

A black and white photograph of a man with a well-groomed beard and short, dark hair. He is looking down and to the left with a contemplative expression. He is wearing a plain white t-shirt. His left arm is visible, showing a wristwatch with a metal link band and several tattoos on his forearm. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows on his face and neck, and highlights on his hair and the watch.

PAPER
SWANS

E.M. LINDSEY

Paper Swans

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E.M. Lindsey

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Content warnings: mentions of narcissistic parenting, childhood neglect, and abandonment.

Paper Swans

They've spent years sharing everything with each other.

Love.

Loss.

First kisses.

And quiet promises.

But the one thing Domenico will never be is Shiloh's. It's a cruel fate, but it's one Shiloh can live with so long as Dom is happy. So long as they never stop being friends. But when Shiloh asks Dom to go as his date to a costume party, he realizes his best friend is going to discover a few things about him he's never told anyone. A few things he's afraid to say aloud to himself.

While Shiloh doesn't think Dom will abandon him, it might just change the dynamic of who they are, and that's not something he's sure he's willing to live with.

Paper Swans is a standalone book that was previously released in the Heart2Heart volume 5 anthology. Paper Swans has been expanded into a 35k word short novel now with a dual POV and additional spicy scenes.

It features best friends to lovers, epic pining, comfort food, emotional support chickens, bad limericks, origami, lipstick, red dresses, and the sweetest most satisfying happily ever after.

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“**O**i, mate. Are you going to share or what?”

Shiloh tucked his sandwich close to his body like he was about to be forced to fight to the death to keep his lunch. “Absolutely not.”

“Has anyone ever told you how cruel you are?” Jules asked, sinking lower in his seat.

Shiloh rolled his eyes and took a massive bite of his food, grinning in Jules’s direction. The light was coming in through the window just so, which made the entire room completely washed out, making him unable to see anything except where Jules’s shadow contrasted with the sun’s rays. Not that he really cared. There was very little in this meeting he gave a single fuck about.

The headmaster had it in his head that all the teachers needed to attend these godforsaken workshops to keep up to date with education techniques, presumably ignoring the fact that nine-year-olds were just tiny sociopaths who weren’t clever enough to do more than emotionally torture them all year long.

And by the time they either sprouted into fully-fledged psychopaths or outgrew their vicious tendencies, they’d be well out of Shiloh’s classroom and torturing form teachers. Frankly, he’d made the best idea when he started studying education, though his best friend thought he should have just come to work with him in his bakery. Of course, Dom had been on about it since his parents had turned over the keys and

high-tailed it back to Naples. Dom didn't seem to care at all that all Shiloh had to do was be near a tray of bakes and they'd burn down to tiny lumps of coal.

Dom had never cared about that sort of thing. He and Shiloh had been attached at the hip since they were seven, and Shiloh had been absolutely arse over tit in love with Dom—the quiet sort of unrequited love—since he was sixteen and coming to realize he was gayer than the day was long. Dom had always humored his crush, Shiloh figured, since he'd never called him out on it, and Shiloh knew he was obvious.

He'd never given anyone the time of day who Dom didn't approve of, and every date he'd attempted to go on over the last several years had ended with him either on Dom's sofa eating leftover cookie dough or on the phone with him wondering why his life was such a shitshow. It was a rhetorical question because Shiloh knew damn well no one would ever measure up to his baker, but Dom was kind enough never to bring it up.

Someday, Shiloh knew he'd be standing at an altar watching Dom marry the love of his life, relegating Shiloh to the weekend friend who'd show up for Sunday dinner with whatever produce and eggs his dad's farm had managed to produce that week. And he'd do it all with a smile, ignoring the way he'd be slowly dying inside.

But that was a fate he'd resigned himself to when they were sixteen, and Shiloh had walked in on Dom kissing Sarah.

Luckily, it hadn't worked out with her. She was now going on her eleventh year of dating the asshole in the seat next to Shiloh in the meeting, and if she were to ever accept a proposal, it would be one from Jules. But the fact remained, even when Dom had come out as bisexual—three years after Shiloh had quietly and sobbingly confessed he was gay—Shiloh would never be the man for him.

And that was fine.

Really.

He had his friendship.

And his sandwiches.

“You act like they’ve been blessed by the Virgin fucking Mary,” Jules mumbled, and Shiloh could hear him rustling around in his bag.

Shiloh just grinned as he finished half the sandwich, then tucked it back into the bag and fished around for what he knew was lying at the bottom. An intricately and perfectly folded bit of paper with a message on the inside.

He pulled it out and ran his thumb over the creases, tracing out the shape of the swan that Dom had left him. There would be a note inside as well, but since he couldn’t see it, he’d wait until they got on the train.

It wouldn’t say anything profound. It would either be some filthy limerick, or it would be a request for Shiloh to bring him back some bao buns from their favorite spot over on Piccadilly that neither of them could be arsed to unless they had business in London.

“How much time have we got?” Jules asked.

“No idea. Can’t see shit in this room with all the shades up. What time is it?”

“Oh, erm,” Jules hummed for a second. “Just gone half eleven.”

“Then four hours,” Shiloh said. “Why the hell are we having lunch so early?”

“Because this fucker is a sadist, and we should have gone out with everyone else,” Jules said.

Shiloh raised his brow and turned to face the foggy blob that was his friend. “You insisted you wanted to stay back for a chat.”

“Right. That is to say...I did, in fact, ask you to stay back.”

“You sound weird. Are you on drugs? Did you get high before this started?”

Jules laughed. “Fuck me, no. But I probably should have. I feel like I might vomit.”

Shiloh pushed his chair back slightly. “These are new shoes.”

Jules scoffed. “I’m not being literal. Christ. I’m...Fuck. I don’t know how people do this.”

“Do what?” Shiloh asked. Real and actual fear started to build in his stomach. “Mate, are you dying or something? How worried should I be?”

“Not at all. Or maybe the most worried you’ve ever been. I want to...Fuuuuck.” He saw movement, then heard the sound of Jules slapping himself in the face. “Alright. The thing is, I’d like to ask Sarah to marry me at her costume party, and I wanted to get your...blessing, I think.”

Shiloh froze. “You...want my blessing?” he repeated.

“Well, Sarah hasn’t got a dad, has she? And her mum...” Jules trailed off and didn’t need to finish his sentence because they all knew about Sarah’s mum and the reason why Sarah had lived with Shiloh and his dad while they were in upper sixth. They didn’t talk about her often. Or at all.

Shiloh quickly shook his head. “It’s not that I’m not flattered, though honestly, if you wanted to ask someone, my dad’s probably the one. But also, you do know that she’s going to literally gut you like a fish if she finds out you tried to ask for someone’s blessing to propose to her, don’t you?”

And then the reality hit.

After eleven bloody years, he was finally going to ask. Nearly everyone had become convinced that Sarah and Jules were never going to get married. And whenever someone brought it up, Sarah would go on a long-winded rant about marriage being an antifeminist tax scam. Not that Shiloh understood it, but he respected it, and he thought Jules was on the same page.

“Mate?”

“Yeah?” Jules said.

“What changed? Last time I heard, marriage was on the hell-no list.”

Jules laughed quietly. “It still is. But...I don’t know. I just love her so bloody much I can’t function sometimes. This isn’t for something legal or official,” Jules said, and Shiloh breathed a little easier because he was pretty sure if that were the case, Sarah would throw the ring in his face and tell him to fuck off straight into the sea. “I just want the entire world to know how much I love her. And since I can’t actually give her that, I can at least declare it in front of all our friends and family.”

Shiloh was both melting inside and turning green with envy because he wanted that. And not just with anyone. With one particular person that he would never get over. But his life was not a weekend BBC special about lifelong friends finally finding love together or whatever.

“Well, you’ve got my *support*,” Shiloh said, careful with his words because he didn’t want Sarah to gut him. “She’s my best friend, and you’re as good as since you come as a package deal.”

“High praise,” Jules said flatly.

Shiloh laughed. “We’ve known each other half our lives, mate. You and Sarah kept me sane all through uni.”

“Pretty sure that was Dom and his biweekly care packages,” Jules said.

Shiloh flushed but hoped he could play it off as the heat coming in through the windows. “Have you talked to Sarah about all this? Is it going to be a surprise?”

“Well...a bit. She doesn’t know the when. Or the where. Or the how,” Jules said.

Shiloh rubbed at his eyes, wishing everything wasn’t completely washed out. His head was starting to pound, and they had hours to go. “Sounds solid. So long as she doesn’t throw you out on your arse for assuming.”

“I think she’s looking forward to it,” he answered, then paused. “You alright, man?”

“Headache,” Shiloh confessed.

Shiloh heard him stand up and a few seconds later, the bright light in the room faded into something dusky and soft. His vision didn't return right away, but as he slipped his glasses over the bridge of his nose, things started to clear up.

Instead of a fuzzy shadow, there was Jules with an almost bashful grin on his face. Shiloh understood what Sarah saw in him. He was one of the first people who understood how to be soft with her and her trauma.

Shiloh and Dom didn't really get it. Not the way Jules did. They understood love couldn't fix the way she'd been mistreated and then abandoned on the side of the road. Literally.

They understood that Shiloh's dad, in spite of loving Sarah like she was his own, couldn't fill all the holes her parents had left behind. They got that loving her wasn't enough to repair anything from before, and that her sharp edges weren't ever going to be softer.

But no one empathized with her. No one let her be herself without walking on eggshells. No one ever made her feel safe until Jules had come along.

Shiloh had worried for a long time that eventually Sarah's acerbic nature and almost cruel rejection of public affection and attention would drive Jules away, but it only seemed to make him more devoted to her. Eventually, he'd come to realize that Jules just loved her for who she was, not in spite of it or for a person she might become.

He just...loved her.

It was yet one more tick in the column of things Shiloh desperately wished he had and never would. Dom loved him of course. They'd formed a bond of misfit outcasts that could never be broken. Dom didn't think Shiloh was fragile because of his shit health growing up and his wobbling eyes that would only ever see the world in washed out shades of grey. The first time Dom saw his white cane, instead of getting weird about it, he asked Shiloh if it was strong enough to leave a welt if he swung it hard enough.

And spoiler: it was.

And on the flip side, Shiloh had never found Dom was worth less with his own struggles. His raging dyslexia and ADHD made school next to impossible, and the idea of university made Dom laugh until he couldn't breathe. But Shiloh was constantly overwhelmed by Dom's genius. He was big and rough sounding, and he'd never quite lost all of his Italian accent, and the people around Benld thought he was thick and a bully and figured he'd be one of the few in their year who spent his young adulthood in prison.

The love between them could never and would never be replicated by anyone else, but Shiloh understood perfectly well it would never cross lines or break boundaries, no matter how much he wished for it.

He thumbed his paper swan again, then looked back up at Jules. "So what is your plan?"

Jules ran his hand down his face. "So you know how she's decided we have to go as couples costumes?"

Shiloh groaned because yes, he did. When they were little, Halloween was hardly a thing. It was something from American films that reminded him a bit of Purim, except with a lot more candy and less baking and sitting in the synagogue pews listening to their ancient rabbi's warbling voice while pulling faces at his dad's interpreter, trying to get him to laugh.

Sarah swore she started the trend of trick-or-treating and cheap costumes and liked to take credit with a massive, fuck-off fancy-dress party the last weekend of October. Shiloh didn't mind in spite of the fact that he was one of their only friends who didn't drink or date or generally enjoy himself at all in public situations.

He had a reason why, and it wasn't so much of being an introvert as it was sitting on another secret not even Dom knew. A secret so heavy he rarely even admitted it to himself. And Halloween seemed to threaten his control every year because he was subjected to half the men in their little village walking around doing exactly what he wanted to do.

They paraded through Sarah's in their fishnet tights and lacy things and short skirts and no one gave a shit.

And God, the fire of need burned deep in his belly, but he didn't want it for a night. He didn't want it as a costume.

He wanted to feel soft silk and lace under his clothes, pressed against his skin, all the time. He wanted to have a lover peel them away, laying soft kisses where his skin would tingle. And knowing he wasn't brave enough to say it aloud to himself told him it wasn't something he'd ever get.

So he suffered.

In silence.

"Shiloh?"

Clearing his throat, he realized he'd lost the thread of the conversation. "Sorry, mate. I'm just not with it today. What were you saying?"

"I've convinced her to choose *The Corpse Bride* as our theme. Only I'm going as..."

"Emily," Shiloh filled in for him. "I see the genius of it."

Jules laughed. "Yeah. It's probably going to be a disaster, but I'm going to ask Dom to help. Maybe bake something I can hide a ring in. He goes mad for all that romantic shit."

Shiloh winced. He didn't mean to, but it would always hurt knowing Dom was capable of all the things Shiloh wanted—needed—and he would eventually give them to someone else. He caught Jules's concerned look and waved him off. "Ignore me. The headache. I'm sorry I keep interrupting."

"Forgiven," Jules said far too easily. "Want to crawl under the table and have a quick kip. Just don't snore, and I'll tell this wanker you had a family emergency."

Shiloh laughed and shook his head before spotting a smudge on his lenses. He pulled them off and rubbed them on his shirt. "Not worth it. We'll be done soon, and I'm hoping he'll cut out quickly so we can get the earlier train."

“Don’t hold your breath,” Jules muttered, and as if on cue, the door opened, and the instructor walked in. He looked like every self-important, arrogant professor Shiloh ever had the misfortune to study under.

He was weedy and thin and tall, and he pulled a face at Shiloh. “No sunglasses indoors.”

Shiloh let out a small breath. “Sir, I—”

“He’s colorblind, you ignorant ass. He needs them to see properly, which he told you at the start of this seminar. *Yesterday*. After you gave him shit about it then.”

“Right, sorry,” he said, sounding anything but. After a beat, he turned toward Jules. “Please open the shades back up. I can hardly see a thing.”

“Absolutely no—”

“Just do it,” Shiloh said under his breath. “It’s only a bonus when I don’t have to look at his face.”

“Lucky bastard,” Jules muttered, then got up to do as he was told like a recalcitrant teenager.



ONE OF THE bonuses of knowing Jules was that he came from an obnoxiously rich family. Shiloh would have loved him as a friend anyway, but he’d long since stopped protesting whenever Jules insisted they take advantage of his trust fund and book things like first-class tickets for trip that barely lasted an hour.

It seemed a waste except on late afternoons after a week-long education conference run by snobby assholes. Jules was at a little bao bun cart before they departed, and Shiloh was able to put his feet up and enjoy the drawn shade, where he could see properly without a headache stabbing him in the temples.

He was holding his paper swan, thinking about Dom's face, and his laugh, and his grin with the two perfect dimples in his cheeks. He was thinking about his lips, and how he'd tasted them only once when Dom asked to kiss him because Shiloh knew he was just experimenting, but he also knew he'd never get the chance again.

The kiss had been terrible. Dom had tasted like garlic and onions, and it was too wet, and he clearly didn't know what he was doing with his tongue. But Shiloh had been patient and soft, and the kiss had turned into every fantasy Shiloh had ever had at his young age.

And then it was over.

Dom curled onto his side, linking their hands together. "Thanks," he'd whispered into the dark.

And the next morning, neither of them had spoken about it and never would.

With a sigh, he carefully unfolded the little swan and stared at the text. It was written in fat, block letters the way Dom always wrote notes to him because it was the only way Shiloh could read them properly. The spelling was atrocious which meant no one had helped him, which made it all the more precious.

*There once was a teacher caled
Shiloh*

Who wood never tel a singel lie

He brot me pork buns

Bcoz of my puns

*And wont judg me for being a
guy*

*(who can't finish this poem bcoz
I can't think of a good line. I miss
you. Com home soon.)*

Shiloh jumped half a foot when Jules dropped into the seat next to him, and his nose filled with the rich scent of barbeque and spices.

“Paper swan?” Jules asked. “You need me to read it to you?”

Shiloh quickly folded it back up and slipped it into his pocket. “It was just one of his limericks about the pork buns.”

Jules snorted a laugh. “I don’t know why he likes these things a day old.”

“I stopped questioning the way his mind works years ago,” Shiloh said with a small smile. He’d only been away from Benld for a week, but Christ, he missed Dom. He glanced at the window in front of their seats, seeing the late afternoon glow, and he could picture Dom and his dad on the farm, doing the evening feed for the chickens, then having tea and likely playing music since Shiloh wasn’t there to complain about it.

“You’re smiling.”

Shiloh snorted. “Happy to see the back of this place.” He took the box Jules offered and slipped it into his bag, then adjusted his seat back a bit, turning to rest his head against the train wall. The car gave a small jerk as it prepared to depart, then it shot forward. Once they were safely en route, Shiloh cleared his throat. “So tell me about this proposal, then.”

Jules clapped his hands together with a massive grin. “Alright. So here’s what I’m thinking—and tell me if it’s crap because I want it to be perfect, and I need your help.”



Setting his phone down, Domenico deliberately kept his gaze on the counter, not bothering to look up at his friend, who was clearly trying to spontaneously develop laser vision so she could bore holes into his chest. He knew if anyone could randomly manifest powers in order to make her displeasure known, it would be Sarah.

She began to drum her fingers on the marble, and he continued to knead the dough a bit rougher than he should have been.

Which meant he'd have to discard that batch. The last thing he needed was customers complaining about scones with the texture of river rocks.

“So are we going to talk about how you've decided to torture yourself some more, or...” she finally said, disturbing the tense silence that had been wrapping around them since she'd strolled through the supply door.

Dom swallowed thickly, eyeing his cup of tea, which was half gone and probably stone cold. “Nope.”

“So...we're *not* going to talk about how you're coming to my party as Shiloh's plus one? *Again.*”

“No,” he said a little more sharply this time. He could have happily gone through the rest of his life quietly pining for his best friend, but Sarah could never just let things lie.

She scoffed and her heels clicked as she crossed from the counter to the prep table, staring him down. Her scent was heavy and floral after working in her shop all morning. On Fridays, she made all her shop’s soaps and usually smelled like lavender and roses all weekend. And he found he quite liked it at the moment. Her presence was distracting him from the fact that he hadn’t seen his best friend in an entire week, and he was starting to get a bit twitchy over it.

Again. Like did every time Shiloh went out of town.

He tossed the rock-hard ball of dough into the bin and sighed. “Well, one batch ruined. I hope you’re happy,” he snarked, finally glancing at her out of the corner of his eye.

“You and I both know those are stress scones, Domenico.”

He winced as she full-named him.

“Why do you keep doing this to yourself?”

Letting out a sigh, he didn’t bother pretending like he had no idea what she was talking about. His love for Shiloh was a secret only to the man himself. And it wasn’t because Dom had been subtle about it. He was like a bull in a china shop and always had been when it came to tripping over his heart.

He’d been that way since he was eleven, lumbering through the classroom door and around desks, about six inches and a stone bigger than all his classmates who were glowering at him like he was some sort of hill beast they were meant to slay. It was double maths, though, so everyone was miserable and needed someone to take it out on. Dom, of course, was brand new from Naples, and his ‘funny accent’ and big arms made all the girls stare and all the boys seem to collectively hate him.

Except one boy, of course. The smallest boy, who he soon learned lived on a farm. He had wispy brown hair and glasses so thick they made his eyes look five times their usual size. They were also tinted red, which Dom thought was kind of

cool, but it was obvious that was one of the reasons none of the boys were friendly with him either.

Not that he seemed to mind much—or he'd just grown used to it and didn't notice anymore.

He smiled at Dom, though, like he wanted him there. And he laughed when Dom casually threw some back-chat at the teacher and got his first-ever detention. Shiloh's laugh was sweet, and it was warm, and Dom knew he was going to get a lot of detentions after that just to hear the sound.

“Why don't you mind being in trouble?” Shiloh had asked him the next day.

Dom had just shrugged. “Doesn't seem worth it to keep my mouth shut. And anyway, my parents don't mind. Reckon yours do, though, don't they? Is that why you never tell those tossers to piss off when they come after you?” He asked it because after school, Shiloh had been bullied by a couple of boys who were big enough to be in upper sixth, but he seemed so...nervous when Dom told him he should stand up for himself.

