



# Credence

Delphia Baisden

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by Delphia Baisden



## CREDESCENCE

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*For my parents Lola and Oscar Baisden,  
for setting the example for how love should be*

## One

James Morgan stood to the left side of the stage, his favorite guitar in his arms. The crowd was passionate and loud, cheering not only for Eden's lead singer, Theo Nichols, but also for him, their guitarist. And for David Rowan, their bassist. And for Phil Archer, their drummer.

Although James and his bandmates partied hard—including alcohol excess and drugs—James couldn't hope for a high more powerful than the one he felt playing for a crowd like this. He felt alive as the notes spilled from his hands as easily as breathing.

With the last chords of the final encore song played, Theo, James, David, and Phil came together in the middle of the stage, bowing, then waving and flashing "devil horns." After a few blissful moments of this, they turned, leaving behind a sea of cheers.

James jogged around behind the stage, using the tail of his T-shirt to wipe the sweat from his face. *Full arena, completely sold out.* He beamed with delight.

"Holy shit, did you see that crowd?" James turned as Phil bounded toward him. James dodged him, laughing.

"Yeah, I saw it!" *Nothing can feel as good as this, nothing,* he thought just as he caught Theo's eye. James flushed beneath the glow of performing for the past two hours. Theo winked at him, and James smiled, more out of habit than actual joy. He almost caught himself admitting that there was something that felt better than performing for a sold-out crowd, but he knew it was a lie. Suddenly, he was very thirsty for a beer. *Or two. Or ten.*

An hour later, after a shower and a change of clothes, beer in hand—the second of the night, the first having been consumed in the shower to calm the leftover adrenaline—James mingled with the band and crew. Alcohol flowed freely, drugs less conspicuously but just as much, and everyone seemed to be in good spirits. He looked around for Phil, finding him stumbling and laughing, engaged in a game of beer pong with David and some of the crew. James couldn't help but love him. Phil was probably the closest thing he had to a brother.

Just as he was about to try to weasel his way into the game, Theo entered the room. James looked back at the game, longing to just go and be normal, to have fun like he knew he should. *I'm still in my twenties. I'm in a successful band. I get to play guitar for a living. So why does it feel like there's always this wall between me and happiness?*

*You know why,* a different voice spoke up from the back of his mind. He downed the rest of his beer, willing that particular voice into silence.

“Hey, handsome.” He heard Theo’s voice low in his ear just as a cold beer bottle was pressed against his neck. He jumped. “Whoa! Easy there, spaz!” Theo handed him the beer.

“Thanks.” Behind them, Phil whooped as his team won a round of beer pong. James smiled.

“Grow the fuck up.”

James turned to Theo. Intoxication not only lowered his tolerance for Theo’s comments, but also loosened his filter for responding to them. “He’s having fun,” James said. “We played a great show tonight.”

“We did. So please, let’s make juvenile asses of ourselves to celebrate,” he said. James opened the beer and took a drink. “Aw, come on, don’t pout.”

“M not.”

“You know, why don’t you go play with them? Maybe loosen your mopey ass up,” he taunted. “You get so defensive over him, maybe you’d rather he—”

“Stop,” James said. “Just stop.” Theo had suggested it several times before. *Maybe you’d rather fool around with him.* The first time, James was sincerely taken aback and apologetic, assuring Theo over and over that Phil was straight, that nothing was going on between them, or ever would. Over time, it’d become clearer to James that it was said more out of insecurity than as an actual accusation. Theo didn’t like James caring about anyone else, platonically or otherwise. Not to mention that on more than one occasion, James would talk to Phil about his relationship with Theo, or Phil would witness some disagreement or tension, and he would encourage James to stand up for himself.

“Come on, Jamie. I was just kidding. I know he’s your bestie.” When James only offered a mild, forlorn smile, Theo sighed. “Look,” he began, reaching into his back pocket. “Why don’t you have a few more drinks? Try to relax?” He took two cards from his wallet, a credit card and a hotel room key card. “Then come up to join me when you’re done?” James hated himself as he let Theo slip the cards into his back pocket, his hand lingering on his backside a beat longer than necessary. “Room 826. I’ll text it to you,” Theo said. *Because he thinks you won’t remember. Because you never remember. Because you have to get so plastered to be okay with this, that—*

“I got it. Room 826.” From there, he watched Theo turn and disappear to do who-knows-what.

“Hey, James!” James turned to see Phil waving to him. He pasted on a smile, walking over to the makeshift beer-pong table. “David tapped out. Wanna be on my team?”

