

Willow

We left shoe prints in the dirt, still damp from recent storms. The three of us, ambling between the trees, our voices free and our laughter wild. Hudson had a cigarette between two fingers and would raise it to his lips absentmindedly, between one-line stories or well-intentioned jabs at Mason. My husband stayed close to me, his hand clutching my own. We'd been married just under a month, and it still felt weird to call him that. But his fingers were my only warmth against the biting, March wind, and I sank into his touch.

"I'm not smoking 'til after the baby comes," Mason replied when Hudson offered him one.

"I told you it's fine, babe." I rolled my eyes but squeezed his hand with affection.

"Obviously, I can't, but you can. Who cares."

Hudson took another breath of his cigarette and exhaled behind us. The smoke drifted back the way we'd come, up toward the leaves, as our trio moved farther along the trail. He eyed me, questioning something, and I understood.

"Maybe I'll stay off 'em forever," I said, granting him a relaxed shrug.

Hudson snorted. "Fat chance of that. I'm not the only addict here." He grinned at me, and I smiled back.

We were headed to one of my favorite hideaway spots in downtown Little Rush. Perfect for any time of the year, any state of mind. I'd taken long walks there on my own, for years and years, spent countless hours in the shadow of those tall trees. The three of us had been here a few times before, though not often, and I figured today was as good as any. Our work schedules were so full now, it wasn't easy to find a day where we could be together, doing nothing. But it had, at last, arrived, and so I led them to my once-secret spot.

There weren't too many places in downtown Little Rush where I could exist for hours without encountering a single human. But this little grove of trees, right alongside the Ohio River, was the perfect spot of solitude. From my dad's apartment, I walked straight down to the bricks winding beside the river, and turned my back on the bridge. Then, I would follow that sidewalk until it abruptly ended, meshing with the railroad tracks, at the end of the street. There were walking trails leading away, following the tracks, and they could take you all the way up the hillside, if you wanted. But I didn't want that. I would simply step off the path, through a thick arrangement of bushes, and emerge on the other side into a different world.

The ground dropped a few feet there, as I climbed through the shrubbery, and it felt like I had disappeared into a place nobody even knew of. The trees were tall and thick, but sparse. It didn't feel as enclosed or dark as a typical forest. And the river swept by on one side, bumping up against some of the trunks, turning the hardened dirt into squelching mud under my feet. From the railroad tracks I'd left behind, no hikers could even hope to see down here, unless they followed. And very few did.

That expanse of dried mud and fallen leaves became a comfortable place for me. I would wander deeper into the trees, which stood around like the crowd at an amusement park when all the rides are closed. Dancing my way through their shadows and touching their rough trunks, I found an area of large stones where I could sit and soak my feet in the water. As the Ohio flowed by, its touch loving and familial, I looked across at the banks of Kentucky or to the right, where the river curled around a jutting hill and disappeared out of sight. There was a large, wooden structure near my spot, sticking out of the water, like it might've been support for a

dock, long ago. Down that direction, I could make out the power plant, and often a barge in the distance.

A line of trees behind me. The river in front, stretched out, endless. The rolling hills of Kentucky, like staring into a mirror, with beautiful, leaf canopies glowing in the sunlight or waving in the breeze. This place felt like a step back in time, like a setting all its own. Nobody could find me here. Nobody could shatter this mirage.

"How many weeks are you out now?" Hudson asked. He continued to work on the cigarette, nearing the end of it now.

Mason stumbled over a root and we chuckled about that for a moment. Just a few minutes now and we'd reach that sacred spot next to the river, with large rocks meant for seating and small, rippling waves that brought in plastic cans, bits of floating wood, and an assortment of little fish. They would swim right under the surface, as if putting on a show, and I would stare at them more intently than anything else.

"Due in just over two weeks," I answered Hudson once Mason had regained his balance. "Before you know it..." I placed a hand on my protruding stomach, though he didn't kick in response.