He later learned Shiloh's mum was gone—she'd left him when he was a baby. His dad and his gran ran the farm. Their family had owned it for ages. They were also Deaf, which Shiloh then confessed was one of the reasons the kids bullied him—the other being he had poor eyesight and couldn't see colors at all.

It was the first time Dom wanted to beat the absolute shit out of everyone who even looked at his new best friend wrong, and it wouldn't be the last.

Instead of making Shiloh explain himself anymore, though, he just threw an arm around him and tugged him toward the courtyard. “Well, I'll beat them up for you then, alright?”

Shiloh had just rolled his eyes and elbowed him. “It's fine. I've learned to ignore them anyway.”

“Well, how about you teach me how to talk to your dad then, yeah?” Dom had told him, and his heart felt like it was

too big for his chest when Shiloh's grin lit up his whole face. "Then he'll let me stay over on weekends, and we can forget about those wankers. I can probably manage farm stuff. I bet I'd be great with chickens."

Shiloh stared at him a moment, then elbowed him back. "Best leave you to the squash."

They were inseparable after that, and twenty years later, Dom was well aware that was part of the problem. They'd spent every waking moment of their childhoods together. They'd talked about running away some nights and staying when they were feeling weak, the idea of homesickness feeling worse than leaving their little town. One night, when the dark made him feel safe, and long after Dom confessed that he fancied blokes, Shiloh finally whispered that he did too. It was the first time Dom had felt a spark of hope, though he wasn't foolish enough to believe it would get him anywhere with his bright, beautiful best friend.

But they were growing up, and the future wasn't so much a fantasy anymore. They had decisions to make and paths to follow.

For Shiloh, he knew leaving Benld was an inevitability—moving away from home, going to uni in the city, becoming the adult he was always meant to be. Shiloh was meant for great things—that much Dom had always known. He was so smart, and he was too good for that little farm in their little town.

And bloody hell, how could he compete with that future? All Dom would ever have to offer was his little bakery and the cottage down the road. It was all he was ever good at—all he would ever *be* good at—and Shiloh didn't deserve to be held back.

So he braced himself for what was to come. Losing Shiloh to the world would be like losing a limb, but at least when it was over, he could start to heal and move on.

Only...well, it didn't actually happen. They passed their exams and talked about uni still like it was this abstract idea that they'd get to one day. But Shiloh was too afraid to leave

his dad now that his gran had passed, and Dom was just terrible enough, and just afraid of losing Shiloh enough, that he didn't try to stop him.

And then, it was just life. Shiloh started working as an English teacher, taking over the farm on weekends, and Dom was left his parents' bakery. They spent every Thursday night at the local, drinking too much beer and moaning about it the next morning. Dom helped Shiloh with the honey harvest every spring and collected chicken eggs on Saturdays.

Sundays, Dom joined Shiloh and his dad for tea because, in spite of how wrong he knew their life currently was, this was his family.

It felt like borrowed time in all the best ways, and every time he told a story that made Shiloh laugh, Dom sold another piece of his soul for whatever extra hours the universe was willing to give him.

Like the year before on Halloween, when he and Shiloh had been standing in the kitchen with flour in all their grooves and edges, and Dom was recounting his most recent shit date—when the guy he'd met on Grindr kept calling him grandpa during his hand job, and Dom realized the man had only agreed to go out with him because he was all grey and the fucker had a *fetish*.

Of course, Shiloh had laughed himself to tears over that, and he'd been calling Dom Gramps for the last twelve months until Dom started actually pouting about it and took Sarah up on her offer for a salon day. He'd been coloring his hair black ever since.

Whenever Shiloh pet his hair after that, which was still coarse and thick, Dom felt like he was melting. "You don't look old to me," Shiloh tried to soothe. "He just wanted the aesthetic without the saggy balls."

Dom scoffed. "How would you know the state of my balls?"

"Because you walk around the house naked for at least five minutes after your shower whether I'm there or not. And

anyway, I think your grey hair was nice. It suited you.”

Dom rolled his eyes and shoved at him. “That’s because everything you see is grey. The black makes me stand out less.”

Shiloh only smiled at him and shrugged. “My point stands. And I don’t think there’s anything you could do to make people not notice you. You’re one of the most beautiful men I have ever set my eyes on. Even if they’re kind of shit.”

And like everything that tumbled from his best friend’s lips, those words wrapped around his heart and squeezed, making him feel a rush of love he knew would never be returned.

He’d been pining since he was eleven, and he was pretty sure that was going to remain his state of being until the day he was dead and buried.

“...*matching* costumes, Dom?” Sarah’s voice cut into his thoughts, and Dom startled back to the present. He stared at the bowl he’d laid on the scale, then the pile of flour he was meant to be measuring. “Neither of you even dressed up last year, and now you’re coming as a bloody couple?”

Dom let out a long-suffering sigh and didn’t ask her to repeat what he’d missed. “It’s no worse than anything else we do. This is just...how it is, okay? I can handle myself.”

She gave him a flat look, and he turned away, not in the mood for another one of her lectures about how he needed to properly move on from his pointless crush because it was never going to happen. He didn’t need the reminder that he wasn’t good enough, or fit enough, or smart enough for his gorgeous, genius best friend.

That happened every single morning when he looked in the mirror.

Not that he thought he was ugly. He rather thought his greys gave him character like Shiloh always said every time Dom complained about them. His dad’s dark locks had lasted well into his sixties, but his mum had always had streaks of iron in her curls, which he’d loved. And well, his face was

alright, he supposed—just shy of plain with his big jaw and his furry brows that he couldn't seem to tame no matter how many times Sarah convinced him to have a wax and a trim.

He was just...a lot. Big in his body, massive hands, a little...maybe not thick, but it had always taken him a bit longer to catch on to things than anyone else. He ran on instinct—the desire to protect those he cared about and make everyone laugh. Of course, Shiloh had always been at the top of the class, and he knew his best friend deserved someone who could keep up with him when he wanted to talk about all those ancient philosophers and old wars and rising and falling dictators and things.

Shiloh had tried to tutor him for years, and he entirely credited him for being able to pass two A-levels, which he considered a triumph. He wasn't overwhelmed with university acceptance letters the way he was certain Shiloh had been, but he'd gotten a couple, and that was something. But it wasn't good *enough*.

“You know what? We're going to fix this before Shiloh and Jules get back. I'm going to find you a date for the party,” Sarah said.

Dom blinked at her. “Sorry?”

“You heard me,” she scolded. “I want you to bring a date, and I know you won't do it on your own, so now I need to get involved. It needs to be someone who isn't Shiloh. I don't care if you go through with this ridiculous plan to match with him. I want you to find someone you connect with. I want you to think about yourself for once—even if it's just your dick. I mean, seriously, how long has it been since you've gotten laid?”

He hated her tone—that sort of smarmy teacher's tone she had developed after coming back to teach the little snot-nosed kids they'd once been. She used her tone on him too often, and it was because it always worked. Like right now when he didn't argue after she snatched his mobile off the counter and tapped in the password she absolutely should not know.

“That's not your business,” he finally snapped.

She gave him an apologetic look, but he could tell by her expression she was not going to give up. “Fine. I can tell from your shit mood that it’s been a while. So let’s think. An app would be the best bet since there’s no real fresh meant in Benld...”

He swallowed thickly, then shook his head. That had been the man who called him old, and he wasn’t looking for a blow to his ego. “Absolutely not. You remember what happened last time I tried that.”

She glanced up at him and shook her head with a sigh before switching to another. “That’s fair. Every one of those you’ve brought round were total wankers.” She hummed, then tapped on an icon he couldn’t see from where he was standing. She wouldn’t exactly have a shortage of conversations to peruse. It had become sort of a hobby, trolling the apps and flirting. He just rarely pulled the trigger because, well...

None of them were appealing.

None of them were Shiloh.

“Ooh, wait. There’s Gary...” she started, and he groaned. He didn’t need to search his memory for *fucking* Gary.

Gary was a fucking weirdo who worked at the phone accessory stand on the pier, and he’d been trying to chat Dom up for months. The only reason he was in Dom’s DMs was because the man was persistent, and well, Dom supposed Gary was a sure thing if he ever got desperate enough. And all he could do was pray it never got that bad.

“Pass. He once told me he gets tingles when he lets his dog lick his feet,” Dom said with a shudder.

Sarah’s eyes went wide. “Fuck’s sake. Alright...” She scrolled a bit more. “Dan. Oh, he’s fit. Oh, and he’s good at flirting. Is that a sext he sent you last week?”

Dom flushed and tried to take the phone, but she danced out of reach. “Once again, none of your business. And our names are *Dan* and *Dom*,” he pointed out. “So obviously that’s a no go.”

She pursed her lips. “Is alliteration your only complaint about him?”

He was pretty sure he knew what alliteration meant, but he wasn't one hundred percent on it, so he just shrugged. “We don't get on that well in spite of his clever sexting.” That wasn't entirely a lie. Dan worked at the gym, and he never hesitated to bring it into any and every conversation. He was a bloody walking Crossfit meme and obsessed with the idea that people wanted to stroke his abs.

Which they didn't.

They were only sort of okay.

But Dom was almost positive the man had a fetish for getting his partners worked up by telling them how much other men wanted to rail him.

“Okay...and you're sure you don't want to give women a go?” She glanced up and winked at him, and he rolled his eyes.

He hadn't entirely ruled women out. His sexuality was fluid enough that he'd been attracted to plenty of women. He just hadn't dated any so far, and he was pretty sure it had everything to do with the fact that he only wanted one person.

“Oh, wait. Look at this one. Kellen. You two look like you've been getting on.”

The back of Dom's neck flushed. He had been flirting with Kellen a rather lot, and he also knew—something that Sarah was sure to pick up on—it was entirely because he and Shiloh could have been brothers. He'd moved to Benld a year back to open up a chip shop masquerading as a gastropub. It was a sister restaurant to the one his parents were running successfully in London.

Dom had almost entirely lost his Italian accent, developed an unnatural love for tea over coffee and meat pies, but he could never get behind the oil-drenched fried fish, no matter how hipster and modern it was dressed up.

He knew it was likely that he was spoilt by all the fresh food from Shiloh's farm and the fact that he constantly cooked

enough for Dom to survive any winter. But it was also a little bit that he was being hard on Kellen because he didn't *want* to fancy someone else.

He didn't want a Shiloh replacement.

It was unfair to them both because Kellen was perfectly nice and deserved a lot better than being sloppy seconds.

He winced when he saw Sarah's fingers were flying over the keyboard, and he knew his time was up.

"He said yes," she said after a beat.

Dom's eyes narrowed. "Did you tell him it was you sending that invite?"

"You mean did I tell him that you're such a mess your second best friend had to get a date with him for you?" she asked, putting one hand on her hip.

"That's not..." he said with a sigh. He carefully set his tray aside after inspecting he hadn't ruined the entire batch with his frustration, then he turned to face her. "I *could* get a date. I get dates all the time. I've had plenty of one-offs. My dry spell isn't because no one's interested, Sarah. I'm not a bloody monk just because I'm in love with someone who won't ever want me back."

There was something in her eyes when he said that about Shiloh not wanting him. Not pity, not even sympathy. It sort of felt like he was the only man outside of a joke the entire village shared.

"What?" he grunted.

She passed a hand down her face. "It's not just you who's hopeless, babes. I've told you time and time again, if you proposed to Shiloh tomorrow, he'd say yes."

Dom rolled his eyes. "Of course he would. He's a fool, and he'd do almost anything if he thought it would make me happy. But if he wanted me—" Dom's voiced thickened, and he measured it so his ache wasn't as obvious. "If he *proper* wanted me, he'd have told me by now. If he proper wanted me," he clarified, "we'd be together, and you wouldn't need to

be finding me a date to your party. But you and I both know it's never going to be like that."

"You're hopeless," she breathed out. "If that's what you think—no, if that's what you really *believe*—go to the party with Kellen. You can still hang round with Shiloh all you want, but then you'll have someone to go home with. And maybe you'll get the chance to see you deserve to be with someone who..." She stopped, then shrugged. "Someone who knows your worth and shows you every day."

He immediately wanted to argue that Shiloh did that. He'd never hesitated, not even once, to stroke Dom's ego and make him feel better and more attractive and smarter than he actually was. But his love would never cross the line into the reality Dom so desperately wanted it to, and that wasn't Shiloh's fault.

Dom just needed to accept he would never get what he wanted.

Three

Dom only fell asleep on Benjamin's sofa when Shiloh was away. And on the occasional night when he'd had a few too many and didn't want to make the walk back to his place. He told himself it was only to keep an eye on things, but in reality, it was just an excuse not to feel lonely for a bit. He'd never impose when Shiloh was home, but Benjamin never sold him out whenever his son was away.

Dom loved the shit out of the old man—nearly as much as he loved his own dad who still FaceTimed him three times a week in spite of insisting he didn't know how to work FaceTime and that it was wasted technology. Dom didn't regret his parents moving back to Italy. He'd gotten his bakery out of it, and he got to see his parents retired and happy.

His mum was constantly complaining, though, that his dad's lack of work made him vulnerable to things like stray cats and stray children who came round for pets and baked goods respectively. Dom had seen it with his own eyes when he'd visited for his birthday the year before, and it settled some of the worry in his gut that his parents would just waste away without having something to do all the time.

Of course, he rarely visited but only because he didn't want to hear them nattering on about his not having a boyfriend or a girlfriend and letting his parents grow old and die without being able to hold at least one of his children. Never mind each of his sisters had a bloody litter of children and his parents were never short of small, sticky hands to clean and dirty faces to wipe.

Dom stopped telling them he wasn't having children—that he most definitely wanted a boyfriend, but it wasn't likely he'd ever end up with one because they'd never compare to the one person he wanted.

He glanced over his shoulder at the window and realized it was only late afternoon. He hadn't meant to kip at all, but somehow the end of the week had gotten to him. He'd sent Shiloh a text before he went to help Benjamin with the Friday weeding, but Benjamin had caught him yawning enough times that he'd ordered him back to the house.

Dom promised himself he'd just rest his eyes for a bit.

He fumbled for his phone on the coffee table and froze when his fingers came into contact with a small, very familiar box and a tiny, folded paper swan sat on top of it. He didn't bother unfolding it. He couldn't read for shit, so at best, there would be a poorly done little sketch on the inside, but likely there was nothing.

That wasn't the point of the swans anyway. He only wrote the limericks because he liked the way they made Shiloh laugh. Once upon a time, anyone laughing near his writing would have made him lose his mind, but Shiloh had never once made him feel less for it.

And in all honesty, he could sit and listen to Shiloh's laugh and only Shiloh's laugh for the rest of his life and never tire of it.

Stretching his arms up over his head, Dom worked a couple of kinks out of his back, then shuffled down the hall to Shiloh's bedroom. If he squinted hard enough, Dom could see the place the two of them had spent all their time as kids. He could still see all the posters Shiloh insisted on putting up, even though he couldn't see them for shit.

Once, he spent all his pocket money on music magazines, cutting out all the prints of Kurt Cobain because Dom was madly in love with him and in the middle of his grunge phase. Dom tried to protest, humiliated he was so obvious, but Shiloh had just told him to shut up, then covered the far wall—every

single inch of it. If Dom hadn't already been in love with Shiloh then, that might have done it.

The room was also the place where they'd shared their single kiss. The quiet night Dom had whispered about wanting to know what it felt like, and Shiloh saying yes. Dom, knew his heart was going to shatter but unable to take it back because if he could only have it once, he wanted it.

Shiloh had been soft and sweet. He'd tasted like the lemon he put in his chamomile tea and smelled like the goat's milk soap his dad made to sell at the market on weekends. Dom had touched his cheek and let the warmth of his skin rush up his arm, and he stored that memory away in perfect form.

Taking a breath, Dom peered through the door and found Shiloh at his desk, one hand in his hair, the other tapping his marking pen on an essay. Shiloh had been a chronic workaholic. He spent his days at the school, his afternoons on the farm, and his weekends trying to fit in both.

Dom was convinced the man was going to drive himself into the grave long before he was supposed to be there, and it terrified the shit out of him.

"Didn't you just spend a whole week doing rubbish teacher stuff?"

Shiloh spun around in his chair, jumping up so fast it went hurtling behind him. Dom's arms were open just seconds before they were full of Shiloh, and he buried his nose in his friend's soft curls, breathing him in.

"Why didn't you wake me?" Dom asked as he set him down.

Shiloh rubbed the back of his neck. "Dunno. You looked really peaceful, and Dad said you needed the rest."

"The traitor," Dom muttered.

Shiloh laughed. "You know how he is. Thanks for staying here with him and keeping an eye on him."

Dom scoffed as he dropped to Shiloh's bed and kicked his feet up to shuffle toward the pillows. "Come here and give us

a cuddle. You don't actually need to do work right now."

"I have seventeen essays to finish marking. So yeah, I do," Shiloh said, but he abandoned his desk again and climbed up beside Dom, curling against him.

Dom understood why everyone thought they were in love—why no one realized it was only one-sided. They truly were like a couple. Not the old married sort but the ones who were still in their honeymoon phase. And it killed him a bit more each day, but it was difficult to care.

"How was it? How was dickface?" He couldn't help Jules's old nickname. It wasn't meant to be cruel now the way it had been when he was dealing with raging jealousy that Shiloh and Sarah had gone to uni and made a best friend who wasn't him. But he grudgingly had to admit he kind of liked the guy. A bit.

"We have to stop calling him that," Shiloh said, peering up at Dom. His eyes were a bit more restless than usual. That happened when he overworked himself. Which was always. "He and Sarah are going to get married."

Dom laughed. "Mate, she's never going to marry anyone."

"She's going to marry him," Shiloh said. "He's proposing at the Halloween party."

Dom blinked, shock running through him. "Oh God, no. No. She's going to eviscerate him for asking. She's going to ruin him. Then they'll have to break up, and she'll be a mess, and we'll have to—"

"She knows," Shiloh cut in.

Dom's teeth snapped together. "She knows?"

"He says she knows," Shiloh clarified. "He doesn't want to make it legal or official or whatever."

Dom's frown deepened. "So why bother?"

"Because he loves her," Shiloh said, sounding oddly defensive and a touch bitter. "Because he wants to tell the bloody world how much she means to him. He can't really do that, but he can tell all of Benld."

Dom sighed and settled back down, pushing his fingers into Shiloh's curls. That almost always calmed him, and this time was no different.

Shiloh let out a tiny sigh and pressed his cheek to Dom's chest. "It sounded nice. Romantic."

"Jealous?" Dom asked. It was a joke, but the way Shiloh stiffened, Dom realized he hadn't taken it that way.

"It's stupid, I know. I mean, it's not like anyone wants to date me, even if I had the time."

The confession danced on the edge of Dom's tongue like it had done a thousand times before, and he forced it back. "You know what I'm going to say to that, don't you?"

Shiloh let out a tiny grunt and nestled harder against Dom's side. "Yes. Shut up and give us a cuddle, please. It was a long weekend."

Dom was helpless to do anything but wrap his arms tight around the man he loved and pretend like his heart wasn't resting fragile and aching between his teeth.

"So did anything interesting happen whilst I was away?" Shiloh asked, his voice thick and sleepy.

Dom carefully combed fingers through his hair as his gut twisted. He thought about Sarah and her demand that he bring a date to her party. That he stop pining and actually try to move on from the way he loved Shiloh. And it wasn't new.

Dom had brought around more than a few dates over the years. They just...hadn't lasted. And he'd long since accepted they never would. "Sarah bullied me into taking a date to the party."

Shiloh sat up so fast, the side of his head cracked on Dom's jaw. He winced, rubbing it with the side of his hand as he met Dom's gaze. "Does that mean—"

"I'm still going with you," Dom said quietly. He reached for Shiloh and eased him back down, not able to breathe without his friend in his arms. "She's just meddling again."

Shiloh made a soft, displeased noise under his breath.
“You should stop letting her control you like that.”

“Yeah,” Dom said. He began to comb Shiloh’s hair again, feeling him relax and slip more toward sleep. “I really should.”

But he wouldn’t. Just like he couldn’t give his heart to someone else, he’d never let Sarah stop trying to love him in her own way.

Four



The one thing Dom loved best about his little bakery was that it was close enough to walk to the shops and then home no matter what the weather was like. Even in pissing rain, it only took ten minutes, and there were days he half thought the rain nourished him like it did all the plants on the hill at Shiloh's farm.

