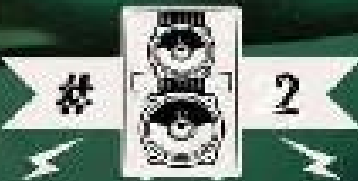


green
LIGHT

CAFFEINE



DAYDREAMS

LARK TAYLOR

green
LIGHT

CAFFEINE #  2 DAYDREAMS

LARK TAYLOR

Green Light by Lark Taylor

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Warning

This book contains material that is intended for a mature adult audience.

Blurb

What is the true nature of the relationship between the guitarist and bassist of the world-famous rock band, Caffeine Daydreams?

Kai

I should be happy.

My childhood best friend and I are living our wildest dream—making music and touring the world as famous rock stars. I've got everything I could wish for.

Except him.

I'll never have Silas. Not the way I want.

Our onstage behaviour gives fans a lot to speculate over, but it's only an act.

The truth is, I die inside every time we touch. It might be pretend for Silas, but for me, it's a constant reminder that I

can't have him the way I truly desire.

Then, a moment onstage leads me to a breaking point, and I can't bear the heartache any longer.

I need to find a way to only see Silas as a friend before I lose our friendship, and him, forever.

Silas

My life is split into two chapters.

Before Kai and After Kai.

My childhood was a nightmare. A darkness I carried alone. But everything became brighter when I met Kai. He took me into his life, his family, his home.

Kai is more than my best friend. He's my everything.

Some people think our relationship is odd...that it's unusual for two friends to be as close as we are.

But everything about us makes sense.

At least, that's what I believed.

When an onstage moment shines a light on the cracks in our foundation, my eyes are opened to a truth that's been right in front of me the entire time.

A truth I want to explore.

But it's too late. Just when I'm ready for more, Kai's moving on.

One thing's for sure; I'm not giving up.

No matter the risks.

Green Light is a bi-awakening, best friends-to-lovers MM rockstar romance. The second in the Caffeine Daydreams series, each book will follow a different couple as they find their HEA. Although better read in order, these books can stand alone.

For full content warnings, please visit my [website](#)

Foreword

The early chapters of this book take place on a council estate in the early 2000s. In Britain today, these areas are commonly known as ‘housing association’ properties. However, given the time in which the book is set, the characters will refer to it as a ‘council estate’ throughout. Likewise, ‘dole’ was a colloquial term for income support - known today as ‘Universal Credit’. This is means tested support from the government, that is given for a variety of reasons.

I drew on my own personal experiences of life on an estate such as the one seen in Green Light. This is not indicative of the experience everyone will have had growing up in these areas, but is simply a reflection of what I experienced.

Finally, there are several Black characters in Green Light. Wanting to have the most authentic portrayal possible, I worked with a sensitivity reader who gave me great advice regarding these characters. Please note that we did decide to go with ‘dreads’ over ‘locs,’ as this is the term used in the UK and is the hairstyle that Kai has adopted.

Dedicated to Cora Rose

Thank you for yelling at me to keep going

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Part 1

BEFORE

Chapter One

Kai

June 2001 – Thirteen Years Old

You wouldn't think taking a shortcut home from school would have life-changing consequences.

It was a stupid thing to do in the first place. Stupid because the route took me straight through Fleming Park and past the local grammar school. Now, if the odds were in my favour, I could slip by without any of the posh, uppity twats noticing me.

Sadly, the odds rarely seemed to be in my favour. The fuckers seemed to have an instinctive homing beacon where I was concerned, always coming out of the woodwork ready to torment me.

I didn't know what it was they hated about me more. That even though I was two years younger than them at thirteen, I already towered over them. That my postcode didn't carry the

same cache as theirs. That I didn't spend much time outside my house because I was helping care for my younger siblings. And my mum. Since starting chemo, she'd needed me in a way she never had. With Dad's job being so high-pressure, I'd stepped in to keep everything going.

Or maybe they hated me because I was Black.

At this point, I didn't care why they tormented me, just that they did. Thankfully, our paths didn't cross often. It wasn't like they'd be caught dead on my estate. Not unless they were hitting up Druggie Bill for a ten-bag of weed.

They weren't too good for us when it came to recreational drugs. One of those posh fuckers probably smoked more than the rest of my estate combined.

"Hey, Mal-ach-kai!"

The taunt rang out across the field. Even if I hadn't recognised the voice as Timothy Smythe, the slow, punctuated way he drew out my name would've given him away.

"Come on, you little chav, don't you want to play?"

I gritted my teeth at the slur. With all the education those twats received, you'd think they'd have a wider vocabulary. Being from a council estate wasn't something I was ashamed of, regardless of what insults they wanted to throw at me about it. To them, a council estate meant you were poor. And being poor, to them, was something to be mocked.

The ironic thing was that we weren't even tight for money. Dad had a fantastic job at an accountancy firm in the city.

Another year, and he should make partner. In fact, we'd been about to move to a much better area. My name had even been down for that stupid school.

But then Mum got sick. Everything else got put on hold as all our lives changed in an instant.

It was ridiculous anyway. Who the fuck judged others based on their address or bank balance?

Pricks. That was who.

I quickened my footsteps, wrapping the handle of my crossbody bag around my hand. I'd lost two bags to Timothy already. I really couldn't afford to lose the contents of this one too. Unlike many of the kids on my estate, I took school very seriously, and this bag contained not only my books but two completed essays. Mum and Dad had drummed the importance of a good education into me from a very young age.

I wasn't going to let them down.

Loud thumps approached as the boys continued to yell my name in that infuriating manner.

"Mal-ach-kai..."

"Don't you wanna play?"

"Where you running off to?"

"Aw. Are you scared, Mal-ach-kai?"

Blood pounded through my veins as I broke into a sprint. Yes, I was scared. Scared of losing a whole night's sleep rewriting my essays. But I wasn't scared of getting a beating.

It wasn't like I hadn't had enough of them from these twats. The only reason they got away with attacking kids from my estate is that they travelled in packs, waiting until they got one of us alone.

It was only a matter of time before someone stood up to them. That person wouldn't be me. Knowing them, they'd go home crying to their mummy and daddy about the kid from the council estate.

The last thing my parents needed was the police on their doorstep. Because, let's be real, whose word would they take? Mine, the boy from the council estate built like a brick shithouse? Or the lanky group of tossers with too-white teeth who smiled like butter wouldn't fucking melt?

Yeah. I knew how that story would end. It's why I never fought back. It wasn't worth the trouble it'd bring down on my family.

They were closer now. My long legs ate up the ground as I sprinted towards the woods on the edge of the field. Once I was in there, I'd be okay. There were always kids from the estate hanging around, and if they saw this lot chasing me, it'd be war.

Say what you like about council-estate kids, but we had each other's back unquestionably. Especially against fuckers who thought they were better than us because it was their parents' names on the deeds rather than the government's.

The tree line was tantalisingly close. My breaths were coming out in gasps as twigs snapped under my feet.

Smack.

Something hit the small of my back, sending me sprawling into the dirt. The wind whooshed out of my chest and I winced as my cheek scraped along the ground.

Shit. Get up, Kai.

Before I could get my breath back, a heavy weight dropped onto my shoulders, pinning me in place. I snarled, twisting my head to see Hugo, Timothy's favourite sidekick, grinning down at me. "Caught you, Mal-ach-kai."

"It's Kai," I spat, wriggling as I desperately tried to unseat him. "Gerrof. I need to get home."

Shiny loafers came into my vision, and my heart sank as Timothy crouched in front of me. "Oh yes, you need to go home to babysit. We see you taking your brother to school in the mornings. What's wrong with your mum? She depressed? Wouldn't be surprised with the dump you all live in."

"She has cancer, you prick," I hissed.

If I'd hoped that might spark some compassion in Timothy, I'd thought wrong. He sneered at me. "Good. Natural selection at its finest."

His words unlocked something in me, and I started thrashing. Hugo yelled for help while pinning me down, and before I knew it, multiple hands were digging into my arms and legs.

"Poor Mal-ach-kai," Timothy said mockingly. "Here we are, just trying to be friends, and you're throwing it back in our

faces.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask what about our current situation suggested an attempt at friendship, but I bit it back. The quieter I kept, the faster this would be over with and I could be back home.

“Looks like we need to give you a lesson in manners.” Without warning, Timothy grabbed a handful of my hair, painfully yanking it back so I had no choice but to look at him. “You’re so pathetic. Not that we expect anything else though. After all, we know that *chav* stands for council houses and victims.”

I gritted my teeth against the pain searing through my scalp. Timothy’s face was so close to mine that I could smell prawn cocktail crisps on his breath. “And you, *Mal-ach-kai*, will always be a victim.”

He pulled back his fist, and I braced for the impact.

Instead, there was a loud thump and Timothy’s eyes glazed over before rolling back in his head.

I watched in confusion as Timothy’s limp hand fell from my hair as he collapsed to the ground, unconscious.

A lanky lad in ripped jeans and an Offspring T-shirt glared at Timothy. In his hands was a thick branch.

Disdain dripped from his voice as he spoke, “Actually, it stands for council houses and violence. Never sure where that came from though, seeing as you fuckers are clearly the more violent ones. But I never did like uneven odds.”

He banged the stick on his open palm twice.

The weight lifted off me as footsteps hurried away. Timothy was already coming to, but his friends weren't waiting for that. Hugo and another shoved an arm under each of his shoulders, half dragging him through the dirt as they scarpered.

“Chav.” My rescuer rolled the word on his tongue, sneering after them as they disappeared through the trees. “Don't they teach vocabulary at that fancy school?”

It was so close to my earlier thoughts that I barked out a laugh. The boy jumped like he'd forgotten I was still on the floor. “Shit, dude, do you need a hand?”

I waved him off, clambering to my feet and dusting off bits of twigs and leaves as I did so. “It's all good. Thanks for jumping in and saving me.”

“No problem,” he said, throwing the branch to the side. “Never hit anyone before, but when I saw how many were pinning you down...”

His voice faded, his lips thinning as he shook his head. “I wasn't going to stand there and do nothing.”

“Some people would've. Or turned around and pretended they hadn't seen anything.”

He tilted his head at me curiously. “Would you?”

“No. I'd step in if it was to help someone else.” I checked my bag over, frowning when I saw the broken catch. “Fuck's sake, not another one.”

“You’re very tall.”

I flicked my eyes over to the other lad. “You’re...observant.”

That surprised him. His head fell back and he let out a throaty chuckle. The sound sent butterflies swirling through my stomach.

Now I was the one who was surprised. What the hell was that about?

“I mean, you’re a tall, big guy.” My chest puffed out at that. “How’d they get you on the ground like that? Was it just that you were outnumbered?”

“No. But no good comes from fighting back. Not for kids like us.”

“No,” he agreed softly. “It doesn’t.”

That was the way of the world. We were tarred with a certain brush before people even got to know us.

Just because of where we lived.

“I’m Kai.” I shoved my hand out like my dad did when he met new people.

“Silas.” His smaller hand slid into mine, sending an unexpected jolt of electricity up my arm.

His face creased into a massive grin, revealing a slightly chipped front tooth and a deep dimple in his cheek.

It was like someone had hit me over the head with something. I stumbled back, yanking my hand from his.

Silas didn't seem to notice my odd reaction. His hands were back in his pockets as he looked past me warily. "Think they'll come back with a bigger gang?"

I hitched my bag higher on my shoulder with a sigh. "For sure. We should get going."

"Yeah." He turned back in the direction of our estate. "Probably for the best. Especially if you don't like fighting."

I followed after him. No, I didn't like fighting...but if someone swung at Silas, I didn't think I'd hold back.

I followed him home, not knowing this would be my life now.

Me, following Silas, waiting for him to really see me.

Chapter Two

Kai

August 2001 – Thirteen Years Old

Silas and I had been hanging out a lot, but not today. I hadn't been able to cancel on him. It wasn't like either of us had mobiles. I couldn't even call him on his house phone because like many families on our estate, Silas's line had been cut off when his dad didn't pay the bill.

I hadn't told Silas what was going on with...everything. It felt like a lot to dump on someone I'd only known for a few weeks. But I was sure he'd understand.

Week two of chemo was always the worst for Mum. Normally, Dad tried to be at home, but August was always tricky. Everyone and their nan needed time off during the summer holidays.

So, with Mum in bed, looking after my siblings was down to me.

“Stop hitting her with that.” I snatched the wooden spoon out of Louis’s hand before he could wallop Mia again.

Predictably, Louis’s lip wobbled before he launched himself into a full tantrum. Was I this much work at six?

Mia, apparently feeling left out, began to wail too. Being four, she liked to copy everything Louis did.

Right now, I couldn’t help but wish that what Louis was doing was *behaving*.

Their wails increased to an almost deafening level. Just when I thought it couldn’t get any worse, the baby monitor crackled with a tinny cry.

“Great, you’ve woken Ruby,” I muttered. “Stay here and don’t move.”

Taking the stairs two at a time, I raced to my parents’ room. I needed to grab Ruby before she woke Mum.

My nine-month-old sister was sitting in her cot. As soon as I entered, her hands went up, making grabby motions, and she began to babble in earnest.

“Shh, Rubes,” I whispered, smiling as I reached for her. “Come on, let’s get your bottle.”

I paused to check on Mum. Fortunately, her fever seemed to have abated and she was sleeping peacefully. She probably needed more water, though, and something to eat. Trying to find something she could face eating was the challenge. Most foods seemed to make her nauseous these days.

I made a mental list as I raced back down the stairs, Ruby bouncing on my hip. Bottle first, settle the others, then get Mum water.

Ruby squealed and giggled as she clung to me, enjoying the journey down the stairs. Mum had been diagnosed with breast cancer during her pregnancy. Everything had happened so fast after her birth. On weekends and school holidays, I took over Ruby's night feedings from Dad so he could get some much-needed sleep.

Because of that, Ruby had a special place in my heart. Her little smiling face was enough to make my day a bit easier.

I skidded into the kitchen and bit my lip to stop several curses from spilling out. Right now, the same couldn't be said for my other siblings.

I loved them, but Jesus. They liked to test me.

"Where did you find the flour?" I asked as I strapped Ruby into her highchair. "And why did you tip it over Mia's head?"

"We're playing hairdressers," Louis said, looking up at me with big eyes. "Was we not supposed to?"

"Poo, poo, poo," Mia chanted, clapping her hands together, sending small clouds of flour floating through the air.

I grabbed the now nearly empty bag of flour before eyeing Mia warily. "Are you saying poo as in shampoo...or have you done a poo in your knickers?"

Mia grinned up at me. "Poo."

I groaned inwardly, rearranging my to-do list. Hopefully, she hadn't pooped in her underwear, but with the way this morning was going, that was highly likely.

Ruby decided that was the moment she was dying from hunger. She might be the most easygoing of the four of us, but she got hangry in the most spectacular ways. Her little fists began to thud on the highchair tray, snot, dribble, and tears mixing on her face.

"Okay, Rubes, I'm on it." I filled the kettle with water, trying to hold myself together. "Just give me two minutes, sweetie."

"Snow angels!" Mia yelled, launching herself into the flour on the floor and swishing her limbs.

"Mia, stop doing that. And where's Louis?" I grabbed one of Ruby's bottles from the steriliser and shovelled formula into it. "Louis? Where have you gone?"

A headache pounded at the back of my head as Ruby's screams got louder.

Just then, the doorbell rang.

"I'll get it," Louis yelled from the front of the house. Great. He couldn't hear me shouting for him but had no issues hearing that.

"No, you don't," I hollered back. "You don't open the door unless you know who it is."

The kettle clicked off, and I decided whoever our visitor was, they'd have to wait. I rushed too fast to fill the bottle, the boiling water splattering onto my hand. "Shit!"

“Kai said a bad word,” Mia said gleefully. “I’m telling Mum.”

“No, you don’t.” I lifted her as she ran past, putting her on my hip. “You gotta stay with me today, Mia. Mum’s poorly.”

She wriggled in my grip, trying to get down. “Put me down. I want my mummy!”

I want my mummy too, I thought desperately. God, how was I supposed to hold this together. It wasn’t even nine a.m., and everything was falling apart.

Just then, a hand reached around and lifted the kettle. “How much water?”

My head snapped round. Silas was here. But how? Why?

“Louis let me in,” he said in response to my unasked question. “He looked like he was about to cause trouble, so I plopped him in front of *Bob the Builder* in the living room.”

“I...” I was at a loss for words. What must Silas think?

“So, how much water?” He repeated his question, raising an eyebrow.

“Nine ounces,” I whispered. “Then under cold water.”

Silas wagged his eyebrows at Ruby in an exaggerated motion, making her giggle. “Under cold water, he tells me, like I’m going to give you boiling. What’s he like?”

I stared at Silas in utter bewilderment. He looked up from the bottle and nodded at Mia. “Why don’t you go get Mia cleaned up? I’ll watch Ruby and Louis.”

I had no idea what Silas thought about the whole situation. It wasn't like I could turn down the help though.

With him cooing away at Ruby, keeping her entertained while her bottle cooled, I carried Mia into the bathroom. The flour had caused enough damage to require a shower.

I was so grateful that the "poo" had meant shampoo that I didn't care.

It took me a solid thirty minutes to get the flour out of her hair. Even then, I wasn't sure I'd got it all, but it would do. By the time I got back downstairs, it was suspiciously quiet. I poked my head into the living room to see the TV off and Louis nowhere to be seen.

Oh god, what was he up to now?

I strode into the kitchen and came to a sudden halt.

Ruby was happily drinking her bottle in her highchair, her chubby feet swinging in delight. Louis was at the table, crayons and bits of paper strewn all over it. His tongue poked out in concentration as he tried to fill in the lines.

And Silas, my lanky friend, was at the kitchen sink with bubbles up to his elbows.

"Colouring," Mia squealed, wriggling out of my hold to join Louis at the table.

"Hope you don't mind me giving them that," Silas said cheerfully over his shoulder. "Found them in the cupboard and figured it'd keep them quiet."

I nodded. "It's fine. Thanks."

"No problem." He put another plate in the rack to drip dry. "I've made you a cup of tea too. Thought you might need one."

I glanced around to see that he'd also cleaned up the floor. The floor was now sparkling clean. "Silas, you don't need to do all this."

He rolled his eyes, not looking up from the pan he was scrubbing. "I know that. But it's what friends do."

I filled a glass of water and dashed it up the stairs to Mum. After coaxing her to take a few sips, I returned to find Silas still at the sink.

"Let me do that," I muttered, my cheeks burning.

"Fuck off," he said before glancing back at my siblings. "Shit, sorry. Forgot I shouldn't swear."

For the first time since I'd woken up, I smiled. "It's okay. Not like they haven't heard it all before living here."

Silas snorted. "Tell me about it. I thought my old estate was bad, but even I'm learning all sorts of new words."

Unable to stand there doing nothing while Silas worked, I grabbed a tea towel and started to dry. "Thank you."

He nodded once. "Wanna talk about it?"

I glanced over my shoulder to make sure the others weren't paying attention. Obviously, they knew Mum was sick, but they didn't know everything.

Dad and I wanted to protect them as much as we could.

In quiet whispers, I told Silas the whole story. He listened, washing the dishes while I poured my heart out.

When I finished, he didn't say any of the things I was expecting. No, "your parents can't expect you to do this," or "this isn't fair," or "you're too young to be worrying like this."

No. Silas just took the towel from me and dried his hands.

Then nodded slowly. "When's her next round of treatment?"

His question threw me. "Why?"

He rolled his eyes like I was being deliberately thick. "So I can make sure I'm here. If she's poorly around the same time, I can come over and help you and your dad out."

My throat thickened. I couldn't speak.

"Oof," Silas said as I crushed him to me. I hugged him fiercely, trying to pour all my unspoken words into my hug.

"Thank you," I whispered.

He was slow to return my hug. Was that because we were boys and boys weren't supposed to show affection according to our fucking ridiculous society?

Or was it because Silas wasn't used to hugs?

His grip tightened like he was figuring out how to do it. "You're not alone, Kai."

I held him a little tighter, wondering why this felt so right. "Neither of us are. Not anymore."

Chapter Three

Silas

February 2002 – Fourteen Years Old

“Silas! Door.”

I flinched as the beast’s voice yelled up the stairs. Fortunately, he didn’t come up, the footfall of his heavy boots telling me he’d gone back to his usual place. The sofa, where he spent all his days. No doubt he’d have a can of Stella in one hand and a cigarette in the other. The screeching sounds of the *Grand Prix* echoed through the air. He wouldn’t move again now. Not unless I made him.

I never meant to. But ever since Mum left, just my existence was enough to piss him off.

I stared at the front door from the top of the stairs. I knew it was Kai. He probably wondered why he hadn’t seen me in a few days. Thank god this had happened between his mum’s

chemo cycles. It was hard enough not seeing Kai, but at least I knew he'd be okay managing without me.

“Si?” His voice, already so much deeper than mine, rumbled through the gap in the door. I could see half his face poking around, concern and confusion written all over it.

I froze. If he saw me now, he'd know something big had happened. I was pretty sure he hadn't believed me the last time he'd noticed something, but there was no way I'd be able to explain this away.

“Hurry up and close the fucking door. What are you waiting for, you useless prick?” the beast barked. “You think I've got enough left in my dole money to heat the whole fucking estate?”

The sliver of Kai's face that I could see hardened.

Fuck it, I'd have to just pray the bruises had healed enough. I wouldn't risk exposing Kai to the beast's fury.

That was my burden to carry.

Racing down the stairs, I yanked the door open and shouldered past Kai. I didn't stop to speak to him, just bolted for the woods at the edge of our estate.

Need to get him away, my brain screamed. Need to keep Kai away from him.

Kai was the singular good thing in my life. I wasn't having the beast take him from me.

I didn't stop until I could no longer see the estate through the trees. Leaning against a tree trunk, I pushed a hand against my side and winced. Fuck, that hadn't been a good idea with the state my ribs were in.

“Si? What was that about? Wha—” His final question faded as he stopped in front of me.

His mouth fell open, disbelief warring with horror. “What happened?”

“It's nothing,” I blurted. “Seriously, I'm fine.”

“Fine,” Kai had echoed, his voice rising to a shout. “Silas, this is far from fucking *fine*.”

I couldn't help it. I flinched at the volume, the condition so ingrained that it was as natural as breathing.

Kai stepped back, raising his hands with his palms facing me, his tone dropping like he was gentling a horse. “It's okay, Si. I just want to help.”

Tears filled my eyes. I swiped at them, embarrassment rising. What must Kai think of me? Did he think I was weak for letting my dad throw me around? That I was stupid for not saying anything?

He crept closer, biting his lower lip. “Where else are you hurt?”

“Nowhere.”

His nostrils flared, my stubborn best friend making his appearance. “Don't lie to me, Silas. We don't do that.”

Shame flooded me. Without saying a word, I gingerly lifted my shirt. Kai's hands quickly took over when he realised how immobile my left arm was.

Between us, we got the material off. Kai scrunched it in his hand, the dirty white cotton clenched in his fist as he surveyed me.

“I'll kill him.”

“Don't say things like that,” I hissed, yanking my T-shirt back. “We're just kids, Kai. We can't do anything to change things. It's okay. I'm used to it.”

“No.” There was a dangerous gleam in Kai's eyes that I hadn't seen before. “You don't need to be used to it. I'm not having it.”

He spun on his heel, his long legs taking him back towards my house.

Shit. I couldn't let him confront the beast.

Ignoring the pain in my ribs, I tackled him around the legs. Thank god for mandatory rugby lessons in school.

Kai hit the ground with a gasp. “Gerrof, Si! I'm serious. I'm not letting him hurt you.”

Panic rose in me, so visceral I almost choked. Using all my weight, I leaned on his upper back, pinning him. “Kai, listen. Please. You can't do anything.”

He froze. “What, you're saying I just let him keep using you as a punching bag?”

“If you say something, it’ll be so much worse,” I whispered. I knew that from experience. Whether it was a neighbour or a concerned teacher, the few times anyone had tried to step in only resulted in more pain for me.

“We have to tell someone,” Kai said desperately. “This is what social services are for, right?”

I laughed bitterly. “You think they actually care about kids like us? Kai, I’ve had more social workers than hot dinners. Nothing ever changes. Dad lies about where the bruises come from and threatens me so I stay quiet. The one time I was honest with them, they went straight to him to corroborate my story.”

I closed my eyes against the memory. “Trust me when I say it’s not worth it. Besides, being with him has to be better than a care home. At least here I have you.”

“You do have me.” The fight left Kai’s body, and I felt safe enough to slide off him and onto the ground. “I’m gonna keep you safe, Si. You can sleep at mine as often as you need to. My parents won’t mind.”

I ducked my head so Kai wouldn’t see the tears threatening to fall. When was the last time someone cared for me like this?

“And one day,” Kai said, his hand covering my knee, “one day, I’m going to take you away from him completely. Then I’ll never let him hurt you again.”

Chapter Four

Kai

May 2004 – Sixteen Years Old

The temperature had hit thirty degrees Celsius for the fourth day in a row. Silas and I were doing what we always did when the weather became unbearably hot.

We'd bought a tonne of ice pops from the corner shop before riding our bikes into the woods.

Now we were sprawled against logs, working through the rapidly melting pile of treats. Arctic Monkeys blasted from my battery-powered speaker, plugged into my portable CD player, while Silas sang along tunelessly.

Like I said, it was like any other day.

But it was also completely different.

Different because Silas had decided it was too hot to wear a shirt. Different because I couldn't stop looking at him.

Different because I could no longer ignore the fact that I was different. That the dreams I was having about Silas weren't the sort I should be having about a friend. That the way he stared after girls was the same way I stared after him.

I'd realised a while back that it wasn't the girls who caught my interest. I hadn't shared it with anyone yet, not even Silas. I knew he wouldn't have an issue with it...nor would Mum or Dad.

But the rest of the estate and the boys from the posh school? Yeah, I'd prefer not to give them any more ammunition.

However, over the past couple of months, that attraction had shifted from all males to Silas.

Fuck, how I'd tried to ignore it. Prayed at night that it would go away. Hoped I'd wake up and think of him as nothing more than my friend.

But, sat in those woods on that hot summer's day, I realised it was futile.

I tried to keep my attention on anything other than Silas and how he looked eating that ice pop. He was my best friend. The person I cared about most in the world. Since the day I'd discovered his asshole of a dad was taking his temper out on him, Silas had spent more time at my house than his own.

I shouldn't be looking at his chest and wondering when he'd filled out so much. I shouldn't be staring at his lips and thinking about if they'd taste as sweet as they looked.

He sucked up a bit of ice and his eyes rolled back in his head. I shifted against my log, panic filling me. Yeah. I definitely shouldn't be thinking about that. Not with Silas.

“What's up with you?”

“Nothing.” I ducked my head, trying to pull myself together. Maybe it was time for me to find a boyfriend...or at least someone to try stuff with. Silas had already had multiple girlfriends, but I didn't even know anyone who was out. Where would I even start looking?

Filing that under ‘problems for future Kai,’ I smiled at Silas. “Do you want to play later?”

Silas lit up, just as I knew he would. We'd both opted for GCSE Music. Part of that meant you got free music lessons on an instrument of your choice. I'd gone for the guitar, while Silas had chosen the electric bass. We'd always loved music, but getting to actually play the instruments? It had borne a new obsession in us both. My parents had even bought us both instruments so we could play at home.

Not that Silas knew that...he thought it was a spare Dad had in the loft. But they'd known as well as I had that his dad couldn't afford to get him one. Even if he could, we all knew he *wouldn't*.

Silas finished up the last of his ice pop and jumped to his feet. “Race you home!”

The fucker was on his bike and tearing through the woods before I scrambled to my feet. Grabbing our empty wrappers, I

chucked them into my backpack along with my CD player and speaker. Then I jumped on my own bike and shot after him.

Hopefully, I'd get over this crush.

Then Silas would just be my best friend again.

And everything could go back to normal.

Chapter Five

Silas

January 2006 – Eighteen Years Old

It was bitterly cold this winter, not that it mattered much inside Kai's garage. His dad had set up several heaters, keeping it warm for our band practices.

Band practice. Like we might one day be something. It was a dream that was a million light years out of reach but one we clung to anyway.

A ticket out of the estate? That was something we couldn't ignore. Other than Kai, none of us had a reason to want to stick around.

It was more than that for me though. It was another escape. Throwing myself into music was a distraction from the shit heap that was life at my house. Kai's parents had offered for me to live at theirs while finishing the final months of my A-Levels. But they already had four kids in a three-bedroom

house. I couldn't put that burden on them. It was one thing to crash on Kai's floor as often as I did, but I couldn't expect them to put up with me full-time.

Although I was rapidly rethinking this decision given recent developments. Frank had a new girlfriend. It'd been a long time since I'd called him *Dad* in my head. He sure as shit didn't deserve the term.

I had no fucking clue how he kept managing to ensnare these women, but one after the other, they seemed to get drawn into his sticky web of lies.

It didn't take them long to see the light.

This one had been around for six weeks so far. Unfortunately for me, she was one of those people who believed family was *important*.

Don't get me wrong, I thought the same. But Frank wasn't my family. Family didn't beat you until you couldn't breathe. Family didn't lock you in a cupboard for days on end as a small child. Family didn't hurl abuse at you for something as simple as treading on a creaky floorboard.

But, thanks to Karen—the new girlfriend—my presence had been *required* at home more often. Frank liked to parade me around in front of her, pretending to be the model father.

It was all an act. One that he dropped the second the door closed behind her.

Thankfully, I knew how to play him. It wasn't something I did often because there would always be a price to pay...but I

couldn't not see Kai. It was the only thing I refused to budge on, no matter what Frank did.

Normally, he didn't give a fuck where I spent my days or nights. But since Karen had entered the picture, all that had changed.

So, I'd made sure to bring up band practice in front of Karen. Sung Frank's praises, gushing over how happy I was that he supported me in my dreams. Lied through my teeth about how he made sure I *never* missed a rehearsal.

Frank had no choice but to send me on my way with a gritted smile.

I'd pay for it later. Of course I would. But it was worth it. I needed this. I needed Kai. Only knowing I'd be seeing him for practise kept me sane during the hours I was trapped with Frank and Karen.

There was a gentle tap on my shoulder like the world knew I needed a reminder of my true family. Kai's mum, Di, was there, holding out a cup of tea. "Here you go, hun. This'll warm your bones."

"Thanks, Di." I accepted the mug, offering her a grateful smile, ignoring the pull in my ribs. Frank had got smarter over the years. It seemed to have clicked how protective Kai was over me. Seemed stupid that he was scared of an eighteen-year-old, but he never left marks where Kai might see them. "How are you feeling?"

“Right as rain,” she said, her lips thinning as they often did when any of us dared question her health. We couldn’t help it though. She’d been in remission for a year now, but we still worried. “As is to be expected.”

“I’m glad.”

She squeezed my shoulder. I hid my wince, grateful Kai’s gaze was fixed on his guitar. I didn’t want him to know I was still too afraid to stand up to Frank. And I didn’t want him doing it on my behalf. Frank would have no problem calling the police and spinning a web of lies about Kai. He’d threatened it often enough.

That was my other reason for not just walking out the front door and never looking back. If I left before my education was complete, Frank’s dole money would take a hit. He wasn’t above blackmailing me about bringing trouble to the Parker’s doorstep if I walked.

“Right, who else wants a cuppa?”

“Me please, Mrs Parker,” Arlo called from behind his drum kit. Like me, he preferred to escape his house as often as possible. Kai’s parents had agreed to let him store his kit here, encouraging him to stop in as often as he liked.

I didn’t know much of his story, but I knew a beaten kid when I saw one. It was there in the shadows in your eyes. The tense way you held yourself, like one wrong word would lead to pain.

The band was our safe space. An escape. A hope and a dream.

“Luca? Kai?” Di asked.

Kai shook his head as Luca shot her a charming grin. “No thanks, Mrs P.”

Di rolled her eyes, her hands going to her hips as she glared at our drummer and singer. “How many times do I need to tell you to call me Di?”

Kai and I locked eyes and smirked. Arlo and Luca would learn sooner or later that she *always* got her way.

“Si, door!” Mike, Kai’s dad, shouted through from the front of the house. I jumped up, my heart racing as butterflies exploded in my stomach.

“Hey.” Kai grabbed my hand as I rushed past, pulling me to a halt. “You invited someone over?”

“Umm...” I rubbed at my hair sheepishly. “Yeah, Sarah. That’s cool, right?”

Sarah and I had been dating for a few weeks now. She was one of the popular kids—always in short plaid miniskirts paired with fishnets. With dyed bright-red hair, a lip ring, and dark-lined eyes, she was way out of my league. But by some miracle, she liked me back.

Kai’s face darkened, making me frown. “Shit, should I not have invited her here? I didn’t even think to ask. I can’t invite her to Frank’s place...”

Kai still wasn't speaking, just staring at me woodenly like I'd whacked him over the head with something.

Di's hands fell on my shoulders before she spoke. "Of course it's okay, Silas. This is your home too. You're very welcome to have your friends here."

Kai found his voice. "She's not his friend. She's his *girlfriend*."

Arlo and Luca exchanged a confused look.

"We can leave," I blurted out. "I'll take her to the café, and we can hang out there. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to overstep."

"No, wait." Kai leapt to his feet, towering over me. Even with my growth spurt, I still hadn't caught him up. "Sorry, I'm being a dick."

"Language, Kai," Di snapped. But she patted his arm as she passed, shooting a worried look at us both.

That was...weird.

"She can come in," Kai said gruffly, shifting on his feet. "Mum's right. It's your house too."

But it wasn't. Not really.

"I don't want to make things uncomfortable..." Why was Kai looking so...angry? What had I done?

"You aren't," he said, shoving me on the shoulder. "Go get her before she freezes on the doorstep."

I hovered for a second, torn between pushing Kai on what was wrong and greeting Sarah.

“Silas! You lost?”

Mike’s booming call made the decision for me. With a final confused look at my best friend, I tore out of the garage to meet Sarah.

I couldn’t wait to show her our stuff. She might be the only person outside Kai’s family to hear our music, but it was a start.

Part 2

NOW

Chapter Six

Silas

If you'd told me as a child that I'd be living the perfect life, there wasn't a chance I'd have believed you.

But here I was.

The stage lights were blinding, my earpiece doing little to drown out the roar of the crowd as my palm slapped against the bass.

We were five weeks into our six-week tour. An exhausting slog across twelve cities, playing a total of eighteen shows.

I'd loved every fucking second.

Up here, on stage, was where I was happiest. Why wouldn't I be? I was literally living out my wildest dreams. It was so many miles from my childhood in every possible way. Not that Frank didn't still pop up from time to time. While my mum had stayed noticeably absent, he'd given interviews to whatever media outlet would pay him, selling them whatever stories they wanted to hear.

Kai had stayed true to his word. He was the one who worked with our lawyers and management to keep Frank down where they could. And when they couldn't? Kai would take me out and distract me with reminders of how great our life was now.

It was great. The best. And having my best friend at my side was the cherry on the cake.

Kai stepped into my eyeline, his brow furrowed with concentration as he flew through his solo. Little did I know that when I saved him from a beating all those years ago, he was hiding this magnificent talent.

What had started as us hiding away from the real world with our guitars progressed into something more serious when we joined forces with Arlo and Luca. Our band practices had morphed into playing wherever we could get into. Weekends were spent performing on street corners during the day and whatever pub would let us in during the evenings.

We'd got lucky. Don't get me wrong, we were a talented bunch of fuckers, and we knew it. But if it hadn't been for that video of us busking outside West Quay shopping centre going viral, Caffeine Daydreams wouldn't be what it is today.

Arguably the most famous rock band in the Western world.

Obviously, this was amazing. Magnificent. Unbelievable. There weren't enough adjectives to describe how great this life was.

Yet I missed those quiet sessions with just Kai and me. The hours spent scrawling lyrics and playing with chords. We still

did that, but now there were always other people around.

Even though Kai was right beside me...sometimes, I missed him. Missed what we once were in the privacy of his garage.

It was a small price to pay to be living my dreams. It wasn't like I'd left him behind. He was literally six feet away from me, his head tipped back as he played through the final notes of his solo. His dreads were pulled back in a bun. Eyes closed, he swayed on the spot, totally lost in the music.

It was my favourite time to watch him.

That day we'd met in the woods was the only time Kai had allowed me to have his back. The dude was overprotective of everyone—his parents, his siblings, his dates.

But with me? Kai took it to a whole new level. Even now, with Frank having been silent for years, he couldn't help but look after me. Whether bringing me coffee or reminding me to eat, he was always thinking of me.

On stage was the only place he seemed to truly let go long enough for me to watch him. To check he was okay.

Other than looking slightly exhausted, unsurprising given our hectic schedule, Kai looked fine. Great even.

Satisfied, I nodded along with the beat, my fingers flying over my bass. Sweat ran freely down my torso, soaking my shirt to me. Maybe I needed to take a leaf from our lead singer's book.

Luca had taken to performing shirtless, something our fans were *very* appreciative of if the clips circling TikTok were any

indication. But there was only one fan Luca was doing it for, and he was stood right in front of the stage watching our lead singer like a hawk. Ollie was a journalist who'd joined us to report on our tour. Seemed innocent enough until you heard the whole story. Ollie might've met all of us that first day of the tour, but his first meeting with Luca had happened months before.

After being stranded in a lift together for several hours, the two had parted ways. Luca had been surprisingly tight-lipped about what *exactly* had happened, but an obsession had been borne that none of us could escape. Needing to see him again, the sneaky git had pulled every string at his disposal to get Ollie on this tour with us.

There was no judgment from me though. I'd yet to fall in love, but if I ever found the right girl, I'd move heaven and earth to be with her. I'd fight dirty and play whatever card I could to get her to give me a chance.

From the way Ollie was watching Luca—like he was two songs away from leaping onto the stage and devouring him—the feeling seemed to be mutual. I might not be the best at reading people, but you'd have to be missing the majority of your brain cells to not spot the raw chemistry there.

Arlo began tapping out the opening beat of “Tease,” and I couldn't stop my smile from spreading. The audience was chanting, waiting for Luca to do what he'd done every other night of this tour.

Kneel. Kneel. Kneel.

That wasn't what had me smiling though. No. Luca wasn't the only one who liked to *tease* during this number.

Kai shot me a warning look over his shoulder as I prowled towards him. I paused, still strumming as I waggled my eyebrows at him.

Come on. Play with me.

He rolled his eyes, and triumph flared in me.

I wasn't sure how this had all started. At first, it was just banter between us on stage. Over time, though, we'd started to dance together.

Whenever we did, the crowd went *wild*.

And the dirtier we were, the wilder they went.

I crossed the stage, stopping behind Kai. This part of the song didn't require any bass, so I slung it behind me, leaving the front of my body free. Kai muttered a curse, knowing what was coming. But I knew he didn't mind. This is just what we did. If I thought for a second he actually meant those complaints, I'd never touch him again.

I knew my best friend like the back of my hand. Kai didn't have any issues with what we did on stage. He just lived for complaining. He was a grumpy fucker through and through. We wouldn't be us if we didn't give each other shit over stuff like this.

Being only a couple of inches shorter than Kai made it easy to mould my body to his. Pressing close to his back, I hooked my chin over his shoulder, burying my face in his neck as I

gyrated against him. My hands weren't idle either, sliding over his muscled chest suggestively.

The crowd screamed their appreciation. To his credit, Kai didn't drop a single chord while I straight-up felt him up. I dipped my hands beneath his guitar, grinning as his breath hitched.

"Easy," I whispered. "All part of the show."

He grunted but let a satisfied smirk glide over his face. Kai didn't have to worry about me stealing his virtue. With his guitar hiding what I was doing, the audience was free to let their imaginations get as dirty as they liked.

Kai and I knew this was all pretend. My hands always stopped a respectful distance from his waistband.

My best friend had fully leaned into it now. His head dropped back, his cheek brushing mine. If I didn't know better, I'd think his hooded eyes were down to lust. He twisted so his mouth was only an inch away from mine. I could feel his hot breath mixing with my own as we sang the lyrics.

Don't say you don't want me, baby

Because you know how I'll take that maybe

And tease you until you can't think

Neither of us had a microphone, but that didn't stop us from singing along with Luca. Our fans loved this part. I'd seen the comments online. They liked to think we were singing this to each other rather than what was actually happening.

Kai and I weren't doing this to tease each other but the audience.

I wasn't stupid. I'd seen the articles, Tweets, and TikToks hinting that something more was happening between us. The speculation had begun long before we started interacting this way on stage. It was bound to happen, given how close we were. From the very start, wherever I went, Kai followed. We were housemates, bandmates, and best friends. He was the one who'd single-handedly got me through my turbulent teen years. When he'd realised he was gay, I was the first person he shared it with.

When Kai came out publicly, the speculation increased exponentially. In a way, I think that might've been what had started this whole little routine. The press was too busy debating whether we were together to pay much attention to what Kai was actually up to.

There was no denying that the dating lives of my bandmates were under the spotlight far more than mine. Which was fucking ridiculous if you asked me. No one deserved to have their personal life scrutinised in the way my bandmates did. It shouldn't matter what your sexual orientation was. It never had to me.

Unfortunately, that wasn't a message the press had received.

By leaning into the flirtation between us on stage but never confirming anything, I kept the spotlight off Kai's real love life. Not that he had much of one, to be fair, but it was only a matter of time before he found that special someone and

settled down. Kai was too loving, too loyal, too committed. He'd find his person one day.

Selfishly, I hoped we had a few more years together before that happened. When it did, I'd have to accept that there'd be someone in his life that he'd put before me. Someone else who'd be the person he'd celebrate his successes with. Someone else to hold him during the hard times.

I could accept that...right?

