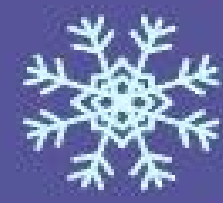


# Cute as Cats



SUKI FLEET

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Cute as Cats

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# Cute as Cats

Cold December rain soaks through my coat as I stare down the busy London street. At what point does someone being late turn into them standing you up? I lean my head back against the wet bricks behind me, trying my hardest to relax.

I've been dreading this afternoon's date for over a week. Well, since my best friend Jas messaged me a joke about office romances and I realised that maybe it was an actual date I'd agreed to go on with Helen, and not two work friends meeting at a café, like I'd initially assumed. When I asked Jas what he thought, he seemed surprised I hadn't realised that Helen might like me. I know I should have said something to Helen then, I know, but I just...I didn't know what to say. No one has ever asked me out like that—a casual text of *'Hey, so, do you fancy coming out for a bite to eat with me sometime? I know it's Christmas Eve, but are you free Saturday maybe?'*

I'm not the sort of person people just ask out, I guess, and now I'm going to have to actually turn Helen down, with words, to her face. And I've been dreading it so badly. Helen is lovely, and she's a great artist and we work well together on the comic we draw for, though we've only actually met a couple of times in real life, since our office is literally wherever we and our tablets are. But I'm...gay—something I don't even think Jas knows, though maybe he suspects I'm not straight, I don't know—I've never said those words out loud. And Helen is...well, Helen isn't here.

*Has she stood me up?*

Maybe I should just go home.

But what if the Tube's messed up and she's stuck on the Northern line with no signal—I did hear something on the news about heavy rain tonight, and that there may be a risk of flooding in places. Or maybe her phone's out of battery and she doesn't know what time it is, but she *is* on her way.

She'll think *I've* stood her up if I leave. And that would be worse. I'd feel worse. I'd feel like a coward. Well, more of a coward, anyway.

I tip my head back and sigh.

Zig-zagging strings of fairy lights cast luminous colours on the wet cobbles. It can be pretty, London, sometimes anyway. Like now, at Christmas, when they put all the lights up, every street blurring into a different world in the rain...or in summer, walking along the empty embankment at dawn, the world hushed and quiet as the city sleeps... I don't mean to fall into a memory, but I only explored early morning London like that with *him*, with his hand briefly holding mine...and then the seasons in my mind change and we're standing shoulder to shoulder as the snow falls up on Primrose Hill, waiting desperately for the sky to turn from a whole-world-can-see-us grey, to a more private dark. I miss that. I miss all of it.

Okay, that's not entirely true. I don't miss all the secrecy, the pretending we weren't together if anyone else was around, the *having* to wait until dark for him to act like I meant something—anything—to him. What I miss is being close to someone. Holding someone in my arms and feeling them hold me back. My stomach starts getting all twisted up and heavy, and I swallow the feelings down like I always do.

You'd think I'd be over it after a year. And most of the time, I am. Well, I mean, I'm over the whole pretending we're just friends, and his, I don't know what else to call it but *embarrassment* to be seen with me. Yeah, I'm definitely over that. And the rest? Well, I'm dealing with the rest.

You'd also think I could deal with turning down someone asking me out on a date like a normal person, but it turns out I'm pretty bad at that too.

The door to the cat café beside me opens, spilling warmth and weird scents into the street. A girl with very glittery eyeshadow and a tinsel headband looks at the small queue on the other side of the door from me, then glances my way. "Zu?" She tilts her head as I nod. "Do you still want your slot?"

The cat café's slots are apparently very strictly timed, and the sensible part of me knows standing out here in the rain isn't going to make Helen suddenly appear. So, shivering and pretty much soaked to the skin, I follow the glittery-eyed girl inside.

Meeting at a cat café was Helen's idea. I've never been to one before. I asked her if she had a preference after every other café/restaurant I'd tried had been booked up. This was the only place that had availability on Christmas Eve (we were lucky—they'd had a cancellation, apparently). And I like cats, I really do. There's a beautiful smoky tabby often sprawled across the pavement at the end of my street when the sun is shining, and sometimes, if I stop, she gets up and brushes herself against my legs, purring loudly and butting her head

against my hand as I stroke her. Jas thinks I should get a kitten. Thinks it'll make me less lonely. But I'm not sure about that. There're some kinds of lonely that no number of cats can cure.

After I've taken off my coat and shoes just inside the front door, and left them in the small reception area—which feels a bit like a cage—I follow the girl through a locked and barred metal door into another narrow, enclosed space, and then into the café.

For a café it seems highly secure. Posters on the wall indicate that the safety of the cats is paramount. And despite all the negativity swirling around in my head, as we walk through the café, I find myself smiling. There are cats *everywhere*—lounging on bean bags, curled up sleeping on those tall cat-tree things, playing with cat toys that look like Christmas baubles, and a couple of fluffy black kittens are squabbling lazily in a hammock.

The place smells intensely of cat. The air is full of drifting fur. And though the café isn't full of people, there are a few, and they're behaving like they're revered guests here, all talking in hushed voices as if they don't want to disturb this peaceful cat world. So hushed, in fact, that you can hear my socks squelch with every step I take, and I'm uncomfortably aware I'm leaving giant wet splodges on the wooden floor behind me. Just for once I'd like to slide through the world unnoticed. Just for once I'd like not to be so big and awkward and always making a mess of things.

“Um, do you have any paper towels or anything I can clean the floor up with?” I ask as I'm shown to a low table surrounded by colourful bean bags.

Glitter Girl smiles. “Oh, don’t worry about it. I’ll be back to take your order in a minute.”

I stare longingly at the menu board hung on the wall opposite my seat. I shouldn’t order anything. My diet isn’t going well—not that they ever do go well. I glance at my watch and somehow manage to snag the gaze of the guy sitting on a blue cord bean bag directly beneath the menu board.

He quickly looks down, a faint smile on his lips as his cheeks turn the same dusky pink as his hair.

*Oh.* My stomach tightens unexpectedly.

But...there’s no way he was staring at me. Not in interest anyway. The guy’s...beautiful. The sort of beautiful I know I shouldn’t let myself think too much about.

His long fingers curl in the fur of the massive fluffy brown cat sprawled across his lap, and the creature starts purring like a tractor engine, loud enough that I can hear it from all the way across the room.

“Are you ready to order?” Glitter Girl is back, quick as a flash.

I swallow, hurriedly turning my attention back to the board. When I found this place online, it had so many good reviews for the food. Apparently, one of the chefs worked at a Michelin starred restaurant, before following his dream of opening a café of his own, where the food was restaurant quality without the posh restaurant snobbery. It seems a shame not to order something.

“Could I have a slice of the Christmas crumble please? With cream,” I add, giving in entirely. The menu says it’s an



apple crumble with a twist. Apple crumble is my favourite.

Helen is now thirty minutes late. It's obvious she's not coming. The first proper date I've ever been on and it's a no-show. Silly, I know, but it hurts, even though I didn't want it to be a date in the first place.

The crumble is melt-in-the-mouth delicious. I eat it slowly. For once, I'm going to let myself enjoy it. I try to work out the flavours, but I'm at a loss. It tastes entirely of Christmas.

A skinny cream cat stalks across my lap, but as soon as I lift my hand to stroke her, she darts away. She does this over and over, until I give up and pretend to ignore her, and then, without warning, she curls up on my right thigh, purring happily and butting her head against my hand. Out the corner of my eye, I can see the pink-haired guy looking in my direction and smiling.

I bite my lip and look over at him, and again, he immediately looks away. I still can't quite believe he's actually looking at *me*, but I manage to resist the urge to glance around and see if there's something fascinating on the wall behind me. We lock eyes more than a few times. The both of us smiling a little more each time it happens.

