

## Finding Elliot

Every night, Joseph Hall has the same dream that's actually a memory, woven and tangled in emotion. It's always the last night. The last night with him.

He's in a hospital room that isn't his. He's sitting with Elliot, laughing over something that doesn't matter. The doctor comes in to say *actually, your results are looking much better than expected. You have a real shot of getting through this.* They have a chance. This is always the part when Joseph realizes it's a dream. But tonight he doesn't try to change it. Because in the dream, the boy he loves is still alive. In the dream, he is still twenty-three. His birthday's next week. They talk about the kind of cake Joseph will bring. They're both still breathing. Still hopeful. He wakes up in tears every morning.

Today is Elliot's funeral. It's a solemn affair, but a vehement reminder that funerals are for the living. It's held in a stuffy funeral home, a cheap poster board front and center in the chapel with a photo of Elliot from 2008, pigtails and braces, grinning into the camera with the wrong name emblazoned in a flourish under his face. The closed casket is mahogany and covered in bouquets of lilies. Relatives clad in formal black attire wring emotion out of themselves over a boy they haven't seen in almost six years, delicately dabbing their faces with a handkerchief, but never hard enough to smudge their makeup.

Joseph enters the room, and every face turns to look down the aisle at "the one who took Annie away". He wears the same suit and tie he wore to his last job interview (they never called him back). When Joseph arrives, he weeps. But for more than one reason. It's like Elliot has died all over again. Like they've erased every moment of him.

"How could you do this to him?" he whispers in the silence, and it wavers throughout the whole room. No one can answer, but they continue to stare. A few of the more perceptive family

members use this time to quietly slink out of the way. No need to be in the room when the conflict starts. Joseph walks forward to the casket and looks at the bouquets that hide the latch, locking out prying hands and eyes alike from seeing Elliot's true state. "All of this. This photo..." disgust drips from his voice, "the name, even the flowers. He hated lilies."

"You weren't invited," a voice rings out against him. It's Elliot's mother. She smiles at Joseph, bearing her bleached teeth like an invitation to war. *Don't cause a scene*, her tone warns. But Elliot is dead. None of this matters anymore. Joseph does not back down.

"Hello, Sarah. Why the closed casket? Don't tell me you'll have him in a dress when you put him in the ground." Joseph knows that Elliot loved dresses, but his mother would only turn them into something rotten. He places his hand on the casket, absentmindedly picking at the engraved wood.

"Don't touch the coffin, it's a rental. She'll be cremated and placed in the family mausoleum." Sarah nods towards the empty urn on the table. It's shining silver, but Joseph can already see the engraved name, and he swears that the urn is the first option on the funeral home's "basic mourning package" advertised in the entry hall.

"Elliot wanted his ashes spread. He wanted to be free. He made that very clear."

Sarah smiles in a falsely-diplomatic way. "We as a *family* decided where her remains will be kept. And you aren't in the family. Annie will remain there."

"You're not going to even put his name on there? Not even now?"

Sarah grabs Joseph's jacket collar, yanking him down to her level, even though it's only a few inches. "Listen to me. We tolerated her little identity politics when she was alive. But now she's home with us. You don't belong here."

"You didn't even want him!" Joseph's face curls in disgust. In rage. He pushes over a vase of lilies. The ceramic shatters on the floor, and he hopes the pieces never come out of the cheap carpet. The remaining relatives jump, and Joseph curses all of them under his breath.

Joseph is escorted out of the funeral. He's fine with that. He has to be. He's lost. It's over. Elliot is dead and locked away, and nothing else matters.

His dream is a different memory tonight. Back to the week Elliot first knew he was going to die. His rushed confessions of love and fear to Joseph. With Elliot being as sick as he was, the two came hand in hand, tied together in a way that can't be undone. Elliot was in love with Joseph. Elliot was terrified of dying. Of the world erasing him. Of his family erasing him. Of everything he had worked for being tossed aside like it was nothing. Like he was nothing, just rainbow-colored smoke in the wind. Joseph can't let that happen.

Joseph wakes up, and this time his eyes are dry. He knows what he has to do.

It all comes to him in a series of steps like he's known how to do this his whole life. He arrives early, his car tucked around the corner. He becomes part of the scenery. It's easy to disappear, he's learned. Night comes, and Joseph watches the ancient groundskeeper totter around like a man who will soon join the tombs he cares for, and waits until at last his light goes out. Then he enters the cemetery, walking on the mossy cobblestone path littered with pebbles from the erosion of a near-neverending stream of grieving souls. It's dark, but the moon is full tonight as it lights his path, coating the ground in silver. Joseph walks for a while in the silence, eyes squinting to read the etchings above each small stone building. The stillness is far too weighted and cold to be tranquil.

At last he finds it, parsing out the worn lettering above the archway. The mausoleum aches in the wind, a quiet cacophony of the many generations of Elliot's family who have lived and died in this town. Joseph prepares the crowbar but the door swings open easily without even creaking. He doesn't dwell on what that could mean.

He turns on the flashlight, looking for the shiny but plain urn. "Found you," he whispers as he removes the urn from its shelf.

When he reaches his car, he pulls a piece of shiny plastic off of the dashboard where he had left it.

"Here, for the ride," Joseph addresses the urn as he carefully sticks a nametag over the engraving. *Hi! My name is Elliot*, it reads. His car coughs awake, the headlights a dim and warm yellowish-orange. "Should we go? I think it's time. You feeling the beach, or maybe the hill where we had that picnic? No matter, we can decide on the way." He places a hand reassuringly on the metal, and for a moment it feels warm.