Honestly, it was something I tried not to think about. Just the idea had a wave of loneliness crashing over me, too much for me to bear.

Dragging myself back to the moment, I stepped back from Kai and swung my bass back to my front. It landed in place just in time for my cue.

Twisting at the same time as Kai, our backs met as our fingers flew over our instruments. I could feel his heat through the cotton of our shirts, his shoulders pressing against mine as we rested our weight on the other.

That was the thing about Kai and me. No matter what happened, I knew he'd never let me fall.

"Tease" transitioned into "Deep Down." Throughout the song, I danced around Kai, drawing out those grins he fought to contain. Each one was like a nugget of gold. I hoarded them all, knowing I was the only one to make him soften like this.

But, like every show, everything flipped when "Night's Darkest Secret" began. It was the sole song in our set where

Luca and Kai switched roles. Like a lot of our catalogue, it was one Kai had penned. Kai had a beautiful voice but was loath to provide more than backing vocals. I had no idea what it was about this song that made Kai want to sing it, but for some reason, he'd insisted. I'd been surprised, but Arlo and Luca hadn't. It didn't matter. We all had each other's backs, no matter what.

When we'd first pitched the song, our management had flipped their lids. Only when Luca outright refused to sing did they relent and let Kai do it.

And given it was our single biggest hit, it was a good thing they had. In fact, it'd been so successful that they'd pushed Kai time and again to take lead vocals on another track.

But for some unknown reason, he'd refused.

Without a guitar, Kai liked to occupy his free hand by slinging it over my shoulders and pulling me close. He'd crowd me from behind, singing the lyrics into my ear like he was whispering a secret. Arlo had once asked if it was odd, knowing I was straight and yet letting another man feel me up.

Logically, I got it. But this was *Kai*. He wasn't just a random guy.

He was the other half of me.

Tonight, Kai grabbed the front of my throat and used it to haul me against him. Like me, he was respectful. While there wasn't an inch between our upper halves, we were careful to

keep our hips well apart. It wasn't like the audience could see it anyway.

His big hands felt so right, cupping my neck. One of his fingers rested against my pulse point, and everything in me relaxed. I let my head fall against his shoulder, my eyes drifting closed as I lost myself in his husky voice.

Don't you know you're my secret?

How much more obvious can I be?

Because while you're thinking of her,

I can't help wishing you were thinking of me

Time and again, I'd asked Kai who the song was about. There was a pain to it, a deep, desperate *need*. It had made me almost angry when I first heard it. I wanted to track down whoever was making Kai feel this way and shake them until they saw sense.

This secret is mine to keep

I'll only share it now

In the dead of night

Because if I show it in the light of day

I know there's a chance you'll push me away

So that's what it'll always be

Night's darkest secret

Wishing you were with me

“It’s no one,” Kai would say, brushing me off. “Don’t worry about it.”

It was the only secret he wouldn’t share with me.

It hurt.

The song came to an end, and Kai quickly stepped away to grab his guitar from Luca. He didn’t look at me as he did so, taking up a spot on the furthest end of the stage.

It made sense. We didn’t want to focus all our attention on one section of the audience.

The next number was fast and hot. I stepped up to the edge of the stage, lifting a foot and resting it on a speaker. My gaze was caught by a fan at the front of the pit. Big, bouncy blonde curls framed her heart-shaped face. Her top was low-cut, her breasts spilling over the neckline. My cock stiffened behind my bass.

Cutting my gaze to her face, I saw her eyes widen and her tongue wet her lips. I shot her a wink, delighted at the way she bounced in excitement.

Oh yes, she’d make excellent company tonight. I could envision her bouncing just like that on my dick.

The set ended and I made a surreptitious gesture at Rhys, my guard. He rolled his eyes but nodded, knowing the drill by now.

Giving the crowd a final wave, I turned to follow my bandmates off stage. Luca had already vanished, no doubt wanting to get the inevitable meet and greets over with so he

could track down his reporter. Kai was prowling off into the wings, barely slowing as he handed his guitar to the waiting tech.

“Hey, Kai,” I called, rushing after him. “Wait up.”

He didn’t hear me. His long legs didn’t pause for a second as he strode out of sight.

“Umm, Silas?” A small voice had me pulling to a stop. “Can I take that from you?”

I turned my charming grin on the cute techie, making her blush intensify. “Of course, sorry about that.”

“No problem,” she said breathlessly, peeking at me from under long eyelashes. “Do you have plans tonight? I was thinking maybe we could...hang out?”

Oh fuck. I winced internally. This was why I shouldn’t fuck the crew. Don’t get me wrong, the night I’d shared with Annie had been hot. But I had a firm policy of no repeats, something I was clear about upfront.

Sadly, like many I’d messed around with, Annie was hoping to be the one to change my mind. In a way, I wished she could. It wasn’t that I was opposed to settling down, but I’d yet to find someone whose company I could stand to be in for longer than a fuck.

Someone other than Kai, obviously. Being around him was as easy as breathing. Why was it so hard to find that same simplicity with someone else?

That was why I had the no-repeats policy. The last thing I wanted was for someone to catch feelings I wouldn't be able to return.

“Sorry, hun.” I flashed her an apologetic grin. “I’ve already got plans.”

Hurt flickered over her face before she replaced it with a determined smile. “Well, you know where I am.”

“Sure,” I replied easily before walking away.

There wasn't a chance of that happening. I caught sight of the blonde from the audience waiting at the front of the meet-and-greet line. She spotted me, her face lighting up as she gave me a coy wave.

With Kai as my bestie and an endless line of beautiful women waiting to keep me company, I didn't need repeats.

Like I said, I was living the perfect life.

Chapter Seven

Kai

I slammed the door behind me, falling back on it and covering my face with my hands.

Why did I keep putting myself through this?

I pushed the heel of my hands against my eyes until my vision turned white. It didn't help. I could still picture Silas's mouth inches away from mine. Feel the heat from his body. Hear his heavy breaths even with my earpiece in.

"Kai? Open up, man."

"Fuck off," I growled at Arlo.

The doorknob rattled before Luca called through. "Come on, Kai. Don't shut yourself away."

I thudded my head against the door before relenting and letting him in. "You two need to learn to take a hint."

"No, you need to learn to stop shutting yourself away when you're hurting." Luca's tone was matter-of-fact as they strode in. Arlo flopped onto the sofa while Luca closed the door and

stood in front of it. He crossed his arms over his chest, his stance wide. “Why’d you keep doing this to yourself?”

“Fuck if I know.” My words were clipped as I busied myself with a drink. “Sometimes I think I like the pain.”

Because that was what it had become. Silas didn’t know it, but this onstage thing between us had blossomed into something toxic. I’d come to both treasure and hate his touch. It was a taunt of what I so desperately wanted but could never have.

“You need to say something,” Luca continued. “Silas wouldn’t touch you like that if he knew how it made you feel.”

Like I’m drowning and flying. A contradiction of living and dying.

My fingers itched for a pen, but I’d written enough songs about Silas. I had notebooks crammed full of lyrics that would never see the light of day. I didn’t need to add another to my collection.

Luca had worked for months to convince me to show the label “Night’s Darkest Secret.” When I’d relented, a small hidden part of me had hoped Silas would hear it and realise what it was about. Who it was for.

But no. My oldest friend had remained as oblivious as ever. Even when I stood on that stage and sang the lyrics into his ear, desperately praying he’d realise what was going on...he was clueless.

Maybe that was a good thing. Silas was straight. Despite how he behaved with me on stage, he'd never shown any interest in me or any other man.

Women, however...he showed *plenty* of interest in them. While on tour, he bedded a different girl every night. It had got to the point where I'd quietly requested to be roomed on another floor.

It was one thing to imagine how he might sound when he came. It was something else entirely to hear him do it and know someone else was the reason.

"I can't," I replied in answer to Luca's earlier question. "He'd be so hurt."

"Not if he knows how it's making you feel."

I swallowed my drink in a single gulp. "I'm not telling him."

Luca opened his mouth to argue back, but Arlo cut him off. "Luca, leave it."

He raised an eyebrow at our curly-haired drummer. "Don't say you agree with him."

Arlo sighed, tapping his fingers on his thighs. "Look, I'm not saying this situation is healthy. But Kai knows what he's doing...right?"

He looked at me, and I nodded. "Yeah. I know Silas doesn't actually feel anything romantic for me. I know this is all just an act."

“But that’s what I don’t understand.” Luca paced in frustration. “If you know all that, why keep doing it?”

“Because it’s better than having nothing at all,” I exploded.

Luca faltered, his hand rubbing over his stubble as he slumped against the wall. “I just don’t want to see you get hurt.”

Arlo sighed. “He’s going to get hurt regardless, Luca.”

I winced but didn’t deny it. I’d resigned myself to heartbreak a long time ago. Pretty much from the moment I’d confessed my sexuality to Silas. He’d been supportive. Kind. Everything I’d expected.

But you know what didn’t happen? He didn’t let out a breath and tell me he was too. That he was in love with me.

So, yes. Heartbreak was inevitable. It happened every day.

To me. It happened every day *to me*. Every time I saw him give that easy grin to another. Every time his eyes sparkled and laughter bubbled from his chest. Every time he casually brushed against me, not knowing I yearned for his every touch.

“Silas doesn’t feel the same way. I’d rather have him in my life than not at all.”

Luca’s face softened with pity. “I hate seeing you like this.”

I bowed my head. I knew that. He’d told me many times before, but what could I do? I wouldn’t risk my friendship

with Silas. It was literally the most important thing to me. “I don’t know what you want me to say.”

Arlo got to his feet. Crossing the room, he wrapped his arms around my waist and squeezed.

I put down my glass with a chuckle, embracing him back. He was so much smaller than me that I could’ve probably wrapped my arms around two of him. “What’s this for?”

“Because you’re a fucking idiot.” He sighed. “But I know a lot about fucking idiots.”

He let me go and turned to face Luca. “Look, I know this is hard for you to understand, given the guy you’ve fallen for returns your feelings.”

“You don’t know that,” Luca interrupted, a faint blush on his cheekbones.

“Please,” Arlo scoffed. “Anyway, what I was trying to say is that sometimes it’s better to have the pain than nothing at all.”

Something in my chest clanged. Sometimes it was easy to forget I wasn’t the only one tormenting myself with someone I couldn’t have. I didn’t know what had transpired between Arlo and Jack, Luca’s guard. Whatever it was had been painful enough to make Arlo retreat into himself, not allowing anyone other than us close. Yet whenever the idea of Jack leaving his post arose, Arlo was the one who’d put a stop to it.

Maybe this was why. Because he also needed the pain.

I wrapped my arms around Arlo from behind while Luca embraced him from the front.

“Guys, I’m fine.” Arlo’s voice was muffled against Luca’s chest. “Although life would be a fucktonne easier if there was even the slightest bit of sexual chemistry between us.”

Our laughter echoed in the small space, this being a conversation we’d had many times before. “Nah. We’re just destined to be lonely fuckers for all eternity.”

“Speak for yourselves,” Luca said, waggling his eyebrows as he stepped back. “I’ve got a hot date waiting for me.”

Just like Silas. My stomach twisted. I hadn’t missed the curvaceous blonde who’d caught his eye, nor the not-very-subtle signal he’d sent Rhys’s way.

“Rub it in,” Arlo muttered. “So much for wanting to make sure we’re okay.”

Luca put a hand on his chest in mock offence. “I can be worried about you and still excited about my sex life.”

There was a brief knock on the door before Jack stuck his head in. Like always, his gaze landed on Arlo, checking him over before turning to Luca. “You ready? Kevin’s getting annoyed.”

“Kevin’s a cunt,” Arlo muttered as Jack led us all from the room and towards the meet and greet.

“Agreed,” I said. Kevin was our manager. We hadn’t had any issues when he’d first started with us. To be honest, he’d been such a welcome relief after the shit show we’d been dealing with that we hadn’t seen any red flags. Over the last few years, though, it hadn’t escaped my notice that he’d become more

controlling. He liked to have a say over everything: the songs we put out, tours, images, and even our personal lives.

The final straw for me had come when he'd interfered between Arlo and Jack. For years, Jack had guarded our drummer like he was his most treasured possession.

Then, we'd all been called into a meeting and informed that Jack would guard Luca going forward. That'd been five years ago.

Arlo hadn't been the same since.

I'd wanted to fire Kevin there and then, but Arlo had refused. My respect for his feelings had stopped me from insisting. Ever since, I'd watched Kevin like a hawk.

I didn't like what I'd seen.

The line of fans began screaming as we came into view. Silas was already there, deep in conversation with the blonde from the front row.

Not wanting to disappoint my fans, I pasted on a smile and began to pose for selfies. It wasn't long before the inevitable question was asked.

"Can I get one with you and Silas?"

"Of course." My best friend sidled up beside me, his dimple flashing. He slung an arm over my shoulder, pulling me in tight to his side.

I sighed internally as the girl positioned us in the frame and clicked away. Touching Silas wasn't the problem. It was that I

couldn't touch him the way I truly wanted.

The second she moved away, I slipped from Silas's grip. I stepped to the side only for Silas to follow, pressing himself against me like he was unconsciously mirroring my movements.

That was where he stayed for the rest of the night, quietly cracking jokes between every selfie. It wasn't long before I forgot that this wouldn't last. That he'd be leaving me to go take that beautiful woman home.

For a few minutes, he was just mine. We were just us.

"Lot of fans to meet tonight," he commented as the last one filed out, leaving us to make our way to the exit. My guard, Dylan, trailed us at a healthy distance.

"Mmm," I said, trying to ignore how his hand brushed against mine as we walked. "More every night, it seems."

Silas pursed his lips. "Noticed they've put the charge up for it too."

I frowned sideways at him. "Since when?"

"At least the start of the tour. Costs three hundred pounds now."

My eyebrows raised. "Holy shit. Who gave the okay for that?"

Silas gave me a pointed look. "Who do you think?"

Fucking Kevin. The one thing we'd fought for was to keep us accessible as a band. With all four of us coming from the

backgrounds we had, we wanted our music and tours to be obtainable. Three hundred quid for a meet and greet would alienate the majority of our audience.

We stepped out into the balmy night air. We'd seen many cities on our tours, but Paris was definitely my favourite. The last time we'd come here, Silas and I had hired bicycles and ridden around the city streets. Laughter wasn't something I gave into often, but that day, I'd let it rumble from me until my sides hurt.

"You want to go grab some food?" We'd had dinner before the show, but after the performance we'd put on, I knew we could both eat.

"Can't do." He winked at me. "Got a hot date waiting for me."

I rolled my eyes, trying to combat the sinking feeling in my stomach. "Date? More like a fuck-and-run."

"Hey," Silas said in mock outrage. "I'm offended."

I shoved him in the shoulder. "No, you're not. You wouldn't know a date if it punched you on the nose and called you Judy."

"You're one to talk. When was the last time you went on a date?"

Well...he had me there. It was hard to date when my heart already belonged to someone else. "You're right, it's been a while. Maybe I'll set one up."

Silas tripped over nothing, his eyes widening briefly before his face cleared. “Really...you, uh, think you might want to meet someone?”

Hope flared at his reaction, but I quickly pinched it out. He was always like this when I talked about seeing someone. But it wasn't because he wanted me in that way. It was because he didn't want anyone replacing him in my life as my best friend.

We were codependent in the unhealthiest of ways.

Perhaps it was time to change that. “Yeah. I mean, I'm thirty-five. It's time I started thinking about settling down.”

Silas frowned, opening his mouth to say something. Before he could, there was a high-pitched giggle as the woman from earlier appeared. She catapulted herself towards Silas, practically climbing him like a tree.

I turned away, nodding at Dylan to indicate I was ready to go.

Silas didn't call after me. His tongue no doubt too busy down the pretty girl's throat.

That was fine. It was how it always went.

I got into the car, staring unseeing at the city sights that sped by.

I meant what I'd said earlier. I was thirty-five now...and I'd been in love with Silas for over twenty of those years.

Did I really want to spend the next thirty-five mooning over him?

I pulled out my phone, flicking through various jobs my agent had sent me. With the tour ending, we had a solid few months of downtime in our schedule. Normally, I wouldn't even bother looking at these offers, knowing I'd spend those months chilling with Silas.

But if I wanted to move on with my life, I needed to actually *do* something.

Starting with putting some distance between us.

Chapter Eight

Silas

“Ooh, yes,” Emily moaned loudly as she bounced on my cock.
“Right there. That’s it.”

Was her name Emily? Or was it Emma? Evelyn? I was sure it began with an *E*.

Bollocks. What Kai had said earlier about me fucking and running had really struck a nerve. Why, I didn’t know. It wasn’t like I didn’t know that about myself. I was the one inviting these women back to the hotel, knowing fully well I’d never call them.

My mind drifted, wondering what Kai was doing right now. Had he gone out for the night? Maybe hit up a gay bar with Arlo? I knew he liked to do that sometimes.

“Hey.” A small hand slapped my stomach. “What’s with you?”

I winced. What *was* with me? I had a hot girl riding me, and instead of focusing on her, I was thinking about my best friend.

“Nothing,” I said, wrapping my hands around her hips and thrusting upwards. My dick obviously hit the right spot because her head fell back on a high-pitched whine.

I continued fucking into her, trying to focus on her firm tits bouncing in my face.

Was Kai serious about finding a boyfriend? He’d had the odd fling, but it never lasted long. I hated those times. Sure, I wanted Kai to be happy...but I’d never been good at sharing. Especially where Kai was concerned.

If he got into a committed relationship, what would happen to us? I couldn’t see a boyfriend being happy with Kai and me spending all our downtime together. Or feeling okay about the way we interacted on stage.

I knew I wouldn’t like it if Kai was my boyfriend. I’d want him all to myself.

Emma...Emily...Evelyn, whatever the fuck her name was, huffed and lifted herself off me.

Bollocks, I’d stopped paying attention again. “Where are you going?”

She was tugging on her dress with sharp movements. “You’re not into this. I’m out. I’ve always wanted to fuck a celebrity, but I didn’t realise it’d be this shit. It’s like you’re not even here.”

The celebrity comment stung, which was ridiculous. I’d literally picked her out of the crowd for a one-night stand. “I am into this.”

“Really?” She threw open the door dramatically. “Try telling that to your dick.”

I winced as the door slammed loudly behind her before staring down at my cock. It lay limp between my legs, not an ounce of fun in him.

“Fuck my life.” I pulled off the condom and flung it towards the bin. Never before had I gone soft while I had a hot girl riding me.

Knowing my luck, it would be all over social media before I woke up.

With a sigh, I flicked off the lamp and rolled onto my side. Stupid Kai was getting in my head and ruining my fun. I was tempted to knock on his door and make him hang out with me.

No, I told myself sternly. *He might not be alone.*

I scowled into the darkness at the thought that my best friend might be getting laid when he’d inadvertently cockblocked me.

Just as I was hovering on the fine line between waking and sleep, an errant wondering slipped in. What position did Kai take in the bedroom? Having three queer bandmates meant I knew more about gay sex than your average straight man.

He had to be a top, I thought drowsily, my eyelids sliding closed.

I fell asleep to the image of my best friend railing into someone, my cock stiff as steel between my legs.

I sat bolt upright in bed, my sheets soaked with sweat. The blankets were tangled around my legs. A familiar figure loomed over me. I squeezed my eyes shut.

It's a night terror. I told myself. Not real. Not real. Not real.

I didn't stop to think. Dragging in a lungful of air, I grabbed my phone. I couldn't see the screen through my fear, but my fingers knew what to do.

Kai picked up after a single ring. "Silas?"

I whimpered, forgetting how to form words. Why wasn't he here already?

"Shit, I'm coming." I could hear rustling in the background, followed shortly by the door slamming. "It's not real, Silas. I promise."

"I can't get out," I whimpered, still caught in my nightmare.

"I'll get you out," he said. I could hear him running now, his feet thudding against stairs. "I'm coming. I promise. Hang on, I'm nearly there."

I focused on his breaths, squeezing my eyes shut once more. There was a beep as my door unlocked, and I let out a shaky breath as the first tears began to fall.

Kai always had a key to my room for this very reason.

Kai was there before my tears hit the pillow. As he'd done hundreds of times before, he lifted my covers and slid beside me. I let him haul me into his arms and press me against his chest. Let his big hand cup the back of my head like I was a broken child needing comfort.

Because that was what I was. No matter how old I got, that broken child remained inside me. The child who'd been betrayed. The child who'd had to grow up too fast.

But just like he had since the day he'd realised what was happening, Kai held me tight. Promised me things would get better.

They would. They *had*.

In these small, dark hours, it was difficult to remember what had changed. That I wasn't that terrified child any longer. That it was just a nightmare, a tortured reflection of what my reality used to be.

Kai continued to murmur in my ear, his grip unyielding.

Focusing on his voice, I let him ground me. Let him remind me that *this* was my current reality.

Eventually, as they always did, the tears slowed into nothing. The darkness crept back in as sleep took over.

The next time I woke, it was minus all the side effects. The darkness had fled, taking the seemingly insurmountable fear of

the night before along with it.

Years of therapy had helped me get to the place I was today. Therapy and Kai.

He'd followed through on his promise. First when we were teenagers and then every day since.

I honestly didn't know where I'd be without him. I didn't like to think about it. It was too dark a path to tread. The darkness still crept in occasionally, but Kai's light was enough to banish it to the shadows.

My head rested on Kai's shoulder, his arm across my hip. Some straight guys might be freaked out, waking snuggled up to another man. But this was *Kai*. Everything with him felt... right.

I didn't move, taking the opportunity to study him. Normally, he was guarded, always holding a piece of himself back. No matter what I tried, I could never tease that final part of him out.

But in sleep, his secrets were stripped away. His face was relaxed. The ever-present frown lines melted away into nothing. There was no denying that he was a beautiful man. Honestly, I didn't understand how he didn't have a queue of fans waiting to bed him after every show.

If he did, he wouldn't be holding you like this now, would he?

I scowled, shifting slightly. That wasn't true. I was sure Kai wouldn't let anyone come between us.

Not even the man who holds his heart?

My shifting woke Kai. He yawned widely before a little frown appeared on his face. He glanced over at me blearily. I could tell the exact second he realised he was holding me. His whole body became as stiff as a board.

“Morning,” I said, trying to alleviate some of the tension radiating from him. “Thank you for last night.”

“Uh, you’re welcome.” His voice was so hoarse in the morning, like dry gravel being raked over. “You okay now?”

I nodded, my five o’clock shadow scratching over Kai’s skin. “Yeah. I’m sorry for waking you.”

“It’s fine,” Kai said quickly, his solemn gaze on me. “I don’t mind. You know that.”

Before I could say anything more, Kai extracted his arm and leapt out of bed. He moved so fast that my face hit the mattress, making me give a small *oof*.

Kai didn’t so much as glance back, hurrying for the bathroom and closing the door behind him.

When he came out a few minutes later, I was sat up and leaning against the headboard. “You know, anyone would think you were the straight one if they could see how you run away after waking up with me.”

Kai rolled his eyes, prowling over to my coffee machine. “You say that like you want to keep snuggling.”

“Wouldn’t mind,” I sniffed before catching myself. What was wrong with me? Why was I acting so butt-hurt?

I couldn’t help it. I felt...rejected.

Kai turned to face me, leaning back against the console table with his big hands wrapped around his mug. “Do I need to remind you that you’re straight? Wanting to *snuggle* with other men doesn’t exactly scream that.”

Something in his tone niggled at me. It was like he was...challenging me somehow. “Wow. Talk about subscribing to toxic masculinity.”

Kai didn’t respond other than to raise an eyebrow as he sipped his coffee.

“I’m confident in my sexuality,” I said, unable to stop myself rising to the bait. “Wanting affection from a *friend* doesn’t change that. If we’re going down the toxic route, I’ll remind you that what I was doing in this bed a few hours ago proves I’m very much straight.”

Kai stared at me, his face totally expressionless. “You fucked her in that bed?”

“Obviously.” I mean, what else did he expect? People didn’t *actually* fuck up against walls or over tables. That shit only existed in books and movies. “Where else would I have fucked her?”

Kai put his barely-touched coffee on the side table, turning his back to me. Without a shirt, I could see every tense muscle in his broad back.

For some reason, I wished I could call my flippant words back. Jesus, how would I like it if Kai pointed out he'd fucked someone else on the same sheets I'd then slept on. Aside from anything else, it was plain rude.

There was a gross feeling in my stomach, sliding through my veins as Kai's muscles knotted tighter.

“Kai, I—”

“I need to get ready,” he interrupted me, already striding for the door. “I'll see you at sound check.”

“Wait,” I said, scrambling to get to my feet. The sheets twisted around my legs, slowing me down. I cursed as I struggled to get free. “Kai, can we—”

The sound of the door clicking shut told me I was too late.

Chapter Nine

Kai

Logically, I knew I had no right to be upset with Silas.

But logic had left the conversation a long time ago where he was concerned.

Whenever he called me in the middle of the night, I went running. He needed me, and I'd be there without question. Realistically, I'd do the same for any of my bandmates.

Would I cuddle Luca or Arlo back to sleep? Hold them close to keep the nightmares at bay? Possibly not.

But it was *Silas*, and he was hurting. How could I not?

The reminder that I'd slipped between sheets still warm from his latest conquest was something I could've lived without. Sure, it was a bit gross, but that wasn't why the knowledge had socked me in the gut.

I won't lie that when Silas mentioned cuddling, I couldn't help myself. It wasn't that I genuinely believed snuggling with another man made you any less straight, more that I was desperate for any indication that Silas felt the same.

But he didn't. The words he'd flung my way shortly after proved that.

I let myself back into my empty room and leaned back against the closed door. The heartbreak choking me bubbled free.

And it hit me then how many times I'd done this. Rushed to an empty room before letting my feelings free. Cried over a man who'd never be mine. One who was unwittingly breaking my heart over and over again.

I buried my face in my hands, the sound rasping from my lips amplified. How many more times could I do this to myself?

Because this was on me. It wasn't on Silas. My feelings were my own responsibility. Silas couldn't help his platonic feelings any more than I could help loving him.

With a shaky breath, I wiped my wet cheeks and stiffened my resolve.

I couldn't keep doing this.

It wasn't fair to me. It wasn't fair to Silas.

Once this tour was over, I was moving on.

It would kill me, but not as much as this. Maybe if I loved another, I'd be able to feel like myself again.

Rather than the broken man who currently occupied my skin.

For the next ten days, my issues faded into the background as Ollie and Luca's relationship was dragged into the spotlight.

One minute, they were loved up and happy, and the next, Ollie was on a plane headed back to England and Luca was distraught. Even on stage, the place he loved the most, he struggled to hold it together.

For the first time ever, Silas and I turned our attention to Luca. Between us, we managed to distract the audience from Luca's impending meltdown, pretending to flirt with him while giving him the time to pull himself back together.

Originally, we'd all believed Ollie had left following an argument, having told Kevin he'd been using Luca all along. Despite my reservations about how Ollie truly felt, something about the story didn't quite ring true. Nothing about Ollie suggested he was one to run from a difficult situation.

But when the truth of the situation was exposed, it was so much worse than any of us could've imagined.

Not only had our manager effectively orchestrated their whole breakup, but he'd also been defrauding us for years. Ollie's final article exposed how he and our accountant had been colluding to funnel chunks of our profits into their own accounts.

Needless to say, Kevin had been summarily fired. Only the thought of lawsuits stopped us from taking a swing at him.

Now we were back in London, ready to perform our final show. This week hadn't even been on the original itinerary, but Kevin had added it at the last minute, eager to milk us for all we were worth.

Luca had shot down to Southampton the second we'd landed in London, determined to win back his reporter. Judging by the massive grins on their faces when they joined us backstage at Wembley, their reunion had been very successful.

With everything else going on, I hadn't thought about the phone call I'd made to my agent a couple of weeks ago.

I knew it was for the best. I needed the distance from Silas. Needed the space to let my heart heal.

Luca grabbed a mic and began to hype up the crowd. With Ollie back in the audience, all his previous charisma and bravado had returned to centre stage.

My gaze drifted to my best friend. Tonight, he'd paired a tight black T-shirt with the scruffy denim jeans he liked to live in. He drove our stylists crazy, but Silas valued comfort above everything else.

Like he could feel my gaze, he turned his attention to me. When his eyes connected with mine, his whole face lit up like the fucking sun. His small smile blossomed into a full grin as he shot me a playful wink.

Even as my mouth twisted to return his joy, it was like an arrow to my heart. How could I not love him? Put any sane person in his company, let his joy leech over their life, and tell them not to fall.

Because they wouldn't be able to. Being in Silas's sunlight was the most dangerous trap of all.

He sauntered over to me, and I couldn't breathe. Knowing what he wanted, I turned so my back was to him.

We leaned against each other, playing our instruments and singing the backing vocals into the same mic.

For the first time ever, my mind wasn't on my performance. I had no idea if I hit the right notes. Sung the right words.

All I could think about was that I'd be walking away from Silas once this show was done.

We hadn't been apart for longer than a night since we'd met.

Could I do it?

I needed to...but *could* I?

Oblivious to my internal struggle, Silas moved away. Only when he came up behind me did I realise the song had changed.

Luca dropped to his knees, my heart falling to the floor at the same time.

“Tease,” a.k.a. my own personal version of Hell.

Silas's hands came around my chest, his lips pressing against my neck. I stiffened. Did he realise his lips were touching me,

or had he just got caught up in the moment?

My hands moved on autopilot. Silas kept ghosting barely there kisses up my neck until he reached my ear. Then, with a single finger, he pulled out my earpiece.

The roar of the crowd hit me like a blast. Apparently, they were enjoying the attention Silas was lavishing on me as much as my cock was.

“What’s wrong?” he shouted into my ear.

I shook my head, keeping my smile on my face and my fingers moving.

“Don’t lie to me,” he insisted, his arm going around my chest to hold me firmly against him. To the audience, it probably looked like he was whispering sweet nothings in my ear. “You don’t lie to me, Kai. What’s wrong?”

My stomach twisted. I lied to him. I lied to him every fucking day. Every time I looked into his eyes and called him my friend. Every time I held him at night and wished for more. Every time I fucked someone and imagined it was him beneath me instead.

And now, I’d lie once again. Pulling out of his grip, I shot him an exaggerated wink and put my earpiece back in.

He gave me an exasperated look. One he’d given me *many* times before.

Striding away during Arlo’s drum solo, I clapped my hands above my head, getting the crowd to join.

I could feel Si watching me. Feel his confusion.

This is why you're leaving, I told myself. It was what was best.

For both of us.

When I turned my back to the audience, Silas wasn't the only one watching me. Arlo was tracking me, his mouth set in a grim line.

I up-nodded him. Of all of them, he knew what I was feeling.

I kept my distance from Silas for the next song. My skin buzzed like my body *knew* I was about to rip us away from him. Begging me not to. Begging me to use this one chance we had to touch him and not feel guilt or shame.

I held out all through "Deep Down," but when we segued into "Night's Darkest Secret," my resolve began to crack.

Luca took my guitar, shooting me a concerned look that matched Arlo's expression. Fuck. I needed to get myself under control before the audience noticed.

Normally, this was the one song where I invaded Silas's space. Where I'd be the one to touch and tease.

Tonight, I'd planned on keeping my distance. But as I rasped out the opening line, it became clear my best friend had other ideas.

He appeared before me, his lip pushed out in an exaggerated pout. Even with both my earpieces in, I could hear the roar of the crowd intensify.

Silas raised a brow, and the fracture in my resolve turned into a cavern, leaving it in pieces on the floor.

Without thinking, I spun Silas around, hooking my head over his shoulder, holding him tight with my free arm. He melted into my embrace, leaning his weight onto me and letting me support him.

Why can't you see,

I'm right here, yet you miss me every time

You're supposed to be with me

Yet you miss me every time

I held nothing back. I let the emotion pour out of me and into the microphone. I held Silas against me and told myself this would be the last time. This distance I was putting between us would change us forever. Never again would we do this on stage. Never again would I touch Silas this freely, knowing it'd never be the same.

This was the last time. So I let myself hold him.

Like he could sense the raw emotion I was unleashing, Silas twisted his head to the side. Our gazes collided, and there was a question there that I hadn't seen before.

So that's what it'll always be

Night's darkest secret

Wishing you were with me

Our mouths were only inches apart now. Luca. Arlo. The whole fucking stadium. They all faded into nothing. Nothing

existed for me except Silas.

Nothing ever had.

His gaze dropped to my lips, and I could've sworn his eyes darkened.

Before I knew what was happening, Silas surged forwards.

He erased those few inches and obliterated my heart in a single action.

His lips met mine. Soft. Warm.

In the distance, I felt my hand open around the mic, letting it fall to the stage. I wasn't sure which of us moved first. Only that we were now facing each other. Hands in each other's hair. Bodies pressed together around Silas's bass.

My tongue swiped at Silas's lips and they opened readily. Our tongues met in a fierce duel, and I almost cried at the taste.

Silas was kissing me back.

And it felt so right.

Chapter Ten

Silas

I had no idea what had come over me.

All I knew was that Kai had been behaving oddly. He'd shied away from my attention where he normally drank it up. Even when he looked at me, it was like there was a barrier there that was entirely new.

I didn't like it.

Even still...I didn't know why I'd kissed him.

I'd been watching him. Listening to him sing about his heartbreak. Feeling his breath on mine.

Closing the distance between our mouths had felt like the most natural thing to do.

And now his hands were cupping my head like I was something precious. His tongue was doing things to mine that had to be unholy.

And I was doing them back. My hands were moving over him like they did during "Tease." But the difference this time

was that I *wanted* them to.

I wanted to touch him.

My finger caught on the wire leading to his earpiece as I ran my hand up his neck, accidentally ripping it out of place.

Kai stiffened, breaking away from me and stumbling back. His eyes swept over the stadium in horror.

Oh my god. We'd been making out in front of ninety thousand fans.

What had I done?

Arlo was standing behind his drum kit, his jaw hanging open. Luca was beside him with an inexplicable thunderous expression.

But it was Kai I was worried about. Kai who looked like he was living his worst nightmare live on stage.

I took a step towards him. The movement caught his attention.

“Kai...”

He didn't look at me. Didn't react to me calling him.

Just turned and ran.

I didn't care that we hadn't finished our set. Didn't care that thousands of cameras were catching my every move.

All I cared about was the fact Kai was running from me.

Shoving my bass at Luca, I followed him. “Kai. Wait!”

He didn't stop. I knew he heard me, though, because his pace sped up.

Cursing his longer legs, I powered through various stagehands and techies as they jumped out of my way. In the distance, I heard Luca speaking into the microphone. I had no idea what he was telling our fans, and right now, I didn't care.

Kai ran into our dressing room, slamming the door behind him. I was on it in a second, rattling the handle. Fucker had locked me out. "Kai, open up."

Silence.

I thudded my head against the door. "Don't shut me out. Don't hide from me."

The door opened so suddenly that I fell forwards, stumbling over my own feet.

Kai caught my arm, steadying me. Pulling me into the room, he slammed the door again before letting me go like I repulsed him.

He stood before me, his chest heaving. Sweat from the show glistened on his skin, his shirt askew. Was that from me? Had I been tugging at it?

I looked down at my palms like they might hold the answer for me. Not that it mattered. No doubt, videos of us out there were currently going viral on every social media network available.

"Why did you do that?"

Kai's question had me looking up. Raw emotion swam over his face. His nostrils were flared. His jaw clenched. "What?"

He prowled a step closer, towering over me. I wasn't scared though. How could I be? This was *Kai*. My Kai. "Why. Did. You. Kiss. Me?"

Why was he so angry? "I don't know."

"You don't know?" He shoved his dreads back, using the tie on his wrist to pull them into a bun. It was something he did when he was agitated.

I hated that I was making him feel that way.

He was no longer looking at me, his scowl on the floor. God, I'd let him down so much. "I'm sorry."

"What are you sorry for? Kissing me, or not knowing why?"

"The first one," I blurted. "I shouldn't have kissed you. I took it too far."

"Took the *act* too far, you mean," he laughed sourly, grabbing the back of his neck.

"No, that's not—" That wasn't what I'd meant. I'd meant I'd taken it too far *in front of an audience*. I hadn't meant to embarrass him.

"I've got it," Kai cut me off. "I think we need to set clearer boundaries. Maybe spend some time apart. I think everything between us is too...blurred."

"What?" Why was he talking about spending time apart? What the fuck had I done?

Everything was moving too fast. I needed to pause time for a second so I could think. Think about why I'd kissed him. Why it'd felt so right.

And why the fuck it had made him so *mad* at me.

"I'm leaving after the show," Kai continued. I struggled to hear him over the high-pitched shriek that had taken up residence in my brain. "I've taken a film role in an indie movie. I'll be shooting on location in Mexico."

"Okay," I said, my brain scrambling to catch up. "I've got that charity gig next week, but after that, I can fly out and join you."

"No." Apparently, Kai had become very friendly with the spot six inches above my head, seeing as he couldn't look away from it. "I mean it, Si. We need to spend some time apart. I need some...space."

"Space from me?" I reached up to rub at my chest. Why was it hurting? Surely I couldn't be having a heart attack at thirty-five?

Kai sighed heavily. "It'll be good for both of us."

"Right. Love that you're making decisions for us both without consulting me." Where had that ice in my voice come from? "Didn't realise our friendship was something you need *space* from."

Something I said finally *finally* made him look at me. "Friendship...that's what we have."

“That’s right,” I said desperately. “I need you, Kai. You’re my best friend. You can’t leave me.”

He gave me a tight smile, and there wasn’t an ounce of the man I knew in it. I felt like I was looking at a stranger, one who was struggling just to be in my presence. “I have my own life, Silas. It’s time I lived it.”

I couldn’t stand it. Couldn’t stand to look at him anymore. I turned away, pretending I was examining the snack selection. In reality, I could barely see through the tears clouding my vision. “I hadn’t realised I was holding you back.”

Kai’s hand dusted over my shoulder, like he’d reached out to touch me and then decided against it. “This is for the best. You’ll see.”

I sniffed, swiping at my face with my hand in mortification. “Sure.”

“Silas.” The pain in Kai’s voice grabbed my emotions in a chokehold. I wouldn’t hurt him. He was the one person who’d kept me safe. I’d *never* hurt him.

Drawing up my carefree grin, I turned to face him. His haunted expression almost had me slipping. Almost. “Sounds like a great opportunity. You’ll have to send me lots of pictures.”

“Silas.” He reached for me, but I skirted around his hold and made for the door. “Are you okay?”

“Yep.” I yanked open the door to see a gaggle of hassled crew bickering. “Sorry, guys, we’re just coming to finish the

show.”

I glanced back at Kai and grinned once more. “Come on, let’s get this done so you can get on your way.”

Kai was rigid in the centre of the room, all his muscles tense. “Si—”

“Leave it,” I said sharply, all too aware of the many watching eyes. Something I should’ve been aware of before launching us into this mess. “Come on, I promise to behave myself.”

I didn’t give him a chance to respond.

I went back on stage.

Took my bass from Luca.

Apologised to the audience.

Played my heart out.

And didn’t look at Kai once.

But it didn’t stop me thinking about him. How right that kiss had felt. How desperately I wanted to grab him to see if it had been a fluke.

I didn’t. Because none of it mattered. Kai was leaving. Had planned all of this long before tonight. Planned his escape without telling me.

Because he needed *space*.

Space from me.

That yawning darkness that only struck at night began to creep in. Soon, Kai wouldn't be here to push it back.

But that was okay. I'd been selfish, behaving the way I had. What he'd said tonight about needing his own life told me as much. I couldn't expect him to keep picking up my shattered pieces for me. I'd always known that one day, he'd get tired of doing so. Get tired of me.

I just hadn't expected it to happen so soon.

Chapter Eleven

Silas

The first month

It took two weeks for the reality of Kai's words to sink in.

Two weeks of unanswered calls.

Two weeks of not even a single text.

Hi. You've reached Kai. Please leave a message and—

I hung up. There was no point leaving another voicemail. What would I say that I hadn't in the countless ones I'd already left him? I'd covered everything from *'Sorry, I kissed you'* to *'I can't believe you left without saying goodbye.'*

I let my phone drop on the bed beside me, my head falling into my hands. Kai had said he was leaving after the show, but I'd thought I'd at least get to speak to him. For us both to cool off and then talk.

But no. Kai had walked off stage and straight into a waiting car. Even Luca and Arlo had been taken aback.

Apparently, I wasn't the only one he'd been keeping in the dark.

Unable to stop torturing myself, I grabbed my phone and went to my photos. I'd been obsessed with capturing as many images as possible since I'd gotten my first camera phone.

Kai's face smiled out from pretty much every one.

I scrolled through them, trying to find evidence of when he'd started to get tired of me. When he'd decided he needed space from me. From us.

But there was nothing. Just Kai and me. The way it had always been.

You're being ridiculous, the logical part of my brain pointed out. *He's a friend. It's not like he's broken up with you. Stop moping.*

I was way beyond listening to the logic though. No amount of telling myself I was overreacting seemed to help. It didn't make me feel any less lonely. Didn't stop me from missing him. He'd been at my side for so long that it literally felt like I was missing a limb.

It'd be easier if he would at least text me to say he was okay. Didn't he know I worried about him too?

I couldn't even blame all this on the kiss. Not when Kai had obviously set the wheels in motion long before.

What had I done wrong? Or was it just what Kai said, that we needed to start living our own lives?

I stopped on an image of Kai's last birthday. We'd rushed home from a photo shoot in London so he could celebrate with his family. The photo had been taken by his dad. Like me, he snapped as many memories as he could. Even without him in the shot, I could remember how his face crinkled as he corralled us into the frame. Mike's hair was shot with silver now, laughter lines etched permanently on his face, a testament to his happy nature.

