



WE ONLY
KISS AT
christmas
con riley

WE ONLY KISS AT CHRISTMAS

CON RILEY



Title: We Only Kiss at Christmas

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We Only Kiss at Christmas © 2023 Con Riley

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C/W: Discussion of the UK care system for young children.

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Also by Con Riley

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TIMELINE INFORMATION

New readers:

Welcome! This book is a standalone novel within a shared world. You can start right here without getting lost.

Readers of my previous works:

This story is set between the end of the *His* trilogy and the start of the *Learning to Love* series. That means we've skipped back a few years from my most recent stories, in case you happen to spot some familiar faces.

Enjoy!

~ *Con*

1

I PLAY A GAME AT CHRISTMAS INVOLVING MARIAH CAREY AND my auntie. Not in person—I don't move in the social circles of the rich and famous. When I'm not yawning through law lectures, I take temp jobs waiting tables. And my auntie? These days, she's soaking up Barbados rum and sunshine, but we still text each other every time we hear *All I Want for Christmas* and include a photo of our location.

I don't make the rules of this game we've played since she left London. I just stop in my tracks on Regent Street and send her a photo of the department store pumping out those high-pitched, fluting top notes. Then I type my thirty-seventh message of the season, which is impressive, given it's not quite December.

Seb: *mariah again pls god make it stop*

I can already imagine her reply.

Auntie: *Sebastian Street, DO NOT take that name in vain.*

She won't mean Mariah's. My auntie sleeps with a Bible on her bedside table and collects guardian angels. Not real ones; she's in her seventies, not delusional. She spends her old-age pension on angels from the shopping channel, but she's worked hard for decades. She deserves a few wings and halos.

I also send her a selfie, trying to fit a good view of the street into the frame with me. It isn't easy in these late-afternoon crowds, not when I'm what my flatmate describes as a six-foot bundle of rage stuffed into a five-foot-seven body,

but I angle my phone to capture this not-quite-Christmas scene of shoppers and black-cab traffic. She'll love to see it, I hope.

My finger hovers over the Send button.

Will she?

It's been years since she was in the same city as me, and she's not even my real auntie, just a children's home cook and care worker who fed my love for cake and told the best bedtime stories.

Maybe she's tired of this game—my last Mariah Carey selfie still has grey ticks, not blue ones, which gives me a sense of humour failure right here in central London on the last day of November. That isn't only down to Auntie's silence. It's also down to getting a summons from the temp agency that usually sends me to wait tables when I'm not in the lectures that bore me rigid lately.

They've asked me to come in right before the office closes, and I guess my days on their books are numbered. After last night, I only have myself to blame if they sack me.

No, the devil on my shoulder whispers as I fight my way down a West End shopping street still full of families and little kids despite it already being after sunset. *Don't you dare take the blame*, my devil insists. *What happened last night was that twat of a photographer Lito Dixon's fault, and you know it.*

Who's to blame doesn't matter—whether it's Lito's fault or mine, I'm still ninety-nine percent sure I'm about to lose my income.

I feel it in my bones as Mariah's voice follows me down the street while shoppers fail to grasp the first rule of city living. They stop and start, going slow instead of marching to London's fast-paced rhythm. Even worse, they cluster together. Whole families block the way with no warning to *ohh* and *ahh* over festive windows.

The urge to shout, "Coming through," or even, "Get the fuck out of my way," to prod them into moving is overwhelming, but I'm pretty sure that if I have a guardian

angel on my other shoulder like Auntie always promised, he'd be the twin of my flatmate.

Do angels speak with accents? Mine would have Pat's same soft Cornish rasp and would probably whisper, "But look at their kids, babe. They love getting to see Christmas."

He'd be right—from tiny infants to preteens, these kids are spellbound, all soaking up being in this dark city while lights twinkle and snow falls in pretty flurries. Their wonder-filled eyes dredge up a memory of a much younger me under the same spell right here outside London's flagship toy shop, Hamleys, with my auntie's hand around mine.

That curbs the urge to yell over the rumble of passing double-deckers. For once, I make a more restrained request.

"Excuse me."

I shouldn't be surprised that no one moves or listens—I grew up in this mad and magical city that must look warm and festive to these wide-eyed kids. In reality, it's stone-cold beneath this sparkling surface, especially for people who can't speak up, which means I engage the second rule of city living and get assertive in a hurry.

"Mind your backs," I bark, but not to make these crowds part for me. "You need to move so the kids can see," I tell grown adults who gawp at me while sheltered by Hamleys' bright red awnings. "Let the little ones get out of the snow," I bark louder, and they do it. They also shift enough that I can make it to my destination with time to spare, but I don't cross the street to the temp agency quite yet, even though arriving early might make a good impression. I delay by pulling out my phone again instead.

Still no blue ticks under my latest Mariah message.

I send a new one, this time to my flatmate, and I don't mention any singer.

Seb: *fucking people patrick they're everywhere make it stop*

He responds right away, calling me instead of texting.

“Punctuation, babe.”

Pat never calls me Sebastian. I have no idea when he stopped calling me that—or Seb, like our last flatmate used to—or why I never told him that I’m no one’s baby. All I know, as crowds jostle me into moving again, is that London isn’t half as cold when he names me with four letters.

It melts me just enough that this slips out. “I’m about to get fired, Pat.”

He doesn’t ask why. He only rumbles, “About to?” as something clanks in the background and music pumps, but I tune it out, caught on what he asks me.

“So you haven’t been fired yet? You know what assuming bad shit will happen to you is called?”

I do. We’ve had versions of this conversation several times already, the last one in bed yesterday morning. Not because we sleep together. Pat’s my flatmate, remember? He’s also my bestie, and a good enough friend to suggest that sharing breakfast in bed would be warmer than both of us freezing our tits off in our frosty kitchen.

He was right about that. He’s also right about this. “It’s called catastrophizing. And what do we do with that kind of self-defeating bollocks?”

I find a spot out of the foot traffic, listening as he counts quietly while something clanks again in the background. Weights, I decide as he continues. He must be training one of his fitness family—the group he’s gathered as a sample for his sport and exercise science dissertation. He’s getting each one of them fitter even though the jury’s still out on whether he’ll make it to graduation. Pat’s grades are shocking, which isn’t fair when he’s so good at coaching.

Pat finishes his count and his voice gets louder. It’s still hard to hear over traffic and shoppers’ chatter plus blasts of music, but I have no trouble registering his message. “We punt that self-defeating bollocks straight into the sun.”

There’s more background clanking coupled with him counting, but I don’t point out that he’s skipped the number

three in his countdown. Nor do I picture Lito fucking Dixon, who's the reason for this catastrophizing. I picture a football instead—the same one that Pat taught me to kick so high I almost smashed a tower-block window.

“Into the sun, babe,” he repeats. “So stop expecting the worst.”

He says something else, but more music drowns it. This time it's from closer, and you-know-whose voice spills through another department store door, one that also spills more shoppers carrying gift-wrapped presents. They flood out, jostling me again, and it isn't often that I wish I was built like Pat, but what I lack in height I make up for in volume. I bark again, much louder, “Do you mind? I'm standing right here,” and a pool of space clears around me.

Very satisfying.

“Babe.” That's not quite an admonishment in my ear. Pat's voice is too gentle, too angelic for this city. I huff at his quiet reminder to chill out, to be kind, to stop acting as if the world is out to get me. Only it *is* out to get me, and I hate what's surely coming so much that I actually snap at the sole flatmate I've ever managed to hang onto.

We've been together for two years. In the same flat, I mean. It's a personal record. A miracle that Auntie might have prayed for. One I shouldn't mess up, and yet...

“The agency *is* going to fire me, Pat. And then how will we cover the rent? We won't,” I insist, my voice rising. “I'll have to get a shitty room in a shitty student house share, and your dad will set you up in that swish one-bed he offered to rent for you. Or you'll go home, full stop.”

“Nope, nope, and nope.” I don't know how Pat can sound this certain. “I'm only going home early for Christmas, not forever. And as for paying the rent, we've still got other options.” He's all rough West Country patience that's easier to hear once a door closes with a click. He must have shut himself into the room that passes for an office at the gym. “But we won't need other options because the agency won't fire

you. You're a banging waiter. And a shit-hot bartender. You never spill a drop, do you?"

After last night, I can't answer that without lying. I also wince as he lists skills I won't include on my CV, not when getting to be a prosecutor means fighting for a place in legal chambers, not pouring Prosecco while wearing an apron.

Pat fights too, only for me, which I'm still not used to.

"The agency *is* lucky to have you," he promises, gravelly with conviction. It's followed by a different kind of background rumble—something in the office must be toppling over. Protein powder tubs, I bet. "Shit," he says. "Stay right there."

I do, breaking one of those city-living rules by going still instead of hurrying. Time ticks closer to my date with doom as Pat sets right an office I can visualise as clearly as the images on those tubs of protein powder. They all show an Adonis from the neck down, and Pat could have been the model, but that's only him on the outside.

Inside, he's...

I don't know how to describe him. All I can do is picture his face, which unlike his torso, is the opposite of etched. It's as soft and comfortable as the oversized armchair that we share more often than our sofa. I also strain to listen when Pat speaks again.

Another double-decker bus passes. Its rumble drowns what he says, despite me clutching my phone tighter. "What did you say?" I bellow, because that's London's third rule, even when snow softens all its sharp edges—if you can't move fast or be assertive, you better be ready to shout your fucking head off.

Pat huffs again. "Chill, babe. I only said that I can always make up the rent if you do need time to look for a new side hustle."

"How?" I face the window, cursing that I look elf-like instead of professional. I shake snow from my hair and turn away, only the next view is worse. The temp agency looms across the street, waiting for me.

“How will I make up the rent?” Pat laughs like the answer is obvious. “By taking on some more shifts.”

“At the gym?” I drop my voice. “You can’t.”

“Yes, I can. They’ve already offered me the daily Mums, Bums, and Tums classes for the week until I go home. You know, the ones with loads of babies?”

I have no idea why he’s so happy about what sounds like hell in scrunch shorts and leaking Pampers. Like my law lecturers insist, I stick to the facts, and only the facts. “No. You really can’t do any more shifts, Pat.”

“Why not?”

I don’t want to say it. I really don’t. Not here, surrounded by strangers hopped up on too-early Christmas spirit. If we were at home, both of us squeezed onto our favourite seat, we’d be close enough that he’d see I wasn’t being a grinch on purpose. Then I’d spill the truth in a heartbeat. But we aren’t, so I settle for saying, “Because extra classes with babies won’t happen at night, will they?”

I’m not certain if that’s factual. What do I know about babies apart from the fact that not everybody wants one?

But here’s the thing about what my lecturers insist on compared to what I see all the time on *Suits* whenever we binge Netflix while snuggled under a fuzzy throw together—winning legal arguments doesn’t always hinge on being factual. It comes down to sounding convincing, so that’s what I aim for.

“You’ve got to study, remember? For your repeat exam. But you can’t go to any of the daytime support sessions at uni if you teach extra gym classes at the same time.”

“And?”

Here’s the deceptive thing about my flatmate. For someone with a soft face and even softer accent, he’s no pushover. He won’t let me off the hook until I answer, so I blow out a sigh that clouds the air and I get honest.

“And then you’ll fail your biomechanics exam.” *Again.* “For a third time, which is the limit. You can’t graduate without it.” That’s all true. I still hate it for him almost as much as I hate what else will happen—Pat won’t only go home to Cornwall for Christmas. He’ll stay there. “Sorry, sorry. It’s not your fault.”

“Nothing to be sorry for, babe. I’m manifesting a better result for me this time.”

Here’s the problem with me—I don’t believe in manifesting, in expecting the best from people or the universe. I believe in what’s black and white, in what’s right or wrong. Like this injustice. “You shouldn’t even have to retake it. They should make allowances because the playing field isn’t level, is it? I mean, the faculty love you when you win all those varsity medals for them. When you go to Nationals and come back with weightlifting trophies. But then they let you drown in exam season.” That’s what happens each time—Pat gets swamped by sums he can’t solve even with a calculator. “It gives me the fucking rage that they know it but still let it happen.”

All that does is prompt a chuckle, although that’s not the right word for what sounds kinda sad, and I can’t stand to hear it. Not from someone I—

Not from Pat.

And here’s that rage again. Fuck the faculty, fuck Lito too, and fuck the rent going up just as our last flatmate left us. Not that I blame Ian. He’s not responsible for greedy market forces, but splitting our rent between two instead of three is why I’m getting jostled in one of London’s most expensive postcodes, hoping against hope I’ll still have a job after this meeting so Pat can focus on what’s important, which is staying in London.

With me.

I also shiver at snow finding its way under my collar, but Pat’s next laugh is as warm as that fuzzy throw at home. One that you better believe I’ll fight to keep snuggling under with him. That means I stride across the street, all guns blazing,

only to almost get mown down by a *Just Eat* moped when Pat speaks again.

I stop dead like I'm new in town, not born and bred here, then I hurry to a door that opens onto a hallway where a staircase leads to the temp agency.

I close the door behind me, shutting out the sound of traffic, standing alone in a space as narrow as our hallway at home, only it isn't cluttered with Pat's weight bench or his bike that always trips me. There aren't airers here holding our shared laundry, or the cardboard box full of Christmas decorations it isn't time yet to put up.

This hallway only holds me. I'm one staircase away from a meeting that might decide our future together, and my voice strangles. "What did you just say? I missed it."

"Only that maybe it's time to rethink what we agreed to last December." It's so much quieter in this hallway that I can hear Pat's swallow and his quieter, "You remember what we agreed together?"

Me? I remember every word of our agreement. I can't say it aloud though, not when Pat hasn't mentioned it even once since.

Just like that, I'm not at the foot of a staircase, certain that bad news waits at its head. Catastrophizing that no-job-no-money outcome will have to wait because right now I'm too busy reliving what happened when Pat pinned a sprig of mistletoe over our living room door last December, and I...

I climbed him like a tree and kissed him.

Heat climbs my throat like I should climb this staircase right now, yet I can't move. Not when Pat might as well be right here with me. I clutch my phone the same way I'd clutched him almost twelve months ago, clinging, fucking clinging, until he took my weight and hoisted me up higher.

Did he kiss me back though?

I still can't process if he did or didn't. Now I repeat his question, hedging for time, because yes, one of London's rules

is hurry-hurry-hurry, but I can't rush this conversation. "D-do I remember what we agreed?"

"Yeah," he rumbles while someone in the agency above me sings along with what could be text number thirty-eight or nine to my auntie. Something swoops in my chest like Mariah's high notes at what he reminds me. "Do you remember what we decided last Christmas? Both of us. Together."

"You mean..." I also still can't process how we went from me throwing myself at him to us agreeing to a new house rule designed to preserve what I value most in this whole city. *In this city?* When it comes to friendship, I value Pat's more than anything on this whole planet.

My best friend raises a completely different subject. "Yeah, when we agreed not to get another flatmate for the third bedroom."

"Oh." I close my eyes. "*That*. Yes. Yes, I remember."

He says, "Maybe we should rethink it," and my eyes shoot open. "Because even if you are fired, I'm sure you'd get more work, no problem, but someone else paying rent would solve all of our problems, wouldn't it? Did..." He pauses, and I don't know how his voice gets even lower. "Did you think I meant we should rethink something else we agreed on?"

My phone beeps a five-minute warning that's also a reprieve from a conversation I can't have here. "Sorry, Pat. I've got to go. It's time." I mean for my meeting, but it's also way past time we did have a conversation now that Christmas is right around the corner—only a little over a week away if I count down to when Pat goes home. "We'll talk later," I promise.

"At dinner with Ian and Guy if you aren't working? They've booked a table at the usual place. Come too," Pat suggests. "I'm about done here. Just need to shower." I blink away a slick and soapy mental visual as he adds, "Then I'll leave to meet them." He must have opened the office door again.

Music pumps, racing like my heart at him saying, “Come if you can, but even if you are working tonight, think about having a third person chipping in with the bills. It would take off a hell of a lot of pressure, and I spoke to Ian earlier. He knows someone who needs a place to stay right away. Something to do with his ex.”

“Lito?” That tosser is the whole reason I’m here instead of earning money. “Ugh.”

“Yeah,” Pat agrees. “Ugh. But Ian says we could meet this potential flatmate tomorrow if you wanted. That wouldn’t hurt, would it? At least have a think about it?”

Think about it?

Once he rings off, I think about nothing else, frozen by indecision at the foot of this staircase until my phone pings another reminder to get moving. I finally climb the steps up to the agency office only certain of one thing—I’ll have to fight like hell to keep my job. Because the other option can’t happen.

It can’t.

Have a third person in the flat over the holiday season?

No way. Not when I’ve waited all year for the other rule Pat and I agreed on.

We only kiss at Christmas, a once-a-year neutral zone of physical contact that neither of us will let wreck our friendship.

Let a stranger get in the way when this could be our last Christmas together?

Never gonna happen.

I BATTLE MY WAY BACK ALONG REGENT STREET LATER. OR maybe battle is the wrong word. This time, the tide of shoppers sweeps me with them, and for once, I don't fight their stop-start current. I don't pay attention to each Christmas card-perfect storefront they pause in front of, either.

Do I even notice this year's must-have gifts piled high or that the snow falls fast and heavy?

Nope. Not while I'm too busy doing some urgent post job-loss strategizing.

I don't take in that melting flakes find their way between my scarf and collar or any of the gift-wrapped piles of Gucci these crowds stop to covet. All I picture is the blackboard in our kitchen—the huge one leaning against a wall that Ian rescued from a skip for Pat to do his sums on. Maybe that was the moment I guessed he'd be a keeper as a flatmate—Ian, that is—because none of the others who came and went before him noticed that Pat needs to get hands on with numbers.

So what if he can't solve equations? Give him a stick of chalk and a damp sponge for when he fucks up and he rules our budget, just as long as I double-check his decimal places. Now that blackboard fills my vision, full of income and expenses that won't tally. They can't. No amount of Pat wrestling with them will make them add up now I'm well and truly jobless and blacklisted from the corporate Christmas parties that pay the best tips.

Even on the underground at Piccadilly, all I hear is his voice echoing in time with the train's hum and rattle.

Think about it, think about it, think about us having a new flatmate.

The carriage I'm sardined into sways, and the sound takes on a different rhythm.

But we only kiss at Christmas repeats over and over. That refrain only cuts off once I leave the Tube at Kensington and head to the restaurant where he said he'd be waiting, but Pat isn't visible through any of its windows.

I see Ian first, sitting beside the man who stole him from us, but I can't bear a grudge, not when Ian touches Guy as if they're the only two candlelit people in all of London. He's oblivious to an audience, and I don't only mean me.

Someone else also watches.

It isn't Pat. A much older man sits alone at a corner table for two, glaring so hard his stare could bore holes.

Ian doesn't notice. He's too busy pushing back a strand of Guy's hair. Guy's oblivious too. His kiss to Ian's palm looks soft. So do eyes that I once worried were as oil-slick sly as Lito's, someone I can't believe that Ian ever willingly banged, but I also know it's water years under the bridge, thank fuck. Not to mention that I've banged my share of randoms, so I can hardly be his judge or jury.

Now Ian's with someone whose eyes smoulder with warmth for him. With love. With so much care, and I don't want much for Christmas but, fuck me, I want—

Someone raps hard on the window.

It isn't Ian or Guy. They're still in their loved-up bubble. It isn't that old man either. He still glares from his corner of the restaurant, thick brows bristling as if offended at seeing two men in love in public, and if I wasn't intent on searching for Pat, I'd march inside like I just marched into my temp-agency meeting, only this time I'd tell this old man to stop staring at two of the only people left in this city who I'd fight for.

Another rap on the glass stops me. Still not Ian or Guy or Pat.

It's this restaurant's owner.

Penny is all bright smiles, waving me towards the door like I'm someone she's missed, right down to flinging the door wide open for me. "Sebastian, where have you been and what are you doing all alone out here on the doorstep? Come in!" Her greeting is as effusive as the scent of garlic and basil, each sentence an exclamation. "It's been too long! Guy didn't mention that you were coming this evening!"

She beams while mentioning Ian's boyfriend as though he isn't a food critic most restaurateurs run from screaming. Penny does the opposite, rushing through her dining room towards Guy while waving a menu.

Heads turn at her yodel. "I should spank you, Guy Parsons! Fancy forgetting to tell me that the whole family was coming."

I stop dead for a second time this evening.

Ian only grins across the restaurant, mouthing a six-letter f-word at me that doesn't belong to us—or to me, at least—not when we're surrounded by the real deal. Table after table are topped and tailed by mothers and fathers and filled with sons and daughters. With cousins of all ages and so many uncles, some in fugly Christmas jumpers even though there's still hours to go until December.

Penny urges me to join what she must have decided is my own family unit, doing exactly what she threatened. She spanks London's top food critic, but only lightly with her menu, before offering to take my coat from me. When she sees the apron I'd worn in a vain hope of work, she also offers to take it.

"You don't need that tonight, Sebastian!" She also tinkles out a laugh that, in a lull between background Christmas classics, sounds a touch frantic. Her touch is too, a quick tug-of-war with my apron that she only ceases when another table

draws her attention. “Sit down and relax,” she orders, already backing away. “No extra waiters needed!”

I’m not so sure about that. The restaurant is crowded. That’s partly down to the explosion in a tinsel factory that’s happened since my last visit. It’s also due to the man she just spanked with her menu. Guy’s syndicated Worst Meal of the Week column has a loyal fanbase, and Penny’s restaurant features often. That’s down to it being a first date location both Ian and Guy love to revisit, but those online mentions are enough to attract plenty of rubbernecking custom.

The man himself gives me a side-eye once I’m seated. “Should you be here?” Guy looks down his nose, which I would say is a feat, given its hooked dimensions, but I don’t point that out or engage in our own usual tug-of-war of bitching and sarcasm. I can’t, not when his gaze turns worried, his voice also dropping. “Patrick wasn’t sure if you were coming. Bad news, is it?”

And here’s the thing about Guy; his critical act is just that. The man’s as soft as butter. I can’t help softening, as well, and lying. “Everything’s fine.”

Guy only blinks slowly across the table at me. “You know I have plenty of restaurant contacts—”

“No need,” I quickly promise. “I can look out for myself.” I don’t want him to beg favours for me, because here’s another city rule to live and die by—never borrow what you can’t pay back. Besides, it’ll be too late now that I’m on every temp agency’s no-hire list.

I scan the room for the person who needs to hear that confession, my eyes locking for a moment with a bristling stare, that old gent still glaring, before I keep searching. “Where’s Pat?”

Ian cackles. He also holds his hand out. “Pay up.”

He isn’t talking to me. Guy sighs, withdrawing a twenty from his wallet. He gives it to Ian but looks at me. “You couldn’t make yourself wait for longer than five seconds, could you?”

I frown. “Wait? Me? For what?”

“Before mentioning your boyf—”

Ian’s elbow must connect with Guy’s ribs. His hiss sounds pained. It also muffles laughter. “He’s running late. Said he had to head home to do something before coming to eat.”

I wonder what that could be. Has our landlord finally come through about fixing our flat’s heating or lighting issues? I must frown because none of my emails citing the law or threatening legal action have worked yet.

Guy leans closer. “Don’t worry. Patrick will be here soon. Then you can surgically attach yourself to his hip and spend the evening finishing each other’s sentences like usual.”

He says that as if Pat and I are codependent. He also taps my menu, knuckles curled the same way I used to curl my fists in fights years before I had to get on the straight and narrow if I didn’t want a criminal record to ruin my law degree chances.

That was also years before Pat, who listens whenever I get the urge to fight for what’s right, and I can’t ignore that something swells under my ribs each time he says more people should listen to me.

“You know what Patrick likes,” Guy says. “Let’s face it, you’ll both share your food, so go ahead and choose his dinner for him or we’ll be here forever.”

Penny must overhear him. “I promised you that someone would take your order in two ticks, and they will, Mr. Hangry.” She tilts her head towards the corner of the restaurant. “Some people have already waited for longer than you, but they haven’t complained because they have good manners.”

That isn’t what I witness from the old man she points at. He still glares, his brow a ploughed field of deep furrows.

Penny doubles down as if she doesn’t notice what I clearly see over Ian’s shoulder. “His manners are impeccable,” she insists. “Unlike yours.” She also delivers four bread rolls to our table, withholding the last one. “None for you.” She drops

Guy's roll onto Pat's side plate. "You were mean so you don't get one, while Patrick is—"

"The kindest person on the planet?"

All three of them look at me as I replay what just popped out. "I meant to say..." I fumble for a change of subject. "What are you two doing for Christmas?"

Guy snorts. "I'm more interested in what you and Patrick have planned. A romantic dinner for two on the big day, is it? Let me guess what's on the menu. One of those stick doughnuts you love to start with?"

"Definitely a Yum Yum," Ian offers, that traitor.

"And a dozen chicken breasts dusted with protein powder for Patrick before you sleep off the excess in that ratty armchair you both cram yourselves into?" Guy flutters his eyelashes, which would be disturbing if he didn't also wink. "Who knows why when you also have a nice big three-seat sofa where you wouldn't have to sit so close together. Is that what the twenty-fifth holds for you two lovebirds?"

"Hardly." I'm not sure how that translates into Ian laughing. He also asks a question that I'd rather not answer.

"Because Pat's going home on Christmas Eve and you won't go with him?"

"He's not going on Christmas Eve. Not this year. He's going at the end of next week." I add more at Guy's raised eyebrows. "His brothers both need to fly out a few days later so they're celebrating early. Then it's Pat's birthday on Boxing Day. Apparently, his mum always goes all out. Has a big party. His extended family is massive." I can't even imagine what that's like. "He's got a ton of cousins, so he'll stay right through to the New Year to see them all."

"And you won't go with him?" Ian repeats more softly. "I know he's asked you."

It isn't that I won't go home with Pat. *I can't*. Not after the one and only time I met his father. Ian surely can't blame me for grumbling, "You know why I can't. You were here."

“When his dad came to visit? Not sure I’ll ever forget it.” Ian pulls apart his bread roll, offering Guy half.

He accepts it with the kind of gentle, “Thanks, love,” that means I’ll always tolerate his teasing. Guy also wonders aloud, “He offered to find Patrick a better flat, didn’t he? And a job at home if he failed another exam. That set you off yapping, but what made you keep going like a terrier?”

He taps his chin with one finger as if he doesn’t remember what made me go off like a rocket.

“Was it when he told you that a career in public defence was a waste of your money-making potential? Or did you go full Jack Russell when he said you’d make more cash in bonuses from a big corporation? Cash you could invest in buy-to-lets, so you could get on the property ladder?” He taps his chin again, and forget what I said about toleration. I’ve never been more tempted to headbutt him. “And what was it you told him?”

Penny swings by with another yodelled answer. “Property is theft!” She also delivers another bread roll to Guy, who absolutely doesn’t deserve it. She does flick his nose though, which is gratifying until she points at me. “Followed by a really loud, ‘Work for the rich? I’d rather eat them!’ At least that’s what we all heard in the kitchen.”

Ian cups his chin in his hands. “Best almost-Christmas lunch ever. What a way to meet one of the not-boyfriend’s parents.”

Forget everything I said about Ian being one of the only people I’d fight for. He’s a dick, like his partner, but at least he waits until Penny leaves before adding, “And I’m pretty sure all of that was a distraction. You were deflecting his attention, weren’t you? From Pat. But, listen, before you wax lyrical about your purely platonic man mountain, I do need to talk to you about Lito.”

I slump because, of course, news travels fast in the photography circles Ian moves in. “I know, I know. I shouldn’t have done it.”

“Done what?” Ian asks, leaning back as Guy tops off his wine glass. He fills mine too and asks a similar question.

“What shouldn’t you have done this time?” It’s Guy’s turn to rest his chin in a hand. “Is this going to be another right-fighting story to add to my Sebastian Street Christmas Hits collection? Fabulous. I bloody love them.”

I huff so hard the candle between us flickers.

I also reconsider.

Do I want to bring up an ex who Ian regrets ever meeting? No, I do fucking not, especially now he’s so happy with this teasing tosser.

I also don’t want that old man to keep glaring at him.

I don’t know why seeing more of that bristling over Ian’s shoulder translates as judgement, but here’s what Auntie always promised my schoolteachers—I only ever fought bullies who tried to mash new kids from the same children’s home as me. Ask me to ignore that happening between lessons? Not a chance. You better believe this old hand came out swinging.

I can’t help doing it again right now.

Come out swinging, I mean.

I get up, my wineglass sloshing, and I know if Pat were here, he’d remind me to think twice before acting. I can almost hear him.

Are you fighting, avoiding, or compensating, babe?

Right now, I do all three: avoiding upsetting Ian by mentioning a bastard he never should have banged and then compensating for it by charging towards what feels like injustice with my verbal fists raised. I reach that corner table and bark, “Can I help you?” I almost add *because you haven’t stopped staring at my friend since I got here*, but this old man stops me in my tracks by sounding like a posher version of Pat.

His accent has the same soft-edged roughness. He also confuses me for one of Penny’s waitstaff. Maybe she was right

and I should have let her take my apron. She was also right about his good manners.

“No, thank you. You’re very kind, but I won’t order just yet. I’m still waiting for my grandson.” He points, and once I turn, I see Ian with Guy’s arm around him. I also see the restaurant doorway further past them. “Forgot my blasted glasses.” He peers around me, looking for the person missing from his own table.

Now that I’m so much closer, I don’t see him glaring. He squints. He also worries. “He’s so late. If I could make this blasted phone work, I’d call him. Tell him to get off whichever pretty twink has caught his attention this time and stop keeping me waiting.” He pokes at a handset on the table. “But the screen goes blank whenever I touch it.”

I stifle a surprised smile at the *pretty twink* jab. I also reach for his phone before pulling my hand back. He interprets that movement, and I hear Pat again in the soft roll of his statement. “Please, do help yourself. I feel an idiot that I can’t figure out how to fix it myself. Fairly tempted to throw it in the Thames, to be honest. Bit impulsive, I know.”

I know all about impulsiveness. I can’t fix what my own created last night, but at least this rash march across a restaurant has a much easier solution. “Maybe I can fix it for you.” I take his phone and crouch beside him. “Unlock it for me?”

He presses a finger to the wrong place.

“No. Here. Look.”

He chuffs and tries again. “Haven’t got the hang of this handset yet. It’s new.” His chest puffs. “My grandson bought it for me.” He chuffs again and watches me adjust the proximity setting.

“That was probably your problem.” I see him squint again at what fills his screen, so I quickly tell him, “You do have a message. Lots of them, actually.”

“Really?” His frown shifts into pleasure that I hope Auntie mirrors when she finally opens my latest Mariah Carey selfies.

“I didn’t hear any of them arrive.”

“Do you want me to adjust the volume? I could change the font size as well, so you can read them?”

Those brows quit bristling and the lines etched in his forehead ease. “Would you?”

I do, then I almost wish I hadn’t. His face falls as soon as he reads the most recent. “Sorry, Pops,” this old man murmurs. “Someone slid more meetings into my diary. Stuck in the Virgin Islands. Hopefully, I’ll be back to fly you home for Christmas.” He huffs out a long sigh. “Dammit.”

“You need to fly home? Where to?” I reach for his phone to Google flights, stopping at his answer.

“Nowhere with a landing strip.” His hand lands on mine and pats it. “I only fly if my grandson is the helicopter pilot. Otherwise, I take a ferry.” He eyes the window, snow flurries still falling, and huffs, “Looks like I might be staying in town. Bet it’s warmer where he is. Virgin Islands? There won’t be many virgins left in the Caribbean by the time he’s finished.”

