



ENDLESS,
Forever

E.M. LINDSEY

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E.M. Lindsey

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Editing: Bailey Polanco

Cover: Natasha Snow

Content warnings: This book contains issues of narcissistic childhood abuse, neglect, gender questioning, transphobia, homophobia, religious based abuse and trauma, drug usage and addiction, drug overdose, addiction recovery, C-PTSD, ableist insults, abuse recovery, and a main character considering cheating.

This book does not contain actual cheating, but it does show a main character engaging in sex with another person who is not the main love interest after their relationship is over. Please take care if this is not your preference.

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couldn't have done this without you.*

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“If you are not long, I will wait here for you all my life.”

Oscar Wilde

Every bone in his body ached. Like a violent, crackling thunder, he heard his joints popping which absolutely wasn't normal for someone at the tender age of twenty-three. Probably had something to do with the fact that he had been completely trashed when he fell into his bed, waking in an awkward position where half his body was hanging off the edge, one arm wedged between the mattress and the dresser. His fingers were completely numb from lack of circulation, and he flexed them a few times to restore the blood flow.

Scrubbing his face, Oliver groped for the water bottle perched near his lamp, twisting the cap with his functioning hand, and gulped down half in one go. The water hit his gut hard, making it ache and twist. He breathed through the pangs of nausea, willing himself to rehydrate, and begged his body to forgive him for the horrible abuse he put it through every other night.

His phone on the nightstand was blinking with notifications. He knew they were all going to be from his flatmate, asking where the hell he'd gone the night before—he remembered that much at least, leaving the club while everyone was dancing—so he didn't bother with checking.

Running his hands through his hair, he twisted his fingers through it in some attempt to order the mess, though he had resigned himself to being a total disaster. After a moment of letting some dizziness pass, Oliver eased himself onto the floor, grimacing at the ache in his feet as he padded toward the bathroom.

His piss smelled like straight vodka which kicked up his nausea again, but emptying his bladder offered some relief, and he decided nothing was more important than a shower. Luckily, their house took less than thirty seconds for scalding hot water to pour from the tap, so he stepped under the stream and used some of his sibling's soap to scrub away the filthy scent of club, sweat, cigarettes, and booze. His fingers skated over the raised skin on his shoulders, the faded scars still puckered and rough, and he tried his best to ignore the way it made him feel every time he had to touch them.

As the water cascaded over his back, he pressed his forehead to the cool tiles and wondered if he'd ever come out of this phase. This reckless, showing up half an hour late to lectures, barely scraping by on Cs, trying to drown himself in booze, phase.

Wasn't he supposed to be a little grown up by now? He had one degree under his belt, his graduate classes going smooth as they ever could for someone who rarely paid attention to anything. But he didn't have even close to a solid topic for what he wanted to write for his thesis, no job, no real responsibilities, and he knew damn well he should by now.

With a heavy groan, he turned the shower off, wishing he had washed himself down the drain, but he was feeling a little better. Dressing in sweat pants and a ratty old t-shirt, he stared at himself in the mirror for a bit, frowning at the dark circles under his eyes. It was bad, but he'd been worse. He scrubbed the last of the club taste out of his mouth—the cheap booze and random tongues—then headed for the kitchen where he saw his far too perky flatmate sitting at the counter.

She had her dark brown hair done in a perfect coif at the back of her neck, wearing a pantsuit, meaning she was going to be working on her teaching hours. “Morning, Mr. Sasaki.”

“It's too early for you to be last-naming me, Ms. Hernandez.” Oliver glowered his displeasure at her as he blindly reached into the cabinet for a mug. Coffee was sitting hot and ready by the stove, and he gulped it down without caring that it seared off several layers of his tongue. “What time did you lot get in?”

Coco shook her head. “God, I don’t know. Three, maybe? Brandon let us stay after they locked up the doors, but that’s only because they were in the middle of a poker game. Which Leo won big, by the way. I told him tea’s on him tonight.”

Oliver snorted as he opened the fridge door and glared at the stack of Styrofoam take-away containers. He knew they should start at least attempting to eat like normal, grown up people, but the effort that would take was too daunting. “Tell him I’m in the mood for a good curry.”

Coco rolled her eyes. “In the five years you two have been living here, you haven’t found a single curry place that matches your standards.”

“S’not my fault London does it better,” he muttered.

With a snort, she pushed her chair away from the counter. “You’re picky and obnoxious, and London does it better because you guys colonized the fucking East without giving a shit about people who didn’t want to be colonized. Prick.”

He widened his eyes. “Listen, darling, I’m not even *white* English. I’m bloody Japanese.”

“You’re ridiculously *rich*, half white, Japanese-English.”

“Excuse the fuck out of you!” he demanded, though he knew he was too tired to have this argument with her again.

“Are you really going to argue this with me, rich boy?” Her brown eyes narrowed, challenging, and eventually when she saw defeat in his eyes, she grabbed her bag and slung it over her shoulder. “That’s what I thought. Anyway, Leo’s in bed and probably suffering from some level of alcohol poisoning, so you should go make sure he doesn’t need a hospital or something.” Crossing the room, she grabbed his shoulder and yanked him down to press a kiss to his cheek. “See you later.”

He watched her as she flounced out the door, winking before it slammed shut. Running a hand down his face, he put his half-drunk coffee on the table and headed up the stairs. His sibling’s room was directly next to his, and the door was cracked. He could hear a gentle snoring, and he smelled traces

of smoke and booze coming from the pile of clothes at the end of Leo's bed.

Oliver had always been protective over his sibling, and when he decided to attend a University in the States rather than follow his mother's carefully planned out path for his Cambridge education, he made sure he had his claws in Leo. He wasn't going to leave without him, not after what they'd suffered.

It was a funny thing, Oliver discovered, growing up getting anything you wanted. His father had come from Japan, accepted into Eton, finishing his degree at Cambridge where he made connections and started up a Publishing company. From there he'd met his mother, a straight-backed, aristocratic English woman who'd come from both money and extreme religious ideology.

Oliver hadn't spent a lot of time with his father, even as a child, but he remembered from a very early age wondering why his parents ever bothered to get married. They rarely saw each other, and when they did, there was never any sort of affection between them. Once, before his father moved to the States, he'd asked him and he shrugged, saying, "She seemed nice enough, and I thought we'd make intelligent, attractive children."

That hadn't been a lie. Oliver had always been aware he was good looking. In spite of the fact that he was Japanese, half his mates from school referred to him as 'the K-Pop star'. He was tall, thin, with his mother's sharp cheekbones, and his father's eyes, and straight dark hair he only recently cut short. His mouth was full, and he could pout like a professional to get his way with most anything.

Leo was much the same, though several inches shorter, but there was no mistaking the siblings were related.

They'd grown up with little regard for material possessions, and a deep hatred for their mother—the woman who did everything in her power to ensure they were stuffed full of internalized hatred for who they were as people.

Oliver discovered his sexuality fairly early, wanking in the wee morning hours at his boarding school to the images of the rugby team. It wasn't long before he was being thrown in detention for having snogging sessions with some of the more curious boys behind the stands, and eventually when the Headmaster wrote home about it, he was given a sound beating and locked in his bedroom for three weeks during the Christmas holidays.

It didn't stop him, of course. Nothing stopped him. Not being dragged to church, not the constant reminders that it was abnormal, that it would make him an abomination. Not the scars he bore from the farce of an exorcism his mother eventually ordered, years after his father left to start a new company in the States. The weeks-long exorcism, which had come at the end of several silver knives, burning sage leaving blisters up and down his arms, and the belief that the gayness was a demon.

He walked away sick, starved, half-mutilated under his clothing...

And hateful.

His sibling, on the other hand, clung to his mother for years. He'd figured Leo had just been afraid of going through what Oliver had, but he couldn't be sure. Leo had been the prized, obedient son for so long, but when Leo was fifteen, Oliver walked in on him in a skirt, smearing red lipstick around his mouth. He'd known then that Leo was just as different as he was, and.

His sibling had started sobbing, begging Oliver to keep quiet about it, terrified of what their mother might do if she found out. So Oliver made it his mission in life to protect him because if he could, if he could save at least one of them from the horrific self-deprecation and gaping wounds of religious ideology and morality, he'd consider it a win.

His mother had wept, loud and publicly, when the siblings announced they were leaving. But they were of age, and she couldn't stop them. They'd boarded the plane and lived off the

trusts their father had set up and settled happily on the West Coast where neither of them had to watch over their shoulder.

Not that they were exempt from bigotry anywhere, but they were safe from their mother's clutches. Leo discovered a word for how he felt about himself—genderqueer—and discovered a group of people who loved him regardless of how he viewed himself. Unfortunately, their childhood had done a number on his sibling, and in spite of putting an ocean between them and the woman who made it her life's mission to torment them, Leo suffered. He sank into drugs, alcohol, and seemed bound and determined to destroy himself before he reached thirty.

Not that Oliver was much better on his own downward spiral, because he couldn't shake the feeling in his gut every time one of his lovers touched his scars. He couldn't get rid of the memories of where they'd come from, and he'd suffered it in silence. For his sibling's sake, mostly.

Because really, only one of them needed to suffer.

"What the bloody *fuck* are you staring at?" came a groggy voice from the burrito of blankets.

Oliver startled, then gave his sibling a half shrug. "Just making sure you're not dead."

"No. Still here. In fucking agony if you really want to know, so you can show yourself out."

Oliver leaned against the doorframe, his arms crossed over his chest. "Seriously, are you alright?"

"Seriously, mate, I'm fucking hungover, and I just want to sleep. I can't do that with you stood there all creepy and shit. *Go. Away.*" Leo picked up a pillow and half-heartedly threw it in the direction of his brother.

It fell several feet short of Oliver, who stared at it, then back at Leo who pulled the blankets mostly over his face. "Listen, I've got class today, but I'll bring something home for tea."

"Soup," came the muffled demand.

Oliver's smile returned, and he backed up. "Fine. Text me when you get up to let me know you haven't decided to die just to spite me."

"I *live* to spite you, you fucking wanker. Now go."

Closing the door behind him, Oliver headed to his bedroom and grabbed his bag. He only had one lecture and it wasn't until later, but if he stayed at the house, he'd worry about Leo all damn day. He had a few papers to get through, so he figured the café on campus was his best bet.

Strolling out the front door, he locked it and wandered off for his morning routine.



THE UNIVERSITY CAFÉ wasn't crowded, to Oliver's extreme relief. There were four baristas behind the counter looking more bored than anything, and only two of the tables were full. Oliver slid up to the counter, giving the woman at the register his most winning smile, and was rewarded with a faint blush across her cheeks.

"Morning, love."

Taking a breath, she put on her Customer Service Expression. "What can I get you today?"

"I could really use a hot tea," he said, reaching into his pocket for his wallet. "Extra on the hot."

She punched a few buttons, then turned to the barista standing behind her, nudging him with her elbow. "Gabe? Hot tea."

"Extra hot," Oliver repeated as he gave the man a once-over. He was taller than Oliver—though most people were—with a mess of black curls hanging just over the tops of his ears. His brows were thick, sitting low over golden-brown eyes, and his nose wrinkled in annoyance with being interrupted, and the patronizing clarification from Oliver.

“Right. Extra hot. As opposed to medium hot,” he replied. His voice was higher than most, raspy like he spoke from the very back of his throat, and Oliver instantly liked it. He was cute, to say the least. Unconventional, but Oliver liked people who didn’t mirror the typical, Californian, over-polished, bleached blond.

The woman at the register made a frustrated noise at him and turned back to Oliver. “Sorry about him. We don’t usually put him up front because he’s terrible with people.”

“That’s okay, I’m only allowed out of the house on certain days of the week because I’m the same. I aim to misbehave at any given opportunity.” He winked, directing it to the one called Gabe who was giving Oliver a surreptitious glance. He grinned in vague triumph as he was passed over a large, steaming paper cup of hot water, and a bag of tea. He glanced at the brand and grinned. “Bloody hell, you’ve got Yorkshire here. I can’t find this anywhere.”

“It’s imported,” the barista said as she took the ten from his hand and made change. “It’s why it costs almost five bucks.”

“I’ll pay it. I keep trying to get my cousins to send me care packages, but they hate me.” He ripped open the sachet and dunked it immediately into the water. He was profoundly aware of Gabe still watching him, so he put on one of his softer smirks as he threw the remaining change into their tip jar. “Thanks loads. I’ll definitely be back.”

He hitched his pack up higher onto his shoulder before choosing the table furthest from the window, pulled out his laptop, and fired it up. He had too much work to get finished, too much research for his thesis which wasn’t due for another year, but his still-vague topic of gender bias at the start of media productions didn’t give him a lot to work with. He had a few websites he was checking out, and he was attempting to get appointments with a couple heads of the Journalism department which was proving difficult.

He was aware of eyes on him, and glancing to the side, he saw Gabe watching as he refilled the pastry window. Oliver

smiled again, mostly to himself, but he knew he was being checked out and he was absolutely okay with it. Someone that cute? He was into it.

The next hour passed quick enough, so much so he didn't realize he was about to be late for class, and he swore loudly as he slammed his laptop shut and began to fumble it into his bag. Just as he was gathering up his phone and keys, there was a presence beside him.

His head snapped over, and his eyes widened to see the barista standing there. Oliver's eyes flickered over his nametag, 'Gabriel "Gabe" Bensaïd', and he couldn't help his smile.

"For the road?" Gabe held out a smaller paper cup, the lid snapped on, but the tea bag string was hanging over the edge.

Oliver's gaze fixed on Gabe's longer, thin fingers. He cleared his throat, dragging his gaze up to Gabe's smirking face. "Really?"

Gabe shrugged. "You looked really stressed."

Oliver closed his hands around the top of the cup, his fingertips brushing against Gabe's, and he felt a tingle up his arm which he enjoyed. "Oh, just another one of those, 'Fuck me for choosing a horrible topic to do my dissertation on,' moments. They're pretty common round here. Or so I've heard."

Gabe smiled, revealing mostly straight teeth, his canines turned out just a little giving his grin more character than most people had. "I know that panic. Intimately. And it's definitely a two cup of tea panic."

Oliver wanted to say more, but the chime of the campus clock reminded him he had two minutes to make his five-minute walk before class began, and this particular professor took great joy in embarrassing people who were late—not that Oliver was ever bothered by extra attention. But still, he was trying to be good this year.

"Well, I have to dash. I'm already late, and it seems like it's going to be one of those days." He gave him a mock salute

as he backed up toward the exit, tripping a little over his feet as Gabe snickered, then he was out the door and off to his class.



“I SWEAR, Ollie, it’s like you enjoy getting verbally abused by your professors.” Coco was lounging on the sofa under the window, one foot tucked up against her chest, a cup of tea clutched between both hands. “You literally had no reason to be late today.”

Oliver rolled his eyes as he lounged sideways in the recliner, his head hanging off the side. “I have perfectly good reasons every time I’m late, love. Today happened to be a second cup of tea.”

“*Ay dios mio ayúdame,*” she muttered. “Listen, I got four texts from Leo today. He’s begging for us to go out with him, but I don’t think you should. You have chapters due.”

“What are you, my mum? Because I’m telling you now, if you want the job, it’s up for hire. And anyway, I wasn’t going to say yes to him. I’m still shattered from last night.”

“I know how you are with him.”

Oliver sat up a little, giving her a challenging stare. “And how’s that?”

“You don’t tell him no, even when you should. He’s a grown boy. He can go to the clubs and destroy his life all on his own.”

Oliver felt a twisting in his gut, because although his housemate didn’t know it, those were the magic words. *Destroy his life*. Oliver had dedicated too many of his hours, his tears, too much of his well-being in order to keep Leo safe, and he wasn’t going to stop now.

“Look, whatever I do is my business. And you know I adore you, but...”

“Spare me,” Coco said, waving her hand at him. “I know what you’re going to say, and I figured the least I could do was throw in my two cents. I know you’re not going to listen to me, but what kind of friend would I be if I didn’t at least try.”

“Better one than I am,” Oliver said with a wide grin.

She let slip a long string of Spanish expletives before getting up and setting her mug on the low table. She passed by the chair, giving his hair a ruffle as she looked down at him. “I’m probably going out tonight too. If I see him, you know I’ll keep an eye out.”

“Course you will, love,” he muttered. But the truth was, if Leo asked, he wouldn’t be saying no. Oliver damn well knew he couldn’t let his spiraling sibling out on his own.

Slipping out of the room, Coco headed up the stairs to get ready for the night. When Oliver heard the bathroom door slam, he eased himself out of the chair and wandered into the kitchen. There were a few boxes of left over Chinese in the fridge, and he threw them into a pot, mixing up everything into one big mess, then flicked on the burner and waited.

As it simmered, Oliver heard footsteps and glanced up just as the tousled head of his sibling came around the corner. Leo was dressed in plaid pajama bottoms, no shirt, his thick, black tattoos shining against his pale skin in the faded afternoon light. His eyes were bloodshot, puffy around the edges, but he was smiling, and he seemed sober.

“Hungry?”

“Hell yes,” Leo said, dragging out a kitchen chair and slumping over the scrubbed wooden table. “All I’ve had is dry toast. My stomach finally stopped trying to claw its way out of my throat a few hours ago.”

“That didn’t stop you from texting all your mates about another night out,” Oliver pointed out. He gave the food a stir, then threw the cartons of rice into the microwave. “You seriously think that’s a good idea?”

“Fuck off, it’s a great idea,” Leo grumbled, scrubbing at his face. He was wearing purple nail polish which was

chipping, and he grimaced at it when he set his hands down flat against the table. “What’s it to you, anyway? I’m passing this semester.”

“Are you?” Oliver challenged. “It’s not my business, but what the fuck do you think is going to happen if you get chucked out? You think mum’ll be waiting with open arms?”

“Could go find dad,” Leo grumbled as he grudgingly accepted the plate of food. He sniffed it, then got up to grab a bottle of soy sauce from the fridge. Dousing his food liberally in the salty liquid, he shoved a huge bite in his mouth and spoke around searing-hot chicken. “Maybe I’ll become a sex worker. They make good money.”

“You’re nowhere pretty enough,” Oliver said. “I sucked up all the good genes before mum shoved you out of that hostile womb of hers.”

Leo shoved two fingers up at his sibling as he took another bite. “Fuck you. I just need to know what I’m doing. I don’t have to be as pretty as you. I’m king of blowjobs. What the fuck do you think this is for?” He clicked his tongue ring against the front of his teeth.

“You are a complete fuckboy,” Oliver said as he took a far daintier bite than his sibling. “But I don’t have time to worry about you. And I don’t feel like going out tonight.”

“So don’t,” Leo said petulantly, bowing his head toward his plate. He cleared half of it in three bites, then swiped the back of his hand across his mouth. “Who said you were invited anyway? I didn’t text *you*.”

“I owe Carol, like, four chapters,” Oliver said by way of reply, but he knew he was only trying to convince himself.

The problem was, every time Leo went out on his own, something happened. Twice he’d ended up in the ER with alcohol poisoning, and Oliver would never get over the frantic call to rescue Leo when someone had handed him a drugged cocktail. He’d arrived just as Leo was being hoisted into the back seat of a car, and Oliver had walked away with a black eye and his lip bashed to hell, but his sibling was alright.

“...and he said that we could go out next Saturday, but I’m not even sure about him.” Oliver realized Leo was still talking, rambling on about his group of friends. “Like, I hate even questioning a person’s identity, but he just seems like he’s full of shit. He keeps laughing on days Mikey wants to use femme pronouns as though it’s some kind of fucking joke. I mean, when will they understand that because some bloke goes around wearing lipstick, it doesn’t change their gender. It’s not a game.”

Oliver sank into the chair and propped his chin up on his closed fist. “So, don’t go out with him.” Having only half-listened, it was the only advice he had.

“Thanks for that,” Leo said with a fantastic eye roll. “Couldn’t have worked that one out on my own.” He pushed away from the counter. “I’m going to have another kip since I’m going to be out late. I’ll try to be good though, alright? I’ll make it to my lectures tomorrow.”

“Sure you will,” Oliver said, but didn’t argue further as he watched Leo head back up the stairs. A moment later, the bedroom door slammed, and Oliver slumped down, pressing his forehead to the cool tabletop.

He didn’t want to think of Leo as a burden. Neither of them had asked for this life. Leo had never asked Oliver to take the brunt of their mother’s abuse. It had been the conscious choice of a scared teenager who couldn’t stand the thought of his sibling being hurt. The mentality of a teenager who was certain he was stronger than the little one—that he could take more, because maybe he deserved it a little.

Oliver had always been obstinate. He was forever hearing stories about how he’d been the worst baby—crying constantly, fussy eater, never slept. He’d been worse as he grew up—had terrible marks in school, was constantly getting calls from his teachers to ask his mother if there was anything she could do about her defiant son.

So maybe taking the hits for the more sensitive of the two was just something he had to offer their messed up little family. He was over it, after all. He might have taken more

risks than most people, treated life and relationships with far less care, but he was alright. He had to believe that.

With a sigh, Oliver pushed himself up from the table and went to the bathroom for a shower. He knew there was no chance Leo was going on his own, but he had a few hours to try and get some work done. He kept it quick, then wrapped a towel around his head as he sat down at his desk and opened his laptop.

His research was coming along, slower than he anticipated, but he'd get it done. His dissertation would be written and ready for a defense on time. He was determined to prove to anyone who ever doubted him, he could do this. He was not the product of his bad choices—he would not be defined by his experiences.

He was valid.

He had to believe that.

“Gin and tonic, love,” Oliver drawled to the cute bartender who was tapping her long, red nails on the polished marble. She’d been hitting on him for the better part of an hour, and he had no desire to dissuade her from the notion that he was an available, straight man. He had eyes on his sibling at the moment, who was currently dancing with a group of people he didn’t know.

Leo was definitely drunk, but in good spirits it seemed. So long as Oliver didn’t get distracted, he could head off any danger.

“Is this seat taken?” The voice was heavy, rich, dripping with a slow, Southern accent.

Oliver’s gaze snapped up to a very tall, fit blonde with broad shoulders and wide smile. He had at least six or seven inches of height on Oliver, which showed especially in his long, heavy fingers. He didn’t wait for an answer either, lowering himself onto the barstool.

“What are you havin’?”

Oliver felt his tongue darting out to wet his bottom lip. “Gin and tonic, but I’ve already ordered.”

The man’s blue eyes lit up, a sunny smile crossing his face. “Where you from? That is the cutest accent I ever heard.”

Oliver felt his cheeks heat up, grateful that the crappy lighting could hide his blush. Normally he wasn’t so flustered over being hit on, but this man was seriously good looking,

and Oliver hadn't planned for it at all. "London," he said eventually. "Chelsea, to be specific. I'm very posh, you see."

The man laughed, sounding delighted as he leaned in toward Oliver. "Posh. Is that what you call fancy?"

"It's what we call rich and terrifically snobby," Oliver said, grinning back. He leaned back just a little, looking at the man through lowered lashes before he extended his hand. "Ollie."

"Just when I think you couldn't get cuter, you go and tell me your name's *Ollie*."

Oliver let one shoulder drift up in a half-shrug. "It's my cross to bear."

Taking Oliver's hand, the man pressed their palms together in a slow, languid shake. "I'm Lucas."

Just then, the bartender came back with Oliver's drink, giving Lucas a look which seemed like a cross between incredible irritation, and also like she was a bit turned on that two good looking men were clearly hitting on each other right in front of her. "You drinking?" she asked.

Lucas smiled at her, and Oliver noticed a faint tinge to her cheeks. "That I am. Just a beer. Whatever lager you got on tap, sugar."

She nodded, giving Oliver a slow, lingering stare before wandering over and filling a frosted pint glass full of the light amber liquid. She set it down a little harder than necessary and leaned over on her elbow. "Starting a tab?"

Lucas grinned, sliding a card toward her. "I am. This, and whatever he's got goin'."

"Oh no, honestly," Oliver began, but Lucas silenced him with a slow hand on his forearm.

"Let me. Least I can do. Show you this good ol' American hospitality and all that."

The bartender rolled her eyes as she took the card, and Oliver had to laugh a little. "That's very nice of you, but I've been living here for several years now. The American charm, sadly, no longer has an effect on me."

“Well maybe folks just aren’t tryin’ hard enough,” Lucas said, not removing his hand from Oliver’s arm. “So tell me, Ollie, you a student?”

“Yes, though I might be lying to cover up why I’m perving over university students at the campus bar,” Oliver said, winking. “I’m in the graduate program.”

“Excellent to hear. What are you studying?”

“Journalism.” Oliver paused to take a slow drink, smiling that she’d used the top shelf gin. The burn was slight, but pleasant. “It was that, or run off and join the circus, but one day I’d like to steal my dad’s company from under his feet, and I don’t think the board would willingly follow a trapeze artist staging a corporate coup.”

Lucas looked at him, then threw his head back, laughing. “Fuck, I am so glad I came out tonight. You drink here a lot?”

“Come on, now,” Oliver said, letting the tip of his fingers count along Lucas’ knuckles. “You can do better than ‘come here often’.”

“Well, I’d like to offer a trip back to the bathroom stalls where I can swallow your cock, but I thought that might be a bit forward.”

Oliver’s cheeks instantly heated up, and he cleared his throat. Grabbing his drink, he downed half of it in one go, grinning as he swiped the back of his thumb across his lower lip. “That would have been...something. If you had offered.” Something niggled in the back of his mind. He was meant to be doing something other than this, but Lucas’ smile was broad and eclipsing everything else in the room.

“How about we chat a bit more, yeah? Maybe not lower our inhibitions too much so we can actually make it to a stall.”

Oliver’s teeth shone over his bottom lip with his grin. “I think that sounds like the most brilliant idea I’ve heard all night.”



FIFTEEN MINUTES PASSED, and Oliver learned Lucas was from a very small town in East Texas, studying engineering, getting his undergrad degree before he transferred—he hoped—to MIT. He was openly gay, and had initially started at the university on a football scholarship, but blew out his knee during his first game.

“My parents can afford it, so it’s really no big deal,” he said, sipping on second half of his pint. “But I think they were hopin’ to use the bulk of my college fund toward grad school.”

“It well and truly boggles my mind, Americans and their cost of university. It’s terrifying, in fact. So much influence in the world, and your politicians actively try to dumb down the youth. Aren’t you terrified?”

Lucas laughed, shaking his head. “I try not to think about it. Why? Is it better over across the pond?”

Oliver rolled his eyes. “It can be. We’re not less racist, but we like our education. And our tea, which yours is complete shit by the way. Not that I should be surprised as you lot threw it all into the harbor for your teenage act of rebellion.”

“And yet you’re here.”

Oliver winked. “That I am. Lucky for you, innit love?”

Laughing again, Lucas reached over boldly, curling his hand around the back of Oliver’s neck and pulled him close. “You’ve got a clever mouth, Ollie. You clever in other ways?”

“Well...I’ve never had any complaints,” Oliver said, a little breathless as their noses brushed together. “You want to find out?”

Lucas did, apparently, but it lasted all of fifteen seconds before a hand was on Oliver’s arm, tugging him away from the kiss. Growling in the back of his throat, Oliver turned his

head, his eyes going wide when he saw a somewhat panicked expression on the face of the barista from earlier.

“Er. Gabe?”

He frowned. “You know my name?”

Blinking, Oliver released his hold on Lucas, though didn’t move back far. “Saw it on your name badge at the café earlier. Is something wrong?”

Gabe stared at him, then he cleared his throat. “I...well... your sibling’s Leo, right? Because he’s kind of...he sort of... might be in trouble.”

It was like being doused in ice water, the way his sibling’s name could yank him from his post-kiss euphoria. He didn’t even look back at Lucas as he threw himself from the bar stool. “What’s he done?”

Gabe threaded his arm through Oliver’s as he dragged him back down the dark corridor where the bathrooms were. “I just saw him snort something. I have no idea what it was, but we should get him out of here. He’s vomiting all over and really belligerent.”

Oliver froze just outside the stall to the lady’s bathroom. “You’re here with him?”

“No,” Gabe said, shaking his head. “I got invited out with some of our friends from the club. The one he’s part of...”

“The queer ones?” Oliver demanded. He knew them and mostly liked them, but not all of them had Leo’s best interests in mind.

Gabe nodded. “It was a small group of us tonight, and I noticed someone following him to the bathrooms. I came in just as he was doing the line.” He pushed open the door and Leo was there, slumped in an open stall, vomit on the side of the toilet and down the front of his shirt. His eyes were half-lidded and his mouth was curving silently around what Oliver assumed were colorful swears.

“Damn it,” Oliver mumbled, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Leo, what the bloody fucking hell have you done.”

“Sod off,” Leo said, or Oliver assumed he said as his tongue seemed too thick to move properly. “Lemme ‘lone.”

Oliver felt a combination of rage and exhaustion, and he lowered his head, letting out a long, resigned sigh. “How long has he been in here?”

“Seven, maybe eight minutes,” Gabe said. He reached up, giving his tight curls a ruffle. “Is he usually like this? This is the first time I agreed to go out with this group. I didn’t know they were into this sort of thing.”

Oliver gave him a small grin, shaking his head. “Well, if anyone can make you regret every single one of your life’s choices, it’s Leo.” He knelt down after that, grimacing as he pushed two fingers against Leo’s sticky pulse point. It was rapid, but not fast enough for concern. “What did you take, you stupid shit?”

“Nothing,” Leo groaned. “S’nothing, was nothing, I...” He heaved again, and Oliver hopped back just in time to avoid the splatter.

“Bugging fuck,” he cursed. “We have to get him out of here before the staff finds him. Any chance you can help me get him outside?”

“Yeah. Actually, I live like a block away if you want to come over to my apartment?” Gabe was tugging on the sleeve of his shirt, his eyes wide and worried. “I mean, as long as you don’t think he’s going to die or something.”

“Doubt it. He’s probably going to puke it out, sleep it off, then hate everything for the next few days,” Oliver said tiredly. “You have roommates?”

Gabe shook his head. “It’s actually my aunt’s place, but she’s off in Israel for the next thirteen months.”

“Good, because this might get worse before it gets better. I’ll replace anything he ruins though, I promise.”

Gabe gave him a slightly dubious look before coming over and grabbing one of Leo’s arms. Oliver took the other, and together they managed to get him on his feet, easing him toward the door. With his foot, Gabe propped it open while

Oliver eased them into the hall, and the three of them made it down to the far exit.

It led straight to the alley, and when the night air hit them, Leo heaved again. Gabe and Oliver dropped him unceremoniously, and he hit the pavement with a smack as his stomach unleashed another torrent of crappy bar-bought drinks. Oliver grimaced at the splattering sound, but eased Leo up once the puking stopped.

“This is pretty disgusting,” Gabe said.

Oliver pulled a face, guilt rushing through him. “I know. I really am sorry.”

“Does he do this a lot?” Gabe asked softly as they eased the younger one back to his feet.

Oliver sighed. “I wish I could tell you no, but he’s been on a spiral lately.”

“Oh, fuck off,” Leo spit at Oliver. “M’a fucking delight. Fucking role model. You bas’ard.”

Oliver rolled his eyes as they made it to the main street. He looked up and down, keeping his eye out for cops. The last thing they needed was to get stopped, but when he worried aloud, Gabe swore again his place was close.

And sure enough, it was less than a block from the bar.

There were stairs which Leo stopped to vomit on only once—and only a little—before going rag-doll limp. In spite of his dead weight, they’d hauled him up three flights, and reached the landing. Gabe let Leo go to get the door unlocked, and Oliver immediately demanded to know where the bathroom was.

“Second door on the right,” Gabe called as he threw his keys into a small bowl by the door.

“I’m going to throw him in the tub and let him sleep it off there. Help contain the mess. You’ve a pillow or blankets he can use? Ones you don’t mind getting ruined?” Oliver didn’t wait for a reply, half-dragging Leo to the door, and he kicked it

open. The tub was small, but Leo would fit, and he didn't put up a protest when Oliver shoved him in.

All loose limbs, Leo collapsed against the cold porcelain and his eyes fluttered closed. Coming to a kneel, Oliver reached out, brushing sticky fringe from his sibling's forehead, checked his pulse, then let out another, pained sigh.

"What the fuck am I going to do with you?" he muttered.

Leo peered one eye open. "Fuck yourself?"

"Theme of the night. Thanks for the cock block, by the way. I almost got some from a fit bloke from East Texas. You owe me."

Leo let out a huge snore in response, and Oliver rocked back on his heels, looking up when Gabe appeared in the doorway with a small pillow and threadbare blanket.

"It's the only thing my aunt won't lose her mind about getting ruined."

"It'll do," Oliver said, and eased Leo into a more comfortable position. He backed up, then flicked off the light and stepped into the hall. "Thanks, mate. Really."

Gabe gave a shrug as he led the way back into his living room and flicked on a couple lights. The place was illuminated by a soft, yellow glow, and Oliver got a short look around. The place definitely looked like it had been lived in for years, knick-knacks on every shelf, picture frames littering the walls, and an old afghan draped along the back of an old, but comfortable looking sofa. The TV in the corner looked like someone had dropped it right out of the eighties, and by the look of the houseplant hanging low vines on the sides, Oliver assumed it didn't work.

"Your aunt's place, you said?" Oliver mused as Gabe went into the kitchen.

"Yeah. She wanted me to come and stay so she could travel for a while," he called back, voice muffled. "You want some beer or water or something?"

"Have you got tea?"

Gabe's head poked around the corner, giving Oliver a wide grin. "Christ, you really are British."

"Was the accent not enough to give it away?" Oliver asked, smiling back. "Honestly why does no one here keep tea? How do you make polite conversation? How do you function?"

Gabe rolled his eyes. "By consuming over-large, sugary beverages which are slowly eating away our bones and decaying our teeth. But I actually do have tea."

"Proper tea?" Oliver challenged.

Gabe gave a sharp flick of his head, asking Oliver to follow him, and he opened a cabinet to reveal several brightly colored boxes. "Any of those proper tea?"

Wrinkling his nose, Oliver rummaged through and let out a sigh. "Well, you have some herbals, so that'll do. It's probably too late for caffeine anyway." He grabbed a box of mint and set it on the counter. "Have you got a kettle, or are we microwaving like heathens?"

"My aunt is equipped." Reaching into a low cabinet, Gabe produced a maroon electric kettle, and filled it from the tap. Flicking the switch, he leaned against the counter with his arms crossed, head cocked to the side. "So."

"Right, yeah. So." Oliver scrubbed his face. "You met Leo before this? Or is this your first introduction? Because I'd like to tell you he's not always like this, but that would be a lie."

Gabe's grin widened, his head shaking. "He and I have known each other a while. We belong to the same trans group."

Oliver blinked. "Trans group."

Going a little pale in the cheeks, Gabe cleared his throat. "Yeah. It's a group for trans people—inclusive of agender and genderfluid. Did he...did you not know that? About him?"

"Oh," Oliver said, letting out a breath of air. "Christ no, I knew that."

Gabe gave him a relieved look. “Sorry, I thought for a moment I outed him and that is a big no in our group. Not everyone there is out, but Leo talks about you a lot, so I just assumed.”

“I’ve known for ages,” Oliver said, reaching into the box for a packet of the tea. Ripping off the edge, he opened a cabinet and found mugs and helped himself to two. “What about you then? If you don’t mind my asking. Your pronouns I mean,” he clarified when Gabe’s brow dipped a little.

“Oh, just he is fine. I’m a trans man.” Gabe reached into a drawer, passing Oliver a spoon, then slid a small plastic bear full of honey onto the counter.

Oliver contemplated it as he took the spoon. He’d never dated a trans person before, but he’d known a fair few, and Gabe was cute. He still got butterflies in his stomach when he thought of the earlier flirting at the café, and as he added the honey, he knew he was certain he’d like it to continue.

“I’m sorry about all this, you know. I’ve been trying to get him to slow down, but he’s so bloody self-destructive.”

Gabe shrugged. “It happens. He’s shared a bit about your history...your mother in particular.”

Just the word mother sent a sharp wave of nausea through Oliver, and he clutched his mug, the heat of the ceramic grounding him a little. “Yeah, she’s a real darling, let me tell you. But I’m hoping he’ll get his head straight soon. He’s inches away from academic probation and the fucking wanker is one more unidentified drug snort away from the bloody morgue. I’m convinced of it.”

Gabe gave Oliver a soft look, reaching over after a minute to give his shoulder a squeeze. “A lot of us have been there. The group will probably help.”

Oliver sipped his tea, then let Gabe lead them to the living room where he sat down, finding the sofa as comfortable as he thought it would be. He kicked one foot up onto the low coffee table and turned to face Gabe who was sitting a cushion away.

“He’s been with you lot nearly a year now, and I swear he’s getting worse. I’m not sure what he’s trying to accomplish.”

“Well, you won’t be able to help him until he wants it, you know.”

“Thank you, psych one-oh-one,” Oliver sneered, then felt instantly bad when Gabe’s face fell. “Look, I...I’m sorry. I’ve been looking out for him nearly his whole life, and I’m not going to stop now, but I’m exhausted.”

“Eventually he’s going to have to learn to fall on his own,” Gabe warned him.

Oliver leveled a look at him, one eyebrow up. “And what if he falls so hard he doesn’t get back up? You expect me to live with that?”

“Yes,” Gabe said slowly, inching over just a little. “You can’t live for him, you know. People who want to die will find a way.”

“Thanks for that, mate,” Oliver said, tipping his mug and feeling his stomach attempt to crawl out of his mouth. “I’ll sleep soundly tonight.”

“I don’t mean to sound like an asshole,” Gabe insisted. “But I’ve learned the hard way that there’s nothing you can do. And if you destroy *your* life in the meantime, what’s going to be left for you if he does actually decide he’s had enough?”

Oliver scrubbed his face, then let out a breath. “I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I didn’t try. I’ve already sacrificed more than I had to give.” He absently rubbed his upper arm where the worst of his scars were nestled under his shirt. “If I stop now, it will have been for nothing.”

“I don’t have siblings,” Gabe said quietly. “My parents kicked me out when I was fifteen and told them I was a boy. I have one aunt—an Orthodox Jewish lesbian, who loves me—but also doesn’t totally understand me—and that’s it. I’ve learned to live for myself.”

“So, you don’t get it,” Oliver clarified.

Gabe gave one slow shake of his head. “I don’t. But I can see you have fire in you. I saw it this morning at the café.”

Oliver raised a brow. “I thought you didn’t like me. You weren’t very friendly tonight.”

Laughing, Gabe flushed a little and looked away. “Hey, I gave you free tea. And anyway, your sibling was puking his guts up all over my shoes and I thought he was about to die.”

“Yes, but this face...” Oliver waved his hand in a circle around his head. “How can anyone dislike this face?”

When Gabe spoke again, his voice had dropped an octave. “That’s not an issue. Trust me.”

Knowing where this conversation could go, and knowing it was not a good idea just yet with Leo still not out of the woods, Oliver cleared his throat and finished off his tea. “You got somewhere for me to crash? I have a class I can’t miss tomorrow, and honestly Leo’s going to be dead to the world at least until morning.”

Looking just a little disappointed, Gabe stood up and beckoned Oliver with a hand. Oliver’s fingers slipped easily into the other man’s, and he tried not to think about how nice it felt to have that sort of contact. The human contact he avoided at almost all costs.

“You can share with me. I have a huge bed, and I promise to behave myself.”

Oliver resisted for just a moment, but he knew he wouldn’t get any rest sleeping on the small sofa. So, unless he wanted to crash on the bathroom floor next to his unconscious sibling, this was it.

Gabe opened the door to his bedroom, and Oliver was met with the faint smell of incense, and possibly laundry powder which he assumed was coming from a small basket sitting on top of a desk. The place was cluttered, a lot like the living room had been, with shelves covered in books and pictures pinned to the wood. The walls were a mixture of eighties glam rock posters and Mucha prints. There were a couple of acoustic guitars, and a larger ukulele hanging from hooks, and

a string of what looked like they might be Tibetan Prayer Flags hanging beside the window.

“Eclectic,” he mused as he kicked off his shoes by the door.

Gabe snorted. “Half of this shit is remnants from my emo teenager phase. But I’m not in here a lot, so I never bothered getting rid of it.”

“And I assume the fuckboys you pick up at bars don’t care that you’ve got David Bowie’s epic crotch bulge staring them in the face.”

“Fuckboys prefer it, didn’t you know?” Gabe challenged.

“I wouldn’t know, in fact,” Oliver said with an indignant sniff, and Gabe laughed as he went to his dresser, pulling out a large t-shirt and a pair of sweats. Oliver took them, giving them a sniff, then nodded. “Thanks, mate.”

“No worries. I’m going to change and check on Leo. Just get comfy and I’ll let you know if he needs anything.”

Oliver wanted to protest, but it was Gabe’s house, and honestly letting someone else take the lead for even a few hours was the respite he was craving. The second the door shut, Oliver wriggled out of his club clothes and into the comfy pajamas his host had provided.

It was a damn surreal night to say the least, and Oliver could definitely count on one hand how many times he’d ended up in someone else’s bed. He made it a rule to never sleep over, and when they were in London, he was too petrified to let Leo alone in his mother’s house for too long to ever have a full night out. It made his friendships fade quickly, and relationships a pipe dream.

But climbing into the bed now felt nice. It was well worn, the comforter heavy and soothing, and there was something about Gabe’s smell that made him instantly relax. He pulled one of the pillows over, burying his face in it, and he could feel fatigue growing, making his eyes heavy and bones ache.

Gabe returned a few minutes later, wearing a big shirt and a pair of boxers. He gave Oliver a small grin as he reached

over for the light switch, and the room plunged into darkness. In the faded light of a far-off streetlamp, Oliver watched as Gabe crossed to the bed and pulled back the covers.

“Well?”

“He’s warm and breathing. I don’t think he’s puked since you got him in the tub, so my aunt’s shitty blankets might yet be unharmed.”

Oliver let out a breath of air, feeling his chest unknot a little more, and he rolled onto his back, putting his arm above his head. “I appreciate this. It’s kind of weird, sharing a bed like this, but...”

“Think of it like camp or something.”

Oliver snorted a laugh. “Mate, I don’t think you quite know how posh we grew up. Boarding school and any camps we attended had private rooms and rowing lessons. We never roughed it or shared.”

“You royal or something?”

That made Oliver openly laugh. “No. My dad comes from money. He moved from Kyoto to London when he was in his twenties to start up a publishing company. He met my mum—my guess is had no idea how fucking mental she was—and they got married. By the time she was pregnant with my sibling, he was ready to turn tail and never see her again.”

“Divorced?” Gabe asked quietly.

“Nah, never bothered. He just started up a couple of divisions of his company here in the States. One in New York, one in San Francisco. Assumed—rightly so—that the bitch would never want to cross the ocean. Course he never had much thought for me or Leo—never thought maybe leaving his sons with the mad cow was a bad idea—” He stopped himself, realizing he was revealing too much. “I just mean, erm...”

Oliver quieted when Gabe crossed the distance between them, laying a warm hand in the center of Oliver’s chest. “You know it’s alright, don’t you?”

“What is?”

“Venting. You’re not there. She can’t hurt you, or Leo. You’re safe here.”

“Yes, thank you, Captain Obvious,” Oliver said, but it was more a knee-jerk reaction than anything. Gabe’s words actually had soothed him a little, and to repay the favor, he reached up very slowly and laid his hand on top of the other man’s. He let it rest with just a little bit of pressure, and when their fingers shifted and slotted together, Gabe didn’t pull away. “Sorry.”

Gabe laughed, breathy and soft. “It’s fine. And it’s also obvious you and Leo are siblings.” He didn’t move closer, which was exactly what Oliver needed to guide him into one of the first restful sleeps he’d had in years.

Three

When he came to, Oliver became aware of several things in no specific order:

He was warm and comfortable.

A weight was pressing around his middle.

He had slept better than he had in forever.

And he was not in his own bed.

Blinking against the harsh light, he peered over his shoulder into a mess of dark curls. He became aware of breath puffing across the back of his neck, and he realized the warm, heavy weight around his waist happened to be an arm. An arm holding him into a very tight cuddle.

Very carefully, Oliver attempted to move, but Gabe let out a grumble, holding him even closer. A warm mouth pressed hard against a knob of his spine, and for just a second, Oliver let himself lay there and enjoy the sensation. He had never slept with another person before, and he had definitely never woken up to a morning hug.

The moment didn't last very long, however, as Gabe started to come to, and the hold on his waist very slowly eased up. Rolling onto his back, Gabe offered Oliver a sheepish smile. "Sorry. I'm a snuggler I guess."

Oliver laughed, rolling onto his side to get a proper look at the man he'd fallen asleep with. He was adorable, all sleep-rumpled and soft at the mouth, and Oliver had the crazy notion to lean over and kiss him.

Instead, he reached a hand over and gave the mess of curls a playful ruffle. "I'd be more irritated if I hadn't slept so well."

Gabe's mouth curved into a smile, and he looked a little shy. "Gotta agree. You're a decent bedmate, if anything."

"Except the morning breath?"

Gabe rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I guess I could do without that." He groaned, easing himself up, and stretched his back. "You want to check on Leo? He wouldn't have wandered off in the middle of the night, would he?"

That was actually something Leo would have absolutely done, and Oliver scrambled from the bed, hurrying down the hall to the bathroom. The light was still off, and Leo was still curled in the tub, snoring gently against the pillow. Oliver let out a small breath, then decided to close the door and let himself have a morning piss before wandering out again.

Gabe was in the kitchen by this point, pulling a face as he tugged on something under his shirt. When he caught Oliver looking, he sighed. "My binder's rolled up a little in the back and I can't seem to..." He let out a grunt as he twisted his torso.

Feeling bad for the man, Oliver walked over and put a hand on his shoulder. "Hold on, just let me." Easing the hem of the shirt up, he dug his fingers under the tight material, and carefully unbunched it against Gabe's skin. The other man let out a long, satisfied sigh as the shirt fell back down, and grinned.

"My hero."

"Oh, sod off," Oliver said with a grin as he took a seat at the kitchen table. "So, you've brought me to yours, and let me sleep in your bed as my sibling sleeps off his drug experiments. Do I get breakfast as well?"

"The only thing I have is oatmeal with berries," Gabe said with a shrug. "The oatmeal is the instant kind, but the berries are fresh."

"I'll take it," Oliver said. "And tea, if you don't mind. You've got some with caffeine, I think." He helped himself to

the cabinets, pulling out a black tea and another mug. Gabe, meanwhile, put the kettle on, then reached into the fridge for a small green plastic basket full of berries, and he began to dig through them to toss the ones that had gone moldy.

It was domestic, Oliver realized. Weirdly domestic. Normally, things like this made his skin crawl. Who the hell was he anymore, having oatmeal and berries? The most he ever consumed was whatever Coco or Leo had left over in the fridge, and he was lucky when it was something more nutritious than dubious looking Chinese food no one could remember ordering.

