

PROLOGUE

Soph POV

I would never have said my 17 years on this earth have been perfect but two things made it feel that way. Dante and Mikey. The three of us have been together since fourth grade through snotty noses, first crushes and homecoming. The brother and dad I never had. My mom has done her best but it's hard to be there for someone when you work every second of your life.

It feels like just yesterday but also a lifetime ago since the start of junior year. I felt so sentimental. Everyone knows I am a total softie - rom-coms since the age of 10 that probably made me Kleenex's #1 customer.

I thought junior year would be so different. College applications, finishing my art portfolio and Dante's promise to help me improve my atrocious grades. Mikey, Dante and me - making great memories. But, I wouldn't say that all worked out perfectly.

PART ONE JUNIOR YEAR

Dante POV

"Mary! Austin!" I'm rushing around frantically knocking on my siblings' doors. You'd think after years of playing parent, I'd be better at it.

"Morning D" My younger sister Gina greets me with tired eyes.

"Morning, you got breakfast?" I say heading for the laundry room.

"Yup. You know when mom and dad are coming home?" This is always the question.

"Flight delayed, they'll be back tomorrow" I say, pulling a clean shirt over my head,

avoiding the disappointment in her eyes.

“I’m taking the bus - want me to bring Austin?” she asks.

Brain Flood by Josie Hilton
October 23, 2022

I throw her the lunch bags I pulled together earlier with a grateful smile as the four of us head out the door.

Mikey POV

I pass my dad, snoring on the couch, TV blaring. I make coffee, enough for two, though I know the second one will go to waste.

I pull on dirty jeans and a gray sweatshirt after applying Axe body spray (who has time to shower?). I jump when I hear the repeated blast of a car horn.

“Jesus D, I’m coming!” I yell, stumbling down my porch steps and into the passenger seat.

“Bout time” Dante says, as he pulls out of my driveway.

“Mi-key!” A sing-songy voice comes from the back seat..

“Mar-y! I sing back. ‘Ready for pre-K?’”

“Yeth!” She lisps, clapping her hands.

After we’ve dropped Mary off, I half jokingly suggest we skip but Dante’s not into it.

“We can’t let Soph down - she’s probably been waiting for us for hours.”

That’s Soph all over. She is so genuinely excited about everything - even school.

Soph POV

I press my head against the cool metal of my locker trying to ease the pulsing pain I have

been feeling all morning. More like all summer but I don't let myself think about that. I see Mikey and Dante, put on a smile and run to throw my arms around them.

“God Soph, chill. Why are you always so damn peppy?” Mikey groans.

Brain Flood by Josie Hilton
October 23, 2022

“Well, *someone* has to compensate for your negative energy”, I snap. Mikey glares at me. “Stop fighting” Dante says, mediating as usual. “Meet back here after last class so we can head to my house?” he adds.

We smile, nodding agreement.

Mikey POV

I know I'm super late to meet Dante and Soph. But when I approach the lockers Dante is alone.

“Where's Soph?”

Dante looks up from his phone, frowning. “Not sure. I've been texting her but she isn't answering.”

Soph POV

I don't remember what happened, how I got here. I just remember drowning. I'm in the hospital. The doctor tells me I had a seizure because I have something called “glioblastoma”.
Brain cancer.

My mom is here. She is sobbing. I think about Mikey and Dante and my heart aches.

“Mom.” I whisper dryly. She looks at me like her heart is breaking.

“I need to call Dante and Mikey.”

She hands me her phone. I dial Dante's number. He answers after one

ring. “Yes? Any news? How is she?”

“Is Mikey there too?” is all I can manage to say.

“Soph? Oh my god are you okay? And, yes he’s here.”

“Guys?” This is when I start to cry, and I don’t think I will ever stop.

Brain Flood by Josie Hilton
October 23, 2022

Dante POV

Mikey and I haven’t left each other's side since Soph called. Soph has glioblastoma, a type of brain cancer that is almost always fatal. Soph only has a year, maybe two, left. That has been the single thought in my mind.

Mikey has been silent. Soph is the sister he will never have. And she is my life raft. I want to wrap her in my arms and make sure she never leaves us.

PART TWO SENIOR YEAR

Soph POV

I am doing what I always do. Lying in my hospital bed thinking about the end of my life. Tomorrow is the start of senior year and I won’t be there. I don’t think I’ll be here much longer either. I sit up as I hear Dante and Mikey approach my room.

Mikey seems happy which I know is an effort he’s putting on for me. Though I am literally dying every time I see them I think I just might live.

“Soph, me and Dante have something to tell you.” Mikey sputters.

“Well, not tell you but we have a suggestion, a project.” Dante clarifies.

“Okay, okay, what's this suggestion, project, thing?” I feel lighter not only because I have

lost nearly a third of my body weight but because it's like it used to be, me, Dante, and Mikey.