Phil had observed the entire interaction out of the corner of his eye. He’d watched the way James’s face changed as they spoke and wondered what Theo was saying to him. When they’d begun fooling around, James had been all smiles and flushed cheeks. Now, the only time Phil saw anything close to that in his best friend and bandmate was when they played a show.

“You alright, brother?”

“I’m fine,” James answered, sloshing his beer as he helped reset the cups.

“You sure?”

“I’m *fine*, Phil,” he said, irritated.

“I don’t believe you. But in the spirit of celebrating an awesome show, I’ll let it go,” Phil said. “For now.”

James stopped, meeting his eyes. “I don’t need you to look after me.”

“I’m only looking out for you because you’re my friend,” Phil said. “And clearly *he* doesn’t.” He said that last under his breath, but James heard it anyway. He took a deep breath, drank down the rest of the beer Theo had given him, then turned to walk away. “James! Come on, man!”

James threw the empty beer bottle in the trash hard enough that it broke against the bottom with a loud *crack*, startling everyone into temporary silence. He didn’t stop to apologize. He didn’t stop until he reached the hotel bar.

Over the course of the next couple of hours, James sat at the bar and drank. He had two double shots of his favorite whiskey—his favorite, not because of the brand or flavor, but because of its high alcohol content—as well as four more beers. *All on my own credit card, thank you very much.* But while Theo’s credit card was tucked safely in the pocket of his jeans next to his own wallet, he fidgeted with Theo’s hotel room key card.

*I should just stop. I should put these under his door, go up to my room, and pass out. Phil’s right—Theo doesn’t care about me. And if it’s showing on my face from across the room...* He sighed. He knew he was unhappy, but he also knew that walking away and expecting to keep peace within the band would never work.

*And what about what you want?* the voice spoke up again. *He’s not even good to you. Aside from the occasional half-assed handjob, you’re completely unsatisfied.* He rubbed his eyes with the thumb and fingers of one hand.

He remembered those first few times with Theo, all the tentative touches and stolen kisses. They’d never had full-blown intercourse, but they had ventured as far as oral sex.

*No, the voice corrected, you’ve gone as far as oral sex. And the tenderness is all but nonexistent now.* He cringed at the truth. James tried to hate him enough to believe that Theo was using him, but even with all the evidence to back it up, James couldn’t help himself. He twirled the key card between his fingers.

*What do you think will happen when you go up there?* the voice continued. *Same thing that always does. He’ll make out with you for a few minutes, then push you toward his crotch.* James took another long pull from his beer. *And then you’re going to do exactly what he wants.*

*So I won’t go. I’ll go up to my room and sleep it off. Make him miss me a little.*

*He won’t miss you, the voice countered. But it will irritate him enough to make things uncomfortable for you, and maybe for everyone, for a few days. You sure you wanna risk that?*

“Can I get anything else for you, handsome?” The bartender had been

kind, although the more James drank, the more he could feel her watching him, wondering if she should cut him off.

“No, thanks-s,” he slurred. “S-sorry. I’ve probably overstayed my welcome, huh?”

“No worries,” she said, closing his bar tab. “You seem awful sad”—she read the slip—“James Morgan. Sorry I wasn’t able to cheer you up.”

He shrugged. “’M not sad, just tired.” He signed the slip. “Thanks”—he glanced over the receipt—“Mary.”

“Hey, piece of advice,” she said, leaning forward. He thought she was going to hit on him, but she said, “I don’t know who’s waiting for you up in that room”—she pointed to Theo’s key card—“but if drinking yourself to this point is what it takes to go up there, it isn’t worth it. Eyes as pretty as yours shouldn’t look so sad at leaving the bar for the night. Even if you’re supposed to be a moody rock star.” She winked, and he smiled.

“Didn’t think you recognized me,” he said as he slid off the barstool, patting himself to make sure he had all his belongings.

“Almost didn’t,” she said.

“You a fan?”

“Isn’t everyone?”

He laughed at that. “You’d be surprised.”

“Yeah, I guess I’ve heard some off-color things. Not about you, though.” He met her eyes again. “Mostly about what’s-his-name.”

“Theo.”

“Yeah, him. ’S he hard to work with?”

“Are you going to sell this conversation?”

“It’s not worth losing my job,” she said.

“Everyone’s difficult sometimes.” He sounded so sure to his own ears, he almost believed it.

“I guess so.” She looked him over again. “I hope that’s not what you’re drinking away.”

