

ZARAH DETAND

Author of *Wear It Like a Crown*

BE

MY



ENDGAME

A Novel

BE MY ENDGAME

ZARAH DETAND



CONTENTS

Disclaimer & Trigger Warnings

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Epilogue

Author's Note

Also by Zarah Detand

Copyright © 2023 by Zarah Detand

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

DISCLAIMER & TRIGGER WARNINGS

Disclaimer

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Trigger Warnings

Parent with bipolar disorder

“Now, folks.” The referee inserted a heavy pause. “I want a nice, clean game. All right?”

Like anyone would tell him that no, what they wanted was an ugly, dirty game. *Come on.*

Bouncing on the balls of his feet, Alex shielded his eyes against the sun, watching the traditional handshake between Jeff and Oliver Bramwell. Sportsmanship suitably demonstrated, the two captains headed to their respective spots as the referee checked his watch with the air of someone who wanted it known that time answered to him, not the other way around. The same thing was true for the two teams lined up in formations that differed slightly—two forwards on Alex’s team facing Manchester United’s lone striker.

Lee Taylor.

Alex let his gaze rest on him for a beat, then he returned his attention to the referee.

Come the fuck on.

When the whistle pierced the air, the crowd in Liverpool’s packed stadium roared like a ravenous beast. Alex’s focus shrank to the pitch in front of him.

It was *on*. Number one against number three, battling it out in a tight race for the top spot in the Premier League. It was a perfect day for it, too—a cloudless sky in early May, with the sun beating down as if it held a personal grudge against any pale-skinned Brits in the crowd. A sea of red jerseys filled the stands.

On the field, it was a different story. The visiting players were decked out in dark green away shirts, clearly instructed by their coach to fight for every inch on the pitch. Got to hand it to Ben Jimmer, he knew how to turn a team around. In just over a year of training Manchester United, he'd yanked their sinking star up by its bootstraps and brought them back to Champions League standard. And Lee Taylor was key to Jimmer's strategy.

Not today, though. Not if Alex could help it.

It was a hard-fought match from the get-go, both coaches shouting instructions and spectators on the edge of their seats. Overpriced beer and soggy chips were forgotten in favour of cheering on the teams, the rhythmic beat of drums and clapping a steady hum in Alex's head. Lee dashed in and out of the penalty area, light on his feet, blink-and-you'd-lost-him. Alex didn't intend to blink and lose him—it was rare for him to mark one specific player, but for the current top scorer of the Premier League, he was willing to make an exception. Sure, when they'd last faced off against each other, Lee had come out on top and he'd only improved since then. But so had Alex.

At eighteen, Alex had been slight and gangly, hadn't yet grown into his new height. Now, some five years later, he'd filled out, and he had no qualms about using his entire body to block Lee and intercept his shots. While Lee might be faster,

Alex had strength on his side along with a healthy dose of lingering resentment, so whenever they clashed, tension stretched thick. It was personal, all right.

Another clash. Alex squinted against the sun in his eyes as they jostled for control of the ball, Lee twisting around his own axis, feigning to the right and darting to the left as he took aim. Alex moved with him, got his foot between the ball and the goal.

Corner.

“*Fuck,*” Lee muttered.

Alex didn’t bother hiding his grin. “Life’s a bitch, eh?”

“Piss off.”

“Thrilling conversation,” Alex said. “Let’s do this again soon.”

Lee’s eyes narrowed, and objectively, Alex could admit that he was really bloody fit—dark hair and equally dark eyes framed by the strong planes of his face. He was an arse, though. Had been at twenty when they’d first met, with a chip on his shoulder that should have given him chronic back pain, and clearly, nothing had changed.

“Just try to keep up, pretty boy,” Lee threw back, and fuck him. Really, just ... *fuck* him for hitting Alex exactly where it hurt, like he’d plucked the shadows right out of Alex’s mind. Both then and now.

This time, Alex’s grin took conscious effort. “I’m just getting started.”

Lee flicked him a dismissive glance and trotted towards the penalty spot. Yeah, because Alex was about to let him out of his immediate vicinity. *Dream on, Taylor.*

Following on Lee's heel, Alex stayed obnoxiously close as everyone lined up for the corner. While Lee was far better with the ball on his feet, he'd scored several headers already throughout the season, and Alex had no intention of letting him add to that tally.

Lee took a step away. Alex sidled up to him again.

“Do you fucking *mind?*” Lee hissed, and Alex shook his head and aimed for a parody of his trademark smile—wide and happy, dimples pressing into his cheeks.

“Not in the least.”

In lieu of a response, Lee stuck out his elbows.

The referee blew his whistle, and the ball came sailing towards the goal area. The noise of the crowd rushed in Alex's ears as he jumped in the air with everyone else, shoulder bumping against Lee's. *Ball, where's the ball, where's the fucking ball? There!* It was Kili who cleared it, bouncing it over to Jeff, who chested it down and sprinted towards the other goal with two of their teammates flanking him, Manchester United's defence rushing into position.

Alex ran after them, moving over to the right wing, *go go go*. In Manchester's goal, Oliver Bramwell made himself as tall as possible, arms out, radiating calm confidence. Bloody national goalkeeper he was too, and Jeff passed the ball to Selim, back to Jeff, and over to Chris. A defender got in the way, but Chris managed to get the ball to Alex, who started forward, saw a gap—and Oliver Bramwell blocked the shot, bloody world-class parade, damn it. But the ball was still hot, dropping right in front of Jeff, and then it was *in!*

The home crowd erupted into cheers, like thunder in Alex's ears as he threw himself into Jeff's arms. “Fucking

champ!” he yelled, and Jeff laughed against his cheek, other teammates joining their huddle.

Top of the table. At least for now.

Twenty-nine minutes down, sixty-one to go, plus injury time.

A short distance away, Oliver was gesticulating in obvious frustration at his goal, two defenders with him. Alex had met him during a series of friendlies earlier in the year, non-competitive practice matches where the then-national coach had brought in a number of less established players like Alex while some of the usual suspects got to rest up for a change. Oliver seemed like a decent bloke, uncommonly outspoken about how football needed to ramp up its sustainability efforts and players collecting sports cars sent the wrong signal, about how female referees should be normalised and sexual orientation finally become a non-issue. Alex might have hoped for some pleasant company in his closet if he hadn't seen Oliver's face light up when talking about his wife.

It was probably easier to be this vocal when your coach was Ben Jimmer, the first and, depressingly, still the only player to have come out at the prime of his Premier League career, as well as the official patron saint of any footballer who refused to fit the standard PR narrative. Alex's father despised Jimmer, of course.

And speaking of... Upon returning to his assigned spot in front of the defence line, Alex caught sight of Jimmer prowling along the perimeter of his coaching zone, dishing out instructions. Mid-thirties suited him. But then Alex was biased, what with how he would forever admire Jimmer for having the guts to put himself out there—too bad that no one had chosen to walk in his footsteps. And yes, Alex realised the

hypocrisy of the thought given he kept his own bisexuality tucked well out of sight, but God, he was only twenty-three and far from a household name, had yet to win his first proper title and everything. Not yet. One day, perhaps, but not yet.

Maybe never.

Alex's eyes narrowed when Jimmer waved Lee over and the two put their heads together. Well, well. If what they were planning involved Lee scoring a goal, Alex would have to disappoint them because his hero worship of Jimmer only went so far. When Lee moved back into position near the centre circle, he caught Alex's gaze and held it. One corner of Lee's mouth lifted in a private little smirk, and Christ, Alex wanted him to bloody *choke* on all that arrogance.

He sent Lee his biggest, toothiest smile and trusted Lee to read it for exactly the challenge it was.



FINE. *Fine*. If that was how Alex wanted to play it?

Challenge fucking accepted.

The whistle blew. Lee passed the ball to Fernando on his right and was already moving by the time Fernando received it. Fernando sent it back to Lee, who passed it on to Sami on his left half a second before Alex appeared, Lee's very own shadow intent on withholding the only drug that Lee believed in—scoring goals. If it hadn't been so bloody annoying, Lee would have been flattered that Liverpool sacrificed Alex's considerable playmaker abilities to keep him in check.

It *was* bloody annoying, though.

Lee ducked and swerved, managed to break away a handful of times during the remaining minutes of the first half,

but never long enough to get a proper shot in. Fucking Alex Beaufort with his perfect fucking smile and hair and *body*.

Halftime break, and they were still one goal down. Lee grumbled his way towards the locker room, Oliver catching up with him on the way there.

“You all right?” Oliver asked quietly, and Lee scoffed.

“Could do without the chaperone.” He held the door for Oliver, accepting a bottle of water from someone as he entered, the relative darkness of the locker room a respite after the blinding sun outside. “And in case you’re wondering? Goal wasn’t your fault.”

“Should’ve secured the stupid ball rather than letting it bounce.” Not one for swearing, Oliver. “Landed right at Whitlock’s feet, too.”

“There are maybe three keepers in the world who could have stopped that first shot from going in, and you’re one of them. *Not* your fucking fault it bounced, mate.” Definitely one for swearing, Lee. “They caught our defence on the wrong foot.”

Since pointing fingers was not conducive to team cohesion, Lee left it at that. They slumped onto a bench next to each other, the air-conditioned atmosphere a welcome relief. Lee kicked a shin guard under the bench before he pulled off his soaked jersey and rubbed a towel down his face. Ah, the sweet smell of eau de sweat mixed with grass stains—a constant in Lee’s life ever since he’d graduated from kids’ teams to the teenage ones.

“By the way,” Oliver said, “Kieran Foxwell is here.”

“Yeah?” Lee hadn’t spotted the new national coach in the stands, but it wasn’t a surprise. With the World Cup just weeks

away, Foxwell would be seeking as much input as possible to finalise his selection of players.

Oliver was a shoo-in. Lee himself... He liked to think that he was in a similar position, although it certainly wouldn't hurt if he scored a goal or two in the second half.

“Think he's here for Sami?” Oliver asked. “Or for Whitlock and Beaufort?”

“All of the above.” Lee leaned back against the locker behind him, briefly closing his eyes. “Not sure if nipping at my heels shows off the full range of Beaufort's potential, mind.”

Oliver cracked half a grin. “Taking it personally, are you? I don't usually see you heckle other players.”

Shrugging, Lee glanced at one of the inspirational quotes on the wall. “Just a bit of history, is all.”

“Didn't realise you guys had met.” Oliver's tone was easy as he towelled off his short-cropped dark hair, and Lee aimed for an equally light response. This was neither the time nor place for details.

“It was years ago, in the Under 21s—he'd just joined, I was about to move to the first team. We got off on the wrong foot. No big deal.”

That wasn't entirely true. To this day, Lee blamed Alex for bumping him out of his uneasy denial zone into the even more uneasy reality that yeah, he fancied guys. Sucked for him that Alex had cottoned on to his crush. Sucked for him, too, that rainbow-coloured captain's armbands aside, football remained a conservative holdout.

Oliver wasn't like that, of course. When Lee had come out to him, one pizza and three vodka shots in, Oliver's initial

frown had scared him. “I’m sorry, mate,” Oliver had started, and Lee had braced himself for the worst even though Oliver had always seemed fine with Ben. But Ben was their *coach*, not someone who had the locker beside Oliver’s and showered next to him on a regular basis. “That must be tough,” Oliver had continued, still frowning. “Having to hide like that. I understand why you do it, but I’m sorry that’s still a thing.”

Lee had pulled him into a hug before he could think better of it, and Oliver hadn’t even hesitated to hug him back. So, yeah. Oliver wasn’t like that. Most of the Manchester United players weren’t like that, or they wouldn’t have lasted long under Ben.

Still.

“Yeah? Seemed like a nice lad to me, Alex.” Oliver set his empty water bottle down. “Met him a couple of months ago, during those friendlies you sat out.”

Lee made a noncommittal noise and focused on Ben, who’d just panthered into the room and now stood near the entrance, surveying the scene like a general assessing his troops. He wasn’t a tall man by any measure, but there was an intensity about him that commanded attention. When he clapped his hands, every head turned.

“All right, gents.” Ben paced forward. “So they’re ahead by one goal. Big fucking *deal*. Because here’s what’s gonna happen in the second half—we go out there and we raise some fucking hell. You press high, don’t be afraid to take a risk or two, and whatever mistake they make, we’ll be right there to make ’em pay. Are you with me?”

Nods and a scattered “Yeah!” here and there.

“I *said*” —Ben narrowed sharp blue eyes at them— “are you fucking *with* me?”

Several more yeahs, Lee’s one of them.

“I can’t fucking *hear* you!”

Clenched fists and a chorus of “Fuck yeah!” and “Hell yes!”

“Good.” Ben’s gaze swept the room, and as much as Lee admired him, it was moments like this when his intensity bordered on psychopathic. Lee would know; he’d been accused of the same. Then again, no one in this room would have been here without an edge of obsession that had put them ahead of their peers—getting up at 5 a.m. to run drills before school, sacrificing friendships and movie nights to tour the country every weekend with a bunch of other kids who mostly hadn’t made it. If you were chill about being the very fucking best, you’d never go professional.

Everyone here was a tad psycho. Some just hid it better than others.

“So. We’ll switch to a more aggressive formation.” Ben stalked over to the tactics board. “Sami, Yann—we’ll push you further up. Neal, Kae—hold the line. Ron, Jace—any attack, I want you to join. Let’s see how they like it when we overload their defence.” Nods all around. “Lee.”

Lee sat up straight, meeting Ben’s eyes. It felt a bit like he was being called on in class, only this was a test he’d actually studied for. “Yep?”

“Keep Beaufort busy—we don’t want him kicking off a counterattack. If you can’t lose him, try to draw additional players to you, open up some gaps for others.”

“Clear,” Lee said.

“Excellent.” Ben’s smile looked distinctly predatory as he tapped the tactics board. “Then let’s take back what’s rightfully ours—the top of the fucking table!”

This time, a chorus of “Fucking right!” and “Hell yeah!” washed through the locker room without Ben’s prompting. Lee drew a deep breath and held it in his lungs for a moment before he slowly released it.

He was going to keep Alex plenty busy, all right.



TEN MINUTES TO GO.

Jimmer must have told his team to go full risk because they kept crashing against Liverpool’s defence like a multi-legged tidal wave. While it made Manchester vulnerable to counterattacks, Oliver had swatted every shot out of the air as though it was a mildly bothersome insect.

Alex pushed dark brown hair off his forehead and gave himself one second to catch his breath after a sprint across half the pitch that had ended with the ball in Oliver’s arms, *again*. When Alex turned on his heel to jog right back to where he’d come from, he found Lee way ahead already—a fox who’d sensed his chance to escape the hounds, and Christ, how had a reportedly civilised country like the UK not managed to fully erase such a thing? Sure, Alex’s father maintained that fox hunting was a noble tradition that—stop, *focus*. Couldn’t afford to get tired and distracted.

Bloody Lee Taylor.

Heart hammering, breath coming in short little puffs, Alex sped up just as Lee was briefly delayed by Liverpool’s defence. The time it took Lee to first circle Jax, then tunnel Declan, was just enough for Alex to catch up.

It was a split second—Lee shifted his weight and prepared to shoot just as Alex lunged forward. Their legs tangled, and they went down in a heap, the ball rolling away in slow motion.

The referee's whistle was almost lost to the din of the crowd, and wait, *no*. Reality stuttered back into gear as Alex sprang to his feet. Touching only the other player was penalty territory, but he'd played the ball, for fuck's sake. He'd played the actual ball.

Hadn't he?

Next to him, Lee jumped up too, starting for the referee to demand a penalty. *No, no, no*. "That was a clean tackle!" Alex protested. He jostled in next to Lee, their elbows bumping, Jeff already there to make the case for Liverpool, two Manchester players arguing against him. The referee gestured for all of them to settle down as he tapped his earpiece, then marched off to review the footage.

Alex had played the ball. He had, he *had*. Yes, it had been a last-ditch, desperate effort to stop Lee, but it had been fair. Maybe Lee had tripped over his own two feet or cleverly got himself tangled up with Alex so it would *look* like foul play.

The referee was taking his sweet time, face impassive as he studied various angles of the scene.

"You" —Alex kept his voice low, lips barely moving, and he didn't turn his head to look at Lee beside him— "took a fucking dive."

A brief glance was the extent of Lee's outward reaction before his focus returned to the referee. "Didn't take you for a sore loser," he replied in an undertone.

“I’m *not*,” Alex started to say. He fell silent when the referee headed back onto the pitch and pointed at the penalty spot. The stadium exploded into a thunderclap of outrage. Fucking *hell*.

The smug look Lee slid his way made Alex grit his teeth. He had a fucking reputation to protect—Alex Beaufort, the Premier League’s very own earl, never a mean word to anyone and gracious even in loss. Lee, though? Lee made it bloody hard for Alex to keep himself in check.

He dug his nails into his palm and stared straight ahead so he wouldn’t have to watch Lee stroll over to the penalty spot, oozing confidence. What an arse.

Alex startled when Jeff sidled up to him. “Chin up, man.” He jabbed a pointy elbow into Alex’s ribs under the guise of adjusting his captain’s armband. “Punch a fucking pillow later—right now, I need you to stay sharp.”

He was right.

After a curt nod at Jeff, Alex trotted to a spot just outside the six-yard box, ready to get in the way of a rebound goal. Not that Lee was likely to miss. All those hours of footage the Liverpool team had reviewed in preparation for this match, and not once had Lee Taylor missed a penalty. His killer instinct was that of a shark who’d smelled blood in the water.

Lee didn’t miss.

Of course he didn’t.

The match continued, as matches did. Alex stuck to Lee like glue, no further ventures to the other side of the pitch even as Alex’s teammates tried to fight fire with fire, the game sloshing back and forth, small inaccuracies piling up as the minutes ticked down. And then it was over.

A draw.

It meant Manchester United would stay at the top of the table while Liverpool climbed to second place, tied for points with Arsenal but with a better goal difference. They'd come so close to winning—ten minutes and a flip-of-a-coin penalty call because no way, no way had that been an obvious one. Alex would take a look at the video later, sure, but he'd be willing to bet that Lee had milked it for all it was worth, made it look far more dramatic than it had been.

The two teams exchanged half-hearted handshakes, Alex steering carefully clear of Lee, who paid him the same courtesy. After applauding the fans for their support and stopping for a quick courtesy chat with Oliver, Alex managed to get through a post-match interview without accusing either Lee or the referee of, respectively, theatrics and gullibility. "It felt clean to me," he repeated a couple of times, with a regretful smile. "Pretty sure I played the ball, but I guess I'll have to rewatch it to understand what the ref saw."

Once the reporter grew tired of trying to elicit a scandalous statement from him, Alex finally got to trudge back towards the locker room, the noise of the crowd fading as soon as he stepped into the tunnel. Jeff caught up with him a few moments later, falling into step.

"Bloody Lee Taylor, eh?" he muttered. The vague admiration in his tone raised Alex's hackles.

"And the Oscar goes to..." he countered.

Jeff gave a quick, sharp laugh and draped an arm around Alex's shoulders. "We'll pay them back next time."

Next time. Alex bit down on his bottom lip and ignored the strange wiggle of discomfort in his stomach. About to reply,

he was interrupted by someone shouting both their names from behind them.

“Jeff, Alex! Got a minute for me?”

Jeff, his arm still around Alex’s shoulders, turned them as one, and oh, holy shit. That was Kieran Foxwell, national coach as of a month ago. He approached them with a massive smile, light on his feet and looking a decade younger than his, what, fifty years or so?

“Congrats on a fantastic game,” he said, shaking both their hands with an affable air after Jeff had dropped his arm. “Real nail-biter of a match. Just never gets old, does it?” He didn’t carry himself like a living legend—youngest player to ever score for England during a World Cup, second only to Peter Shilton in sheer number of appearances for the national team. Then drugs, bankruptcy, rehab, and finally a second career as a coach, where he’d had to work his way from the third league back to the top.

“Would’ve been even better if we’d won,” Jeff said with a regretful shrug.

“Can’t have it all, can you?” Foxwell’s smile didn’t fade. “Now, lads, is there somewhere we can talk for a sec? Your coach said there are meeting rooms further along that hallway.”

Did that mean—shit, it had to, right? Foxwell wouldn’t pull them aside just to tell them he wasn’t going to nominate them for the World Cup. Or would he? Alex glanced around and found the sparse corridor largely deserted, most players already gone with only a few other people still milling around, casting curious glances their way.

“I’m sure we can find an empty room, yeah.” Alex turned his attention to Foxwell, along with a big smile. *When in doubt, Alexander, you show respect.* “If you want to follow us, Mr Foxwell?”

Foxwell’s face twitched into a playful grimace. “Kieran, please. I’m old, but Mr Foxwell is still my dad.”

“Kieran,” Alex repeated carefully, and oh, wow. He would be... He’d... Holy fucking *shit*, he’d be on the national team. Probably, almost certainly. Wearing the white jersey with the team crest on the left side of the chest—three lions and ten Tudor roses, placed right above the heart. Even if commentators largely agreed that England had a snowball’s chance in hell of winning this time around, it would be... *God.*

It would still be a dream come true.

Alex must have gone a little wild-eyed because Jeff kicked his foot. “Right this way,” he told Foxwell. Kieran.

They started moving, and Alex remembered his manners just in time to ask Fox—*Kieran* about how his start in the national team had been since he’d taken over on uncommonly short notice, after the previous coach had resigned on charges of tax fraud. Kieran’s chuckle was loud in the narrow tunnel. “Ah, it’s been a ride. But what would life be without a little excitement and unpredictability, am I right?”

“One hundred per cent,” Jeff agreed while Alex, who organised his life around routines, simply nodded.

The first room they tried was indeed empty, with a tactics board in one corner and a big screen at the front to review match footage. The faint smell of dry-erase markers hung in the air as Kieran closed the door and gestured for them to pick

a couple of the chairs scattered around the space. “Have a seat, lads.”

God, it felt good to sit. Alex shoved at his sweaty bangs and stretched out his legs, abruptly aware of his aching muscles. This was the Premier League and no match was a walk in the park, but Lee had pushed Alex to the limits of his endurance.

He’d need to train harder.

“All right.” Kieran leaned against the edge of a table at the front of the room, hands clasped in front of him. “I’ll cut to the chase—Jeff, Alex, I want you on my team.”

Jeff leapt from his chair, his whoop bouncing off the walls. “Fucking A, man!” He pulled Alex up and into a hug that Alex returned, electricity crackling along his spine. The national team. The fucking *national team*. Millions watching, judging, and what if Alex wasn’t good enough? What if he was thrown into the fire and found wanting?

It was so much easier to be confident with a ball at his feet.

“Thank you,” he managed, tucking his doubts away and trading them for a huge smile because this was *massive*. “That means so much, Kieran.”

“You’ve earned it,” Kieran said. “Both of you.”