He snorts while plucking his menu card from the surface of the table set for two, although I’m almost certain he can’t read it. He doesn’t argue when I take it from his gnarled hand and list tonight’s specials for him. “Thank you...”

“Sebastian.”

“Thank you, Sebastian. I might as well eat.”

I don’t have the heart to tell him I can’t take his order. Not when he’s been let down once already. Besides, he peers around me when the restaurant door opens again as if that last message was a mistake, only it isn’t a grandson who enters. Or at least, not his.

It’s Pat.

Penny greets him with a hug, looking tiny in a thick embrace that, even secondhand, shortens my breath. She also takes his coat along with the hat he pulls off, his hair a disaster that she tidies, candlelight catching the gold hidden in it. She must say something about his clothing.

I can't hear what, not over chatter and a backing track of Christmas music, but Pat skims a hand over the front of what I know is his best shirt, the one he wears to pull the people I hear him shuffle out of our flat the next morning. Or that I used to hear, before both of us stopped bringing hookups home. Now all I hear is my stomach rumble, and I haven't been hungry all day, too sick with apprehension, but now my stomach fizzes like the Prosecco I used to pour at corporate parties and...

I've never been more thirsty.

I HURRY ACROSS THE RESTAURANT, ON COURSE TO INTERCEPT Pat before he can reach our table. That way I can fill him in without mentioning Lito in Ian's hearing, but I definitely should have taken off my apron before heading in Pat's direction. Hands rise as I pass, multiple pairs of eyes trying to meet with mine. One woman even calls out after me. "Hello? We're still waiting for some water?"

I look back. "I don't actually..." I cast a quick glance ahead to where Pat still chats with Penny. "Okay, yes. One moment."

Guy's treated us to dinners here often enough that I know where the carafes are kept. That much I can do while Penny's busy, but I can't place that old gent's food order.

I duck behind the bar and dig inside a chiller. When I stand, carafe in hand, Pat isn't where I last saw him or with Penny. He isn't at our table either when I check. All I see is Ian facing Guy, his frown gone, his candlelit smile softened. Beyond them, that old man smiles too, his phone pressed to one ear.

Penny arrives to take the carafe from me. She also has to mistake whatever seeing those smiles does to my face and jumps to her own conclusions. "Your Patrick's gone to sort out his hair." She gives me a little push toward the bathrooms, smiling so hard her nose wrinkles. "Think he wants to look his best for someone special." She also raises the carafe. "And I thought I told you to relax tonight but thank you."

Ice tinkles against the glass. Her laugh does too, still a touch frantic.

“You sure you’re okay, Penny?”

“Of course!” She backs away. “Just a little caught out by how much busier we are this year. All that awful man’s fault.” She glances at our table—at Guy—showing me what fondness looks like on her in a surprise reminder of another woman who used to smile at me the same way, even when school sent me home with bruised knuckles. Penny bustles away, but not before saying, “If you weren’t always such a busy bee, I’d snap you up, Sebastian!”

That should feel like a reprieve, a first Christmas gift of the season, an offer I should chase her to accept. Needing to see Pat tugs at me much harder.

This time, I pass tables and I don’t stop until I find Pat exiting the bathroom just as I enter the hallway leading to them.

This is someone I see minutes after I wake up every morning and last thing almost every evening, but he could be a stranger. Maybe it’s down to all the tinsel and the fairy lights that Penny’s hung here, but Pat looks amazing. His torso-hugging black shirt strains over his chest, his jeans clinging to quads it’s a miracle they cover without splitting, and yeah, that’s definitely his pulling outfit.

He’s late because he went home and got changed.

He doesn’t usually do that.

I mean, yes, he changes out of his gymwear into something less sweaty, but he does that at work, not at home. That particular shirt? It’s been out of his rotation for so long I’d forgotten he owned it, relegated to the bottom of the laundry pile along with those jeans. Together, they’re what Ian used to call Pat’s getting-lucky combo. And he used to get lucky a lot, back when we first moved in together.

Is he heading to a club after dinner tonight?

I almost ask him until the music changes, and how many times am I going to hear Mariah before today is over? This

time, I don't take a selfie. Instead, I blurt the reason why I've landed us in trouble. It spills like the wine I was paid to pour for bankers last night.

“Pat, I got into it with Lito.”

“Into it? When?” He prowls closer, his gaze searching. “You okay, babe?”

“Of course I am.” Part of me prickles at the idea of anyone thinking I'm defenceless. In reality, I'm a scrappy fucker and not much scares me, but Pat knows that. Another tiny fragment of me likes how his gaze keeps searching, checking me over regardless, even after I snap, “It was last night, and I don't mean that I hit him.”

Pat steals the wind right out of my snappy sails. “Firstly, I know you wouldn't. You haven't since you were at school. Secondly, he's lucky you didn't. You would have crushed him.” He comes closer. “No question, no competition.”

I preen then—like I literally puff up—and that's the Patrick Trelawney effect in action. He'd rather cut off his own hands than punch some twat's lights out, but he knows my currency, my language, the way to the heart of the kid inside me who fought the hardest each time a foster family tried to keep me.

He also knows my bone-deep need to insert myself in other people's business. He's so on my wavelength he hits the nail on the head with one good guess.

“Who was Lito being a dick to?”

“His new assistant.”

“Ian's replacement? Where?”

“At the event I was working. I thought Lito was showing him the ropes to start with. You know, how to take corporate party photos?”

“But he wasn't?” Pat inhales slowly. His exhale is just as measured. “What did you see?”

“It wasn't what I saw. Not exactly.” I look down and study my shoes, then Pat's, which gleam far more than the last time I

saw them in our hallway. Tonight they're freshly polished to the same shining, warm brown I see once our eyes meet. "I heard him doing that thing he used to do to Ian, you know? When he used to phone him just to tell him all the ways he was useless before we—"

"Changed his ringtone to Britney?"

"Singing *Toxic*?" I nod. "Yeah."

"Because who lets that kind of poison in their life, right?"

I nod again. "It was so weird last night."

"How do you mean?"

"You remember how Lito made Ian do all the office admin even though he's brilliant with a camera?"

Pat nods.

"Well, this new assistant isn't a trained photographer like Ian, but Lito still made him do everything technical." My frown reflects Pat's. "He arrived carrying all of Lito's equipment, laden down like a fucking donkey while Lito swanned ahead as if he was something special. Like he was so much better than this poor sod who didn't know his way around a camera."

I still feel my hackles rising at seeing someone doing their best but getting bollocked for their efforts. Imagine if Pat did that with his fitness family? He'd have no clients instead of requests to run more classes.

"He couldn't set up the lighting, Pat, or find any of the lenses Lito asked for, and Lito would not let the fuck up about him being useless. He even compared him to Ian, saying—" I can't help studying my shoes one more time, my hair swinging forward.

I freeze as Pat pushes a strand back in a reenactment of what I witnessed Ian do for Guy when I first got here, except Pat and me? We're flatmates, not so in love that it's transparent through a restaurant window.

Then I meet his eyes again, and I melt. I also zone out because that's the Patrick effect too whenever we're close and

he listens to me.

“What did Lito say?” Pat prompts after a long, quiet moment, and I stutter back to the present.

“T-to his new assistant? He said that if he ever wanted to make it in London, he better start being more useful. And more grateful.” That’s ambiguous, I know. “I guess you had to hear it.” And see what I saw flash across bruised eyes at last night’s party. Not that any bruising showed up on the outside. All the harm Lito does is internal, and once seen is never forgotten. “So I told that wanker a few home truths, and I warned off his assistant.”

“Warned him off? How?”

“I told him that Lito is a nobody. A rat on a sinking ship. That Ian’s won awards left and right since leaving Lito’s agency, and what awards has Lito won lately? Fucking none. A big fat zero. He was only there last night to take free party photos of bankers because he’s desperate to sign up some new corporate clients. Meanwhile, Ian has a waiting list as long as his arm. I told his replacement all that, and said he should get out as fast as he could, and...”

“And?” Pat rumbles. He also moves even closer, our shoes almost dovetailing, which I see through a hanging curtain of hair he pushes back again. This time his touch lingers, tracking my hairline from my forehead to my temple to the hinge of my jaw, ending at the tip of my chin, which he oh-so gently tilts up. “And, babe?” he rumbles again.

“And I emptied a bottle of Prosecco all over Lito, which is why the agency fired me.”

“And?” he repeats because, of course, Pat knows there has to be more.

Here’s the truth no amount of tinsel or fairy lights can dress up. “And I’ve spent the whole day convinced I didn’t only ruin Lito’s evening. I might have made things worse for his assistant.”

“Hmm.” Pat’s hand drops.

I track its next movements, skimming his shirtfront like when he arrived and spoke with Penny. Now it rubs over his pecs in a slow back and forth that's almost hypnotic.

I tell myself to stop staring. I also tell myself to get it together. It doesn't matter that I'd forgotten how that black shirt showcases where Pat is broad and where he narrows, where he's built and where his workouts carve him. That's all superficial, no reason to objectify someone I've seen do yoga in his undies more times than I can remember. What's under all that flesh is what really matters. I hear that loud and clear in his suggestion.

"You probably did his assistant a favour." He follows that with more conviction. "I bet you rang an early-warning alarm bell for him. You did good, babe." His nod is so firm that I want to believe him.

I also want to hug him.

I fold my arms around my middle because it isn't Christmas yet, is it? Besides, sharing with him like this in hallways is what we've done as friends and flatmates for what feels like forever. He's only the second-ever person to read me as well as he does now by making a solemn promise. "Even if it cost you your job, it was worth it." He says that with so much conviction.

There isn't a weight bench or bike littering this space like in the hallway of the flat we won't be able to afford for much longer. There's isn't any of our laundry crowding me closer to him either, but here I am virtually drifting against him, and he's...

What I've needed.

I look up at a smaller smile from Pat than usual, but fuck me, it's concentrated, which doesn't make sense when his dimples don't even make an appearance let alone deepen like whenever I bring him breakfast in bed or surprise him at the gym and let him train me.

I can't explain this difference between that welcoming, wide smile and this small, intense one until he looks up. My

gaze follows his to the space above us, and for all the hundreds of times we've been as close as this in our own hallway at home, mistletoe has only once hung over our heads.

This second time, we're all alone, divided by a door from the restaurant where Elvis croons a faint *Blue Christmas*. That song is muffled along with the sound of happy diners, but there's nothing unclear about Pat's question.

"You ready to talk about anything else? Because if you are, I'll listen." His voice is rough yet soft-edged, the same gruff as that old man's, and—

"Shit."

I stumble away from Pat, not closer.

"I forgot to place someone's order."

Pat follows me out before I can tell him not to move a single muscle from under those green leaves and white berries, but maybe that's for the best. It means that when I finally slide into the seat beside him at a table where our food is cooling, I'm opposite Ian who didn't only disentangle himself from that wanker Lito but who now fires on all cylinders, teasing us for how long we've been missing.

Guy smiles. He also winks across the table at me again, which I'd snarl at if I wasn't caught up in replaying what almost just happened, only with a different ending than the first time we stood under mistletoe together.

What if I'd climbed him again?

I can't think about that while Pat's foot presses against mine under the table or while he delivers his olives to my plate, but I suppose that's fair when I've transferred all my mushrooms to him without thinking. I only tune in when Penny asks how our meals are.

"Fine," Guy tells her.

"Fine?" Penny presses the back of her hand against her forehead, bringing all the drama. She pretends to swoon before recovering just as quickly. "What do you mean fine?" She presses a hand to his forehead next. "Huh. No fever." She

picks up the wine bottle. “Still a glass or two in here, so it isn’t the alcohol talking.” She crouches like I did beside a man I can now see tucking into his own dinner in the corner of the restaurant, only she takes the piss instead of a food order. “The last time you ate here, you said your dinner was forgettable.”

“That’s usually a blessing,” Guy insists but this is a faint imitation of the online savaging he’s famed for. “Let’s face it, your more memorable meals haven’t been for good reasons, have they?”

She narrows her eyes. “You said our take on Italian food was barely one step up from Dolmio. That you’d eaten more authentic versions from the ready-meal section at Tesco. Next, you’ll be telling me you don’t want any dessert.” And here’s a side of Guy none of his online fans get to witness. He orders every dessert on the menu.

Not for him.

For me.

On any other evening, I’d plough through them and not leave a single speck of icing sugar. Tonight, my sweet tooth barely kicks in.

“You okay?” Pat murmurs as tables start to empty, the evening drawing to a close after hours of chat and laughter that I’ve been aware of but only in my periphery. “Ian asked you a question.”

I take in the fact that Ian has his phone out and that Guy’s place at the table is empty.

Ian tilts his head. “He’s gone to settle up.” He waggles his phone at me. “Can I message that potential flatmate? Tell him to come and see you tomorrow?” His finger hovers over a contact. “Sounds like perfect timing for you both, cash-wise. Plus, you’ll like him. I’ve only talked to him a few times but he seemed a fun guy. When Lito wasn’t around,” he adds darkly.

“Lito?” I push my dessert plate away for good. “What do you mean?”

“It’s his PA, the poor sod,” Ian says with real feeling while every mouthful of sweetness I’ve eaten turns to guilty ashes. “He called first thing this morning. Asked where I went after leaving the agency. Sounded like he’d had a hell of an evening.”

My vision narrows. “Why?” I ask, even though I have a horrible idea that I already know this answer.

Ian shrugs. “I didn’t ask for the gory details, but considering he called me from the office at six this morning while he was clearing out his desk, it can’t have been good, and...”

“And,” Pat asks quietly.

“He sounded pretty shaky.”

Shit.

I flash a look at Pat before meeting Ian’s again. He waggles his phone at me one more time. “Why not meet him? Even if he isn’t long-term flatmate material, a talk with you two might work some Christmas magic.” He must see me blink. “By showing him what a decent relationship looks like?”

The table behind us erupts into sudden laughter as if they all eavesdrop and know that relationships and I are oil and water. Or oil and vinegar, like in the dish beside the empty breadbasket on our table. The yin-yang shape of the dish separates liquids that contrast but also go together, and that part could be true, I suppose. Pat *is* mellow. I’m an acquired taste. No one chooses to drink vinegar on its own, do they? Ian might as well have taken a sip; his smile turns bitter. No. Not bitter exactly.

He’s regretful.

“I should have warned him to leave the first time he called me.”

“When was that?” Pat asks.

Ian looks over his shoulder to see what I also notice—Guy’s been grabbed by a family of fans who want a photo. “A

few months back,” Ian says while smiling. It fades as soon as he turns back. “That was the first time. He tracked down my number to ask about Lito’s booking system, which made no sense to me when I ran his office and apparently is still a head trip. I wonder if he cocked up a booking yesterday and that’s why Lito lost it with him.”

“Listen,” I start to confess.

Pat interrupts me. “Do you think Guy needs rescuing?”

Ian turns again, and Guy sees us all watching. He narrows his eyes and claws his fingers, but a food critic with a reputation as a monster wouldn’t pose for this many photos, would he?

No, I’m the only monster here tonight. One who’s caused more problems for someone that Ian continues to describe.

“The first time we spoke, he wanted to know if there was a trick he was missing to Lito’s systems. Said he wanted to do a good job but had fucked up so often he was starting to doubt if he was cut out to make it as a PA. I told him it was pointless trying to get to grips with running Lito’s office. Making his assistants second-guess is all part of his weird ‘always got to be right’ dynamic. He’d only change the rules as soon as Jack got the hang of it.”

“Jack?”

Ian waggles his phone. “Yes, Jack. Can I give him your addy? Tell him to come see you tomorrow morning?”

Pat says, “Yes,” which I should nod at given I’m the reason Lito’s latest victim needs to change locations in a hurry.

Maybe I do nod—Ian types fast, sending that message, and the last of the evening passes.

We leave at closing. Penny waves us off, but I don’t hear her goodbye on the way out. My head’s too full of an internal refrain like on the Tube on the way here. This time, when I board with Pat, the wheels against the track don’t hum a constant *we only, we only, we only kiss at Christmas*. It’s a

different phrase on repeat that lasts after we change trains and then walk through our estate, our tower block looming.

We climb the five flights up to our landing together, our steps in time with what echoes in my head, the icy breeze on our wind tunnel of a walkway almost blowing away my confession.

“I’m a bad person, aren’t I?”

Pat must hear me.

“Because of Jack?” He turns to me, his face in shadow. “No fucking way, babe. That’s all on Lito.” Fairy lights sparkle behind him, laced around windows in the block opposite, which always seems too close in daylight, but now, at midnight, those lights give him a twinkling halo, and maybe that’s why my real truth slips out.

“No. I’m a bad person because I’ve waited all fucking year.”

“For?”

Snow flurries, and it must be cold, but that’s not why my voice shakes. It’s because I’ve only ever asked for what I want most once in my life, and I got knocked back. Getting knocked back by Pat now isn’t on my Christmas wish list, but we’ve always been honest with each other. “For us,” I finally tell him. “For you and me together.”

“And?”

Has his voice ever been deeper? It rattles something else free deep inside me.

“I don’t want anyone else in the flat this Christmas.” I know that’s the devil on my shoulder speaking. The angel makes me add, “Even if it’s my fault they need somewhere to stay,” but I’m nowhere close to being a perfect person, so I grab Pat’s scarf and pull. He follows me into a flat that might not only house the two of us tomorrow morning. “But Jack isn’t here yet, is he?”

And so what if there isn’t any mistletoe in our hallway?

I still slam the door closed behind us in a hurry to get Christmas started.

PAT TAKES A FEW STEPS AWAY ONCE THE DOOR SHUTS, WHICH could be fatal in this cluttered darkness. Something clangs—one of his dumbbells, maybe, while a different weight settles on my chest at him walking away instead of coming closer. It shifts as soon as he flicks on a light switch, and I get to see him shedding his coat in a hurry.

I hurry to get mine off too when Pat turns, and someone so big shouldn't be able to prowl like he does next. He should lumber like a grizzly, footsteps loud enough that our downstairs neighbours bang on their ceiling in retaliation, but here he is, taking silent steps towards me, slow and careful like each one might detonate a hidden landmine.

Something inside me explodes when he takes a final step and says, "We should talk."

I shake my head. There's no way I'm wasting time with conversation. Not about what I boxed up like last year's Christmas decorations, sliding away that mistletoe we kissed under and then never mentioned again. Not about what unpacking it this year might cost us either, even if Auntie always promised that I'm doomed to repeat what I won't face or learn from.

And that's what happens. I don't mean that I learn something—twelve months hasn't taught me shit about cramming Patrick-sized emotions inside a me-sized package. Instead, I repeat exactly what happened the last time I let my control slip around him.

I climb him.

Again.

I do it right now, right here, where I should know better and where I should draw another no-more-kissing line between us so I don't risk our friendship.

Do I do that?

No, I fucking do not.

See?

I've learned fuck all, apart from discovering that Pat knows how to kiss me back as if he's used the last twelve months to plan how.

Our mouths fuse, my arms tight around his neck while he hoists me higher, and it's everything I imagined, everything I had to stop myself from reliving each day since this last happened.

It's all that and so much more. His tongue slides against mine, slick and sleek and setting off a whole new set of lights that sparkle behind my eyelids. Nerves crackle to life, burning so bright that I must let out a hiss as if he burns me. Or maybe it's more of a whimper—his hold loosens like he worries about the tightness of his grip, but fuck that. *Fuck it.* I've waited a long, long time for this, and if we really do only have one night to ourselves before sharing our space, you better believe I'll make the most of it.

I cling, my legs locking around him, but he breaks our kiss, and I think it's over.

Is this really all I'll get for another twelve months?

One kiss that might as well be a piece of coal in my Christmas stocking?

Maybe that's what I deserve after causing this latest impulsive trouble, only Pat doesn't let me go. He turns with me still in his arms, those lights from the block opposite visible through our front door's glass pane. They halo a face that doesn't match his hard body, but that isn't what I zoom in on, like I've got one of Lito's fancy cameras.

It's Pat's missing dimples.

They're back, as if he's really happy.

No. Not as if he's happy.

He's fucking delighted, and maybe that's what makes his next kiss all the sweeter. And it *is* sweet when maybe it should be rough and frantic. By rights, we should rush to take this upright embrace horizontal and press another kind of detonator together. Not one attached to a landmine this time, but the kind that topples whole tower blocks into devastation, so they slump in piles of rubble.

That's what I imagine as he devastates me by kissing along my jaw slowly, like we have all the time in the world, not only a few hours before someone whose life I've helped to demolish knocks on our door.

Pat does the opposite of hurry. He takes his time, his teeth grazing the hinge of my jaw before kissing his way lower. I had no idea that would do it for me, or that the spiky flutter of his eyelashes against my throat would set off tiny explosions, but here I am having a private fireworks party and it's not even Diwali.

I still see fantastic bursts of colours in a space that's usually dark and dingy. Not only that, I go ahead and beg for more. I tilt my head, unable to keep in another whimper, but I've always been greedy for sweet things, and this is better than any cake—even better than my favourite Yum Yum doughnuts, and that's really saying something.

Pat lifts his mouth away, but he still doesn't put me down, and maybe that's a blessing. I'm not sure my legs could hold me, not when he presses my back against the door, still taking my weight on one strong quad.

I balance there while he unfastens the top few buttons of my shirt so he can kiss his way even lower, and I light up at the sensation. That bright flare is only internal. In reality our hallway light flickers once. Twice. Then we're plunged into complete darkness. But that's okay. Having one less sense might keep my brain from shorting out completely.

It goes offline soon enough, no space left in my skull for thinking the moment Pat's tongue is back in my mouth and his hands roam. He gets the rest of my buttons unfastened until my chest is bare, shirt hanging open in a hallway so cold that my breath would show if our landlord wasn't such a dick about maintaining anything electrical.

I don't feel the cold, only its impact—I could cut glass with my nipples, and I wouldn't have said mine were sensitive right up until the moment Pat finds one and pinches.

Forget Diwali. Forget every single one of the Bonfire Night parties Auntie made happen each November for us. Pat's touch even gives the Olympics a run for its opening-ceremony money, and I'd know—every kid in my home was there in 2012, tickets wrangled by a woman who I hope knows I'll never forget seeing that stadium light up. Now I do the same, lighting up just as brightly, only because Pat rubs my cock through my clothes and pops my fly button.

We're doing it.

Really doing it.

Or we're about to right here, not in either of our bedrooms, although Pat staggers with me in that direction. Then he sinks, and I've bitched so often about all of his gym shit filling up this hallway, but I've never been happier that we have a weight bench somewhere this convenient.

It's set on a slight incline instead of fully upright, and is the perfect height to kneel in front of once I slide from his lap to get his clothes unfastened. I head for the main event, leaving his shirt for later—for round two—for however many times we get to bang before meeting a potential third-wheel flatmate, because you better believe I'm not sleeping.

Not tonight.

I'm so stuffed with desserts and pasta that I should be full and yet I'm still starving for him—for what I wrestle out of his open fly, to be specific. And wrestle is the right descriptor for trying to pull down jeans that might make his arse and thighs look perfect, but they're a bitch to peel off.

Here's where being fuelled by injustice plays to my strengths. Even if Pat's the one with all the muscles, I won't let denim beat me. I apply brute force, yanking them down until his cock is right there, just enough light from outside to see that Pat's big all over, and that's unsurprising. His hold on my chin is—surprising, I mean.

It's gentle.

Also shaking.

I go still when his voice shakes too. "Babe? A-are you—"

Sure?

I show him, taking hold, and fuck me, he's a handful. A mouthful as well, I bet, but I've never let big things scare me. The tip of my tongue makes contact, and Pat shudders. He also says, "Yeah," all low and throaty, and forget tower blocks falling or London skies lit by fireworks, my mouth floods with saliva as if I've never eaten.

He repeats that low, "Yeah," and that's more than enough permission to go ahead and get greedy, and I am so, so greedy for him—for Pat—for my very own personal trainer at the gym and budget wrangler in our kitchen. He's my favourite person left in Britain exactly as he is, not as his dad seemed to suggest would be a better version of him. I don't want him half the country away, and fuck his earning potential. Fuck if he even graduates. In my opinion, he's enough exactly as he is. He always has been.

He groans as I sink my mouth over one of the few parts of him I haven't seen uncovered before tonight. He's bare in my mouth, the taste exactly the kind of sharp and musky that does it for me. He's a lot, but I'll do my best to take him, even if I need all night to do it.

It won't take that long.

Pat floods my mouth with a spurt of precome as though what I've barely started really does it for him too.

I give him an experimental tug while taking him deeper, still plenty of him to hold on to even when he nudges my

throat, and he lets out the kind of guttural sound that means I have to struggle out of my trousers and grip my own cock.

It's so hard it has its own heartbeat, but so does Pat's. We're matched that way like we're also matched in a messy feedback loop of his hips jerking and me almost choking. It shouldn't make my balls pull up, but his do too like we're on the same losing-control wavelength.

I choke again, and he drags me up from the floor to his lap. Then I give thanks for this crowded city's light pollution. Its glow means I get to see that Pat reclines on the bench with his shirt shoved up higher. The ripple of his abs is blurry, my eyes wet and teary. I wipe them to see him starry-eyed despite this hallway's shadows, and forget my sugar addiction—he's all I want in my mouth again.

Maybe that's mutual. He urges me up from his lap to stand and pulls me closer, so I straddle his chest. Then my cock's engulfed and he blows me like it's what he goes to the gym to train for. Or why he was assigned the room next to mine our first year of uni, both of us there two years later than all the other freshers, if for different reasons. I went back to school as a last promise to the woman who can't have heard Mariah lately, given her text-message radio silence. Pat's delay was down to needing extra coaching through his A levels, but all that meant was that we were a team of two before the end of the first week, and I never guessed back then how right this would feel between us.

There's no turning back now, is there?

Not from this.

I'll worry about tomorrow later. For now, I clutch his head, his fade prickling my palms like those spiky eyelashes tickled my throat.

Pat looks up, still starry-eyed, a tear streaking his cheek, because sometimes small packages can hold big surprises too, can't they? I reach back, his cock so hot in my hold, or maybe that's only in comparison with tonight's coldness, then I let go to lick my palm, but Pat grabs my wrist before I can give him a tight, wet wank.

He guides my hand lower, his legs parting, and I'd give a fist pump or write a thank you note to Father Christmas but I can't do either, or keep my dick in his mouth. Not while I'm reaching back and twisting. And not when the bench almost topples.

Pat must grasp the bike leaning next to it for balance. The bell on its handlebars lets out a soft *ding*. He grasps my hips next until we're steady, then gives me a hand job that means I need to warn him because I've had one hell of a dry spell lately. Or maybe shooting first then exploring later is a better mission, and again, we share a wavelength.

"Yeah," he says for a third time as I shuffle back, and he sits up. Then I'm on his lap, our cocks brushing, and we get each other off with our hands, which leaves our mouths free for more of what I've wanted since last Christmas.

We kiss, and he groans like he's as desperate for more of that as me. The weight bench wobbles again, and I reach out for balance, his bike crashing over just as Pat crashes over a different kind of edge.

He comes in a wet splatter and it's so hot that it pulls a trigger for me. We both shudder, both kiss, both peel apart and towel off, using laundry hanging on an ailer that now seems genius instead of untidy to have right here where we need it.

Pat pulls up his jeans but leaves his shirt off and I'm suddenly aware that it isn't only cold tonight. It's fucking freezing in here.

I shake—can't help it. Pat does too, I feel it when he finds a soft pair of joggers and kneels with them in hand. For me, I realise, and step into what he offers, using one broad shoulder for balance, and don't ask me why that feels more intimate than what we've started, and for what I guess we'll continue further down the hallway. All I can do is catch his hand when he stands, and ask, "Where's this headed, Pat?"

I'm asking to which of our bedrooms, but he doesn't answer, distracted by a new shadow, only this one's outside the front door. It blocks that ambient light, someone hesitating

outside, neither ringing the doorbell nor knocking, but that doesn't matter.

Pat opens it regardless, even though that's another cast-iron city rule broken, especially here on a housing estate his dad stalked through in silence but must have seen enough to know it has its share of road men and drug users. That isn't who Pat finds waiting.

If anything, he reacts as if he's found a baby abandoned on our doorstep, not a photographer's ex-assistant.

The hallway light chooses this moment to flicker back on, and I see that Jack's pinched with cold, his teeth chattering. "Ian gave me your address." His eyes are so wide and wary, I can't help thinking that more than the cold makes him stutter. "H-he said to stay with a friend tonight and to come here tomorrow, but I don't have anyone... I don't have anywhere..."

Pat meets my eyes and forget what I said about him being starry-eyed just for me. Now they shine again, and I can predict what's coming.

"Come inside. You'll be safe here." Pat extends a hand along with that promise.

And Jack?

Of course he takes it.

I WAKE PAT EARLY THE NEXT MORNING.

Keeping it real, I must wake all the floors above and below us as well, but that's what happens when I don't notice until too late that his bike isn't in its usual position. It leans away from Pat's weight bench now, and I realise why.

I did that.

Last night, I didn't notice or care that I'd created a brand-new trip hazard. Not while getting Pat off. I didn't notice it either after Jack arrived, too focussed on Pat's quiet, consoling rumble while showing him to Ian's room and getting him settled.

This morning, tripping over that bike means I nearly launch our tea across the hallway carpet—which, to be fair, is already stained a grim and dingy colour.

It's also well overdue a Hoover. Grit digs into my bare feet as liquid slops over the rims of our mugs. It floods the tray, which I clutch to my chest, my breath held, outside the door to Ian's old bedroom, but at least I don't shout. I save my morning bellow for the minute I let myself into Pat's bedroom, only I switch it for a whisper.

“Your fucking bike, Pat.”

I'm way quieter than usual. He still rolls over, too alert for someone who was asleep, so I guess he's been conscious, like me, for ages.

Has he been second-guessing what happened before Jack arrived so early this morning? Or has he been wondering what would have happened if Jack hadn't been there and we'd kept going?

We'd have fucked like Christmas bunnies.

Gone all the way, no doubt about it.

It's impossible to guess if he's been thinking the same when all he whispers in return is a quiet, "Sorry."

I can't tell if he's sorry we didn't bang or if he's relieved we dodged a friendship-ending bullet. There'd be no going back from the kind of all-night dicking I'm sure would have happened. Now we've landed somewhere in the middle, and I don't know what that means for us.

Pat sits up, bare chested like usual, despite the flat being icy, and I'd usually burrow under the covers beside him without hesitating. Today I hover between his cross-trainer and treadmill, our tea getting colder by the second, my breath visible, and this is...

This is...

I have to close my eyes against the sight of his forehead creasing.

"Let it go," he whispers, and I do.

I keep my eyes closed and let go of what I've held back for almost twelve months—of what's also kept me awake for hours and woken me early this morning. "This is exactly what I didn't want to happen, Pat."

There.

What I've been certain of for so long is finally out in the open.

Out in the open? Climbing him a first time punctured that can of worms. Repeating the same thing last night, only with a tight, wet, handsy addition? There's no way to stuff these worms back where they belong now. In fact, more keep wriggling out and I can't stop them.

“I don’t want this,” I repeat, my voice weirdly raspy. “I really, really don’t. Not between us.”

I open my eyes to find Pat blinking up at me, his hand extended. “I meant let go of the tray, babe.”

“Oh.”

I do let go. I also turn away.

He must put the tray on the bedside table. I hear the mugs clink as he sets it down. I also hear his covers rustle, but I can’t tell if that’s to lift them like usual or if he’s tucked them tight so there’s no way in for me.