In reality, though, he just hated driving. He'd attempted to get the hang of it once when everyone else was starting lessons.

But along with the fact that he could barely read or write well enough to pass the written exam, cars just felt too big and too reckless. After his third panic attack behind the wheel when Benjamin had offered him a few lessons, he gave up unless he absolutely had to, and told everyone his feet and the trains were all he ever needed.

Of course, it also led to days like that late Thursday afternoon when some shithead, probably from London, came careening round a corner, hitting a puddle at top speed, and soaking him through to the skin. The asshole didn't even look back at him as they headed out of Benld, and he stood there like a soaked cat—glowering ineffectively at the open, empty road.

He shook himself off, then trudged up his lane and managed to make it through his front door without any further incident. His house was quiet now that his parents were gone, leaving behind only echoing memories of a loud childhood and a lot of laughter. And it wasn't like they were dead or lost, but standing there dripping wet and lonely, their absence felt particularly painful.

He was staring down the road toward forty now, and all he wanted was to curl up on the sofa under his nonnie's quilt that smelt a bit like cloves and mint and eat whatever soup his mum had been working on. He wanted to watch crap telly and listen to his dad shout at *Millionaire* contestants for their wrong answers.

Digging his phone out of his pocket, he stripped down on his way to the bathroom and turned on the shower. Grimacing at the trail of wet he'd left behind on the floorboards, he piled everything in the corner, then leaned against the edge of the sink and hit the first name on his favorites list.

"Are you ringing me from the toilet again?" Shiloh asked by way of greeting.

Dom rolled his eyes. "I just wanted to call and let you know that when I die of hypothermia, you can have my DVD collection."

Shiloh scoffed. "Mate, no one watches DVDs now. I have, like, six streaming services—two of them anime only. I don't even think I own anything that can play a DVD."

"You're too modern. The worst farmer in the world," Dom said with a groan, smiling because Shiloh's voice soothed that ache inside him, even if it couldn't make it go away entirely. "You're not supposed to have telly. You're supposed to have, like, books. And candlelight."

"Fuck off." Shiloh was quiet a moment. "What happened? Why are you hypothermic?"

"Just some twat in a car who probably thought it was hilarious to drive into the puddle I was walking past."

Shiloh swore quietly under his breath with hot rage that made Dom's heart pound because, although Shiloh would never love him the way he wanted to be loved, he still cared about Dom more than anyone they knew.

“Want to come over? Dad's been making a fuss about his guitar being out of tune. And he made that chicken and dumplings thing you love so much.”

Dom groaned loudly. He'd seen the dish on some American film when they were kids, and Dom had developed a quiet obsession. His parents told him to get over it because to his dad, if it wasn't gnocchi, it didn't count as a dumpling. But Benjamin had quietly searched down a recipe, then perfected it.

He'd surprised Dom on his birthday when he was fourteen, and ever since, he used it as a bribery tool when he needed a favor.

And usually, that favor was tuning his guitar.

Dom had been confused, of course, when he first met Shiloh and he told him that his dad was a musician.

“But...he can't hear anything,” Dom had argued. “How can he play?”

Shiloh had just rolled his eyes and said you didn't need to hear music to enjoy it—which sounded ridiculous. But Shiloh invited him over so his dad could show him what it was like.

Dom was nervous, but Benjamin beckoned him over, then had Dom lay his hand on the side whilst he began to strum. Dom had been half expecting something close to cat shrieking sounds, but the man's fingers had danced over the strings of his Spanish guitar, the scales cascading like water along a rushing stream. He felt the way the notes rose and fell in vibrations under his fingers, and in that moment, he understood.

‘I want to learn too,’ Dom had signed to Benjamin a few weeks later—one of the first proper sentences he'd managed in BSL.

Benjamin had taken the request just as seriously as when Dom had asked to learn how to collect eggs, and how much to water the squash, and how to harvest honey without being attacked by a swarm. So really, there was very little Dom would ever say no to whenever Benjamin asked.

Dom also didn't need to be bribed with chicken and dumplings, but it did put a bit of a spring in his step as he hurried through his shower. When he was mostly dry, he threw on a warm jumper and some jeans and began the walk up the hill.

They always called the Evanses' farm 'the hill', though it wasn't really much of one. It was just tall enough to stand out a bit and make it easy to spot from the road. Of course, they were also liberal with the word farm since it wasn't anything more than a small patch of land that only grew enough vegetables for the local market stall.

But they had always gotten by with what they had.

It was a brisk walk over, but Dom found he rather needed it after his long day. He knew his mood was because how deeply in love with Shiloh he'd always been and how hopeless it was. And he supposed it would have been a lot easier if Shiloh had been the sort of person to notice years ago and just rejected him to his face.

Dom had always been pragmatic, so he would have been able to move on. But Shiloh had always stayed close, had always gone out of his way to make Dom feel like he was worth something, and that little spark of hope remained.

The horrible little voice in his head tortured him with *maybe. Maybe* there was a chance. *Maybe* Shiloh hadn't said anything over the years because he was just too afraid of ruining what they had. *Maybe* he just didn't know that Dom was arse over tit mad for him and would be until the day he died.

The last one was the least likely, though it would have been the kindest one of all.

Dom had just never been a subtle person, try as he might. He was bumbling and awkward and wore his heart on his sleeve. He knew the way he looked at Shiloh, the way he trailed after him like a lost puppy, like he couldn't breathe without talking to him at least once a day. And there was no way in hell Shiloh didn't already know.

He was just too kind to break Dom's heart, and Dom wasn't brave enough to ask Shiloh to do exactly that.

Tapping his fingers on his thigh in a little pattern, Dom picked up speed. The crisp autumn air made the tips of his ears cold where his wet hair rested against them, and he fought the urge to rub at them as he climbed the steps to the Evanses' front door and rang the bell.

There was never any sound. Benjamin had rigged it so it only flashed the lights, which worked for everyone. Dom only knew when someone was coming by the heavy footfalls on the wood floors just beyond the door.

The one thing he'd quickly learned about a Deaf house was that it wasn't quiet. At all. Shiloh had grown up used to it, but Dom had been overwhelmed by the sheer volume of *everything*. They stomped to get each other's attention, and knocked on the walls, and the TV was always at top volume. Benjamin would sometimes turn on the Hoover or the blender and forget about it, and whenever Dom stayed over, he'd wake with the sun as Benjamin got to work on morning chores, right outside Shiloh's window.

Shoving his hands into his pockets, he grinned when the door cracked open, and Shiloh's face appeared. He raked his gaze up and down Dom's body, then scoffed and pulled him inside. "You're frozen."

"Nah. Just had a quick shower is all, and the wind got cold." He fluffed his hair, which was still wet but a little stiff at the ends, and batted Shiloh's hand away when he tried to touch his cheeks. "I'm not going to catch hypothermia from a four-minute walk, mate."

Shiloh scoffed again, then backed up. "Weren't you going to catch it from a puddle outside?"

Dom waved him off. “Completely different. Anyway”—he gave Shiloh’s work clothes a once over—“aren’t you done for the night?”

“I’m just fixing part of the fencing round the girls’ coop,” he said. “Dad’s in the kitchen. You should eat before he gets you going on his guitar.” Shiloh took another step toward the back door, then froze. “When you’re done, I, erm...I have something to show you.”

Dom’s brows lifted. “Oh yeah?”

“It’s...” Shiloh dragged a hand down his face. “I’ll explain later.”

Dom gave him a little mock salute, knowing he wouldn’t be getting anything out of his friend before he was finished with his work. And anyway, he really was hungry for something warm and home cooked after his long day, and the smells from the kitchen were making his stomach growl.

He rounded the corner, finding Benjamin at the stove, and he stomped his foot down twice, as hard as he could. The older man turned, grinning wide when he saw Dom standing there, and he jerked his head at him to come all the way in.

He looked old now, Dom noticed. Not scary old. Not like he needed to start *worrying* old. But his hair was as grey as Dom’s would’ve been without the dye, only a bit on the whiter side. And there were wrinkles that stuck on his face instead of smoothing out when he stopped grinning. His knuckles had gotten fat and a little bent, and he walked slower these days.

It made his chest ache—a sort of vicious reminder of mortality and how everything came to an end. And it reminded him that they were thirty-six now, and he’d wasted so much time not telling Shiloh how he felt.

Or not moving on so he could find a way to be more happy and less lonely.

‘Tired?’ Benjamin asked.

Dom shook his head. ‘Long day.’ He settled into his usual seat—the one he’d used since he was small, though he took up far more room now in the little nook of the kitchen. But

Benjamin had never treated him like he'd outgrown his skinny little twelve-year-old body, and he liked that. 'You?'

'My guitar is out of tune. I can feel it.' He stopped signing while he set the bowl of chicken and dumplings in front of Dom. 'And it was making the cat cry.'

They had one cat—a little mouser who lived out in the barn mostly but liked to sun herself in the lounge every afternoon. She was ugly and ragged and orange, and for some reason Dom would never understand, Benjamin loved her more than life itself.

'I'll take care of it,' he signed with a laugh, then picked up his spoon and shoveled a too-hot bite into his mouth. It stung, but he didn't care, the warmth settling into his bones. He grinned at the older man. 'I needed this.'

'I know,' Benjamin told him with a slightly smug grin. 'I always know when my boys need something. I get a small itch in my left big toe.'

Dom laughed again, rolling his eyes as he polished off the food. By the time he was scraping the bottom of the bowl and savoring his final dumpling, Shiloh had returned, looking a little wind-swept and pink in the cheeks from the cold night. He brushed off Benjamin who tried to force a bowl into his hands, scoffing as he kicked a chair out from the table and sat.

'I ate,' he complained, his fingers a little stiff.

'You're skinny,' Benjamin fired back.

Dom waved his hand to get the older man's attention. 'Go get your guitar.'

Now distracted, Benjamin left the room, and Shiloh let out a small sigh as he leaned back. "He's been insufferable lately. He's got it in his head that he's going to die in the middle of the night while I'm *lonely* and *unmarried*. He thinks I need to find someone."

Something in Dom's gut twisted, ugly and pained. "Oh? I...well. He means well, doesn't he?"

Shiloh gave him a flat look. “*If* I ever get married, it’s not going to be because my father ordered me some, like, American mail-order groom.”

Dom choked on his last bite, thumping his fist on his chest. “Fuck’s sake. He’s not going that far, is he?”

“No,” Shiloh admitted, “but it’s not out of the realm of possibility. He tried to sneak a dating app onto my phone last night. Grindr.”

“Oh my God,” Dom groaned. “He’s not supposed to know about Grindr!”

Shiloh gave him a flat look. “Yeah, except you taught him how to use the internet. You showed him Tumblr.”

“Fuck,” Dom whispered.

“Exactly. I was forced to tell him how shite it’s been for you, but he just gave me a look and said it was obvious why it’s not working for you. Like I…” He stopped abruptly when Benjamin entered the room, casting them both suspicious looks, and Shiloh narrowed his eyes at him. ‘I was telling Dom about your antics last night with Grindr.’

Benjamin waved his hand dismissively as he set the guitar over Dom’s lap. ‘I want you settled before I die.’

Shiloh gave Dom a pointed stare. ‘See?’

Benjamin made a low humming scoff. ‘I worry.’

Dom reached over and gave the man’s arm a reassuring pat. ‘He can take care of himself. And you know I’ll bake for him. He’ll never starve.’

At that, Benjamin got a look in his eye—one Dom knew well: longing. He hadn’t exactly made it a secret he’d hoped the two of them would fall in love, but Dom had always put a quick stop to that line of thinking.

Picking up the guitar, Dom quickly got to work, and Benjamin went back to tidying the kitchen. Shiloh joined him at the sink, and as Dom strummed through some chords, he watched the pair of them work on the dishes. Their hands moved in a sort of rhythm that only came from a lifetime

together. He couldn't make out what they were signing, but it didn't matter.

It was a combination of Shiloh complaining, and Benjamin worrying that his son was taking on too much work, and Shiloh trying to reassure him he was fine exactly as he was. Dom was loved by his parents, but Shiloh was Benjamin's entire world, and he wasn't sure he'd ever be able to understand what that felt like.

He knew it burdened Shiloh at times, but he also knew his best friend wouldn't trade it for anything.

Pushing to his feet, Dom walked over and laid a hand on Benjamin's shoulder to grab his attention. 'Finished. You go play and we can finish up.'

Benjamin gave him a long look, then took the guitar back and made space for Dom's larger body. He didn't say anything before he left, but Dom felt the weight of his stare for long moments before he retreated to the lounge, soft music filling the air.

"How is he really?" Dom said. "I don't always notice it, but he looks..."

"Old," Shiloh breathed out. "I mean, he's fine, of course. His last physical, he was at the peak of health for a man of his age, especially one that spent most of his life doing hard labor on the farm. I think he's just...I dunno. Tired? I mean, he had all these expectations for me when I was little. Before Mum left, and before Gran died. Now I think he blames himself for it. Like I'm some delicate Victorian debutante who's got the wasting sickness or whatever rubbish is in those romance novels he keeps reading."

Dom wasn't entirely sure Benjamin was wrong. Not completely.

Shiloh was small, and he was delicate, and he felt things deeply, which left him afraid of pain. It was obvious why he avoided love and dating. He and Dom had both nursed Sarah through heartaches over the years, and he'd more than once gotten a bit pissed and confessed that he didn't think he was

strong enough to withstand all the emotions she put herself through.

Dom supposed Benjamin assumed he'd have a son a bit more like him—sort of tall and rugged and willing to take risks. Shiloh had come out the complete opposite, and Benjamin hadn't loved him any less for it, but he did worry more.

“So,” Shiloh said, swiping his hands on a towel before passing it over. They put the last of the dried bowls away, then he went to the cupboard and pulled out a couple of his dad's German ales he loved so much. “About that thing I wanted to talk to you about...”

“Right,” Dom said from behind a sigh, “your secret. Or... whatever.”

“It's not a secret. It's about the costume. I think I've sorted out what I want.” For whatever reason, Shiloh actually looked embarrassed, and Dom stepped a little closer to him.

“You know we don't have to do this, right?”

Shiloh pursed his lips, then cracked the top and took a long drink before he spoke again. “There's no way in hell she's going to let us out of it. Last year was a fluke.”

Dom groaned because Shiloh was right. “She'd hunt us down and murder us where we slept if we try to get out of it.” He didn't bring up the date thing again, and he was grateful Shiloh seemed to be avoiding that topic because Dom wasn't ready to talk about it yet. Hell, he hadn't even officially confirmed it himself since Sarah's text.

Shiloh shuddered a little, then stared down at his feet. It was one of his many tells, this one all nerves and anxiety. “I...” He let out a small laugh. “So remember two years ago when Liza wanted to throw that Valentine's themed fancy dress? Except they wanted all the blokes to come in gowns? Then Sarah lost the plot and made a public display of Liza?”

Of course Dom remembered. Sarah had tracked Liza down in the middle of Primark and shouted to God and the rest of the world about how the idea was offensive and imagine how

many people would be left out if she stuck to her idea of gender binary and making a mockery of masculine people who enjoyed feminine clothing.

Dom had loved her just a little bit harder after that, and Sarah hadn't regretted losing the friendship with Liza.

"What about it?" Dom pressed when Shiloh didn't go on.

His friend cleared his throat, then took another long drink. "So before I realized it was a shit idea, I, erm..." He laughed and shook his head. "Christ, I'm not sure how to say it."

Dom blinked, then realized what he wasn't saying. "Easy. Just put words together until I understand what you're trying to tell me."

Shiloh's face went bright red, and he glanced off to his left, biting the corner of his lower lip. "Bloody hell. Okay. I found a costume that day when we were browsing. It was a little shit thing, you know? In the one-pound holiday bin. It was all tangled up with old Christmas crackers and New Year's hats."

Dom's throat went tight and hot, and he was feeling... something unnamable and terrifying. "Alright," he said slowly.

"So I...I snuck away and tried it on." Shiloh met his gaze after an impossible moment. "I didn't buy it, but I stood there in front of the mirror and stared at myself for so long I started to look like I wasn't human anymore." He licked his lips. "Do you think I'm a freak?"

Dom had to take a second before he answered. "Why would I think you're a freak for a costume? I don't understand what you're trying to tell me."

"Because I...because it..." Shiloh almost looked like he wanted to cry, and Dom couldn't stop himself from reaching out and taking his hand. He pressed his thumb to the inside of Shiloh's wrist, then stroked it over his strong, fine bones.

"You what?" Dom reached for his chin, tipping his head up. Shiloh's eyes were moving back and forth so fast Dom wasn't sure Shiloh could actually see him. "What happened, love?"

Shiloh took a deep, trembling breath. “It was a Bo-Peep costume.” Shiloh confessed in an almost whisper. “It was a short, frilly dress with lace. And I liked it, Dom. I stared at myself for so long because I liked it.”

Dom was helpless against the sudden image of Shiloh in a little dress, and it was by some miracle his cock didn’t burst through his jeans.

Because he’d fancied him before, but now? In frills and lace?

“I was afraid everyone would know, even after I put it back,” Shiloh went on, dragging Dom from his thoughts. “So when Sarah invited me to dress up for Halloween that year, that’s why I begged you to get us out of it.”

They’d made up excuses and stayed in, binging *Schitt’s Creek* on Netflix all night. It had been maybe the best Halloween of his life. And now he understood exactly what had Shiloh all shaken up.

Now he stood in front of his best friend—the man he was in love with—listening to him detail out a fantasy Dom didn’t even know he’d had, with fear and insecurity wrapped around the words.

And he wanted to say something immediate and comforting, but Shiloh’s confession hadn’t just broken his brain. It had shattered it.

It took Dom almost too long to collect himself. It was the way he saw Shiloh start to shut down that kicked him into action, and once again, unable to stop himself from getting a little too close, he reached up and cupped Shiloh’s cheeks.

“Listen to me,” he said, and Shiloh’s jaw clicked shut. Dom ran a tongue over his lips, but it didn’t help. “I know I’m probably the most biased person in the world because nothing could make me think you’re a freak. And you know that anyone who made you feel that way would end up on the wrong end of my fists.”

“Yeah,” Shiloh breathed out.

Dom ducked his head to recapture his gaze, and when he had it, he let the silence wrap around them for a beat.

“Nothing’s wrong with you. It’s okay to like it.”

“Yeah, but...”

“No,” Dom said. “No buts. You’re allowed to like it. There’s nothing wrong with...with any of that. Plenty of people like dressing up that way. And not just in Halloween costumes.”

Shiloh shrugged, and when Dom reluctantly pulled his hands away, he rubbed the back of his neck. “But I’m not...I don’t want to be a girl, you know? It just feels so complicated, and with what Liza had said about boys in dresses...”

Liza had been making the whole thing into a joke, and he could only imagine how that had shredded Shiloh inside.

“I should send Sarah after her again for making you feel this way,” Dom grumbled.

At that, Shiloh laughed and shook his head. “I mean, it’s fine. I, erm...I thought maybe it would be good, though, if I wore something like that to Sarah’s. Like, it would be safe to do it there.”

“It will be,” Dom said. And he wasn’t lying. It would be safe there. For Shiloh. For Dom, it would be the ultimate test of his patience and self-control because he was already too in love with this man, and seeing him in a dress would likely stop his heart.

“Would you,” Shiloh asked, his voice falling again. He stopped, then cleared his throat. “Would you look at the one I bought this year? You know, make sure I haven’t picked out any clashing colors or anything? And anyway, we need to figure out how you can match it.”

Dom wanted to groan and beg off, but then Shiloh would know something was wrong. And he’d, of course, take it the wrong way, so Dom would have to explain, and then...

And then everything would be ruined.

“Of course,” he said, hating himself a little because it would be torture.

The relieved breath Shiloh let out was enough to settle Dom some. He’d be able to get through it and make his friend feel good about himself. Then he’d go home and have a wank and hate himself just a little bit more than he had when he’d woken up that morning.

“Why don’t I check on your dad,” Dom said as he set his mostly finished beer on the counter. “You can, er, get sorted.”