His head was spinning a little with the thought of it, and with the knowledge that Gabe seemed to be enjoying it too. Oliver licked his lips, then accepted the bowl of oatmeal, heading to the table with his tea. In silence, the pair added the fresh fruit, occasionally meeting each other's eyes as they ate.

"So, you said you have a class today?" Gabe said, clearly trying to make small talk. "What's your degree again? I can't remember if you mentioned."

"Journalism," Oliver said with a shrug. "I always thought maybe I'd go work for my dad later on, but I'm not sure it's what I want to do with my life." He sighed, rubbing at the sleep still crusted in his eyes. "You really don't want me to go into the whole fucked up reasons why I do things, do you?"

Gabe shrugged. "I don't mind if you want to vent. I mean, I'm working on my creative writing degree. I want to be an author, but I figure I'll have to teach while I'm doing it so I don't, you know, starve to death or whatever."

Oliver laughed. "Or you could find yourself a sugar daddy. I'm loaded, you know."

"Is that an offer?"

Oliver licked some berry juice off his spoon. "It might be. How old are you though? I mean, there's got to be a proper age difference if this is going to work."

"Ripe old age of twenty-five."

"Bollocks. I'm younger. Looks like we're not fated to be."

Gabe's eyes twinkled with mirth, and he opened his mouth to say something, but the pair were interrupted when Leo padded into the kitchen, shirt off, jeans suspiciously dark and sticky-looking. Oliver was immediately on his feet, crossing the distance between them.

"You with us, mate?"

"Fuck off," Leo muttered.

With a snort, Oliver turned back to Gabe. "Seems he's still among the living. You want some tea?"

"Proper tea?" Leo asked as he eased himself into a chair with a wince. "Also, why the bloody hell was I in a bath?"

"Because you were puking like the Exorcist demon in the club bathroom," Gabe said as Oliver fetched another mug and bag of the black tea. "I really didn't want to have to clean that shit up in my apartment."

Leo at least had the grace to look sorry as he accepted the mug, immediately adding sugar though it hadn't begun to steep yet. "Sorry about that. I don't really remember much from last night. How'd we get here? And *why* are we here?"

"You snorted some shit in the loo," Oliver said through clenched teeth. The irritation and frustration he'd been repressing was boiling to the surface now, and even Gabe's patient stare wasn't taking the edge off. "We thought you might have overdosed, so we dragged you here to see if we needed to call for an ambulance."

Leo glowered at his sibling. "I knew what the hell I was doing."

"Oh really?" Oliver challenged, his voice high and tight. "You knew you'd be so fucking wankered on God only knows what, you wouldn't have a single memory of the night before? Do you realize where you could have woken up if I hadn't been there? If Gabe hadn't grabbed me from the bar?"

"You're not my mum."

"No," Oliver said coldly. "I'm not. Otherwise, I'd be holding your head in a bucket of holy water until you turned

blue.”

Gabe sucked in his breath and looked away, and Oliver quickly shut up. Leo looked ashamed, but only for a minute as he sipped his tea. “Where are we, exactly?”

“Right near the club,” Gabe offered quietly.

“Good. I want to go home, shower, and sleep.”

“You’ve class today,” Oliver pointed out.

“I don’t think I’ll do anyone any good if I’m unconscious during a lecture, Ollie. So, thanks for your concern, but I think I’ll pass.” Pushing himself away from the table, Leo went for the front door—still no shirt, and one shoe missing—and he was gone.

Oliver stood to follow, but Gabe put a hand on his arm. “Let him make that walk of shame on his own.”

Clenching his jaw so hard it hurt, Oliver shook Gabe off, but sat back down. “I don’t know why he has to be such a little shit about everything.”

“Probably to piss you off since you care so damn much,” Gabe said. “He’s going to need help, but you can’t force him. Just...take a step back. Breathe. You can keep him from killing himself without holding his hand to class. If he fails out of school...”

“He goes back to the UK,” Oliver said quietly. “To *her*.”

Gabe’s expression fell. “Just try giving him some space. See what he does with it.”

Covering his face, Oliver breathed heavy, but allowed his shoulders to relax. “Alright,” he finally said, and wondered if he meant it. Could he actually bring himself to let Leo fall a little on his own? The truth was, he worried his sibling had become so dependent on Oliver pulling him from the fire that if he didn’t, Leo wouldn’t be able to recover, that he wouldn’t know how.

But Gabe was right on one count—Oliver couldn’t live for him. Not forever. And something about that made Oliver crave what he’d been denying himself since he could remember. A

taste of something just for him. And that something was sitting close enough that if he wanted to, he could reach out and touch him.

“Can I get your number?” Oliver blurted after a long pause, dropping his hands.

“My number?” Gabe looked confused, the expression adorable, although it made Oliver wonder if maybe he was reading Gabe completely wrong.

Trying to muster up his most charming grin, Oliver shrugged. “Yeah. You know, so I can text you or ring you up. See if you’re free for a...for a date or something? Sometime?”

“Just the two of us? No drugged-out, pea-soup-vomiting siblings?”

Oliver let out a delighted laugh. Gabe’s answer wasn’t a rejection. “I can’t promise anything. This is LA after all, but... I’ll do my best.”

Gabe giggled, and it sent a pleasant tingle up Oliver’s spine. “Fine, alright. You can have my number. Give me your phone and I’ll put it in.”

Oliver went back to Gabe’s bedroom and fished through his jeans with slightly shaking hands, finding the small device and happy to note it still had some battery. He tossed it to Gabe who quickly put himself in the contacts.

“I just sent myself a text,” he said, handing it back. “So now I have yours too.”

Oliver grinned as he reached up to try and finger-comb some of the tangles from his hair. “And you’ll answer if I text you?”

“Barring broken fingers or unexpected coma,” Gabe promised, and Oliver smiled wider.

Fifteen minutes later, Oliver was back in his club clothes, full, caffeinated, and feeling lighter than he had in a long time. This was far better than the hot Texan from the bar, and he wondered if he was doing the right thing. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d done something for himself. A

quick fuck here and there was one thing, but with Gabe, he found himself craving more.

“So...see you soon?” Gabe asked, leaning on the door as Oliver stepped into the hall.

Oliver nodded, looking back almost shyly at Gabe’s dark eyes watching him. “Definitely. I’ll pop by the café later if you’re working.”

Gabe’s smile widened. “I am. Evening shift, so after six.”

“Good excuse to get my homework done.” Oliver took a step closer, and Gabe’s hand darted out, grabbing the edge of Oliver’s shirt to pull him close. “And...have you slip me free, expensive British tea,” he said, almost whispering.

“Only if you’re very good...or very stressed,” Gabe said, and laughed very softly as he gripped the side of Oliver’s hip. “Thanks for the awesome sleep.”

“And morning cuddles,” Oliver breathed, leaning his forehead in so they were pressed together. Their noses brushed, and he knew all he’d have to do was angle his head, and they’d be kissing. But he waited. “I’d like to try that again sometime.”

“Won’t hear me saying no.” Gabe’s hand moved up, cupping the side of Oliver’s neck, then pressed a soft kiss to his cheek, barely brushing the corner of Oliver’s mouth. “Get home safe, okay?”

Oliver breathed out hard through his nose, pressing his forehead even tighter against Gabe’s before peeling himself away. “Text you later. I swear.”

“I’ll hold you to it,” Gabe called, and then he turned and closed his apartment door.

Head spinning, Oliver headed down the stairs and in spite of the chilly morning air, he didn’t seem to notice. His feet clomped along the pavement as he made the walk toward his house, and for the first time since he could remember, Leo wasn’t the only thing on his mind. For the first time, he was looking forward to something he felt that maybe, just maybe, he deserved.

Four

On a whim, Oliver went by the sandwich shop nestled in the University Mall and grabbed a couple of breakfast sandwiches for himself and Leo. It was a small gesture, one he was hoping would inspire his sibling to show some sort of remorse, or at least offer the barest apology. He knew Leo loved him, but he wondered if Gabe was right about everything. Maybe taking care of Leo constantly was only making it worse.

His post-Gabe smile was long gone as he stepped into the house, looking around at the empty living room. There was a vague, humid smell meaning someone had taken a shower, so he ventured up and saw Leo's door cracked open.

Pushing on it with his toe, he peered into the dark space, seeing a lump under the covers which had to be his sibling. Easing himself in, he sat on the bed and used his elbow to shove at Leo's legs until the younger man threw back the covers.

"What?" he hissed.

Oliver handed out the wrapped sandwich. "I brought you breakfast."

Leo's face was hard for only a moment more. The corner of his mouth softened, then quirked up into a half smile as he reached out and took the sandwich from his sibling. "Is there bacon on it?"

"You think I'm a heathen?" Oliver asked, smiling back.

The pair of them shuffled backward to the headboard, sitting shoulder-to-shoulder, eating in relative silence. Oliver could recall a handful of these moments in his past, but not enough to make his past experiences worth it.

Crumpling up the parchment paper, he tossed it in the general direction of the bin, then crooked one leg up, hugging it to his chest. “You feeling alright?”

Leo sighed. “Can you save your lecture for...”

“I’m not going to lecture you,” Oliver interrupted dryly. “Honestly, I just want to know if it’s out of your system.”

Leo dropped his sandwich wrapping to the floor beside the bed, then leaned his head back and turned sideways to stare at his sibling. “Mostly. I can probably make it to my last couple of classes today. I just need another hour or two of sleep.”

Oliver reached up, carding his fingers through his hair. “I can’t stomach the thought of you having to go back to *her*, alright? We’re so close to being done and I just...*fuck*, mate, can you please try?”

Leo rolled his eyes, but he gave his sibling a playful nudge with his elbow. “Yeah, alright. I’m...I’m not doing this on purpose, you know? I just drink and then stop thinking. I don’t even remember who gave me that shit.”

“Well luckily Gabe was there before anything really tragic happened.”

Leo snorted a laugh. “Lucky for who? Me, or your dick?”

“You know what...” Oliver stopped, blushing a little. “Actually, I think he and I have a date. Or the promise to make a date. Or something.”

“Or something,” Leo mocked, but he was smiling wider. “I had a feeling you would like him. I almost mentioned something the other day, but you’ve been such a twat about dating I thought it was better not to. He’s a good sort though, so don’t fuck him up.”

Oliver licked his lips, shaking his head before he was really aware of what he was promising. “Proper date. No one-

offs. I'm going to see him tonight at the café."

Leo reached over, giving his sibling's shoulders a squeeze before shoving him up a little. "Good. Now fuck off so I can sleep and actually try to be a decent student for once, okay? And if it makes you feel better...I'll stay in tonight."

"Make it two nights and I won't follow you out to the clubs next time you go," Oliver tried, easing himself from the bed. He gave his sibling a cautious look, but Leo's attention was on the alarm he was setting.

"Whatever you say, Ollie."

It was as close to a promise as he'd get, he knew, so he took it as a win. Backing up, he cast his sibling one more look before shutting the door and heading to his room to get ready for his day.



FOR THE FIRST time in a long time, Oliver's classes dragged. Normally, he prided himself on being an active participant in discussions—maybe to feed his ego a little, but also because despite his lackadaisical attitude toward life, he did care about his degree. But he found himself silent in class, answering questions when asked, taking half-notes if any at all.

His mind was wandering, fixated on soft eyes and a mess of dark curls. He was crushing. It was a strange feeling, swimming in this unfamiliar territory, and he wasn't sure how to go forward with it. Yes, he'd fancied people before. He rarely had trouble getting someone to go home with him for the night—but he wasn't really thinking of sex. Not entirely. He was making a valiant effort to envision a nice dinner, holding hands, walking near the boardwalk—whatever other romantic couples did.

He'd never actually tried to woo someone.

He wasn't even sure that word was even valid in the dating world anymore.

Oliver gathered his laptop, shoving it into his bag at the end of his final class. It was only four, and he knew Gabe said after six, so he busied himself attempting to study at the library, though it was difficult with Gabe on his mind. He knew if he wasn't careful, if he continued on his same path, he'd screw this all up. And this time, he didn't want to. This time, he actually cared that it went well.

He didn't get much done at the library beyond a handful of emails, mostly sending memes and jokes to his sibling, and replying to a couple of old friends in London he kept in vague touch with. The minutes were creeping by like years, and at five-fifty, he pulled out his phone and typed out a quick text.

I'm on my way to the café. Not sure if you'll get this, but I hope you haven't changed your mind since this morning. x

He hit send before he could stop himself, then spent the entire ten-minute walk feeling like an absolute, clingy moron. But it was what it was. He was a man in his twenties who had no idea how to date someone. It was tragic. A disaster waiting to happen.

He reached the café just as the clock went six. Pacing a little, he peered in the window, but there was no sign of Gabe anywhere. Feeling the urge to play with his hair just to have something to do with his hands, he turned on his heel to leave when he heard a quiet giggle behind him.

Spinning, his eyes widened when he saw Gabe leaning against the side wall, one leg cocked up against the bricks, a cigarette pinched between his first and middle finger. He gave Oliver a nod of hello, then beckoned him over.

"Alright, Gabe?" Oliver said, half-jogging across the distance.

"Not bad. How are you?" As he asked the question, he offered Oliver a cigarette.

“I shouldn’t. I smoke way too much when I go out drinking and I’ve been trying to cut back.” He felt ridiculous saying it, but his chest unknotted a bit when he saw Gabe’s soft smile of understanding.

“I only do it when I’m working,” he said with a shrug, taking another drag. “I shouldn’t, but it’s the only excuse my boss accepts when I need to get the fuck out for ten minutes.”

“Public service jobs,” Oliver muttered. He was trying not to stare, but it was difficult. He was fascinated by the sharp cut of Gabe’s jaw, by the stubble, by the way his eyes and nose seemed to take over his face, but in a way that screamed, *‘kiss me, you fool!’* He wanted to run his thumb over Gabe’s pouty bottom lip, and then dig his fingers into those curls and snuggle up with him for days.

“You’re staring,” Gabe said, flicking some ash from the end of the cigarette.

Oliver sighed. “Sorry. You’re so cute, I can’t help it.” He could flirt, he knew that, and by the high blush in Gabe’s cheeks, he thought maybe it was the right thing to say.

“Ah. Well. How’d studying go?” Gabe was grinning shyly, which made Oliver feel weak in the knees.

Mouth a bit dry, Oliver shrugged one shoulder up as he got comfortable, lounging next to the other man. “It would have been good, except I was distracted today. I kept thinking about my interesting morning.”

Gabe’s mouth quirked up at the corner. “Oh? Interesting, was it?”

“See, I woke up next to this really cute bloke, and I’ve never done that before.”

Letting out an undignified snort of laughter, Gabe shook his head. “Oh really? You’ve never spent the night in a dude’s bed? Or a woman’s?”

“I never stay long enough for morning cuddles, is what I’m saying,” Oliver replied with a shrug. “But it was nice. Extremely nice.”

Gabe bit down on his lower lip, and Oliver had to physically restrain himself from grabbing Gabe by the shoulders and replacing those teeth with his own. “Well...I wouldn’t be averse to doing it again, you know.”

Oliver couldn’t help his grin as he nudged Gabe with his elbow. “You mean it?”

“I mean it. I have Thursday off this week. If you want to maybe do something?”

“I would...I mean, yeah. Yeah, okay.” Oliver felt like a complete idiot, the grin plastered on his face not doing him any favors, but Gabe seemed to be happy with the reaction. “You want me to pick you up? Is there anything you want to do?”

“Isn’t that up to you? The connoisseur of posh things?”

“Christ,” Oliver muttered. “You know what, fine. I’ll ply you with expensive food and fine wines. And you can provide the snuggles after, since you appear to be the expert and all.”

Gabe licked his bottom lip, then gave a sharp nod. “Be at my place by six. And bring comfy pajamas. They’re a must for morning cuddles, just so you know.”

“Well, I didn’t know, and...” Oliver began.

“If you’re trying some, I sleep in the nude line...” Gabe interrupted.

“Blimey, no,” Oliver said, rolling his eyes. “I might be a complete shit sometimes—no one would argue there—but I’m going to be on my best behavior. Scout’s honor.”

Gabe rolled his eyes but laughed a bit. “I’ll eat my apron if you were actually a scout but... I’m glad you’ll be on your best behavior. I just hope not *too* good.” He crushed out what was left of his cigarette, then flicked it into the nearby bin. Turning slightly, he reached out and grabbed the collar of Oliver’s shirt. “I don’t know why I like you.”

“Not usually your type? You like some other type of boys better than British ones?”

Gabe rolled his eyes as he tugged Oliver even closer. “More like I don’t usually go for snarky, cis, fuckboys. But you’re...charming.”

“It’s the accent,” Oliver muttered, moving in so close they were almost touching nose-to-nose. “Throws people off. I’ll have you know I am a complete disaster.”

“Mm, we’ll see about that,” Gabe said. He reached up and dragged his hand down Oliver’s cheek, letting his thumb draw a line under his bottom lip. “So, Thursday, then?”

Oliver let out a shuddering breath and again restrained himself from closing the distance between them. “I’ll be there. Wild horses couldn’t stop me.”

Drawing his face in close again, Gabe feathered light kisses across Oliver’s jaw, stopping at the very corner of his mouth before pulling away. Wearing a very shy smile, he let his hand slide down the front of Oliver’s chest, then dropped it away completely. “I can’t wait. Text me later.”

“I will, I promise. Have a good shift,” Oliver said, his voice trembling as hard as his hands were. He stood there, feeling kiss-stupid without even having been *properly* kissed, and watched as Gabe disappeared through the employee doors.

He didn’t go in for coffee, but he allowed himself a few minutes to watch the other man work through the windows. A few times Gabe looked out, giving him a quiet smile, and after a little while, Oliver turned and left.

It was enough. Especially with the promise of so much more to come.

Five

Like the hours had crawled by, so did the days leading to Thursday. Oliver barely made polite conversation with Coco, who took it upon herself to be as scarce as possible, likely out of fear that Oliver was finally losing his cool. Even Leo was giving his sibling wide berth, though when he learned Oliver was going on an actual date, he couldn't stop himself from taking the piss.

"I hope you're going to treat him like a prince," Leo cautioned on Thursday evening when Oliver was spending an obscene amount of time on his hair. "Flowers, chocolates. The works."

"Sod off," Oliver said through a grin as he brushed his hair into a very careful pompadour. "Besides, I know how actual princes want to be treated, and I don't think Gabe would appreciate that much."

"Posh fucker," Leo said, and hit Oliver's elbow so his hair messed up and he had to start over.

"I will kill you. I will kill you and bury your body, and no one will miss you," he hissed as he ran his fingers through his now-rumpled locks. "Anyway, I've a very nice night planned. I found a restaurant which overlooks the water—booked a table with a view. Then we'll have a walk on the pier, then go back to his."

"For a shag? You fucking tart."

"That isn't any of your business." Oliver finished his hair without any further incident, then backed up so he could see

his upper half in the mirror. He went semi-casual, his nicest pair of jeans, with a button-up white shirt, sleeves rolled to the elbows otherwise he'd feel like he was back in sixth form. He put a little bit of spray in his hair to keep it from falling, then turned to his sibling. "Well?"

"I'd say shaggable, but we're related and that's disgusting. Gabe will like it, though."

"You think? He said I wasn't his type," Oliver mused as he pushed his sibling away from the door and stepped into the hall. Leo followed him downstairs and into the kitchen where he put his kettle on. "Have you seen him date before?"

"Not really." Leo hopped onto one of the breakfast bar stools and pulled a cluster of grapes from Coco's serving bowl. Popping one into his mouth, he spoke around the fruit. "He's kind of the quiet one, you know? Doesn't go out a lot, keeps to himself. He's been in the group for sodding ever, but he's kind of the shy sort. I tried to chat him up when we first met, but he wasn't having any of it."

"That's because you're an even worse walking disaster than I am," Oliver replied absently as he hunted around for a clean mug. He found one, then took a bag of the tea from the cabinet and poured the hot water. "You think he really fancies me though? I mean..."

"I think," Leo said slowly, "you should stop trying to talk yourself out of this. If I can refrain from going out for an entire week—which I have done, by the way, with no thanks from you—you can go on an actual, proper date."

Oliver shot his sibling a withering glare, but there was no real heat behind it. "I guess we're both strapping on our grown-up boots, aren't we? What's next? Picket fences? *Children?*"

"Stop talking hetero," Leo complained, throwing a grape at his sibling. "But I do hope you have a nice time. You might actually like having a boyfriend."

Before, the very idea would have made his skin crawl, but the thought of being allowed to wake up next to Gabe any time

he wanted because they were a couple—it had an appeal Oliver had never felt before. And he liked it.

“Any last-minute tips before I go?” Oliver asked.

“Ask him before you kiss him for the first time—consent for everything. Hold the door for him, but don’t pull out his chair because that’s ridiculous. Compliment him a lot. And I dunno, read the room. Or something. You know I’m not actually good at dating advice, right?”

Oliver laughed, clapping Leo on the shoulder before he headed to the door. “Laterz. Don’t wait up, and don’t do anything stupid.”

“I’ll be here, studying all night, like a good little demi-boy,” Leo called as Oliver slammed the door.

A massive smile plastered across his face, Oliver climbed into the car and started up the engine. It had taken him a while to learn how to drive, having never bothered as London traffic was hell, but when he realized how awful public transport was when he moved to California, he didn’t have much choice.

It was still a shaky thing, but with his GPS, he was able to navigate the streets well enough to get back to Gabe’s apartment, and he found a decent spot without having to parallel park. As he got out, he realized his nerves had fired up, and his fingers were shaking a little as he attempted to push the lock button on the keys. It took three tries and a nice laugh at himself before he was composed enough to get to Gabe’s door and knock.

There was a good minute’s pause, but he could hear footsteps inside. When the door swung open, Gabe was dressed, but he had a towel around his shoulders and his curls were hanging long over his forehead, dripping wet.

“I’m so sorry,” he gasped. “I was running late.”

Oliver smiled, shaking his head. “No worries. Go finish getting ready. I already feel like I know your place, so I’ll just make myself comfortable.”

“Oh my God,” Gabe muttered, but he was grinning, and he gave Oliver a little shove toward the sofa before rushing back

toward the bathroom.

Oliver flopped down on the sofa, sinking into the cushions a little. He cocked one foot up on the edge of the coffee table and let his gaze wander. He'd been caught up before, with Leo's dramatic attempts to throw himself over the proverbial edge of wellbeing, so his mind hadn't registered much the last time he was in the apartment. But now he could clearly see the knick-knacks on the shelves and the photos on the walls.

A few photos were of Gabe as a kid with a much rounder, baby face. The clothes hideously mid-nineties with neon pinks and purples, but Gabe's curls were still the same—wild and short. His face wasn't much different except the glow of youth, a tinge of pink to freckled, chubby cheeks, and sunburnt ears. Oliver wondered what he was like back then, before his falling out with his parents. He looked well loved. At least, more loved than Oliver had grown up. It was a wonder how far a person could be thrown from family for nothing more than discovering who they truly were and still turn out alright.

Oliver let out a sigh, trying not to let himself go morose before his date. He wanted to enjoy his night with the adorable barista, not think back on the nightmare of childhood.

When Gabe finally returned from getting ready, Oliver gave him a slow up and down, showing his appreciation with a lecherous gaze. Dressed in loose jeans and a collared shirt, he looked ready for a semi-formal dinner. And he looked damn good, too. The shirt hugged his torso just so, and the jeans flattering at the back. His curls were still wet, but it looked like he'd thrown some product into them, likely in a vain attempt to keep them tame.

“Alright?” Gabe asked as Oliver rose from the sofa.

With a grin, he beckoned Gabe closer, and adjusted the edge of his collar which had come up slightly. “Better than I was all week. I swear I thought Thursday was never going to come.”

Gabe smiled, leaning in a little and surprising Oliver as he sniffed his neck. “Same. You smell really good, by the way.”

“I showered,” Oliver said, and Gabe laughed.

“Thank God for that.” He reached out, a little bold, and grabbed Oliver’s hand, pressing them palm-to-palm. “So, time for my fancy date?”

“So long as you have those promised snuggles after,” Oliver said.

“I washed my comforter today, so it’s fresh and fluffy. Did you bring the pajamas?”

Oliver grinned, pulling Gabe close so their sides pressed together. “I did. Soft and cozy. You probably won’t be able to keep your hands to yourself.”

Gabe grabbed his keys and phone, then pulled Oliver into the hallway. “You talk a big game, my friend. You’re not as slick as you think you are.”

Pouting out his lip, he watched as Gabe’s eyes darkened a little, and knew at least some of his tricks of seduction would work. “Really? Am I losing my touch?”

Gabe licked his lips, then rolled his eyes away from Oliver to lock his door. “You’re going to make me regret this, aren’t you?”

Yanking Gabe in, Oliver buried his face in the other man’s neck, breathing him in. “I might. But I promise it’ll be in a really good way.”

“Fuck,” Gabe muttered. He stood there a moment, then carefully extracted himself, offering Oliver his hand. “How about we get through dinner first, yeah? Then we can... resume?”

Oliver’s smile was wide and sharp. “I think I can live with that. Come on, I’ve brought my car and I’m fairly sure I won’t kill us on the way.”

“That,” Gabe said as he was pulled to the street, “does not bode well.”



OLIVER MANAGED to get them to the restaurant in one piece and utilized the valet to avoid the mess which was beach-side parking. The queue to turn the car in was long, but they'd arrived fifteen minutes early. Oliver handed over the keys, waiting on the curb for Gabe, and was startled into a smile when Gabe grabbed his hand, twinning their fingers together.

“This okay?” Gabe asked quietly.

“More than.” Oliver squeezed back a little as they followed the wandering crowd to the front doors of the restaurant. It was full of people, groups of families and couples on dates, all milling around waiting for their names to be called. Oliver managed to elbow his way through to the host desk and gave his name. “Oliver Sasaki, reservation for two. We're a bit early, I know.”

The hostess looked at her computer screen, then nodded. “It should only be about ten more minutes. You're welcome to the bar if you want to grab a drink though.”

Oliver looked at Gabe who gave an encouraging nod, so he pulled his date along to the semi-packed bar. They found a couple of stools near the end, where a massive TV was perched, but it was on mute, so they'd have a chance to talk.

“Gin and tonic,” Oliver ordered from the perky bartender. “Whatever you've got that's top shelf.”

“Whatever local lager you have on tap,” Gabe put in.

They received their drinks and settled into their chairs as a group next to them shouted loudly when one of the players on screen made a foul shot. “You ever get into the whole sport thing?” Oliver asked, squeezing his lime into the drink.

Gabe shook his head. “Nope. I've been accused plenty of times by friends of not having school spirit because I refuse to

go to the games—especially during our undergrads. But it's not my thing.”

Oliver laughed a bit as he sipped through the small, black straw. “I was forced into it. Footie, and rugby for a while. Just my school teams though. Leo was better at it than I was, but my mum thought it might pound some hetero back into me. Unfortunately, when I got caught blowing the footie captain after the game, she realized it hadn't worked.”

Gabe, who had been taking a drink, choked a little. “Oh my God, are you serious?”

With a wide grin, Oliver nodded. “He was bi-curious, I offered to help sate it. We got off with each other a few times before he decided he was straight. Married some girl right out of sixth form. Shame, too. He was very good looking.”

Gabe chuckled a little, shaking his head. “Never any good when your boyfriend goes straight on you.”

“Oh, he was *not* my boyfriend,” Oliver clarified. “Didn't really have one of those in school. Or, well...ever.”

Gabe's eyebrows shot up. “Ever? As in never once?”

Letting out a slow breath, Oliver leaned toward him a little, elbow resting on the bar top. “Never once. Does that...is that... a deal breaker? Red flag?”

Gabe bit down on his bottom lip, brows furrowed in thought. “Is it because of your sibling?”

“Partly.” Oliver said cryptically. He wasn't sure he was entirely ready to talk about his mother's heterosexual conditioning this early on. “Partly because having a boyfriend when I was younger was...frowned upon. In my home. The habit sort of carried itself with me. Then I started university, and no one ever really caught my fancy long enough.”

Gabe was looking at him carefully, and his hand snuck out, pressing it over Oliver's knee. “What about now, though? Because really, it's only a deal breaker if you're just looking for a quick fuck. I'm not into that.”

Oliver smiled very softly, his head shaking just a little. “No worries there, mate. I don’t offer a night of cuddling if I’m only in it for a shag.”

With a small chuckle, Gabe removed his hand, curling it back around his beer. “Do they really call it a shag in England?”

“Yeah,” Oliver replied with a small laugh. “They do. You’ve no idea how many times I get asked about that. But... are we alright, then?”

“Yes,” Gabe said, and winked at him. “We’re just fine.”

A few moments later, they were called to their table which was on the second floor of the restaurant, in front of the massive, floor-to-ceiling windows. Gabe’s eyes widened, and Oliver couldn’t help his smile.

The pair sat, and Gabe shook his head as he picked up the menu. “You weren’t kidding about trying to woo me with posh things, were you? Is this how the better half live?”

“Better half,” Oliver said with a snort. “I’ll have you know I’m very humble and almost never do things like this. But you asked for it, if you recall.”

Gabe blushed a little, hiding his face behind the menu, but Oliver could see the sides of his eyes crinkle with a smile. “So, what’s good here?”

Laughing at the subject change, Oliver shrugged and flicked through the short menu items. “No idea. Like I said, I never do stuff like this. We should order the most decadent thing on the menu, though. Like...lobster tail smothered in fois gras and truffle oil.”

Gabe giggled, face still behind the menu. “I’m a vegetarian.”

“Christ,” Oliver muttered. “You’re not going to make this easy, are you?”

“Not on your life.”

Oliver felt his heart pounding at how easy it was all coming tonight, how comfortable and wonderful it was. Never

had he connected to someone like this. Like he'd known Gabe all his life. He took a breath and his eyes settled over his menu at the other man. "Fine. Just order the most expensive salad then, and you'd better have at least four more drinks. The bill had better not be less than a hundred bucks."

"Trying to get me drunk?"

"Trying to break my bank, more like," Oliver said with a wink.

The pair eventually did decide on food, sharing a roasted brussels sprouts appetizer, and another cocktail. The food was delicious, the table lovely in spite of it being too dark to really enjoy the waterfront view, and the company got better as the night went on.

They skipped dessert, and Oliver gave a pleasant laugh when he saw the bill had just broken a hundred by a handful of cents. He passed over his card, and when the bill was paid, the two walked hand-in-hand out the doors, and into the chill night air.

"Fancy a stroll?" Oliver asked. "I feel like I ought to walk off a bit of the booze before I try to drive you home."

"Mm, good point. We could take off our shoes and walk on the sand."

It was possibly the most sappy, romantic thing anyone had ever suggested to Oliver, and he was all over it. They raced to the low, stone tide wall, casting their shoes down and rolling up their cuffs. Gabe took his hand again, and they padded over the soft, dry sand to the hard-packed wet, and began to wander toward the brightly lit pier miles down the beach.

The wind had a bite to it, and the water which occasionally nipped at their toes, was too cold to be comfortable, but Oliver swore he had never felt so happy in his life. His hand was warm in Gabe's, and though he wanted to throw him down to the soft sand and kiss him stupid, he also felt content just walking.

"So, good date?" he asked.

Gabe gave him a curious look, head cocked to the side, a smile playing at his lips. “Not bad. I mean, for being your first.”

“Room for improvements?” Oliver asked with a cheeky smile.

Gabe giggled and yanked him a little closer. “Maybe. We’ll see how the rest of the night goes. But a fancy dinner and a walk on the beach—hard to beat that.”

“Better than going out to the clubs and cleaning up my sibling’s vomit, yeah?”

Gabe rolled his eyes. “Definitely. Though...was that a date?”

“It could have been,” Oliver said, and in a bold move let go of Gabe’s hand to wrap his arm around his waist. Gabe made a startled noise, but moved in a little closer, and held Oliver right back. “I mean, had it not been for the fact you’d intended on hanging out with Leo, and interrupted my attempt to chat-up a cute Texan...it might have been.”

“Big regrets there?” Gabe asked, smiling over at Oliver.

“Hmm.” Oliver stopped walking, twisting in Gabe’s arms to cup his cheek. His head cocked to the side as he pretended to contemplate the question. “He was cute, but you are something much better.”

“What’s that?” Gabe asked, his voice barely audible over the shallow waves.

Oliver grinned. “Well, I’m not entirely sure there are words for it, you know. Just...” He trailed off and let his thumb trail over Gabe’s cheek. “Would it be incredibly inappropriate if I wanted to kiss you right now?”

“You mean on a moonlit walk on the beach with the waves crashing over our feet?” Gabe asked with a laugh. “Incredibly inappropriate.” He fisted his hand into the front of Oliver’s shirt and yanked him so close, their noses were touching. “Not that I’d mind.”

“Oh.” Oliver’s tongue darted out to wet his lips, and he could feel Gabe sucking in his breath. “Well then...”

Gabe tilted his head to the side just as Oliver closed the distance between them, and their lips met. It was slow, a deliberate kiss without any of the romance-novel desperation behind it. Oliver kept his hands in a firm grip over Gabe’s hips, and with parted lips, their breaths mingled together.

Their mouths closed together for a moment, locking, holding each other in place with a warm tenderness Oliver had never experienced before. Then they broke apart, slowly and carefully, Gabe’s hand still in Oliver’s shirt, Oliver’s fingers gripping into the waistband of Gabe’s jeans.

“That was nice,” Gabe whispered.

Oliver bent his head forward, pressing their foreheads together, and he grinned. “More than. Do you think we might include kissing in these promised cuddles?”

Gabe reached up to brush the back of his knuckles across Oliver’s cheek. “I think that might be arranged.”

“How incredibly excellent. And I have to say, my head is feeling rather clear now, so if you’d like to get back to the car, we can head over to yours.”

“Netflix and chill?” Gabe asked.

“Really? You sure *you’re* not the fuckboy here?” Oliver snorted a laugh, but he pried himself away from Gabe’s grasp, taking his hand and they hurried to their shoes. The promise of intimacy that stretched beyond sex, beyond what Oliver had only known before this, was seeping into his bones, making him want things. And Oliver was enjoying these short moments of not denying himself for the sake of others.

It was definitely something he could get used to.

For someone who had never experienced a relationship, the first week of having an official boyfriend felt like a triumph. Unable to ignore classes, Oliver did his best to stay focused, rewarding himself with phone calls, visits to the café for sweet, small kisses, and the promise of a pizza night and the entire weekend to themselves at his with Gabe.

Gabe was enthused, and Oliver found himself oddly surprised that Gabe seemed as eager to spend time together as Oliver was.

But he wasn't about to question it. Not now.

Not when he was this deliriously happy.

"I cannot wait to meet this boyfriend of yours," Cocoa said Friday afternoon as she closed her laptop. "Seriously, I have never seen you mooning over anyone ever. It's...bizarre. Like you're a pod person or something."

"Fuck off," Oliver said, but he was smiling as he dug into a bag of jellybeans, carefully selecting out the pear flavored ones. "You'll like him, though. He's funny—like proper funny. And adorable. And..."

"Please stop. You're starting to sound like a Disney Channel special."

"They'd never be as gay as I am," Oliver said with a wink, mashing the sweet between his teeth. "Anyway, he'll be here after his shift, so I'm sending Leo out for pizza."

Coco's eyes widened. "You mean to tell me King Drinks-A-Lot is staying in? On a Friday?"

"I might have used a smidgen of bribery," Oliver said with a shrug. "But yes. Are you incredibly impressed with me now?"

Coco rolled her eyes, but she was smiling. "Maybe a little. So, pizza and beer, and movie or something? Or should we be super lame and play scrabble?"

"I would never be that heterosexual," Oliver complained.

"I'll have you know plenty of people play scrabble. Including raging asexuals like myself."

Oliver shook his head. "You're just conditioned to believe things like scrabble are normal, Co. Trust me, they're not. At any rate, I really only like Cluedo, and I can't seem to find it anywhere, so I think we'll have to go with a movie."

"Fucking lame," she said, but by her tone, she was happy for him.

Coco had been his roommate long enough to become invested in his life, and though she never really lectured him on his choices, he could tell she worried. But she was like a sister to him, so he was more than excited to introduce his boyfriend to her, and to have a quiet night in.

Leo was heading down the coast for the weekend with a few friends, leaving just after dinner. It was Oliver's real test to see if he could make good on his promise to let Leo have some space.

Not just for Leo, but for himself, too.

Gabe hadn't been wrong about what Oliver and Leo both needed, and he knew it. It was time to start pulling away and proving to his sibling he trusted Leo's decision making.

"I'm going to pick up the beer," Coco said, interrupting Oliver's thoughts. "If I let your sibling do it, he's going to buy that cheap American shit, and you can't expect me to put that in my body."

Oliver waved her off and went back to his reading as she grabbed the keys and headed out. He was attempting to get the last of his chapters revised before Gabe showed up, mainly because he wanted absolutely nothing hanging over his head for the entire weekend.

He was hoping things would go further than the kissing.

He was enjoying getting to know the other man and settling into a proper relationship before getting too physical, but he was craving more. Every time Gabe smiled at him, white-hot desire shot through his belly, coiling down into his fingers and toes. He could tell Gabe wanted him, the heat in their kisses growing in intensity every time they saw each other, but they were trying to be responsible.

To take it slow.

To learn each other.

Just as Oliver finished editing one section, he heard footsteps on the stairs and turned to see Leo wandering into the kitchen. His sibling was dressed in tight, shiny yoga pants and a loose, tunic-like blouse. His hair was pulled into an intricate knot on the back of his head, and he was wearing a smear of gold shadow over his eyelids.

“I thought you were staying in,” Oliver said.

Leo looked down at himself, then rolled his eyes. “I am. Well, until Mikey gets here. It’s not a crime to want to look pretty, you know.”

Oliver snorted. “As you like it.” He glanced at his last sentence, deleted a few words, but his head wasn’t in it anymore. Leaning on his elbow, he turned back to his sibling. “Leo, are you trans?”

Leo, who had a glass of juice halfway to his mouth, froze. “Er, yes, I suppose I’m under the trans umbrella. Why?”

“You’ve never really explained it,” Oliver replied with a shrug. “Haven’t really said much after joining your group, and I was wondering. Am I misgendering you? I call you my sibling sometimes, and I still call you Leo. If it’s wrong, will you tell me?”

Leo's face softened into a sweet, patient smile, and he turned, leaning against the counter. "It took me a while to sort it out. Even now, I'm not entirely sure how I define myself. I keep reading more and more about being genderqueer, and there's just... *so* much. But I'm comfortable with my name right now, and I'm alright if you call me your sibling."

Oliver relaxed a little, then nodded. "Alright. But, if it changes just... just say something, yeah? You know I want you to be happy. I want you to be you."

Leo chuckled fondly. "Yeah, I know. Anyway, you should go get ready. Shower. I'm pretty sure that smell is coming from you."

"Oy!" Oliver lifted his arm to sniff himself. "I smell like a fucking field of roses, you miserable little twat."

"Only because you're used to the stink. You're never going to get laid like that, you know."

"I hate you," Oliver grumbled. But he went upstairs anyway and busied himself with getting washed and fresh for the night.

By the time he was done, wearing loose jogging bottoms and a tight black t-shirt, Gabe had arrived and was talking with Leo and Coco at the kitchen counter. Beers were already cracked, one of the pizza boxes open.

Oliver let out an affronted gasp. "You started without me?"

"No one's fault but yours, mate. I didn't think it was going to take you two hours," Leo said, shaking his head back and forth. "Also, how is it you can spend so much time in there and come down still looking like that?"

"You are so rude. How are we related?" Oliver complained as he slid up next to Gabriel. He leaned over to nuzzle his boyfriend, reveling in the smell of espresso. "Mm, delicious," he muttered into Gabe's ear.

Blushing just a little, Gabriel reached up to cup Oliver's cheek and pull him in close. "I think you look very nice."

"He's biased," Leo said.

“So what if I am?” Gabriel gave Leo a winning smile before Coco announced they should take everything into the living room and start the movie. The three deferred to Coco who put on a romance with subtitles, but they were talking and laughing, paying no attention to the plot.

By the time Mikey arrived to take Leo, Oliver was a little buzzed and surprisingly relaxed about his sibling spending an entire weekend away from him. He got up though, to hug him goodbye, and held him tight for a second.

“Be careful. Please.”

Leo huffed, but squeezed Oliver’s shoulder fondly. “I will. And you know you’ll get a text if anything comes up.”

“Just don’t let it,” Oliver stressed, then gave his sibling’s cheek a hard pat before he was out the door.

“That’s my cue,” Coco said as the door shut.

Oliver lifted his eyebrow as he came back to the sofa, nuzzling back into Gabe’s side. “Cue for what?”

“Oh, Andi and I are redecorating her apartment, so I decided to let you two lovebirds have the place to yourselves and get up to your naughty business. You can thank me in the form of a giant gift basket full of chocolate. I like the dark stuff.” With a wink, she jumped up from the floor and stretched her back.

Feeling completely mortified, Oliver hid his face in Gabe’s neck as his roommate sauntered out of the room. “I’m sorry. They’re horrible. I swear I have no expectations for this weekend.”

Gabe reached over, pinching Oliver’s chin between his fingers and thumb, and turned his head. “What if I do?”

Swallowing thickly, Oliver cleared his throat. “Well, erm...I think I’d be alright with that.”

With a small laugh, Gabe pressed their noses together. “Would you, Mr. No Expectations?”

Oliver nudged his boyfriend hard. “I resent the implications. Just because I’m fine with it doesn’t mean—”

His words were cut off by Gabe's lips capturing his in a heated kiss. Abandoning his protest, Oliver wound his arms around Gabe's waist, pulling him in close. The kiss deepened, hotter and heavier than the last they'd shared, and he couldn't help a small moan as the front of his jogging pants started to tent.

"You couldn't even wait five minutes for me to leave," came Coco's amused voice from by the front door. "Really, I don't need to see this shit."

Oliver turned, red and breathing a little heavy, but unashamed. "Fuck off, then. We don't need an audience."

"Behave yourselves. Or don't." Her laugh carried her out the door, and it slammed shut.

The room was suddenly too quiet, too still, and Oliver found himself searching Gabe's face for any sign he was unsure. "I want..." Oliver stopped and took a breath. "I want you. But I also don't want to push you."

Gabe reached up and cupped Oliver's cheek, his thumb brushing along the sharp cheekbone. "I want you too. I just... I want you to know I don't have a cock the way you do."

Oliver blinked, then tried not to laugh. "I figured that one out a while ago, love. If it bothered me, you really think I'd have you here?"

"I think some men don't entirely think about it when they date me. I'm fairly passing, you know."

Oliver shook his head, pulling Gabe a little closer. "You know I fancy you, right? I'm not fussed about your parts. I want *you*."

Gabe's eyes darkened a little with desire, and his lips parted as he tugged Oliver in for another searing kiss. "I was hoping you'd say that. Any chance you want to take this up to your bedroom?"

Oliver didn't need telling twice. He rose from the sofa, offering a hand out and pulled Gabe up in one swift motion. They all-but raced each other for the stairs, laughing, stopping to kiss every few steps before making it to Oliver's untidy

room. Neither paid attention to the state of his dirty laundry as they shucked their bottoms, Oliver throwing back his comforter and diving into the pillows.

He made a grabby-hands motion at his boyfriend who slid along the sheets, pressing himself hard against Oliver's front. Wrapping one leg around his hips, Gabe ground himself against Oliver's rock-hard erection.

"Condoms?" Gabe breathed, lowering his mouth, sucking along Oliver's pulse point.

"D-drawer," Oliver gasped, throwing his head back a little to give the other man some room. "Just... fuck, Gabe."

Gabriel chuckled against Oliver's heated skin, reaching down for the hem of his shirt, and he started to pull it up. The motion threw Oliver, the sudden panic that Gabe might see the scars, might ask questions, and he reached out a firm hand, stopping him.

"Do you mind if we don't?"

Gabe blinked in surprise, pulling back. "Don't what?"

"Take off shirts?"

Gabe tried to swallow, the motion catching in his throat for a second, and he unwound himself from the other man. "Are you bothered by my...?" He gestured at his chest.

Oliver's eyes widened in surprise. "What? *God*, no. That's not...that's not what I meant."

Gabe's eyes were cold, hurt, and he shook his head. "You can be honest with me, you know. I know how all this shit works. I've been here a dozen times before, and I..."

Oliver reached up, taking Gabe's hand. "I have scars," he confessed. "A lot of them. And I don't like to talk about it. I don't like to even think about it. It'll just kill the mood, and..."

Gabe was frozen, his entire body relaxing just a fraction. "Oh. You never said."

“I’m sorry,” Oliver said from behind a breath. “I never meant for you to think... It’s just...it’s a thing for me. It’s stupid.”

“It isn’t,” Gabe said very softly, then lifted his hand to the back of Oliver’s neck and pulled him in for a very soft, sweet kiss. “It’s not stupid. And you can leave your shirt on. I’m sorry I jumped to conclusions.”

“You’ve a right to,” Oliver mumbled against the other man’s lips. His erection was gone for the moment, but he felt a wave of relief and comfort in those warm arms holding him tight. “I should have explained before. But I want your whole body, I do. I want everything about you.”

Gabe kissed him for another moment, then pulled back. “Look, why don’t we just stop. Just for tonight. Let’s hold each other, and in the morning...”

“Yeah,” Oliver whispered, and let his head come to rest in the crook of his boyfriend’s neck. He didn’t want to think about the scars. Think about his mother or how she’d ordered the wounds which were supposed to purge him of his demonic desires. He didn’t want that evil bitch to creep into this thing he had with Gabe, this thing he was allowing himself to keep, to be selfish with.

Gabe’s hand was drawing lazy lines up and down his spine, and Oliver felt his eyes slipping closed as they rested there together. “This is just as good, you know. I just like being here with you.”

Oliver pressed himself against his boyfriend even harder. “I don’t know what I did to deserve you, but I’m grateful for it.”

Gabe chuckled low and gentle into the top of Oliver’s hair. “Well, I plan to keep you, Ollie, so brace yourself.”

Oliver laughed and pressed another kiss to the side of Gabe’s neck. “I will.”

Seven

Morning came, and with it, warm arms and soft lips kissing along Oliver's neck. With a groan, he rolled over and shoved his hands up the back of Gabe's shirt. A hoarse, sleepy chuckle escaped Gabe's lips as he continued to nip along Oliver's collarbone which was barely visible under the neck of his shirt.

"Someone's awake," Oliver muttered.

"Mm, and someone else is waking up." Gabe pressed his hips against Oliver's, rubbing against his morning erection.

"He might be." Oliver chuckled as he kissed the corner of Gabe's mouth. "My breath is disgusting though."

"I'm alright with it," Gabe whispered, then claimed Oliver's lips in a greedy, deep kiss.

It wasn't as bad as Oliver thought it would be, the passion outweighing the sour taste in his mouth. Before long they were rutting, his thigh between Gabe's legs, knee pressing very gently upward.

"Want you," Gabe whispered.

"God. God, yes," Oliver moaned in response.