I can’t see for myself, not while facing the window, which is pointless while the curtains are drawn, but I don’t need to pull them back to know what’s out there. I can already hear it.

There’s the usual drone of traffic, the far-off scream of sirens, and over it all, the daily cries of gulls who’ve chosen city living when they could escape it if they wanted.

I wrap my arms around myself, but that doesn’t stop me from shivering or from spilling some more jittery conversation instead of addressing last night’s events in detail. “You know they could literally flap their fucking wings and be at the beach instead of screaming their heads off outside our windows, right?”

“Who could?” Pat asks.

His voice is still low, still quiet, still considerate of the stranger in the bedroom next to this one.

I do my best to maintain the same low volume as him. “Those fucking gulls, Pat. The ones that nest on the roof when they could be living their best lives where they really belong. But do they?” I have to wrestle my voice quieter. “No, they fucking do not.”

“You know what this conversation sounds like, don’t you?” Pat asks from the bed before giving me the right answer. “Avoidance, but you go ahead.” The covers rustle again. “You tell me exactly where those gulls belong instead of telling me what it is you don’t want between us so badly.”

“I don’t know,” I huff. I also ignore the second part of his suggestion. “Do I look like a seagull expert? The seaside’s got to be nicer than this shit hole.” He should know. His family home comes with a view over sand and endless water that must have a price tag in the millions. “Their lives would be easier back there.” That comes out sounding as gritty as the hallway carpet. The one in here is just as threadbare, nowhere near good enough for Pat. I’ve seen photos of where he grew up. Compared to this place, it’s a palace. No wonder his dad keeps sending him smart one-bed listings. “Maybe they followed you here from Cornwall and they’ll follow you back.”

There’s no wrestling down the increasing pitch of my voice, no way to stop a spiral I know I’d also see if I opened the curtains, gulls circling white against a November dawn. Or a December dawn, I realise.

Pat will need to flip the page of the wall calendar that hangs next to this window. It’s a twin of the one in my bedroom, made by Ian for us both last Christmas. Pat’s version has a black cross drawn through each day of November, and I’d turn it to December for him, only I can’t risk letting go of myself for long enough to do it.

I can’t keep this inside either.

“You’re going to go back there for your early Christmas and you probably won’t come back at all. Not once you tell your parents how close you are to failing. Your dad will find you a job there like he promised”—which rattled me way more than his offer to pay for a one-bed flat after seeing this place—“and then you’ll be gone for good, and I’m going to wish to fuck we hadn’t ever—”

I don’t need to keep holding myself so tightly.

The sheets rustle again, and Pat’s here to do it for me.

Those thick arms of his tighten around my chest, and Jesus, he pumps out so much body heat I don’t only shiver, I virtually convulse as soon as he makes contact. He’s plastered against my back, not an inch left uncovered, and it’s the first time I’ve felt warm in forever.

Don't get used to it.

He must pluck that straight from my head. "I'm not going anywhere," he rumbles.

He will though.

Pat inhales slow and steady, his palm flat on my chest, over my heart, and fuck knows what he feels there, but he rumbles again, this time adding a qualifier. "I'm not going anywhere until the end of next week, so why don't you tell me exactly what it is you don't want between us?"

I can't.

I can't say a single fucking word while his thumb rubs back and forth, close to a nipple, and it's still cold in here, okay? That's why it tingles so much, not because each sweep of his thumb is somehow an electric reminder of last night's surprise pinches. I shiver again, and Pat holds me tighter, but only for a moment before murmuring, "Okay, babe," and his hold loosens.

I get verbal then in a hurry. I also grab his hands, pressing them back where they belong because I've been frozen since he opened our front door to welcome in a stranger. Have him let go of me again now?

I can't let it happen.

I also stop holding in what I lay awake for most of last night thinking. I tilt my head back first. It connects with his shoulder, but I can't see his face, at least not completely, which makes it easier to confess, "I don't want what I did last night to fuck us up."

"What *you* did?" It sounds like he's smiling. I twist to face him, looking up at someone I've shared this space with for two years, at a friend who shakes his head as if he knows what I'm thinking for the millionth time since we moved in together. He shakes it again when I start listing accusations. "I practically jumped you, Pat." I swallow. "For a second time. Now everything's going to be weird all over again."

"Nothing's going to be weird," he insists as if us standing in his bedroom wrapped around each other is normal.

“It already is.” That must come out too loudly. We turn to the door, both of our heads swinging as one, both hearing footsteps. They pass by, the bathroom door at the far end of the hallway shutting next with a click. I still lower my voice as if Jack might overhear us.

“Everything’s different now. From your bike being in the wrong place, to us not sitting in bed together, right down to a fucking stranger being in our bathroom, which is my fault.”

“You say that like having Jack here is a bad thing.”

“You don’t think it is?”

“Sounds like perfect timing to me,” Pat suggests. One of his hands sweeps up and down my back, and I don’t know why I suddenly picture a pile of kindling, but fuck me, I’ll catch alight if he rubs any harder. Or maybe I suddenly break into a sweat because our shitty heating system has finally clicked on. “It *could* be perfect timing for all three of us,” Pat repeats. “And not only because Jack can help with the rent.”

He does let go of me then, crossing to that photo calendar. Now Pat touches the same vibrant photo I woke up to. We both feature in it, the pair of us smiling in a Moroccan souk with spices piled around us, so vivid in Ian’s photo that I can almost smell them instead of our flat’s underlying mildew.

Pat’s finger drags from our smiling faces to the dates below it, touching the last few days in November that he’s crossed through with thick strokes of a black marker. He flips back a few pages, cross after cross counting down to something important to him.

I don’t need him to flip forward to know it’ll be that final biomechanics exam before he leaves for Cornwall, or to what I once heard him describe to Guy as a second chance he couldn’t fuck up. That shows how bad Pat is with numbers—it’ll be his third and final attempt to pass that module, not his second. “Nope,” he repeats. “Jack staying here for a few weeks could really help us.”

“How? If you mean because we need his cash, I think Penny would offer me some temp—”

“No. The money doesn’t matter,” he insists, when of course it does. His eye contact is so steady that I can’t look away from him adding, “But Jack being here could help us another way.”

“How?”

“By being a buffer.”

“A what?”

“A buffer. Between us. That’s what he could be while we do what Ian said last night.”

I cast my mind back, drawing a blank about anything that isn’t me mauling Pat’s mouth and body, and part of me cringes at him wanting a buffer to stop it from happening again.

Pat mentions something different. “Ian said we could show him what a good relationship looks like, remember?” He waggles the calendar as if that supports an argument that I’m still having trouble computing. “That’s what Ian said Jack could use the most right now, didn’t he? A chance to be around people who listen to each other. Who respect boundaries, even if they want something different.” He swallows. “Or want something sooner.”

I nod, but Pat only squints as if he’s not sure I’m following his line of thinking. He isn’t wrong about that. It’s always tough to focus when he’s almost naked.

“Maybe you need to see what I mean to believe me,” Pat says, which doesn’t make anything clearer. Neither does him doing something else that isn’t normal for us, because yes, we share a bed and body heat until the heating kicks in every morning, and yes, I do often end up on his lap when we share the living room armchair. That’s only practical for optimal Netflix viewing, and is our version of normal, but what we *never* do is hold hands while walking down our hallway.

Or we haven’t until this morning.

He only lets go at the closed living room door where the reason he was late to the restaurant last night becomes apparent as soon as he swings it wide open.

Mistletoe dangles above us.

So much of it.

It's everywhere. So are baubles that smother a tree that has more tinsel than fir needles, each branch so heavily weighted with decorations that I have no idea how it's standing upright. It actually isn't, I notice. It leans at an unsteady angle like I lean into Pat when he flips to the last page on the calendar he's brought with him.

His version of December has a different photo to the one Ian had printed on mine.

Flip to December on the twin of this calendar in my bedroom and you'll see Pat on a surfboard, his abs glistening with drops of seawater, sparkling like Edward fucking Cullen caught in sunlight. Or Emmett, who could be Pat's body double.

His calendar also shows a single person, only it's me, and I have no clue how Ian works his magic. He's made sugar crystals from a Yum Yum look like glitter. They dust the front of my coat like diamonds—like I'm worth a fortune—so dazzling that I can't focus on what Pat points out below that image.

It takes a too-long moment to process that his countdown of black crosses won't end with that final chance to pass biomechanics.

They end on the first day of December.

Today is circled right in front of my eyes, only not in thick black marker. He's used gold and silver as if marking treasure.

"We only kiss at Christmas, right?" Pat murmurs while down the hallway, the toilet flushes and water pipes clang along with my heart. "That was your boundary," he reminds me. "So I've waited." He finds my hand again, and I don't know when I curled mine into a fist, but he waits all over again until I can unclench. Then he threads us tight together.

Pat raises our linked hands to gesture at a room that's as cluttered as ever. It's also outrageously festive. "Mum always decorated the house at the start of December, so this spells

Christmas to me. December first. It's what I've counted down to." His voice lowers along with our linked hands. "And it was after midnight last night when you..." His gaze darts to the hallway. "When we..." Then it swings back to me, warm but worried. "I thought..."

He unthreads our fingers, and he's a national powerlifting champion who can press hundreds of kilos over his head without sweating, but now he drops my hand as if it's too heavy for him.

"If I jumped the gun, us having a buffer is a good thing, yeah?"

I go to refute that he did any jumping, but he says something that chimes like Big Ben inside me.

"Because you aren't ready to believe we won't fuck up what we've got already, are you? Or you aren't ready yet?" he suggests. "Maybe because your mental countdown was different. Did Christmas start later for you in your family?" He winces. "Sorry, sorry, I mean did Christmas start later at the children's home?"

His forehead creases as he corrects himself, and I've never wanted more to ignore the sirens that wail each time I imagine my life without Pat in it and instead pick up from where we left off. I'd kiss away each one of those lines if he didn't say, "Yeah, Jack being here is perfect timing."

He holds the calendar and lets one finger drift from the first of the month to a square that has a single word written on it.

Home.

He touches what he's written. "I don't care if it takes until I leave. I've already waited all year. I can wait for longer." His head dips, eye contact broken. "Or I can let it go completely."

He also straightens, his broad and bare chest expanding as he makes a promise.

"This year, Christmas only starts when you say so."

6

A FEW DAYS LATER, THE TUBE TRAIN SINGS *CHRISTMAS ONLY starts when you say so* all the way to Penny's for my first shift.

It's easier to tune out while fighting my way through crowds of Christmas shoppers to get there. Much easier than at home where there are constant reminders, like that mistletoe swinging each time Pat leaves to take extra gym classes even though they aren't necessary now that I've picked up these shifts. It also swings whenever the other reason we aren't so broke peers around the living room doorway, like he did again this morning.

There was plenty of space for Jack to share the living room with me while I sorted through my exam revision note cards, yet he hovered like he wasn't sure if he was welcome before disappearing back to Ian's bedroom. Truthfully, he only ever emerges the minute Pat wheels his bike back inside after work and parks it in the way, like usual. Then is Jack reserved and silent?

No, he fucking is not.

He comes to life the minute Pat asks, "How are you doing today, babe?"

I say as much to Penny, who asks after our new flatmate before my first lunch service. "Jack? He's spending all his time in Ian's old room when Pat isn't home. He likes him, not me."

Penny stops polishing cutlery alongside me. "Really? Jack doesn't like you? No!" She sets down a fork to ruffle my hair,

which I'd tell her is workplace harassment and cite the legislation if she didn't follow it with, "But you're such a lamb, Sebastian," like she hasn't ever heard Guy call me a terrier when we eat together.

"Don't say that so loudly. I'm going to be a top prosecutor one day. Can't have all of London hearing I'm actually soft and woolly." That's a joke. I'm not convinced these days that the law is for me, and London won't hear a thing while this restaurant is empty. I point a shiny knife at the vacant tables, suddenly suspicious this offer of a shift comes from a place of charity instead of necessity. "Are you sure you really need me?"

"Oh, yes." She plucks up a tablet to show me something. "Read that."

It's Guy's latest *Worst Meal of the Week* column.

"Another Friday night," I read aloud, "another utterly mediocre meal at Penny's, that blight on Kensington's five-star food reputation. I'd tell you all about it if I hadn't already forgotten what I ordered. I'm sure each mouthful of pasta was a travesty. While Italy weeps, say a prayer for my stomach, but whatever you do, don't eat there, especially from their new Christmas menu." I can't help flinching at his closing sentence. "When it comes to crimes against good cooking, I predict you'll come to a guilty verdict."

I look up, expecting to find her upset or angry.

Penny smiles so hard her nose wrinkles more than I've ever seen it. "Isn't he awful?" She crosses to the window. "I'd have stern words with him if this didn't happen every time he gives us a mention." She presses the button that raises the restaurant shutters, and it's a cool but crisp day outside so sunshine should stream in. However, not much light can get through the line of people waiting for their own chance to be judge and jury.

We're run off our feet for the next several hours, serving plate after plate of pasta to customers who express surprise and then snap photos that flood their socials. The phone rings with more bookings and by the time service quietens, I'm back

to polishing—glasses this time, for a dinner service that Penny is delighted to tell me is fully booked already. She also picks up from where we left off.

“But really, Sebastian, why is your Jack spending so much time in his room?” Her eyes narrow. “And why do you still call it Ian’s room? It’s got to be a year since he moved out.”

“Because Ian was the flatmate we had for the longest. Our best one. We got to be good friends really quickly.” I rub at a smudge on a glass, my conscience equally clouded. “Probably because we did a lot together about a month after he moved in.”

“Why was that?”

Because that’s how long it took us to figure out that Lito was a gaslighting twat who knocked his confidence.

I replay Jack hesitating in the doorway this morning, looking so conflicted.

Fuck.

“Because Ian needed to keep busy.” That’s what Pat and I decided together, after living with a jumpy shadow. Now I can’t avoid my own silent question and answer.

How is Jack any different? He isn’t. It’s me.

Penny interrupts a thought spiral that yells as loudly as the gulls outside Pat’s window. Her question is a lot softer than their screeching. “So why did you do a lot with Ian but you aren’t spending any time with this new flatmate of yours?”

Because of what Jack interrupted?

Because Pat calls him babe?

No. The real reason is guilt, plain and simple.

Because it’s my fault Lito lost it with him.

That’s much more truthful. Penny crouches behind the bar like Pat did beside my bed this morning. She’s counting wine bottles, but Pat crouched for a different reason, asking me to keep Jack busy. Now I pause, a linen napkin wrapping my fingers instead of Pat’s hand finding mine under the covers. I

also wish to fuck I'd been awake enough to hold on to him for longer rather than letting him slip out of the flat so early, leaving me to listen to Jack creeping to the bathroom on quiet feet as if he walked on eggshells.

I'm a wanker, no two ways about it, for escaping the flat today just as quietly.

Penny finishes counting wine bottles while I polish glasses even faster, pissed off with myself because I can almost hear Pat saying, "That's a displacement activity, babe," as if he's a top psychologist, like one of his older brothers.

But knowing what he'd say means that I also admit, "It's me, not Jack."

I need to stop blurting like this. I would, only Penny gets up to ruffle my hair again, cooing as if I've said something interesting, not awful, and she's so bloody friendly that I keep going. "Some people make friends easily. I'm not one of them."

"You?" She frowns, which is rare enough that it looks all wrong on her. "What about at school?"

I shake my head. "Was always the new kid." Or I was until I behaved so badly no foster parents would have me and I got to make the home my permanent address. I know what she'll ask next—*why* is a question that's best swerved, in my opinion, but I can't swerve the loud rap on the restaurant window.

Penny doesn't either. She also tuts. "No good at making friends? What do you call those two?"

Pat raises a hand in a wave that Jack watches before raising his own and giving a tentative waggle.

"Is that him? Your Jack? You didn't say you were so alike, Sebastian. He could be your brother!" She squints. "Or a younger cousin, maybe. How old are you?"

"Twenty-two."

"Yes, he looks younger," she says on the way to the door. "But he seems friendly enough to me."

And he is. Or at least he is with Penny.

They chat while I finish laying the last tables for dinner and Pat follows to ask a quiet question. “You okay?”

“Yes. Fine. You?” I step around him, working my way down a long table set for yet another family Christmas party. “How were the mums with their bums and tums?”

He looks about to speak as I glance back at him. Then he closes his mouth and traces the edge of this evening’s menu. Pat’s touch to the graphic printed on the corner of the card is quick—there and gone before he says, “Good.”

That’s all he finally comes out with about his morning, which is unusual for him. At any other time, he’d wax lyrical about reps and personal bests because nothing gets him as chatty as his clients’ achievements.

Their progress always makes him talk a mile a minute. This stilted one-word answer? It’s exactly what all my avoidance was meant to, you know, avoid between us.

I keep working, keep moving down this never-ending bloody table for what must be a huge family. I set out more Christmas crackers and menu cards decorated with what Pat registered much faster than it takes me to notice. Each corner is embellished with a sprig of green leaves and cluster of white berries.

Pat must have circled the table. He blocks my progress, his hand covering mine and squeezing while I study a mistletoe image. “Or my day was good until I came home to find Jack packing.”

Fuck. Because I left without saying goodbye to him?

Pat gives a different reason. “Because Lito called him and ordered him to get his arse back to his office.”

“He ordered him to do what?” I’m loud enough that Penny and Jack look our way from the far side of the restaurant. Jack’s taken my barstool, only now Penny has him polishing more cutlery instead of glasses. He looks worried, and my conscience pokes as sharply as the steak knife Jack rubs, its

blade bright and gleaming. I turn away from that contrast to his bleak expression. “He was really about to go back to him?”

“Looked that way to me.” Pat tugs on my apron, exerting pressure but only lightly. I could ignore it and he’d let me go, no hassle, no questions asked, because he wasn’t kidding about respecting boundaries even though I don’t have any for him.

Of course I go where he pulls me—he could even pull me all the fucking way to Cornwall and I’d be tempted to follow if I didn’t believe it would cause nothing but trouble. He drops into a seat once we’re out of Penny and Jack’s sight, and I don’t even think—I sit as if we’re at home together, settling on his lap, one arm around his shoulder, while he tells me what he walked into.

“If I’d come home five minutes later, I think we would have lost him.” He says that as if Jack is someone special, not a virtual stranger. Or maybe he’s only a stranger to me. Pat suggests so by adding, “I know it isn’t the first time Lito’s called him.”

There’s no need to ask how come he knows that when I don’t. Because Jack isn’t the only one who’s walked on eggshells lately, is he?

Since he’s arrived, I’ve done my own hesitating and backing off whenever he and Pat have chatted. Up until now, I thought that had gone unnoticed. Pat slides an arm around my hip as if he knows I’d avoid this too, given a chance. He won’t let me, hugging me closer to him—close enough I can see shadows under his eyes.

He’s tired.

Of your bullshit, the devil on my shoulder offers.

Whatever the real reason, Pat’s blunt with me and, like Penny’s frown, that’s so rare I sit up straighter. “You’d know that too, babe, if you spent any time with him. He thinks you don’t want him in the flat.”

“I do.”

I don’t, but I owe him.

Pat shakes his head, his tone coming out much firmer than I'm used to hearing from him. "It doesn't look that way to him." His tone reverts to its usual softness. "Or to me. But that's how you were with Ian before we got to know him, isn't it? You used to leave me and him talking like you weren't..."

His brow creases again, and I know all of his expressions, every single smile that feathers those tiny lines beside his eyes, each deepening of his dimples whenever I tell him he almost got his sums right.

This look, though?

I don't have a name for it, apart from bruising.

I don't like it on him.

"You acted like you were the outsider, not Ian." He grinds that out like saying it is painful. "As if you assumed you were the one who didn't belong—"

Cutlery rattles behind us.

"Oh." Jack rounds the corner, clutching what I need to finish laying this table. He holds the tray of silverware close to his chest the same way I clutched that tea tray the morning after he moved in, and Pat's right—he *is* wary around me. He can't even meet my eyes now. "S-sorry," he says, backing away, but I'm already up from Pat's lap.

"No, stay." I don't know why it's so hard for me to say this. I make myself speak regardless. "I could do with your help."

That breaks some ice. Jack thaws a little more as we work together, the restaurant quickly getting back to shipshape. Pat goes to find my coat while Penny does what she does best, peppering Jack with questions. In the few minutes that Pat's gone, I hear that Jack's from a small Somerset village and has only been in London a few months.

"I came here for my first full-time job."

"As?" Penny asks brightly.

"As a PA specialising in finance," he says, and Penny *ohs* as if he's headed the Bank of England instead of done some

filing for a wanker with a camera. “It was an amazing offer to get right out of college.” Jack confirms what brought him to our doorstep. “But I think I misunderstood what my boss expected. It wasn’t anything like the job description.” He meets my eyes, maybe remembering that I witnessed Lito calling him a useless fuckwit.

Something twists tight inside me while, over the sound system, Bing Crosby croons about peace on earth to all men. Only Jack won’t get a minute’s peace on earth if he goes back to Lito, will he?

Jack shakes his head as if he knows what I’m thinking. His tone still hints at self-doubt and confusion. “I don’t understand how I got top marks at college but it turned out that I wasn’t good at any of it. At *none* of it. I did every single thing wrong that my boss asked me.”

Penny clucks. “Well, you’re very good at this.” She passes him more cutlery even though I’ve polished it once already, but I guess why when Jack bows his head over it, rubbing hard but still talking.

Pat murmurs from behind me, sounding approving. “Keeping him busy helps. Let’s do more of that. Together, yeah, babe?” He holds my coat open for me to slide into.

That tight twist in my chest doesn’t let up. It creeps to my throat, my voice strangled. “I can dress myself, Pat.”

“Of course you can,” he agrees, surrendering my coat to me while Penny and Jack talk, and I’d tune in to their conversation if not for Pat looping a scarf striped with his uni colours around my throat next. “But you feel the cold a lot more than I do, don’t you?” He adjusts it, taking his time to loop it once more. “Or maybe I just like knowing for sure that you’re warm and cosy.”

Fuck knows why I go on to let him fasten my last few buttons before batting his hands away, suddenly hot and flustered. He still adjusts my collar, fingers brushing where he kissed my neck and wrecked me before we found a full-grown baby on our doorstep. Now Pat tucks his scarf around where

his mouth left me tender, and I can't remember the last time someone did this for me.

Yes, I can.

I touch the fabric. "You're worse than Auntie."

"Auntie?" Pat says, sliding into his own coat.

"Just one of the team. At the home."

He only hums, interested but not probing, so I keep going. "She was old school. Said I wouldn't feel the benefit if I didn't do up my coat before going out to play."

"Mum said the same to me." Pat grins. "Still does to my brother." He must mean the one who plays big-money hockey, not the psychologist who works in war zones, because he adds, "She fusses even though Calum literally spends his life at an ice rink. Your auntie sounds like a smart woman. That's who you text sometimes, right?"

I nod, and he could poke some more about her, but here's the thing about Pat—yes, he always asks for one more rep from his fitness family, but he never pushes for more than they've got left in their tanks, and I've never had enough left in mine to admit my biggest failure ever.

Instead, he tilts his head towards the bar, where Penny doesn't poke or prod either. Her questions all sound natural, not leading. She's such a people person.

"No," Jack tells her. "I didn't have my own place." He frowns a little, his snub nose wrinkling like hers, only for a less happy reason. "The job was live in. I did pay rent for my room."

Which was right next to Lito's bedroom, I bet. I flash a look at Pat to find he's still focussed on his scarf. The one I'm now wearing. I touch the fabric looping my throat, and his gaze skitters away before slowly returning, like he can't help looking at me, while Jack says, "I told myself that it didn't matter if the job was tougher than I expected. Not if it meant I got to put the title Executive Personal Assistant on my CV *and* I got to live in London."

Penny hums. “Sounds like you thought the streets were paved with gold.” Her laugh tinkles. “Plenty of people think that when they first get here. Then they can’t wait to leave!” She heads for the windows and Jack follows, cloth and cutlery still in hand.

“Why would anyone leave?” Jack asks. “It’s got everything.”

I crane my neck, tracking their movement, but really I’m eavesdropping.

“Or that’s what my granddad always told me,” Jack confesses. “He was in the Household Cavalry, a Horse Guard before he took over the stables at the same house where my granny was the housekeeper.”

“How very *Downton Abbey*.” Penny’s laugh is another light and lovely tinkle.

“Not really. Just lots of silver to polish when I stayed with them during the school breaks. And when I lived with them for a while.” Jack wiggles a fork, its tines catching the wintry light and glinting.

“No wonder you’re so good at that,” Penny tells him warmly in another surprise reminder of Auntie, who was always positive and praising if decades older. “Only don’t rub too hard,” Penny warns him. “Leave a bit of silver on my cutlery, won’t you?”

“Ha! None of this is real silver.” Jack peers as if searching for a hallmark. “Nope. It’s not even plated.” His head jerks up, his expression stricken. “S-sorry, I...”

“Was joking?” Penny pats his cheek. “Of course you were, love. So you think you know your real silver from your plate or stainless steel, do you?”

Jack nods. “Saw plenty of the real deal. Loved it, to be honest. Sitting at this massive table with my gran when I was little, turning everything shiny. She said I was a real help.” His voice roughens. “She never told me I was useless.”

“That’s because you aren’t,” Penny tells him firmly, and I hope Guy keeps writing awful reviews for her forever; she’s a

rare reminder of care in this sharp-edged city.

Pat is another. He touches my chin, exerting another tiny pressure until I face him. “So nosy,” he murmurs while fastening his own coat, and I have no idea why I bat his hands away for a third time only to go ahead and fasten his zip for him. It’s weirdly satisfying. And engrossing. It also doesn’t need to take so long to pull a zip all the way up that I miss Jack approaching.

I don’t know what he makes of what he finds me doing. His eyes widen and he stops halfway between us and Penny, back to shy and voiceless, and isn’t that what I used to hate most about being the new kid at school over and over?

No one should feel like an outsider or that no one wants to listen to them.

My hands are still on Pat’s chest. I feel it expand as if he’s about to break the silence, while behind Jack, Penny gives me a thumbs-up that I translate as *you can do it!*

Fuck me, I actually try to.

“So, you haven’t seen much of the city?”

Jack shakes his head. He also glances at the window, less light steaming in now that clouds have gathered, the sky turning gloomy.

“Want me to show you around?”

“Really?” Jack faces us again, his focus fully on me. He also aims something in my direction that I haven’t seen since his arrival, and I’ve said that London’s mad and magical, haven’t I? That only flurries of snow and people like Penny can make it seem enchanted? I add Jack’s smile to that list, but it isn’t what holds my attention.

Pat does.

He rumbles, “We both will,” and tags on a quieter, “Yeah, babe?”

“Yes.” I nod, the window reflecting a Christmas tableau of three men who might not be wise, but I’m giving it a shot and that has to count for something. “All of us together.”

The window then reflects Pat beaming, and do you know what?

The whole city outside brightens.

PAT PLANS OUR FIRST TRIP FOR A COUPLE OF DAYS LATER, although I have no idea why he chose this destination. Even Jack eyes the building dubiously, doing more of his usual hesitating at the doorway.

This time, it's a gallery he wavers outside of, hanging back on the doorstep instead of entering, and I can guess his reasons. It's dedicated to photography, to everything Lito said Jack wasn't equipped to handle. He even steps back, both hands shoved deep in his pockets.

Penny suggested we could be related—cousins, I think she mentioned, even though I'm a one-and-only with no known blood relations. Today I can't stop seeing similarities, especially now his body language does so much talking for him.

I'm the king of tightly crossed arms and blank faces, or I used to be before Pat told me it was a defence mechanism and asked what exactly did I need to defend myself against around him?

Nothing.

I don't have to wonder what's made Jack the same kind of uptight. I was there, remember? Seeing an action replay of Jack closing off again provokes the same instinct to get between him and whatever it is that shuts him down so quickly, only I don't have to tip a bottle of Prosecco over Pat like I did over that asshole. I never would nor need to. I still speak up for Jack, who stays tight-lipped.

“Pat, maybe going somewhere else would be better?” I point in another direction and mention what would usually make me want to poke my eyes out. “Bond Street is that way. Plenty to see there if Jack likes window shopping. Do you?” I ask, but Jack’s focussed on Pat, and I know that feeling.

I focus on him too as he turns, filling the entire doorway right beside a window display of photos featuring statues of ancient Greeks. Or Romans, I guess. Yeah, they’re all gladiators in these photos, and Pat could be a living and breathing version, carved from flesh instead of marble. They’re all solid like him, not pretty or perfect, but Pat looks as if he could beat them all in battle. Or he does right up until he opens his mouth to ask Jack a gentle question. “You know Ian, right?”

Jack nods, then he shakes his head. “We haven’t actually met. Not in person. We’ve only spoken over the phone a few times.” He glances away, and his nose was pink with cold already but now a more vivid version stains his cheeks. “Heard a lot about him though.”

Pat meets my eyes, and why he’s brought Jack here clicks into place the moment he says, “I bet Lito told you Ian was useless.”

Jack darts a look between us before nodding. I nod too because Jack needs what Pat’s brought him here to witness. In fact, I can’t help grinning. “What a massive, massive bellend that dick is. Come on.” I catch hold of Jack’s elbow. “You need to see this.” Pat backs out of the way, letting me lead because I know exactly where to take Jack.

We pass displays of London over the years and bypass learning spaces where photographers hold talks and training sessions. I leave them all behind, heading for the public exhibitions. “Would someone useless get invited to contribute to a show here?”

I hold out both arms, turning in a circle in a room filled with Ian’s work exactly where it belongs with other up-and-coming photographers.

Jack pauses in its doorway, and I expect to see Pat right behind him, only I don't. It's just me and Jack, and I'm not the best person for this conversation, not when Pat always has a deep well of relationship advice to draw from. All I've got is a shallow puddle, so I point out what is plain and simple.

"Ian's getting noticed, and not because of who he used to work for."

Jack eyes me, still dubious, but that hot flush recedes so I keep going.

"Would you believe that tosser told Ian he'd never make the big time? That without his backing, he'd be stuck in a small town forever, getting nowhere fast? All that negative shit-talk is the opposite of what he said when they first met."

That all must sound familiar and hit too close to home for comfort because Jack's head drops while he's still in the doorway.

I go back to him, doing my best to channel my inner gym bro. Pat would grab his hand and pull—would get physical, like he did when we first moved in together and he'd share his space with me. He's so tactile, but in a good way, one that says *I'm comfortable around you*.

Progressive overload, he called it. These days, I know that means gradually adding extra weight to a barbell, little by little, only Pat overloaded me with friendship.

Now I do my best to mimic the same friendliness by grabbing the ends of Jack's scarf and tugging. "Come on. You really do need to see this." I tug again, asking him without words to trust me and, fuck knows why, he does.

Jack crosses the whole room with me, all without hesitating. He also stands close as I show him what Lito couldn't hope to capture even with the world's most expensive camera.

"Oh," Jack says at Christmas scenes caught in a Cornish kitchen designed for disabled people, each scene warmhearted and wholesome. "These are special."

“Ian’s work? Of course it is.” I puff up on his behalf. “He’s brilliant, but did Lito ever tell him that once he got him alone and isolated? No, he fucking did not. And definitely not once Ian ditched him.”

“Ditched him? You mean they were together?”

I’ve seen the word *aghast* written plenty of times online and in books. I didn’t realise I’d never seen it in real life until Jack shows me what it looks like. “I didn’t know that.”

“That’s because your ex-boss is all about his own image. He wouldn’t want anyone to think he’d been dumped, let alone by someone so gifted.” I chance a different question. “Were you... were you and him...?”