Shiloh’s cheeks pinked again, and he looked down at his feet but nodded all the same. Dom waited to see if he was going to say anything more—maybe put up a protest—but when he didn’t move, Dom took that as his cue. He slipped through the door and into the lounge where Benjamin had stopped playing and was reclined on the sofa with his feet up on the coffee table.

The guitar was lying across his lap, and he smiled at Dom as the bigger man shuffled forward.

‘Good talk?’

Dom rolled his eyes. ‘How’s it feel now? I didn’t hear the cat crying.’

Benjamin scoffed. ‘She’s in the barn, but it feels better. Thank you.’ He gestured at the armchair for Dom to sit, and he did after a single beat of hesitation. When he was settled, Benjamin put the instrument aside and leaned over his knees. ‘You’re hurting.’

Dom startled a bit, quickly shaking his head. ‘I’m fine. I’m...’

Benjamin lifted a steady hand, and Dom’s own fingers stilled, curling into his palms before dropping down to his lap. The man had always had a way of calming any storm raging inside of Dom—in ways his own parents could never manage. He used to think they were happy to be rid of him on weekends when they’d send him up to the farm because he always came back exhausted from work and more settled.

‘When I was fifteen,’ Benjamin signed slowly, ‘I fell in love with Shiloh’s mum. She was a year ahead of me at school. Of course, no one wanted to be friends with me because,’ he waved his hand toward his ear. He didn’t wear hearing aids anymore, but Dom had seen photos of him when he was little, and they were big, obvious, hulking things that led to a device that was strapped to his chest. ‘I was angry.’

Dom had never heard this story before. Benjamin had only ever talked about how desperately in love he’d been with Holly. How their life together was a fairy tale. He swallowed thickly and nodded for him to go on.

‘She fancied me. It was obvious,’ he added with a small laugh. ‘I wasn’t easy to love, though. I was bitter and angry because my aunt forced me to go to the hearing school, and my mum didn’t put up a fight because the Deaf school was teaching everyone to speak anyway.’ His hands paused, and there was a look of old resentment simmering in his eyes. He shook it off quickly, though. ‘I spent most of my young life certain that Holly and I would be nothing more than friends.’

It was in that moment Dom knew what the man was getting at, and he tensed. ‘It’s not the same.’

‘It is,’ Benjamin insisted. ‘And you’ve been more patient than my son deserves. He’s too like his mum—afraid that he’ll be too much. He doesn’t realize that one of these days, someone else will come along and make you look at them the way you look at him.’

Dom wanted to run outside and bury himself in the garden. He startled when he felt a touch on his arm, and he realized Benjamin had risen from the sofa and was now kneeling beside his chair. ‘Be patient, but not forever.’

That sounded so damn pessimistic. He wasn’t sure he’d ever be ready to give up that tiny sliver of maybe when it came to his happily ever after with Shiloh. But then he thought about his date with Kellen—about Sarah’s words and now Benjamin’s.

Maybe he was the biggest fool in the world for thinking that waiting around would be worth it.

He wasn't the best of men, but he was alright. He did deserve some happiness and not just in fits and bursts.

'I need to go help Shiloh sort out his costume for the party,' Dom said, his fingers trembling.

Benjamin didn't try to stop him. He rose with a grace Dom could only hope he'd have at that age, and he moved back to the sofa and picked up his guitar. The quiet, strumming chords followed him as he made his way down to Shiloh's room, and they wrapped around his heart and told him it was probably time to make a choice.

Five

Dom wasn't sure what to expect when he walked into Shiloh's room. A part of him was afraid he'd walk in and Shiloh would be dressed in the costume, and he didn't know if he'd have the strength to do anything but cross the room and kiss him.

Luckily—or perhaps unluckily—Shiloh was still in his jeans and jumper. He was holding a balled-up bit of red cloth between his hands, though, and when Dom looked closer, he saw the edges of lace.

His cock twitched, and he prayed to any god that might be listening that he could do this without entirely giving himself away.

“That’s it, then?” he asked.

Shiloh cleared his throat, then nodded. “Yeah. The, erm... the shop person said it was bright red, which sounded a bit garish?”

Dom rolled his eyes. “Halloween costumes are meant to be garish. That’s the whole point.”

“Are they?” Shiloh asked in a very soft voice, now looking down at his hands.

Dom’s heart gave a painful thud as he crept closer to his best friend. He reached out, touching the backs of his wrists with the tips of his fingers, and waited for Shiloh to look up. “I mean, I’m not a Halloween expert or anything, but I look at it this way. You either wear an exaggerated version of yourself.

Like, someone might wear a sexy nurse costume, though Sarah might fling her out for that on feminist principles.”

Shiloh laughed. “Right.”

“Or you dress up as something that isn’t like you at all. Like...I dunno, the Hulk or something.”

Shiloh’s chuckle got a little bit louder, but his face fell the moment he looked back down at his hands. “It’s Little Red Riding Hood,” he said in a voice so quiet Dom had to strain to hear him.

When he did, though, his cock thickened, and his breath caught in his chest. Little Red Riding Hood. Fuck. “I...erm... Well, that...could be good.”

Shiloh looked up at him again. “It’s ridiculous, isn’t it?”

“Can I see it?” Dom asked, hating himself a bit. “It doesn’t sound ridiculous, but you know I’ll tell you the truth.”

“Do you want me to put it on?” Shiloh began, but Dom was quick—maybe a little too quick—in his response.

“No. No, I...just...hold it up, yeah? Wouldn’t want to spoil the surprise too early if you put it on now.” He sounded like a fool, but he knew for absolutely certain he couldn’t take seeing him in it like this.

Alone.

In his room.

Shiloh didn’t seem bothered as he shook the dress out, then held it up to his body. “There’s tights,” he added as the silky, wrinkled fabric fell toward his thighs. “Fishnets.”

Oh.

Hell.

Shiloh was going to murder Dom with this. The costume was obviously cheap—probably belonged in the pound bin even when it was in season last September, but...bloody hell. Though Shiloh wasn’t wearing it, the red against his skin—olive from working in the sun every weekend—was the perfect complement. And the lace was just so, the skirt short and the

bodice low but the pinafore giving it a look of confused innocence.

It *was* Shiloh.

“There’s also a cape,” Shiloh added. “I hung it up after I realized I’d made the dress too wrinkled by stuffing it into my wardrobe.” He frowned down at it, then sighed. “Maybe I should just get something else. I could go as Sherlock Holmes or...”

“Stop,” Dom said urgently. He reached for Shiloh’s wrists again and held them tight as he captured his best friend’s gaze. “I bet Sarah has a way to get wrinkles out of the costume without ruining the fabric. She’s brilliant at shit like that. And it...it’s going to look good, Shiloh. *You’re* going to look good.”

Shiloh blinked up at him, his mouth going a little less tense in the corners. He swallowed thickly. “You think so?”

“Yes,” Dom said, then squeezed again. “Yes, I do. I think you’ll look beautiful.”

Something flared to life in Shiloh’s eyes, and he almost looked lost as he leaned in for a second. Dom braced himself for what was coming, but before Shiloh got any closer, he shook himself out of it. “Thank you. Thanks. I...This is all a lot, but I mean, it’s just Halloween, right? No one has to know that I’d like...that I might want to...”

Dom squeezed him one last time before drawing away, feeling the empty space between them like a canyon. “No one has to know unless you want them to. Unless you trust them.”

“So just you, then,” Shiloh said with a crooked smile, and Dom’s heart thumped again. “Will you come with me?”

Dom frowned. “To the party? Yeah, mate. I already told you we’d go matching.”

“No, I mean...” Shiloh slapped a hand over his face and dragged it down with a groan. “I never asked if that date Sarah tried to set up...erm. I just...thought it might be easier if we went *together* together. Not just matching. But if you’ve said yes, then of course you should...”

“No,” Dom blurted, then slapped a hand over his face. He swore he was going to choke on his own tongue, and he forced himself to acknowledge that Shiloh wasn’t asking him on a date. Just for company like always. “I,” he started, prepared to tell Shiloh that Sarah had gone through with texting Kellen, but he couldn’t force the words out. “Of course we can go together.” He reached out and let the tip of his first finger touch the lace before dropping his hand back to his side. “Why don’t I come as the granny-wolf, yeah?”

Shiloh grinned, and every moment of his aching heart was worth it for that smile alone. “Really?”

“Yes,” Dom said again.

Shiloh dropped the dress and flung his arms around Dom, holding tight. “Thank you. This... Well, it’ll be good.”

Dom didn’t bother trying to hide the way he buried his nose in Shiloh’s hair and breathed him in. “Yeah,” he said, and God, that tasted like a lie because he didn’t think it would be good at all. “It will be.”

“**S**hove over. I need to be dramatic,” Sarah said, hip-checking Shiloh on the bench.

He shifted as she dropped down, and he knew she was pouting because she’d come to bring Jules his lunch, but he’d gotten stuck in an emergency parent-teacher conference with one of his more unruly students. He offered her half his sandwich, which she took and tore off a bite.

“Dom’s?”

“Isn’t it always?” he asked.

“Did he write you a limerick today?”

Shiloh fished out the paper swan from his little lunch box and unfolded it to show her. It was sadly blank apart from the smallest little heart traced in pencil, which was impossible for him to see in the afternoon sun, but he’d already looked at it earlier.

“I guess he’s falling out of love with you,” she said.

Shiloh tried not to flinch, but he didn’t think he managed it. “He’s never been in love with me.”

“You both drive me round the fucking twist, darling. Like, I literally want to pull my own face off sometimes because of you.”

Shiloh’s brows furrowed, and he shaded his eyes to try and see her a bit better. “Why are your knickers in such a twist? You’re not usually this mean to me on a Tuesday.” And he really wasn’t in the mood for it. He’d had a nice long weekend

with Dom, the thousand-ton weight lifted from his shoulders now that his best friend knew his secret and hadn't thrown him out like rotten fruit.

He was still a little shaken by it, but he'd known he had to confess to Dom before he showed him his costume. Shiloh had never been good about hiding his emotions, and Dom would have read him like an open book the second he saw Shiloh standing there in the dress and tights.

Dom had been a bit odd after the initial confession. His good-night text had been short, and there hadn't been a good-morning one. But he'd come into his classroom Friday morning to find a little box containing a single croissant and a paper swan with a dodgy little wolf scribbled in the center.

And the weekend had gone just like every other weekend. Dom showed up for farm chores early, stayed late for tea, played music with Shiloh's dad, and watched crap telly when they were too sore to move.

Life had seemed normal.

And a bit more perfect.

"Did you know Jules is going to propose to me at the party?"

Shiloh let out a soft laugh. "Yeah. He told me on the trip. He also insisted you knew."

"Well, he's not dead and buried, is he?" Sarah pointed out.

Shiloh leaned back slightly and squinted at her. "If you speak to him the way you're speaking to me, it's a bloody wonder he wants to do this at all."

"You know what," she started, then froze and deflated, dropping her forehead to her arms. "I'm sorry, babes."

Shiloh immediately deflated too, his frustration with her melting into pity. He gently brushed his hand over her plait, which was hanging down the middle of her back. "What's got you so worked up? Is it the marriage thing?"

Sarah turned her head to look at him properly. "D'you think the reason he doesn't want a real marriage is because he

wants an easy way out?”

Shiloh started to laugh, but after a second, he realized she was serious. “My darling,” he said, soft and slow, “you have spent your entire relationship telling him how much you don’t want to get married. You’ve spent most of your life telling us how you’d rather die than be someone’s wife.”

Sarah covered her face with one hand and let out a shuddering sigh. “I know. I know that I’m...I’m not right in the head. And I wasn’t lying. Marriage scares the absolute piss out of me. My parents were so busy being obsessed with each other that they—” She stopped abruptly the way she always did when she brought up her parents.

If Shiloh hadn’t been there when everything had crashed down around her, he might have never known the full story.

“I’ve talked to Jules about it for hours. Days,” she groaned. “Until my throat hurt from sobbing and I had no tears left. And he knows that it’s my worst nightmare. I just...can’t help but wonder if the reason he didn’t put up a fight is because he knows I’ll be too much for him one day.”

Shiloh smiled and dropped his arm to the table, resting his cheek on it so he could look at her directly in the eye. “Maybe he didn’t put up a fight because the only thing in the world that matters to him is you being happy.”

“That scares me too,” she whispered. “I don’t want him to love me that much. That’s too much power.”

Shiloh hated how much he felt that, deep in his chest. He wondered how much Dom knew about his feelings. He wondered if Dom ever complained about Shiloh this exact same way to their other friends. More than once, Shiloh was convinced that people were looking at him with soul-deep pity because they understood just how in love he was and how hopeless he’d become.

But this wasn’t about him.

He reached out and stroked her cheek. “Let us take you out tonight. A proper piss-up. Fuck knows I could do with one, and you know Dom never says no.”

Sarah's smile softened, and her eyes lit up. "No alcohol poisoning. I just got a massive online order that has to ship to the States, and half of them are custom soaps."

"And I've got a lecture coming up about the Hittites..."

He stopped when her finger pressed over his lips. "No."

He laughed, giving it a small kiss before he pulled away. "Get me drunk and you won't be able to stop me."

"Get me drunk and I'll be willing to listen," she said. She lifted up, then leaned down and pressed a kiss to his temple. "I love you so much. You know that, right?"

He propped his head up on his palm, elbow pressing into the table. Her tone was suddenly serious, and that worried him. "Of course I do. What brought that on?"

"Only that you're such a good person, babes. Like...such a good person. You and Dom both deserve to be happy, and I wish..." She sighed, glancing away. "Never mind. It doesn't matter."

It did matter, but he wasn't going to ask her to finish her thought. He knew exactly where she was going with it. She just wanted them to be happy.

He thought about how she was trying to set Dom up on a date for the Halloween party, and he knew she wasn't doing it to hurt him, even if it did. Even if she was responsible—indirectly—for every night Shiloh spent curled up under his duvet trying not to think about Dom on the date Sarah had talked him into making.

Between the two of them, Dom was the only one who hadn't managed to convince Sarah to stop trying to manage their love lives. Dom insisted he was just humoring her, but Shiloh was starting to wonder if maybe he wasn't.

Maybe his loneliness was finally starting to make him realize he didn't want to live that way the rest of his life.

Shiloh snapped out of his thoughts as Sarah reached out and pulled the paper sack with the elephant ear pastries Dom had given him close to her. "Help yourself," he said flatly.

“I will. Thanks. I have to steal because he’ll never spoil me the way he spoils you,” she said with a sniff. She nibbled off the edge of one, then dabbed her finger at the corners of her mouth. “So did you pick out a costume yet?”

Shiloh felt his face erupt into flames. “Oh. Erm. Well...”

She looked far too gleeful. “Brilliant. What is it?”

“A secret,” he muttered. He put his hand over his eyes again so he could see her better. “Has Dom told you about his?”

Sarah shook her head, rolling her eyes. “No, the fucker. Said it’s a surprise.”

Shiloh deflated a bit and shrugged. “You’ll see at the party.”

“You’re both so mean to me,” she moaned, stuffing her face with a larger bite. “Can you at least tell me whether or not it’s Tim Burton related? Like, has Jules managed to finally convince you that we should do a theme?”

“That did not happen,” came a voice from behind them, and before Shiloh could react, Sarah squealed and jumped up from the table, throwing herself into her lover’s arms.

Shiloh adored them both, but he was in no mood to sit and watch them kiss and make heart-eyes at each other. He was still feeling too fragile. He stood up and gathered his things to the sound of lip smacking, then turned when they were quiet. “Text me later, yeah?”

Sarah frowned. “You don’t need to leave. We just—”

“I actually have a meeting with a student before class,” he lied smoothly. He offered the rest of the pastries out to her, and she took them before pulling him close, kissing his cheek. He held her tight and rested his lips near her ear. “He loves you exactly the amount you deserve to be loved. Don’t worry. But if you want more, tell him that. He’ll burn the world for you, darling. So let him.”



SHILOH STARED at himself in the mirror, terrified to keep looking but terrified to glance away. His eye lids were smeared with something dark—blue, he was fairly sure. His lips were lined and plump with a color he couldn't place, but the title on the cheap tube of lipstick said it was called Cherry Blossom.

Maybe it was soft pink like spring petals. Maybe it was something richer like fallen autumn leaves. He'd never really know, and he didn't even know why it mattered because he couldn't see the paint on his face. He couldn't tell if he'd done it right. It was just different shades of the same color, like everything had always been.

And yet, this felt different.

He felt...soft.

Delicate.

His heart beat faster as his fingers brushed along the silky fabric lying on the counter, then onto something a bit rougher and full of holes. A dress—the tag told him it was red. Dom had always said red was spices, and heat, and warmth. Next to that, fishnet tights in black—a color he did understand.

He wasn't brave enough to put them on. Not yet. But he'd have to be soon enough since Dom had officially agreed to be his date at the party. Not just as his costume partner but more. At least, that's the way Shiloh wanted to see it, even if Dom never would.

He startled when he heard the thump of the front door, which meant his dad had come in from feeding the goats. Grabbing a flannel, he quickly poured on a heavy dollop of soap and began to scrub his face until it looked clean. He had no idea if it was, but if his dad saw him dressed up, he didn't think the man would care. Or at the very least, he wouldn't stop loving Shiloh, and he supposed that's all that mattered.

Tucking the makeup, dress, and tights under his arm, Shiloh darted into his room, shoving the costume into his wardrobe before hurrying to the kitchen and taking a seat at the table. The vegetables were waiting for him, and when he was sure his dad was washing up, he got to work.

It was nice. It was quiet and mindless, and it was exactly what he wanted. He could sink back into the memory of his painted face, even if it made him feel lost and bereft because he could never have it the way he wanted.

‘Has one of the chickens died?’

Shiloh blinked up at his father, ripped out of his thoughts by the man’s waving hand. ‘What?’

Benjamin repeated his question, a tiny smile on his face.

‘No,’ Shiloh answered back, dropping a bean back into the bowl. His heart ticked up. Had something happened?

‘One of queens go missing from the hive?’

Shiloh’s lips flattened into a thin line. ‘Why are you asking me this?’

‘Because I can’t think of another single reason for you to have that look on your face.’

Shiloh scoffed quietly as Benjamin took a seat across from him at the table. He’d been wrist-deep in a bowl of runner beans, pinching off the edges so he could put them into a pan. Dom was coming for tea, and Shiloh had been trying to perfect the recipe they’d had at Chinese the last time they’d gone down to Brighton for a long weekend.

In reality, it was just busy work. It was him trying to keep his mind on anything except the upcoming party, and the dress he had waiting for him, and the fact that he was pretty sure Dom had a date with Kellen that he planned to cancel because he couldn’t help but ask Dom to attend the party with him.

Like, *with* him with him.

Like an asshole because Dom deserved to have a nice date and a decent shag at the very least. But Shiloh had panicked when he came to realize that Dom probably was

going to go with someone else, even if he'd spend the entire party ignoring his date and entertaining Shiloh.

'Ever do something really shitty to someone you care about?' he asked his dad after swiping his damp fingers on his jeans.

Benjamin raised a brow at him. 'What did you do?'

'I think I made Dom give up a date to Sarah's Halloween party for me.'

His dad gave him an old, familiar look of both disappointment and pity, and it hadn't gotten any easier to bear, even after all these years.

'I don't need a lecture,' Shiloh told him. 'I feel shit enough as it is.'

'Was he upset about cancelling the date?'

Shiloh scoffed. 'No. He never is. He's too nice.'

'Yes, I'm sure that's what it is,' Benjamin signed back, his perfected nonverbal sarcasm almost a damn artform. Shiloh had never been able to replicate it, but he knew it well. With a tiny sigh, Benjamin rose and walked around the table, touching his son's cheek gently before drawing his hand back to sign, 'Is he coming for tea?'

Shiloh laughed. 'He only doesn't come round for tea when *Bake-Off* is on.' And only because Shiloh went over to his so they could watch it together because Dom hated shouting at the telly without a real, live person to keep him grounded. Or so he always said.

Benjamin's smile softened, and he shook his head. 'I think you have your answer then. Don't make any food for me. I'm going out tonight, and I won't be back until late.' Then he turned on his heel, leaving the kitchen.