Boldly, Gabe reached between their bodies and shoved his hand down the front of Oliver's boxers, closing his thin fingers around Oliver's swollen cock. He began to stroke him, a light touch, increasing the pressure just a little on each upstroke.

"Uhg, fuck," Oliver muttered, pressing his forehead against Gabe's shoulder. "You...should stop that," he

managed, “if you don’t want me to come before I’m inside you.”

Gabe let out a low moan, then rolled over toward the nightstand. He opened the drawer, fumbling around and came out with a box of condoms that was ripped open along the front, and a small bottle of lube.

Oliver tried not to seem over eager as he took the box and lube from his boyfriend, but instead of immediately ripping into the package, he set it aside and hooked his fingers under the hem of Gabe’s boxers. “May I?”

“Please,” Gabe whispered, needy and almost begging.

Oliver quickly pushed the offending material down toward Gabe’s ankles, and on his way up, removed his own. They laughed, kicking the underpants away before pressing their legs back together. Oliver’s cock twitched against Gabe’s thigh, and his hand moved down, pressing flat against Gabe’s lower stomach.

“Can I touch your...?” He wasn’t certain what terms Gabe used for himself, and he waited for his boyfriend to take the lead.

“My dick? Yes, yes you can,” Gabe said, and his voice trembled a little with the answer.

He carefully reached through Gabe’s soft curls, parting his folds, and the pad of his finger quickly found Gabe’s long, swollen dick. He rubbed it between his thumb and first finger gently, slow, careful motions which made his boyfriend gasp, dropping his head down hard against Oliver’s shoulder.

“Oh fuck, that’s good,” Gabe gasped.

Oliver chuckled, the sound low with want and desire as his fingers moved up and down, carefully circling around his entrance. “Do you want me here?” he asked, pressing against his hole, then trailed his fingers further down until they were pressed between his ass cheeks. “Or here?”

Gabe let out a sharp breath as his face pressed harder into Oliver’s neck. “The...the first one. I want...please.”

Oliver groaned, moving his hand back and dipping in just for a second to feel the walls clenching around him. He pushed his fingers in and out, not going too deep, scissoring them just slightly.

Gabe gasped, thrusting his hips forward. “Oh God, fuck me now, okay? Please.”

“Anything you want,” Oliver breathed, and kissed him long and slow as his hand reached behind him for the condom. Without breaking the kiss, he managed to tear open the packet, then slid the condom over the tip of his dick and rolled it down. “You want lube?”

“Mm, yes. The testosterone I take makes me a bit drier than normal.”

Oliver quickly poured a few dollops of lube onto his fingers, stroking himself over the condom a few times, then carefully rolled over, propping himself between his boyfriend’s legs. “Alright?”

“More than.” Gabe arched his hips, letting Oliver’s cock line up with his hole, and then in a fluid motion, Oliver pushed in.

Gasping, he felt Gabe’s insides clenching around him, and he had to fist the sheets tight to keep himself under control. He’d fucked before, plenty of times, and those times had been good. But never had he wanted it so badly. Never had he wanted his partner to enjoy every second, to draw it out, to feel something.

“Move,” Gabe whispered, drawing Oliver out of his thoughts.

Oliver looked down at the other man, watching him from under heavy, dark lashes, and he couldn’t help a slow smile creeping over his mouth. “You are so gorgeous.”

Gabe shifted his hips, making Oliver moan, and then he started a rhythm around Oliver’s cock. Gabriel gasped and tightened around Oliver’s cock.

“Yes. Good,” Oliver moaned, thrusting harder as Gabe’s hands urged him on. “Good. Fuck.”

“I’m going to come. I’m going—I’m going to come,” Gabriel moaned just minutes later. “Rub my dick, Ollie. Please.”

Reaching between their bodies, Oliver rubbed his finger along Gabe’s cock once more, feeling his boyfriend tensing and cresting, then crying out with his orgasm. The way Gabe quivered around Oliver was just enough to throw him over the edge, and with harsh, erratic thrusts, he was coming hard and fast.

His head bent down, the front of Gabe’s shirt muffling his moans as he buried his head in the center of his boyfriend’s chest. He trembled a little with the aftershocks, then finally rolled to the side, surprised at just how much he was sweating for sex that hadn’t lasted a full five minutes.

“Ollie?”

“Yeah?”

Gabe was quiet a long moment before he asked, “Will you put your fingers inside me?”

Oliver moaned very softly as he slipped his hand between Gabe’s thighs and pressed two fingers back in. His insides were still spasming lightly, but after a beat, Gabe began to relax and tighten around Oliver.

“Kiss me,” Gabe said.

Oliver did. The kisses were soft and lazy and sweet. He basked in the taste of them as he slowly pumped his fingers in and out, and eventually Gabe’s fingers closed around his wrist and eased his touch away.

“Thank you.”

Oliver hummed, kissing the edge of Gabe’s jaw once more before rolling away and making space between their bodies. “Anytime, love.”

“God,” Gabe said, reaching over to brush a few stray locks from Oliver’s forehead. “That was fucking good.”

Oliver laughed, his hands still quaking a bit as he reached down to pull off the condom and tie it. He threw it in the

direction of the bin, a little disgusted with himself that he didn't even look to see if he'd made it, but he was too boneless and sated to care.

Groaning, he threw one arm up over his head, twisting his face to the side to get a good look at his boyfriend. Gabe had his head against the pillow, looking fuck-stupid and more gorgeous than ever.

"We're going to do that again, right?" Oliver asked after a moment.

Laughing, Gabe reached out and curled one hand around the side of Oliver's hip. "I think so. If I have anything to say about it."

"Mm. Good." He shifted over to press a few lazy kisses along Gabe's jaw, then nuzzled against his cheek. "How about breakfast, yeah? I don't think I have anything here, but I know a good café."

"Fine," Gabe said as he nuzzled back. "As long as it's not the one I work at. And after we eat, we're going food shopping. If I'm going to stay here all weekend, there's no way I'm eating out every meal."

Oliver grinned. "What if I eat you out for every meal?"

Gabe flushed but he didn't entirely look displeased with that idea. "I'm being serious, Oliver."

He grinned at his boyfriend. "Fine, but you're cooking, love. Trust me, you don't want me to even try."

"Fair enough. Though I don't know how you survived this long without even the basics." Gabe stretched his arms above his head. "Hand me my binder, will you?"

Oliver laughed, rolling off the bed to rummage around for his jeans. He picked up the fallen condom and threw it in the bin properly before picking Gabe's binder up off his pile of clothes, tossing it over. "You underestimate how posh I grew up, dearest. My mum was either drunk or hysterical, so if we didn't have a cook, we would not have been fed."

Gabe's face fell, and Oliver's gut twisted when he saw a look of pity. He hated pity more than anything, but he knew if the situations were reversed, he probably would have felt the same way. Taking a breath, he went to his closet to rummage around for a fresh shirt.

"What if I showed you some cooking basics, hmm? Then you can practice and ply me with delicious home-cooked meals and bottles of wine?"

Rolling his eyes, Oliver spun toward the bed just as Gabe was securing his binder on. "Is this your secret, subtle way of telling me you're a high-maintenance boyfriend? Posh dinners and breakfasts in bed?"

"Oh dear," Gabe said, stepping onto the floor to find his jeans. "He's found me out."

Oliver snorted, grabbing his shirt by the hem, and he pulled it off without realizing what he was doing. In fact, he didn't notice anything at all until he caught Gabe's eyes fixated on his right arm and side of his torso.

Bile rose in his stomach and he spun, grabbing his fresh shirt and quickly pulled it over his head. He cleared his throat, saying a silent prayer Gabe wouldn't ask.

But his luck had never been any good.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No," he said sharply. Grabbing the side of the closet, he clenched the door so hard his hands ached, hoping the pain would anchor him. "If it's all the same..."

"Just...what happened? You know I'm not going to judge you. You can talk to me."

Rage and pain from his past eclipsed everything he felt, or might have felt, for the man standing beside his bed, erasing every moment they'd just experienced together.

Instead of understanding that Gabe simply cared, he was furious. "How big of you. How fucking pragmatic. You're not going to judge me." Oliver's jaw was clenched so tight his head began to ache. "You know what, I think I'm going to go

for a walk. And when I get back, you should be gone. I don't...this isn't going to work out.”

Gabe called out a loud protest, but Oliver was running now. He was only half aware of what he was doing, where he was going. He felt the door slam as he left the house, and his feet were bare on the chilled pavement. But he was going now, half-dressed, tears in his eyes, memories he'd locked away years ago threatening to break the surface.

This. This was why he didn't date. This was why he didn't get close to anyone.

He liked Gabe, and the thought of seeing that look on his face when he found out what happened, what Oliver had gone through...he couldn't take it. He couldn't stomach it. Not from anyone, but especially not Gabriel.

He felt like he'd run for miles, and when he finally stopped to look back, Gabe wasn't there. He hadn't come after him. He wasn't sure if he was relieved or broken, but his chest was aching, and he had to stop. He collapsed against a garden wall surrounding a large house, and crooked one knee up to his chest.

Resting his head forward, he wondered how it could all go so badly wrong so fast. He'd been falling for Gabe, in such a short time, but there was no turning back now. He knew the other man wouldn't understand—couldn't understand. No one did. No one would be willing to accept why Oliver had done what he did.

He was destined to be alone. This only served as a reminder of why he didn't get close to people. Because when you cared, when you wanted something, it hurt that much more when it was ripped away.



A TINY PART of him hoped Gabe remained at the house. That maybe he was someone who would fight to stay together, but

the front door was open and there was no sign of anyone anywhere. With a resigned sigh, he slammed the door, turning to give the nearby arm chair a kick for good measure.

“Fucking good,” he lied to himself, then rushed up the stairs, pulling his sheets from the bed and stuffed them into the wash.

It was for the best, he reminded himself. When you were alone, you couldn't get hurt.

Though, he wondered as he fixed himself tea and stared at his phone which hadn't made a peep all morning, if alone avoided pain, why did he feel like this?

His sibling texted late into the evening as Oliver sat in front of Netflix, a bag of chips open in his lap, though he hadn't touched them.

What the fuck did you do?

Oliver sighed, staring at the screen, and decided not to answer. He was making good on his promise to let Leo have his space, and he wasn't going to bother his sibling with his romance problems. He would just wallow, trying to erase the lingering scent of Gabriel which clung to almost all of his things. He tried to stop seeing him every time he closed his eyes, and stop feeling him every time his mind wandered back to that morning with warm hands, soft lips, and the most careful embrace.

Self-hatred was his home away from home, it seemed.

Sunday came around, and with the afternoon came the return of Leo, who was scowling as he dropped his bag by the front door. Oliver, who still hadn't moved from the sofa, rolled his head to the side and let out the tiniest sigh of relief that Leo looked not only fine, but well-rested.

“So, how'd you cock this one up?” he demanded, sinking into the chair near the sofa.

Oliver rolled his eyes, then his head away from his sibling. “No idea what you're on about.”

“You’re such a fuckwit, Oliver. The one good thing that happens to you, and you turn into an arse.”

Oliver was immediately up straight, his eyes wide. “What? I’m not the arse here!”

“Really? So, you fuck your boyfriend, then run out on him immediately after?” Leo’s eyes narrowed at his sibling. “He told me what happened.”

Feeling a fresh wave of panic rippling from his gut, Oliver threw his hands over his face. “You don’t understand. I didn’t run out on him because we fucked.”

“According to him, that *is* what happened. He said you fucked, then out of nowhere you just shouted at him to get out.”

Swallowing thickly, Oliver picked at a loose thread on the side of his blanket. His stomach was twisting around itself because that wasn’t what happened. Gabe had twisted the events. “It had nothing to do with that. The sex was bloody amazing.”

“Then you might want to explain, because I’m about four seconds from punching you in the face,” Leo warned.

Oliver gave him a withering look. “He saw my scars.”

Leo’s face immediately softened. “Did you tell him about ___”

“No,” Oliver said in a sharp rush. “I told him I didn’t want to talk about it.”

“And?” Leo pressed, his brows still dipped into a low frown.

“And...he kept pushing.”

Leo let out a frustrated groan. “Believe me, I understand what that’s like, Ollie, but you shouldn’t have kicked him out like that.”

“Probably not,” Oliver said quietly, feeling like somehow he and Leo had reversed roles, and the younger was now more mature and understanding than he could ever be. “I didn’t...I

can't..." He sighed, scrubbing his face. "I don't want him to know, alright? I don't want to have to explain what she did, and how it made me feel about—" my body, he finished silently, but he couldn't bring himself to say it.

"You know at some point you will have to tell him," Leo said. "And you have to trust that he'll understand."

"I don't know if I can," Oliver retorted. "He didn't listen to me about what I needed."

Leo's gaze dropped to his lap. "I get it. But you need to tell him that. And your timing with this whole thing was piss-poor."

"How?" Oliver demanded. "

"You made him think you panicked from the sex, Oliver. He's been dysphoric all fucking weekend. He said you did a total one-eighty on him. He thinks the shirt thing was just an excuse to get him to leave without looking transphobic."

"Well, *fuck*,"

Feeling like he'd been kicked in the stomach, Oliver got to his feet. He'd been so caught up in his panic, he hadn't stopped to consider how his total mood flip might have looked to someone else. In his own head, it made sense. In his own head, where he understood every nuance of his trauma, his anger was justified.

But to Gabe who knew very little about Oliver's past? Who had taken a risk fucking Oliver and bearing himself the way he did?

Leo was right. Gabe deserved some explanation. He needed to know it had nothing to do with his body.

Oliver was just shattered in a billion pieces, and he wasn't sure there was a way to put him back together.

"For the record," Leo called as Oliver shuffled toward the stairs for a shower, "he will understand. So maybe keep that close to your chest when you see him."

Eight

“He’s the assistant manager over at the Fourth Street bookshop, and I believe he’s on shift right now,” Leo had called as Oliver was heading for the door.

He hadn’t known that, and had intended on first checking Gabe’s apartment, then posting outside the café until the other man arrived. But the information was helpful, and the little used bookshop wasn’t far from their house.

The late afternoon was nice, the slight breeze promising colder temperatures as autumn waited right around the corner, and it helped clear his head as he moved through the upscale neighborhood. His eyes wandered as he strolled, hands in his pockets, gaze flickering between the people he passed. All of them looked content, some even happy, and he wondered if he was destined to feel this aching pit in his stomach for the rest of his life.

Somewhere deep in the back of his head, he knew it was his own fault. No one else was doing this to him. But he couldn’t seem to stop himself, and he didn’t know why. He wasn’t foolish enough to think he could be saved by some prince charming swooping in—hell he had no desire for that at all. But he didn’t know where to begin.

Though, apologizing to Gabe was a good start.

He had never ever, in his life, ever intended on making someone he cared about feel rejected over their body. In fact, the guilt was so pressing, his throat kept going tight and he was a hair’s breadth away from bursting into tears.

Taking a breath to control himself, Oliver turned the corner onto the main street where the bookshop waited. It had been there for just about ever, a small stone building which was surrounded now by a brewery, and a string of bars the university students frequented. But the bookshop thrived, drawing in tourists and locals alike.

Oliver had been in there a handful of times himself, loving the smell of old parchment from ancient books the owner kept stocked on tall shelves. He'd never been a big reader before, but there was something about that shop he loved.

He'd never seen Gabriel there before—he would have remembered someone so good looking. But it was no surprise the barista had a second job at a place like that. It seemed just his style, and in spite of his raging guilt, the thought of Gabe amongst all those old books brought a smile to his face.

With a breath, he approached the shop and peered in. He couldn't see anyone behind the counter, but the shop looked bare, so he took the chance and walked in. The heavy, familiar scent hit him, and he paused to breathe it in before he went on his search.

The shop itself was small, two story with the stairs directly in the center for customers to go up and down. There were only a few main stacks, and shelves against the walls, so there wouldn't be many places for Gabe to hide.

Consequently, he found the other man re-shelving from a small pushcart at the back of the shop. Oliver froze, then took a breath and knocked on the side of the shelf. Gabe turned, his eyes going wide, and his cheeks paled.

“What the hell do you want?”

Oliver winced, but he knew he deserved it. “I erm...had a chat with Leo who told me you might have got the wrong idea the other morning.”

“Oh? Wrong idea?” Gabe said, his voice low and furious. He shoved the book he was holding back onto the cart and turned to face Oliver. “About what? You fucking me then completely flipping out and breaking up with me? You

swearing you wanted all of me, then tumbling into trans panic? Please, Oliver, enlighten me about my wrong ideas.”

Licking his lips, Oliver looked around to make sure no one else was listening before taking a few steps closer. “It wasn’t trans panic. It wasn’t you at all.”

“Right. It wasn’t you, it was me. You know, that line doesn’t actually work on people. You didn’t need to make up some bullshit story to get me to leave.”

Shaking his head, Oliver stepped even closer, but froze when he saw Gabe tense. “No, I...it is me. It...” He threw up his hands and growled. “I didn’t want you to see the scars. And when I asked you to stop, you didn’t.”

There was a small flicker of guilt on Gabe’s face, but he squared his shoulders and Oliver saw the life of their relationship flashing before his eyes. They were both stubborn shitheads—both too ready to die on their imaginary hills to save pride.

“I panicked,” Oliver went on in the silence between them.

“I own that I didn’t listen right away, but you could have tried actually explaining to me that I was crossing a line instead of telling me to fuck off and running out like that. I would have listened eventually.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t always think rationally. Most of the time I just...act in the moment and try to clean up the mess later.”

Gabe swallowed heavily, and for just a second, a smile flickered across his mouth. “That’s not new information. I figured that one out all on my own the night you brought Leo to my house.” The moment was interrupted by the front door chime going off, making them both jump.

Oliver deflated, leaning against the nearest shelf. “Can we talk later? I’m really shit at all this, but you’re the first person I’ve not only liked, but actually trusted in...hell, maybe ever? And I want a chance to start again.”

Gabe let out a quiet sigh. “You can come over to my apartment. I’m off at four.”

Oliver nodded, feeling something stirring in his gut. The desire to reach over and kiss Gabe until his insides felt better. The desire to have those arms around him again because it had been no more than a full day and fuck, he missed him. “I promise. And I really am sorry.”

Gabriel stared at him a long time, then bowed his head. “Yeah. Me too.”

Oliver turned on his heel just as the customer called out for help, and he hurried out of the shop.

It was something, at least, and though he was confused about what happened and how to make it better, he was willing to try. He hadn’t been lying about Gabe being the only person he’d ever liked this much, and he wasn’t ready to lose him.



OLIVER TURNED up at Gabe’s door at half four, with nothing in his hands. He had scoured the shops for hours, but nothing screamed, *‘I’m sorry for losing myself in a panicked moment and making you feel dysphoric.’*

He half considered buying a blank card and writing something along those lines inside of it, but he wasn’t poetic enough, and he had a feeling Gabe wouldn’t entirely appreciate the sentiment.

By the time he gave up, four o’clock had come and gone, and he knew if he didn’t head over to Gabe’s straight away, he’d be late and then there would be no chance of forgiveness. Abandoning the shops and hoping his words would be enough, Oliver broke into a run.

He arrived at Gabe’s door right as the time ticked by four-thirty, and he knocked softly, pressing his head against the door jamb and hoping desperately Gabe hadn’t blown him off. He held his breath and tapped his foot. The seconds ticked by, and there was nothing.

Just as he was about to give up, the knob turned and the door slowly creaked open. Gabe's face appeared in the crack, and after some hesitation, he swung it open. "Hey."

Oliver swallowed. "Hey. I'm still very sorry. And if it means anything to you at all, I'm willing to explain stuff. A little."

Gabe's brow furrowed, then he carefully stepped aside, motioning Oliver in.

He felt like leaping into the air, but it wasn't a triumph yet. His only hope was to give Gabriel details he hadn't shared with anyone. Even his sibling only knew because he'd been present for part of it, and knowing their mother, Leo accurately guessed all the rest.

But the words describing what Oliver had gone through had never slipped past his lips before, and he was struggling to believe this was worth it.

Only, turning to look at him, Oliver was starting to believe it might be. The curious, cautious look in Gabe's eyes, the way he was wringing his hands, the desperation only half-hidden in his face because Gabriel wanted to know. He wanted to know if it was worth it, too.

Taking a breath, Oliver strolled to the sofa and took a seat against the far side armrest. He kept his legs spread apart, hands hanging between his knees, and he twisted the single, silver band he wore on his left middle finger.

"First of all, I wasn't put off by the sex or your body. That might have been the best shag I've ever had, and I'm obsessed with you, Gabe. All of you." Oliver glanced up at Gabriel who was hovering by the cushion farthest away from him. After a second, he lowered himself down, and Oliver went on. "I understand why it looked like that, but I swear it...I... I meant what I said when I told you I wanted all of you. I just wasn't prepared for you to see me like that."

"Clearly," Gabe said.

"You just...you wouldn't let it go and it..." He didn't have the words, and his voice trembled.

“It triggered you,” Gabe offered very quietly.

Oliver blinked, then nodded. “I...suppose that’s it. I’ve never talked about them before. The scars. The...incident. Ever. To anyone... Not even Leo.”

Gabe’s eyes widened a fraction. “Ollie...” He let out a soft breath. “Shit. I was over here being such an indignant asshole about the whole thing, but I really, really owe you an apology.”

“It’s fine,” Oliver started, but Gabe shook his head.

“Seriously.” He looked up and met Oliver’s gaze. “I can be a real dickhead sometimes when I think I’m in the right. And I didn’t consider that I was hurting you. I’m so sorry.”

Oliver let the apology sink deep into his bones before he spoke again. “I wasn’t thinking rationally, because I never think rationally when it comes to my past. And I never let people get close enough to see the scars,” Oliver said, reaching down to tug at the bottom of his shirt. “But Leo said maybe I should tell you, because maybe you’d get it. So, back when I was younger—”

“Oliver, wait,” Gabe said, putting up a hand. “I’m not giving you an ultimatum. And I’m sure as hell not going to force you to relive something you clearly don’t want to relive. You don’t owe me anything.”

Oliver laughed, the sound a little choked, and all he wanted right now was for Gabe to hug him. But he wasn’t ready to ask for one yet. “If I did tell you though, if I thought maybe it would help me, would you be alright with hearing it all?”

Gabe, bit down on his bottom lip for a second, and let a breath out through his nose. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure about you,” Oliver said with a wry grin.

Gabe let out a startled laugh, then rubbed a hand down his face. “Charmer.” He took a slow breath, then met Oliver’s gaze again. “I’m here to listen, Ollie. I don’t really know how much help I can be, but I’m here for you.”

He leaned back against the side of the sofa and put one arm behind his head, resting down on it. He felt a warmth in his chest he wasn't used to, and he wanted to curl up inside it.

Instead, he had to relive some of the worst moments of his life because Leo was right—it was time to share them with someone who actually cared.

“My dad left for good just after Leo was born. I don't think he ever quite understood my mum, you know? She came from this really strict family, very wealthy, old-school titled land owners kind of thing.”

Gabe blinked at him. “Wait. Are you, like, royal?”

Oliver laughed. “No. And I didn't inherit a title from my mum, but even if I had, it wouldn't have meant anything.”

Gabe snorted. “Still. That's kind of wild.”

“Yeah,” Oliver said, not quite able to match Gabe's smile as the rest of the story pressed itself against the back of his tongue. “She was also extremely religious. She went to this church full of total fanatics. She was convinced that any untoward behavior was caused by the devil and his minions.” Oliver let out a choked laugh, shaking his head.

“I know those people,” Gabe said darkly. “Believe me.”

“I expect you do,” Oliver replied. “I told you about sucking off the footie captain and everything. Well, I didn't really like him, but Leo was getting bolder and bolder with openly defying her. I was afraid of what she was going to do if she caught him wearing dresses and snogging boys, so I started getting more reckless, getting caught so she'd be paying attention to me and not Leo.”

Oliver licked his lips and carefully studied Gabe's face. For the moment, the other man sat passive, eyes wide, expression open. Oliver cleared his throat and went on.

“When I was seventeen, just before I was going to take my A-levels, she decided she'd had enough of my behavior. The Headmaster had sent another letter home because I'd got caught in someone else's dorm. So, over the Christmas holiday, she informed the Headmaster I'd be delayed a few

weeks. Then she sent me..." Oliver's voice broke and he stopped, shifting uncomfortably in his seat.

The motion seemed to break Gabe's concentration and desire to sit so far because in a second, he had shifted over to the middle cushion, and put one hand on Oliver's thigh. "Look, you can stop if you need to."

"No," Oliver said, shaking his head. "I just...just need to get through it." He cleared his throat again and took a breath. "She had these friends at her church who said they could exorcise the demon out of me. She turned me over to them, and I was there for a month."

When Gabe took his hand, Oliver did nothing more than turn his palm so they were pressed together. He didn't say anything, just held him tight as Oliver took another shaking breath. He was tired now, from reliving it, but felt stronger saying it aloud.

"I'm not entirely sure where they got their exorcism standards from. Films, maybe, or shit from the internet. Either way, it was nothing short of torture. It started simple—sleep deprivation, not being allowed to do anything except read the bible and pray. But when I didn't show signs of compliance, it got worse. They held my head under holy water until I passed out, started burning me with sage, carved on me with silver knives." He used his free hand to lift the hem of his shirt and didn't watch Gabe's face as his would-be boyfriend got a good look at the scars.

"Leo was there at some point. I don't remember when, or for how long. I just know she'd sent him to show him what could happen if he let the devil inside him as well. I tried to hold out as long as I could, but eventually I cracked. I wailed and professed that I was clean and begged to be let go. They sent me back to her, and I told Leo he had to stop. We both had to stop. We had to lie low and get through our exams. I promised him I would do everything in my power to get him away from her, so he'd never have to experience what I did. And eventually I got my father to pull some strings, and we got into the university here."

“Ollie,” Gabe whispered.

Oliver shook his head. “It’s been years, and most of the time I’m fine, but it’s hard when I know people will ask why I look like this under my clothes.”

Gabe swallowed thickly. “Like I did. Not listening. Not respecting you.”

Oliver shrugged because Gabriel wasn’t wrong, and as much as he wanted to absolve him of what he’d done, the truth couldn’t be ignored. “Every time I think I can be rational about it, I panic.”

“Well, I know I didn’t make it easier for you. And I really did think you were just using it as an excuse to throw me out, but I could have been better.”

Oliver played with Gabe’s fingers. “We both could have been better.”

Gabe squeezed his hand again and laughed softly. “Yeah. Can I ask how long since you’ve seen her?”

“Almost three years,” Oliver said quietly. “My father did us the favor of getting us out of there, but he hasn’t done more than that. If either of us lose our visa, we’ve got nothing but her to go home to.”

“Does he know what she did?” Gabe asked.

Oliver’s chest squeezed. “No. I...hell,” he gasped and took a slow breath. “I don’t know how he’ll react, and I don’t think I could handle him telling me it was my fault.”

“Would he do that?”

Oliver laughed bitterly. “I don’t know. I was so young when he left, I barely remember him.”

Without ceremony, Gabe pulled Oliver over, closing what little space there was between him. He grabbed Oliver’s face between his palms, pressing them against his cheeks, and he pushed their foreheads together. “You didn’t need to tell me that, Ollie. You didn’t owe me anything. But thank you for trusting me.”

Oliver closed his eyes letting himself bask in the comfort of the other man for several moments. “I think maybe it was time I told someone. What good is it doing me sitting in my head, tormenting me? Driving me to push the one person away who gives a shit?”

Gabe let out a low chuckle, growling a little as he wrapped one hand around the back of Oliver’s neck and tugged him in for a kiss. “You’re a fucking idiot,” he mumbled against Oliver’s lips.

Unable to stop his grin, Oliver kissed back. “I know. I know I am. But if you’ll forgive me and have me back...”

“Not even a question. So long as you forgive me.”

A warmth burst through his chest, and he wrapped his arms around Gabe’s middle, tugging him onto his lap and kissing him soundly. “Well, I’m not going to try and change your mind about wanting me, you know. That’s for damn sure.”

Gabe pulled back, grinning as he shook his head. “Good. Because I like you this way. As fucking reckless as you are.”

Oliver nuzzled their noses together. “Yeah. I guess I am.”

Lying on Gabe's bed, Oliver found himself perched between the V of his boyfriend's legs. He had his cheek pressed against Gabe's right thigh while he held a cotton ball soaked in rubbing alcohol over Gabe's left one. He swiped it across the skin in a heart-shaped pattern, then tossed it behind him toward the bin.

His fingers hovered over Gabe's knee, tapping out a staccato pattern as Gabe took the syringe full of his weekly testosterone, and jabbed it into the now-clean area. Oliver winced in sympathy, despite having been there for nearly all of Gabe's injections over the last seven months. He let his fingers draw a line down toward Gabe's calf.

When the syringe was gone and Gabe had swiped up the single drop of blood, Oliver reached his face over and pressed a soft kiss against the injection site. He turned his face up, giving his boyfriend a lazy, sweet smile which was returned, along with a hand pressed to his cheek.

"You want to go to the beach today?" Oliver asked, stretching his back into an arch. He nuzzled against Gabe's soft thigh, then shifted so he was sitting in the middle, his nose pressed just above Gabe's belly button as he laid kisses to his warm skin.

"I guess we could. I'm off for the whole day, and it's too nice out to waste it."

"Before June Gloom hits, yeah?" Oliver said.

Gabe rolled his eyes as he pulled Oliver up for a proper kiss. “You’re sounding like a true Californian now, you know. Pretty soon all thoughts of tea and crumpets will have left your body.”

“That,” Oliver said, punctuating his statement with a kiss to Gabe’s lips, “will never happen. First of all, crumpets are delicious. And secondly, not only does LA have to fight my English side—which might I remind you is responsible for colonizing half the Western world—but it also has to battle the Japanese half. And let me tell you, we Japanese people are bloody feisty.”

“Even the half-English ones?” Gabe asked, and Oliver nodded, grinning and pressing several, smacking kisses along Gabe’s jaw. “Well, at least we have enough sushi here to pacify you.”

“So rude. What a horrid stereotype.”

“So, you taking me for sushi last night was what?”

“Just me trying to help you rebel against your vegetarianism. You had shrimp.”

“No, *you* had shrimp, and then you kissed me with your shrimp mouth,” Gabe said, running his fingers into Oliver’s long hair. “I suppose you’ve corrupted me, though. Whatever would my poor aunt say if she could see me now?”

“She’d probably call you a foul heathen and strike your name from the Temple records. Then give me a lot of chocolate for putting up with you.” Oliver laughed as he kissed Gabe once more, then pulled away. “Come on, you’ve got your new swim binder to try out, and I think your pasty cheeks could do with some sun.”

“Pasty, he says,” Gabe grumbled as he wriggled out from under Oliver’s arms. “The English boy calls *me* pasty.”

Oliver gave him a wicked smile as he rummaged around for their beachwear. Half his things were at Gabe’s now, and neither of them seemed to mind. He still paid his rent on time, and checked up on his sibling, and attempted to split his time wisely as his lectures were almost over, and the time to turn in

his dissertation was almost upon him. But more often than not, the couple took refuge at Gabe's small, cozy place.

Seven months felt like a lifetime to Oliver, who was still getting used to the idea of having a boyfriend—someone who wanted him all the time that he wanted back. Someone who could, and was more than willing to, keep him distracted when his anxiety kicked in. Or when his sibling hit a rough patch.

But Leo was dealing with his newfound freedom from his sibling's watchful eye better than Oliver anticipated. In seven months, there had only been three rescue calls, and none were as bad as they had been in the past. Leo was making it to most of his classes, and was no longer dealing with the threat of expulsion from the university. Gabe still attended their trans group, Leo still made appearances from time to time, and Oliver stopped worrying so much.

He was happy, and it was strange. He kept waiting for the other shoe to drop, but he stopped expecting it to happen every day.

Hopping on one foot as he attempted to untangle his swimming shorts as he put them on, Oliver fell on the bed and wriggled around as he dressed. Gabe rolled his eyes, stripping down to nothing as he searched for his swim binder which Oliver had discovered online, and had given to him as a Hanukkah present.

“You know, Hanukkah doesn't really do presents like this. It's not like...Christmas replacement,” Gabe had said, but his eyes were shining with delight as he looked at it.

“Yeah well, consider it I dunno, a collection of gifts for all the holidays that do get presents I missed this year when I didn't know you.” Oliver then swept him up into an embrace, and kissed him softly. “I went through great pains to get your skin color right on that website. Like an entire hour, okay? So appreciate me more.”

“Oh, I'll appreciate you plenty,” Gabe had warned.

And he did.

Grinning at his boyfriend now, Gabe slipped the binder over his head, adjusting it in his tall mirror before he grabbed his own black swimming shorts, and shrugged them on. He rummaged around and found a couple of tattered, paint-covered t-shirts, and tossed one over at Oliver before shrugging his on.

“Sunscreen?” Gabe asked.

Oliver reached under the bed for their wicker beach basket and threw the top open. “Aye. And that pasty zinc stuff you use on your nose.”

“Any water bottles left in there?”

Oliver moved around the sandcastle toys he insisted on buying their last trip to the beach and came up with a crusty one. “Er. They look a bit dodgy. We can get more. Besides, we’ll want sandwiches if we’re making a day of it.”

Gabe sighed, but shrugged as he went into the hall for their beach towels. “Go make something for us to eat. And I think there’s water in the fridge. I want to take the bus. There’s no way I’m putting up with Saturday parking.”

“Fine, but you’re carrying the chairs,” Oliver complained as he wandered into the kitchen.

He rummaged in the fridge and found a ripe tomato, avocados, and the vegan mayo Gabe loved so much. He brandished Gabe’s massive butcher’s knife, slicing the produce, then slapped together a couple of sandwiches, wrapping them in cling-film, and stuffing them into the beach basket. He took a couple of waters, and a couple of unpeeled oranges along with them, and decided it would be good enough.

There were enough food trucks and restaurants along the way if they got really hungry, and mostly, Oliver just wanted to enjoy the first real warm day of the season.

It was late April now, but the winter rain had stayed very late, and left the beaches foggy every day before noon. He was craving sun, and he wondered then if maybe Gabe had a point. Maybe California was washing all of the English out of his

blood. Not that he'd mind so much. He was happier here than he had ever been in London, and erasing all traces of his mother that he could wasn't a bad thing.

Sighing, he put on a careful smile when Gabe strolled into the room, a floppy sunhat perched on his head, and a pair of oversized sunglasses low on his large nose. Oliver dug around, finding his obnoxiously red, heart-shaped ones, and slid them up to his brows.

"Have I ever told you," Gabe asked, putting one hand at Oliver's waist, "that my boyfriend is criminally attractive?"

"Mm, you might have mentioned it. Best not tell him we're getting up to naughty things whilst he's away."

Gabe kissed the tip of his nose and laughed. "Better not. He's a mean little fucker when he gets angry."

"Sounds horrible." Oliver snickered as he grabbed the keys, then laced his fingers together with Gabe's. They left, locking up, and Gabe hitched the beach chairs and umbrella along his back as Oliver carried the basket handles in the crook of his elbow.

They headed for the bus stop, both of them only vaguely annoyed by the crowd, but Oliver wasn't foolish enough to think they were the only ones who decided to enjoy the first nice day in months. They managed to cram themselves into the first bus that came along, and Gabe pushed the button for their stop ten minutes later.

Taking huge gulps of fresh air, Oliver took a moment to glare at the retreating bus. "Fuck the parking. I'm not doing that next time," he grumbled.

Gabe laughed, pressing his hand to the small of Oliver's back. "Stop being a baby and hurry up or all the good spots will be gone."

"It's noon. All the good spots are already gone," Oliver countered, but he let Gabe drag him across the busy street to the tide wall. They walked for a while, until they found the stairs to the beach, shucking their shoes and making their way around the people all trying to set up. It wasn't as crowded as

Oliver assumed, tourist season not quite up and running yet, so most of the people were locals.

They found a decent spot near one of the Lifeguard towers, not too close to the wet sand, but not too far. Oliver set up the chairs while Gabe got the umbrella up, and before long, they were lounging back and being soothed by the gentle sounds of crashing waves.

“You know, I’ll hand it to LA—the beaches are amazing. I cannot begin to describe the horror that are the rocky, freezing British beaches.”

“And yet I’m guessing you spent too much time there anyway?” Gabe challenged.

Oliver shrugged. “When we could get away. We had to take what we could get.”

Rising, Gabe used the side of his sandal to flatten the sand, then spread his towel in a sunny patch, and took off his shirt. Laying with his face at Oliver’s feet, he looked up at his boyfriend. “If you think this is nice, you should see Hawaii. My aunt took me when I was sixteen. It was crowded, but my God it was beautiful.”

Oliver’s eyes twinkled behind his shades as he leaned forward. “Sounds like a graduation trip might be in order.”

“It’s expensive,” Gabe warned.

“Well I’m loaded. Aren’t *you* lucky?” Oliver nudged Gabe with the side of his foot.

With a snort, Gabe rolled over and put one arm over his head, turning his face to the side. “Fine. Be a good boy for a whole year, and I’ll let you take me to Hawaii. You can ply me with fruity cocktails and romantic hikes to waterfalls.”

“Sounds like a dream,” Oliver said quietly. And the truth was, it did.



AS THE SUN REACHED MIDDAY, the pair went for a short swim, Oliver only testing the still-chilly waters with his ankles and toes before plopping himself in the sand as Gabe braved the more frigid waves. He came out a few minutes later, water glistening off his curls, his wide smile warming Oliver straight down to his toes.

They padded back to their umbrella, Gabe lying on his towel in the sun. Oliver sat on the sand near his boyfriend's head, and as Gabe let the warm rays dry him, Oliver dug into the sand.

"This is nice," Gabe said, reaching out a hand to trace along the skin of Oliver's bare hipbone. "We should make this a tradition."

"Like a yearly thing?" Oliver mused.

Gabe grinned, his eyes crinkling behind his shades. "Exactly. One year from now."

"In one year," Oliver said thoughtfully, "we'll be back on this beach, only I'll have finished my dissertation and...and we'll have shagged before we came out."

Gabe snickered, rolling over to lay his head on Oliver's thigh. The other man hissed a little at the cold curls pressing against his skin, but he tangled his fingers in the soggy locks and massaged Gabe's scalp a little. "I'll be done with school, and working a decent job, and not stuck in shitty customer service," Gabe said. "And have half my top-surgery money saved."

Oliver smiled softly, gently kneading his boyfriend's scalp. "More than. Because your sweet, loving boyfriend is going to give you an incredibly impressive birthday gift of money toward the fund."

Gabe turned onto his side, walking two, elegant fingers up and down Oliver's calf. "My boyfriend needs to stop spoiling me so much."

"Well, your boyfriend has to spend his ill-gotten money on something, doesn't he? If your boyfriend doesn't spend his money on expensive gifts, it'll be donated by his heinous mother to churchy causes which we know are firmly against top surgeries and other queer activities. And your boyfriend finds that idea detestable."

Gabe looked up, a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "Does he? Does he find it just absolutely disgusting?"

"Dreadful, even," Oliver said, his voice dropping a bit as he shifted down a little more. "Has your boyfriend ever told you how incredibly sexy your fingers are?"

"He has," Gabe said, his voice going just as low as Oliver's. "Are you inclined to agree?"

"I would," Oliver said slowly, shifting now so they were both sharing Gabe's towel, lying face-to-face, "but your boyfriend seems like the jealous type who would not appreciate even the most attractive of English blokes chatting you up."

"Mm, I suppose he is," Gabe said, taking those aforementioned elegant fingers and cupped them around Oliver's cheek. "Good thing I love him, you know?"

"Do you now?" Oliver's tone was full of reverence. They had said their I love yous before, but they kept them few and far between, so every time he heard it, it sent a thrill up and down his spine.

"I do. Very much." Gabe turned his face to the side so their lips met, pushing together gently, carefully, and Oliver breathed out hard through his nose.

"Good thing I love you just the same." Oliver cupped his hand around Gabe's hip and held him tight. "This has been a damn good day, you know."

"Well, I think so," Gabe said from behind a small laugh. He pressed his forehead against Oliver's and basked for

several, long minutes. “In three years,” Gabe said very quietly, his voice heard just above the waves, “we’re both going to be boring old career men. And after our traditional trip to the beach, you’re going to take me on some nerdy, professor-y vacation to London. And we’ll do all sorts of things boring old couples do. Like museums and galleries.”

“And we’ll have tea at outdoor cafés and laugh at all the punk kids on the street and completely forget when we were exactly like them.”

Gabe chuckled and pulled Oliver in for another kiss. “So, about that shag you mentioned.”

“The one a year from now?”

“Yes, that one.” Gabe paused to kiss him again. “I think we should probably head back to the apartment and practice. You know, just so we get it right.”

Oliver groaned, pulling Gabe down and slipped his tongue into his boyfriend’s mouth, drawing out a kiss, long and slow. “And maybe a naked shower?”

“Yeah,” Gabe breathed. “A naked shower sounds nice.”

Scrambling to his feet, Oliver shoved Gabe onto the sand as he hurried to fold the towel while his boyfriend giggled. Brushing himself off, Gabe finally rose to help clean up, and before long, they had supplies in the beach basket, the umbrella and chairs folded back into their carrying cases, and t-shirts wrapped around the backs of their necks.

They were just reaching the tide wall when Oliver’s phone began to buzz in his pocket, and he grumbled, shifting the basket to his other arm as he reached for it. Glancing at the screen, he saw his sibling’s name flashing, and he sighed as he answered.

“This had better be good. I’m in the middle of a beach day and I’m about to get a shag, so...”

“You need to come home.” There was something in Leo’s tone that was dark, almost terrified, and Oliver froze. “Right now. Ten minutes ago, actually.”

“What’s going on?”

“Just get home.” Leo paused for a long moment, then said, “Dad’s here. I can’t do this on my own. Please.”

There was a funny buzzing noise in his head, and it took several moments for Oliver to realize he’d dropped the basket. Gabe was grabbing his arm, trying to get his attention after picking their things back up. “Yeah, I...okay. Yes. I’ll be there quick as I can.”

“Good.” And with that, Leo disconnected the call.

Feeling numb and confused, Oliver blinked up at Gabe. “I...have to go. I have to go home.”

“What happened?” Gabe asked. He reached for the back of Oliver’s neck, and not thinking, Oliver wrenched away from his grasp. Reeling back like he’d been slapped, Gabe’s eyes went hard. “What’s happening?”

Oliver swallowed thickly. “I...my dad. My dad’s at mine. I need to...something must be wrong.” He was desperate to cling onto a coherent thought, desperate to keep his head straight.

“Alright,” Gabe said carefully. “Let’s get a cab, yeah? It’ll be faster than the bus, and there’s a bunch out on the main road right now.”

Oliver nodded, saying nothing as he followed Gabe past the tide wall. They pushed through the crowd walking along the boardwalk, out to the main road where there was a string of yellow cabs waiting for passengers all along the curb. Gabe hailed the first one, and they managed to squeeze themselves and their supplies into the back.

Oliver sat, mute and terrified as Gabe gave directions to the apartment, then handed over his card ten minutes later when they arrived. Oliver let his boyfriend take his hand, pulling him out, and they made their way up to the too-quiet living room where Oliver started to tremble.

Hesitant, Gabe reached out. This time when he touched Oliver’s neck, the other man crumbled. “I don’t know what it could be,” Oliver said through a chattering jaw, “but I can

count the number of times he's come to see me on one hand. So...so something must be wrong."

"Or maybe," Gabe said carefully, holding Oliver tight, "he's just decided it's time to see his children. Don't jump to conclusions before you know. You'll only hurt yourself." Gabe touched his cheek lightly. "I love you, Ollie. Go take a quick shower, get dressed, then get in the car and go see what it's about."

Oliver swallowed, then nodded and pulled himself away. He wanted to kiss Gabe hard, to drag him to the bedroom and make love to him slowly because right now, he was craving intimate contact. But he couldn't let himself fall apart. He couldn't let himself be weak. Not now.

Dragging himself down the hall, he slipped into the bathroom and turned on the shower as hot as he could stand it. Stepping under the stream, he was only half aware as he lathered his hair, using a handful of soap to wash away sand and sea. He finished quickly and grabbed a towel, scrubbing the stray drops of water from his skin as he went to Gabe's room.

Gabe was there, sitting on the bed up against the headboard, regarding Oliver with some caution. Neither of them said anything as Oliver began to rummage through the things he had there, growling after a moment when he realized all he had were casual jeans and shirts.

"Fuck. I don't...he can't..." He shoved his hands into his hair and tugged. "Fuck."

"What's the matter? He can't what?" Gabe pressed.

Scrubbing his eyes with the heels of his palms, Oliver let out a slow breath. "All I have are jeans. I need something proper."

"He won't mind. It's an impromptu visit and you're in college, Ollie. If he expects you to be dressed formally on a Saturday afternoon..."

Oliver let out a high, tense laugh. "I don't know what he expects. I haven't seen the bastard in two years. The last time I

saw him, he flew into for four hours, took me and Leo to a lunch, and was gone. I don't know...I don't..."

Gabe shuffled from the bed to the floor, then went through Oliver's things to pull out his nicest jeans, and a black, collared shirt. "This will do. You'll be alright."

With trembling fingers, Oliver took the clothes from his boyfriend and slipped them on. Forcing himself through a few, calming breaths, he took a comb to his hair, ordering it as neatly as he could, and refused to look in the mirror.

"You want me to go with you?" Gabe offered as Oliver sat to tug on his socks.

Looking up at Gabe, Oliver shook his head. "Probably not a good idea. I mean...he knows what I am. He bloody well knows I'm a queer and a degenerate, my mum made sure of that. But I'd rather not...I mean it's best if I..." He was frustrated with his inability to finish a single sentence.

"Alright. Just text me when you can. And you can come back here when it's over."

Oliver allowed Gabe to draw him into a soft embrace, pressing a kiss to Oliver's temple. "I know," Oliver whispered. "I'll keep you posted when I can. I promise."

Gabe drew away, then stood back as Oliver toed on his shoes, gathered his keys and phone, and together they walked to the door. It was like peeling a bandage stuck to stubborn hair, letting Gabe go, but Oliver forced himself to do it. Gabe was right. It could easily be nothing. It could be nothing more than his father deciding to have lunch again.

It could be some distant relative had passed.

It could be anything.

Pulling Gabe in for a quick kiss, he muttered, "I love you," before turning away and heading to the street. Leo was waiting, Leo was counting on him and for the first time, he was ready to be an adult.

The drive back to his house was simultaneously the longest and shortest drive he'd ever made. He pulled into his usual spot, turning off the engine, and pocketed his keys. A sleek, black car was parked along the curb, up the street from the house, and Oliver had to assume that was his dad.

His back was aching from the tension, and he fought the very real urge to just jump back in the car and go, leaving every memory of his family behind. But he couldn't just leave Leo on his own. Not like that.

Taking a breath, he straightened his shoulders and did his best not to slip into the exhausted, shattered man he'd been the last time he'd seen his father face-to-face. He'd come too far to give back into that fear.

