrapper of the granola bar. He jumped into the passenger seat, dropped everything into his lap, and buckled his seatbelt.

“Right on time!”

“You’re late. We’re going to be late.”

“We’ll be fine,” he replied as he pulled on his shoes. “Does this mean no phone?”

“We’ll talk after school.”

“This sucks,” he sighed as he opened his granola bar. “How am I supposed to message all my hotties?”

Meredith had taken a sip of coffee and nearly spit it out as she laughed.

“Dork,” Robert said.

Declan grinned, full-toothed.

“What he said.” Meredith wiped her mouth and took another sip. “You’re my dork, though, and I love you.”

“Aww,” Declan replied.

Meredith drove fast enough to make it to the school

right after the first bell but slow enough to not be noticed by any passing cops. As she pulled to a stop, Declan leaned over and gave her a peck on the cheek.

“Love you,” he said and hopped out.

“Be good.” She glanced back at Robert. “You too.”

“Always.”

There were no other cars waiting behind her, so Meredith lingered and watched as the boys walked toward the east entrance. Declan pretended to trip and bump into Robert. Robert hopped and nudged Declan with his shoulder. Sometimes, Meredith questioned her decision to say yes to fostering a teenager. The two had come a long way, though. When they fought, it was like brothers, not the angry brawls they had when Robert first moved in. He was fuming, bitter, and hurting. She knew the feelings all too well. Declan was protective. Robert would say things to Meredith that Declan thought crossed the line. Declan would get in his face and yell. Half the time fists would fly. Once, she had to take them both to the hospital for stitches.

Now, she couldn't imagine life without the two of them, though she knew Robert's mother was finally getting the help she needed. If she stayed on that path, then eventually Robert's time with them would end. That was for the best, Meredith hoped, but she still hated the thought.

She glanced at the clock.

She was meeting clients at nine for a showing and she still had to run by her office to get the paperwork. It was

one of her newer homes and she wasn't familiar enough with the details to wing it.

As the boys disappeared through the door, she shifted and pulled from the curb.

It was a fifteen-minute drive to her office. Her phone rang as she rolled into the parking lot. It was Amber, Robert's caseworker. Meredith scrunched her brow and searched her memory. Amber wouldn't call this early unless it was important. Had she forgotten about a meeting or a court date? Had something happened with his mother?

"Hello," she answered.

"Hey, Meredith. How are you this morning?"

"Good." She chuckled. "A little frazzled. You know—typical life with the boys."

Amber had two teenagers of her own. "I understand that."

"Did I forget something?" Meredith asked as she parked.

"No. No, you're good. We're just... We're looking for a placement."

Meredith laughed.

"I know. I know. You told us just one at a time."

"I don't even have a bed for another."

"I understand and normally I wouldn't call you but the father asked me to. He says he knows you. I told him that you have a boy placed with you and that's your limit,

but he insisted.”

“Who’s the father?” Meredith asked.

“His name is Daniel Wagner.”

Meredith pulled the phone from her ear and closed her eyes. She thought back to the first time they met. His green eyes. His buzzcut that made his ears stick out too far. His grin.

That grin.

The innocent charm.

He had the same grin when they met at the coffee shop. When she saw it, for a moment, she pondered what could have been. He seemed to have finally gotten his life together.

What happened, Danny?

“The boy’s name is Tanner. He’s fourteen and seems on the quiet side,” Amber continued.

Meredith returned her phone to her ear. “Yes, I know. I mean, I know about him. Daniel told me when we met...” She sighed. “Daniel and I ran into each other. Wow, that had to have been a year ago. It was around the time Robert arrived. He told me about Tanner and how he was finally getting his life on track. It was the first time we had seen each other in years. We knew each other in high school—we, um, were in a relationship for a while. Like I said, that was a long time ago.”

“I understand if you want to say no. I told Daniel that I would ask.”

Meredith sighed. “When would you bring him?”