“Together?” Jack pales, and that’s a feat considering he was as winter white as me a moment before. “Oh, no, no, no. Except... He... No.” He clears his throat, but his voice doesn’t come out any stronger. “I told him that would be...” He stretches for a word, frowning before settling on, “Unprofessional. That’s when I started talking to Ian more often because nothing went right after that. Not at work or at home. Staying in my room was easier.”

His narrow shoulders straighten, and I love to see it. “But staying in wasn’t why I came to London, only he wasn’t happy about me going out either. All of a sudden, he needed me to work with him every evening. You saw how well that went.”

“Yeah. I did.” What Jack shares adds to a monochrome image of his life in London so far. It has none of the warmth or colour Ian’s next photos capture, and it’s easy to guess where Jack learned to walk on eggshells. They’re the same ones he’s walked on in a flat that, up until this moment, I’ve only wanted to share with Pat.

The thought of him going back to Lito’s has me shaking my head firmly.

I’m not sure how Jack translates that. He trips over his explanation. “I-I tried to be better at my job. I really did, even though Ian told me it would only get worse. I thought it was

me. That as long as I kept trying, I'd get better at it. I didn't. I didn't get better at *any* of it."

He taps his temple like he's trying to hammer in office routines that I have absolutely no doubt Lito kept switching up on purpose.

"Nothing I did was right, which pissed him off, and then you..." He makes a pouring motion over his own head. "Lito really lost it then, and it was like every single flash of his cameras went off at the same time—I could see the future, *my* future, if I stayed." He shakes his head. "I didn't see it before. Not until you did that."

For a moment, we don't stand in an exhibition. I guess we're both back at the party where I emptied a bottle of wine over a complete wanker. "Sorry," I tell him. I also admit, "I should have already told you I was sorry for doing that."

"No," he insists, a lick of colour returning. Even his voice has more life. "You were epic."

I must blink.

His colour rises some more. "You were," he breathes. "So, so epic, Sebastian. Someone charging in and standing up for me like that? You spat bullets and he backed off so fast. It was like seeing myself from the outside, you know? What the fuck was I letting happen that a complete stranger had to intervene for me? I mean, what the actual fuck? So I called Ian again that night and he told me about a spare room he knew about. Only I didn't know it would be yours."

"You did the right thing," I promise even though finding him on our doorstep had stopped a heated moment that he brings up.

"I know me turning up like that spoiled your evening. You and Pat were..."

Christ knows what we must have looked like to him, all post-orgasmic and half-dressed. I should tell him that he actually did us a going-too-far favour. That we aren't together. That we're friends forever, not whatever it looked like that he

walked in on. Instead I say, “Then we’re even.” I also have to undo my coat, suddenly overheated.

He grins, and it’s only the second time he’s aimed one at me. It’s a reminder of Ian finally shaking off the shadow Lito had him under, right down to Jack saying, “I seriously have no idea what I was thinking.”

“We’re all allowed to make mistakes. And to change our minds.” I picture mistletoe until Jack steps into my eyeline. Then I say, “The real mistake would be going back for a second helping.”

“What if I still owe him for—”

“For what?”

Jack twists the ends of his scarf, his knuckles somehow even paler than the rest of him.

I frown. “Wait. Is that why Lito has been telling you to come back?” He flashes me a surprised look, so I tell him, “You might as well know that Pat and I tell each other almost everything. Tell one of us something, and you’re probably telling us both.”

“Relationship goals,” he says quietly. I don’t get to tell him that’s down to years of sharing space. He’s too busy spilling more details. “But yes. Lito says I owe him. And he’s right.”

“What the fuck do you owe him for?”

Jack’s gaze darts away. He also heads off, pointing to another exhibit, but I know that trick of old.

Know it?

I’m an avoidance pro, remember? Pat’s the expert at stopping that shit in its tracks, and I need him here, right now, to do that.

I look around again for him. There’s still no sign, no broad shoulders taking up the doorway, no warm eyes creasing at their corners while teasing away what looks like panic, so I slip out my phone and send him a quick SOS before striding after Jack, who’s slipping away, closer now to the exit.

“Jack?”

He doesn't answer or stop. He keeps retreating, keeps avoiding, and I can't let him do that, not if his going back to that toxic dipshit is a real and present danger.

“Listen. Please, Jack. Wait.”

He stops then beside another wall of photos.

“Unless that knob paid you in advance or lent you a ton of cash, you don't owe him a single thing. Did he lend you money?”

“No.” He flashes me a wild look. “I can cover the rent. I've got savings.”

“You're good.” Right now, he can stay rent free if he needs to. I make a stab in the dark and ask a different question. “Did he tell you he invested time in your training, and you owe him for that? Or that you need to go back if you ever want to make it here? Because that's bullshit. All of it. Look at this if you don't believe me.”

I point at a photo of the same souk Ian included in our calendars last Christmas. It's an explosion of colour that I give a new title. “This is what life after Lito can look like. What life is like when you boot the devil off your shoulder. The one who keeps whispering that you owe him.”

I'm so not cut out for this.

I don't have the right relationship skill set, and fuck knows where Pat got his because after that disaster of a meal with his dad it surely can't be genetic. I look around again, only I'm searching for a Pat-shaped rescue package that shows no sign of materialising. It means I take the only other option even though I hate it.

I huff out a huge breath and get talking, only now I make it personal.

WE MOVE on to another display, stopping in front of a photo of Pat bare chested and glinting. There are seagulls in this blown-up version, spiralling where they belong, above Cornish waters. And that's what Jack needs—wings—or someone with them.

It's the only reason I confess, "My auntie believes in guardian angels. Says we all have them. Every time I got into trouble as a kid, she'd tell me to stop listening to the devil on my shoulder. Give my angel a chance to get gobby."

"You got in trouble?"

"Like you wouldn't believe."

Jack's forehead furrows like that old man who had bristly eyebrows and a broken mobile. "But you're studying the law."

I look away. The urge to add distance between me and this conversation is strong, and where the actual fuck is Pat?

I check my phone. Still no answer, so I huff out another huge sigh and tell Jack, "Maybe it took me a while to learn to listen to my angel. To realise all of her advice came from wanting me to be happy. Don't make the same mistake of refusing to listen. You've got good gut instincts. If you want to survive here, you'll need them."

I'm not doing this right.

I can't be.

All I've done is upset Jack. His hand shakes as he pushes back a strand of fair hair. Or maybe that's to mask his eyes gleaming. I clutch the ends of my own scarf—or Pat's, to be truthful. I don't need to keep wearing it in here, but right now it feels like a lifeline, and I wish to God that Pat would hurry. He'd know what to say to stop that shaking. He'd be so much better at this than me, full stop.

I still have no clue where he gets his life-coach wisdom, so fuck knows how I'm meant to replicate it. I can only hope that saying this doesn't mess up Jack any further. "Pretend you've got an angel on your shoulder right now. One that only tells

you the truth. One who wants you to be so, so happy. What does it tell you?"

"Not to go back."

Thank fuck.

"See? Good instincts. Don't doubt them again if Lito tries to guilt you into doing it. Ask yourself this instead: if you care for someone, what do you do? Big them up or constantly put them down?"

"Big them up?" Jack says, but it comes out sounding uncertain, so I tell him what Pat's done for me so often and what I do in return as naturally as breathing.

"That's right. You big them up because you only want good things for them. Yeah, you can piss each other off." I picture that death trap of a bike in our hallway. "But even being pissed off with each other comes from a place of giving a shit, not of having to win." One day, Pat's going to fall over that bike and break his neck, and of course I don't want that for him. "You get me?"

Jack nods as I picture our kitchen with its blackboard covered in chalk calculations. "If someone important to you is struggling, do you call them stupid or find simple ways to boost their confidence and help them?"

"Help them," he says quietly.

"Of course you fucking do." I also can't help replaying Pat cradling his phone for ages before calling his dad the last time he got his sums wrong under exam conditions, those huge shoulders of his rounding, and my voice roughens. "And if they really can't get to grips with something, you let them know you still love them."

"It wasn't a love thing." Jack shudders. He also frowns in front of another photo, and here I am, or the version of me on Pat's calendar anyway. I glint like I'm worth a fortune, strewn with actual diamonds, not snow and Yum Yum sugar, my eyes a polished and shining silver.

Jack's eyes still shine as brightly. He blinks fast a few times, then says, "But what I can't figure out is why Lito used

to be a lot more positive about me. Because he really was when I first met him.”

“Where was that?”

“At my college graduation.”

Of course it was. Lito’s such a slimy cradle snatcher.

“And for the first few weeks that I worked for him, he praised me all the time. It made me think...”

“That you must be the one who was fucking up when everything started to go wrong?” I remember Pat saying this to Ian. “It’s called love bombing. Telling someone they’re wonderful and then pulling the rug out from under them. Makes you feel all wobbly, right? Off-balance? Then he threw in a bit of gaslighting—telling you that you’d failed when you only followed his instructions to the letter. That leaves you so unsure, you start doubting everything about yourself and believing everything about him. Sound familiar?”

Jack neither nods nor shakes his head. He’s perfectly still, like me in the photo, his eyes wider than seems possible.

He’s a baby. A bloody infant.

This city’s going to mash and crush him if someone doesn’t walk him through it.

“Of course it sounds familiar,” I say for him, channelling some of Pat’s gentleness instead of my default barking or bullet-spitting. “And you know what else that is?”

Jack shakes his head quickly.

“It’s a *him* problem, not a *you* problem, so if that devil on your shoulder is telling you to go back and try harder to please him, you kick him in the nuts and tell him to fuck right off.”

I poke him in the chest as if he’s Pat, which shocks Jack—and me—but I keep going, poking between words to punctuate them. “What are you going to do the next time that twat calls, expecting you to run back?”

“Tell him no?”

That still sounds too much like a question. “And?” I poke him again.

He bats me away, laughing—actually laughing—and it isn’t only the first time I’ve heard that. It’s also the first time he pokes me back, standing his ground. “I’ll kick him in the nuts.”

I laugh too, and it echoes. “Too fucking right you will, and if you can’t do it, pass your phone over to me. It will be my pleasure.”

“Or pass it to me,” Pat says from behind us, and I have no idea how much of that he heard, but he pulls me against him before doing the same to Jack.

A heavy arm claims each of us as we stand surrounded by proof of what he says next. “I’ll tell him you’ve moved on to something better. Because you will, Jack.”

If that promise rumbles through me, I guess it must do the same for him. I lean around Pat to see what looks close to hero-worship from Jack, and I’ve never wished more for Ian to capture a turning-point moment with his camera as I do this one.

Pat herds us towards the doorway. “But moving on starts with remembering why you came here in the first place.”

Jack halts. “To this gallery?”

“No, *here*. To this city. You said your grandfather told you stories, yeah? Told you London was life? I spoke with someone at the front desk. There’s an archivist here cataloguing past collections. I just met him. He says they’ve got a shit ton of old Horse Guard photos up in the attics. That’s what you said your grandfather was, right? A Horse Guard?”

Jack nods, and it shouldn’t be possible for his eyes to shine any brighter, but when Pat says, “Want to see if you can find some shots of him?” they don’t only shine, they glisten.

ONCE JACK HEADS OFF TO DIG THROUGH YEARS OF PHOTOS, Pat leads me to a staircase. “He might be awhile. There’s a café on the next floor. The archivist says they have”—he stage-whispers—“Christmas cookies.” He starts up the stairs, taking them two at a time like I usually would at the prospect of festive glucose, and on any other day, I’d follow him in a heartbeat, only I can’t.

Instead, I freeze at the foot of the staircase, and Pat must realise that I don’t follow him. He stops, then turns to face me. He also must guess what prompts my hesitation.

Or who.

“There’s enough photos to keep Jack busy for a while,” he promises. “We’ll be done long before he is. But I’ll let him know where we’ll be if you’re worried.” He pulls out his phone and thumbs a quick message. He also holds a hand out to me before remembering that line drawn between us and the start of Christmas.

His next move is less smooth. He jerks both hands into his pockets, shoving them deep and, for a fleeting moment, he could be the person he just messaged.

Jack did the same thing, didn’t he, right outside this building?

“Sorry,” he murmurs, and it shouldn’t be possible for someone as big as Pat to fold himself this little with one sole jerky movement.

I respond on instinct, jogging up the few steps between us because he doesn't have a single thing to be sorry about. Then I take one more step than he has, which just about puts me on his level. We're the same height, give or take a few inches, which makes it easier to do this.

I hug him, and I don't let go, right here on a staircase in a virtually empty gallery while, only a few streets away, London's masses do their Christmas shopping.

We might as well be the only people in here. There's no one else around to witness his slow withdrawal—not from me. He pulls his hands from his pockets and hugs me back, if lightly, while murmuring, "I thought we weren't doing this." The word *yet* is silent, hanging in the air above us like a sprig of something green and leafy.

"That's kissing." *Or banging.*

I'd tug at my scarf—*his* scarf—if I could reach it between us. It must have snagged, making this next question come out tightly. "Friends can hug at any time of the year, can't they?"

Pat doesn't answer. He just squeezes me back, only his hold leaves me almost breathless, and forget my scarf trying to choke me. Now all of me is wrapped so tightly that my bones groan, but so what if he cracks a few ribs? I've got others. Besides, it's worth it—he's back to smiling when his hold finally loosens.

He still doesn't let go completely, but I don't either, and that's totally fine and friendly.

So is being face-to-face with my best friend, with my longest-lasting flatmate, with only the second person in my life that I've ever wanted to keep near and never see leave. There's scarcely an inch between us. He's so close that his murmur is a warm gust kissing my cheek. "What did I do to deserve this?"

Part of me has a ready answer. "That was a really nice thing you just did for Jack." The rest of me internally frowns at Pat feeling like affection comes with a price tag. That he has to earn it. That he won't deserve it without meeting some kind

of expectation. It makes me hug him again, only this time I'm the one who could crack ribs. "But that's you, isn't it, Pat? Always trying to make people happy."

"No," he almost whispers, and it doesn't matter that I've seen Pat roar as loud as a lion while watching rugby or sing his heart out, drunk in the back of Ubers after a night out clubbing. It's when he's this quiet that I want to listen. "Not people, babe," he says slowly and carefully. "I'm not interested in making *people* happy."

His breath is another soft kiss and it doesn't matter that his *only you* is also silent.

I hear it.

I don't know why this feels like time turning backwards. We're doing all of this out of order. I've already had his cock in my mouth—would have banged him like a drum if a baby hadn't landed on our doorstep—but when have we ever stood for so long wrapped up in each other like this?

I feel the need to fill a silence that I should let lie while we're locked together in what a stranger might mistake for a first-date embrace.

Not that we're kissing. Not yet. But breathing like this in tandem is more intimate than I'm used to. His hands sweep up and down my back until my spine loosens and I'm more draped against him than fully upright. I'm melting, and I should zip my lips forever—let myself soak up what seeps from him—but Auntie always said I was my own worst enemy when it came to knowing when to keep my mouth shut.

"You listened to him, Pat. Heard what mattered to him. And you did something about it."

Of course he fucking did. It's only what Pat's shown me over and over, starting with Ian. Maybe I've shared space with him for so long that I stopped noticing. Now that we're here on this almost silent staircase, I can't do anything but replay other examples where his listening mattered.

Each one has me as its focus.

The most recent instance floods back, our cluttered hallway behind us, a decorated living room ahead that screamed, “*It’s Christmas,*” as loudly as Noddy Holder. And with me stuck fast on the threshold.

What also sticks is what he told me.

Christmas starts when you say so.

Or not.

That’s what he promised—that he’d listen, whatever my decision—and my eyes sting out of nowhere. “You always listen, Pat,” I manage to grit out while blinking against his jacket. “You’re so good at it. Where’d you learn to do that?” I guess it must be from his oldest brother. Pat’s told me how he used to ask Reece test questions before his psych exams. Exams his brother had no trouble passing.

Passing?

Reece scored a PhD and works with kids who’ve survived shellings. He’s the kind of smart and empathetic that should leave Pat overshadowed, but their shared interest in listening is a strong family thread that I suppose could be genetic.

Pat doesn’t sound so sure. “Maybe I learned at school.” He pulls back but doesn’t go far, although he does change the subject. “Does all of this mean you’ve decided to adopt Jack?” He verbally backtracks. “Not adopt,” he clarifies as if I’m upset that never happened for me. “Have you decided that he’s one of us now? Took you a while to decide with Ian, remember?” There’s a smile in his eyes, those faint lines beside them feathering again. “Because if you have, that means you’re getting faster.”

I must frown. He hurries to add, “Because it took a month after Ian moved in before you really warmed up to him. Jack’s only been with us for how long? Less than a week and you’ve already decided he needs mother henning?”

“I’m not a fucking chicken.”

“My mistake,” Pat says, as easygoing as ever. “Only you just did a pretty familiar mother hen impression.” He clucks, then nudges me with one huge shoulder, oblivious to his own

strength until he has to grab me. “Sorry, sorry.” He clutches me, only letting go once he’s happy that I’m steady. “Jack will be fine where he is for a while.” Pat backs away, climbing a few steps before asking a final question. “You ready to come to the café with me?”

I am, even if he doesn’t reach out a hand to me this time.

He doesn’t have to.

Maybe I’m not only getting faster at accepting new people, I’m also learning from his example. I must be because it’s as easy as pie to do some reaching out of my own—I grab his hand, and he doesn’t say a single word about my clasp being tight or clammy.

Pat only murmurs, “I’m going to buy you every single cookie,” and we don’t have the budget for that. Not even a little.

I still go ahead and let him.

AN HOUR FLIES while I demolish enough sugar for the two of us.

I sample shortbread in the shape of Christmas trees and gingerbread stars piped with festive icing, then I plough through a pair of mince pies that he sweet-talks someone into heating for me and serving with clotted cream and brandy butter. I can’t help groaning as steam rises along with the scent of allspice that reminds me of Christmases when I was younger and of pouring a cap full of rum essence into the kind of Caribbean cake I haven’t tasted since. I scrape up a last spoonful and make a start on a slice of fruit-studded Stollen, eyeing the last Christmas cookies, while Pat only takes a few bites of the cake he’s chosen.

All too soon, I’m full. I lick crumbs from a finger before pointing at the cake he’s broken into pieces instead of eating. “You don’t want that? What’s wrong with it?”

“Nothing’s wrong with it.” Of course, he pushes his plate towards me. “You can have it.”

“I shouldn’t.” I rub my stomach. “Ruin all the hard work my trainer put into my six-pack? He’d kill me.” That’s a joke. I don’t have a six-pack. A three-and-a-half-pack on a good day, maybe, but I am thicker across my chest these days, and my deltoids are rounder caps to my shoulders. That’s down to the personal trainer who taught me that slow and gradual progressive overload lesson.

The only man who’s ever counted my reps and made me want to give him one more sits across from me right now, his gaze fixed on the hand that still rests on my stomach as if he sees what he’s helped to sculpt under my shirt. It darts away as soon as I say, “But anyway, that’s not what I meant.” I squint at his plate. “I meant, don’t you like it?”

“Didn’t realise what was in it.” His nose wrinkles. “Bit too sweet for me.” He pushes it my way again. “Go on. You can have it.”

I’m actually full but saying no to sweet things isn’t in my wheelhouse. Neither is owing what I can’t pay back. “Swap it for the last two cookies?”

He acquiesces, and those cookies disappear into his pocket wrapped in a napkin, because heaven forbid he take a bite and blow his carb macros. He’ll eke out that iced star and Christmas tree for ages, but that’s Pat, all about delayed gratification. Me though? I fall on the cake like I haven’t eaten, taking a first sticky mouthful, and let out a sound that Pat stills at.

“Oh, my God,” I manage to get out around my mouthful, which I’m sure can’t look attractive, but this is the closest I’ve come yet to Auntie’s baking. Pat still stares, so I swallow and keep going. “All that protein powder has wrecked your tastebuds. You really don’t like dates or rum?” I ask, my hand hovering over the rest.

He’s easygoing again, but his eyes twinkle. “The rum’s okay. Maybe I’ve forgotten about dates. It’s been a while.”

His last sentence isn't about cake. I know it.

I eat the rest, my eyes fixed on his plate, aware that he still watches. I have to look up once it's empty. "A while for me, too." I don't know why my sex life hasn't felt more drought-like. It should do, surely? Or like a dating famine, leaving my stomach grumbling, not satisfied like it is now. This is the same satisfaction I get after each gym session with him or after bingeing a true-crime series on his laptop, both of us squished together somewhere warm and cosy.

I don't know when I stopped hooking up or when I last bumped into one of Pat's in the hallway. It's been so long I can't picture who last slipped out of his bedroom. All I see clearly is him across the table from me, one of his hands close to mine, not quite touching, while underneath, my feet have captured both of his without me noticing.

Someone turns the lights out as a clue the café's closing. Pat shifts his chair back, that under-table contact broken, and we head back downstairs to look around more exhibits while Jack's still busy, and I don't know that we've ever done this. Sure, we've gone to plenty of galleries, supporting Ian, but wandering like this, with no aim?

It's different.

Nice.

No. It's more than nice. I can't unpick the difference as we meander on a clockwise journey. The photos are distracting even if it takes me a while to grasp that I don't only look at images. As we move around the room, I take in that we're following a year in this city, tracking the slow shift of its seasons.

We come to a halt in winter, almost back where we started, close to Ian's photos.

A different photographer has captured a melting icicle hanging from a bronze nose. A pigeon perches on it, and I don't need to see the steps of the National Gallery in the background to know exactly where to find this location. "That's one of the lions at the base of Nelson's

Column.” Another icicle hangs in the next photo, this time, from a pipe played by a child cast in gleaming metal. “The statue of Peter Pan,” I tell Pat. “You know, in Kensington Gardens?”

“Where we saw the parakeets?” he asks, smiling at a memory I almost laugh at, and maybe I would if I didn’t also recall what else happened in that park last summer with Pat—something I’d filed under *dangerous* and relegated to a vault that I’ve kept locked. The next photo is an icy contrast to that summer memory. “The ice rink at Somerset House. You’ve skated there?”

“Once.”

He could do what I did earlier—I know he must have seen me poke, poke, poking at Jack until he would talk. All Pat does is let out an interested hum while studying more photos.

I study them too, only now in silence. This photographer has taken plenty of candid close-ups of people skating, of families hanging onto each other to stay upright, and of collapsed piles of parents and kids. There’s humour as well as fear and relief in these photos, one person’s excitement skating close to another’s white-knuckled terror. I see spills and slides and tumbles. It’s the only reason more detail tumbles from me.

“It wasn’t anything like I imagined. I thought it would feel like flying, but I spent the whole time on my arse.” Or clutching the same ice-rink barrier as the photos also show. The images seem to tumble along the wall, curated to take us on an icy Christmas-season journey around a corner that leads to a narrower passageway. That’s where I crash some barriers of my own, and I don’t know why, not when the past is the past, and I’m all about futures full of justice, but I pull him with me, only to then stand behind him, which makes no sense when he’s taller than me.

I can’t see the last photos. Not a single one of them, or Pat’s face.

It’s the only way I can make myself spill more than I’ve ever told him.

“WE GOT TAKEN OUT ON DAY TRIPS SOMETIMES. FROM THE children’s home,” I say to Pat’s broad back, glad when he doesn’t turn to face me because I’m an actual adult, not poor little Oliver Twist. I’m not one of Peter Pan’s lost-boy companions either, even though Auntie always paused over those pages when she read to us at bedtime. Remembering that prompts me into saying, “She took us to Kensington Gardens, and after we saw that Peter Pan statue, one of us demanded proof that it was really him.”

That was me.

“That was you, right?” Pat asks, as if he knows my mistrustful mind inside out and backwards.

I don’t hold in my laugh. It echoes, and Pat turns my way just enough that I see one of his dimples deepen before he turns back, and I come clean.

“Yeah. It was me. But that statue really doesn’t look anything like the movie version of Peter Pan, you know? So she found an exhibition in a museum.” I’d forgotten that extra day trip until this moment. Now I hear the same tick-tock of a swallowed clock that had followed us around a museum in Docklands full of storybook boys and pirates. “She read the original story to us from start to finish.”

That drifts back too.

“Her voice was magic,” I tell him.

She never lost that reminder of Barbados, her lilt only stumbling while reading to us about where the Lost Boys came from.

“But now that I think about it, Peter Pan’s story was the stuff of nightmares. After all, it’s about boys who fell from their prams as babies who no one ever found or even bothered to look for. Not exactly bedtime-story material for kids in a home, is it? But she said those lost boys had a lifetime of adventure, never had to grow up, and could play forever.”

That’s no reason to clutch a scarf that hangs loose around my neck or to sound this strangled. Perhaps that’s why Pat doesn’t turn again or ask questions right here in this narrow space where it would be so easy to feel cornered.

He gives me enough space to tell him, “She insisted that made us special. Them, I mean. The lost boys in the story.”

“That was your auntie?”

“Not only mine,” I tell him quickly. “We all called her that. She also insisted that we got to do what other kids did. You know, like ones who had proper families? She said it wasn’t fair they got experiences that we didn’t, which is how we all got to go ice skating. I don’t know where she found the money to make it happen.”

Or maybe I do.

I think back to hearing her on the phone in the office, bludgeoning some poor sod at the council. “She could be relentless about us getting chances. About chasing fairness for us.”

“Sounds familiar.” Pat still has his back to me, still looks at this photographer’s work as though it’s captured his whole attention. I know it hasn’t, and again maybe that’s down to living with him for so long. He stands way too still when I know that he’s built for movement. And he’s far too quiet for someone used to shouting encouragement over pumping gym music.

Now though?

He's frozen like the people in these final photos, braced as if he's the one on ice, expecting it to crack under his feet at any moment.

Because he wants to know more but won't poke at me for details.

Maybe that's what makes my own ice crack. Or perhaps it's down to me getting an up-close look at the contrast in the photos that he stares at once I stand beside him.

These images must be of fathers and sons. I'm only guessing, going by what the first one shows me. Surely a stranger wouldn't drip disappointment over someone else's kid, one who hangs onto the edge of the rink. That's what this photographer's caught, front and centre—a blistering reaction to fear of falling. "What a fucking dick."

Pat jolts, reanimating. "Who?"

"Him. What a wanker." I stab at the glass over this view of disappointment, of an adult who should reach out a hand to help their offspring. "Auntie would have ripped his fucking head off if he'd tried that with any of us." It's so easy to add this. "She was the best thing about all of it."

"About being in a children's home?"

That's all he asks. Or all he lets himself ask. Wanting more is right there in him pressing together lips that I know are soft and giving. Or that's how they are usually. Now they're so much thinner—maybe as thin as the ice I take a turn to stand on by asking him this question. "What do you want to know, Pat?"

"Everything," he says in a rush. "I want to know everything about you."

"Like what?"

"Like how it was for you there. Like whether you were looked after—*properly* looked after. Or were you just..." He shakes his head, mouth twisting like it did after tasting that cake upstairs in the café. "Or were you just... I dunno... *kept*."

I've seen Pat bench-press my bodyweight and more. Seen him ride hard in back-to-back spin classes, still able to hype his fitness family without even panting.

Now, though? He's breathless.

"I want to know that you were always okay. That you always had everything you needed." He does poke then, only he doesn't jab at a photo of an adult's disappointment. "Most of all, I've hoped you had someone in your corner like I did." He touches the edge of a different father-and-son photo, this one showing care and patience, and I can't help frowning at what looks the opposite of what I witnessed the one time I met Pat's dad.

Pat must see my frown. "Someone there to catch you if you fell, yeah? It sounds like your auntie was that for you. Fucking massive relief to hear it." He jabs at that first photo again. "Because the thought of anyone acting *this* way with you?" He swallows. I hear its dry click, and his voice turns raspy. "The thought of *that* being why you ended up in a home? It slays—"

I kiss him.

Not to stop him speaking. I don't know when I passed a tipping point between holding back and sharing with him. Not that my floodgates are wide open. Fuck, no—London born and bred, remember? But a wave of wanting to share for once sloshes over. I'm bone-dry and saturated at the same time, and I don't know what to do with that. It's outside my frame of reference. No rules of city living cover how to show someone what you value without risking it getting stolen from you. All I know for certain is that right now? Right here?

He can ask whatever the hell he wants, or he can as soon as we break this kiss.

It won't be anytime soon.

Pat gathers me close, not needing mistletoe above us or Christmas music in the background to pick up from where we left off, which is wild because if there ever was a moment for Mariah to sing her fucking heart out, here it is.

So what if I never got everything I wanted at Christmas like in TV movies? So what if I never got a single gift from Hamleys? I had Auntie, and now I have him.

He's all I want this year and for every single one after.

Dangerous, my devil whispers. *You know where he's headed if he fails again.*

Because that's what I remember the most clearly about watching a real-life father discuss a son's future, one that he'd mapped out for Pat at the far end of the country.

I tune that voice out.

Tune it out?

I stop thinking at all while Pat's mouth is on mine, his lips parting, and they're back to that amazing softness—back to that contrast to his hard body. He's pure Pat like this—*so pure*—and I want so much more that my mouth also opens.

Our tongues touch and we've done this before, haven't we? I don't know why it repeatedly shocks me. It must do the same for Pat. He jolts in my arms, then starts to pull back.

Realising why takes a moment. Then I let go of him just as quickly, or at least I try to, jerking away. He won't let me. His arms lock around me, all while I'm embarrassed and muttering, "Shit. Shit, sorry that I taste bad."

"Bad?"

"Dates." I must taste of the very last thing I'd eaten. "You hate them."

He pulls me closer, and that's not rejection in eyes as richly brown as that cake had been. I know exactly what that looks like—seen plenty from prospective families after I acted up and made them send me back to the one and only home I wanted.

He's as welcoming as the woman who baked me consolation cakes and who I still play song-based games with by text, even if she's slow to answer.

Pat's a brand-new reason to be glad no one else ever kept me long-term, or I'd never have met him, would I? Wouldn't have ever got to hear him say, "Oh, I like dates just fine with you," and mean it.

He glances over my shoulder at the passageway opening. "I thought I heard something, that's all." He pauses for another moment, an ear cocked, the whole time not letting me go.

He's so close that his breath doesn't only kiss my cheek, it coasts my ear, and I melt against him for the second time in this building, only this time it comes with us kissing again.

Pat doesn't hold back. His tongue finds mine with no hesitating, and we're going for it.

I slide a hand up from a shoulder I haven't once stopped grasping, because Pat isn't the only one who's done with distance between us, and isn't this only what's crept up all year long, like the spring, summer, and autumn photos on show here?

Trying to corral this to Christmas is pointless.

We're surrounded by wintry photos but I'm as warm as the first time he trained me at the gym last spring or as hot as when he came back from Cornwall last summer, weeks earlier than I expected, and didn't I love that? He was home, and I don't know when he became that for me.

Now he smooths a hand up and down my back like he's done several times recently. I'm pretty sure that I pictured kindling the last time when snow fell around us, but right now? I'm back in the same park as that statue, sunbathing with my shirt off and with parakeets flying in lime-green swoops above us while Pat covered my back with sunscreen. He took his time rubbing my back like he does now, and all I could do was breathe through it while my cock throbbed, trying to stave off my hard-on by counting how many days were left until this Christmas.

I can't breathe through what I'm feeling right now. His tongue strokes out so much sensation, every nerve in my body

firing again like I can't ever help around him but have tried so hard to keep a lid on.

I've failed at that mission. I'm as hard now as when he'd murmured about not wanting me to burn last summer. Now here we are in winter and I'm burning all over again, only what stokes this fire is a different deadline.