The click of his shoes on the pavement was almost deafening as he approached the door. He pushed his palm against the chilly wood and paused. He was his own man now. He was brave. He wouldn't let anything destroy this.

Curling his fingers around the knob, he conjured the image of Gabe's smile in his mind to remind himself of what he had to go back to, then pushed it open. Soft voices met his ears, and he breathed. No one was shouting, no one was crying. He slipped his shoes off next to a few pairs near the door and padded around the corner into the living room.

Seeing his dad was always a little bit of a shock. Both Oliver and Leo had grown up with only one parent, one they

didn't resemble at all. Any family they'd ever seen had been on the English side, so they always felt like the odd ones out. They were the spitting image of him, really, aside from a sharper edge to their jaws and Oliver's lighter hair. But their heritage had always been obvious, and they'd only had each other to relate to.

His dad was in a suit and tie, his hair much shorter than either of the siblings wore theirs, but it was their face on that man. Ren Sasaki smiled at his eldest son in person for the first time in ten years. Rising, he gave Oliver a short nod, which Oliver returned without really thinking.

Leo was sitting in the armchair, calm but incredibly tense, and he looked at Oliver with a small grimace.

"Sorry it took me so long to get here," Oliver said swiftly.

Ren shook his head, reaching out to clasp his son's shoulder. "Leo said you were out with your...boyfriend."

Oliver felt his throat tighten as he sat down on the sofa, a cushion of space between himself and his father. "Ah yes. I was. And I don't mean to be rude, and not that I'm not pleased you're here, but is there a reason you're paying us a visit without even calling first?"

Ren let out a small laugh, his head shaking. "More blunt than you've ever been. How are you doing, Oliver?"

Oliver stared at him. "Well enough. Which you know, I'm sure."

Ren sighed carefully, shaking his head. "Alright, we'll skip the pleasantries. God only knows you don't owe me any of them as I've never been the most attentive father." Oliver winced, his gut clenching because the very last thing he wanted to do was open up a discussion about how his father was never much of one at all. "Your mother is ill."

Oliver blinked as the words hit him. "How ill?"

"Incredibly. I've only just been informed."

Oliver glanced over at Leo who was determinedly staring anywhere but at Oliver. Clearing his throat, the older sibling

nodded. “Alright. With what?”

“Early onset Alzheimer’s. It’s aggressive, advancing faster than most of the doctors expected it to. She’s got an in-home nurse with her, but she’ll either need to be sent to a hospice care center, or have someone home with her.” He gave his son a careful look, and it took Oliver a moment to realize what his father was saying.

“Hang on. Someone... as in me?” Oliver asked with a scoff. His scars began a violent, phantom itch and he squirmed a little.

“I’m only saying...”

“What?” Oliver barked, forgetting all sense of respect and propriety. “You’re saying what, exactly? That I should go back to that foul beast who tortured me for years? That I should forget what I went through because suddenly she’s ill and has no one?”

“Oliver,” Ren interrupted, his voice low and commanding. At the tone, Oliver went stone silent. “Sometimes we need to put the past behind us.”

“Easy for you to say,” Oliver said, his tone stiff. “You weren’t there to see what she’d done. You weren’t there to stop her. I’m not asking you to care after all this time, but I am telling you that I will not subject either of us to that woman ever again.” He looked at his sibling as he finished his thought, and Leo’s shoulders relaxed just a fraction.

Ren let out a small sigh, shaking his head. “She’s not long for the world, you know. She’s not...she doesn’t know much anymore. I’ve been to see her. She didn’t recognize me.”

Oliver bit back a retort, the desire to tell his father that she might not have recognized him anyway, had it not been for the fact that his children looked just like him. Married for nearly thirty years and he spent less than five of them living with his spouse. It made them less than strangers.

“Surely she can get better help than the bitter sons she spent years abusing,” Oliver said quietly.

“She has no one,” Ren said.

Oliver swallowed, then looked away. “She has only herself to blame for that.”

Ren gave him a very careful look. “She also has me. Had I been there...” He stopped and shook his head. “Someday in the future, we’ll sit down, and I’ll let you have a go at me for all my failings as a parent. For now, I thought... I thought you deserved to know about her, and to maybe decide for yourself what you felt is best.”

“And I expect you’re leaving after this? No chance *you* want to go and stay with your wife?” Oliver challenged.

“I can’t afford to take the time off,” Ren said, looking vaguely apologetic. “But I’m not far from here. You know you’re always welcome.”

“We’ll bear that in mind,” Oliver said with traces of bitterness. His insides were quaking, his mind desperate to have some space to process the fact that his mother—a woman he hated with every fiber of his being—was dying. And there was no stopping it.

“You’re not staying for tea?” Leo asked, speaking for the first time since Oliver had arrived.

Both Ren and Oliver stared at the younger sibling, Oliver with wide eyes. “Ah, no. Not today. But I meant what I said. I’m only in San Francisco. I’d be more than happy to hire a car or charter a flight for you. Just say the word.” Rising, Ren straightened his coat, then turned to Leo who had gotten up first.

The pair embraced lightly, a stiff, too-formal hug, but Ren looked happier than Oliver had ever seen him. It was enough to get him up from the sofa, and enough to step into his father’s waiting arms for his own.

“Will you?” Ren asked.

“Come and see you?” Oliver rubbed his face and sighed. “I suppose we might. If we can find the time.”

Leo offered to see Ren to the door, and the moment they were out of the room, Oliver sank back down. He rested his elbows on his knees, dropping his face into his palms, and

didn't move. Not even when he heard Leo come back into the room.

The sofa dipped as Leo sat, and after a minute, he said, "I guess I didn't have to call you back for that. Bit pointless, wasn't it?"

"Nah," Oliver said softly. "Wouldn't want you to process that all on your own. I...maybe I was being a bit harsh with him."

"No, Ollie. You were not. It was unfair of him to ask you to go back to that," Leo said firmly. "If you'd said yes, I would have stopped you."

Oliver laughed. "I'm sure you would have." He finally dropped his hands and looked at his sibling. "You don't want to go see her, do you?"

Leo's face was drawn and tense. "I don't...I don't know. Everything in me says no. Says she doesn't deserve it. But then I'm afraid I'll regret it if she dies without me going to see her one last time."

Oliver licked his lips in thought. "You know what we need right now?"

Leo looked at him, one perfectly sculpted brow lifted. "What?"

"A fucking drink."

Leo laughed, then rose from his chair and held his hand out to his sibling. "That is the best thing you've said to me in a long while."

Eleven

One drink turned into a two-day binge. It had been years since Oliver let himself go like that, and with good reason. He was not a nice drunk, or a particularly careful one. He forgot about checking in with Gabe, forgot about classes, research, or homework. He barely made it home in the wee hours of the early mornings, woke late, and the next night dragged an eager Leo out to club after club.

It wasn't until one in the morning the third day that Oliver bothered to remember he had a boyfriend who was probably worried about him. And it was only because he walked in on his sibling getting a blowjob in the bathroom by someone who had curly hair like Gabe.

He turned away from the bathroom, fumbling for his phone, but it had died hours before. The club no longer held any interest for him. What he wanted was the warm, comforting arms of his boyfriend, soft lips, and seeking hands all over his body. He was done with trying to drink away his pain. He wanted to be with the person he loved.

With a mission on his mind, he stumbled out of the bar and somehow managed to find his way across town to Gabe's building. The front doors were unlocked, and he stumbled up the stairs, stopping to nearly be sick all over the floor a few times, but eventually he made it to the landing.

Reaching the door, he leaned on the door frame and pounded on the wood over and over until the door flung open, and a bleary-eyed Gabriel appeared.

“Oliver? What the fuck? Do you have any idea what time it is?”

Oliver gave him a wolfish smile. “Shag o’clock?” He snickered at his own pun. “Shag my cock, more like.” He started to take a step inside, but Gabe put a hand out, pushing him back, and Oliver gaped at him. “What the bloody hell, Gabe? I haven’t seen you in ages. Haven’t you missed me?”

“You’re completely wasted,” Gabe said, his voice hoarse with sleep, “and you haven’t called or texted me in days.”

“But m’here now,” Oliver whined. He pushed against Gabe’s hand, but his boyfriend was unmoving.

“Look, go home and sleep it off. Call me in the morning if you bother to remember, and you can explain why you ghosted on me for three fucking days. I’m not doing this with you right now.”

“Bloody hell, have you always been such a nag?” Oliver grumbled. “Honestly I can think of a hundred better things you can do with your mouth than complain.” When Gabe stared at him, no expression, he snickered. “Suck my cock, for one.”

Gabe gave him a hard shove and he stumbled backward, toppling over and landing on his backside. “If you go home right now, I might find it in me to pretend this conversation never happened.” With that, without a second of ceremony, Gabriel slammed the door and Oliver heard the lock snick into place. Then the chain on the door.

From where he sat, Oliver stared disbelieving at the door, his head shaking. “I can’t believe...” He stopped when his head swam and his stomach lurched, and it was by some miracle he didn’t heave up the viciously bitter liquor he’d been consuming all night.

There was nothing to be done now. He knocked a few more times, but when Gabe didn’t come back, he muttered a few curses under his breath and stumbled back home. The door was unlocked, and Coco was nowhere to be found, so Oliver heaved himself upstairs and into his own bed.

It had stopped smelling like Gabriel, and now just contained the faint, ugly scent of alcohol-sweat and old cigarettes. His head was pounding, and he knew the morning was going to be painful, but at least while his head was occupied with the drink, he wasn't thinking of his mother.

Or if he was, at least he wasn't missing the mother she should have been.



COME MORNING, Oliver woke earlier than he had the last two days, full of hangover and regret. He hadn't been drunk enough to black out, which left him foggy memories of showing up at Gabriel's. The post-binge guilt was seeping into his bones as he dragged himself from the bed and into the shower. By the time he was clean and dressed, he was wallowing in self-hatred.

He had not only contributed to Leo's falling off the wagon in a spectacularly violent fashion, but he'd also alienated the one person who really wanted to be there for him. He couldn't even begin to wonder if he'd done irreparable damage to his relationship with Gabriel.

The last thing he needed now was to lose the person he loved.

With a sigh, Oliver passed by Leo's room, dismayed to see his sibling hadn't made it home that night. He could only hope the man Leo had been with in the bathroom had been kind enough to take care of him, but he didn't have it in him to worry much. Right now, he had some major groveling to do.

He found his way to the kitchen, grateful there was half a bottle of orange juice, and poured himself a glass as he plugged in his phone and pushed on Gabe's contact. It rang, and just when he was sure it would go to voicemail, a hesitant voice picked up.

"I hope you're sober."

“I am. And more sorry than I have ever been,” Oliver said quietly. “Any chance we could meet up?”

There was a long pause, then a quiet sigh. “I have to work until two. Then I have a meeting with my advisor. But I could see you after.”

“Come by mine?” Oliver offered, not wanting to invite himself into Gabe’s space until he was certain his boyfriend had forgiven him.

“I don’t know. Is Leo home?”

Oliver frowned. “Erm, no. He didn’t come back last night, but he probably will be by the time you’re finished.”

“Then no. Meet me at that little park by the café. We can talk there.”

Oliver felt like he was being punched in the gut, and he put a hand to his forehead to quell the sudden dizziness Gabe’s words caused. “Are you ending it with me? Is this, like, a break-up conversation?”

There was another long pause before Gabe answered. “I don’t know yet. We’ll talk later.”

Oliver opened his mouth to tell the other man he was sorry again, that he loved him, that he hadn’t meant it, but the line was dead. Swallowing against the lump in his throat, Oliver glanced at the clock and realized he had time to make it to a class, but there was no way he’d be able to concentrate.

Deciding he’d be better off going for a walk to clear his head, he grabbed his keys and left. The day was nice out, sunny without a hint of fog. There was a slight breeze coming from the direction of the shores, but he kept away from the water.

The tourist population was picking up slowly, the shops busier than they had been in weeks, and Oliver found himself browsing, grabbing a couple of trinkets he thought Gabe might like. He found a hat which reminded him of Leo, and a little gold necklace for Coco. He stopped by a little sidewalk café and had lunch, then by two, he was heading back to his place to wait.

The door was still locked, and as he went upstairs to his room, he poked his head into Leo's room to find it still bare. Hoping his sibling was alright, Oliver put his little gifts on his bed, then headed down for his phone.

A few texts waited. One from Leo asking if he was going out again tonight, two from Coco reminding him to leave his rent on the counter, and that she'd be home tonight so he had better have any mess picked up. And the last from Gabe, saying his lab group had been cancelled and he could meet at three.

Oliver glanced at the clock, then sent a hurried text back, letting Gabe know he'd be there. Slipping into the bathroom, he checked his appearance, then grabbed his phone and rushed out the door.

He wanted to get there early, to compose himself, to think of how to explain his mental state over the last few days. But how could he, when he didn't understand it himself? When his emotions were buried too deep and had been for too long that he wasn't sure up from down anymore.

But he had to try. He loved Gabriel far too much to let him go so easily.

He was slightly out of breath by the time he reached the park. He wanted to get there before Gabriel, to give himself a little more time to prepare his apology, but he saw his would-be boyfriend already sitting on a low bench under a tree. Gabe was dressed casually, in jogging bottoms and a tight t-shirt, and he was holding a couple of to-go coffee cups. He gave Oliver a very cautious smile as he approached, and tipped one of the cups up in greeting.

"Hey." Oliver sat, giving a full body's worth of space between them. When Gabe offered over the drink, Oliver took it, and immediately smelled a fragrant jasmine tea. He smiled just a little, sipping on the bitter, floral liquid. "Thanks."

"Thought you could use something easy on your stomach," Gabe said, clutching his own between his hands so tight, the paper began to bow.

“Yeah.” Oliver used his free hand to rub down his face, curving his fingers around the outside of his mouth down to his chin. “I, erm...I really am sorry. About last night. Or...this morning. Whatever. I was a complete twat.”

Gabe let out a small, tense laugh. “Yeah, you were.”

“I fucked up.”

“Yeah,” Gabe said, offering a slow nod, “you did. I don’t like being talked to like that. I am not your personal fuck toy.”

“That wasn’t...I didn’t...” Oliver cleared his throat, trying not to stumble over his words. “I love you, Gabriel. I have never thought of you that way, ever. I just...my head wasn’t right.”

“Were you high?”

Oliver blinked in surprise. “No. Christ, no I was just drunk. And stupid. And fucking sad, I think.”

Leaning back on the bench, Gabe stretched one arm along the edge, not touching Oliver, but closer than he had been. He sipped on his tea, then set it down on the ground and took a breath. “I need you to explain. Because the last time we parted, you and I were planning a trip to Hawaii, and you said you were going to text me later. Then I didn’t hear a thing until three days later when you showed up at my door at one thirty in the morning, drunk out of your mind, and meaner than you have ever been.”

Oliver felt his cheeks go white-hot with embarrassment, and he looked down at the ground between his feet. “My mum’s dying.” His voice went tight against his will, and he cleared his throat hard. “Early onset Alzheimer’s, or so my dad says. It’s aggressive, and she doesn’t have long. My father decided he should ask my sibling and me to go back to London to take care of her.”

Gabe swallowed, then nodded. “I see.”

Oliver rubbed at his scars through his shirt, still not looking up. “I was so angry. I couldn’t believe he had the bollocks to ask me to go there. To take care of *her*. To set aside what she’s done to me like somehow she deserves...” He felt

his voice rising and he stopped, trying to contain his emotions. “Like somehow she deserves more care than I ever did,” he finished in a quieter tone. “My father wasn’t pleased. Leo was relieved, of course. I think he was afraid I’d say yes and make him go back. I didn’t know what to do.”

“So, you attempted to drink yourself into oblivion?” Gabe asked, his voice just a little tense now. “You didn’t think to call me?”

“No! I hadn’t...” Oliver growled in frustration. “It wasn’t my intention to get fucking pissed, you know. I just thought a drink to unwind would help, and then everything sort of... went out of control.”

Gabe sighed. “Ollie, I’m sorry about your mom.”

This caused Oliver to look over sharply, almost surprised, and he saw the honest remorse on his boyfriend’s face. “There’s nothing to be sorry for. You know she deserves this.”

“I don’t know that. But I do know *you* don’t,” Gabe said very quietly. “You don’t deserve to feel obligated to care for a woman who had you tortured. One who never really loved you—or if she did, it was a toxic love. But you need to learn to deal with shit better. You can’t talk to me that way and then expect me to just forgive you.”

Oliver clutched his paper cup hard. “I know. I know I don’t deserve your forgiveness. But I am sorry, and I do love you very much.”

After a moment, Gabe moved closer, and Oliver tried not to let his eyes get hot or his throat tingle with tears that wanted to fall. A warm hand fell on Oliver’s thigh and squeezed. “I know you love me. And I love you. I want to be here for you, but you can’t...”

“No, I know,” Oliver interrupted in a rush, and finally turned to Gabe. “I won’t again. I swear.”

Gabe lifted his hand from Oliver’s thigh and cupped it around the side of his neck. “I’m going to hold you to that.”

Oliver let out a slightly wet laugh and set the tea down, shifting over so Gabe could put his arms around Oliver’s

middle. He nuzzled against Gabe's neck, breathing in his scent, and felt more comforted than he ever had in his life. "You can hold me to anything you want—and I don't mean that dirty. Well...not really."

Gabe laughed very softly. "Mm, right."

"I mean that I want to be held to a higher standard. I don't like behaving the way I did. It's not who I am. I just couldn't stand feeling the way I was feeling, and I didn't know how to deal with it."

Gabe's fingers moved up and down Oliver's spine, just the barest pressure. "I know, babe. And no one expects you to grin and bear it. Your mother was a fucking demon, Ollie, but she's still your mother, and you're going to be conflicted. It's okay to hurt."

Oliver swallowed back the tears and pushed his face harder into Gabe's neck. "Can we go back to yours, please? I...I need..." He stopped and cleared his throat, hoping Gabe understood what he wanted to say. "Something. I don't know. A hug, maybe?"

Gabe's free hand reached down and took one of Oliver's, squeezing his fingers. "Yeah. Of course we can."

Oliver allowed himself to be pulled up, and their fingers twinned together as they made their way down the street to Gabe's apartment. Once inside, Oliver was surrounded by the sights and smells of everything familiar he had been craving since he learned about his mother. The door shut swiftly, the sound echoing through the quiet room, and then hands were on him.

Gabe shoved him up against the door, his nose pressing into Oliver's cheek with purpose, his mouth curved into a smile as he pressed a soft kiss to Oliver's skin. "Missed you," he breathed.

It sent shivers up his spine, and Oliver quickly fisted his hands into the front of Gabe's shirt, tugging him close. "I missed you too. And I'm so sorry."

“I know you are,” Gabe said, speaking right up against his lips. He brought one hand up, tugging at Oliver’s hair, and carded his fingers through it as it fell in soft waves around his ears. “And I forgive you. So, moving on, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Oliver mumbled, then palmed both of Gabriel’s cheeks and pulled him in for a kiss. His tongue slipped inside Oliver’s mouth gently, needy but careful, and trying to speak how much he loved Gabriel without using his words.

Before long, Gabriel was tugging him back down the hall, into the bedroom. The bed was unmade, the window open letting in a faint breeze which promised an early summer heat. Oliver fell back, laughing a little as Gabe knelt between his thighs, going immediately for the fastening on his jeans.

Undone, Oliver lifted his hips so Gabe could remove the offending bit of clothing, letting it pile onto the floor. It was soon followed by Oliver’s shirt, then Gabe’s jogging bottoms, binder, and t-shirt. Skin to skin now, chest to chest, they kissed slow and languid.

Oliver felt himself harden against Gabe’s thigh which was pressed between his legs, and he shifted, grinding hard. “God. I want you so bad.”

“Me too,” Gabe breathed. He kissed Oliver again, fumbling for his nightstand where they were well stocked.

It wasn’t long before Oliver was kneeling between Gabe’s legs, his hand teasing Gabe’s dick gently. Gabe bucked beneath Oliver’s careful, pressing fingers, getting close to the edge as Oliver stroked him. “Would you,” Oliver said, a little breathless. He swallowed thickly. “Would you top?”

Gabe’s eyes went a little wide, but he nodded, biting his bottom lip between his teeth for a second. “Yes. You really want that?”

Oliver met his gaze with a fierce determination. “I do. I want you inside me.”

Oliver and Gabe had talked about it before—had both mentioned it was something they wanted to try. Gabe had a strap-on, and he’d fingered Oliver to orgasm more than once,

but they'd never quite got there. It seemed like a fitting way of coming back together.

Reluctantly letting Gabe up, Oliver wriggled out of his boxers and curled a hand around his cock, watching as his boyfriend retrieved the strap-on and slipped the loops around his thighs. The one he'd bought had a vibrator which rubbed right against Gabe's dick to bring him off, and Oliver's cock throbbed when he heard Gabe let out a soft moan.

"Need you," he said, trying to urge his boyfriend along.

Gabe looked up with a chuckle as he tightened the belt, then walked to the side of the bed and grabbed the lube. "Turn over for me, babe."

Oliver didn't need telling twice. He pulled one leg up to his chest as he rolled onto his side, and he let out a slow hiss as Gabe sank one lubed finger into his hole. It had been a while, so the burn was more intense than usual, especially after Gabe added a second finger, but he wanted it—he needed to feel claimed. He thrust back against Gabe's hand until he couldn't take it anymore, then turned his head, wordlessly begging for more.

Gabe didn't hesitate as he slicked up the silicone cock with another palmful of lube, then pushed Oliver to hands and knees before getting behind him. He curled one hand around Oliver's thigh, the other going up to his chest, fingers toying with his nipple. "Ready for me?" he breathed.

Oliver gave a choked moan, nodding his head fast and tightened his muscles as Gabe slid in with one, smooth thrust. They both let out a small cry. It felt like years since they'd been here, though it had only been days. But the distance Oliver had put between them spoke volumes and volumes, and he never wanted to experience that again.

"Uhg, fuck," Oliver muttered, lowering his forehead to the mattress. "Fuck."

"E-el...eloquent," Gabriel stuttered back against him as he picked up his rhythm. Oliver could feel the faint vibration

which was torturing Gabe's dick, and he thrust back a little harder.

Oliver couldn't help a strangled laugh as Gabe grunted, then moaned loudly, biting down on the back of Oliver's shoulder. His legs spread wider, taking Gabe in deeper. His mouth was open in a slight pant, right up against the crook of his elbow, and he began to cant his hips in time with the other man's.

"So...fucking...close," Gabe gasped.

Oliver gave only a grunt in reply as Gabe held him by one shoulder, speeding up his thrusts until they were erratic and hard. He heard Gabe come first, quivering and trembling above him. Then, a rush of liquid flooded from the tip of his dick as he careened over the edge, spurting on the sheets below him.

His head bowed forward, and he felt Gabe's breath brushing across the back of his neck as the aftershocks made his arms shake and shiver. After a moment, when it felt like his arms would give out, he bore down, and Gabe carefully pulled out.

Rolling onto his side, his hand snaked out, carefully brushing a few sweaty curls away from Gabe's forehead. "That was bloody fantastic."

Gabe let out a happy hum as he leaned into Oliver's touch just a little. "Yeah, it was. I hate fighting, but let's promise to make up this way every time."

Oliver chuckled and grabbed Gabe by the shoulder, drawing him close. "I can live with that. But let's not have too many rows, yeah? I prefer the sweet stuff."

Gabe let out the smallest laugh as he reached up, letting his long fingers draw down Oliver's cheek. "Look at you. Not a year ago, you hadn't even had a boyfriend before and just wanted to get your rocks off with quick, one-night stands. Now you like the sweet stuff."

"You've corrupted me with your evil ways and sexy body," Oliver murmured, pressing a line of kisses down Gabe's jaw.

“It’s criminal. You should be punished.”

“That right?” Gabe asked in a low voice. “How so?”

Grinning wickedly, Oliver kissed him long and slow. “Oh,” he said when he pulled away, “I bet I can come up with something.”

Twelve

The rest of May passed without any real incident. Leo managed to make it to most of his classes, and passed them all, even if the marks had only just scraped a high C. But it meant he wouldn't lose his place at the University, and he was doing his best to keep it together.

Coco moved out shortly after, which Oliver was sad to see her go, but watching her graduate was a moment of pride for him. She'd been offered a job at a company in Spain starting almost immediately, so the last week of May was spent with the four of them having a huge yard sale and packing what little she was going to take with her.

"You know," she said that evening over a massive pile of Chinese take-away boxes and several empty beer bottles, "this house is going to be awfully empty without me here."

"Like you ever were," Leo said, rolling his eyes from his spot where he was sprawled across the armchair. "What are we supposed to miss, exactly? The random stilettos left in the middle of the floor? Or when you'd use my toothbrush to unclog the drain?"

"Only when you cut your hair in the sink and then tried to wash it down, you asshole," she said, rolling her eyes.

Leo flipped her a V with his left hand, then reached for his beer, taking down the rest and slamming the empty bottle on the floor beside him. "Spain's going to be fantastic, you know. Good beaches, good people. Delicious food. You're going to have an amazing time and never want to come back."

“I certainly can’t wait,” she said, grinning. Her gaze flickered over to the sofa where Oliver was laying between Gabe’s legs, his head resting on his boyfriend’s chest. “Anyway, as I was saying about this place being all quiet and lonely.”

Oliver blinked at her. “What of it? I’m not keen on moving, and if you think I’m going to trust some stranger to move in...”

“Not a stranger,” she said pointedly.

Oliver followed her gaze to Gabriel’s face, and felt his face redden. “Oi, d’you mind? Isn’t that the boyfriend’s job to ask?”

“Just... isn’t your aunt coming back soon? Your shag pad’s about to get all... not sex-friendly,” she said with a shrug.

Gabe cleared his throat and his grip on Oliver went just a little tight. “I think Ollie’s right about the whole discussing it *not* with the person who’s about to pack her shit and go to Spain and leave us plebeians here with the dredges of American society.”

“You’ll get your chance to escape the Americans and inflict yourself on foreign land soon enough. Aren’t these two going to give you some European tour? Show you all the filthy alleyways and reasons why the English are so not cooler than Americans?”

“We so are,” Leo said lazily. “And our accents are much sexier.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Oliver said with a grin up at Gabe. “The California accent isn’t bad at all.”

“You’re just biased,” Gabe said lightly.

“Anyway, moving on,” Coco said, shrugging. “I will be writing, you know. And inviting you over to enjoy the nice Spanish sun. Now that you two have been at least a little acclimated to things other than foggy London, I think you could survive a week or so.”

“Just don’t expect us to tan,” Leo said, smiling at her.

“After three years knowing you both, I know there’s a better chance of snow on the beach at Christmas.”



A FEW HOURS later found Gabe and Oliver sinking into Oliver’s bed. Coco had left, visiting a few family members before she was off to Madrid, and Leo was out with a bunch of people from his group for a summer goodbye party.

It left the house quiet, and Gabe was already shrugging into a pair of Oliver’s pajamas before Oliver even asked if his boyfriend was staying. Smiling to himself, Oliver allowed himself a few minutes to think about what it would be like to share a place with his boyfriend. He certainly wouldn’t hate it, and they spent a lot of time together anyway.

They were only a few months away from their one-year anniversary, and that seemed like a reasonable amount of time to take the next step. But it hadn’t gone unnoticed how uncomfortable that idea made Gabe when Coco brought it up. It made him wonder if Gabe was having second thoughts, and he realized he wouldn’t be able to let it go until he talked to him about it.

As the pair settled in, Gabe’s head pillowed on Oliver’s shoulder with a warm arm around him, Oliver pressed a soft kiss to his boyfriend’s curls. “Hey love?”

“Mm?” Gabe turned slightly, pressing a kiss to the top of Oliver’s ribs.

“Sleepin’?”

Gabe let out a low, tired chuckle. “Not yet. Why?”

“I just...” Oliver took a breath. “What Coco said. Earlier.”

Gabe went a little tense in Oliver’s arms. “You really want to talk about this right now?”

“Don’t see why not,” Oliver pressed. He let Gabe back away, both of them shuffling up to pillows, and Gabe leaned on his side, propping his head up on his hand. “It’s not unreasonable to consider it.”

“No, it’s not,” Gabe agreed, but there was something in his eyes that didn’t align with his words.

“I mean, we’ve made it this long, yeah? And I like you. I spend enough time with you.”

Gabe let out a long, slow breath. “Is it so terrible that I like with what we’ve got going on right now?”

Oliver pursed his lips, trying not to feel the sting under his ribs. “No. But...are you not happy with me?”

“You know I am,” Gabe insisted. He reached one hand up, trailing it up and down Oliver’s sternum. “I love you.”

Oliver swallowed thickly, then asked the question which had been burning in his gut. “Is this because of what happened after my dad visited?” Gabe’s wince was all Oliver needed for conformation. “Bloody fucking Christ, Gabriel,” Oliver said, trying not to let his frustration seep into his tone. “I can’t possibly be more sorry, can’t possibly feel worse about it. But am I not allowed a mistake? Can I not be an arse once or twice in this relationship?”

Gabe shifted away slightly, his gaze hardening. “You can, and that’s not the point. I forgave you, and it’s not what happened that bothers me.”

“So, what is it? You don’t trust me?”

“Truthfully?” Gabe asked, and Oliver nodded. “No, I don’t. I mean, not entirely.”

Oliver reeled back like he’d been slapped, hurt rushing through his body like it never had before. “What have I done besides that one thing—in nearly a sodding year—that gives you reason not to trust me?”

Gabriel took a long breath, then eased himself up into a sitting position. Shifting to the side to better look at Oliver, he pressed his back to the wall, one leg cocked up and hugged to

his chest. “You still haven’t dealt with what your mother did to you when you were a kid, Ollie. You’ve stopped living for your sibling, and you’ve stopped denying yourself things you deserve. But you haven’t bothered to *deal* with it. And now your mom is dying.”

Feeling his throat go tight, Oliver sat up and leveled a stare at his boyfriend, not quite understanding his point. “And?”

“And... even if you could fly there right now and say all the things you’ve always wanted to say to her, things she deserves to hear, it won’t matter. She’s already too far gone. So, you’ll have to live the rest of your life without getting any real resolution. You haven’t been dealing, Oliver, and when she dies, I’m afraid of what’s going to happen to you. I’m afraid you’re going to spiral so far, you won’t be able to come back again.”

Oliver closed his eyes very slowly, his hands clenched into fists. He was fighting back memories, fighting back the phantom aches in his scars, and the haunting echoes of his screams as he begged to be let go. He swallowed, breathed, and counted to ten.

When he opened his eyes again, he spoke calmly. “I can’t pretend like I know what will happen when she goes. I’ve never lost a parent before, and God only knows how well I’ve dealt so far. And maybe you’re right—I might spiral, but to punish me before something actually happens...”

“This isn’t a punishment, Oliver,” Gabriel said in a rush. “I’m not saying never. I’m saying not right now. Just hearing she was sick sent you into a three-day drinking binge, and while I do love you—more than I’ve ever loved a partner before—I have to protect myself.”

“So, it’s a test. You want to see how I hold up under pressure?” Oliver’s tone was harsh, but he couldn’t help it. The pain in his chest from knowing Gabriel didn’t trust him was overwhelming.

Gabriel looked hurt, and Oliver felt a wave of guilt because he did sort of understand where his boyfriend was coming from. How could he not, when Gabe was only

speaking the truth. But he didn't feel like he was slipping. He had support, he had the only family he loved living under his roof, and he had someone who loved him to the ends of the earth. Someone he loved back.

So why should his life be thrown into ruins when that old bitch finally croaked?

"I understand why you don't get where I'm coming from," Gabe said after some silence. "You have no context. You've never dated before me, and...and I know my words hurt you. I'm not asking you to try to understand me, either. I'm just asking that you respect my decision. I don't want this to come between us, and we see each other so much anyway. Nothing has to change, Ollie. I'm not saying no. I'm not saying never. I'm just saying not right now."

"Not right now," Oliver repeated.

Gabe nodded, meeting Oliver's gaze firmly. "We can revisit the idea soon, okay? As soon as everything's over. Alright?"

Oliver forced himself to focus on his love for the other man, on his patience he had for Gabriel that he didn't have for anyone else. His head fell forward, then picked back up, and he realized he was nodding. "Alright. I can do that."

To his credit, Gabriel didn't insult Oliver by looking surprised that his boyfriend agreed. Instead, he gave Oliver a slow, sappy smile, and reached out a careful hand, pulling him close. "I love you so much."

Oliver bent his head down as they moved back beneath the covers and held each other. "Just promise you'll spend loads of nights here with me, in my bed. All snuggly."

Gabriel laughed quietly and kissed Oliver on the side of the neck. "Just like this?"

Oliver moved even closer and held on even tighter. "Yes, love. Just like this."

Thirteen

“**W**hat the hell are you doing?” came a vaguely annoyed voice from behind him.

Oliver looked over at his shoulder to where Leo was looming. His sibling was dressed to go out, wearing a calf-length black skirt and a flowing tunic-like shirt with a silver heart emblazoned across the chest. He was leaning over the counter, looking in a hand mirror as he spread thick, liquid eyeliner across his top lid.

“Going out?” Oliver asked in response to his sibling’s question.

“Not that it’s any of your business, but yes. Now answer mine, because that looks like you’re pricing flights to London.”

“I am. I want to surprise Gabe with a trip. It’s almost our anniversary and he’s never been.”

“Have you asked if he’s got time to go?” Leo asked, reaching into his makeup bag for a small tube of reddish lip gloss.

“Not yet. I’m not buying tickets until I talk to him first, I just wanted to price them out. Why are you so interested? You want to come along as well?” Oliver gave his sibling a wolfish grin.

With a grimace, Leo swiped his finger under his bottom lip to tidy up a few smears. “Not even a little bit.”

“Really?” Oliver spun in his chair, quirking a brow up.
“Why not? You like London.”

“Yes, but that old bitch is still alive, and I’ve no intention of setting foot in that city until she’s dead and buried.”

Oliver felt something funny twist in his gut at the thought of his mother being actually and truly dead, but he wasn’t about to examine that now. “Fine. Suit yourself. I’ll bring you some proper chocolate when we get back.”

Leo rolled his eyes as he adjusted the hem of his skirt, then grabbed a bottle of hairspray to set his fringe over one eye. That finished, he preened a bit, his head high, chin out. “Don’t wait up.”

“When do I ever?” Oliver muttered. His sibling was just reaching the door when Oliver’s phone rang, and the number on the screen startled him. “Hang on a second, Leo. It’s dad.”

At that, Leo froze, and a faint color rose along his cheekbones. He leaned on the back of the armchair as Oliver swiped the answer button and pushed the phone up against his ear harder than was necessary.

“Hello?”

“Oliver?”

“Yeah, er...dad.” It had always felt awkward addressing him by any familiar terms, but Oliver was far past calling the man, ‘father’.

“I’m sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but I just got word your mother passed. About fifteen minutes ago. The nurses phoned. She went in her sleep.” Ren’s voice was devoid of emotion, almost clinical, like he was speaking about a stranger.

Oliver said nothing for a long moment, shocked into a silence between them. It wasn’t as though he didn’t expect this. He’d been waiting to hear the news of her passing for months now. But hearing it was official, that she was gone, thought there would be some reaction. Maybe rage or repressed grief, but there was just... nothing. Just a faint numbness settling over his limbs.

“Right. So...right,” he said eventually, clearing his throat.

“I will, of course, be making the arrangements, and I expect both you and your sibling to turn up at the funeral.” Ren paused, and when Oliver didn’t respond, he went on. “We can discuss travel plans soon, but I won’t keep you now. I am sorry you never got to say goodbye.”

“Yes, well...” Oliver swallowed, not sure what to say, because he’d done it on purpose, and surely his father knew that. “Thanks for letting us know. Be in touch soon.” He didn’t wait for a goodbye before hanging up.

It was clear by the look on Leo’s face, he knew. “When?”

“Fifteen minutes ago.” Oliver set his phone down on the computer desk with a loud thunk. He startled from it, then cleared his throat again. “We’re expected at the funeral.”

“Fuck that. Fuck her,” Leo spat.

“And yet, we will be going,” Oliver said. “You said yourself you’d set foot there when she’s buried in the ground, and that’s going to happen.”

Leo’s jaw was tense, and he clenched his fists. “I’m not going to deal with this right now, Ollie. I’m going out. Don’t call me, alright?”

Oliver waved him off. “Wouldn’t dream of it, dear heart. Have a good night.”

Without another word, Leo spun and slammed the door on his way out. The silence was almost physical, pressing against him on all sides. The website was blinking at him, asking him if he wanted to pick a flight. It felt mocking, in a way. His mother had robbed him, yet again, of comfort and happiness. Any trip he made there with Gabriel would be tainted with her death.

Slamming the top of his laptop down, Oliver picked up his phone and went up the stairs. His room was dark, his window open to let in the cool breeze coming off the nearby water. He found himself thumbing through his messages, pausing over Gabriel’s name, and a text was at the tip of his fingers.

He had several options. Have Gabe come over and talk him through it. Put on Netflix, order some food that had the potential to clog two or three arteries, and deal with his emotions alone. Or he could say nothing and beg Gabe to join him out for a drink to forget.

The latter sounded better. Because he was not feeling equipped to let the news hit him just yet.

He tapped out the text.

Need you. Wanna go out for a drink tonight?

Gabe responded five minutes later, telling Oliver to meet him at their usual spot at eight. No arguments, no questions. With any luck, Gabriel's day in retail would have been so terrible, his mood would eclipse Oliver's, and he wouldn't notice anything was wrong.

But there were still two hours before Gabe was done, so Oliver decided to dress and get there a little early. A few extra drinks to get started never hurt anything.

Fourteen

He was far gone by the time Gabe arrived at the club. It hadn't been intentional, and he was doing his best to keep it together, but he'd never been the best with subtlety. His unfocused eyes spotted Gabe walking through the door, wearing jeans and a slightly baggy sweater which seemed hot for the evening, but it still sent shivers of want coursing up and down Oliver's spine.

Divesting himself of his current dance partner, Oliver followed Gabe to the bar, sliding his arms around Gabriel's waist and propping his chin on his boyfriend's shoulder. "Hey there, sexy beast. You come here often?"

"Only when my sexy British boyfriend invites me out. He's the jealous type too," Gabriel said with a grin, "so you should probably run before he sees you."

"Mm, I bet I could take him," Oliver said, pressing a wet kiss under Gabe's ear. Sliding to the side, but not totally taking his hands away from Gabe's waist, he looked him up and down. "You don't think it's a bit warm for that?"

"It's fucking sweltering," Gabe said with a shrug, shoving the sleeves up higher. "But my back was aching, and I had to take my binder off."

Oliver's face fell. "Ah. Well..." He stopped, letting his hand slip up the back of Gabe's sweater, and he drew his fingers up and down his spine. "How about we only stay for a few drinks, yeah? Then we can take this party elsewhere. A naked-friendly elsewhere."

Gabe quirked an eyebrow up at Oliver. “You seem like you might have already had a few.”

Oliver’s cheeks pinked a bit. “Well...maybe a few. Just a few. Couple. Few.”

Gabe tried to look stern, but his giggle left something to be desired. “Is there a reason you’re getting trashed on a Wednesday?”

“Not really,” Oliver said, pulling a face. He wasn’t drunk enough to ramble about his mother yet, which he considered a win. Especially since it felt like something was currently trying to claw its way out of his chest. “Maybe just feeling a bit reckless. And I want to dance.”

“I might have heat stroke if I go out there like this,” Gabriel said with a small sigh. His drink was delivered, and he took a long sip of the icy cocktail. “I don’t mind waiting if you want to dance a bit more, though.”

Oliver pouted a little, but tugged Gabriel closer. “I want you more than I want dancing. Just finish that and we can go.”

Gabriel hesitated but put his hand on Oliver’s cheek and stroked it with his thumb. “Maybe then you’ll tell me what has you upset?” When Oliver looked a little surprised, Gabriel laughed. “You’re a shitty liar, Ollie.”

Oliver’s pout increased, though was replaced with a quick grin when Gabriel leaned over to kiss him. “It’s nothing, really. Just...family shit. Don’t worry about it, okay?”

Gabriel’s face darkened a little at that. “Leo?”

“Nah. He’s off getting wanked with his new hot boyfriend. Just...I’d rather not talk about it, okay? I just want to get a little pissed and make out with my *old* hot boyfriend.”

“Boyfriend,” came a scoff from right behind Gabriel, and Oliver’s eyes snapped up to a couple of guys he’d seen around on campus. The fraternity types, bleached hair, collared shirts, identical grins showing they were both mean and plastered.

“Are you two going to fuck off, or are we about to have a problem?” Oliver replied, ignoring Gabe’s sharp head shake.

The taller one laughed, pushing forward against Gabe a little. “Just think it’s funny that you’d call a dyke your boyfriend. I mean, look at those tits.”

Oliver felt rage well up in him, mingled with the swirling emotions of his mother’s death, and his mouth moved before he could even properly think. “I will fucking destroy you!” he screamed, launching himself at the two men. Gabe caught him by the shoulder, holding him back. “You transphobic pieces of shit!”

They were laughing, and Gabe looked furious. “Don’t do this,” Gabe hissed in his ear. “Let it go.”

“Let it go?” Oliver shouted, pushing Gabe back. “Didn’t you hear what they said? Jesus Christ, Gabriel...”

“I’m not going to make a fucking scene here in a bar,” Gabe said, his tone furious. “And I don’t need you to fight my battles for me. I just wanted a drink and a chance to unwind. I’m not fucking fighting some shithead cis-boys.”

Oliver was still breathing heavy, but the two men had moved on to the end of the bar, leaning over to talk to one of the bartenders. He was trying to catch his breath, but he was too drunk and too close to the edge to just let it go.

“You want to go home?”

Gabe looked immensely relieved when Oliver slapped a couple of twenties on the bar and started away. Instead of going for the door, though, Oliver took what was left in his glass and flung it at the two men, catching them right in the face with the dredges of his cocktail. Wearing a grin of self-satisfaction, he opened his arms as an invitation to fight.

“What the fuck you gonna do about it, mate?”

No one had a chance to find out. Security arrived to escort Oliver out of the bar, and Gabe came out a moment later, looking furious and embarrassed. He didn’t say anything, though he had Oliver by the wrist, and they were heading down the street in the opposite direction to Gabe’s.

“What the fuck,” Gabe asked as they rounded a corner and came to a stop, “were you thinking? You just got thrown out of

a bar.”

Oliver shoved him off, looking furious. “You wanna just roll over and let those fucking douchebags misgender you, that’s your choice, Gabe. But I’m not going to just sit there and...”

“You don’t get to decide when I’m offended,” Gabriel cut in, taking a step back from his boyfriend. “You don’t get to decide when it’s too much. I don’t enjoy it. It doesn’t make me fucking feel good that my breasts invalidate my gender to garbage like that. But it’s not your place.”

Oliver wanted to listen. He truly did, but his mind was going too fast, and the pain was racing up his spine, consuming him from the inside. “Well fuck you then, Gabriel. I try to stand up for you and *I’m* the bad guy?”

“Yes,” Gabriel said. “You are. You’re no better than they are if you’re not going to respect my choices.”

Oliver froze, blinking rapidly. The stress of the evening, the adrenaline now plummeting, sent his stomach into a violent spin. Before he could answer, he was grabbing the nearest wall, and his stomach unleashed a torrent of shots and beer onto the ground.

Oliver’s entire body trembled as his gut purged everything he’d had that night, the smell of partially digested alcohol making him feel even sicker. He dry-heaved when his stomach was empty, and as he started to rise, he realized he was sobbing. Refusing to turn, he gripped the wall, side-stepping the mess he’d made, and pressed his forehead to the cool bricks.

“You should get home,” Gabe said, his tone a little kinder than it had just been. “Whatever’s happened...”

“My mum died,” Oliver blurted miserably. He let out a choked laugh, still refusing to turn around, even when he felt a sudden, warm hand on the small of his back. He pushed his head harder against the bricks until his skin started to sting and it felt like his skull would crack. The pain brought him down a little, and his breath came out, shaking and thick with tears.

“My dad rang earlier, just before Leo went out. She died. I have to...I’m off to London for the funeral.”

“When?” Gabe asked, his voice almost a whisper.

“Dunno. I’ll get the details soon, I expect.” He took in another breath and grimaced at the taste of vomit still in his throat. “I’m really fucking sorry, Gabriel. I don’t know why I’m like this. I don’t know why I can’t just be a fucking decent boyfriend. Clearly you were right all along, you know. Not to trust me.”

“Ollie,” Gabriel said, his tone almost heart broken. “You know I love you.”

Barking an angry laugh, Oliver finally turned his head, looking at Gabriel’s stricken expression. “But love’s not quite enough. You made that pretty clear. Isn’t going to cure me, is it? Not going to erase the scars or somehow turn back the clock and make that bitch not...not...” He stopped when his stomach heaved again, but nothing came out.

Gabe stood there a moment, looking helpless before he reached out, pulling Oliver away from the wall. “You need to shower, and brush your teeth, and get in bed.”

Oliver stumbled but let himself lean on Gabe as they made the trek back to his house. Luckily the night was cool, the breeze coming from the direction of the ocean soothing to his sweaty brow and aching limbs.

“You’re not going to stay with me, are you?” Oliver asked quietly, just as they reached his driveway.

There was a long pause before Gabriel answered. “No. I’m not. I don’t want to see you until after you get back from London.”

Had words been able to cause physical wounds equal to the pain he felt from that, Oliver was sure he’d end up bleeding out right there on the pavement. But it wasn’t like he didn’t understand. It was only fair. It was only what he deserved. He hadn’t been able to hold up his end of the bargain for more than a handful of days. He’d promised Gabriel he’d never cross a line with him again, and then he’d

done it. He could count the hours of how long it had taken before he fucked up once more.

Swallowing, he didn't reply, but he allowed Gabriel to get him to his front door. He fumbled for his keys, and didn't look back as he stepped in. He didn't want a messy goodbye. He didn't want to cry in front of Gabriel right then. He didn't have the stomach for it.

If he was going to survive the next few weeks of going back to the place which had only ever caused him pain, he couldn't let himself give in to weakness. Not while there was still hope. Gabriel hadn't said forever. He just said for now.

For now.

That was something Oliver could live with.

Oliver had been away from London long enough to forget that the summers could get hot. The moisture in the air from the unforgiving Atlantic sea combined with the summer heat made the days oppressive and uncomfortable. The flat they'd grown up in had no air conditioning, and the windows offered very little relief, even when every single one sat wide open. The siblings were profoundly grateful for the suite their father booked, and even more so that they'd have to spend very little time in the Chelsea flat.

The funeral was to take place at their mother's church—an ancient cathedral with the same echoing walls, marble statues, and stained glass that littered the city. It was the same church Oliver had been tied up and dragged through to a back door where he was loaded into a car and whisked out of the city to be purged of his demons.