Kai was in the centre of the photo, grinning at the novelty cake shaped like a guitar that Mia held. She was a pastry chef at one of the top restaurants in Southampton. Quite apt, given how often Louis used to dump flour over her head.

The former troublemaker, now a well-respected tattoo artist, stood with his arm protectively around their mum's shoulders. She'd been given the all-clear many years ago, but it hadn't stopped us worrying. With Kai and me on tour more often than not, Louis had quietly stepped into the role his elder brother had once occupied. It wasn't as necessary now, what with their dad being retired and their siblings grown...but still. He looked out for them while we were away.

Ruby was there too, leaning over Kai's shoulder, cheeks ballooned as she prepared to blow out the candles before the birthday boy could.

They were my family too, stepping into the gaping void left by my own useless parents. His parents treated me like another

son. His siblings like another brother.

Finally, unable to avoid it any longer, I focused on myself. I was where I always was. At Kai's side. Joy radiated from me as I stared at my best friend's face. He so often shied away from attention that I delighted in these moments where he was the one being celebrated.

Fuck, we looked so happy. What had happened to us? What had I done that was so bad he wouldn't even take my calls?

My eyes landed on Ruby again. Aside from Kai, she was the one I was closest to. I'd watched her grow from a cheeky baby into an even cheekier adult.

I opened up my thread with her and typed a quick message.
You awake?

My phone immediately began to ring with a video call. I swiped to answer it, grinning when Ruby's sleepy face filled the screen. "Hey, Rubes."

Her hair was piled in a messy bun on the top of her head, her eyes blinking like an owl's. She yawned so wide her jaw cracked. "Sorry, so tired."

I gave her a sympathetic smile. "Just come off shift?"

"Yep." Ruby worked as a nurse in the trauma unit at Southampton General. That was why I texted her first. She worked such long shifts that I didn't want to risk waking her with a call. "But I've got four days off now."

"Want me to go, and you call me back when you've slept?"

“No, it’s fine.” She tilted the phone to show me a mug of tea. “This’ll keep me going for a little while.”

I was burning to ask her about Kai, but I didn’t want Ruby to think that was the only reason I’d called. “How’s things?”

Ruby sipped from her mug, raising a thin eyebrow at me. “Is that really why you called?”

I sighed, running a hand through my hair. “How do you always see through me?”

“Blame it on being the youngest sibling,” she said. “Gotta have a fine-tuned bullshit metre to know when you’re being tricked, lied to, or played.”

“I really do want to know how you’re doing,” I grumbled. “I miss you, Rubes. All of you.”

Her face softened. “I know. We miss you too.”

There was a long pause before I spoke again. “Have you heard from him?”

Ruby’s eyes darted to the side like she didn’t want to look at me as she answered. “Yes. He’s been texting every day.”

It was like a punch to my stomach. So he wasn’t ignoring everyone.

Just me.

“How is he?”

Ruby shrugged. “I dunno. It’s Kai. Even if he was miserable, he wouldn’t say anything. He seems okay.”

“What do you mean?” I frowned. “Kai doesn’t hide when he’s hurting.”

Ruby took another sip of her tea as she studied me. “Really? So he explained exactly why he’s fucked off to the other side of the world during his break rather than spending time with his best friend and family?”

“No. But he did say it’s to do with me. Not you guys.”

“That I’m well aware of,” Ruby muttered. Before I could ask her what she meant by that, she spoke again. “Why’d you kiss him?”

I winced. “Didn’t realise you’d seen that.”

“Please. Even if I hadn’t been watching the livestream, I only would’ve had to open TikTok to have it shoved in my face. I’ll be honest, could’ve lived without seeing it.”

“Did the whole family see it?”

“Do you really want me to answer that?”

I groaned. “Fuck. Does everyone hate me now?”

Ruby’s eyebrow lifted again. “Why would we hate you?”

“Dunno. Seemed to be Kai’s reaction, so it’s not a massive leap to assume you all feel the same.”

“Kai doesn’t hate you.”

I swallowed hard around the sudden lump in my throat. “Well, it sure feels that way right now.”

She repeated her question from earlier. “Why’d you kiss him?”

I was about to tell her it was all a part of the act. That I'd taken it a step too far. But then she raised that fucking eyebrow a notch higher, and I broke. "Honestly? I'm not sure. His mouth was just right there. He was singing that damn song about his broken heart and...I don't know. It just felt...right."

Ruby surveyed me for a minute, her nails tapping on her mug. Then her tone snapped into the one she saved for the ward.

I was in trouble now.

"Okay, tough love time. You've fucked up really badly, but it's okay. You didn't know, so none of us are actually mad at you."

"What are you talking about?"

"How do you feel about my brother?"

"He's my best friend." That was easy to answer.

"And how do you think he feels about you?"

"I'm his best friend." My voice trailed off. "At least...that's what I thought."

Ruby sighed, rubbing her forehead like she was getting a headache. "Okay, it's not my place to say more. But what I *will* say is to think about how you feel when you're around him. How you feel when he's not there."

"I don't need to think about that. It's only been two weeks, and I feel like I'm drowning."

Ruby looked at me pointedly, making me wish this was a standard phone call. I could live without all the judgmental looks. “Do you think that’s how all best friends feel about each other?”

I scratched my head. “Well, no. But it’s different with us.”

“Exactly! It’s *different*.”

I stared at her, at a total loss of what she was getting at.

“Look, I need to get some sleep. But think about it, Si. Think about why it felt so right to kiss him. About how you can’t cope without him here.” She sighed. “I love you, Si. I do. But I can’t keep watching you hurt him. Figure out how you really feel about him and what you want.”

My jaw dropped open, unable to keep up with what she was saying.

“And do it fast before it’s too late. Because, trust me, you’ll be the one kicking yourself.”

The screen turned black as Ruby hung up. My stunned face was reflected back at me. I looked like someone had just turned my entire world on its head.

Apt, given that was what had happened.

The second month

A great thing about being a member of a world-famous rock band was that there were countless videos of you. Hours of your life were immortalised on the screen to revisit whenever you liked.

But this was also a fucking horrific thing.

Because, right now, I couldn't stop watching them. Endless clips of me on stage. In interviews. Entering and leaving events.

Kai was by my side in all of them.

The worst were the ones on stage. Suddenly, I was watching us dance in a whole new light. How I lit up whenever Kai approached. How easily I ran my hands all over him.

That smile on my face as I leaned my chin on his shoulder. It wasn't one I was used to seeing there.

I looked fucking *content*.

There were so many times when our lips came close. So many shows where a mere gust of wind might've been enough to send us crashing together.

I was so happy.

Kai though...Kai wasn't.

I'd never really watched videos of us before, not this closely. If I had...maybe I would've seen the signs.

Whenever I approached Kai, his smile would fall flat. He grimaced when I touched him. Several times, I caught him exchanging unsettled looks with Luca or Arlo.

Not once did my on-screen self spot any of this. Watching it back, it was as clear as fucking day.

Kai hadn't enjoyed what we did up there. How the fuck had I never noticed? And why hadn't he said anything?

Unable to torture myself more, I slammed my laptop screen shut. Moving to the bed, I pulled up my text thread with Kai. Endless reams of blue bubbles greeted me, a tiny *Read* written beneath each.

I added another without thinking.

Why didn't you tell me you hated dancing with me on stage?

The message was read almost instantly. I bolted upright as three little bobbing dots appeared.

Holy shit. Was he actually going to respond?

The dots disappeared. Reappeared. Disappeared.

My hands were shaking as I typed another message.

I can see you typing, Kai. If I call, will you answer?

The dots disappeared once more.

They didn't come back.

I swallowed around the thickness in my throat. This was so fucking hard. Kai was my go-to person for advice. The one I talked to about *everything*.

This silence was killing me.

Unable to stop myself, I hit his name. It rang twice before going to voicemail.

I tried again.

One ring. Voicemail.

The third time, there was no ringing, just the message I'd come to hate.

Hi. You've reached Kai. Please leave a message, and I'll get back to you.

No. He wouldn't.

I threw my phone at the wall, wincing when I heard an ominous crack. Despite having more money than I could possibly spend, I didn't like to waste it. I never took it for granted.

But thanks to my childish outburst, I would have to get a new phone. Teenager-Silas would slap me upside the head and call me a fucking moron.

And he'd be right. For several reasons, it seemed.

Well, it could stay there for tonight. It wasn't like Kai would miraculously decide he was ready to talk to me.

I hugged a pillow to me, pretending it was Kai's chest. It was no good. It was too soft, not the hard planes I was used to. Didn't smell like him either.

It was the best I had for now.

I just had to hope and pray that when Kai returned, things would go back to normal.

Sleep came faster than I expected. But even in my dreams, I couldn't escape Kai.

We were in his kitchen. Me leaning against one counter, him leaning against the sink.

The coffee machine was beeping. A pan was sizzling on the hob. It was just like any other morning when I gatecrashed Kai's house for breakfast.

But something felt different. There was an electricity humming that wasn't usually there.

Or maybe it had been. Maybe I'd just never noticed it.

Kai's gaze was hooded as his eyes swept over me. "You been thinking about me, Si?"

"Yes."

I blinked, and he was in front of me. It'd been a long time since I'd thought about our size difference, but now he was towering over me, and I was finding it hard to breathe.

"Whatcha been thinking about?" he murmured, trailing a finger down my chest. "Been thinking about me touching you?"

"Yes." I wasn't in control of what I was saying, the responses flowing like water. "Touch me, Kai."

He gave me a smile I'd seen a thousand times before. "Never going to say no to that."

His hand palmed my cock. I was already hard, but his touch was like someone had doused me with petrol and set me alight. "This what you wanted?"

“Yes.” Something niggled at the back of my mind. Something I was forgetting. Something important.

His hand circled my shaft. Somehow, my clothes had vanished, and there was nothing but his warm skin on mine. “Do you like me touching you?”

His question had my neurons firing, the thing I forgot suddenly bursting from me. He didn’t like us dancing together. Didn’t like the way we were on stage. “Do you like touching me?”

Kai smiled sadly as he let me go. “That’s not the right question, Si.”

“But it is!” He was getting further away. “Why won’t you talk to me? Tell me what you’re thinking.”

“It’s not the right question,” he repeated. His voice echoed as he drifted out of sight. “The right one is—do you like me touching you?”

I bolted upright in bed, my heart racing.

I clutched at the sheets, staring down at my cock in disbelief. It looked angry, curved towards my stomach, begging for relief.

Do I like him touching me?

Pretty sure I knew the answer to that...even if I wasn’t ready to admit it.

The third month

I went to the gym.

Played Skyrim until I couldn't keep my eyes open.

Attended yet another charity gala with a big smile on my face.

Nothing stopped me from thinking about what Ruby had said.

I can't keep watching you hurt him.

How had I been hurting him? Was it the way I behaved with him on stage?

All evidence pointed to the fact I *had* hurt Kai. Ruby wouldn't lie about something like that. And the fact several weeks had passed without a word from Kai further proved it.

But what had I done? What was I missing?

Honestly, I'd been wracking my brain but had come up with nothing. Even if it was somehow connected to our onstage dancing, we'd done that for years. What was it about this tour that was different?

Except for the kiss. Obviously.

But Kai had had his plans in place before that...so I had to have fucked up in some other way.

A basketball whacked my face, jolting me from my musings.

“Ow,” I scowled at Arlo, rubbing my cheek. “Give me a heads-up next time, will ya?”

“I did,” Arlo said, grabbing the ball and dribbling with it. “You were off in la-la land.”

Shaking my head at Arlo, I tore down the court after him. When my phone had gone off this morning, I’d practically fallen out of bed with the speed I’d moved. But like always, it hadn’t been Kai’s name filling my screen.

Arlo was a good runner-up, though, especially since he’d suggested hitting up the court for a one-on-one game.

This was just what I needed. Some space to burn off energy and a bit of alone time with Arlo.

Well...as alone as we ever got. My gaze caught on Simon and Rhys, our protection details. Even though it’d been years since Luca and Arlo had switched guards, it was still odd to look over and not see Jack chatting with Rhys.

“How’s the downtime going?” Arlo asked as I tried to steal the ball from him.

I grunted in response, frustrated that the little shit was faster than me.

“That good, huh?” He dipped around me, dribbling up to the basket and scoring with ease.

I gestured to the bench where our bags were. Arlo followed me over, taking the bottle of water I held out. “Have you heard from Kai?”

“Yeah, of course. His filming schedule sounds insane. Wouldn’t catch me doing that...” Arlo’s voice faded as the realisation hit him. “Why? Have you not heard from him?”

I slumped onto the bench, my head falling between my shoulders. “Nope. Not since he walked off stage. Apparently, he’s got time to keep in touch with everyone...except me.”

Arlo dropped onto the bench beside me. “Shit. I’m sorry.”

“I just don’t get it...what did I do?”

Arlo sighed. “Maybe...maybe it’s just that your friendship has changed. Maybe you’re just...growing apart.”

“But that doesn’t make any sense!” I exploded in frustration. Across the gym, I saw Simon raise an eyebrow in question.

Arlo waved him off. “Why doesn’t it?”

“Because nothing has changed,” I said, lowering my voice. “Everything has been like it always has. I must’ve done *something*.”

“I mean...you did kiss him.”

“I know.” I leaned my head against my hand. “But it can’t have been that. He’d already arranged to leave.”

Arlo was quiet. “Kai is gay.”

I looked up at Arlo in confusion. “Yeah...and?”

Arlo bit his lip like he was trying to figure out how to phrase it. “He’s gay, Silas. He’s attracted to men. How do you think he feels with you grinding up against him every night?”

I bit my lip, not wanting to admit that I’d been wondering the same thing after watching videos of us back. But that was because he was uncomfortable, not because he was attracted to me. “It’s different with me. Kai doesn’t see me like that.”

Arlo sighed, and the look he shot me was so reminiscent of the one Ruby had given me that I flinched. “What if he did?”

Four little words. That was all they were.

But they changed everything.

First, Ruby had hinted at it, and now Arlo.

If Kai had feelings for me...fuck. How long had he felt this way? Was this a new thing?

Suddenly, I saw everything through a different lens. The fact it was always me who initiated our contact on stage. How Kai would always shut down whenever I got chatting to a girl. The fact he refused to room on the same floor as me...

No. It wasn't possible.

Because if it was...

If it was...

Fuck. I had to have been crushing him over and over again.

“Huh, I can almost see your head exploding,” Arlo said, patting my knee.

“Why the fuck didn’t any of you say anything?”

“Wasn’t our place,” Arlo said, spinning the ball. “I probably wouldn’t have said anything at all if I hadn’t seen the way you kissed him back on stage.”

My voice came out as a whisper. “What do you mean?”

“That wasn’t an act. You kissed him like he mattered.”

Okay, I officially had a headache. “Fuck, I don’t know what to think. Am I even into men?”

Arlo snorted. “Oh my god, there was me thinking I wouldn’t have any advice for you, but it turns out I do.”

I looked at him helplessly. “Yeah? What?”

“Go home and watch some gay porn.”

I goggled at him. “How’s that supposed to help?”

Arlo smirked. “Well, either you’ll get hard...or you won’t. At least you’ll have your answer.”

I didn’t respond. Of all the things Arlo could’ve suggested, this one actually seemed sensible. “And if I don’t?”

“Then maybe this break is the best thing for you both,” Arlo said softly. “If you can’t be what Kai needs, you need to step back and let him live his life.”

I rubbed my chest. “I can’t imagine going on like this, Arlo. It fucking hurts.”

Arlo’s gaze drifted over to our guards. “I know it feels like that now, but you can. Even if it feels impossible, you’ll get through it.”

I studied our drummer. Just how much pain was he hiding from us?

Caffeine Daydreams might be a huge success, but if we didn't start dealing with our shit, we would collapse at the seams.

My laptop was open to my preferred porn site. A bottle of lube sat beside it.

All I needed to do was click on the right category.

But I couldn't seem to do it.

And not for the reasons you might think. Not because I was worried about finding that it did turn me on.

Because I was scared it wouldn't.

I wasn't saying I wanted to leap into a full-on relationship with Kai. Of course I wasn't. To be honest, I hadn't even thought that far ahead.

But I knew without question that I didn't want this space between us to last. I couldn't go on hurting Kai, even if it was unintentional.

Arlo was right. I needed to use this time to figure out what I wanted. If what he was hinting at was true—if Kai wanted to be with me in a way that was far from platonic—I needed to decide what I wanted.

Because if I didn't want Kai in the same way he wanted me...I needed to back away.

Even if it might kill me.

Judging by the kiss we'd shared, all signs pointed to yes. The increasingly sexual dreams I'd had about him were also a massive tick in that column.

I had to know though. Taking a deep breath, I moved the cursor to the categories section and changed it from 'All' to 'Gay.'

The new page loaded, and I was almost instantly bombarded with various options. *Group. Public. Bears. Twinks. Daddy.*

Thanks to my other bandmates, I knew enough to understand what I was looking at. But where did I even start?

I scrolled through the endless thumbnails, my knee bouncing under the table. Should I watch someone going at it solo? Or was it better to find a couple?

This wasn't going to work. I was overthinking it too much. I was about to close the screen when my attention caught on one particular image. Two men locked in a passionate embrace.

Two men...who strongly resembled Kai and me.

Taking a deep breath, I clicked on it.

The scene opened with the men furiously making out. There was no build-up, no clumsy attempt at a storyline. The Kai lookalike had the blond guy pushed up against the wall. One of his hands was between them. The camera angle was a bit

awkward, but from how his arm muscles flexed, I knew what he was doing.

Fuck, I thought as my cock hardened rapidly. Eyes glued to the screen, I lubed my hand and wrapped it around my shaft.

“You gonna take my cock, baby?” Not-Kai murmured.

“Yes.” I found myself moaning along with the bloke on the screen. Suddenly, I didn’t need to pay any attention to them. My imagination was supplying me with a hot and heavy reel of exactly how Kai might tackle me to the bed. How his big hands would spread my legs wide. Would I feel embarrassed, having someone look at the most intimate parts of me with such intensity?

Maybe with someone else. But with Kai? The thought alone had my cock leaking precum.

“That’s it, baby, bear down for me.”

My eyes flew open just as the Kai lookalike pushed inside the other guy. But it wasn’t him I was paying attention to. It was the Silas doppelgänger. He didn’t wince or try to wriggle away. No, his eyes rolled back in his head and the filthiest moan I’d ever heard spilt from his lips.

“That’s it,” the top praised as he bottomed out. He gave his partner a second to adjust before pulling out slightly and then slamming back in. *“Fuck, you feel so good.”*

My hand flew over my cock faster.

“Harder,” Not-Silas grunted. The other guy complied, fucking him so hard that the bedframe banged against the wall.

Having only been with women, I hadn't considered how it must feel to have someone rail you like that. That wasn't to say I hadn't had anyone touch me down there. A few women I'd been with had been game to do some exploring. It'd always felt good, but I hadn't considered putting anything bigger than a finger up there.

Judging by the whimpers and moans coming from the bottom, I'd been missing out.

Not-Kai wrapped his hand around his partner's cock, stroking him furiously. Was that what Kai did with men? Did he make sure they fell over the edge first?

Fuck, I was so sure he did. I imagined him walking in right now and seeing what I was doing. He'd shove my hand away, growling into my ear before taking me in his grip and...

White liquid filled my hand as my orgasm whipped through me. I rode out the waves, imagining Kai beside me, coaxing me through it.

When it was over, I closed the laptop screen and stared at the mess in my hand.

Well. That was one question answered.

The only thing to figure out now is what I would do with that information.



The fourth month

My yell reverberated from the walls.

The fear leeches from my nightmares, chasing me awake. I was standing beside my bed with no recollection of how I got there. My pillows were on the floor and my duvet was kicked from the end of the bed.

I pressed a hand to my chest, willing my heart to slow.

It's just a dream. He's not here. He can't hurt you.

Dropping to the floor beside my bed, I reached for my phone. Like I had a thousand times before on nights like these, I opened my contacts and hovered over Kai's name.

But what was the point? Kai also wasn't here. And he wasn't taking my calls.

I rubbed my hand over my face, forcing my fear and sorrow down. I was being selfish, expecting Kai to keep picking up my shattered pieces.

It was probably why he'd left in the first place.

But everything was going to change when he got home. I planned on being at the airport to meet him. I had no idea if what Ruby and Arlo had hinted at was true, but if it was...

If it was? Well, I wouldn't let Kai walk away from me again. Sometime over the years, I'd stopped looking at Kai as a friend and started seeing him as something...more. And given

how I'd almost worked my dick raw with various fantasies, that *more* was far from platonic.

I would make sure he knew how much he meant to me. That I'd always be his best friend, regardless.

But I was also open to exploring things if that was what he wanted.

Knowing sleep was impossible, I took my phone into the living room. I poured some rum into a glass, imagining how Kai would roll his eyes over my choice to drink it neat.

Kai. I missed him so much. I hadn't realised quite how deep his roots wove with mine until they were suddenly ripped away.

Deciding to torture myself, I sat on the sofa and opened Instagram. Kai's handle was the only one in my search bar. During tours and recordings, our social media was in the hands of our assistants.

Luca and Arlo never bothered to take control back during our downtime, but Kai and I always had. We liked to share the more personal side of our lives with our fans. Not the intimate details but funny snapshots of our everyday lives.

Never in a million years had I imagined it was a place I'd be relegated to where Kai was concerned. Waiting on tenterhooks for a new picture, along with a few million fans.

Well, they could all get in line. Kai had been mine first.

The few photos he'd uploaded from Mexico had been bittersweet. A frosted margarita glass on a table. Sunset over

the ocean. I was thirsting for these glimpses of his life like a dying man.

His profile loaded and the glass slipped from my hand.

It shattered as it hit the floor, liquid hitting my foot.

I didn't move. Didn't react.

Just stared at Kai.

Kissing another man.

Moreover, he was a man I recognised...even if we'd never met.

Tristan Wells. Hollywood's latest sweetheart and star of fuck even knew how many movies.

Hands trembling, I scrolled to read the caption.

When new places introduce you to new people. Forever grateful to have met you, Trist.

My heart fell right alongside the glass on the floor.

Arlo and Ruby were wrong. Kai hadn't run away because he was grappling with feelings for me. Not when he'd replaced me so fast.

I couldn't give up hope though. Not yet.

I typed a message to Kai.

Three words.

One question.

Is it true?

Chapter Twelve

Kai

Is it true?

I closed out of the message without replying. Exactly as I had every time I'd opened it over the past five days.

You are such a coward.

I'd thought walking away from Silas was the hardest thing I'd ever have to do.

But as we approached Heathrow Airport, I knew the worst was yet to come. Now, I had to face Silas. Face the consequences of my actions.

Knowing how much I'd hurt him by ignoring him all this time.

I thought it'd be better for both of us. A clean break so we could learn to live without being in the shadow of the other.

That hadn't worked. Not for me, and from what Ruby told me, not for Silas. But still...I couldn't go back there. That was the one thing I'd taken from this experience.

It had hurt to be apart from Silas. It had felt like a physical wound in my chest that ached day and night. Four months had felt like an eternity.

But it was nothing compared to loving him up close. To touching him and knowing he didn't feel the same. To spending every waking minute with him and suffering because he would never feel the same.

No. I wasn't going back to that. Thanks to the band, Silas would always be a part of my life.

But I was going to make sure he wasn't all of it. This break had been brutal but for the best.

If I could keep him at a distance, maybe I could protect my heart better than before.

“You okay?”

I forced a smile in Tristan's direction. He peered up at me in concern, his delicate hand on my forearm. The filming itself had been boring. The schedule long and drawn out.

Tristan had been the single bright spot, the one thing that had kept me going.

“Yeah,” I said. “As okay as I can be.”

“This is for the best,” he said. His perfectly styled dark hair didn't move as he shook his head. I didn't know what was more attractive about him: his full lips, his cheekbones sharp enough to cut paper, or his vivid green eyes. Even his South Carolina accent was the perfect blend of honey and citrus. It

was a combination that had film studios and audiences alike drooling. “You know that.”

“I know.”

Tristan and I concocted this plan two weeks ago after consuming our weight in tequila. Well, Tristan’s weight, maybe. If we’d consumed mine, we’d both be dead. It started when Tristan walked in on me staring at a photo of my last birthday. My whole family were around me, watching me about to blow out the candles on my cake.

But I could only see Silas. His grin. His dimples. The easy adoration as he stared at me.

It’d been so easy to mistake that adoration for something more.

Given how it wasn’t the first time he’d walked in on me moping over my phone, Tristan had declared an intervention.

That was code for tequila and this harebrained plan.

“I’ve hurt us both so much by doing this,” I told him, my voice choked with unshed tears. “If I let things go back to how they were before, what was the point?”

“That’s why my plan is so good,” he exclaimed, gesticulating wildly. “If you have a ‘boyfriend’, it’ll make Silas respect your boundaries. You won’t need to explain that living that codependent lifestyle with him touching you all the time is killing you. With me there, you’ll settle into a more normal friendship.”

“And what’s in it for you?”

*Tristan's eyes were sad as he stared out over the ocean.
"Hopefully? Freedom."*

The plane made a swooping motion, dragging me back to the present. A fortnight later, I still wasn't sure if this was the best plan. But I'd try anything if it meant I got to have a normal friendship with Silas.

Tristan gave an alarmed moan at the turbulence. I reached over and patted his hand. "Thank you again, for all of this."

"Please, hun, you're doing me a favour." Tristan steadied his nerves by taking a deep breath. "Like I said before, I've got my own reasons for doing this."

I tapped his beautiful face. One seen on magazines and billboards almost as often as Luca's. "What reason could you possibly have for needing a fake boyfriend?"

"One I'm not prepared to share, so quit it." Tristan playfully nipped at my finger, keeping up the pretence while we were surrounded by nosy members of the public. We'd decided against chartering a jet, opting instead for a commercial flight. It'd seemed like a good idea at the time as it would get us back faster, but I hadn't accounted for the fact we'd need to keep up the facade for the entire ten-hour flight from Mexico.

"Maybe I can help," I said, keeping the fake smile on my face. "If you tell me what the problem is, maybe I can come up with a solution."

The smile Tristan gave me was equally as fake. "Trust me, this ruse will be enough."

I sighed internally. I liked Tristan a lot...just not in the way we'd led everyone to believe.

Nothing to do with him. The only thing he had missing was the fact he wasn't Silas.

His friendship was all that had got me through the past four months. We'd bonded on our first day on set, and over the following weeks, I'd found myself opening up to him. The pain I'd kept hidden for so long came pouring out. Tristan became my confidant. Every time Silas texted or called, I'd go to Tristan. He'd distract me with wild tales from Hollywood, tours of the local area, or even celebrity parties.

And when all else failed? He'd break out the tequila.

It was clear Tristan was hiding pain of his own, but no amount of alcohol would make him open up. The diva persona everyone believed he had was exactly that—a persona.

The real Tristan was sweet. Caring. Protective.

The fact he was here proved that.

We entered Arrivals and were met by an onslaught of paparazzi.

“Shit,” I grunted, automatically putting my arm around Tristan to shield him. Being my size meant I was used to doing this for my bandmates, so it was natural to extend the protectiveness to Tristan.

“Keep smiling,” he said through gritted teeth, waving from under my arm. “Remember, we’re in love. We’re happy.”

Following his lead, I forced my lips to twist in what I hoped was a passable attempt at joy. Where the fuck was Dylan?

Like I’d summoned him by thought alone, Dylan appeared in the midst of the crowd. At his side, nudging his way through to us, was Rhys. Why was Silas’s guard here?

My heart stuttered. Was Silas here too?

“Car’s waiting,” Dylan said. “Good to see you, Kai.”

I gave him a thin smile before stepping closer, ensuring no one else could hear. “Is Silas here?”

Dylan evaded my gaze. Rhys was chatting to Tristan while taking his baggage from him. “No.”

“Then why is Rhys here?”

Dylan gave a cough, his cheeks flushing. “We thought it best for us both to come, given you were arriving with Tristan.”

“You’re a terrible liar.” I hadn’t informed *anyone* that Tristan would be returning with me. The press being here was just rotten luck.

Dylan gestured at the paparazzi and gave me a pleading look. “Can we discuss this later? Right now, I’d like to get you out of this situation before it runs out of control.”

“Fine,” I ground out before stalking over to where Tristan and Rhys were waiting a few feet away.

Sliding my arm around Tristan's shoulder, I fixed on my smile and allowed Rhys and Dylan to steer us through the crowds.

"Okay?" Tristan breathed through his own smile.

"Never better."

We hadn't even made it onto the M25 before my phone started vibrating in my pocket.

"Silas?" Tristan asked as I pulled it out and checked the screen.

"No, Luca." Was I disappointed it wasn't Silas? I had no reason to be. I was the one who'd ghosted him.

And after I hadn't responded to his message about Tristan...I hadn't heard from him again.

"Hi, Luca."

"That's all you've got to say to me. 'Hi, Luca'?"

My lips twitched at his melodrama. "Sorry, is there some script I should be following?"

"Hmm, let's see." The sarcasm was strong with this one. "How about *my boyfriend will be accompanying me home?* No, you're right. You should've told me that *before* you landed at Heathrow."

My eyes flew across the car to where Tristan was staring out of the window. “How’d you even know about that? There’s no way it’s hit the press yet.”

“Ollie picked it up off the wire,” he grumbled. “And it might not have hit the press, but it’s certainly hit Twitter. He has Google alerts set up for all of us.”

“Bit creepy.”

“No, sensible when you pull shit like this.” Luca paused. “Although I found out he had mine set up a long time ago, way before our tour. I’ve decided that’s adorable rather than creepy though.”

In the background, I could hear Ollie cursing him out. There was a muffled noise like Luca had put his phone over the speaker. No doubt so he could kiss Ollie thoroughly without me hearing.

I was happy for him. For both of them.

But I didn’t love the reminder of what I’d likely never have.

“Anyway, like I was saying,” Luca said when he returned, slightly out of breath. “You could’ve given us a heads-up that Tristan would be coming back with you.”

“Why? It doesn’t matter, does it? It’s not like he’ll be in the studio with us.”

“No, but...” Luca fell silent for a moment. “Listen, have you spoken to Silas?”

Shame rose like bile in my throat. “Not recently.”

“Maybe you should.”

“I don’t see why. My love life is none of his concern.”

Tristan reached across the car and laid his hand on mine. I flipped my palm and squeezed, grateful for the support. He shot me a sympathetic smile before returning his attention to the window.

“With most friends, that’s true...but this is *Silas*. I’ve never known you to so much as buy a new shirt without getting his opinion first,” Luca said.

“Things change.”

“Hmm.” Luca was clearly unconvinced. “Have you spoken about the kiss?”

I closed my eyes as a headache began to throb behind my eyes. “Is there a point to this call? Because it’s starting to feel like an interrogation. And if that’s the case, can we save it until I’m not jet-lagged?”

Luca sighed. “I’m just saying, I think you two should talk. Have you thought about how this is going to affect him?”

My eyes flew open at that. “Affect *him*? What’s he got to do with my relationship?”

Luca was silent for a long time. So long that I actually checked to see if the call had been disconnected. “I get that he’s hurt you, Kai. But he didn’t mean to. He didn’t choose to. But what you’re doing now? Cutting him out of your life without telling him why? That’s fucking wrong. You’re *knowingly* hurting him, Kai. That’s not you.”

I saw red, hating the truths Luca was hurling my way. My defences went up. “What the fuck are you saying, Luca? Am I not allowed to live my own life without getting Silas’s permission first? Do I need to run every decision by him?”

“No, but...”

“Look.” I glanced at Tristan, happier than ever that he’d accompanied me home. “You told me to move on, and I have. Now Silas and I can be *friends*. The way it’s supposed to be.”

Luca muttered something I didn’t quite catch. “What was that?”

“Nothing,” he said, his tone far too airy to be truthful. “I’ll see you at the barbecue tomorrow, and we can catch up then.”

I narrowed my eyes at the sudden topic change. “What barbecue?”

“It’s at our place. I definitely mentioned it to you.” He definitely *hadn’t*. “We’re going to start brainstorming ideas for the album. Two p.m. Don’t be late. See you then!”

He hung up before I could say anything in reply.

“Everything okay?”

I mustered a smile for Tristan. “How’d you feel about experiencing a British barbecue?”



“It’s raining.” Tristan peered through the windshield at the very overcast sky.

“I noticed,” I said, flicking the indicator to turn onto Luca’s winding driveway.

“But why are we having a barbecue in the rain?” Tristan persisted. “Surely we’ll order takeout now?”

“No. A bit of rain won’t stop us from grilling outside.”

We pulled up outside Luca’s house. A detached five-bed house, it was a long way from the two-bed flat he’d shared with his mum back on his estate.

Tristan didn’t move to unbuckle his seatbelt, just continued staring at the downpour in dismay. “You can’t be serious. This is *not* barbecue weather.”

I clapped him on the shoulder and gave him a grin. “We’re British, there’s no such thing.”

“My shoes will get wet.”

I rolled my eyes at him, knowing where this was coming from. “You don’t have to come, Tris. I can take you back to my place, and you can chill there.”

He took a deep breath before letting it out in a whoosh. “No. It’s okay. I can do this.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.” He bit his lip. “I can’t let my anxiety keep getting in my way. Besides, what’s the point in me coming all this way and then letting you face Silas alone.”

My stomach churned at the thought of seeing him. Four months. Sixteen weeks.

Part of me wanted to run and hide. He was bound to be mad at me for ghosting him, and rightly so.

But a much larger part of me was burning to get inside. To see his dimples. His chipped tooth that he had never bothered to fix. To hold him close and breathe in the liquorice scent of the soap he liked to use.

Tristan slid his hand into mine, his touch reminding me why I shouldn't do that. Why I couldn't go back there.

Fortunately, Luca's house had a porch. We ducked under it, keen to get out of the rain.

Luca was the one to answer the door. Feet bare and a beer in hand, he looked more relaxed than I'd ever seen him. I knew without asking that it was the Ollie effect.

Being in love suited Luca.

His welcoming smile slipped when he spotted Tristan beside me. "Ah, Kai. You didn't mention you were bringing a guest."

"Is that going to be a problem?"

Luca pulled his grin back into place, but that was the beauty of having a friendship that spanned decades. It was easy to spot the bullshit. "Not at all. The more the merrier."

"It's great to meet you," Tristan stepped forward, holding a hand out to Luca. "I've heard so much about you all."

“Well, we’ve heard nothing about you,” Arlo drawled as he eased around Luca.

What had got his goat? I shot Arlo a warning look. For some reason, this just seemed to piss off our drummer even more. “Bit strange really. Kai’s never brought a serious boyfriend around before.”

“First time for everything,” I said between gritted teeth. “Now, are you going to let us in? Or are you going to continue behaving like pricks and making Tristan feel unwelcome?”

Both Luca and Arlo looked chastised. Luca stepped forward and shook Tristan’s hand warmly. “Sorry, Tristan. Please, do come in. Ollie seems to have cooked enough to feed the five thousand, so I hope you’ve brought your appetite.”

Arlo and Luca stepped back, letting us into the vast area that Luca tried to insist was a *hallway*.

It was a lobby. Last time I’d checked, a hallway didn’t have room for one sofa, let alone the two that filled this space.

“What’s taking you so long? Ollie wants to know—” Silas stepped out of the kitchen and stopped dead in his tracks. “Kai. You’re here.”

My eyes gobbled up every minute change since the last time I’d seen him. His hair was shorter than it had been at the end of the tour and more immaculately styled than he usually bothered with for this type of hangout. He was clean-shaven too. That was unusual. Normally, I had to badger him to pick up his razor before we went to family events. He’d even tried

to get away with a five o'clock shadow for my sister Mia's wedding...despite the fact he was a groomsman.

The outfit I recognised. It was a shirt I'd bought him for Christmas. I'd told him I'd picked it because of the material. Silas was a sucker for a super soft shirt.

And that had been part of it. But I'd mainly picked it as it was the exact same shade as his royal blue eyes.

It wasn't surprising to see him wearing it here. I swear, he'd wear it on stage if he thought he could get away with it.

No, what was surprising was the way he was looking at me.

Like I was a stranger. Someone wholly new that he was seeing for the first time.

His barrel chest expanded as he inhaled deeply, a new determination shining in his eyes. He took a step forward.

That was the exact moment that Tristan decided to pop out from behind me, putting himself in between us both.

“Hi! You must be Silas.”

Chapter Thirteen

Silas

It was funny how I'd spent years making a living playing songs about heartbreak. About the horrific moment of realisation where you discover the future you've been building in your mind doesn't exist.

Until I'd seen Kai stroll out of Arrivals at Heathrow, Tristan tucked protectively under his arm, I hadn't understood it. Hadn't understood the severity of what it would mean for me.

A split-second revelation that changes everything you thought you knew.

I'd watched from a distance, not wanting to get caught by the paps. I didn't know what I said to Rhys and Dylan, only that they'd left me alone to weave through the crowd and help Kai and Tristan.

I must've left. Must've ordered an Uber home.

The final text that I'd sent to Kai was all I could think about.

Is it true?

Well, now I had my answer.

Even so...I hadn't expected Kai to bring him today. Our initial planning sessions had *always* just been for us. Okay, so Ollie was here, but things were serious between him and Luca.

Was Kai just as serious about Tristan?

Suddenly, it slammed home that Tristan was standing in front of me, waiting to shake my hand. His welcoming smile had slipped into uncertainty as his hand started to drop.

Over his shoulder, Kai was frozen. His hand was raised in mid-air—to pull Tristan back? Or was he reaching for me?

I met his eyes over Tristan's shoulder. What was I seeing there? I'd always thought I'd been able to read my best friend so well. Before, I would've thought he was anxious. Or uncertain, maybe.

Now? I had no idea what to believe.

Belatedly, I realised Tristan was still waiting for me to greet him. I slid him a charming smile, wrapping his smaller hand in my own. "Welcome, Tristan. Any friend of Kai's is a friend of mine."

Tristan's eyes widened slightly like he hadn't expected such a cordial greeting. Then they narrowed as the subtle layering of my statement sank in.

That's right. He was mine first.

Easing my hand back, I fell silent, waiting for Kai's next move. Again, I was caught in this dichotomy of before versus

now.

Before, I would've bear-hugged the shit out of him before sitting him down and demanding every minute detail about his trip. And that was just when we were separated for a day.

Now...now I didn't know what to do.

And that fucking scared me. I'd thought Kai would come home and we'd be able to slip back into how we were before. That maybe I'd be brave enough to confess the thoughts and fantasies that had kept me company in his absence. To question him about what Arlo and Ruby had hinted at.

To ask him if it was true.

Instead, I had to watch as his boyfriend claimed my place at his side. As he wrapped his arm around his waist and gave him a sickeningly sweet smile. "Okay, babe?"

I gritted my teeth at the endearment. It felt so false coming from Tristan's lips.

It'd feel real coming from mine.

Kai draped his arm over his shoulder and gave him a soft smile. My stomach clenched. It was the one he normally reserved for me. "All good."

There was an awkward pause before Luca clapped his hands together. "Okay, let's head on out back before Ollie burns everything."

My eyes followed Kai as he followed Luca to the garden. His arm didn't leave Tristan's shoulders.

He hadn't even said hello.

Numbness was pricking all over my skin, my arms hanging by my side. When had things reached this stage between us?

Had I lost Kai in every way possible?

My heart felt like it was cracking in two. Maybe I should just leave. If Kai felt so uncomfortable around me that he couldn't even *greet* me, perhaps I shouldn't be here.

Maybe this was the beginning of the end.

Oh, who was I kidding? That had happened the second I'd kissed him in front of ninety thousand fans.

A hand touched my arm, and I jumped out of my skin. "Fuck!"

"Sorry," Arlo said. I'd forgotten I wasn't alone. "You okay, Si?"

I started to smile before shaking my head and exhaling. "No. I'm fucking not."

"We didn't know he was bringing him."

"Why would you?" I asked bitterly. "Looks like Kai is keeping lots of secrets these days."

Arlo's brow puckered. "I dunno. Something about it seems...off."

Tristan's perfect laugh filtered through the air. I glared in the direction it came from. "They seem pretty happy to me."

I could feel Arlo's gaze burning into the side of my face. "And you're happy for them, yes?"

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

Arlo huffed a laugh. “Oh, I dunno. Could be the fact I thought for a second you were gonna punch Tristan in the face. Or maybe it’s how you’re glaring at the kitchen like you’re about to commit second-degree murder.”

“Second-degree?”

“Crime of passion,” Arlo elaborated.

I folded my arms over my chest. “That implies there’s *passion* involved.”

“You telling me there’s not?”

I spun to face Arlo helplessly. “I...I don’t fucking know. Okay? All I *do* know is that I took your stupid fucking advice, and now I can’t stop picturing me and Kai—”

Arlo winced. “Nope. Don’t need the details.”

I slumped back against the wall. “This is all your fault. Yours and Ruby’s. If you hadn’t opened your mouths, maybe I never would’ve realised. Now I want Kai, and I can’t fucking have him.”

Arlo leaned against the wall next to me. “And how does that make you feel?”

“Fucking hopeless,” I said hollowly. “Like someone has removed my heart and is using it for a punching bag.”

“Okay, I’m going to say two things, then I’m *done* interfering. You’ll have to sort the rest of this bullshit out yourselves.”

Another round of laughter burst from the kitchen, Kai's deep rumble joining the others'. Fuck how I'd missed that. I gestured for Arlo to tell me his 'advice'. I'd listen, then I was going home. If Tristan was the one Kai wanted to be with, I needed to get on board with the idea before we lost all semblance of our friendship.

I needed to have Kai in my life, one way or another.

But not today. Today, I was going to go home and drown my sorrows in a bottle of Lagavulin.