"What happens if he comes on St. Patrick's Day?" Hudson asked, a glint in his eye. "You *have* to dye his hair green. That's just a rule."

"Shut up! God, can you imagine?" I covered my hand with a mouth, laughing. The image of a green-haired baby, *my* baby, was almost too much. "I feel bad for your kids, if you ever have some."

Hudson chuckled at this and blew one last cloud of smoke into the air. Then he ground out the cigarette butt on a passing tree.

"Speaking of..." Mason jumped into the conversation. "When's the wedding? For you and Layla?"

Hudson stuffed both hands into the pockets of his jacket, throwing an exasperated look at Mason. "Whatever. It's only been a few dates." The corner of his mouth twitched and his eyes gleamed with something like mischief. "But... we are going on a weekend trip this summer, up near Indy. Brown County, you know. It's kinda crazy. Did you know when I first met her, I gave her a handshake?" Mason burst out laughing and Hudson smacked himself on the forehead. "I'm such a dumbass."

This news about him and Layla made my heart skip a beat. I smiled at Hudson, imagining him and her, off in a cabin somewhere, a place all to themselves. I wondered if they'd go to college in the fall, if they'd go together, but I didn't want to pry. Hudson deserved a peaceful, relaxing summer with a girlfriend and a future. I hoped he would really soak it in, before everything started to change at a relentless pace. Then again, maybe we were too late and things already had.

"Oohh." Mason winked at me. "That's the first step, right, babe?"

"We've got big plans this summer, too," I said to Hudson, ignoring Mason's question. "Hopefully... we're gonna get an apartment."

"That's exciting, where at?"

"Pretty sure my parents just don't want a crying baby in their house every night," Mason said, glancing to me for confirmation.

It was true, they'd been super helpful, letting us fashion a life together in the second floor of their home. Maybe that's why it felt weird to call Mason my husband, since we were living above his parents. I felt more like a girlfriend staying the night, sleeping in his same bed as high school, keeping our voices down. Waking up to find his mom cooking breakfast twice a week, the awkward intimacy of just living around Jed and Lucy, twenty-four/seven. But a baby would change everything. Our lives were about to get noisier, messier, more stressful, and I felt —we both felt— that we needed a place to ourselves when it happened. Jed and Lucy's support meant the world to me, but I couldn't wait to strike out for ourselves. Even though some nights, the prospect was terrifying.

"Where are you gonna live, though?" Hudson raised his eyebrows and stopped walking.

We had reached the edge now, standing a few feet from the river. It was a quieter place than the forest trail, where songbirds had gifted their serenades. Now, the water gently lapped against the shore and a loud, squawking bird flew by.

"I wasn't sure if we could afford it..." I looked to Mason, who put an arm around me, not interrupting. I went on. "But we're both moving into bigger roles, manager roles, at the restaurants so I think we can. We're looking for a downtown apartment, right now."

Hudson folded his arms and nodded, eyes slightly larger than normal. "That's pretty cool. I've always thought it would be neat to live down here."

"Don't worry, I'll give you a key to our place." Mason punched him in the shoulder gently. "You're our plan-A babysitter, and you don't have a choice."

"What an honor," Hudson said, the sarcasm dripping from his voice.

The two of them devolved into a quick, mock-boxing fight, while I climbed onto one of the large rocks and stared out at the river. It was at its lowest point in a month, knocking against the side of my rock, and I hurriedly untied my shoes. Once I was barefoot, listening to the laughter and "ooh, gotcha!" of their pretend fight, I slipped my toes into the frigid water, shivering as I sunk in up to my calves.

I reached out with one foot, pressing my toes into the mud and slime of the earth. The Kentucky hillside was sparkling with colors, a clear sky above us, despite the chilly temperature. At this time of year, you could see the houses and the roads more clearly, since some of those leaves had died and left naked branches hanging. I continued to stare across the river as Hudson and Mason took their places on one side. They were wordless, clambering onto the rocks. Mason settled next to me, leaned his head on my shoulder, and sighed.