Jeff let go of Alex, walked right over, and pulled Kieran into a hug as well while Alex watched, frozen. Rather than show surprise, Kieran just laughed and patted Jeff on the back. “That’s the spirit, lad. Keep it up and you just might be in the running for team captain.”

Captain. Oliver Bramwell was captain of the national team, and he was certain to return as its goalkeeper. Equally

certain to return was Lee Taylor because only a madman would leave the top scorer of the Premier League behind. Kieran might be many things, but mad wasn't one of them.

So. Alex would get the dubious repeat pleasure of playing on the same team as Lee, then—teammates with someone who'd decided to hate Alex for no good reason when Alex had been a mere eighteen years old, fresh to the Under 21s and a little scared even though he'd tried to hide behind a big smile and a quest to make everyone like him. Maybe Lee had seen right through it, spotted the insecure boy behind the happy mask and fancy title. *Pretty boy*. Exposing Alex as a wide-eyed kid with a cute smile and a smidgen of charm—largely irrelevant.

Fuck Lee.

Alex grabbed onto that anger and used it to stifle any echo of doubt in his mind. He'd prove that he belonged—to his parents and Lee and the world, and maybe a little to himself, too.

He'd prove that he *deserved* this.

St George's Park.

It looked like something out of Alex's childhood dreams, manicured grass shining in the warm haze of an afternoon sun, the training pitches surrounded by towering floodlights. While Alex had been to the national football centre once before, in preparation for those exhibition games earlier in the year, it was different this time—this was for the bloody World Cup.

“D’you need a minute?” Jeff asked from behind him. “I can give you some privacy if you, ah ... need to release some *tension* ahead of the team meeting. If you get my drift.”

Alex turned away from the window to find Jeff smirking at him, suitcase already open and spilling its contents all over the bed on Jeff's side of the room. Chaos was Jeff's speciality and par for the course when sharing any kind of space with him, so Alex had come to accept it as the inevitable price he paid for Jeff's company.

“Unfortunately,” Alex said dryly, “you’re just way too subtle. Please spell it out for me.”

“Y’know what I love about you, mate?” Jeff didn’t pause for an answer. “You’ve got everyone convinced you’re this

bundle of sunshine, but really, you're a sarcastic little shit."

"Only with people I trust and like."

"All four of 'em."

"Yeah." Alex inclined his head. "If that."

"Colour me honoured." Jeff joined Alex at the window, his smirk merging into a softer grin. "Fucking amazing, isn't it? With some luck, I'll even get to play this time around."

Three years older than Alex, Jeff had already been part of the squad four years ago. He'd watched three matches from the bench before the team had been sent home to shrill criticism for not even making it past the group stage. Only a handful of players had survived the resulting overhaul of the team—Jeff, Oliver, and Lee among them. With an average age of only twenty-five years, the team Kieran had assembled was the youngest to ever represent England at a World Cup.

And Alex was part of it.

He bumped Jeff's shoulder. Jeff bumped him back, and then they just stood there for a minute, gazing out at the state-of-the-art training facilities that contrasted with the backdrop of rolling hills. They'd be here for a week before flying to Spain, with two more weeks of preparations at the team hotel in Alicante before the first match—against the Netherlands, no less, because why wade into the shallows if you can jump in at the deep end?

Alex stirred first. "All right, let's go. Don't want to be late to the first meeting."

"Whatever happened to fashionably late?" Jeff asked wistfully, but he moved to dig his phone out from under a pile of clothes and was ready to leave by the time Alex had dabbed some toothpaste on his tongue.

They made their way down to the conference room and found several others already there—Oliver, for one, along with Lee, who Alex would have expected to be too cool for an early arrival. He was lounging in one of the ergonomic chairs that surrounded the long, rectangular table at the centre of the room, frowning at something on his phone, cheekbones highlighted in a rather irritating manner by the natural light flooding in through large windows. When he glanced up, it was just in time to catch Alex looking.

After a curt nod, Alex took more time greeting other players he knew before he made it a point to sit as far away from Lee as possible. Jeff plopped into the chair next to him a moment later.

“If you believe that wall” —Jeff dipped closer to Alex and pointed his chin at what amounted to a framed exhibition of England’s football history— “we’ve got a bloody impressive track record, eh? Glorious past, glorious future.”

Alex stifled a snort. “You might want to squint a bit. Makes it easier to ignore the date on that one lonely World Cup trophy.”

“Or just sing ‘It’s coming home’ until your brain starts leaking from your ears.”

Somehow, the exchange made Alex feel lighter, taking pressure off his chest that he’d been scarcely aware of. Jeff was good at that sort of thing. People who didn’t know him tended to see the sharp tongue and miss his loyalty and the protective streak that ran a mile wide, honed by being the oldest brother of three. The youngest was gay, and Jeff would bite the head off anyone who dared to say a word. If Alex were to come out to him, Jeff would defend him exactly the same. Which was why Alex hadn’t told him—he didn’t trust Jeff’s

sense of discretion to override his impulse to protect and defend.

The other seats around the table had mostly filled up by the time Kieran entered with his light, bouncing walk. “Gentlemen!” he announced. “Lads, fellas, *men*. Welcome to St George’s Park, and welcome to the team!”

“Ave, Caesar,” Jeff muttered out of the corner of his mouth. “Morituri te salutant.”

Alex bit his lip against a smile. Across the length of the conference table, he caught Lee giving him a critical look, presumably judging Alex’s level of dedication and finding it wanting. Screw him.

“In the coming weeks,” Kieran continued brightly, “we will train together, eat together, sleep together.”

Sleep together. Ha. Alex nudged Jeff’s foot, and Jeff nudged him right back.

Kieran executed a pirouette that might have seemed flamboyant on someone a little less ... bloke-y. “We will learn to read each other’s fucking *minds* so that when we’re on the pitch, we don’t move as individuals but as a unit. You are all exceptional athletes—that’s why you’re here. There’s very little I can teach you in the way of performance in a few scant weeks. What we will focus on, gentlemen, is strategy, behaviour, and attitude.”

If Kieran had hoped for enthusiastic reactions, he’d have been sorely disappointed. He didn’t seem the type for disappointment, though.

“Any questions?” he asked, and a tentative hand went up. “Yes?”

“How do you define behaviour and attitude?” Lewis, one of two goalkeepers that acted as Oliver’s backup, lowered his hand again. Natural twists in his hair added an edge to his clean-shaven look. “Seems like everyone’s got their own versions.”

“Excellent question, keep ‘em coming.” Kieran nodded happily. “Here’s how I see it. Behaviour is your direct response to a concrete situation. How do you react to an opponent baiting you in the heat of the moment? Attitude is the bigger picture. Your mental disposition, your confidence and self-awareness, your resilience. Way I see it, you and everyone else around this table—you’re not just star athletes. You’re people, and my responsibility extends to that.”

Huh. That was ... different. The Liverpool coach routinely asked them to check their daily grievances at the door because no one bloody cared—they were professionals, and they were expected to deliver.

Kieran went on to answer further questions, from logistics and how he would decide on the starting line-up, to whether he planned to emphasise offence or defence, to his rationale for having players share rooms, and visits by partners and family members at the team hotel. Not really a concern for Alex, that last point—his parents were unlikely to make the trip unless it was for the final and the royal family was in attendance, and his last relationship had fizzled out like a stale bottle of soda some months ago. So far, he’d resisted Jeff’s attempts at matchmaking.

“That’s it for now, lads!” Kieran clapped his hands. “Take the rest of the day to look around and check in with the fitness staff so we can set you all up with a personalised programme.

I'll see you at dinner, and then bright and early tomorrow morning for our first proper training session."

Murmurs acknowledged Kieran's statement, then players started filtering out of the room. Alex was among the last to leave with Jeff already some steps ahead, and because Alex's luck clearly just happened to work that way, he reached the door right as Lee did.

Lee's mouth twisted into an exaggerated smile as he gestured for Alex to go ahead. "After you."

"Oh, no, I insist." Alex planted his feet and smiled back just as obnoxiously. "Age before beauty." That was a load of shite, of course, because Lee was fucking gorgeous. But if he insisted on calling Alex 'pretty boy', the least Alex could do was humour him.

"Backhanded politeness?" Lee's dark eyebrows drew together. "Impressive. Is that what they teach you at posh-boy school?"

"Yes. Along with the Queen's English and a strong sense of entitlement."

"Prat training comes at a price," Lee said. "Money well spent, I'm sure."

That was when Alex noticed Kieran right behind them, quietly watching. Oops. Alex moulded his smile into something more conciliatory and nodded at Lee, who flicked a glance at Kieran before he smiled back at Alex, eyes crinkling at the corners.

"Just kidding," he said blithely and Christ, he *was* hot. Shame about the personality.

"Obviously," Alex agreed, shoving both hands into his pockets. Kieran's soft snort suggested their performance had

been found wanting—there went Alex’s backup plan of a career in theatre.

Lee seemed to arrive at the same conclusion because he cleared his throat, hesitated, and then turned to leave with an awkward little shrug of his shoulders. Alex followed suit and hoped that come morning Kieran would have forgotten all about that little moment.



POSTED BY @AlexanderBeaufort (May 23, 6:19 p.m.):

And so it begins! Such an honour to be part of the national team. We’ll do our best to bring it home! Today’s challenge though - don’t get buried under the mountain-high piles of clothes @TheJeffWhitlock left in our room.



THEIR FIRST TRAINING SESSION started with printed handouts, of all things. And it wasn’t anything to do with football strategy either.

Seated in a circle on the training pitch, the morning sun raising fog above the grass, Alex could tell he wasn’t alone in his confusion at being asked to keep one copy of ... a *Guardian* article on wealth management? Yes, that. Keep one copy, and pass the rest of the printouts on to the player next to him.

“Y’know,” someone said to Alex’s left, “this reminds me of school. Never finished those A levels, now did I?”

“Told you I consider myself responsible for more than just your performance on the pitch.” Kieran looked perfectly comfortable sitting cross-legged on the damp grass with them. “First five minutes of every training session, we’ll have a *conversation*, lads. About anything other than football.”

“Financial planning, though?” Jeff asked, tone openly dubious.

Kieran nodded. “Among other things. I realise that for a bunch of millionaires, that seems like a quaint idea—but been there, done that, got the bankruptcy declaration to prove it.” He didn’t leave time for comments. “Three minutes to read the article, then I want some thoughts. Don’t have to be clever thoughts—it’s not a test. Whatever comes to mind, yeah?”

Murmurs of agreement because it wasn’t like anyone would tell the coach to stuff it. Alex skimmed the text that declared financial failure the norm for a majority of pro athletes, then advised against wasting money on yachts and false friends, and to instead control spending, invest in low-risk and market-neutral funds, have a plan B, and avoid get-rich-quick schemes.

“Thoughts?” Kieran asked.

“Kinda itching to buy another sports car,” Jeff said, straight-faced.

A few people snorted, Kieran among them. “Fantastic,” he said. “Taught you a real valuable lesson, haven’t I?”

To Alex’s surprise, it was Lee who spoke up next. “Seems like boring stuff, financial management. ‘S true, though, that we’ll retire by, like, thirty-five—bit later for the goalies, maybe.” He wasn’t looking at anyone in particular, his attention firmly fixed on the article. “That’s still a lot of life to go. Especially if there are people depending on us.”

How about investing in a woman who cares more about you than she cares about diamonds and expensive bags? If you can find one. Alex thought but didn’t say it—not the place for snark, plus he didn’t actually know much about Lee’s private

life other than that he wasn't wearing a ring. Honestly, Lee didn't seem like the type to indulge someone other than himself.

"Excellent point," Kieran said. "And that's if you don't get injured a month or a year from now and never recover."

"You're just a bundle of fucking sunshine, aren't you?" Lewis mumbled.

"*Now* you're getting it." Kieran's grin was massive as he rose from the ground. "All right, gentlemen. Time to get this show on the road."

With that, he moved them through a series of warm-up exercises before lining them up for passing drills, the ball zipping back and forth as names got called out. Then dribbling exercises, and set-piece practice. Defensive drills.

And as it turned out, Kieran had not forgotten the exchange he'd witnessed yesterday—at least Alex assumed that was the reason he and Lee got paired up. Because facing off against each other had worked so well for them in the past. Well, no time like the present for some personal growth.

Alex kept his voice neutral. "You want to start in defence or attack?"

"I can go either way." Something sparked in Lee's eyes—amusement, maybe. It was brief, gone in a second, and didn't show in his tone when he continued. "Why don't I start defending, switch it up for a change?"

Heroically, Alex managed to bypass any comment about how Lee could teach him a thing or two about wangling questionable penalties. Alex didn't get nearly enough credit for his restraint. "Sure," was all he said.

Next to them, Jeff and Finley, a right-back, were already engaged in a battle of skills and wit, Jeff lobbing over-the-top insults that Finley countered with laughter and taunts he seemed to have borrowed straight from a boxing ring. By contrast, Alex stayed silent as he tried to break past Lee, who was equally silent as he fought to block Alex's path. Kieran passed them a couple of times, pausing to watch before he moved on to the next pair.

Alex wasn't sure whether he or Lee had the upper hand. He was also sweaty and unsettled, too *aware* of Lee. Usually, Lee relied on his footwork and speed much more than he did on sheer physicality—Alex had watched enough hours of footage to know his style. This was different. It felt like a dare, like Lee was just waiting to see how much he could get away with until Alex cried foul.

Well, Alex had been tackled by enough entitled upper-class pricks to handle a bit of rough play. He wasn't about to blink first.

Switch.

Alex shoved hair off his forehead and didn't let his attention linger on how Lee lifted his jersey to wipe his face, exposing a flat stomach with a hint of abs, a tattoo curling in the dip beside his left hip bone. *Enough.*

By the time Lee's jersey dropped back into place, Alex had dragged his gaze away, up to Lee's face. Lee tilted his head, Alex arched an eyebrow, and they were off again, roles reversed. With Lee attacking, he was in his element, while Alex's speciality lay in directing the game from the back, in finding gaps to get that one pass through that opened up the game. Gritting his teeth, Alex shoved in close and fought Lee for every inch.

When Kieran called an end to the exercise, they were both out of breath, glaring at each other. Rationally, Alex knew it hadn't been anything outrageous—it had been testy, yeah, but Lee hadn't deliberately tried to injure him.

And yet.

“You do realise,” he told Lee, “that we're supposed to be on the same team now. Right?”

“On the same team?” Lee repeated slowly, with a strange twist to his tone, and yes, whatever, Alex got it—he was a privileged brat who hadn't quite shaken off his pompous accent when they'd first met.

“You might want to downsize that shoulder chip before it starts charging rent, you know?”

Lee scowled. “I'll trade it in for a slice of your privileged pie, how 'bout that?”

That was rich coming from someone who'd dismissed Alex the moment he'd mentioned that his father was a Peer of the Realm. Alex tilted his head and let the corners of his mouth tug upwards. “How about a bake-off? My privileged pie against your oversensitive cupcakes.”

“I'll bring the popcorn,” Jeff said from right next to them, and Alex realised that they were starting to attract attention. Lee seemed to draw the same conclusion because he turned away, grabbed the ball, and trotted off without another word.

Prick. Alex needed a second to wipe the frown off his face.

“What *is* it with you two?” Jeff asked as they moved towards where the rest of the team had gathered around Kieran and some water bottles.

‘He was mean to me when we were little’ sounded childish, so Alex lifted a shoulder. “He just rubs me the wrong way.”

“Maybe you should show him how to rub you the right way, then.” Of course Jeff would take it as an engraved invitation to inject some innuendo—he had yet to meet a conversation he didn’t want to steer into the gutter. “Seriously, though,” he continued right after. “I don’t think he’s that bad. Just a bit awkward at times, more of an introvert.”

The polar opposite of Jeff, then, and they would have spent a fair amount of time together during the last World Cup along with other national team engagements since.

“That’s because you’re not the enemy,” Alex told him.

Jeff snorted. “The enemy?”

“Aristocratic background, fancy education, received pronunciation.”

“Ah, yes.” Jeff pursed his lips. “You do sound like a bit of a prat whenever you talk to your father. Must be either genetic or contagious.”

“Thanks ever so much,” Alex said dryly.

“It’s what I’m here for.” Jeff bumped their arms together, stopping a few steps away from the others. “Anyway, just saying—think Lee’s family background isn’t the greatest. Might be why he’s a tad sensitive.”

“Hardly my fault, is it?” Alex asked, and Jeff shook his head.

“Nah. But just try to get along, yeah? Politely ignore each other if you have to. Just not on the pitch, what with how we’re all on the same team now.”

Jeff had a point, but... “Takes two to tango.”

“Takes one to change the music.”

It was mildly concerning when Jeff, of all people, sounded like the sensible one. Alex glanced at where Lee was talking with Oliver, both of them swigging water, and yeah, all right. Alex could try a little harder—or maybe even just try at all.

He turned back to Jeff. “Fine. I won’t actively aggravate him.”

“That the best you can do?”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

Jeff’s laugh carried. “What was it Kieran said—behaviour and attitude?”

“I’ll improve both once Lee stops calling me pretty boy.”

“But” —Jeff treated Alex to an exaggerated leer along with a bottle of water that he handed over— “you really are so very pretty. He probably just can’t help it.”

It didn’t sting, coming from Jeff, because Alex knew it truly was a joke—Jeff had seen how bloody *hard* Alex had worked to make Liverpool’s starting squad at the age of nineteen, always the first at practice and the last to leave. Jeff also knew that being the product of selective breeding had done a fat lot of nothing for Alex’s football career.

Should have gone into cricket. Maybe then his parents would have deigned to show up to his matches.

“Fuck you very much,” Alex told Jeff, tone and smile pleasant.

Jeff clutched a dramatic hand to his chest. “Not in *public*, dear.”

Moments like this made it rather hard to believe that Jeff was straight. If he weren't, though, Alex would have been the first to know because Jeff didn't do secrets and was proud to defy expectations.

Sometimes, Alex wished he could muster the same immunity to other people's judgement.



LEE COULDN'T SAY he was surprised when Kieran put him on the same team as Alex for the practice match. It was fine, mostly. There were a couple of moments when Alex should have passed to Lee instead of Jeff or Dec, and Lee might have taken a shot or two at the goal even when Alex had been better positioned, but it was fine. Mostly.

It appeared as though Oliver disagreed.

"Let's talk about Alex," he said as soon as Lee returned from the shower.

Lee draped his towel over the back of a chair and retrieved the set of clothes he'd laid out earlier on the crisp white bedspread. "Let's not."

Oliver was a master at wielding expectant silence like a weapon. When Lee glanced over while buttoning up his jeans, Oliver was still perched on the edge of his bed, simply waiting.

"Oliver."

"Lee."

"*Oliver.*"

"You know it's only a matter of time until Kieran addresses it with you both. Might as well practise what you're going to say."

“I’m hardly gonna tell the coach I used to have a crush on him and he took it badly.” Lee hadn’t exactly meant to say that, but he didn’t want to take it back either.

“You had a crush on Alex?” Oliver clarified.

“Not on Kieran, that’s for sure. I mean, he’s fit for his age, but...” Lee pulled on a faded T-shirt and sat down on the other bed, abruptly tired. He was not looking forward to filming that ad campaign later today. “Y’know. Not looking to date someone who could be my daddy, for all I know.”

Oliver gave Lee a critical once-over. “No family resemblance, far as I can tell. I think you’re safe.”

“Not the point.”

“True.” Oliver leaned forward, elbows on his thighs. “Because the point is that you used to have a crush on Alex and he took it badly. Like, how badly?”

“Stone walls have been known to show more emotion.” Lee worried his bottom lip with his teeth, then realised he was doing it and stopped. “That’s before he started sniping at me any chance he got. Didn’t out me, though, so I guess there’s that.”

“That sucks, mate.” Oliver seemed to take a moment to digest things, frowning slightly. “How did he even find out?”

“I, uh.” And this was where it got embarrassing. “I called him pretty boy. Like, as a joke, yeah? But also kind of not as a joke.”

“Pretty boy?” Oliver echoed, his tone just a tad incredulous. Fair enough—Lee probably deserved that.

“I was twenty and confused and my only experience with guy-on-guy stuff had been porn, okay?”

“Pretty boy, though?” A smile twitched around Oliver’s wide mouth. “Maybe he just took offence to your poor attempt at flirting. Or he thought you were mocking him or something.”

Lee considered it. He didn’t think so, but it wasn’t like they’d known each other well. “I mean—maybe?”

“Well, does he definitely know you’re gay?”

“Why else would he have gone all weird?”

“I don’t know.” Oliver shrugged philosophically. “But did he actually come out and say it?”

Come out, ha. Not the time for puns.

“I mean...” Lee shifted. “It was implied.”

“Implied.” Oliver sounded rather unimpressed.

“Why else would he have gone all weird?” Lee repeated. It was his line and he was sticking with it. Too bad that defence had never been his strongest suit.

“I don’t know,” Oliver said, just like before. “Did you *ask* him?”

“Ask him whether he knew I had a big gay crush on him?” Lee scoffed. “Yeah, no. I’d barely admitted the word to myself—I wasn’t going to say it out loud.”

“Did you ask him why his behaviour towards you had changed is what I meant.” Oliver made it sound obvious, his eyes kind, and Lee looked away after a moment.

“Just so you know? Marrying a psychiatrist has broken your ability to have a normal, bro-style conversation with a lot of manly grunting and awkwardly skirting around emotions.”

“Sorry for your loss.” Oliver sounded decidedly not sorry.

“No, you’re not.”

“True.” Oliver’s voice was light. “Makes me a better team captain though, doesn’t it?”

Valid.

Lee carded a hand through hair that was starting to grow out when he preferred it fairly short. He made a mental note to have his hairdresser visit before they left for Spain. “Okay,” he told Oliver. “I’ll take what you said into consideration.”

“Good.” Oliver smiled at him with all the pride of the additional four years he had on Lee. “Who knows—maybe you got it wrong. Jeff’s brother is gay, and I doubt he’d be great mates with Alex if there was a real issue there.”

Another valid point. Lee remembered Jeff being quite vocal about equality issues at the last World Cup, to the point where he’d nearly decked another player for a thoughtless comment that Lee couldn’t even remember. It had been some minor everyday slight that Lee had grown immune to over the years, until he’d arrived in Manchester to a team where Ben Jimmer had banned that kind of talk.

“Maybe,” Lee allowed.

“I’m not saying become best friends with Alex, yeah? Just ... try to get along, I guess. We’re all in this together.”

Someone knocked on their door to announce that lunch was ready. Lee called out a confirmation that they’d be right down before he turned back to Oliver. “Are you speaking as the captain right now, or as my friend?”