A few minutes before my slot in the café is over, I whisper an apology to the cat in my lap, before gently lifting her off me so I can get up and place my plate inside the cage-like trolley, where I've seen Glitter Girl putting the dirty cups and dishes. It's next to a narrow lift and only a couple of metres away from where pink-haired guy is sitting. .

I stop in front of him.

“Merry Christmas,” I say, my heart beat banging in my ears. There must have been some magic courage-giving ingredient in that Christmas crumble. I don’t feel quite real.

The guy looks up and gives me the biggest smile yet, his cheeks dimpling. His eyes are light, light brown, as golden as the sun on an autumn afternoon. I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone with such pretty-coloured eyes. Fuck, he is really beautiful. I smile back, my skin heating as I turn to go. I’ve never approached someone I’m attracted to like this before. I kind of feel like I’m having a heart attack, but it feels good too.

Fingertips brush my wrist and I turn back in surprise. The guy pulls a small pad and a pen out of the front pocket of his T-shirt.

*I’m deaf*, he writes quickly, then, *I’m pretty good at lip-reading*. His smile turns hopeful.

Oh. Okay. My stomach swoops as we hold eye contact. It’s so intense my mind kind of freezes up and forgets anything else exists. *Say something*, some deep part of my brain hisses. *You need to say something and not just keep looking at him*. But no words are coming. And somehow words seem unimportant, because I feel like I’m trying to say so many things with my eyes, everything I need to maybe, but perhaps he can’t see that, or feel it like I do, as his smile begins to fade and, all at once, his eyes flick away.

He looks down at the pad he’s now not just holding, but actually gripping in his hand, and there’s a certain brittleness fixing his expression in place.

I open my mouth, then close it again. I've messed this up. Fuck, in the space of maybe twenty seconds, I've somehow messed this up, and I have no idea how to fix it.

I glance round for a pen, pencil, something to write with, and see one of the server pads with a little pen attached lying on top of the cage. I reach for it, jumping a little as the barred café door bangs wide and a gust of freezing blows through the café. Pink-haired guy lifts his head. I hold out the pad, hoping he sees, then I crouch down next to him and, leaning the pad on my knee, start to quickly write, *Merry Christmas. I'm actually probably better at writing stuff down than saying it out loud.* I draw a smiley face. *Talking is not my strong point as you can probably tel—*

“Oh my God, Zu! I completely misread your text. I thought you said you'd booked *for* five! Not that the slot *ended* at five.” Helen's voice nearly shocks the life out of me and I look over at the café entrance, my eyes wide.

“I am so sorry,” she calls from the doorway.

Glitter Girl stands behind her, eyes-wide, her expression a little stunned. Helen is like a force of nature and she can be very loud. There are a lot of signs up asking people not to shout as it disturbs the cats, and a few people are looking at us. I know my slot here is over and I do need to go, but....

“It's okay,” I say, probably not loudly enough. I hold my hand up and wave. “Just a sec.”

I want to finish what I'm writing. I want to try to fix this...this...whatever this is—this tiny chance maybe, this spark of connection—that I know I've somehow broken with

the guy beside me. It feels important. But when I turn my head to glance at him, to show him that, I find he's no longer there. The fluffy brown cat that was curled on his lap brushes itself against my legs and purrs.

With a frown, I look all the way around the room. Where did he go? There's only one exit to the café, which Helen is currently blocking, so he definitely did not go out that way. The toilets are in that direction too, and I didn't see him cross the room. There's a stairwell on the other side of the trolley, but that has a sign next to it that says, *strictly no entry*, and leads down to what I presume is the kitchen where they prepare the food. He must have gone down there. Which means he's either so desperate to get away from me he's willing to get himself in trouble, or, I draw my eyebrows together, he works here.

I kind of hope he works here, as the thought of him being that desperate to get away makes me feel all kinds of awful. My heart is a little heavy as I stand up. With a quiet sigh, I put the pad and the pencil back on top of the trolley. It's probably for the best he's gone. There was no way he was interested in me anyway, not like *that*. I'd have just been making a fool of myself.

The brown cat starts up its tractor engine purr as it circles my legs in a figure of eight. Suddenly the shy cream cat who curled in my lap trots over and starts doing the same thing. I can't move. I look over at Helen and see she has her hand over her mouth, laughing. Glitter Girl is grinning too. They say something to one another, then Glitter Girl comes over.

“They’ll move off if you just start walking.”

“I don’t want to kick one of them.”

She smiles at me. “Kiitan’s cat never goes near anyone usually. You must be special.”

“Kiitan’s cat?”

“The cream. Macha. She’s very choosy.”

I’m lost. “Who’s Kiitan?”

“Oh, you were just talking to him. He’s the pudding chef.”

The pudding chef. My eyes flick over to the stairwell. He does work here.

“Can you...” I swallow. “Can you tell him I’m sorry... I’m...I’m just not very good at...” I flap my fingers a little as if they’re going to get the words out for me.

Glitter Girl raises an eyebrow and smiles at me, and I really wish I was not blushing so hard. Fuck.

“So you’re not, er, dating the woman who just came in?”

I shake my head.

“Why don’t you talk to Kiitan yourself? He finishes at seven.” She glances at her watch. “Can you wait around until then?” she asks softly. “He couldn’t take his eyes off of you. It was sweet the way you were flirting with one another.”

*Oh.* Is that really what was happening? And it was obvious enough to be noticed by someone else? My stomach squeezes.

I look over at Helen. She waves at me and points outside. Turing back to Glitter Girl, I nod. I kind of feel like I owe it to Kiitan to wait around. Even if it does mean standing in the rain for an hour or two.

“You don’t have to wait outside,” Glitter Girl says as if she can read my mind. “I just can’t serve you food or anything. The insurance is really strict about how many customers we can have inside at any one time, so you’ll have to be a friend, not a paying customer.”

“Thank you, that’s really kind of you... I, um, just need to go and talk to my friend first.”

“I tried to get her to come in, but I think she felt bad she’d missed her slot. When you’re ready, wave at me and I’ll let you back inside.”

Carefully I step over the cats. They follow me all the way to the door. Which is strange but nice...really nice. Glitter Girl holds them back so they don’t follow me through to the small reception area beyond. I hurriedly pull on my shoes and coat. Outside, it’s raining really hard. Poor Helen looks as though she’s cowering under her umbrella, her curly hair is flattened against her head. I’m pretty much soaked as soon as I step out of the door, but Helen immediately shares her umbrella with me anyway.

“I’m so sorry, Zu. You must have thought I stood you up.”

“It’s okay, honestly. I...I...” I take a deep breath. “I didn’t realise this was a date until Jas said something. I should be the one saying sorry.” Helen chews her bottom lip and I feel awful. “I should have said something before today, but...I

didn't know how. I'm sorry. I'm...I'm..." The rain hammers against the café window and my heart is thumping in my ears so loudly, I barely hear the words as I say them, "I'm gay...." I swallow. "I'd really like to be friends, but that's...that's all."

Helen reaches out and squeezes my shoulder. "I should have been clearer when I asked you out. I was going for super casual!" She laughs and the sound surprises me. She doesn't seem upset. "I'd really love to be friends." She looks around. "I think I'm going to get a cab home to get out of this rain though. I'm soaked. And so are you. Do you want to share a ride?"

I shake my head. "Thank you. I'm...I'm going back in the café for a bit."

Helen's eyes widen for a second. "Did I...were you... that guy with the pink-hair...did I interrupt something?" My skin flushes so fast it feels as if all my blood has rushed up to my face. "Oh my God, I'm so sorry." She smiles.