“He’s in school right now. He goes to Bingham, which would be convenient for you. I believe he even plays on the football team with Robert. I could bring him after school.”

“That gives me time to find another bed.”

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Amber asked.

She wasn’t. “Yes.”

Boys

The bell rang. Classes dismissed. It was Tanner’s lunch period.

He was hungry. Maybe he’d make it in time but there was something he needed to do. Everyone else in the hall scurried, some even running as teachers shouted to slow down. Tanner dawdled with slow steps, barely lifting his feet. His shoulders were hunched and eyes toward the ground.

He was one of the last in the hall when the bell rang again. He glimpsed forward and then over his shoulder. No one was looking as he slipped into the locker room.

The coaches’ office sat empty. Another boy stood at a urinal. Tanner pretended that he had to pee as well until the other boy left. Then, he crept around the corner. A lost-and-found box sat near the first bench. It was his primary target. He only owned a few changes of clothes and they were deteriorating. He found a red t-shirt on top that was the right size. He pulled off his hoodie, laid it on the bench, and traded his stained and torn undershirt for the t-shirt.

He found another, a size too big, but still worth saving. He shoved it into his backpack. There was a pair of boxers. He held them to his waist and dropped them back into the box. He was skinny but not that skinny. He skipped the pairs of shorts. He had several of those and he only wore them when he had to.

Toward the bottom of the box was his best score—two pairs of clean socks. He put one in his bag. Then, he sat on the bench, slid off his shoes, and slipped the other onto his bare feet. Finding nothing else of worth, he pulled on his shoes and hoodie and tossed his old shirt into the trash.

He chewed his lip and stared at the lockers. Searching them had been a temptation every time he raided the lost-and-found. He always talked himself out of it. He wasn't a thief. The lost-and-found was stuff nobody wanted or had forgotten about. Yeah, there were also those kids he cornered on his walk to school Friday morning. He had an excuse. He had barely eaten in three days. He wasn't a thief.

Still, he told himself, a look wouldn't hurt.

Most of the metal doors were protected with padlocks. He opened the first that was unlocked and found it empty. The next had clothes but they also reeked of having not been washed in weeks. The next had a full wardrobe but everything was too baggy. He was running out of time to eat lunch but he decided to check one more.

A brown wallet was tucked under a pair of black shorts. Tanner glanced around, though he knew he was alone. He grabbed the wallet and flipped it open. Inside

was a learner's permit. He recognized the kid in the picture, Owen. They were both in the same math class. Like Tanner, he never said much, but he seemed nice.

Put it back.

Tanner shook away the thought and checked for cash. He found six one-dollar bills. He quickly snatched them, slid them into his back pocket, and returned the wallet. His heart raced. He knew he had to leave before he changed his mind.

He ran through the locker room, burst through the door, and slammed into the back of a bulky kid named Sam Perkins. Tanner said sorry and tried to slither past but Sam grabbed his arm.

Tanner cursed under his breath with his back to the wall, Sam blocking his right and Harris Stevens his left.

“In a hurry, Wagner?”

Tanner didn't reply.

“I saw you play Friday. You made some nice catches. I guess you're Mister Superstar now?” Sam smirked. Then, he leaned toward Tanner and sniffed. “You still smell like my old jockstrap. I guess fame doesn't change that.”

Harris snickered. “Your mommy forget to do your laundry again?” Then the short boy with the scar above his left eye covered his mouth as he feigned surprise. “Oh, that's right, it's just you and your daddy and, what, a van by the river?”

Tanner rolled his eyes. “Just leave me alone.” He tried to brush past again and Sam grabbed the front of his

hoodie.

“No, man. Me and Harris want to help you.” Sam pulled open the door and dragged Tanner back into the locker room. Tanner tried to fight himself free but Sam had too much muscle and weight. Harris followed, repeating his nasally chuckle. “What do you think?” Sam asked Harris. “Shower or bath.”