Hudson broke the comfortable silence first. He swung his legs back and forth, picking at small rocks on the ground beside us. "I guess the baby's gonna change more than I realized."

Mason took a deep breath, then asked, "You think we can still... do stuff like this? After he's here?"

Neither of them spoke, and I suspected they were waiting for my input. I offered, "Life tends to push people apart. But I don't think we have to let it."

"What do you mean?" Hudson asked.

"I mean..." I blew a raspberry and reached down to the riverbed with my toes again, feeling its warmth and trying to take solace from it. Trying to stay grounded. "Maybe what we do will be different, but it doesn't mean we can't do things together."

"How can we already be parents?" Mason reached for my hand, and I touched my fingers to his, waiting for him to continue. His eyes were low, uncertain. "Are we even adults?"

Hudson chuckled, though it wasn't a necessarily happy noise. "At least you're getting an apartment, right? I'm still living with my parents. I still don't know if I'm... I'm gonna go to college. Or work another year or whatever."

"So many questions, huh?" Mason swallowed hard, staring into nothing, his hand dead in my own. "I thought we found answers, you know? Now we're right back to... to this."

I felt the air and conversation growing colder, darker. I wanted to say something, or maybe undo the last few minutes of our time. We'd been so happy, only five minutes earlier, so carefree. And now I understood what they were speaking of. The uncertain questions nagging at our minds, clouding our future. We'd gone through a whole summer of this, a school year of it. Doubts and fears, replaced by new ones, an endless parade. Mason and I had an early graduation, which offered some reprieve, a beautiful moment, closure. But with each closed chapter, a million others abounded, and I didn't know what to make of it.

I let a few minutes pass where each of us was lost in thought. A barge appeared around the bend in the river, and it started to make its way closer. Leisurely, gradually, it plowed ahead, mindless of the hills on either side or the hundreds of eyes that were staring at it. The three of us, perched so close to the water's edge, tucked away in the cover of trees, watched it come. I wondered if anyone on board could see us. If they found us curious or interesting, or altogether plain. It didn't matter, but it did to me.

"Does stuff ever stop changing?" I glanced at the other two and found their expressions vacant, their minds wandering. I went on to explain my point. "Maybe this is just how it is, now. Everything, changing, all the time. I don't know. But... but we're gonna be parents, Mason, and we're gonna do our best. And Hudson, you're gonna find people who love you, wherever you go and end up. I think... I think maybe we're too worried about where we're going, and we should think more about who we're going with. And hold them."

Hudson turned to me, a melancholy smile. He was a nighttime sky with a single star. "It worries me. All of it."

"That's okay, though." I reached across Mason, touching Hudson's knee. He had been the first person I told about the baby. I remembered it vividly, the way he hugged me in that McDonald's booth, our tears that dripped onto the upholstered seats. He didn't meet my gaze now, but I felt his tension soften. "It's okay to be afraid."

Hudson stood up from the rock after that, brushing off my hand, though not unkindly. He hesitated, shuffled away from us, and knelt down on the ground. Fumbling with the small stones, rubbing his fingers along the edge, he started to skip them across the water. I couldn't help but watch him, and the barge sailing closer, casting slightly-larger waves to our shore. Mason and I didn't speak, we just watched as Hudson flung tiny stones across the Ohio's shimmering surface. They each bounced a few times, before drowning forever.

Mason reached an arm around me, fingertips on my stomach. I leaned into the crook of his neck, breathing in his scent, closing my eyes for a second. The sounds of the river and trees overtook me, their leaves rustling, water tickling the rocks. I could hear Hudson's feet grinding into the gravel as he flung stones, his sharp intake of breath with each throw. And then he stopped and his voice cut through my reverie.

"You think you two will ever leave?"