"I'm sorry," I say again. Even though Helen seems amazingly fine with my being a complete coward about not telling her that I didn't want this to be a date, the guilt that I sort of (very ineptly) hit on a guy while I was waiting for her is looming large. *You did think she had stood you up at that point though*, a little voice points out. But still, it feels wrong.

"Don't be. It's no big deal. We got our wires crossed, both of us, that's all." She leans in and gives me a quick one-armed hug. "All the people that I've seen working here are very cute. I'm definitely coming again." She glances behind and I see Glitter Girl watching us through the window. Helen looks back at me with a wry smile. *Oh*.

“Think she’s looking at you or me?” she asks softly.

“Definitely you.”

“Is it really weird if I go in and give her my number when she probably thinks we’re on a date?”

I laugh, wishing I could be that brave, that free. “Not weird at all. She, um, asked if we were dating and I...I said no. She was kind of the one who said I should wait for the guy I was talking to to finish his shift.”

“Ah, okay.” Helen’s eyes sparkle. This is why I like her, I realise. She’s so open and curious, and when she wants something, she goes for it. All her drawings are like that too, bold and bright, with little unexpected twists that make you smile.

Jas saw her art on Instagram last year and asked her if she’d be interested in working with us. With Helen as the character artist—the personality—it’s taken our comics to the next level. Both Jas and I do the words (though we all storyboard the scenes), but I’m the background guy mostly, there to fill in the gaps and create a little atmosphere. It’s where I’m happiest. And Jas does anything and everything to do with marketing. Luckily marketing is his happy place, because I’ve always hated the idea of selling anything to anyone, and if I was in charge of it, I doubt more than ten people would have ever seen our comic and we’d both be back working in the poky McDonald’s in Victoria and drawing in our breaks, like we did when we were at uni.

I guess we’re a perfect team. And wow, I could have messed our working relationship up for all of us. All because I was too much of a coward to tell Helen the truth. Although



actually dating a work colleague doesn't really strike me as the greatest idea in the first place.

The rain starts coming down so hard, Helen's umbrella collapses. Instantly I feel like I'm standing under a cold shower with my clothes on. We're both soaked to the skin in seconds. We gasp at one another.

Glitter Girl opens the door and hurriedly gestures we come inside. We stand in the reception area, dripping and shivering. Helen squeezes her hair out with an apologetic expression.

"Oh my God. I'm so sorry I left you both out there," Glitter Girl exclaims. "I didn't realise it was raining so heavily."

Outside, the drain is overflowing, and water is beginning to flood out across the narrow street.

Glitter Girl glances at the few people left in the café and frowns. "Someone just told me the tube's flooded at Old Street. Shoreditch might still be open but it's further away. I think I'm going to have to close the café early. I don't want anyone to get stuck here on Christmas Eve, and I need to get home to make sure my mum's okay. She can't get out of the house without help."

Helen nods, she hasn't taken her eyes off of her. "We could call everyone taxis."

"Good idea...if we work out where everyone lives, people can share. I'll refund everyone and offer them a complimentary session."

Even though closing the café and getting everyone home is a great idea, my stomach sinks as I realise the rain has probably washed my chance to talk to Kiitan again clean away.

Since the cat café is located half-way down a cobbled street and the taxis can't pick anyone up from right outside, Helen and Glitter Girl, whose name is actually Michelle, organise four taxis to pick people up from the big café on the corner.

I stand in the reception area watching the street really beginning to flood.

The rain doesn't look like it's going to let up any time soon, so people start to head outside, making a run for it to the other café.

“You ready, Zu?” Helen asks.

I glance back into the café and stop, sure I catch a glimpse of pink on the stairs.

“What about the cats?” I ask Michelle. “Will they be okay?” What if the street outside floods so badly water starts entering the buildings.

“Kiitan is going to make sure they're safe and he'll lock up. He has a bike out the back, so he'll ride home.”

A bike? I take another glance outside. He's going to bike in *this*?

A chorus of meows sound as the last few people leave. The cats seem unsettled. The shy cream cat, Macha, the one Michelle said belongs to Kiitan, has made her way to the top

of the tallest climbing post and is sitting on the platform meowing pitifully. Half a dozen of the cats stream towards Kiitan as he appears at the top of the stairs, but as soon as he bends down to pick one up, they all scatter. Maybe Kiitan needs a hand with the cats. Plus, isn't the kitchen downstairs, in the basement? If the street outside is flooding, is he going to be able to keep the basement dry on his own if water starts pouring in?

"I'll...I'll be there in a minute. I'll just see if...if..." My skin heats as both Michelle and Helen grin at me.

Helen squeezes my shoulder. "Text me later. Let me know you got home safe. Or just that you are safe, even if you're not in your own home," she adds in a whisper.

Blushing, I nod.

After Helen and Michelle leave, I try to wring out my clothes in the reception area. I look up as the barred door opens and find Kiitan holding out a towel to me. He gives me a small smile, but there's a kind of fixedness to his expression that I wish wasn't there.

"Thank you." I quickly step into the café so the cats don't escape into the reception. They're still meowing and restless. Maybe they're hungry.

Kiitan glances at me before pulling the pad from his pocket. *Are you waiting for someone?*

I shake my head. I don't know what to say. Well, I do but I can't exactly say, *You. I think I'm waiting for you.* Because what if he doesn't want me to? I mean...I know Michelle said all that stuff about him not being able to take his

eyes off of me, but that doesn't make it a fact. I mean, maybe he was staring at me because he thinks I look really odd or something.

I gesture behind me. "Um, the street's flooding."

Kiitan glances outside and frowns. *There's a door in the basement that leads out into the alley behind the cafe. You can go out that way if you want?* he writes

Again, I shake my head. I'm thinking about asking him if I can borrow his pad to write on or if that would be rude, when he kind of reads my mind and pulls an order pad out of his pocket—the order pad I wrote in earlier—and holds it out.

My hand is a bit shaky as I write, *I stayed behind because I thought you might need some help. I can go if you'd prefer?*

He shakes his head, but doesn't quite look at me. *So how come you're better at writing stuff down?*

I blush a little, realising he must have read what I didn't finish writing to him earlier. *Just feels easier, I guess, I write. Always been easier.*

His eyes flick to mine. *What's your name?*

*Zu. Short for Suzuki. After the car. My mum was going to call me Mercedes Mini if I was a girl. My older brother is called Morgan Cooper. Think I got off lightly.*

Kiitan smiles as he reads and my stomach flip flops in a way that should be unpleasant, but it's really, really not. *I like your name a lot,* he writes.

*I've never met anyone call Kiitan before.*

He glances at me before writing. *I chose it. I didn't like the name my parents gave me. They didn't like me much. So I chose a name for myself when I left home. It was my great grandad's name. He was from Nigeria. He used to call me kitten when I was small. He liked cats too.* Kiitan grins, but I can see it's more of a determined expression than a happy one. The sort of grin that marks a boundary, that tells people going beyond it is something that has to be earned, maybe.

*You're soaking. I'm going to get you some dry clothes.*

I watch as he hurries across the room and disappears down the stairs. He moves like a dancer, all light and full of grace, as if he's aware of the world around him in a way I don't think I've ever been. A chorus of meows follow after him. I wonder if his quick exit was because he didn't want me to ask him any questions about what he just told me. I wish I could let him know that I wouldn't push him to talk about anything he didn't want to, but yeah, I think that sort of thing is probably something you have to show someone, not just tell them, and he doesn't know me.

When I look down, I see half a dozen cats surrounding my legs. I bend down to stroke one after another and their purrs vibrate up my arms.

