

Izzy Baldwin

The Qualifications of Being Saved

Nico's shoulder clips the tree with a hot flash of pain as he stumbles into the forest at the edge of his step-mom's backyard. The bark latches into the cotton of his shirt like a cat's tongue licking fur, stretching it, ripping it.

"Hell," Nico whispers, fumbling blindly in the dark. The twigs and leaves on the ground crunch as he skids to a stop, prodding the new hole and the bloodied skin beneath it. For a moment, all he can do is worry about the frayed edges of the cloth, and pretend that's the worst problem he has.

Once he's run out of time and motivation to pretend, he pulls out his phone with trembling hands. His breath fogs in the light from the screen as he turns it on to call Charlotte. Closing his eyes, he shifts his feet and imagines the crush of earth as a pair of footsteps joining him. He presses his palm against the tree, where it tore into his shoulder. If it were warmer, he could pretend he was taking her rough, unforgiving hand. The speaker rings and drowns out his gasping before she answers.

"Nicolaus," she says, and it's such a Charlotte thing to do, to greet him with the name he hates, when he loves her but not what she does. He can hear her chewing over the speaker, a wet smack of lips and the clack of her teeth against silverware before she swallows. "Why are you calling me?"

The better question would be, *when is he not calling?* He can't help but call Charlotte, because she speaks to *him*: pathetic, thankless Nicolaus who is so aimless he wouldn't be able to follow a path even if it were laid down, brick by brick, at his feet. Not the unrealized potential, or the idea his father nurses over a drink that's much like Nico: all for looks, not taste.

“Hey,” he wheezes out, feeling the icy bark of the tree bite beneath his nail beds. “Hey, hey, hey. Listen.”

“Talk faster and I might.” The scrape of a knife against a plate shrills against Nico’s ear, and he cringes. “Like you might’ve guessed, I’m eating dinner. Where are you?”

“In the woods,” Nico answers, words slippery like fish wriggling in his hands. “Outside my, uh—my step-mom’s place. The one my dad crashed at. It’s Christmas. Merry Christmas, Charlotte.”

“Yeah. Christmas, Saint Nicolaus. Merry or not. I’m going to hang up.”

“Wait, just wait. Please. I was at my step-mom’s place.”

“The one your dad *crashed* at.”

“Exactly. Yeah. The big house, the one we visited for my twenty-first birthday. The one with the red door you hated because—”

“Because they spilled the paint on the silver hinges. I know, Nicky.”

“Sure,” Nico says, running a hand through his hair before the curls tangle in between his fingers and trap them there against his scalp. “And, listen, so I came over because it’s, you know, the holidays—”

“And now you’re calling me because your dad said something to make you freak out, didn’t he?” She pauses, and Nico imagines her gently blotting her mouth with a napkin, leaving a red smear. Nico strains to hear who’s at her table but is only met with silence. “You still haven’t realized you and your dad’s relationship was thrown out to sea since you were conceived. Start swimming.”

A sharp laugh empties Nico’s lungs as he hunches forward, cradling the phone closer to his face as if to kiss the screen. “Could you bring me a boat?”

Another scrape of silverware; the rip of bread. The clink of glass and a gulp. “You can’t call me every time you need someone to save you.”

“Charlotte,” Nico whispers, “do you hate me?”

“And if I did?” Charlotte waits. Nico would call it hesitation to be kinder to himself, but he knows better. “If I hated you, Nicky? What then? You going to keep calling me? Gonna keep coming here hoping for something new when you know better?”

“Charlie, come on—”

“Come on, *what?* Nicky, I’m not going to save you.”

“Why not?” Nico asks, vaguely feeling the cold ground seep through his pants as he slides down to greet it, thumping his head into the tree behind him. “I can’t be that hard to save.”

It’s the easiest way to say, *fix me*. It’s the easiest way to beg, *fix me. For him*. Because even though Nico looks like his father plucked fresh from his twenties, his youth’s already been tapped off into the ashtray. His father has no interest in good-for-nothings that remind him of all that’s been lost, of all that could have been but never will be. At this point, Nico wonders if his father would prefer tending to a gravestone because at least that would stay still.

Something skids over the phone—maybe a chair, followed by a forced sigh. The kind that Charlotte has when she’s gritting her jaw. Nico wants to kiss her, and he wants Charlotte to make it hurt. “I tried. I have *tried*. I told you not to go there. I told you to spend the holidays with *me*, Nicky. Just you and me.” She pauses again, and Nico realizes he hasn’t heard anyone else eating with her. “You know exactly what your dad is about, how he’s not gonna know you, how he’s going to tell you about what you should’ve been, could’ve been.”

It’s true enough. Nico’s dad is always spinning some new path for him to take, from med school to finance—anything that doesn’t start with “dead” or end with “beat.”

“I just need someone to love me right now,” Nico says. “Even if I’m not that good.”

The phone is silent in his hand.

“Charlotte?”