“That’s fair.” Oliver smiled. “A little bit of both, I suppose. You’ve got an almost guaranteed spot in the starting eleven, and I think Alex’s got a very good chance and could be a great

asset to the team—if the two of you can figure out how to work together.”

“That’s if he doesn’t crack under pressure,” Lee pointed out. “He’s just twenty-three.”

“And you were, what, twenty-one when you made your World Cup debut?”

“You mean those final fifteen minutes in the last group match? Didn’t exactly turn the game around, did I?”

“You scored.”

“And we still got sent home.”

“We’ll do better this time.”

Lee cut Oliver a lopsided grin. “At least if we all manage to work together as a team—that’s what you were gonna say next, right?”

“And now I won’t have to.” Oliver grinned back. “Good talk, thanks for your openness. Let’s go have some lunch.”

After the discussion they’d just had, Lee didn’t feel particularly hungry, but he got up regardless and followed Oliver out of the room and down to the dining area. They were among the last to arrive, with only a few free seats left at the table set out for the team, coaches, and supporting staff. Fortunately, the table that held Alex and Jeff was already full.

Lee had promised to take Oliver’s words into consideration, and he would. Voluntarily sitting next to Alex would have gone above and beyond the call of duty, though. Also, Alex might have fainted with shock, and someone probably would have found a way to blame Lee for it.

No, Lee was just fine right here—between Oliver and Lewis, with a couple of tables and plenty of polished wood

floor to separate him from Alex. Polite distance counted as progress, didn't it?



AFTERNOON HEAT PRESSED down on the pitch as the production crew set up for the commercial, directed by a mouthy bloke in his forties who was clad in a baseball cap and sunglasses. Lee wasn't sure on what basis Hops & Heritage Brewing had been chosen as the team's main sponsor when encouraging drinking among fans wasn't exactly on message. Sure, they were advertising non-alcoholic beer, but that was a fig leaf at best.

Money talked, it seemed. Good thing the biggest offer hadn't come from Philip Morris or Japan Tobacco.

“And *action!*” the director called.

Kieran led the team through a series of drills and sprints while cameras were swarming around them. Once the director and crew were satisfied with the amount of footage, the team was motioned over to a cooler filled with ice cubes and the sponsor's non-alcoholic beer. Lee grabbed a bottle, condensation cool against his palm, and took an exaggerated sip as a camera zoomed in on his face. The beer wasn't entirely terrible, at least.

“Look fresh, folks!” the director barked out. “All the taste, none of the buzz!”

Lee took another sip, then followed instructions to toast some of the other players—clinking bottles with Oliver, forming a little triangle with Oliver and Jeff as they threw their heads back in fake laughter, beers raised. Alex was motioned over to join them a moment later which Lee should have expected given that Alex's looks, charm, and aristocratic upbringing made him a fan favourite. They stood shoulder to

shoulder, laughing and carefully not looking at each other even as they toasted to victory, team spirit, and celebrating responsibly.

It set the tone for the coming days.

By all appearances, Alex had been subjected to a similar intervention as Lee because he seemed perfectly content to skirt around Lee the same way Lee skirted around him with hardly even a nod. Whenever Kieran paired them up, they worked in concentrated silence, and during matches, they managed to avoid clashing too openly when facing off against each other and succeeded in the occasional one-two when on the same team.

Maybe you got it wrong.

It was possible. But Lee wasn't sure it really mattered at this point—they wouldn't become the best of mates even if it turned out they'd gotten their signals crossed. That ship had set sail years ago, so far gone by now that it wasn't even visible anymore on the horizon.

So what if Kieran seemed to watch them closely? So what if they lagged behind everyone else during an exercise that required navigating a blindfolded partner through an obstacle course using only verbal cues? Someone had to come in last, and anyway, there were eleven players on a team.

Lee didn't see why it had to be a problem.

The team hotel near Alicante seemed undecided in its aspirations—one half of it wanted to be a massive old castle while the other veered towards clean, modern lines that abhorred any unnecessary ornamentation. Palm trees dotted the surrounding landscape, barren hills stretching in the distance, the lush green of a golf course just off to the side. The scent of orange blossoms and jasmine mingled with the warm, briny scent of the nearby sea.

Under a hot afternoon sun, Lee wrestled his luggage from the team bus and joined the parade of players and entourage wending their way into an air-conditioned lobby decked out in white and red leather with hotel staff lined up to welcome them. Kieran stood by the reception desk, chatting with the manager.

“Dibs on the first shower,” Lee told Oliver.

“Actually...” A hesitant look slid across Oliver’s face, and he lowered his voice. “Listen, just in case—keep your cool, yeah?”

Okay, cryptic. “In case of what?”

Oliver glanced around before his attention returned to Lee. “Kieran decided to take charge of rooming arrangements.

Thinks it's a chance to mix it up, improve the team dynamic."

Oh, no.

No, no, no.

"Oliver Bramwell." Lee leaned forward. "You're our bloody captain. It is your *duty* to—"

"I tried," Oliver interrupted. "Told him people might find it more relaxing, easier to unwind, if we stick with the familiar arrangements—didn't resonate. He said—"

"Everyone!" Kieran's holler cut into whatever else Oliver might have added. "Gather 'round, please!"

With trepidation weighing heavy in his stomach, Lee turned to find Kieran at the centre of the lobby, wearing his usual bright smile and a T-shirt that sported the words 'Yes, you can!' They were declared by a green leaf identified as an encourage mint.

Along with his teammates, Lee shuffled closer, but made sure to keep at the back of the group. If Kieran was about to announce what Oliver had implied he might... Bloody hell. Lee was perfectly content with the equilibrium he and Alex had struck—steer clear of each other whenever they could and limit any exchange to the utmost necessary bits when they couldn't. Rooming together for a month, and longer if they survived the group stage? It was a blueprint for disaster.

"All right, lads," Kieran continued, voice raised to carry. "Here's the thing. We're all human, right, and we like predictability. It's bloody nice to hang out in your comfort zone, isn't it? Well, I am here to push you a little."

Clearly, Lee wasn't the only one with rather mixed feelings about being pushed—there was a noticeable ripple of discomfort that ran through the group.

Kieran's grin turned slightly mischievous. "I can see your enthusiasm, lads. Keep up the good work." He paused to ensure that he had their undivided attention. "I took the liberty of sorting the rooming assignments, mostly on the grounds of who I think could combine well on the pitch."

The announcement was met with murmurs of discontent.

"Yes." Kieran nodded, raising his hands. "I know that may feel unnecessary to many of you, uncomfortable even, or like I'm overstepping. But keep in mind that improved communication can translate to our game and help the whole team." He inserted a meaningful break. "In other words, I expect you to build some camaraderie, even if it might not be with who you usually hang out with."

That was... Lee didn't even know what that was. Bold? Ballsy? It sure took guts to send a bunch of star players to their assigned rooms like a group of rowdy children.

There were some unhappy faces, but no one actually spoke up in defence of the status quo.

Given that Lee suspected his interactions with Alex had already put him on Kieran's watchlist, he made sure to keep his mouth shut and hoped that his roommate would be someone, *anyone*, other than Alex. Like... Lee was a good person, mostly. Donated to charity, had practically raised his sisters, bought a house for his wayward mum. He'd never even dream of kicking a puppy. So, really, he couldn't quite see what atrocious crime he'd committed that would be deserving of such a cruel and unusual punishment. Maybe he could do a better job using his social media for political activism, true, and he admittedly wasn't the first guy to take a new player under his wing at the club—but that was because he needed a

while to loosen up around new people, not because he had his nose too far up in the air to give a sod.

Anyone. *Anyone.*

Kieran shared a few more logistical details, then they were free to retrieve their room keys and retreat until dinner. The hotel employees had been briefed well, it appeared, since a smiling woman approached Lee just moments later to send his suitcase ahead to his room while she talked him through everything he needed to know. Two minutes later, he was equipped with a keycard that allowed him to confirm that Oliver was on the same floor but in a different room. Together, they headed for the lifts while Alex, all smiles, was still chatting with a hotel employee. Figured that he'd be the type who felt a personal need to charm everyone in his vicinity.

Unsurprisingly, the room was nice. Spacious, decorated in beiges and dark greens, with two large beds separated by bedside tables. Enormous windows and a balcony overlooked a garden with manicured lawns, tidy hedges, and a mosaic-tiled water basin, a dedicated pool area slightly further behind. Lee dropped his backpack on the bed closer to the window and crossed over to the suitcase that sat next to his own. The name tag said *'Alex Beaufort'*.

Of fucking course.

Lee straightened just as the door opened. And—damn it all to hell. For a second, he and Alex stared at each other. Then Alex entered and turned to gently close the door.

Silence.

Lee cleared his throat. "So."

Alex shifted to face him again, chewing on his bottom lip, and in that moment, he looked young. "Yeah," he said softly.

“So.”

“Here we are.”

“Yeah,” Alex repeated.

More silence. Well, this was delightfully awkward.

Alex shifted, shoving a hand through his wavy hair as he glanced around the room. “You already picked your side?” He sounded neutral, more like he was casting around for something to say. Beds, though, and what if the reason he was uncomfortable wasn’t their general dislike for each other, but the fact that he’d be rooming with someone who’d used to fancy him?

Lee stiffened slightly. “Yeah. Problem?”

“It’s fine.”

“If you’re sure.”

“It’s *fine*,” Alex repeated, a hint of annoyance colouring his voice. He crossed over to the unclaimed bed and set his backpack down next to it, presenting Lee with a stellar view of his backside, nicely outlined by jogging bottoms in the officially approved team design. Lee looked away.

“Okay then,” he said.

Alex huffed out a breath but didn’t respond otherwise.

Five seconds passed. Ten. Then Lee turned away, pushed open the balcony door, and stepped outside into the stifling afternoon heat. It wasn’t humid, so there was that, but playing in these conditions would take some getting used to. He propped his elbows on the railing and closed his eyes for a moment, the sun painting the backs of his lids a radiant orange.

They couldn't keep this up—not for a month or longer. The Oliver-shaped angel on Lee's shoulder wanted him to extend an olive branch, but Lee wasn't even sure where to start. Possibly with a semi-normal conversation that consisted of more than one word at a time.

Too bad that Lee was much better at creating awkward moments than he was at dispelling them.



OF FUCKING COURSE.

Alex should have known that Kieran wasn't the type to just let things go. Kieran probably had a whole theory about challenging players' comfort zones by means of surprise rooming arrangements, about how it would trigger personal growth. Granted, Alex had made a genuine effort to improve his interactions with Lee and could tell that Lee had done the same—unfortunately, it had been too little too late.

So here they were.

With a huffed breath, Alex stilled where he'd started unzipping his suitcase, then rose slowly. After escaping to the balcony a few minutes ago, Lee had stripped off his top and was now sprawled in one of the two blue-striped armchairs that sat in the shade of an umbrella, glaring at his phone. Even so, he was really bloody attractive, all angular features and smooth, tanned skin—but that was ancient news to Alex, and the sooner he got over it, the better.

He rolled back his shoulders and straightened his stance, then headed for the balcony. Lee looked up when Alex stepped outside, expression unreadable. Another moment of silence as they looked at each other, and Christ, Lee's eyes were really very dark, had anyone ever told him?

Alex located his ability to speak at the bottom of a deep intake of breath, hot afternoon air filling his lungs. “All right, look.” His smile felt a little strained, but he clung to it nonetheless. “We should talk.”

A shadow crossed Lee’s face, then the corners of his mouth quirked into a sarcastic grin. “The three words every man dreads to hear.”

Don’t let him get to you.

“Do you disagree?” Alex asked evenly.

Lee’s eyes narrowed before he shook his head and got up. “No. Inside, though.” He grabbed his jersey off the back of the armchair he’d occupied, Alex needing just a second to divert his attention away from the dark dusting of hair that disappeared into the waistband of Lee’s jogging bottoms.

“Okay.” Alex turned to lead the way back into the room—into *their* room, and bloody hell, that would take some getting used to. Lee followed and closed the balcony door, leaving the heat outside. Blessedly, he put his jersey back on before sitting down on the edge of his mattress.

Alex mirrored him, tucking his hands between his thighs, and silence descended once more as they studied each other across the divide between their beds.

“Go ahead,” Lee said with a small wave. Alex resisted arguing because that would have thrown them right back into a passive-aggressive two-step of faux politeness about who’d go first—*not* productive.

So. Where to start?

One of Kieran’s handouts had talked about how openly addressing negative emotions and biases could reduce their power and move a conversation forward. Huh—which had

been part of how he'd announced the rooming assignments to them earlier in the lobby. Cheeky bastard.

Well, never let it be said that Alex wasn't willing to learn from his elders.

"Right. So." He strove for a neutral tone. "Since we'll be sharing a room for the foreseeable future, we should probably clear the air, right? Get it all out."

"Out, huh?" Dark humour edged Lee's voice. "By all means."

Right, then. Alex spread his hands. "Okay, so as far as I can tell, you see me as some posh aristocratic airhead who doesn't actually deserve to be here."

Lee paused before he answered, his eyebrows drawing together. "Taking a leaf out of Kieran's book, are you?"

"You noticed?" Alex wasn't sure why he was surprised—maybe because Jeff considered Kieran's pre-training conversations an unwelcome delay to one of the few things he truly cared about, namely playing football.

"Yeah, well." A second as Lee appeared to weigh Alex. "I know you think I'm some dumb, undereducated pleb—"

"Hang on," Alex interrupted. "What? I don't think that."

"Well, *I* don't think you're a posh airhead," Lee said slowly. The calculating edge to the way he watched Alex persisted, as though he was trying to work something out.

"You don't?" Alex didn't quite buy what Lee was selling. "Could have fooled me, what with the whole pretty boy thing."

"The whole..." Lee trailed off, and for once, the silence that followed didn't seem heavy, just thoughtful. Alex let it sit

for a few moments before he shifted, and the movement seemed to startle Lee out of whatever it was he'd been contemplating. "So you thought—" Lee paused just long enough that it registered. "When I called you pretty boy, you thought I meant, like..."

"That a pretty face was all I had to offer to the team?" Alex finished. "Well, *yeah*."

"Bloody Oliver," Lee muttered for no reason at all. A slow grin took over his face and changed it from attractive to breathtaking. "Mate, I was *teasing*. Just quoting some *FourFourTwo* article I barely remember. Think it mentioned your jersey was very popular among female Liverpool fans even though you'd only just been promoted to the first team."

"Like you have room to talk," Alex shot back, and Lee shrugged one shoulder.

"I kind of stopped listening to anything other than myself, the coach, and my goal tally, to be honest."

Lucky you.

Since Alex didn't care to be quite that honest with Lee, he didn't say it. Instead, he opted for a shrug of his own. "Okay, so maybe you were teasing about the pretty boy thing. But what's your problem with my family background?"

"My problem with your family background?" Lee looked genuinely baffled. "I mean, your father comes across as a conservative prick, not gonna lie—probably thinks even the middle ages were far too liberal for his taste. Guess that's part of the job description when you're in the House of Lords, though, so..."

"You seemed quite put off by the idea that I grew up in that environment," Alex clarified. "As in aristocracy, Harrow

School, all that.”

Lee didn't look any more enlightened. “I did?”

“Yeah, you—” Alex cut himself off and shook his head. If Lee either honestly didn't get it or insisted on faking ignorance, this wasn't a constructive direction to pursue, so, moving on. “Never mind. What was that undereducated pleb thing all about?”

Lee leaned forward, frowning, and seemed about to respond. Then he abruptly closed his mouth again.

“What?” Alex said after a couple of seconds had passed.

“Just reassessing. Give me a sec.” Lee's attention didn't waver from Alex, and Alex forced himself not to look away. He wasn't eighteen anymore. “So,” Lee said slowly. “After I called you pretty boy—when you were all ‘oh, screw you, I had my Premier League debut at eighteen and you were nineteen when you had yours, and also, unlike *some* people, I take my A levels seriously’—”

“I said that?” Alex asked.

“Sure did.” Lee raised his brows. “Except now I think it wasn't actually personal. Or it was, but not... You reacted to what you thought was an insult. It was ‘I work hard for stuff’ and not ‘I'm better than you, so fuck off.’”

“I—what?” That was rather a lot. “Why would I... You thought I was reacting like that to a joke because... I don't know. I had no sense of humour? That doesn't even make *sense*.” Alex shook his head. “I mean, no one reacts like that to a joke.”

A small smirk twisted Lee's mouth. “That's what I thought at the time.”

Nope, still didn't make sense.

Alex sat up a little, spreading his hands. "Come on, you must have realised that I didn't think you were joking."

Lee's gaze slid to the England flag the hotel people had put up above the door to the bathroom, a nice effort given that most of the staff would be cheering for their home country. Good thing that England and Spain were in different groups. "I probably should have," Lee admitted, much to Alex's surprise. "Would have, I guess, if not for—" He cut Alex a sharp look. "I'm a bit sensitive about not doing all that well in school, only just managed to finish my A levels. So."

What was it Jeff had hinted at—Lee coming from a tough family background? The way Lee held himself suggested he expected Alex to jump at the chance to get a job in, and Alex considered it for all of a second. It wasn't the point of this conversation, though, and maybe there was some common ground to be found between them yet.

"Well, in all honesty..." Alex leaned back on his hands. "It wasn't some deep intellectual curiosity that had me acing mine. Quite simply, if I hadn't, my parents would have put an end to my unfortunate interest in football faster than you can say 'FIFA is a mafia'."

"Well, maybe they were right to push you on the education front." There was a weird tinge to Lee's voice. "Shows they care, right?"

Alex would have framed it more in the context of asset management, but potato, potato. "Uh," he said carefully. "Sure."

Lee's eyes narrowed. "What?"

“My parents aren’t exactly the caring types.” Alex hadn’t planned to say that, but then, it wasn’t a secret he guarded close to his chest either. Clearly it wasn’t something Lee had expected because he took a moment to respond.

“They might get along with my mum.”

Ha. “Only if your mum can easily recite her place in the line of succession.”

“Astronomically far away wouldn’t cut it, I suppose?” A smile tugged at the corners of Lee’s mouth, and Alex let his own lips curve upwards.

“I’m afraid not.”

They were *smiling* at each other.

It was weird. And there was still the small matter of why Lee had been a bit of a prick almost from the moment they’d met, hardly responding to Alex’s attempts at starting conversations when Alex had tried so hard to fit in as a new arrival to the Under 21s. Surely that hadn’t been all in Alex’s mind? Especially not Lee suddenly shutting down, which had come right after Alex had mentioned that his promotion to Liverpool’s first team hadn’t stopped his father from insisting on an arrangement that would allow Alex to finish his A levels at Harrow School.

Honestly, Lee’s claim that he’d been kidding about the pretty boy thing still didn’t sit entirely right with Alex. A joke? Hard to reconcile that claim with Lee’s cool stance towards Alex from the moment they’d met. Oh, and also, *also*, Alex would very much like Lee to acknowledge that the penalty call at their last match against each other could have gone either way.

But okay, Alex could park all that until further notice. He and Lee didn't need to become great mates—Alex would happily settle for peaceful coexistence.

If that required putting aside old grievances? Well, fine. Alex could do that.

For the team.



LEE DIDN'T *FLEE* the room. He just happened to feel a tad antsy after being cooped up for the duration of the trip, and hitting the gym was the ideal remedy. It seemed like Alex agreed because he left right after Lee got back, giving Lee a chance to unpack without having to navigate their forced proximity.

How was he supposed to act around Alex now? In a way, it had been easy when he'd been able to simply dismiss Alex as a homophobic snob. This, now, was unfamiliar territory, and while it was better than rooming with a bigot, Lee liked things to be predictable.

Alex didn't know. It still hadn't quite sunk in.

All this time, Lee had been waiting for the other shoe to drop—a pointed comment, just enough to start a rumour, or a joke that would dare him to react. He'd pictured Alex luxuriating in how Lee couldn't be certain of what Alex did and didn't know, what Alex would and wouldn't do. Instead, Alex had mistaken Lee's poor attempt at flirting for an *insult*, and Lee wasn't sure whether that said more about him or Alex.

After years of sharing locker rooms with plenty of half-naked, athletic men, Lee had perfected his ability to ignore his surroundings. So when Alex returned from his own workout

just before dinner and stripped down to dark blue boxer briefs right there in the middle of the room, Lee remained resolutely focused on his phone. Only when Alex was heading for the bathroom, clothes in a pile at the foot of his bed and his back to Lee, did Lee allow himself one quick, covert glance from where he was lying diagonally on top of the covers of his own bed.

Yeah, Alex was really bloody fit. Moving on.

Lee didn't look up again when Alex reemerged from the bathroom in a cloud of steam and completely naked, ambling over to the wardrobe where he took his sweet time choosing an outfit. Well, hey. At least it confirmed that Alex truly didn't suspect any undue interest on Lee's part.

"You realise it's not a fashion show, right?" Lee asked after Alex had considered and dismissed three similar jeans-and-T-shirt combinations, and right, so much for Lee keeping his full attention on his phone.

Alex threw him a glance, perfectly at ease in another pair of boxer briefs—rightfully so, with a body like that. "Don't you ever get tired of jogging bottoms and fitness tops?"

"Not really, no." Lee looked down at his ensemble in white and blue. "Nothing wrong with the official team outfit, is there?"

"Nothing at all. If, you know," —Alex's smirk was far off the sweet smile he tended to flash for the cameras— "you're into being boring."

"I'm into being efficient," Lee countered, sitting up against the headboard of his bed. "Taking five minutes to combine a pair of dark blue jeans with a white T-shirt seems like a bit of a waste."

“Spoken like a true ignoramus,” Alex said, and Lee strove to keep his focus on Alex’s face rather than let it venture down to Alex’s pecs, defined abs, or the tantalising peaks of his hip bones.

“You’re a lot more sarcastic than you let on.”

“I pick my moments.” Alex reached for the pair of jeans that sat between two others on the bed. Other than a minor deviation in colour, it looked no different than the one on the right or the one on the left.

When Lee said as much, Alex paused in buttoning it up. “First off, it’s a different brand. Secondly, it’s a different cut.”

Lee blinked and filed the visual of Alex’s slender fingers against his partly undone jeans away into a dark corner at the back of his mind. “Still looks the same, though.”

“Lord help me—you’re worse than Jeff.” The words were infused with just a hint of amusement.

“What’s wrong with him?”

“Have you ever seen him voluntarily wear anything other than sports clothing?”

“And I repeat—what’s wrong with him?”

Alex finished buttoning up his jeans. “Try wearing a proper outfit to a bar for a change. Women will look at you differently, especially the ones who don’t know who you are.”

Because *that* was what kept Lee up at night, yeah. “Thanks,” he said dryly. “But I’m good.”

“Yeah, I guess you’d do okay either way.” Alex assessed Lee with a quick look before he tilted his head, his mouth pulling into a thoughtful line. “Okay, how about this—if we win our first match, you let me dress you for the party

afterwards. See if you'll feel differently in clothes that don't come with a sweat-wicking claim."