James put on his biggest smile. “Not even a little bit,” he lied. Her face said she didn’t believe him. *Can everyone see it?* he wondered, unnerved.

“Take care, handsome.”

“You too, Ms. Mary,” he responded.

\* \* \*

James walked out of the bar and nearly face-first into Phil.

“Jesus!” James stumbled back, managing to catch himself. “Damn, dude, I thought you’d already gone to bed.”

“Nope,” James said, steadying himself against the wall.

“Alright, come on, time for bed,” Phil said, trying to wrap an arm around him.

“Nh-come on, Phil, I can walk,” James protested, pushing away from him.

“Barely.”

“Don’t follow me.”



“Like I don’t know where you’re going?”

“I don’t want to hear the lecture, *Mom*,” James jeered.

“I don’t want to lecture. I want to apologize,” he said, and James stopped, turning to him. “I was out of line, and I’m sorry.”

They walked into the elevator. James had to think for a minute. *Something...*26, he thought through the haze. 8, 826, *got it*. He pressed the 8 button.

“How much have you had to drink?”

“Yes?” He snickered, and Phil shook his head.

“Look, I know you’re too drunk to talk this out right now, and frankly, I’m too tired to try. But I really am worried about you.”

“Don’t know why.”

Phil punched the Stop button. “Because this thing between you and him, it used to make you happy. You used to smile like an idiot and blush like a teenage girl. You used to be excited to be around him. And you didn’t have to drink to tolerate him.” Even through the alcoholic cocoon he’d placed around himself, Phil’s words hurt. “I can’t tell if it’s just a cooling off or if he’s—”

“He’s nothing! I said I’m f-fine. I’m fine! Just drop it!”

“Fine.” Phil restarted the elevator. “Whatever, man. I promise not to say I told you so.”

“And I promise to try not to punch you in the throat while I’m drunk.”

“You’re not drunk,” Phil said as the elevator stopped at his floor. He stood in the doorway so the doors couldn’t close. “You’re fucking plastered. Just like you’ve been every night for weeks. If you have to get this drunk to fool around with someone, maybe he’s not for you. Just a thought.” He stepped back, allowing the doors to close.

*He’s right, you know*, the voice piped up again. But James was far too intoxicated to listen. In spite of everything—and everyone—telling him not to, he rode the rest of the way up to the eighth floor and found his way to Theo’s hotel room.

Phil stomped down the hall toward his room.

“Drunk, stubborn asshole,” he swore under his breath. He wanted to punch something. *Theo. Punching Theo sounds like an excellent idea*. But he knew James would never forgive him. He realized he hadn’t been watching for his room number and turned around, frustrated. He caught movement about halfway down the corridor. It was Theo, coming out of another hotel room.

“Hey, Phil,” Theo said as he approached him.

“Hey,” Phil said.

“I’m glad I ran into you. I wanted to apologize for earlier,” Theo said. “For when I said you should grow up. I know it upset James.”

Phil stifled a cringe. “Yeah, well, whatever. Water under the bridge and all that.”

“Is it really? ’Cause I get the impression you don’t like me very much. At least not where James is concerned.”

“Look, he’s like my brother—”

“I know,” Theo interrupted. “Sometimes I think he’d rather be with you.”

Phil did cringe then. “If you really believe that, you’re even dumber than I thought.” He saw Theo’s fists clench at his sides. *Go ahead, asshole, hit me. I fucking dare you.* Theo followed Phil’s gaze down to his fists. He relaxed them, chuckling.

“You seen him anywhere? I’ve been looking for him.” Suddenly, Phil wanted to stop him. Because if he used the anger Phil could see in his face—or those fists—on James, Phil would never forgive himself. “Don’t know if his drunk ass remembered my room number.” Theo winked.

“If you think the gay thing makes me uncomfortable, I’ve got news for you,” Phil said. “I knew James was gay long before he ever met you. I was just hoping he’d find a guy who actually gave a shit about him.”

“You think I don’t give a shit about him?” Theo tried to intimidate him, but Phil didn’t back down.

“I *know* you don’t.” He looked Theo in the eyes, and for the first time, Phil noticed how dilated his pupils were, as well as the slight sheen of sweat on his face.

“Well, Phil, as always, it was good talking to you,” he said. “I’m gonna go see if I can find our favorite drunk. See you tomorrow.” He winked again, and Phil felt his stomach turn. As he watched Theo walk away, something in his gut told him to stop him, to find James and make him sleep it off away from Theo, at least for tonight. But then he thought about how frustrated James already was with him. He sighed as he began trying to find his own hotel room again.