He might not come back. To London. To me. To this bottle full of shaken feelings that I'll never wedge a cork back into if he doesn't pass his exam.

Pat can't feel that inner conflict, that fear. At least, that's what I assume until he adds a little distance. We're still connected, still kissing but he inches away to one side, and I move with him. He shifts away again and of course I follow, revolving with him in a slow circle and I don't know why we're slow dancing without music but I do know I'm not ready to stop.

Not yet.

Not while we sway, and I've never felt more connected, more rooted, even though we keep moving until my leg slots between his.

We press together fully, and his groan is a low and rough sound. He's as hard as I am. He also twists slightly, that slow circling resuming like he doesn't want me to feel rushed again, and I can't let him think that, not when he's everything to me.

Everything.

I'm so done with distance. Even an inch feels like a mile now, so I grasp his hips and make sure he can feel what he does to me.

He shudders, still kissing, his fingers snagging where my hair is longer, and I'd make a mental note to get a haircut if that tug didn't do something for me. Strands must twist around his fingers but I'm not complaining—that tight hold is only fair considering my hands find his back pockets and slide in.

We're as close as our clothing allows, both of us sharing breath until not only the ice in the photos around us sparkles—so does my vision when he breaks off, only this time he

doesn't ease away from me. He shoulders himself between me and the passageway entrance.

I hear why. Footsteps approach in a hurry, then pass.

Jack can't have seen us. He calls out, "Patrick?" and like earlier when my laugh had echoed, his next, "Oh, Sebastian, where are you?" rings out, chiming. He laughs before I can answer, his footsteps retreating.

They echo as well, and I can't help smiling. He sounds a hundred times happier than when we got here. It's such a contrast to all his wary worry that I flash a grin at Pat only to find him staring. Not in the direction that Jack's voice came from. He stares at me like I'm the one who made that happy difference. He also closes in to clasp my face with both of his hands and I stop thinking about Jack. All I hear is his low-pitched murmur.

"Can't help thinking that Christmas is getting closer, yeah?" He quickly adds as if I'm some blushing virgin, "There's still no hurry. No pressure. Not from me."

He almost kisses me again. This time, he pulls back, and yet again I can't help trying to follow when he retreats, but he looks to the passageway entrance when Jack's footsteps return.

I stare that way too when more footsteps join his. They must belong to the archivist because Jack says, "Sorry, Dev. I think I missed my flatmates, but yes, I do want to stay for longer if that's still okay with you?" His voice fades. I still hear him say, "Let me message them. I'll tell them to go home without me."

He leaves, both sets of footsteps receding, while Pat's phone vibrates between us.

I look back to find Pat watching me again, still waiting. Still not making a move without my say-so. He only pulls out his phone to read Jack's message. "He'll be back at seven." He sends a quick reply, then meets my eyes. "Two hours."

That's neither a demand for how we use that time nor a suggestion. It's only an observation.

He checks his watch, still unrushed, still contemplative while I'm a jangling ball of want and terror, which is wild too when nothing in this city scares me, remember? Nothing, that is, except for losing what I want to keep the most all over again.

Pat murmurs, "This time of day, it might take an hour to get home." He remains cool, calm, and collected. Or that's how it seems until he sighs, and it sounds heartfelt. "Seems like forever since we had an hour alone at home together."

Fuck knows if it's my angel or my devil who whispers, *You should make the most of every minute*. I don't care which one speaks, I just follow that instruction.

I grab his hand, and Pat comes along with me, heading for the exit, but only slowly. "Babe?"

I flex my fingers, my mouth drying around an offer that might bite me in the arse soon. "Christmas does feel closer, and I know a faster way home."

And Pat? He doesn't ask if I'm sure. He holds my hand all the way to the nearest station, only we don't walk through the dusk side-by-side.

We run there together.

WE MAKE IT HOME IN FORTY MINUTES, EMERGING FROM A LAST station after sundown. People get out of our way, and they should. Two men running through the dark in our postcode? Nine times out of ten, that doesn't happen for fitness reasons.

We pound down streets, our footsteps echoing, and I don't know why this is the first time Pat looks like he belongs here where dealers lurk with blades and powder in their pockets. The only powder in Pat's dusts those Christmas cookies, but seeing that edge on him? On someone whose soft core usually shows up on his surface? It's really something. Or it would be if I could keep pace for long enough to keep looking.

Pat realises I'm lagging. He slows down for me. "Might want to up your cardio. I'll have a word with your trainer."

He's teasing. He's also got a point—Pat is barely out of breath while I'm doing my best not to wheeze like an asthmatic. "It's the change in temperature," I gasp now we've left underground humidity behind us and emerged into what in comparison feels like an arctic evening.

It's dark enough already that my breath plumes a grimy yellow under the lampposts threading through our estate. Perhaps Pat mistakes those cloudy exhales as more evidence of unfitness. He slows next to our block instead of jogging straight up to our landing. Or maybe he has a different reason for coming to a halt. I guess so when he pulls me into an inky shadow. "Still no rush," he promises.

“Says the dick who just made me set a new land speed record.”

He ignores my bitching. He also ignores me tugging us towards our stairwell, which is right there, barely twenty feet away at the most, both of our bedrooms only five floors above us.

Alarm bells ring. Not somewhere on this estate. This is an internal siren wailing, set off by him pressing pause like this instead of hurrying.

He's having second thoughts?

Those alarm bells stop the moment his hand finds my wrist, his touch warm enough that I realise he's taken off a glove. “What are you doing?”

“Checking your pulse,” he says as if that's normal.

“What the fuck?” I pull free. “Why?”

He finds my wrist again. He also lifts my hand, turning it in his to kiss where my pulse hammers right here in this pool of darkness surrounded by high-density housing.

Part of me is aware that the block opposite could pass for a giant advent calendar; gold light spills from some windows while fairy lights twinkle in others. The rest of me is focused on Pat kissing that bare spot between my glove and my sleeve again. It stops my heart right here where knife crime is a much more common reason, not this. Not Pat's lips pressing against thin skin in a nonsexual first that I don't know what to do with.

My brain can't deal with receiving something this small. This tender. This devastating.

I can't think, can't process anything but the warmth of his mouth and the cool contrast of the tip of his nose, landing in more small and tender touches that combine to mean I don't have a smart comeback for once when he speaks. I can only listen.

“We can go upstairs and start Christmas right now,” he tells me. “I want to,” he promises. “Fuck, I want that more

than anything, but I'm just saying that your pulse is still going like the clappers. If anything, it's getting faster, so if this is stressing you out, I will absolutely leave it. Not you," he clarifies, and that's a sign that he heard what I spilled in that gallery.

Not all lost boys are fictional.

My wrist muffles what sounds like him adding a quiet, "Never you." He lifts his head. "But you told me a hell of a lot today." And I guess this is a glimpse of his oldest brother. "If you need time to process—"

One day, I might not get the time to kiss him to shut him up like I do again now.

I might not get the time to pull him up the stairs to a home that's messy but is all ours for the next hour at least. That means I set the pace by taking the steps two at a time and by pulling him along our walkway while issuing a wheezing order.

"Open that fucking door, Pat."

He does, the door slamming closed behind us, and we're back where we belong together.

A clock still ticks like at that Peter Pan exhibition I only remembered today. It means I strip right here in our hallway where I don't need the lights on to know my coat lands on his bike after I throw it aside. The bell on his handlebars *dings* like last time.

Pat laughs, and just like that he's back to teasing. "Someone's in a hurry." He flicks a switch. This time the lights come on bright enough that I blink, but that's good.

We were in the dark last time, weren't we? Now I want to see more of him.

I do as soon as I start to unbutton my shirt and he turns to hang up his coat. He also unfastens his belt. I hear him unzip his fly too, then I lose sight of him for a moment when I give up on my buttons and drag my shirt over my head, and I've managed to undress myself just fine since I was little, but finding Pat with his jeans around his ankles, bending over to

unlace his boots, means I lose coordination. I also spot that something else is missing.

“Where are your boxers?”

He looks over his shoulder. “Been too busy to keep up with my laundry.”

At any other time, I’d add that to a bank of guilt about him working so hard, or I’d remind him that Jack’s contribution means he doesn’t have to keep taking on extra classes. But for now I make a silent promise to at least take that laundry chore off his shoulders. I verbalise something different while kicking off my own shoes and trousers. “You mean you’ve been going commando this whole time?” It’s a mental visual that’s as good as Santa coming early.

The real deal though?

Pat peels off the last of his clothes apart from his socks, and I don’t blame him—gritty floor, remember? That’s another chore I mentally take on with the small section of my brain that isn’t occupied with the sight of him almost naked, hard despite the cold in here.

It’s quite something to witness, but I’m hard as well, aren’t I?

His gaze drops, locking on what my hand wraps.

I don’t know who moves first or care. All that matters is that he’s got me, and I’ve got him, and there’s no one in the flat to interrupt us.

We kiss deeply from the get-go, picking up from where we left off in central London, but we don’t turn in a slow circle this time. I climb him and he staggers, but if I’m heavier than usual, he only has himself to blame for feeding my cake habit.

He stumbles again, his bike toppling, and I’d bitch about it blocking the hallway if my mouth wasn’t fixed to his, and if he didn’t crash against the living room door, which swings wide open.

He staggers back, the door closing behind us, and we sink into armchair softness in almost complete darkness. No

moonlight spills through the open curtains, only that faint streetlight yellow with pinpricks of festive brightness from the block opposite, but that's all I need to spot a remote on the coffee table.

I kneel up to grab it from the straddle I've ended up in. Before I can, I almost bite off my tongue because Pat finds my cock, and I'm so keyed up that it's my turn for precome to wet the web between his thumb and finger.

Both of us must see it glisten. He breathes out a rough, "Babe," like he can't believe how primed I am for this. *For him*. For the two of us getting this close again with nothing and no one else between us.

I flail again, this time with more success. I grab the remote, tree lights flickering to life, and I wouldn't have said that red, gold, or green were Pat's colours until his gaze reflects them. Then it's clouded by a ghost of his huffed exhale. "Babe," he repeats, his hold on my cock loosening.

For a second time this evening, I can't compute why he backs off, not while so much want pools in my balls and belly. My cock throbs with loss as his hand rises to his mouth, and I don't grasp that all he means to do is lick away that precome wetness until I watch him taste me. He shows me that he's as greedy for me as I am for every single thing about him, and I get with the programme.

That means I shift higher, my free hand gripping his shoulder, my cock at his mouth level, and I've seen Pat smile so often, but this grin? This sharp flash of white teeth? It should make me think twice, but he rumbles out a throaty, "Yeah," and all I can do is hope to God I don't paint his face before he blows me.

The tree lights flicker again, or maybe that's oxygen deprivation. I lean in, my breath held, and Pat's tongue meets where I'm slick and shining. I swear I'm not usually like this, ready to shoot before getting started, and yet here I am, on the cusp all over again, and I'm all for Christmas coming early, but not when we've got at least another half hour alone together.

Half an hour?

I'm not going to last thirty more seconds, let alone thirty minutes, especially when he opens his mouth wider, waiting for me.

I'm going to come before his lips close around me. I'm so certain of it, I almost lose my balance and have to clutch the back of the seat with both hands, and I would if I didn't still clutch that tree-light remote.

I throw it to the side, knocking over a stack of revision note cards, and I can't be mad about them falling out of careful order, not when that reminder of post-Christmas exams helps to stave off pleasure. I've hated every single pointless lecture about justice lately and that turns out to be a blessing. It means I get to slide my cock into Pat's mouth without embarrassing myself completely. Or too early. That's touch and go when he pulls off, a thread of saliva glistening between us, and I catch a glimpse of him clutching the base of his own dick like he needs to do some staving off of his own.

I don't know why the sight of his surrender once he gets his mouth back on me—of his shoulder moving slowly at first and then faster—is so hot to me. All I can guess is that his creased brow could be my mirror.

I don't want this over, either.

None of it.

We're so on the same page, so in tune, and I knew that already, but it's *everything* to witness—too much and not enough at the same time as he sucks sensation from me and gives back even more.

I can't breathe around this repeat of intensity, this heat, even though this room is frigid. His mouth is lava all over again, burning me up at the same time as my balls try to climb inside my body and my nipples tighten.

He reaches up, touching my chest and pinching like he first did only a few days ago, looking up as I hiss, his gaze questioning—checking in again before testing what might be

pain or pleasure, and I don't know. I don't. I can only let out a huge breath, drag in another, and shudder.

Pat instantly pulls off. I'd complain if not for how hoarse his voice is. "I can see your breath." He also pulls me down, and I don't have time to complain before cosy fabric drapes my shoulders and he says, "There," with so much satisfaction you'd think I'd sat on his cock not on his lap. But isn't that Pat through and through, happiest when he knows I've got what I need most?

Or what he thinks I need most.

Right now, I need his mouth again, or for us to move this foreplay to something involving lube and condoms, but I settle for mirroring the hand job he gives me. We kiss as the clock ticks away our alone time, but I can't make myself hurry, not when his mouth slips to my throat, and not only because him sucking where my neck joins my shoulder does something for me. It's him pausing to adjust the drape of this fuzzy, warm throw that makes me warm and fuzzy as well.

For him.

He keeps making sure I've got what I need, and I don't have to be good with numbers to calculate how many people have done that for me. Pat checks in again while mouthing along tendons I didn't know were connected to whatever gets my motor running or serves out more precome.

"Yeah? You like that?" His hold on my cock turning silky is an answer, and I spit in my own palm to reciprocate that slickness. I can't help stroking faster until he groans against my throat. He also says, "I'll leave a mark if I keep going."

I can't make myself tell him that he's already left a mark on me. Here's an example: I've spent the whole afternoon being a nice person. You think I had that in me before him? That I'd know how to do it *and* enjoy it?

Fuck, no.

Now I clamp his face to my throat even harder and hope he takes that as permission. As an order. As me telling him to leave another mark on me, and to not stop this time.

For once, words are beyond me, and forget his mouth on me feeling good, I've never been more turned on—so much so that I have to muffle a whimper against my forearm.

Pat still must hear it. He also reacts like I've fired a starting pistol. One moment I'm on his lap, the next I'm being lifted for just long enough for him to swipe aside the laundry on our longer sofa while taking my weight one-handed, and that sole feat of strength justifies every single penny of our shopping budget he's ever spunked on protein powder.

The throw slips from my shoulders, but it doesn't matter, not when I end up flat on my back with him above me, and I don't need any other cover.

Only Pat.

He pumps out heat that I soak up as we get back to kissing—wet and messy, deep and hurried—close to frantic, like the hand job he goes up on one elbow to resume, because a clock *is* ticking, but there's no ignoring that goose bumps cover his back when I clasp him, and I wish I could warm him like he does me.

I'd roll him over and cover him completely if I could, even if there isn't enough of me compared to him to do that. I'd still get between his legs like he's between mine and add some more friction instead of letting go of my dick, like he does now, to touch other places.

He skims my chest, then he touches my throat, still wet from his mouth, before he grips biceps that are a whole lot stronger since he became my personal trainer.

He also shivers, and that's a shot fired from a starting pistol of my own.

I reach out blindly, feeling around for the throw. It's the opposite of easy to do that with my tongue deep in his mouth, but I can't stop. Kissing him, I mean. Not when Jack could be back soon.

I should be annoyed at that time limit, should snap and growl at having to share this space at all during what I still

worry will be our last Christmas together, one that Pat will spend most of in Cornwall.

You better believe that past-me would demand that Jack should fuck right off after having to wait almost a whole year to pick up where Pat and I left off, despite me being the instigator who drew that line between us. I'd also blame myself for pouring the Prosecco that washed Jack onto our doorstep.

Only that's not true about me, is it?

I'm not to blame, and Pat's hand rising to my jaw, cupping it like I'm worth holding onto, seems to confirm that.

I'm at real risk of suffocating, his tongue dips alongside mine so deeply, but I don't picture me blacking out before we ever get around to fucking. It's Pat I see behind my closed eyes, telling me I did good when Jack needed a dose of truth—of tough love—and a new friend in this city full of people where it's so easy to be lonely, all in front of a photo where I'd sparkled like some Christmas angel.

Pat makes me want to be like that more often. To punt that devil on my shoulder into the sun. To live up to what a children's home cook and care worker said even lost boys had inside them. Now I rub his back to chase those goose bumps away and he rumbles in appreciation, then shivers. "Thanks, babe," he murmurs, as if I really am kind instead of the stick of justice-driven dynamite he first moved in with.

His mouth drifts back to that place on my throat that could detonate me if he sucks there for much longer. It also makes me want to wrap every Christmas gift in London and pile them under the tree for him like he's wrapped so many gifts for his fitness family. That's what is piled under our tree—balls for the kids and skipping ropes for their mums from Poundland, but fuck giving him a pile of Poundland presents. Fuck all the designer gifts Regent Street has to offer.

I'd ship Pat's father up here to see how his son changes people, rep by rep, class by class, mums and bums and all their tums included. And I don't mean what he does to their bodies.

Pat tells people they aren't alone with their struggles and then proves it.

Order his dad to watch that process?

Right now, I'd beg him to pay attention. Because so what if Pat doesn't pass one degree module or have a big-ticket sporting contract or PhD potential? He loves training people and...

I've never been sorrier for blowing my chance to tell his dad that. For right-fighting instead of building bridges.

It means I wasted my one chance to keep him.

Pat breaks off from kissing me to tell me without words that I'm kind—*kind*, for fuck sake—instead of a yappy, snappy fucker. It's visible in him cupping my face again and staring like he already opened his favourite Christmas present. It's audible too in more of those deep, appreciative rumbles while I rub his back over and over in the same long and slow sweeps he's modelled so often for me.

It's also there in another shiver.

He's still cold, still goose bumped, still not quite letting me share my body heat with him, and I bet that's because he thinks he's too heavy for me.

I pull him closer, both legs hooked around him, and he finally does it—he lies on me, letting out a shudder and a soul-deep sigh, and isn't that where he touches me without even trying? I don't know how he does it or why it happens right here in a room full of our combined chaos made pretty by all those twinkling tree lights he put up to start Christmas early for me.

For us.

For both of us together.

It makes me want so much for him, and maybe there's something to be said for progressive overload, like he promised when he first slipped extra weight onto my barbell. Without knowing, I've built up strength that I haven't needed until this moment.

My free hand finds some fuzzy fabric, the throw caught by the leg of the coffee table, which is heavy and solid. I still give the throw one good yank and the whole table tips over, more than just my law revision note cards spilling along with it. A folder crammed with research also flies open, years of carefully gathered evidence spilling, but I can't stop to gather what falls and scatters, not when I get to do what Pat did for me.

I cover him with soft fabric at the same moment that someone downstairs thumps on the ceiling at what must sound like a demolition.

I ignore that hammering, but I can't ignore what he tells me for a second time in only minutes. "Thanks, babe," he repeats, like I've done something special instead of the bare minimum to keep him warm and cosy. He's the one who lifts his covers for me each morning, the one who spent a year being patient compared to me quietly losing my shit about whether doing this might end us. Now I can't keep my hands off him even as I wonder how the fuck he's made me a better person.

It distracts me enough that I don't realise he's moving again until I'm wedged sideways and we face each other. He finds my cock, not stopping this time until pleasure spangles my vision. Or maybe that's oxygen deprivation—the throw is pulled over both of our heads, and both of us breathe as heavily as when I wheezed up the steps to our landing.

Now I do a different kind of climbing.

This ascent is internal, tied to the climax he's close to pulling from me. His hand is so good on me, and who knew that weightlifting would leave calluses that rub in all the right places? Not me, but I didn't know that his cock would leave a damp kiss on my three-and-a-half-pack each time my fist around him lowers either.

I pump him like he does me, only hoping that I twist as much pleasure from him until he says, "Oh, fuck. Nearly. Nearly," sounding frantic, and I'm not saying that sounds like him asking for me to do more than we've done so far, but he

lets out a grateful sound the minute I switch hands and slide a licked wet finger to where he's furred tight.

That's all I do, no pressing inside, no probing, just a circling touch that asks a silent question.

Pat stills, going rigid, and I don't know if that's a yes or a no until he groans and rolls us.

Who knows where the fuck the throw ends up, or what tumbles to the floor with a loud clatter along with both of us. I don't look or care. I just see Pat sprawled on his back, with his legs spread. He's surrounded by scattered papers that are important to me, but nothing is as vital as giving him what he asks for without speaking.

He's still tense as I touch him again, each muscle delineated as I slowly ease a finger inside him for a first time in a way that makes my cock throb, and London's full of amazing sights, but this?

Him?

I've never seen anything like him, apart from those photos, maybe—the ones of gladiators I saw on what I now know was our first real date together.

He's so hot, so far out of my league, so much more than every dictionary definition of perfection. Or that's what I think until I press and rub inside him.

I thought he was tense already. Now he really could be carved from marble, so I do what's felt good to me in the past, ramping up the pressure, and right now, right here, I get a payoff—he closes his eyes, his soft face back to knife-sharp.

His curled fists promise murder if I stop what I'm doing, so I don't. I keep up that rubbing slide inside him while kneeling between his legs, his cock thick and hot and heavy in the tight ring of my other hand as his climax hurtles closer. But he's trained me, hasn't he?

That means I don't stop there.

I ask for more from him like he has from me by pushing me for one more rep each time and progressively making me

stronger. Now I ask for more by sucking his cock with a finger deep inside him, and I'll never stop getting him off like this, given the option. Or I wouldn't, until he pulls at my hair, and I lift off just as he spills.

Tree lights flicker, and puddles on his belly glisten as he groans. I swipe through them while he shudders one last time, then I kneel over him to get myself off, one hand braced on his chest.

Forget anything I ever said about what I want Santa to bring me.

Nothing will match Pat watching me do this like he'd soak up the sight if he could.

Of me.

I'm already all his, and him believing that is all I want this Christmas, thank you very much, Mariah.

Who cares if we both shiver when it's over? I find that fuzzy throw and cover us both in this room full of wreckage but we might as well lay in Barbados sunshine, not on the floor of a flat devoid of the heating that we pay for.

My devil will deal with our landlord later. Right now my angel covers us both with feathery, warm wings, and I've never felt more like flying.

So what if Jack comes home ten minutes later to find me making tea, bare chested in the kitchen? Or that I still glow instead of shiver while my breath clouds like steam does from the kettle?

What does it matter if he can't take his eyes off a love bite that I asked for, one that has to make him come to some not-only-flatmates conclusions about Pat and me?

Jack can think what he likes. I don't care about that either.

I'm too busy being happy.

I'M NOT SO HAPPY AT WHAT FEELS LIKE DAWN O'CLOCK THE next morning when those fucking gulls wake me or when I check my phone.

Grey ticks.

I glare at them, willing them to turn blue as I head for the kitchen to make our morning tea like usual. This morning I stop before I get there and send Auntie a quick *are you okay* message, then I head in a different direction, lured by the prospect of warmth that's too strong to resist.

Who am I kidding?

It's the lure of Pat.

I slip into his bedroom on quiet feet, dodging his treadmill and cross-trainer to slide under covers he must lift out of habit while still mostly asleep. Or maybe once again, he's more awake than I guess—instead of letting me take my spot against the headboard, he pulls me down next to him and then rolls us until he spoons me.

It's my new favourite thing about Christmas, even if I would have been up for waking in here instead of next door, but here's more proof of how bad Pat is with numbers—he says we've got all the time in the world, not just the rest of this week, so there's no need for rushing.

Now his lips brush my shoulder. "You didn't fall over my bike." His sleepy voice is nothing like those screeching gulls. It's soothing. So is the weight of his arm pulling me even

closer. “That means it’s going to be a good day.” I also hear him swallow. “Hope my biomechanics lecturer gets the message and goes easy on me.”

I roll over. “You’re meeting him today?” Here’s the problem with climbing into his bed this early while undercaffeinated. It means I blurt something thoughtless. “Have you prepared?” Of course he hasn’t. When would he have had time? I lurch upright. “Let me put together some revision cards for you. Write you some last-minute notes.”

“What would they say?” He pulls me down again, this time anchoring me where he wants me with one heavy leg between mine. “Please excuse Pat from resitting this exam, sir. And from his final research project. He’ll never gather enough data to analyse, not with such an insignificant sample.”

He means his fitness family.

“Your lecturer is a dick. Your sample isn’t insignificant.”

“But it is what I need to talk through with him, so it’s today or never because I’m going home soon, remember?”

My heart sinks. “That’s rushed up.”

“Yeah. It has.” He makes the same quiet offer I’ve already turned down. “And you’re still welcome.” He leaves that door open, one I’d push wider if I could trust myself not to spoil their celebration. Pat only rubs his eyes, and maybe that helps him see the bright side. “But I’m not gone yet, so can we get back to the part where we’re having a good start to the day?”

He rolls on top of me, and we don’t do this in the mornings—don’t lie like this with our bodies aligned and fitting this well together. What we do is share tea while Pat listens to me bitch about the state of the world and seagulls. I don’t know why I wind my arms around his neck or tilt my chin up, asking for the kind of good-morning kiss I’ve only ever seen in movies, and just like in a rom-com, the unwanted third wheel nudges the door to Pat’s bedroom open.

Jack only does that by a sliver, but the door creaks like everything else in this shit pit of a high-rise hovel, and both

Pat's head and mine swing to see him hesitating on the threshold like every day that he's been here so far.

Until yesterday.

Until I made an effort to make him welcome.

That's got to be why I say, "Come in," and why Pat whispers quietly enough that I hope I'm the only one who hears him.

"Kind, babe."

I shove him off me and sit up, aware that I sound prim. "Do you need something?" I'm also aware it's freezing—my breath shows much more clearly this morning.

"I-I heard that you two were up," Jack says. "B-but you didn't go into the kitchen like usual." It takes a moment to realise he doesn't stutter. His teeth chatter. "S-so I made tea instead." He carries a laden tray, three mugs rattling.

Because his hands are shaking.

I guess that Pat comes to the same conclusion. He lifts the cover on his far side. "Get in and warm up, babe."

I don't notice what he calls him until Jack's eyes widen. They meet mine before skittering away. "Oh, I couldn't."

He can't know that Pat uses the same word for so many people. It makes it easy to set his mind at rest. "Yes, you could." I hold out my hands for the tray. "Get in before you freeze off your bollocks."

Here's proof of how cold it is here this morning: Jack doesn't argue. He slides into bed beside Pat, who must be wrong about me not falling over his bike this morning. A concussion is the only explanation for me being speared by more of last night's happiness at Pat lifting an arm to scoop Jack closer, and Jack giggling like a kid, insisting that it tickles.

Jack laughs, gulls screech, the neighbour downstairs knocks on the ceiling, and I can't make myself care, not when Pat joins in with his own warm chuckle. He also takes the mug of tea I pass him. He aims a quick, "Thanks, babe," at me,

using the same four letters as always—the same ones he aimed Jack’s way—but this version is condensed sweetness, audible honey or golden syrup, and it’s lucky that I’m seated. The contrast would weaken my knees if I was standing. It also makes me slow to tune into an offer that Jack makes to us both.

“What?” I bark, and he recoils, tea slopping. “Sorry, sorry.” I punch the devil on my shoulder right in the dick, then I try to echo Pat by asking him more softly, “What did you say? Only it sounded like you just offered to pay extra to stay here *and* to do all of our cleaning for us.”

Jack quickly shakes his head. “Oh, no, no, no.” Then he nods more slowly. “Well, yes.” He raises his chin as if expecting rejection, and believe me, I’m an old hand at forcing that from foster families, so I know what I see when Jack adds, “I actually said I’d pay more if that means the heating can come on sooner?” He shivers. “And if we could keep it on until a bit later in the evening?”

Pat tells him, “We would if we could. There’s something wrong with the timer, only the landlord says it can’t be broken because it works sometimes.” He finishes his tea, settling the mug on his lap before slinging his arm around me. “Seb told him his legal duty. Emailed it to him as well, citing the legislation. Made fuck all difference.” And isn’t that another example of fighting for justice that’s turned out to be pointless?

“Maybe I could have a go at getting some maintenance scheduled?” Jack offers. “Like I could have a go at tidying up around here while you’re at work too. If you don’t mind me saying...” He clutches his mug tighter, or Ian’s mug to be specific, one he left behind when he moved out. It has all three of our faces on it. It’s also chipped, and I wonder why Jack chose it when there are plenty of unchipped ones in our kitchen cupboard.

Did Lito make him feel like he deserved the worst the world had to offer? I bet he’s the reason Jack flashes a wary look between us before telling us what’s only truthful. “You two *are* a tiny bit organisationally challenged.”

Pat laughs at that understatement, and Jack's hold on his mug looks a touch less white-knuckled. He must be warmer as well. His voice doesn't shake, no sign now of a stutter. "It would actually help to keep me busy between making job applications. I really don't want to tell my family I lost mine while they're away. On a cruise with my gran," he adds. "She finally retired, so they're celebrating. I'll tell them as soon as I have an interview lined up."

"You don't want them to know?"

He shakes his head. "They wouldn't blame me."

They shouldn't. There's only one person who deserves judgement or enough Prosecco poured over his head to drown him.

"I don't want them to worry," Jack admits. "They already did enough of that about me moving here in the first place. Couldn't understand why I didn't want to stay working in our local phone shop when there was a chance of me managing it one day. They'll worry themselves sick if they think London is full of people like..." He doesn't have to name Lito. He does repeat, "They're good people," which Pat bafflingly echoes.

"Same," he tells Jack, and I can't help boggling because that isn't what I heard when his dad listed all his brothers' achievements and then suggested Pat cut his losses and come home with him. A year later, his suggestion that Pat is some kind of loser still rankles.

Maybe Pat fell over his bike on his way to bed last night. A concussion would explain why he's blanked out a conversation that still gives me the rage each time I remember it and is why I've tried to hold back from what I now can't help. I find Pat's hand under the covers and squeeze it as he displays more concussion symptoms by sounding convincing. "They only want the best for me too."

That isn't what I heard. Not one bit. Pat does acknowledge a small part of what I witnessed. "We just have different interpretations of best. Or at least my dad does." Perhaps he feels my tension at that second understatement. He lets go of my hand to pull me closer, rubbing my arm as if I'm the one in

need of consolation. “Pretty sure he still sees me as the baby of the family. He worries.”

Pat shares more, and this is a prime example of him being so much bigger than me. I don’t mean in size. He goes all out, trusting Jack with something I know must hurt him. “That worry ramped up when I failed my first year.”

“You failed?”

“Twice.” The blanket over us slips when Pat lets go of my hand to scrub at the back of his neck, my turn to drape it over him as if I can help cover his embarrassment. “Crashed and burned two years running now. Cruising in on a third fail right now.”

He also shares a label I can’t even spell without double-checking, let alone live with daily.

“Having dyscalculia makes anything to do with numbers a challenge.” He answers a question I see Jack’s about to ask but bites back. “It’s a processing disorder. I had years of kids taking the piss when I couldn’t keep up with them in lessons. Years of teachers losing their patience with me. Of my school writing me off.” Then he mentions something surprising. “Until Dad got on the case and found somewhere better for me, that is. But I still only grasp most numerical concepts at a basic level.”

Jack frowns. “But you—”

“Count reps for people? Calculate how much protein they need per pound of bodyweight? That I can manage. Assess a client’s potential and help them reach it? No problem. Ask me to calculate motion, force or momentum using biomechanical equations?” He shakes his head. “I’m lost from the get-go. There’s no way to fix that.” And here’s another example of Pat going all in, proving every point Ian suggested we make to Jack about healthy relationships. He’s so raw, honest, and open.