Boy, they'd sure made some progress in the last few hours—unless Alex planned to dress Lee in a clown costume, of course. Lee considered him for a few seconds. "What's it to you?"

"I like fashion." When Alex grinned, there was nothing sweet about it. "I also like hearing that I'm right."

"You know what's weird?" Lee asked before he could think better of it.

"People who drink English Breakfast in the evening?"

It startled a snort out of Lee. "Yeah, that too. I meant more how you've got this reputation as, like ... the darling of the Premier League when you aren't half as sweet as you like to pretend."

The way Alex's eyes narrowed suggested he was weighing whether to take offence. In the end, he simply shrugged. "It's not all fake, you know? I think there is a certain obligation on people like us to model good behaviour. But you were all ... standoff-ish with me when we met, so I guess I stopped bothering."

Standoff-ish? That was not how Lee remembered it. He remembered feeling strangely intimidated by Alex, unsettled by Alex's polished language and boyish charm, unable to pinpoint the cause of his unease until they'd ended up talking after one practice session and Lee had suddenly realised that he was *attracted* to Alex. More than just a passing appreciation for a fit guy that Lee had been able to reason away in the past, but a proper crush, which, bloody *hell*. He was pretty sure he'd high-tailed it out of there, although he

couldn't recall the details. Cue some soul-searching and a couple of sleepless nights followed by the infamous pretty boy incident, and here they were.

Not something he could explain to Alex, though.

“Okay, listen.” Lee set his phone aside and crossed his legs, making an effort to hold Alex’s gaze. “I know this is gonna sound like a line, but it wasn’t you. I was still a bit shy back then, and you were” —*effortlessly charming*— “rather hard to ignore.”

“You were shy,” Alex repeated flatly. He paused, then shook his head. “Why? Everyone knew it was only a matter of time until you’d be moved to the first team.”

“This may come as a surprise to you, but being shy isn’t rational.” Lee could have left it at that, but if he was at least partly to blame for how vastly they’d got their signals crossed... “Plus, my teenage years were kind of rough.”

It was the extent of what Lee was willing to offer, and maybe Alex could tell because he nodded and finally, *finally* reached for a T-shirt. “Thanks for telling me, I guess.”

Well, well. Look who packed some manners for the trip.

“You’re welcome,” Lee told him and wondered whether he should avert his eyes. Probably not, right? “Also, okay.”

“Okay?”

“We win against the Dutch, you get to pick an outfit for me —*if* I deem it acceptable. Not sure where you’ll find one here, but I guess that’s your problem, not mine.”

“There’s this thing called the internet, Lee. It delivers.”

Smartarse.

“There’s also this thing called dinner, Alex. It awaits.”

Alex tugged at the hem of his off-white T-shirt. It fit him admittedly well, but it was still just... Well, it was still just a T-shirt. “I’m almost done, but feel free to go ahead.”

“It’ll look better if we show up together.”

Alex slid Lee a surprised look that instantly raised Lee’s hackles. He countered it with a pointed stare, and Alex’s face relaxed into a smile. “Chill, mate. It’s just nice that you don’t take your spot in the starting eleven for granted—that you’re willing to make an effort, you know.”

“I don’t think there are any guarantees with Kieran.” Lee considered it briefly. “Other than Oliver, maybe. Unless he breaks both his arms, he’s playing.”

“Don’t jinx it,” Alex muttered. “Okay, gimme just a sec, then I’m ready.” With that, he dashed into the bathroom, and when he came back out, he smelled like some expensive cologne—noticeable but not overpowering, cedar wood and something else. Frankincense?

There was a comment at the tip of Lee’s tongue about how Alex better not expect Lee to use more than deodorant because yeah, not happening. He opted against it and got off the bed to join Alex by the door.

“Dinner?” Alex asked, and Lee nodded.

“Lead the way.”



THEY DIDN’T TALK MUCH on the way down, just a comment here and there about how the Football Association must have instructed the hotel to dot the common areas with England flags and historical team pictures. Lee was acutely aware of

Alex by his side, still struggling to rearrange his perception of Alex into one that accounted for what he'd learned today.

Not a homophobe. Possibly self-conscious about his upbringing. Healthy sense of sarcasm.

“At least,” Alex spoke into Lee’s thought process, “the hotel staff here can’t judge us too harshly for basking in past victories.” He gestured at a range of pictures from 1966. “I mean, Spain won just once too, even if theirs is a bit more recent. And they stand a much better chance than we do.”

“Because we’re a young team?” Lee asked. “As far as I’m concerned, that’s our chance right there—let them underestimate us.”

“Right.” Alex was quiet for a beat, the usual confidence he projected muted for once. “You really think we have a shot?”

“Honestly?” Lee stopped next to the door that led to the hotel restaurant’s patio, abruptly reminded that Alex was only twenty-three. Sure, Lee was just two years older, but this was his second World Cup even if the first hadn’t been something to write home about. “Yeah, it’s a snowball’s chance in hell. But crazier things have happened, right?”

One corner of Alex’s mouth pulled up. “Like how a few football matches triggered a war between Honduras and El Salvador?”

“Way to look first right, then left, and then pick the depressing option. I was more thinking of how rats laugh when you tickle them.”

The other corner of Alex’s mouth pulled up too. “Really?”

“Yeah.” Lee stepped aside to let Lewis pass. He gave them a cautious look, likely wondering whether an intervention was in order, but then moved on without comment. “My sister

studies biology,” Lee continued. “I didn’t believe her at first, but there’s solid research and all. It’s these high-pitched chirping sounds that are outside our hearing range so you need special equipment to hear them but ... yeah. It’s real. And apparently, rats enjoy being tickled because they actually seek it out.”

“That?” Alex’s whole face lit up. “Is amazing.”

“I thought so too. There’s a *National Geographic* video about it—I can show it to you after dinner.”

Before Alex could reply, Jeff joined them with a, “Well, what’s this? Am I being replaced? I am scandalised, Alex. *Scandalised.*”

Lee didn’t know Jeff all that well, but the fact that Alex barely reacted seemed to suggest this wasn’t unusual behaviour. “You told me to play nice,” Alex told Jeff. “Happy?”

“Very,” Jeff said with a decisive nod, and right, Lee should have expected that Alex had received an earful about their interactions too—why else would he have made an effort to clear the air between them? They weren’t becoming *friends* after two semi-pleasant conversations.

“We thought we’d arrive together,” Lee contributed. “Give everyone a minor heart attack at seeing us act like civilised people around each other.”

Jeff grinned. “I like it. Give me a minute so I can find a good seat for the show.” With that, he slipped out onto the patio, leaving behind a momentary gust of warm evening air and silence that felt tinged with just a hint of awkwardness.

“So, uh.” Alex shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “Topic suggestions for what we can talk about when we

walk in?”

“The state of the world?” Lee offered.

“Depressing.” Alex’s lips quirked. “Whether you snore?”

Right. Because they’d be sleeping next to each other.

“I don’t,” Lee said with dignity.

“How do you know, though?”

“My ex would have told me.” Giovanni truly would have—he hadn’t been the type to censor his words. “What about you?”

“Whether I snore?” Alex held the door for Lee and followed suit before he replied. “Nah, my ex *definitely* would have told me. She did complain about how I steal the covers, but that’s not exactly going to be an issue with us.”

She. Of course.

Lee snorted softly, aware that several heads turned at their appearance. “Only if you sleepwalk across the room and climb in with me.”

Oh, for fuck’s sake. *Why* had he said that?

“No sleepwalking,” Alex promised lightly. “I don’t fancy a kick in the nuts.”

“And on that delightful note...” Lee tilted his head as he smiled at Alex, making sure to let his eyes crinkle at the corners for the sake of their audience in general and Kieran in particular. “Enjoy your dinner, and I’ll see you later?”

“Inevitably,” Alex returned with a smile of his own that didn’t look fake. They stood like that for a second, then Lee turned to claim the free seat next to Oliver at a table for four while Alex moved over to where Jeff was sitting.

After reaching for a bread roll, Lee took in his surroundings. The evening sun drowned the golf course in golden hues, all gently sloping hills and lush grass, and he knew it was only a matter of time until Oliver would comment on the insanity of maintaining a golf course in an area that was starved for precipitation. Oliver wasn't wrong, of course.

He was also staring at Lee with a shrewd expression.

Lee kept his voice low. "Okay, so you were right."

"Oh, excuse me." Oliver leaned closer, grinning broadly. "Can you speak up, please?"

"You heard me." Lee glanced at Finley and Declan who were sharing their table. Fortunately, they appeared engrossed in a conversation about Argentina post-Messi and Portugal post-Ronaldo.

Smug was not a good look on Oliver. "So," he said in an undertone. "I was right, huh? I take it he's not a homophobic prick, then?"

"No." Lee shot a look at where Alex was laughing at something Jeff had said, head thrown back. *Stop staring.* Lee tore a piece off his bread roll and returned his focus to Oliver. "Still painfully posh, though."

"Is he now?" Oliver's lips twitched into a teasing curve. "And how's that crush doing?"

"Oh, shut up." It wasn't exactly the mother of all comebacks, but it was the best Lee had.

Oliver elbowed him. "Never."

"I'll call Sanna and tell her you're being mean to me." Fat lot of good it would do given that Oliver's wife was likely to just laugh at Lee and tell him to get laid because "feeling

another human's touch is important for your sanity, Lee, and I'm not volunteering my husband", to which Lee would ask who the hell had been crazy enough to hand her a therapist licence. Sanna was great.

"Like she'd believe you over me," Oliver said.

"Hey, she likes me."

"Wonder why," Oliver grumbled, then bumped their knees together. "Hey, I'm glad it's not what you thought it was."

"Me too." Lee sent Alex another look, and yeah, he really was glad it had been a misunderstanding and that Alex was maybe kind of all right, after all. None of that made it a good idea for Lee to let his guard down and indulge in lingering glances, though, because sooner or later, Alex might catch him staring and then what?

Safer to stay at a distance.

Somehow, Alex had expected Lee to be a slob. As it turned out, Lee was the very opposite—his side of the room was meticulous, and each night, he laid out his clothes for the next day in neatly folded stacks. When Alex asked about it, Lee stilled, one hand flat on top of the most recent pile he'd prepared.

“Force of habit, I guess,” he said slowly. “Used to do it for my sisters all the time, and now I just find it saves me mental energy in the morning, not having to think about what I’m going to wear.”

It was a puzzle piece that aligned with how Lee talked to his sisters almost daily, and while Alex wasn’t actively trying to listen in, he couldn’t help but overhear the occasional conversational snippet. Lee’s sisters seemed to treat him like a parent more than a brother, running their grades past him and venting their respective frustrations about teachers and homework, and professors and deadlines. They also sought his advice on everything, from disagreements with friends to new haircuts to boys, boys, boys. More than once, Alex had found himself biting down on a smile, reading on his bed while Lee tried to explain the finer details of male behaviour to one of his sisters.

Yeah, good luck with that.

“You’ll make a great dad one day,” Alex finally commented one evening, after Lee had ended a call with his youngest sister Shelly—based on what Alex had caught, she must have spent a considerable amount of time ranting about a boy who’d promised he’d text and, three days later, still hadn’t.

Lee snorted as he set the phone on the bedside table. “Think I’ve got my hands full with these two for now.”

His mum wasn’t the caring type, wasn’t that what he’d said? No dad in the picture, as far as Alex could tell.

“I take it your parents weren’t around much?” he asked carefully.

“My sperm donor didn’t stick around long enough to leave his name, much less a return address.” Lee’s dark eyes narrowed, his voice carrying the faintest hint of a challenge. “So, no. All I know is he was Italian—which narrows it down to maybe ten million daddy candidates if you exclude all Italian men who are currently above the age of ninety and below the age of thirty. Not quite *your* family tree situation, is it?”

Alex closed his book and met Lee’s frown with a smile. “Not quite. Let’s just say that any muttering of illegitimacy would be an affront to the very fabric of our family tapestry.”

“Is that a direct quote or are you paraphrasing?”

“Translating the displeased twitch of an upper lip into actual words.”

Alex could see the precise moment Lee’s amusement won over whatever expectations he’d held about Alex’s reaction. “How very insolent of you.”

“That’s me—the rebel sheep of the family.” *Hardly*. Since it wasn’t often Lee volunteered personal information, Alex decided to prod for just a little bit more. “What about your sisters’ dad? Or dads, I guess.”

“He hung around for a bit before he decided my mum was simply too nuts for him.” Bitterness seeped into Lee’s voice. His attention slid away from Alex to the open balcony door, warm evening air wafting into the room. “Fair enough. But if you can’t handle it, what the hell makes you think it’s fine to leave three kids with a person like that?”

All right, that had been rather more information than Alex had bargained for—not that he minded, he just wasn’t quite sure how to respond. “How old were you?”

“Eight. Got lucky that our grandma was around for a few more years so that by the time she died, I could—” Lee cut himself off, gaze sharpening on Alex’s face. “Never mind.”

“You could...?” Alex prompted, and Lee shook his head.

“Doesn’t matter.” Lee’s tone put an effective stop to the conversation. Fine, Alex could take a hint. Even more so, he was also able to make an educated guess based on the tidbits of information Lee had let slip about his disengaged mum, how he’d been the one to lay out his sisters’ clothes for the next day, and the way they treated him like a father figure. But why had Lee offered that opening about his grandmother in the first place if he had no intention of following through?

“If you say so,” Alex agreed neutrally, shoving a pillow under his chest as he opened his book back up.

“I do.” Lee reached for his ebook reader, and that was another difference to sharing with Jeff—Alex didn’t have to defend the fact that he preferred books to wasting time on a

phone or tablet. Bonus, his thrillers weren't embellished with a jarring soundtrack courtesy of Tik Tok.

For a minute, it was quiet in the room.

"I didn't take you for a thriller kind of person," Lee commented.

Alex glanced up and over, grinning a little. "What kind of person did you take me for?"

"Something a little more ... high-brow, I guess. Virginia Woolf or Kazuo Ishiguro. Salman Rushdie."

"Should I be flattered or offended?" Alex asked, tucking one finger between the pages of Baldacci's most recent novel to mark his spot.

Lee made a seesawing gesture, one corner of his mouth hitching up. "Little bit of both? Also, who still buys hardcovers, mate? Especially when it's a thriller you'll read once—that's what ebooks are for."

"Can't put an ebook into one of those neighbourhood book exchange boxes, can you?" Alex countered.

"I strongly doubt you live in the kind of neighbourhood that has a book exchange box."

"Please, as if you do. But I drive by one on the way to team practice."

"So you're like the book-dropping fairy?" Lee's smile was fully pronounced by now, the evening light washing his features in warmth, and Alex reminded himself not to stare.

Lee had an unfortunate habit of stripping down to boxers and a white tank top once he'd brushed his teeth in the evening, and it showed off his arms rather nicely. There'd been a time when footballers were all about leg work while upper

body strength wasn't much of a priority—not anymore, and Lee was someone who took his whole-body workout programme seriously. Sucked for Alex's peace of mind, especially as he could hardly tell Lee to put on some clothes when Alex himself liked to sleep naked and compromised by wearing boxer briefs when sharing a room.

“I'm giving back to the community,” he declared with an air of grandeur.

“Giving back to the community—of course.” For once, Lee seemed to be laughing with Alex rather than at him. “It's hard-won, your reputation as everybody's darling.”

It was, and leaving free books scattered about Liverpool had nothing to do with it. Alex had learned to soften the crisp edges of how he'd grown up speaking with anyone other than his relatives, to balance his parents' expectations with what he wanted for himself, and to keep any interest in the male half of the population in check—that was the price he paid. He led a privileged life, no doubt about it, but being well-liked didn't come naturally to him.

Funny how Lee had never bought what Alex was selling.

“Well,” Alex said. “Since you're mocking me and my taste in books, what are *you* reading?”

Lee cut him a smug look. “See, that's the beauty of a Kindle—you won't know unless I tell you.”

“I'll grab it while you're in the shower.”

“It's passcode-protected.”

“You've got trust issues, man.”

It was meant to be a joke, but based on how something tightened around Lee's generous mouth, it fell flat. No

response.

“I was kidding,” Alex added after a few beats of uncomfortable silence. “You can do whatever you want with your Kindle—I’m not judging.”

“Right.” Lee’s voice was slow, eyes distant, before he suddenly focused on Alex. “Nah, it’s probably true about the trust issues. *You* try having a stepdad who ditches you when you’re just a kid and doesn’t bother getting back in touch until he sees your name in the papers. And when you tell him to go to fucking hell” —Lee drew a sharp breath— “he decides to sleaze his way back into your sisters’ lives. Right? See if that teaches you to expect the worst from most people.”

That was ... a lot.

Alex twisted his upper body to fully face Lee, and for a strange moment, he was tricked into the illusion that Lee’s gaze skimmed from Alex’s chest down and around to his boxer-briefs-clad arse, the room warm enough that Alex had kicked the sheet down to his feet. A blink, and whatever Alex might have seen was gone.

“So let me get this straight.” Alex took a moment to realign the pieces of what he’d overheard earlier. “When you told your sister to be careful around him—on the phone just now... I take it you were no longer talking about the guy who hadn’t bothered to text her?”

Lee pursed his lips. “Why would she need to be careful around someone she almost certainly won’t be seeing again?”

“I don’t know.” Alex shrugged one shoulder and smiled in a way that he hoped would diffuse some of the tension hanging around Lee. “I was caught up in a literary

assassination, so I didn't listen too closely. Just caught a few words here and there."

"Right," Lee said slowly.

"Not that I deliberately listen in on your conversations," Alex hurried to add. "But we're sharing a room, so there's not a lot of privacy, is there?" *Abort, abort.* "Anyway, I just... That sucks. About your stepfather."

Lee exhaled, some of the tightness around his eyes fading. "Yeah. It does."

Since there wasn't anything helpful Alex could offer, he simply nodded, and after a few seconds, Lee turned back to his Kindle. Alex waited for another moment, just in case there was more, then he reopened his book.

It was peaceful, almost.



POSTED BY @AlexanderBeaufort (June 8, 9:07 p.m.):

Sharing a room with @TheJeffWhitlock: chaos

Sharing a room with @LeeJTaylor: a neatly folded stack of clothes for the next day, every day



"THE POINT IS..." Jeff dropped into another squat. "The *point* is that I perform better if I'm allowed to have a pint now and then."

"I don't make the rules." Oliver sounded unmoved, and Alex suppressed a smile at how Jeff's drama had completely missed its mark. "Take it up with Kieran."

"You're our captain," Jeff said. "It's your duty to represent the team's interests towards the coach."

“One person craving a pint does not constitute a legitimate team interest.”

“It should.”

“To be fair,” Alex put in, “there is a case to be made for how the entire team is better off if Jeff is in a good mood.”

“Yes,” Jeff said, triumphant. “Listen to the man, Oliver, for he speaketh the truth.”

Lee, who’d been doing his own set of squats, laughed softly. “You know how there’s this thing called non-alcoholic beer? Because we happen to advertise it.”

“All the taste,” Alex started.

“And none of the buzz,” Lee and Oliver finished together.

“I don’t drink for the *taste*.”

Jeff would have undoubtedly continued if Kieran hadn’t called them over to introduce a series of drills. They took turns weaving through cones that had been set up in a zigzag pattern, keeping the ball at their feet as they raced against the clock, the evening sun casting long shadows on the pitch. Lee won, to no one’s surprise, and a couple of weeks ago, Alex might have quietly resented him for it even though Lee wasn’t the bragging type. Now, he gave Lee a subtle nod that earned him an equally subtle nod in return.

Not friends, no. But teammates who got along just fine.

It seemed like Kieran had yet to trust their newfound equilibrium, though, because he kept pairing them up—not for every single exercise, but more often than not. Set-piece practice, ball interception, passing drills... Today, it was Lee trying to score while Alex played the defensive bulwark. It felt just a tad reminiscent of their last face-off in the Premier

League, and in what Alex considered an admirable show of restraint, he didn't comment on Lee's history of tripping over his own two legs when it suited him.

"Good work," Kieran commented as he paused to watch for a moment. "Both of you."

Lee stopped the ball with a tap and threw Kieran a grin. "You know you don't have to keep supervising us like a bunch of naughty children, right? We figured our crap out, so if you want to *occasionally* pair us with others..."

"Nah, I know," Kieran said. "Proud of you lads for putting the team first, by the way—but I really think there could be something special here."

"Special," Alex echoed slowly, after exchanging a quick, sceptical glance with Lee.

"See, here's the thing." Kieran took a step closer, waving his hand at nothing in particular. "Alex, you're a midfielder, not a full-time defender—still, no one here is more effective against Lee than you. You understand how he moves, and more often than not, you can anticipate it."

"Bloody frustrating, is what it is," Lee grumbled.

The corners of Kieran's mouth quirked. "Fair enough. But imagine how useful it could be when you're actually on the same team."

Lee appeared to give the idea some serious consideration, his dark eyebrows pulling together, and Alex realised that he might have been staring for a beat too long when their eyes met. "I guess that could come in handy," Lee said.

Alex wiped a hand across his forehead before he lifted a shoulder. "Yeah, I guess. If we can make that work? Yeah. That really could come in handy."

Eloquent. If Alex's father had witnessed the scene, he would have ordered Alex to harness that runaway train of thought, to tell the conductor to apply the brakes or steer the conversation onto a coherent track. Alex had heard it early and often enough that he could recite the reprimand by heart, and he rarely fell into that trap anymore.

Kieran, on the other hand, nodded as though Alex had made a worthwhile contribution to the conversation. "Couldn't agree more. So make it happen, boys."

Right, because it was just that easy. Funny how it hadn't already occurred to them.

"Working on it," Lee said lightly. "It's just that miracles take a minute, you see?"

"Lose the attitude." The amused spark in Kieran's eyes ran counter to his words. "Oh, and Lee—since you asked about meditation apps, I just saw that the one I use lets me give you a free thirty-day trial. Come find me before dinner and we'll set it up."

A meditation app? Lee was just full of surprises.

"Great," Lee said, and Alex waited until Kieran had moved on before he let his lips twist into a lopsided smile.

"You know you make enough to pay full price for some app, right?"

"Okay, one" —Lee toed the ball up from the grass and bounced it on his knee— "I never say no to free stuff. And two, remember that thing about bankruptcy and pro athletes? Not planning to be one of them."

"And getting thirty free days out of an app is going to prevent that."

“It all adds up.”

They were both smirking now, watching each other while Lee kept the ball in motion. Alex couldn't have said what it was that tipped him off, but when Lee suddenly feigned to the left and darted right, Alex was ready.

“Bloody frustrating,” Lee repeated, one corner of his mouth twitching upwards as Alex danced away with the ball.