Harris grinned. “Bath.”

Tanner’s eyes grew large with fright. “No, no! Please!”

Harris swung open the door to the first toilet stall. Tanner clenched Sam’s wrist and kicked against the floor but the concrete was too wet and his feet slipped. He squirmed and threw elbows. Sam let go long enough that Tanner thought he might escape but Sam quickly grabbed the back of his shaggy hair and yanked him to his knees.

The toilet had been flushed but dried brown chunks were splattered inside the bowl. All he could do was close his eyes and hold his breath.

“Hey! What are you boys doing?”

Sam let go of Tanner’s hair. “Nothing. He fell. I was helping him up. Isn’t that right, Wagner?”

Tanner sat, somehow avoiding the water on the floor. Coach Taylor eyed Sam and Harris.

“Is that so?” he asked Tanner.

Sam grinned and held out his hand. Tanner swatted it away and pushed himself up.

Coach Taylor narrowed his eyes. “Wherever you boys are supposed to be, it’s not here. I suggest you go.”

“Sir, yes, sir,” Sam said, saluted, and marched toward the door. Harris giggled and followed.

The coach turned to Tanner. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

Coach Taylor looked skeptical but nodded. “You too. Get your butt out of here.”

Tanner paused long enough to first wash his hands. The bell rang before he shut off the water. His lunch period was over. At least in his dad’s car there was still a cheeseburger from last night. With the six dollars, maybe he could get another and some fries that evening.

The Night Before, October 13

Him

How many times had he dug through a dumpster? Or begged on a street corner? It provided food but he felt less than a man, less than human. How did his son feel?

He deserves better.

It was a nagging thought ever since he saw her walk into the stadium with her son and the man that he assumed was a boyfriend. *She is better.*

Tanner had spent time in a foster home when Daniel was in rehab. It was motivation for Daniel's recovery. The family seemed nice. They took care of Tanner and treated him well. Tanner didn't complain other than that one time at the end of a visit.

"I don't want to go back."

Daniel promised he wouldn't have to once they were reunified. Things would be different. He was sober now. He would stay that way.

He couldn't forget the disappointment in his son's eyes when Tanner discovered he was using again.

He deserves better.

They sat in the park that Sunday evening, the car windows down. It had been a beautiful day and was giving way to a comfortable night. Fathers and mothers kept watch on their children who climbed, swung, and slid. There was a group of boys on the basketball court who looked about Tanner's age. They played shirts versus skins, street rules. That's where Tanner should have been, not stuck with his old man in a car that doubled as their home.

Their stomachs growled.

It had been four, maybe five days since their last meal. Tanner had school lunches but the nights were long. They went as long as they could without having to pick through smelly trash. But it was inevitable.

"We need to get something to eat."

Tanner pulled a wad of one-dollar bills and some coins from his pockets. "We can get something with this." He handed the cash to his father.

Daniel smoothed the bills and counted—\$12.65.

"Where'd you get this?"

"I found it."

Daniel glanced at his son who stared at his dirty white tennis shoes. He didn't believe him. The cash looked like some kids' lunch money. He wouldn't know for sure if he didn't ask. He didn't want to know.

There was a McDonald's a few blocks east. They could eat for a day or two if they spent wisely.

Daniel had another thought. He had used the last of his heroin that morning. He felt the body aches. Worse

would soon come. He knew how to score quick cash if needed but not in ways he'd prefer. The cash was enough to purchase some cheap weed that might take the edge off until he could afford more heroin.

"I... um... I should..." Daniel stared at his son. *He deserves better.* He returned the money to Tanner. "Why don't you get something from McDonald's? Whatever you want."

Tanner nodded, shoved the cash into his pocket, and headed out.

Daniel buried his face in his hands and sobbed. When he composed himself, he took out his phone and found the number for Amber Wilson. She had been the social worker when Tanner was in foster care. Daniel decided to report himself.

He deserves better.

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