

MAJOR TRIGGER WARNING!! This story contains themes of fire, (burning down a building), prior thoughts of death, and most of all, non-violent death (suffocation).

[Love Burns]

Amalia was united with her perfect best friend. Will always had their life put together. Always had a plan, always did their best, and accepted everyone with open arms. Amalia wished she was even a bit like Will. Maybe then she'd be free.

Free from all the horrible things boiling inside, from her life altering obsession, and from the intrusive thoughts. She hadn't even thought about how to hide her pyromania from Will. How was she supposed to hide that she can't go a day without lighting a lighter, adding logs to a burning pyre, just to breathe in carbon and ash?

She looked at Will. She knew that they wouldn't judge her. They'd probably support her and help with her obsession, but some part of her brain told her Will would drop her if they knew that she was throwing her life away. Plus, she knew that if Will knew, she'd have to stop. And she did not want to stop.

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Willow thought the past few days with Mal had been amazing. They didn't do extravagant things, but they still had so much fun entertaining themselves. They were happy until a crushing dream cracked them out of sleep.

They saw their parents shaking their heads with arms crossed, like they were a disappointment. It hurt knowing the people who were supposed to support them the most abandoned them. But then Willow turned around and saw Mal, the only person they wanted to be perfect for, with the most disgusted look on her face. They woke up in a cold sweat.

"Mal?" Willow whispered, calling for her. "Mal?"

Mal wasn't in her spot next to them, and the house was dark. Willow crept out of bed, the floor cold. They kept calling for their best friend while walking out of the bedroom. Then, they saw the faint glow of light coming from the living room.

They walked around the corner and gasped at the sight before them. Mal was standing, facing away from them, and there was a glow around her face. A lighter, no doubt.

"Mal?" They called out. Mal didn't respond, it was like she couldn't hear them at all. They took a step closer. "Mal." Yet still, she didn't answer. "Amalia," they tried again. *Why is she ignoring me?* They kept walking toward her, getting close enough that Mal surely could hear them. Frustrated, they snapped her fingers in front of Mal's face in hopes that she'd notice.

Mal whipped her head around to face them, eyes wide and practically bulging out of their sockets. She yelled, piercing Willow's ears. Mal was so freaked out that her expressive hands dropped the item she was holding, sending the lighter flying to the ground. Time slowed down as if to taunt them, the flame locked and still floating on the metal. They watched as the carpet beneath them was set aflame, the fibers dancing in an attempt to fight the flames, only causing the enemy to spread further.

Their bodies were frozen. Willow hadn't even processed what happened yet, the events happening too fast for their brain to properly make sense of it all. The image of Mal dropping the object was repeating in their head, looping like a poorly cut clip. Even when Willow's brain caught up to speed, they found themselves to be stuck.

They were never a fighter or a flighter. They simply stood still when in the face of danger. They couldn't help feeling petrified, stuck in place, freezing up all of their limbs and forcefully stopping their ability to move. They looked at Mal, seeing the equally terrified yet amazed expression on her face.

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“Oh my god.” Amalia’s jaw was hung open, panic bubbling inside her chest. “Oh my god, oh my god.”

“Mal, Mal,” Will said her name with the same panic in their voice. “What did you do?”

“Oh my god,” Amalia only repeated, unable to compose proper sentences. “What do we do? We need water, oh my god we need water—”

Will immediately grabbed a half empty bottle on the coffee table and poured it onto the brazing fire. The compound did little to the dangerous threat, still working on swallowing up everything Amalia worked for. She felt frozen in place, like she was sinking to the bottom of the ocean, the water lowering her body temperature until her blood turned to ice. The heat wasn’t enough.

This was becoming too real. The thought of them dying was becoming too real.

“We need to get out,” Will said.

Amalia struggled to meet her eyes with her friend’s. She knew she had to move, had to run with Will, but she couldn’t. Her sick mind was *begging* her to stay, to watch the inviting flames perform a tango she knew all too well. It tried to justify the death wish, saying that it’d be best to die in her own apartment, surrounded by her best friends, both Will and hues of red and gold.

“I can’t,” Amalia responded. “I’m sorry. I can’t. You... You should go.”

Will’s eyes narrowed. “What are you talking about? We need to leave, now.”

“No,” Amalia said, shaking. “No, I want to stay.”

“You’ll die.”

“I... I want to.”

“What?” Will frowned, confusion evident in their facial features. “Mal, what’s going on?”

Here was the part where Amalia would have to come clean about the past few months. Weirdly, she felt more uncomfortable talking about her obsession than the deadly situation her obsession put them in.

“Amalia,” Will repeated.

“I…” she choked on her words. “I like looking at fire, that’s all.”