“Just remember how it could come in handy,” Alex told him with no small measure of glee, and Lee huffed out a half-laugh, gesturing for Alex to return the ball so they could start another manoeuvre. Just to be a dick, Alex aimed his pass too far to the left—turned out that Lee could read him too because he was moving in the correct direction before the ball even left Alex's foot.

“Cute,” Lee commented idly.

“Cute, pretty—you sure know the way to a boy's heart.” A second too late, Alex remembered that this wasn't Jeff. While he and Lee might be getting more comfortable around each other, jokes of the suggestive persuasion were a far cry from where their comfort zones overlapped.

Lee raised an eyebrow, sunlight brightening the deep brown of his eyes to a lighter shade. Humour coloured his tone. “I consider myself somewhat of a specialist, yeah.”

Now that *was* the kind of response Jeff might have given, except he would have underlined it with lewd hand gestures to illustrate just what kind of specialist he considered himself to be.

“Thank you,” Alex said.

Lee blinked. “What for?”

“Keeping it appropriate for general audiences.”

It took a moment, then Lee smiled. “Jeff?”

“Let’s just say I know far more about his sex life than I’d like.” Given Alex’s extensive awareness of Lee’s ... well, *everything*, this was starting to feel like a risky conversation. What if Lee decided to take his cue from Jeff? Alex didn’t care to know what lube Lee favoured and whether his last girlfriend had enjoyed a bit of bondage now and then. Just ... no. Thanks.

Blessedly, Kieran picked that moment to call everyone over and split them up for a practice game. Alex wasn’t surprised when he ended up on the same team as Lee. Blue jerseys it was, for both of them.

Even though it was past eight in the evening, the day’s heat lingered—good training for their upcoming matches that would all kick off around this time of day. While Alex didn’t love playing in temperatures like this, he didn’t mind it as much as some of the others did, just needed to make sure he stayed hydrated. Lee, on the other hand, seemed impervious to the heat, likely used to it from his time in Italy before Ben Jimmer had lured him back to the UK.

Alex needed to reduce the amount of space Lee took up in his head. They spent a fair bit of time together these days, and Lee was both intriguing and objectively hot—it was natural for Alex to get a little fixated, but that way lay slumbering dragons. Best not to wake them.

He was here to play football. That was it.

There was something inherently beautiful about the rhythm of the game under the glow of the setting sun—the ball zipping across the grass, the harsh echo of cleats biting into

the turf, Kieran shouting instructions as both teams tried to outsmart each other. More than two weeks into their training, Alex had come to know the other players and their styles, the way they moved across the pitch, their top speed and whether they threw their whole body and weight into a challenge or preferred to sneak up from behind.

Maybe it was because Kieran's words hung fresh in Alex's mind, but there was this moment, a split-second decision—two red players pressing in on Alex as he moved the ball across the halfway line, most of the blue team behind him with the exception of Jeff and Lee. Jeff was in a better position, yes, but a red midfielder was hovering just behind him, and Alex *knew* how Lee moved. So he slid the ball through between two red defenders and right into the path Lee had chosen, having started half a second before the ball had left Alex's foot. No offside.

Oliver loomed in the red goal as Alex darted to the left and Jeff veered right, Lee at the centre, defenders already beaten. Upper left corner. The ball sliced through the air in a beautiful arch, sailing past the tips of Oliver's fingers.

Goal!

Lee whooped, face shining with delight, and then Jeff pounced on his back with a triumphant yell. Alex hesitated for half a step, just long enough for Declan to catch up and join the celebratory huddle, then Alex reached them too, patting Lee's shoulder. For a second, their eyes caught.

“Great pass,” Lee told him, grinning, flushed and breathing hard from his sprint.

“Great goal,” Alex returned, grinning back.

Lee chuckled. “Ready for Kieran's ‘I told you so’?”

Before Alex could reply, Finley and Callum barrelled into them, shouting their own congratulations, and yeah, it was just a practice game—but any goal against Oliver was hard-earned. Alex stepped back to make room, absently noting how Lee’s jersey clung to his athletic frame, which ... *enough already*. With that thought firmly in mind, Alex turned away to start trotting back towards the other half of the pitch.

Enough.



LEE LIKED ROUTINE, always had. Maybe it was down to how he’d been deprived of it as a kid, his mum just as likely to let them skip school so they could spend the day at an amusement park as she’d been to stay out all night without any notice.

In that sense, rooming with Alex was easy. Alex’s alarm went off at the same time each morning, and while he rolled out of bed and into the shower, Lee either dozed for a few more minutes or eased into wakefulness with the guided meditation app Kieran had recommended. Once Alex was done in the bathroom, radiating energy as he moved to dig out his clothes for the day, Lee went to brush his teeth and take a shower himself, careful not to let his thoughts stray too closely to Alex in just a pair of skimpy boxer briefs, parading around the room and perfectly oblivious to how bloody *distracting* it was.

When Lee was finally ready to leave for breakfast, he collected Alex so they could head down together, typically finding him out on the balcony, enjoying the morning freshness as he tapped away on his phone. At breakfast, they sometimes sat at the same table but more often split up to find Oliver and Jeff.

It worked, for the most part.

The one time Lee dared to complain about Alex's choice of underwear to Oliver over a plate of scrambled eggs, Oliver laughed at him.

"Sorry, mate." Oliver lowered his voice. "Not feeling particularly sympathetic about you getting to share a room with the guy you fancy while my wife's all the way back in the UK."

"One" —Lee shot a quick glance at Toby and Finley, sitting across from them at the table and engrossed in a conversation about action movies— "I'm merely appreciating the view. Two, when you see her, you actually get to touch—I don't. It's hard, okay?"

"I bet it is," Oliver stated casually, and Lee sent him a scandalised look.

"*Oliver*. Have you been spending time with Jeff?"

"He's selectively amusing," Oliver said.

"Just don't..." Lee hesitated, fishing around for the right words only to settle on, "You know. Don't let anything slip."

Oliver's eyes turned serious. "I wouldn't."

"I know," Lee said, and he did, he *did*, but sometimes he just wished that things were a little easier, that he didn't have to be so fucking careful all the time. If Ben had done it a decade ago, would it really be such a big deal if Lee came out now?

Probably, unfortunately—yes. Things had changed, but it was a glacial drip, not a landslide. Lee wasn't sure he was ready for that kind of pressure and attention. He'd have some people in his corner, sure, but he'd still have to essentially walk the road alone while Ben had been in a long-term relationship with his now-husband.

Or maybe Lee was a coward looking for excuses.

“Hey, what’s going on with you?” Oliver asked softly.

Lee raised his gaze from his plate, frowning. “Are you asking as my friend or my captain?”

“As your friend. You’re doing just fine on the pitch, and you know it.”

Lee did. He was quite possibly in the best shape of his life, and the Spanish summer heat bothered him less than it did others. Especially now that he and Alex had found a rhythm, he’d been able to score some pretty sweet goals in their practice games, even if he did say so himself.

“Yeah.” He pushed some parsley to the side of his plate. “And I don’t know. Just a bit tired of pretending, I guess. Or…” He lifted the corners of his mouth. “Maybe it’s just been a while since I got laid.”

“Anything I can do?” Oliver asked.

Lee arched a meaningful eyebrow.

A brief moment passed before Oliver got it, then he snorted. “Dick.”

“That’s the general idea,” Lee confirmed. “Also, you *have* been hanging around Jeff.”

“I can neither confirm nor deny that.”

Lee kicked him under the table, received a kick in return, and went back to eating his eggs, smiling.



EVENINGS FOLLOWED A SIMILARLY PREDICTABLE PATTERN. Unless training ran late, they got ready for bed around eleven, catching up on messages and reading for a few minutes before

one of them turned off the light and the other followed suit shortly after.

While Lee always needed some twenty minutes to fall asleep, Alex seemed to drop off almost as soon as his head hit the pillow, his breathing evening out within moments. Lucky bastard.

Except—not tonight.

Half an hour after they'd mumbled goodnight, Alex was still tossing and turning, taking quiet, shallow breaths on the other side of the room. Lee could have ignored it. They had their first match the next day, though, and they weren't friends, but they were ... teammates, at least, and there was an understanding between them built on nearly two weeks of sharing a space.

Damnit.

"Alex," Lee muttered into the darkness.

"Sorry, am I—" Alex shifted to face Lee, the whites of his eyes just visible. "I'm bothering you, aren't I? Sorry. I'll stop moving around."

"That's not..." Lee sighed. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

Lee stayed silent, waiting.

"Just thinking."

Right. Lee let Alex's words hang in the air for a moment before he nodded against the pillow, keeping his voice light. "Nervous, then?"

Alex inhaled sharply, then released the air in a whoosh. For a second, it seemed as though he wouldn't reply. "Yeah,"

he admitted.

Lee remembered how four years ago, he'd been just as nervous before the first match that had ended in a tie. All players had been in individual rooms back then, no one he could have confided in even if he'd wanted to, and in the end, it didn't really matter that he'd had a bad night's rest because he'd watched the entire match from the bench.

Alex would be playing—probably, almost certainly—and Lee needed him sharp. Good thing he had plenty of practice talking his sisters down from a variety of mental ledges.

“Perfectly normal that you're nervous,” he told Alex, propping himself up on one elbow to show he was paying attention, yet leaving the light off to keep the shadows between them. Velvety night air filled the room through the balcony door they'd left partially open. “Wanna talk about it?”

“What's there to talk about?” Alex asked, but he didn't sound contrarian, just a little lost. “I just have to get over it, don't I?”

Sure, because that's how feelings worked. Not.

Lee hummed. “What's the worst thing that could happen?”

“Is that supposed to be helpful?” Alex scoffed. “We lose. And I don't play. Or I do, but I make an idiot of myself and prove my parents right.”

If Lee hadn't been camped out in his very own glasshouse, he'd suggest that Alex could benefit from talking to someone about his bi-parental baggage. As it was, he left it at a nod. “Okay. And what's the best thing that could happen?”

“We win, and I'm part of it.”

“And what’s more likely?”

“The Dutch are a good team. And they’ve got way more experience than we do.” Alex drew an audible breath. “Their playmaker has, like, a hundred international matches under his belt for the national team—I’ve got four. Even if I play—”

“You will,” Lee interrupted. Rude? Yes. Necessary? Also yes.

It seemed to do the trick because Alex shut up for a second, clearly redirecting his runaway thoughts. “How do you know?”

“Because you train hard and you’re really fucking good. Kieran is the kind of coach who rewards that even if you’re young and new. Also...” Lee let a deliberate smirk creep into his voice. “I will most definitely be playing, and you complement me well. So, you’re welcome.”

Alex’s quiet laugh melted into the night. “Modesty suits you.”

“It’s just one of my many attractive qualities.”

Another laugh, and Lee found himself tucking a smile into the palm of his hand. For a moment, comfortable silence settled, distant noises filtering in from outside—a car passing somewhere further away and people talking in the hotel garden, too low to make out more than the rise and fall of Spanish voices.

“Thanks, Lee,” Alex said then, hardly above a whisper.

“I’m not trying to butter you up,” Lee told him. “Just calling it like I see it, yeah?”

“Thanks for talking to me, though. It’s not...” Alex paused. “You didn’t have to. Last I checked, it wasn’t part of

the roommate job description.”

“Nah, but it’s part of the being-a-decent-human-being job description.” Lee dropped his head back onto the pillow, suppressing a yawn. Their alarm would go off at seven thirty, and then it was breakfast, a brief strategy session, and off to a hotel near Valencia so they’d arrive with plenty of time to spare. “Still nervous?”

Alex rolled onto his back. “Yeah. Maybe ten per cent less than before.”

“Think you’ll be able to get some sleep, then?”

A second passed as Alex considered it. “Possibly.”

“Mission accomplished.” Lee should leave it at that. If he didn’t want Alex sticking his nose into Lee’s family business, it was only fair he showed Alex the same courtesy—after all, Alex had pried only a little a few days ago, after Lee’s fleeting need to vent to someone, anyone, about Brandon’s outlandish belief that he deserved to weasel around his daughters when he’d been a grown-arse man leaving a bunch of kids at the mercy of someone he openly called a nutcase. Maybe his regrets would ring a little more true if they hadn’t coincided with Lee being promoted from the Under 21s to the national team.

Anyway. The point was that Lee shouldn’t stick his nose where it didn’t belong. He had approximately zero credentials when it came to counselling others on healthy family dynamics.

And yet.

“Hey, and just so you know...” Lee raised his head to peer at Alex’s side of the room, making out the dim glow of a bare

chest. “Your parents are wrong. You absolutely belong on that pitch—can’t think of a better place for you.”

It was too dark to see Alex’s smile, but it shone in his voice. “Thank you.”

“Yeah, well.” Abruptly self-conscious, Lee dropped his head back down. “Now go to fucking sleep, okay?”

“Okay,” Alex echoed softly, and it took only minutes for his breathing to even out. For once, Lee wasn’t far behind.

Posted by @AlexanderBeaufort (June 14, 5:33 p.m.):

Been trying to convey the finer points of fashion to @LeeJTaylor who maintains that joggers and a plain t-shirt constitute style. Not so. If we win our first match, I get to dress him for the party - suggest outfits, please!



THE GAME WAS A RUSH. Adrenaline bubbling in Alex's blood, the roar of the crowd in his ears, some kind of mathematical magic in how his subconscious predicted the path of the ball and how it would intersect with friend and foe.

And they won.

They *won*.

3:1, with Lee scoring two goals, Jeff one, and Alex himself racking up two assist points. Lee had been right—Alex had been part of the starting eleven. He'd been subbed out some ten minutes before the end for Alfie, more defence-oriented than Alex and brought in to lock down the score and see the game through.

It was a noisy bus ride to the seafront hotel that would host the team for the night, much closer to the stadium than their regular hotel, with individual rooms that allowed for having

partners and family over. Alex's pulse still raced with residual adrenaline and excitement, barely able to sit still for the twenty-minute drive. Next to him, Jeff was rehashing his goal to anyone who would listen in between texting Marco, his youngest brother, who'd come out to watch the game.

Once they arrived, everyone gathered on the beach for a small celebration with visiting partners and other family, their usual curfew suspended for the night. Kieran held a speech while players' kids were running over the sand, the sky a rich black, torches flickering in a gentle breeze from the sea, and a DJ playing lounge music at a low volume. After that, Alex drifted from group to group for a bit, his smile just about tattooed on his face, laughing and clinking bottles of their sponsor's non-alcoholic beer which was either growing on him or it was euphoria altering his taste buds. He ended up chatting with Lewis, who was in a good mood even though as a backup keeper, the only way he'd get even a minute of playtime was if something happened to Oliver.

"It's what I signed up for," Lewis said with a shrug. "Do I want to be out there on the pitch? Fuck yeah. But Kieran didn't invite me along so I'd be a whiny bitch. Right now, my job is to cheer the team on and keep Oliver on his toes 'cause he knows that the moment he falters, I'm gonna be there."

"That's the spirit, mate." Lee had wandered over just in time to catch Lewis's speech and raised his bottle in a salute. His white button-down fit him just the way Alex had hoped it would, short sleeves granting a glimpse of toned biceps and the ink swirling up one upper arm, dark jeans hugging Lee's muscular thighs, naked toes digging into the sand. The warm torchlight gleamed on his face and darkened his eyes. He looked ... well.

Yeah.

Maybe Alex had done a slightly too good job of picking Lee's outfit for his own peace of mind. At least he wasn't the only one to appreciate Lee bypassing his functional wear for once—Marco had given Lee an obvious once-over earlier and winked when he'd noticed Alex catching him in the act. Sometimes, Alex wondered whether Marco suspected that Alex wasn't entirely straight. Just because Alex had no gaydar to speak of didn't make it a myth.

"It's the only fucking spirit there is," Lewis said, toasting Lee, only to frown down at his beer. "Except this tastes like arse. I'd much rather sit a dent into the bench than live on this shite for weeks to come. In the interest of team morale, backup plans like me should get to drink whatever the hell we want."

"It's not *that* bad," Alex said, and both Lee and Lewis turned to him with matching expressions of shock. Lee reached out to feel Alex's forehead, seeming to realise what he'd done at the same time as Alex did. Briefly, they stared at each other, then Lee dropped his hand.

"No fever," Lee said airily. "I reckon the adrenaline's gone to his head."

"Nah," a voice came from behind Alex. "That's just the crazy passed down from his dad."

"Like he'd touch something as common as beer." Alex laughed, making space for Marco to join their group. "Marco, this is Lee and Jeff, which you probably know. Lee, Lewis—this is Marco, Jeff's baby brother."

"Oh, screw you, Alex," Marco said with a light jab of his elbow to Alex's side. "I'm a year younger than you. There is nothing 'baby' about me."

“Once a baby, always a baby.”

“Stop quoting my brother.”

“So tell me, are you old enough now to need a shave?” Alex asked with faux interest. “Or are your cheeks just naturally smooth like that?”

“My *cheeks*, huh,” Marco said with a wink. “Well, wouldn’t you like to know?”

It was testimony to how well Jeff had trained Alex’s immunity to this sort of innuendo because Alex didn’t even pause. “Show me yours and I’ll show you mine.”

“Not in public, baby,” Marco tutted, and Alex was about to respond when he caught Lee looking at him with a strange weight to his regard—not amused like Lewis but something else, something Alex couldn’t place. He met Lee’s eyes with demonstrative ease, ignoring the vague twist of apprehension in his gut.

Lee lowered his gaze, and Alex felt cold all of a sudden. It was nothing. Probably.

Since the moment for a smart retort had come and gone, Alex settled for a chuckle and changed the topic to Marco’s plans for hiking around Spain with some friends over the coming week. Lewis drifted off at some point while Lee hung around, seeming genuinely interested in the multi-day route Marco had picked that partially intersected with a well-known pilgrimage trail.

Jeff wandered over soon after, quieter now than he’d been on the bus, manic energy faded to a happy glow. He slung one arm around Marco’s shoulders and the other around Alex’s, muttering about how it was a great night when he had two of his favourite people right by his side. Jeff limited declarations

of affection to when he was either drunk or bone-deep tired, so Alex nudged their feet together and made cooing noises at him until Jeff batted at Alex's face and called him an insufferable prat.

“But you love me anyway,” Alex stated, and Jeff frowned.

“Nah, you're my charity case.”

“Mean,” Alex told him, but they were both grinning, the day's win still shimmering in the air. Tired, yes, but happy.

“Top of the fucking group,” Jeff said apropos of nothing, and Alex hugged first him and then Marco, and then Lee too because it would have been odd to leave him out. One of Lee's arms curved around the small of Alex's back, cheeks pressed together for a second before they separated, something hot and heavy slithering up Alex's spine that he ignored.

He'd already hugged Lee twice today, after Lee's goals. This third time was no different.

Not long after that, Jeff and Marco trundled off to the room they shared, and then it was just Alex and Lee. Side by side, they gazed at the dwindling party for a minute, most of their teammates already gone to spend time with their loved ones. The sea provided a steady rhythm to the comfortable silence, no stars visible in the overcast sky, and Alex finished off his beer before he cut Lee a glance. “Guess we should call it a night too, huh?”

“Yeah.”

Neither of them moved.

“It'll be strange to have a room to myself for tonight.” Alex tagged a chuckle onto the end of the statement. “Like, it'll be weirdly quiet, especially after this, and winning the match earlier.”

“You calling me noisy?” Lee asked with a hint of humour shining through his voice, and Alex could have taken the easy way out, made a joke about snoring or sleepwalking, and gone off to the room where he’d ditched his bag earlier in the day.

“You’re not,” he said instead. “But there’s just something about having someone else there, you know? Some kind of resonance instead of empty air. I’m starting to see the appeal of white noise machines.”

Lee turned his head to give Alex a slow look, the night robbing his eyes of all colour. “Is this your roundabout way of asking whether we can share like usual?” He didn’t sound opposed to the idea, more curious, even a tinge intrigued.

The question pulled Alex up short because yeah, he kind of was asking, wasn’t he? He sure didn’t need someone to hold his hand so he could fall asleep, but he’d grown kind of used to having Lee settle down next to him.

“I mean ... well.” Alex met Lee’s eyes and lifted one shoulder. “You probably like the quiet, I guess?”

Silence reigned for the gap between one wave and the next. “There’s only one bed,” Lee said then.

“Right, yeah.” Alex nodded and looked away. “Of course, never mind.”

Another beat of silence.

Lee cleared his throat. “It’s huge, though. I don’t mind if you don’t.”

That was—wait, what? Was this some kind of test? Like, if Alex said he minded, he’d come across as ... something. Socially awkward, maybe. Weird about meaningless physical proximity when showering with teammates was a normal

occurrence. Why would Lee want to test him, though? Also, Alex needed to say something *now*.

“I can grab the bedding from my room,” he said.

Maybe it was the right answer because Lee gave him a small, sweet smile. “Yeah, all right.”

Yet neither of them made a move just yet. Lee let his gaze sweep across the beach, and Alex did the same—the dark sand dotted here and there with torches and a few last stragglers, the DJ having eased into slow, hypnotic beats that blended in with the rhythm of the sea.

“Let’s go?” Alex asked quietly, and Lee’s attention drifted back to him almost lazily, the smile still tucked into the corners of Lee’s mouth.

“Let’s go,” he replied just as quietly.



TEMPORARY INSANITY.

Maybe.

Or maybe it wasn’t. Maybe the hopeful twist in Lee’s gut had been right and Alex’s demonstrative ease with Marco did mean something, and the roundabout way Alex had suggested that he and Lee share a room did, too.

It’d be a terrible idea, though. Hooking up with Alex based on the rush of their win and the imaginary buzz of non-alcoholic beer. Truly, *truly* terrible. Their friendship, if that, remained fragile at best, and throwing sex into the mix could easily make it implode.

So, yes. A terrible idea.

Too bad that didn't seem to matter at all when Alex knocked and Lee's traitorous heart skipped a beat.

He pulled the door open and Alex slipped past him into the room, a pillow and a sheet bundled up in his arms. After glancing up and down the corridor to find it empty, Lee closed the door and turned. Alex was spreading his sheet out on the side of the bed that Lee had cleared for him, stripped down to a T-shirt and a pair of boxers, and Lee felt a tad awkward still wearing the clothes Alex had ordered for him some days ago. They fit Lee nicely according to both Alex and Lee's own assessment of himself in the mirror, but they were tighter than what he would have chosen for himself.

Jeff's brother seemed to have appreciated the look. Maybe Alex had too—Lee resembling a bit more the boys Alex would have hung out with at Harrow School.

"You already brushed your teeth?" Lee asked, lingering near the door.

"I'm all done, yeah." Alex pulled off his T-shirt and dropped it by the side of the bed like it was any other night, the two of them on their respective sides of the same room. When he slid under the sheet, Lee switched off the overhead light, leaving only the warm glow of a bedside lamp.