I stand up as Kiitan returns with an armful of clothes. He holds them out and inclines his head towards the café's bathroom.

"I'm not sure I can move," I say, taking the clothes and looking down. Kiitan follows my gaze and claps his hand over his mouth as he laughs. More than a dozen cats are now gathered around me and a few are actually lying on my

soaking feet. Their warm bodies feel like little furry hot water bottles.

*Cats are a good judge of character*, he writes, then he bends down and gently shoos them away so I can move.

I'm kind of worried the clothes Kiitan found for me won't fit, but it turns out, they're just about perfect. Large navy-blue sweatpants and an oversized grey hoody. Only the pair of black sports socks are a little too big. I doubt these are Kiitan's clothes as they look like they'd swamp him. I hang my clothes over one of the cubicle doors, and then duck under the hand dryer for a moment to dry my hair. It feels so good to get out of my wet things and get warm. When I glance in the mirror, I catch my reflection smiling back at me. It surprises me how happy I look. But maybe it shouldn't, because right now, happy is how I feel.

I exit the bathroom to find Kiitan crouched down by the front door making little soothing noises to the cats surrounding him.

He looks up and smiles. He smiles a lot. It's pretty catching.

I squeeze the pad in my pocket, unsure if I should write or speak. "Thanks for the clothes."

He watches my face carefully as I speak, then writes, *They belong to Leon, the other chef. He won't mind you borrowing them. He always keeps a change of clothes at work. You're about the same size... Do you want to help me feed the cats? It'll help calm them down.*

“Yeah, I’d love to.” I try to keep eye contact when I’m speaking. I don’t know if it helps. It does mean we have quite a lot of eye contact going on though, which is, I don’t know, filling my stomach with butterflies and also making me feel really close to him somehow.

Half-way down the stairs there’s another cage-like barred door, probably to keep the cats out of the kitchen, I think.

The kitchen itself is big and bright and very clean. All the surfaces are shining chrome and the walls and floor are covered in sparkling white tiles.

Kiitan points to a doorway next to the huge fridge, which opens into a small room full of cat food, feeding bowls, cat beds and a few toys.

I touch Kiitan’s arm and he turns immediately. “Do the cats live here all the time?”

*Some of them, he writes. I take my cat, Macha, home on my days off. The rest of the time we take it in turns to stay late and get here early so the cats can go outside to the alley when the café is closed and someone is here to let them in again. It’s not the best set up as we have to carry them through the kitchen.* He leans back against the doorway and meets my gaze.

He’s lovely. So bloody lovely. My heart thumps. I’ve got to be imagining the way he’s looking at me, haven’t I? I have zero experience at this. With slightly trembling hands, I pull the pad out of my pocket.

*I'm sorry about earlier when I kind of froze up...I'm worried I offended you or something. I don't know why I'm telling him this now, it just feels important that he knows. That I'm honest with him. That I'm true.*

His eyes search my face for a moment before he writes, *Sometimes people don't know what to say when I tell them I'm deaf. They get embarrassed and...he glances up at me and shrugs...I guess they're just not interested in figuring out how to talk to me. Like it's not worth the effort. Like I'm not worth the effort maybe.*

My heart squeezes. Fuck. Stuff like that must really knock your trust, your confidence. He doesn't have to tell me.

“Is...is that what you thought I was doing?” I don't want to look away from him, so I say the words out loud. It's true I didn't know what to say, but it wasn't because he told me he's deaf.

Kiitan looks down and shrugs again. *Maybe...a bit...because you didn't say anything, but then I thought your date had arrived and figured that was why you'd looked so sad when you came in. It made sense. You were waiting for someone. Of course you were waiting for someone. Thought I'd made a fool of myself. Felt embarrassed, I guess. I'm pretty good at picking up on body language, the signals people give off, like, if they're maybe...interested.*

He doesn't look up for a moment and I really wish he would. “You didn't make a fool of yourself,” I say as soon as he lifts his gaze. “And you didn't read me wrong. Not at all.”

He presses his lips together, trying not to smile. “Okay,” he mouths, meeting my eyes for what feels like a very



intense second. Then he looks down and writes, *But I still spent my whole break staring at you, when you were in fact waiting for your date.*

When he glances back up it's with one dark eyebrow raised and an expression that's maybe a little pointed, and I suddenly get it. He thinks I'm messing someone around.

*She wasn't...* I scribble out the words. *Helen is my friend and coworker and I've been a complete coward to her. I didn't actually realise it was a date when she first asked me out, and by the time I did realise, it felt too late for me to say that I'd thought we were just meeting up as friends, work colleagues, even. I didn't know how to tell her I wasn't interested in her like that.* I stop and run my hand through my hair. *But we talked outside, just now, and I apologised and she...* I frown... *she laughed and it wasn't a problem. I really like her as a friend, but that's all.*

Thinking about the whole conversation with Helen, it makes me wonder what on earth I was worried about. Sometimes you make stuff into these massive shapes in your mind and they turn out to be so much smaller in reality.

*It's just,* I carry on writing, *I've never been asked out on a date before.*

Maybe I shouldn't admit this. Surely by twenty-two years of age most people have been on hundreds of dates.

Kiitan frowns a little as he reads what I've written. A faint blush stains his cheeks as he writes, *You're gorgeous. You've obviously not been hanging around in the right places. If you were, you'd have people asking you out on dates all the time.*

I stare at his words and swallow, my heart thumping hard. I want to tell him no one has ever told me they think I'm gorgeous. I want to tell him that he's stunning, that he makes my breath catch in my throat. But before I can even get the words straight in my head, never mind get them written down on the pad clutched in my hand, this weird coldness washes over my feet and I look down and see waves of dirty water flooding across the clean kitchen floor.

Wide-eyed I meet Kiitan's gaze and, at the exact same time, we glance over towards the back door and see a river of water gushing beneath it. Shit. We need to block the door with something, anything, but, I quickly look around the kitchen, there is absolutely nothing to block the door with in here.

*Beanbags, I think, cushions.*

But before I can rush off, Kiitan shakes his head. "Please grab the cat food," he mouths. "Take it upstairs."

I do as he asks, carrying as many bags of cat food as I can up the stairs. Luckily the bags are sealed, as the cats surround them in seconds.

I hurry back down stairs. When I get there, I see Kiitan is struggling to pull down a metal shutter over the back door. The water is ankle deep now, and freezing. I pull the borrowed joggers up to my knees and wade across the room towards him. Once I reach the back door, I grab the shutter, and with both of us tugging at it, it quickly slides to the floor. The water stops gushing immediately. Kiitan crouches down and locks the shutter to a metal ring fixed to the tiles. Then he stands up and leans back against the shutter, his chest heaving.

After a moment, he writes, *The previous owner installed this after a flood a few years ago. We've never used it before. I wasn't sure it would work.*

When he meets my gaze, his eyes are still a little too wide.

“Seems to be working pretty well.” I cast a brief glance down at my feet. “Do you have a bucket? I can bail this water out into the sink over there.”

*There's a sump and a pump somewhere that should sort it out, if we can find it. Will you feed the cats with me first? It might help them settle down.* He glances over towards the stairs where I can see most of the cats watching us and meowing loudly.

I nod.

His fingers brush my wrist for a second. *I'm really glad you're here. Thank you.*

I'm obviously not in complete control of my body, because I watch him put his pad and pen in his shirt pocket and then reach for his hand.

Not quite looking at me, he locks our fingers together and grins. Hand in hand we walk up the stairs, and for the first time in my life, I feel so light I might actually be floating.

Upstairs, the cats swarm around us as we open one of the bags of cat food. Kiitan laughs as I pour food into dishes and then lay them out on the floor one by one in a line. The cats trot after me, following my every movement.