Shiloh glared at the bowl of beans. "I didn't ask a bloody question, then, did I?" Of course, no one was around to hear him, which he was grateful for because he felt a bit like he was losing his mind to pining-induced madness. If there was such a thing.

Rolling his shoulders back, Shiloh forced himself up from the table and grabbed his tofu press, peeling off the top and setting the block on the cutting board. He ran his knife through it until he had perfectly even cubes—at least as far as he could tell since he had his glasses off and was going mostly by feel—then he grabbed the five-spice and little bowl of sauce he'd put together and began to season everything.

He had a good char going on both the beans and the tofu when he heard the front door open and shut, and when Dom didn't immediately appear, he knew his dad had apprehended him. It was just as well. Shiloh was feeling off-kilter since his afternoon with Sarah, and he wasn't quite sure how to shake it. He didn't want to be a burden to Dom.

He didn't want to be the lonely, sorry hermit who didn't get along with anyone except his chickens and his childhood best friend, who was indulged only because he was so pathetic. He wasn't used to being so self-pitying, but he supposed with forty creeping up on him, that sort of thing happened.

He really ought to start investing in more cats than just his dad's little mouser.

“Oi. You didn't,” came Dom's voice from behind him.

“I might have,” Shiloh said without turning around.
“Depends on what you're asking.”

Suddenly there were two soft yet powerful arms wrapping around his middle, turning him to place a wet kiss pressed to his cheek. “You've made that tofu thing?”

Shiloh laughed, resisting the urge to melt into Dom's embrace. “Yes. I had to cook this up before it turned.” A total lie. He'd bought it at the shop three days before, but Dom didn't need to know that.

“You know how much I love you, right?” Dom said, slowly drawing away.

Shiloh swallowed back a sigh. He did know. It was too much and not enough all at the same time. “Of course I do.”

Shiloh felt Dom's gaze zero in on him, and then his thumb reached up, brushing something at the corner of his eye. "Were you painting?"

Shiloh's breath hitched just once before he could get control. "Er. Yeah, I was. Did I have something on my face?"

"Bit of blue right here," Dom said. He swiped at Shiloh's skin once more before pulling his hand away. The look he was giving Shiloh said he didn't quite believe him, but Shiloh wasn't about to poke the bear. Not over this. Not when there would be questions he didn't want to answer.

He cleared his throat. "Do you need to wash up before we eat?"

Dom shifted back just a little, his expression shifting back to a soft smirk, and he shoved one hand into the pocket of his jeans. "Probably. I tried this American cornbread recipe and somehow, I've got the dough stuck in really weird places."

Shiloh couldn't help his small grin as he glanced at the yellowish stains on Dom's front. Shiloh always loved him in his chef's whites. It did things to his insides he tried to only think about when he was by himself in the shower and feeling brave enough to risk perving on his best friend.

Not that he'd ever tell Dom.

"You can wash up and I'll meet you in my room. Dad's on his way out."

"Yeah, he caught me before he took off. He's got a date, hasn't he?"

Shiloh's eyes widened as he squinted at the figure of his best friend. "Did he say that to you?"

"No, but he looked really smart. He was wearing his nice shirt and those jeans we made him buy last spring."

Shiloh's cheeks went hot. God, what would it be like if his dad started proper dating? If he brought home some woman to love and marry? Would she...oh fuck, would she be his stepmum?

“I don’t know what you’re thinking, but I’m looking forward to your rant,” Dom said, then laughed himself all the way to the back bedroom where Shiloh could only just hear the water running in the sink.

He turned back to the food, quickly realizing it was starting to smell a bit burnt, and he dropped it all into one bowl. More often than not, Dom ate off his plate, so Shiloh stopped dirtying two. He stuck two sets of chopsticks on the side, then fumbled around until he found his glasses, slipping them over his nose.

It was nice to see a bit more clearly, though his headache started to remind him it hadn’t totally gone away. But the trade-off was that he’d get to see Dom properly for a bit, and every little throb of pain was worth that.

Balancing the tea tray on the palm of one hand, Shiloh made his way into his bedroom and saw his covers were already mussed. He heard Dom at the sink, singing off-key to some pop song Sarah was always blasting in her car.

Shiloh could picture him perfectly, swaying and bouncing to the beat as he scrubbed dough from his fingernails, and it left him with a warm longing deep in the pit of his chest. Did people actually get over that feeling? Was it possible to let go and move on?

As it was, the thought of not loving Dom this way was the same as trying to cut off his own foot. Was it possible? Sure, in theory, but the pain was enough that his brain prevented him from being able to actually do it.

He sighed to himself, and just as he was setting the tray on the bed, he heard Dom’s footsteps. Turning his head, he was just in time to see his best friend’s figure fill the doorway. Shiloh’s eyes drifted up, and he caught the edge of Dom’s smile.

“God, you’re a sight for sore eyes.”

“I haven’t heard that phrase since the eighties,” Shiloh pointed out, trying his best to ignore the way those words made his heart thud in his chest.

Dom laughed, walking over and yanking Shiloh into a firm hug. He buried his nose in Shiloh's messy curls and let out a contented hum. "You were barely alive in the eighties, darling."

"My point stands," Shiloh grumbled. He basked only as long as he could stand it before gently pushing Dom away. "Come on. You must be starving."

"I wasn't until I smelled your cooking," Dom said, then jumped onto the bed, only narrowly missing the tea tray. "Have you got drinks?"

Shiloh went over to the little mini fridge he'd brought home with him years back when he'd returned from uni. He kept it in his room only to avoid a broken ankle from stumbling around the kitchen at three in the morning when he was dying of thirst.

"Some peach squash Jules left here that I don't think he's coming back for, ginger beer, and..." He ducked down farther and squinted to try and see what was at the very back. "One dodgy looking Coke that might be a couple years old."

"I'll have that. I'm feeling risky tonight," Dom said.

Shiloh rolled his eyes but grabbed it from the back and set it on the nightstand before climbing up on the bed. Dom was already sitting with his back pressed to the headboard, his legs stretched out, looking far too much like he was where he belonged. The worst part was Shiloh could reach out and touch him. He could curl up in Dom's arms. He could pull the blankets over them and beg to stay like that forever, and Dom would happily agree.

He'd hold Shiloh like he didn't want to be anywhere else in the world, and that would be amazing if Shiloh didn't know that Dom would use that same enthusiasm when trolling dating apps to get his rocks off. And even that wouldn't feel so terrible if Shiloh didn't know for a fact that someday Dom would find someone who made him feel the same way Shiloh felt right then: needy, desperate, and content.

"Are you hungry, love?" Dom asked quietly.

Shiloh realized he'd closed his eyes against the pain in his chest. He nodded, forcing himself to look at Dom and smile. "Starving actually." He pulled the tray between them and offered Dom a set of chopsticks before picking up his own. Once they were settled, he removed his glasses and the world settled into an even foggier blur, easing some of the pain in his temples. "Too bad you didn't bring some of that cornbread. It might have tasted nice with this."

"Mm," Dom said, his mouth full. "Doubt it. I had to chuck the lot. I mean, I might have actually gotten it right since people do have weird taste in things, but I want to believe it was an epic failure."

Shiloh laughed softly as he poked at his runner beans. "What's the experiment for?"

Dom chewed and swallowed another massive bite before he answered. "You know Kellen?"

Kellen. The possible Halloween party date. One of the few men Dom regularly texted that felt like a threat, even when Dom wasn't actively speaking to him. Shiloh had met him exactly once, and that was enough.

He was tall, good looking enough to be some Instagram model, and humble enough not to realize it. He was nice, and he seemed genuinely pleased to have met Shiloh, which made the whole thing worse.

"I know him," Shiloh forced himself to say after far too long a silence. He could feel the weight of Dom's stare and prayed he wasn't going to have to explain himself.

"Apparently, he's been watching a lot of some show called *Chopped*, and they did an entire episode on chili. He got obsessed with trying it—the proper American version—so he asked me if I could work on a cornbread recipe."

Shiloh nodded, the bite of tofu in his mouth tasting suddenly like ash. He swallowed it and reached for his cup of water, trying not to choke on it. "So, erm, so you two have been talking a lot, then?"

“Just since Sarah meddled and asked him to the Halloween party for me,” Dom said, his voice quiet and tense. “He’s quite nice, you know.”

“Yeah,” Shiloh said softly. “I know.”

Another silence settled between them, then Dom put his chopsticks down with a soft clink, and though Shiloh wasn’t looking at him, he felt Dom turn to face him. “Have I done something wrong?”

Shiloh quickly shook his head. “Of course not. What could you have possibly done wrong?”

“I don’t know. You’ve been acting odd since you got back from London, and I’m starting to think there’s something you haven’t told me.”

Shiloh looked up at him, irritation racing through his veins. It wasn’t really at Dom, even if it was because of him. But the one person he wanted to pour his heart out to was the one person he couldn’t tell the truth, and it was starting to wear him down.

“Not everything is a conspiracy, you know,” he muttered.

Dom pulled back slightly. “I didn’t say it was, but I also know I’m not wrong. You’ve been quiet and distant. Even Sarah said...”

“All Sarah does is gossip because her life is boring and unfulfilling,” Shiloh snapped, knowing he was being cruel. But he couldn’t seem to stop himself. “The biggest highlight of her week is setting you up with some accountant or whatever the fuck Kellen does, then patting herself on the back for something that you’ve already done.”

“I’ve already done?” Dom asked very softly.

Shiloh scoffed. “Don’t act like you haven’t run through almost every available man in Benld.” Except me.

It was the wrong thing to say. He knew it immediately. Regretted it immediately. His heart ached, and an apology danced on the edge of his tongue, but he didn’t get the chance

to say it. Dom shoved the tray back and scooted to the edge of the bed.

“I don’t know what any of us have done to deserve that,” he said softly, his voice trembling with either rage or hurt. Or both. “I love you, but I’m not going to sit here while you call me the village whore and Sarah the village idiot. Call me when you’ve got that stick dislodged from your arse, yeah?”

Then he was up and out the door, and Shiloh was holding all the pieces of his heart that he himself had shattered.

But no. Fuck that.

He jumped up from the bed so quickly, he upended the barely touched dinner. His feet tapped along the floors as he shot through the house, and he stumbled through the front door and into the garden in time to see Dom reach the edge of the road that led to his place.

“Wait!”

“I’m not in the mood right now,” Dom called back.

“I know, but...but I love you. And I’m really sorry.” Maybe that was dirty pool because he knew Dom could never resist him when he confessed his love, but he couldn’t let him walk away.

Dom froze, and from what little Shiloh could see, he was pretty sure he had his head bowed. “Shiloh...”

“I know,” he begged. “I know. I’m the worst asshole that ever walked the earth, and you’re right. Something is wrong. I just...” Was he honestly going to tell him? Was he finally going to crack? “It’s humiliating.”

Dom slowly turned, crossing the distance between them until he had Shiloh’s face cradled between his hands. “Nothing you say, do, want, need, or fantasize about should ever make you feel humiliated.”

Shiloh’s eyes burned. His life felt both chaotic and mundane all at the same time. He was a teacher, and he lived down the road from his best friend, and that was enough. Yet the quiet part of him wanted to put on lipstick and feel the tug

of silk panties bunched up and wrenched to the side as that very best friend fucked him into oblivion while telling him how pretty he was.

And he knew only one of those scenarios was attainable.

But he also knew if he confessed the dark parts of himself, Dom would crack open the earth to give it to him, even if it meant sacrificing his own idea of the perfect future.

“This is about the dress, yeah?”

Shiloh swallowed thickly and nodded, taking it as an out since it wasn't a total lie. “I'm scared to show that part of myself, even at a party. I'm scared someone will look at me and know.” He took a breath and stepped away from Dom. “I'm scared to watch all of you move on and be happy with partners while I'm left behind.”

Dom made a soft noise, then reached out and grabbed Shiloh's hand, tangling their fingers together. “Going on a date to some party with Kellen doesn't mean I'm proposing to him.”

Shiloh laughed softly. “I know that. But...you might one day. He's really fit, and he's nice. He'd be good for you.”

Dom's face did something complicated, but Shiloh wondered if maybe he was just imagining it. “Trust me, mate. He's not the one for me. I only said yes because I've been spoiling Sarah for years, and I still can't seem to say no to her.”

Shiloh laughed so hard he snorted. “Bloody hell. Same.”

Dom sighed and yanked Shiloh into his embrace, wrapping his massive arms around him. The feeling was too damn good. “I'll text Kellen and tell him going to the party together isn't a good idea.”

Shiloh stiffened. “Domenico, no! I'd never ask you to do that.”

Dom buried his nose in Shiloh's hair and took a deep breath in. “I know, love. I know.”

Seven



“Oh. You fucking *didn't* cancel on Kellen.”

Dom tried not to wince, tried not to look intimidated, but when Sarah got that look in her eyes, he had no power against her. It wasn't his fault he was soft for his best mate. “Shiloh had a bit of a breakdown last night,” Dom tried to argue. “What was I meant to do?”

“Tell him that you love him, and that you're there for him but that you also have a date to the bloody party because you're trying to be happy for once in your life,” she snapped.

Dom gave her a flat look. “Going with Shiloh will make me happy.”

“For a night,” Sarah pointed out. “And then what? You'll go home alone and unfucked, your sorry little cock ready to pack it in and leave you because you won't stop neglecting it.”

“Not all of us need to get off seven days a week,” Dom bit out. “And listening to you insult me, Shiloh, and the way I feel about him is getting a little exhausting. And hurtful.”

Sarah's eyes blazed for a second before she sagged against the counter. “You're both idiots, and I just want you to be happy.”

“Why do you think your plan is going to make me happy? At best, Kellen and I would hook up, and I’d still go home alone. I’d still wake up and text Shiloh and spend weekends at his house. He might not ever love me the way I love him, but I can still be happy with him so long as he’ll have me around.”

Sarah muttered something under her breath that Dom didn’t catch.

“What was that?”

She blinked owlishly before shaking her head. “It’s nothing. Just...” She let out a long sigh. “I’m sorry. I know I’m a lot, and I know I’m the luckiest woman in the world for finding someone who loves me with all my personality flaws. I guess I just want that for you.”

Dom gave her a look. “Have you tried to meddle with his life too? Or is it just mine?”

“I tried, but I almost lost him,” Sarah admitted. “I’ve never seen him so angry as when I tried to set him up, and it just wasn’t worth it.”

Was that the secret to getting her to lay off? He wasn’t sure he wanted to experiment with it. Sarah had been through enough, had been abandoned enough. He didn’t want to add the threat of that to her heavy heart.

“I just think it’s better this way. Kellen wasn’t even really upset. And it sucked a little,” he admitted because yeah, a quick, meaningless shag would have felt nice after such a long dry spell, “but it wasn’t the end of the world.”

“Did you talk to Shiloh about this?” Sarah pressed.

He shrugged, swiping his hands on his apron. He was making stress cookies—little almond thumbprint ones with jam that was nearly done cooling. “I didn’t really get the chance. We had a massive row out in his garden, and he sort of broke down.” He, of course, couldn’t tell Sarah what Shiloh was really upset about because he’d promised he’d keep it between them.

But he wished he could. He had a feeling Sarah would be a lot more understanding if she had some idea what Shiloh was

struggling with.

Sarah scoffed and hopped up on the counter, crossing her legs primly. “So what? You just sat on the porch while he made puppy eyes at you, and then you cancelled all your hard-earned weekend plans?”

Dom turned away from her, grabbing the tray of dough a little more roughly than he intended and shoved it into the oven. “You’ve seen his puppy eyes, Sarah. You’re just as helpless against them as I am.”

“I’m not,” she told him, her voice a little more careful this time, “because I’m not the one tortured in love with him.”

Dom felt his heart ache at her brutal honesty. “I don’t... mean to be.”

He heard her let out a sigh, then her heels clicked on the floor before a small, delicate hand wrapped around his wrist and spun him around. He wanted to cry, or maybe rage a little, at the pity he found in her gaze.

“I know you don’t, but you’ve never given anyone else a chance.” She reached up and smoothed her fingers over his cheek, likely wiping away a stray bit of flour. “You’re such a good person, Dom. You have the biggest heart of any man I have ever known, and you deserve to be loved. You deserve to come first.”

Dom closed his eyes and bowed his head toward her. “I don’t know if that’s strictly true. I’ve never been much of anything. I mean, Shiloh’s chosen to stay here and help his dad for now, and I get it. It makes sense why. But there’s still time for him to do more. He could move abroad and stand in front of lecture halls at bloody Harvard or something. And that... I’m never going to have a future like that. This was always meant to be my life. But if he finds out the truth, he’ll stay for me too.”

“So?” she demanded, cocking a fist up on her hip. “Why the hell shouldn’t he be the sort of person who stays for the man he loves?”

“Because that would mean I’m holding him back,” Dom said, the words erupting from his chest, and he realized just how long he’d been holding them in by the pain they left behind. “Someday he won’t need to keep up the farm. Benjamin is going to retire, and they haven’t really been turning a profit in years. Just enough to get by.” Dom pushed his fingers into his hair and pulled gently. “Shiloh’s going to realize that the rest of the world is out there waiting for him. He could finish his PhD, meet someone brilliant, someone as smart and beautiful as him. Someone who wants to travel. Someone who can hold conversations about history and philosophy and all the things that make my eyes cross. And they’ll...they’ll do everything together he can’t do with me.”

Sarah’s face fell. “You have no idea, do you?”

Dom scoffed and took a step back. “About what? Trust me, love, I’ve never been anything other than brutally honest about myself and what we are.” He waved his hand around the kitchen. “This is where I belong. It’s where I was always meant to be. And I’m okay with that. But I’m not okay with telling Shiloh how I feel and risking his entire future for a compromise.”

She shook her head, but for the first time in the long years they’d been having that same argument, he finally saw defeat in her eyes.

“Do what you will,” she said on a sigh.

“You know I’m not trying to be contrary. I hate rowing with you.”

Her smile was brittle, but it was genuine. Rising onto her toes, she tugged him close and smudged a kiss to his cheek. “Let me put the kettle on, then we can see if anyone has costumes in stock that’ll fit you.”

Dom rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m just going as a wolf. I don’t need anything fancy.” She raised a brow at him, but he didn’t have it in him to explain just yet about Shiloh’s costume. He’d be showing God and the rest of the town what he looked like in a dress, but Dom wasn’t going to give that

secret away until Shiloh was ready to do it himself. “It’ll be good. I promise.”

She sighed again, then patted his cheek. “If you say so.”

He watched her walk away, the swinging door creaking on its hinges, and he let out a breath when he was finally alone. His heart ached, and he knew that he did deserve love in some capacity. But not at the expense of what Shiloh deserved. Dom would do anything for him, go anywhere for him.

But he refused to hold him back. ***

Eight

The thing Shiloh loved most about Benld was that it had everything they loved about bigger cities without all the chaos of tourism. They didn't have to fight holidaymakers and their over-sized sun hats and rolling cases, reeking of pina-colada sun cream, for a café table that overlooked the water.

There was something to be said about sitting there with his legs stretched out in front of him, unable to see much but content to listen to the quiet waves lapping at the beach while Dom nattered on about his week. He was halfway into a story about Dierdre, her six children who always broke at least three things in the bakery every time she came in, and her creative ways of slipping him her number.

“She begged me to just cut into this little dome cake, and I swear to God, mate, it looked like one of those ‘nailed it’ fails on Instagram. I think it was meant to be a frog or something because it was hideously green with bulging eyes.”

Shiloh smiled as his fingers traced lines over the holes in the wrought iron table. “Sounds dreadful.”

“It tasted worse.”

Shiloh laughed. “You actually took a bite of it?”

“Don't judge me. She looked so desperate. Anyway, I cut the poor thing open—hopefully put it out of its misery—and there was a soggy bit of paper on the inside.”

Shiloh pulled a face. “Gross.”

“Yeah. It was a Post-it Note. Glue and everything.”

Shiloh snorted, then lifted his cup to his lips and took a long sip of his now-tepid oolong. “What did you do with it?”

“Slipped it into my apron and told her to have a nice day. Gave the little ones some almond cookies first,” he added, because of course he did.

Shiloh’s heart warmed. “You should consider her proposal. I know she’s dreadful, but you’d be a cute dad.”