What now?

Slowly, on quiet feet, he rounded the bed and sat down on his side before he started on the buttons of his shirt. Behind him, Alex heaved a dramatic sigh. "And thus ends the one time I see you in clothes that actually flatter you."

Lee turned his upper body, letting the corners of his own mouth tip up in response to Alex's smirk. "Why do you care, anyway?"

“I like to improve the aesthetics of my surroundings,” Alex said grandly. “Call it community service.”

“You’re so full of shit,” Lee told him, and maybe it came out a hint too fond because Alex’s smirk softened into a gentle smile.

“*Hey.*” The protest lacked heat. A moment later, Alex crossed his arms behind his head, biceps distractingly on display, the sheet pooling somewhere around his waist. “It’s kind of nice not to be alone after the day we’ve had. I mean, Jeff’s got his brother and Oliver’s got his wife, and we’ve at least got each other, you know?”

Humour coloured Alex’s words, and it wasn’t anything tangible, didn’t exactly constitute Alex making his opening move, but it left the door ajar for Lee to get a foot in. Facing away from Alex, he finished unbuttoning the shirt and slid it off his shoulders, careful to keep his voice neutral. “So how come you’re single—thought I saw some pictures of you with a girl a while back?”

Alex’s answer was delayed by half a second. “Grace? Yeah, we broke it off some months ago. Things just fizzled, you know.”

Lee got up to drape the shirt over the back of a chair, glancing over his shoulder at Alex before he started undoing his jeans. “And you haven’t dated since?”

“No. Didn’t seem to be much of a point.”

“How come?” Lee folded the jeans and placed them on the chair as well, then turned to face Alex in just a pair of boxer briefs. He thought he saw Alex’s attention dip for a blink of an eye, but it was too quick for Lee to be certain that he wasn’t just seeing what he wanted to see.

Alex shifted slightly. “Well, there are a couple of women my parents want me to meet, so...”

“Your parents want you to meet some women?” Lee repeated blankly, pausing by the side of the bed.

“Not like an arranged marriage,” Alex hurried to say. “Just ... to consider whether there might be something there. Eventually.”

Uh.

“Your parents picked out women you should meet, to see if you’d want to marry one of them? And then—what, your families will go to war together?” Lee knew he was staring at Alex, but seriously, what the fuck. “What *century* is this?”

Alex sat up against the headboard, sudden tiredness etched into his features. “Look, no one is being forced into anything, okay? It’s not that different from friends setting you up on a date with someone.”

“Except friends want you to have a good time, not improve the family gene pool or... I don’t even know. Complement your parents’ apple orchard with some cherry trees that belong to the family of the bride, I guess?” Christ, Lee had known that Alex’s father was a traditionalist based on the sheer amount of snobbery the bloke spouted into any microphone that would hold still for him, but this took tradition and sent it right back to the middle age.

Also, so much for Lee’s little theory that Alex might have been looking for a different kind of celebration.

“There’s nothing wrong with taking into account someone’s family background,” Alex said. “See whether you’ve grown up with the same values.”

Lee snorted. “Sure.” Since he was starting to feel mildly awkward looming by the side of the bed in just his boxers, he sat down at the foot of the mattress, diagonally across from Alex. “Except that’s the kind of thing you only say if your ancestors can be traced back to the sixteenth century.”

It took a second, then Alex looked contrite. “Sorry.”

“No worries. I’m not currently applying for any son-in-law positions with aristocratic families, so it doesn’t exactly matter.” And it didn’t, really—Lee had outgrown any self-consciousness about his family background. Yeah, there’d been a time when he had acted like Brandon was his dad in front of classmates. But then Brandon had left, and then Nan had died, and then Lee had been too bloody busy holding it all together to pretend for anyone other than the girls.

“Still.” Alex rubbed a hand down his face. “I guess I’m just trying to say, you know... Like, arranged marriages were normal not that long ago, right? It’s only recently that at least in Western countries, we decided to leave something as crucial as marriage to an emotion as irrational as love, and we disregard all other factors.”

Lee let the statement sit between them for a moment before he shook his head. “Is that your parents talking, or do you actually believe that crap?”

“Well, if you’re such an expert on love, why are *you* single?” Even though the question carried a challenge, Alex looked tired more than anything else—like his body was just now catching up with the events of the day, adrenaline ebbing away. Lee felt it, too.

“I moved back to the UK, and neither my ex nor I felt like long distance.”

“Doesn’t sound like she was the love of your life,” Alex said, tone still caught halfway between exhausted and challenging. Somehow, the combination slid past Lee’s usual filter and triggered him to correct Alex.

“He.”

Alex’s attention snapped to Lee’s face, the air growing still between them.

“Problem?” Lee asked slowly. He didn’t really think it would be, not after he’d seen how comfortable Alex was with Marco—but Marco wasn’t sharing a room, and presently a bed, with Alex.

“What? No. No!” Alex shook his head, the dim light darkening the hazel of his eyes to a dull brown. “Just reassessing some stuff. You’re ... gay? Or bi?”

Lee kept his gaze on Alex and his chin tilted up. “Gay.”

“Okay.” Another pause, Alex’s frown easing slightly. “So, all right—you’re gay. Which explains why you’re single, I guess.”

“You *guess*?” Lee huffed out a laugh. “I mean, sure, I spend a lot of time surrounded by fit, athletic men. Too bad they tend to be either teammates or opponents, and very likely straight. Not an ideal situation, all in all.”

Ah, shit. Lee needed to get his brain-to-mouth filter checked—it didn’t take much of a mental leap from Lee mentioning attractive teammates to the implication that Alex would be very much included in that category.

Awkward.



“TOO BAD THEY tend to be either teammates or opponents, and very likely straight. Not an ideal situation, all in all.”

Very likely straight.

It was an opening served on a silver platter if Alex had ever heard one. Except ... *God*. He couldn't. He *couldn't*. First off, he'd never come out to anyone, hadn't ever explored his attraction to guys beyond acknowledging it to himself and occasionally indulging in aesthetic appreciation of a fit male body—such as Lee's. Secondly, if Alex dropped the information now... Well. He was essentially in Lee's bed, and it would be hardly surprising if Lee took that the wrong way.

Eventually, maybe, Alex might want to tell Lee about himself. Not tonight, though.

He fished around for a playful smile, found it, and slapped it onto his face. “Okay, so, honesty hour: when you called me pretty boy—did you, in fact, mean it?”

It had been a joke, really just a joke, but Lee's face tightened. He sat up a little straighter, and Alex nearly let his gaze drop to Lee's bare chest. *Eyes up here.*

“Well.” Lee's tone was painfully careful. “I mean... I didn't *not* mean it.”

Alex's world tilted for a blink of an eye. “Hang on. You were flirting with me?”

“Not, like...” Lee briefly met Alex's eyes before his gaze skittered off to the side. “Badly, for one. And I didn't really think... That is... You know.”

Alex was staring, he knew he was, but, just, what? Lee had been *flirting* with him all those years ago, and Alex had taken it as an insult. “Pretty boy, though?” he asked instead of the dozen other questions flitting through his mind.

Lee mumbled something and scuffed a hand down his face, and was that the faintest hint of a blush, barely noticeable against Lee's tanned skin? Lee Taylor, *blushing*?

Alex cleared his throat. "Sorry, what was that?"

Lee sighed and brought his gaze back to Alex, something deliberately brave in its steadiness. "It seemed to work in porn. Which was about the extent of my experience with guys at the time."

A spark of heat slid down Alex's spine. He swallowed before he managed a laugh. "That makes a scary amount of sense."

Lee's smile was framed by tension. "Are you okay with this?"

"You being gay? Yes."

"The fact that I used to fancy you."

Alex's focus tripped over the past tense. Right, yeah. Years ago, a pretty face and a cute smile might have been enough to hold Lee's attention. Now, though? They'd both grown up a bit, and Lee had the looks and money to collect some experience along the way. He'd mentioned an ex, after all.

That was fine.

"Used to?" Alex underpinned the question with a grin and a snooty wave of his hand. "So you don't think I'm pretty anymore, is that it?"

He'd clearly gone for the right tone because Lee seemed to relax for the first time since he'd dropped that tiny bomb on Alex. "You're still plenty pretty, Beaufort. It just so happens that my tastes have evolved to favour guys who look my age."

Oooh, shots fucking *fired*.

Alex let his eyes go wide and soft, bottom lip sticking out a little. “You mean old?”

For one glorious second, Lee stared. Then he shook his head, laughing. “Bloody hell, you’re good. It’s a real loss for the ladies that your parents intend to take you off the market.”

Which landed them right back where they’d started.

The room felt overly warm for even just a sheet, so Alex moved it off his lap and crossed his legs, leaning back against the headboard. Lee’s gaze dipped down to Alex’s bare collarbones and further. Alex was certain Lee wouldn’t have let that happen in the locker room where fit guys in various states of undress were a common sight—Alex was well aware.

He rather liked Lee looking at him, though. Maybe that wasn’t fair when he had no intention of following through.

“Well.” He let one corner of his mouth curl up, and Lee’s focus returned to his face. “Given you’re even more thoroughly off the market, you’re hardly the best judge of what women want.”

“To the contrary.” Lee’s smirk brightened his eyes. “I excel at emulating the female gaze.”

It startled an inelegant snort of laughter out of Alex, the kind that Jeff always strove to tickle out of him. “Okay, fair.”

They were both comfortably quiet for a beat, Lee still perched near the foot of the bed, hazy lamplight washing over his muscular body.

“Also,” Alex said, letting seriousness creep into his tone, “I’m sorry.”

Lee looked genuinely surprised. “What for?”

“Implying earlier that because you’re single, you have no right to a qualified opinion on ... love. Or relationships. It must be a lot harder to find someone when you have to be this careful.”

“It’s...” Lee’s chest rose on an intake of air. “Not easy, yeah.”

“Yeah,” Alex echoed, and how had Lee even met his ex? Also, did he want to come out one day, follow in Ben Jimmer’s footsteps? Was that why he’d returned from Italy to play for Manchester United—to have a guaranteed mentor in his corner?

None of these questions required an urgent answer.

Since it looked like, at least tonight, Lee would volunteer no more than he already had, Alex didn’t fight the pull of a yawn. “Guess we should get some sleep, right?”

“Right.” Hands in his lap, Lee seemed to be waiting for something.

Alex arched an eyebrow. “What?”

“Don’t you want to go back to your own room?”

“Why?”

“Uh.” Lee tilted his head, a small wrinkle between his eyebrows. “Kind of obvious, I’d think?”

Alex blinked at him. “Do you *want* me to go back to my room?”

“Well, I mean ... not necessarily.” Lee’s voice tilted up at the end just enough to hint at a question mark. “Only if it’s more comfortable for you.”

God, Alex should tell him—wipe that air of uncertainty off Lee’s face. But even if Alex had been straight, he rather hoped he wouldn’t have been a dick about it.

“You don’t make me uncomfortable.” *Tell him.* Alex bit down on the inside of his cheek, the sting of pain settling the buzzing in his ears, and no, he just—no. Not tonight. “Also,” he continued, “we’ll go back to regularly sharing a room tomorrow, plus locker rooms, showers, all that stuff. Unless you want me to tip everyone off, I’m not going to change how I act around you.”

It was damn near heartbreaking, the way Lee’s eyes filled with gratitude. “Thank you.”

Bloody hell, now Alex felt like a fraud. Maybe because he was one, kind of—meeting Lee’s honesty with omitted truth.

“No need,” he said quietly and moved on before Lee could respond. “How many people know? About you.”

“On the team? Just Oliver.” Lee smiled slightly, and Christ, he was gorgeous—his plush mouth at odds with the strong line of his jaw and his prominent cheekbones, dark eyes warm. “And you, of course. Beyond that, my sisters and my ex. That’s it.”

Five people, compared to Alex’s total of zero.

“Thank you for trusting me. And” —Alex hesitated— “for talking me down a bit last night. I may owe Kieran for putting us in the same room.”

“Me too.” Lee’s voice was gruff. “And you played well today, by the way. You belong on that pitch, and if your parents disagree? Screw ‘em.”

“It’s not really about how well I play, you know?” Alex tugged the sheet into his lap. “It’s like... Imagine if Prince

Joshua decided to join the Premier League—not quite suited to his role, is it?”

Lee cut Alex a sly look. “You’re no prince, mate.”

“I realise that.” Alex shrugged. “Not entirely sure my parents do, though. My father in particular.”

Lee took a moment to consider it. “Sounds fucking exhausting,” he said then. “My mum may not be in the running for any kind of parenting award, but at least she never tried to take over my life. Why do you put up with it?”

Jeff had asked Alex the same thing, more than once, but with more swear words involved. Alex’s answer was identical, though. “Because they’re the only parents I have.”

Something shifted in Lee’s expression, and when he spoke again, it was low. “Yeah, okay. I get that.”

Maybe he did, in a way that Jeff couldn’t because Jeff’s family might be loud and chaotic, but they’d help each other hide any body, any day.

A silent second spun out between them, then Alex dipped his head with a smile. “Sleep?”

He didn’t wait for a reply before he wiggled down the mattress and pulled the sheet up to somewhere around his belly, then sent Lee an expectant look.

With a small delay, Lee slid under his own sheet, and the bed really was massive, leaving plenty of space between them. Alex had shared beds with Jeff before during away games, so really, this wasn’t all that out of the ordinary. Except... Except tonight, sharing had been a conscious choice rather than circumstances beyond their control. Still, though. Nothing that unusual. Most of their teammates had partners or other family over because it wasn’t the night to be alone, not when the roar

of the crowd was still ringing faintly in Alex's ears. It presented a counterpoint to the familiar sounds of Lee fluffing up his pillow and settling on his side even though Alex had learned that he'd be on his back come morning.

"Good night," Alex mumbled.

Lee flicked off the bedside lamp, plunging the room into darkness. "Good night, Alex." The words were laced with a new kind of warmth, or maybe just an openness that hadn't existed before. It wasn't entirely balanced, though. Not while Alex was holding back.

Some other time, maybe.

He closed his eyes and waited for blackness to seep in around the corners of his mind, extinguishing all thought.

Lee wasn't in the habit of waking up before the alarm, but then, he also wasn't in the habit of sharing a bed with Alex.

Slowly, careful not to jostle the mattress, Lee raised himself up on one elbow to study Alex's face, relaxed in sleep, lips slightly parted and brown hair a little tousled. He really was beautiful—no wonder since he stemmed from a long tradition of selective breeding.

More than that, though, Lee *liked* him, liked his smart mouth and subtle sense of humour, how bloody hard he must have worked to be here because no one landed a spot on the national team based on daddy's clout. Alex's family had wealth to match their titles, so he could have chosen to spend his life wasting his parents' money. Instead, he was here. Had clawed his way through the youth system just like Lee had, actively defying his father's wishes while Lee's mum just hadn't cared, too busy with her own crap.

With a measured exhalation, Lee turned away to slide out of bed. On silent feet, he padded over to the half-open balcony door, sunlight slanting through where they'd left the curtains partially open last night, painting diagonal lines across the floor.

The air outside was still fresh and tasted of salt, the sun-flooded balcony granting a sweeping view of the beach and the sea beyond. Lee grabbed a blanket off one of the lounge chairs and wrapped it around himself before he propped his elbows on the railing, letting his thoughts flow in time with the waves.

They'd won.

Japan was next.

Japan ranked quite a bit worse than the Netherlands, so it should be an easier match. On paper, at least.

Alex, still asleep in Lee's bed.

Pretty boy. What *madness* had prompted Lee to admit that he'd found his inspiration in porn?

It was a bloody miracle Alex had taken it as well as he had. He had, though, and Lee exhaled through a flash of embarrassed heat. *Moving on.*

Moving on—to the realisation that if Alex got caught sneaking out of Lee's room, it would be a hard one to explain given they were a tad old for sleepovers. It could easily lead to someone goading Alex into clarifying that he fancied women, not men, and then Lee might be forced to claim the same to circumvent suspicion. Fuck no. He wasn't ready to come out, but he'd rather avoid actively lying.

He needed to wake Alex up, send him back to his own room.

After returning inside, Lee pulled the curtains open to let the light in. Alex made a small, protesting noise when sunshine washed over his face, but rather than wake up like Lee had hoped, he rolled away, presenting Lee with the smooth curve of his back.

Well.

That left Lee with three options, as far as he could see. One, water; two, be loud; three, shake Alex awake. As Alex deserved neither water nor being yelled at, door three it was. Lee perched on the empty side of the bed, briefly hesitating before he reached out to lightly touch Alex's shoulder.

"Hey."

No reaction.

"Alex?"

A deep breath, Alex's shoulder shifting under Lee's touch. Quickly, Lee withdrew his hand, curling it into a loose fist against his stomach. Alex rolled over a moment later, blinking up at Lee through hazy eyes.

"Time to get up," Lee said softly, refusing to feel shy about their proximity.

"Yeah?" Alex's voice was sleep-rough, different from their usual morning routine of Alex having been awake for some fifteen minutes already, thrumming with energy, by the time Lee rolled out of bed.

"Yeah." Lee inhaled and glanced away. "You should sneak back to your room before everyone gets up."

"Sneak back to my room?" Alex's smile, still tired around the edges, carried a hint of mischief. "Are you ashamed of me, Lee?"

"You're hilarious," Lee told him, dry as chalk.

"Thank you. Not enough people appreciate that about me." With a yawn, Alex sat up, the sheet falling down to his lap. When he swung his legs out of bed and got up, clad in only his

boxers, nothing indicated that he felt any more self-conscious around Lee than he had before.

“Think your sense of humour is like marmite, mate—an acquired taste.”

Alex threw a grin over his shoulder. “Aww, *man*. Now that’s just mean.”

“Mean is literally my brand,” Lee said, and it was funny how even two weeks ago, they couldn’t have joked like that.

“And here I thought your brand was built around making goalkeepers cry.”

“Same thing, isn’t it?”

“Valid.” Alex pulled on his T-shirt and grabbed his keycard and phone off the bedside table, then moved to gather his pillow and the sheet. Should Lee get up to walk him to the door? Probably not—it might imply something they weren’t. He stayed on the bed.

“See you at breakfast, I guess?” He wasn’t sure why he’d made it a question. “Thank you for ... you know. Being cool about things.”

“Not something that requires a thank you,” Alex said firmly, mouth twisting into a frown. He hesitated for a second, then smiled again. “See you in a bit.”

Lee smiled back. “Inevitably.”

After a furtive look up and down the corridor to make sure the coast was clear, Alex slipped out of the room and quietly closed the door. Once he was gone, Lee got up from the bed, feeling strangely awake, even a little jittery. Meditation and a shower, and he’d be fine.

Alex beat him to breakfast, already nursing a cup of coffee by the time Lee made it onto the terrace. When Alex caught sight of him, he waved and pointed at the only spot still available at the table he shared with Jeff and Marco. Since Oliver wasn't there yet, probably still shacked up with Sanna, Lee made his way over and dropped into the free chair.

"Saved you a seat," Alex declared with an air of grandeur that implied it was a feat deserving of a medal.

"Did you risk your life defending it?" Lee asked, leaning forward with fake fascination.

"I'd rather not go into detail, if it's all the same," Alex said. "Too traumatic."

"Make sure to work through it with Richard." Which reminded Lee that he needed to schedule his next session with the team's psychologist. He appreciated the offer of professional support in unpacking the emotions that came with a high-pressure event like the World Cup, even if Lee sure as hell wasn't going to let Richard dig too deeply. While Lee liked him, it was still the Football Association that paid Richard's bills.

Jeff interrupted his conversation with his brother to make a cooing noise. "*Look* at you two." He flashed a cheesy smile. "It's like watching two toddlers flirt on a playground."

If it had been anyone other than Jeff, Lee would have wondered whether Alex had blabbed. It was Jeff, though, so Lee shot Alex a brief glance that was met with a tiny headshake and a smile. Thought so.

Before either Lee or Alex could comment, Marco jumped in with, "Well, you'd know, wouldn't you? What with how you've never outgrown the toddler mindset."

“Watch it, young man.” Jeff’s sternest voice wasn’t very stern at all. “One, respect your elders. And two, I lost my virginity when you were still in diapers.”

“If that’s your measure of maturity, I rest my case.”

“You *rest* your *case*?” Jeff shook his fork at Marco. “What are you—fifty?”

“I’m a law student. We age prematurely.” Marco’s eyebrow game was truly commendable. He was also a reasonably attractive bloke if a tad too waifish for Lee’s taste, and if last night’s appreciative once-over had been any indication, he wouldn’t be opposed to a hook-up. Not that Lee had any intention of messing around with Jeff’s little brother, but ... Christ, it had been a while since he’d got laid, and spending a considerable portion of his waking hours around Alex wasn’t helping.

“I’m a law student,” Jeff parroted, his mocking tone at odds with the fondness in his eyes. “Look how smart and important I am!” Before Marco could get in a response, Jeff turned to Alex. “Hey, speaking of pricks! Namely mine.”

“Do I want to know?” Alex asked Lee with overstated apprehension colouring his voice.

“There is no good way to finish a statement that starts with Jeff’s prick,” Lee said.

“Amen, brothers,” Marco said.

“Very funny, Huey, Dewey, and Louie.” Jeff chewed his scrambled eggs with pointed boredom, swallowed, and addressed Alex again. “Back to the topic of pricks, though. Alex, I wanted to check—thought I might invite Isabella to one of our games.”

“Yeah?” Alex looked surprised. “Didn’t realise you stayed in touch.”

“Isabella?” Marco asked.

“Met her at a dinner party that Alex’s mum threw, we got talking.” Jeff nodded at Alex. “I know her family is a bit like yours, so anything I should know before I invite her?”

“Well.” Alex stopped to thank a server for delivering an omelette, and Lee took the opportunity to order a coffee. “Don’t think her folks are as bad as mine,” Alex continued once the server had moved away again. “They don’t hate football, so that’s something.”

“Oh, good.” Jeff placed a hand on his heart. “I didn’t want to risk being tarred and feathered for besmirching their daughter.”

“That’s much more American,” Alex told him. “In the UK, we get the job of public shaming done by means of the stocks and the pillory.”

“You’re a great comfort,” Jeff told him.

“You know,” Marco put in, directed at Alex, “you’d think that someone who enjoys publicity as much as your dad would be all over the idea of a son who plays for Queen and country.”

Alex sighed. “I think the problem is as much with it being football as it’s about the fact that I chose it for myself.”

“Oh, yes.” Jeff nodded sagely, lips pursed. “How very dare you live your own life?”

“Blasphemy,” Marco agreed while Lee stayed quiet, not sure whether his friendship with Alex was already at the stage

where he could openly criticise Alex's parents. Then again, he'd done it before, so...