It wasn't the same vicar, of course. At Oliver's tender age of seventeen, the vicar who spent his days rambling about demons and Lucifer was already reaching the end of his years. This one was younger, almost fit. *A waste of a perfectly good, shaggable man*, Oliver thought. He had a pretty mouth and wondering eyes, and if Oliver had been in a very different place in his life, he'd probably attempt to seduce him.

But what was the point, now?

Death was supposed to leave the living miserable, and he certainly was. His mother's wrath hadn't ended with her life.

Not when it was destroying Oliver from the inside and taking away what little support he had.

He only had himself to blame, really, but it felt so much better hating her for it.

A chilled glass pressed against his knuckles, and Oliver looked up to see his sibling handing him a glass of whiskey. There was a lime mashed amongst the ice, just the way he liked it, and he gave his sibling a grateful smile as he took it, tipping back a long swallow.

“Text off dad. He’ll be here in an hour, and we’ve got to go to the viewing at the church.”

Oliver felt his stomach roil hard. He clamped his jaw together, praying to a God he never believed in that he could just keep it together, just for a little while. He took another sip, then sat back against the chair, glancing out at the London skyline which was beginning to cloud over.

It was funny how the skies in the movies were always dreary and dark the day of funerals. He never really thought about it before, but maybe it was fitting the universe would mourn the loss of a life—even someone like his mother. *Someone ought to*, he thought. Because apart from the vicious, acidic anger sitting in his gut, he felt very little emotion at all.

Leo strolled over to the sofa across from the chair and sat, and it was then Oliver realized his sibling was wearing a black dress. It wasn’t tight, off the shoulders a bit, long sleeves, the skirt hanging down well past the knees. He assumed it was Leo’s last fuck you to their mother, and he appreciated him all the more for it.

Oliver wasn’t as brave.

“You hear from Gabe at all?” Leo asked after a few moments of silence. It was profoundly obvious Oliver and Gabe were on the rocks, but Leo didn’t bother to ask after Gabe until now.

“Text off him this morning telling me I could ring him if I needed to.” Oliver didn’t mention it was in response to a series of drunk texts and subsequent apologies from the night before.

Most of them had been innocuous—he missed him, wished he was back home, was sorry for the things he’d done. A few bordered on pathetic, begging Gabe not to leave him, and Gabe was gracious enough to let those slide.

“You two on the outs, then?” Leo asked, swirling his drink around his glass.

Oliver rubbed his face, leaning his head back with a long-suffering sigh. “I don’t know what the fuck we are right now. I made a complete fucking arse of myself the last time we went out. We’re...taking some time.”

“Ah, the kiss of death to every relationship. How well I know it.” Leo pressed the side of the glass to his temple. “Whatever, you know. I mean...it happens.”

Not to me, Oliver thought. And it was true, because Gabe had been his first, and letting Gabe go would be like carving out one of his own organs. But what else was he supposed to do? He had no idea how to make a relationship work. He was a hopeless case, and he knew it. He wasn’t going to stop trying, but it was almost funny how he could see the end just along the horizon.

He was two more glasses of whiskey into his drinking binge when the door to the suite opened, and Ren walked through the door. He looked well put together, of course, in his expensive suit and short-clipped hair. His shoes made a faint tapping on the tiled floor as he approached the siblings, a somber look on his face.

“The car’s waiting downstairs. Please tell me you’re not drunk.”

“Not drunk enough,” Oliver said, easing himself to his feet. “Proper drunk, *Otōsan*,” he sneered.

Ren blinked in surprise, then scowled. “Please don’t make a scene, Oliver.”

Barking a laugh, Oliver sauntered over to the table and set his drink down. Hard. He ran his fingers through his fringe, making sure it fell into place, then gave his father his most winning smile. “If you’re worried I’m going to embarrass you

—don't be. I'm here for propriety's sake, and the sooner I can get the bloody *fuck* out of this city, the better.”

Ren looked over at Leo whose face remained passive. His eyes raked down Leo's dress, but instead of ordering him to change, he merely let out a weary sigh and beckoned them along.

It was a small triumph, Oliver supposed. He walked close to his sibling, elbows touching, grounding him in the moment which he desperately needed. Leo seemed to realize it and kept close to him as they headed for the sleek black car parked right out front.

Ren took the front seat, letting his two children have the back, and no one spoke a word as they pulled onto the main road. London traffic was still as bad as Oliver remembered it, the car nearly at a stand-still, and had a sudden vision of himself bolting from the car and taking the tube somewhere—anywhere that wasn't here. It would be too easy. They were moving at a crawling pace, and the door handle was right there.

A hand on his thigh stopped his train of thought, and he looked over at his sibling who was staring at him with a knowing expression. “It'll be over soon,” Leo muttered.

Oliver felt his throat constrict, eyes burning with tears because Leo might not have suffered the same, but he knew. He knew like no one else did. “Yeah. I'm...I'm alright.”

Leo barked a low laugh in the back of his throat. “You're about as alright as I am.”

Oliver rewarded him with a smile, which was returned, though strained. They didn't say anything more as they approached the church, and the car pulled around to the side where the vicar was waiting at the side door.

The viewing wasn't for another hour, meaning the immediate family would have some time alone with the body before the public was let in. Their mother hadn't been a very popular woman, not even in her social circle. The name Alice Mary Worthington Sasaki didn't command a lot of compassion

or respect in her community, and very few were there to grieve her passing.

But people would show up. People who respected her husband, and distant relatives who only showed their faces at weddings and funerals. Oliver assumed he'd have a few cousins there, maybe even a few old friends from school, but no one he cared about seeing in particular.

Really, he just wanted to go home. He wanted his little beachside condo with his sibling upstairs and his boyfriend in his bed. He wanted warm arms and comforting kisses, and to forget this had ever happened. He wanted to erase her, to burn her out of himself with the violence she used to try and burn out his demons.

He would have no such luck, though. The estate in Chelsea was left to him, his father having long since abandoned London. He would have to deal with it at some point, he knew, along with any other unfinished business she'd left behind. He would have to perform the role of functioning adult, prepare the house for sale, and take care of any final debt.

Oliver had known all along that's why his father insisted he show up here. He wanted proof his son was worthy to be called son by him. If only Oliver truly cared, really. If only he had a reason to.

Climbing out of the car, Oliver stuck by Leo as they made their way to the vicar who looked slightly taken aback by the sight of the siblings. Oliver had to assume he looked about as well as he felt, and he knew everyone would be looking twice at Leo's attire. But he had never been prouder of his sibling, and he found himself standing up a little straighter as his father made the introductions.

"Ah, here are my boys," Ren was saying as the pair approached.

Oliver bit down on his tongue with the urge to correct his father when calling Leo a *boy*, but he knew that was Leo's choice to fight that battle. His sibling, it seemed, didn't want to bother. It made Oliver's stomach twist that he'd gone so

wrong with Gabriel at the bar, especially when respect was so easy.

He shook his head mentally, knowing this was not the time to relive that moment. Instead, he stuck out his hand. “Good to see you.”

The vicar didn’t seem to look directly at him, shaking Oliver’s hand, then Leo’s with only a hint of trepidation and a second glance at the dress. The pressing rain had them all hurrying inside shortly, however, which Oliver was grateful for. The longer they stood around and made pleasantries, the longer the day would drag.

He wanted nothing more than to see his mother’s body put in the ground and buried under six feet of dirt. She could lay there for eternity, and he wouldn’t find it in him to care that she was dead and rotting away. Maybe she was in her own heaven, or maybe she’d found her way to the hell she so loved to threaten him with.

Maybe, he thought with a wry grin as they walked down a dimly lit corridor to the viewing room, he would see her there one day.

The vicar opened the door, the hinges giving an ancient squeak, and he stepped in first. The parlor was very low light, the heavy scent of both flowers and perfume coming from somewhere which Oliver assumed was to mask the smell of either death, or chemicals used to embalm the body.

The place had a slightly homey feel to it, which surprised him. It reeked of old Anglican rituals, but the chairs were soft, and there were small tables laden with tissue. Her casket sat against the far wall, the lid propped half open, and he could just make out the stark white profile of her face. From where he was standing, she didn’t look real. Nothing like the hateful woman who had spit venom at him as he and Leo took their things and left for good.

Now, she was a wax statue. A ghost of herself, now in more ways than one. They’d put make-up on her, which startled him. He could see a dusting of blush across the one visible cheek, and her lips were rouged. Her hair was powder

white, and he didn't know if it had happened naturally in the time he and Leo were gone, or if it was a side-effect of being dead.

Either way, the whole thing was starting to make him dizzy. The room felt hot suddenly. Too hot, and he tugged at his collar until Leo's hand gripped his wrist and pulled it down. "You need to get out of here?"

Oliver swallowed, his throat painfully dry, and he couldn't help but look over again. Insane ideas began swirling around his head. What if he just started screaming? What if he rushed the casket and tipped her body onto the ground? What if he fell to his knees and started to cry, begging her God to let her come back just long enough to tell her what she'd done to him—what a monster she'd created?

What if he took a knife to her dead skin? What would it look like? He doubted she'd still bleed.

Not like he had, anyway.

He forced himself to think of how Leo's fingers felt on his wrist, the tight grip almost painful, but necessary. "I think I need a bloody drink, but no chance of that now, is there?"

Leo looked pained, then reached into his pocket and pushed something hard plastic into his hand. A pill bottle. "It's opiates," Leo said under his breath, glancing over at their father who was deep in conversation about what to expect with the funeral proceedings. "Mikey gave them to me before we left. They're not that strong, but just...take one."

Oliver swallowed thickly again, then turned away and popped the cap as quietly as he could. He tipped one white, round pill into the palm of his hand, and dry swallowed it. It went down harsh and painful, sticking to his throat and leaving him with a vicious, bitter taste. But he got it down eventually and shoved the pill bottle back at Leo.

"Thanks."

Leo gave him a slow, careful look, but didn't say anything as he slipped the bottle back into his pocket, and then glanced

back up at the front of the room. The vicar and their father had finished talking, and they were beckoning them over now.

“We’ve come early so the pair of you can pay your respects before other guests show up,” the vicar said. “Only family is allowed for the private viewing, but you’ll be expected to greet them here, as well as during the funeral.”

Oliver felt bile rising into his throat at the thought of all those insincere condolences. He doubted anyone really knew what she’d been capable of, what she’d done. He doubted anyone would see him as anything more than a grieving son.

He desperately wished the pill would kick in soon, before anyone arrived.

“...fine on our own. If you’d like to give us a few moments,” Leo was saying.

Oliver almost laughed when he realized his baby sibling was filling his role. He was taking charge and commanding the situation, and Oliver felt like a complete failure. Hadn’t his job always been to protect Leo from these things? To shield him from unnecessary unpleasantness?

His hands were trembling now, but his father and the vicar actually agreed and moments later, they were in the room alone. Their mother’s dead body was still there, in the casket like a dare, begging Oliver to defile her in some way—as she had done to him so many years ago.

Leo dragged him to a chair and sat him down, holding him tight by the shoulder. “Don’t.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Oliver replied, his tone sharp but shaking.

“It’s written all over your face. You’re lucky our father doesn’t know you better. Just let it be. She’s not there. That’s a fucking corpse, Ollie.”

His throat went tight again, and he cleared it, daring to look over at the casket. “I know. I hate myself for not coming earlier. Even if she hadn’t been able to recognize me, at least she would have been alive.”

“And you would have what?” Leo asked with a scoff. “Hit her? Burned her? Attempted to exorcize the demons of old age and bigotry from her bones? Even if she was alive and coherent right now, it wouldn’t have made a difference.”

Oliver glanced up at his sibling, staring at the pale smear of gold shadow across his eyelids, at the soft pink gloss along his bottom lip. He had moved on, embraced who he was with a fullness Oliver knew he could never achieve, and it made him feel proud. But left a taste as bitter as the pill he’d swallowed.

“I don’t want to be here,” he said, acutely aware he sounded like a petulant child. “I want to get the fuck out of here and go home.”

“I know.” Leo finally moved his hand away, grabbing one of the nearby chairs and pulling it close to his sibling. “I’m going straight back after this. Dad’s out of his fucking mind if he thinks I’m going to stay on for any reason.”

Oliver looked over at him sharply. “Did he ask you to?”

“He hinted at it.” Leo rubbed his face carefully, not disturbing his make-up. “He’s not thrilled with my marks, thinks I ought to come back here for a proper education. Funny how he wants to blame the American universities for it instead of me.”

“He’s never paid any real attention,” Oliver said with a shrug. He glanced down at his hands clasped between his knees, and he noticed they weren’t trembling anymore. His head started to feel a little floaty, and a smile flickered across his mouth. “I think that pill is kicking in.”

Leo looked at him sideways, a small smirk playing at the corners of his lips. “Good. Just... don’t start giggling during the funeral.”

Oliver snorted, shaking his head. “Fuck you, Leo.” Leaning his head back, he closed his eyes, and it was easier now to pretend they weren’t in the room with her dead body. “I fucked up with Gabriel, you know. Probably worse than I ever have.”

“How?”

Oliver cracked open one eye. “Some fucking twats at the pub were calling him a dyke. He came out without his binder, and he was pretty uncomfortable. I lost it. He asked me to let it go, but I didn’t. I made a scene and got kicked out. Then I shouted at him for not standing up for himself.”

“Did he punch you?”

Oliver snorted. “No, he didn’t.”

There was a long pause before Leo answered. “I’d have punched you in the face, but that’s just me.”

“I think I was too pissed for him to feel comfortable getting violent. I vomited all over my shoes straight after,” Oliver said with a laugh. “He walked me home and told me he didn’t want to see me until after the funeral. He thinks I can’t keep it together, and he thinks I’m going to spiral now that the bitch is dead.” He ran his hand down his face hard enough to make his nose sting and eyes water. “He’s probably right, you know.”

Leo gave him a long, hard stare. “I know,” he eventually admitted. “You only know it because you’re fucking high. Tomorrow you’ll sober up and all your repressing shit will happen again. You need a goddamn therapist.”

Oliver laughed, this time the sound booming off the walls and he realized he just didn’t give a shit who heard him. “You’re probably right, but I’m a bloody coward. I don’t want to relive all of that.”

“Who would?” Leo asked. “And there’s no guarantee it won’t make it worse. But if you don’t try, Gabe’s never going to forgive you.”

“It’s probably already too late for us anyway,” Oliver said. “Which is the worst, you know? Because I fucking love him like I have never loved anything before. When it’s officially over, he’s gonna rip my bloody heart out and leave me with nothing more than a gaping cavity in the middle of my chest.”

Leo lifted his brow, then shook his head. “Your heart is on your left, under your ribs. Not the center of your chest.”

“Thank you for that, Doctor-Professor Sasaki,” Oliver said, but he was smiling now. With a sigh, he looked at the clock and realized their relatives would be arriving any minute. He rose, feeling a little floaty and his limbs heavy, but he knew he’d be able to manage it now. Offering a hand to his sibling, Leo hoisted himself up and they took turns making sure their suits were righted and hair in place.

“You ready for this?” Leo asked. “All the cheek kissing and I’m so sorry for your loss?”

“Yeah, I’ve got this. I’ll pretend it was about that goldfish you fed Oreos and beer to last year,” Oliver said, smirking just a little. “I was pretty sad about that damned fish.”

Leo chuckled. “Bloody good funeral, that. I never meant to be a fish-killer, you know.”

“It’s what happens when you get stoned and try to take care of pets, you stupid fuck.” Oliver reached out, grabbing his sibling by the back of the neck, and yanked him close. He pressed their foreheads together, and he took in a huge breath. “I fucking love you, Leo. And not just because I’m wankered on that pill you gave me. I couldn’t do this without you. Not this, and not the last three years.”

Leo let Oliver hold him in place for a moment, then carefully pulled away, but kept a tight grip on his sibling’s wrist. “I love you too. I don’t know why sometimes. But I do, and it’ll be over soon.”

Oliver sighed as the door opened, and a pale face of a random cousin poked in. He put on his best mourning expression, nodding for her, and the siblings took their spot a few feet from the casket. More family arrived shortly after, and the tears began. Dry lips pressed to their cheeks, insincere hugs, and they bore it with the weight as only the children of an abuser could do.

A careful smile, a nod of the head, and a quiet, “Thank you,” whispered into the void.

“**C**ould have gone worse,” Leo said, his voice only a little slurred. They managed to escape the suite the next afternoon, finding a quiet local where only a handful of people were drinking and watching a recorded rugby match on the muted TV above the bar.

Oliver had his hands wrapped around a glass of whiskey, a couple of black straws jammed into the pulp of a lime, and he was watching the amber liquid go hazy with the fruit juice. “Mm? What did you say?”

Leo laughed, taking a pull from his gin and tonic. “I said it could have gone worse, the funeral. Weird to see people from school though.”

Oliver snorted, his head shaking back and forth. He was still a little off from the pill Leo had given him the day before, but not nearly as giddy and numb as he had been. The viewing had gone as planned, Oliver occupied enough with family members he hadn’t seen in decades, so he wasn’t thinking much about his mother’s body.

The funeral itself lasted as long as any proper Anglican funeral did. The vicar did a decent job of making his mother sound like she had once been a decent human being. Oliver was spared from making any big speeches by his father reading a passage from the Bible—nothing Oliver recognized, but then again, he’d spent years blocking out those lessons.

The drive to the cemetery was long, but they had an escort through the streets, and in a haze, Oliver watched his mother’s

casket lowered into the ground. He expected some great storm to unleash itself on everyone who stood around, watching the morbid procession of events, but the most they got was a gentle summer mist, and a heavy fog settling around the area.

By the time it was all over, Oliver was too tired, too sober, and inches away from punching the next person who gave insincere condolences.

A few people had attempted to make small talk. Mostly people he barely recognized from school, and a handful of people from his teenager years whom he figured had only come to see how the Sasaki siblings had fared all these years in the States.

The worst was Mitchel Teague, one of the boys from school he'd had a little tryst with on the football pitch. He could very clearly remember the feeling of Mitchel's cock down his throat, and seeing him there with a glint in his eyes, his wife on his arm, Oliver nearly lost it. It had taken everything in his power not to laugh until he cried, and then cry because *God* did he miss Gabriel right then.

He knew coming back to London was going to be ugly for him, but he had no idea how bad it would feel until that moment when Mitchel met his eyes and gave him a wink.

"I just can't believe we ever hung round with stupid fucks like that," Oliver said after a little while. He drank half the contents of his glass in one go, then swiped the back of his hand across his mouth. His phone was in his pocket, pressing hard against his thigh, almost begging him to send a text to Gabriel. He was trying though, to give Gabriel and himself space, to work things out on his own so he could be better. He wanted to be better, to stay in love and deserve to be loved back.

"That Mitchel though," Leo said, waggling his eyebrows, "he looked like he was gagging for it. I bet he'd have let you have another go at him."

Oliver pulled a face, smacking his sibling on the arm. "That's disgusting. It was disgusting the first time round. You'd think I'd go again?"

“Nah,” Leo said, giving him a sharp grin. “Just thought it was funny. Bet he’s thought of you with every wank since the night you sucked him off.”

“I didn’t need to know that. I didn’t need to *ever* think about that.” Oliver downed the rest of his drink and slid off the stool. “I’m going out for a smoke. Order me another, yeah?”

Leo merely tipped his glass at his sibling as Oliver made a semi-steady path through the pub tables and out the door. He walked a few paces away from the front of the building, slipping against the bricks behind a massive bin, and fumbled in his pocket for his smokes. He lit one, taking a huge drag, and relished in the burn. His lungs were aching, and all he really wanted was a warm bed. *His* warm bed.

When he reached into his pocket for his phone, he knew it was a bad idea. It was probably too late to call Gabriel, but he was thumbing through his contacts anyway, and he was pushing the button even though his brain was screaming for him to stop.

It rang and rang. Just when he thought he might luck out, that the Universe was saving him from embarrassing himself, a sleep-thick voice picked up. “Ollie?”

Just the sound of his boyfriend made him go weak in the knees, and he had to push himself against the wall for support. “Hey. Sorry, it’s probably really late there, yeah?”

“Yeah, but...you alright?”

Oliver let out a laugh far more bitter than he intended, and he pressed the heel of his palm to his forehead. “If I said yes, would you believe me?”

“No,” Gabe said, sounding a little more awake now. He snorted a laugh and sighed. “Are you, though?”

“No, but I’m not as bad as I could be.” He leaned his head back against the wall and took another long drag, speaking through the thick smoke in his lungs. “Some bloke I sucked off at my old school showed up to the funeral. With his wife, no less, to pay his respects to the bitch.”

Gabe was silent for a long moment. “Ah. Must have been awkward.”

“It was. A two glasses of whiskey kind of awkward. Leo’s ordering me a third right now. We’re at some shite pub in fucking Chelsea surrounded by drunk men watching a rugby match, and I haven’t eaten since yesterday before the funeral. It’s my own, personal little hell. And I fucking miss you.”

“I miss you too.”

The admission startled Oliver, who hadn’t expected Gabriel to say anything along those lines. “Fuck, Gabe. I can’t wait to come home. This place is a nightmare, you know. My family’s all here, none of them know anything, and they expect us to be sad and I just...I don’t have it in me to wear that face.”

“I know. I...” Gabriel cleared his throat. “I feel like a serious asshole for letting you go off to London like that. I knew what you were going to be facing, and I’m not happy about what happened between us, but I do love you. I shouldn’t have...”

“No,” Oliver said quickly, standing forward a little too fast. His head swam, and he clenched his eyes shut. “No, you had every right. I was a fucking twat about everything, and you deserved so much better. Nothing you said about me was wrong, love. I haven’t dealt with it. I’m still not dealing with it, and I don’t know how to even begin.”

Gabriel let out a very small sigh. “Ollie, let’s not do this now. We can talk about this when you get back, alright? Just know that I love you, and I miss you so much. I can’t wait to see you when you get home.”

He hadn’t cried before this. Not for Gabriel, not for his mother. Nothing more than a handful of tears—if that. But it was all over now. The floodgates burst and he turned toward the wall, his chest heaving with sobs. He pressed the phone to his ear so hard it hurt, and he tried to speak, but he couldn’t get his throat to work. His knees felt suspiciously weak, and before he realized it, he was kneeling down with one hand pressed hard against the brick to anchor himself.

His eyes were burning with the tears, his cheeks aching, throat so tense he wasn't sure he'd ever be able to speak again. Gabriel was still on the line, murmuring comforting words, and every part of Oliver's body begged to be home, in his bed, with Gabe's arms around him.

He couldn't cope, and he couldn't carry on like this. He attempted to compose himself, taking in a few breaths, willing the tears to just hold on a few more days. He swiped under his nose with the back of his hand, sniffing loudly into the alley.

After a second, he let out a choked laugh and shook his head. "Lost it a bit there, didn't I?"

"Have you cried at all before now?" Gabriel asked.

Oliver snorted. "For *her*? Fuck, no. And that wasn't really for her, anyway." His voice was thick with tears, but he eased himself back to his feet and tried to shove away the feeling that he was still suffocating under his grief. "I don't want to fuck up, anymore, but I don't know how to stop."

"You'll work it out," Gabriel said, his voice far off and a bit sleepy now. "You will. You're a good person, Oliver. You're worthy of love. You just have to figure yourself out."

Closing his eyes, he tried not to let the words hurt so much. "I know," he breathed. "Anyway, I'm being a selfish git here, keeping you on and I know it's bloody late. So...can I text you later?"

Gabriel yawned for a second, and there was a slight smile in his voice when he spoke. "Of course you can. How about call me tomorrow at some reasonable hour. We'll talk. I'll tell you what kind of awesome souvenir I want you to bring home for me."

In spite of the raging ache in his chest, Oliver let out a small laugh. "Yeah, alright. It'll be something brilliant and super British, I promise."

"You're a dream. Anyway, I'm falling asleep on you, so I'm going to go. But if you need me, just call, okay? No hesitations."

“I promise,” Oliver said, but knew deep down he wouldn’t do this again. Not until he’d worked himself out a little more, got himself closer to the man Gabriel deserved. “Sleep well, love.”

“Mm, I will. Goodnight.”

The line went dead, and Oliver spent another few minutes mopping up his face and ignoring passers-by giving him curious looks. When he felt like he could stand on his own two feet again, he strolled back into the pub, and didn’t quite meet Leo’s gaze.

He noticed there was no fresh drink on the bar, however, and glared. “Where’s my whiskey?”

“Dad rang. He’s sending a car, so I closed out the tab.” Leo grabbed Oliver by the chin, forcing him to look up. “Did Gabriel break up with you?”

“No.” Oliver took a long breath. “Told me he loved me and missed me and...” His throat went tight again, and he cleared it, yanking his chin away from his sibling’s fingers. “Anyway, so what are we doing?”

Leo stared for a while before answering. “Lunch. He’s having us brought to lunch with the lawyers. Talking about the estate. I want to go fucking home, Ollie.”

“I know. And we will. Very soon.” He felt as miserable as his sibling sounded, but what else could he do? They had to be adults about this whole thing. No more running from their problems.

Seventeen

Stepping off the plane was the greatest feeling of relief Oliver had ever experienced in his life. Tension he hadn't realized he'd been holding in his neck and shoulders started to relax, and he was struck by a profound exhaustion.

Leo opted to drive, immediately on the phone the second they got in the car, and Oliver was dozing by the time they made it back to the house. The smell of home, the feeling of being away from everything else, struck Oliver hard. He had a difficult time keeping it together as he threw his suitcases against the wall and went to the fridge for a bottle of water.

"I'm heading out," Leo said as Oliver cracked the top and took a long drink. "You need anything?"

Oliver's eyebrows shot up. "How the hell can you go out? We just got off a bloody international flight. I want to die right now."

"I can't sit still. Mikey's on his way to get me." Leo gave him a casual shrug, and though Oliver felt a pang of worry in his gut, he couldn't bring himself to care much.

"Just be careful. I'm going to sleep for ten hours, then maybe go see Gabe."

"Don't forget dad wants all those forms faxed over to him," Leo said as he leaned over to the hall mirror and applied some red lipstick. "They seemed vaguely important."

Doing his best not to sigh, Oliver nodded and watched as Leo flounced out the door. He knew on some level he should be more concerned about his sibling's behavior, but he wasn't

going to police how Leo was coping. As it was, it was taking everything in him not to have Gabe over immediately. But he knew he needed space, to center his head, and part of that was being on his own for a little while.

Being home was a small comfort, and as he slipped into his room, he found one of Gabe's discarded t-shirts. He threw all of his clothes onto the floor, slipped the t-shirt over his head, and crawled into his bed. It was only moments before sleep claimed him, but it happened in his safe space, surrounded by the smells of home, and the person he loved most in the world.



HE WOKE with the sun the next morning and felt a little disoriented by too many hours of being in his bed. He checked his phone to make sure he hadn't slept more than a day, then rushed to empty his painfully full bladder. He scrubbed his teeth, ignoring his stomach which was begging for food, and shuffled back into his room for his phone. The one thing he wanted more than anything in the world now, was to call his boyfriend.

There was a good chance Gabe was working, but when his boyfriend picked up, he let out a huge sigh of relief. "Hey, you."

"Hi," Gabe said. "When did you get in?"

"Last night. Leo buggered off, and I crashed. Just got up actually, and was hoping you hadn't eaten yet?"

There was a small pause, then Gabe laughed. "How about brunch? We could go to that little place you love by the beach?"

"You're a bloody dream," Oliver breathed into the phone. "Meet you there in twenty?"

"Already on my way."

Oliver left off the *I love you*, in spite of wanting to shout it to any and everyone who might hear it. Instead, he scrambled for some jeans, brushing his hair out of his face, hating that he still smelled like a stale airplane. He kept on Gabe's shirt, figuring his boyfriend wouldn't mind so much, and slipped his feet into some sandals.

It was only a fifteen-minute walk, and he was almost bouncing in excitement when he spotted Gabe's head of shaggy, dark curls waiting amongst the Sunday brunch crowd. His feet picked up their pace without him consciously aware of it, and before long he was tugging Gabe into a soft kiss.

"Mm, God I have been thinking about that all week."

Gabe reached up, cupping Oliver's cheek, his dark eyes drinking him in. "Me too. I've already put our names in, so it shouldn't be long."

Oliver was more than content to stand there with his hands at Gabe's waist, just holding him. Gabe didn't protest when Oliver tucked his face into his neck, and they ignored any strange looks they got as they basked in each other.

"How was the flight back?" Gabe asked after a little while.

"Terrible," Oliver groaned against Gabe's warm skin. "It felt twice as long as the one going over, and Leo was anxious the entire time. Got no sleep, and I've so much paperwork to get sorted. My mum left everything in my name."

Gabe brushed his hand down Oliver's back. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. You want some help with it?"

Oliver hummed his appreciation at the offer and the nickname. "Nah, it's fine. Most of it's just signatures, then I have to fax it over to my dad. His lawyers will make sure everything's sorted. It's just not something I especially feel like doing."

Gabe chuckled. "You know, you were only there a few days and I'm pretty sure your accent is stronger."

"Oh, sod off," Oliver groaned, and Gabe laughed harder. "Just you wait til I drag you there, you shit. You'll be talking like a Londoner in no time."

“You really think it’s enough to outweigh my born-in, hysterical American patriotism?”

“You’re an idiot,” Oliver said, raising his head for a kiss.

A few moments later, they were called to their table, lucking out and getting one right at the window. Oliver immediately ordered a couple of mimosas and the pair filled their plates before relaxing back in their chairs, the soft, early summer sun filtering across the table.

“So,” Gabe said as he nibbled on some of the fruit, “how are you really?”

Oliver wanted to lie, because the last thing he wanted to do was drudge up all the emotions his mother’s funeral had brought to the surface, but he’d made himself a promise to do better. To be better. “I think I’m alright, but I’m not sure. I think right now the relief of being home is eclipsing anything else. I was barely together during the whole thing. I had to take a couple of Leo’s sedatives.”

Gabe pulled a face. “Not sure I like the sound of that.”

“I was careful, they weren’t anything illegal,” Oliver muttered, poking at his smoked salmon. “Mikey gave him something to take in case it became too much.”

Gabe, who knew Mikey from their group at the university, licked his lips and looked away. “I’ve just heard a few things about Mikey lately, and if Leo’s getting really close to him, you might want to be careful.”

Oliver narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean?”

Gabe let out a breath. “Maybe we should talk about this later. You just got in and...”

“No,” Oliver said firmly. “Being an adult means dealing with this shit when I need to. So, what exactly did you hear?”

“That he’s been into more than just easy shit lately,” Gabe said, shrugging one shoulder. “More than just pills or weed.”

Oliver licked his lips. “Like...”

“Like hard stuff,” Gabe said, his voice tense. “Heroin, mostly.”

“Shit.” Oliver let out a heavy breath. “You know for sure?”

“No,” Gabe said in a rush. “I don’t know for sure, which is why I didn’t say anything before now. But if he’s giving your sibling opiates casually, you might want to just...check. Or keep an eye out.”

Oliver swallowed thickly. “I’m trying not to police him.”

“I know,” Gabe said. “And you’ve done really well there, and he *is* getting better. But I just...worry.”

Oliver felt torn between worry and anger. Why would Gabe bring this up now? And based off a *rumor*? But he reminded himself forcefully that Gabe was only concerned. He was friends with Leo, and he loved Oliver. He wasn’t trying to stir up anything unpleasant just for the hell of it.

“I’ll talk to him about it,” Oliver said eventually.

Gabe looked sad as he picked up his coffee and took a long drink. “I am sorry. I shouldn’t have said.”

“Nah,” Oliver replied loftily. “It’s really fine. I’ll sort it, but for now I just want to enjoy this.”

Gabe’s face softened and he smiled across the table. “That sounds ideal to me. After this I think we should go back to your place and have a day in.”

“You don’t work?” Oliver asked.

Gabe’s grin widened. “I might have called out sick. You know, so we can take advantage of your homecoming.”

Oliver licked his lips. “Now that’s what I wanted to hear.”



THEY BARELY MADE it in the door before Gabriel was on him, pinning him to the wall, devouring his mouth. Oliver groaned,

letting his hands run up the back of Gabe's shirt, clutching hard against the warm skin just above his jeans. A knee snaked in between Oliver's legs, pushing up with slight pressure, making him crave more. His hips bucked forward as he sought some sort of friction.

"Uhg...fuck," he murmured against Gabe's mouth.

Gabe grinned against his lips, then pulled back to draw his tongue along the hot skin just under his ear. "Missed you, want you, fuck...Ollie," he groaned, then took Oliver's earlobe in between his teeth. "Bedroom?"

"Can you make it that far?" Oliver joked, even as he grabbed the front of Gabe's shirt and began dragging him toward the stairs.

They took them two at a time, stumbling, pausing to kiss in the hallway, then in the bedroom doorway. Gabriel took the lead after that, slamming the door hard, the sound ringing through the room as he bodily shoved Oliver toward the bed.

Oliver fell down hard, his head lolling back as Gabriel straddled him, pinning his hands lightly above his head. He leaned his head down to kiss him again, long and slow, and so needy. "Did you miss me?"

"Fuck," Oliver said, bucking his hips. "You know I did. Missed you so much. I love you so much."

He was babbling, but it didn't matter as Gabriel began to rummage through the nightstand, refusing to take any more time for foreplay. "Get my jeans off," he ordered.

As Gabe searched for what he needed, Oliver's fingers made quick work of his button and zipper, getting his jeans down around his hips. Shifting, they broke apart just long enough to get rid of clothes, and Gabriel came away naked and triumphant with a condom and small bottle of lube in his hands.

Oliver took that opportunity to flip their positions, kneeling between Gabe's legs. He took the lube first, squirting a bit on his thumb before rubbing it up Gabriel's slit, giving him firm pressure along his dick.

Gabriel's head rolled back, then his eyes squeezed shut as he let out a long moan. "Fuck. Want you in me. Please."

Oliver didn't need telling twice. His fingers, trembling with need, ripped at the condom wrapping and quickly slipped it on. He slathered himself with a bit of the lube before grasping Gabe by the backs of the knees and sliding in.

He was hot and so wet, pulsing with need as Oliver picked up a furious rhythm. Gabe had his head thrown back, his cheeks flushed, breath coming in heavy pants as Oliver pushed in and out of him.

"Good. Yes, so good," he babbled.

Gabe tightened around him, canting his hips to match Oliver's rhythm. "Harder," he begged.

Oliver complied instantly, his fingers holding on in a bruising grip. He felt himself getting closer, cresting, and he quickly reached between them to gently rub at Gabe's dick, urging him on. "Come on, love. Come for me. Please."

Seconds later he felt the pulsing, the hot rush of fluid as Gabe let out an obscene groan and came. Hard. His mouth opened, eyes clenched shut, and it was all Oliver needed to give in to his own orgasm. He bent forward, breathing out Gabe's name as he spilled hard.

When it was over, he fell to the side, his weak hands carefully removing the condom and depositing it into his small bin. He swiped at his forehead, beads of sweat falling down around his temples and ears, and he chanced a very small smile at his boyfriend who looked barely capable of speech.

"Wow," Gabe said after a few moments. "That was..."

"Mm, yeah," Oliver replied. He had just enough strength to turn on his side, and he fumbled for Gabe's fingers. "God, I missed you. And not just for the fantastic shagging."

Gabe laughed quietly as he shifted over, one arm going over his breasts, the other reaching out to cup Oliver's cheek. "I missed you too. I...I know you're not all the way better. I know it's not just going to end. But I'm going to try to be better. To be there for you."

Oliver let himself close his eyes, basking in the heady smell of their love-making as Gabe ran gentle fingers up and down his sternum. “You’ve been wonderful, you know. This entire time. And I promise I’m going to do better by you. I just... bloody hell, I love you so much.”

Gabe turned to him fully, pressing against his side and tilting his head for a long kiss. “I love you too, you know. The day I dragged you and your sibling back to mine, I didn’t see this coming. I thought you were kind of an ass.”

Oliver’s eyes widened, and he let out a startled laugh. “Did you now? Right bastard, was I?”

“Maybe not a total bastard, but you were a snob. I thought you were just one of those party assholes, and it turns out you’ve got this amazing, giant heart.” Gabe pressed his palm over the left side of Oliver’s chest. “I’ve never met anyone who loves as fiercely as you do, Ollie.”

Oliver closed his eyes again, pressing their foreheads together. “Well, you know I learnt from the best, right? I was a mess before you came along. And I’m not totally better, but I want to be.”

“That’s what matters, you know,” Gabe whispered.

Oliver kissed him on the tip of his nose. “I hope so, love. I really do.”

Eighteen

Things settled in over the next few weeks, but Oliver stopped feeling better. Reuniting with Gabe only did so much for his mood, and before long he found himself sullen, sinking into uncomfortable thoughts about his mother. His nightmares started up again, and he stopped sleeping over at Gabe's to avoid awkward questions.

Twice now Gabe mentioned therapy, and Oliver felt sick at the thought of having to relive what his mother did to him. What purpose would it serve to recount in gory detail being kidnapped and tortured until his demons were purged? To relive the horror which forced him to exist the rest of his life covered in scars?

The matter was dropped, but both of them noticed the shift. He was drinking more, and he hadn't made a single sentence of progress on his dissertation. When Gabe mentioned it, Oliver walked away and didn't talk to him for the rest of the night.

Just before the start of the fall term, Leo sent a text to Oliver, telling him about a house party right off campus. Oliver and Gabe were having a quiet night in, bingeing on movies and junk food, but Oliver perked up at the mention.

"You want to go?" he asked, almost bouncing on the sofa cushion.

Gabe frowned, worrying his bottom lip for a moment. "Are you sure you're up for going out and drinking? What if you get wasted?"

Oliver scoffed. “I’m not a bloody child, you know. I’m old enough to manage a few drinks and conversation.”

Gabe’s cheeks flushed, and just when Oliver was sure he was going to be turned down, he shrugged. “You know what, why not? The semester starts soon and we might as well go out and do something fun before we’re drowning in work, right?”

Oliver’s grin threatened to split his face, and he kissed him. “Brilliant. I really need to just unwind.”

Scrambling from the sofa, he rushed upstairs to change into jeans and a t-shirt. Gabe hadn’t bothered to change out of his own lounge clothes, but he wasn’t fussed as they headed out to the address Leo texted.

It was only a few minutes away from the campus, and they decided to walk, avoiding the hell that was parking in the area. They could hear the party from a block away, and Oliver started to feel his adrenaline ramping up. He wanted to drink, to forget about his looming depression or Gabe’s refusal still to move in with him. He wanted to forget he’d come from a shitty, broken home with a bitch of a mother and an absentee father. He wanted to forget that he’d done it all for his sibling, and all for what?

It felt like nothing.

He let go of Gabe’s hand as they approached the door, and as it swung open, he was met with a wave of weed and cigarette smoke. He breathed it in, smiling a little, even when Gabe was grimacing, and they pushed through a throng of people.

They moved straight for the kitchen where someone immediately shoved a joint into his face. Ignoring a pointed look from Gabe, he took a long drag, blowing the smoke out in a long stream before reaching for a stack of red, plastic cups. He was just grabbing the gin when Gabe’s hand curled around his wrist.

“Don’t go too crazy.”

Oliver sneered, yanking his hand away. “It’s a party, Gabriel. I want to get wankered, and I don’t want you breathing down my neck about it. I’ve been bloody good this whole summer.”

Gabe flinched, pulling away. “Fine. I’m going to find a beer and see if Leo’s around.”

Oliver waved him off, throwing a few ice cubes into the cup, then poured straight gin. He drank it all to the delight of a few guys standing nearby who shouted for him to do it again.

He refilled it.

They hooted, shoving their glasses into the air, and he repeated the gesture until the bottle was half gone, and he could feel the alcohol and weed seeping into his limbs.

The feeling was light, heady and wonderful. He found another joint, taking several hits before making his way down a crowded hallway, toward the source of the music. Bypassing the main living room, he found what looked like a game room with a pool table set up, another bar which had a long board, shot glasses glued to the top. A tall guy with a massive, dark beard was pouring whiskey into each one.

There was a line of people screaming, waiting for their shots, and Oliver threw his head back and laughed as the tall man tipped the board up, and all six people took their shots at once.

“Fucking brilliant,” he declared.

“I’d recognize that cute accent anywhere,” came a voice from his right.

Oliver spun, and he came face to face with a tall blonde, with wide shoulders, wearing a pink polo shirt. He had a wide smile, almost familiar, and Oliver tried to place it. “Er...?”

“You don’t remember me, do you?” he asked, his shining teeth poking over his bottom lip with his smile. “We were having a really nice night until some twitchy little fella pulled you into the bathroom. I never saw you again.”

Oliver’s eyes went wide. “Oh shit! Texas?”

He laughed. “Close enough. You do remember?”

“Couldn’t forget that cute southern drawl,” Oliver said, putting his arm on a fit bicep. “Fancy seeing you here, though.”

“I get around. I’ve seen you on campus a few times, but never had the balls to come and say hi.”

“But you’ve got them now, do you?” Oliver asked, leaning in slightly. His head was spinning, and the man’s smile was almost blinding.

“Well, I’ve had some liquid courage.”

Oliver laughed, unable to stop himself. “Fuck. What do you say you and I go out for a smoke, yeah? This place is crowded.” He couldn’t remember his name, but Texas would do for now. Looping their arms together, Oliver headed for the back door which led to a massive yard, complete with a huge gazebo, pool, and canopy.

Several people were milling around, smoking, drinking, a few people in the pool fully clothed and attempting a game of volleyball over a battered net. There were cups everywhere, discarded bottles, and in the back of his mind, Oliver wondered what a bitch it would be to handle the clean-up.

Then he smirked because it wouldn’t be his job, and he found himself leaning into Texas as he fished smokes out of his pocket. He grabbed two, sticking them both in his mouth and lighting them before handing one off.

“Well,” he said, blowing out a cloud of smoke, “it is really interesting running into you again.”

Texas grinned at him. “Isn’t it? Almost like it was fated. I was really disappointed I didn’t get to take you home that night.”

“Yeah?” Oliver asked with a wink. He stopped, Gabe flashing behind his eyelids as he blinked, but he wasn’t doing anything wrong. Harmless flirting, really. There was nothing wrong with escaping Gabe’s constant hovering and implications that he was fucked up. He wasn’t fucked up, he

was upset. “I think we would have had a good time, don’t you?”

“Mm, I like to think I’m pretty good.” Texas winked and took a step closer. “Here’s to second chances?”

Oliver leaned over, then glanced to the side and saw Gabe’s image in the window. He blinked, then pulled back. *What the fuck am I doing*, he thought, shaking his head. Was he seriously thinking about cheating on Gabe? With some random dude from a bar?

This was not him. He loved Gabe, and Gabe was only concerned about him. Rightfully so, it seemed, because Oliver was rock hard in his jeans, and in spite of all the love he felt for Gabriel, he still wanted to grab Texas by the collar and fuck him stupid behind the gazebo.

Texas was leaning in though, and grabbing him by the shirt. Just before their lips met, Oliver put his hands up and stopped him. “Look I...I really shouldn’t. I have a boyfriend.”

Texas’s eyes went wide. “What?”

“Yeah. One I love quite a bit, and he’s here. I...it’s been a rough couple of months. I shouldn’t have even come out here with you. Fuck, mate, I don’t even remember your name.”

“Ah.” Texas rubbed his face. “But you want me, right?”

Oliver nodded. “Yeah, I really fucking want you. Like, one more drink and I’m pretty sure all my morals would be right out the shitting window. So, I...I’m gonna go. I’m sorry.”

Texas let out a sigh, but he nodded. “Yeah, alright. Lucky guy, though. The one who captured your heart.”

Oliver swallowed because he was pretty damn sure Gabe wasn’t the lucky one. He was the poor bastard who had happened upon someone completely broken. Someone who should have loved Gabe as much as he deserved, but he couldn’t bring himself to be that man. No matter how much he wanted to. No matter how hard he tried, or how often he promised.

Feeling close to heaving up all the liquor he'd imbibed, Oliver threw his smoke into the bushes, and stepped back in the house. He moved through the rooms, finally locating Gabe in the living room, sat in an armchair with a beer in his hands. He gave Oliver a glance, but his expression was unreadable.

Guilt hit him like a physical blow, and the sudden realization of what he needed to do nearly brought him to his knees. He couldn't keep putting Gabe through this. He couldn't keep setting him up, only to destroy every vow he ever made.

He was ruined. Or at the very least, he wasn't well enough to be with someone who deserved better. Everything he was, wasn't fair to this gorgeous man, and he knew he had to do it. End it. Pull it off like a stubborn bandage, and just...go.

He licked his lips and held his hand out. "You wanna get out of here? I don't think this was such a good idea."

Gabe opened his mouth to reply as he grabbed Oliver's hand, but before he could get a word out, someone rushed into the room. Oliver didn't recognize him, but Gabe seemed to, and his face went dark. "Hey Troy, what's up?"

Troy. Tall, dark haired, and looking incredibly concerned as he rubbed the back of his head. "Man, I think Leo really fucked up this time."

Oliver felt cold fear wash over him. "What?"

"He's...fuck man, I think he OD'd. Mikey gave him some shit and he went upstairs, and I can't get him to wake up."

All thoughts of relationships and love, even Gabe, were gone as he grabbed Troy by the sleeve. "Show me where he is right now."

They rushed through the house, up a narrow set of stairs, and down a hallway. Troy opened a door, revealing a dimly lit bedroom covered in band posters and a bed in the corner. Leo was on his back, his face turned toward the wall. His skin was ashen, eyes closed, and one arm flopped to the side. He had no shirt on, and Oliver couldn't miss the track marks in the crook of his elbow even if he wanted to.

“Fuck,” Oliver breathed. “He’s been shooting up?”

Troy frowned. “Yeah, man. For the last few months. He’s been alright with it up to now. Pretty chill, weekend shit, you know? For parties. But lately he’s been hitting me and Mikey up for more. I don’t know what Mikey gave him, but fuck...”

Oliver broke out of his shock, rushing to Leo’s side, and his fingers felt for a pulse. It was there, fluttering and weak, but thrumming against the pads of his fingers. “Gabe,” Oliver said very slowly, “you need to call an ambulance.”

“Aw man, come on,” Troy said, sounding panicked. “Can’t you just take him home and let him sleep it off?”

Oliver turned heated eyes on Troy, feeling murderous. “If he dies, I will come after you. I hope you realize this. You and Mikey both. Gabe, call the fucking ambulance. Troy, you have maybe three minutes to get everyone out.”

Troy looked furious but scared as he scrambled from the room. Gabe was already on the call, and Oliver could hear Troy’s raised voice trying to get everyone’s attention.

Feeling like he might vomit, Oliver turned his attention back to Leo who was stone still. His breathing was shallow, his chest struggling, and he had the sick realization that this might be it. Leo actually might not pull out of this one.