Dom said nothing for a long moment, and Shiloh desperately wished the sun wasn’t totally washing out his vision because he wanted to know what look was on his face. “That life isn’t for me, mate.”

Shiloh wanted to argue because he didn’t believe that. Dom was the perfect man for a domesticated life full of picket fences and little kids running round the front garden. He’d spent far too much time envisioning their own life just like that. Once his dad retired and gave up the farm, they’d stick close by but buy something different. Something uniquely theirs.

Dom would build things, and the house would always smell amazing. Shiloh would keep chickens and bees because he wasn’t sure he could live without them now, but there would be no pressure to be anything except themselves.

“Shall we take a walk?” Dom asked, startling Shiloh out of his thoughts. “I’m getting a wicked leg cramp.”

Pushing his chair back, he passed Dom his mostly empty mug, then fetched his cane from the edge of the table, feeling each click as it wobbled into place. Even the darkest glasses couldn’t save his vision from being totally washed out on perfect autumn day like this, and giving up the sight of it was hardly a sacrifice when he had Dom at his side and the bite of sea air that carried hints of winter on the current.

The stone wall that separated the beach from the street was the perfect guide, and he let his cane tip graze it as they made their way toward Sarah’s shop. “Do you want to stop in?” he asked a few minutes into the stroll.

“Hmm? Stop in where?”

“Sarah’s,” Shiloh said.

“Oh. Er. I’d rather not if it’s all the same to you. We had a bit of a row the other day, and she’s been weird with me over text since then.”

Shiloh stopped and frowned. “What were you rowing over?”

“Erm.” Though Shiloh couldn’t see his face, he could perfectly picture Dom’s expression that matched the quiet hum, telling Shiloh he was trying to come up with a lie.

“Domenico,” he warned.

“It was nothing, alright. We just—”

“Dom?”

Shiloh froze. The voice calling Dom’s name was a vaguely familiar, low rumble, a sort of delicious spicy tone that made him think of cinnamon. Something nagged at his gut, but he couldn’t place it.

At least not until Dom spoke.

“Kellen.”

Bloody. Fucking. Hell.

“Hey. I don’t mean to interrupt your, er...helping someone out?”

Shiloh realized what Kellen was saying, and he bristled, turning to face him. “He’s not helping me out.”

“Oh my God,” Kellen breathed. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t recognize you. I didn’t realize you were...I mean. Have you always been...”

“Blind?” Shiloh said irritably. “Didn’t we have a whole conversation about it at the pub?”

“Well, that was about color,” Kellen said softly. “I didn’t know it was the same thing.”

Shiloh squared his shoulders and tapped his cane twice against the ground. “I’ll let you two catch up.” He started off,

ignoring Dom calling his name, but he didn't go too far. There was a bus bench just on the edge of earshot, and he took it, leaning his head back and closing his eyes against the too-bright sun.

It took him a second to pick out their voices over the wind, but after a beat, he could hear them.

"...the other night. I totally understand. I just want to know if it was something I said."

"No, not at all," Dom said, his voice tender, making Shiloh feel painfully hateful. "I just had another obligation."

"Oh. Well, Sarah said to bother you about it, but that seemed rude. Then I saw you and, well...I just thought we had a good time last time we were together."

"We did," Dom said, and his chuckle made Shiloh want to vomit. "At least, I did. But nothing's changed. I'm not really in a place for a relationship."

"I get it. Well..." Shiloh heard a faint slapping sound and figured the guy had dropped his arms to his thighs. "If anything changes, you've got my number."

"Of course. Will you, ah...still be at the party?"

"I was thinking about it. So long as it won't be too weird."

"Not at all. See you round."

It only took a second to realize what was happening, and Shiloh was incensed by the time the bench shifted with Dom's weight. He took several breaths before he trusted himself to speak again.

"You had a date with Kellen to the party."

Dom cleared his throat. "Sort of. I told you Sarah was on me about—"

"You had a confirmed date with him," Shiloh said through clenched teeth. "At least, confirmed enough to need to cancel."

"Shi—"

“Don’t,” he said, pushing to his feet.

“I’m not trying to fight with you,” Dom said, and Shiloh saw his shadow as he rose. “You asked me to go with you. I don’t know what the bloody hell I did wrong.”

“Saying yes to me for a start,” Shiloh said, throwing his free hand into the air. “Not being honest. Patronizing me.”

“Patronizing you? When have I fucking ever—”

“I need to go,” Shiloh said. He took a breath, then turned. “I’m walking home.”

“Don’t be daft,” Dom called, but when Shiloh ignored him, he didn’t follow.

He didn’t have any clue if he was glad about it or more heartbroken that Dom wasn’t willing to fight for him, but at least he got what he wanted. He was starting to break his own heart, but maybe that was the true start to moving on.



ELVIS NUDGED SHILOH’S CHIN, nipping at him, and he looked down at her tuft of black feathers. Giving her a little stroke, she nestled into his arms. She was probably his favorite chicken ever—a weird little thing that bullied all the other hens while crowing like a damn rooster. His dad didn’t believe him until one day she started doing it while Benjamin was holding her, and he felt it running through her body.

Like most silkies, she was more emotional support animal than farm chicken, spending all her free time trying to break into the house so she could snuggle with him on the sofa. Which was what they were doing now as the sun dipped low on the horizon.

He stroked the front of her as she nested in the crook of his neck, and he turned his gaze back to the TV. The sound was muted only because if he turned it on, his dad had a bad habit of turning it up for him and forgetting about it. And days like

today, Shiloh's sensory overload was threatening to send him to bed for the entire weekend.

A soft tap on the wall drew his attention to the kitchen door and Shiloh found his dad there, watching him with raised brows. 'I've been watching you talk to her for the last half hour. Do you want to tell me what's going on?'

'Nothing,' Shiloh answered with flippant fingers, but of course, his dad wasn't buying it. Benjamin walked over and sat down, giving his son a pointed stare until Shiloh cracked. 'Fine. I had another row with Dom.'

Benjamin's eyes widened. 'How many has that been?'

'Two in a week,' he admitted. 'It's all about this party. I should just cancel.'

Leaning over his knees, Benjamin met his gaze. 'Is that really what you want?'

The truth was, Shiloh didn't know. The issue with Dom was uncharted territory. It was not their first fight, of course. He could remember dozens of times where they didn't speak for a few days, and even once an entire week. But those were over petty problems like where to book short holidays and who was going to pay for concert tickets.

This was something entirely new. Shiloh had had his feelings truly hurt. He knew damn well Dom thought he was doing something kind, something loyal by cancelling the date, but that was the problem. He had no idea how pathetic it made Shiloh feel like he was the charity choice.

His throat felt tight, and he swallowed heavily, setting Elvis down on the floor. She wandered off as he swiped a few feathers from his front, then found the courage to look at his dad.

'I'm lost.'

Benjamin's face fell, and he shifted over from the chair to the sofa. 'I know. I've been watching you for a while.'

Shiloh bent his head toward his knees and took in a slow breath before straightening back up. 'I don't know what to do.'

I'm madly in love with him, but nothing's ever going to happen. And I can't tell him.'

'You're really telling me you don't know he loves you back just as much?' Benjamin asked.

Shiloh wasn't a total fool. He knew what everyone said about them, but nothing could convince him it was the truth. Dom had proven time and time again that he'd set every bridge he'd ever crossed on fire to make Shiloh happy. But that didn't mean he wanted to do it. And he didn't know how to trust that Dom would tell him the truth.

'How did you know you wanted to be with Mum?'

Benjamin scoffed. 'I didn't at first. We hooked up because I was young and foolish. And drunk. She didn't know a single word of BSL, but we had a nice time.'

Shiloh couldn't remember her at all. He'd seen a handful of photos, but when he came out with wobbly eyes and low vision, apparently that was enough for her. Having a Deaf boyfriend had strained the thread holding her together. Her disabled son had snapped it.

'If you could have me without actually being with her, would you change it?'

Benjamin gave him a soft smile. 'No. We did have a nice time. I wasn't heartbroken when she left. I hurt for you because you deserved someone who loved you. But you have me.'

'Yeah,' Shiloh signed with a small smile. 'This isn't helping me at all.'

Benjamin laughed and pulled Shiloh into a hug so tight, he almost wanted to cry. The warmth of it—the reminder he was loved beyond words—was everything he needed in the moment. He felt a bit better when his dad pulled away, and he shook his fingers out before signing again.

'I know I should talk to him. I know that I'd be able to tell if he was lying to me. But I think mostly I'm terrified of the truth.'

‘That he loves you, or that he doesn’t?’

‘Both,’ Shiloh admitted. ‘It’ll change everything. He knows all my deep, dark secrets. He’s seen me at my worst. He once even wiped my ass when I had that flu so badly I couldn’t move.’

Benjamin laughed again. ‘If that’s not true love, I don’t know what is.’

‘But true love isn’t always romantic,’ Shiloh pointed out. ‘You’ve been telling me that since I was a kid.’

Benjamin’s expression softened, and he cupped Shiloh’s cheek for a long second. ‘And I meant it. But sometimes it can be both. Sometimes it can start as one and become the other down the road. I just don’t want to see you lose yourself to the unknown.’

And that was the problem. He’d confessed his biggest secret to Dom—had confirmed that Dom wouldn’t do anything but support him. But there was one more confession, one more line to cross, and doing that could make or break who they were.

He just didn’t know how to live without him.

He didn’t know if he could.

‘I think it’s time,’ he finally said.

Benjamin nodded. ‘You know you’ll always have me, but please trust it won’t go the way you’re afraid it will. You deserve to be loved exactly as you are, and I think he might be the one capable of giving you exactly that.’

Shiloh, if possible, was even more afraid. But he realized in the beat of stillness that followed his dad’s words that he was also ready.

Dom only ever sat in his office that late when things in his life were falling apart. And not knowing where he stood with Shiloh—with his apologies rejected and his texts unanswered—his life felt like it was falling apart.

He'd come in after Alan had closed up for the day, then sat in his office, staring at a stack of requisition forms and cake design requests he couldn't even hope to read. His cork board had a half dozen paper swans pinned around it, a reminder that he was loved.

Except he wasn't so sure about that now. Oh, he knew Shiloh loved him, but there was something in his best friend's face that told him something had changed. Something had shifted. Maybe it was that Dom had crossed a line he didn't know was there, but that felt entirely unfair because Shiloh had never minded when Dom rearranged his plans to be with him.

That was sort of their thing.

And if Shiloh didn't want that anymore, it was his responsibility to say something. As much as Dom desperately wanted to read his mind, he couldn't. No amount of smoking weed and making eye-contact for half an hour at a time had given them the ability to do that.

And they'd tried more than once back in school.

His fingers trembling, he rubbed at his eyes and wondered if he should just stop being a child and head home. It wasn't like Shiloh was going to be there waiting for him. Only...it

was the weekend. It was Friday night, and Friday nights were supposed to be dinner with Shiloh and Ben.

So what was he meant to do now?

Fuck, why did things have to get so twisted up?

Why did Kellen have to be at the bloody beach that afternoon?

Dom had thoroughly burnt his bridge with Kellen after Shiloh had stormed off. He called him and asked him to meet Dom at the café, then he told him that he wouldn't be changing his mind. He was in love with someone else, and Kellen immediately knew who it was.

“I could tell the night you invited him to the pub for drinks. You hung on his every word.”

“Why didn't you say something then?” Dom had asked, and Kellen just laughed at him.

“Because I wanted sex, and you were a sure thing.”

Which...was fair. Dom was often a sure thing when he was in the mood to actually sleep with someone else. And the sex with Kellen had been good. It had just been hollow and pointless. So Dom hadn't brought it up again.

They parted ways cordially, but it was obvious Kellen wasn't going to text him again, and Dom had no intention of seeking him out. That was one small problem solved, but the other was trying to figure out how he'd been fucking up with Shiloh.

He supposed that yeah, cancelling a date with someone to be with Shiloh the night of the party could be considered patronizing. Especially since Dom hadn't even really discussed it with him and since he'd kind of blown Shiloh off when he'd asked about the date.

But he wasn't doing it intentionally. He just wanted to be with his best friend in whatever capacity he'd let him. And the fact that Shiloh was going in a dress and makeup was...

Well...

He'd been trying not to think about that part for a full goddamn fortnight.

Lost in his head, he didn't register the bells on the front door of the bakery chiming until the door had swung shut. His heart leapt into his throat, then settled between his teeth. There was only one person besides Alan who had a key to the bakery, and Alan would have come in the front door.

His hands shook just slightly as he rose from his chair and stepped out of his office into the corridor. In the distance, he heard the soft steps of thick-soled loafers on tile. Then the kitchen door opened, and he appeared.

Shiloh.

Dom froze as they gazed at each other, less than twenty feet separating them.

Shiloh cracked first. "I'm sorry."

Dom's eyes widened. "What?"

"I'm sorry." Shiloh took a step closer, then stopped like he was forcing himself to stay still. He looked ragged and worn like he'd been working outside all evening and hadn't cleaned up. There was dirt under his fingernails and a few feathers stuck in his curls, which meant he'd probably spent time cuddling with Elvis.

Fuck.

Dom was so in love with him.

"I was being completely irrational," Shiloh said, filling the silence between them. "It just feels like you don't trust me to manage myself sometimes, and that hurts. I've spent most of my life being underestimated. Fuck, my own mum left me because she thought I was going to be some pathetic sack of shit who couldn't take care of myself, and..."

"Your mum left because she was cracked in the bloody head, Shiloh," Dom said. He closed the distance between them and took Shiloh by the shoulders. "She didn't know what a perfect man she had in your dad, and she didn't know what an absolute fucking star she had as a son. And that's her loss. But

I don't even care because it's my gain. I'll love you enough for whatever she left behind."

Shiloh let out a shattered laugh, shrugging before he let Dom pull him close. "It's not about that really. I don't care that she wasn't around. But I need to know that you trust me to manage my life and my feelings. If I'd known you wanted to go with Kellen—"

"I didn't," Dom told him, pulling back. He met Shiloh's gaze through his red glasses, and held it. "I swear to you, mate. I didn't want to go to the party with him. Sarah literally stole my phone from my hand and made the date. I'm happy with things the way they are. I would tell you if I wanted anything to change."

"Anything?" Shiloh said quietly. There was something in his tone, something he was holding back.

Dom frowned. "Have I said something wrong again?"

"No, no." Shiloh cleared his throat. "You really are happy, though? Just as we are."

"Of course I am. Have I ever given you the impression I wasn't?" Dom was so confused. Did he want more? Of fucking course he did. He'd have killed for it. But he didn't want Shiloh to ever think that this wasn't enough for him.

Shiloh let out another strained laugh, but instead of pulling back, he took Dom's hand in his. "No, you never have. But I want you to promise that if there's ever a time you need to prioritize someone else over me..."

"Won't ever happen," Dom vowed.

Shiloh tugged on his hand hard enough to hurt. "I'm being serious. If there's ever a time where you need to—where you meet someone who makes you want to—then you'll tell me."

It was an easy promise to make because Dom knew already that would never be the case. "I swear on this bakery that I would tell you."

Shiloh sniffed, then looked past him toward the hallway. "Are you working?"

“Hiding from my feelings and my empty house,” Dom confessed.

Shiloh rolled his eyes and pulled Dom toward the front door. “Come on, you fucking lunatic. Dad made spagbol from a jar, and it’s not a Friday night unless I can hear you complaining about how shit it tastes.”

Dom laughed, allowing Shiloh to pull him out of the shop. Their fingers tangled as they started up the road, and for the first time since Shiloh had left him by the sea, he felt like everything was going to be okay.

Shiloh was tipping milk into his third cup of tea that afternoon when a body darkened his doorway. He looked up, half expecting some irate helicopter parent or maybe the headmaster there to finally tell him that he was sacked because he was shit at teaching small children.

Instead, he found Sarah, who was looking a bit green around the edges. She offered him a small smile as she shut the door behind her, then took one of the chairs from the desk nearest to Shiloh's and sat down.

"Tea?" he offered. He was still a bit cross with her for meddling in Dom's life, but he'd come to accept that as one of her personality flaws. And it wasn't like he was marrying her anyway.

She shook her head, then bit down on her thumbnail before spitting it out and quickly rubbing at the varnish, which looked freshly done. "Can I ask you something?"

"Even if I said no, would that stop you?"

Her bottom lip wobbled, and he felt a surge of panic. She'd never reacted to snark with emotion before unless extreme sarcasm counted.

"Sarah?"

"God, I really am a fucking monster, aren't I?"

He blinked at her. "Darling, what are you talking about? What's happened?"

“Jules told his mum he was going to propose to me, and she started crying. Literally, like heaving sobs I could hear through his phone.” She swallowed thickly, and he could tell she was genuinely upset. “She went on this long tirade about how I’m going to ruin his life. That she hoped he’d outgrow this need to be rebellious by bringing someone like me home. And I figured it was just because I’m poor, you know?”

Shiloh hated that he understood, but he did. Jules’s parents had never come around. Ever. And Shiloh knew there was a reason why. “It wasn’t that?”

“No. That wouldn’t bother me. I’ve been bullied about secondhand clothes and being abandoned for most of my life.” She waved it off, and he hated that she felt like it was nothing.

“So what was her reason?”

“That I’m cruel. That I’m unkind. That I’ve made Jules feel like shit about himself. She said I don’t take anything seriously to the point that he’s having a faux wedding with me because if he tried the real thing, I’d laugh in his face and make him feel stupid.”

Shiloh said nothing because he wasn’t entirely sure those criticisms were a lie. Jules loved her, but Sarah had more than once in the past made him feel like shit. In the beginning, she’d been insecure about his money and his upbringing. She pushed him harder and harder, believing she could drive him off before he left her broken hearted, and it took years to get over that.

She wasn’t that way anymore, but he could see why Jules’s mum might hold a grudge.

And she was absolutely right about the wedding. The only difference was, Shiloh didn’t think Jules actually cared about the legal part of being married. He just wanted Sarah.

“I’ve been mean to you and Dom,” she said, interrupting his thoughts. “It’s not just Jules. I’m such a raging bitch to the people I love, and...and I don’t know why I just realized it. But fuck me. I’m going to lose you, aren’t I?”

Shiloh quickly stood, coming around the desk to pull her into a hug. He rocked her as she cried and tried to figure out what to say because while she wasn't going to lose them, she did make it hard to be around her sometimes. When her mind was made up, when she was feeling stubborn, being right was more important to her than how other people felt.

It was hard not to blame her for how wrong things had been with Dom lately. But he held grace for her in ways he didn't for most people because he was there and present when she'd been through some of the worst moments of her life.

And he knew what that did to a person.

"Sarah," he said very softly when she'd calmed down. He pulled back and cupped her cheeks to swipe the tears away. She never cried. Ever. Only when she was truly hurt. "I can say with absolute certainty that Jules loves you. He's not secretly on his mum's side about this. There's no way in hell he'd have been with you for this long and felt that way. He doesn't want you to change."

"But..."

"This isn't a long con, love," Shiloh said with a small grin, making her laugh. "And while I understand perfectly well that parents are supposed to love you more than anything, sometimes they don't. Sometimes they look at a tiny, newborn baby with wonky eyes and pack their bags because the only thing that matters is their own idea of perfection."

She let out a breath. "Yeah."

"And sometimes they look at their young child and pack their shit because the only thing that matters is their own selfish interests."

She sniffed and swiped her hand under her nose.

"They're human. Just like Jules is human. And I can't lie and say his mum isn't right about some things. You've lived a hard life, and you can be hard on the people you care about. But all of us—Dom, me, Jules—we've all decided it's worth it."

"I want to be better. I want to be nicer," she told him.

He'd never heard this from her before, so he wanted to give her the benefit of the doubt. "And we can work on that. But maybe a Monday afternoon the day before your party isn't the time for self-reflection. Because you know what's coming."

She closed her eyes on a soft groan. "Yeah. God, how do I look him in the eye and say yes before I tell him that I know I've been an absolute shit?"

"Easy. You do just that. You look him in the eye and tell him yes. Then later—after he's shagged your brains out—you tell him all the rest," Shiloh said.