"Yeah, mate," he told Alex. "It's like you have free will or something."

Jeff gasped. "Surely not."

Alex shot them a flat look. "You're all hilarious."

"We try," Jeff said modestly.

From there, the conversation moved on to the four group-stage matches scheduled for the day, most notably Belgium against Portugal. Lee was glad to see that by the time his coffee arrived, all traces of sadness had faded from Alex's expression. It didn't mean anything—or if it did, then only that he was coming to consider Alex a friend and preferred to see him happy rather than sad.

Nothing to it. Certainly no cause for concern.

Once more, but with conviction.



POSTED BY @AlexanderBeaufort (June 17, 4:27 p.m.):

Brilliant start, couldn't be happier! (Please hold your EARL-y day jokes, thank you.) Next up: Japan!



THINGS CHANGED BETWEEN THEM.

It was in the details, like how they sometimes brushed their teeth side by side now, talking through the toothpaste foam, or how Alex no longer stepped out of the room when his father called to criticise Alex's eloquence in interviews. After calls like that, Lee would draw Alex into a conversation about something easy, even silly—like the top three things they

would eat if nutrition guidelines didn't matter. But it was also in the big things, like how they talked freely now, how well they combined during practice games and had taken to sharing a table for four with Jeff and Oliver more often than not.

And it was in how Alex was fully aware of Lee's attention on him and didn't do a whole lot to discourage it.

He should have. But every time he glanced over his shoulder and caught Lee looking, especially in the mornings when Alex was choosing his outfit for breakfast and Lee's defences seemed more translucent, a little thrill travelled up Alex's spine. So he pretended not to notice and kept doing what he was doing.

Until the fourth time it happened.

Alex was buttoning up his jeans when he noticed Lee's gaze tracking the movement. The other times, Alex had simply acted like he hadn't noticed but something possessed him to still his hands and smirk. "My eyes are up here."

Lee flinched, blushing. "Fuck, I'm sorry." Still sprawled in bed, he rolled onto his back and stared up at the ceiling. "Not trying to make this weird, I swear. Just ... been a while, you know."

The blush was sweet. The way Lee seemed downright uncomfortable wasn't, so Alex waited until Lee shot him a glance from underneath his lashes, then he unpacked his brightest smile. "Why would it be weird? You're gay, this is a safe space, and I am the product of a family that selects spouses for desirable physical attributes, among other things. Plus" —he leaned forward and aimed for a conspiratorial whisper— "I'm a professional athlete. The body comes with the territory."

A momentary frown slid over Lee's face before he shook his head, smiling back. "Way to objectify yourself."

"It's a gift."

"Sure seems like it." Lee rubbed a self-conscious hand over the morning stubble dusting his cheeks, face still a little red. "You know that's not true though, right?"

Alex paused in his consideration of two T-shirts that were admittedly quite similar. "That I'm working hard for this body?"

"That you're, like ... no more than a product of your family." Lee looked distinctly wary, as though he already regretted saying anything in the first place, yet he pushed on regardless. "You're more than just some combination of DNA that your parents ordered from Stork Ltd. Like, *you* chose to play football and made it all the way to here, and I doubt your dad's got much of a sense of humour to speak of, and it wasn't some genetic mishap that meant you're fine with my sexuality—that's all you."

Tell him.

Alex selected one of the T-shirts, just for something to do with his hands, and pulled it on. "You make me sound a lot cooler than I am."

"For someone who's got everything going for him, you sure suffer from selective imposter syndrome."

"Early conditioning." Alex affected a devil-may-care grin that Lee was unlikely to buy and strove for a bad impression of his father. "Speak more succinctly, Alexander. Do not slouch. Modulate your voice—children should be seen, not heard. Comb your hair. Straighten your collar. Stop being so ... *you.*"

The corners of Lee's mouth pulled down. "Well, fuck your dad. What about your mum?"

Alex bit down on the impulse to defend his father. "She's not the kind of person who's given to displays of emotion. Kind of just follows my father's lead, you know? I assume it's how she was raised, too."

"So what? If you decide to have kids, it's your bloody responsibility to treat them right."

Alex wasn't sure they were still talking about him, or at least not exclusively. He sat down on the edge of his bed and studied Lee across the gap—sprawled in bed, on his side with the sheet pushed down to his waist, morning sun lighting sparks his dark eyes. Alex took a measured breath. "Was your mum ever in therapy?"

Lee's brow crinkled. "Yeah. Not until I hit twenty, though. That's when I started reading up on some stuff and realised that she ticked just about every box for bipolar disorder. Was just harder to see it behind the substance abuse."

Okay, wow. Alex tucked his hands between his thighs and lowered his voice. "That's people who swing between mania and depression, right?"

"There's two types." Lee sat up, his gaze skirting past Alex. "Second type swings between depression and baseline, with shorter periods of hypomania—so the mania is not as severe and doesn't last as long. Like, no more than four days." He sounded calm, almost as though he was reciting information that didn't concern him. "Type I, on the other hand, tends to spend a bit more time at baseline and a little less in a depressive state. But it's all averages, right?"

“Right,” Alex echoed softly, and Lee shot him a vague smile that faded almost immediately.

“Yeah. But when a manic episode hits? It’s longer—like, a week and more. So the person doesn’t sleep, and stays out all night partying, and talks like they’re a verbal machine gun. And they run around buying four new fridges because the door on ours doesn’t close properly.”

Jesus, and Alex had been complaining about how Daddy hadn’t praised him enough as a child.

“What did you do with the other three fridges?” Alex asked after a moment. It must have been the right reaction because the tension around Lee’s mouth relaxed.

“My grandmother got a couple of neighbours together, and they put them in the back of a van and drove them back to the store.” This time, the smile touched Lee’s eyes. “She was not the kind of lady who took no for an answer.”

“You really loved her, didn’t you?”

“She was the one adult in our lives that the girls and I could always count on.”

“You were eight when she took you in, right? After your stepdad packed up and left?” Alex countered Lee’s surprised look with a shrug. “Hey, I listen when people tell me things.”

“Duly noted.” Lee nodded. “And yeah. My mum was around, mind, and she was a normal mum some of the time, and some of the time she wasn’t. When Nan died, I was thirteen, and it just... There wasn’t anyone else who could take care of the girls whenever Mum took a trip to Crazytown, so...” His self-deprecating shrug just about broke Alex’s heart. “There went my good grades.”

“Because you were a thirteen-year-old boy who was raising his baby sisters,” Alex said. “And, oh! Also training hard enough to go fucking professional.”

“Football was my happy place.” Another self-deprecating shrug. “Back then, it was the only thing that made me feel good about myself, you know? Like, school sucked because I didn’t do the homework, and my sisters were eight and five, so I was mostly just focused on screwing up a little less than our mum did. Make sure they had a proper breakfast and something clean to wear, that sort of thing.”

“You’re amazing.” Under normal circumstances, Alex would have reviewed and edited the words before they slipped out. The way Lee ducked his head to hide a smile prevented Alex from wanting to take it back.

“You really think so?” Lee asked, and it wasn’t coy, just surprised and cautiously pleased.

“Yes.” Alex waved one hand in the air. “And your sisters clearly think the world of you.”

“I’m probably for them what Nan was for me.” Lee shook his head, a smile still playing around the corners of his mouth. “Anyway, enough about me—let’s get some breakfast.”

Alex still had so, so many questions, like how Lee had managed to stay sane and whether he was afraid that he or his sisters had the same disposition, whether he’d ever tried to find his biological father. He watched Lee roll out of bed and pause to stretch on his way into the bathroom. Alex realised he was staring at the muscular expanse of Lee’s back and pulled his attention away.

“Hey, just ... your mum. Is she stable now?”

“Mostly.” Lee glanced over his shoulder, a small crease between his eyebrows. “She’s on a combination of meds and therapy, and for the most part, yeah. She’s pretty stable. It’s just hard, you know. Trusting that it’ll last when it’s like... I know she’s ill. But it still feels like she failed me because every time—when I was young—every time after an episode, when she went back to normal... I never stopped hoping that it would last. Stupid, yeah?”

Oh, for heaven’s *sake*.

Alex rose from the bed, crossed the two steps that separated him from Lee, and drew him into a hug. It took a second for Lee to relax into it—just long enough for Alex to notice that Lee was warm against him, all smooth skin and hard muscle. Then Lee wrapped a tentative arm around Alex’s back, and for a couple of seconds, they simply stood like that, easy silence spinning out around them.

“Not stupid,” Alex said eventually. “Just human.”

When they pulled apart, Lee’s smile was noticeably wobbly. “That’s me—human.”

“You and me both,” Alex told him, throat a little tight with words he still held back because this wasn’t the moment.

Another time. Tonight maybe, or tomorrow. Actually, it might be better to wait until after the Japan match, to avoid any distractions. They’d only just settled into this new normal, after all, and things were bound to change again once Lee learned that Alex wasn’t straight either. Alex wasn’t ready for that. Not just yet.

So he fished for a grin, pinched Lee’s waist, and ordered him to get a move on because “coffee is a thing of beauty, Lee,

and if you aren't ready to leave in the next ten minutes, you're on your own."

"Your addiction is quite unbecoming," Lee said primly, but his answering smile was soft in a way that made Alex's stomach give an odd little lurch. He took a step back so he wouldn't take one forward. It was only when Lee had disappeared into the bathroom that Alex felt his heartbeat slow to a normal rate.

Fuck no. Developing an inconvenient infatuation didn't mesh with the path laid out for him since birth—and so he wouldn't.



JAPAN.

Nine minutes into the match, England took the lead off a corner kick—Jeff circled the ball into the penalty area, and then Alex's header grazed the fingertips of the Japanese goalkeeper but went *in*. His first fucking goal for the national team. Alex was still blinking through his disbelief, adrenaline a dizzying rush in his ears, when Lee barrelled into him, grin so blinding that for a moment, it was all Alex could see.

Eighteen minutes later, Oliver plucked a shot out of the air and threw it to Jeff, who started for the Japanese goal. With three defenders swarming him, he sent the ball to Alex on his right, and Alex found Lee on the edge of the box. The keeper stood no chance.

"There's another forty-five minutes to this game," Kieran told them during the half-time break, voice raised to carry over the happy buzz. "Don't let your guard down, lads. Let's take it home."

Sixty-second minute. Penalty for Japan—a tough decision but not entirely unfair, Finley having stopped a Japanese striker about to break through. Goal for Japan, Oliver’s face like thunder, and England was one man down because Finley had seen a second yellow card for his foul. Collectively, they lost control of the game, Japan crashing up against their defence lines again and again. Oliver, who kept playing at his usual level, was the sole reason Japan scored just one additional goal.

A draw. It felt like a loss.

They’d held on to the top spot of their group, but by the barest margin—instead of prematurely bagging one of two tickets to the round of sixteen, Morocco and the Netherlands were lurking just one point behind them. Even Japan still had a chance if they won their next game.

It was quiet after the match, players slouched on the benches, some with their heads tipped back against the lockers, eyes closed. Alex set both elbows on his thighs and stared at the floor, stomach heavy. They’d come so fucking *close* to sealing the deal.

“All right, lads.” Kieran didn’t need to raise his voice this time—you could have heard a pin drop. “Just so we’re clear, I’m not disappointed because we walked away with just the one point. I’m disappointed because you weren’t outclassed today, but out-spirited. Because you got smug. Because you thought you had it in the bag, and now everyone’s going to ask whether this team is simply too young, too inexperienced, when I *know* what you lot are fucking capable of.”

A few players stirred. No one spoke up.

Kieran sighed. “Okay, that’s enough for tonight, I think. Bus is waiting, so off we go. Let’s get a good night’s rest and

leave all further analysis for tomorrow.”

Slowly, one by one, Alex’s teammates rose from the benches, grabbed their things, and filed out of the room. Alex stayed seated until Jeff walked past him and, without even looking, grabbed Alex’s elbow and hauled him up and along.

“Move now, mope later,” Jeff ordered.

Alex caught Lee’s eyes from across the room, Lee’s face grim yet resolved as he got up and followed them out, just a step behind. It might have been coincidental, but Alex was glad for Jeff right beside him and Lee not far behind, especially once they exited the building to cameras and flashes.

After the first match, the British press had loved the team in general and Alex in particular. While he hadn’t scored, his two assists along with a high number of completed passes had garnered him more than his fair share of attention, and a few friends from school and his childhood had seemed to delight in sending him some of the more ridiculous headlines. Titles like *‘No More Earl Gray: The World Cup Begins!’* and *‘Earl-y Days Yet But We’re Off to a Great Start’* had made Alex cringe while Lee had laughed long and hard before he’d asked why Alex was only an earl when his dad was a duke, and did those titles deteriorate from generation to generation until all that was left was an everyday sucker?

The press wouldn’t love them after this. And Alex’s father would take great pleasure in pointing it out.

There was very little chatter on the bus as it took them to that night’s hotel. Those who had someone waiting for them slunk off immediately while the handful of them who didn’t lingered in the lobby for a few minutes longer, until Jeff broke

away with a bright, “Well, everyone, so that sucked. See you losers tomorrow.”

Alex glanced at Lee and mumbled his own version of a goodnight before he trailed Jeff to the lift, Lee following them a moment later. The three of them rode up in silence and exited into a hallway lined with stone tiles and yellow-washed walls. “So,” Jeff said when he stopped in front of his room. “Guess we’ll just have to win the next one, then.” Like it was nothing.

Lee moved further along the corridor to his own room. “Solid plan,” he commented in passing, and Alex tried to think of something funny to say, but his brain was stuffed with cotton, throat still tight with disappointment.

Bloody hell, it's not the end of the fucking world.

He’d be fine. He just needed some sleep to clear his head, that was all. And yeah, he kind of wished he weren’t on his own tonight when he could greatly benefit from Lee’s ability to calmly dissect Alex’s fears and doubts. But life was not a jukebox, and Alex was a bloody grownup who didn’t need a nightlight or someone to check for monsters under the bed.

Except when Alex went to unlock his own room, Lee sent him a sharp look, a curious tilt to the curve of his mouth hinting at a question. Maybe Alex wasn’t the only one who could use the company.

So he took his time digging the keycard out of his pocket, waving Jeff off with a smile. And then it was just Alex and Lee left in the hallway.

They were quiet for a beat, watching each other, before the corners of Lee’s lips tugged up. “You’ll be over in a few?”

Alex inhaled, lungs expanding. “Yeah.”

After they parted with a shared smile, Alex sped through a shower and brushing his teeth, then gathered what he needed for the night. He peeked out into the hallway before dashing over to Lee's door. It took just a second for Lee to let him in, and Alex got momentarily stuck on how Lee hadn't bothered with more than a pair of briefs after the shower he must have taken, smelling of the hotel's lavender soap when Alex brushed past him as he stepped into the room.

"What took you so long?" Lee asked after he'd closed the door. At this point, Alex knew him so well that the gently teasing grin registered before Alex even glanced at Lee's expression.

"Some of us have hygienic standards," Alex said with a haughty sniff.

"Some of us are slow."

"Just because *you* shower faster than the average Ramones song..."

Lee's shrewd look came with a tinge of surprise.

"What?" Alex dropped his stuff on the side of the bed that Lee had cleared for him.

"Does your dad know you listen to American punk rock?"

"The number of things that my dad doesn't know about me could fill an encyclopaedia." Such as the fact that Alex had no intention of emulating his father's political engagement at any point in the near or distant future, or the nature of Alex's sexuality given his dad still maintained that Prince Joshua's coming out some years ago should have been a private matter, not to be disclosed to the public and certainly not *flaunted* for the world to see.

“It’s truly inspiring,” Lee said, “to spend time with someone whose daddy issues match my mummy ones.”

“Nah, I think you win.” Alex let the corners of his mouth curve up. “My father would never dream of buying four fridges—that’s what hired help is for. Honestly, I’m not convinced he knows the way to the kitchen.”

“Do you?” Lee asked with a sly look, and Alex surprised himself when he laughed.

“I sure do. It’s where the chocolate lives.”

“Hardly part of your nutrition plan.”

“What’s life without the occasional cheat day?”

“Not what you should say to whatever wife your parents pick for you.”

“Oh, fuck you very much, Lee.”

“Anytime, honey.”

They were both grinning now, Alex sitting on the edge of the bed, Lee still near the door. The crisp night air that streamed in through a gap between the curtains smelled of pine trees, and it wasn’t until Alex took another deep breath that he noticed the tightness in his chest had dissipated.

Something might have shown on his face because Lee’s grin softened into a smile. “Feel better?”

“Surprisingly, yes.” Alex smiled back. “You?”

“A bit, yeah. Still sucks, mind.”

“It does.” Alex let it hang between them for a sobering moment, then he exhaled and shifted up on the bed. “Hey. There’s something, uh…” *Come on.* “Something I’ve been meaning to tell you.”

Lee's brow puckered as he crossed his arms. "Cryptic much?"

"Nothing bad," Alex rushed to assure him. "Just ... personal. And I don't really..." He halted, and fucking hell, it wasn't rocket science, was it? *Just say the bloody words.* Except he'd never done so before, and tonight kind of sucked, and it wasn't like he needed to tell Lee right this very moment. "You know what? Perhaps not tonight. Tomorrow's a new day, though, so remind me to tell you in the morning."

"Still cryptic," Lee informed him, but his expression relaxed, arms dropping to his side as he crossed to the other side of the bed and sat down gingerly. He made a point of looking elsewhere when Alex tugged off his T-shirt and slid under the sheet.

"Thanks for letting me kip here," Alex said softly, partly to draw Lee's gaze. It was silly and maybe even a little unfair, the way he wanted Lee's attention on him.

"It's not a hardship." Lee's voice was light. He still evaded Alex's eyes as he stretched out on his side of the bed, though, a brief moment of silence settling between them that Alex couldn't quite read.

"Thanks anyway," he said.

Lee rolled onto his side, eyes warm. "Don't worry about it, yeah? It's nice not to be alone after a match like that. Reminds me of when my sisters would sneak into my bed because they'd had a bad dream—mostly Shelly 'cause Kira was too cool for that kind of shit even when she was four."

"*I'm* too cool for that shit," Alex told him, and the corners of Lee's mouth quirked.

"Yet here you are."

“Yet here I am,” Alex agreed.

With a chuckle, Lee twisted his upper body to reach for the lamp on the bedside table. And if Alex’s focus snagged on where a trail of dark hair disappeared into the waistband of Lee’s briefs? Well, no one had to know.

“Night,” Alex murmured into the sudden darkness that flooded the room.

“To a brand new day,” Lee replied, and yeah, amen to that. A brand new day when Alex would finally tell Lee—really, he would. First thing in the morning, no more excuses.

Just ... not tonight.

All mornings were evil, but some mornings were more evil than others.

Today was a particularly evil one—Lee didn't need to even open his eyes to make that call. Maybe it was because the alarm had cut right into a deep sleep phase, or maybe it was because yesterday's match had encased his bones in lead. Either way? *No*.

The alarm shut off. Ah, blessed silence.

“Lee.”

He grumbled and rolled away from the annoying voice.

“*Lee*.”

“Piss off.”

“I know the passcode to your Kindle,” Alex chirped, laughter tucked into his tone. “And I'm not afraid to use it.”

Like Lee cared. At this point, the only reason he refused to share his reading habits with Alex was because a man needed to maintain some air of mystery. “And I repeat, piss off.”

“Now that's not very nice.” A few seconds later, the mattress shifted as Alex got up and, by the sounds of it, ducked into the bathroom. Running water, Alex spitting some

toothpaste into the sink, then the sound of his bare feet padding back into the main room and towards the window. Lee slid one eye open to check on him—just in time to get a brutal dose of sunshine when Alex threw the curtains wide open. For a moment, Lee blinked at Alex’s lean silhouette, light flowing around his figure.

With a groan, Lee sat up. “Why do you hate me?”

“I *adore* you.” Alex’s voice was drenched in sugar. “You are the yin to my yang, the butter to my toast, the Romeo to my Juliet.”

Lee fought a smile. “Meaning we’re obsessed with each other and will die at the end of the story?”

“But oh, the poems they’ll write about us!” Alex fanned himself with a hand, eyes dancing with impish humour. He exuded energy, his bare chest tapering down to a narrow waist, muscular thighs that Lee wanted to bite.

It was too early for this. Lee rubbed a hand down his face. “What time is it?”

“Six twenty.”

“And why, pray tell, did you set your alarm for six twenty?” Given the circumstances, Lee considered his tone remarkably polite. “We were up past midnight and breakfast isn’t until eight. Right now, we’re probably the only two idiots in this hotel who are awake, staff exempted.”

“That’s kind of the point.” For a split second, a crack appeared in Alex’s cheerful facade, granting Lee a momentary impression of something nervous hanging around him. Right—there was something Alex had wanted to tell Lee.

“Oh, *fine*.” Lee heaved a dramatic sigh. “Let me just splash some water on my face so I feel a little more human, yeah?”

“Course.” Alex turned away when Lee rolled out of bed, as though he wanted to avoid meeting Lee’s eyes. He’d said it was nothing bad though.

“I’ll be just a minute.” With that, Lee closed the door to pee, wash his hands, and brush his teeth. The mirror showed that he’d worked up a solid tan from the Spanish sun, and unlike some of his teammates, his Italian heritage let him circumvent the lobster stage.

When he came back into the room, Alex was sitting on the bed, his sheet already folded next to him. The hotel lay silent around them, and without even meaning to, Lee lowered his voice. “Y’know, this whole thing feels like being on a spaceship—not just us, but the entire team. Like we’re in this weird, isolated bubble, floating in space, and once in a while, we touch down to play a match, take a few selfies with some fans, and then we’re off again.”

Alex flashed him a smile. “I think our food’s marginally better, but, yeah. So I guess that makes us cabinmates?”

“And friends, I hope.”

“Definitely friends.” Alex got up from the bed, then didn’t quite seem to know what to do with himself, curling the fingers of one hand into the hem of his T-shirt. He must have put it back on while Lee had been in the bathroom—a loss in terms of the room’s aesthetic appeal, but such was life.

“There’s something you wanted to tell me?” Lee prompted, and Alex nodded quickly, taking a step closer to Lee.

“Yeah. Promised myself I would, so...” He trailed off, frowning. When it became clear that nothing else was immediately forthcoming, Lee shot him a grin.

“Let me guess—you are, in fact, Messi’s secret love child?”

Alex snorted, shoulders loosening a little. “He’d have been, like, thirteen. Creepy much?”

“Ronaldo, then. He’s a couple of years older, isn’t he?”

“Still creepy.”

“Well, there goes your chance to renounce your father.”

“Tempting,” Alex said. “Too bad reality isn’t a lunch menu where you get to pick your preferred version.”

“Unless you’re my mum off her meds.” It might be a little too early in the day for jokes like that, but Lee had always relied on humour to dull the sharp edges of a painful subject. “So, anyway. Shoot.”