Standing up a bit, he leaned over his sibling to check the other arm and saw the deep bruises there. “Fuck,” he hissed, palming Leo’s cheek. It was all he could do to not slap him over and over. “What the fuck were you thinking, you stupid bastard?”

For his part, Gabe was calm and collected. He handled the call expertly, checking his pulse, his breathing. Within five minutes, three paramedics were racing up the stairs of the near-empty house. Oliver was shuffled to the side, Gabe taking his hand as they took over and assessed the situation.

“Definitely an overdose,” the tallest one said. He turned to the couple. “Do you know how much he took?”

Oliver shook his head. “No. I didn’t even know he was using. I...” He stopped and cleared his throat. “We were

downstairs. A friend came and got us. He told us he'd taken too much."

The paramedic looked grim but began searching and came up with a used syringe and a small, empty baggy. He slipped it into a plastic bag, then the three of them got Leo strapped to a gurney and began the trek down the stairs.

Oliver followed, Gabe close at his heels, and he hesitated at the ambulance door.

"There's a few cops on their way. They're going to want to talk to you about this. It's mandatory we call this in, I'm sorry. You can meet him at St Mark's after this, alright?"

Oliver felt bile in his throat, but he nodded as the ambulance doors slammed shut. With a whine of the siren, the vehicle sped off just as a cop car arrived. Oliver felt numb as he gave his statement, providing everything he knew, including Mikey and Troy's names.

Gabe seemed mildly concerned, but he didn't say anything much as the cop finished up with Oliver, then sent them on their way.

"Come on, let's get a cab," Gabe said, grabbing Oliver's fingers.

Oliver nodded as Gabe fired up his app, and they waited on the side of the street. Everything was threatening to hit him all at once, and he closed his eyes tight against the onslaught of panic and worry. "Fuck," he breathed out, harsh and sharp. "Fuck. He might actually die. He could...there's a chance..."

Gabe quieted his words with a soft embrace, pressing a kiss to the side of Oliver's neck. "You knew this could happen. You've known it for years. But he was breathing when they got there. It's going to be a rough road for him when he wakes up, but don't start thinking about him like he's already gone."

Swallowing against the lump in his throat, Oliver let Gabe push him into the cab, and they made the drive to the hospital twenty minutes away. Gabe paid, letting Oliver hurry into the lobby, and the nurses looked up Leo's information.

“I’m sorry we can’t let anyone back there just yet. He’s being worked on.”

Oliver felt his stomach twist. “Worked on. What does that mean? Is he...has he...?”

“He’s coded twice, but he’s stable for now. We’ll have someone call you back as soon as he can have visitors.”

Oliver’s knees went weak, and he nearly fell. Gabe caught him and eased him into a nearby chair. Their hands linked, and Oliver leaned forward, his eyes tight shut. He wondered if maybe he stayed that way, in the dark, holding his breath, not letting himself feel, maybe it would all pass. Maybe it would all stop.

He wasn’t so naïve that he would believe such a thing, but for that agonizing second, he let himself hope. When he opened his eyes, he was still there. It hadn’t passed, and Leo was still fighting for his life.

“He can’t die. He can’t. He can’t leave me here alone like this,” Oliver muttered, his voice high and tight. There was a bubble of hysteria building behind his ribs, and it was by sheer will alone he didn’t give into it.

Gabe’s grip on him tightened, and he yanked him so close, their foreheads crashed together. “It’s going to be alright, Oliver. Whatever happens, it’s going to be alright. You’re not alone. I’m here.”

Oliver swallowed thickly, unable to speak another word. For the first time since they’d met, he couldn’t take comfort in Gabriel’s words.

Nineteen

Leo survived.

The first six hours had been touch and go, but by dawn, Oliver was allowed to go back and see his sibling. He was unconscious, heavily sedated, but his vitals had stabilized for the most part, and he would begin a treatment to help him detox without sending his body into shock.

“Based on the levels in his system and the marks on his arms, we can safely say your sibling has been taking a significant amount for quite some time,” the doctor said, looking down at the lab results on the chart. “Due to the nature of the overdose, he’s going to require a psych eval and likely a mandatory three-day stay in behavioral health once he’s fully conscious.”

Oliver let out a long breath. “Yeah. Alright. Do you, erm... need me to sign anything or...?”

“Presently no. We have you listed as his emergency contact, along with his father? Ren Sasaki?”

“Right,” Oliver said slowly.

“He’s been notified as well.”

Fuck, Oliver said in his head. He swallowed. “Alright, thank you. Would it be best if I stayed or...?”

“No, go home. He won’t come around for some time, and if anything happens, we’ll call you immediately. I don’t anticipate any problems after this. He’ll be uncomfortable, but

I don't think he's been using long enough to put his life in any danger from withdrawal."

Oliver shook the doctor's hand, remembering his manners somehow. He started toward the lobby where Gabe was waiting, but just before he reached the doors, his phone began to buzz in his pocket. He didn't need to look at the screen to know who it was.

"Can we please not do this right now?"

"When shall we, Oliver?" Ren's voice asked, sharp and angry. "How long did you know this was going on?"

"About six hours, when I found him overdosed on fucking heroin," Oliver snapped. He hit the button for the automatic doors a little too hard, and stormed past Gabe, heading outside. "He's a grown person. I am not his bloody keeper."

"I want you two back in London," Ren said. "Whatever your little plan was, your desire to escape..."

"My desire to escape?" Oliver all-but shouted. "It wasn't a desire to escape! She tormented me. Do you even realize that? Do you know what she did? Have you any idea of the physical scars I carry round from that? Burn marks, knife wounds! She had me exorcised and tortured for a month, and only when I vowed that my demons of queer buggery had been purged, did she let me go. I took Leo so she couldn't do it to him. So, don't act like us leaving her was some act of rebellion."

Ren was uncharacteristically quiet. "I'm arranging for your sibling to be put in a rehab facility in London."

"He won't agree," Oliver ground out.

"Yes, he will. Your ability to pay for the rest of your education is riding on it. Both of you. I'm sorting out the sale of the house, and you'll be put up in a flat. You and your sibling will be getting proper help. I'm not claiming I've ever done anything to protect you, but in this case, I know what's best." Ren paused for a long moment, and when he spoke again, his tone was quiet and calm. "Are you really going to fight me on this, Oliver?"

Letting out a breath, Oliver fumbled with the smokes in his pocket. He saw Gabe come out, but for the moment, he ignored him. “No,” he said after a long pause. The truth was, he had to let Gabe go. He had lost control over Leo, and over himself. He’d never let himself move past what his mother had done, and it had eaten him alive from the inside out. Now Leo was clinging to life, and Gabe was about to have his heart broken. “No, I’m not going to fight you.”

“Good. Your flight leaves next week. That should give you enough time to get everything sorted out. I’ll be there tomorrow to break the news to your sibling.”

Oliver ended the call without another word. Shoving the phone into his pocket, he lit his cigarette, then tried not to flinch when Gabe took his hand. “He’s going to live,” he muttered after a little while. He wanted to pull his hand away, but he was feeling selfish and just wanted a moment of comfort before he dropped the bomb.

“Alright,” Gabe said quietly.

“My father’s arranging rehab for him, and...” Oliver paused to take a few drags and winced when Gabe’s hand moved from his fingers to his waist, pulling him close. “It’s in London.”

“Probably best for him. To get away from everything,” Gabe murmured. “I’m so sorry, sweetheart. I know how hard you tried. But I’m here, okay? We can get through this together.”

Oliver bowed his head, then very carefully, stepped away. “I can’t do this with you. I’m...I have to...” He cleared his throat, dropped the cigarette, and crushed it out with his shoe. “We have to break up.”

Gabe blinked at him several times. “What?”

“I don’t want to. Fuck, I love you more than I have ever loved anything,” he said fiercely, his throat going tight against the last words he wanted to say. “But I almost cheated on you tonight. Last night. Whatever.”

Gabe took in a long breath and let it out. “I know. I saw you through the window. But I also saw you push him away. You did that all on your own, and I think...”

“I saw you in the window too,” Oliver admitted. “If you hadn’t been there, I would have done it. I was angry at you for being up my arse about getting better. I’m angry at my mum for being dead so I can’t bash her face in bloody. I’m fucking furious at my sibling for being such a stupid shit. And with all of that, I would have done it, in spite of how much I love you.”

Gabe swallowed thickly. “I see.”

“I love you, but my love is toxic. I’m no good, and no matter how many promises I make, no matter how many chances you give me, it’s not going to stop. I’m smart enough to know that. So...I’m sorry. Fuck. I am *so* sorry.”

Gabe bowed his head. “I am too.”

To Oliver’s surprise, that was it. Gabe turned and walked off, and against his very nature, against the fierce craving living in his bones, Oliver didn’t call him back. He didn’t move, didn’t breathe until he couldn’t hear the echo of Gabe’s shoes on the concrete.

And only then, in the silence of the early morning, was he certain it was over.

Twenty

Oliver glanced down at his phone and sighed. He was just finishing up the last bit of his research, but it was time to get Leo from his afternoon session. Clicking the save button, he shut his laptop and glanced around his flat. Keys on the table and a half-finished cup of tea perched on the counter, there wasn't much he needed to do.

Standing up, he stretched his arms high above his head, his shirt riding up, and he drew his hand down his belly. They'd been in London now for almost a year. Leo had put up a huge fight initially, but by the time Ren left the hospital, Leo was committed to his recovery and Oliver was packing.

He withdrew from the university, he sold most of their possessions in a massive, too-cheap yard-sale, and he wrestled with the desire to see Gabe one last time. But in the week between Leo's hospitalization and their flight back to the UK, he hadn't heard from his ex.

Not that he expected to, but Oliver hadn't anticipated how awful it would feel to lose him like that. It was like cutting off his own limb or carving out a kidney. He could live without it, but the pain was almost unbearable. Every time he left the house, he felt a twisting in his gut. He didn't know what he'd do if he ran into Gabe, yet found himself creeping by his ex's usual haunts.

Gabriel wasn't anywhere to be found, though. Even when Oliver was brave enough to go by the café and the bookshop, they were devoid of the curly-haired man. It left him aching and sore, wanting, but maybe it was for the best.

When they first arrived in London, it had been tougher than he thought it would be. It no longer felt like home. In spite of never losing his own accent, he could hear them now on other people. He'd grown accustomed to the funny culture of the Californians, and he missed the heady, warm smells of the Pacific Ocean. He missed the easy smiles and casual conversation he could make with anyone he passed by.

The cold, English culture of not making eye contact and strict, polite manners left him feeling more alone than he had in so long.

Even knowing his mother was dead and buried, no longer able to hurt him, he was still afraid of the city. Afraid of what it could turn him into, and the damage it could inflict.

But Leo was getting better. He spent ninety days in an inpatient facility where he received medication for his withdrawals, and therapy for his addiction. Oliver visited as often as he was allowed and really, it was the light in Leo's eyes returning that inspired him to go ahead with his own therapy.

His father arranged for it, a therapist who specialized in treatment of adults who were dealing with traumatic childhoods. *It won't matter now*, he told himself. *She's dead, it won't be a scandal*, he repeated over and over, *and she can't hurt you anymore*.

It hadn't been easy. He was angry at first, and his instinct to shut himself off—to pretend it hadn't hurt him—kicked in. But several weeks in and the anger turned into pain, which was something he could work through. It distracted him from missing Gabe, and it allowed him to work past the trauma it caused.

He'd never be cured, he realized. He would never be a person who hadn't been tortured and abused, but he could stop letting it control his life. He could stop being afraid of people getting close to him.

When Leo was finally released, the siblings used the money from their mother's flat sale to get their own in Hampstead. It was a nice place, small but cozy, close to shops

and to the University campus. They started off slow, of course. Oliver only had one term of lectures left before his dissertation was due. Leo was only a year away from finishing his bachelors, and with the end goals in sight, they both suddenly felt like productive people.

Like they were finally able to move on with their lives.

Oliver got a job working for an online publication, had been doing well enough there for the past six months and, to his great surprise, started dating. It was the moment he realized he was moving on, that he was letting himself. He had entertained ideas of running back to the States, to find Gabriel and have a profound moment. The slow run across the beach. Sailing off into the sunset.

It was when Sam's eyes met his and Oliver found himself saying yes to the invite out for a drink that he realized there would never be his cliché happy ending.

Six months later, he realized he could probably be happy with that.

Maybe not with Sam, maybe their relationship wasn't forever, but Oliver needed that moment to let everything in his past go.

Pulling up to the curb, Oliver sent Leo a text and a moment later, his sibling breezed out of the building. He looked much better than he ever had, putting on several pounds making Oliver realize just how skinny and sickly he'd always looked. He was wearing a long black skirt and AC/DC t-shirt, his hair still clipped short, though the top was longer and falling elegantly over one eye. He had a smear of pink lipstick across his mouth, and his white teeth shone with a smile when he spotted Oliver waiting.

"Been here long?" Leo asked, climbing in and slamming the door.

Oliver shook his head as he turned into the impossibly slow London traffic. "Nah. Just pulled up. How did everything go?"

“Good,” Leo said. “I think they’re going to let me intern at the end of this term, which would be brilliant.” He leaned back in his seat, looking out at the low clouds. “Funny how people with issues like ours go into therapy, innit?”

Oliver snorted. “Who better to coach you through problems than someone who’s actually been there, eh?”

Leo smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “Don’t you wonder how many of them actually have their shit together, though? I certainly haven’t been well long enough to feel qualified to tell people how to manage their lives.”

Oliver shrugged, pulling behind a row of cars, and sighed at the long wait. “I guess. I just think it’s easier to sort out other people’s problems than your own. I mean think about it, you’ve got the outside perspective with the inside experience. I think you’re going to be brilliant.”

This time Leo’s smile reached his eyes, making them bright and happy. It had been so long since Oliver had seen his sibling like this, and though it had been a year now, he never got tired of knowing they had made it this far. They were getting better.

“So, date tonight?”

Rolling his eyes, Oliver sighed, but the corners of his mouth quirked up. “Yeah. Sam wants to try this nouveau gastropub something or other in Chelsea. Haven’t been that way since mum, but he’s got his heart set on it.”

“You’ll be fine,” Leo assured him.

Oliver licked his lips, nodding. “I know. It just never gets easier to think about her. Even the last days of therapy, saying her name felt like razor blades in my mouth. The anger doesn’t go away.”

“No, and you know it won’t,” Leo said. “I don’t think I’ll ever forgive her. But just don’t let it control you.”

“Thank you, Doctor-Therapist Leo,” Oliver said, grinning playfully. “Really though, I feel alright about it. And after all my research today, I could do with a pint and something really decadent.”

“Bring me cake,” Leo said. “I’ll be at home revising. I need cake.”

“Alright,” Oliver said with a snort, and managed to get out of the massive queue of cars and turn down their street. He found alright parking, and before long, the siblings were heading up to their flat so Oliver could get ready for the night.

Sam had promised to be there a little early, so Oliver hopped in the shower, putting gel in his hair before rummaging through his wardrobe. He went semi-formal—black slacks, a button-down white shirt, but no tie. He rolled the sleeves to his forearms, then quickly scrubbed his teeth, and went on a hunt for his shoes.

Just as he was struggling into his socks, there was a knock on his bedroom door, and he looked up to see his boyfriend leaning on the door frame. Sam didn’t have the unassuming beauty Gabriel had. He was more striking with sharp features, freckles, and a shock of reddish blonde hair. He had wide, green eyes, and a dimple in each cheek which Oliver found endearing.

He really did like Sam. He had a good sense of humor, a decent personality, and when Oliver had come clean about his past, Sam hadn’t judged him. He was quick to notice when Oliver was having an off day, or when he was feeling overwhelmed, and even quicker to offer a cup of tea, or even just silence in the room.

Oliver knew the relationship would go far if he let it. The only problem was, he constantly found himself comparing every little thing Sam did to Gabriel. And he knew how unfair it was. Sam knew a little about Oliver’s first and tragic relationship. He knew Oliver still carried a small torch for the one that got away, and he didn’t seem to mind much. Oliver assumed Sam was waiting for the years to tame his feelings for his lost love—but Oliver doubted anyone would ever measure up to the man Gabriel had been for him.

It was why at least three times a week, he considered splitting. Why half the time, the words, “We should break up,” danced on the tip of his tongue.

But before he ever got them out, Sam would do something sweet or endearing. He'd bring Oliver his favorite pastry, or a book he thought Oliver might like. He'd pick him up a woolly pair of socks, or take him for a tea all the way in Surrey at a new trendy café, and Oliver would lose his nerve.

Sam deserved better, but for now, they were happy.

"Hey, cariad," Sam said, his deep voice and Welsh lilt booming through the quiet room. "How was your research today?"

"Horrid," Oliver said with a small pout. He rose, holding his arms out for his boyfriend.

Sam chuckled as he pulled Oliver close to him. "Will a cwttch make it better?"

"No," Oliver said, and turned his face up. "But it's a decent start. And maybe a kiss as well?"

"Hmm," Sam replied, his eyebrow raised, a playful smirk tugging at his lips. He bent his head down and pressed a soft kiss to the corner of Oliver's mouth as his arms tugged Oliver into a gentle little cuddle. "Well, how's that for a start?"

"I think you could do better."

Sam let out a small snort. "Always the critic. So hard to please." He turned his face and gave Oliver a proper kiss, making the other man hum with pleasure.

Oliver ran his palms up Sam's broad arms, resting on his shoulders. "Much better. I think the next thing I need is a good pint and some decadent chocolate."

"Proper food first, and then the chocolate," Sam warned.

"You are the least fun," Oliver whined, but smiled as he went back to the bed to finish with his shoes. "How was your day, love?"

"It was alright. Joanne," he said, referring to their Editor in Chief, "has been riding my arse like she owns it about this bloody Gentlemen's Club article. Seems to think that I'd have some idea what men actually get out of these things."

“Did you tell her you’ve been an out and proud, raging homosexual since upper sixth?” Oliver asked with a sly grin.

Sam rolled his eyes, tugging Oliver by the hand into the living room. “No, but only because she’s known for ages. At least since she caught us snogging in the supply cupboard and I had to give her my whole sordid history of blowing computer nerds in empty classrooms.”

Oliver rolled his eyes. “Well just fake it then, yeah? Or hire someone to ghostwrite it. I doubt she’d notice a difference.”

“This would be the one time she does, just watch.” Sam let out a sigh as he dropped into the armchair. He glanced at his watch, then out the window at the darkening sky. “I don’t fancy being sacked because I hired some hetero perv to talk about why he likes watching women shake their bits and tits.”

“I feel like that’s super sexist, but I’m not really sure,” Oliver said with a hum.

“Oh, it is,” came Leo’s voice from the hall. He walked into the room, giving a little salute to Sam as he went for the kitchen. Oliver heard him flick on the kettle, and he came back a moment later. “You could ask Coco when she comes in on holiday. Only I think if you say bits and tits to her face, you’d lose the bits you’ve got.”

Oliver snickered as his sibling went for the sofa, laying lengthwise across it. “When’s her flight in?”

“Tuesday,” Leo said with a wave of his hand. “She’s almost a citizen now, you know. Job and everything, looking at filing for it.”

“This is that mate from California, yeah?” Sam asked.

Oliver nodded as he dropped on to the arm of the chair, and grinned when Sam’s arm came around his waist. “You’ll like her. She’s our raging-ace queen.”

“Raging ace?”

“Asexual,” Leo said mildly. “She’s the one who found that trans club I joined up there.” What left hung in the air was that

it was the group who helped Leo get addicted to heroin and sent his life spiraling, but Oliver and Leo both avoided that topic with Sam—or anyone who didn't know them intimately. "She's fun. You'll like her."

"Well, I'm looking forward to meeting some of the people who knew you when you were American," Sam said, which earned him a playful smack to the shoulder. He glanced at his watch again, then tightened his hold on Oliver's waist. "We ought to get going. You know the traffic is going to be murder, and they'll only hold our table for so long."

Oliver rose, walking over to drop a kiss on Leo's forehead. "Be back with your cake."

"You're the best."

"I know I am," Oliver said as he went for his coat. "You should tell me more often, though."

"I like your head the size it is now, thanks," Leo shouted back. "Be safe, boyo."

The pair left, closing the door with a firm click, and Sam took Oliver's hand in a tight grip. It was warm and comforting, and though Oliver should have felt contentment from a safe, healthy, loving relationship, he didn't.

He missed Gabe, and he felt lost.

Pushing it aside, he gave his boyfriend a smile as he was led down to the street and dragged out for their date.

Twenty-One

The dinner was amazing. The food was wonderful, and the conversation was as pleasant as ever. For moments at a time, Oliver could forget everything—where he was and why, his past, the potential for his future. He was nothing more than a grad student working on his dissertation, with a sweet, caring boyfriend.

“Alright,” Sam said as he took care of the bill, “we should head for the tube, yeah? We can swing by Tesco and grab Leo his cake on the way.”

“He’s going to be less than thrilled to get a Tesco’s cake,” Oliver said with a slight laugh.

“Yes well,” Sam put his arm around Oliver’s waist and squeezed lightly, grinning, “that’s what the little shit gets for asking this late at night. All the good shops are closed.”

Oliver rolled his eyes, but they fell in step outside, holding on to each other lightly. Oliver rested his head on Sam’s shoulder as they made their way up the street, and he felt good. Maybe not content, but he started to wonder if he could settle for these moments of happy. He could build a future on that.

“I was thinking we ought to get away soon,” Sam said as they rounded the corner. The shop was just up ahead, and luckily it was late enough that there wasn’t much of a crowd. “Maybe a little holiday in Cornwall?”

Oliver pulled a face. “The bloody hell is in Cornwall?”

“A beach,” Sam said with a playful laugh. “A very nice room with a big bathtub. Nice pubs. The fact that we’d be on holiday together not in London. No dissertation,” he muttered, stopping before the entrance to the shop and pushing Oliver against the wall.

Oliver let out a groan. “Mm, I love it when you talk dirty to me.”

Sam snickered as he pressed his face against the side of Oliver’s neck, leaving a slow, dull, sucking kiss. “Yeah? You like that? No laptops, no research material. No internet.”

Oliver giggled, low in the back of his throat as his hands came around the back of Sam’s neck and held him tight. “So, a weekend away? You think we’re ready for that?”

“Six months, you know,” Sam murmured, and lifted his face to kiss Oliver. “I think we’ve earned a short holiday, cariad.”

“Alright,” Oliver said from behind a breath. But although he was grinning, something was uncomfortable in the pit of his stomach. “Let’s plan something in a couple of weeks, yeah?”

“Good,” Sam said with a wide smile.

Oliver felt extreme relief when the subject was dropped, and they went into the shop for Leo’s cake. They found something passable and snickered a little as they headed out, knowing for all of Leo’s snobbery, he’d probably just be happy for the chocolate.

The ride on the tube was short enough, and Oliver paused just outside his flat when they finally arrived. “Do I get an invite up?” Sam asked with a waggle of his brows.

Oliver let out a small breath. “I...really shouldn’t.”

“Come on, babes,” Sam pressed. “We almost never spend the night together. I know you’re busy, but...”

“It’ll be better when I’m done, I promise,” Oliver swore, but he could hear the lie behind his words. He’d been keeping Sam at a distance since the beginning, and Sam knew it. “Please?”

Sam's eyes flashed with caution and disappointment, but he acquiesced with a slump of his shoulders. "Alright. I do have the promise of the holiday, which means I get you all to myself for a whole weekend."

Oliver nodded, his smile feeling plastered on and saccharine, but if Sam noticed, he didn't say anything. Instead, he cupped Oliver's cheeks and kissed him long and slow. "I'll see you tomorrow," Oliver whispered, cutting the kiss off short.

Sam nodded, pressing several close-mouthed kisses to Oliver's cheeks. "Yes, you will. Have a good night."

Oliver hummed and watched Sam walk off before he headed inside. The walk up the stairs was painfully long, but it gave Oliver a little time to sort out his head. He knew what he was doing. He'd been examining himself and his habits, the poor way he dealt with uncomfortable situations, for over a year now. And Sam was no fool. He had to be aware that Oliver was keeping him at a distance.

But he couldn't help himself. He didn't feel ready to move on. Maybe he felt he was undeserving, or maybe it really was that no one would ever measure up to Gabriel, but it was what it was. Oliver couldn't change it.

He felt dejected and low by the time he stepped in, and was only a little annoyed to see Leo still up when he got in. His sibling was curled up on the sofa near the window, the TV on in the background without the sound, and his laptop on his knee. He looked between the bag Oliver carried, and his sibling's face.

"Tesco? Really? You go to the *dearest* restaurant in all of London, and you bring me a *Tesco* cake?"

"You want it or not?" Oliver asked flatly.

"Bring me a fork, you arse."

Oliver snatched two out of the drawer and plopped down next to his sibling. He popped the plastic lid off and together they dug in. "It's actually not bad," Oliver mused a few bites in.

“Well, you could have done worse,” Leo admitted, licking the side of his fork. “Is there a reason you just stuffed yourself stupid on a two-hundred pound dinner, and are now eating cake that cost a tenner?”

Oliver stared down at the gooey sweet for a long moment. “Sam wants to go on holiday together. To Cornwall.”

“And that upsets you?” Leo asked wryly. “Cornwall is offensive to your spoilt and delicate nature?”

Oliver gave his sibling a withering glower. “It’s not Cornwall. I just... dunno if I want to do that. To take that step together.”

“So, quick afternoon buggery and staying over at his flat once a month are fine, but holidays are right out? I really don’t understand your logic here.”

“I just...he’s not...” Oliver said weakly, flapping his free arm a bit.

Leo looked at him sharply. “He’s not Gabriel, is what you’re saying.”

Oliver had been good about never saying Gabe’s name aloud, about avoiding it at all costs, and Leo had picked up on that straight away. To hear it now, in the dark of their flat in the middle of the night, it felt like a physical blow, and he winced.

“I should be over it by now. I had closure, you know? I ended it with him, and with good reason. He needed someone far better off than I was.”

“Closure and good reasons don’t erase heartbreak,” Leo pointed out. “I know I’m not the best judge here—I never had anything particularly healthy, but I can tell the pair of you loved the hell out of each other.”

Oliver leaned his head back against the cushion and closed his eyes against the impending pain. “I just thought it might stop hurting by now. That the sound of his name wouldn’t feel like someone was boiling my insides.”

Leo took another bite, staring thoughtfully into the distance. “Have you ever thought about trying to contact him? Maybe sorting things out, having a chat or something? Maybe it would help.”

“I’m not sure I could bear it. I mean, I’m still sorting myself out.” He took a long, slow breath. “I thought I might, once the nightmares stopped, but they haven’t yet. I can’t talk to him until I’m...until I’ve become something better than I was.”

“You are,” Leo said fiercely, dropping his fork to curl his long fingers around Oliver’s wrist. “You’ve done amazing this far, and you deserve to be loved. Whether it’s by Sam or Gabriel, or some fit bloke you meet tomorrow, you deserve it.”

Oliver looked at Leo for a while, then gave him his softest smile. “You know I love you, right?”

Leo rolled his eyes. “You’re such a sappy shit. But yes, I do. Lucky me.”

Oliver snorted a laugh and shoved his sibling before they resumed their cake. Before long, they turned their attention to the TV, and eventually Oliver was tired enough to head off for bed. For the first time that week, the nightmares didn’t come.

Twenty-Two

Met with an armful of wild hair and lithe limbs, Oliver lifted Coco off the ground in a huge hug. It had been too long since he'd seen anyone from his former life, and though he thought it would be hard, having her there with him was the biggest comfort he'd found since returning to London.

Her laugh rang in his ear as she kissed the side of his face, swiping at the lipstick stain she left behind. Standing back, she took him by the shoulders and looked him up and down. "Christ, look at you! You look amazing, Ollie."

His grin spread wide at the sound of his old nickname. It hurt a little, reminding him of what he'd lost, but her voice was a comfort he hadn't realized he'd been craving. "And you, my little *señorita*! How's Spain?"

"Wonderful, of course. Mostly because I'm there," she said with a laugh, grabbing her suitcase and dragging it behind them. They headed out of the airport, and Oliver immediately hailed a cab. "It's nice to get away for a bit, though. My family's not happy I've come here instead of back to California, but I can't deal with them right now."

Oliver frowned as he gave directions to his flat. "What? Why? You were always so close to them."

"I'm..." She lowered her voice. "I'm engaged. Met this amazing woman at work. Uhg, you would just love her, Ollie. She *gets* me. Like, everything about me. Doesn't have any unrealistic expectations about our relationship. Doesn't ask me

to compromise.” She leaned her head against the window, tilted toward him, and her smile was more serene than he’d ever seen it. “Her name’s Claudia.”

“Do I get to meet her?”

Coco laughed brightly. “When you come visit, absolutely. We want to take our honeymoon in Cabo.”

Oliver laughed. “I expect a wedding invite at the very least. But your family...?”

“They’re...my parents are conservative Catholics, you know? So obviously the church wouldn’t be performing our wedding—not that I’d want it to. But they don’t understand, and I’m tired of the lectures. They think this is all some phase, some act of rebellion. I’m tired of trying to get them to accept me for who I am. So, if they want to be this way, they won’t be included in my life.”

Oliver reached out, brushing a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “You deserve only the best, love. And some day your family will see that.”

“I hope so,” she said, the mood dropping a bit. “But for now, we won’t worry about it. I’m here for a—how the hell’d you use to say it? A week-long piss-up?”

Oliver threw his head back and laughed. “Yes. We’ll get wanked on good English beer and shitty pub food, and I’ll show you all the best parts of being British.”

“Well, you know I’ve been waiting for this a long time,” she said, wagging her finger at him. “And that sibling of yours, too. I miss living with you two.”

Oliver smiled warmly. “Yeah. We miss you too.”

They reached the flat ten minutes later, Oliver paying the fee, and he helped Coco get her things up the stairs. Leo sent a text saying he’d be home within the hour, so Oliver showed Coco the shower to wash the plane smell off as he fixed tea.

By the time she was done, dressed, and hair dried, Leo had returned, and she ran into his arms, as warm and fierce as she

had with Oliver at the airport. Leo held her tight, his eyes suspiciously bright as he pressed a kiss to her face.

“I can’t believe you’re here,” he said.

Coco palmed his face. “I’ve missed my YouTube eyeliner tutorial best friend, you know,” she scolded. “I mean okay, I know I’m the one who left, but it’s not the same without you.”

Leo rolled his eyes, but he was grinning as he took the offered cup of tea and the three of them went into the living room to sit. “So, tell me everything. Whilst you were drying your hair, Oliver mentioned some fiancée you have. Spare no details. Not a single one.”

Coco went on to describe her fiancée, and as she spoke, Oliver realized what he was missing. That spark in his eye, the tone in his voice that said even something as simple as not being in the same room as his lover caused him pain. He was missing the desire to kiss his lover all the time, to feel empty when his arms weren’t around him.

He didn’t have that with Sam, and he wasn’t sure if it was because he was keeping him at a distance, or if it just wasn’t right. But he wanted it. He missed that feeling so much, and he knew Leo had been right earlier. He was a better person now, and he deserved all those things.



THAT NIGHT, Coco was restless, so they decided to go out for a few drinks. Oliver insisted on the local for the first, not wanting to traipse all around London. After some insistence from Coco, he sent a text to Sam to have him meet up for the pint.

Oliver hadn’t talked to Coco much about his relationship with Sam, but it was clear she could read it from his face he wasn’t entirely happy. Not like he had been in California.

“Why are you with him if you don’t really like him?” she insisted, poking him in the shoulder.

Oliver sighed. “I do like him, actually. He’s fit, he’s nice, a really good shag. He likes me well enough.”

“Only he’s not Gabriel,” Leo said, a wry smile over his fizzy water.

Understanding dawned on Coco’s face, and Oliver rushed to stop her from saying anything. “That isn’t it. It really isn’t. He and I are just taking things slow. I don’t want to get in over my head like I did last time.”

“But you said your therapy went well,” Coco pointed out. She paused to take a drink of her martini. “And wasn’t that the problem last time?”

Oliver shrugged. “Part of it, yes. Part of it was me not knowing how the bloody fuck to behave in a relationship.”

“I think you’ll actually like him,” Leo told their friend. “He’s pretty brilliant, and he looks at Oliver like the sun shines out his arse. It’s a shame, really.”

Oliver pulled a face, but he didn’t say anything more as he saw Sam walk in through the door. He gave Coco and Leo a firm glare before waving him over, and was greeted with a short, swift kiss as Sam took the remaining seat at the pub table.

“Well, well, he *is* cute,” Coco said before any introductions were made.

Oliver rolled his eyes. “Christ. Coco, this is Sam, Sam—the ex-housemate I am now regretting inviting over to our lovely country.”

“Lovely and dreary,” Coco said, extending her hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“Oh, likewise. I’ve been waiting for this quite some time now. I kept telling Oliver I was looking forward to meeting the people who knew him back when he was nearly American.”

“You’re an arse,” Oliver muttered as Coco laughed.

“He was pretty American, let me tell you,” she said with a huge grin. “He had, like, nine guns and every piece of clothing he owned had an American flag on it. He also didn’t offer me tea ever at all.”

“You are a filthy, rotten liar,” Oliver snapped with a grin. “I always offered tea.”

“But the guns and flags?”

“Well,” Oliver said loftily, “when in Rome.”

Sam threw his head back, howling with laughter and the entire table fell prey to it. Sam slung his arm around Oliver’s shoulders, pulling him in for a short kiss. “This is why you’re fantastic. Have you lot been here long?”

“Nah, just one drink in,” Coco said and hopped off her chair. “Come on, Ollie. I need a refill. Sam? What are you having?”

“Pint, love. Ta!”

Coco grabbed Oliver’s hand and dragged him up to the bar before rounding on him. “Break up with him.”

Oliver gaped at her. “What? Come on darling, he’s not that bad. Honestly, he’s...”

“Oh, I know,” she said, waving her hand. “He’s actually amazing. But he’s head over heels in love with you and if you don’t feel the same way, you need to end it. If you’re not there by now, you won’t ever be, and that’s not fair to him...but I think you already know that.”

Oliver bowed his head. “Yeah.” He took a slow breath and let it all out in a rush. “Buggering *fuck*.”

She laughed and grasped his shoulder. “Yeah. I don’t know how the hell you get yourself wrapped up in shit like this, but will you trust me, please? If you care about him at all, you need to stop before he gets in any deeper.”

Oliver’s face pinked, but he knew she was right, and it was awful. But he was an adult, he was mastering his problems and emotions, and he knew he couldn’t allow himself to string Sam on any longer. It was only fair.

“I’ll go back to his tonight and end it.” He leaned his head on her shoulder and sighed. “How’ve I got on this far without you?”

“I don’t know, but I’m surprised it’s not a bigger disaster than it is now,” she said with a grin, then ordered drinks to take back.

The rest of the evening was massively subdued as Oliver knew what he had to do. Every time Sam touched him, leaned in for a kiss, or smiled in that absurdly affectionate way he did, Oliver felt his gut twist harder. Breaking up with Gabe had been the most painful thing he had ever done, but it was in the middle of learning his sibling had come close to overdosing, and the knowledge he would be moving back to London.

This was the first time he’d be participating in something so adult. Something so responsible, and something that wasn’t about him.

“Listen, I wanted to talk to you about something,” Oliver said, leaning into Sam near the end of the evening. “Can I come back to yours for a bit?”

Sam brightened. “Of course. Actually, there was something I wanted to talk to you about as well.”

Licking his lips, Oliver nodded, and only hoped he could get in what he wanted to say before Sam could. Not because he was afraid Sam would end things first, but because he was afraid of Sam making it harder.

“We’ll catch you two later, yeah?” Oliver said with a knowing look at Coco.

She leaned in to kiss his cheek, then hugged Sam. “It was good to meet you, Sam.”

“Hope you see you again, love,” Sam replied.

Coco didn’t bother with a response, only shooting Oliver a quick look before she and Leo went the opposite direction.

Sam took Oliver’s hand as they walked down the street and Oliver didn’t have the heart to stop him, though when Sam

squeezed his fingers, he didn't reciprocate. Luckily Sam's flat was close enough, and ten minutes later, he was sitting in the lounge looking even more awkward than he felt.

"So," Oliver said at the exact time as Sam said, "Well..."

They both laughed, and Sam shook his head. "Let me go first, yeah?"

"Well, what I have to say is..."

"Please," Sam begged, interrupting him.

Licking his lips, Oliver let out a breath. "You might regret it, you know."

Sam's expression faltered, and he let out a tiny sigh. "I think you're about to split up with me, and if that's the case, I want to go first. So, let me?"

Oliver felt like he was hit by a punch in the gut, and he cleared his throat. "Go on, then."

Sam's expression was more cautious now as he looked at Oliver. "I'm not an idiot, you know. I can tell you're pushing me away, and I can tell you don't care for me as much as I care for you. I know part of it's your past, and part of it is probably you just not quite knowing *how* to love someone."

"Sam," Oliver said tiredly.

"No, let me finish," Sam said, holding up his hand. "I'm in love with you. I think I was half in love the second you walked into the office, and it was less than a month before I was completely smitten. I think maybe your sibling—maybe your friend as well—are telling you to cut me loose to spare me. I know how these things work. I've been on both sides of this situation before. But I want you to give me a chance, to give yourself a chance to properly fall in love."

Rubbing his face, Oliver shook his head. "I just don't..."

"Oliver, you haven't even tried. We don't spend time together. We don't sleep over at each other's. We have short dates, quick shags, and occasional snogs in the broom cupboard at work. But if you let yourself try, I think we could be good."

Oliver pursed his lips. “So, what exactly are you suggesting?”

“That you let me tell you how I feel. Let me say I love you, knowing I won’t expect it back until you feel it. And...” Oliver could tell from Sam’s expression whatever was coming, it was big. “And I want us to move in together.”

Oliver choked on his own tongue for a moment. “You what? Are you mad?”

“No, I’m not. I think it could be good for us. I think that we should go on our holiday, and then you can move in here with me. Leo’s in a good place now, and he can get a flatmate if he needs the company. Or...or I can move in with you if he prefers,” Sam added in a hurry, seeing the uncomfortable look on Oliver’s face. “But I think we should dive right in and give it a go. If in six months you still don’t feel the same, then we call it quits.”

Oliver blinked at him in absolute shock. “Sam, I...I’m still in love with my ex. I keep comparing you to him. I’m not any good for you.”

“I think you just need something to move on to,” Sam insisted.

Oliver knew his therapist would likely disagree with that statement, but there was a tiny voice in the back of his head playing devil’s advocate. It said maybe Sam was on to something. That maybe diving in and just ignoring all the rules was exactly what Oliver needed to move on.

And it wasn’t like Sam was walking into it blind. Oliver had been brutally honest about everything, and Sam knew Oliver wasn’t in love. He’s just heard Oliver say he was comparing Sam to his ex constantly, and he still wanted this.

“Can I think about it?” Oliver asked.

Sam nodded, a light shining in his eyes. “Yes, of course you can. But please don’t leave now. Stay the night with me, go on holiday with me in a few weeks, and then decide. Okay?”

Oliver bit down on his lip, but Sam was moving onto the sofa with him now, his warm hand cupping Oliver's cheek, and the comfort felt nice. The touch was addicting, and when Sam bent his head down for a kiss, Oliver found himself tilting his up. He found his lips parting for the wandering tongue, and he found his hands wandering into Sam's soft locks.

He knew it was probably useless, that his heart wasn't ever going to belong to another, but he decided he owed himself a proper chance to move on. How else could he ever know if he was ruined for anyone else? How else could he call his recovery a success?



LEO TOOK a long drag of his cigarette and leaned his head back against the brick. He let the smoke drift up from his lips into the foggy London skyline, then glanced over at Oliver who had his own cigarette pinched between his teeth, still unlit. "When do you leave?"

Oliver reached into his pocket for a lighter, then took a long drag before answering, his voice smoke-thick. "Thursday. He's got us a nice place in Helford Passage, right off the water. Some little cottage."

"Sounds nice," Leo said, his eyebrows dipped low. "You know Coco thinks you're mad for giving him another go."

Oliver laughed, sucking on his smoke for a few minutes. "Yeah, I know. She all but threatened to murder me for agreeing to Sam's proposal. I still can't decide whether or not I should have taken her advice but..." He trailed off and shrugged. "I feel like I owe myself the chance to be happy, and it's not like he doesn't know where I'm at."

"I like him," Leo said. "You could do a *lot* worse."

"I know," Oliver said from behind a laugh. "I think I have done, even with one-offs. I keep thinking I ought to be fair to

him, but he's making the choice. I'm certainly not asking him to stick around."

"He's probably a damned fool."

"Yeah." Oliver rubbed a hand down his face, then flicked the butt of his cigarette across the rooftop. Putting his arms behind his head, he turned his head to face his sibling. "So, you've got my dissertation all set? You really think you can do a decent editing job?"

Leo barked a laugh. "No. But who've you got better than me, eh?" He nudged Oliver with his elbow. "It'll be fine, no worries. You'll turn it in on time, you'll defend the hell out of it, graduate, and be the sort of swotty shite we used to take the piss out of when we were kids."

"I hate myself."

Leo chuckled and shook his head. "Nah, you don't.

Twenty-Three

He was shoving a pair of jeans into his suitcase when there was a knock on his door, and Oliver looked over to see Leo wearing a smug expression. “So, has anyone told you lately your spelling and grammar are the worst?”

Oliver’s eyebrows flew up, then he grabbed a pair of socks and threw them at his sibling’s face. “Fuck off. You should be so lucky I put effort into it.”

Leo laughed as he flopped down onto Oliver’s bed. “So. Packing. When’s he getting here?”

Oliver checked the time on his little digital clock and sighed. “Should be here in twenty. And actually, I wanted to talk to you about something.”

Leaning up on his elbow, Leo gave him a discerning look. “Alright.”

“You know, a few weeks ago when I agreed to this mad idea of staying in a relationship with him?” Oliver cleared his throat and ran his fingers back through his loose hair as Leo nodded. “And he had that mad idea about us living together?”

Leo’s cheeks went faintly pink. “Right.”

Unable to meet his sibling’s eyes, feeling a little ridiculous, Oliver busied himself with his shirts. “I think I want to take him up on the offer. I’m not...” He hesitated and bit down on his lip, then forced himself to look at his sibling. “I’m not ready to live apart from you, though. It’s not that I don’t trust you,” he added in a hurry, “but it’s so soon, and I...”

“It’s alright,” Leo said, cutting his sibling off. “I don’t think I’m entirely ready for you to move out either.”

Letting out a breath of relief, Oliver plopped down next to his case. “So, I’m thinking about asking him to move in here. With us. You two get on well enough, and it could be good. Don’t you think?”

Leo blinked several times, then smiled. “You’re asking my permission?”

“Don’t be a git about it,” Oliver warned. “But you live here as well, so it’s only fair.”

Laughing, his sibling shook his head and pushed himself up to sit, leaning back against the wall. “It’s fine, Ollie. I like him well enough, and…” He stopped when he saw a look cross Oliver’s face. “What’s this really about?”

“The last time I approached this topic with someone I was dating, things went to shit,” Oliver admitted, not quite up for saying Gabe’s name right then. “I know the situation’s different, and honestly I think Sam’s a fucking idiot for wanting to stay with me when clearly I’m not as invested as he is, but I’m nervous.”

“You think he’ll turn you down?”

Oliver raked his hands through his hair again. “I don’t know. He seemed a bit keen on having me move in with him, going on about how you should be fine to be on your own. And you are, you’re doing well. But *I’m* not ready for it yet.”

“It’s okay if you don’t trust me, you know,” Leo said quietly. “It hasn’t been that long, and I’m only clean a year. There’s plenty for us both to worry about. And if he turns you down, then he wasn’t as invested as he said.”

Oliver blew out a heavy breath. “Yeah, you’re right. Anyway, I made him a key, so if you’re okay with it, I’m going to ask him on holiday. And who knows, maybe this is exactly what I need to move on.”

“Maybe,” Leo said, but he didn’t sound convinced. After a pause, he got up and yanked Oliver to his feet, wrapping him

in a hug. “You’ll be fine though, whatever happens. We both will.”

Oliver laughed as he ruffled Leo’s hair, then gave him a shove toward the door. He didn’t agree with Leo out loud, not quite ready to do that, but for the first time in possibly ever, he actually felt like maybe they would be.



ALTHOUGH OLIVER DIDN’T LIKE TRAVELING through England in a car, he gave in to Sam’s request that they drive instead of taking the train. It would allow them the freedom to travel around the area more if they wanted to get outside of Helford Passage.

It was a fairly long trip, and although they stopped a few times along the way, by the time they reached the cottage, Oliver was desperate to be out of the car. He shot out of his seat the moment the engine was off, stretching his back in a long arch with his arms above his head, and took a breath of the sea air.

It wasn’t like California—though nothing on this side of the world was. It lacked the sharp, heady, salt smell behind warm air currents. But it was nice, the air fresh and far enough from the city to feel like they were somewhere very different. He smiled when Sam came up behind him, wrapping arms around Oliver’s waist and pressing a kiss to the side of his neck.

“I’m so happy you’re here with me.” His deep voice rumbled against the back of Oliver’s ear.

Oliver smiled and realized he was happy too. Or, at least, something like it. Reaching up, he palmed Sam’s cheek and leaned his head back against the taller man’s shoulder. “Yeah. I think it’ll be good.”

Taking Oliver’s hand, the pair went inside. The cottage had been recently used, so it was aired out and lacked the dust of

disuse. The front door opened immediately to the lounge, where there were two squashy sofas with a hideous floral print which looked like they'd seen better days, and a small coffee table littered with travel magazines detailing what there was to do in the area. A handful of cheap prints hung on the wall in a failed attempt to give the place a homey feel, and there was a fireplace against the far wall which looked very well used.

The kitchen was large enough, a fridge and two-hob cooker tucked caddy-corner from a small sink. There were still dishes in a drying rack near the window, and a small, two-person, scrubbed wooden table near the back door.

The back door led to a small path, which then led to the beach. The cottage was sitting right on the coastline of a fishing cove, meaning the waves were small, and the beach traffic was mostly old men in funny hats with long poles and folding chairs.

Oliver had a sudden vision of himself as one of those old men. Of retiring somewhere like this. A little cottage, a tackle box, and a stupid hobby. He tried to picture Sam with him there, sitting in his own little chair, maybe a small dog on his lap.

But it didn't feel right.

He knew he could conjure the image of Gabriel easily, that it would feel like coming home, but he couldn't allow it. Not now. He was trying to move forward, and he owed this to Sam. He owed this to himself.

A warm hand on his hip broke him out of his thoughts, and he turned to see Sam smiling at him. "Well, cariad, what do you think?"

"Fairly brilliant," he said with a tiny smirk. "Very... homey."

Sam rolled his eyes. "Such a city boy, eh. Well, come see what else this place has." He dragged Oliver down a small hallway first to the bedroom to throw their suitcases inside, then to a door across the hall. It opened up suddenly, to a surprisingly large bathroom which was very, very posh.