"Number one," Arlo began. "How you're feeling right now...imagine that over *decades*. How might that make you behave?"

I stiffened. Wait, was Arlo suggesting...

"And number two," he went on before I could interrupt and get some clarification. "If you feel that way about Kai, are you really going to let some little upstart twink snake your man away from you?"

"I'm not about destroying relationships," I muttered. "If *Tristan* is who Kai wants, I need to get on board with it. I can't lose him entirely."

"And you won't. But what if Tristan isn't who Kai wants? What if there's still a chance that someone else has his heart?"

It was like someone had lit a match inside me. It started as a tiny ember before flaring into an almost uncontrollable flame of hope. "Then I'm going to fight for him. If I'm what Kai wants...I'm gonna make damn sure he knows I'm an option."

“Atta boy,” Arlo said, punching me in the arm with a grin. “Think you can wait out Tristan?”

I nodded slowly. “Yep. If Kai is serious about him, I’m not going to fuck that up. I can wait for the relationship to run its course. But if this ends up with Kai walking him down the fucking aisle...well, let’s just say that you’ll be picking up the pieces.”

“If that happens, I’ll fly you to Vegas and get you so drunk you’ll forget your own name.”

“You hate Vegas.”

Arlo gestured for us to go and join the others. “That’s how confident I am that it won’t happen.”

“Hmm.” I followed Arlo out of the hall. After our little chat, I wasn’t so inclined to leave. No, I wanted to see Kai and Tristan together. To see if he really did make my best friend happy.

Because if he did...? Well. I was going to have to find a way to be okay with that.

One thing was certain, I wasn’t putting up with Kai pushing me away. He’d had sixteen painful weeks of space already.

If he wanted that space to be permanent, he would have to strap on a pair and tell me.

And ready himself for a fight. There was no fucking way I was letting him walk away from us until I’d exhausted all possible options.

I stepped into the kitchen and immediately sought him out. He was leaning against the counter, a beer in his hand. His gaze snagged on me immediately, the bottle hovering in mid-air, several inches from his lips.

I didn't need to force a smile to my face. I looked at my best friend, and I swear, I fucking lit up. "Can't believe you slipped past without a hug."

Kai's eyes cut away from mine as he put his untouched beer on the side. Tristan broke away from where he'd been chatting to Ollie, moving towards Kai.

Yeah, no. I wasn't letting this little shit come between us. It was a *hug*, for fuck's sake.

My height gave me the advantage over Tristan as I made my way around the table to Kai before he'd even taken three steps.

Kai's solemn brown eyes met mine, and I almost faltered. There was a fear there I hadn't seen before, an uncertainty that almost had me turning back.

But then he lifted his arms, and I knew nothing could stop me.

I crashed into his embrace, winding one arm around his middle and the other over his shoulders. My hands fisted in his shirt as I held him close.

Turning my head to the side, I breathed in his familiar scent. Being slightly shorter than him, my face was level with his neck. Suddenly, all the frustrations and confusion of the past

few months faded. So long as Kai was in my arms, everything made sense.

I couldn't lose him.

Kai's arms were wrapped just as tightly around me. His chest expanded against my own, rising and falling rapidly.

"Missed you," I whispered in a choked voice.

At my words, Kai drew in a sharp breath and let me go.

I wasn't even *near* ready to release him, but there was little I could do. I stepped back reluctantly, swallowing hard around the lump in my throat.

Tristan swept into my place like he was claiming his prize. "I'm just so happy to meet you all."

The only thing that kept me sane was the fact Kai hadn't moved. Hadn't even acknowledged the man practically burrowing into his chest. He was staring at me like he'd seen a ghost.

I didn't drop his stare, lifting my chin defiantly. If Kai thought I'd let this go, let *us* go, he didn't know anything about me.

"It's good to see you," he said finally, his eyes lingering on me for a moment longer before he seemed to remember we weren't alone. "All of you. Four months was too long."

"Damn right, it was," I muttered, grabbing a beer from Luca's fridge. Thankfully, we were well past standing on

ceremony in this group. I spent more time in the other bandmate's homes than my own.

Technically, I used to spend all my time in *Kai's* home. But hey, times had changed. Not for long, though, not if I got my way.

Ollie announced the food was ready and everyone swarmed to the door. Taking it in turns to use the umbrella, we dashed over to the barbecue and grabbed our food before passing it to the next person.

I glowered through the kitchen window as I watched Kai hold the umbrella over Tristan in a gentlemanly fashion.

How many times had he done that for me and I never appreciated it?

The bite of burger I'd just swallowed turned to stone in my stomach. Maybe that was Kai's problem. He'd spent *decades* looking after me.

What thanks had I given him?

I didn't get a chance to talk to Kai for several hours. Tristan was apparently the most devoted boyfriend on earth, not slipping from his side for even a second. Whenever I tried to draw Kai into conversation, Tristan would interject himself and change the topic to some funny story about their filming. There was no discussion about the upcoming album. Everyone was too enamoured with the stranger in our midst to remember why we were there.

After a while, I gave up trying to catch Kai's attention. Instead, I grabbed myself another beer and sat at the kitchen counter.

The others had all commented on how I hadn't noticed what was really happening. That I wasn't paying attention.

But I was paying attention now.

I watched. And I watched closely.

And the more I watched, the more I began to hope.

For as much as they played the role of a couple in love, there was no heat. When Tristan looked at Kai, it was with worry in his eyes.

And Kai? He couldn't stop looking at me.

Was it because he'd missed me too? Or was he wondering how to make this space between us permanent?

I caught his eye as I drained my beer. I swear, his eyes dropped to track my throat as I swallowed.

I put the bottle on the side and shot him a wink.

Kai ducked his head and cleared his throat.

Oh yeah. I had hope. Just a drop.

That was all I fucking needed.

Chapter Fourteen

Kai

My music was still playing in my headphones as I let myself into my house after my run. Heading straight to my fridge, I grabbed a bottle of water and drained it in a few gulps.

Thirst slaked, I stared out the window. It overlooked my lavish garden. It was way too much for just me, but when I'd been looking at houses, Silas had fallen in love with it.

No, I didn't live with Silas. Yes, I'd taken him with me to view every house before making a decision.

I'd never pretended we had a healthy relationship.

When we'd viewed this house, the garden had been nothing more than an overgrown tumble of weeds and abandoned blocks of rubble from the house renovation. I hadn't been sure, but Silas had been the one to see its potential. He'd strolled through the stinging nettles, oblivious to the welts they left behind, raving about things like *space*, *south-facing*, and *patio*.

In truth, I hadn't been able to even get a glimpse of what he was suggesting. He'd been so enthusiastic, so damned *bright*,

that I didn't even try.

I just bought the house.

Fortunately, I hadn't had to put Silas's plans into action. He'd turned up the day I picked up the keys with his car loaded with tools.

With his guidance and my willingness to do anything he asked, we'd transformed the space from a weed-filled wasteland to an oasis. The luscious lawn was broken up by winding paths. Plants filled the borders with small water features hidden here and there. A massive patio stretched out from the back door, a space where Silas and I liked to entertain during the summer.

But my favourite spot was the hammocks. Hanging between the trees, it was where Silas and I had whiled away many an hour under the night's sky.

Was it any wonder I couldn't get over him? Silas's thread was the constant colour through the tapestry of my life. We were woven so tightly together that there was no separating us.

Not unless the tapestry was burned. Was that something I really wanted to do?

I thought back to Silas's odd behaviour yesterday. How closely he'd watched me with Tristan. The way he'd seemed to breathe me in when we hugged.

Fuck, it had almost killed me to act so cool with him. All I'd wanted to do was drag him somewhere private where we could hold each other without the curious eyes. I wanted to tell him

about my travels before demanding every tiny detail about what he had been up to.

I wanted to fall to my knees to beg his forgiveness for my radio silence. Tell him how much it hurt me to put that distance between us. How I regretted it. How I wished I could take the last four months back.

But whenever I'd felt myself begin to crack, Tristan would be there. A cautioning look, a gentle touch, whatever he needed to do to remind me why I was doing this.

I was so glad he'd been there. Without him, I would've been right back where I'd started. What would have been the point of going through all this bullshit if nothing changed?

Movement flickered in the corner of my eye. The empty water bottle fell from my hand as I jumped. I ripped my headphones out as I glared at the intruder. "For fuck's sake, Si. You scared the life out of me."

"Sorry," Silas chirped, looking anything but. "To be fair, I said hello. Not my fault you still had your headphones in."

I grabbed the bottle from the floor before chucking it into the recycling. I used the time to adjust to Silas being in my house.

Mostly naked.

"Why are you in a towel?" I asked, keeping my back to him.

"Water pressure is better here," he said, reaching past me to grab an apple from the bowl. I shivered as his bare arm brushed against mine. "Plus, you've always got the healthy shit stocked."

My lips twitched despite myself as I turned to face him.
“Healthy shit...you mean fruit?”

He crunched into the apple and shot me a wink, just like yesterday.

And, just like yesterday, my cock got excited and started to stiffen. Which was not a good thing, given I was wearing athletic shorts.

Oh, and also because I wasn't supposed to be getting hard-ons over my best friend. A message my dick had yet to receive.

It didn't help that water dripped down his hairless chest, circling one of his nipples like it was *begging* me to taste it. I didn't look further south.

That was a fucking lie. Of course I did. Not that it mattered. I'd seen Silas naked so many times that I had no trouble picturing how he looked under that towel.

Just another inadvertent way Silas had tortured me over the years. He'd never thought twice about stripping in front of me.

To be fair, he didn't know how I felt about him. And in my defence, I tried very fucking hard not to look.

But I was only human.

I shifted against the counter, arranging my legs to hopefully hide the effect Silas had on me. It was something I was well-practised at. “So you came over, realised I wasn't here, and just decided to have a shower?”

“Yep,” Silas replied, biting another hunk of apple. “Why is that weird? We lived together for years. It’s not the first time I’ve used your shower.”

That was true. I searched my mind for a response less unhinged than *you shouldn’t do that because I’m dying to strip that towel off and fuck you over the counter*. Thankfully, my brain supplied me with a saner response. “I have a boyfriend now. You can’t be doing stuff like this anymore.”

Silas didn’t look away from me as he swallowed his final bite of apple. He moved to put the core in the bin and ended up only inches from me. “What stuff? Behaving like we always have?”

I was so fucking torn. Half of me wanted to haul him against me, while the other half screamed at me that I would just get my heart broken. Again. “It’s not normal, Si. Surely you can see that?”

He didn’t answer me. “Where’s your boyfriend? If you’re so close, why isn’t he staying here?”

Shit. How was I supposed to answer that? “He needs his own space.”

“Right...and there wasn’t enough here? In your *seven-bed* house?”

I winced. In truth, I had pushed Tristan to stay here, but he’d explained his anxiety was much easier to manage in a familiar hotel environment. “It’s still new between us.”

“Still new, but serious enough to bring him home to introduce him to your friends.”

The edge of hurt in his voice had my defences threatening to crumble. I stood firm though. “Yes.”

He stepped closer, his chest almost brushing against my own. “And that’s what you want? For us to not be like we were *before*?”

No. That was what my heart was screaming. It hammered the bars of the cage my brain had put around it, begging for any scraps of Silas’s attention.

But I’d given up letting my heart rule me. It never learned.

“That’s right.” I couldn’t look him in the eye. I settled for a spot over his shoulder. “You’re my best friend, Silas. That’ll never change. But we can’t...”

“Can’t what?” His hand came up to catch my chin. He forced me to look at him. To see the determination in his eyes. The hurt. The hope. “What *can’t* we do? What can’t we be to each other now that Tristan is in the picture?”

It hit me then, exactly why he was behaving like this.

He was afraid. Of losing me. Our friendship.

“You’re jealous,” I said in disbelief.

“So what if I am?” He still hadn’t let go of my face. “You going to tell me I shouldn’t be?”

I shoved his hand away and shouldered past him. My voice was rough as I spoke nothing but the truth. “He’s not replacing

you, Silas. You're still my best friend."

His breath ghosted against the back of my neck. "Is that what we are to each other? Friends?"

I spun around, confusion making my temper climb. "Of course! What else would we be?"

"What about that kiss then? What do you call that?"

It was the one thing he could say to remind me of what I had to lose. I threw his words back at him. The careless statement that had shredded me deeply and haunted me during our time apart. "Part of the *act*. That's all that ever was."

Shadows flickered over his eyes. For a heartbeat, I wondered who this man was. My Silas had never looked at me like this before. Like he was a breath away from shutting me up with his mouth or fist.

It would be the latter. I locked the cage tighter, refusing to contemplate anything else.

Then he stepped back, his usual grin returning. But there was an edge to it, something I didn't recognise. "The act. Of course."

He gave me a mock salute before disappearing in the direction of his bedroom.

Yes, he had his own bedroom here. Right next to my own. It was another reminder of the boundaries I'd failed to put between us.

By the time he returned, thankfully fully dressed, I'd made us both a coffee. For a second, I'd considered putting his in a travel mug. Even Silas wouldn't be able to miss the hint that he should be on his way.

But when my hand snaked up to grab it, it returned with one of my standard ceramic ones.

No, not a standard one. The one with an image of a sloth that was reserved for Silas alone.

Silas was humming a tune as he reached for his mug. I braced myself as he took that first sip, knowing exactly what was coming.

The moan Silas gave was always indecent enough to have my blood rerouting itself. "God, that's good. I've missed your coffee."

I distracted myself by focusing on my own mug. "You have no less than four coffee shops within a five-minute walk of your house."

"But none of them come with the side of scintillating conversation you provide."

I grunted, trying hard not to smile. I was not known for my words, something Silas had never minded.

Why would he when he could talk enough for the both of us?

Like he could read my mind, Silas settled onto a stool at the island and launched into a story about a dinner he'd had with Ollie and Luca.

As I took the stool opposite, I flashed back to the countless times we'd sat like this. From that first kitchen table at my parents' house on the estate to our shitty shared flat at Uni to an endless parade of hotel rooms in all corners of the world.

It was how we started our day. How we always had. Even during these past few years when we'd lived apart, it had been rare for a day to go past without one of us encroaching on the other's space for our morning pick-me-up.

The only times we missed them was if Silas still had... *company*. Not that that happened often. Sure, he fucked a different woman every night on tour. But he rarely invited them to spend the night.

And as for me? That had never happened. I wish I could say it was because of some weird attitude towards commitment, as it seemed to be for Silas, but that would be a lie.

It was far healthier than that. I never let anyone else stay in case my phone rang in the middle of the night. If Silas needed me, I knew I'd go running. How the fuck would I explain that to someone? That I was leaving the bed they were in to go hold another man.

But you did leave him, my brain helpfully pointed out. Think how many nights Silas has suffered through without you.

I spun my mug slowly as I listened to Silas jump from one story straight into another. No, Silas would've called me. Even if I'd ghosted him, he had to know I'd answer a call in the dead of night.

It was the exception to the rule I'd set. I was protecting myself by going no contact during the day.

But if Silas had needed me at night? That wasn't about me. It was about him.

And I wouldn't have let him suffer alone. Not through that. It could be ten years down the line. I could be happily married and snuggled up in bed with my husband.

Yet I knew that if my phone rang at two a.m., Silas's name on the screen, I'd go running. Can't imagine what my future spouse might think about that...but that was a bridge I could cross later.

Silence tapped at my ears, and I realised belatedly that Silas had stopped talking. That look was back in his eyes as he studied me. That one I didn't recognise.

“You ready to actually *talk* yet?”

I felt my cheeks heat. He didn't need to elaborate. I knew what he was asking.

Why had I run? Why had I ghosted him?

I wasn't ready for that. I didn't think I ever would be.

I couldn't look Silas in the face as I shook my head. This was it, the moment he'd walk away from our friendship. I wouldn't blame him. He wasn't the one who'd broken us.

That was all on me.

I stared sightlessly into my mug, waiting for the inevitable.

But it never came.

“Okay,” Silas said, his voice strained. “We’ll put a pin in it. For now.”

I closed my eyes. *Tell him. Tell him you’ll never be ready. That you need space from him because your fucking heart is breaking. Tell him it’s not his fault, but it’s for the best.*

The words never came. I stayed silent like the fucking coward I was. And when Silas offered me an olive branch by asking me about filming, I grabbed it like the lifeline it was.

Because I knew I was fucked.

I couldn’t give Silas up completely. It was like asking me to give up air. I had given him up for four months and almost asphyxiated.

So, as I gave him all the mundane details of my trip, taking care to avoid mentions of Tristan, I changed tact.

I’d thought I’d known heartbreak before where Silas was concerned, but none of that compared to the physical agony of not having him in my life at all.

I was going to have Silas as my best friend again. Nothing more. Nothing less.

And I was going to be okay with that.

I was.

Chapter Fifteen

Silas

When Kai had thrown my words about our kiss back at me, I'd known that wasn't the right time to push. Something that was further compounded by his refusal to talk about the real reason he'd left. Kai was a stubborn fucker at the best of times. Once he'd made a decision or had an idea about something, he stuck to it, come what may. The only way around it was to wait him out.

So that was what I was doing. I was waiting. But I wasn't giving him space. We'd had enough space between us recently. Like hell was I letting him push me away again.

Not ready to be parted from Kai, I persuaded him to hit up an escape room with me. We'd done most of the ones in the area, but fortunately, a new place had opened while we'd been on tour.

“What's the theme of this one?” Kai asked as I drove us into Portsmouth.

“Millenium Meltdown.” I dropped my voice into a mock ominous tone. “With only an hour until midnight, can we prevent Y2K before it’s too late?”

Kai made a noise that was half-groan and half-laugh. “Ah, it’s going to have lots of shit from our childhood labelled as *nostalgia*, isn’t it.”

“Most likely. No doubt we’ll be walking out feeling as old as our knees tell us we are.”

We exchanged a conspiratorial grin. Neither of us actually thought thirty-five was *old*, but some of our joints disagreed. Especially after several shows on the trot.

“Remember the first room we did?” Kai stroked the stubble on his chin.

I gave a hoot. “Christ, I don’t think I could ever forget that. It was the 1940s war one, and we got so hung up on that fucking replica decoding machine that we didn’t get out.”

“I still say they shouldn’t put items in the room unless they are relevant to a game,” Kai grouched.

“So you’ve said. On the way to every game we’ve done since.”

We grinned at each other again, and some of the tension I’d been carrying lifted. This was us. This is what we did. Spent time together and gave each other shit.

Not wanting to lose the moment, I continued our reminiscing. “Remember when you thought the light fitting was a clue?”

Kai covered his face with both his hands. “Why’d you have to bring that one up? I paid for the damages!”

Laughter bubbled out of me. “You’re the reason they have that warning now about how the lights are *not* part of the game. Little do they know it’s because of Kai, guitarist for Caffeine Daydreams.”

“You’re a dick, you know that.”

I winked at him as I pulled into the car park. “Ah, but I’m *your* dick.”

Kai coughed and turned his head away. “Oh, Dylan’s here.”

“Yep.” I turned off the engine. “Thought it was a good idea given the last time we were in public together...”

I didn’t need to finish my sentence. The way Kai stiffened told me that the memory of the kiss was as fresh for him as it was for me.

Judging by the speed at which he exited the car and loped over to Dylan, he still wasn’t ready to discuss it.

That’s fine, I told myself as I got out and joined them. *That’s not what today is about.*

No, today was about reminding Kai about us. Showing him that we could be together without any of the awkwardness. I wouldn’t push him to talk about it until he was ready.

We walked into the escape room, excitement already rising. Since giving our first one a shot a few years ago, Kai and I had made it our mission to take on as many as possible.

The game master came out to greet us, his customer service smile faltering as he spotted us. “Oh my god.”

Familiar with this reaction, I stepped forwards and extended my hand. “Hi, I’m Silas and this is Kai. We’ve got a game booked for eleven a.m.?”

Dylan smirked from his position against the wall. He always found it funny when I introduced us to people who recognised us. But it was a good way to remind them that we were just ordinary guys, there to do what anyone else was.

It worked too. The game master fixed his smile and shook my hand. “Lovely to meet you. Have you done an escape room before?”

“A few,” Kai hedged.

“Ah, a couple of experts.” The game master clapped his hands enthusiastically. “I’ll hold back on the hints then.”

“Please don’t,” I said in alarm. “We’ve done a lot, but not *successfully*.”

“Because you don’t listen,” Kai said with an eye-roll. “If you listened, we’d get out faster.”

I arched my brows at him. “Or perhaps you should, you know, not *touch the light fittings*.”

The game master winced. “Ah, you know you can’t do that here, right? If it doesn’t move instantly, it means—”

“It’s not supposed to.” Kai cringed. “It’s okay. I learned my lesson the hard way.”

“Phew. For a second there, you had me thinking I was going to have to tell one of my idols off.” The game master shot Kai a coy look that had me frowning.

Fortunately, Dylan took that as his cue. “On that note, I’m assuming all of you will be happy signing an NDA? Kai and Silas want to enjoy their time here without worrying about any information being leaked to the press.”

The bespectacled game master looked appalled. “We would never do that. What happens in the game room, stays in the game room.”

Dylan’s smile didn’t waver. “So signing the NDA won’t be an issue then, will it.”

I swear, Dylan got his way through stone-cold politeness more often than not. It only took a few minutes for the staff to be rounded up and their signatures given. Kai and I used the time to explore their range of EXIT games, pretending we couldn’t see the way the staff were all lingering to observe us.

“Have we played this one?” I held up the Airplane Crash one.

“Yep. Took us four hours before we completed it.”

I put it back on the shelf. Our obsession extended beyond playing in actual rooms. We had most of these board game versions to keep us occupied when travelling. “How about this one?”

By the time they were ready for us in the room, we’d picked up four games we hadn’t played. It was a small thing that we’d

done a hundred times before, but it gave me hope that Kai really did want to keep spending time with me.

“I’ll take those,” Dylan said with a long-suffering sigh. “I’ll be out here if you need me.”

I thanked him and handed them over, but Kai was hovering nearby.

“You can come in with us if you like,” Kai blurted suddenly. “We could always use a third brain.”

“Or second, seeing as you two share one,” Dylan responded while I glared at Kai. “But it—”

I didn’t give him a chance to finish, rudely talking over him. “No, he can’t. It’s a two-person room.”

Kai shuffled on his feet awkwardly. “I’m sure they’ll make an exception...for us.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. We rarely flaunted our fame to get our own way. Of all of us, Kai was usually the one most against it.

I stepped closer to Kai, dropping my voice low so the only one who might hear was Dylan. “Got a problem being locked in a room with me, Kai?”

His eyes fell to my lips as he drew in a quick breath. “No. Of course not.”

“Good.” I didn’t back away. Didn’t break eye contact. “Because, as it happens, I can think of lots of things we could get up to in a locked room. Just the two of us.”

Kai reeled back a step, his jaw falling open. “What?”

I smirked at him, letting my eyes trail over his body. I’d never been a subtle flirt, and if Kai mistook this, then he was a bigger idiot than I was. “All those different...*puzzles*. We don’t want a third person getting in the way. It’d slow things down.”

He tilted his head like he’d caught onto my double meaning but struggled to understand if I meant it.

“Well, either way, I’m out,” Dylan said, cutting into the tension fizzing between us. “Don’t fancy being locked in a room. I’ll sit out here and play *2468* until you come back.”

I shot him a look of thanks. “You’re addicted to that game.”

“Gotta have something to keep me distracted while babysitting you two.” He softened his words with a wink.

The game master approached. “Okay! If you’re ready, follow me.”

The awkward tension between Kai and me lasted through the game master’s pregame spiel. But once the door was closed and the timer started, it dissipated as we got caught up in the room.

Kai had been right—it was full of nostalgia that made us feel old. Before long, we were searching out keys and trying to figure out codes. We’d never had a problem working as a team. It was part of what made us so successful on stage. All the shit that had been going on between us faded.

We were having fun.

My senses were heightened around Kai in a way they never had been before. I shivered every time his skin touched mine as he passed me a key. My temperature rose another degree whenever he brushed past me.

All those casual touches that I'd once taken as normal meant something else now.

Something so much more.

We unlocked a door into another room and let out a resounding whoop. I swept into the closet-sized space and eyed the tangled wires with dismay. "Lots of coloured wires and sockets. I'm guessing if we put them in the right places, it'll complete the game. No idea where I'm supposed to put them though."

"Bollocks," Kai said from the doorway. "Give me a second. I'm sure I saw something with colours on out here."

Not wanting to be idle, I spent the time Kai was gone shoving the wires into various sockets, hoping to stumble across the answer. Luck was not on my side.

"Here," Kai said, squeezing into the narrow space beside me. He was frowning down at a piece of paper in his hand. "I think this is it."

Using the grid he'd found, we worked together to quickly plug the wires into the right sockets. I crouched to do the lower ones while Kai leaned over me to do the ones on top.

"Come on, come on," I muttered as my competitive streak kicked in. I'd be a grumpy fucker if we didn't escape in time.

“Almost there,” Kai said. Just then, a red cable sailed past my head. “Balls.”

“I got it.” I swiped it up, pushing to a standing position. My chest brushed against Kai’s as I rose, our bodies bumping together.

Fuck. This space was tight.

Kai’s mouth was only inches from mine. He suddenly felt much bigger than me, his breath rasping as his gaze dropped to my lips.

I’d spent years grinding my body against Kai’s in front of millions of fans and thought nothing of it. But this felt so much more intimate. Our bodies weren’t even touching, yet my cock was growing stiff just being in his proximity.

The game was forgotten as we waited for one of us to take that step. To cross the line into something new. Something different.

Something *necessary*.

“Si.” He breathed the word, half a plea, half a curse.

I tilted my head, holding my breath as I waited. This was it. I wasn’t dreaming or fantasising.

This was really happening.

“Players, you have one minute remaining.”

We jumped apart as the outside world crashed in. Kai’s eyes were wide with horror as he stumbled away and out of the small space.

Running away. Just like he had the first time.

An alarm began to shriek, warning us that the end of the world was imminent.

I felt numb as I stared at the red cable in my hands. I could plug it in and win the game. Kai and I would go back to being friends, and no doubt it'd never be mentioned again.

Or I could say *fuck it all* and let the world burn.

And pray we'd still be standing at the end of it.

I continued to stare at the cable, counting out the final seconds in my head.

When it was over, I joined Kai in the main room, hands shoved deep in my pockets. He was leaning against the desk, his arms folded over his chest and his head bowed. Everything about his posture screamed that he didn't want to talk about what had happened.

So we stood in silence until the game master entered. He frowned at us both, scratching his head. "You were so close. What happened?"

Wasn't that the question of the hour?

Over the next few weeks, Kai and I slipped into some warped version of the friendship we'd once shared.

I had no idea what was going on inside Kai's head...and I hated it. Did he want us to just be friends? The way he acted suggested yes, but I couldn't forget the near kiss in the escape room.

As usual, Kai hadn't mentioned it. Any time the subject came close, he changed it.

It was driving me fucking insane. I wanted to grab him by the collar and insist he told me what he wanted. What was going on in his head.

I couldn't do it though. I wasn't that selfish. I couldn't bear the thought that I might've inadvertently hurt Kai in the past... I wasn't about to force him to talk when he wasn't ready.

No, I wasn't going to force him to talk...but I was going to try and force his hand in other ways. I hadn't missed the way Kai watched me whenever he thought I wasn't looking.

For someone who had a boyfriend, he sure was interested in checking out my arse.

Just yesterday, I'd waltzed out of his shower in the skimpiest towel I could find, and Kai had full-on choked on his coffee. I swear I caught a glimpse of a bulge in his shorts before he hastily turned away.

Okay, maybe I was stepping over several boundaries, trying to get a rise out of Kai this way. But we'd never been good at respecting those.

So until he told me otherwise, I fully intended on encroaching on his space as often as possible. I was still pissed

at him for ghosting me, but that wasn't what was important.

Making sure Kai would stay a part of my life was.

To my utter frustration, the one part of our friendship that *hadn't* returned to normal was the touching. After our near miss in the escape room, Kai treated the air around me as a no-go zone. He was careful to make sure he didn't so much as brush his arm against me as he passed. And as for hugs when I arrived or left? They were a thing of the past.

Fucking ironic that he'd stopped just as I'd realised I never wanted him to.

Tonight, we were at a bar opening in Soho. To my dismay, Tristan had slipped into the car after Kai. Judging by the expression on his face, he was as happy to see me as I was him. But for Kai's sake, I kept things cordial. I still didn't believe they were in love or serious, but I had to be respectful.

Tristan, however, hadn't got the memo. He barely waited until Kai went to the bar to get us drinks before rounding on me. He had a lazy grin, but it did nothing to detract from the barb in his words. "Why are you here? Don't you have better things to do than gatecrash your friend's dates?"

"Can't say I do," I said, not taking my eyes off Kai at the bar. He was wearing a silver shirt that clung to his muscles. Like he was trying to torture me, he'd rolled up the sleeves, leaving his forearms on display. It wasn't that I hadn't noticed how hot he was before. For fuck's sake, I'd helped him pick out that shirt. Didn't think I'd be watching him in a bar months later, imagining stripping him out of it.

Seemed wild to me now that I hadn't. All this time we'd wasted because I'd been so fucking blind.

"He has a boyfriend," Tristan said pointedly. "Me. Can't you see this is fucked up?"

And there it was, the reminder that I didn't actually *know* how Kai felt about me. All I had to go on was some vague hints. Still, I wasn't giving Tristan the satisfaction of my uncertainty. "Can't say I do. This is how Kai and I have always been together."

"It's weird," Tristan said flatly. I could feel his stare burning into the side of my face, but I refused to look away from Kai. He was leaning forward now to talk to the bartender, making his already tight trousers cling even more to his rear. It'd been two hours since he'd walked out in that outfit and I'd nearly swallowed my tongue. How had I gone two decades without climbing him like a tree?

I was here first. That was what my petty arse wanted to respond. Instead, I went with, "Take it up with Kai. If he's got a problem with me being here, that's down to him. Not you."

Okay, perhaps I was being a bit shitty. But I wasn't backing away until Kai told me to. Besides, if I thought for a second Kai was serious about Tristan, that he truly had feelings for him, that would be different. However, the couple of times I'd been out with them both, I hadn't seen them do as much as hug.

Unless they saw me watching, of course. Then they'd glom together so hastily that I had to fight the urge to laugh. I knew

Kai like the back of my hand. If he really liked Tristan, he had a funny way of showing it.

All I had to do was wait patiently for their *relationship* to run its course.

Kai came back, balancing the three drinks in his hands. His easy grin slipped as he caught on to the tension between Tristan and me. “What’s happened?”

“Nothing,” I said, relieving him of a beer and sipping it. “Tristan and I are just getting to know each other.”

“Actually, Kai, can I talk to you?” Tristan took their drinks and put them on the table next to us. “Alone?”

Kai’s gaze bobbed between us for a second before he nodded. “Of course.”

They didn’t go far. The VIP area didn’t allow for that. Wanting to at least *try* and give them some privacy, I pulled out my phone and opened Insta. I snapped a couple of photos of the club below, posting them to my story and tagging the club and Kai.

Ignoring the slew of notifications that started to come in, I pocketed the device and couldn’t resist checking in on Kai. They were still huddled in the corner. I had no idea what Tristan was saying, but with how Kai was glowering at the floor, it couldn’t be anything good.

He better not be upsetting him, I thought as I sipped at my beer. The idea of him making Kai happy was painful.

But the concept of him hurting Kai? That was unacceptable.

Kai's muscles grew tenser the longer Tristan spoke. Suddenly, I couldn't bear it any longer.

Crossing the space in a few strides, I went over to them. Tristan fell silent as I drew near, his scowl making it clear how he felt about my interruption. "What?"

I ignored him, my gaze resting on Kai's clasped hands. His tight shoulders. "You okay?"

He jerked in surprise, his brown eyes whipping up to mine. "Yeah. Of course."

No, he wasn't. There was an exhaustion there I hadn't seen in years. Not since his mum's last scare. That knowledge itched at me like a rash. "Wanna dance?"

"What?" Tristan snapped. The little dude looked like he was about to burst a blood vessel.

"Dance," I replied with deliberate slowness. Kai hadn't looked away from me, his lips parting in confusion. "Friends can dance together."

Tristan scoffed. "Since when have you two ever danced together?"

I gritted my teeth as I finally broke the staring match between me and Kai. "Every night on stage, for approximately thirteen years. Everyone knows that."

From the corner of my eye, Kai flinched like I'd hit him. Fuck. Had our...*my* behaviour really hurt him that deeply?

“I don’t feel like dancing,” Kai said finally. His head was bowed as that heavy exhaustion seemed to wash over him once more. He reached out a hand, but not towards me.

Towards Tristan.

“I think you should go, Si. Tristan and I want to spend some time together. Alone.”

The flash of hurt that ripped through me was so visceral I actually lifted a hand to my chest to check. No, there was no injury.

Not one you could see anyway.

I didn’t let it show. The last thing Kai needed right now was to think he’d upset me. He was clearly going through something...even if I didn’t know what that was.

And that hurt more than anything. I used to be the person he reached out to. The person he confided in.

Now he had someone else. Someone who wasn’t me.

Maybe this was it now. I’d missed my chance.

If I’d ever even had one.

“No worries.” I clapped Kai on the shoulder to show him there were no hard feelings, even if that couldn’t be further from the truth. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Kai bit his lip and glanced at Tristan. His thumb started rubbing the back of the other man’s hand. “Actually, you shouldn’t come over in the morning. Tristan will be staying the night.”

“Lots of nights,” Tristan said quietly but firmly.

I turned my back to hide my face before quickly pushing my way through the crowd. I didn’t want Kai to know I was hurting, but I wasn’t a good enough actor to play this off.

I blitzed past Rhys in a rush, not stopping to check he was following.

Thankfully, he appeared at my side as I stepped out to the flashing of what seemed like a hundred cameras.

“Silas, are you and Kai a couple?”

“Was the kiss a stunt?”

“Are you jealous of Tristan and Kai?”

“Are you leaving early because of an argument?”

Dylan, Kai’s guard, appeared at my other side from nowhere. Between him and Rhys, they were able to cut a path through the paparazzi to where we had parked earlier.

Dylan opened the door for me to get in, using his body to keep the press back before closing it behind me. At the same time, Rhys slid into the driver’s seat.

“Sorry,” I muttered as he pulled away from the bar and onto the busy city street. “Didn’t realise I’d be leaving so abruptly.”

“Not a problem,” he said mildly. “All part of the job.”

His eyes shifted to meet mine in the rearview mirror. “You okay?”

Was I okay? In the past few months, pretty much all the constants in my life had been stripped away.

Guess that was the danger of having almost all your constants revolve around one person.

When I didn't respond, Rhys asked a follow-up question, reminding me I wasn't completely alone. "Arlo's or Luca's?"

Chapter Sixteen

Kai

I was already awake by the time Tristan surfaced the following morning. Truth be told, I hadn't slept much.

I couldn't stop picturing Silas's face before he turned away from me and fled.

He'd looked...devastated.

"Morning." I greeted Tristan as he slid onto a stool with a massive yawn. Poor guy didn't look like he'd slept any better than me. What was keeping him up at night though? "Tea?"

He gave a visible shudder. "Ew, no. I need real caffeine."

"Tea has more caffeine in it than coffee."

He peered up at me over the bags under his eyes. "That's scientifically untrue."

I was already at the coffee machine and making him an espresso. I'd spent enough time with him during filming to know how he took it. "Then explain why us Brits are always so polite. It's the tea. It keeps us awake."

He took a sip of his coffee as he gave me a bemused look. “Y’all are polite but not smiley. I can never tell if a Brit is being kind or sarcastic. It’s a little scary.”

I took the stool opposite him. “Always best to err on the side of sarcastic.”

“Noted.”

We slipped into a companionable silence as we sipped our drinks. My mind drifted back to the night before and how Tristan had pulled me aside. I didn’t know what had been said between him and Silas, but it was enough to make my new friend worried about me. Worried enough to remind me of what we were trying to do here.

“Thank you for staying.” I’d been afraid Silas might not take my request seriously and show up anyway. I hadn’t wanted to be caught out in a lie.

For the first time, I’d set a firm boundary between us. A healthy one. An appropriate one.

And it had almost fucking killed me.

Tristan waved off my thanks, studying me with a solemn expression. “How are you feeling this morning after...you know?”

I braced my hands on the counter. “Not great. You’re right. What we’ve got going on will lead to more pain for me in the long run. But fuck...it hurts. I’m so used to him just being *there*. You know?”

Tristan pursed his lips. “Okay, I wasn’t going to meddle, but I have to ask. Are you sure Silas doesn’t have feelings for you?”

His question poked at the hole I was so careful to keep covered. The one where I shoved all the hope that only ever got me burned. “No. He’s straight. Trust me, if he felt anything other than platonic, I’d know about it by now. He tells me everything.”

He raised a manicured brow. “The same way you tell him everything?”

“That’s different. Si...he can’t hide his feelings. He wears his heart on his sleeve. He always has.”

“I’m just saying, I’ve never seen two ‘friends’ behave the way you two do. I know you told me y’all have this unhealthy codependent schtick going on...but wow. It’s so much worse than I anticipated. In all honesty, I’m not surprised you fell in love with him. You haven’t had the opportunity to learn who you are without Silas.”

“That’s what this break was supposed to be about.” The fatigue from the night before seemed to be catching up with me. “Finding out who I am and what my life would be like without him.”

“And how is it?”

“Fucking shit,” I said baldly. “Lonely and depressing. Like someone removed one of my lungs and then asked me to run a marathon.”

Tristan sighed. “Look, I know we haven’t known each other long, but I care about you. If you think Silas doesn’t have feelings for you, maybe we should keep up this ruse. But... what if he does, Kai? What if you’re pushing away the one thing you wanted?”

“I’m not,” I said, shaking my head quickly. “Silas doesn’t see me like that.”

“Then why did he ask you to dance? Why does he behave like a jealous lover whenever I’m in the vicinity?”

I’d been asking myself the same questions. It was dangerous thoughts like those that had kept me up half the night. “I think he is jealous...but not for the reason you’re hinting at. Now that you’re here, our friendship has changed. He feels threatened by you.” I heaved a sigh. “Just the fact he threw our onstage behaviour in your face proves that. It’s just an act to Si. It always has been. To him, it’s another way we demonstrate how close we are. As friends.”

Touch was Silas’s love language. Even as a teen, he’d thought nothing of grabbing me for a hug or leaning his head on my shoulder. We’d once been short of chairs at a band meeting, and he’d just sat on my lap. Like that was normal.

To him, it was. It wasn’t his fault I’d never been honest with him. I’d never explained that each touch was a dagger to my soul. A reminder of what I’d never have.

This was all on me.

Tristan pursed his lips. “I can see that, I suppose. Perhaps he thinks that if he can make you behave like you always did, things will go back to normal.”

“Exactly.” I was relieved Tristan got it.

“Do you want it to go back to normal?”

I blew out a long breath, considering my answer. It was probably the most selfish decision I’d ever made, but I knew it was the right one.

Even if I fucking hated it.

“No. I don’t. I can’t. I want Silas in my life, but I can’t keep letting him break my heart.”

“You could be honest with him. That seems like the easiest way to fix this.”

“No. That’s the easiest way to destroy us completely.” I shook my head before grabbing our cups and walking them over to the sink. “You don’t know Silas like I do. He’d feel so guilty about everything that he’d act weird around me. Or, even worse, he might try and force himself to have feelings for me just to make me feel better.”

“He wouldn’t.”

I turned to face Tristan with a grim smile. “He might. That’s the thing that scares me the most. If he ever finds out how I feel and tells me he feels the same, how would I know if it’s the truth?”

“You’re saying he’d lie to you?”

“No,” I said slowly. “I don’t mean like that. I think he’d *believe* he returned my feelings. That’s the kind of guy he is. There’s very little either of us wouldn’t do to make the other happy. But it’d only lead to heartbreak for both of us. I can’t risk that. I can’t hurt or lose Silas completely.”

Tristan grimaced. “Okay, I don’t know him very well, but I think you’re doing Silas a massive disservice. If someone tried to assume I didn’t understand my own feelings, I’d probably throat-punch them.”

“It’s a good thing we’re only fake boyfriends then.” I put my hand over his and squeezed. “Trust me, where Silas is concerned, I know what I’m doing. Are you okay to continue this charade for a little longer?”

“For sure,” Tristan said. “Like I told you before, this is helping me more than you realise.”

“And you’re still not going to tell me anything more about that?”

“Nope. But give me your face for a cute selfie, and I’ll consider your debt paid.”

I forced away my concerns about what Tristan was hiding as I smiled for the camera. Tristan pushed his face against mine, grinning for all he was worth.

He lowered the phone and the happiness was gone like he’d flipped a switch. “There. That should do it.”

I patted his shoulder roughly. “I’m here if you want to talk.”

“I know.” He gave me a tight smile. “But I don’t think I’m the one you need to be talking to this morning.”

“You’re right.” With how Silas had left the club last night, I knew I needed to check in on him. I wouldn’t feel easy until I knew he was okay. Yes to boundaries, but a hard no to making Silas sad. I would still be his friend.

But in a healthy way.

With boundaries.

Fuck, I was so screwed.

My key was in the lock to Silas’s house before I realised. There was me, setting boundaries.

And immediately stepping over them.

Repocketing the key, I took a deep breath, and for the first time ever, I rang the bell.

“Kai?” Silas’s voice was confused as it came through the ring camera. We all had various security setups in our homes. You never knew when a fan might get *too* keen. “Have you forgotten your keys?”

I scratched the back of my neck, suddenly feeling awkward. Perhaps this was a mistake. “Ah—no. Just figured I’d ring the bell.”