“Dyscalculia is a disability. I’m disabled. I always will be.” He’s also brilliant. So brilliant, like now. He draws in a deep breath, lets out a gusty exhale then, of all things, kisses

my forehead and echoes something I've said to him so often. "But do we let it stop us?" He phrases that like we're a team of two against the whole world.

"No, we fucking do not," I grit out, and oh my fucking God, the room turns blurry—Jack, Pat, everything, including the gulls outside the window, watching with their heads tilted. "Because it's part of you, not all of you."

Pat sounds gritty as well. "That's what Dad always says too." He snorts. "He gets a bit fierce about it."

Jack asks, "And your mum?"

Pat snorts. "She's so laid-back she's virtually horizontal. Lately, I can see that's probably why they've always been rock solid. Dad goes off like a rocket. She's very zen, which helps in her work."

"As?" Jack asks.

"She teaches yoga."

Jack leans around him. "How about you, Sebastian?" he asks me brightly. "Are any of your family prosecutors? Pat mentioned that's your career goal."

There isn't any *want* about it, but I don't have a ready answer for once. Not without admitting that I don't have any blood relations. Not that I care, but it changes how people see me, and I'd rather start the day by sucking off Lito Dixon than by dealing with anybody's pity.

Pat answers for me, and there's so many ways he could describe the differences in our backgrounds. He settles for, "Seb's following in his Auntie's footsteps. She was all about fairness before she retired, wasn't she, babe? About seeking justice."

That means I can nod without explaining. I don't even need to when Pat makes it sound like I really do have a family.

"Seb's making her proud. Me too."

That also makes it easier to do some leaning of my own, and not only against Pat. I lean around him to tell Jack, "Apply for some jobs, but don't feel like you need to clean up our

mess. Meet me after my lunch shift at Penny's instead. I'll show you some more of the city. Where do you want to go?"

"Me?" he blinks.

"You," I agree. "What's left on your sightseeing list?"

"Oh, so many places." He offers one. "Like the London Eye?"

"Might struggle this close to Christmas." I explain when he frowns, "Lots of schools have broken up for Christmas. Unless you have had loot for a private pod, there isn't much of a chance. It would be cheaper and easier after Christmas."

"But it's definitely worth doing?"

I shrug. "The London Eye? Probably."

Jack frowns. "You haven't been on it?" He chews on his lip. "I'll take it off my list if heights scare you."

Pat snorts. "That's why you'd never, ever get my dad on it. He hates heights."

"Heights don't scare me," I tell Jack. "I just..."

Haven't had the time? That's a lie. *Haven't wanted to?* That's partially honest. Step into one of those glass pods on London's biggest wheel without the woman who fought for so many outings for us?

"But you'd want to?" Jack's *with me* is silent.

I tell him my whole truth. "Actually, I have always wanted to. Maybe I've saved it for a special occasion. Let's do it."

"Really?" Jack's smile is shocking. "Just you and me, Sebastian? After Christmas?"

"Just you and me, after Christmas," I agree. I also tag on a condition. "But call me Seb, yeah?"

It's probably coincidental but Pat's arm around me tightens, and it doesn't matter that our heating is temperamental or that snow speckles the gulls perching outside his bedroom window.

I'm not sure I've felt warmer in this building.

PENNY FINDS me kneeling in the stockroom later, digging through dusty wine bottles. We're only halfway through the lunch service, which again is improbably busy, so I hurry. Penny doesn't seem rushed. She crouches beside me, smiling so hard that her nose has its trademark wrinkle. "He's back!"

"Who?" I keep digging, shifting bottles out of my way until I find the one a family has ordered for a Christmas lunch celebration. It's pricey, costing almost as much as a week's rent, so I take care, lifting it carefully and checking its vintage.

Penny's so excited she almost squeaks. "Your biggest fan, of course!"

"Pat?" I shoot to my feet and check my watch. He shouldn't be here, not when there's only five minutes to go until his meeting. Or his repeat exam. I'm not sure exactly what it is that he's facing, and I hate I can't make whatever it is easier on him.

Shit. I hope he's okay.

"No," Penny says, and I wouldn't have guessed this was possible, but if anything, her nose wrinkles harder. "Not your Patrick, but it's interesting that he's the first person you thought of."

She stands and bumps me with her shoulder. "I saw the way he looped that scarf around your neck the last time he was here. You know, the same scarf you arrived wearing this morning. Maybe you should have kept it on to cover that completely coincidental..." She touches her throat, not saying *love bite*, thank fuck, one that I hoick my collar up to cover. She does grab the bottle from me, giving it an excited waggle. "Have you two finally made it official? Guy didn't mention it. I'll have to ask him!"

"You will not." I'm not ready to share what's shifted between me and Pat. Because something has, no way to shove

that genie back in its bottle now I've given it a good, hard rubbing. "And stop shaking that bottle."

It's too late—sediment rises, and I'm only grateful it isn't for Guy. He'd have a field day if Penny served it to him.

"Anyway, I don't have any fans." I set back the cloudy bottle and select another, guarding it from her enthusiasm on the way out of the stockroom where a glimpse of an old man peering down at his phone stops me. "Oh, you mean him?" I nod toward the corner of the restaurant where he's seated alone. "I wouldn't call him a fan." Although, now that I think about it, his craggy face had shifted from a deep frown to a smile when I took his order. "I hardly know him."

"Who?" Penny scans the restaurant. "Arthur? He is a lamb, but no." She points in the opposite direction. "Him."

Jack's here.

He's also hours too early.

He shrugs a backpack from his shoulder and raises his hand like he did the last time he arrived with Pat. Today he's alone, and the waggle of his fingers isn't half as hesitant. I almost wave back before remembering what I carry. "Give me a moment. I'll tell him to come back when we're finished." I also can't help glancing over at that old gent. His smile is gone now he peers at his phone, frowning like it behaves as temperamentally as our heating system.

Or maybe that frown is because he'll have to eat all by himself again.

He's our only single diner amongst a room full of families, and something twinges inside me.

It twinges again when I tell Jack that I won't be done for ages.

"Oh." His face falls before he rallies. "I could help? Then maybe you could finish early?" Behind him, I spot that old guy set his phone down and sigh, and I suggest one way Jack could be useful.

"You worked in a phone shop?"

He nods.

“Hold on.” It only takes a moment to check if my solo diner minds sharing his table and to make introductions. “This is Jack,” I tell him. “He’s new in London. And this is...” What did Penny call him? “Arthur?” He nods but his frown only truly shifts when I tell him, “Jack knows his way around phones if you’re still having trouble?”

I leave them to it, only returning when Arthur waves a menu. “Can I add to my order? My treat for helping,” he insists when Jack says he can pay for his own food. Arthur looks much brighter as he leans over this table for two and whispers, “Doesn’t matter what you choose. It all tastes like sauce out of a jar, but it reminds me of home.”

“In Italy?” I frown. His accent doesn’t support that.

“No, off the coast of Cornwall. Sometimes the supply boat to the island gets delayed, so I’m no stranger to cracking open a few jars for my dinner. Now my ride home is delayed too.” He means his helicopter-flying grandson, I guess.

“How come you’re in London?” Jack asks, and I leave them to it again.

The rest of the shift is a busy blur of celebrations, of cordite-scented snaps from Christmas crackers, and of office workers wearing paper hats and exchanging secret Santas. I only notice that table for two in the corner is empty when Penny yodels from over at the bar.

“Oh, Sebastian? Your friends are leaving.”

I hurry over to them. “Leaving?”

“Yes,” Jack says while helping my lone diner into his coat. “Did you know there’s a Horse Guards museum?” His grin is back to full-beam brightness. “Arthur’s offered to show me.” Jack waits until his lunch date heads off to speak with Penny. Then his voice drops. “That’s okay, isn’t it? If I see some sights with him?”

Okay? I’m pretty sure this frail stranger who leans on a cane doesn’t pose Jack any danger.

Jack raises a different issue. “Only I thought it would give you and Pat some alone time.” His winter-white skin gets pink in a hurry. “You’re very loved up, aren’t you?”

I can’t make myself dispute that or will away heat that climbs my own throat like a ladder. I do dispute his next statement.

“I don’t want to be in your way.”

“You aren’t.” I know that’s how I must have made him feel. Now we’re almost at the end of the week and forget me being a terrier. My mother hen clucks. “Listen, I’m sorry—”

“That you have a super-hot boyfriend?” His smile is back, and it changes so much about him. No. Not *so much*. It’s everything. He’s cute and confident and teasing, not shaky or full of self-doubt, and I can’t get over how much I like that shift for him.

I also sense the hand of Pat in Jack saying, “I’m going to try manifesting a hot boyfriend of my own, just like him. Put that wish out into the universe, you know? State my intention not to settle for less and see what happens.” He even winks. “Anyway, I’ll be out all afternoon. Oh.” He swings his backpack onto the bar. “I did have a little tidy-up so you two can have some quality time instead of cleaning. The only thing I wasn’t sure how to put right was this.”

He unzips his bag, tipping out my revision note cards. He’s punched holes and strung them together with the gold twine Pat used to wrap his Poundland presents. “So they don’t get muddled.” He tips the bag some more, papers spilling out onto the surface between a cocktail shaker and an empty water carafe, and I realise what else he’s brought to me.

These papers are the contents of the folder I knocked over. Jack holds evidence of years of life in Britain—proof that I’ve painstakingly hunted down and gathered.

Jack tips out even more. It keeps coming and coming, a snowdrift of history covering the surface of the bar as both Arthur and Penny also drift our way to see what he shows me.

Jack tidies this flurry into a neat stack. “I brought all of it with me in case you had time to show me your system.”

I choke, which he must take for a laugh, not my throat tightening about a virtual stranger holding what I’ve invested so much time and work in. Only Jack isn’t a stranger, is he? He’s someone who wants to help me, not hinder. He jumps to a different, but still accurate, conclusion.

“You don’t have a system? Fabulous.” If his hands weren’t already full, I’m pretty sure he’d rub them together at this prospect. “I’ll make one for you.”

“System?” Arthur asks. “For what?”

“For these old documents.” Jack digs deeper into his bag, emerging with an empty folder. “It’s for a legal case, yes? One from the past because you’re doing a research project on whether an old law was applied correctly or incorrectly?” It’s not a bad guess. He aims his next aside at Arthur, “Seb’s doing a law degree,” then he places the folder between us.

His lunch partner drags one gnarled finger below the title printed on it. “Windrush,” he says. Or more accurately, he sighs the name of what fuelled me to get back to school in a hurry instead of waiting tables so I could get the grades for law school. Now this old man adds a neat summary of everything I’ve collated. “A very bad business. Shameful.” I can’t help nodding.

“Really?” Jack stops shuffling papers into some kind of order. “Why?”

Arthur touches the edge of a photocopied birth certificate printed in Barbados. “Because after the last war, we needed help rebuilding the country. Needed our steelworks manned twenty-four seven. Our factories all lacked workers along with our transport system. We didn’t have the workforce so we invited other people to do it for us.”

He taps that title. “Windrush was the name of the first ship bringing those people to Britain from the Caribbean. More came for the next thirty years.”

“That long after the war?” Jack asks. “To do what?”

“Everything it took to rebuild Britain,” Arthur tells him. “And to care for us. To be our nurses. To cook and clean and mop up our messes.”

Jack says, “Sounds a bit like my gran.”

The housekeeper, I remember. One who’s on a very different kind of ship, right now, a reward for decades of hard work, while Jack leafs through proof of someone else’s hard-work record.

I watch him smooth out a photocopy of National Insurance contributions, the kind that should guarantee the kind of old age he mentions. “She’s retired now.” I also see his hands go still when Arthur mentions what started this collection.

“Retirement was a bit different for the Windrush generation.”

“How?”

I know this answer, but there’s not a single chance of me speaking. I can’t. Not past this lump in my throat.

Arthur does it for me.

“Because these were Commonwealth citizens under Britain’s shield of protection, but when they stopped work, we sent them back like none of that mattered.” He meets my eyes. “Your project is about that scandal?”

I nod.

“About the inquiry and the compensation scheme for restitution? Or partial restitution,” he allows gruffly. “Good for you.” He echoes what Auntie always told me. “Because if we don’t learn from miscarriages of justice, we’ll only repeat them, won’t we?”

Jack gathers up those papers, all business. “Right. Leave it with me. I’ll put it all into logical order. Oh.” He meets my eyes too, only his gaze is a touch wary.

“I put some other things into logical order back at the flat too. If you don’t like it, just let me know later. It’s only a tiny bit of reorganisation. I can put everything back where I found it if you two prefer things the way they were. Let me know

this evening?" I'm almost sure he winks. "I won't be back until then."

A buzzer summons me to the kitchen for more plates of subpar pasta, and by the time I get back, they're outside the restaurant and I've lost my chance to tell Jack to be careful with my folder.

I think he will be, like he's careful with his old gent, making sure he's steady before they leave on a London adventure. I've also missed the chance to tell him that staying out all afternoon won't be necessary. Not today. Pat and I won't need any alone time, not when he has a gym class straight after his meeting and won't be home until this evening when he'll need to pack for Cornwall.

But.

That doesn't mean I can't go to the gym to spend time with him while I still can, does it?

I POP HOME TO GRAB MY GYM BAG, STOPPING DEAD AT WHAT Jack described as a tiny bit of reorganisation. Then I head for Pat's workplace on a slightly different mission than I first intended.

I don't only want to see Pat now. I also need to warn him about what he'll come home to. That means battling my way onto a bus full of Christmas shoppers, then battling my way off near a building that usually thumps with music audible from the bus stop. Today I get off a double-decker, and that *thump-thump-thump* is missing. I can't hear it, even as I get closer to the gym entrance. It's still quiet as I scan myself in, inexplicably so—that is, until I find Pat. Then I see the reason for this unusual quietness.

He stands in a fenced-off area where people usually swing kettlebells to build their core strength, only he's surrounded by his family.

I don't mean his real one. It isn't his father or mother with him, or either of his older brothers. These people are the ones he's brought together for his final uni project, old and young all together, from toddlers to geriatrics. None of them are related, but they all focus on the same thing—on what Pat cradles while wearing a Santa hat and smiling down at his squirming armful.

This infant has to be the youngest member of his fitness family, and the reason he's silenced that pounding music. Pat's thick arms make the baby look so tiny. He stares down,

captivated, and I remember him mentioning so often how much he misses his littlest cousins. No wonder he's good with babies. The infant in his arms gazes up at him, cooing. One little hand reaches for a dimple, and I understand that urge, that instinct, that desire to touch and coo and, well, maybe not exactly to dribble or drool, but damn.

Damn.

I'm used to seeing Pat in workout leggings. In seeing how his quads stretch them. I'm also used to making myself ignore how his tanks strain over his chest. But ignore what care looks like on him?

That's impossible now I see it from the outside.

This is the same look that's usually focussed on me.

It's how he's looked at me forever—not like I'm fragile but like he's awed, and I don't know how that hasn't registered as intensely as it does right now that he holds a tiny human full of potential. All I can do is watch as equally tiny fingers curl around one of his, clinging tightly, and Pat's eyes soften. I also see his lips move.

So strong. You're getting so strong, babe.

That's what he tells this baby, summing up what he tells everyone he interacts with. They're stronger than they know, and he'll help them make incremental progress.

A protective surge overwhelms me right here in a place designed to build muscles. I can't name them like Pat can. All I know is that there's one in the centre of my chest that he's somehow expanded—that swells even more now with how much I want everyone who thinks he's failing to know what I do down to my bones. Pat's so strong in ways that exams and equations can't hope to measure.

They should all see him the same way I do right now.

I want that so fiercely for him that I pull out my phone and snap photos. I can't send them to his biomechanics lecturer, and I'm sure as hell not sending them to his own family. I send them to the next best thing.

A reply pings back in seconds.

Ian: *Is your not-boyfriend getting broody?*

I grind to a halt next to a barbell station, one word in that reply as heavy as every steel plate piled beside it.

Is that what we are now? Boyfriends?

That's what Jack called us, and what Penny alluded. Ian's been calling me and Pat not-boyfriends for as long as we've known him. It's the only reason I type a hurried question.

Seb: *how often do you have to cop off with someone before it counts as official*

Seb: *hypothetically*

I swerve to the right, Pat too engrossed with his cooing bundle to notice my arrival. The changing-room door closes behind me as my phone chimes.

Ian: *How often?*

Ian: *If you copped off with Pat? Once.*

Ian: *Hypothetically, twice means you two are as good as married.*

He adds a hearts-in-eyes emoji followed by one more message where he full-names me.

Ian: *But if it's with someone else, you and I need to have words, Sebastian Street, about wtf you're thinking. Lock Pat down before he leaves. Better yet, go home with him.*

I slide my phone away without replying. That doesn't mean I don't ask myself the same question.

What the fuck am I thinking?

Another part of Ian's message lingers.

Lock Pat down? Lock him out, more likely, only not from me. From his family if I did go home with him but couldn't keep my yap shut.

That would be a guaranteed disaster because I might not understand families but I do know that Pat loves his. Cost him that closeness by going off again at his father?

Never gonna happen.

I change my clothes rather than think any more about it, pulling on my own leggings and tank before going back out, swerving the treadmills this time instead of starting my workout with a warm-up. I head straight for that fenced-off area instead, and Pat sees me. He also hands off that baby and heads straight for me while I try to read his expression.

Surprise comes first, then something that I don't have a name for crosses his face as he reaches the barrier corralling the flock of toddlers and crawling babies who follow his progress. The right words come to me as soon as he vaults that barrier, heading directly for me.

He's pleased.

Pleased? For a second time, he's fucking delighted to see me, and relieved for some reason. It's a lot to deal with. For once, I'm speechless. Voiceless. All I can do is take the quick hug he offers. His lips skim my ear—not in a kiss, although it probably wouldn't matter. Who's going to argue with someone his size? But it isn't a kiss. Pat says a single word that stands for so much.

It's a name. A question. A label that only has four letters yet spells more now than friendship or flatmate affection.

“Babe?”

I can't keep this in any longer. “I need to talk to you.”

He doesn't pull back, but that relief on his face fades. “About last night?” A slight frown flickers. “Or about this morning?”

A mental slideshow of the last twenty-four hours replays, recapping all the ways we've blown through flatmate barriers.

Blown through them?

We've vaulted them like he did that fence.

His fitness family gather behind it, watching as I relive being flat on my back with him above me in bed this morning, and I shake my head. “No. It isn't about any of that.” I can't help looking away, and that's not me—I'm the opposite of shy,

for God's sake. I also can't predict our future but I can tell him what's true right here and now. I meet his concerned gaze. "I'm good with that. With all of it. With everything that's happened."

He blows out a sharp breath. "Good." Then he lets out what might sound like a laugh if I didn't know him better. He also scrubs his face while murmuring, "Can't pretend I haven't been doing a little bit of catastrophizing."

About me when he's got other reasons to worry?

Before I can ask about his exam and meeting, he says, "Then I told myself to let it go. It's only for Christmas, right? Because that's what you said, yeah? That we only kiss at Christmas?"

We've already done so much more than kiss. Pat waits for an answer, only whatever's swollen in my chest blocks it. Pat waits another beat before asking a second, quieter question.

"Unless you've reconsidered coming home with me so we can kiss after Christmas as well?"

He keeps cracking that door open.

I keep leaning against it while war with logic, with likely too-snappy outcomes, with my track record for shooting my mouth off about unfairness, especially if I think it's Pat related.

He asks another question that's safer ground to answer, or at least it's thicker ice to stand on that won't crack beneath me just yet.

"So, what did you come here to talk about?"

"Oh, about Jack."

"Everything still okay with him and you?" Pat looks behind me, that slight frown reappearing. "Where is he?"

"He's fine. He's been busy. *Really* busy." I picture what I walked into at home. I also see Pat's class waiting for him. "It's nothing awful. At least, I don't think it is." His class crowds the barrier, still waiting for him. "I'll show you later. You're busy. I just..."

Pat watches, his gaze fixed only on me, warm and rich like a cake we once shared, and fuck knows why I sound this prickly. “I just wanted to see you, okay?”

“Okay.” Pat doesn’t beam like Jack. Or like Arthur when I turned his table for one into a table for two. If anything, Pat’s smile is smaller than before, but man, it packs a wallop. “That’s more than okay with me. Go warm up. I’ll be with you in a minute.”

“What about your class?”

“You missed it. Or almost missed it. We’re just finishing up.”

“You’re not working this evening?”

“Nope. I got someone to cover for me.” He tilts his head, and I didn’t know how much I needed to hear this until he says, “Because you aren’t the only one who wants more time together. I’m nearly all yours.” He pauses. “If you want me?”

I do. So much.

He must see it.

“Good,” he repeats, that small smile intensifying. “Hey. Can you do me a favour?”

Right now, he could ask me for anything. He’s got my whole attention, and why the hell does that feel like every weight in this building piled on me? Pat rubs his own chest while speaking. “There’s a bag on the desk in the office. A Santa sack.” He unclips his key fob. “Grab it for me?”

I do, and that glorified cupboard of an office is as crammed full as ever. Tubs of protein powder block the way to the desk where a Santa sack waits.

Pat would be able to step over this wall of tubs with no problem. I have to shift the top layer, piling them beneath a notice board holding the gym rota. Pat’s name is all over the printout for the first week in December. It’s right there, over and over in multiple handwritten extra-shift additions, all the way to today.

Then there’s nothing.

I mean, the gym stays open, apart from Christmas morning, but Pat's name is missing, and I knew that. I *know* it. I do. I also know that my jaw clenches at how much I'll miss him. So will the group about to receive these Poundland presents. It signals the end to a whole year of fitness for what Pat's biomechanics lecturer calls a paltry sample, but there's nothing insignificant about the family I find sitting on mats around him.

Old and young members chat while children run and crawl and toddle around them, and I wish the whole faculty could see what he's created—what fitness can look like when it isn't about trophies or medals. It's a gift, like the ones Pat shares now, handing out his presents.

He doesn't only give out all those balls and skipping ropes he's spent hours wrapping. His class circles him before leaving, offering a gift of their own wrapped in festive paper. "This is for you, Pat," one of the mums says. "From the kids. Have a merry Christmas." She also flashes a smile in my direction. "And to you, Seb." She adds, "We've heard so much about you," and Pat blushes—honest-to-fuck blushes—but he opens a gift that leads to a roar of laughter.

Maybe most people wouldn't find an abacus designed for kids a great Christmas present. He loves it. *Really* loves it. That shows as he gets kids to do star jumps, and he slides beads after each rep, not losing count. He also accepts hug after sweaty hug goodbye, and some sloppy toddler kisses, before giving them a few last words of gym-bro wisdom.

"If you celebrate, don't hold back from enjoying yourselves. Christmas is once a year, not a diet and fitness deal-breaker. Unwire your brain if that's what you're thinking. Rewire it to let yourselves enjoy the holidays without worrying about your macros. And if you're planning to see your extended families and it gets stressful, don't forget our first group rule."

One of the mums says, "Don't try to lift the heaviest weight first?"

“You got it. Start small. Stretch your family-Christmas muscles with a few people at a time if you can. Then what?”

Another mum says, “Take breaks.”

“You got it.” Pat flexes, and a little boy pokes his biceps. “Because rest is when the torn fibres in your muscles repair.” He lifts that little boy over his head as if he’s a giggling barbell before setting him down. “That’s when muscles grow, so do the same with your families if it all starts to feel a bit heavy?” They all nod again. “Take breaks, like going out for a walk.” He flicks a look my way. “This year, someone reminded me of how good it is to walk and talk outside, not only on a treadmill.”

His gaze holds, and I wonder if he pictures the same swooping parakeets, or a lost boy statue, that I do from one of our many walks and talks around this city.

“That’s my Christmas survival plan this year,” he says as a toddler tries on a boxing glove that engulfs their whole arm, “so I won’t need a pair of these or a punchbag.” He’s joking, I think. “If it gets too much, I’ll take the breaks I need by getting out—by walking. So how about you all close your eyes for a moment and picture a walk you could take. Where’s your favourite outdoor place?”

He leads by example, his eyes closing, and I’m too far away to see spiky lashes I know are the same shades as the demerara and muscovado sugar that my auntie baked with. I can almost feel them against my throat as he tells this group, who only used to have the same postcode in common before Pat linked them to each other, where he’ll walk this Christmas if he needs to.

Without me.

I clench my jaw again, torn like those muscle fibres he mentioned.

“Mine used to be on the moors,” he tells them. “I’d go there with my old headmaster. Walk and talk our way up each Tor. That was always a good place, and with a great person, but he’s retired now. So today I’m picturing somewhere

different because I've been walking and talking with someone else who's special to me."

He means me.

Me.

Pat stands. "So don't stay trapped in the house if personalities start clashing. Pick your favourite person"—he glances at me—"and take a break until you can see the funny side again, or at least until you can remember the real reason for the season."

A crawling baby pulls herself to her feet, her little hands another pair of tiny starfish clutching his gym leggings. He scoops her up and sits her on his hip. "Which is family, right?" He blows a raspberry against her cheek, smiling when he tells them, "Enjoy your families—little by little if you have to. Build up your family muscles, and if you need to walk and talk with someone you trust to help that gradual process, remember you've got each other, Fam."

His fitness family gather, it looks like to exchange phone numbers, and the session is over.

So is Pat's last shift. I follow him back to the office, unable to hold back as soon as the door shuts behind us.

"How did your meeting go? And your exam?"

"The meeting went okay." He doesn't meet my eye, which the terrier part of me wants to sink its teeth into. I don't have to. Pat tells me, "I won't have to worry about biomechanics anymore."

He finally passed? Thank fuck. I can't help myself from asking, "But what about—"

"My insignificant sample for my research project?" Pat's one step ahead. "We've come up with a way to make it significant. All I have to do is wait for my lecturer to confirm some details, so you can stop worrying about me and tell me what's got you worried."

I make a start but quickly realise that warning him about what I found at home—about what Jack's done in the name of

organisation—isn't what keeps bubbling up inside me.

For better or worse, what's really on my mind spills over.

Spills over?

It all floods out the moment I say, "Walk and talk with me, so I can tell you?"

“YOU WANT TO GO FOR A WALK?” PAT’S GAZE FLICKS TO THE window, the light outside already fading. “Now?”

“Yeah.” I can’t keep this in. “Because that’s what you just said to do. You know, with someone you can trust?”

“To listen?”

He has to know he’s that person for me. Pat showers fast as I get changed, and here’s some of that trust in action—he doesn’t ask why I get him to catch a bus heading in the opposite direction from home. He just follows me up the twist of a double-decker’s staircase and then sits in the front row with me, but I can’t make myself crow about getting the best seats on the bus or point out any of London’s landmarks.

I point out other places.

“I was fostered by a family who lived down that street.”

His thigh presses against mine.

“They were nice people. I still kicked off until they sent me back to the children’s home.”

Pat rests a hand on my leg, warm and heavy, as another half mile passes in stop-start traffic. The next street I point out to him will turn leafy come springtime. Now those trees are as bare as my statement. “I made another family give up on me down there. They kept talking about adoption. I had to get into a *lot* of trouble before they’d send me home.”

My first school suspension and skirmish with a police caution.

“They wanted to keep you?” he murmurs over the hum and rumble of the bus engine, over the chatter of shoppers behind us comparing Christmas bargains, and underneath it all, I hear his real question.

“They weren’t who *I* wanted to keep.”

Daylight dims over the city, and no one’s watching, so I give into the urge to curl a hand with his while he looks out the window.

He’s giving me space, listening without looking at me as buildings blur beyond him. I can’t focus on the endless sprawl of shops and housing, or on twinkling lights shaped like angels strung over the busier streets. All I see is Pat watching neighbourhoods pass where I could have been raised if I’d behaved better.

It’s a blur of posher housing next to shitty tower blocks that he seems to find captivating, but isn’t that what he’s done since I met him?

Pat sees beyond all this brick and mortar. Sees what links people, not what divides them. He must have been born wearing rose-tinted glasses. Mine are black and white, and I’d say I’m not sure when or where I started to see life so starkly, only that’s a lie, isn’t it? One that I’ll have to stop telling myself as soon as I get off this bus, which shouldn’t feel like wading through sticky treacle. But that’s how each step downstairs feels at our next stop.

I wade some more once we’re off the bus until we get to a street where I can’t go any further.

Pat stops too. “You okay?”

No. I’m not. But I am committed, even if I’m not sure when that happened. I only know that he’s the one and only person I’d share this place with. Not that there’s anything special about this location. It’s just a point on a London street map between SoHo and Whitechapel, but that’s where I make a start by going back to the beginning.

To *my* beginning.

“This is where the only person I ever wanted to keep first met me. The person I kept getting into trouble for so they’d send me back to her. She always said the same thing whenever the social workers brought me back.” I echo what she used to say, only her voice had a lilt that sounded like home to me. ““Stop pushing families away, Sebastian Street. You deserve to have one.”” I clear my throat. “But when I was little, she’d read me an extra bedtime story. And when I was older, she’d bake me a welcome-home cake.” I can almost smell the spice that was as much a signal of home as her *don’t-listen-to-your-devil* scolding.

“Your auntie,” Pat murmurs. He looks around. “There’s a children’s home around here?” He points down a road lined by old Georgian buildings. Then he turns around, gesturing at a more modern block of student housing. “Or did this used to be a—”

I don’t have to answer, not when he sees what we stand right next to.

“Sebastian Street.”

The sign he reads is in black and white, like my view of the world until Pat muscled his way into it.

“I don’t...”

“Understand?” I point at the street sign. “It’s pretty simple, Pat. Whoever left me here didn’t hang around to name me. It’s not that uncommon. I’m not the first or last baby named after where their birth mother left them.”

The urge to turn around, to walk away from what crosses Pat’s face, is overwhelming, but how many times have I done that, knowing I had the safety net of a Windrush angel waiting for me? Now there’s only Pat on this street I’m named for.

“It isn’t even accurate.” I start to walk, which still feels like wading. “Come on. I’ll show you where she actually found me.”

I grab his hand, and it’s a sign of how off-balance he is that I can tow him along the street with zero resistance to where it

ends in a square that would have been green and leafy on the summer evening when I came into the world kicking and screaming.

Tonight, the branches are bare and snow-flecked. They're also lit by fairy lights. So is the bandstand at its centre, where people gather. Students, I guess, setting up for a carol concert. I point at the structure they're filling with music stands and candles.

"It was right there."

"Wait." Pat processes, and how many times have I seen him do this in front of our blackboard with a stick of chalk in his hand? "Wait. You said 'she' found you?"

I hate seeing him struggle. Maybe that's why I went off like a rocket at his father. This time, I keep my voice level. "Auntie was a cleaner back then. Only not in a children's home. At the university." I gesture at the buildings around us. The nearest houses a law school, so maybe my drive for justice is genetic if that's where either of my absent parents studied. "She was on her way home from her cleaning job when she heard..."

An angel telling her to take a detour.

"What did she hear?" Pat catches hold of my hand, pulling me closer. "Tell me?" That isn't a demand. It's a gentle request, and of course I do what he's demonstrated with Jack and with Ian before him. With all those people who brought him that abacus gift at the gym too, and I wish to God his family could see this strength instead of focussing on his one and only weakness.

"She heard me crying." I don't sniff because I'm still a tearful infant. Fuck no. It's cold, that's all. Bitterly so. It must be for my voice to shake. "She heard me, and found me, just a minute or so before the police arrived."

"Who called them?"

"I don't know," I have to admit. I lift our linked hands towards surrounding windows. "It could have been a student." He doesn't ask if I'm talking about who raised the alarm or

who left me right here where more students now gather, some of them wearing wings and halos edged with tinsel.