The place had marbled countertops, tiled floors, and a huge bathtub that could easily fit three fully grown people. There were small, silver jets on the sides, and the shelves along the walls held what looked like bottles of pearly soaps and frilly hand towels.

“Wow,” Oliver breathed.

“I know. I thought we could end our night in here. Take some time to...soak.” Sam dragged the tip of his finger around the shell of Oliver’s ear, eliciting a small moan from the shorter man. “Does that sound alright to you?”

“Mm, it might,” Oliver hummed.

“Maybe a little more than *fairly brilliant*?”

With a laugh, Oliver turned in Sam’s arms and grabbed him by the back of the neck. “Maybe a little more than that.” Then he kissed him, slow and careful, bringing one hand to Sam’s cheek. “Thank you. This is really lovely.”

Sam grinned. “Of course. Only the best for the man I’m in love with.”

Oliver felt a wash of guilt, but the smile on Sam’s face was genuine enough that Oliver could let it go. They headed back into the bedroom to freshen up, and then decided a nice dinner would take the edge off their long day of travel.

“And after,” Sam said as they started toward a small pub, “a nice, long bath.”



OLIVER INTENDED on waiting a little longer before springing the move-in on Sam, but as they lounged in the bubbling jets, it felt like the right time. He was perched between Sam’s legs, both of them half-hard and enjoying the feeling of each other’s skin on skin.

Oliver's hair was dripping, and Sam was massaging soap along his scalp gently when Oliver realized he was happy. Content, even. Not the same as he had been, but it was a change. A good one.

"That feels amazing," Oliver said, turning his head for a kiss. "Why have we never done this before?"

"Because," Sam said, easing Oliver forward to recline so he could rinse the bubbles from his hair, "you were being a bit of an idiot about things."

Oliver laughed as he shook his head in the water, coming up with dripping locks down around the sides of his face. He smiled as Sam reached forward to brush his hair back, and then came in for another kiss. "Reckon I was. A *bit*."

"That's what happens when someone carves your heart into little pieces, and takes a few with them when they go," Sam said, pressing his palm to Oliver's chest. "It never heals up the same way."

Oliver let out a shaking breath. "You know that *I* broke it off with *him*."

"Outcome's the same still, innit?" Sam asked. "Pain isn't any different when you break your own heart."

Oliver shrugged, starting to feel vaguely uncomfortable about the direction the conversation was taking. He had skillfully avoided talking about Gabe much, at least nothing more than the bare bones of the story. He was a good person who was there during a bad time in Oliver's life, and it had ended quietly but painfully. Oliver never gave much more than that, and until now, Sam hadn't asked for more.

"Will you tell me about him?"

Oliver felt his throat constrict, and he coughed to clear it. "Sorry?"

"The one who got away. The lucky bastard who managed to crack through your walls and earn your love."

With a small huff, Oliver leaned back against his chest. "You don't think that's a bit, I dunno, morbid? Us being on our

couple's holiday and talking about exes?"

Sam chuckled into the top of Oliver's hair. "Maybe if I were the jealous type. But I just want to know more. I know it was a tough time for you, and I'm not asking you to reopen old wounds. I'd just like to know what it was about him you loved so much."

Closing his eyes, Oliver ignored the stabbing pain in his chest as he allowed himself to conjure up the memory of Gabe. "It's hard to put it into words, if I'm being honest. He was... God, he was rude sometimes, so snarky and sarcastic, but also lovely."

Sam let out a slow breath. "What did he look like?"

Oliver smiled in spite of himself. "Wild, dark curls, dimples in his stupid cheeks. A cute nose that made me want to bite it all the time." He swallowed and felt waves of pleasure and pain mixing in his belly at these memories.

"Big cock?" Sam asked with a snicker, and Oliver immediately stiffened.

"I don't see why his genitals matter," he snapped.

Sam backed off, pushing Oliver up by the shoulders. "Hey, I was only joking. I didn't mean anything by it."

Shaking his head, Oliver let out a breath. "It's just... never mind. It was just so much more than the sex. It was the first time I let myself feel for anyone. I dunno what it was about him exactly. At least, nothing I could put into words. But we spent a night together taking care of Leo after he'd passed out, and the moment I walked away, I knew I would be walking back. Saying those words to him the night I broke things off was the hardest thing I have ever done."

"Do you regret it?" Sam asked, carefully massaging Oliver's shoulders.

Oliver shook his head. "Not really. Not *him*, anyway. He deserved better, and I was a right mess. Me and Leo both. Gabe knew it. I wanted to move forward in the relationship, but he kept putting a stop to it because he knew I was going to fall apart, and he was protecting himself. In the end he wanted

to help me, to put himself at risk to make sure I could get better, and I knew it would only end up destroying him. I couldn't focus on myself if I was consumed with him."

Licking his lips, Sam's hand moved from Oliver's shoulder to his cheek, and his thumb rubbed along the skin there. "You could try and find him again, you know?"

"I could do, yeah," Oliver admitted. "Not the first time I've thought about it. But honestly, it's better this way. I want him to be happy. I want him to have moved on with someone who treats him the way he deserves to be treated. Who loves him the way he deserves to be loved."

Very carefully, Sam brought his face in and captured Oliver's lips in a chaste, slow kiss. When he pulled back, he pressed their foreheads together. "You're a good man, Oliver Sasaki. You deserve love just the same."

Oliver wrapped his hands around the back of Sam's neck. "I know I do. And I know I'm a shit to you a lot of the time, but don't for a second think I don't realize how lucky I am to have you." He paused, then carefully pushed away. "Stay here. I have something for you."

Ignoring Sam's bemused expression, Oliver clambered from the tub. Grabbing a towel on the way out, he hurried into the bedroom. Oliver dug around in his suitcase, and soon found the small, red box he'd tucked in with his jeans. Clutching it in a bruising grip, he took a long breath, then hurried back into the bathroom.

Sam was waiting, his body low in the tub, chin propped up against the porcelain, and he sat up a little when Oliver slid back into the water. Holding the box between his fingers, he handed it to Sam.

"I was thinking about what you said before. Before we took the holiday," he clarified as Sam took it into his palm. "The thing is, I'm not ready to leave Leo, and he's not ready for me to go. But if you're still interested..." He trailed off and gestured to the box.

Licking his lips, Sam pried off the top, his light eyes going wide at the silver key nestled in a small bed of cotton. “Is this...?”

“Key to my flat. Ours, if you like,” Oliver said in a rush. “Whenever you want. I’ve talked to Leo about it and... *mmfph!*” His words were cut off by warm lips on his, a possessive, claiming kiss.

“Yes,” Sam muttered right up against Oliver’s mouth. “Yes, I absolutely will move in with you.”

Unable to hide his grin, Oliver kissed back slowly, trying to shove every ounce of affection he had for this man. It wasn’t perfect, and it wasn’t love. But it was something. It was the start to moving on.

And Oliver knew he could live with that.

Twenty-Four

Half expecting some massive, life-changing disaster to crash down on them during the weekend get-away, Oliver was on edge the entire time they were in Cornwall. But as they made the drive back, holding hands every so often, telling jokes about co-workers and smiling fondly at each other, Oliver realized that everything was fine.

It was more than fine.

Sam was moving in with him, he was moving forward with his own life, and things were getting better.

The following Monday, Sam was out on assignment, and Oliver perched at his own desk editing a piece for the next morning's print, when he heard a small giggle. Peering up, he saw a pair of blue eyes poking over his cube, and he let out a sigh.

"Yes, Mel?"

Their office was very small, the online publication employing less than twenty people, so everyone knew each other's business. Melinda was another editor, employed six months longer than Oliver had been, and had been the one to originally point out Sam was taken with him the moment Oliver had been hired on.

She had appointed herself a cupid, much to the chagrin of both men, but they were often too busy or too tired to argue with her. "A little birdie told me you and Sam took a big step last weekend."

“The little birdies round here need to keep their fucking mouths shut,” Oliver said, with only a hint of venom. He sat back in his chair and reached for his mug of tea, giving her a challenging eyebrow.

A second later, she disappeared, then rolled back in her chair to invade his cube. “Is it true, though? Are you two moving in together?”

“I’m not entirely sure that’s any of your business,” he reminded her.

She scoffed, waving her hand dismissively. “You know how this office is. It’s everyone’s business.”

“Yes well, I am working on a deadline, so…”

“So, you’d better spill whilst you have the time, darling.”

Rolling his eyes, Oliver sighed and realized it wouldn’t matter if he tried to keep it quiet. The moment Sam changed his address on the payroll records, everyone would know. “Fine. Yes. We’ve agreed to *try* living together.” He paused and then added, “Please don’t make a big fuss.”

Melanie let out a small squeal but covered her mouth. “I’m so excited. I should get a second job as a matchmaker.”

Oliver rolled his eyes. “Sure love, whatever you say.”

“Will there be wedding bells in the future?” she asked, wagging her brows.

Oliver, who had just taken a sip of his tea, choked a little. “We’ve been dating six months. You don’t think it’s a little early to be talking about marriage?” Although truthfully, it was less the length of time and more making that kind of commitment to Sam.

Giving a dismissive wave of her hand, Melanie smiled, the expression a little smug. “Look, he’s really fit and very nice. You need to lock that down, you know? I mean, it does pain me that the two fittest blokes in the office happen to be not only gay, but super gay for each other…but really, I just want to see you both happy.”

Oliver sighed, wanting to know why it was important to her. He hadn't been there all that long, and the idea of being invested in someone else's relationship seemed ridiculous. But he smiled at her anyway. "Yes well, we are happy, darling. So, if that's all...?"

"Yes, yes. Alright." She quickly leaned over and pressed a slightly sticky kiss to his cheek, then swiped at the lipstick mark with her fingers. "I'm happy too, you know, for you both."

"Thanks," he said with a gentle smile.

Sam returned to the office a few hours later, and before Oliver could warn him, Melanie was squealing again. Sam was a little more enthusiastic about the whole thing, boisterously declaring his intentions, and Oliver sat at his desk with his head down, a faint blush across his cheeks.

It got worse when Sam kissed him. He heard a few wolf whistles until their boss barked at them to get back to work, and he didn't miss the knowing looks of several co-workers as the pair left hand-in-hand at the end of the day.

"That was mortifying," Oliver complained as they headed for the street.

Sam laughed, giving his hand a playful tug. "Aw, come on. They can't help it. We're cute."

"I just don't see why they have to be all up in our business," Oliver said with a shrug. "I mean okay, it's a small office so they're going to have some idea. But why get all... invested?"

Sam shrugged, his light expression hardening a bit. "They want to see us happy, is all. I mean, it gives people hope that things can work out. So many relationships these days are so bleak. Especially with that whole ball-and-chain, straight culture rubbish."

Oliver could hardly argue with that, and instead of carrying on, suggested they grab a curry to bring home. Leo was still working hard on editing Oliver's thesis, and there was a week left before it was due. Sam planned to move his things

in after Oliver handed it in, during the two weeks Oliver would be using to prepare his defense. It was a tense time in their house, but Oliver figured it would prove whether or not Sam could handle things at their potential worst.

The couple brought home several different curries to a grateful Leo who looked tired, eyes red-rimmed from the reading, but when Oliver tried to take the work back, he refused. “You have a week left, and you need at least a couple days to go back over it. Besides, I’m nearly done.”

Oliver sighed but didn’t argue. Instead, he fixed himself a large bowl of tikka masala and rice and curled up on the sofa with a few of his favorite baking show. Sam quickly changed out of his office clothes, coming to curl up next to him, and Oliver let himself peer into the idea of the future.

He let himself think about how this could be every evening. Coming home from work, Sam curled up next to him, Leo in his chair, together like a small, cobbled family he had never expected. He wasn’t sure if the idea terrified him or comforted him, but there was no denying the potential now.

In for a penny, he thought to himself as he spooned rice and lamb into his mouth.

Sam’s hand fell onto his thigh and instead of tensing, he went lax. The feeling of his boyfriend comforted him, and he decided that things would be alright. They really would be.

Oliver was pacing the house when Leo walked in, giving his sibling a withering glare. The defense was in three days, and Oliver was running himself mad over it. He knew he was prepared—he'd been researching for years, and his topic wasn't very complicated. However, his nerves were frayed with anticipation, and the idea that soon enough it would all be over, and he would be done.

He would have his graduate degree, he would be a proper adult in a proper relationship, and the demons of his past were close to silent.

Reaching for the counter, he grabbed his glass of juice and drank half in one go as Leo shrugged off his coat and hung it on the back of a kitchen chair. "Mobile off?"

Oliver raised a brow, then shrugged. "Probably dead. I lost it yesterday afternoon and couldn't be arsed to look for it."

Rolling his eyes, Leo went to the counter and flicked on the electric kettle. "Dad's been trying to get through since yesterday. He says he's going to be here for your defense."

Having just taken another drink, Oliver choked, pressing his hand to his mouth to keep the juice in place. He swallowed quickly, giving a few coughs to clear his throat, then turned wide eyes on his sibling. "He what?"

Leo scoffed as he got down a mug and bag of tea. "You heard me. He's proud of you. Wants to celebrate. Meet your boyfriend," he added in a quieter voice.

Oliver froze, then took a step forward. “You told him about Sam?”

“Well, he’s going to notice that we’ve got some bloke living here, isn’t he? Sleeping in your bed, shagging your arse off every night. It’s not like we could keep it a secret.”

“Christ,” Oliver groaned.

“He does know you’re a raging queer by now, Ollie. Any closet you were ever in was made of glass.”

Oliver huffed, leaning onto the counter, and he dropped his head. “It’s not about that, you shit. It’s just... weird, alright? It’s not like we were close to either of our parents. One beat us horribly for the whole raging queer thing, the other ignored us entirely. So...”

“Yeah well, he’s trying now,” Leo said, and it was true. Ren hadn’t been very active in their lives, but he was calling more, sending emails, and any time something came up, he offered help and support. It was more than he’d done in their adolescence, and although it didn’t make up for anything, Oliver could appreciate it for what it was.

“Alright, fine. I mean, I suppose there’s no stopping him, is there?”

“Doubt it. He’ll want to do some expensive dinner, which Sam loves anyway. And he’s charming. Dad will love him.”

Oliver couldn’t know that for sure. He’d never had a frank talk with his father about his preferences, and although his father was had been least peripherally aware of his relationship with Gabe, it had never been discussed openly.

“Anyway, Sam also texted and said he’d be late tonight and to eat without him. I was thinking pizza.”

“Yeah, alright,” Oliver said absently as his mind went back to picturing his defense panel. “Whatever you want.”

Leo snickered a little into his tea, then wandered off to leave Oliver to his fretting. He moved to the sofa, drawing his legs up to his chest, and stared off into the distance.

That was how Sam found his boyfriend four hours later.

It was half-eleven when Sam finally walked in, looking exhausted and a little surprised to see Oliver still up. He was curled up on the sofa, the worried expression still marring his face.

Sam quickly shrugged off his coat, stepping around a pizza box left carelessly on the floor, and sat down a cushion away from his boyfriend. "Alright there, cariad?"

"As I can be," Oliver muttered. He hadn't looked over, but when Sam reached out to grab his thigh, he didn't pull away. "Work late?"

"Sharon was up my arse almost literally about this fucking West Ham piece. Made me go down to that disgusting pub, you know where they all go for drinks after? Once they saw my press badge, it was like rabid dogs or something."

"Should've got pissed," Oliver said, the absent tone still hanging on his words. "Would have made it more bearable."

"So is coming home sober enough to snog my boyfriend," Sam pointed out.

Oliver turned his head slowly, unable to stop a slow grin. "Oh? Is that what you had in mind?"

"Unless you want to continue your worrying?"

Rolling his eyes, Oliver shifted over and twisted his fingers into the front of Sam's shirt. He pulled him in, kissing him deeply for a few moments. "You taste of smoke."

"Yeah well, I got that one fit center-forward you like watching to give me an exclusive as long as I had half a pack of those Turkish smokes with him. Honestly, I feel a bit high."

Oliver laughed and shook his head. "You're ridiculous." He tugged Sam down and kissed him again. "You want to go to bed?"

"I thought your plan was to get absolutely no sleep and worry for the next three days."

Oliver lifted his eyebrows. "Who said anything about sleep, eh?"

Sam's eyes instantly went darker as he rose, dragging Oliver with him. They kissed once more before Sam propelled Oliver backward down the hall, and into the bedroom. He closed it with a soft click, flicking the lock just to be safe, and turned as Oliver was pulling his shirt up over his head.

Licking his lips, Sam began to wriggle out of his pub-smelling clothes, leaving them on a pile on the floor near the bed as he took several, careful steps toward his lover. His long, pale fingers ghosted up Oliver's stomach, pausing to swirl around his nipples before lowering his head and running the flat of his tongue along the hard nub.

Oliver groaned quietly, tipping his head back as Sam's mouth worked a trail up toward his neck, sucking dully at the sensitive skin just under his ear. "Want you," Oliver moaned.

"What a coincidence," Sam said, and grabbed Oliver's wrist, bringing the other man's hand to the bulge in his boxers. "It seems like I feel the same way."

"You're an idiot," Oliver said with a laugh as he flopped back down on the bed. Sam knelt between his knees, gently palming Oliver's erection through the thin cloth, and leaned his head down for a slow kiss.

Their tongues slid against one another, hot and needy, and Oliver moaned again, right into Sam's mouth. "Want you inside me."

This time Oliver's groan was loud, all thoughts of waking his sibling gone. The only thing that mattered right then was getting Sam on his back, legs in the air, and cock inside him. "Grab the...the..." Oliver barely managed as Sam slid his hand into Oliver's boxers. "Fuck." Sam began to stroke him with a firm, up and down motion, thumbing the top of his cock with each pull.

With his free hand, Sam groped around the drawer for the lube and condoms, wasting no more time. He didn't protest when Oliver flipped them over, or when Oliver squirted the lube onto Sam's hand. "Go on. I want to watch you."

Sam threw his head back, groaning even louder than Oliver had as he put one hand between his legs and began to prepare himself. Oliver watched, licking his lips hungrily, barely suppressing a needy tremble.

He didn't last long before shoving Sam's hand away and slicking himself up over the condom. Holding Sam's legs behind the knees, Oliver pressed against him, and looked into his eyes. "Ready for me?"

"More than. Please," Sam begged. "Fuck me."

Oliver gave a wolfish smile as he pushed forward, hard and fast the way Sam liked it. His pulse raced at the sight of Sam's head thrown back, a blush crawling across his cheeks. His mouth was open, panting as he thrust his hips in time with Oliver's canting. "Good," he groaned. "Good, *yes*."

Sam gave as good as he got, enthusiastic and needy as he reached between them to stroke himself. The sight of him, the feel of Sam's insides trembling and tightening around him, Oliver didn't last long. His head dipped forward and with a few, hard thrusts, he spilled into the rubber.

He was vaguely aware of Sam coming shortly after, a groan and a shiver. Oliver took a moment to appreciate how delicious his boyfriend looked before pulling out and carefully tying the condom off. He tossed it into the bin, then collapsed on the pillow. A small smile crossed his face as Sam drew him close, pressing several kisses across his cheeks.

"That was amazing."

"Mm," Oliver agreed, unable to keep his eyes open. "Knackered now too. I owe you one."

"Maybe later," Sam said, sounding muzzy with impending sleep.

All thoughts of worry and stress about the dissertation and defense drifting away, Oliver let the warm arms and gentle breath of Sam lull him to sleep.

Twenty-Six

Never in his life would Oliver have the sort of thrill he felt zinging up his spine when he burst out of the building where his father, sibling, and boyfriend waited. He had done well, only slipped a handful of times. The entire board treated him as a colleague rather than a person under extreme scrutiny, and he knew that he'd wowed them.

He was grinning wider than he ever had, his cheeks aching as he stumbled into Sam's arms. His taller boyfriend lifted him by the waist, spinning him a little and sharing a kiss in spite of the audience. Oliver didn't mind at all. The lips were warm and added to his feeling of success and triumph.

"So, I take it the whole thing went well?" Sam asked in his ear.

Oliver couldn't help his laugh. "Very, extremely well, my darling."

Sam palmed Oliver's cheek before letting him slip to the ground. "I'm so proud of you."

Oliver felt his face go a little warm as he turned to his father and sibling. Ren was barely smiling, looking as terse as ever, but there was a softness when he extended his hand. "Congratulations, Oliver."

Oliver ignored the formality of the sentiment as he placed his hand in his father's, still unable to get rid of his wide grin. "Thank you. I can't believe how well that went."

Leo offered him a quick hug before they were ushered off to Ren's hired car and clambered into the back. The restaurant

Ren chose was one of the posher ones in the city, a private room reserved in the back for the four of them, along with a handful of Ren's associates.

The talk at the table was mostly business, though Oliver was able to recount a few of the memorable moments during his defense. Eventually, though, he tuned out the conversation in favor of drinking a gin and wrapping his foot around Sam's leg under the table.

"Hey, when we get home tonight, I have a gift for you," Sam muttered quietly, leaning into Oliver.

"Is it a naked sort of gift?" Oliver asked.

Leo choked a little on his drink and rolled his eyes. "Really, you two?"

Oliver glanced around the table, then laughed. "No one's listening."

Sam smiled too, reaching over to put his hand on Oliver's thigh. "Part of it might be, but there's something else. And something I want to ask you."

"You're not proposing, are you?" Oliver asked, only half joking. The last thing he wanted to deal with was the idea of marriage barely three weeks into living with a boyfriend for the first time.

Sam, however, laughed and shook his head. "No, love. Nothing like that."

Oliver visibly relaxed, leaning into Sam a little, and eventually was drawn into a conversation about his upcoming future.

"Ever think about going into publishing?" one of the associates—Bernard or Brandon, he couldn't quite remember—asked.

Oliver shrugged. "Dunno. I mean, journalism is alright, but it's easy to become disillusioned by the media."

"Well, you know, you've got a decent resource here," he winked at Ren. "Nepotism and all that. And it's hardly that really, if you take your degree into account."

Oliver hummed. “I hadn’t really thought. But I reckon it would be something to consider.”

Ren nodded tersely and steered the questions in another direction as a small dessert was brought around. When it was over and they were enjoying a brandy, Ren leaned over toward Leo, and got Oliver’s attention.

“Would you join me outside for a quick smoke?”

Oliver blinked in surprise but nodded. They rose, and he gave Sam a *‘help me’* look before he followed his father out the front doors and to the side of the building. Ren pulled out a pack of very thin cheroots and handed one over, along with a slim, silver lighter.

“I didn’t know you smoked,” Oliver said, taking a long drag and passing the lighter back.

“On rare occasions.” Ren lit his own, leaning against the wall for a moment and regarded his son. “You look like me.”

Oliver choked a little on his drag and lifted a brow at his father. It was true, he had more of his father’s features than he did his mother’s. No one had ever mistaken his Japanese heritage, and he couldn’t count how many times people assumed his mother had adopted him and Leo. But growing up without his father around, he hadn’t ever given it much thought. He never had anyone to relate to, to understand what it was like growing up in London with the mannerisms of a well-bred English boy without the look to match it.

“Reckon I do.” It was all he could say to that, really, and Ren offered no follow-up.

The father and son enjoyed half their smoke before either of them spoke again, and when Ren opened his mouth, the words were startling. “I want to offer you a job.”

Oliver blinked at him. “Is this because of what your mate in there said? I don’t need nepotism, and...”

“It’s hardly nepotism when you qualify for the position,” Ren said, waving his hand dismissively. “I’ve several openings for editors, and of course I will not deny it’s a small attempt to make up for my lack of presence in your life.”

Oliver drew his tongue over his bottom lip. “Is it the California or the New York office?”

“San Francisco. You’d be working on fiction and in the office. You’d have an editing pseudonym of course. No one would know you were my son, if that’s a concern of yours.”

Oliver hummed. “You don’t even know if I’d be any good at it.”

Ren chuckled. “Fair enough, but I owe you the opportunity to try. You and your sibling have impressed me immensely. The offer stands. I would of course provide an apartment, and Leo is welcome to come along and finish out his graduate degree there if he feels he’s ready to make this sort of change.”

Licking his lips, Oliver dropped the cigarette on the ground and watched the red cherry fade out before crushing it with his shoe. “What if I wanted to bring Sam with me?”

Ren looked vaguely surprised but gave a small shrug. “It’s your life, Oliver. If he makes you happy...”

He doesn’t, was Oliver’s first reaction, but he knew it was knee-jerk. He was enjoying living with Sam. He cared about him. Maybe he didn’t love him just yet, but there was something there. He could feel it. “I’d like to at least ask him.”

“You don’t need to tell me now, you know. Take time, enjoy and celebrate your victory.” Ren dropped his own cigarette, then reached out and gave Oliver’s shoulder a squeeze. “I really am proud of you. I always have been. I’ll forever regret not letting you know before now.”

Oliver felt something squeeze around his heart, but he didn’t allow himself to do anything other than smile. “Thank you. I...that means a lot.”

Ren nodded and beckoned him back inside. As Oliver took a seat, he looked over at Sam who was chatting to one of Ren’s colleagues, laughing and shaking his head, and Oliver knew right then he was going to take his father up on the offer. It was too appealing. He appreciated London for helping him get well, to work past all of his pain, and to see his sibling better, but it wasn’t home anymore.

Maybe it never had been.

The idea of moving back to California, being near the pacific again, created an almost physical ache. He knew he could be happy there, with Leo safe, and with Sam by his side. He'd just have to ask, and hope Sam would understand why he needed this so badly.

When he closed his eyes and remembered the smells and sounds of the place he still thought of as home, he only caught a brief glimpse of dark curls and dimples.



THEY DIDN'T GET HOME until late. The three of them were exhausted, Leo excusing himself before Oliver had a chance to bring up the job offer, but he knew there was time for that later. He knew with Leo, moving back to California wouldn't be a hard sell. For now, he was happy to be home, able to take off the uncomfortable suit, and fall face-first onto the bed.

Sam joined him a few moments later, running his palm up and down Oliver's spine. "Good day, yeah?"

With a small laugh, Oliver turned his face to his boyfriend. "Yeah, not bad. I mean, as days go. Thanks for being there with me. It meant a lot."

"I wouldn't have been anywhere else," Sam said, and leaned forward to press a kiss on the tip of Oliver's nose. "You too tired for a chat?"

With a small yawn, Oliver shook his head and grinned. "Nah, that's fine. I believe you owe me some gifts." He waggled his eyebrows with a small laugh. "Also, there was something I wanted to talk to you about too."

"You're not going to propose, are you?" Sam joked.

"Oh, sod off. You'd say yes if I asked."

“Yes,” Sam deadpanned, making Oliver flinch. “But I’ve never been particularly interested in marriage, so no need to worry your pretty little head.”

“Pretty, is it?” Oliver quipped, trying to lighten the mood.

Sam leaned in again to press kisses along the one cheek not smashed against the duvet. “The prettiest. So, you want to go first? Unless you’re breaking up with me again, of course.”

Oliver laughed once more. “Not this time. It’s actually kind of a big thing, really. Bigger than anything we’ve done so far.” He cleared his throat, then pushed up, propping himself up on his forearms to better look at his boyfriend. “My dad offered me a job today.”

Sam blinked, then grinned. “At his publishing company?”

Oliver nodded. “Proper job and everything. As an editor. And well, I think I’d like to take it.”

“But that’s brilliant,” Sam said, his grin widening. “I know it seems like nepotism, but you’d be really good at it.”

Oliver’s cheeks pinked a little. “Dunno about that but...I think I could be alright. That’s not...that’s not entirely it, though.”

“Okay,” Sam said very slowly. “What else?”

Taking a breath, Oliver closed his eyes, not willing to see Sam’s initial reaction. “It’s in California. San Francisco, actually.”

There was a pause long enough for Oliver to crack one eye open and peer at Sam. “So, it’s not...you can’t work from here? Or well, anywhere else?”

“No,” Oliver replied softly. “I’d have to work in an office and everything. I wanted...I was hoping,” he tried, taking a breath to relax himself and gather the courage he needed. “I wanted to ask you to come with me.”

Sam made a small noise in the back of his throat, then cleared it. “Come to California? To the *States*?”

Feeling anger begin to prickle along the back of his neck, Oliver pushed himself to sitting. “Yes. You know, it’s not nearly as horrible as you might think. I mean, it’s not London, but it’s not total shit, either. I liked it there.”

“Yeah, but you were also completely fucked up at the time,” Sam blurted, then stopped himself. “I’m sorry, cariad. I didn’t mean it like that.”

Startled almost physically by the statement, Oliver reared back. “How did you mean it, then?”

“I meant,” Sam tried, keeping his tone steady and slow, “that I assumed you sort of got over that phase in your life.”

“Phase in my life,” Oliver repeated.

“Yes. The running from your past, rebelling against your family phase. What’s wrong with London?”

“It’s not home,” Oliver said sharply. “I don’t...I never intended on staying here.” He blinked rapidly for a moment, then curled his arms around his legs, pulling his knees to his chest defensively. “What did you want to talk to me about tonight, then?”

“Well,” Sam said, and pushed himself up to sit against the wall, “I got a job offer as well.”

Oliver blinked, saying nothing.

“It’s in Cardiff.”

“Wales,” Oliver echoed. “You got a job offer in Wales. You didn’t tell me you were applying for another job.”

“Neither did you,” Sam retorted, sounding angry for the first time since Oliver had known him.

“I *didn’t* apply for another job,” Oliver defended. “My dad offered it to me at dinner tonight.”

“Yet you just said you weren’t planning on staying in London. When were you planning to leave?”

Oliver swallowed. “I hadn’t given it much thought. You only moved in a few weeks ago, and I wasn’t sure where we were headed.”

“Right,” Sam said, breathing out heavy and hard. “So, the answer to Wales is no, is it?”

“I’m not moving to sodding *Cardiff*,” Oliver said only a little meanly.

Sam let out a bitter chuckle. “And yet you expect me to pack up and move to bloody California without a job prospect, without any idea of how to make a living, or anything? Do you realize how hard it is to get approved for a visa? And what if I don’t find something in enough time? Did any of that occur to you?”

“No,” Oliver blurted. “He made the offer tonight, not weeks ago. I wasn’t planning on moving you in here only to spring a bloody move to another country three shitting weeks later.”

Licking his lips, Sam took in a breath and closed his eyes. “Why do you want to move back to California, Oliver?”

Blinking in surprise, he laughed. “I told you, I got offered a job by...”

“No,” Sam interrupted. “It’s not the job, and we both know it. You’re hoping to find *him*.”

Oliver laughed again, more startled than anything. “No, I’m not. I’ve moved on.”

“Everything you’ve done with me is either to try to forget him, or to bide your time until you can find him again.” Sam shuffled to the end of the bed, swinging his legs to the floor. “I love you, Oliver. I do. And I would walk over hot coals if I knew it meant at the end of things you could actually move on and open yourself to me. But tonight’s proved to me that will never happen. He didn’t leave with pieces of your heart, Oliver. He left with the entire bloody organ, and you want to go find it again.”

“All because I don’t want to move to fucking Wales?” Oliver cried indignantly, ignoring the stabbing pain in his chest.

Sam shook his head, a sad smile crossing his face. “No, cariad. It’s because you’re aching to go back there, and you

always will be. I can't compare to that, and I need to let you go. I should have weeks ago, when you offered me the out. But I was foolishly in love, and I suppose we all do stupid things when other people have our hearts."

Swallowing, Oliver cleared his throat and was surprised at how thick his voice sounded. "So, this is it, then?"

"I think so," Sam breathed, and let out a watery laugh. "I think it is. I'm sorry for trying to force you into something you knew you didn't want. It wasn't fair to you...or me."

Part of Oliver wanted to fight. To beg Sam not to go, because even if he *was* in love with Gabriel still, he'd never find him. But it was too late, and Sam was right. Gabe had left with his entire heart, and it was unfair to ask another person to spend a life with someone who could never properly love them.

"Alright."

"I think," Sam said, and ran his fingers into his hair. "I think I'm going to go. I'll get a room somewhere, and when I can sort out a flat, I'll send for my things. You won't have to worry about it."

"Alright," Oliver whispered again.

Sam started to pack a small bag, and Oliver watched numbly as his now-former lover dressed, slipped into his shoes, grabbed his bag, and left. Like it had happened before with Gabe, Sam didn't look back. He didn't pause, didn't give any opportunities for second chances. Oliver heard him drop his key on the kitchen table, the front door opened and closed, and that was it.

It was over.

And although he hated himself a little bit for it, Oliver felt relief blossom through his chest. Not just for him though, but for Sam who deserved so much more than he could ever offer.

Twenty-Seven

“Hey sweetie.”

Oliver tried not to groan as he pushed his chair back to look over at his neighbor. She was grinning, her chin propped up on her fist, elbow on her desk, and she had the look on her face he’d seen before. “No, Kristen. I’m too busy to do you any favors.”

The brunette bat her lashes at him a little. “Come on. I have this friend who...”

“Oh God, double no,” Oliver said, shaking his head and tried to push his chair back to his desk, but her lightning-fast reflexes caught it before he could, and she spun him with surprising strength.

This was not the first time his workmate had attempted to set him up on a date. Oliver had been working for his father now for a year, and when his cubical neighbor found out he was gay and single, she began to parade out her list of friends like she was a one-woman, gay dating website.

“He’s really cute. Like, totally your type.”

“I have worked here exactly one year and three months, and have dated no one,” Oliver reminded her.

“Which is why you should take me up on this offer,” Kristen replied.

“I just don’t know how you can have any idea what my type is if you’ve seen me date absolutely zero people.”

“I see who you check out when we go for drinks,” she said, wagging her finger at him. “Seriously, his name is Will and he’s really cute. Tall, broad shoulders, gorgeous face, no weird accents or anything funny like that. He’s a manager at the SeaSide Farmer’s Market.”

“Unwashed hippy is what you’re saying. White guy with a beard?”

Kristen rolled her eyes. “Look, he’s had shitty luck with guys lately, and you’ve had literally no luck at all. What can a single drink hurt?”

Oliver bit down on his bottom lip, hating himself a little for actually considering the set up this time. Kristen wasn’t the first of his co-workers with a well-meaning offer to set him up with their, “*Really cute, really gay friend*,” that he’d turned down. And really, Oliver hadn’t been actively avoiding dating so much as he was busier than he anticipated when taking the job at his father’s company.

The split with Sam had gone as smooth as it could have. When Oliver went into work the morning following the split, the only thing left of his former boyfriend was a letter of resignation delivered to their boss. No one said anything about it, giving Oliver wide berth, and kept the topic down to quiet whispers behind his back they thought he couldn’t hear.

He left a month later, the moment he was approved for his work visa, and though he promised to stay in touch with everyone, he knew it would never happen. He and Leo packed up the flat, sold what they didn’t want to take with them, and said goodbye to London for what Oliver hoped was the very last time.

A month after arriving, Leo was accepted to Stanford, mostly by the grace of his father’s money, but the two-year graduate program was highly rated, and Leo was feeling better than ever. It would be the first time in his life Oliver had lived alone, and though he missed his sibling, he was looking forward to it in a way.

It was the final step in moving on, really.

The work also kept him busy. It hadn't been like his old job, sitting around a desk, making the occasional correction, and formatting articles for their web publication. Now he was dealing with overly picky authors and manuscripts so poorly written, he couldn't work out why they'd been accepted.

He spent more time re-writing than he did correcting spelling and grammar, and at times he fought the very real urge to just stand up and walk out. But he had something to prove—to his father and to himself—and after a while, it just became routine. He learned how to tune out the authors shouting at him through video chat and email, he learned to ignore their protests, and forced the changes to go through. He stopped worrying about making them happy, and more about just doing his job.

He had friends there, too. He drove down to Stanford a few times a month to see Leo, and on weekends he and his office mates would have drinks and drag their least favorite authors over plates of fried foods.

It was nice.

It was normal.

A life he'd always craved and always felt was beyond him and was now within his grasp.

“If I do this,” Oliver said, giving Kristen narrow eyes, “you're going to owe me.”

Kristen's face dropped. “Owe you what?”

“Well, a little birdie told me you just got a brilliant new manuscript in your inbox. And you're going to trade me.”

Kristen's eyes widened. “Not for the...”

“Yes, love. For the Vampire one.”

With a huge groan, she sat back, covering her face. “Oliver,” she moaned.

“How much do you love your friend? How much do you want him to have this date?”

“I hate you so much,” she said, dropping her hands. “Fine. Fine, but you have to go on at least two dates if he’s interested. Barring like, racist comments—which I know he’s not a racist so you can’t make shit up—you have to get past your weird...” She stopped and waggled her fingers at him. “Your weird whatever it is that keeps you from dating, and *try* to like him.”

Oliver let out a harsh breath. The idea of dating exclusively did not sound appealing, but the idea of getting the worst book he’d ever read off his desk and into someone else’s queue was enough to make him take her up on it. “Alright, fine. But I’m going to tell him I bartered the date for the book.”

“You’re a complete asshole.”

“This should not be news to you, my love. Now text me his number. And expect an incoming email in three minutes.”

Oliver shoved his chair back to his desk and got to work, sending her the file before shooting an email off to the EOC about the swap. He heard the deep groan from her end when the email arrived, and a second later his phone buzzed with the mystery man’s number.

“Any chance you’ve got a photo of him?” Oliver asked through the cube wall.

“Nope. You’re just going to have to be surprised. I’ve already sent him a text telling him to expect yours, and to not send any selfies. I’m not going to let you get some ridiculous, preconceived notions about him from the way he looks.”

“He’s got a neck-beard and a fedora, hasn’t he? He’s not some bi-curious twat who wants to experiment with his sexuality because he thinks it’s edgy, is he?”

“Jesus Christ, Oliver,” Kristen said, poking her head around the cube again. “If you must know, he’s about six months out of a long-term relationship, so he’s fragile and wants to take things slow. Which is exactly why I thought he’d be good for you.”

Oliver sighed again but wasted no time in sending a text to Will the Mystery Date. Within ten minutes, they had a time set up for later that evening—just a quick drink at the local bar, and Oliver had an email with his new project.

It wasn't the most ideal way he could have ended his day, but as far as endings went, it didn't seem so bad.

Twenty-Eight

“...And for whatever reason, I agreed.” Oliver stopped just outside the bar and leaned against the wall as he finished up his conversation with his sibling. “I mean, I guess two dates is worth it to get rid of that nightmare book, but I’m starting to wonder if this was such a good idea.”

“Well, at the very least you can get a couple drinks out of it,” Leo said, his voice sounding muffled.

“Mate, are you in bed right now?”

“I’m tired,” Leo complained. “Really bloody tired, and Max isn’t going to be home until after two. He’s got all the closing shifts this week, so I get no shags, *and* I have to cook for myself.”

“You are unbelievable,” Oliver complained. “I wish my biggest problem was having to fry up some fucking bacon in the mornings.”

“That *is* your biggest problem,” Leo reminded him. “Anyway, quit faffing round and just go inside, get your beer—or whatever shit you drink these days—and send me a text after. Though if he actually does have a neck-beard and fedora, you’re immediately taking a photo.”

“Oh, absolutely,” Oliver said, sucking on the cigarette one last time before flicking it away. “I’m going to post it and tag that bitch Kristen in it if she seriously tried to set me up with some hipster.”

“Hipster White Boy TM, bane of your existence?” Leo asked with a laugh.

“Fuck off. I’ll talk to you later.” Oliver hit the end button and shoved his phone into his pocket before heading for the front doors. He had no intention of actually making something work with this guy. Just two drinks and a less difficult book to edit at the end of the day.

Pushing open the doors, Oliver stepped into the bar and glanced around the dark space. Will hadn’t given in to his request for a selfie, and instead said he’d be at a pub table near the bar, and would be wearing a white t-shirt, and had brown, curly hair.

It wasn’t a lot to go on, but as Oliver scanned the crowd, there was only one who fit the description. The man was wearing a very wide smile, which was barely visible through the massive beard on his chin. Oliver had to physically hold back his grimace as he offered his own smile and walked over.

He was not a fan of facial hair at all, and he had always been clear about that one. It was no surprise why Kristen had kept it a secret, and he knew Will’s personality would have to be screamingly brilliant for him to be interested in anything beyond a second date.

“Oliver?” Will asked, his voice surprisingly light for being so tall and broad.

Oliver extended his hand for a quick shake. “Hope I didn’t keep you waiting long?”

“Nah, I got here a little early.” He flicked the edge of his pint glass with his thumb. “Paced myself though. Can I grab you a drink?”

Just then a server popped by, and Oliver quickly gave his order. “Gin martini, rocks, extra dirty with two olives.”

When she was gone, Will gave a short laugh. “I like a man who knows what he wants in alcohol.”

Oliver almost grimaced at the horrible line, but instead he smiled and shrugged. “I’m only a little fussy, and mostly about my booze. I’m sure Kristen told you loads more, and it’s probably all lies and slander.”

“How about the part where you’re the CEO’s son?” Will offered.

Oliver’s cheeks pinked a little. “Fine. And that. Though it should be telling that I’m not some corporate suit, and I’m working in the dredges just like everyone else at the company.”

Will chuckled and shook his head. “Dude, no worries. My dad actually owns the SeaSide Farmer’s Market.”

“So, you’re a sell-out hipster, then?”

When Will laughed again, Oliver felt a stab of annoyance at how easily entertained he was. The server dropped off the martini, and he quickly took half down in one gulp.

“Bad day? Or is this because you had to be coerced to go on this date?” Will asked.

Oliver flushed and shrugged. “It was less a coercion and more of a buy-out. She let me trade one of the worst books I have ever read for something written by a decent author. I just have to agree to at least one more date if you’re keen after this.”

“Are you going to try and make yourself seem unfriendly and rude so I won’t want to?” Will asked, a small sparkle in his eye.

“Oh, no worries there, mate,” Oliver said with a wry grin. “It’ll only take me being my sunny self.”

With a snort, Will leaned forward. “Would it help if I told you that I only agreed to go on this date to get her off my back too?”

Blinking in surprise, Oliver set his glass down and clasped his hands. “Really?”

“Really really. She doesn’t seem to understand that after a long relationship and painful break up, some people might actually *want* to be alone for a while. After six weeks of nightly phone calls and daily emails, I got her to agree to get off my case if I tried one date and it didn’t work out. I think she thinks you’re more charming than you actually are.”

“I’m not sure if I should be relieved or insulted,” Oliver admitted.

Will laughed again. “Don’t worry, you are *ridiculously* good looking, and I think your personality is more friendly than you want to admit. But I’m not interested in having a boyfriend.”

Oliver sighed in relief. “Thank God. I was not interested in trying to fend you off all night. But you seem like a decent sort so I’m happy to at least share a few drinks.”

Will’s grin widened, and Oliver felt himself relax knowing now the pressure was completely off. “So why not tell me about this book you traded off. I want to know Kristen’s suffering.”

Oliver laughed hard, leaning forward and putting his hands splayed flat on the table. “Oh love, believe me. She’s going to be crying herself to sleep every night.”



“...AND the tattoo appears out of nowhere—no mention of it in the entire sodding book, and yet it’s suddenly the solution to all their problems. And miraculously this human, this chemist, by the way with no previous experience in the supernatural, randomly knows the legend behind it. And the poor girl just up and says, sounds alright, I’ll be the savior.” Oliver was grinning at Will’s doubled-over laughter, the ginger swiping tears from his eyes. “So yeah, darling Kristen has to sort out that entire thing.”

“Oh my God, that is the best thing I’ve heard all week.”

They were three drinks in, two hours into the fake date, and they’d ordered and shared a plate of fried mushrooms. In between talking about the Book from Hell, as Oliver had lovingly dubbed it, he learned more about Will and the two of them found an easy connection.

“I expect several furious emails, and probably two a.m. phone calls just to shout at me,” Oliver said with a shrug. “But she asked for it.”

Will sat back, taking a breath. “She did. She *so* asked for it. I swore if she didn’t stop telling me the only way to get over my ex was to move on with someone as quickly as I could, I was going to start sending her singing telegrams at the office.”

Oliver chuckled. “Why are straight people so weird and obsessed with making all the gays get married?”

“No idea. It’s probably why their divorce rate is so high. I’ve got this friend...well I use the term loosely but anyway, he’s a Mormon.”

“Those religious blokes with the white shirts and ties?”

Will nodded with a smile. “Those are the ones. Anyway, so he’s married to this woman he can’t stand, and last year, he begs his church to grant a divorce—because you know, with them it’s not just with the courts? Anyway, his bishop agrees to it, but only under the condition that he be married again within six months.”

Oliver’s eyes widened. “You’re shitting me. Six months? To find a person, fall in love, and get them to marry him?”

Will snorted. “Yeah, only it doesn’t seem like love comes into play a lot with them. He was sent to their dating bootcamp. There were all these singles events that people in their church who weren’t dating or engaged had to attend. All chaperoned by church elders or whatever they’re called. He explained it to me, and I swear to God, I had nightmares for months after.”

“I would have as well,” Oliver said, sipping on what he determined would be his last drink. “God, I have never been more relieved to be gay, atheist, and British. We have a handful of those over there but not like here. You Americans with your religion. It terrifies me.”

“Republican Jesus. Blessed be the automatic assault rifles, *ayyy-men*,” Will drawled.

Oliver chuckled and set his glass down. “Exactly. And on that rather bizarre note, I should go. It’s late and I actually have to get a bit of work started before morning. I’m in a meeting first thing. But this was more pleasant than I expected.”

Will nodded, signaling for the server, and handed over a card. “Look, we should do this again. You seem like a good guy, and I’m not opposed to having a new friend. Especially one that isn’t going to change his mind and try to get into my pants.”

“Well, I do fit that description,” Oliver admitted.

“It’s the beard, isn’t it?” Will asked.

With pink cheeks, Oliver laughed. “A bit, yeah. It doesn’t put me off being mates, though.”

“I can live with that.” Will clapped him on the back and then got his card back, scribbling his name at the bottom of the receipt.

“How about Wednesday, then? Dinner’s on me,” Oliver offered.

“Perfect. Text me pictures if Kristen starts crying tears of blood with that book, alright?”

“Oh, I will,” Oliver said, and winked as he pushed his chair in. “See you later.”

With that, he headed out, feeling lighter than he had when he went in. It never felt better to have a friend who understood him, and even better having someone who shared his lifestyle without wanting more than he was willing to give. He had an almost bounce to his step as he made his way home and was still smiling as he sat down on his sofa with his laptop to begin a little bit of the work.

The book was still in his queue, and he wanted to give the first parts a read-through before heading off to bed. It would be his big project for the next few weeks, and although he was told the quality was much better than the other books he’d been given, he didn’t trust his co-workers to actually know quality writing most of the time.

Firing up his program, he went into the kitchen while his email and queue loaded, flicking on the kettle for a cup of tea. He sent a text off to Leo, a quick run-down of the night, but got no response since his sibling was likely sleeping.

With his tea in hand, Oliver sat back down and opened up his documents. There were four, as per usual. The author's bio, their marketing plan, blurb, and manuscript. He clicked the first one open, and saw the penname in bold, black writing.