There was a long silence. For a moment, I thought Silas wasn't on the other end of the line.

But he spoke again, the crackle of the speaker doing nothing to hide the challenge in his tone. "What, afraid your boyfriend won't like it if he knows you've used a *key* rather than me letting you in? The end result is the same, you know."

His words sank like stones in my stomach. It was just like I'd told Tristan—Silas was jealous he was being replaced. "Just...let me in, Si. Or would you rather I left?"

The door swung open so suddenly that I jumped back a step. "Jesus! Were you there the whole time?"

Silas lifted his chin, folding his arms over his chest. "Had to make sure you weren't a weirdo. You can't trust anyone these days."

The blow hit solidly in the centre of my chest. Si didn't give me a chance to respond, just twisted on his heel and stalked towards his kitchen.

When I joined him, he was slamming mugs in front of the boiling kettle. I stayed silent as he made us both a cuppa, not knowing what to say.

You might think him making me tea without asking was a good sign, but it literally meant nothing. Even if your mortal enemy turned up on your doorstep, you'd still be expected to offer them the beverage. Okay, you might make a piss-poor version where the tea bag barely meets the milk, but you'd still *make* it.

Silas silently passed me my cup. I couldn't help but notice it was in my mug, a cracked white one we had picked up in Tenby. It had *Much Ado about Puffins* emblazoned over it. The pun had drawn a rare cackle from me, prompting Silas to buy it to keep for me at his house.

I pushed our past out of my mind as I carried it over to the table and slipped into my usual seat.

But Silas didn't follow.

Instead, he perched on the kitchen counter, his expression unreadable. "No Tristan this morning?"

"No, he decided to grab some more sleep."

I didn't know why, but my words had Silas flinching. "Lucky Tristan."

"If I'm keeping you up, I can go." I was already pushing back my chair. "You can go back to bed if you like."

Silas's cheeks were flushed as he waved for me to sit back down. "No, that's not what I—never mind. Why are you here?"

"Do I need a reason?"

Silas hummed as he sipped his tea before putting it behind him. "I never used to think so, but after last night, apparently we do."

I winced. "Listen, about last night...I didn't mean for you to leave like that."

“What, you wanted me to stay and play the third wheel when you’d both made it clear I wasn’t welcome?”

“We didn’t say you weren’t welcome.”

“Right...” He drew the word out in the most sarcastic fashion possible. “That’s why you asked me to leave. And why you said no to dancing with me.”

“I was with my *boyfriend*,” I said, my frustration making my temper rise. “I’m not going to dance with you in front of him.”

“No, you just do it in front of thousands of fans.”

I didn’t mean to say the words, but they slipped out. “Because you make me.”

Silas reeled back like I’d hit him. “What?”

“Nothing.” I scraped my chair back in alarm, crossing over so I could stand between his legs. “I didn’t mean...”

“Yes, you did,” he whispered. “You didn’t want to do those things on stage with me, did you?”

The words of denial curled on my tongue and withered to ash. No, I’d never wanted Silas touching me there. In private, where it meant something...yes.

But never under the scrutiny of thousands, knowing it didn’t mean a thing.

Silas covered his mouth in horror. “Christ, Kai. Why didn’t you ever *say* anything?”

I was frozen. His legs brushed mine on either side, but I couldn’t move away. “I...I didn’t want to hurt you.”

“So instead, you let me hurt you.”

“That’s not what I said.”

“It’s what you meant though, isn’t it?” A sheen covered his eyes. Fuck, this was everything I’d been afraid of. “Tell me the truth. Did I hurt you?”

I closed my eyes as the word broke free in a whisper. “Yes.”

“How?”

My eyes flew open. “What?”

“Tell me how I hurt you. Did I embarrass you? Was it because I was flaunting your sexuality?”

Because I’m in love with you, and you’ll never want me like that.

“No, of course not.”

“Then what is it?” Silas pulled at his hair. “Fuck, Kai. Why won’t you just talk to me?”

I opened my mouth, but no words would come out. This was it. My time to be honest.

But I couldn’t do it.

Silas’s lips curled in a sneer and my heart cracked further. He’d never looked like that before. “So that’s how it’s gonna be? We’re just going to keep lying to each other?”

He shoved my chest to make me step back, but I stood my ground.

“Move,” he hissed.

“No.”

He slid from the counter, crowding me with his body like he thought that would make me move back.

Which would make sense, given what I’d just told him. But he didn’t know my issue wasn’t with him touching me.

My hands wrapped around his wrists. “I’m not lying to you, Si.”

“You’re not being honest though, are you?” His nostrils flared as he glowered up at me. “Why did you leave?”

“I can’t tell you.” Not without admitting to everything.

“Why did you nearly kiss me in the escape room?”

I stepped back at that. “I didn’t…”

He followed me like he was taunting me. “Oh yes, you did. Why’d you tell me not to come over this morning?”

“Because Tristan would be there.” That reminded me of my get-out-of-jail-free card. “I have a boyfriend, Si. I can’t be discussing these things with you.”

“Why not? What *things* aren’t we discussing?”

Silas was on one now, his eyes blazing as he moved closer. I’d seen this side of him unleashed on others before but never on me.

I didn’t know whether I was scared or aroused.

Then he whispered the one question I couldn’t ignore. “Why are you pushing me away?”

“Si...” My throat was so dry my voice cracked. “I’m not. I’m just...moving on.”

He stepped back, widening the space between us. “Moving on...without me.”

“We’re best friends,” I said desperately. “I don’t want to lose that. But we should start behaving like normal best friends do. You gotta admit, Si, no one else is as close as us.”

He turned his head to the side, but not before I caught a glimpse of a tear tracking down his cheek. “And that’s a bad thing? Being as *close* as we were?”

“Yes,” I whispered. I lifted my hand to wipe away his tear but stopped before touching him. “It is if we aren’t letting ourselves be happy with other people.”

Si looked at me, not hiding the tears now falling freely. “What if we can be happy together?”

I was sure my body kept moving. My heart must’ve been pumping blood around to my organs. Neurons were surely firing in my brain. My chest was rising and falling as my lungs expanded.

But for a split second, it was as though everything had frozen.

“Together?”

Silas took a shaky breath before straightening his spine. “Together. You and me. Like a couple.”

I was frozen.

“Tell me you don’t want me like that,” he said, his voice shaking. “Tell me you don’t have feelings for me. Tell me you only want me platonically. If you tell me that, I’ll back off. I’ll never say a word about it again.”

I couldn’t tell him that. I couldn’t. My vision blurred with tears. “What are you saying?”

He stepped closer, his hand landing on my hip. “I’m saying I have feelings for you, Kai. I know you’re with Tristan... Hell, I’m not even sure if you *do* see me that way. But I want to say you’ve got a chance with me. If you want it.”

It was like my greatest dream and worst nightmare coming true all at once. My words to Tristan just that morning echoed in my mind.

I think he’d believe he returned my feelings. That’s the kind of guy he is.

“I can’t do this,” I said shakily, stepping out of his grip. “You don’t mean that. You don’t have feelings for me.”

Silas’s eyes narrowed to slits. “You telling me how I feel right now?”

Tristan might’ve been right about the throat punching. But Silas didn’t understand. He was just afraid of being replaced.

“When did you start having these feelings? When I returned with Tristan?”

Silas’s forehead furrowed as he thought about it. I barrelled on, desperate for him to see things my way before the cage around my heart broke open because it had got the wrong idea.

“Think about it, Si. We’ve been close for *decades*, and you’re only just realising you have these feelings? When I finally have a serious boyfriend?”

A muscle jumped in his jaw as he stared at me.

“You’re afraid of being replaced,” I said softly, hating that I couldn’t take him at his word. “Tristan is in my life now, and our friendship is changing.”

“Our friendship is changing all right, but Tristan isn’t the one doing it,” Silas said bitterly. “That’s all on you.”

He was right. This was on me. “You don’t have feelings for me, Si. You’re just confused.”

“But you have feelings for me, right? Or am I *confused* about that too?”

I bowed my head, my lips firmly closed.

Silas gave a disbelieving laugh and poked his finger into my chest. “You know what? Fuck you, Kai.”

My head snapped up as I gaped at him.

“You don’t get to tell me how I feel.” He blazed on, spitting his words like bullets. “You don’t get to dismiss my valid feelings as *confusion*. If you don’t want to be with me, you just have to say it. Don’t hide behind excuses.”

Was that what I was doing? “I just...I don’t want to lose you as a friend, Si.”

His gaze shuttered as he took several steps back. “You’ve got a funny way of showing it.”

He turned, his whole body trembling as he stalked for the door. I made to follow him, but he held his hand up, stopping me in my tracks.

“No. Not right now. Go away and think about what I’ve said. Don’t call me until you’ve pulled your head out of your arse.”

I swallowed around the thick lump in my throat. “And if I can’t?”

He dropped his head so I couldn’t see his profile. “Then I guess we won’t be talking for a while.”

Chapter Seventeen

Silas

Kai had gone by the time I returned downstairs. Part of me had wondered if he'd wait. If he'd think about what I said and realise the truth.

That I wasn't lying. I wasn't confused.

I was just head over heels for him.

But no, the ground floor was silent, Kai long gone. I'd stood in the kitchen, staring at where I'd offered my heart to my best friend on a platter.

Never in a million years had I expected him to fling it back in my face.

I'd imagined maybe he'd let me down easy, explain he didn't feel the same. Or perhaps rebuke me, say that I had no place doing this when he had a boyfriend.

But the way he'd rejected me was so much worse. He hadn't *believed* me. That it was so inconceivable, so ridiculous, that I might want him in a way that was anything but platonic. Even

worse, he didn't deny that he had romantic feelings for me. That would've been easier...maybe.

I thought I knew Kai better than I knew myself.

Today proved how fucking wrong I was. Never would I have believed he could reduce my feelings to nothing. A mere inconvenience that I'd get over.

I'd meant it when I'd said not to call me until he'd pulled his head out of his arse. I wasn't expecting him to leave Tristan for me or anything like that. But until he could acknowledge my feelings rather than belittle them?

Yeah, I was happy to wait for that.

Well, happy was a stretch. But for the first time ever, I didn't want to be around Kai right now. I didn't want to be around anyone.

I spent the next three days closeted inside my house, catching up on all the episodes of *The Circle* I'd missed while on tour. Originally, I'd been waiting to watch them with Kai. Trashy reality TV was a guilty pleasure we indulged in together.

But since everything had gone up in smoke, I wasn't waiting any longer. It was a tiny, petty rebellion, but it felt satisfying nonetheless.

Maybe I'll text him who the winner is, I thought sourly as I shovelled more Pot Noodle into my mouth. It was curry-flavoured, something Kai couldn't stand. Just the scent of it made him gag.

I'd bought a whole tray of them out of spite. Turned out I didn't much like them either, but I'd be damned if I wasn't going to eat every single one.

My phone buzzed for the hundredth time. I glanced at the screen to check it wasn't Kai before ignoring it again.

Sooner or later, I would have to face the real world. We had studio time booked in for tomorrow, which meant I'd have to come out of hiding.

And I'd have to face Kai. Have to look him in the face, knowing he'd rejected me.

With how fun *that* was bound to be, I felt perfectly entitled to ignore everyone until then.

Unfortunately, the world had other ideas. I'd barely got through another half an episode before a beep alerted me to my front door opening.

I threw off my blanket in a rush and scrambled to my feet. Very few people had my key. Just Kai, Arlo, Luca, and...

"Jesus fucking Christ," Ruby proclaimed as she swept into the room. For some reason, she was more dolled up than usual. She wore a pretty black shift dress with red heels. Not only was she wearing makeup, but she'd arranged her curls in a fancy updo.

No amount of makeup could hide the disgust as she took in my living space. Her fingers pinched her nostrils shut as she spoke. "What is that smell?"

I dropped back onto the sofa and pulled the blanket back over me. “Dunno.”

Ruby tutted as she strode over to the windows and flung back the curtains. She didn’t stop there either, opening a few windows wide.

I winced at the sudden influx of sunlight. “Ow.”

“Stop moaning,” Ruby said in a firm voice that I imagined she usually reserved for troublesome patients. “This place is a pigsty, and you’re not much better.”

I picked up my Ben and Jerry’s from the table and saluted her with a spoon. “A pleasure as always, Rubes.”

She snatched it from my hand before I could take a mouthful. I whined in protest, only for her to knock me on the head with the spoon. “Is this what you’ve been living on? Pot Noodles and ice cream?”

“Maybe.” I glared up at her. “When did you get so bossy?”

She gave me a withering look. “When I got old enough to realise you and Kai are like most men. Piss-poor communicators who need to be kept in line.”

“Hey!” I protested. “I don’t need to be kept in line.”

She looked pointedly at the pile of detritus littering every surface in the room.

“What? It’s not like I was expecting company.”

“Men, honestly.” She started to gather the rubbish in her arms. I got up to help her, but she batted my arms away. “No.

There's no time. You need to go shower and get ready."

"Ready for what?"

She sighed. "Please don't tell me you've forgotten."

I searched my mind frantically, but nothing presented itself.

"Umm..."

She grabbed the spoon and whacked me on the head again. Even in heels, she still had to reach to do it, but by damn she did. "What's wrong with you? It's Dad's sixtieth—you helped organise it."

"Balls," I said, clapping my hands over my face. How could I have forgotten? "I'll go get ready."

I made it as far as the doorway before recent events hit me, freezing me in place.

How could I face Kai? Would he even want me there?

"Why are you standing in the door like a lemon?" Ruby demanded from behind me. "You're going to make us late."

"I can't go."

Ruby laughed, the sound fading when I still didn't move. "Wait, what?"

I turned numbly to face her. "I'm sorry, Rubes. I can't...Kai won't want me there."

"What are you on about? Of course he will."

I shook my head sadly, staring at the carpet. "No, he won't. We had a massive fight, Rubes. I can't go. I'm so sorry."

Ruby sighed, rubbing her fingers against her temple. “Okay, stuff is starting to fall into place now.”

“What stuff?”

“Well, first, we have the stellar condition of your living environment.” She gestured widely like a game show host. “Plus, there’s the fact both you and Kai have been ignoring your phones.”

“He’s probably busy with Tristan,” I scuffed my toe against the carpet. *Stupid, idiotic Tristan.*

That wasn’t fair. Tristan seemed perfectly nice. All he’d done was realise what a catch Kai was and snapped him up.

I was the idiot for not doing the same approximately eighteen years ago.

“Doubtful. From what Louis said earlier, he found him sulking at home. Like you, he had to be reminded of the day, dragged out of a disgusting pit, and shoved into the shower.” She gave a delicate sniff. “After finding him in that state and you not answering your phone, Louis nominated me to check in on you. Have to say, I wasn’t expecting things to be as bad as this.”

God, that was so unlike Kai. Had I hurt him by telling him my feelings? I slumped against the doorframe. “Shit, Ruby. I’ve made such a mess of things.”

Tears burned at the back of my eyes, but I bit my lip to hold them back. Ruby was already deep in nurse mode. If she knew

how broken I was, the fussing would accelerate to unprecedented levels.

There was no fooling Ruby. The next thing I knew, I was sat at my kitchen table, a steaming mug between my hands.

Ruby couldn't hide the worry in her eyes as she took the seat opposite me. Instead of tea, she held a fine-stemmed glass filled to the brim. "Pinot? It's barely four p.m."

Her withering look had me cowering. "I feel like I need it to get through this conversation. Besides, we're getting an Uber. And don't pretend you don't keep this here just for me. We both know you hate wine."

"It's—"

"Pretentious," Ruby chimed in with me. "So you've said. Repeatedly. Now, start talking and talk fast. We've got a party to get to."

It was on the tip of my tongue to remind her I wasn't going, but I chickened out under the glare she levelled me with.

"I...I told Kai I have feelings for him."

She choked on the sip of wine she'd just taken, hitting her chest to clear it. I shoved back my chair in alarm, but she waved me off. "I'm fine."

I hovered uncertainly until I was sure she was okay.

"Sorry, that wasn't what I was expecting you to say. Just to be clear, when you say feelings, you mean...?"

“I mean, I want to be with him. I want him to be my... boyfriend. Partner. Husband. Whatever the fuck you want to call it. Kai’s it for me.”

Ruby’s squeal was so loud that I worried for the glass she was holding. Before I could blink, she’d rounded the table and thrown her arms around my neck in a tight hug. “Oh, I’m so happy. This is the best news ever!”

“Rubes.” I gasped, pulling at her arms. “Can’t. Breathe.”

She dropped her arms hastily. “Oops, sorry. Got overexcited for a minute.”

She practically bounced back to her chair, her grin taking up her whole face. For a second, she looked so much like Kai that I couldn’t bear it. I let my gaze drop to the table, begging that numbness to take over again.

“Wait...” Ruby said slowly. “If you told Kai you have feelings for him, why did you argue? If anything, I should be here dragging you *both* out of your bedroom because you were too busy fucking to remember the party.”

“Jesus, Ruby.” I rubbed my forehead. “I don’t need to hear you talking about *sex*. You’re like twelve.”

“I’m twenty-three, and I’ve probably had more sex than both of you combined.”

I clapped my hands over my ears. “La, la, la. Not listening.”

She leaned over and flicked me on the elbow. “Don’t make me get the spoon.”

I lowered my hands. “Always straight to the violence with you.”

“Problem with being the youngest sibling, I’m afraid. Got to play to your strengths.”

“And violence is your strength?”

“I’ll give you a demonstration if you don’t quit trying to distract me. What happened with Kai? Why aren’t you fucking like a pair of Energizer Bunnies and staring lovingly into each others’ eyes?”

I sighed. Should I really be talking to Ruby about this? She was Kai’s sister, but she felt like mine too. I’d been in her life since she was a baby and regarded her as my sibling as much as Kai did.

“Two reasons. One, he has a boyfriend.”

Ruby waved her hand dismissively. “Tristan has been in his life for, like, five minutes. There’s no way Kai would let that stand in the way of the two of you.”

I snorted because that was exactly what was happening. “And two, he didn’t believe me. He thinks I’m jealous of Tristan taking over my role in his life.”

“Are you?”

“Of course I am. But that’s not why I feel like this. I think...I think I fell in love with Kai a very long time ago. Probably not long after we met. I was just...oblivious. Blind.”

“And it took seeing him with Tristan to realise that?” There was a note of suspicion in her voice like she could see where Kai was coming from.

“Nope.” I met her eyes, not hiding a thing. “I started to realise it when I kissed him. By the time he returned from filming, I was sure of it.”

Ruby regarded me silently for a beat. “You’re confident about this? About Kai? You’re not going to change your mind a few months down the line and realise you were better off as friends?”

“I’m sure. Kai is the one thing in my life I’ve always been sure about. I’m not going to change my mind.” I took in a shaky breath. “That’s what the fight was really about. Kai wasn’t willing to risk our friendship, but I’m not going to settle for that. I can’t. Not now that I know I want so much more.”

Ruby drained her glass in a few impressive gulps. “Okay. Then here’s what we’re going to do. You’re going to go upstairs and shower while I clean up down here. You’re going to put on your jeans—the black pair, not the torn ones you normally slouch around in—your soft blue button-down Kai got you for Christmas, and your brown brogues.”

Ruby’s bossiness almost had me smiling. “Then what?”

“Then we’re heading to Mum and Dad’s, and you’re going to show Kai what he’s missing.”

The pep talk Ruby gave me was completely undermined by the sight that greeted us when we arrived at her parents' house.

The table was full, every spot bar one occupied.

And in the seat at Kai's side, the one usually reserved for me, was Tristan. The only other person who wasn't a blood relative was Mia's husband, Duncan.

Kai was the only one who noticed our arrival, his lips parting in surprise. He snuck a quick glance at Tristan before returning his gaze to me.

Was that guilt? Shame? Or was he just pissed that I was encroaching on their time with his family? Meeting the parents was a monumental moment, after all.

Everyone was chatting animatedly, asking Tristan question after question. It struck me then that this was a first for Kai and me.

For him, it was the first time he'd brought someone home.

For me, it was the first time in decades that I felt like I wasn't part of the family.

I took a step back, preparing to flee. Kai's eyes widened in alarm as his chair scraped along the floor.

Everyone looked up at the noise, swivelling in their seats to see what had caught Kai's attention. I lifted my foot to step

back again, but Ruby, the traitor she was, gave me a hard shove in the small of my back.

“Silas,” Mike cried, getting to his feet. “You’re here! I was starting to worry you weren’t coming.”

I ignored the burning stare from Kai, focusing instead on the larger-than-life man before me. “Wouldn’t have missed it for the world. Can’t let you make your diabetes worse by eating the cake all on your own.”

Mike’s laugh was booming as he wrapped me in a bear hug. “Give it a few more years and the doctors will be on you too. I’m telling you, it’s no fun getting older.”

I pulled back to study him. “But you’re doing okay though, yeah? No new concerns?”

He chucked me under the chin with his knuckles like I was still a scrappy fifteen-year-old kid. “You worry about yourself. Besides, it’s my birthday. I’ll eat all the damn cake if I want to.”

“That’s why I got you your favourite.”

“Red velvet cake?”

“You know it.”

He gave me another hug. The first one he’d ever given me had taken me off guard. I remembered how stiff I’d been, completely unfamiliar with an older male giving such easy affection. Mike hadn’t minded though. I didn’t know if Kai had told him about my home life or if he’d been able to read it

on me somehow. But he didn't let go. Just held me until I'd relaxed.

I'd ended up sobbing against his chest, unleashing a whole childhood worth of trauma on a man who was practically a stranger.

From that day on, he'd been so much more.

The other solid presence in my life tutted and pulled me from her husband's arms and into her own. "Give me my boy. I need to squeeze him."

My boy. Two words. Five letters. Such a minute expression, but it never failed to warm my heart.

"Hey, Di." I tucked my chin on her head, breathing in her grounding scent. It might've been decades since I'd seen my birth mum, but with Di in my life, it'd been a long time since I'd felt like I was missing out. "Missed you."

She pulled back to swat at my arm, demonstrating where Ruby got her violent streak from. Thank god she didn't have a spoon. "Where have you been? Why haven't you come to see me?"

I couldn't help it. I looked at Kai. For once, he was totally unguarded. He was biting his lip, his eyes swimming with emotion. Hope? Bitterness?

Or love?

I smiled at Di, dropping a kiss on her forehead. "Sorry, Di. Been busy. Tell you what, I'll come over this weekend, and you can put me to work."

She narrowed her eyes at me. “Don’t think I won’t, Silas. My poor garden has never been without you for so long. I’ve got gutters that need clearing and a veg patch full of weeds. And don’t even get me started on the patio. Another week, and I’d be getting the jet wash out myself.”

“Oh, don’t do that. I’ll get it all sorted for you,” I promised, giving her another squeeze.

“I can help,” Kai cut in gruffly. I jerked my head around to see him watching me closely. “We can both get it sorted.”

It felt like someone had uncorked a bottle of champagne in my stomach. Was Kai saying that because he was hoping we’d be returning to our friendship? Or because he was ready to take me seriously?

Unable to analyse it with his family watching, I gave him a curt nod before greeting his siblings. Louis got a half-hug, half-back clap, but Mia was fully lifted off her feet and twirled in a circle.

Then Kai was there. I didn’t know when he’d got up, but he was moving towards me, his face determined.

I had just enough time to lift my arms before he crashed into me. I rocked back a step at the force, but his arms wrapped around my back. Keeping me safe.

He pulled me close, his face buried against my neck. I could feel his heart pounding against my chest, his breath raspy against my skin.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. He was practically crushing me to him, his fingers clinging to my back to the point of pain. “I’m so fucking sorry, Si.”

The champagne feeling was back again as hope rushed through me. It felt like the most natural thing in the world to reach up and embrace him back. I breathed him in, feeling like I was drawing my first full lungful of oxygen in several days. I kept doing that until I felt dizzy. Drunk on Kai.

“Can we talk?” he whispered against my neck.

I started to nod, but my eye caught on someone at the table. Tristan was watching us closely, something like realisation on his face.

I pulled back quickly. Everyone was watching us. Di and Mike looked bemused, used to us being affectionate with each other.

Kai’s siblings looked...worried. Louis was rubbing his chin while Ruby shrewdly studied us.

It was a reminder that this wasn’t the time or place for any discussions. As much as I wanted to drag Kai somewhere private, I couldn’t do that with his family waiting.

Or his *boyfriend*.

I painted a casual grin on my face before punching Kai on the shoulder. “Let’s go. We’re late for our table booking. Can’t have your dad missing out on his cake. His diabetic nurse needs a reason to yell at him again.”

Kai stepped back, eyes wide, his hand going to the spot I'd punched. My stomach lurched at his confusion.

Before I could do anything, Ruby stepped in, looping her arm through mine. "Come on, you're with me. I need all the gossip about Luca and his journalist. Kai *never* tells me the good stuff."

I let her lead me out, my mind racing over what Kai wanted to talk about.

Did he want something more with me? Or would he beg for us to return to how we once were?

The feeling of his eyes burning into my back suggested I was right to be hopeful.

But Kai had brought Tristan home to meet his parents. That was a huge step that Kai had never taken before.

Maybe there was no hope for Kai and me after all.

I stepped out into the cool night air. I tried not to breathe it in too deeply, not wanting to erase Kai's lingering scent. It was stupid, but I would've done anything to hold on to him for just a bit longer.

If he was going to break my heart, I needed to make the most of every second of tonight. Not just with Kai but with his family.

Because not being in Kai's life meant not being in theirs either.

Losing his family would hurt me.

But losing Kai would break me.

I wasn't sure I could survive it.

Chapter Eighteen

Kai

Never before had an evening with my family dragged on as long as this one.

It wasn't like I'd planned on missing tonight. It was Dad's sixtieth, after all. But ever since I'd left Silas's house, I'd been like a ghost. I'd barely eaten, slept, or showered. Time had ceased to exist, the memory of Silas's face as he'd told me to stay away haunting me.

I couldn't function. All I could do was write.

I'd filled two whole notebooks with new lyrics. Full of anguish, pain, longing, and regret. Waste of time as they'd never see the light of day. I could safely say that "Night's Darkest Secret" was no longer my most angsty song. I wasn't sure it would even register on the scale compared to what had poured out of me over the last few days.

I'd turned my phone off completely, knowing I'd break and phone Silas. Beg him to just put this behind us and move on as friends.

But he didn't want to hear from me. That much he'd made clear.

Which led to the question...did Silas *really* have feelings for me? It seemed inconceivable, like I'd somehow manifested it through decades of pining, almost beyond hope.

As the days dragged on, a horrifying realisation settled in my gut. If Silas truly did want to be with me...I might've made a terrible mistake.

I'd rejected him. Pure and simple. Every choice I'd ever made had been with the goal of making Silas happy.

Except for the ones over the past few months. Amazing how fast I'd been able to destroy the foundation we'd built.

Slowly, I'd realised that it didn't *matter* what I thought. If Silas wanted to give us a shot, if he wanted me...what the fuck was I doing? Was I really stupid enough to push him away?

Fine, I might end up brokenhearted at the end...but really, could it be worse than how I currently felt?

So, all in all, it wasn't surprising that I'd forgotten Dad's birthday bash. Ruby and Silas had organised it months ago, just another reminder of how deeply our roots were entrenched. Louis had been tasked with pulling me out of my hole. He hadn't said much as he shoved me into the bathroom with a change of clothes, but his eyes had been worried.

We'd been halfway to my parents' house before Louis asked the question I'd been dreading. "Where's Silas?"

I'd tapped my fingers on the door of the car. "Don't know. We...we had an argument."

Louis's expression had been comical. "What? You guys don't fight. What happened?"

I'd shrugged, not wanting to get into it. Louis would've probably hauled me over the coals if he heard how I'd flung Si's confession back in his face. Rightly so, but I'd done enough self-flagellating to want any from him.

"Will he be there tonight?"

Hope had bubbled through my veins. "I...I don't know. I'm not sure."

Louis had stared out the windscreen, his lips pursed. "He won't miss it. It's Dad."

Fuck, I'd prayed he was right. Having to explain to my parents why Silas wasn't there was a conversation I'd rather avoid.

Hey, Silas finally made all my dreams come true. Instead of kissing him, I threw it back in his face. If I can't fix this, we might not see him for a while.

Giving Dad a heart attack was not what I had in mind for his birthday.

We'd pulled up to the house, and what I saw there had me suddenly praying Silas didn't put in an appearance.

"You invited your boyfriend?" Louis had scowled through the windshield at Tristan leaning against the wall.

“It’s complicated,” I’d muttered, getting out of the car and heading over to greet him. I’d forgotten I’d invited him. It’d been before that fateful night in the club, when I’d still wanted him as a barrier between Si and me.

But now the cage around my heart had been unlocked, and Tristan being here was no longer what I needed.

I could hardly tell him to go, not without explaining everything that had happened. But before I could do that, the front door had opened, my family spilling out to greet my supposed boyfriend.

That was how I’d found myself sat at the same kitchen table from my youth, my fake boyfriend beside me. The house might’ve changed, but this piece of furniture had followed them.

My parents’ home was my first big purchase when the money began pouring in. But I hadn’t bought it alone.

No, Silas had insisted on contributing half. Whether that was because he wanted to repay them for all their kindness over the years or because he saw them as his own parents...I wasn’t sure. But he’d wanted to do it. Said it would make him happy.

Of course I’d let him.

This seven-bedroom detached house was a long way from the one we’d grown up in on the estate. With all my siblings moved out, my parents didn’t *need* this much space. But Si and I wanted them to have it. One of the most important things

to all of us was family. We wanted them to have somewhere we could all stay whenever they wanted us to.

But now, I was sat here with someone else. Every time I glimpsed Tristan from the corner of my eye, I flinched in surprise.

I was so used to Si being there. Si being the one at my side.

What if he never was again?

The second Silas walked in on Ruby's arm, I'd felt complete. The raging ocean of uncertainty and despair roaring through me had calmed at the sight of him.

And fuck, had he looked good. He'd worn that shirt again, the one I'd bought him for Christmas. The jeans he'd paired with them had me shifting under the table, trying desperately to control myself.

I'd been about to go up to him. To pull him into my grip and hold him until he understood I never wanted to let him go.

But then his eyes had slid to Tristan. I had watched as they widened in shock. As his lips thinned.

As his heart cracked.

And I'd hated myself all over again.

Any doubt I'd been harbouring over whether Silas truly had feelings for me evaporated. I'd never seen that look on his face. Like I'd cut open his chest and revealed his bleeding heart to everyone.

I was such a dick.

The rest of the night had been a slow torture. Silas had sat between Ruby and my mum, keeping both entertained with stories from our last tour. I noticed he didn't mention our onstage kiss, and neither did they.

Dad, Louis, Mia, and Duncan had gone out of their way to make Tristan feel welcome, asking him questions about films he'd been in and actors he'd met.

Me? I'd spent the entire meal watching Silas interact with Mum and Ruby. A bittersweet reminder of how much I loved him being here. Where he should be.

I was what was wrong with this picture. I never should've thrown his words back in his face. I should've sent Tristan away tonight.

Fuck. My mistakes started decades ago, right around the time I decided not to be honest with Silas about how I felt.

Who knew how much time we'd lost?

Silas had tried to dip out after the restaurant, citing an early morning as an excuse. Ruby and Mum had had none of it, though, practically frog-marching him back to one of the cars.

As was our birthday tradition, the meal was followed by several rounds of Monopoly at my parents' kitchen table. I watched Silas like a hawk, waiting for him to go to the toilet or stretch his legs...anything where I could catch him alone.

But he never moved from his spot between Ruby and Mia, directly opposite me. He focused on the game in front of him,

laughing in all the right places, teasing my family as he usually would.

Did they see how he was only going through the motions? Did they recognise that Silas wasn't himself? That he couldn't bring himself to look at or talk to me?

"You okay?" Tristan whispered, nudging me with an elbow.

My head swivelled to look at him, another whack of guilt hitting me as I realised how much I'd ignored him all night. "Yeah...I'm sorry. I'm terrible."

"You're not," he said softly, keeping his voice low so no one else could hear. He rested his hand on my arm and squeezed. "It's complicated. I can see that now."

I gave him a grateful smile for his understanding. But when I returned to the game, I saw Silas had finally looked up at me.

Just in time to see me smiling at Tristan.

"Right, I think I'm off to bed," he announced, getting to his feet and brushing down his jeans. "Sorry guys, touring takes it out of me."

"You've been back for four months," Mia protested, missing the obvious tension in the room.

He ruffled her hair, giving her a small smile. "I'm old now. Gotta get that beauty sleep in."

I scrambled to my feet. "Si, wait."

He didn't stop, marching for the door and heading towards the stairs. "Too tired, let's talk tomorrow."

I flinched, hating that he was walking away from me. But could I really blame him, given how often I'd done the same to him recently?

I walked to the bottom of the stairs, hovering there for a moment. Should I go after him when he'd made it clear he didn't want to talk right now?

Before I could decide, a hand landed on my shoulder, making me jump. "Help me with something in the garage, Kai?"

I nodded numbly at my dad's request, following him silently through the door that led into the garage. It wasn't used to hold cars. Instead, it was an overspill space for my parents' hobbies. Now they were both retired, they had taken up various projects. On one side was my dad's Warhammer collection while on the other was a variety of storage bins filled with Mum's yarn.

"What did you need help with?"

"Well, you can start with what's going on with you and Silas."

I leaned against the worktop and sighed. "I didn't realise you'd noticed."

He grunted, mirroring my pose against the opposite counter. "You can't pull the wool over my eyes. Tell me what you've done wrong."

"Why do you assume it's me that's the problem?"

He fixed me with a look so knowing I felt my cheeks heat. “Because Silas barely *looked* at you all night. He might’ve put on a good show for everyone else, but you and I know he wasn’t himself tonight.”

It was my turn to grunt.

“You’ve been gone for Silas ever since that summer you both turned fifteen. Why haven’t you sorted stuff out yet?”

I sucked in a breath. “You knew? All this time?”

“Of course we did.” His gaze softened. “We might’ve had a lot going on back then, son. But your mother and I would’ve had to have been blind to have missed how you felt about him.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

He shrugged. “Figured you’d work it out between you. Especially once you started all those big displays on stage.”

I groaned. “Please, let’s pretend you never saw any of those.”

“Trust me, I wish I hadn’t. To be honest...we thought the two of you were together and just waiting to tell us. But...you never did.”

I shook my head. “No. It wasn’t like that. Well, it wasn’t like that for Si.”

“But it is now?”

“What makes you say that?”

“I saw the kiss,” he rumbled. “Think the whole world did. There’s no way that was platonic on either side.”

“Well, I thought it was.”

“Then you’re a fool.” That was Dad, always cutting to the heart of the matter. “Is that why you’ve got that actor with you?”

“It’s a long story.” And one I was not sharing with Dad. If he thought I was a fool for not realising how Si felt months ago, he’d tear a strip off me if he knew how I’d reacted. “I’m going to fix it.”

“You will,” he said confidently, striding to the door. “Because you’re *both* part of this family. So, one way or another, you need to get it sorted.”

I lingered in the garage for a little while longer, trying to process everything. It was like a clock had been counting down all my life, and now we were approaching zero hour. Suddenly, I was running out of time.

It might’ve taken us forever to get here, but I’d be damned if I was the one who’d fuck us up again.

Determined, I stalked to Silas’s bedroom and knocked on the door. Usually, I’d just barge in, but as much as *I* was ready to have this conversation, I couldn’t expect Silas to be. Not with my family on the floor below.

Along with Tristan. God, I wished I’d sent him home earlier.

Silas’s expression was wary as he opened the door. My heart sank at the way he pulled it tight to his body, leaning against

the jamb.

His message was clear. I wasn't welcome in his room.

“What are you doing here?”

I swallowed hard, hating the way he was looking at me. The way I'd *made* him look at me. “Can we talk?”

He wavered, biting his lip as his hand twitched on the door.

Then footsteps echoed along the hall. “Kai? Which room should I...?”

Silas's face hardened in an instant. “Wait, I can explain...”

It was no use. I stared at the door he'd slammed in my face and inhaled deeply.

“Fuck. I'm sorry, Kai. I didn't realise you were talking to him.”

I forced myself to step away from Silas's door. “Not your fault. This is all on me.”

Gesturing for Tristan to follow me, I led him into the next bedroom.

“I'm sorry,” Tristan whispered when I shut us in the room.

My head snapped to him as he sank down on the end of the bed. “Sorry? What on earth have you got to be sorry for? If anything, I should apologise for dragging you here tonight and then barely saying a word.”

He shook his head sadly. “No. I'm sorry for suggesting this whole plan in the first place. I was wrong, Kai. I think we both were.”

I lowered myself onto the bed next to him. “What are you saying?”

Tristan’s mouth twisted as he thought hard. “When I first met Silas, I figured he was just jealous of me replacing him as the most important man in your life. But I’ve been watching you both all night. I think he’s jealous, but not because of that. He has feelings for you, Kai. Anyone with eyes could see that. Even if he hasn’t said it out loud—”

“He has,” I mumbled.

Tristan’s breath caught. “Wait—what? Silas told you he has feelings for you? When?”

“A few days ago.” I dropped my face into my hands, muffling my speech. “That’s what we argued about.”

“I’m so confused. If he told you he had feelings for you, why aren’t you together?”

I didn’t lift my head, waiting for the penny to drop.

Tristan didn’t make me wait long before he groaned. “Oh fuck, Kai. Please don’t tell me you didn’t take it seriously. What did I tell you about that?”

“That you’d throat-punch me if it was you.”

“And did he?”

“No. He did tell me to go fuck myself and not speak to him until I pulled my head out of my arse.”

Tristan lay a comforting hand on the back of my neck. “Does that sound like a man who doesn’t know what he wants?”

“No,” I answered him honestly. “I’m an idiot. He gave me everything I ever wanted, and I threw it back in his face.”

Tristan was quiet for a long time before he spoke again. “It’s going to be okay. Once you’ve explained to Silas, he’ll give you a chance.”

I gave him a wan smile, my heart aching. “Fuck, I hope so.”

I’d lose everything if he didn’t.

I didn’t sleep. I just lay there, revisiting every time I’d fucked up with Silas. From not telling him how I felt years ago to pushing him away over the past few months.

If he agreed to give us a go, I would spend the rest of my life trying to make it up to him.

I had insisted on Tristan taking the bed. I’d taken the sofa opposite. It was pushed up against the wall. On the other side was Silas. We were separated by just a few inches of plasterboard, but with what I’d done, it might as well have been an entire fucking ocean.

How could I have been so stupid?

A low cry from the other side of the wall had me bolting upright.

I grabbed my phone on reflex, expecting to see Silas calling me.

But there was nothing.

I pressed my ear to the wall, holding my breath so I could hear.

“No, no, no. Please don’t. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to.”

I was on my feet and running.

It didn’t matter that he hadn’t called me. If Silas needed me, I was going to be there.

His room was dark as I burst in. A sliver of moonlight crept in from the window, illuminating Silas. He was sat up, his knees drawn to his chest as he rocked slowly.

“Si.” I rushed to him, sliding onto the bed and pulling him into my arms. “It’s okay, baby. I’ve got you.”

He tried to speak, but nothing came out but a sob.

“It’s okay,” I reassured him again, pulling him so he was lying down. I arranged the quilt over us before tucking him in against my chest. Just like I’d done since that very first nightmare. “I’m here. You’re not alone.”

Gradually, his shaking subsided and his breathing returned to normal. My chest was wet from his tears, but I didn’t let him go to mop it up. No, I’d hold him for as long as he needed.

I could tell the moment he was fully awake and aware of what was happening. He stiffened in my arms, pulling back so abruptly that he nearly rolled off the edge of the bed. He ended up on his back, staring at the ceiling. Even with the minimal

light, I could see a muscle jumping in his jaw. “What are you doing here?”

It was like a knife in my gut. I studied him. My best friend. My confidant. The only man I’d ever love.

Refusing to look at me. Like doing so might break off another part of his heart.

“Why didn’t you call me?”

Silas kept his gaze steady. “Didn’t think you’d come.”

I flinched, my hand going to my chest. “I’ll always answer your calls, Si.”

That had him twisting his head to the side and, fuck, his eyes. I’d never seen them look so empty. “I’d believe that if you hadn’t ghosted me while filming.”

“But you never called at night...I would’ve answered then.” A horrifying realisation washed over me. “Are you saying you’ve been having nightmares and just...going through them alone?”

His expression turned hopeless. “What else was I supposed to do, Kai? You made it abundantly clear you needed space from me.”

“Not at the expense of your own happiness.”

He made a choked noise. “Can’t believe you thought you could ignore me for four months and I’d be *happy* about it. Anyway, you shouldn’t even be in here. You should be with Tristan.”

“No, I should be with *you*. Forget about Tristan. We aren’t together.” I couldn’t stand the distance between us, but I didn’t want to force Silas into doing anything he wasn’t comfortable with. I wriggled closer, my hand stroking up his neck and cupping his cheek. “I’m so sorry, Si. There’s a lot I need to tell you, that we need to talk about, but I want to start with that. I’m sorry I hurt you. It was never my intention. Fuck, Si, the one and only truth I’ve lived by is that I want you to be happy.”

Silas blinked rapidly. “You’re ready to talk?”

I nodded. “I’ll answer whatever questions you have. I just...I can’t have this distance between us, Si. I can’t cope. I know it’s not healthy, but you’re the air I need to breathe. These past few months without you felt like I was slowly suffocating, able to draw enough breath to keep me alive but not enough to *live*.”

Silas bit his lip. “You know what? I don’t want to talk.”

“You don’t?”

He sat up abruptly, and my mouth went dry in fear. He was leaving. Walking away.