She looked away from them, not wanting to see the disgusted reaction on their face. *What kind of idiot would let something as stupid as fire ruin her life?*

Instead of huffing out an annoyed breath and leaving her like she’d always thought, they came closer and held her hands in theirs. “Please be honest with me.”

“I want to,” Amalia responded. She pointed to her head. “It hates me. Won’t let me talk about it.”

Will put on a small smile for her, going to sit down on the floor. “Let’s have one more conversation. Let out anything you want to say for the last time.”

Her eyes flew wide open. “What are you talking about? You’re leaving.”

“I’m staying with you,” Will corrected. “I’m not going to leave you.”

“You’re crazy.”

“So are you,” Will shot back. “We’re ride or die, why would you ever think I’d let you die first?”

“I’m not important enough for you to throw your life away.”

Will looked offended, gesturing for Amalia to sit. “That’s not true. Mal, you’re my best friend, and practically the only family I have. You saved me in my darkest times, and you were there when my family wasn’t. I would’ve died a long time ago if not for you. I’m not going to convince you to do otherwise, if you’re sure about it. If at any point you’re unsure, we’ll get out of here.”

Amalia avoided the question of whether or not she was sure about her decision to stay. “Why would you stay with *me*? I’m so messed up. I don’t want to drag you down with me,” she said instead.

“Who says I’m not messed up?” Will asked. “I don’t think you realize – because I didn’t realize about you – but I’m just as screwed in the head as you are. It has caused so many problems for me that I wouldn’t even live for long either way. So, if I had to choose between dying now with you, the most important person in my life, or to live for a few more days in misery after losing you, only to end up dead as well, I’d rather skip a few steps in the process.”

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Willow knew they won the argument. After years of bottling everything up, scary words not daring to form after being repressed for so long, it was strange how easy it was to keep rambing. *I never would’ve thought being honest was this easy.*

They watched Mal ponder, wondering what she was thinking about. Eventually, she said: “Okay.” Her eyes drifted to the withering carpet. “You’re staying with me.”

“Yeah.”

“Willow,” Mal said suddenly. “I can’t breathe.”

Willow could feel the ashes and carbon taking over the space in their lungs, suffocating them. They felt so sleepy. Even within the burning hot and extravagant fire, they felt like they were in the deepest part of the ocean. It was chillingly cold, causing them to cling onto Mal for warmth, the warmth unfamiliar in the cold regions of their life. They could barely feel the rise and fall of Amalia’s chest, even though their bodies were pressed right against each other. Tears pooled in Willow’s eyes as the reality of everything truly kicked in. *I’m dying. Mal is dying.*

They exhaled as best they could, pulled their best friend impossibly closer and let out their last breath.

[Artist's Statement]

I started thinking about my own definition of family: the people in your life that are there to support you, and won't purposefully walk out. I wanted this story to be about found family, because I hold my own found family close.

Amalia and Willow are each other's found family. Willow explains the importance of Amalia to them, and how Amalia has influenced the goals and plans Willow set for herself. The same thing applies to Amalia, who trusts Willow because they have consistently proved that they are there for her.

However, they both hid things from each other (i.e, Amalia's addiction to fire), which created dramatic irony where neither thought the other was struggling. For example, one of Amalia's thoughtshots was *What kind of idiot would let something as stupid as fire ruin her life?* The audience knows that those are just intrusive thoughts from Amalia's head, and that Willow wouldn't be irrational, but Amalia doesn't know that. Her mind led her to believe that Willow would leave her, which wasn't true.

The snapshot in this story was when Amalia dropped the lighter onto the floor. Each detail of the start of the fire was slowed down, to make the audience truly understand what was happening. This is strengthened by Willow's emotions: "Willow hadn't even processed what happened yet, the events happening too fast for their brain to properly make sense of it all." From this, you can tell that Amalia dropping the lighter only took a few seconds, but making sense of the severe and irreversible damages was a slow process that added more tension.

The dialogue reveals how the characters struggle, which helps to understand not only the characters, but also why the story took the path it did. Willow says: "If I had to choose between dying now with you, the most important person in my life, or to live for a few more days in misery after losing you, only to end up dead as well, I'd rather skip a few steps in the process,"

and this shows why Willow stayed with Amalia – Amalia was essential for their survival, because of the struggles that we can infer.

The motif was the feeling of being at the bottom of the ocean, feeling cold and alone. Amalia and Willow both experience this feeling, and they deal with it in different ways. Amalia does everything in her power to make the feeling go away, leading her down a pathway of needing fire to be warm, whereas Willow lets the feeling consume them until they can't feel anything. This is how the two deal with all their feelings, Willow represses them while Amalia lets them out, both hoping the problems would go away.

Everyone has experienced this feeling of being alone, although maybe not in the exact wording. Mental health is a big issue, and something I want to achieve by writing this is normalizing having issues and having a healthy way to be able to let out your feelings.