She laughed, then shook her head. "Jesus, I can see why Dom's so shit-crazy in love with you."

Shiloh took a step back. "Very funny. Honestly, I'm feeling a bit tender where he's concerned right now, so if you could not mess with me..."

Sarah grabbed his wrist. "I'm not taking the piss, babes. Dom has been madly in love with you since you were, like, eleven and hitting puberty. He thinks the bloody sun rises and sets on your dick, and I'm pretty sure he wants to put his mouth on it too."

"That's the weirdest thing you have ever said to me," Shiloh told her, his voice sort of dry and hollow. He started to laugh, the sound just shy of hysterical, and he only realized he was gasping for breath when Sarah gently took him into her arms.

"I'm sorry. Jesus, Shy. I thought you knew."

He looked up at her, his eyes wide and wild. "You thought I knew? You don't think I would have done something about it if..." He stopped himself, hating the ugly feeling rising in his gullet because on some level, he had known. Fear had kept him from believing it because losing Dom would kill him, but had he really been torturing them both for all these years?

"I understand," she said. Her gaze met his, and he saw her eyes flicker back and forth like she was matching his nystagmus. "Trust me, I understand, babes. You know better

than anyone how many times I almost lost Jules because loving and losing him would have been so much worse than never having him at all.”

Shiloh felt like he was choking on his own tongue. “But after all these years, does he really—”

“Love you? Worship you? Adore you?” Sarah’s expression was full of pity, and no matter that he hated it with every fiber of his being, he knew he deserved it. “All that and more.”

He took a step back from her. “So why have you been trying to set him up?”

“Because he deserves to be loved by someone brave enough to do it,” she said bluntly.

Those words felt like a knife to his heart. “I do love him.”

“I know. But if we weren’t standing here right now, would you have ever given him what he needs and put him out of his bloody misery? Or would you have allowed him to waste away at your side, telling himself—telling yourself—that it was enough?”

He squeezed his eyes shut. “I fucked up.”

She laughed, gripping his shoulders and giving him a small shake. “I know. But you can still fix it. There’s time, love. There’s so much fucking time.”

Half of Shiloh wanted to run to Dom and drop to his knees, begging for forgiveness. The other half wanted to run and hide because now that he said it aloud—now that it all made sense—there was no turning back.

He chose something in the middle instead.

“Sarah.” He cleared his throat, but his final confession was dancing at the tip of his tongue. “I need a favor.”

“Anything for you,” she told him.

He took a breath. “I need you to help me into my dress. And makeup.”

“For tomorrow night?” she asked.

He bowed his head, then shook it. “Yes. But...also no.”

“Oh, darling,” she whispered. She touched his cheek and brought his gaze up, repeating, “Anything for you.”



Dom wasn't always the most outgoing person, but he laughed a lot, and he did genuinely enjoy being in the company of other people. He also wasn't a nervous man by nature, so his anxiety about Sarah's party was something new and uncomfortable.

Between the two of them, they'd managed to cobble together a wolf outfit that would suit. She had some leftover faux fur ears and gloves from some rave she'd gone to years back. They were black with sparkles, but he didn't really mind since it was a party, and he wasn't trying to look authentic.

He half considered confessing he was going as the Big Bad Wolf, but he knew then it would give Shiloh's costume away, so instead, he chose a black jumper and some jeans. She did up his makeup after that with a black nose, colored in brows so they looked furry, and lips and eyes lined in kohl.

Dom stared at himself for a long time, rather impressed with her work.

Sarah grinned at him, perched on the kitchen table since she could never sit in chairs like an average person, and she shrugged. She was dressed up as Aphrodite with gold arm bands and a cascading toga, her curly blonde wig a little askew on her head.

“Alright, you’re sorted. I have to go make sure Jules didn’t bollocks up the entire set-up. He got this fuck-off-sized bowl for punch, but I’m terrified it’s going to crash right through the little card table, and I am so fucking skint, I cannot afford a floor repair right now.”

“You know your future husband is rich, right? And if hell freezes over and he says he won’t buy you a new table, I can fix it.”

She rolled her eyes and shoved at him. “Fuck off.”

He knew that was Sarah for, ‘I love you.’ Leaning in, he bused a kiss against her cheek, careful not to smudge his makeup. “Don’t stress. We’ll see you shortly. Tonight’s going to be amazing, okay?”

“Okay.” There was a new expression on her face—something almost devious, and it made his heart speed up. “Go have fun picking up Shiloh. And if I don’t see you at the party later, I won’t blame you.”

“What the actual fuck does that mean?” he asked.

She hummed, giving him a wink before she hopped to the ground and let herself out. In spite of wanting to chase after her and ask what the hell she was on about, he did rather like that she was unceremonious in her goodbyes. It allowed him to focus on the task at hand, which was walking up to the farm and fetching Shiloh for the party.

He and Shiloh had been texting most of the day, but Shiloh hadn’t sent him a single selfie of his costume progress, and he wasn’t sure he could take being surprised by the full picture of the man he loved in a dress. His mouth got a little dry when he started thinking about it, and he prayed to whatever god might be listening that he’d be able to keep his composure when he finally set eyes on his best friend.

His phone buzzed right as he was zipping up his jeans, and he glanced at the screen to see the text from Shiloh saying he was ready. The party was already underway, but he knew Shiloh liked to be late. He never did well before the crowds arrived when early partygoers wanted to make small talk, and

though Dom usually saved him from the awkward silences, it was easier to just wait until people were too busy to notice them.

He stood in front of the mirror for another long moment, then took a breath, pocketed his phone, and headed up the road. He took his car, not wanting to make Shiloh navigate the road in the pitch dark, but that short drive robbed him of a chance to finish composing himself.

He pulled up in the front, then he looked over to find Benjamin crouched in the front yard with the barn cat. He smiled up at Dom, letting out a low whistle, and his hands moved in the faint yellow light from the porch lamp. ‘You look great.’

Dom rolled his eyes. ‘Thank you. Sarah did it.’

‘Matching costumes, right?’ Benjamin asked with a smile playing around the sides of his mouth.

‘Have you seen him?’ Dom couldn’t help but ask.

Benjamin let out a small laugh. ‘He refused to come out. He’s been waiting for you.’

And oh. *Oh*. God...he was going to die before the night was up. ‘I’d better get in there and make sure he’s not a total disaster. See you later?’

Benjamin simply nodded, then went back to stroking the cat. Dom watched for an extra second, to buy himself one single breath, then he moved up the porch and in through the front door. The house was quiet—the lingering scent of curry from their night’s take-away that was Shiloh’s anxiety food.

He felt a pang in his gut for Shiloh, knowing what this was costing him. He was brave—he’d always been brave—but not the same way other people were. Shiloh had just accepted the way things were—that he was different and always would be—and he refused to let people bend or break him.

But he was never loud about it, and he knew that this moment was the most seen Shiloh was ever going to be.

Hurrying through the house, he came to a stop at Shiloh's closed door. He curled his fingers into a fist, poised to knock, but it still took him several moments to pluck up the courage—and even when he did—he was afraid the tapping was too quiet for anyone to hear.

After a beat, though, he heard his friend call out, “Come in. I know it's you.”

Dom rolled his eyes but smiled as he pushed inside, the cheeky grin on his face a mask as he braced himself to see the thing he'd been fantasizing about for far too long. His heart thudded as his gaze took in the back of Shiloh. He was facing the window, and there wasn't much to see. He had on the red, sort of silky cape with the hood up over his head. It covered most of him, cascading to the backs of his calves. But below that, Dom saw his shapely legs hugged by black fishnets, reaching all the way down to the Mary Janes that had an inch of sole strapped over the top of his feet.

His dick twitched, and he wished he'd had a jockstrap or something so he could have hidden how badly he was being tortured.

“Are you going to turn round?” he asked, an edge to his voice he desperately tried to hide by clearing his throat.

Shiloh's shoulders hunched, and he didn't move, saying nothing.

“Shiloh,” Dom breathed out. He took a step closer, hand reaching for him, but he stopped when Shiloh went tense. “You know I won't take the piss.”

A moment passed, then two. Eventually, Shiloh let out a small breath and spun—fast, like he was just trying to get it over with. His eyes were closed, and in spite of desperately wanting to drink in the sight of his best mate—and probably the greatest love of his life—in a dress, his eyes were stuck on the dark shadow brushed over his eyelids.

He didn't know if Shiloh had done it or if maybe someone had come over to help, but his makeup was perfect. He was pale as always, but his freckles were missing and there was a

slight contour to his cheeks. When his head twitched slightly to the side, the light caught, and he saw that his cheeks were lit up with some sort of glitter.

“Fuck *me*, mate,” he said before he could stop himself.

Shiloh peered one eye open at him. “That bad?”

“You look amazing,” Dom told him. He couldn’t lie. Shiloh would see straight through him, and Dom loved him too much to betray him like that. “Who did your makeup?”

Shiloh bit his lip, and Dom had a feeling he was probably blushing under those layers of foundation and powder. “I did. Sarah came by earlier and helped me label all the colors so I could get it done right. But I, erm...” He let out a soft *hah* and dropped his arms to his sides, and the motion caused the cape to open up, revealing the dress.

For a single beat of his heart, Dom thought he might pass out.

“I practiced,” Shiloh said.

Dom blinked, coming back to himself, and he cleared his throat again. “I can tell. You’ve done...I think it’s...” He had no words. He felt ridiculous and wished he was better at being what Shiloh needed. “Is that what the blue was on your eyes the other night?”

Shiloh’s face erupted in pink. “Yeah.”

“I thought so. It didn’t look like paint, but I didn’t want to make you feel uncomfortable.” He absently reached up, adjusting his wolf ears, trying to think of what to say.

“You look really good too,” Shiloh said softly.

Dom rolled his eyes and took a step back. “This was all Sarah,” he said, gesturing at his face. “I had no idea what I was doing.”

Shiloh swallowed, and Dom saw the way it caught in his throat as he took a step forward. “Well, she did brilliantly.” He curled his hand into a fist, then released it as he stepped close enough to touch, and he laid just the tips of his fingers on Dom’s shoulder. “I, erm, I have something for you.”

Dom's brows dipped. "Okay. You didn't need to get me anything."

Shiloh laughed softly and shook his head. "I didn't. Sarah...she told me that you," he started, then stopped, and Dom could see he was fiddling with something in his hand.

Dom swallowed against a lump in his throat. "She told you that I what?"

Shiloh reached out and uncurled his fingers. Sitting against his palm was a little paper swan, perfectly creased if not a little wrinkled from the way Shiloh had been holding it.

Dom made a soft noise in the back of his throat. "Shiloh..."

"Just take it," Shiloh said. "Read what I wrote."

Dom's fingers trembled as he plucked the swan from his friend's grasp and tugged at the wing. It gave easily. "You know I'm shit at this," he added with a small, self-deprecating laugh.

"You'll understand this."

Dom was petrified as he straightened the last fold, then stared down at the thick, simple block letters in the center. Not a limerick, the way he liked to send. Not a little drawing that Shiloh usually sent him. Just three words that made him feel like he was both falling and flying all at the same time.

"Shiloh..."

"I do. So fucking much. I've been an idiot for so long, and Sarah kind of slapped some sense into me today. I knew it was time."

"What was time?" Dom asked, his voice barely a whisper. "What are you saying?" He needed to know because this was hardly the first time he'd seen *I Love You* written in the middle of a paper swan, but it was the first time those words had made him feel like this.

"If I begged you," Shiloh said, his voice a little stronger than the moment before, "would you forgive me?"

Dom pulled back in surprise. That was not what he was expecting to hear. “For what?”

“Being a fool,” Shiloh said. “For believing that you could never...” He trailed off looking away, and Dom wanted to shake him, to beg him to go on. He was scared if he did, the moment would be ruined forever. “I thought you were being kind.”

Unable to stop himself, knowing that if he didn’t reach out, his chance would be lost, he took Shiloh by the chin and turned his head back so their gazes could meet. “Kind about what?”

“Everyone’s always whispering about how much you fancy me. I...I’m not thick, you know?” He let out a small, self-deprecating laugh. “I might have never been with anyone before, but I know what flirting is. I know what you’re like...” He trailed off again, shrugging. “Sarah told me she’s been trying to set you up because she’s always known that we love each other, but she was tired of watching me torment you with what you could never have.”

“Shiloh,” Dom said, his heart aching because shitting *hell*, he hadn’t realized. How had he never realized? “Are you saying this entire time, you’ve been in love with me?”

“We’re both so thick,” Shiloh said with a broken laugh. His hands came up, curling into the fur bit of the costume like he was afraid to let go. “I couldn’t bring myself to have faith that we could make this work, that you’d be interested in some anxious, sorry, pathetic mess like me. I didn’t want you to try to love me, realize you couldn’t, and then resent me for it.”

“Bloody fucking hell. I would never. Christ, Shiloh, I have been in love with you almost all my life.”

“I know,” Shiloh said on the edge of a small sob. “So have I.”

Dom couldn’t stop the small, helpless laugh from bubbling up and out of his throat. God, the love of his life was just as big of a fool as he was. “You’re serious? You’re actually serious?”

Shiloh just nodded. “My dad’s about ready to strangle me because I refused to believe him when he said you were in love with me. He’s been listening to me moan about how I’m going to have to watch you get married and have...I dunno, babies or dogs or ferrets or something. And I’ll happily take being the fun uncle because I will love you for the rest of my life, but...”

Dom groaned, every quiet feeling he’d been hoarding rushing through him. He backed Shiloh up against the bed with both hands now on his waist, and he looked down at him, knowing heat was in his eyes. “Did you decide to wear this tonight for me?”

Shiloh’s swallow caught in his throat. “Yes...and no. When I saw it in the shop, I thought of you. And then I thought of how you might look at me if I was wearing it, and I...well. You’re the only person I ever want looking at me that way.”

“And?” Dom asked, daring a look into Shiloh’s eyes. “Have I disappointed you?”

Shiloh looked up through his darkened lashes. “I don’t actually think that’s possible.”

Dom groaned and leaned in, not kissing him yet, but sharing breath. “You’re the most beautiful man I have ever seen in my entire life. I don’t even know what to do with myself right now.”

Shiloh licked his lips, then shook his head and very slowly wrapped his arms around Dom’s waist. “I’m still afraid.”

“Of me?”

“Of tomorrow,” Shiloh admitted. “Of putting all this back on the shelf and going back to being myself. Dressing in my boring clothes and going back to my mundane life and not being brave for you all the time.”

Dom squeezed his eyes shut, wondering how he hadn’t managed to convey to this man that he was in love with every single atom of his body, mundane or not. Not just him in a dress, or being brave, or taking risks.

“Sorry,” Shiloh said into the silence between them.

“I’m the one who owes you an apology,” he said in a rush. When Shiloh’s mouth opened to argue, he pressed his finger to his lips. It took him a moment to get over just how soft Shiloh’s mouth was against his skin, but he had to get this out. “I have been in love with you since I was eleven years old. Since you smiled at me and asked if I wanted to be your friend. And it’s only getting worse as the years go on.”

Shiloh blinked, then gently pulled his face away to speak. “I know why I never said anything, but why didn’t you? You’ve always been the brave one, Dom?”

Dom groaned and leaned forward, burying his face in Shiloh’s neck. *Fuck*, he smelled so good—so earthy and perfect and...him. “Because I’m not brave when it comes to you. I know I’m not thick, but I’m not a scholar. I’m not going to go do big things, but you will. And if I locked you down here with me, I’d only hold you back.”

Shiloh laughed quietly. “I’m a *primary school teacher*, you daft twat.”

Dom pulled back, shaking his head. “You don’t have to be. You should have done your doctorate and taught classes in fancy lecture halls at prestigious American universities. And I know you stayed because your dad needs help. I get that. But there’s still time for you to do more when your dad retires. But I can’t...I’m never going to be able to measure up to all that. This small life is all I’m good for.”

There was hurt in Shiloh’s eyes, and Dom hated himself a little for being so blunt, but it was time.

“You deserve so much more than what I am,” he finished softly.

Pulling away, Shiloh took a step back. His fingers reached for the cape strings, and Dom—despite everything that had just been said—felt his cock thicken as it slid to the ground. The dress fit Shiloh poorly. It was cheaply made and boxy, and yet, it was one of the best things Dom had ever seen.

It sat right alongside everything else Shiloh had ever worn.

“You have no idea, do you?” He closed his eyes in a long, slow blink. “You look at me when I’m wearing old jeans and ripped t-shirts, face all swollen with bee stings, and make feel pretty. And...and soft, and *worthy*. And I was terrified if I told you the truth about how I felt—about all of me—you would take it away. For my own good. And it sounds like that’s exactly what you tried to do.”

Dom felt a crack in his chest as he realized where it had all gone so badly wrong.

“You should have told me how you felt and trusted me to make the right decision. I stayed here with you because nothing in the world is better than having you,” Shiloh said, taking a step closer. His shoes thumped on the floor with the weight of his body.

Dom breathed out slowly. “I don’t want to lose you.”

Shiloh shook his head as the distance between them closed again, and he reached up, grasping his thin fingers into Dom’s shirt. “You never will. Ever. *You* are my home. I would have dealt with you falling in love with someone else because more than I wanted you for myself, I wanted you to be happy. And hell, if that’s going to be with—”

“You,” Dom interrupted. It was over. He’d lost the battle, but as he curled his arms around Shiloh and tugged his body close, he realized he had just won the war. “I have been, and always will be, in love with you. I have and will always choose you.”

“So show me,” Shiloh snapped, desperation in his voice. “Choose me. Don’t just love me, Dom. I’m giving myself to you, so take me.”

He loosened one arm, then brought his hand up to cup Shiloh’s cheek. They’d touched before, cuddled before, slept in the same bed. Shiloh had given Dom every single piece of himself...

Except this.

“If I do this,” Dom said, “I won’t be able to let you go.”

Shiloh let out a tense laugh. “That’s what I’m bloody hoping for, mate. Now please, just...”

Dom didn’t need to hear those last two words. He leaned in and took him in a kiss. It was hot, tense, just a press of lips first like neither of them knew what to do. Then Dom stroked Shiloh’s cheek, and he began to soften. Shiloh’s mouth opened gently, accepting the careful stroke of Dom’s tongue—tentative at first, then needy.

Shiloh tasted nothing and everything like he’d imagined. A spark of mint from his toothpaste, and chocolate because he’d probably been stress-eating sweets. And there was something else so uniquely Shiloh, Dom knew he’d never be able to find a word for it.

But that didn’t matter. He didn’t need one because he had this.

“Stop me if I—” Dom started, but he broke off with a startled gasp when Shiloh nipped his lower lip.

“No. No, we’re not stopping.” He pressed his body harder against Dom’s, and when Dom grabbed a handful of dress, he heard it rip.

“Bugger...”

“Tear it,” Shiloh said. “It’s crap anyway. Next week, we can go into London and find something that actually fits me.”

Dom’s heart thudded so hard he went a little dizzy. Pulling away, he cupped Shiloh’s cheek again, brushing his thumb over his kiss-swollen lips. “You really want that?”

“It wasn’t just for you,” Shiloh said, running his free hand down his side. “It was just all the more perfect knowing that you liked it.”

It was so much more than like, but he was still afraid to tell Shiloh just yet how badly it turned him on. So he tugged again, feeling the fabric give, then tear. It fell from his shoulders, pooling on the floor around his feet next to the cape, and he ran his hands over the rough fishnets curving around Shiloh’s bear ass.

Because he wasn't wearing anything.

"No knickers?" Dom murmured.

Shiloh laughed, soft and tense. "I didn't have time to find any that fit. But..." He leaned back and stared down at his cock, which was straining at the tights. "Can we leave these on?"

"I'm going to ruin them," Dom growled. He eased Shiloh back, careful over the clothes, holding him gently when his knees buckled as the backs of them met his mattress. "Do you mind?"

"No," Shiloh said, his voice thick. He eased down to the duvet, sinking into the heavy fabric, then Dom dropped to his knees and unstrapped the shoes.

As he pulled them off, he kissed the bottoms of Shiloh's feet, and the smaller man let out a chest-deep groan. "You like that?" Dom asked.

Shiloh didn't answer beyond another moan.