*They are never this polite, usually it's a free for all. I think you're some sort of cat whisperer, Kiitan writes.*

Macha is still sitting on top of the tallest structure. I stand beneath her and lift up my arms. She considers me for a moment and then leaps lightly onto my shoulder.

Kiitan shakes his head and grins and I grin back, then frown at the way he's shivering. I can't believe I didn't notice how completely soaked he is, though he does seem to be trying to hide it. But now I'm looking, I can see his top and trousers are wet through from his battle with the shutter. Shit, he must be freezing.

I quickly lift Macha from my shoulder and place her on the floor so I can pull the pad out of my pocket. *Do you have a change of clothes?* I write.

He shakes his head.

Chewing my lip, I look around the room. I'm not sure he's going to really want to wrap himself up in one of the cat blankets, but it might be better than being cold. Then I remember something I saw when I first came in.

*Back in a sec,* I write.

I jog over to the café's reception and pull out a box from beneath the coat hooks. Lost property.

Outside, the street is now completely flooded. Luckily there is a step up to the café entrance, but if the rain doesn't slow soon, the water is going to start creeping in. Maybe if we fill the reception area with beanbags and cushions that might hold it off for a while. Yeah, and maybe that's just me being hopeful, because I don't really want to think about what we'll

do if water does start flooding into the café. There doesn't seem to be any access to the upper floors of the building from in here. And cats are not known for being the biggest fans of water.

The lost property box contains one small dark green hoody, a thin black cardigan, a single red glove, and a furry grey hat which makes Kiitan look so cute I have to squash the urge to wrap my arms around him and hug him. But there're no trousers. I guess they're not the sort of thing you'd mistakenly leave behind in a café.

Kiitan holds his finger up as though he's just had an idea and disappears behind the dirty dish trolley for a moment. He comes back wearing a pair of checked chef trousers which are far, far too big for him. Luckily they have a drawstring which he ties fairly tightly.

*Remembered we had some of these in the cupboard. Keep spares in case anyone spills anything badly. This is the smallest size we could get. I usually just wear my black trousers so having to change is not so much of an issue. Didn't reckon on the kitchen flooding though.*

I try not to watch as Kiitan pulls off his shirt and swaps it for the hoody. He's very lean, and as he stretches I can see the shadow of his ribs and every muscle across his abdomen outlined in sharp definition. I force myself to look at my hands. He's stunning. A perfectly proportioned fantasy I can't possibly have.

I don't get why he said what he said. I'm not like him. I'm not gorgeous.

I glance up and find him watching me. He tilts his head, and the look in his eyes is one I've got to be imagining. Haven't I? Because his eyes are saying, *I want you*, loud enough that it's echoing around my head.

But before I can even think what to do about that, Kiitan's gaze flicks away to the far side of the room.

"Shit," he mouths.

I jerk my head around to see what he's looking at and my heart sinks. A growing puddle of water is creeping under the reception door and out into the café.

"Cushions?" I point at the dozens of cushions scattered around the room.

Kiitan shakes his head and runs a hand through his hair.

I pull out the pad from my pocket. *Yeah, I guess we need more of a flood barrier than a pillow fort.*

I want to make him smile, and he does, for a fraction of a second anyway.

The café is split level, and there's a step up to the back of the room.

We try to pick the cats up and shoo them up there, but they just scatter and meow at us and then trot back to circle my legs.

Kiitan's eyebrows draw together. *I think they might follow you.*

"What?"

*Go and sit down.*

I do as he asks, and sit on one of the soft cord beanbags next to the wall at the back of the room. And it's weird, but he's right, the cats follow me, crowding close and settling around me. Kiitan shoos a couple away and sits next to me, his back against the wall.

*I feel like king of the cats*, I write, and he smiles, but I can see how worried he is.

*I don't know what to do if the café floods*. He glances up at me, his beautiful eyes filled with anxiety.

*Is there anyone we can call to help us get the cats out?*

He stares out the café window for a moment and shakes his head. *Leon and Michelle have family responsibilities. Leon and his girlfriend have a baby, and Michelle takes care of her mum. I can't ask them. Not on Christmas Eve. And I don't want to worry them. We manage the café between the three of us. There is no one else. We'll probably have to call the fire brigade or something, but they're going to be inundated with calls for help.*

I stare outside at the dark, watching the way the fairy lights lining the street cast twinkling shadows on the flood water. Something's different. I tilt my head, listening for the rushing sound of rain hitting the café window. But it's gone, leaving behind a weirdly quiet silence that you just don't usually get in the centre of London.

*I think the rain has stopped*, I write quickly.

Kiitan gets up and, avoiding the massive puddle, pads down the edge of the room to take a closer look. He turns and gives me a thumbs up and a smile.

Relieved, we sit at the back of the room watching the puddle of water slowly recede. The cats have settled at last and are sleeping on the cushions around us. I'm texting Helen to say I hope she got home safe and that I'm okay and still helping Kiitan, when my stomach rumbles.

Kiitan glances at me then picks up his pad. His pen hovers over the page but he doesn't write anything for a minute or two. I hear him take a deep breath. *Soooo...the rain has stopped...and it's Christmas tomorrow...I guess you probably want to get home now?*

*Not really,* I write back quickly.

He smiles and then looks down. *What about your family?*

*They're in Canada. I'll talk to them on Skype at some point. Sometimes we'll eat together like that, but it's a bit weird.*

I remember what he told me about his family not liking him much, but before I can think whether or not I should ask him anything about them, he writes, *I don't see mine.*

*So you've not got any plans?*

He shakes his head. *Leon and Michelle both invited me for lunch, but I said no. They're both having big family dinners and I'm not good with crowds of people I don't know. I feel a bit lost when there's a lot of people talking and I can't follow what everyone is saying. I was going to pop in maybe, that's all...* He shrugs. *You've really not got any plans?*

*I said I'd go and see my friend Jas at some point tomorrow, but we didn't set a time. So currently, my only*



*definite plan is helping you clean up the kitchen downstairs.*

*We could do that and then I could rustle us up something to eat?*

When he looks up, there is an eagerness to his expression that is all kinds of endearing, but I think about the Christmas crumble with cream that I ate earlier and shake my head. *Make something if you're hungry, but I shouldn't.*

Kiitan frowns and again he hesitates for a minute before writing, *Shouldn't? Why not?*

*I'm on a diet. I kind of failed earlier when I had the dessert. It was so good. My eyelids flutter shut and I sigh.*

*So you liked my Christmas crumble, huh?*

*It was magic. I loved it. Fairly sure whatever was in it gave me the courage to approach you in the first place.*

I can tell he's trying not to smile too widely. He is very, very cute.

My traitorous stomach rumbles again.

*But you are hungry right now, aren't you?*

I nod.

*Diets sound kind of rubbish.*

I sigh a bit more heavily this time. *Yeah...and they don't really work for me. I know they don't, but when you've been on one sort of diet or another since you were about fifteen, it's...it's hard to stop. I mean, I'm scared I'll just put on more and more weight if I do that. I'm scared my hunger is always lying to me. That if I eat what I want, I'll just get bigger and bigger and bigger.* I never talk about this and it's

hard to write the words, but it's also kind of freeing telling someone. Just talking about what I'm scared of, even if that in itself is scary too. *Thing is, when I do actually lose any weight, I just feel hungry all the time and look awful, probably because I feel so miserable. Kind of messed up, huh?*

I look down, and the little voice that in my head that hates me whispers, *how can he possibly want you when you look like this?*

*Maybe this is you, you know? Body stuff is hard when you feel like you don't fit some ridiculous idea that someone you don't even know came up with but you're told everyone thinks is right. Believe me, I know.* There's pain in his eyes as he looks at me, and when he glances down, all I want is to hug him. I wish I had the courage to make that move, but I don't. Not yet. *You look perfect to me, he writes, just as you are. You look strong, powerful, like no one is ever going to push you around, like your place in the world is certain. Like if you hugged me while all around us a storm was raging, I'd feel like it wouldn't touch me. You'd make me feel protected.*

He meets my gaze and even though the horrible part of me is telling me he can't possibly mean all that, at the same time, I can feel that he does. I don't think I've ever met anyone I feel so...so, I don't know, accepted by. I still don't have the courage to hug him, though I do desperately want to. And yeah, I'm starting to think that maybe...he might want that too....