I'd forgotten how Hudson always liked to get straight to the point. It was a characteristic I admired, but one that resulted in some awkward pauses, like just then. Mason and I fidgeted

where we sat. His arm gripped me a little less tightly and he lowered his chin onto my head. We were thinking the same thing, asking the same unanswerable question. Would we?

"My parents seem like they will," Mason answered first, to my surprise. He cleared his throat and I turned my head to glance up at him. That sharp jawline worked around, as he gnashed his way to a complete thought. "Going on some cross-country trip in July. Dad didn't say so, but I think they're looking for a place to move. Trying to figure out where they wanna go."

"Mine sure aren't," I jumped in, if only to save Mason. He looked very uncomfortable as he'd spoken, jaw still moving, muscles tensed. "Going nowhere but the grave. Plus, you know..." I glanced to Hudson now, since I was answering his question. "The businesses, those are pretty strong roots. And we're the ones they'll be holding here, pretty soon."

Hudson chewed on our answer for a minute. He threw another stone, though it sank right into the water with a plunk. The barge was directly in front of us now, carrying what I think was coal. The boat's sides were dark and nondescript, its main deck nothing more than piles and piles of that dirty element it transported. One end of the ship rose higher than the rest, the only sign of life. I thought barges, around here, reminded me of hearses. Slow and steady, straight into the afterlife, just beyond the bridge.

"You think Jed expects you to keep those forever?" Hudson asked at last.

Mason scoffed, meeting his friend's eyes with a cheerful skepticism. "Who knows what he expects, honestly..."

We took a few minutes and watched the boat sail past. Hudson skipped more stones and convinced Mason to try his hand at a couple. None went so well. I laughed at him, with them, and we waited for the sun to sink further. It had begun its descent, over behind the smokestacks, and I couldn't wait to see what it might paint this evening. We'd been waiting for it all day, honestly. Nothing beat a sunset down on the river, how it emboldened the skies, reflected on the Ohio's glassy expanse. It could change the entire world, just for half an hour. The most spectacular of sights in the most unexpected of places. I couldn't wait, and so we did.

"You know what's weird?"

The boys turned to me. They were standing by the river now, each with stones in their hands. I perched on my rock, imagining myself as some kind of pregnant, enticing siren, attracting all the sailors and gorgeous sunsets to my shores. But the moment passed, and their expectant glances dragged me back into reality.

"A part of me feels..." I paused, waffling over the words I might choose. "Feels like we've gone through so much, you know? Like there can't possibly be anything left, like this is it. But I know that's not true. Hell, we're not even in our twenties!"

Hudson smirked. "Don't remind me. I have a liver twice my age."

None of us could think of anything to say after that. They continued to skip stones for a few minutes, but that activity lost its luster, and Mason took a seat next to me. Three faces, gazing up at the sunset. Hudson's silhouette painted so starkly against the backdrop. The sunlight touched our features and hailed us golden. It reached out into the sky and sent ripples of yellow and red and orange into the darkening, blue sea. That sky, a fervent collage of colors, reflected on the river. Mirroring each other, magnifying.

Across from us, Kentucky caught on fire, the pine canopies ablaze with light. Everything the fading light touched, it transformed into gold or a beautiful red. The Midas sun peered down at us, three unimportant people along a forgotten river, surrounded by a forest teeming with life,

blooming into spring. It took my breath away to see the world come alive, all of a sudden, and the smokestacks painted so dark against the colors. A glorious phenomenon.

"I used to hate sunsets," I murmured, feeling—to my disbelief—a tear threatening to spill over. "I used to not care."

Hudson faced away from both of us, staring off at the bend in the river, or at the sunset, or at both. He took deep, unsteady breaths, holding a single rock between his forefinger and thumb.

Mason opened his mouth to speak, but hesitated. I nudged him to go on. He directed the question at Hudson. "You okay, man?"