“Okay so pretty much this has been the hardest fucking year of our lives. I mean of course it's been the hardest year of YOUR life I just mean-”

“Mikey...” Dante warns, cutting him off.

“Guys, oh my God.” I say groaning.

Brain Flood by Josie Hilton
October 23, 2022

“Sorry. So, Mikey and I want to make your bucket list real. You tell us what's on it and we'll go do it, before...” He trails off. We all know what he means.

I don't know what to say. I feel angry that I can't complete my bucket list with my favorite people. I also want to cry because of how thoughtful they are.

I go with the crying option.

“Shit Dante we made her cry.” Mikey searches frantically for the Kleenex.

“I'm okay, it's just really sweet.” I give them a salty, wet smile.

Dante comes over pulling me into a hug. Mikey joins. I have never felt safer. They just left and I am staring at a piece of white paper. My mind is blank and my eyes are heavy. I shove it aside and roll over.

PART THREE

Dante POV

Soph died last week. I am drowning, I am being pulled into deep dark waters and Soph isn't here to rescue me.

Mikey and I haven't been to school for a week. We've been helping Soph's mom with the

funeral arrangements. She would have liked it, I think. I couldn't focus on the daisies (Soph's favorite flowers) or her beautiful smile in the large framed photo by the coffin. All I could think is: She. Is. Gone.

Brain Flood by Josie Hilton
October 23, 2022

Mikey POV

I loved her like she was my own blood. Though we fought about every little thing I would give anything to lose one more argument. The funeral just ended. Dante and I are sitting in his car staring at the envelope Soph's mom just gave us. Staring at our names written in Soph's unmistakable loopy writing.

Soph POV

Dante and Mikey,

Even if I lived to 100, I wouldn't have loved anyone more than I love you two. I am sorry for not making the bucket list. It was a really sweet idea but I couldn't bear seeing you guys live my dreams without me. Plus you need to follow your own dreams.

So, my dying wish is that you both do something for yourselves.

1. Dante, you are the smartest person I know but you always put everyone else first.

You know you want to go to college. Make it happen.

2. Mikey, you are my brother so as harsh as it sounds, you need to get your shit

together. You are better than your dad. He doesn't deserve to call you family.

Break free. Oh, and eventually you should get married. If not, I think my ghost is gonna be haunting my 60 year old single brother.

3. Oh, and please keep an eye on my mom. She could use the family.

PART FOUR: GRADUATION

Dante POV

I grab my cap and gown before jumping in the car. My phone buzzes. A text from Mikey: "I won't be late today". I know it's not true but gotta give him credit for trying. As I pull up he is outside, waiting. And, he actually looks kinda clean for once.

"Someone took a shower" I say laughing

"Shut up, D" He says, shoving me lightly.

"Are your parents coming?" He asks, getting a little more serious.

"Mom said they'll try. But, you know, I've got Mary, Austin, Gina ...and you."

Mikey POV

Dante is standing at the podium.

"I think I can speak for everyone when I say we all miss Soph- Sophie. I wish she could be here with us today. I've learned some important things since she left us. Even when someone isn't here they are always with you. And, as long as you surround yourself with people you love, you don't need to feel you are sinking - we keep each other afloat."

I smile through my tears. I miss Soph every day but the future looks bright. I am doing what she wanted, getting out of here. Dante is too - who could turn down a free ride to Michigan?

Things are looking better. I would never say perfect, or even close to it, but it's starting to feel that way.

Artist Statement:

I chose to focus my story on a chosen family from the perspective of three people, Mikey, Dante, and Soph. Chosen family means you can find family in people who are legally not your family, meaning through friendship. I chose to show how each character portrays their personalities through how they interact with their biological and chosen families through personality, identity and humor. Dante's parents are often absent so he takes on the role of parent for his three younger siblings. This makes him a very responsible and caring person but also boxed in.

Mikey doesn't have a good relationship with his dad as he is an alcoholic and Mikey has to fend for himself. Although Mikey only has to take care of himself he still cares for his friends and demonstrates this through humor.

Soph is the daughter of a single mom who works a lot of hours. This forces Soph into being a very independent person who finds family in her friends. She has a unique personality having been alone a lot with the opportunity to discover her own interests and passions.

I used a snapshot to show Soph's death and how Dante and Mikey reacted. I thought because this was the climax and most dramatic part of my story I would use a snapshot to really show how much this affected Dante and Mikey. I used dramatic irony when Soph got her diagnosis and Mikey and Dante didn't know. I used my thoughtshots when Soph was thinking about Dante and Mikey when they came to visit her. My motif was "drowning" or "sinking". I chose to show this in a metaphorical way. Soph, Dante, and Mikey keep each other "afloat" and when Soph gets her diagnosis they are thrown overboard and feel like they're "drowning". I think

the dialogue is really important for my story as it shows how the characters interact with each other and other characters. It gave them more depth and moved the story forward.