

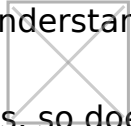
Wynton

Wynton remains suspended in an ethereal space, caught between the weight of memory and the reality of the present, where time has become a shapeless thing. The air is thick with the scent of flowers, overwhelming in its sweetness, as though Cassidy herself is woven into the fragrance surrounding him. Silence stretches between them, stretching far beyond seconds, minutes—perhaps even lifetimes—leaving him in a state of limbo where he is neither fully present nor completely lost. His mind drifts, wondering what she might be doing at this very moment. Is she reading? Is she simply watching over him? A deep longing stirs within him, one that aches with the desire to feel something tangible, something real. He hopes—almost prays—that she is touching him, even if only in the smallest way, bridging the space that separates them. The memory of a past moment resurfaces, one in which her fingers had gently brushed his face under the quiet glow of moonlight, an unspoken connection that made him feel seen in a way he had never felt before.

As he clings to that memory, his thoughts shift toward music—the one language that had once allowed him to express the emotions he could never find the right words for. He had spent years searching for something within music, the aching beauty that existed between the notes, a feeling so raw and ungraspable that it had often felt just beyond his reach. Now, he realizes, he has become that space between the notes. Suspended, weightless, filled with longing but unable to move forward. It is an irony that is not lost on him, a cruel twist of fate that has left him hovering in uncertainty, a silent melody trapped within his own body. Where once music had been his escape, his way of giving meaning to the inexpressible, now he finds himself caught in its silence, unable to play, unable to move, unable to speak.

Then, just when he believes he might remain trapped in this void forever, Cassidy's voice cuts through the stillness, soft but steady, carrying with it the weight of

everything he cannot say. "I'm not sure what you know about your family and what you don't, Wynton," she says, her tone careful, deliberate. "But I need to tell you that we're okay, you and me—we're okay." The words are simple, yet they are the first thing that truly reaches him, grounding him in something more solid than the haze of uncertainty that has consumed him. He clings to them like a lifeline, their warmth breaking through the fog that has dulled his senses. He doesn't know everything, and he may not yet understand the full truth, but in this moment, her words are enough.



As her voice fades, so does the overwhelming scent of flowers, as if the very air around him is shifting, changing. The floral fragrance, once so consuming, now dissipates, leaving behind a hollow space that mirrors the strange emptiness settling within him. It feels as though something has ended, as though this fragile, in-between moment has reached its natural conclusion. But even as silence returns, it is no longer heavy with isolation. Instead, it is filled with quiet understanding, with the unspoken promise of something more. For the first time in what feels like forever, Wynton does not feel entirely alone. Cassidy has left him with a thread of connection—thin, delicate, but unbreakable. And though he cannot yet grasp what it means or what lies ahead, he knows one thing for certain: in a world filled with uncertainty, this single moment of clarity, this fragile connection, is something worth holding onto.