Then Silas kicked off the duvet and shoved me onto my back. Before I could say anything, he straddled my waist. Fuck, I was wrong. He wasn’t leaving.

He was getting closer. His arse landed squarely on my groin, and my hands flew up to grab his hips in surprise. We were both in underwear. Two thin pieces of cotton separated us.

Silas's chest heaved as he put his forearms on either side of my head to brace himself. The move left his mouth hovering only inches from my own. I could feel his breath on my lips. Fuck, how I wanted to close the distance between us.

But I'd read the situation wrong with Silas way too many times before for me to take that risk. He needed to take that step.

"No more talking," Silas whispered, his eyes flicking between mine. "Things get messy when we talk. Let's leave that until tomorrow."

Part of me yearned to spill it all now. Tell him the truth about my feelings. Tristan. My fears.

But we had time. We didn't need to rush.

"Okay," I croaked. "We don't have to talk. We can just sleep."

Please let me sleep in here. Don't make me leave.

A slow grin worked its way across Silas's face. He ground his pelvis against me. I nearly wept at the feel of his hard cock through his boxers. "Who said anything about sleep?"

That was all the warning he gave me before his mouth descended on mine.

Kissing Silas was everything I remembered it to be and so much more. He tasted like mint mixed with the liquorice scent I always associated with him. His lips were firm against mine, with no hesitancy in his movements.

My lips opened for him the instant his tongue swept across them, demanding entrance. I whimpered as his tongue ran over mine.

It was everything. *Everything.*

Silas sank his teeth into my lip before pulling away. His pupils were blown with lust, his eyes hooded. “This okay?”

I didn’t answer him with words. He wanted no talking, so I’d show him with my body.

I rolled him effortlessly so he was the one trapped beneath me. We’d both foregone pyjama tops, so there was no barrier between our chests. I lined us up carefully, my pelvis slotting against Silas’s.

Tiny pinpricks scattered over my skin at the feel of him against me. I knew he’d initiated it, but I had to check. As far as I knew, this was his first time with a man. The last thing I wanted to do was cross any boundaries or make him uncomfortable. “Tell me to stop, and I will.”

His response was to grab my rear with both hands. He lifted his hips at the same time, rocking against me forcefully. “No stopping.”

I growled before taking his mouth. Decades of pent-up pining poured out of me as I devoured him. I’d pictured this moment more times than I cared to admit. Imagined a million different ways it might go down. In all of them, I’d had a degree of control. Finesse. I was able to use everything I’d

learned through my past sexual experiences to drive Silas crazy.

How wrong I was. There was no thought. No planning. Just a need to rut against Silas. To swallow his moans with my mouth. To touch every inch of his body that I could. To memorise every inch I'd seen but never been allowed to explore.

“Kai.” Silas's head arched back, giving me access to his neck. I nipped along the skin, leaving little memories of myself behind. If he woke tomorrow and realised he didn't want this, at least I'd be able to see my marks on him for a bit longer.

Silas's nails dug into my back as his hips bucked upwards. His lips were swollen from my kisses, the cherry-red matching the flush on his cheeks.

He was close. I was too. I undulated my body against him faster, ignoring the friction from my boxers as I sank down to kiss him again.

Fuck, I couldn't get enough of his taste. I didn't think I ever would.

Silas's whole body tensed, his fingers digging into my back to the point of pain. He made a choked noise into my mouth as warmth flooded the space between us.

My orgasm hit out of nowhere. It unleashed a torrent of pleasure that had all my muscles quaking. I didn't know what

sound I made, but it was loud enough to have Silas clapping his hand over my mouth.

When the final wave rushed over me, I realised what he'd done and my eyes shot to his in alarm. Oh god, was he freaking out about being with a man? Had the noise I'd made at the end been too much?

But Silas wasn't freaking out. No, he was grinning at me softly, an eyebrow raised. "Hot as that was, I didn't think you'd want your parents hearing us."

I kissed his palm before pulling it away. "Jesus, I didn't even think about that."

"It's okay. I don't think anyone would've heard."

That was true. Tristan was the only one close to us, and he slept with military-grade earplugs.

I stared at Silas, unable to believe what had just happened. His hair was stuck to his head with sweat, his cheeks glowing. His swollen lips were curved in a satisfied smile, his eyes gleaming.

He looked like a man come undone. I'd seen every side of Silas except this one.

Fuck he was so beautiful like this. Sated and content.

Because of me.

He lifted his thumb to my mouth and pulled my lower lip. "Still think I'm making up my feelings?"

“No.” Silas wasn’t that good of an actor. It was difficult to speak with his thumb toying over my lip. And very distracting.

I smirked before sucking his thumb into my mouth. Hollowing out my cheeks, I revelled in the way Silas’s gaze darkened, his hips unconsciously moving under mine again.

Oh, Silas. The things I was going to do to him.

Chapter Nineteen

Silas

This probably wasn't the best idea I'd ever had.

Tristan was on the other side of this wall, but I believed Kai when he said they weren't together. I was confused about why he was here... Had they broken up? Or had they never been a thing?

These were questions that could wait until the morning, along with the thousand or so more I had for Kai. I'd meant it when I said I didn't want to talk. If all I got with him was this night, I didn't want to waste a second of it on words.

Especially not with the way he'd just sucked on my thumb. Despite my recent orgasm, my cock was taking an interest in the situation again.

Reluctantly, I pulled my thumb from between his lips, not wanting him to think I was a needy mess for him.

Which, to be fair, I was.

He watched me from above, his body still pinning me to the bed, a slightly awestruck look in his eyes. "You're so

beautiful.”

My breath caught. I’d never been called beautiful before... but coming from Kai?

It felt like the most perfect compliment I’d ever received.

I didn’t know what to do with the emotions bubbling inside me. I was feeling too much all at once.

I needed to get control of this situation before I broke down and started demanding answers from Kai. I didn’t want that. Not if he was going to break my heart all over again.

I put my finger on his lips. “No talking.”

His tongue darted out to lap at the pad of my finger, making me shiver. Jesus, what was with Kai and his mouth?

If it felt this good on my finger...how would it feel on my cock?

On my hole?

I blushed furiously, grateful for the darkness. I’d stumbled on rimming during one of the many nights I’d spent getting off to gay porn.

He licked my finger once more before kissing it softly. “Okay, no talking. Can we shower though? I haven’t come in my underwear in years, and it’s...uncomfortable.”

Now that he’d mentioned it, I could feel the material of my boxers clinging to me. “Yeah. Shower.”

He jumped up before freezing beside the bed. “Umm...you can go first. If you like.”

No. That wasn't happening. I was keeping Kai glued to my side for as long as possible.

Forever if I got my way.

I didn't say a word, just grabbed Kai by the hand and towed him towards the ensuite.

The light seemed obnoxiously bright after the darkness of my bedroom. Suddenly, I was very aware that Kai was only a few feet away from me.

Barely clothed.

It wasn't like I hadn't seen him in the nude before...but back then, I hadn't wanted him the way I did now.

Back then, I was a moron.

I tried not to stare at him as he shucked off his boxers, instead focusing on turning on the shower and getting the temperature right.

His breath hitting my neck was the only warning I had that he'd joined me. "May I?"

I realised he was toying with the waistband of my underwear. I swallowed before nodding, not trusting myself to speak.

With the speed we'd gone at earlier, I thought Kai might've been quick about it. I could not have been more wrong. His fingers skated around the entire waistband, flirting with the skin beneath. His lips pressed hot kisses along the back of my neck and shoulders.

I shivered as goosebumps erupted all over my body. The spray from the water was making my boxers wet and even more uncomfortable, given they were covered in cum, but I didn't care. I wasn't rushing Kai. Not when he was *finally* touching me. My eyes closed, my head falling back as I basked in Kai's attention.

He peeled my underwear down an inch, his thumbs smoothing over the top of my arse. I bit the inside of my cheek to hold back a groan.

Kai huffed a laugh against my neck like he knew exactly what I was doing. He pushed my underwear down until they hit the floor. I stepped out of them hurriedly, kicking them to the side and stepping under the spray. Kai closed in behind me as soon as I was done, cupping my arse cheeks with his hands.

This time, I didn't stop the sound that came out of me. It reverberated off the tiles, the shower doing little to muffle the noise.

Kai growled in response, his hands squeezing gently. He massaged and rubbed his hands all over my arse like he was memorising how it felt.

Suddenly, his mouth was at my ear. "You've got no idea how many times I've wondered how it'd feel to touch you like this. Especially when you're on stage. Bouncing around in those tight fucking trousers. Do you have any idea what you've done to me, Si?"

I groaned, far too gone in lust to answer him. My hips pushed back, and I gasped when his erection brushed against

the top of my crease. “Fuck.”

Kai gave a deep chuckle, his hand coming up around my throat as he held me tighter against him. His other snaked in front to wrap around my shaft. “Oh, we’ll get there, baby. Not now though.”

I whimpered as his cock brushed against me again. Jesus, how big was he? Would that even *fit*?

Like he could tell what I was thinking, he stroked his hand over my throat soothingly. He matched his movements with his other hand, driving me crazy with the gentle motions. “Everything moves at your pace, Si. We don’t ever have to do that if you don’t want to.”

“I want to.” I ground my hips against his, a more satisfying version of what I did when we danced on stage. Except now there was nothing between us.

It was glorious.

Kai’s hands froze on me before he resumed his movements. When he spoke, his voice was shaking slightly. “Fuck, Si. Is this really happening?”

I pushed his hands away and twisted so I was facing him. Grabbing his face with both hands, I forced him to look at me as I spoke. “It’s real. It’s happening.”

His warm brown eyes still looked uncertain. Words weren’t working. This is why I didn’t want us to talk.

Instead, I lifted my mouth to his, pouring out my reassurance with my kiss. I felt him relax under me, one of his hands

gripping my hair as the other returned to my arse.

This position had his cock against my stomach. I pulled back and risked a glance down.

Yep. I was right. It was a fucking monster. Like me, he was uncut. His foreskin was pulled back, revealing a bead of precum at the tip. What would that taste like?

With a shaking hand, I feathered my fingers along his shaft. His skin was tight and smooth, his cock throbbing under my touch. Given I had my own dick, I hadn't expected to feel such shock at touching him. But this was a big moment for me. How many times had I laid awake at night, imagining how he might feel?

I didn't get to do more than a singular stroke before Kai wrestled me back against the wall, his mouth devouring mine again.

"Can't have you touching me yet," he whispered into my mouth. "Not before I've tasted you."

Oh my god...did he mean he was going to—

Apparently, he was.

I couldn't tear my gaze away as my best friend sank to his knees before me. He eyed me hungrily, the water falling around him like rain.

He blinked the water from his eyes as he looked up at me. "This okay?"

I nodded so rapidly that I knocked my head back against the wall. “Ouch.”

“Muppet,” Kai said affectionately, his long fingers going around my shaft. He pulled back my foreskin, that small movement making me throb. “Try not to injure yourself when I do this.”

That was all the warning he gave before he ran his tongue around the head of my cock, lapping my precum with a small hum.

My head fell against the wall again, but this time I didn’t feel the pain. I couldn’t feel anything other than Kai’s mouth as he sucked my cock.

“*Oh-my-fucking-god,*” I babbled, my hands finding their way to Kai’s head. My knees buckled underneath me as a wave of new sensations rolled through me. “Kai, oh fuck. Don’t stop.”

He didn’t. If anything, he went harder. Hollowing his cheeks like he had on my thumb, he sucked me deep into his throat. The heat that was enveloping my cock was unreal. I’d had blowjobs before, of course, I had. But none had ever felt like this.

I thrust my hips forward without thinking, my body seeking more of what Kai was offering. The head of my cock hit the back of Kai’s throat, making him gag.

I backed off hurriedly. “Shit, sorry. Got carried away.”

Kai's response was to loop his biceps under my thighs. With an impressive show of strength, he lifted my weight off the floor, his hands cupping my arse. "Get carried away. Make me choke on your cock. I need it."

Then he dove forwards, taking me right to the back of his throat. With him holding me like this, I was helpless. Not only was he working me over with his mouth, but his hands were making my hips thrust forwards. All I could do was grip his hair and hold on for dear life.

Every time he gagged on my cock, it seemed to spur him to take me deeper. I wanted to check on him, going so far as to ask a couple of times.

But Kai would just glare hotly up at me, something that was both intimidating and arousing, given his mouth was wrapped around my cock. Then his hands would make me move again until I was happily fucking his throat.

Never before had I been in this position. Never before had I been dominated like this.

Never before had I been so turned on.

My orgasm built at the base of my spine. I fought valiantly to keep it down, not wanting this moment to end.

Then Kai did something unexpected. One of his fingers danced along the crease of my arse before slipping inside. He brushed it lightly over my hole and all my synapses began firing.

There was no hope. The orgasm I'd held back broke free. I didn't even have a chance to warn Kai. All my limbs tensed as I shot my load into his throat, dots filling my vision as I rode out the waves.

Kai hungrily swallowed every drop. He held me in place until my body went limp. He licked my softening cock, nuzzling it until I became too sensitive and tried to wriggle away.

Fuck, was this what sex was like with all men? Or was it because it was Kai?

I didn't honestly care. Nor did I plan on finding out.

Kai was it for me. And if this was an indication of how our sex life would be, I was kicking myself for not making this discovery years earlier.

We had a *lot* of time to make up for.

My limbs were still shaking. I had no idea how Kai had managed to hold me up during that. I mean, I knew he always liked to push himself on the bench press, but I'd had no idea that would translate into him holding me against the wall while swallowing my cock.

He lowered me gently to the floor. It was only when he stood up, his erection heavy between his legs, that I realised he hadn't come.

I was about to offer to help him with it, but I didn't get a chance.

Kai loomed over me, his mouth sinfully swollen. His hand shuttled twice over his cock before his orgasm hit him.

I think he meant for his cum to hit the floor, but as soon as I realised what was happening, I instinctively leaned forward. Hot white liquid covered my cheeks for a second before the water washed it away.

“Shit,” Kai gasped, bracing himself against the wall with his hand. “I didn’t mean for it to hit you in the face.”

A single drop was on his finger. I pulled it towards me, catching it on my tongue. It was bitter but not unpleasant. “I did. It was hot.”

Kai sank to his knees again and rested his forehead against mine. “Baby, you have no idea.”

Chapter Twenty

Kai

I woke up the next morning the same way I had hundreds of times before.

With Silas in my arms.

The positioning might be the same. The way his leg had found its way between mine. How his face was pressed against my chest. Even the small snores huffing from his mouth were the same.

But everything was different.

I was different.

After cleaning up in the shower, we'd collapsed into bed. We didn't talk, just exchanged lazy kisses like we had all the time in the world.

God, I hoped that would be the case.

Eventually, Silas had drifted off to sleep. It was a long time before I followed him though. I didn't want to close my eyes, just in case I opened them to find nothing had changed. That I

was alone on that cramped sofa, a literal and metaphorical wall keeping us apart.

Sleep must've claimed me at some point. I didn't think either of us had moved all night. My morning wood was pressed against Silas's warm thigh. How many times had I woken up in this state and immediately panicked? Tried to calm myself down before Silas felt it and realised?

I mean, it had happened before. He'd always laughed it off as one of those things. That was the kind of man he was. He never wanted me to feel uncomfortable or embarrassed.

Yet that was exactly how I'd made him feel when he'd confessed his feelings for me.

I'd make it up to him. As fun as it'd be to show him the various ways we could take care of our morning wood, we needed to talk first. I wasn't letting us stay suspended in this confusion and miscommunication any longer.

Two decades was long enough.

A light tap on the door was followed by Tristan's head poking in. I stiffened, making Silas shift sleepily. Shit, I'd forgotten I had a loose end to tie up.

I gestured to Tristan that I'd meet him in the hall. Guilt twinged as I eased my arms out from around Silas. It felt wrong to leave him in bed to go and talk to another man. But once I'd spoken to Tristan and told him he could go, there'd be nothing standing between us.

I grabbed a robe from the back of the door, throwing it on before joining Tristan in the hallway.

“Sorry I wasn’t there when you woke up,” I said quietly after closing the door behind me. “I know you hate being in unfamiliar places.”

“It’s okay.” Tristan gave me a wan smile. “I can cope for one night. Looks like you guys have worked things out.”

I couldn’t hold back my grin as I thought back over our night together. “We’re not there yet...but we’re on the way.”

“Good. You deserve to be happy. Even if you’re going to break the internet when your relationship comes out.”

I groaned inwardly. Tristan wasn’t wrong there. Our onstage kiss had doused the rumours and conspiracy theories with petrol and set them alight. If I hadn’t fled the country after our final show, I imagine the press would’ve hounded us. It’d been bad enough with us on separate continents.

But once they knew the truth...the attention would be overwhelming.

It wasn’t enough to put me off being with Silas though. Nothing was. I’d face down every reporter in the world if it meant I got to love him the way I’d always wanted.

“I’ve ordered an Uber,” Tristan said. “Figured I’d get out of the way before everyone woke up.”

“Thank you.” I pulled him in for a hug. “Bringing you here might not have been the best thing, but I’m so damned grateful for everything you’ve done.”

Tristan patted my back. “I’m glad to have you as a friend. And like I’ve said, this was helping me as much as you.”

I froze. “Wait, us ‘ending’ this...is it going to cause a problem for you?”

Tristan pulled out of my arms and began to fiddle with one of his rings. “No, of course not.”

I’d known him long enough to know his tells. “Tristan...”

“It’s fine,” he said hastily. “This was never meant to be a permanent solution...just something to give me a bit of breathing space.”

“I wish you’d tell me what’s going on.”

He slumped against the wall. “It’s...complicated. I want to, but...”

“I get it.” Life was a chaotic and convoluted mess at the best of times. “Is there anything I can do?”

“No.” He smiled tightly. “Maybe just give me a heads-up before you and Si go public. It might give me time to get... plans in place.”

“I can’t imagine we’ll be doing that for a while. The last thing we need right now is more press attention. We won’t hide it forever, though, so of course I’ll let you know.”

“Thanks, Kai.” His phone buzzed in his hand. “My ride is here. Let’s catch up when you’re next in the States.”

“Wait,” I blurted as an idea came to me. “What if we made another post? A coupley type one? Would that hold whoever is

bothering you off for a bit longer?”

Tristan wavered. “I mean...yeah. It would help. But what would Silas think?”

“If Silas knew something was going on with you, he’d be the one suggesting it.” That I was confident about. Si would do anything to help someone out. Okay, he might not be Tristan’s biggest fan right now, but once I explained everything, that would change. “Trust me. Let’s take a photo now. I’ll fill Si in on everything and text you the go-ahead to post it.”

Tristan’s shoulders sagged like I’d lifted a weight off them. “I really should say no, but I’m not selfless enough. So, instead, I’ll just say thank you.”

I tucked him in against my side. It felt wrong to hold him like this, but Si would understand once I explained. I pressed my lips to his cheek, raising the phone to catch us both in the frame.

“Thanks,” Tristan said as I passed his phone back to him. “You’re the best boyfriend I could’ve asked for.”

“Anything for you, I’m ju—” My words were cut off as a door slammed behind me.

Fuck. No, no, no, no. Please don’t be Silas. Please don’t have seen and misunderstood.

I spun around, fear gripping my heart. Silas was already at the end of the hall, his shoulders taut and fists clenched at his sides.

“Si, wait! I can explain!”

I shot after him, but he was moving too fast.

It's okay. He can't leave. He's not even dressed.

But he wasn't letting that stop him.

I raced down the stairs after him as he swooped his shoes from the ground and yanked open the front door.

“Si, wait,” I begged, hurrying after him. “I can explain. It’s not what you think.”

He wheeled on me, hurt and anger sparking like kindling. Burning down the precious thing we’d been building between us. “Save it. I’m so fucking *tired*, Kai.”

I froze as he stalked towards me. “This is the final time I’m going to say this. Sort your shit out. If it’s me you want, then have me. But I’m not going to be second best to anyone.”

A disbelieving laugh broke from me. How on *earth* could Silas think he was second best?

“Glad you think I’m funny,” Silas spat bitterly, walking backwards. “Sometimes I think I don’t even know you.”

His words cut me to the bone. My vision blurred as I took a step forwards. “Si, *please...*”

But it was too late.

He’d slid into Tristan’s Uber, the driver taking off quickly.

I dropped to my knees, the bite of the gravel barely registering against the pain of watching Silas leave me.

“I’m so sorry,” Tristan said, coming up behind me. “I’ve fucked everything up. Again.”

“No, this is on me.” It always had been. I’d made a chain of endless mistakes where Silas was concerned.

“You can’t let him get away.”

“I’m not going to.” Of the two of us, I was the one who needed space when things got hard. Not Si. If he had space, he ended up in a tailspin where he couldn’t see the wood for the trees. I needed to get him to listen to me, and soon.

I got to my feet as a plan slowly started to form in my mind. Silas couldn’t hide from me for long. We had studio time booked in for this afternoon.

If I could get Arlo and Luca to help me...

I bade Tristan goodbye, reassuring him again that this wasn’t his fault, and left him outside to wait for another Uber.

I hadn’t made it further than the hallway before I collided with Ruby. “Oof, sorry.”

“That’s okay,” she said with a yawn. “My fault. Haven’t had any tea yet and...wait, why are you coming in from outside?”

I tried to stop from wincing but wasn’t fast enough for Ruby’s shrewd attention. “Malakai James Parker. What’ve you done? Where’s Silas?”

“He’s left.”

Her hands went to her hips, and I knew I was in trouble. She might be thirteen years younger and a whole foot shorter, but that haughty nurse look had me quaking in my shoes.

Well, my metaphorical ones, anyway. I'd been so desperate to stop Silas that I'd run outside barefoot.

"What did you do?" she seethed. "Tell me you didn't make him leave."

"I fucked up." Then I told her the same thing I'd told Dad and Tristan. "I'm going to fix it."

My new mantra, apparently.

"You better," she said warningly. "I love you *both* like my brothers. I'm not losing either of you, so get it sorted."

I dropped a kiss on the top of her head. "Don't worry, I'm not going to let that happen."

I jogged up the stairs, refusing to look at the door to Silas's room as I passed it.

I refused to accept that last night would be the only one we shared. I'd fucked up, but I was going to fix it.

I was going to fix it.

Storming into the room Tristan had slept in, I grabbed my phone. For a second, I debated calling Silas and trying to get him to listen over the phone.

Then I remembered the look on his face as he told me to sort my shit out. Yeah, this wasn't a conversation we could have over the phone.

Instead, I hit Arlo's number. It took a few rings before his sleep-addled voice came on the line.

"Arlo? I need your help."

Chapter Twenty-One

Silas

In all the years of friendship I'd shared with Kai, I didn't think I'd ever been this angry with him.

Not when he'd fucked off to the back of beyond for four months.

Not when he'd ghosted me.

Not when he'd thrown my feelings back in my face.

All those things had hurt me. Cut me so deep that the pain was almost visceral. But I hadn't been *angry*. If Kai had harboured feelings for me all these years, it would explain his behaviour.

However, leaving my room to see him kissing Tristan?
Telling him he'd do *anything* for him?

After he'd spent the night with me?

Yeah. I was fucking pissed. Furious, even.

Kai had told me Tristan wasn't his boyfriend, and like a fool, I'd believed him. I never would've gone there last night if I'd

thought otherwise.

The scene I'd unwittingly stumbled across this morning revealed the truth. I wasn't sure what had hurt more. The kiss Kai had given Tristan's cheek, or the words I'd heard from the other man's mouth.

You're the best boyfriend I could've asked for.

I wanted Kai to be mine...but clearly, he belonged to someone else.

Thank god there'd been an Uber outside. No idea who it was supposed to have been for, but I'd felt no guilt in pinching it. The driver had been booked to go to a hotel a few streets from my house, which worked out perfectly.

My phone buzzed in my hand, making my heart race. When I glanced at the screen, it wasn't Kai's name, but Arlo's.

"Yeah?"

"Good morning to you too."

Arlo sounded like he was barely awake. "Why are you calling me so early?"

"Couldn't sleep," he muttered as he stifled a yawn. "Just wanted to see if you need a lift this afternoon."

I froze. "What's happening this afternoon?"

"We're booked in for our first session at the studio. Don't tell me you've forgotten."

Of course I'd forgotten. I leaned my head against the cool window. "Do I have to go?"

“Umm...yeah? We can hardly write without you there.”

I snorted. “Come on, we all know I’m not a lyricist.”

“But you’re a part of the band. We need your input on the instrument side.” He paused. “Why are you being weird about this? Has something happened?”

It hit me then that it wasn’t just losing Kai that was at risk here...but the whole band. My career. My *life*.

If I couldn’t stand to be in the same room as Kai...how would we continue as part of Caffeine Daydreams?

Fuck. I wish I’d thought of this before going down this road. Call me naïve and big-headed, but I hadn’t honestly expected this to happen. I’d stupidly thought Kai and I would get together and start living happily ever after.

I was wrong though. Fairy tales hadn’t existed in my childhood, and they sure as shit didn’t exist now.

My head spun. This was just too much to take in all at once. Maybe I just needed to get through today. With Arlo and Luca there, along with our producer and manager, it was unlikely Kai would say anything anyway. All I had to do was get through the session, then I could hightail it out of there.

Until then, I could be a goddamned professional. The most professional musician to ever musician.

Without speaking to Kai.

Or thinking about how he’d looked on his knees the night before, staring up at me like I was the answer to all his

prayers.

Or remembering how he'd pulled Tristan tight to his side. Tucking him in like he *belonged* there. Like Kai wanted to keep him *safe*.

I'd been stupid to think this was all about me. I thought maybe this was our story.

Instead, I was a side character in theirs.

“Si? You there?”

“Yeah,” I replied heavily. “I’ll...I’ll be there.”

There was another long pause. “Is everything okay, Si? Do you need to talk?”

I did. I needed to talk. But not to Arlo.

There was only one person who could make this better. And he was the one person I didn't want to see right now.

“No, everything's fine. I'll meet you at the studio.” I wanted to have my car there in case I needed to make a quick getaway. Couldn't count on there handily being an Uber waiting for me whenever I needed it. “I'll see you later.”

I got there early, hoping to slink in before anyone else arrived.

Fate was against me. I walked into the studio to find all my bandmates. Even Arlo was there...and he was *never* on time.

They fell silent when I entered, making me narrow my eyes.
“Subtle.”

Luca smirked at me lazily. “Someone has a big opinion of himself.”

I rolled my eyes. “Someone knows his bandmates.”

Well, some of them. I purposefully didn’t so much as glance at Kai. I could feel his eyes burning into my face as I fell onto the sofa beside Arlo.

“Where’s Betty?” Our new manager had only been with us for a few months, but she was already several leagues above Kevin.

“She’ll be here later,” Luca said, pulling his notepad out of his bag. “Along with Louise. Figured there wasn’t much point in them being here until we had some song ideas solidified.”

Louise was our main producer. Normally, she was here through this stage, but if Luca wanted to mix things up, I wasn’t about to argue.

Luca began outlining several ideas he’d had. His relationship with Ollie had unlocked his muse, leading to countless songs about finding love and happiness.

It was enough to make me sick to the stomach. After a while, I had to tune him out.

I tried not to look at Kai. I really did. But decades of friendship meant I couldn’t help glancing his way. It was like I was hardwired to share my every thought and micro-expression with him. I wanted to nod at him when Luca hit on

a particularly good lyric. Or roll my eyes when he waxed on about Ollie for a touch too long.

Each time I forgot and looked over at him, he was already staring at me. To his credit, he hadn't tried to say a word to me aside from a greeting when I'd arrived. He'd even chosen to sit in a chair rather than on the sofa where we usually crashed together. Something for which I was both grateful and pissed about.

Grateful because he was giving me space.

Pissed because I didn't actually *want* space.

To the casual onlooker, Kai probably looked completely relaxed. His shirt was unbuttoned halfway down his chest, his ankle resting on his knee. He lounged in the chair like it was a throne.

It was the intensity he was watching me with that gave him away. It was like no one else was in the room. It didn't even seem to bother him that I was avoiding him.

No. He simply stared at me, his eyes hooded like they'd been last night as he'd thrust against me. One of his hands was raised to his face, stroking over his lips like he was remembering how I'd tasted.

I shifted in my seat as my cock began to stiffen. How could I be so angry with him yet so damned turned on?

I jolted as Luca's voice pulled me back to reality. "What do you think, Kai? You got anything?"

Kai spoke without looking away from me, showing he'd been paying more attention than I had. "I have some things that could work."

I had no idea if Arlo or Luca had picked up on the awkward tension between us. I tore my attention away from him, dragging in deep breaths and trying to force my heart to slow.

He has a boyfriend. He's been fucking with you.

Had he though? Even with what had happened this morning...did I really think Kai was capable of intentionally hurting me?

No. I didn't think he was.

"Okay, great. Let's get the instruments out and see what we've got."

Luca and Arlo made tracks for the attached studio. I could see them through the glass, Luca pulling the mic down to his height while Arlo got set up at the drum kit.

I didn't move because Kai hadn't moved. To get to the other room, I'd have to practically brush past him.

He tilted his head at me before speaking softly. "Can we talk?"

His words took me back to last night. To him asking that in my doorway just as his boyfriend appeared behind me.

It was enough of a reminder to force me to my feet. "No."

I skirted past him, careful to not let any part of us touch.

Luca's head snapped up as I entered. "You okay?"

“Yep,” I said curtly, keeping my head bowed as I slung my strap over my shoulder. “Peachy.”

Kai entered just after me, whispering something in Arlo’s ear before taking his place beside me. I’d never paid much attention to our studio setup before. Like everywhere else, Kai and I had gravitated towards each other naturally.

Now, it felt like that connection was an anchor, pulling me down to the depths until I could no longer breathe.

I tried to tune him out. Tried to think about nothing but the words Luca was singing and the beats Arlo and Kai were throwing out. I picked up the bass line as they toyed with various rhythms and melodies.

It was no use though. All I could focus on was Kai next to me. His towering form that stood way too close. The scent of the shower gel we’d used during the night.

I was going out of my mind.

Just when I couldn’t take it any longer, Luca stepped away from the mic. I sagged in relief, already moving to take off my bass.

“Okay, Kai. Your turn.”

My hands stilled on my strap, my surprise making me address Kai without thinking. “You’re singing?”

Kai had only ever sung one song before, and even that had taken months to get him to that stage. Now he was stepping up of his own accord?

He hummed as he moved to the microphone, not breaking eye contact with me. “What can I say? Recently, I’ve been... *inspired.*”

A shiver went down my spine. I couldn’t look away from him as he twisted the mic to face me.

“I’ve got a melody in mind.”

“Just start singing and we’ll jump in,” Arlo said as Luca grabbed a spare guitar from the wall.

Kai cleared his throat, his nimble fingers strumming his guitar.

And then he began to sing.

Do you know how it feels?

To never think you’ll be the one

Do you know how it feels?

To think our friendship will be done

Do you know how it feels?

To tell yourself this will be enough

Do you know how it feels?

To be with you through the good and the rough

Do you know how it feels?

To hear you say the words I’ve dreamed about

Do you know how it feels?

To be terrified by doubt

The song continued, my jaw hanging open as Kai poured his heart out. Finally, the last note faded. My hands hung loosely at my sides, where they'd been for the entire song. I had no idea if Luca and Arlo had joined in, but I sure as fuck hadn't.

It was too much. There were too many versions of Kai. My best friend from childhood. The man I'd spent my life on stage with. The one who'd run from me and ignored me for four months.

The one who'd shown me pleasure like I hadn't even known *existed*. The Kai who brought another man home to meet his family.

Then there was this one. Pouring his heart out through his lyrics and begging me to pick it up.

Which one was real? It was overwhelming. I couldn't think. Couldn't begin to put this together in my head.

I stepped back, and Kai shoved his guitar in Luca's direction. "Si, *please*. I need you to listen to me."

My back hit the wall. From the corner of my eye, I saw Arlo and Luca leave the room, quietly closing the door behind them. Couldn't blame them. If I were a witness to this shit show, I'd want to leave too.

Scratch that, I was *part* of it, and I definitely wanted to leave.

"Those are all pretty words." I gestured to the mic. "But they mean fuck-all when you belong to someone else."

Kai's patience broke, something I saw so rarely. "I belong to *you*. Damnit, Silas! I always have. *You* are the one who holds my heart. It has *always* been you. It'll *always* be you."

I wanted to believe him. I did. "Then why are you with Tristan? If I'm the one you want, why the fuck are you with *him*?"

I was so mad. Mad at him for not telling me how he felt before he ran. Mad at Tristan for being with him.

But most of all, I was mad at myself for not waking up and seeing Kai earlier. Maybe if I had, this could all have been avoided.

This wasn't the right time for this. It was too raw. Too fresh. If I stayed, I would end up saying something I'd regret.

I didn't give Kai a chance to answer my question, ducking past him and hightailing it for the door. But when I turned the handle, nothing happened. "What the fuck?"

I shook the door a few more times before hammering on it. "Luca? Arlo? The door is jammed."

The lights flicked on in the opposite room, illuminating the grim faces of my bandmates. Arlo was leaning on the sound mixing desk, and it was his voice that came over the speakers. "It's not jammed, it's locked. And it's not getting unlocked until you two fuckers sort this out once and for all."

I stalked over to the window, shooting a murderous glare at them. "Open the fucking door. Now."

Luca shoved Arlo aside so he could speak. “We aren’t letting you two tear yourselves or the band apart any longer. Sort your shit out, and we’ll let you out when you agree to play nice.”

With that, they both walked out. Leaving me locked in a room alone with Kai.

“Fucking unbelievable.”

Kai gave a low whistle, making me wheel around to face him. “Yep.”

He didn’t seem bothered...or surprised. His agitation from earlier was nowhere to be seen. In fact, he was settling on a chair and pulling a bag from underneath. He rummaged for a minute before triumphantly pulling out a bag of Maltesers. “Snack?”

Realisation dawned on me. “You set this up.”

Kai shrugged as he tore into the packaging and popped a handful of chocolate into his mouth. “Can’t run away now.”

“Well, you’d know all about that,” I said bitterly, throwing myself into the chair opposite him. I was tempted to drag it over to the other side of the room, but that felt petty.

And maybe Luca and Arlo were right. There was no point running from this. We needed to get everything out in the open.

So we could both move on.

Kai cleared his throat, shoving the now-empty packet back in the bag. He’d always been a nervous eater. “I deserve that.”

“Damn right you do.”

Kai sighed before leaning his forearms on his knees. I tried not to notice how it made his muscles bunch, forcing my eyes to look elsewhere. They were traitorous bastards, though, sneaking their way back there without me even realising.

“Before I say anything else, you have to know I’m not in a relationship with Tristan.”

I opened my mouth to point out the obvious, but he reached across to put his palm over my lips. God, how I wanted to dart my tongue over his fingers. Maybe suck one into my mouth like the night before.

It was strange to be this angry at someone yet still drawn to them. But that was me and Kai all over. Nothing about our relationship should make sense, but it always had to us.

That was all that had mattered.

“Tristan and I are not, nor have we *ever* been, in a relationship,” Kai spoke quietly, his eyes searching mine. “He saw what a state I was in while in Mexico and offered to pretend to be my fake boyfriend.”

What...? I couldn’t wrap my head around what he was saying. He let his hand fall away, and I immediately blurted out, “You were *never* together? At all?”

He shook his head. “It was a stupid idea, in the end. It didn’t do what it was supposed to.”

“And what was that?”

“Keep me away from you.”

I reeled back in my chair. “What, so it wasn’t enough that you hadn’t seen me for four months...you also didn’t want to be close to me when you got back?”

Fuck, I thought I’d felt heartbreak before, but it had nothing on this.

“No, that’s not it.” Kai blew out a breath in frustration. “I’m getting this all wrong. Again. What the fuck is wrong with me?”

Two decades of protective instincts finally reared their head. Even if I didn’t understand anything else, I knew Kai was *hurting*. I...I didn’t want that. “Hey, it’s okay. Start at the beginning. I won’t interrupt.”

He raised an eyebrow, drawing a reluctant chuckle from me. “Okay, I’ll *try* not to interrupt.”

He laughed nervously, shaking out his hands. “Sorry, it’s just I’ve imagined this a thousand times...but I never quite pictured it like this.”

I tilted my head at him. “Imagined what?”

He took a deep breath, taking both my hands in his.

“Imagined telling you I’m in love with you.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Kai

“Say that again,” Silas breathed.

The words I’d fought so hard to contain for almost our entire friendship were now as easy as breathing. “I’m in love with you, Silas. I’ve loved you for so long that I don’t know how to do anything else. Loving you has been the one constant in my life. Not my family, nor our careers, or even our friendship. It’s just been you. Loving *you*.”

Silas blinked slowly, his hands limp in mine. “For how long? How long have you loved me?”

I swallowed. “Umm...it’s hard to say when I knew for certain. Maybe the first time I realised I would actually quite happily commit murder when I saw the bruises your dad gave you? Or maybe it was when you kept showing up for me during Mum’s chemo. No matter how hard it got, you were always there.”

I gave a low chuckle, shaking my head at the memory. “Or maybe it even goes back as far as you whacking Timothy

Smythe unconscious with a stick.”

Silas was silent for a moment before he ripped his hands from mine with a curse. “Fucking hell, Kai.”

He was on his feet and pacing. “You’re telling me you’ve loved me for *decades*?”

I shot up, my palms raised as I pleaded with him. “I tried not to, believe me, Si. I fucking *tried*. But no matter who I dated or slept with, no one could get to my heart. Because it’s always been yours.”

A distressed noise slipped from his lips as his hands tugged at his hair. “That’s not what I’m upset about, Kai.”

I stilled. “It’s not?”

“Of course it’s not,” he exploded. “You’ve just told me that for *years*, I’ve been putting on a show with you on stage. Grinding up against you and being...*completely* inappropriate. Then making you watch me take home girl after girl every night.”

I stepped up to him, my hands going to his shoulders. “You didn’t know, Silas.”

“But I should’ve,” he whispered miserably, his head dropping. “It’s what I’ve been scared about since I first... suspected you might have feelings for me. I should’ve seen it earlier. I know you better than *anyone*. How could I not see this?”

I couldn’t help it. I needed to hug him. I pulled him tight to me, relieved when he didn’t shove me away. “You couldn’t see

it because I hid it from you. This is not on you, Si. It's on me.”

“Why didn't you tell me?” His voice was muffled against my chest. “Did you really not trust me that much?”

“It's not about trust,” I answered him honestly. “I couldn't risk losing you, Si.”

His head whipped up, hurt shining in his eyes. “You wouldn't have lost me, Kai. Jesus, do you really think so little of me?”

“Of course not.” I held him firmly. “But things would've changed between us. You wouldn't have kept dancing with me on stage. You wouldn't have phoned me in the middle of the night to comfort you. You wouldn't have spent every waking minute with me.”

“No...because those things were hurting you.”

“They were also the things keeping me alive.”

“If that's true...” Silas said slowly. “Then why did you leave? You obviously didn't need or want those things. You left me for *four* months, Kai, without saying a word. It would've been bad enough even if nothing happened.”

I winced as he pushed out of my arms, carefully stepping back. “And something did happen, Kai. We *kissed*. Onstage. In front of thousands of fans. Didn't you think that was something we should talk about?”

“We did talk about it—remember? You said it was all part of the *act*.”

“No, those were your words, not mine.” He crossed his arms over his chest calmly. “What I said was I shouldn’t have taken it that far.”

“The act,” I whispered in disbelief. “That’s what you meant.”

“No,” he said softly, his arms dropping as he stepped closer. “I meant I shouldn’t have taken it that far in front of the *fans*. Fuck, Kai, weren’t you there? It wasn’t just you doing the kissing. I was in that moment just as much as you were.”

I gaped at him, not wanting to believe what he was telling me. “I thought...I thought you were acting.”

He snorted. “Since when have I been that good of an actor? Remind me again, what role was I given in the GCSE Drama performance?”

My lips twitched despite the gravity of the moment. “I believe it was a tree.”

“Tree number *three*,” he corrected me wryly.

Silence fell as Silas reached a hand up to stroke my jaw. He brushed it once. Twice. “I was there with you, Kai. Right there, in that moment. Waking up to realise that the way I felt about you was far from platonic.”

I closed my eyes, unable to stand how much I’d hurt him. “And I left you alone to deal with that. I’m sorry.”

“My sexual awakening was not your responsibility,” Silas whispered, thumbing at my lower lip. “You might’ve been the

cause, but it was for me to work through. And...as much as I hate to say it, maybe you were right.”

“Right about what?”

“Putting distance between us.” He swallowed, his hand still stroking my face like he couldn’t stop touching me. “It gave me...time. Time to figure out that my feelings for you were...changing. No, not changing.” He shook his head impatiently. “They were the same as they always were, but I’d just never realised. What I feel for you goes far deeper than what I feel for Luca or Arlo. For years, I put it down to just being best friends. But you were right...what friends behave like we do?”

I chuckled. “None that I’m aware of. But...I’m sorry. Leaving you like that...not saying goodbye...was the single most selfish thing I ever did. My only excuse is that I was at my breaking point. As much as I loved touching you on stage, it fucking destroyed me knowing it didn’t mean the same to you as it did to me.”

His hands froze on my face. “Do you want me to stop touching you now?”

“No,” I barked, grabbing his wrist and refusing to let him move. “It’s different now.”

Yes. Everything was different now.

“So you went away hoping, what? That’d you’d get over me?”

It seemed so stupid now. “Yeah. Turns out you’re kind of impossible to get over.”

He flashed me a dimpled grin, his chipped tooth on display. “Well, I could’ve told you that.”

“Didn’t work at all. That’s where Tristan came in. It’s true that we got close while we were filming. It was fucking *breaking* me being apart from you, Si. Tristan was the one who helped me through it.”