C.S. ROMAN

NICE AND GENERIC, nothing that stood out, and nothing that sounded familiar. He knew this one was a debut author, and had wowed his editor in chief, Jake Kelley, who had immediately sent off a contract to the author's agent. It wasn't often Jake got excited about fiction coming in, especially something classified as romance, so Oliver had to assume there was something good here.

The blurb itself was less than impressive and would have to be re-written, but he could leave that to the last. The book itself seemed to be a gay romance—something that was only vaguely surprising now that the traditional market for things outside of cis, hetero-romance was picking up. But there was nothing striking about the tale. Two men who fall in love, fall apart, and find their happily ever after.

He'd read it a thousand times.

With a sigh, he went back to the bio.

C.S. ROMAN LIVES in Northern California where he received his graduate degree in English. He's currently a professor at San Francisco State University, teaching literature and creative writing.

OLIVER FOUND that information oddly specific, as most of the authors writing under pennames preferred to keep details like that out of their bio. But to each their own, he supposed.

Clicking open the manuscript, Oliver sat back with his tea, and his eyes began to scan the words. The language and writing were an almost physical relief, he realized within the first few paragraphs. A few misplaced commas here and there were nothing like the constant passive language and run-on sentences he'd been dealing with over the last few weeks.

The author's prose was just short of poetic, not overworded, and not patronizing. The book opened with the introduction of a young man getting ready to start his first semester of college, and holding a secret so tightly, even the reader couldn't know right away.

He liked it almost immediately. Resigning himself to doing far more than just a few minutes of work that night, he settled in for the long haul. He was grateful to finally have some decent work, and something that made taking this job worth it.

Twenty-Nine

Oliver was all-but trembling when he walked into the office the next morning. It was more than obvious he hadn't gotten a wink of sleep, and while he would have loved to blame it on the fact that the book was so good—and it was—it went a little deeper than that.

Bursting into Jake's office, he sank into one of the chairs near his desk and waited for his boss to finish up his phone call. Jake gave Oliver a wary look, but hurried off the call, cradling the phone very carefully before leaning over the desk.

“Problem?”

Clearing his throat, Oliver said, “Big one. Er, well...might be. Might be a big one. You know that book I nicked from Kristen? From the new author?”

“Roman, yeah. What about it? I read the thing and I know it's good, so—”

“It's not that.” Oliver cleared his throat. “You know him in person? You ever met him?”

“No. He was out of the country when we got the approval, so his agent came in to negotiate for him. Is there a problem here?”

“Yeah, I erm...” Oliver cleared his throat. “I have to give it back to Kristen. I'll take that fucking vampire book back.”

“Why?” Jake pressed. “I thought someone like you would actually like Roman's book.”

Letting out a high-pitched laugh, Oliver sat back and covered his face. That was exactly the problem with the book. Someone like him. Exactly him, to be specific. It had only taken him three chapters to realize what he was reading. Three chapters to know where the book was going to end, and what was going to happen to the characters. Three chapters to know he was probably never supposed to read it.

At least, not like this.

“There may be a conflict of interest,” Oliver said, speaking through his fingers. He cleared his throat and attempted to sit up and look professional lest this get back to his father and he be dragged down to Ren’s office for a chat.

“Why? You know the author?”

“I think so. I think,” Oliver stopped, hesitating with his words because how did he possibly reveal that he was fairly sure C.S. Roman was Gabriel Bensaïd, and that the character by the name of Oscar was, in fact, Oliver. “I think this book is about me. Me and him, actually. I think Roman is my ex.”

Jake looked at him for a long time, then threw his head back and laughed. “Really fucking funny, Sasaki. But I’m too goddamn busy to...”

“Gabriel Bensaïd,” Oliver said, and Jake’s laughter abruptly stopped. Licking his lips, he sighed. “I knew about thirty pages in where it was going.” He scrubbed his hand down his face again. “The whole thing is our story.”

Jake’s eyes widened. “You’re serious? You’re not shitting me right now?”

Oliver shook his head, feeling miserable and aching. It had been a long time since he’d let himself really think about Gabriel. A long time since that hollow ache made itself known in his chest. He had something of Gabriel’s now, close enough to touch him, but still so far away. “I haven’t spoken to him in years. I don’t even think he knows whose publishing house this is.”

Jake licked his lips. “Well fuck me, Sasaki. Are you going to put up a fight about this? About the content of the book?”

Oliver startled in his seat, sitting up straighter. “Put up a...?” He hadn’t even considered that, not even for a second. It wasn’t just his own story being told, really. It was Gabriel’s, and the ending showed at the very least, Gabriel had been able to move on. “God, no! No, it’s not that. I was just thinking that maybe I should talk to him,” his mouth blurted before his mind could catch up. “To let him know that I’ve read the book. Tell him who, exactly, he’s signed on to publish with.”

“Oh, I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Jake said, shaking his head hard. “No, I don’t...”

“It’s only fair that he knows who runs this company,” Oliver insisted. “I’ve got his email on the marketing plan, so I could contact him that way, but I think it would be better if it came through a phone call.”

“Oliver,” Jake warned.

“He has a right to know who he’s publishing with in case he wants to pull out. If he finds out after, you know he could sue.”

Jake’s face fell. “I swear to God you live to make my life difficult.”

“I’ve not done a thing,” Oliver protested, but any other words died in his throat as Jake began to scribble something down on a piece of paper. He slid it across the desk, and Oliver looked down at a local number he didn’t recognize.

Slipping the number into his pocket, Oliver pushed up to his feet and cleared his throat. “I erm...I think I’m going to take the day off.”

“Mm,” Jake muttered, waving his hand. “You do that. And don’t fuck this up for me, Sasaki. This book will make good money.”

Oliver wanted to say something rude or snarky, maybe even push it far enough to see if Jake had the balls to fire him, but instead he turned on his heel and left. Ignoring Kristen’s imploring gaze, he slipped into an elevator and rode down to the ground floor.

The air outside, the foggy, almost refreshing breeze, was the only thing keeping him together as he started off down the street. The number in his pocket was almost burning, fierce and begging for him to do something. To call. To text.

Oliver found himself collapsing in a chair in the patio area of a café, the number in his hand, mumbling an order to the server. He was staring between the piece of paper and his phone, and eventually he entered the number into his contacts.

He wasn't sure how to go forward, and suddenly he was hitting Leo's number and saying a prayer he was catching his sibling between lectures. When it rang and rang, he nearly cried until a rushed voice picked up.

“Someone had better be dead.”

“I found Gabriel.”

After a long pause, Leo let out a heavy groan. “How? Where?”

He took five minutes to explain the entire story, and by the end, he was almost sobbing. “What the fuck am I supposed to do with this, Leo?”

“Obviously fucking call him,” Leo said sternly. “The universe is sending you clear signs. You have not been over him since the moment you met him.”

“He's moved on though,” Oliver groaned, dropping his head so low, it made contact with the chilled, metal table. “In his book, he...”

“That's fiction, you absolute twat,” Leo barked. “You think he wrote an autobiography?”

“He practically did,” Oliver said with a sigh. “I mean, cleverly hidden, but to the person who lived it, it's obvious.”

“You have to tell him you read it,” Leo said.

“I know that,” Oliver snapped. “But what the shitting hell do I actually say? Ring him up like, Oh hi there, Gabriel. Remember that day I tore both our hearts out because I was a piece of shit, and left you stood on the side of the road without

even a proper goodbye? Well, I'm an editor now, and your book just came into my queue."

"That actually works," Leo said.

"Fuck off, it does not," Oliver hissed. He lifted his head when the server returned with his latte, and he drank down half like it was full of liquor. Wincing at the violent burn on his tongue, he sat back and put one hand over his face. "I'm willing to bet he won't come anywhere near me if he knows I'm editing this."

"*Are* you editing it?" Leo challenged.

"Well no, actually. I'm returning it to the woman I took it from, but that's not the point. I doubt he'll even take my call once he sees my name."

"So, use your little penname or whatever it is and tell him you want to have an in-person chat."

"Isn't that kind of awful?" Oliver asked.

"I don't think there's any way you can be less awful in this situation," Leo pointed out. "At least it will get him to the meeting. Then you can say you're sorry or whatever the bloody hell you want to say to him. You can tell him you don't plan on halting the book, and you'll be having someone who doesn't know anything about the two of you handling it, so none of the content will be compromised. Then apologize for being a twat and confess you thought he deserved to hear that to his face and you're sorry for misleading him with the fake name."

Oliver froze, staring down at the fading foam in his latte. "When the hell did you become my voice of reason?"

"I've had that role since forever," Leo said impatiently. "And you know it. Anyway, I'm missing one my most important lectures for the day so if there's nothing else..."

"Alright, go on. I hate you though."

"You really don't. Text me and tell me how it goes."

With that, the line went dead, and Oliver dropped his phone on the table. He stared at it like it might explode, or

melt, or turn into a machine-version of Gabriel intent on taking revenge for everything he'd done.

But in the end, he finished his drink, took the number, and went home.

He knew it was a bad idea to have the number in his possession and be drinking at the same time. But to his credit, Oliver was mostly sober when he sent off the text message.

Hi, this is your editor with RS Publishing. I've just started the preliminary work on your book and was hoping you and I could have a quick meeting about the content. I'm in the city, and was told you are as well, so is there a good time we could meet up?

He added his work email address to ensure Gabriel would know he was actually employed with RS Publishing, and not some crazed murderer who was out to get him. Though Oliver wondered if maybe he was the only person who would have strange thoughts like that.

Either way, he was halfway through his third drink when the second text came through. The idea that Gabe had contacted him—though Gabe might not have known it just yet—was enough to make him feel like his stomach was trying to crawl out of his throat.

It was similar to the moment Oliver realized he was irrevocably in love with that adorable man, and probably always would be.

Taking a heaving breath, he grabbed his phone and opened up his messages to read.

Sure. I hope it's nothing too terrible. I've got early lectures at the university tomorrow, so we could meet after? There's a restaurant right off of Powell that serves vegetarian which I'm partial to. Does that sound alright?

After that text came the address and Oliver felt his eyes go very hot. His throat constricted at the thought that this was still his Gabriel. His curly-haired, ridiculous vegetarian who was now a big-named professor and probably absurdly happy with a man who worshiped the ground he walked on.

Like he had always deserved.

Oliver sent the affirmative text back, feeling subdued. This was so wrong of him. Wrong to spring himself on Gabe like this. But maybe the book was a sign Gabriel was over Oliver. That it no longer hurt to talk about, so he could use those old feelings to bring something inspiring to the masses.

The characters in the book didn't end up together, and maybe that's how it should have been always. Oliver hadn't done anything in life to earn Gabriel back. He'd shut himself away, and although he was no longer plagued by the demons of his early childhood, he hadn't ever been able to move on.

Not completely.

It was no surprise Oliver didn't get a wink of sleep that night, nor was it a surprise he didn't go into work the next morning. Leo texted, but didn't bother him, and Oliver held off sending the book back to Kristin until after the meeting.

The only thing he had to do was cancel with Will, but his new friend was amiable about it. "You wanna meet up later this week and talk about it? Because you sound really bummed."

"I am," Oliver admitted, staring at himself in the mirror and wishing he didn't look so exhausted. "That book I traded Kristin for ended up being written by my ex."

"Like the Big Ex?"

"The one who left a gaping hole where my heart should be?" Oliver asked with a bitter laugh. "Yeah, that one. I had no

idea, either. How fucked up is that?”

“That sounds too wild to be a coincidence, my friend,” Will said. “You’re going to meet him, right?”

“I’m the one who invited him out, so yeah. I just need him to know that I’m not actually going to be anywhere near the content of the book so nothing will be compromised. And I dunno...that I’m sorry I fucked up so badly he had to make a book about it.”

Will chuckled. “It’ll be alright, man. Just breathe a lot, and if all else fails, stay after he takes off and get stupid drunk.”

“Sound advice,” Oliver said with a laugh. “I’ll ring you later, yeah? Or I’ll text you. We’ll reschedule.”

“Sounds good, man. Be safe.”

Oliver hung up and quickly got in the shower, praying the hot water would wash away a little of the violent emotions raging through him. He had to do this. He could do this. He was a grown man with a job, a degree, and a life now that was all his. He was no longer responsible for anyone but himself, and that was something.

He at least had something to show Gabe. Assuming Gabriel didn’t take one look at him and run the other way.

Taking his time getting dressed, he went with business casual. Black trousers and white shirtsleeves fit him well, and he combed his hair as neatly as he could with shaking hands. The shower helped him feel better, but the dark circles under his eyes were as prominent as ever. Not that it mattered. Perhaps it was his penance that he should wear them to the dinner, knowing that Gabriel would probably be looking his best.

With a deep breath he left his apartment, phone and keys in his pockets, jacket tugged tight around his waist. He considered a cab, but it was less than a ten-minute walk and honestly, he needed to keep himself moving or he knew he’d start to lose his nerve. He tapped his fingers in a staccato pattern along his leg as he counted his steps to the restaurant.

He was early, at least thirty minutes when he arrived at the doors, and he quickly gave his name at the desk. “Andrew Jones,” he said, using his editing pseudonym.

The hostess checked her computer, then gave him a winning smile. “Your table should be ready in a few. Is it still for two?”

“It is,” he confirmed, “but he’ll probably be later than I am.”

“You’re welcome to wait at the bar if you’d like, and as soon as it’s ready, I’ll take you over.”

Oliver gave her a short nod, then walked over and was greeted by an attractive man with wavy brown hair and soft eyes. He looked Oliver up and down, and it was impossible to miss the glint in his eyes. “You look like you’re in need of a stiff drink.”

Oliver gave a rough laugh, scrubbing his hands down his face. “Am I really that obvious?”

“I’m afraid so,” he said with a chuckle. “It looks like an, *I need an extra half shot in my drink on the house*, kind of night.”

Oliver almost laughed. The thought of being hit on by the bartender as he was about to reunite with the only person he had ever loved was a bit absurd. But he took it for what it was. “That would be fantastic er...” He glanced at the bartender’s nametag. “Derek. How about a gin martini. Top shelf, extra dirty, two olives.”

“Rocks or up?”

“Up tonight. I don’t need anything cutting my liquor.”

“You got it.” Derek immediately got to work, mixing the drink fluidly. It was almost to the brim of the martini glass, and Oliver took a huge gulp of it, letting out a careful sigh. “You want to talk about it? I’m not exactly overwhelmed with business at the moment, so I can offer a friendly ear.”

Oliver sighed. “You won’t like it.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because I think if I offered you my number, you’d take it. And that’s tempting because you’re incredibly fit.”

Derek’s cheeks went faintly pink. “Guess you’re not the only one obvious around here.”

“Ah no, and it’s flattering. But the thing is, I’m about to have a very awkward, possibly very painful dinner with the erm...how does the phrase go? The one that got away?”

Derek’s eyes widened. “Oh yeah?”

Taking a drink, Oliver waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. “Mm, it’s all terribly complicated, involving me being a complete fucking mess, then having to leave the country, and never giving him a proper goodbye. Or well, the goodbye I *did* give him involved a lot of ripping out hearts and stomping on them.”

“His or yours?” Derek asked, leaning on the bar.

“Fair bit of both, I think,” Oliver admitted. “Let’s just say I pined, and the pining has destroyed any potential for relationships since then. So, as I said, no good for you. Sorry, mate.”

“Not even for one night?”

“Tempting,” Oliver said with a grin, then took another, long drink. “Believe me, it’s *very* tempting. But I just can’t bring myself to do it. Not even for casual shags.”

Derek sighed. “It’s a shame. You’re really adorable.”

Oliver rolled his eyes a little, but grinned as he bit into an olive. “Ah it’s the accent. Distracts from everything else about me that’s complete and total rubbish.”

Derek laughed loudly this time, then grabbed a napkin and scribbled his number on it. “In case you change your mind. Really.”

Oliver slipped it into his pocket but shook his head. “I won’t, but it’s given me at least a little bit of an ego tonight should I have to endure my ex talking about his happily ever after.”

“Mr. Jones?”

Oliver turned to see the peppy hostess waiting with two menus in her hand. “Ah. Table ready, then?”

“Good luck,” Derek called as Oliver hopped off the stool and took his martini in hand. “If you want me to spit in his drink, just rub your nose like this,” he swiped his index finger over the tip of his. “Just in case he’s got it too good.”

Oliver laughed and winked over at Derek. “You’re a real treasure. I hope you get lucky tonight.” He didn’t look back as he followed the hostess to the table. She set out the menus and then promised the server would be by within a few moments to see if he needed anything.

Sitting at the table now, his nerves started to get the best of him. His hands were on his thighs, but his fingers were trembling and quaking, and he was fighting off the very real urge to down the martini. Instead, he took another slow drink, and prepared himself for Gabe’s inevitable shock and fury.

Ten minutes passed, then fifteen. The time for the reservation had come and gone by twenty. Oliver was on his second drink and getting pity looks from Derek across the restaurant.

He was about to call it quits when he heard a too-familiar voice asking for his name at the front. His stomach jumped into this throat and he forced himself to take several, calming breaths. He was buzzing from the gin a little, which he wasn’t sure now if that was a good or bad thing, and he closed his eyes for a second.

When he opened them, there was Gabe. He looked so much the same and yet so different, and Oliver physically ached. Gabriel’s hair was shorter now, tamed a bit with product, though still a nest of curls just above his ears. His brows were dipped low, mouth in a thin line, and he was wearing trousers and a shirt similar to his own. It was strange seeing him like that, out of his patchwork jeans and threadbare t-shirts.

But it was still him. It was still the Gabe he'd walked away from three years ago, and his heart felt like it was about to beat out of his chest.

By some miracle, Gabe merely gave him a nod and took his seat. He didn't shout, he didn't even seem surprised which was the most startling part until Oliver realized what was happening.

"Jake told you?"

One of Gabe's eyebrows lifted, and then a very careful, very slow smile crept across his mouth. It showed one of his dimples, and Oliver was certain he might go into cardiac arrest. "Yeah. He sold you out."

"Probably for the best," Oliver muttered. "I'm a complete arse, but I wasn't sure you'd meet me if you knew who I was."

Licking his lips, Gabe turned his face up as the server approached. "I would very much like a pint of whatever your best lager is."

"We've got..."

"I don't care," Gabe said a little sharply. "Whatever's most expensive." He turned his gaze back to Oliver. "This is all on the company, right?"

Giving a startled laugh, Oliver nodded. "It is, yeah."

The server looked less than impressed but turned and walked off to give the order. Oliver looked up to see Derek watching, and he smiled, giving his head the barest shake.

"I almost didn't come, you know. I think I walked up to the restaurant, then turned back around forty times before I finally gave up and came in."

"I wouldn't have blamed you. Did erm...did Jake explain the whole thing?"

"Not all of it, I don't think," Gabe said, and sat back, crossing his arms. He cleared his throat, then sighed. "He only said you had gotten my book and were worried how I felt about you editing my work."

“I traded for it. Not on purpose,” Oliver added in a rush, wishing he had something other than gin to combat the sudden dryness in his mouth. “One of my co-workers was trying to set me up on this ridiculous blind date. I told her I’d go if she’d take my shite book for the decent one she’d just got. I didn’t... I had no idea it was yours.”

“Pename,” Gabe said quietly. His eyes were calculating, but they were soft, and Oliver swore his heart stopped beating for just a second because it had been so long since he’d been able to see Gabe’s face. His hands twitched, desperate to reach out and touch him, so he curled them in his lap.

“I got a couple chapters in, and it started to become fairly obvious. By the end, I knew it was you. It was cleverly done, don’t get me wrong, and very good. I’m impressed.”

Gabe gave him a little smile. “Thanks.”

“Jake all but threatened my life if I did anything to make you pull the book and run. Which I hope you’re not going to do. The book is going back to my co-worker who is an incredibly brilliant editor. You won’t have any trouble with her.”

“I’m not worried about it,” Gabe said, then looked up with a kinder smile when his beer arrived. “Thank you.”

“Need a few moments before you order?”

“Maybe longer,” Gabe confessed.

“Some water would be wonderful, though,” Oliver cut in. “And an appetizer?”

Gabe shrugged. “Have you still got the hummus one?”

The server nodded. “Cucumbers and carrots, or pita?”

“The veggies,” Gabe said.

The order taken, the server hurried off, and Gabe returned his attention to Oliver who was nervously poking at the stem of his martini glass.

“You know RS Publishing is my dad’s company, right?”

Gabe laughed and rolled his eyes. “I do now. I didn’t before, or that’s the last place I would have taken a contract from. But the offer was the best one I got, considering.”

“Considering?”

“The topic. It’s not exactly mainstream, so being offered an advance at all was pretty shocking.”

“Your story is compelling,” Oliver argued. “I mean, vaguely based on real life events, you made brand new characters come to life. It was impressive.”

“Yeah well, you were always easily impressed,” Gabe said, then took a drink as if to stop himself from saying more. “But thank you. I...I guess I was hoping some day you might actually read it, you know? Maybe not like this, but...”

Oliver gave a soft laugh. “Yeah. I reckon the end was one of those fuck yous. Look how brilliant my life is, I hope yours is shit.”

“Jesus, Ollie,” Gabe all-but whispered, and Oliver’s throat instantly burned with the desire to break down and sob. “That...that wasn’t what it was about. I just couldn’t bear to write an ending which left them miserable. I didn’t want to tell everyone that at the end of things, when you lose your first love, you lose everything for so long.”

Oliver shook his head. “I deserved it, though. I think about what I did, what you went through and...I...” He swallowed thickly. “I could have done things so much better, and I didn’t.”

“You could have, but at the time you were suffering, and your sibling had almost died. I wanted to help, but I didn’t know how.”

Oliver looked down at his hands, clasping them in front of his drink, and bit down on his lip so hard, it nearly broke the skin. “There wasn’t anything you could have done. I was a person who couldn’t be helped by anyone but myself. He’s better though. Leo.” He chanced a look up and saw Gabe smile softly. “Getting his graduate degree in psychology at Stanford.”

“So, he came back too?”

Oliver nodded. “He spent a year in rehab. I spent a year in intensive therapy. Got my dissertation finished and defended. Right after that, my dad offered me a job, and honestly it was then I realized the only place I felt at home was here.”

Gabe looked at him, his entire face gone soft. “So here you are.”

“Here I am,” he said, feeling a mixture of thrilled and miserable. He wanted so desperately to ask if Gabe had moved on. If the ending of his book was true and that he’d someone amazing. But he was too afraid of the answers. “You look like you’ve done well for yourself. Teaching and all that.”

“I can’t believe I actually got sucked into it, to be honest,” Gabe said with a slight chuckle. He quieted as the hummus and vegetables were set on the table, but neither of them bothered to reach for any. “I nearly bailed on the whole idea, but my aunt talked me into it right before she died.”

Oliver sucked in his breath. “Oh. I’m so sorry.”

Gabe shook his head. “It’s alright. I mean, I was sad, of course. She was everything to me, but I think she’d be proud of where I am today.”

“Of course she is,” Oliver said, almost harshly. “Who wouldn’t be. A fantastic job, a book on the way. If the ending is at all realistic, you found someone to make you happy...”

Laughing, Gabe shook his head. “Subtle, Ollie. You could have just come out and asked.”

Oliver flushed and shrugged his shoulders. “Seemed impolite.”

“When have you ever cared about polite? I know three years hasn’t changed you that much,” Gabe challenged, reaching for a carrot and poking it in his direction. He swiped it in the hummus, then took a bite and spoke around it. “And no, that part was fantasy. I had a few on and off relationships, but it’s hard for me, being gay and trans. It’s not the friendliest environment. Not everyone was immediately willing to see me exactly as I am instead of what I should be.”

Oliver felt his gut twist, and a bit of hate for anyone who had ever made Gabriel feel othered. He might have pined for him, but he hadn't been lying—to himself or to anyone else—when he had said he wanted Gabe to find someone who made him happy.

“I'm sorry everyone's shit. But if it makes you feel better, the one person I dated after you, crashed and burnt so badly, I think I still have singe marks.”

Gabe rolled his eyes. “Why would that make me happy? I meant what I said. I didn't want you to be miserable.”

“Hard not to think that,” Oliver said, his tongue moving faster than his brain, “when I did what I did.” He stopped and took a breath. “I've been miserably in love with you for the last three years, and well...I guess I just assumed you had wanted that for me.”

Gabe dropped the cucumber he was holding. “Ollie...”

“I'm not here hoping you'll give me another chance,” Oliver said in a rush. “Fuck, I shouldn't have even said that, but I could never lie to you. I just...I wanted to make sure you were happy. To let you know that book made me so bloody proud of you, and I just...I'm sorry. For how it all happened.”

Gabe took a long drink of his beer, then sighed. “It's alright. I don't think you've got some dastardly ulterior motive or anything. And for what it's worth, you seem a lot better, and I'm proud of you, too. You and Leo both.”

“He'll be really pleased that you showed up tonight. He always really liked you.”

Gabe grinned. “He was a good friend. I thought about him a lot. Worried. Did a lot of google searches to make sure he ended up you know...making it out alright. Never found much, but he updated his Facebook profile picture occasionally, so I felt like it was safe to assume.”

Chuckling, Oliver shook his head. “He's still a social media whore. But he's doing well.”

“And you?”

Oliver sighed. “As well as can be expected. I got through everything, moved past it. Stopped letting my anger control me. Came to terms with the fact that I’m never going to be cured because what happened to me defined me, but it doesn’t have to destroy me.” He stopped and grinned. “All that psycho-babble you used to love so much.”

Gabriel laughed a genuine, deep belly laugh. “Yeah. You seem different. In a good way.”

Settling back into his chair, Oliver felt something uncoil in his chest, and for the first time since he had said goodbye to Gabriel, he realized that maybe he was going to be okay. If there wasn’t a future, that was fine. He would move on from it and live, but this was what he needed. This exactly. The smile, the knowing that ultimately, he hadn’t ruined anyone, not even himself.

They fell into easy conversation after that, Gabriel talking about his past relationships and telling funny stories about several of his students. He talked about defending his thesis, and about the doddering old men in his department who tried to run things the way they had in the fifties.

Oliver in return talked about Sam, about the ridiculous decisions he made, about living with him for three whole weeks. “It was a record, you know,” he pointed out.

Gabe snickered over his salad. “Yeah, I know. Did you give yourself a little ribbon at least? Gold star that read, *I tried?*”

“No, you shit,” Oliver said with a wide grin. “I bought myself an entire chocolate cake and ate it. Completely alone.”

“You’re disgusting. You’re a disgrace,” Gabe said.

Oliver sniffed, turning his nose up in the air. “I’m fantastic, you mean. A sodding role model for all the pathetic gay boys who can’t seem to keep their hearts or affairs in order. And anyway, he was just terrified of becoming American, and yet he expected me to move to *Wales*. Where they don’t actually like the English. Where I’m liable to be mugged just for

existing as English on their soil. At least here they find me charming.”

“Oh, we only tell you that you’re charming. Secretly we’re slipping you drugs to make you compliant. Soon enough, you decorate your apartment in pictures of horses running through water and American flags. Then the conversion is complete. Only you don’t get citizenship and we constantly give you shit about foreigners taking our jobs.”

Oliver threw his head back and laughed so hard his cheeks ached. “You are the worst. I don’t know why I ever missed you.”

“Because I’m a fucking delight. Didn’t you say that to me once?” Gabe asked, pointing his fork at Oliver.

The mood sobered a moment after that, as Oliver recalled the exact moment. It was one of the moments he realized he was falling for Gabe, hard and fast. His smile softened and the laughs died down.

“This was good. I don’t know how to thank you for this.”

Licking his lips, Gabe pushed his plate to the side and clasped his hands on the table. “Can I tell you something?”

Oliver nodded as he sipped his water. “Anything. I think I’ve sufficiently embarrassed myself with my honesty, so if you’d like to have a go, I’m all ears.”

Gabe smiled faintly, but took a quick breath. “I never got over you. I tried. So hard, you know? I hoped maybe if I wrote it down in the book, it might take the edge off. But instead, all it did was bring you back here, and now I don’t know what to do with myself.”

Oliver felt his tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth, refusing to budge, refusing to form a reply. All he wanted right then was to take Gabe in his arms and beg for a second chance, but he’d already promised both himself and Gabriel that’s not why he’d come.

“Any chance you still smoke?” Gabe said, breaking the silence.

Giving a wet, tense laugh, Oliver nodded. “Technically no, but you know me. Why? D’you fancy one?” He quickly took out his card and slapped it on the table, motioning for their server to come over. “We’re going to pop out for a quick second. Can you run that for me?”

The server swept up the card as Oliver rose, and he tried not to walk too close to Gabe as they hurried for the front doors, and down long enough to be safe smoking distance.

With shaking hands, Oliver reached into his pocket for the cigarettes and the lighter he wasn’t supposed to have, handing one over to Gabriel before lighting his own. He took in a long drag, tipping his head back as he let the smoke ease out through his mouth and nostrils.

“You sure know how to end an evening, Gabe. You know that?” Oliver asked with a laugh.

Gabe shoved one hand into his pocket, the other holding the cigarette to his mouth as he looked at Oliver over the V of his fingers. “I suppose I do,” he replied, his voice thick. “I didn’t mean for that to all come spilling out, but here you are. Still fucking bright as ever, almost overwhelming with your stupid smile and your gorgeous hair. You were supposed to age like shit and if I ever saw you again, I was supposed to just breathe a sigh of relief like I’d dodged a bullet.”

“It’s not easy for me either, you know,” Oliver pointed out. “Comparing every poor sod I meet to you—and they can never measure up. I came here to apologize and promise never to interfere in your life again, and all I can think about is shoving you against the wall and kissing you breathless.”

Gabe gave him a long, hard look, taking a huge drag of the cigarette. Letting it out, his hand hung down near his thigh, and barely audibly he said, “I’m not stopping you, Ollie. I should...but I’m not.”

It was like his body moved before he could even think about it. His cigarette was on the ground, his hands were twisted into Gabriel’s shirt, and his former lover’s back was pressed against cold brick. He had his face so close he could

smell the smoke on Gabe's breath, feel the heat from his skin, and his eyes closed.

"If I start kissing you now," Oliver whispered, "I don't think I'm ever going to be able to let you go."

Gabe let out a slow chuckle, reaching one hand up to cup around the back of Oliver's neck. "I think I'd be okay with that."

"Yeah?"

Gabe laughed again. "It's better than torturing myself with memories and telling myself I can never have this again. I want you. I'm probably the biggest fool on the planet, and God help me, but I want you."

Shoving a knee between Gabe's legs, he hitched him close. "If I do this, that's it. It's over for the both of us and you're fucking mine. Please understand that. I'm going to hold you, and fuck you, and kiss you every goddamn day. I'm going to marry the hell out of you and build us a house and that's it. You hear me? This is your one chance to get out."

Gabe dropped his cigarette and palmed Oliver's cheek. "No, Ollie, because that's the thing. I never had a chance. I was always yours."

Feeling a rush thorough him like a volcanic eruption, Oliver couldn't stop himself. His lips crashed forward, hard, needy, bringing him back where he knew he belonged. Bringing him back to his love. Their mouths and tongues moved together like they'd never been apart, with a ferocity that spoke volumes. Gabriel let out a small moan, and Oliver felt dizzy with need as they pressed their bodies together in a hard line.

When he pulled back, they were both a little breathless, and Gabe was holding on to the front of his shirt. "Go inside and get your card. I'll get a cab. We're going back to my apartment."

Gulping, Oliver nodded and used every ounce of his self-control to pull away from his lost love. "Okay. I...yes. Okay." He fought back the fear that this was Gabriel playing some

game with him, as some sort of final retribution for leaving the way he had. He tried not to think of how he would feel stepping back to the street only to find Gabriel gone.

He slipped into the restaurant and found their table. His card and receipt were sitting on a small, silver tray, and he snatched it up. With trembling hands, he scribbled a massive tip, his name, then hurried back out.

For a terrifying second, he didn't see Gabriel anywhere. Then, as his eyes scanned the car park, he found Gabriel waiting near an open cab door. He saw the smile waiting for him, the smile which said this wasn't over, that this was just the beginning, and his heart thumped hard against his ribs.

Rushing to the door, Oliver let Gabriel take his hand as they slipped inside the car, and he didn't say anything as the love of his life gave directions to his apartment. The ride felt longer than it was, a ten-minute eternity of the pair of them holding hands, thigh pressing against thigh.

Then the cab came to a halt and Oliver felt his insides start to quake again. He could hardly believe it was real. The last three years had been spent missing Gabriel so much his insides felt flayed raw, and he had been convinced this would never happen. That Gabriel had been lost to him for good.

He laughed as they climbed the stairs—different building, different life, but so familiar. Gabriel all-but tugged him, the pair of them giggling a little, giddy with anticipation. Oliver felt almost overheated as he waited, foot tapping on the floor while Gabriel got his keys out and fumbled with the lock.

“Hurry up,” Oliver muttered.

Gabe gave him a disbelieving stare, a small snort as he finally got the lock to turn. “Don't rush me. I'm nervous.”

Rolling his eyes, Oliver pressed his hand to the small of Gabriel's back. “I am too. I never thought there would be a day I would be nervous to be alone with you.”

Turning with the door half open, Gabriel palmed Oliver's cheek. “I know. It's...weird.” He backed up through the door, dragging Oliver with him, and it slammed shut like a

benediction. Almost physically startled, Oliver flinched as Gabe pushed him back against the wood and brought his face in close.

“This isn’t it, right? I’m not going to wake up to an empty bed ever again?”

“No,” Oliver muttered against warm lips.

“Promise me,” Gabe begged. His hands went up, almost desperate as they clung to Oliver’s shoulders.

Reaching up, Oliver ran his fingers into the curls he had missed so much it was like a physical wound, and his eyes closed against his will. “I promise. God, I swear it. There’s never been anyone but you, Gabriel.”

His words were silenced again with a kiss, with Gabriel’s body pressed against his. He surged, moaning, wanting and needy as he clawed at the man in front of him. Gabriel responded in kind, not breaking contact as he pulled Oliver forward through the apartment, and into a dark bedroom.

It smelled so much like Gabriel, Oliver had to take a moment. Tears prickled in the corners of his eyes as the memories rushed back. Their first kiss, the first time they had sex, the first time Oliver knew he was irrevocably in love with this man.

The bed was untidy, but as usual, Gabe was unashamed of it. Instead of trying to tidy up, he busied himself with buttons and the zippers on trousers. Before long they were in nothing but shirts and boxers, looking at each other like familiar strangers.

Oliver reached his hand out, one finger tracing along the bottom of Gabriel’s shirt. “May I?”

Nodding, Gabriel stepped forward and Oliver went through the old, familiar motions of undressing him. It was like muscle memory, his hands not needing his brain to remember where to touch, to elicit those needy groans and the surge of hips. His fingers traced gently over faded half-moon scars on Gabriel’s now-flat chest—a body so different yet so familiar, it made him ache.

They fell to the mattress, crawling up toward the pillows with Oliver on his back, Gabe between his legs. “If we do this, I’m not letting you go again,” Gabriel whispered, echoing Oliver’s words from earlier.

“And I’m going to hold you to that,” Oliver said, his hands gripping Gabriel by the hips. “I was so fucking stupid. Such an absolute fool. Please, please forgive me.”

“I did,” Gabe whispered, pressing his lips against the side of Oliver’s neck. “Minutes after you left, I forgave you, because what else was I supposed to do? I loved you. I still love you.”

A wrecked sob tore from Oliver’s throat, but there was no time to give in to it. He was moving with Gabriel now, their body heat mingling, hot mouths ripping at each other, trying to find every inch of exposed skin.

“I’m going to suck you off,” Oliver whispered as he felt the heat rising off Gabriel’s skin.

Pushing up on his elbows, his lover met his gaze. “Yes. It’s been so long.”

Licking his lips, Oliver eased Gabe’s thighs apart, leaning in to take a deep breath of the scent that had been absent for so long. He used his fingers, parting Gabe’s folds to see his thick, swollen dick nestled in his hair.

Fuck, he’d missed this. Nothing had ever compared.

Leaning in, he ran his tongue along the length, then closed his lips around it. He suckled, feeling Gabe’s hips bucking up, desperate for more friction. Oliver traced a touch along the inside of Gabe’s thigh, toying at his entrance.

“Here?” he asked, pulling away just far enough to speak.

Gabe groaned. “Please. Please...”

His begging was the same—though his voice was a little deeper and more desperate than it used to be. Oliver felt like the same person all of a sudden—that madly in love, terrified man before he shattered apart. Only he could feel the places inside him that had been put back together, and suddenly he

realized that Gabe was the glue holding him in the shape he was in.

“I love you,” he said, then slipped two fingers inside as he applied his mouth once more.

Gabe shouted, his fingers twisting in Oliver’s hair as he guided him in the rhythm he wanted. It didn’t take long before Gabriel started shaking in earnest, and as Oliver gave the man’s dick a firm suck, he quivered around his fingers and came, soaking Oliver’s hand.

“Oh my love. My love,” Oliver murmured, pressing a wet, open-mouthed kiss to Gabriel’s inner thigh.

Gabe let out a shaking laugh before he reached down and pulled Oliver to him, kissing him slow and thorough. “Again. I want you inside me.”

Oliver stared down at him and brushed a collection of curls away from his forehead. “You’re sure.”

“I’m going to die if you don’t fuck me tonight, Ollie,” Gabriel all-but growled.

Oliver needed no more answer than that. Letting Gabriel go so he could grab a condom, he rolled it over Oliver’s painfully hard cock, then laid back with his legs spread. Oliver kissed him as he reached between them to position himself, and in seconds, he’d slipped inside.

There was a single pause—just the beat of a heart—and then they were moving together, like they had never been apart.

Their mouths were barely touching, sharing breaths, tongues dancing and tangling together. Every part of their body moved in tandem, reminding them this was meant to be. That the space and distance between them would soon be nothing more than a memory.

“I love you,” Oliver whispered on the edge of a sob. His balls tightened as he teetered on the edge. “I love you so fucking much, and I am never letting you go”

Gabe touched his cheek. “Come inside me. I need it.”

So Oliver did.

When Oliver was finally able to catch his breath, he rolled off to the side and curled one hand over his lover's hip. Gabriel turned, reaching out to brush away some of Oliver's fallen hair, and ran his knuckles down Oliver's cheek. "Did you really mean it?"

With a laugh, Oliver shut his eyes and leaned into the caress. "I have never meant anything more. I'll never stop being sorry, and I can't promise there won't be rough times. I'm never going to be cured, you know."

Gabe's fingers trailed along the scarring, touching each bit of puckered flesh with reverence. "I know. I never expected that."

Licking his lips, Oliver opened his eyes. "I've stopped living for other people. I've stopped blaming myself for what my mother did. I never stopped loving you, but...it's different. Because I think know how to love you the way you deserve. In the way I didn't understand before."

"I believe you," Gabe said.

Oliver closed his eyes against the unexpected emotion hitting him directly in the chest. He had no idea how badly he'd needed to hear that. Shuffling closer, he laid his mouth against the side of Gabriel's pec, marveling at the soft skin, hoping that his beloved felt even better in his body now than he had before.

Another beat passed, and then two. His heart began to steady itself.

"What do we do now?" he asked quietly, finally opening his eyes to look at Gabe.

A small smile graced Gabe's mouth, and he leaned in for another, gentle kiss. "I don't really know. I guess we take it day by day. See where this goes?"

"Well, I might already have some idea," Oliver said with a small grin. Because he did.

Wherever there was Gabriel, there was home.

And that's exactly where he needed to be.

Epilogue

Pressed up against the door, Gabe's head fell back, and he let out a tiny moan. "This," he gasped as Oliver attacked his neck, "is a terrible idea. They're going to be here any minute, and Will still has his key from when he was watching the cat. He could walk in here and see us."

"You've no idea how much of a fuck I do not give," Oliver muttered against flushed skin. His hand snaked into the unbuttoned front of Gabriel's jeans and slipped under boxers. Teasing Gabriel's dick gently with the tips of his fingers, he sucked a small mark onto his collarbone. "You really want me to stop?"

Gabe's hips bucked as Oliver's fingers teased his entrance. "Oh, fuck. No, don't...God, don't stop."

With a wicked grin, Oliver slipped two fingers inside just a little, rubbing hard against Gabriel's walls. "I didn't think so."

"You are an absolute bastard," Gabriel panted as he pushed his hips down hard against Oliver's hand.

"So they tell me." His smug grin dropped when there was a pounding on the door.

"Hey, sex fiends, you know the constant-fucking, honeymoon phase is supposed to end at some point, right?"

"Fuck off!" Oliver cried through the door, not stopping what he was doing. He grinned as Gabe shoved the side of his fist into his mouth to keep from crying out. "Just start setting up, yeah? Leo's going to be here in about thirty minutes."

“Yeah alright, but you owe me,” Will called back through the door.

When the footsteps died down, Gabe turned heated eyes on his lover. “Fucking...hurry up,” he panted.

Oliver sped up his motions, thrusting his fingers the way Gabriel liked, rubbing Gabriel’s dick with his thumb until his boyfriend’s head fell back against the wall and let out a muffled cry of ecstasy. Feeling hot fluid spill over his knuckles, Oliver carefully pulled away, easing himself out of his boyfriend’s jeans.

“You love it.”

“I love *you*,” Gabriel corrected, “and therefore tolerate your assbattery.”

“Assbattery, is it?” Oliver repeated, mocking Gabriel’s accent.

With a snort, Gabriel grabbed a towel off the bathroom counter and threw it at his lover. “Wash up. You don’t need to be getting all up in the food with sex hands.”

Oliver rolled his eyes but went for the sink as Gabe shook out his curls, then left the small room. Grinning at himself as he turned on the water, Oliver let out a very self-satisfied sigh. It had been two years since reuniting with Gabe, and he had been half-convinced for at least a year of it, that it was going to fall apart.

That the Universe was going to remain as cruel and cold as his mother had been and continue to tease him with what he wanted most, only to rip it away again. But that didn’t happen. Gabe was still here, living with him, going to bed with him every night.

Gabriel’s book had done well too. Not topping the charts, but enough to contract a second, then a third. Enough to pull in decent money each quarter.

Their relationship wasn’t perfect, and Oliver had no delusions that it would be. Their fights were loud and fantastic, both of them cutting to the quick with angry words

and accusations. But they were fast to make up, fast to remind each other that they loved each other and always would.

It helped with their friends around. Will and Derek had met the night Oliver invited them both out for drinks, and while they started out as friends, it was obvious from the moment they met, there was something there. Oliver couldn't be happier about it, and the four of them spent more time together than they did apart.

Leo was still living in Stanford, getting ready to start his first year of practice as he worked on his MD. But he visited several times a month, saying he needed to keep an eye on Oliver, though it was clear his sibling just missed the company.

It was nice. It was the family he had always dreamed of having and thought maybe had been beyond him. Maybe he was too broken for it.

Daily, Gabriel reminded him he was deserving.

Swiping his hands on the dry towel, Oliver tidied his now-short hair, then wandered into the kitchen where Will was showing Gabe the latest line of organic, hand-made soaps the Farmer's Market had picked up.

"Bloody hipsters," Oliver muttered to Derek who handed him a beer.

Rolling his eyes, Derek leaned against the counter and crossed his arms. "Tell me about it. Do you have any idea how much shit I get for showing up to work smelling like patchouli?"

"I have never, ever in my life put patchouli on you," Will complained, tossing a cracker at Derek's head.

"Mhm, whatever you say, babe." Derek grinned and nudged Oliver in the side with his elbow. "So, how's work?"

"Not changed since we had drinks on Wednesday," Oliver said. He glanced over at the table and saw the gaudily wrapped gifts. "What did you get Leo?"

“That hideous black dress with the cat on it he was eyeing last month,” Will replied, pouring some sort of ugly, brown lotion on Gabriel’s hands. “The one he wouldn’t stop going on about.”

“And that set of books,” Derek added. “And a bottle of two-hundred-dollar scotch.”

“You spoil him too much,” Oliver complained.

Gabe rolled his eyes. “You got him nine-hundred-dollar Louboutin’s.”

Oliver flashed two fingers up at his boyfriend. “They were on a sale. And I’m his brother. I’m supposed to do the too-expensive shit. And anyway, he got me and you a seven-night stay in Hawaii, so I owe him at least five more pairs of nine hundred dollar stilettos.”

Gabe smiled at the memory of their last holiday and shrugged before going back to his conversation with Will. Oliver smiled and looked over at Derek who was watching his own boyfriend with some fondness.

“You know, two years of blissful happiness later, and I haven’t even gotten a gift basket or anything,” Oliver complained.

Derek blinked. “For what? A random invite to a shitty bar? I like to think the universe would have thrown us together anyway.”

“No one appreciates me around here,” Oliver groaned.

Before anyone could reply, the front door opened, and Leo stepped in. He was bright-eyed, looking nice in his ripped jeans and white t-shirt, and he had his arm threaded through his new girlfriend’s. Oliver had met her a few times and thought she was wonderful. Her name was Emily, a grad student at Stanford going into biochemistry, coming along just as Leo’s relationship with his boyfriend Max was falling apart. They seemed good for each other, and Oliver couldn’t have been happier about it.

“Nice James Dean thing you’ve got going on,” Oliver said as he yanked his sibling into a hug.

“Arse,” Leo replied, kissing Oliver on the cheek.

Emily nudged Leo. “I told you everyone was going to think James Dean.”

“What the hell *are* you going for?” Oliver questioned.

Leo flushed, and Emily rolled her eyes. “He’s been on a Grease kick lately.”

“Oh Christ,” Oliver muttered. “I’m getting a drink before I get into any of that. Anyway, happy birthday, you shit. I’m glad you’re here.”

Leo hugged him again, then eyed the presents. “I hope you know I’m not waiting for food to open these.”

Gabriel, finally done with his inspection of Will’s funky bath products, slid across the kitchen to put his arm around Oliver’s waist. Leaning his head on Gabe’s shoulder, the pair watched as Leo tore into his gifts, all-but crying over the dress, and the noise he made over the shoes could hardly be considered human.

Oliver smiled, turning his head to kiss Gabe on the cheek, and was rewarded with a gentle squeeze around the hips. “Reckon he likes it all?”

“I think so,” Gabe said, laughing when Leo kissed the side of the black heel. Looking up at his boyfriend, Gabe’s dark eyes shone with affection. “Happy?”

Oliver looked at him for a very long time, letting the emotions crash through him before his tongue formed around the words. A soft smile turned the corners of his mouth up, and he leaned his head in to whisper in his boyfriend’s ear, “There’s not a word for what I am. But yes. I am very, incredibly happy.”

Gabriel smiled and turned his head for a kiss. “Good,” he mumbled against Oliver’s lips.

Pressing their foreheads together, Oliver smiled again. “Yeah, it is rather. Very, extremely good.”

THE END

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About the Author

E.M. Lindsey is a non-binary writer who lives in the southeast United States, close to the water where their heart lies.

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