

Chapter 3: Holding Life Together

Chapter 3 begins as sunlight filters through the trees, with Willem glancing at the deep red of the car and chuckling. "It's harlot red," he jokes, the words rolling off his tongue as if they've been rehearsed, though the humor is effortless. Malcolm shakes his head in amusement, his smile mirroring the warmth of the moment, and together they drive onward, the lush greenery of summer stretching endlessly on either side of them. The world outside feels vast and bright, yet it is the comfort of their shared understanding, the years of friendship woven into every laugh and exchange, that makes this simple drive feel significant.

Arriving home, they are greeted by the comforting aroma of simmering tomatoes and garlic, the air thick with the scent of a meal in progress. Jude is at the stove, stirring a saucepan of sauce with a careful, practiced hand, his wheelchair positioned comfortably near the counter. The kitchen, alive with warmth and familiarity, quickly fills with the chatter of friends as Willem and Malcolm join Jude, their voices overlapping as they recount their drive, the heat, and their excitement for the evening ahead. In the midst of it all, Jude looks up at Willem, offering one of those small, private smiles that speak volumes—a look filled with history, quiet understanding, and the kind of love that does not demand words to be felt.

As Willem watches Jude move through the kitchen with a practiced grace, he feels a deep sense of admiration for the way Jude navigates his world. There is strength in the way he carries himself, never letting his disability define him, never allowing it to overshadow the life they've built together. These quiet, everyday moments—the laughter of friends, the ritual of preparing dinner, the simple act of being present—are what Willem has come to treasure most. They are the essence of their Happy Years, not defined by grand gestures or perfection, but by the unwavering comfort of knowing they are home, in every sense of the word.

The dinner table is filled with the lively hum of conversation, plates being passed around, and the occasional clinking of glasses in silent toasts to nothing and everything at once. JB may be missing, but his presence is still felt, woven into the fabric of their shared memories, his absence only a temporary pause rather than a loss. As they reminisce about their younger days, the struggles, the triumphs, and the moments of reckless joy, Willem realizes how much they have all changed, yet how the foundation of their bond remains unshaken. In this fleeting but tangible moment of togetherness, he understands that despite the hardships, they have built something extraordinary—a life shaped by love, resilience, and the quiet strength of enduring friendship.

As the evening winds down, Willem finds himself lost in thought, reflecting on the road that led them here. He thinks of the past—their early years, the struggles that once felt insurmountable, the uncertainty of what their lives would become. And yet, here they are, standing in the aftermath of all those battles, still together, still choosing one another every single day. It is a revelation that fills him with both gratitude and a quiet certainty that what they have is rare and unbreakable.

Later, as he helps Jude prepare for bed, the intimacy of these small moments carries more weight than any declaration of love ever could. The brushing of teeth, the quiet exchange of glances, the gentle ease with which they move around each other—these are the pieces of their life that matter most, the small things that add up to something monumental. Willem feels a deep, unshakable appreciation for it all: for Jude, for their friends, for the simple yet profound act of being able to share another day together.

Lying in bed, Willem allows himself a moment of stillness, feeling Jude's warmth beside him, listening to the rhythm of his breath. The future is uncertain, as it always has been, but what he knows for sure is that they will face it together, just as they always have. As sleep begins to take hold, he whispers into the darkness, the words meant for no one but himself, yet carrying the weight of every promise ever made. "For you, Jude. Always for you."