Silas stiffened, pulling back slightly. I squeezed his wrist again. “He offered to fly over and pretend to be my boyfriend. I was worried that if he didn’t, things would go back to how they were before. If I’d had the slightest inkling you felt the same way, I wouldn’t even have considered it.”

He was still looking unsure. I leaned my forehead against his, staring deep into his eyes. “I mean it, Si. There was never *anything* between us. I was too blinded by you to even look at anyone else. And Tristan? Well...he’s got his own stuff going on.”

He frowned. “What kind of stuff?”

“Honestly? I’m not sure. Whatever it is, it’s serious. Serious enough for him to agree to be my fake boyfriend to help me stay away from you.”

“Poor guy,” Silas’s face softened. “Wait, is that why you took that photo this morning?”

Relief poured through me. “Yes. We both knew our fake tryst was coming to an end. It was obvious to just about everyone that I can’t stay away from you. I offered to take one

final photo for him to post in the hope it'd buy him some more time. But not until I'd explained everything to you."

Silas groaned. "Ah, man, now I feel like a dick. I know I'm being irrational. I just remember his hands all over you, and it makes me want to punch something."

I rubbed his wrist. "I get that."

I saw the horror dawn on his face. "Oh fuck, Kai. This is how you felt every time I took someone else home. Is that why you moved to a different floor on tour?"

"It doesn't matter," I said quickly. I didn't want Silas blaming himself, not when he didn't know.

He yanked his arm from my grip and threw both around my neck. I staggered back a step under his weight, my back hitting the wall.

"It fucking *matters*, Kai. You matter. More than anything. I'm sorry I hurt you. I'm sorry I didn't figure things out sooner. I'm sorry I—"

I surged forwards, catching his lips with mine. His apologies were undoing the fragile stitching holding me together. I didn't want them. I didn't *need* them.

I just needed him.

Silas sank into my kiss with a groan. He flattened his body to mine, his hands straining as he tried to get as close as possible.

I felt the same. There wasn't an inch of space between us, but somehow it was too much.

Silas was breathing words out between kisses. I was so lost in him that it took me a minute to register his words.

Sorry. Sorry. Sorry.

I growled, flipping our positions and boxing him in against the wall. “No. No apologies, Si. I’m the one who needs to apologise. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you how I felt years ago. I’m sorry I got scared and ran away. I’m sorry I tried to keep you at a distance with Tristan. I’m sorry you saw what you did this morning. I’m *sorry*.”

“How about we both stop being sorry and do something else instead?”

He rocked his hips forward, and I shivered as his cock brushed against mine.

Silas was hard. For *me*.

Would I ever get used to this?

I tried to force my brain to focus. “Don’t you think we should talk more first?”

Silas continued rolling his hips against mine. Fuck how I loved the mischief in his eyes. “I mean...probably? It’s kind of hard to think straight when you’re pinning me in like this. It’s giving me all sorts of fun ideas.”

I groaned, stepping forward to still his hips. Not that that helped. Now my cock was pushed against his, begging me to get with the programme.

I sucked the skin between his neck and shoulder, adding another mark to the ones already there. I wanted to cover him in my marks so everyone knew Silas was *mine*.

Finally.

Silas cursed, tilting his head to give me better access. “Fuck, that feels so good.”

I laved my tongue over the skin before giving it a final kiss. “What else did you have in mind?”

His gaze darted over my shoulder to the window. “Depends. How long did you tell the others to give us?”

“Until I text them.”

“What about Betty and Louise?”

I smirked. “Technically, we don’t have a studio session today. We cancelled it this morning when I asked Arlo and Luca for help. We kept the room booking, but that’s it.”

“The cameras?”

“Turned off. Rhys is in the security room, making sure no one turns them back on. Dylan and Jack are on this floor at each end of the corridor. They won’t let anyone other than Luca or Arlo through. Short of the fire alarm going off, we won’t be disturbed.”

Now it was Silas’s turn to smirk. His long fingers began to massage my erection through my jeans. I bit my lip to contain my whimper. Why the fuck hadn’t I gone for joggers?

“Hmm...not sure how I feel about you being so certain something would happen.”

“I knew *something* would happen.” My voice was raspy, my focus torn between my words and the fact Silas was now unbuttoning my jeans. “But I didn’t know what. For all I knew you’d end up bludgeoning me to death with your bass.”

Silas snorted. “There’s no way I’d risk Gertrude like that.”

“Weirdest fucking name for an instrument ever,” I whispered, my eyes drifting closed as he released my aching shaft from the denim confines. “But if that *did* happen, I didn’t want there to be any video evidence.”

Silas’s touch was dancing over my member. It was like he was familiarising himself. Or memorising the shape. Whatever he was doing, I hoped he never stopped. “Always thinking of me.”

“Always,” I whispered. “I didn’t think *this* would happen. In all honesty, I just wanted to make sure I could keep you here long enough to listen.”

“Well, I’ve listened. So...what should we do now?”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Silas

Kai's eyes widened slightly. "Umm...what were you thinking?"

I grinned at him as I gripped his shaft firmer. "Hmm. Not sure. We could throw around some new lyrics. Perhaps play around with some of the melodies from earlier."

Kai hissed as I thumbed his slit, marvelling at the stickiness there. "Or, you could fuck me."

Kai's cock throbbed as he gave a low moan. "Jesus."

"Just Silas," I quipped. "Now, where did we land on the fucking?"

He gave me an incredulous look. "Hang on, you've been into men for—what? Five minutes? And now you're ready to go all the way? It's a bit sudden."

"Cheeky fucker. You should know that I like to throw myself into the deep end." I took a deep breath as I met his gaze. "Besides, this doesn't feel sudden. It feels like we've been building to this the whole time."

I could tell Kai was wavering. I reached up to kiss him.

“Please,” I whispered brokenly against his lips. “I need this. I need to feel you inside me.”

Kai cursed under his breath. “I don’t have any supplies.”

I pulled back to scowl at him. “Since when are you ever unprepared?”

He rolled his eyes. “I don’t go fucking other men often, Si. Seems kinda wrong when I’m always pretending they’re you.”

“That shouldn’t make me as happy as it does.”

“I can get you off like this,” Kai offered, palming me through my jeans.

It was tempting. Especially with the skilled way he was massaging me through the denim. But it wasn’t enough. I didn’t know why it was so important, but right now, I *needed* Kai inside me. I needed to know that he was mine in the most primal way.

I was burning. I needed Kai to douse the flames.

“Who packed that?” I gestured to the bag Kai had pulled the Maltesers from earlier.

“Arlo. Why?”

“Excellent.” I shoved Kai away and rummaged through it. Triumph leapt in my chest as my hand fell on a small tube. “I knew it.”

A second more, and I had the other item we needed. I held them up to Kai with a smirk. “He’s a determined little fucker.”

“We need to take him out to dinner,” Kai said, snatching the lube from my hand. His gaze flicked to the condom, and he swallowed. “We can use that if you’d feel more comfortable, but I’m negative. I haven’t been with anyone in over a year.”

My breath caught in my chest. Fuck, I wished I could say the same. Wished I’d waited for Kai.

Or, better yet, I wished I’d woken up and had this realisation years ago.

“I’m negative too,” I said. “I got tested after the end of the tour.”

His mouth popped open. “You...you haven’t been with anyone since...”

“Since we kissed?” I stepped up to him, unbuttoning his shirt. I didn’t want anything between us. “Of course not, Kai. You’ve possessed me. I can’t even think about being with anyone else. I was lost from the second you put your mouth on mine. Maybe even before that.”

“Silas.” It was a plea and a prayer all at once.

I shoved his shirt to the floor, ripping mine off after. The rest of our clothes fell alongside them as we were driven by an urgency we couldn’t ignore.

Then we were naked. My eyes trailed down Kai’s body, mapping the lines I’d seen a thousand times before but never actually *noticed*. I’d been too distracted in the shower.

I wasn’t distracted now.

His broad shoulders rose and fell rapidly, his chest expanding with panting breaths. God, I wanted to run my tongue over his nipples. And down his abs. All the way to the happy trail leading to his cock.

His very hard, very sizable cock. My mouth dried out as I imagined it inside me. Filling me up. Ever since the day I'd first watched the gay porn, I'd been thinking about how it might feel.

Kai's cock was several significant steps up from a slender finger. It didn't scare me though. It probably should, given it was bigger than anything I'd tried before...but fuck. I wanted it.

Don't get me wrong, I would've craved it regardless of his size. It was Kai. I wanted *him*.

But I wouldn't deny that him packing significant heat was appealing.

Never thought I'd be a size queen. Kai was teaching me all sorts of new things about myself.

"We don't have to do this," Kai said gently, misunderstanding the way I was gaping at him. "We can do other things. Lots of other things."

"Oh, and we will," I rasped, wrapping my hand back around him. "But those things can wait. I want you inside me. Right now. Don't make me wait."

My words unlocked something in Kai. With a snarl, he grabbed the back of my neck and hauled me to him. There was

nothing gentle about it. Our teeth clashed together as he consumed me. We were almost wrestling with each other, like we were trying to physically climb inside the other.

My back crashed into the wall, Kai pinning me against it.

“Make you wait,” he snarled between kisses. “Fuck, Si. I’ve *waited* for you for decades.”

I groaned as he shoved two of his fingers into my mouth. “Suck, baby. Get them nice and wet. Because I’m not *waiting* a second longer.”

I did as he instructed, laving my tongue over the digits. I sucked hard, imagining his cock in its place. Its heavy weight on my tongue. Choking my throat.

My cock throbbed against Kai’s thigh. I needed to calm down. I hadn’t been this close to the edge with such little stimulation since I was a teenager.

Being with Kai was breaking down all my control.

“That’s it, baby,” Kai praised me, nibbling along my neck and jawline. “Suck me hard. Like I did to you in the shower.”

My eyes rolled back in my head, and I was grateful for the wall at my back holding me up. Just the mention of what he’d done to me in the shower had my spine tingling.

“Did you like that?” He breathed in my ear. His hips undulated slowly against mine, his cock snagging deliciously on my abs. “Me on my knees? Pinning you in place and making you fuck my throat?”

He pulled his fingers from my mouth, allowing me to gasp out a response. “Jesus, Kai. How didn’t I know that you’re into dirty talk?”

“Feels like you’re into it too.” He smirked wickedly as he grabbed my cock and stroked it. “There’s a lot you’re going to learn about me, Si. I can’t wait to teach you.”

I bucked under his ministrations. “Fuck, I am here for all of it.”

“Good,” he whispered. “Now turn around and put your hands on the wall. You’re going to keep them there while I work you open.”

I moved so fast I went dizzy and stumbled.

Kai snorted a laugh. I scowled at him over my shoulder.

“Sorry,” he said, grinning affectionately. “You’re just such a clumsy prick sometimes.”

“You shouldn’t be surprised by that,” I grumbled, bracing my forearms against the wall as instructed.

He ran his slick fingers along my crease, making me shiver. “I’m not. It’s just...this is such a big moment, you know? I’ve imagined you like this so many times.” A finger slipped between my cheeks and danced over my hole. “Bent over, ready and waiting for me. It’s a lot.”

The wobble in his voice had me looking back over my shoulder, my concern for him overriding my horniness. “You okay, Kai?”

He cleared his throat and smiled broadly. “Better than okay. You being a clumsy little shit reminded me that it’s you. It’s you and me.”

I softened. “It’s always been me and you. This won’t change that. Just makes it more fun.”

“Much more fun,” he drawled, slightly dipping his finger in. “Want me to get the lube?”

“Not yet.” I panted. It might sound weird, but I liked that he was working me open with nothing more than my own saliva. We’d have to grab the lube eventually, but for now, this was good. “Keep going.”

Kai pressed close to my back, kissing my shoulders. “Just tell me if you need to stop. There’s no rush.”

“Yes, there is. If I don’t get you inside me soon, I might die.”

Kai’s barked laughter had me smiling despite myself. “School was wrong. You definitely had the drama skills to play at least tree number two.”

I tensed as he slid his finger slightly deeper, my body bucking at the intrusion.

“I love you, but I’m using the lube,” Kai said matter-of-factly.

I wanted to complain but didn’t. I knew how stubborn Kai was and given his size...yeah. Lube was probably the best plan.

His finger was cooler when it slipped back inside, this time with more noticeable ease. I still couldn't help tensing against the unfamiliar sensation.

“Relax. Breathe out and bear down.” Kai's deep voice rumbled over me. “Let me in, baby.”

Blowing out, I concentrated on following his instructions. His finger slipped in a few more inches as my body opened for him.

I couldn't imagine being in this situation with anyone else. A few months ago, I never would've imagined that I'd be naked and about to be fucked against the wall of a recording studio.

But this was *Kai*. Nothing I did with him would or could ever feel anything other than perfectly right.

I really should've spotted my feelings sooner.

Kai's hand moved and a second finger joined the first. I focused on my breathing as Kai whispered praise in my ear.

Then he crooked his fingers and brushed against something.

My eyes flew open as all my nerve endings fired. “Oh fuck!”

“Hmm, you like that, do you?” Kai murmured. “Let's check again and see.”

He did it again. My cock, which had been softening under all the unusual sensations, was suddenly rock hard. I thrust forwards, the head of my cock catching on the soundproof material covering the walls.

He did it a third time. “Kai!”

“Oh, you definitely like that.” I was thrusting back on his fingers now, desperately seeking out the feeling. “We’ll make a greedy bottom of you yet, Si.”

I whimpered. “Please, fuck me.”

“Not yet. This might feel good, but you aren’t ready for me yet.”

Despite knowing he was speaking facts, decades of friendship meant I couldn’t resist ragging on him a little. “Someone’s a bit full of himself.”

Kai didn’t rise to the bait, simply chuckling as he added another finger. “Well, shortly, you’ll be full of me. And then we’ll both know I was right to take the prep seriously.”

I lost the ability to argue with him. My whole world boiled down to Kai and the way he was working me open. He didn’t rush, taking his time to make sure I was comfortable.

He did make sure to brush over my prostate as often as possible. Maybe I should’ve been embarrassed by the high-pitched whine that whimpered out of me whenever he hit it. I was far past that point.

Finally, *finally*, Kai decided I was ready. I winced as he pulled his fingers out of me, the loss leaving me aching. I waited, expecting to feel him pushing into me, but nothing happened.

“Not like this,” Kai muttered, tugging my shoulder until I faced him. “I need to see you. Want to see your face.”

“I want that too, but I’m not sure how we can make that work like this.”

There was a good several inches difference in our height. If we were in a bed...fine. But up against a wall?

Kai rolled his eyes. Then, just like in the shower, he looped his arms under my thighs and lifted. I squeaked as my feet left the ground, my weight now supported by Kai and the wall.

“Straight guys, no imagination, I swear.” Kai smirked as he rubbed his cock over my crease, demonstrating that I was now at the perfect height to take him.

“Hardly straight,” I pointed out as the head of his cock brushed against my hole. “Just...a late awakening.”

Kai’s smile softened. “I’m glad I’m the one who woke you up.”

I grabbed the back of his neck like he had mine earlier. But I didn’t kiss him. No, I brought his mouth within an inch of mine and gazed steadily into his eyes. “It only ever could’ve been you. I think it’s *always* been you, Kai. And it always will be.”

Then I kissed him.

His tongue slipped into my mouth at the same time his cock pushed into me. I groaned into his mouth, remembering his advice from earlier.

Kai kissed me through it all, going slowly like I was a fragile piece of china.

He was right. I needed the extra prep.

Even with the extra prep, it wasn't enough. I broke away from his kiss, my head hitting the wall with a gasp. "Fuck!"

"You okay?" Kai asked urgently.

"Yes," I panted.

"Not much more to go," he said soothingly.

"There's more?"

How was that possible? Fuck, it already felt like I had a baseball bat up there.

Kai paused. "We can stop, Si. We don't have to do this."

"No, I want to. Please, don't stop."

"Okay." Kai didn't resume moving though. "Let's get your body more on board then. Touch yourself for me, baby."

Spitting in my hand, I did just that. Within moments, I was hard again. The pressure in my arse had eased slightly. Another few moments and my hips were moving of their own accord, pushing down on Kai. Trying to take him deeper.

"Oh my god, Silas." Kai's whole body trembled as he bottomed out inside me. "You're so tight."

"That's because your dick is fucking ridiculous," I said. "But I'm getting used to it."

Kai smirked at me as he pulled back a few inches before sinking back in. "We can practise."

“Yessss.” My head fell back as the feeling transitioned from *comfortable* to *fucking awesome*. “Lots and lots of practise.”

He continued to fuck into me, his eyes never leaving my face. Was he watching to make sure I was okay? Or to reassure himself I was really here? That this was really happening?

Because that was why I was watching him. I couldn't believe we were doing this. That Kai was fucking me. It was his arms holding me up. His cock stretching me wide. His eyes burning into mine.

And he loved me. He fucking *loved* me. Not as a brother. Not as a best friend.

But as so much more.

“Kai.” I couldn't stop moaning his name as he picked up the pace. His cock passed over my prostate, making me feel like I was lighting up from the inside out. “Please. Oh fuck.”

“Keep touching yourself,” he rasped, slamming his hips upwards. “I'd do it for you, but I don't want to drop you.”

I kissed him. It was fast but filthy. “You can touch me next time.”

His rhythm faltered as vulnerability flickered in his eyes. “Promise?”

I knew what he was really asking.

“This isn't a one-time thing.” I cupped his cheek. “This is it now. You and me.”

His smile was like a budding flower, cautiously sprouting before erupting into full bloom. “You and me.”

Kai held me tight as we both started the final race to the finish. My legs were around his waist, my heels digging into his rear. I didn’t need to worry about him dropping me. I think I was more concerned about how sturdy the walls were. With the rate we were going, there was a danger of Kai putting me through it.

Thank fuck it was a soundproof room. I was making noises I hadn’t even known were possible. Whimpering, begging, pleading moans. Begging Kai to take me. Harder. Faster.

“I got you, baby,” he whispered, slamming into me. “Come for me, Si. Come all over me.”

It was like my body had been waiting for his command. A hollow cry ripped from my throat as pleasure scorched through me. Hot cum spilt over my hand, splattering up Kai’s chest.

Kai was only two thrusts behind me, burying himself deep with a shout. His lips rested against my neck, his whole body shaking.

A small sob broke from him.

I wrapped my arms around his shoulders, hugging him fiercely as Kai let go of two decades of longing.

“It’s okay, Kai. I’ve got you. I’m here. I love you, and I’m here.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Kai

I had imagined my first time being inside Silas more times than I could count.

Not one of those imaginings ended with me sobbing on his shoulder. His whispered declaration of love only made me cry harder.

Fortunately, my outburst of emotion didn't seem to throw Silas off. No, if anything, he seemed to understand. This hadn't just been sex. Not for me.

It was the realisation of years of dreaming.

And he loved me. He didn't just have feelings for me. He *loved* me.

Half an hour later, we were sprawled against the wall of the booth. We'd cleaned up the best we could. Arlo had thoughtfully included a pack of baby wipes, which made the whole process much easier.

We didn't give our drummer enough credit. Arlo might seem like he wasn't always present, but I was starting to think he

saw a lot more than we'd ever suspected.

Silas's head was leaning on my shoulder as he munched through a share-size bag of Haribo. Not that he was *sharing* it. He'd always been tight with his sweets...I wasn't suffering under the illusion that our being together would change that.

Even his positioning slumped against me was familiar. We'd ended many a recording session with him collapsed against me like this. Both of us exhausted, on the floor together, while Arlo and Luca continued to hammer out a stubborn part of a song.

But now I didn't have to keep my hands still. They were free to run up and down Silas's arm. To pull his legs over mine. To toy with his hair.

Silas finished off the last of the sweets, carefully discarding the packet back in the bag. "I have a question."

"Only one?"

He smirked up at me. "For now."

I kissed his smirk away. Just because I could. "What do you want to know?"

Something flickered across his eyes. "Is 'Night's Darkest Secret' about me?"

I wouldn't lie to him. Not anymore. "Yes."

He closed his eyes. "And the new one? The one you sang earlier?"

I lifted his chin, waiting until he opened his eyes and looked at me. “Si, they are *all* about you. I have fucking notebooks stuffed to the brim with songs about you.”

His lips twitched. “Even the ones you wrote when we were teenagers?”

I groaned. “Of course you have to remember my adolescent hormonal ramblings.”

Silas snorted, nudging me with his elbow. “Don’t worry. I’m definitely the one who looks stupid in this situation. You’ve literally been whispering lyrics in my ear about unrequited love...oh my god!”

He sat up abruptly, covering his face with his hands. I leaned forward too, forcing myself not to laugh. “What?”

“The lyrics are literally ‘*how much more obvious can I be?*’...which you sang to me while I was happily oblivious.”

It was no good. My laugh ripped from me. “Yeah. You really should’ve guessed.”

“Fucker,” Silas grumbled, whacking me on the arm. “Not my fault I’m a muppet.”

I pulled him onto my lap, kissing him full on the lips. “It’s not. I wouldn’t have you any other way.”

He slipped his tongue inside my mouth, and I melted. My cock had seen more action in the past twenty-four hours than the previous twelve months combined. That didn’t stop it from thickening like we had time to go another round.

It'd have to hold. It wouldn't be fair to make Arlo and Luca wait all day. Not when they'd helped orchestrate this whole thing.

“We need to text the others,” I said between kisses.

“Boring.” Silas sighed. “Fine. Let's get it over with, then we can go to your place and order Chinese food.”

I stared at him as a lump formed in my throat. “As easy as that?”

“Do we need to make it more complicated? The way I see it, we've been a couple for years. We just hadn't got around to the fun stuff.”

“You mean I get to keep you as my best friend *and* we can have sex when the mood strikes us?”

He grinned, stroking my cheek. “You get to have me in all the ways, Kai. I mean, sure, we can take it slow if you want. Go out on dates. Shit like that.”

“No,” I blurted. “I mean, yes to dates. We basically do that anyway. But fuck no to slow, Si. I'm happy to go as fast as you want to.”

“Good. We've wasted enough time. I'm ready to just get on with being happy with you.”

He was saying everything I'd ever wanted to hear, but there was still one thing nagging me. “What about...the wider world? Do you want to keep this hidden? I'm happy if you do. It's a lot of pressure to put on a new relationship.”

Silas bit his lip before shaking his head. “No. I don’t want to hide us. I’m not ashamed of you, Kai.”

“I know. But the press attention will be unreal.”

“It will...but that’s going to happen regardless of *when* we confirm what everyone already suspects. Maybe it’s better to rip the plaster off all at once.”

“You’re right. But there’s no rush. We can enjoy each other before letting the rest of the world in.”

“Speaking of the rest of the world, you better text Luca and Arlo before they lose their shit waiting. And Tristan. He deserves to know.”

He was right. Tristan had done so much to try and help. It was only fair to let him know it had all worked out in the end.

After sending the texts, I turned my attention back to Silas. We continued joking around, exchanging kisses and casual touches. It was so easy to get lost in each other that I think we both forgot we were expecting imminent company.

“No one wants to see that.”

Luca’s voice rang out from the speakers, making us jump out of our skins. Our heads whipped around to see our bandmates grinning at us through the window.

“Speak for yourself,” Arlo said when they unlocked the door to let us out. “I wouldn’t mind a free live porn show.”

“You need to get laid,” Silas said, grabbing Arlo in a headlock and ruffling his hair.

Arlo shoved him off with a weak laugh. “I’d argue with you if that wasn’t so fucking true.”

Just then, Jack stepped into the room, appearing over Arlo’s shoulder. From the expression on his face, he’d heard every word of that final exchange.

And hadn’t liked it one bit.

Jack didn’t acknowledge it though. “Luca, your car’s outside. You’ve got an interview in less than an hour.”

Arlo tensed when he heard Jack’s voice. He didn’t turn to face him, just addressed Silas breezily like no one was even there. “Yeah, I definitely need to get laid. Let’s all hit up a club soon. Doubt I’m going to be as lucky as you lot to have my perfect man fall into my lap.”

He spun around, his mouth falling open in mock surprise. “Oh, Jack. Didn’t realise it was you. Well, if you’ll excuse me.”

He brushed past the bigger man like he didn’t have a care in the world.

Unlike Silas, Arlo was a good actor when he needed to be.

Jack’s jaw worked for a moment, his fists clenching and unclenching at his sides. His expression changed like he’d come to some kind of a decision. “Luca, you okay if I take off for a minute?”

Luca’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Sure. Take your time.”

We all watched as Jack spun on his heel and stormed off after our drummer, leaving a lingering silence in our wake.

“Think we can trick the two of them into a locked space?” Luca mused after a while.

“Worked for us,” Silas said, looping his arm around my waist and softly smiling at me.

I returned his grin, leaning down to kiss him. When I came up for air, Luca was grinning at us broadly. “So this is all sorted now? You’re a thing?”

“Yep,” Silas answered for us, and I happily let him. “We’ve both finally pulled our heads out of our arses.”

“Thank fuck,” Luca muttered. “Now we just need to get Arlo and Jack to do the same, and it’ll be happy days.”

Silas and I spent the next week living in a little bubble at my house.

We binged all of *The Circle*. Silas had already seen most of it without me, but given that it was my fault for keeping him at a distance, I didn’t hold it against him.

We ate our weight in takeaway food.

And we had sex. A lot of sex.

Right now, I had Silas leaning over the kitchen counter, my balls thwacking against his arse as I railed into him.

I wasn't even sure how we'd ended up here. He'd come in wearing one of those stupidly undersized towels again. One thing had led to the other, and before I knew it, I was searching out the lube to work him open.

"Fuuuuck," Silas moaned. He had one hand braced in the sink, the other on the edge of the counter. "Don't stop. I'm so close."

I grinned down at him dopily, keeping my pace steady. Silas was quite the demanding bottom. Lucky for him, I was more than happy to go as often as he wanted.

Well, almost as often. Silas had a habit of underestimating the toll it took on his body. We weren't teenagers. We were men in our thirties. There were only so many times I could see him wince as he sat down before I cut him off.

Fortunately, he was as easily satisfied with my mouth on him. Something I was also more than happy to provide.

I looked down at where we were joined, marvelling over his magnificent bubble butt. The way it bounced against my hips was mesmerising. All ripe and peachy. Begging for me to take a bite.

It was almost better than the feel of his tight channel strangling my shaft. Almost, but not quite.

"Kai..." Silas pleaded, his legs starting to tremble against mine.

Unable to leave him wanting, I pulled him upright so his back was flush with my chest. Thanks to our height difference,

I had to crouch slightly. My knees would hate me later, but right now, I was in heaven.

I knew what Silas needed. Pinning him to me with one arm, I wrapped the other around his cock. He was dripping with precum. I slicked my palm with it and began to jerk him off. “This is all your fault, you know. Coming in here in that little fucking towel.”

I punctuated every word with a thrust. Silas’s breaths came in quick pants now. “You. Love. That. Towel.”

“Damn right, I do,” I hissed, fucking into him as I stroked him faster. “Can’t tell you how many times I’ve pictured doing this. Just ripping it off you. Bending you over. Fucking you where you stand.”

Silas moaned loudly, his eyes fluttering as his orgasm drew nearer.

“You like this, don’t you? Me with my hands all over you. Burying myself deep inside you just because I can. Owning you over and over again.”

“Yes,” Silas cried. “Own me. Fucking *ruin* me.”

Silas’s hole clamped around my cock as he erupted. It was too much. Too intense. I held Silas tight as I buried myself to the hilt and filled him up.

Our breathing was loud in the quiet kitchen as we came down from the high. My cock slipped from Silas as it softened, my knees protesting as I stood straight.

“Jesus, I need another shower now,” Silas wheezed, swiping up the piece of material that started it all. “You and that fucking mouth. It’s no wonder we let Luca write most of the songs. We would need to advertise our shows as something else entirely if you were in charge.”

I slung my arms around him, burrowing into his neck. “Nah, it’s all you. You bring out the poet in me.”

“And what a dirty fucking poet he is.”

“You love it.”

Silas grinned up at me. “I do. And I love you.”

It wasn’t the first time he’d said it to me. Nor even the one hundredth. But it was only the last handful that had truly meant something. Meant he felt the way I *wanted* him to feel. “I love you too.”

We couldn’t stay in our bubble forever. As much as I wanted to hoard my time with Silas like a dragon with his gold, we had responsibilities. Not only did we have the album to write and record, but in a couple of months, we were performing at the LondonFM Autumn Festival. Having just come off a world tour, it wasn’t like we’d need to spend days in rehearsal, but there were always decisions to be made.

Besides, I wanted to experience Silas as my partner in all areas—not just the bedroom.

Not that we ever generally made it to the actual *bedroom*, but you get what I mean.

I leaned on the door jamb and took in Silas. He was collapsed on the sofa, one hand under his head while the other idly scratched his stomach.

I could've been looking at him at any point over the past twenty years. But this was different. Because now I wasn't fighting myself to not stare at his abs. To not eye the bulge in his shorts and wonder how he tasted. To not imagine how his long fingers might feel stroking my cock.

"I'm taking you out on a date."

My words had Silas's head popping up like a meerkat. "Why?"

I rolled my eyes as I strolled over to him. "I dunno. Heard it's what couples do. Go outside, in the wide world. Be around other people."

Silas sat up, grabbing my shirt and tugging me forwards. I fell on him with a muffled *oomph*.

"If we're around other people, we can't do this," Silas said as he thrust his hips against mine.

I groaned. I allowed myself one tantalising press downwards before leaping up. "Nope. Not letting your heathenish ways sway me this time. We're going on a date."

"And *then* sex?"

"You have a one-track mind."

“Guilty.”

His answer had me blanching. I smoothed it away, but not fast enough.

“Wait, why’d you look like that?”

Sighing, I took a band from my wrist and focused on pulling my dreads back into a bun. “I just...look. The sex is great. But we’re more than that...right?”

Silas’s mouth fell open in confusion. “What?”

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m *loving* the sex. It’s fantastic. Perfect, even.” The words tumbled out as I tried to make sense of my chaotic thoughts. “But I don’t want us to...burn out.”

“Burn out?”

I nodded rapidly. “I want us to have a strong foundation, as well as the sex.”

A slow smile crept across Silas’s face. Getting to his feet, he pulled me in for a blistering kiss.

“Kai, I say this with love: we literally *cannot* get a stronger foundation than ours. As for burning out...can you *really* see that happening? You’ve wanted me for twenty years. Do you think you’re going to wake up a year from now and suddenly change your mind?”

“Not me,” I whispered, hating to admit my greatest fear.

Silas sighed. “Look, Kai. I get it. You’re scared. You’ve finally got what you always wanted, and you’re afraid of it being ripped away.”

I touched my forehead to his. “Can you blame me? I spent four months away from you, and it nearly killed me. I’m trying not to be needy...to not rush things...but it’s hard.”

“I like you needy,” he murmured, stroking my back soothingly. “I don’t feel like we are rushing things. We’re just doing what makes us happy. Are you happy?”

“Of course I am.”

“Then let yourself be happy,” Silas said simply. “If taking me out on a date makes you happy, then that’s what we’ll do.”

“Spending time with you makes me happy.”

“Well, that’s good, considering how much of it we spend together.” He squeezed my biceps. “If you think about it, we’ve technically been dating for years.”

I hummed, feeling far calmer now I knew we were on the same page. “True. Which is how I know you’re going to love what I’ve got arranged.”

“An escape room?”

“Of course. Followed by dinner at Mango.”

Silas gave a delighted groan. Yep, there were definite perks to dating your best friend. Made planning what to do super easy.

“Hell yes.” He pinched my rear. “Let’s go escape and eat our weight in Thai tapas. Then blowjobs.”

My laugh boomed out. “Then blowjobs.”

Silas snuggled into my chest. “And you thought you were the needy one.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Silas

Kai had booked us into a 1960s-themed spy room. These types were my favourites. Solving puzzles with vintage twists? Sign me the fuck up.

However, we hit a snag fairly early in. Turns out Kai and I could no longer be put in a confined space without one of us trying to cop a feel of the other.

Thank fuck, Dylan and Rhys had been there to get the NDAs signed. Any leaked footage would have bordered on pornographic.

It niggled in the back of my mind that to the staff here at least, we were confirming we were together. I didn't have a problem with that...and from what he'd said in the recording studio, I didn't think Kai would either.

But he'd made it clear he hadn't enjoyed our onstage antics. The last thing I wanted was to put him in a similar position.

Needless to say, we didn't escape in time. Not that either of us really cared. We'd joked together. Laughed. Flirted. Kissed.

Like I'd told Kai, it was the same as it had always been... just with lots of fun extras.

Both our guards accompanied us to Mango. With us doing little to hide our relationship, we thought it best to bring them both along. We invited them to join us, but they declined, opting to sit at the bar.

The pretty woman behind said bar had no impact on their decision, I was sure.

I was grateful it was just Kai and me. We'd been coming to this restaurant since we were twenty, before the band took off. The only difference in coming now was that they sat us in a quiet corner, tucked behind a decorative screen.

It was a considerate touch. Most restaurants liked to seat us as though we were on display. Using us as an advertisement to draw others in.

But the owners here never did that. As a result, not only did we come here often, but we hyped it on our socials as often as possible.

Being kind and considerate works, people.

We were on dessert when Dylan approached our table, Rhys hot on his heels.

"What's wrong?" I said immediately, noting Dylan's ashen face.

"It's my sister." He swallowed hard. "She's been in a car accident."

“Oh my god.” I jumped up, my hand gripping his arm. “Is she okay? What can we do?”

“She’s been taken to Southampton General.” His voice shook. “I need to get over there, but...”

“Go,” Kai said firmly, standing too. “You need to go now.”

Dylan nodded, tears falling down his cheeks. “I’m sorry to leave you.”

I exchanged a glance with Kai. “Dylan, I’m not sure you’re in a fit state to drive.”

“I’ll drive him,” Rhys said gruffly. From the tense way he watched him, I doubted he’d leave his side until they had news.

“We can’t both leave,” Dylan said helplessly. “They need a protection detail.”

Kai and I rolled our eyes in unison. “Yes, you can. We’re grown-ass men. It’s not like we’re on tour or there are screaming hordes of fans outside. Besides, we’ve almost finished here. Our car is outside.”

“We’ll be fine,” Kai added. “Go. And if you need anything, *anything*, just call.”

Dylan nodded numbly, but I wasn’t sure he even heard. He was lost in thought, his body crumpling inwards as he walked towards the door.

“Text when you’re home,” Rhys barked over his shoulder as he raced after the other man. “Dyl, wait up!”

A hollow silence followed in their wake as we slipped back into our seats. “Oh my god.”

“I know,” Kai said grimly, reaching across the table to grab my hand. “I just keep thinking, what if that was Ruby? Or Mia?”

“Same.” They weren’t related to me by blood, but they were my sisters nonetheless. “Fuck, I hope she’s okay. We need to offer to pay for private treatment if it’s needed.”

“Of course we will,” Kai said as he tapped on his phone with his spare hand. “I’ve already let Betty know. She’ll be in touch with Dylan tomorrow to offer whatever he needs.”

“Good.” To be fair, Southampton General was one of the top trauma centres in the country. She was in the best place possible. But if she needed further treatment or recovery, we could make sure that happened somewhere nicer than the standard NHS hospital.

And that wasn’t knocking the staff, one of whom was Ruby. They were fucking awesome. But there was no getting away from the fact that the NHS was massively underfunded and majorly overworked.

Neither of us touched our desserts after that, too preoccupied with Dylan and what he was going through.

There was a bite to the air as we stepped outside, a reminder that autumn was just around the corner.

We were within six feet of Kai’s car when a shadow broke away from the wall. The man stepped in front of me, cutting

off my path.

Ice raced through my veins, my stomach lurching as the voice from my nightmares manifested itself. “Hello, son.”

I was frozen in place. Kai had no such issue. He moved in a flash, pushing me behind him as he stepped between us. “What are you doing here, Frank?”

Over Kai’s shoulder, I watched numbly as my father sneered at Kai. “Oh, it’s you. Still sniffing around after my kid, I see. Disgusting.”

My stomach rolled. He could say whatever he wanted to me. But not to Kai. Never Kai.

Taking a deep breath, I stepped to the side, pulling level with Kai. I kept my face blank as I surveyed the man before me. The man who I wished only fucking existed in my nightmares.

The years had not been kind to him, no thanks to the drugs and alcohol he’d pumped through his system. His hair hung in greasy strands around his face. The sneer revealed yellow teeth with a couple missing.

“Don’t talk to Kai like that.”

“Oh, you’re going to speak to me now? Thought you liked to pretend you don’t have a dad.”

“I do have a dad. But he’s sure as shit not you.”

Frank moved to grab my collar, but Kai’s arm shot out to stop him. “Back the fuck up, Frank.”

“Don’t touch me,” he spat in Kai’s direction. “He’s my son. I’ll treat him however the fuck I want to.”

Kai stepped forwards, a dangerous gleam in his eyes. “Oh, I’ve seen how you treat him. I saw it back then when he’d turn up at my house with bruises and broken bones. And I’ve seen it since, every time you’ve sold your story trying to cash in on his success.”

Numbness started tingling my fingers as that yawning darkness crept in.

“So what if I did?” Frank jeered. “He owes me fucking *everything*.”

“He owes you nothing,” Kai countered hotly. “So whatever you think you’re here to achieve, it’s not going to happen.”

Frank bristled. “We’ll see about that—”

I interrupted him, my voice hollow. “What do you want?”

Kai shot me an incredulous look, but I just wanted this over with.

His beady eyes darted between us, no doubt noticing how Kai was hovering protectively. “Well, I have one story left to sell. How two members of the biggest band in the world are fucking. Have been since they were teenagers.”

Kai’s voice was level. “How much are you asking for?”

“I think ten grand should hold me.” His voice was as greasy as an oil slick. “For now, anyway. And you’ll give it over unless you want everyone to think you actually *are* a couple.”

I chuckled, the noise making both men snap their attention to me.

“That’s the best you can do?” I slipped my hand inside Kai’s, stepping closer. “Threatening to out me and Kai? Unluckily for you, Frank, we couldn’t give a shit about that.”

Frank reeled back in disgust as Kai smiled at me proudly. “You fucking *what?* You’re...fucking *a man?*”

Suddenly, I was looking at him and wondering what I’d ever been afraid of. Sure, he had a few inches on me, but I was no longer the scrawny kid I’d once been. I’d packed on muscle over the years, and I was certain I was faster on my feet than this cunt.

Still, I didn’t let go of Kai’s hand as I went toe to toe with Frank. Not because I needed him to protect me, but to ground me. “Actually, if you wanna be specific, that man is fucking *me.*”

Frank literally stumbled back a step, his mouth falling in horror.

“Oh look, he’s a homophobic twat too,” I said to Kai mildly. “He really is going for the full bigotry bingo card.”

“Think he scored a full house on that years ago,” Kai said darkly, not taking his eyes off Frank.

“I still want my money,” Frank spat out stubbornly.

“Well, I wanted a dad who gave a shit,” I said bitterly. “I didn’t get that from you, but I got that from Mike. So, you can

go and find your money from someone else. Because you're not getting a penny from me."

That was Frank's breaking point. With a muffled curse, he swung one of his meaty fists.

Even if Kai hadn't caught it with his arm, I could've easily evaded it. I'd been right. The years had slowed him down.

But him taking a swing was apparently Kai's breaking point too.

Grabbing my dad by the collar, he swung him up against the wall of a nearby shop. I glanced around frantically, but we were alone. Thank fuck.

"Now listen here." Kai's voice was dangerously low as he pinned my struggling sperm donor in place. "I might've listened to Silas when we were kids, but I won't let you touch him now. Silas is *mine*. If you ever come near him again, I'll kill you."

Frank gave an incredulous laugh. "You can't *kill* anyone. You're one of the most famous people in the world, for fuck's sake."

"Exactly." There was an icy malevolence in Kai's voice that I'd never heard before. "I'm famous. And disgustingly rich. Rich enough to hire someone to do my dirty work for me. Rich enough to bribe whoever the fuck I need to turn a blind eye to your disappearance. Not that it would even be a problem. I doubt *anyone* would even notice you'd gone missing, let alone give enough of a shit to do anything about it."

“I’ll tell everyone about this,” Frank seethed. “I’ll go to the press and tell them you threatened me.”

Kai smirked. “You do that. Let’s see who they believe. Me and Silas, upstanding celebrities who actively volunteer for child abuse charities. Or you, a washed-up drunk whose only known connection to his son is the stories he sells for money.”

I stepped next to Kai, looking Frank in the face for what I prayed was the final time. “Not only will no one believe you, but if you do that, I’ll tell my own story.”

Kai’s head whipped to me. He knew better than anyone how well I hid my past. But no more. I wasn’t letting Frank have any power over me. “I’ll tell them about the beatings. How you’d lock me in my closet. How you’d purposefully starve me until I was too weak to fight back. I’ll tell them all of it, Frank. I’ll go to the fucking police if I have to.”

“And we’ll add that you are threatening him and trying to extort money,” Kai said. “Our words against yours, Frank. Who do you think they are going to believe?”

Kai glared at him for a moment longer before releasing him. He wiped his hands on his coat like he was trying to remove the feel of him.

Frank shoved past us, muttering under his breath and eyes on the ground.

Kai waited until he was a few feet away before speaking. “Oh, and, Frank?”

He looked over his shoulder.

“I meant what I said.” Kai spoke like he was commenting on the traffic. “Touch Silas again, and you’ll end up at the bottom of a river somewhere. I mean that.”

For the first time, there was fear in Frank’s eyes. He nodded once before scurrying off into the night.

I kept my knees locked in place until I could no longer see him.

Only then did I let myself break. I sank forwards, knowing Kai would catch me.