Pat's hold on my hand tightens, so I keep going. "Or maybe a lecturer saw someone leave me and called it in as suspicious. All I do know for sure is that Auntie said she never usually walked to her bus stop this way. She also never forgot what it was like to see so many wheels start to turn together."

"Which wheels?" he asks quietly as we circle the bandstand where someone lifts a violin that sings into the dusk, a flute joining it.

"The wheels that turn whenever a kid gets abandoned. The ones that make sure they get looked after. The police came first. Then the nurses who let her hold me after work every evening until I went to my first foster family. The social workers who scrambled to find a newborn placement for me. They're why she retrained when she was already in her fifties and how she ended up as a carer at the home I was finally sent to when nothing worked out for me long-term."

It's Pat's turn to sound gritty. "How old were you then?"

"I dunno. Six or seven?" I shrug. "She said she couldn't believe it when she saw my name again. How many Sebastian Streets could there be?" I raise a hand to my guardian angel's shoulder. "She said it was like getting an old prayer answered."

"Because she got to keep you?"

I wish I got to keep her.

I settle for saying, "Because she got to know for sure that I was safe. She never stopped wondering about me, out of all the kids she helped to look after."

"But you were special."

That's a statement, not a question.

I sniff again. I'm also me, so I snap, "No," but Pat knows me. He *knows* me, so he waits and watches until I tell him, "Yes." I was special to her, and I always knew it. I clear my throat. "She spent over ten years making sure I got the same as

other kids, even though I didn't care about things. I had her." I have to clear my throat again. "She was with me from day one. That was all that mattered to me. *Her.*"

Now I can't help wondering why she hasn't replied to my most recent messages. All those grey Mariah Carey ticks instead of blue ones still gnaw at me. She's as old as Arthur, well into her seventies. I don't want to think about the most logical reasons for her abrupt radio silence. Instead, I make myself continue.

"From then on, it didn't matter that no one else kept me, you know? You live with me, Pat. You know exactly what I'm like."

Too snappy. *So yappy.* Quick to bite at more than ankles.

"You were just a baby," Pat says roughly.

"Not for long, but once she looked after me, you better believe I fought every foster family that tried to get to know me. I made them give up and be glad to see the back of me, so I got to come home to her."

"So you got to keep her."

"Yeah." I swallow. "I did that right up until I couldn't."

"Because?"

The reason why is in that folder I let Jack leave with. It's crammed full of legal argument, of evidence, of fine detail proving without doubt that she should still be here.

I keep it simple.

"Because that's what happens." I focus on the bandstand where our story started. "I couldn't keep her. She mattered and I couldn't keep her, and right now I'm..." It's so hard to admit this. "I'm fucking terrified. Scared to fucking death, Pat."

"Why?" he asks quietly, asking for one more rep, one more push to get this weight off my chest.

It takes real effort.

"That I won't get to keep you too."

I find even more in my tank without him asking.

“I shouldn’t even want to. Not if that costs you your family.”

“Costs me? How?”

“By being me. By being why people don’t keep me, either.” I don’t need to bark a list of reasons. Besides, Pat won’t let me.

“Listen to me.” His low rumble contrasts with the fluting voice of a student who starts to sing, and I was wrong. A carol service doesn’t start here. This angel wearing a tinsel halo sings about what wise men say, about fools rushing in, and I can’t help falling in love when Pat makes this promise.

“You’re keeping me and I’m keeping you.”

I’m nobody’s baby.

I’m not.

But fuck me, I love it so much when he holds me.

DON'T ASK ME HOW WE GET HOME. I DON'T PAY ATTENTION, not to London passing by or to my breath hazing under streetlights or to the five flights up to our landing. I'm in a golden bandstand bubble that lasts until our front door opens and Pat says, "Shit, babe. We've been burgled."

My bubble pops, but only for a moment because this is what I meant to mention when I got to the gym but forgot as soon as Pat vaulted a fence to reach me. Now he blocks my way as if protecting me from the sight of a hallway we both know should be cluttered.

It's empty.

I know why, so I wedge myself under his arm. "Not burgled. Jack's had a tidy-up." I remember what he told me. "Nothing that has to be permanent."

I'm talking about Jack's reorganisation, not what Pat promised to me next to that bandstand, but tell that to my heart. It's waited until right now to pound as loudly as our downstairs neighbours sometimes do on their ceiling, only not about tipped-over coffee tables. My heart stutters over what else Jack's changed further along this hallway, and for the first time since he moved in, I don't make the most of his absence by climbing Pat or by getting naked. I don't even take off my coat before grabbing Pat's hand and leading him straight to my bedroom.

Pat lags when we're halfway along the hallway. "Where's my bike?"

I lead him to its new location, and we both stand in my bedroom doorway. Or at the doorway to what used to be my bedroom.

Now it's set up in stations, like that area at the gym where Pat and his fitness family exchanged presents. In my bedroom, one station now holds his bench, all his weights and barbells neatly arranged beside it. Another station holds his cardio equipment, treadmill and cross-trainer both facing a TV. A final station holds our shared laundry along with a first that Pat voices for me. "We've got an ironing board?" There's plenty of room for it now my bed has been dismantled, the mattress leaning against a wall with Pat's bike against it, no way to trip over its pedals.

"He didn't ever see me using this room." I back out, leading Pat next door. "He only ever saw or heard me in yours."

Pat stops in his bedroom doorway to list more of Jack's reorganisation.

"Two desks."

I don't know how he's fitted them both in and kept the room uncrowded.

"Two chests of drawers."

Both are edged with tinsel. So are twin bedside lights that cast a glow. This room looks so warm and cosy. It *is* warm and cosy. I tell Pat why. "And he got the landlord to fix the heating timer."

Pat doesn't respond to that. He only mentions what he sinks onto.

"Only one bed."

I wheel away from that truth, crossing the room to where Jack's added a miniature Christmas tree to the windowsill. Its lights twinkle, doubled by the darkness that reflects bright speckles. It also reflects me, looking as ghostly as this comes out sounding. "He thinks we're together, Pat. *Really* together. That we were already. That we always have been."

Pat's also reflected by this night-dark window. I see him get up and close the distance. He's solid where I'm insubstantial. Broad everywhere I'm narrow. As real as the arms that come around me. "Because we were. We are." Then we're back in that bandstand bubble where time stood still, both of us caught in amber until he murmurs, "Aren't we?"

Beside us is a wall calendar where Ian made me glitter like something priceless. That's what Pat is to me, so I answer in a hurry, only I can't easily get these words out.

I turn in his arms instead, meaning to show him. Before I get to, Pat shows me everything that tonight has meant to him. It's right there in care that's taken years to drift like snow into something deeper, and I'd capture exactly what his face shows me if I had a camera and half of Ian's talent, only it wouldn't be in focus—my hands shake again as I start to unfasten his coat, and Pat must notice.

He unfastens it himself, then helps me to lose mine, and I'd apologise to Jack for us littering the floor with them, only Pat pulls me to the edge of the bed where he sinks again.

I'm still no one's baby, still a functioning adult who doesn't need taking care of. I also still let him pull me between his legs regardless, and I don't argue when he holds me, the side of his face against my belly, his arms tight around me for a long, sweet moment. Then he melts the rest of my clothes away until I'm down to my underwear, his breath coasting from my navel to the waistband of my last piece of clothing.

His head dips while I still stand, shuddering at warmth that wets the cotton covering where I'm so hard for him.

He gets me even wetter. Gets me so much hotter than can be due to our resurrected heating system. He brings to life something I don't have a complex name for. I only have four letters that I string together like Jack did to my revision note cards. I'm knotted to Pat by this, not by the sight of him peeling down white cotton turned translucent where he's mouthed me.

My cock springs free and so does what I have to tell him.

“Love you, Pat.”

“Yeah?”

I nod, and he lifts the same sheets as usual for me. I rest my head on the same pillows that we share every single morning, but everything is different when he strips and then braces above me.

His biceps are right there, firm like his chest, and like each ridge in his torso all the way down to his hard-on. I focus on his face, which softens at my promise.

“I really do.”

He nods again. Tries to speak. Shakes his head. Then we’re kissing again.

Forget needing a mistletoe-excuse to do that or an X drawn on a calendar for permission, this is what I want daily for the next twelve months. For every Christmas that comes after.

For now, I settle for us having this night lit by fairy lights and magic. That’s how his mouth feels on mine. His hands too, our fingers threading, and he stops bracing above me. It doesn’t matter that he’s heavy. I want this, want *him*, want us like this, together. I want that so much I stop breathing, and because he’s him, he tunes in.

Pat raises himself again, going up on one elbow.

He also gives me options.

“You know it would only take five minutes to put your bed back together.” He tells me why. “Because I’ll do that if having your own space matters.”

“What do you want?”

“You,” he says simply. “Here.” He looks down at me, and those fairy lights shouldn’t sparkle in his gaze, not with the sheets pulled so high, so maybe it’s actually my vision affected by what he murmurs. “I don’t know when that started. When this bed turned into ours instead of mine.”

He pushes up to sitting, assuming our usual position. “Or when the pillows on this side of the bed became yours.” He

brushes cotton as ruffled as his expression. “I am too. You know that, don’t you? All yours, babe. That won’t change if you need time after everything you told me.”

That’s the last thing I need, and time is the last thing I have to waste now, but I check in, which is another sign that he makes me a better person. “Do you need more time?”

He shakes his head, and I know what commitment looks like on him so I show him the same. I fit in his lap like usual, the only difference is that I reach over to his bedside table. My digging in a drawer jostles a snow globe Jack must have put there. Glitter stirs around a mounted Horse Guard as Pat takes what I pass to him and nods at my instruction.

“Then stop talking and do me.”

He only says, “Whatever you want.” Then it’s easy to get off his lap and lay back. Pat pulls the sheet over us both, and this is a different kind of bubble. One that gets hot and humid while we kiss with Pat between my legs, good and heavy from the get-go, and I’m meant to be a right-or-wrong expert, so how come I didn’t know that this is what I’ve always needed?

His weight is my anchor, his shoulders wide enough to leave us both tented. We still run out of air, and his cheeks are stained a hot pink when he shoves it away, both of us breathless. I drag in a cooler lungful as he braces on both hands and rocks against me, his cock as hard as mine, as hot, as damp, for what is coming.

He still takes his time. Pat surveys me, and fuck knows what he sees. Do I look wrecked and already desperate? Or am I as soft-eyed as he is?

I can’t ignore that he blunts every single one of my sharp edges. There’s no way to slice what ties me to him, this bond, this cord, this connection that doesn’t break as he moves down the bed in a reverse prowl while still looking at me.

Our gaze only unlocks when he mouths at my cock then envelops it in warm, wet tightness, and it’s so intensely good that I don’t notice the click of a cap. I only feel the wet press

of his finger inside me, and it's a lot to deal with, but then again, that's me in a nutshell, isn't it?

A vault door once slammed shut behind the only other person who knew I was a lot to deal with. A lot to live with. Too much to handle for families who weren't her.

Now that vault is wide open, but not because Pat takes me to pieces with his mouth, with his touch, with each breath we share when he surges up to kiss me again.

He's still inside me, still somehow wedging that door to my soul open, and isn't that a truth there's no more avoiding? I can't compare any of this to random bangs in my past, and no wonder my sex life's been a desert lately.

Do this with anyone who isn't him?

Never gonna happen, like I'll never get over him sucking on my tongue and touching me inside where everything turns to fireworks, to sparklers, to something white-hot and greedy—so greedy that I groan, my back arching. Pat reads that signal. It's only one of so many I've sent and he's received, a culmination of more than a yearlong wait that means I've come to this with no secrets left, and for once, I'm grateful for that blurted *only-at-Christmas* promise.

It means he hasn't only drawn a cross through each day on his calendar. He's also drawn me closer, so close I don't know what the fuck I'm going to do without him, but I trust that rope between us is going to hold all the way to Cornwall and back.

I want that more than I know what to do with. Want us to make it despite me.

All I can hold on to is him. I clutch at his shoulder, grabbing at an arm I know can curl medal-winning weight but only moves now in careful fractions until my clasp tightens and again he reads me. He shifts, and I roll with him, this straddle ending with the rip of a wrapper and more lube and with the head of his cock right there.

I have to close my eyes to sink onto him. I open them to more of that sparkling, only not from fairy lights or snow globes or tinsel, and who the fuck knows if I'll ever get used

to seeing myself reflected in eyes that widen like he sees me as a bigger person. Like I'm a lot, but in a good way.

He blurs, and Pat drags in a deep breath, exhaling what could be a prayer or a curse. All I know for sure is that he's a lot too.

I need what feels like an age to take all of him. Longer than getting from one end of Regent Street to another in December. The whole Christmas season could pass before I reach where he ends and we can get started, and I still sink, thanking every angel up in heaven that we didn't rush this.

Any of it.

Pat's fingers curl into my hip, his teeth digging into his lip, his forehead a whole field of furrows, as if he feels the same white-hot burn that's only eclipsed by him thrusting up like I guess he's held back.

I can't keep a shout in.

His apology isn't wanted or needed, not now we're this connected. He still presses our foreheads together. "Sorry, sorry." Then I shift, and we're fucking.

I can't even call it that, although fucking is exactly what we do until we both pant and shine with sweat, or at least I do. It feels like more as he wrecks me on his lap, then does it with me on my knees, and all those pillows come into play, piled beneath me as I take, take, take for what feels like forever.

Damp cotton rubs my cock when I can't hold myself up any longer, more of it folded in my tight fists, my knees sliding, and still he keeps going.

I don't know why the fuck I ever thought of him as gentle.

He's relentless. I can't keep up with his endurance. We have to switch, which isn't something new that we've invented, but it's the first time someone's slapped my bottom and huffed, "Gotta up your cardio, babe," only for now he doesn't ask me for more, for one more rep, for what he needs to get off.

He lets me rest by opening himself for me, and here's hoping no one in the block opposite has a telescope trained on the open-curtained show he gives them. He also throws a condom at me, and I can't be too out of condition because I catch it and the next time we fuck, he's the one on his back with his eyes closed and with pillows piled beneath him, and I'm between his legs.

He lifts one. It rests heavily on my shoulder, but I can take its weight while watching him ratchet up to coming. Everything tightens again, each of his muscles delineated, but they still aren't my focus.

He is. All of him, and he must see it as I screw into him with the deep thrusts that make him seize up, and this is where I do have endurance. I'll do this for as long as it takes. In fact, I go even slower, and time stretches again.

Forget the birth of stars and them dying. Forget Regent Street or even the Romans laying claim to the Thames and building the foundations of this whole city.

There's only him and me, and Pat urging me on, and I so want to live up to his expectations.

I dig deep and do it.

Sweat drips, and he clenches, then it's game over. And maybe he's right about my training programme. I tell him so once it's all over and we lie together, both of our chests heaving.

"More cardio," I agree.

He raises a fist, and I bump it, and we lie in the quiet of a flat only holding two people until the front door opens and Jack lets himself in.

I drift as the sound of him moving through our home filters down the hallway, and it doesn't grate, not even a little. I simply roll over and Pat pulls up the sheets, his big arm coming around me, and I sink into a deep and warm pool of comfort that signals sleep is coming.

Or at least I sink until Pat tugs on that rope between us.

The flat is quiet. I only hear his breathing and his quiet statement. “You must think about her sometimes.”

He doesn’t mean the only other person who could read me as completely as him.

“No,” I tell him before rolling over, that cracked-open vault spilling. “Not sometimes. If I let myself, I think about her *all* the time. I never stop wondering.”

Like, what made her do it and what might have helped to stop her from walking away without me.

Like, was I made out of love or something else, and did anyone help her through that.

Like, where is she now, and does she wonder about me like I do about her.

I’ve never verbalised any of that. I haven’t had the will to.

But now?

I tell Pat, and he listens.

ONCE PAT LEAVES FOR CORNWALL, I DON'T KNOW HOW THAT first day without him passes. Or the second. All I know for sure is that I serve subpar pasta and Christmas dinners to family after family, then watch Netflix with Jack, the armchair strangely roomy even with both of us in it.

I also tell him that he can leave what he's reorganised exactly where it is, and his pleasure is one bright spot in forty-eight hours that are otherwise grey and dreary without Pat.

The third day dawns surprisingly brightly, a wintry sun showcasing a fresh snowfall and gulls spiralling over the block opposite, which I waste who knows how long watching.

I'm spurred into movement by what lands on our doormat. This letter from the university finance department is addressed to Pat, but I've always helped him through the maze of sports scholarships that cover his fees, so I open the text conversation on my phone that's already full of Pat's journey home without me.

It's crammed with photos of Cornwall taken through a train window, of huge tors rising, grey and craggy, and of something far softer—his mum's smile is just like his. She's Pat to a tee, only a pocket-size version with wild hair who does yoga with him in her kitchen.

That room is a muddle, not a show-home palace like I imagined. If anything, it's cluttered. There's a weight bench in one corner along with the two yoga mats unrolled next to each other. I also see evidence of the reason for him heading home

this early—the wreckage of an early Christmas dinner still covers the table in another photo.

I skim more pics, scrolling to the last one he sent, and I have to blow out a breath at him smiling out at me while seminaked. Those aren't the pillows in his bedroom—*our* bedroom—that he leans against, or his sheets that pool at his pelvis, but none of that is what holds my focus. It's the five-word promise he's typed below it.

Pat: *Back before you know it.*

I don't know if he'll get back before he needs to respond to whatever is in this finance letter, so I send a photo of it to him.

Seb: *shall I deal with this*

Someone else trying to solve Pat's problems resurfaces even though I'm in our hallway, not sitting across from his father. That memory prompts me to type a second message.

Seb: *only if you want*

I'm sure those gulls must cry outside as I wait for an answer that doesn't come. I can't focus on them while missing Pat this much, but I can't miss that there's something wrong with the reservation system when I show up at Penny's for a lunch shift that's suspiciously quiet.

“What did he write this time?”

“Who, sweetie?” Penny pushes back some of my hair that's fallen forward while I glare over a tablet screen devoid of bookings. “Goodness, I haven't seen that frown for a while. Are you sure you're feeling entirely okay?”

I'm not because it turns out it's impossible to feel whole when part of me—the best of me—isn't here, but I stick to business. “I'm fine. What did Guy write?”

“Guy?” she asks as if she doesn't know him—a straight-up lie that might impress me if I wasn't distracted by her tucking more strands of hair behind my ear. “You really do look a bit peaky, Sebastian. How about you take the afternoon off?”

I should jerk my head away from her touch, and I would, but... it's nice. So is the press of her palm to my forehead—so

nice that I can only summon some weak-sauce snapping.

“I don’t want any time off. I want to keep busy. And you know exactly who I’m talking about. What did Mr. Worst Meal of the Week write?” I can’t help coming out fighting even though I know Guy has a soft spot for her. I jab at the tablet. “Look. There’s only one table booked for lunch.”

“Oh, don’t you worry about it. We’ll get walk-ins.” She’s as breezy as her next suggestion. “How about you keep busy by choosing today’s playlist?” Penny still fusses with my hair, and I still let her, so maybe we’re as bad as each other.

The day stays dull, despite the sunshine. Don’t ask me to explain why, or how it only brightens when Penny’s right and we get our first walk-in.

Jack arrives with his senior-citizen bestie. He’s full of where they’ve spent the morning together, and it’s another bright spot.

“Did you know about the silver vaults?” he asks me. “The ones underneath the city?” He points at the floor like those underground tunnels housing silver merchants are beneath us, not miles away under Chancery Lane. “They’re amazing. You can’t usually take photos in the shops down there, but Arthur had a word, and they let me. I took a ton. My gran will love them.”

Penny nudges me once they’re eating. “That was a lovely bit of matchmaking, wasn’t it?”

I can’t argue, not when they talk nonstop, drawing me in once I go to clear their empty dishes. The restaurant is quiet enough that I can take the chair Jack adds to their table for two.

Arthur tells me about his grandson’s island-hopping. “Can’t be any virgins left so he’s moved on to St. Lucia.” Then his eyebrows bristle and it takes me a moment to realise he’s apologising because I’m wrapped in an accent that’s so warm and familiar I don’t initially grasp what he tells me. He repeats himself when Jack pulls out a folder that he’s finished organising and lays it on the table between us.

Right now, right here, where I chose the playlist so it's my fault that Mariah sings about all she wants for Christmas, Arthur mentions the one thing I can't have, although not for lack of trying.

"Sebastian, I really am so sorry. I didn't realise all of these documents related to someone special to you. Not until I helped Jack put them into order."

I don't know how I ever saw him as ferocious. His gaze lands so softly on me.

"I saw the letters you wrote. To her MP. To the Home Office as well, explaining how you knew her. How she'd been crucial to so many childhoods. To yours in particular." He turns to a photo of a small Black woman who laughs in a children's-home kitchen, and his cashmere tone roughens. "I don't have a seat in the House of Lords these days, but I have friends who still do. Could one of them raising an official question help?"

I'm stuck on the first part of what he just told me. Jack clarifies what he must have discovered over their shared meals and excursions. "Arthur has a title." He almost squeaks, "He's a duke."

Past me would have had something to say about the kind of wealth a dukedom suggests. About eating the rich and sharing their riches. About unfairness and injustice.

Today?

All I can do is choke this out. "An official question about what?"

"About getting her back," Arthur rumbles. "For you."

That's kind. It's also years too late. I shake my head. "She told me to stop trying a while ago. That she's too old for more upheaval. Besides, she'd only worry that it could happen again." I'd never want a repeat of that nightmare departure for her. "She's settled now, comfortable."

Arthur turns to the last page of this neat and tidy folder. "Because you got her some compensation?"

“From the Windrush scheme? Yeah, I helped her with that.” Was that settlement landing in her bank account when my drive to prosecute whoever signed her deportation order faded? Being right still wouldn’t make a difference, would it? Not when she told me to set my shield and sword down and get on with my own life instead of fighting for hers in Britain. “All I really want is to know that she’s okay.” I slip out my phone, scrolling to a conversation that’s so much more than a Christmas pop-song tally. “She hasn’t been answering lately.”

Arthur peers at my grey ticks. He also flicks a look at Jack that I can’t decipher until he says, “Jack mentioned a few days ago that you’ve been worried.”

Of course Jack’s picked up on so much since the door to that vault inside me came off its hinges.

“Could she be having the same problem that I did?”

“With her phone? Maybe.” That’s the one reason for her radio silence that I’ll let myself latch onto. I do make myself admit what Pat strategized with me before leaving. “I’ve emailed the local hospitals.” No news has to be good news, right? Calling the police is next on my list, and so what if that’s catastrophizing? Someone’s got to watch out for her like she watched out for me. “And I’ve emailed her and written.” Sent her a Christmas card with Big Ben surrounded by snowy flurries.

Arthur asks, “Would she let someone help her with her phone settings like you helped me?”

“Let?” I say as Penny approaches. “She’d talk their bloody ears off.”

For once, Penny doesn’t yodel. She crouches beside me, and if Pat were here, I’d ask what the fuck else he broke inside me because I love the way she looks up at me while pushing my hair back. I love Arthur too, for telling her that his meal was delicious. I’m so full of an emotion I don’t have city-living rules for that it leaves me slow and stupid. So slow and stupid that it takes a while to register what she tells me.

“I think some more friends are here for you, sweetie.”

More friends?

I look over to the window and my heart stops.

Pat waits outside with his back to me, and I stand up so fast that my chair almost topples. Maybe it does fall, and me with it—a knock to the head would explain why I see double.

Two Pats turn around, and Jack squeaks again. “Oh, my God. There are two more just like him?”

That’s who waits outside for me—two more versions of Pat, who share his height and build. They share the same wide and warm smile too, only one misses a front tooth.

Calum.

The other brother lifts a phone to his ear.

Reece.

His comment is easy enough to lip-read—*Got him, Pat.*

I grab my phone then, looking for an explanation, but all Pat’s sent me is a reply about that finance-department letter.

Pat: *I’m dealing with it right now, but you can open it.*

That will have to wait. For now, I’m too busy in a tug-of-war with Penny, who wins. She wrestles me out of my apron and into my coat, even doing up my zip for me. “Otherwise you won’t feel the benefit, will you?” She also beams, then herds me outside where I wouldn’t exactly say I’m rude, but I can’t help barking a question before either brother can greet me.

“Where’s Pat?”

They laugh. They also exchange cash in a reminder of Guy and Ian that might offend me if Reece didn’t also tell me, “You were the first person Pat mentioned when he got home. He hasn’t stopped.”

I can’t help smiling.

“Yeah,” Calum says. “He’s been doing a lot of that too.”

Reece crosses arms as thick as his little brother’s. “We hoped you might come home with him.” From close up, it’s

easier to see that he's the oldest. His eyes have deeper lines feathering from them but they share Pat's warmth. "Then he mentioned that meeting all of us at once might be a lot." He tilts his head at their middle brother. "We're both flying out later, so how about we spend an hour or so together? Just the three of us, yeah?"

When he puts it like that, I can't argue, although I want to when I'm marched through central London by a pair of Cornish giants who don't take into account that my legs are shorter, but at least Reece tells me what the rush is. "Pat has an early Christmas present for you."

I stop dead. "He *is* here?"

"He's busy," Calum says. I don't get a chance to be disappointed that this surprise journey won't end in an early reunion, not when they're full of questions about their brother's life in London, and it's good to have an appreciative audience for that. By the time I finish talking, I blink at where we've stopped.

The outdoor ice rink at Somerset House is as crowded with families as in those gallery photos.

The only difference is that it's daylight and that Calum's explanation comes with a gap-toothed grin. "Pat said you only got to skate once. That you spent most of your time on your arse, and it wasn't anything like you'd imagined." Pat must have told him a whole lot. "Like flying, right?" From up close, his smile isn't exactly the same, but it shares Pat's sweetness. "He asked me to give you a do-over. Let me?"

"And me," Reece offers. "Because you can't fall with both of us to catch you, can you?"

This isn't how I expected to spend an hour when I should be working, but I get strapped into bigger versions of boots Auntie last fastened for me, and Calum's right. It *is* impossible to fall when they both link arms with me, and I might not get all I want for Christmas by having Pat home early, but I do get one old Christmas wish granted.

The ice empties, and I can't help thinking that someone with a big-money hockey contract made that happen. "We've got five minutes," Calum murmurs. "Trust me?"

You know doing that with a stranger goes against every rule that this city has ever written, but I nod and, fuck me, it's worth it.

Both brothers pick up speed with me between them, and I've never gone faster. I've also never felt power like it, and I'm used to being around a powerful person, so I should know all about the benefits of well-trained muscles, but this?

It's a whole other level.

I almost say so, but then Calum says, "Ready?" and that's how I discover these laps, which already feel too fast for a rink this size, have only been a warm-up. And as for flying?

No wonder those gulls scream.

I do too, with laughter, and I remember the first time I felt this wild and bubbling fizz of exhilaration. I'm lifted, only not by Pat this time, and there's no mistletoe above me, but this is the same soaring feeling as after waiting all year long to kiss him.

I'm not sure my feet touch the ground even after we leave the rink and I text him.

Seb: *your brothers pat omg*

I send a pink-nosed selfie with all three of us grinning like fools in it, and his reply pings in as if he's waited for it.

Pat: *Not so bad, are they? For a pair of wankers.*

I float for a while longer down more streets crowded with shoppers and through Tube stations, the train singing *I wish Pat was here* all the way along tracks that won't lead me to him, but that's okay. His brothers spill story after story, so it feels like Pat's right here with us, and I wonder why the fuck I ever worried about him being compared to either of these two carbon copies, or about having to defend him at a family gathering and spoiling their celebration.

They both love the bones of their brother.

Calum's lisp makes him sound the youngest, not one three years older than Pat who says, "He's the baby of the family. We're all a bit protective," and don't I know that feeling?

Then Reece says something that raises old hackles. "Dad's the worst about Pat."

"How?" I snap, but I have to wait for an answer.

We emerge at Piccadilly where I'm herded through the kind of crowds that usually make me growl and grumble, and a penny drops when I see bright red awnings.

We're on Regent Street, right where Christmas started for me this year. Or where it almost ended. Today I pass the door to the temp agency and barely notice as Reece tells me, "Dad's the worst for always wanting to make Pat's life easy."

Easy?

I picture Pat's rounded shoulders and him holding his phone, hesitating before calling home, and I almost tell Reece he's mistaken, but a woman stops me. I don't mean by blocking my way like these crowds of window-shopping families. She does it by extending a hand outside another of my old Christmas-wish locations.

"Hello, love," Pat's mum says outside London's flagship toy shop. "I'm Lynne. Help me find a present?"

I'M TOO old for toy shops. Too hard-edged to belong in a space full of plush teddy bears and pink-boxed Barbies. Pat's mum doesn't know that. She doesn't let go of my hand either, not until we're in a section crammed with sets of Lego. "This is Pat's idea of heaven," Lynne tells me. "At least it used to be. This year, I think he wants something different for Christmas." She smiles, and it's like seeing Pat in miniature, she's so easygoing. "Or someone different."

"Definitely someone," Calum echoes.

“Yup,” Reece agrees as if he’s both judge and jury. “Lego isn’t going to cut it. Not for Pat.”

I look around. “He’s here?”

“Sorry, no.” She lets go of my hand to unfasten her coat and to smooth back the same wild hair I last saw on my phone. I surreptitiously add another message.

Seb: *omg your mum and your brothers pat wtf*

She takes my hand again, leading me to another department. This corner of the shop is full of Christmas baubles. “At home, we add a new one each year.” She raises her other hand, a gift bag already swinging from her wrist. “How about you choose one for your tree with Pat? My treat, love. For your first Christmas.”

It isn’t our first Christmas. I almost say so. She speaks first.

“For your first Christmas *together*.” I’m hot all over at the thought of what Pat must have gone home and told them for her to sound this certain. “Pick something special for the two of you.”

There are so many options, from reindeer with red noses to London sights and iconic buildings. I find a simple round ball painted with green leaves and white berries that she smiles at while Calum makes kissing noises and Reece nudges him so hard we almost all tip over, a family of toppling dominos with only me as the outsider. Only that isn’t how I feel, for once.

It’s... nice again, especially when we find a café, which is crowded with more toys and with children hopped up on sugar. It’s also where we get to sip hot chocolate, but that isn’t what leaves me smiling. It’s them sharing so many Christmas stories featuring a person missing from this cramped table.

I tell a story of my own then, illustrating it with photos. “Look at what Pat’s fitness family gave him.”

They don’t laugh at that abacus designed for kids that my photo shows Pat clutching. They melt, and it’s such a Pat reaction that I remember what he promised to the people surrounding him in that photo—it would be easier to deal with

an influx of family in stages. They could grow their resilience, like their muscles, bit by bit instead of all at once.

I met his brothers first, now his mother.

My eyes narrow and I send another message.

Seb: *if this is your idea of progressive fucking overload...*

I stop before typing that I'll be having some stern words with him the next time I see him. What I actually do is take a photo of his mother and brothers across the table littered with half-empty hot-chocolate cups, and I send a second message.

Seb: *it's working*

He answers quickly.

Pat: *Good.*

Pat: *And it's good that you're taking rest breaks.*

He mentioned that at the gym as well, promising that rest was the key to handling more weight, which is what lands on my chest all over again as soon as Calum says, "Remember that time Pat pranked Dad by subbing all his favourite Christmas chocolates for Brussels sprouts wrapped in the same paper?"

Reece snorts. "And then he waited for Dad to notice?"

Calum nods. "Never going to forget how he completely lost it."

"He what?"