"Yeah, I guess so." Hudson let out an exhausted, pent-up sigh. He turned to face us, halfway, and I saw his face real screwed up in concentration. Almost in pain. "I just don't know... where we go from here? What are we supposed... supposed to do, supposed to be? Nothing is stable, nothing makes sense." He kicked at the rocks under his feet, aggressively sending a handful into the river and a small cloud of dust into the air. "Everything is slipping away, rushing by, moving in." He huffed and turned away from us completely. I barely heard the next sentence. He spat it like a cuss word. "I thought this place was supposed to be slow."

Mason faltered for words. He mumbled something, under his breath, but it wasn't clear. Hudson wound up and chucked the stone as hard as he could. It bounced once, high into the air, and then straight down. He chuckled mirthlessly and let both arms dangle at his sides.

I stood from the rock and reached for his hand. My fingers found his, and he gripped mine loosely, uncertainly. Hudson turned and there was a desperation in his eyes I understood all too well. Lips quivering, he opened his mouth, but then closed it again. Looking at me. Waiting for something. Anything.

"It doesn't matter where you go, Hudson," I said, his hand now shaking in my own. I threw both arms around him and drew him against my stomach, hugging him as tightly as I could manage.

The sunset at our backs, the eternal river rolling along. I thought I heard the large clock chiming from half a mile away. I hesitated to speak, to give him my heart. But that's all we had left, anymore, was each other. The three of us. And that's all we'd ever known.

"We'll always be there. It's all gonna be okay. Just take... one step, at a time, and we'll do it, too."

Hudson raised his chin. His eyes sparkled with tears and hope. "One step?"

I nodded and hugged him tighter, squeezing him as hard as I might. The deep river at our feet would never cease, and so I would never stop protecting him. Even once all the clocks had gone quiet and the Midas sun had buried itself beyond the hills.

"One step. Things aren't so bad, if you just count by ones."

Short Q&A

Thanks for reading! I hope you enjoyed this look at Willow, Hudson, and Mason as they move into their adult lives. Here's some questions that you all have been asking, as well as my answers. [If you enjoyed the book, please do leave a review at Amazon or Goodreads!](#) It makes a world of difference and helps me out tremendously.

Will there be a sequel?

This is a tough question to answer right now. I've been thinking about it a lot, as I move into my next book projects, and I do think I want to write a sequel. However, I think that will probably be five or ten years down the road. At that point, I'll have more life experience and better understanding of what it means to go through your mid-20's. I'd love to catch up with these characters and find out what they've been up to. So, yes, I really do expect there to be a sequel, but you'll have to wait a while for it. In the meantime, I've written and will keep on writing other books, so check them out!

What inspired you to write this?

This book is the most personal I've ever written, because it draws a lot on my personal experiences and those of people I've known. The characters are a mixture of people I've known and have heard stories about. I was also inspired to write it because I wanted to tackle the darker side of being a teenager and growing up through high school, things like mental illness, substance abuse, suicide, relating to parents. All subjects that are real and important, and that I think we don't talk about enough. So this book did a lot of things I think are important, all of which made it very personal for me to write and publish, but people have loved it! That's made this a very special book already, and I'm so thrilled about what's happened with it.

What is Little Rush based on?

Little Rush is heavily based on my hometown of Madison, Indiana. It's a small rivertown, right on the Ohio, with a lot of the same dynamics as Little Rush. Many of the settings are real places that I've changed the name for. People in town who have read it have a special connection with the book because of that, but you can always come visit. It's beautiful at all times of the year, and downtown Madison is one of my favorite places in general. If you're ever in town, shoot me an email, and maybe I can steer you along the Everything, Somewhere tour or something!

Who is your favorite character?

Willow has grown into my favorite character from the novel, which I didn't expect when I started writing it. She's been a source of inspiration for me to push through writing it and is a combination of a lot of people I know. Certain aspects of her strength and tenacity and integrity I drew from my mom, who the book is dedicated to. Willow also has this ability to see the town as

it was, as it is, and as it could be in the future, making her an important character for not only the readers but also all the other figures in the book. In short, she makes the novel what it is, and she's remained my favorite character throughout.