*Okay, I tell myself as I pick up my pen, all the parts of me that just want to bring me down can fuck right off for a few hours.*

I look back at what he wrote and smile. *I'd really like you to rustle us up something to eat.*

He grins.

*I really like you*, I add, feeling my stomach somersault as though the world's smallest rollercoaster is racing around inside me.

Kiitan blushes. *I really like you too, Suzuki the Cat Whisperer.*

His fingers find mine and my breath catches as we smile at one another. He pulls my hand into his lap before letting go of my fingers to write, *So you've never been on a date, but have you had a boyfriend/girlfriend/significant other?*

I don't really know how much I should tell him, but being completely honest, however much it might hurt, feels right with him. *Kind of. A year ago. But he was confused. I think he wished he was straight, or at least didn't want to admit that he wasn't. We could only be together in secret, on his terms. I guess I made it into something more than it was, and in the end, he didn't want any of it and he got a job in Bristol and left. I haven't seen or spoken to him since.*

*Sounds like he was a dick to you. What would you do if you saw him again?*

I shrug. *I don't know. I don't think I really want to see him again. I'm not sure I ever wanted him exactly, just what I thought we had, being close to someone, you know?* The past has been replaying in my mind like some sad song I just don't want to listen to anymore. *What about you?*

*Boyfriend/girlfriend/significant other?*

I nod.

*I'm pansexual, just so you know. Last person I dated was Leon, the guy who's chef here. It was before we worked together, and obviously it didn't work out, but we're good friends now. Had a few relationships before that. Girls and boys. Got hurt a few times. He shrugs. No one I think about now, so none of them were probably as serious as they felt at the time. Haven't been with anyone for a long while. And now it sort of feels like maybe I might have been waiting for someone... He sneaks a glance at me then looks down again. So...hypothetical question, say you were stranded in a cat café on a rainy Christmas Eve, and this guy you were with was a chef who really liked you and wanted to make you something nice to eat, but he was going to need your help to clear some flood water out of the kitchen first—do you think that sort of situation could be in any way classed as a date? Or would that be too weird?*

My heart squeezes. *I think that would be my perfect date.*

I don't plan on leaning towards him and letting our cheeks press together, it just sort of happens. The way his slight stubble catches mine causes my breath to hitch, and when he turns his head and brushes our lips together, I am floating and lost and yet somehow so very found at the same time. He climbs into my lap and, for a moment, I stop thinking entirely. With a smile, he tilts his head and kisses me again. Just gentle, just soft. Then the tip of his tongue touches mine and I gasp as if a fire has been lit inside my lungs, stealing all

my oxygen. I run my hands down his back and he arches closer and groans into my mouth and suddenly we are kissing with a fierceness that I've never experienced before. I've never kissed anyone like this. His fingers tangle in my hair and I wrap my arms around him needing to get closer somehow, needing to *be* closer. As if being close to him is the only thing I've ever wanted. The little noises he makes—part plea, part moan—drive me wild, and I just want him to keep making them. I don't ever want him to stop. I've never kissed anyone I want this much.

Panting, he pulls away. We stare at one another wide-eyed and I get the sense that went as unexpectedly for him as it did for me. His shocked expression breaks into a grin. His lips look swollen and the urge to trace his mouth with my fingers is impossible to stop. I feel stunned. All I can think about is how soft his lips are. He closes his eyes and kisses my fingertips. Then with trembling hands, he pulls his pad out of his pocket.

*Ummm, he writes, still grinning. WOW. I think I want to do that all night? And then all day tomorrow and maybe the day after too? But, um, shit, fuck, I think we need to sort the kitchen out before the flood water does any more damage and I still want to make you food, because you're hungry, and DATE, and it feels weirdly romantic that I cook for you, and then I really, really, REALLY want to kiss you again. I've NEVER been kissed like that. I am SO turned on!*

He collapses against my chest laughing.

*I can't believe I wrote all that down. I have zero inhibitions right now,* he scribbles.

His sweetness and honesty are making my heart ache. But when he looks up and searches my eyes, there's a vulnerability to his expression, and the edge of that hesitancy is there again, and all I want is to chase it away. I'm not sure my shaking hands could hold a pen if I tried to write in this moment, so I just say the words and hope I'm clear about every single one. "I'm so glad I'm here with you, and if I never do anything else in my life but kiss you, I think I'd die happy."

"Fuck," he mouths.

Closing his eyes, he kisses me again. Just once. When he pulls away, I can see how dark his eyes are and almost feel his want to just keep kissing from the neediness in his expression. And I realise what I thought at first was maybe restraint is perhaps more likely a whole lot of worry about the floodwater covering the kitchen floor. He cares about this place, about the cats who live here. It's not just a job to him. I can see that. I don't want him to be so torn.

I lock our fingers together as he climbs off my lap, determined to help him in every way that I can.

We find the sump and the pump in the cat food cupboard. The cats meow at us from behind the barred door on the stairs.

*Think the cats are worried about us,* I write. They are making quite a lot of noise.

Kiitan smiles. *They're worried about YOU. They're not interested in me, they think I'm just a part of them.*

Although Kiitan protests a bit and tells me that the pump should do all the work, I start bailing water from the floor into the dishwashing sink with the biggest steel bowl I can find. I want to get the floor cleared and clean as quickly as possible so we can get on with the actual DATE, but I'm too shy to tell him that. I do tell him I'm happy to sort this out if he wants to get on with making food for us. Out the corner of my eye I can see him scrubbing his arms and hands in the other sink, and then he's drying himself and staring into the fridge, a thoughtful look on his face.

I pause mid-bail as his pad appears in front of my face. *Anything you don't like/can't eat?*

I shake my head, feeling pretty certain I'm going to like whatever it is he makes me.

He leans on the steel worksurface to add, *I'm veggie so I don't cook meat for myself, but I can for you, if you want?*

"I want to eat what you eat."

"Okay," he mouths, smiling. He spins on his heels and goes back to the fridge.

I keep bailing. My muscles ache, but it's a good ache. It reminds me of when I used to do weights when I first started uni because they had a free gym. I've never enjoyed exercising as such—running at school was the worst—but I always liked lifting stuff. I'd kind of forgotten that until now.

After the last of the dirty water has been sucked into the sump, we mop the floor quite a few times with hot water and a bit of this thick lemon-smelling floor cleaner, and then we take it in turns to sit up on the draining board of the big

dishwashing sink to clean ourselves up properly. The sink creaks and I worry I might break something, but I don't like to think about where the water might have been overflowing from and I'd rather be clean. Especially because of *DATE*. I glance at Kiitan and grin.

Kiitan finds two stools so we can sit next to one another at the end of one of the shining work surfaces. I lay out plates and glasses while he dims the overhead lights, then searches for a box of matches to light the handful of tealights he discovers under the sink. I'm not sure what he's made for us to eat, and I don't look until he brings whatever it is over in a pretty green bowl.