He did just that, supporting our weight and holding me as shuddering sobs tore from my chest.

“I got you,” he whispered, cradling me to him. “I’ll never let him hurt you again.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Kai

I wasn't a violent person. But there wasn't a shadow of a doubt in my mind that I could become one where Frank was concerned.

Silas was quiet the whole way home, clinging to my arm as I drove through the quiet city streets. The moment we slipped from the car, he nudged under my arm, letting me bundle him up.

We stayed like that throughout the night. He didn't want to talk, and I didn't push him.

Just held him tight.

When dawn finally broke, so did his silence.

"Thank you."

I kissed his stubbled cheek. "You don't have to thank me, baby. I'm sorry he was able to get that close to you."

"You can't protect me from everything."

"No, but I *can* protect you from Frank."

“You always have,” he mused, stroking his hands over my chest. “I don’t think I would’ve survived without you.”

It wasn’t the first time he’d said something like this, but like all those other times, my breath cut through me. The utter fear of what might’ve been if he hadn’t saved me that day. If we hadn’t found each other. “You’ve got me. As long as you want me.”

“I think that’s what hurt me the most when you left.” His voice was quiet, so quiet, like he daren’t speak this thought too loud. “I wasn’t just losing you, but losing my family.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to apologise again for leaving him, but Silas had made it clear that he didn’t want that. “You wouldn’t have lost your family, Si.”

He glanced up at me furtively. “You say that, but you’re my only family, Kai. You and your parents and your siblings... you’re all I’ve got. It was...it was a reminder, that’s all. That if I lost you, I’d lose my family too.”

“That would literally never happen.” I frowned at him. “Didn’t you speak to them while I was gone?”

He shrugged. “Yeah...I mean, I spoke to Ruby a lot. And your parents. Even went out for a drink with Louis.”

“See, they wouldn’t leave you.” I stroked his hair. “No matter what happens with us, baby, they’ll always be your family.”

“Yeah...maybe.”

He wasn't buying it. After the shitshow with Frank the night before, I couldn't blame him. It'd taken him a long time to understand that my family accepted him as much as they did me. It wasn't surprising that the reminder of his sperm donor had his insecurities bubbling to the surface.

The chances of us breaking up were slim...but no one could predict the future. If we went into this with Silas worrying that losing me meant losing my family, how could I know he was staying with me for the right reasons?

There was only one way to fix this. One way to remind him that he had a seat at my parents' table, regardless of everything else.

I'd sent an SOS to my family, asking them all to gather at my parents' house the following day. Mum always cooked a massive Sunday lunch and liked to have as many of us there as possible, so I knew it wouldn't be an issue. We tried to get together as often as we could. No one commented in the main chat other than to say they'd be there, but within seconds, I had a private message from Ruby.

Please tell me you have good news.

Silas and I had agreed to wait and tell them in person, so I'd replied with the slightly passive-aggressive thumbs-up emoji.

Ruby's middle finger reply told me what she thought of *that*.

“You sure you want to do this?” Silas bit his lip as we walked up to my parents’ house. “We don’t have to do this if you’re not ready.”

I wheeled around, putting both my hands on his shoulders. “Si, I’ve been out to them since I was nineteen. This won’t come as a surprise to them. But if you’re not ready, that’s different. This is your journey. It’s up to you when you come out. We don’t need to rush.”

“It’s not that...” He blew out a breath. “It won’t be a surprise that you’re bringing a guy home. But it will be a surprise that it’s *me*.”

I stared at him for a moment before my lips twitched. Before I could stop myself, a full laugh broke free.

“Stop laughing at me!” Silas said with a pout. “They’re my family. What if they don’t want us to be together?”

The fact that Frank had made him this insecure made me wish I had punched him.

“Baby, you don’t need to worry. They’ve known about my feelings for you for a *very* long time.”

“They have? Since when?”

“Well, Dad and Ruby made it clear the other night that I haven’t been very good at hiding it from the family. And Louis...” Maybe I shouldn’t tell him this. But...honesty. This is what I was going for. “He found me crying after prom and put two and two together.”

“Prom?” Silas frowned at me quizzically before horror dawned. “Oh my god, the night I lost my virginity.”

“It’s fine,” I said quickly, trying not to remember the first tender sting on my young heart.

Silas’s cheeks were red with mortification. “I told you all about it. In *graphic* detail. Fuck, Kai. Why didn’t you just tell me to shut up?”

“You were so happy.” I shrugged. “I didn’t want to ruin that moment for you.”

He sighed, his head falling against my shoulder. “It’s a good thing I’ve decided you’re it for me because you say shit like that and I remember you can be a fucking idiot.”

“I’m *your* fucking idiot.” I kissed the tip of his nose. “And can I just say, I love that you’re still giving me shit. Nothing’s changed in that sense...and I love that.”

“Nothing *has* changed,” Silas emphasised. “We are the same as we always were, but now we are able to love each other the way we always should have.”

“There you are.” My dad’s booming voice had Silas trying to jump away from me. I tightened my hold, refusing to let his fear take over. “Your mum was starting to fret.”

With a few short strides, he was beside us. He didn’t miss a beat before throwing out his arms and wrapping us both in a big bear hug.

“Now, have you two sorted things out?”

“Umm...yes?” Silas’s voice was muffled by both mine and my dad’s chests.

“Sure about that?” Dad didn’t let us go. “Because if you’re coming here to tell us anything other than you’re desperately in love and giving a relationship a go, I’m not going to be pleased.”

“It’s okay,” I said to Dad, slapping him on the back. “We got everything sorted.”

“Good.” He stepped back, Silas inhaling a massive gasp of air as he stumbled slightly. “If you carried on much longer, I would’ve locked you both in a room and refused to let you out.”

Silas and I exchanged a fond grin. “Funny you should say that...”

I didn’t get any further before my mum was there, shoving between us to face Silas with her hands on her hips. “There you are, young man. I’ve got a bone to pick with you.”

The blood drained from Silas’s face as his gaze locked with mine over her head. For a heart-stopping second, I thought Silas was going to deny us. That his fear of losing the only family he’d ever known would trump his feelings for me.

I needed to learn to have more faith in Silas.

“I’m in love with Kai,” he said firmly to Mum. “I’m sorry if you’re unhappy with that, Mrs Parker, but we’re together. And, if I get my way, that won’t change any time soon.”

Mum didn't move for a second. Then she clipped him around one ear. Then the other.

"Ouch," Silas hissed, slamming his hand over his ears. "What'd I do?"

I hid my grin behind my hand. I loved how Silas was *worried* Mum wouldn't treat him like part of the family.

"First one was for calling me *Mrs Parker* like I'm the cat's mother rather than someone who practically *raised* you."

Silas rubbed his ear sheepishly.

She grabbed his cheeks, forcing him to meet her gaze. Her voice was gentle. "The other was for even *thinking* I'd have an issue with you and Kai together. What on earth could give you that idea?"

Silas didn't answer, but his eyes shuttered. *Fucking Frank.*

"Si." I gently moved my mum to the side so I could take her place. "I know your mum fucked off and your dad is a complete cunt, but my parents love you. We *all* do. Like I've been trying to tell you, nothing will ever change that."

"Kai's right," my dad said, clapping Silas on the back of his neck. "Even if Kai fucks up and lets you slip through his fingers, you'll still be our son. You'll still be expected to show up at Easter and Christmas...plus every other week to mow the grass."

A tear slid down Silas's cheek as he gave a choked laugh. "Please. If anyone is going to be fucking this up, it'll be me."

I highly doubted that, but this wasn't really about me or even us. It was about Silas. About his need to belong.

“The same will still apply, even if that is the case,” Mum said firmly, wrapping her arm around his waist. “You’re part of the family, Si. The only thing that might possibly change is your surname.”

Silas’s eyes flew to mine as my mouth dropped open. Did Mum seriously just drop the wedding bomb?

“Mum,” I hissed, feeling like an embarrassed seventeen-year-old all over again. “We’ve literally been together a week.”

“Pssh.” She waved that away like it was immaterial. “You two might not have been bumping uglies, but you’ve been together in every other way for years.”

Silas and I threw our hands over our ears. “Mum, don’t say things like that.”

“Kill me now,” Silas groaned.

“I give up.” Mum threw her hands up in frustration. “Honestly, do you kids think me and your dad don’t have a healthy sex life? Why, just last week—”

“I don’t think they need to hear that, Di,” Dad interjected smoothly, steering her towards the house. “Come on, let’s get you a drink.”

We were silent as we watched them leave. As the door closed behind them, we faced each other.

And burst into raucous laughter.

Eventually, the sound faded into the night, leaving us wiping tears from our eyes.

“See, you had nothing to worry about. You can’t let Frank’s cuntishness get in the way of you being happy. Neither of your biological parents deserves another second of your time.”

“Meh. I have much better ones anyway.” It was like a weight had been stripped for him, my usual cheerful Silas reappearing in a blink. Amusement danced in his eyes as he waggled his brows at me. “Besides, soon we will be married, and they’ll be mine on paper too.”

“Can’t *believe* Mum dropped me in it like that.”

Silas wrapped his arms around me, pressing his lips to the base of my throat. “I can. Remember when Louis brought his first girlfriend home? She asked the poor girl if she preferred carnations or roses as her friend Suzy is a florist and could do them a cracking deal on wedding flowers.”

I hugged him back, laughing as the memory popped into my head. “Poor Louis, you mean. I don’t think he’s brought anyone home since.”

Silas lifted his head, giving that all-too-familiar grin. “I know it’s been a week, but...your mum’s right. We’ve basically been a couple for years.”

My eyes widened. “Is this a marriage proposal?”

He rolled his eyes, digging his fingers into my ribs until I laughed. “Of course it’s fucking not. But...I’m just saying. I’m

not putting limits on us. I say we move at whatever speed feels right. Not what society tells us we should be doing.”

I smirked. “Good, because I feel the same way. Fuck everyone else, let’s just do what makes us happy.”

Silas kissed me one more time before grabbing my hand. “Come on, before they send Ruby out to get us.”

He was pushing the door open before he paused, snapping his fingers like he’d just remembered something. “Oh, and, Kai?”

“Yeah?”

His dimple flashed as he grinned back at me. “When I propose, you won’t need to check if that’s what’s happening. You’ll *know*.”

Then he swept inside my parents’ house, leaving me dumbstruck on the doorstep.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Silas

Dinner with Kai's family...well, *our* family, had gone great. No one had seemed surprised by our news. If anything, they were relieved.

The knowledge that even his parents had known about Kai's feelings for me had a knot of guilt forming in my stomach. How was it that everyone had been able to see how he felt except for me?

I got why no one said anything, but fuck. I wish they had. Anything to take back the years of hurt I'd unwittingly bestowed on Kai. I couldn't help thinking about all the girls I'd taken back to the hotel, a different one every night. How Kai would dip out early whenever I hit it off with someone in a club. How he'd always had an excuse if I invited him along with a girl I was dating.

Little by little, I'd been breaking his heart. And he might've said he was fine with it.

But I wasn't sure I was.

“Okay, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I replied, striding into the bedroom and kicking off my shoes. Like always, we were crashing at his parents’ house. It meant we could have a few beers at dinner without worrying about getting home. “Just tired.”

Kai’s nostrils flared like they had all those years ago in the woods, the day he’d learned the truth about my home life. “Don’t lie to me, Silas. We don’t do that anymore.”

Anymore. Because we both knew he’d been lying to me for a very long time.

I sat on the edge of the bed, leaning on my knees and letting my head drop forward. “I’m just...all up in my head.”

His knees brushed my hands as he stood before me. “About what.”

I groaned internally. “If I tell you, it’s just gonna piss you off.”

“Well, if you *don’t* tell me, I’m gonna get pissed off anyway. Seems like you’re fucked either way.”

I sighed. He was right. There was no getting around it. “I’m frustrated with myself. For not seeing what everyone else obviously could.”

Kai’s fingers went under my chin, tilting my head up until I looked at him. My mouth went dry at the sight of him smouldering down at me. His dreads were loose, hanging around his head as his eyes sparked with heat. “Okay, I’m going to say this once, and *only* once. You got that?”

Fuck, he was hot when he got bossy. “Maybe.”

He smirked like he knew the effect he was having on me. Pretty sure the bulge in my trousers was giving me away. “You are not to blame for things that happened in the past. It has no bearing on us now. Or maybe it does. Without those things happening, maybe we wouldn’t have ended up here right now.”

“I still wish I’d figured things out earlier.”

“But maybe if you had, it might not have worked,” Kai said firmly. “We were young and stupid back then. Maybe this is the way it had to happen. Maybe we needed to be *ready* before taking this step.”

Kai’s words healed an aching wound in my heart. He was right. It was time to stop living in the past and start living in the present. My attention snagged on the sizable bulge level with my face, my mind helpfully supplying me with an idea on how we could demonstrate *living in the present*. “I’m so ready now.”

He went to step back, but I grabbed him around the back of his thighs. “Where do you think you’re going?”

A small wrinkle appeared between Kai’s brows. “Umm...to get ready for bed?”

“But I said I’m ready.” I grinned mischievously as I slid my hands up to squeeze his arse. “And look, here I am at the *perfect* height to suck you off.”

Kai groaned. “That’s not even slightly what we were talking about.”

“I know...but now that’s done and dusted, I was thinking we could do other things. More fun things.”

“You were thinking about that while we were having a serious discussion?”

“It’s called multitasking, Kai.” I pulled on his trousers, my mouth watering as his hard cock was revealed. “Besides, it’s your fault for dangling that weapon in my face.”

Kai laughed. “You’re the one who got it out.”

My hand glided along his shaft, going underneath to cup his balls. “Because getting it out leads to fun things. I’m just making up for lost time here.”

“Fuuck,” Kai said as I rolled my hand over his balls. “Wait, we’re at my parents’ house.”

I snorted. “Didn’t stop us last time.”

“I guess not...”

I winked at him. “Guess this time you’ll have to be quiet.”

Holding his cock towards my mouth, I studied it for a moment. I hadn’t done this yet. Sure, Kai had sucked me off *many* times, but I’d yet to return the favour.

“You know you don’t have to do anything,” Kai said quietly.

“I know that, but I want to. I’m just taking my time about it.”

“You don’t have to get it all in.” Kai’s voice was hoarse as he ran a hand over my hair.

“Get all of it in? Fuck, Kai, I’m a bassist. Not a sword swallower.”

He gave a throaty laugh. “You’re a fucking wind-up merchant, that’s what you are. But seriously, just having your mouth on me will be enough to wreck me.”

I took a deep breath. After a week of almost nonstop sex, I was familiar with the size and shape of him. If anything, that made me more nervous than I might’ve been. Now I knew damn well how big he was. I was reminded every time I sat down, for fuck’s sake.

But I wanted this. I wanted to be the one driving Kai crazy with pleasure.

Besides, like he said, I didn’t need to deep-throat him. We could work up to that.

I could become the deep-throating champion.

Maybe.

Starting slow, I flicked my tongue over his slit. The whimper from Kai gave me the confidence to run my tongue over the head. I moaned at the taste, so foreign, yet also undeniably Kai.

“Silas,” Kai whispered. “That’s it, baby.”

I preened under his praise. Opening my mouth wide, I took the first few inches of him into my mouth. Sucking experimentally, I swirled my tongue around him.

“Holy fucking shit, Silas!”

I pulled off with a plopping noise to glare at him. “Shh! If anyone hears us, we won’t ever live it down.”

He looked at me pleadingly. “I can’t help it. I told you what having your mouth on me would do.”

I thought quickly, nudging him backwards. “Come on.”

Within a few minutes, we were enclosed in the ensuite, the door firmly locked. Naked and with the shower running, Kai was free to be as loud as he liked.

Well, within reason. It wasn’t as good as a literal sound booth, but it was better than the bedroom.

Which was good because Kai could not keep quiet. And I was fucking *here* for it.

“That’s it, baby,” he praised, his hands deep in my hair as I bobbed on his cock. I was on my knees, water spraying over me from the shower. I didn’t care though. I was too focused on driving Kai wild.

His knees trembled, the wall holding him up as I sucked him down. I’d been right. There was no way I could fit all of him in. There was also no way I was ready for him to fuck my throat the way I did with him.

Baby steps. We’d get there.

Instead, I jacked the lower half of his cock with enthusiasm while my mouth took care of the top half.

“Love you on your knees for me,” Kai groaned, his fingers tightening on my hair. “Fuck, Silas. How am I supposed to

watch you on stage now without thinking of you like this?”

I couldn't smile at him, not with his cock stretching my mouth wide. But I looked up at him from under my lashes.

He was debauched.

His chest heaved rapidly, his muscles tensing and flexing. His head was thrown back, water beading down the taut lines of his neck.

And his eyes? They were on me.

“You're so beautiful. Don't stop. Oh my god, Si. Don't stop, baby.”

I didn't. I couldn't. I was desperate to taste him. My own erection throbbed between my legs, begging for relief. It'd have to wait though. I wanted Kai to come first. No, I *needed* it. Needed to taste him. Needed to take him apart, knowing I was the one he needed to put him back together again.

He didn't make me wait long. His hands spasmed on my hair as he gave a loud moan.

Hot sprays of salty liquid filled my mouth. I swallowed rapidly, but there was too much, some of it leaking out of the corners of my mouth.

I was barely able to sweep my hand over my mouth before Kai pulled me to my feet and kissed me.

“Wait,” I said, pushing back. “I taste like you.”

“Don't care,” he murmured. “Need you too much.”

He backed me against the wall, his tongue deep in my mouth. One of his hands cupped the back of my head while the other roamed all over me.

I sank into his kiss, trying to ignore my aching cock. It was pressed against Kai's abdomen, the friction enough to keep him interested but not enough to offer relief.

Fortunately, Kai didn't keep me waiting. Pulling back long enough to grab a squirt of conditioner, he slicked his hand over my cock.

"Gonna get you off like this," he muttered against my lips. "Can't stop kissing you."

"Fine with me," I gasped before our mouths crashed together again.

It took mere moments for Kai's talented hand to bring me over the edge. But it took a lot longer for us to stop making out and turn the shower off. Even that involved lots of lazy kisses.

We had a lot of time to make up for.

And boy, was it fun doing so.

The next two months passed in a cloud of bliss.

Kai and I slipped into a relationship as easily as we had our friendship. Within a few weeks of it being clear that neither of

us wanted to spend a night apart, I put my house on the market and moved into his place.

His house had always felt more like home than my own, so it just made sense. Some people might think we'd moved too fast, that we were too codependent...but quite frankly, those people could fuck off.

Kai was happy. I was happy. His family was happy.

That was literally all that mattered.

Despite the fact we hadn't gone to much effort to hide our relationship, the press hadn't clicked onto it. Something that *amused* Ollie greatly. We'd told him he could have the scoop, but he'd brushed it off. "The attention will be insane, trust me. Hold on to this peace for as long as you can."

Seeing as he was not only a journalist but had also just gone through this with Luca, we decided to follow his advice. Given how much time we'd spent together *before* we were in a relationship, the public didn't seem suspicious of our frequent public appearances.

It wasn't a big deal to either of us. We could've taken the same route as Luca and made a statement about it. But the longer it went on, the more amused we became, wondering if people would *ever* notice.

But tonight was going to be the real test. For the first time since making our relationship official, we would be performing on stage together. The LondonFM Autumn Festival was a huge event held in Wembley Stadium.

And Caffeine Daydreams was the headline act.

I'd tried to talk to Kai about how he wanted to go about it. Did he want us to stick to different sides of the stage? Behave like we always had? I was game for whatever and had told him as much.

His answer had been to laugh and kiss me until I stopped jabbering. Then he'd simply said, "Don't worry about it. Just go with the flow."

Just go with the flow. Since when was Kai so chill?

We hit the stage to the usual thunderous applause. Adrenaline spiked as my eyes roamed over the packed stadium. My hands tingled as I ran them over my instrument.

Fuck, this never got old.

I looked sideways at Kai to find him watching me. He threw me a wink, and I grinned back at him. Thank God we'd worked all this out. There'd been so much at stake—losing each other, the band, our entire livelihood...it had been a huge risk.

But damn. I was glad we'd taken it.

We weren't doing a full set tonight, just three songs: "Tease," "Something," and "Deep Down."

"Tease" started, and I kept my feet planted. The whole crowd bayed, the chants loud. A lot of them were chanting for Luca.

Kneel. Kneel. Kneel.

But most of them were chanting something else.

Dance. Dance. Dance.

I glanced over to where Kai was, a small frown appearing when I saw he wasn't there.

Just then, lips brushed over the back of my neck. I twisted in surprise to find Kai with a familiar look in his eyes. But it was one I was used to shooting his way, not the other way around.

Come on. Play with me.

Like I'd deny him.

Hitting the final note for my part, I swung my bass behind me as we swapped positions. The volume in the stadium blasted upwards, almost deafening, even with my earpieces in.

With my bass at my back, I pressed close to Kai. I sang the lyrics into his ear as he leaned back against me. My hands teased all over him, dipping further south than I ever would have before.

Thank fuck his crotch was covered by his guitar. I didn't go *that* far down, but it was enough for him to be sporting a sizable bulge.

Every line of Kai was relaxed as I ground against him. A blissful smile twisted his lips as his fingers danced over his instrument. This was nothing like how we'd danced together before. Now, every touch was intimate. Meaningful.

A tease.

When it was time for me to come back in, we flipped back-to-back. I could feel his heat leeching onto my skin through

his shirt. Now I wished I'd done a Luca and gone shirtless. Never mind, I'd get my fill of him later. In private. When I could lick every inch of him because he was *mine*.

There was only so much of Kai I wanted to share with our fans. How he looked when he came apart as I rode him was *not* one of them.

We spent the rest of the song pressed together, only parting when "Something" took over. My eyes drifted to Ollie, who stood like always beside Jack in the pit. His face lit up as Luca crooned the lyrics to him.

Their love was special. Theirs.

My gaze caught on Kai, who watched me with a soft smile.

Just like our love was special. Ours.

The final song came to a close, and the crowd went wild. I put my hands in the air, waving as I began walking backwards.

But none of the others moved.

"Hey, Dreamers," Luca drawled into the microphone. "We've got a special treat tonight, just for you."

We did? I shot a questioning look at Kai and then Arlo, but they both evaded my gaze.

"Tonight, you're not only getting another song, but one that no one else has heard yet."

My frown deepened as a chill went down my spine. Holy shit, what had I forgotten? What were we playing? Something from the new album? My mind began frantically racing

through various tracks, wondering which one he was talking about.

The crowd was almost hysterical now. Luca gave them a satisfied smirk, knowing exactly how to work them. “Even better, I’m not the one singing it.”

My mind came to a screeching halt as Kai took up his guitar and handed it off to Luca. Even more confusing was the techie who appeared at my side, impatiently tugging at my instrument until I handed it over.

“Now, as Luca said,” Kai spoke into the mic, “this song is *very* new. So new, in fact, it’s not technically finished. So, I’m going to ask you all to just...imagine the lovely bass line for now. Because not only are you all hearing it for the first time, but so is someone else. Someone who’s very important to me.”

I drew in a gasp, something that was echoed by about ninety thousand fans.

Kai pulled the mic from the stand before facing me. “Let’s not have *any* confusion this time. Silas, this one’s for you.”

Arlo counted them in with his drumsticks.

Five.

Kai stepped forwards.

Six.

My breath whooshed out.

Seven.

His hand trembled as he lifted the mic to his mouth.

Eight.

He began to sing.

It wasn't just a song—it was a story.

The story of us.

Two boys in a dark place

Gave each other a safe space

But one gave away his heart

While the other didn't know where to start

I stepped closer to him as he sang, unaware my feet were moving.

Now you're telling me I have a chance

Now you're telling me you're changing stance

And I'm telling you that you are wrong

Because I've kept my heart close for too long

My hand wrapped around the back of his neck, pulling his forehead to mine. I hated that he still beat himself up for what happened. But who knew what might've happened if we hadn't chosen the route we did. Would we have ended up right here? Where we were meant to be?

I'd like to think so...but there was no guarantee that would've happened. So I, for one, was *grateful* for everything that had happened in our past. Grateful because it had led us here. To each other.

With me finally seeing him the way I was supposed to.

*Now you're fighting for me every day,
Now you say you want me in every way
And I'm telling you all my hopes and fears
Praying you'll be mine for all the years*

I lifted a hand to his face. Our story continued to pour from his lips. The pain of the past. The joy of the present. The hope for the future.

There was no one else. Just two boys from the council estate, vowing to be there for the other.

No matter what.

The final note broke from him on a quiver before he lowered the microphone.

I blinked away tears, giving him a small smirk. "For me."

He grinned back, his own eyes glassy. "They are all for you, Si. And you fucking know it."

I didn't know who moved first. One second, we were grinning at each other. The next, our mouths were crashing together. There was the distant sound of the microphone hitting the floor. I jumped up, Kai catching me with ease as my legs wound around him.

This time, it was my earpiece that was knocked out. I winced as the roaring sound hit me, pulling back from the kiss. I waved sheepishly at our screaming fans. "Guess the news is out."

“It actually broke a few hours ago,” Kai confessed. “Someone snapped a photo of us kissing outside that escape room yesterday.”

“Well, you couldn’t expect me to wait until we were somewhere more private. You were a badass with how fast you solved that puzzle with the marbles.”

Kai pecked my lips again, his arms holding me steady. “You okay with all this?”

I glanced out at the crowd, then at Arlo and Luca, who were both beaming at us from across the stage. “Yeah, feels pretty perfect considering how this all started.”

“It started a long time before we were on stage.”

“It did.” I leaned my forehead against his. “But it was up here that I woke up and finally *saw* you. I promise I’m never going to lose sight of you again.”

With the entire world watching, Kai claimed my lips once more.

I didn’t care who was watching.

Kai was mine. He always had been.

And now, he always would be.

Epilogue

Kai

Six months later

“Where’d you hear about this escape room?”

“It’s brand new.” Silas practically bristled with excitement as he led us through the industrial estate towards a unit in the back. “Just opened.”

“Mm-hmm,” I said dubiously, eyeing our surroundings. The presence of both Rhys and Dylan steadied my worries. After our onstage declaration, we hadn’t been able to leave the house without multiple security guards. Half a year on, the presence had dwindled. But still, we weren’t taking any chances.

Better safe than sorry.

Dylan drew level with me. My once-cheerful guard now wore a mask of stress at all times. “How’s Sadie?”

He startled at my question, his lips thinning into something almost resembling a smile. “She’s...okay. Every day is much the same as the one before, really.”

“I’m sorry.” I reached out to squeeze his arm. “Do you need to take some more time? We don’t mind.”

“No, it’s okay,” he said hurriedly. “Honestly, being here is a distraction. I need that right now.”

“Okay, well, the offer’s there if you ever change your mind.” After her accident, he’d taken some time off to help her rehabilitate. But even with access to the best physiotherapists, there was only so much they could do to help her regain movement in her legs.

We’d paid Dylan his full wage while he was off, ensuring he knew we’d do that for as long as needed. Our hearts broke for him when Sadie woke from the coma to the news she’d never walk again.

Silas continued bobbing along in front of us, like a cork in a bottle of champagne ready to be popped. “He does know where we’re going, right?”

Dylan blinked. “He does. It’s just up ahead and on the right. I came here earlier to get the NDAs signed.”

That was thoughtful. “Thanks, Dylan.”

He nodded again, stepping back like he was trying to fade into the shadows. Ahead of us, I saw Rhys clock his friend’s

movement, his face tightening.

As promised, I spotted a sign in the distance: *Escape Rocks*.

Catching up to Silas, I gestured at the frontage. “Escape Rocks. Lemme guess, it’s all cave-themed.”

He slid his hand into mine, and I instantly felt at home. “No, muppet. It’s rock-themed...as in rock music.”

I perked up. “Okay, that’s pretty cool.”

Silas poked his tongue out at me. “To think you doubted me.”

A small gasp from behind us had us halting. Rhys stared at his phone screen, his mouth open in shock.

Oh god, it was just like with Dylan. “What is it? Who’s hurt?”

“What?” Rhys jolted. “Nothing. Sorry.”

His gaze slid behind us before widening. “Shit, Dyl.”

Dylan was slumped against the wall, his shaking hands covering his face. “*No-no-no-no-no.*”

Silas and I jogged over, arriving just as Rhys dropped to his knees. I put an arm across Silas’s chest to stop him from getting closer. We’d both seen Luca through more than one anxiety attack. The last thing Dylan needed was us crowding him.

“Dylan, listen to my voice.” Rhys spoke firmly but kindly. “Everyone is fine. I didn’t mean to startle you.”

A broken sob came from behind Dylan's hands. Silas cocked his head to the side with a grim frown, and we drew back several paces to give them some privacy.

After a few minutes, Rhys was helping Dylan to his feet and brushing off his trousers. Pity settled in my stomach at the bright splotches on Dylan's cheekbones.

"Sorry about that," he said as he joined us, his voice quavering.

"Don't apologise," I said firmly. "You've done nothing to be sorry for."

"Kai's right," Silas added. "And we're going to insist you go home and take a few days, Dylan. Spend time watching Netflix and eating shitty food. Whatever it is you do to relax, that's all we need you to do."

He nodded miserably. "I think you're right. I'm a liability at the moment."

"Oi," Rhys barked, his hand wringing around Dylan's bicep. "You are *not* a liability. Don't talk about yourself that way."

Irritation flared in Dylan's eyes, more emotion than I'd seen from him in months. "Listen, you can't just—"

I cleared my throat, suddenly feeling like this was turning into a moment Si and I shouldn't be part of. "Why don't you both take off? We can do this another day."

"No!"

The word came from all three of them simultaneously, making me narrow my eyes in suspicion. “Okay, what’s going on?”

“Nothing,” Silas said airily. Too airily. “But we should probably head in.”

“Wait.” I turned back to Rhys. “Everything is okay though—yeah?”

He rubbed his hand over his head sheepishly, exchanging a look with Dylan, who just shrugged. I guessed Rhys had filled him in while he was calming down. “I guess it can’t hurt to tell you...you’re going to hear sooner or later. Jack’s resigned.”

“What?” Silas and I exclaimed in unison.

Rhys held up his hands. “That’s all I know. He’s leaving, effective immediately.”

Silas and I looked at each other, and I knew we were both thinking the same thing.

Arlo was going to be crushed.

On that bombshell, our guards turned back towards the cars, Rhys promising to be there to collect us when we were done.

“Can’t believe Jack’s leaving,” Silas said.

“Me either.”

“Think Arlo knows yet?”

I grimaced. “If he doesn’t, he will soon.”

“He won’t take this well.”

“We’ll get him through it,” I said, pulling open the door and gesturing for Silas to enter first. “It’s what we do.”

Half an hour later, we were blitzing through the room. Music pounded through the speakers, a combination of rock from our childhood up to the present day.

“This theming is great,” I said to Silas with a grin.

“It really is.” He was looking at the photos on the walls. “Ha! Look, there’s one of us up here.”

Dropping the lock I’d been twiddling with, I leaned my chin on his shoulder. Sure enough, surrounded by several other images, there was one of us at our very first stadium performance. We’d opened for Vanity Flair, who’d been at the top of the charts for a whopping sixteen weeks.

Only to be knocked off by us. Their supporting act. Fortunately, they’d been good sports about it.

“Oh look, there’s another one.” I pointed at a frame to the right. “Where’s that one?”

Silas peered at it. “Ah, Rome, our first tour. That was the first time we performed ‘Tease.’ Remember that?”

My cock thickened at the memory. “I remember I had to rush back to the hotel and jerk off. Several times. Jesus, feeling you dance against me. I couldn’t decide if having you touch me like that felt like heaven or hell.”

Silas leaned back into me. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be.” I pressed a kiss against the top of his head. “I look back at those memories now, and I’m...happy. If anything, it makes me laugh to think how oblivious you were.”

“Meanie.” He rolled his eyes goodnaturedly.

We continued to peruse the photos, and almost instantly, I found another of us. “Wow, they really like Caffeine Daydreams here.”

“They must do,” Silas mused, running a finger along the edge of the frame. “This was at the charity gala in 2012. That guy wouldn’t leave you alone, so I ended up dragging you onto the dancefloor.”

“We stayed there all night,” I remembered with a chuckle. “Yeah, you really should’ve realised your feelings weren’t just *platonic*.”

“Probably,” he said with a smile.

There were a few more shots, ones from award shows, performances, and galas. It was like the owners had found every highlight of our careers and decided to showcase them.

When we came to the final photo, I froze. It was the one I’d stared in Mexico. My birthday, Silas beside me as I prepared to blow out the candles.

That photo wasn’t public. How the hell had the owners got their hands on it?

“Ooh, look, this one’s crooked,” Silas exclaimed, indicating the birthday shot. Unlike me, he didn’t seem perturbed by it being here. “Wonder what will happen if we straighten it?”

“Silas, wait—”

But it was too late. Silas had levelled the frame. There was a click and a hidden door to our right opened.

“Aha!” Silas said triumphantly, throwing me an over-the-top wink. “After you, good sir.”

I put my hands on my hips. “What are you up to, Si?”

“Me? What makes you think I’m up to anything?”

“Tree number three, remember?”

He shoved my shoulder impatiently. “Just get in there, Kai.”

My amused grin slipped off my face as I stepped into the hidden room. It wasn’t big, probably six feet by nine.

Every inch of the walls was covered in photos of Silas and me. Tiny fairy lights hung from the ceiling, illuminating so many moments from our past.

Silas on my shoulders at Reading Festival, a fake plastic crown on his head.

Both of us in our school uniform, hunched over homework at my kitchen table.

Sat on the curb outside my childhood home, mud all over our knees and ice pops in our hands.

In the music studio at college, an extremely young Arlo in the background on the drums.

My family and Silas at Ruby's graduation.

Silas and me dancing at Mia's wedding.

Then there were the ones from all the places we'd travelled:
Rome, Milan, Sydney, Bali.

It was our whole life in pictures.

Right in the centre were two that were bigger than the rest. I didn't need to ask where these had been taken.

Both contained a little part of my soul.

The first was our kiss during the final show of our tour. The kiss that gave Silas a realisation he hadn't expected...and sent me running halfway around the world.

The second was another kiss. This one was the LondonFM Autumn Festival, where we finally confirmed what our fans had suspected all along.

Two moments in time that had shaped us indefinitely.

"Silas, what is this..." My voice trailed off as I turned around.

To see the man I loved.

My best friend.

Down on one knee.

"I thought a lot about how to propose," Silas said huskily. "We've shared so many good times together. If I look back over my life, all my happy memories involve you. Every. Single. One."

My vision blurred as Silas continued, “It might have taken me a long time to catch up with you, but there’s no doubt in my mind that I’ve loved you for as long as you’ve loved me. These photos...they are *us*. It’s you and me. Together. How we’ve always been.”

Silas pulled a box from his pocket, and my tears spilt over. His face faltered when he saw them. “Oh shit, don’t cry. I have more of my speech to go yet. If you cry, I’ll cry.”

I made a noise that was half-hiccup and half-laugh. “Sorry. I’ll try and pull it together.”

Yeah, there was no hope of that happening. Not while Silas was making all my dreams come true.

“I told you once you’d know when I was proposing to you,” Silas said, opening the box to reveal a simple platinum band. It was unfussy—just like us. “In all honesty, I was ready to ask you that night. But I wanted to make this special for you. You spent so long waiting for me, Kai. You never thought you’d get the happy ending you deserved. But if you marry me, I promise I’ll spend every day making you smile. I promise to watch trashy TV as much as you want. I promise to drag you around garden centres whenever we aren’t on tour. I promise to always be your best friend.”

He paused, his lips twitching. “And blowjobs. I promise you all the blowjobs you can handle.”

Laughter warred with the tears. “Fuck’s sake, Si.”

“It’s your fault. You’ve made me addicted.”

His face softened. “So, what do you say? Wanna make your mum happy by officially giving me your surname?”

“Yes,” I whispered. I held out my hand for Silas to slip the ring into place. The second it hit my knuckle, I hauled him to his feet and into my arms.

He wrapped his legs around my middle as his mouth met mine.

“I can’t believe you did all this,” I gasped between kisses. “It was perfection. The escape room, the photos. Perfection.”

“Gotta use the benefits of decades of friendship,” Silas said, groaning as I sucked a mark onto his neck.

“There was just one part...”

Silas lifted his head to frown at me. “What?”

“If,” I whispered. “You said *if* I marry you. Silas, there isn’t any possibility I would have ever said no. No matter what path we might’ve chosen or where we ended up, there would only ever be one answer to that question.”

I kissed him reverently. Tenderly. “Yes, Silas. *Yes*. I can’t wait to marry you. I can’t wait to call you my husband. To introduce you as Mr Parker.”

His lower lip trembled. “I love you, Kai.”

“I love you too.” I leaned my forehead on his, just breathing him in. “I loved you before I even understood what love was. My heart was designed for you. To be owned by you. Only ever you.”

I wasn't the only one crying now. Silas's cheeks glistened under the fairy lights as we kissed, surrounded by snapshots of our love.

Then he fidgeted in my arms, his hard cock making contact with my stomach.

The mood shifted in an instant.

Suddenly, I couldn't think of anything other than sinking inside Silas. Inside my *fiancé*.

"Please tell me there aren't any cameras in here."

Silas ran his tongue over his bottom lip, looking up from under hooded eyes. "What do you take me for, an amateur? I even had Rhys and Dylan sweep it to double-check."

I lowered us to the floor, pushing him back and climbing on top of him. "And the door?"

"I locked it from this side as we came in. No one can get in."

I rocked my hips against him slowly. After several months of him in my bed, I knew how to drive him wild. "Lube?"

He flashed his dimple at me. "Front left pocket."

"Wow, you *are* prepared."

"Not every day you ask the man you love to spend his life with you." He stroked his thumb over my lips. "Had to make sure I was ready for anything."

"Except me saying no," I countered, fishing the lube from his pocket. "Because literally anything else could've happened except that."

We fell into kissing again, our clothes being kicked or pulled off haphazardly until we were just two naked, sweaty bodies grappling on the carpeted floor.

Silas hissed as his back scraped against the coarse material. “Okay, maybe I didn’t think of *everything*.”

“Here.” I grabbed my shirt and laid it out for him. “This should protect your back.”

His gaze was soft as he reclined on it. “Always looking out for me.”

“Always,” I vowed.

A flash of blue between Silas’s arse cheeks caught my eye. Confused, I pushed his knees apart. The sight I was met with had my cock weeping. “Oh my god, is this what I think it is?”

“Like I said, I wanted to be prepared for everything,” Silas said, wriggling his plug-filled arse in my direction. “I’m ninety-nine percent sure we won’t be disturbed, but I figured I’d cut out the prep time just in case.”

“Resourceful and smart.”

Silas gave me a cheesy grin. “What can I say? I’m the whole package. It’s no wonder you fell in love with me.”

I rolled my eyes at him as I gently pulled out the plug. “Yep. I was fucked from the start.”

The funny thing was, Silas probably thought I was joking. But it was the truth. I’d been gone from the instant I’d looked

up at him holding that stick. The boy who hated violence but was prepared to fight to defend a total stranger.

I lubed up and sank inside him, his tightness now as familiar to me as breathing.

“I love you,” I said, holding him close as I moved in short, shallow thrusts.

“I love you,” Silas moaned, his fingers scratching over my back. Tiny, stinging sensations erupted over my skin. Good. I hoped he was marking me. Even with a ring on my finger, I craved any physical evidence that reminded me this wasn’t just a dream.

That Silas truly was mine in all the ways I’d always wanted.

As much as I wanted to take my time, worshipping him in all his favourite ways, I didn’t want to risk getting caught. Picking up speed, I sucked Silas’s nipples as my cock pounded into him.

“Yes,” Silas whimpered, his back arching. “More.”

I gave him what he asked. His cock was trapped between our stomachs. I would’ve worried about the friction, but Silas was leaking so much precum that it wasn’t an issue.

Changing my angle, I ground my shaft over his prostate, rolling my body forward to keep the perfect amount of pressure on Silas’s cock.

Within moments, Silas cried out, his hot cum filling the space between us. Seeing his beautiful face contorted in ecstasy was enough to tip me over the edge.

When I finally had my breath back, I lifted my head to smile at Silas. *My fiancé*. A glimmer of light reflected on the ring he'd slipped on my finger.

The best possible reminder that this was real.

"You're going to be my husband," Silas said, sighing in contentment.

"I am." I brushed my nose over his. "Husband and best friend."

"Of course." Silas grinned at me, the same grin he'd given that first day we'd met over twenty years before. It hit me like a sucker punch now, just as it had then. "Husbands, soulmates, best friends."

"Sounds like everything to me."

"Perfection," Silas corrected me.

Perfection. He was right. Our journey getting here might have been messy, but I wouldn't change it for the world.

Because Silas *was* my world. And now I had him where I'd always wanted him.

In my arms. Never to be let go.

THE END



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Join my Facebook group for the latest news, exclusive teasers and promos, and to witness me generally screaming into the abyss as I write (it's fun, I promise. Well, fun for *you*, not necessarily for me) - [Romance Larks \(Lark Taylor Author group\)](#).

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Finally to my readers: I hope you enjoyed Kai and Silas. These boys tugged on my heart strings.

Also By Lark Taylor

Caffeine Daydreams - MM Contemporary Rockstar Romance

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About the Author

Lark lives with her family in southern England. An obsessive romance fan, she loves nothing more than a Happily Ever After – especially if there’s a good plot and a hefty amount of spice along the way. When she’s not reading or writing, she can be found hiding from adult life in escape rooms, travel and the MCU. As a Bi woman with OCD, Lark is a fervent supporter of the LGBTQIA+ community and an advocate for mental health awareness and support.