Dom took that as tacit permission to keep going, half his attention on how overwhelmed he was to finally be allowed to have this, and the other half tuned into every single one of Shiloh's twitches and groans because this was his first time. For everything.

And the fact that Dom got to claim this moment as his—and would claim every single moment after—it was almost too much.

His eyes got hot, but he wasn't going to let himself go there until they'd both come.

"We're not going to make it to the party," Dom said suddenly as he rose high on his knees and dug the tips of his fingers into the little holes near where Shiloh's erection was straining the tights.

Shiloh rose up on his elbow. "Sarah said she'll forgive us. I think she knew."

Dom grinned—toothy and a little feral—then he tugged. Shiloh's gasp almost covered the sound of the thin fabric

tearing, and his cock sprung out—heavy and thick with need. Dom licked his lips, then held the base in his grasp as he ran barely parted lips over his length.

“I’m going to suck you,” he said, a warning—a promise.

Shiloh groaned, and his head fell back hard, his legs spreading farther. “Yeah. Yes. Please.”

Dom watched his face for a moment as he stroked Shiloh’s cock. It wasn’t the first time he’d seen it, but it was the first time he’d been allowed to touch. And he was going to take his time to savor it.

He wasn’t going to let himself believe that when it was over, that was it. That with the sun would come regret. But with the sun would come change, and Dom wanted to make sure Shiloh woke up and remembered just how fucking good it was.

How perfect.

How much Dom was going to spend the rest of his life loving on him so he never spent another moment thinking he wasn’t enough.

He let out a breath over the tip of Shiloh’s cock, then gently sucked the head into his mouth. Shiloh was gorgeously responsive, arching into him, legs spreading wide, begging noises falling from his lips like a waterfall. Dom dipped his tongue into the slit—tasting the very essence of him—then opened wide and sank all the way down.

Shiloh let out a cry, fingers clawing at the sheets. Dom’s eyes fell shut as he sucked him, but his hands wandered, feeling the curve of his legs, the tights snug over them. Shiloh was so fucking beautiful. Yes, he was pretty, but he was so much more than that.

He was a delicate, graceful enigma—a sort of juxtaposition of the hard work showing on his calloused hands and the softness of innocence in his face.

And fuck, Dom wanted to both protect that *and* ruin it.

He sucked harder, holding his breath as he sank down to the hilt, and as he came up, his eyes opened to find Shiloh pushed up on his elbows, watching. Hollowing his cheeks, he urged Shiloh's hips to take his mouth in a shallow thrust, and Shiloh obeyed gorgeously.

A trembling hand lifted, then traced around Dom's stretched mouth, and his tongue darted out to lick his lips. "I never thought it could be so good. So..."

Dom sucked harder, and Shiloh trailed off with a moan.

It was good, but it wasn't enough. Dom was wearing too many clothes, and he wanted to be closer to him. He pulled away with a wet pop, and Shiloh's protests died in the air when their gazes locked and realization dawned on his face.

"Are you going to fuck me in the ass?"

Dom's entire body jolted with the bluntness of the question. "Not tonight," he said, regretting those words very much. But they weren't prepared, and Dom wanted him to know that sex could be better than good without penetration.

"Okay," Shiloh breathed out. He trailed his fingers along the inside of his thigh as Dom struggled with his buttons, and then he grasped his cock when the shirt came off. "You're so fucking gorgeous."

Dom almost laughed as he leaned over Shiloh and let him run fingers through his coarse chest hair. "I look like an old man."

Shiloh rubbed some of the hair between his thumb and forefinger. "Not to me. Never to me. You...look like you. And that's all I've ever wanted."

Such a simple statement, but an entire universe of love and want was contained in those words, powerful enough to make Dom's eyes get hot.

"I need you," Dom said.

Shiloh shook his head, but Dom knew it wasn't him saying no. "You've always had me."

That was all he needed. He climbed on the bed, now naked, caging Shiloh's legs with his thighs. He was so much bigger than him, so he was careful not to lay all his weight down as Shiloh braced his back against the headboard and arched up, so their cocks brushed together.

"Yes," Dom murmured. He looked down—both leaking, both so hard he wasn't sure they were going to last longer than a minute.

But that was okay.

He took their cocks in his hand, then pressed the other behind Shiloh and began to stroke him. Shiloh's mouth dropped open, panting, and Dom sealed that gap, drinking in every sound like he needed them to survive.

"Harder," Shiloh begged, the word muffled.

Dom obeyed, stroking harder, faster as Shiloh's hands moved into his hair and pulled.

His balls went tight, and there was a hot fire burning in his gut, desperate to release. "I'm going to..."

"Yes," Shiloh demanded. "Yes. Do it. Come all over me."

As though they were magic words, Dom felt himself release—a sharp, furious cry ripping from his chest as he came. His vision whited out, and he could only feel the way Shiloh began to spill right alongside him, could only hear the muffled cry as Shiloh buried his noises against Dom's neck.

They sat there like that for a long time—long enough that Dom's knees started to cramp. He was too old for acrobatics, and he felt a little foolish that he hadn't kept in better shape. But as the gentle fingers trailing lines up his sides reminded him—that didn't matter.

What he was...it was enough.

He was exactly what Shiloh wanted.

"I love you, Shiloh." The words were whispered in the tiny space between them, and Dom pulled back just enough to capture the other man's lips in a searing kiss.

He had no idea who rolled them over, but it didn't matter. He came to lying on his side with Shiloh wrapped around him like he was afraid to let go.

"I'm here," Dom said softly.

He gently eased back, then traced a line over Dom's cheek. "So am I."

Dom closed his eyes, and for the first time ever, knowing it had a soft place to land, he let his heart go.

Twelve

Dom grinned as Shiloh turned from left to right in front of the mirror. He was wearing a small frown, his bottom lip out in a pout. He ran his fingers from the bottom of the lace camisole to the straps that were a little loose on his thin shoulders. “You’re certain?”

Dom had managed to hide his erection in his jeans well enough, but it wasn’t going to last if Shiloh kept touching himself like that.

“The colors don’t clash?” Shiloh asked for the fifth time.

“They’re blue and black,” Dom told him, coming up behind him. Shiloh was wearing a skirt that came to mid-thigh, and Dom saw the twitch of his cock in the thin fabric, even though it was tightly tucked behind a pair of white lace knickers.

“That sounds like a bruise,” Shiloh complained.

Dom laughed softly, then dragged his hand up to Shiloh’s left nipple, pressing just to the side of his areola. “The bruise right here is purple.”

Shiloh let out a soft gasp. In the short time since they’d given up trying to avoid how much they wanted each other, Shiloh had been fucked every which way Dom could think of. They’d explored every random idea that had come into either of their heads, and Shiloh discovered he rather liked a bit of pain when he was coming.

Especially if the pain was caused by Dom’s mouth.

His eyes met Dom's in the mirror, and in a flash, he got that look on his face that made Dom's cock twitch even harder. His tongue dragged over his lips, then he turned and stood high on his toes, just barely reaching Dom's ear.

"I suppose it doesn't matter since you're the only one seeing me in this, and you're going to peel it right off me the moment we get home."

Dom shuddered, biting down on the crook of Shiloh's neck. "Or in this fitting room if you're not careful, little minx."

Shiloh laughed softly as he peeled himself back and turned toward the mirror again. Uncertainty flitted across his face once more, and Dom desperately wished the intensity of their love was enough to erase all the fears Shiloh had about being himself.

They'd only been official for a few days, but in that time, Dom had come hard enough to see God, and it felt like everything had finally settled into place. But there was an entire life stretched out in front of them that they had to live.

"What are you thinking?" Shiloh asked.

"That I'm in love with you," Dom said simply. "It's going to take me a while to get over the fact that I can say that."

Shiloh laughed quietly and backed away, slipping past the curtain. "Give me a few minutes to change back into my clothes. We're going to be late meeting Sarah if we keep making out."

Dom wanted to say he didn't give a single shit what Sarah thought, but they hadn't seen her since before the party, and they owed her everything. Lunch was the least they could do. Turning back to the pile of discarded clothes, he eyed a small pile of silky knickers and swept them into his hands.

"Meet you outside, love!" he called. He knew Shiloh would linger a bit longer in those clothes. He wasn't ready to change himself or his wardrobe, but he'd quietly confessed to Dom that he'd lock himself in his bathroom at home, put on makeup, and then stare at himself until his eyes went blurry.

Someday, things would be different. Until then, Dom could do little things like shoving the knickers at the poor saleswoman and trying to rush her through ringing him up.

“Would you like any of these wrapped?” she asked.

Dom quickly shook his head, looking over his shoulder to make sure Shiloh wasn't coming. “No. Just bang them into something. I'm in a bit of a rush.”

She shot him a frown, but she placed them in a plastic shopping bag, and he grabbed it, rushing for the front. He had nowhere to hide it, and in the end, he stuffed it into the front of his jeans like a creep.

He didn't bother looking around at the people passing him by, and he hovered near the wall until the shop door opened, and Shiloh appeared. He looked a bit flushed, but he was smiling, and Dom noticed the sun reflected on a bit of shiny, clear gloss he'd put on his lips.

Fuck, he wanted to kiss it away just to watch him reapply it.

Instead of doing that, he snagged Shiloh's hand and threaded their fingers together, swinging their hands between them. The sound of Shiloh's laugh might have been the single greatest thing in the universe. Fuck, he was so in love.

“Guide me,” Shiloh said, gripping Dom's arm instead of pulling out his cane.

Dom hooked a finger under his chin and kissed him. “Always.”

They came around the corner, and Dom immediately spotted Sarah waiting for them, looking vaguely irritated, with Jules at her side, wearing his usual smile. Dom leaned in to his lover. “Sarah's probably going to have words for us.”

“When doesn't she,” Shiloh asked. He gave Dom's arm a pat and made a clicking noise as though he were a horse.

“Cute,” Dom muttered, but he couldn't get rid of his grin as they approached the tables.

Sarah was instantly on her feet, levelling a finger at them both. “Kiss. Right now.”

They both froze, then Dom cleared his throat. “Sorry?”

“You heard me. I said kiss. Right now. I refuse to believe you two got your heads out of your arses that easily. So prove it.”

Dom felt a surge of irritation rush through him. “We’re not a performing art piece, Sarah. I’m not going to just snog my boyfriend to prove—”

He didn’t get the chance to finish his sentence. Shiloh spun him, cradling his face as he kissed him soft and painfully tender. Dom lost himself at the feel of Shiloh’s warm tongue gently grazing his lips before he pulled back.

“You called me your boyfriend,” Shiloh whispered.

Dom tipped his head down, knocking their foreheads together. “S’what you are, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Shiloh said with a laugh.

Dom hummed, rocking them gently from side to side until someone to their left cleared their throat, and he peered around at Jules, who was covering his eyes with one hand while Sarah gave a slow golf-clap.

“Fantastic. Now we can eat.”

Shiloh scoffed as Dom guided him to a chair, and he leaned forward, shading his eyes to help him see. “Now you prove it. Show me the ring right now.”

Sarah immediately shoved her hand out, wriggling her fingers as Shiloh grabbed them and held the ring up close to his face. After a beat, he sighed and shot Dom a soft look. “It’s gorgeous. Was it amazing?”

“It was a disaster,” Jules admitted. “I got so nervous I fainted.”

“Oh my God,” Shiloh gasped as Sarah nodded and said, “It’s true. He did.”

Dom tried to hold in a laugh. “Mate. That’s...”

“I know,” Jules said. “But I know she told you about my bitch of a mum causing trouble all last week, and I was in total panic mode thinking she was going to say no. Or run.”

“I’m in love with a moron,” Sarah groaned.

Dom grinned over at Jules. “So in love you’ve agreed to marry him.”

“I’ve compromised all my morals, and I couldn’t be happier,” she said.

Shiloh made a soft happy noise as he leaned in close to Dom, hugging his arm and laying his cheek on his bicep. Dom was struck by the sudden realization that none of this was new. If nothing had happened the night of the party—if nothing had changed—they’d be doing exactly that right there.

Fucking shitting hell, how had he not seen it? How did he ever doubt?

Why had he wasted so much time being scared of the best thing that could ever happen to him?

He met Sarah’s gaze across the table as Jules and Shiloh launched into work complaints, and he stroked his fingers over Shiloh’s knuckles as he mouthed, ‘Thank you,’ to her.

‘Any time,’ she mouthed back.

Dom settled back into his seat, getting lost in the rise and fall of Shiloh’s passionate rant, and he realized that amazing sex aside, and the surprise he was currently hiding in the front of his jeans to come, he’d never be happier.

And he could only pray to any god willing to listen that he got to keep this. Forever. And if that was a bit too long, he’d like to tack on a day.

Epilogue

The Wedding

SHILOH PRESSED his nose close to the glass, trying to see himself properly. He was dressed in a tux, which made him want to pull his face off with how scratchy the starched fabric was against him, but it was for Sarah, so he supposed it was worth it.

The lights in the dressing rooms were fluorescent, which was the worst thing for his eyes, but he couldn't find the switch to turn them off, and Dom had been gone for a quarter of an hour. The two of them had mostly gotten dressed at their house before the ceremony, but they wanted to put finishing touches on at the venue. Sarah had rented out several little cottages on the water for everyone since the ceremony was going to be held right where the low waves would lap at their feet.

It was so very Sarah that it made Shiloh feel emotional.

Breathing out gently, Shiloh raked his fingers through his hair. It was one of the first compromises he'd made with himself—growing it out. He wasn't sure he'd ever be ready to live out in the open with certain things. He wasn't sure he ever really wanted to.

He'd come to realize after he and Dom had become official, that it was something he wanted to share quietly with

the person he trusted the most. He didn't need the world to see him in skirts and dresses. He didn't want people doing double-takes as he walked down the street in heels and fishnets.

He just wanted a safe space for when he put them on, and Dom had always been that. Romance or no.

A small part of him regretted not saying anything sooner. He could've spoken up decades before, and Dom would have immediately dragged him to London to go shopping. But fear had kept him from so much.

It wasn't worth dwelling on, though. It had been almost a year to the day, and Shiloh was living with Dom in his little house down the hill from the farm. His dad had all but thrown him into the street when Shiloh started to hesitate about the idea of moving, and Dom had just laughed, then carted half his things down the hill in a wheelbarrow.

Shiloh had been quietly terrified of all the changes, of things getting worse now that they were official. Instead, they'd only gotten better.

The thought made him smile as he bunched his hair into a bun and wrapped an elastic tie around it. It was only just long enough now for his springy curls to hold in place, and he turned from side to side in a failed attempt to get a good look at his reflection.

But everything was entirely washed out in white.

With a sigh, he grabbed the little makeup kit Sarah had given him, bypassing the eyeshadow because he'd only make a mess of it, and taking out the tinted gloss. He laid on a thin layer and was just capping it when he heard the door open.

There was a beat of silence, then a gentle knock on the wall, meaning it was his dad.

Shiloh turned quickly. 'Blind from the lights.'

Benjamin crossed the floor and took Shiloh's hands into his own, signing in the tactile way they'd developed over the years when Shiloh's eyes weren't cooperating. 'You look beautiful.'

Shiloh hadn't told his dad anything, but he knew he'd paid attention. He'd seen the bits of color he wore on his eyelids and lips. He'd seen his hair and the softer way he carried himself with Dom.

'Thank you. Mind helping me with the eyes?'

Benjamin laughed. 'You might want to wait for Dom. He's on his way. I just wanted to say hello before you two get attached at the mouth again.'

Shiloh shoved him away with a laugh just as the door opened again, and he heard the gentle touch of skin on skin as his dad and Dom conversed. Before Benjamin left, he pulled Shiloh into a firm hug and said into his ear, "Love you."

Shiloh signed it back, then listened to his dad leave. Just as the door shut again, there was a quiet snick, and suddenly the lights were off. The only thing left was the hazy glow from the window, and it was such a visceral relief, Shiloh wanted to cry.

"Thank you. I didn't even think to ask my dad."

Dom shook his head as he crossed the room and took Shiloh's face between his hands, kissing him gently. "It's been a chaotic morning. Sarah's had her third and I think last breakdown. She told me I could have fifteen minutes with you. I just can't ruin your tux."

Shiloh laughed, but that turned into a soft gasp when Dom immediately spun him around to face the mirror. His eyes were still a bit blurry, but he could see himself, and the looming figure of Dom behind him, now. His mouth went dry.

"You are so fucking pretty. I don't know how I'm going to keep my hands to myself," Dom murmured before nibbling on the shell of his ear. Dom's hand drifted down Shiloh's chest, bypassing his cummerbund and tugging at the button on his trousers. It let go with a small pop, then Dom's fingers pushed past the waistband.

After a beat, he must have found what he was looking for because as his fingertips grazed silk and lace, he moaned. "I fucking love your panties."

Shiloh's eyes slammed shut as his cock stiffened, growing harder with each beat of his pulse. He arched his hips forward as Dom pulled the trousers down around his thighs, and he began to stroke him through the panties with the heel of his hand.

"I'll make a mess of them," Shiloh complained, his voice breathy.

Dom chuckled, nipping at his neck. "That's the idea, my love. I want to make a fucking mess of you. And I brought a spare."

Shiloh moaned, trying to keep his voice low, but it was damn near impossible as Dom's hand made it past the elastic of the knickers and pulled his cock out. He tucked the fabric under Shiloh's balls, keeping him on display, right there in the mirror.

Shiloh couldn't look away. He was too far to make out any details clearly, but he could see himself arching into Dom's touch, his hips fucking forward into the circle of his lover's fist, and the glint of Dom's eyes, watching.

Shiloh was immediately close. "You're going to make me look bad," he said on the edge of a moan. "I'm ready to come right now."

"Yes," Dom hissed. His hand was moving between their bodies, then Shiloh let out a sharp gasp as a warm cock pushed between his legs. Dom started thrusting against Shiloh's balls, right along the crotch of the panties. "Fuck. That's how I want you always. Desperate. Needy. On the edge of coming."

Shiloh lost himself, then matched the rhythm of Dom's hand like he was born to do nothing else except get fucked. Dom's front was hot against his back, even through the thick material of his jacket, and as he chased the ecstasy of his completion, he didn't care if he ruined his tux, or his hair, or anything at all.

The only thing that mattered was Dom's hand on his.

Dom gently grazed the head of his dick with his thumbnail, and that's when Shiloh lost it. His vision whited out once more

—but for a very different reason this time—and he spilled all over Dom’s knuckles. He could feel his lover cupping his hand around the head, and when Shiloh was spent, Dom pulled back and Shiloh heard the sound of him stroking himself.

“Come,” Shiloh ordered. “Come on my ass.”

Dom shoved him forward, keeping him bent in half, and Shiloh heard the frantic fapping sound, then Dom’s groan right before a hot spurt of come hit him right over the curve of his ass, soaking into the silk.

Shiloh felt glorious—gorgeous and filthy all at once. His knees trembled with the effort to stay upright, but Dom quickly spun him and held him as he kissed the breath from his lungs.

“I love you,” Dom murmured.

Shiloh smiled into the kiss. “I love you.”

“We’re going to need to plan two weddings,” Dom said when he stepped back and helped Shiloh shimmy out of his trousers.

Shiloh froze, then nearly tripped over his own feet as he tried to get the fabric up his legs. “I’m sorry, what?”

“Two weddings,” Dom said. “Because we’re going to miss the first one. I won’t be able to let go of you long enough for either of us to get to the altar.”

Shiloh’s heart felt too warm and too big for his chest. He couldn’t breathe. “And the second?” he managed.

“I’ll have gotten most of it out of my system by then. And I can’t fucking wait to marry you in front of everyone we’ve ever known,” Dom said. He stepped in close, then dropped to his knees and exchanged the filthy knickers for a pair of soft cotton ones. Shiloh’s grin threatened to split his face. Dom slowly rose again, kissing his way up Shiloh’s chest, ending at his lips. “I can’t wait to tell the whole world you’re mine.”

At that, Shiloh laughed as he righted his trousers, then he held Dom close. “Oh, my love. I’m pretty sure that’s one thing everyone already knows.”

“So you’re saying no?”

Shiloh hummed, then tipped his head up and looked Dom in the eyes. “I’m saying the first and second go might not be enough. We might need three.”

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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.