*Pasta salad with mint and basil pesto, he writes. And maybe a bit of rocket and watercress thrown in.*

He serves me a spoonful and gestures I take a bite. It tastes divine.

*There wasn't a huge amount of food left over in the fridge so I kind of went with everything green.* His eyes search my face.

It's probably the best pasta salad I've ever tasted. *I could eat this forever. It tastes amazing.*

A flicker of relief crosses Kiitan's face before he grins, serves himself some pasta salad and sits down next to me. *So, you said your friend Helen was a work colleague. What is it you work on together?*

*We draw. Comics. It's an online series. There are three of us that work together. Me, Helen and Jas.*



*Wow. You're an artist.* Kiitan stares at me for a moment. *Would you show me? Always wished I could draw.*

*I've always wished I could cook.*

We grin at one another.

After shoving another forkful of pasta into my mouth, I pull out my phone and sign into the website Jas created. God, my taste buds are in heaven.

*It's not really popular but it's got a decent following now and we pull in enough money for the three of us to keep doing it, which is all we wanted really. Just to get paid enough to do the thing we love.*

Kiitan takes my phone. He stares at the screen for ages, zooming in and out on different bits. It's just the first scene, the one Jas uses in his promo. But it's still one of my favourites.

*The feel is amazing. It's giving me shivers,* he writes. *Whoever did the detailing on this background is seriously good.* He blushes and glances up. *Do you all work together on everything? Now I'm thinking I should have asked you what part you did first, because all of it is amazing, but I especially want to make you feel good, but I am obviously really bad at flirting.* He pulls a face. *And now I'm making it seem that I think flirting is kind of like lying. Okay, I'm going to stop writing down every single thought that comes into my head now.* He scrunches his nose and winces.

I laugh. I love that he expresses what he feels. That he's so honest. I'm not sure I've ever met anyone quite so truthful.

*I do all the backgrounds.*

He claps his hand over his mouth and laughs. *Seems like I'm very into everything about you*, he writes, blushing more.

*I'm very into everything about you too*, I think.

I bite my lip. *Would you teach me some sign language?*

Kiitan cocks his head to the side, his eyes searching my face.

He signs something, then writes, *I'd love to. Are you sure this is what you want to do on your—our—first DATE?*

I nod, looking into his lovely eyes. I can't think of anything I want to do more. Well, I can, but this is part of that, part of being close to him, isn't it? I want to know how to talk to him without writing stuff down. I know I am generally better at communicating if I write out what I want to say, but it feels different with Kiitan. I want to look him in the eyes when we tell each other stuff. It feels important.

*What do you want to know how to say?*

*Your name?*

He presses his lips together, trying not to smile. "Okay," he mouths.

Beside his name, Kiitan shows me how to sign about a dozen words, mostly for the things around us, and then phrases like, *how are you*, *I really like your pink hair*, and *I love cats*. Well, he tries to show me anyway, but I'm uncoordinated and he's funny—it's honestly the best hour of my life.

Sometimes he makes sounds when he's signing, as if he's going to speak, but seems to stop himself when he realises. I feel awkward asking him if he ever speaks, but somehow, he reads my mind anyway.

*Some people speak when they sign, but I don't like speaking. I got teased about my voice when I was younger and...he shrugs. I just don't do it now, not even with my Deaf friends.*

It's another thing he's said that makes my heart hurt. That makes me want to put my arms around him and protect him from all harm. *Were you born not being able to hear?*

Kiitan shakes his head. *I got meningitis when I was three. Lost my hearing. I can sort of remember sounds. It's weird... You're my first first date I've actually talked about this stuff with.*

*Really?*

*Yeah, talking about all my insecurities is normally fourth or fifth date stuff.* He grins. He's joking. *I do only talk about this with people I trust though. It feels kind of scary that we kind of only met earlier and now I feel like I know you. Like I've known you for ages.*

*I feel like I know you too,* I think, but before I can write it down, Kiitan gets up and starts to clear the dishes away. My immediate impulse is to help, but I wonder if I should give him a bit of space. Maybe this is going too fast and it's too much. But it doesn't feel like too much.

*Maybe he needs reassurance that you feel the same way he does,* a little voice whispers.

I quickly open YouTube on my phone, trying to find a video that will help me.

My heart is beating in my throat as I follow him over to the dishwashing sink. I wish I knew him well enough to walk up to him and wrap my arms around him, but maybe he doesn't want that, maybe he doesn't like that sort of spontaneous closeness, and anyway, his back is turned and I don't want to shock him. So instead, I stand next to him, so he knows that I'm there, and brush my fingers lightly down his arm. He looks up.

*Hi*, I sign.

Biting his lip, he puts down the plate he's about to wash. *Hi*, he signs back.

*I'd really like to hug you*, I clumsily try to sign. His eyes-widen, and for a brief second, I've no idea if I've gotten those words anywhere near right.

And then he steps towards me, throws his arms around my shoulders, and squeezes me tightly. A little shocked, I hug him back. I guess I must have gotten something right. His cheek is level with my collarbone and, when he shifts his head, I can feel the warmth of his breath against my throat. I press my nose into his hair. His skin smells all warm, like a soft cinnamon roll, and beneath that, a scent that can only be him. The moment is perfect. He's perfect. Fuck. He's so, so perfect.

When he takes my hand and leads me upstairs, I try not to let my nerves get the better of me. Maybe our brilliant kiss earlier was just an anomaly. Maybe we're not as well matched as it somehow feels. Maybe this really is happening too fast.

Not at all sure how this is going to go, or what we're going to do with all the cats, we drag two bean bags into the corner and sink down. The cats barely seem to notice us. There are no curtains covering the large café window and Kiitan flicked all the lights off on our way upstairs anyway, so the room is lit only by the fairy lights crossing the street outside. It's enough light to see one another in, just. But I doubt anyone wandering by would notice us. Not that anyone is likely to be wandering by, unless they happen to be wading through the knee-deep floodwater, and if they're doing that then they'll likely be concentrating on where they're putting their feet and I doubt they'll be looking in—

Kiitan squeezes my hand. “Nervous,” he mouths.

I nod.

“Me too.”

With a trembling hand, I cup his cheek and he closes his eyes and leans into my palm. And I don't know what happens, but as soon as his lips brush mine, my nerves lift and float far, far away. It's as if my body speaks the same language his does, and it absolutely knows how to make him feel as good as he makes me feel, if only I will let it. And I will. I do.

This doesn't feel like a first meeting, a first *DATE*. It hasn't from the beginning. It feels like more, so much more.

We kiss and stroke one another all over. I am so turned on I feel dizzy with it, but I never want the sensations to end. I just want to feel this. I just want Kiitan all warm and needy in my arms. I want to kiss him and touch him all night long.

Every time I run my hand down his back, he arches into me, rubbing himself closer, his cock stroking against mine through our trousers.

I brush my fingers through his hair as he pulls away to write, *What do you want?*

“I want to make you come.” My words are more of a needy plea. I’m surprised he can lip-read them.

*Do I get to make you come after?*

I swallow. He’s watching me so closely. “Yeah. If...if you want.” I think I’m going to come anyway, whether he makes me or not, just from doing what we’re doing now, touching and kissing and being close.

*Of course I want. Oh my God.* He tosses the pad and pen aside, throws his arms around my neck and sucks on my tongue.

I back up for a second. “What...what do you like?” I ask, my heart thumping in my ears. I want to please him. I need to know. Kissing him makes it hard for me to think straight.

“Show you?” he mouths.

I nod, staring at his swollen lips.