Here I go, and this instinctive reaction—this bark—is exactly why I'm not cut out for family Christmases. Why I'd need a muzzle, or a pint of Prosecco with a Valium chaser to get through it.

Pat's mum only smiles at my snap. She also takes a quick photo, showing me what she points out. "That's exactly the same face Martin makes if he thinks any of his boys are in trouble. Defensive, like he'd do anything to protect them."

Reece adds a gentle, "Pat lost it, Seb, not Dad. Laughed himself almost sick."

“Pretty sure he did a little wee in his pants,” Calum offers. “Because Dad played along and ate that raw sprout like it was delicious. Really hammed it up. He always sees the funny side.”

I don’t know what to do with that information.

It isn’t what I witnessed over a restaurant table. If anything, this photo of me on his mum’s phone is a closer representation. I turn over that similarity between me and the other man missing from this family outing on the way out of the building, and I surrender to what I’m pretty sure is in my near future.

I still send another text.

Seb: *you and your dad are here y/n*

Pat’s answer pings in after more Tube rides, this time ending at a station where we take the South Bank exit. I pass the kind of food festival I’d usually stalk for sugar. I’m too wrapped up in reading his answer to take notice of what would usually tempt me.

Pat: *Yes.*

He also sends a voice note that I listen to on the way to another entry on my Christmas wish list.

Pat’s message starts with a single word that does so much heavy lifting.

“Babe.”

For once, he’s out of breath.

“I’m running late but I’m coming. Just stay where you are, and I’ll find you, okay?” He must check the time before his message cuts off. “Fuck. Dad will already be waiting at the London Eye for us.”

That means I’ll meet him for a second time, only without Pat, if I follow where his family leads me. They walk ahead, approaching another of London’s tourist attractions, one my auntie tried her hardest to make happen for all her lost boys.

I never got to go on this attraction with her. Never spun in its big wheel. Pat's dad hasn't either. At least that's what Reece tells me when I catch up with them.

He doesn't exactly whisper, like Calum doesn't exactly knock me off my feet with a nudge of his huge shoulder, but Lynne's smile is hopeful and she nods along with what Reece says.

"Dad won't tell you that he hates heights, but Pat told him this was right at the top of your wish list. Do you know what is at the top of Dad's list?"

I shake my head.

"His kids being happy." He nods towards the lines of waiting people, one of them Pat-sized, who edges closer to this huge wheel that won't stop turning, no way off once he's aboard it. "Doing something that leaves him weak and dizzy to make sure that happens? That's our dad. He's all bark and no bite, and right now, I bet he's struggling." Reece doesn't need to nudge me again. He only asks, "Help take his mind off it?"

Lynne also makes an offer. "Martin was hoping to share this with you and Pat, but we can all come with you if Pat won't make it here in time."

The wheel keeps turning, my chance to board with the last man in London I want to share a confined space with almost passing, but do you know what?

I stretch a few rested muscles and make a promise.

Seb: *don't hurry babe i've got this*

I SENSE THE HAND OF A GENEROUS HOCKEY PLAYER AGAIN IN the fact that our pod only holds two people. It's just me and Pat's dad in a space designed for bigger parties than a single pair of strangers, but Martin and I do have one thing in common.

He can bark as loudly as me.

“We got off on the wrong foot.” That carries loud and clear to my end of this capsule, which slowly gains height. We rise over the Thames in what is essentially a glass egg, one that Pat's dad maybe thinks is as fragile—that could crack if it climbs any higher. His voice does. Crack, I mean, not turn falsetto. “Patrick told me we did.”

He holds a handrail. No, *hold* isn't the right descriptor, and Reece wasn't kidding—his dad clutches it, his shoulders hunched with tension, in a glimpse of Pat. Confusingly, Pat's also there in a flicker of humour that I glimpse when I stop next to the bench at the centre of this capsule. I hear it too in a laugh that comes out sounding shaky. “If I'd known he'd make me pay for that meal like this, I would have thought harder about what I said when we all last met. About me giving you career advice, and telling Patrick I'd fix his problems, only I was...” He stops.

This pod doesn't.

It keeps climbing, this big wheel still turning while afternoon light dims over the city, evening fast approaching.

“You were what?” I ask as, beyond the glass, seasonal lights take over and begin to twinkle.

London shrinks. So does this big man, even though he’s the same height and build as all three of his sons.

“I was so worried.”

“Because he kept failing his biomechanics exam?”

“No,” he barks, and that sound is so familiar—but not from Pat. From me, and so is what Martin says next. “Because he was under so much pressure. It wasn’t fair. Patrick can’t help his issues.”

His face creases, and I know that expression. Pat’s thinking-about-other-people face is right there as soon as his father’s stern lines soften.

“I wanted him to know that he had other options.” He also huffs, “I’m so bad at this.”

If he means talking about family dynamics, I know that feeling. It helps me to follow his next barked order.

“There’s a bag by the bench. Look inside it.”

I do. I also sit down because these photo packets are a blast from a past. The postman would deliver similar ones after day trips with Auntie, only the glossy photos I leaf through don’t feature her lost boys. They focus on a single infant.

“Is this...?” It can’t be Pat. This baby with a tube in his nose is tiny, barely a handful. He’s connected to monitors. To wires. To breathing apparatus.

“Patrick? Yes,” his dad admits, sounding breathless like he’s the one in need of extra O₂. “He came so early that we almost lost him. He wasn’t meant to be a Boxing Day baby. We weren’t ready.” His laugh is strangled. “I’m still not ready for him to take on the world without us.”

I look through more photos. Some are of Pat’s first Christmas, and I don’t know much about kids, but a one-year-old shouldn’t be this small, should he? Or hooked up to hospital monitors again. I turn it to face his father.

“Pneumonia,” Martin murmurs. He also lets go of the handrail to wipe his forehead as if he’s broken into a cold sweat, and yes, the pod is much higher now, but I’m pretty sure that isn’t what scares him.

It’s the thought of losing someone he loves.

Who we both do.

It’s right there in the next packet of photos, and in Martin saying, “We can’t be sure that Patrick’s prematurity is why he struggles.”

“With numbers?” I could snap that Pat excels in other ways, but I don’t need to. Martin does it for me.

“He has so much more to offer, but did his first school believe that?” He doesn’t say, *no, they fucking did not* like I would. I still hear it and can’t help nodding when Martin adds, “So I didn’t stop looking until we found the right school for him. One that saw his potential.”

Pat’s next photos show the small, intense smile that he doesn’t aim at many people. This time it lands on a man who I guess is the old headmaster he’s mentioned. They both wear hoodies bearing the same leafy logo.

Pat is still small and skinny. His hoodie swamps him, but in the next shot he touches his chest as if he’s proud of that GH stencilled on it. He’s proud again in a third photo, clutching a shining trophy, and his dad says, “Patrick used to get picked last for sports. At his new school, they made him team captain because he has this instinctive grasp of...”

He takes so long to reach for the right word that I fill in for him.

“Of teamwork?”

Martin nods. “To start with, I wasn’t happy about him playing every sport going. Put his body under even more stress? But Patrick...”

“Flew?”

He nods instead of answering aloud, his brow creasing.

It's easy then—so easy—to pack away our last meeting like I pack away those photos and then show him a few of my own. I stand beside him to do that while we're at the highest point of a ride that should be fun but is the opposite for this big man.

Pat's a great distraction, and I didn't realise I'd taken quite so many shots of him with his fitness family. They're nowhere near as good as Ian's would be, but magic still fills my phone screen.

Pat holds a baby, Santa hat in place and dimples fully on show. He's surrounded by strangers of all ages who've bonded, who are stronger due to him, and who aren't alone in this city or on their health journeys. "He's still flying," I promise.

"That's what he tells me. That he's doing great already and the future only looks brighter for him."

The jury is still out while his final research project hangs in the balance, but I focus on Martin's next admission.

"It was hard. You know? When he moved away. I couldn't see if he needed our help, and would he accept any that we offered, like money?"

No, he fucking would not.

Martin snaps his fingers. "I could get that for him as easily as this." He snaps his fingers again. "Or a decent job. I've got so many contacts. I'd get him plenty of work, no problem."

That's the same offer Guy made for me, isn't it? Did I see that as controlling?

No, I fucking did not.

Guy was only being helpful. It's what you do when you care about somebody.

"I don't know why I ever expected him to let me." Martin chuffs out the kind of sound that I remember making before Pat told me why me fixing his sums wouldn't help him.

Again, I fill in for his father. "Because he digs his heels in about being independent?"

“That’s a polite way of calling him stubborn.” Martin’s sigh is long-suffering. It also comes with an eye roll and a surprisingly warm smile. “He gets that from his mother.”

I do bark then, but with a laugh, and it’s even easier to let go of our last shared-meal disaster and to acknowledge my part in it. “I’m sorry I shouted last time. I was...”

“Feeling a touch protective?” Martin doesn’t avoid it either. He meets it head on, which is another trait belonging to my favourite flatmate. “Me too.” He shrugs. “It only seems like minutes ago that Patrick was born. You saw what kind of start he had? I didn’t want him to struggle then. I don’t now. That goes for you too, Seb.”

“Me?”

Now we face each other while this pod descends, neither of us taking any notice of London or the Thames coming closer as Martin nods. “I showed him those listings of flats for both of you.” He tugs at his scarf, mentioning a conclusion that Jack also jumped to. “My fault for assuming you two only needed one bedroom.”

“You’re not the first person to think that.” A seagull flies level with us, its beak open as if laughing. “Or to be right before I knew it.”

He meets my eyes. They’re clear, steady, and smiling. “Pat started and ended every sentence with you, so...” He shrugs. “All I thought about was both of you starting out here where it’s so hard to make a living. It’s always cost more to live in London, but these days?” He shakes his head. “I don’t know how anyone does it. That’s why I mentioned career choices to you, which was none of my business.” Now he taps his temple. “Tell that to my brain. You’re wired into mine with Pat, and having kids makes you think ahead. Are you still focussing on public prosecution?”

I shrug. I really don’t know.

He lets go of the handrail again, this time clasping my shoulder briefly. “If you need a sounding board, try Lynne or Reece.” He scrubs at the nape of his neck before clutching the

handrail again. “Because just in case you hadn’t noticed, me dialling back on being a dad isn’t coming easy. Not when one of my kids is heading out to a war zone and another straps actual blades to his feet to make his living.” He blows out a long breath. “I don’t know why all three of them think they’re invincible. That they can take on the whole world.”

I don’t know how to be a son.

I’ve never been one.

All I know for sure is that all three of his boys would want me to ask this. “You think they could do any of that if you weren’t in their corner?”

His surprised smile suggests that I’ve said the right thing for once.

I don’t push my luck. I stop there and face outwards. His smile is still visible in the periphery of my vision while I get busy pointing out the sights, and who knew that all those walks would come in useful? I name locations and show landmarks to Martin until this ride is finally over, then I head for the exit, pretty sure Pat will be waiting outside for me.

I stop when Martin says, “I’m trying to let go.”

I’m not sure he only means of the handrail. I still go back and help him. “Come on. Pat’s waiting.” I clasp his elbow like his sons did for me.

The pod still moves, the ground slipping past at the exit, and Pat’s dad almost loses his balance, but I hold on tight, and we take that final step together.

PAT ISN’T WAITING OUTSIDE for me. He must have messaged his mum to say why. “He’s still on his way, love,” she tells me. “Held up by a Tube closure. Says he’ll meet us halfway.”

“Halfway to where?”

Lynne only mimes zipping her lips, but apparently the halfway point is Kensington, where she sets a Christmas

riddle. “He said you’d know where to find him from here. That you won’t get lost. We’ll see you soon.”

She surprises me with a tight hug and kiss to my cheek, his dad with a handshake that ends in a hug too, and his brothers with backslaps before they leave me.

I watch them go, and so what if crowds intent on Christmas-shopping missions curse at the space I take up? I still linger, waving when they look back before rounding a corner. Then I take off, because of course I know where Pat will be waiting for me.

Not at Penny’s, even if it is just around that corner.

Not at home in our flat either.

It’s getting dark, but that doesn’t matter. The gardens I run through are speckled with so many lights I have no trouble seeing, although it’s so fucking cold that my breath mists. And that’s how Pat appears—through a fog that clears as he pushes away from the fence around a familiar statue. He leaves that leader of lost boys behind, stopping with maybe six feet still between us, as if this confession can’t wait for him to close the distance.

“Reece was on the case.” His breath clouds too. “I told him to bail at the first sign that you weren’t having fun. He would have backed off if you’d looked at all like this.” He narrows his eye in an impression that I shouldn’t smile at but do. He smiles back, dimples on full show like in the photos I just shared. “I made him promise me,” Pat adds. “Was pretty sure he’d do what I asked, considering that I’ve got years of dirt on him. On both of them.”

“Dirt like you laughing so hard one Christmas that you peed your pants?”

“Fucking Calum,” he guesses correctly, but he grins. It only fades as he tells me, “I couldn’t stay in Cornwall, so I told them all what’s in that finance letter.”

I must look blank.

“You haven’t read it?” He pulls out his phone, the screen illuminating a face that is nowhere close to as soft as usual

once he finds an email. “Read it now.”

I do, frowning over the finance department confirming his withdrawal. “You’re quitting.”

“Keep reading.”

I do. “You’ve transferred from sport and exercise science to a different programme? To a community health course?”

“Not really transferring. I already have almost enough credits to pass. The course is”—he doesn’t say *easier* or *worth less*—“more vocational. All I have left is to submit a report on a community health project, document enough practical hours, and boom, I’m a certified community health practitioner.”

“You don’t need to do any data analysis? No equations?”

“Not like on the degree course. And the sample size I already have is perfect.” *His fitness family*. “Small-scale.” His incisors dig into a lip that I know is soft and giving. “That’s my skill set.”

I keep scrolling, eyes narrowed. “What about your bursaries? Or the sports scholarships covering your costs? If they try to claw any of that back, I’ll—”

“Let me deal with it instead of fixing it for me?” He takes his phone back, both arms coming around me, pulling me close, and there’s a smile I now know is a family likeness. “It’s all good. But this is what I told Mum and Dad the minute we finished our early Christmas dinner—that I’m transferring and that I’m going to keep doing what seems to be working for me with my other fam.” He shrugs. “I’m nowhere close to being ready to say goodbye to any of them. Dad took it really well.” There’s a good reason for that. It’s only what I tell him.

“You’re so loved, Pat.”

“You too,” he says thickly as we walk together, and I have no idea if we hold up busy people when we leave the park and rejoin the shopping masses. I don’t care, not while Pat tells me about a business plan he wants to work on while finishing his new course. One that he’s already run by his dad and that Calum wants to play a part in.

“Not because he’s got the money to help me set up a fitness family network. But because he’ll need something to do when his hockey life is over in a few years, and that’s what my biomechanics lecturer mentioned when I met with him.”

You know I’m ready to growl. Pat laughs while Christmas music filters through shop doorways. “I told him I was worried about passing, and he’s the one who suggested I transfer instead of resitting my exam. That’s why I’m here today. My lecturer said it was the last day to get those wheels in motion before the office closes for Christmas. He also said that out of all his students this year, I was the only one with a sustainable concept and I should go for it. That I might not be cut out for equations, but I could smash this. London’s so big, babe.” He says that like I’m new here. “Think how many fitness families I could get going.”

We round a corner where candles already flicker through restaurant windows. They showcase something I’m not cut out for either. Or that I haven’t been until now.

A different family gathers.

There’s Ian and Guy, those loved-up muppets, looking into each other’s eyes like usual. Penny sits for once, chatting with Lynne and Martin, while Jack looks like a dog with two tails sandwiched between two big, blond brothers. He reaches across the table, taking something from Arthur.

It’s his phone.

Jack studies it before lurching to his feet.

Our eyes meet through the glass, and I’ve had so many mixed feelings about Jack since spilling that bottle of Prosecco for him. But right now, as he presses the phone to the glass to show me the photo Arthur’s grandson has sent?

I count every single blessing that our doorstep is where he washed up.

He’s why I get to see that not all angels have wings. Some have rotors like the helicopter in the background of this shot featuring an island-hopping stranger who has tracked down the one person I’m missing.

This image of Auntie swims until I blink. She's still there, still smiling, and like my heart after so much worry, Christmas can start over.

Pat grasps my wrist before I can hurry inside to ask questions.

"Listen. I'm not spending the rest of Christmas without you. Mum and Dad will—"

"Understand if you stay here?" After today, I believe that, but now I also know what this time of year means to them, especially his birthday. "They love you. I do too. Ask me again, Pat."

He does, his breath a warm kiss against my cold cheek. "Come home with me for Christmas?"

I nod. I also do what comes so naturally that I have no idea what I've spent twelve months thinking.

How could I ever limit kissing him to only Christmas?

From now on, I'll do it daily. I make a start right here with a restaurant full of friends and family watching.

There isn't any mistletoe above us, but that's okay.

I've got a bauble in my coat pocket covered with it.

EPILOGUE

Summer in central London

Patrick

Clattering wakes me on the morning of Seb's graduation. I also find my bed empty.

No.

This isn't only my bed these days. It's well and truly ours now, even if I still can't believe it.

I can believe what Seb tells me after sliding between stacks of boxes and into our room, only wearing briefs and a snippy expression. He shoves a tray holding three mugs and spilled tea, and I guess what's coming.

“Your fucking bike, Pat.”

There it is.

“Yeah.” I take the tray from him, doing my best not to grin. “My fucking bike. Tell me all about it.” Then I settle back against the headboard and lift the sheets for him because this is how we start every morning when I don't hold early classes. Not by him bitching about my bike—that's usually tucked away in the spare room. It being a hallway trip hazard today is coincidental, and temporary.

What we have isn't. Temporary, I mean.

He's it for me long-term, even when he's raging like now. *Especially* when he's raging, to be honest, and I'm sure Reece has psych textbooks explaining why Seb facing the world with his verbal fists raised does it for me, but labels don't matter. Not to me. I already know what pulls me to him like the world's strongest magnet even when he's rocking a bad attitude and an even worse case of bedhead. It's the fact that he only rages about what's important but never sweats the small stuff.

That's what Seb does now, and it's my favourite part of being with him. Keeping it real, it was my favourite part of Seb even before we started kissing as if Christmas was year-round. Mariah might as well sing daily when each morning like this reminds me of Dad unwrapping a Christmas chocolate. Life with Seb is also full of surprises, and there's probably a whole other textbook on why my heart thumps more when I'm around him than after hard spin classes, but I don't sweat that either.

Today I just enjoy him settling against me to start his bitching in a room full of clutter, but does he focus on what's piled up around this bed in more trip hazards? To quote Seb, no, he fucking does not. He only focuses on family, and maybe this is where Guy is wrong about his Jack Russell characteristics. Seb's a Border Collie, constantly rounding up his herd of special people, which means he verbally circles our flatmate while growling, and again I guess what's coming.

Jack doesn't. Or at least, he doesn't know why Seb's about to go off like a rocket. Other than that, Jack knows plenty, but he's also excellent at keeping secrets. He really will make a great PA to someone very lucky.

Now Jack slides between those stacks of boxes between the door and this bed, then slides into bed beside us to claim his tea, and to be fair, Seb does let him take a sip before starting. Not that he barks an order as soon as Jack's done with his first swallow. He just leans around me to jab a finger at him, and then says, "You wait right there and don't move a fucking muscle."

Seb stomps out of the room with another clatter that comes with a soft *ding*, and Jack blinks over the rim of his mug, all silvery wide eyes that are full of silent laughter. I'd think he was cute if I wasn't already in love with someone way cuter, even if I can never let Seb know I think that about him. He already knows how much I love him now that I can say it aloud instead of only showing him with baked goods, and you better believe I tell him often.

Jack whispers, "Wait right here? I wasn't planning on going anywhere, Pat." He bites his lip. "Does he know?"

"About today?" I shake my head while eyeing my suit hanging from the curtain rail next to Seb's. "Not unless he's been through my suit pockets, and I think we'd know if he had."

There's no way Seb knows. He wouldn't only go off like a rocket if he knew what was in my pocket. He'd detonate and take down this whole tower block we'll soon be leaving.

Jack tilts his head at the muddle we've made of this room while packing. "Shall I—"

"Tidy up for us? How about you leave shifting all those boxes to the movers?" Because that's why we're surrounded by chaos. There's a neat and tidy two-bed house in all three of our futures, with no neighbours banging on their ceilings or gulls screaming, all thanks to help from my folks that was easier to accept when it was Seb-related.

Give him a roof and four strong walls and a door only the three of us have keys to? Of course I said yes to help with getting a first foot on a property ladder for him. I don't care if we never climb that ladder any higher. I also don't care if it's furnished with secondhand donations from my fitness families either. I'm touched by how much they've helped us, and by how that network keeps expanding.

Having success right out of the self-employment gate? It might be because I've manifested the shit out of that positive outcome. More likely it's down to my main motivator, my driver, my all-time favourite person. Seb has no idea that he's the one who keeps showing me how to reinforce connections.

He comes back to do just that again, only this time, he drags the blackboard from the kitchen with him. It's taller than him, but he never lets getting outclassed size- or height-wise stop him.

Jack snorts back a laugh, and that's a sign of how the best cure for a nasty dose of Lito Dixon is an even longer dose of living with someone who jabs his finger for very different reasons.

This time, Seb points with a stick of chalk to start a pep talk, and I'm meant to be the qualified coach, but that doesn't stop him when he should be getting ready for his graduation. He still finds time to draw three circles on our blackboard. He also writes a title above them.

How not to end up working for another dickhead.

This Venn diagram has three sections like our spare room does for cardio, weights, and laundry. Seb labels them *Cash*, *Skills*, and *Jack Being Happy*.

Here comes another jab, Seb's chalk pointed firmly at Jack. "Think of these circles at your interview later."

"It isn't an interview," Jack insists. "It's a casual chat over lunch."

"Casual chat, my arse. It's an interview, only he isn't interviewing you. *You're* going to interview him. You're going to sound him out, and you aren't going to settle for anything less than answers that fit into this middle section." He stabs at the intersection of those circles. "You deserve decent money, not temp-agency wages, and a good use of your actual skills, not fuckwittery dreamed up by a controlling asshole. Most importantly, you deserve to work for someone who doesn't move the goalposts just to make you worry." He jabs that intersection again. "This is the full package."

Each stab of his chalk acts as punctuation, the kind missing from every text message he's ever sent me. It doesn't matter, I've always read him loud and clear like I do this morning when he could be focussed on his own successes. Instead, he's

focussed on a flatmate we wouldn't have if not for his first intervention. Now Seb stages another, his voice rising.

“You deserve the full package from your next job, but will you get it if you work for another gaslighting bellend?”

After eight months with us, Jack's well trained.

“No, I fucking will not.”

Seb nods, then he crosses his arms, his biceps a modest gun show revealing nothing like his real strength. His three-and-a-half-pack though? That's tense with how much he wants this for Jack. “Tell me what you do deserve.”

“The full package?” Jack asks over the rim of his mug.

I take that mug from him, pleased it isn't a chipped one. This mug is newer, from some tourist trap no doubt. It features a photo of Jack alongside someone with bristling eyebrows. Seb's brows draw down too, so I ask Jack for a stronger answer.

“That sounded like you asking a question, babe. Try again. Only this time, close your eyes and picture what the full package looks like for you these days.”

“Is it allowed to be one of your brothers? Or both of them? Because I can picture that, no problem.”

Across the room, Seb breathes, “For fuck sake,” and I close my eyes instead of replying. You have to know who I picture. Seb must do too—I open them to find him watching. Me. Not Jack. He can't have any idea how sweet his smile is, or he'd scowl to hide it, but for now, I soak up the real Seb. *My* Seb. And maybe he does a bit of soaking up of me too.

Seb doesn't speak again until Jack snorts at us having a more-than-flatmates moment. Then Seb's gaze breaks with mine and lands on Jack, only he doesn't growl or prowl or snap again. He asks a simple question.

“What do you deserve, Jack? Only this time, say it like you mean it.”

Jack does, and you can tell that he's had great coaching because he bellows, “The full fucking package,” loud enough

that every seagull perched outside our window takes off.

It's a beautiful day outside, sunshine streaming through our bedroom window, but Seb's smile?

It glitters.

SEB'S graduation goes without a hitch. He crosses the stage to collect his law degree to applause, and not only from me. My parents are here to cheer for him with me.

Dad even whistles, two fingers in his mouth, no way that Seb can fail to hear him, and there's that sweet smile again, one that melted me the first time I saw it at uni. And yeah, seeing it land on Dad now? It sums up the progress we've all made since last Christmas.

Not that Seb's changed, nor Dad. The difference now is that they understand each other's motivations, and the same goes for me. Of course, I understand Dad so much more now that I want to give Seb everything he missed out on and every single thing he's still missing. That's got to be genetic.

It also means that we don't hang around for photos of Seb in his cap and gown like the rest of his cohort. Seb has another location in mind for that, which means we all follow him across London, and so what if the restaurant that is our next stop gets terrible write-ups? It's where Seb wants to celebrate, and today he gets what he wants.

Penny's closed the restaurant to everyone else but Seb's favourite people, two of whom sit apart from us at a corner table. And here's another version of his herding instinct—Seb makes it almost to the end of this celebration meal before giving in to that urge, leaning back in his chair to eavesdrop on a casual lunch date that's been a long time coming.

Arthur's grandson, Rex, and Jack keep missing each other, banking meetings taking him out of the country so often. Now I lean back too and hear Jack discover the reason for all of Rex's island-hopping.

“So what you’re telling me is that your last PA didn’t protect your diary. They let anyone and everyone change your meetings, even at the last minute?”

“Not really anyone and everyone,” Rex tells him. “Only one person, but no, my last PA didn’t stop him.”

Jack could promise not to do the same if Rex employs him. Instead, he asks the kind of question that makes Seb do a little fist bump.

“Why do you think that is?” Jack doesn’t stop there. “Because it’s the kind of thing PAs let happen when their boss is a nightmare to work for.”

I’m not sure that’s the case for this potential new boss, not when Rex says, “It wasn’t my old PA’s fault. It’s very hard to say no to someone like the bully who made her do it. It was someone higher up the food chain. To be honest, I feel bad for her. My PA, that is. If I’d known she was being pressured, I would have stopped it.”

Seb’s chair almost tips back and I need to grab it. I also stage an intervention of my own, shuffling Seb away before he can eavesdrop anymore or join in on what sounds like Jack finding a new job working for someone decent.

I steer him to the bathroom but don’t get quite as far as that. We stop when the hallway door closes between us and the restaurant, and there’s no tinsel now in this hallway, or fairy lights to twinkle, but it doesn’t matter. Not when Seb always lights up every space he takes up, and right now, he’s incandescent.

“Did you hear that?”

I don’t know why he’s fuming after Jack did so well.

Seb tells me, complete with that jabbing finger. “He gave Jack all the right answers, but did you see him? No wonder Arthur said he wouldn’t leave many virgins in the Caribbean. He’s even better-looking than in his photos. What if he tries it on with Jack?”

He backtracks just as quickly.

“He isn’t as good-looking as you, obviously.” His lips brush my chin, which I know isn’t as strong or square as either Reece’s or Calum’s. Seb still makes me feel like a supermodel when he stands on tiptoe to reach my lips, and I might not be good with numbers but you know I always have one more rep in me for him.

We kiss and time passes. I don’t know how long. It doesn’t matter, not when Seb’s arms loop my neck and his mouth opens, and we’re back where we started, until he can’t help looking at the doorway, still worried.

“Jack can look after himself, babe. Look who trained him.” I don’t mean at the gym, even though that’s where Jack spends most of his evenings with us, getting even stronger. “But, yes, I did get a look at Rex, and do you know what I noticed?”

Seb shakes his head.

“He’s got kind eyes just like Arthur.”

Seb smiles then, relaxing, which is just as well because his phone chimes and we’re off to our third stop of the day.

“Time to go,” he tells me. “Ian’s waiting outside for us.”

But here’s the thing about good friends. They’ll always wait a few more minutes for something this important, so I kiss Seb again, and this time?

I take longer.

Ian does need to get to another booking, so we all hurry to where Seb wants his graduation photos taken.

He puts his cap and gown back on in a bandstand between SoHo and Whitechapel, and then he takes a deep breath. I can tell it’s shaky. Nothing usually scares Seb, so I pull him away while Ian changes camera lenses.

“You okay?”

He nods, his lips pressed together. Then he shakes his head, his voice thready. “Is this a stupid idea? What do you think?”

I have to take a deep breath myself before answering. “I think it’s the best idea you’ve ever had.” This needs repeating until he believes me. “The kindest idea too, babe.”

I’m a sap, okay? One who is way too soft for this city without someone like Seb in my corner. Now he does a pretty good impression of me, all of his hard edges softening while standing right where someone left him.

That means this needs saying as well.

“You want her to know how your life played out. That good things happened for you. How can that be a stupid idea?”

Because this isn’t about whether a stranger deserves this information. It’s about putting the good news out there, or at least onto a website where search engines can find it.

“Now she’ll be able to Google your birthdate and this location and know exactly what happened to you.”

Ian points his camera. “Say cheese.”

Seb doesn’t.

“What if…”

He’s asked me this frowning question so often lately.

I answer for him the same way as always. “What if she reaches out? Then we’ll deal with it together. And if she doesn’t?”

He answers this while Ian takes photo after photo of Seb not smiling with the bandstand in the background. “We’ll deal with that too. You and me, Pat. Together.”

“That’s right. You can go ahead and smile, babe.”

Seb can’t.

Ian takes some more shots, then shows us. Even unsmiling, they're so much better than good. There's something heroic in each shot where Seb's cape billows in the breeze, and yes, whoever finds these photos will see what they missed, but they'll also get to see what they created. Who wouldn't be grateful for that?

It's only what I tell him under my breath as Ian takes shots of the two of us together.

"Even if you can't smile, they'll get to see someone brave. Someone with a law degree who isn't afraid to change direction." Seb's postgrad switch to social work is only proof that genetics are important but nurture is what really matters. "They'll get to see you exactly as you are, and maybe they'll get to rest easy."

He nods, and Ian asks if we're happy with what he's captured.

Seb nods again, but I'm not happy. Not yet. Not when I know Seb inside out and backwards, and know his full potential, because that's a coaching rule, right? Asking for a little more when you know there's some left in the tank, but all tanks need refuelling, so I go ahead and do that.

"What would your auntie say about putting these photos online?"

The only snap, snap, snap comes from Ian's camera. As for Seb, all he can manage is a rough-sounding, "She'd say I was finally listening to my angel."

It's the perfect moment to show him what I've kept secret in my pocket—what all of my extra classes have funded along with air miles gifted from a banking frequent-flyer.

Two tickets to Barbados seemed the best present I could give him.

"Why not ask her yourself, babe?"

Who cares if Seb's eyes shine, damp at the prospect of a trip we'll make together, months before December?

His smile in Ian's final photo is as good as Christmas coming early.

The End.

Not ready to say goodbye to London? Subscribe to my newsletter for a bonus scene featuring all three flatmates.

tinyurl.com/WeOnlyKiss

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CON RILEY lives on the wild and wonderful Welsh coast, with her head in the clouds and her feet in the ocean.

Injury curtailed her enjoyment of outdoor pursuits, so writing fiction now fills her free time. Love, loss, and redemption shape her romance stories, and her characters are flawed in ways that make them live and breathe.

When not people-watching or reading, she spends time staring at the sea from her kitchen window. If you see her, don't disturb her — she's probably thinking up new plots.

I'm most chatty in my Facebook reader group: Con Riley's Readers. Come and say hello!