He yanks the hoody over his head, and I am transfixed by the way his narrow chest is heaving, then he leans forwards to drag the chef’s trousers down his thighs at the back, exposing his bum. His hand tugs at mine until I get the idea and cup his bare bum cheek. The feel of his warm soft skin causes my brain to blink off for a moment. He sucks my lip and moans into my mouth as I squeeze a handful of softness.

I'm going to come in my pants. Right now. But I'm distracted but the way he brings my other hand to his mouth and licks a thick wet stripe across it. Sucks my fingers one by one, then swirls his tongue around my palm. It's so hot watching him. Before my hand dries from his spit, he pulls his trousers down at the front and lifts his cock out. He's so perfect in every single way and his small cock is very hard. He gasps when I touch him. I've only ever wanked someone off, so, still squeezing his bum, that's what I start to do.

But he grasps my wrist to stop my hand moving and shifts his hips so his dick slides in and out of the wet tunnel of my fingers. He watches it the whole time, his mouth open in amazement, as if me touching him like this is the hottest thing he's ever seen. I'm going to come so hard from just watching him get off. Without moving my hand, I tighten my fingers around him just a little and he flicks his eyes to mine and grunts softly. I clutch his bum a little harder and he gasps and kisses me. I have to squeeze my eyes shut. I'm not even touching myself and I am so, so close.

His body shakes from the slow movement of his hips, the way he's controlling his pace and holding himself back. But it doesn't take long before he seems to reach some sort of limit and his thrusts gets quicker and jerkier and little sobbing sounds tear from his throat. I can feel he's going to come. I knead his bum cheek, slip my fingers into his crease and he comes with a raw yelp, his cock flying through my fingers, soaking my hand with warm stickiness.

He lets me stroke him for ages after. My fingers rubbing gentle shapes over his softening cock, his balls, the very top of his inner thighs. I want to explore every inch of

him. I feel like I'm balancing on the edge of a cliff and I just want to stay there, right on the very edge and, at the same time, I desperately want the intense release falling off the cliff will bring me.

Resting his forehead against mine, he presses kisses all over my face.

He mouths something between kisses that I don't quite understand, probably because he's still fairly blissed out and I'm so turned on I can hardly see straight. He pulls back, his eyes searching my face as he mouths whatever it was again.

“I want to suck you, that okay?”

Oh. I swallow as I nod. “I've never...no one has ever...”

His eyes fix on mine. “No one, ever?”

Feeling very wide-eyed, I shake my head. His grin grows big.

I'm fairly sure he mouths, “Come in my mouth. I love doing this,” before dipping his head and sliding down my body.

His trousers are still half way down his thighs and I sit up to brush my finger over his cock again, unable to leave it alone. He turns sideways and jerks his hips towards me so I can reach him. I can feel him getting stiff again. I can't stop touching him.

He waits until I'm looking at him before slipping his hand into the waistband of my borrowed joggers. Slowly, slowly, he rubs his hand over the front of my underwear. Oh fuck. My head hits the wall behind with a thunk. I lift my hips



as he tugs the trousers and my underwear down my thighs. I watch through slitted eyes as, with a grin, he blows warm air over the tip of my cock. When the warm wet heat of his mouth envelops me, my brain flies away to some other place and I am just a feeling, just this single moment of pleasure, just the desperately brilliant sensation of my cock deep in his perfect mouth.

I don't last long. My whole-body tenses and I try to warn him I'm going to come. Kiitan sucks me deeper, swallows around my pulsing cock, and my orgasm goes on and on and on.

Afterwards we kiss and kiss. Kiitan gets completely naked and we rub our cocks together and come at almost the exact same time. We clean one another up with a towel I find and wet under the hot tap in the bathroom.

When Kiitan's skin starts to get goosebumps, I help him pull his clothes back on and we keep kissing, lazy and sweet, as if we can't stop touching our mouths together.

At some point we must fall asleep, but I don't remember it. Bright light wakes me. But it's not sunlight. Someone has switched all the overhead lights on. I squint and realise from the light shining in through the big café window that it's probably late morning anyway. On Christmas day. And Helen and Michelle are standing in the doorway to the café, smiling at us.

Kiitan lifts his head and rests it against my chest. Without thinking I put my arm around him, then tense, a sinking part of me expecting him to quickly pull away, but all

he does is make a soft *mmmmm* sound while he snuggles closer.

“We just came to check you’re both okay,” Helen says brightly, “and you are so...” She reaches for Michelle’s hand. “We’ll leave you to wake up properly and maybe see you later.”

Still sleepy, I blink, not sure what to say. They came all the way out here on Christmas day to check we were okay.

I pull my phone out of my pocket and see that my text to Helen last night didn’t send. I didn’t notice at the time, too busy thinking about other stuff. And my phone was on silent, so I didn’t notice the several texts she had sent me after. Shit.

“I’m so sorry you had to come all the way out here,” I say.

“It’s okay. I’m glad you’re both alright,” Michelle says, she turns to Helen. “We thought you probably would be. Maybe not *how* alright though.” Helen laughs and I hear her whisper, “I think I won the bet.”

Still only looking half-awake, Kiitan pulls his phone out, stares at the screen then presses his palm against his forehead. With a little difficulty, he sits up and signs something to Michelle who quickly signs something back, shaking her head and smiling. As soon as she’s stopped, Helen catches her hand and links their finger together again.

I stare at them. They’ve been holding hands on and off this whole time. How am I only just noticing this now?

When they turn to leave, I get up, guilt at them having to come and check on us making me want to at least see them

out. Kiitan gets up with me.

At the front door, Michelle signs something to Kiitan. Something about cats, I think, from what I remember Kiitan showing me last night. He blushes a little and glances at me. I look between them.

“What did she say?” I mouth when they’ve gone.

Kiitan pulls out his pad. *That we’re cute*, he writes. *She said that we’re as cute as the cats.*

I take the pen from his fingers and write, *you’re the cute one*. He rolls his beautiful eyes.

Outside, the street is no longer flooded and there seem to be a fair few people wandering up and down for Christmas day. Kiitan wraps his arms around my neck and presses his cheek against mine like he doesn’t care who sees we’re close, like he doesn’t care that it’s probably quite obvious from the crumpled state of our clothes that we spent the night wrapped around one another. He sighs contentedly and I can’t help but kiss him. I feel his smile curving against my lips and I know this is only the beginning.

The end

~

*Thank you so much for reading! I hope you enjoyed this short and sweet, cat-filled Christmassy story. If you did, I would be super grateful if you’d consider leaving a short*

*review—they help with visibility on Amazon enormously.*

*Thank you <3*

*If you'd like access to a few free short stories I've written and be informed of new releases and occasional sales, please join my newsletter [here](#).*

## Also by Suki Fleet:

This is Not a Love Story

Wild Summer

Skeleton

Innocence

Falling

The Glass House

Lima Oscar Victor Echo and The Truth About  
Everything

Te Quiero

Foxes

Just Like Heaven

Wildflowers

Light Up The Dark

Alfie Adams Comes at Life Sideways

For Sam, times infinity

Fight For This

Sometimes There's Stars

The First Boy I Ever Kissed

The Witness of the Sun (Book of Light I)

The Happiness Project

Ethan Gold Feels Like Home

## About the author:

Suki Fleet is an award winning author, a prolific reader (though less prolific than they'd like), and a lover of angst, romance and unexpected love stories.

They write lyrical stories about memorable characters and believe everyone should have a chance at a happy ending.

Their first novel *This is Not a Love Story* won Best Gay Debut in the 2014 Rainbow Awards, and was a finalist in the 2015 Lambda Awards. Their novel *Foxes* won Best Gay Young Adult in the 2016 Rainbow Awards.

If you'd like to offer your support and buy Suki Fleet a coffee you can do that here at [Ko-fi](#).

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