“Right.” Alex knotted his hands in front of his stomach. “So, yeah.”

Okay, this was getting just a little concerning. “You said it was nothing bad, right?”

“It’s not!” Alex’s gaze slid to Lee and away again. “I just don’t know how to, you know, actually say this.”

“How about an interpretive dance?” Lee kept his tone deliberately light, smiling, and for a moment, Alex stared at him with wide eyes. Then, suddenly, Alex raised his chin and took the three steps that separated them.

“Fuck it.”

With that, he pushed himself into Lee’s space, abruptly *close*, and pulled him into a rough kiss. *God*. It was heat and Alex’s fingers digging into Lee’s shoulder, a warm hand against the back of Lee’s neck and the taste of toothpaste on

Alex's lips. Lee twisted closer and got one hand under Alex's T-shirt to grab his waist, running his tongue along the seam of Alex's lips.

Alex's fluttery moan brought him back to his senses.

Lee stumbled back. "What the fuck?"

Alex slow-blinked, lips and cheeks red. It very nearly undid Lee, and he took another step back because no, *fuck* no.

"What the actual *fuck*?" he asked again.

"I..." Alex swallowed, staring at Lee as though words were beyond him.

"I'm not your gay fucking experiment." Pun unintended, and bloody hell, Lee needed to *think*. He wanted Alex, yeah, sure. But that didn't make it a good idea.

"That's not..." Alex inhaled sharply. "I'm bi. So."

"You're..."

Bi. Alex was bi? Since when?

"Oh yeah?" Lee narrowed his eyes. "Since fucking *when*?"

"Since ... forever. Like, years."

"Years," Lee repeated blankly, and did that mean—back when they'd first met and Lee had bumbled through his first attempt at flirting with a guy, did that mean that Alex actually might have been receptive if Lee had got it right? And did it matter?

"Yeah." Alex sounded slightly more confident now, rolling his shoulders back as he held Lee's eyes. "Just never acted on it."

“You’ve been—you’re bi. And you’re telling me only now.” Lee crossed his arms in front of his chest, and fuck, he felt naked wearing just his boxer briefs, especially when kissing Alex was something he might have imagined before, just once or twice when he’d been too tired to control the direction of his thoughts. Not like this, though. “I was so fucking open with you, yeah? And you couldn’t even be bothered to tell me that it’s okay for me to look because there’s an actual *chance*?”

“I’ve never told *anyone*,” Alex protested. “It’s not exactly easy, okay?”

Lee huffed. “Trust me, I know it’s not.”

“Maybe you’re just braver than me.”

“Yeah, maybe I am.”

Alex pulled his bottom lip between his teeth, and Lee hated that his attention got stuck on that, if only for a moment. “Everyone has their own pace, right?”

“Right.” Lee shook his head, anger coating the edges of his vision. “And if yours is stuck on glacial, okay, fair enough. Doesn’t give you the right to just plant one on me.”

“You kissed me back.”

Lee had. Because how could he have resisted?

“I made a mistake.”

“A mistake.” Alex narrowed his eyes, voice tinted with disbelief. “Felt like you were pretty into it.”

Fuck you.

“It’s been *months* since I got laid. At this point, I’d snog a moderately handsome wall if it had decent oral hygiene.”

“Screw you,” Alex said, and he had the actual audacity to look a little hurt when he’d been the one who’d held back. All this time, while Lee had slowly unpacked his vulnerabilities, Alex had strung him along, pretending he was oh-so-accepting when in reality, he had no room to judge Lee because they weren’t all that different.

Lee retreated by another step and bumped into the bathroom door. “Get out.”

“Gladly,” Alex ground out.

“Good.”

“*Good.*”

They glared at each other for a few seconds that twisted through Lee’s blood like some kind of potent poison. Then Alex’s mouth flattened into a thin line and he turned, grabbing his stuff off the bed before he marched towards the door. Lee watched him—his perfect body and the way he didn’t spare Lee even a single glance as he cracked the door open, clearly not so affected by what had gone down that he forgot to make sure his little secret, *their* little secret, didn’t accidentally run into an early-bird teammate. The coast must be clear because Alex left without another word and pulled the door shut with enough emphasis to register in the silent morning.

Only then did Lee exhale a long, shaky breath. Oh, fuck. He’d been right to protect himself. He deserved better than to be Alex’s default choice based on the simple virtue of being conveniently available, a way to scratch an itch before Alex went off and married whoever daddy dearest picked for him. Lee did deserve better.

So why did he feel like crap?



ALEX MADE it through breakfast without Jeff buying a clue that something was seriously off. Or, perhaps more accurately, Jeff noticed but gave Alex an easy out.

“Still bummed about the match?” he asked, and Alex shoved some tasteless eggs into his mouth and nodded. He carefully didn’t glance at Lee, a few tables over.

Half an hour later, they were herded onto the bus—tinted windows and air-conditioning to keep the heat at bay, and it reminded Alex of Lee’s spaceship comment, a few minutes before things had gone to hell. And fine, maybe Alex shouldn’t have grabbed Lee quite like that. But it wasn’t like Lee hadn’t been looking, and he certainly hadn’t been complaining either, what with how he’d wasted no time sticking his tongue down Alex’s throat.

Whatever, though.

Except, oh! How fucking *dare* he judge Alex for not disclosing his sexuality sooner? It was Alex’s choice whom he told, and when. Just because Lee had shared some private things didn’t mean Alex owed him—volunteering truth wasn’t a tit-for-tat business negotiation, for fuck’s sake.

Alex put his headphones on, closed his eyes, and willed himself to catch up on sleep. He dozed off at some point, mind lulled into a tranquil state of lethargy by the steady hum of wheels slapping the road, by the familiar buzz of conversations. Jeff woke him up when they arrived, and Alex trailed him out of the bus and into the familiar lobby of their team hotel, its modern wing bumping up against the older part reminiscent of a castle.

And ... Christ. Alex was still sharing a room with Lee. Of course he was—he'd just forgotten, for a moment there. Any lingering cobwebs of sleep dissipated.

“How about a dip in the pool?” he asked Jeff.

“Think Kieran wants us in the conference room in forty minutes,” Jeff told him. “So, just enough time for a wank in the shower.”

Alex cut him a look. “Images I didn't need.”

“Prude.”

Since innuendo was Jeff's forte and Alex wasn't at his brightest anyway, he left it at a shrug. A covert check revealed that Lee was already gone, had probably headed straight to the room to drop off his stuff. Well, they couldn't avoid each other forever, so best get it over with.

For once, Alex took the stairs instead of the lift, sports bag bumping against his thigh on every second step. In front of the room, he fought the ridiculous impulse to knock—he had just as much of a right to be here as Lee. So he tapped his card against the electronic lock, waited for the green light, and pushed the door open. Lee looked up from where he was sitting in one of the armchairs by the window, phone in hand and frown firmly fixed in place.

Alex carefully closed the door, and then it was just them and the abyss of silence that gaped between. He turned away to set his bag down next to his bed. When he glanced over his shoulder, Lee had gone back to his phone.

All right, then. So that was how they were going to play it.

Since the match analysis would be followed by a training session, Alex grabbed his football kit and went into the bathroom to change. He thought he heard Lee give a derisive

snort at that, but when Alex pointedly turned to look at him, Lee's attention was fixed on something on the screen. Arse.

Lee didn't react at all when Alex came back into the room, and Alex should ignore him. Really, he should. "You're going to act like I don't exist?" he asked instead. "Very mature."

It earned him a masterfully executed eyebrow raise before Lee slowly, deliberately, refocused on his phone. The hazy sunlight that filtered through the half-open curtains cast him in bronze.

"Do you have a problem with me being, you know..." Alex cleared his throat. "Bi?"

"A problem with you being bi?" Lee said it smoothly, his attention veering towards Alex. "No. Less than you, maybe, given that I can say it without hesitation."

"Give me a fucking *break*. Just because I don't prance around shouting my sexuality from every rooftop—"

"Neither do I."

"—doesn't mean I'm struggling to accept myself."

"You didn't even tell *Jeff*." Lee leaned forward, a cobra ready to strike. "Someone you seem to consider a friend, even a good friend, and you know he'd be in your corner, but you couldn't be bothered to trust him with that?"

Alex shifted his weight and fought the impulse to avert his gaze. "Jeff? Or do you mean yourself?"

Lee's chin tipped up. "It's not much of a friendship if only one person is honest."

Okay, that hurt. Alex swallowed around the tightness in his chest. "I don't tell just anyone about how things are with my parents, you know?"

“Thank you for your highly selective trust.” Lee’s voice dripped with sarcasm, his eyes bitter. “So generous of you to bestow that kind of courtesy on this lowly peasant, my Lord.”

Alex cut him a sharp look. “That’s hardly fair.”

“Isn’t it, though?” Lee asked, and Alex crossed his arms, then realised he’d done just that and dropped them back to his side.

“It’s not.”

“Agree to disagree.” Lee’s tone was cool, as though he’d already drawn a line under their friendship. Alex bit the inside of his cheek and waited for the sting to distract him from the leaden pressure in his belly.

“Fine.” He inhaled sharply through his nose. “Guess there’s no point in trying to solve this if you simply don’t care.”

Lee’s eyes flashed with something that Alex couldn’t read. “Guess not.”

God, how had things gone downhill so quickly?

“Okay,” Alex said, quiet now, and for a moment, it looked like Lee was going to respond. Then he shrugged and turned away, and yeah, all right, Alex could take a hint.

And yet he waited for another second, and another. Still nothing.

“I’ll take a walk,” he told the back of Lee’s head. “See you at the strategy session.”

“Can’t wait,” Lee muttered, and screw his passive-aggressive bullshit. Swallowing back any words to that effect, Alex picked up his phone and didn’t spare Lee so much as another glance before he left.

Fuck him.



TRUST KIERAN TO choose today of all days to pair Lee with Alex for every. Single. Drill.

The first two, anyway, and it felt like a throwback to a month ago—working in hostile silence, avoiding each other’s eyes, Lee’s shoulders tight enough that the team masseur might remark upon it later. The second exercise was an intense one too, jostling for the ball in close quarters, and Lee was too bloody *aware* of Alex. Heart beating too fast as he tried to shield the ball, balance a little off as their shoulders and hands and hips bumped, feet knocking together.

So really, when Lee went down, it was only logical.

“The fuck?” Alex hissed.

Logical to Lee. Not to Alex, it seemed.

Lee rolled back to his feet. “What’s your problem, mate?”

“*Mate?*” Alex’s lips pulled into a hollow smile. “My fucking *problem* is how much you like to trip over your own two feet. Like you’re just looking for a reason to cry foul.”

Really, he’d gone there—all the way back to that Premier League match some weeks ago? Well, all right. Common courtesy demanded that Lee follow his lead.

“Funny how the ref didn’t see it that way.”

Alex drew a breath, the sun catching glints of gold in his hazel eyes, and fuck, Lee wanted to kiss him. Still, or maybe more than ever.

“Funny how—” Whatever Alex had been about to say, Kieran sliced clean through it.

“Cool off.” Kieran’s tone lacked its usual cheer, a rare frown on his face. “Both of you. Separately, if necessary.”

Fuck.

“Sorry,” Lee mumbled, at the same time as Alex ducked his head and offered a lukewarm apology of his own. Clearly, they’d be the hot topic at dinner tonight—everyone was staring at them as though they were an entertaining yet mildly off-putting internet meme. Bloody move along, folks. Nothing to see here.

“We’re all a little on edge after the match last night,” Kieran told them, expression softening by a margin, and right, yeah, the match. *That* was what had them sniping at each other. Obviously. “I get it, yeah? But” —he raised his voice to be heard by the rest of the team— “the best thing you can do is take that anger and turn it into something productive. Use it to focus your mind on the next game. And maybe next time we’re ahead by two goals, don’t think it’s in the bag. Because the moment you do, that’s when the other team’s gonna kick you in the nuts. End of life lesson.”

It complemented the article he’d handed them today, as part of the usual pre-training routine: *The Power of Negative Emotions*. Not a lot of discussion on that one as the message had been loud and clear.

Dismissed by Kieran’s nod, Lee moved off the training pitch to grab a bottle of water. Alex was a few steps behind him, and they would need to talk to each other, probably, because this wasn’t going to work.

It wasn’t Lee who’d started it, though.

And yet. After a half-second of hesitation, he bent down to grab a second bottle of water and offered it to Alex. Hey, never

let it be said that he wasn't mature enough to extend the occasional olive branch.

"Thanks." Alex's fingers brushed Lee's as he accepted the bottle, and Lee withdrew his hand, suddenly unsure what to do with himself. Everyone else had gone back to their training drills—everyone other than Oliver, who was heading straight for them with his captain face firmly fixed in place.

"Incoming," Lee told Alex with a tiny flick of his chin.

Alex followed the direction Lee had indicated. "We could try to outrun him."

Lee chuckled, and for just a moment, things clicked back into place. Then Alex raised the bottle for a generous swig, and Lee instantly remembered licking the minty taste of toothpaste off Alex's lips. He looked away.

His brief distraction cost him the right moment to reply. Just as well, then, that Oliver had closed the distance. Under the pretence of picking up a water bottle for himself, he murmured, "What was that just now?"

"Nothing," Alex said, and wow—he was a far worse liar than Lee had given him credit for. Lee considered himself somewhat of an expert on the matter given he'd spent his teenage years telling all sorts of lies about why he was the one picking up his sisters, where his mum was, and why he hadn't done his homework. He'd come to appreciate truth as a luxury you could more easily afford once you were an adult with a proper income.

Not the whole truth, of course. Never that.

"Like Oliver will believe that was nothing," he told Alex. "Didn't they teach you how to lie at posh school?"

Alex sent him an unimpressed look. “Must have skipped that day.”

Lee knew this was a sensitive subject and he should quit while he was ahead. On the other hand... “All right, fair. Your dad’s a politician, though—shouldn’t he have raised you on a steady diet of political half-truths and flat-out lies?”

“That would have required spending some actual time with me,” Alex said, then seemed to remember that Oliver was listening. He pressed his lips together. “Anyway.”

“Anyway,” Oliver echoed dryly. “Now, come on—what *was* that? I thought you guys were fine.”

Lee took a sip from his bottle. Alex developed a sudden interest in the hem of his jersey, inspecting it with rapt attention.

“You can talk to me right now” —Oliver inserted a weighted pause— “or you can talk to Kieran at some point tomorrow if you don’t fix whatever’s going on. Your choice.”

“Sounds an awful lot like blackmail to me,” Lee grumbled.

“Sounds an awful lot like a reality check to me,” Oliver returned.

“Um,” Alex said, and Oliver nodded at him.

“Excellent point. Let’s go.”

“Power has changed you, man,” Lee said sadly, but the thing was, Oliver was right. If Lee and Alex didn’t figure their shit out, Kieran would sit them down in the very near future, and Lee didn’t particularly care to get another taste of Kieran unpacking his disappointed father routine. Honestly, the speech after yesterday’s match still smarted a little.

“Cry me a river.” Oliver gestured towards the locker room, about to start walking, when Alex stopped him with a quick touch to the upper arm.

“How about a deal?”

“A deal?” Oliver studied Alex with a quick, assessing gaze.

“Yeah.” Alex rubbed the back of his neck, voice low but urgent. “I know that Lee trusts you, okay? And it’s not that I don’t. But it’s just ... personal. Give us a chance to sort it out ourselves?”

“Because we’ve done such a brilliant job so far,” Lee put in.

Alex turned imploring eyes on him. “Let’s try harder.”

That wasn’t fair. *Alex* wasn’t fair because Lee wanted to hold on to his anger, he did, but how was he supposed to do that when Alex was looking at him with a mix of trepidation and hope?

Lee sighed. “Yeah, okay.”

“Thank you.” It was quiet, sincere.

Oliver’s gaze found Lee’s, a question in his eyes that Lee didn’t know how to answer. After a beat, Oliver nodded. “You have until dinner.”

“*Thank* you,” Alex repeated, the tiny upwards curve to his mouth speaking of blatant relief.

“Work it out, lads.”

Brief silence settled in the wake of Oliver leaving to rejoin the other goalkeeper. With a small sigh, Alex raised the water bottle to his face and rolled it against his forehead,

condensation leaving behind a sheen of wetness. When Alex glanced over and caught Lee watching, neither of them looked away.

It was Alex who broke the moment. “How about a walk?”

“Kieran told us to cool off.” Lee let his lips tilt into a careful smile. “Not sure a walk in this heat is gonna do the trick.”

Alex hesitated. “Pool?”

That was a terrible idea—Alex was distracting even fully dressed, and Lee didn’t see how that would improve if Alex was near-naked and wet. A bad idea, yes.

So Lee, of course, nodded. “Sounds good.”

They dropped by the room to change into their trunks. The last thing that their impending conversation needed was for Lee to catch Alex staring at his bum, so Alex made sure to keep his eyes averted. It seemed like Lee was of a similar mind because he kept his back to Alex even after he was done changing and didn't turn until Alex uttered a soft, "Let's go?"

"Yeah."

Back to one-syllable sentences, were they? Jesus, Alex never should have told Lee, or maybe he just shouldn't have kissed him out of the blue. It had seemed like a good idea at the time, actions speaking louder than words and all that.

Quietly, they made their way down to the pool, blessedly deserted with all their teammates and most of the staff on the training pitch. The water glittered turquoise in the afternoon sun, a small breeze rippling the surface and distorting the mosaic tiles that lined the basin. White sun loungers and umbrellas were arranged around the space, rich lavender bushes scenting the air, and a neat stack of towels awaiting use. As soon as they dropped their phones and room keys by the side of the pool, a hotel employee showed up to ask whether they needed additional towels or any help with the

umbrellas. They declined, and the man melted back into the garden.

It was a reminder that they were not alone. Sure, everyone here had signed non-disclosure agreements, but no harm in keeping their voices down.

Alex stripped off his T-shirt and left his sandals on a sun lounger before he sat down at the edge of the pool, cool water sloshing around his ankles. He waited for Lee to do the same, an arm's length between them that Alex was keenly aware of. He squinted at the water, blinding sunlight making bright spots dance through his vision whenever he blinked.

Right, then.

“I’m sorry,” he started. “For, you know. Not telling you sooner. And for the way I went about ... telling you. So to speak.”

Lee snorted but remained otherwise silent. When Alex turned his head, he found Lee watching him with a quizzical frown—searching now, earlier hostility gone. Alex swallowed.

“In my defence,” Alex added after a second, “it was my first time telling anyone. Between that and your porn-inspired attempt at flirting with me all those years ago, maybe we’re kind of even?”

A reluctant chuckle escaped Lee, and it was hard to tell under the tan, but his cheeks looked a little flushed. Might be the sun. “Fair point.”

Okay. This was starting to feel ... better. Like the dust was settling.

Alex chanced a smile, just wide enough to flirt with an indentation of dimples. “I have my moments.”

“Do you, now.” Lee’s voice was dry, but it lacked the acidic bite that it had carried this morning. He tilted his head, sunlight sparking in his dark irises. “You really haven’t told anyone else?”

“No.” It came out rather harshly, so Alex shook his head and repeated, softer, “No. Just you.”

Expression turning thoughtful, Lee drew his bottom lip between his teeth. He released it when he caught Alex staring, and Alex glanced away, at the reflections of light on the pool’s surface.

“Sorry,” Alex mumbled.

“What for?” It was light, almost sweet. Lee didn’t leave Alex a chance to react, though. “I guess I’m honoured to be your first, then. But you may want to work on your reveal methods.”

“You mean I can’t go around sticking my tongue down a guy friend’s throat as a way of saying ‘hi, mate, so I also fancy blokes’?”

“Might get you punched in the face by someone less lenient than me.”

“Back to the drawing board it is.”

“Hashtag sad.” Lee’s grin lit up his eyes as he splashed Alex with a bit of water. Alex reacted by letting himself tip face first into the pool, holding his breath as the water closed over his head. He heard a muffled second splash, and when he resurfaced, Lee was floating next to him. They treaded water for a minute, watching each other. It felt different now— heavier, like standing on a 5-metre platform for the first time, trying to work up the courage to jump into a swimming pool that seemed tiny from this high up.

“What makes it so hard?” Lee asked eventually.

Ha.

Alex raised a meaningful brow. When Lee laughed, the heaviness evaporated, Alex’s pulse slowing to a normal rate for maybe the first time since that morning.

“What makes it so hard to tell people, I mean,” Lee clarified.

It was a fair question, yet not one that Alex found easy to answer. He shoved wet hair off his forehead and forced himself to hold Lee’s gaze because yeah, maybe he owed some honesty. “I’m used to fitting in, I guess. Like, I was never the odd one out, you know? I was the popular kid, the one everyone wanted on their team.”

“Tough being you.” Lee’s tone held a note of ... not envy, no. Self-deprecation, maybe? It figured that being a teenage boy who had a weird mum and was essentially raising two younger sisters—well, it wouldn’t have put him on an instant track to popularity. ‘Football was just about the only thing that made me feel good about myself’, wasn’t that what he’d said?

“I know I had it easy, yeah?” Alex drifted over to the shallow end of the pool until he felt tiles under his feet. “What I’m trying to say is ... maybe I got a bit dependent on being liked. Perhaps it’s how I balanced out” —he sent Lee a lopsided smile— “that my parents didn’t hug me enough when I was little. Which, just for the record, might be why it threw me when you didn’t like me, back then.”

“I did like you.” Lee’s voice was even. “Rather more than I was comfortable with, as we discussed.”

“I could pretend to be sorry if you’d like?”

Amusement sparked in Lee's eyes. "A handwritten letter of apology bearing your family seal would mean a lot."

"I'll see what I can do." Alex let the brightness of the moment carry him forward. "But, like. What I'm trying to say is that fitting in... It's something that matters to me. I'm not ashamed or anything—I just don't want to be different."

Lee fixed him with a dark look. "Welcome to my world."

"I *know*, okay? Like I said, I fully admit that I didn't exactly suffer here. And I also know I shouldn't care quite that much about what others think." Alex leaned against the side of the pool, briefly closing his eyes against the sun, warm orange flooding his vision. He continued quietly. "I know all that. But I still care."

Lee was quiet for a moment. "Yeah, all right. And I guess your dad wouldn't exactly throw a coming-out party if you told him."

"I'd pay good money to see him perform *Dancing Queen* in a rainbow shirt."

"*The Sun* would, too."

"*'Shock: Duke's Disco Debut!'*" Alex let his grin fade. "I mean, in all seriousness—my parents wouldn't kick me out, nothing that extreme. But it would be another layer of disapproval, along with the express expectation that I'd keep it under wraps."

"Seems like the only way you can make them happy is by means of a personality transplant." It wasn't said unkindly. "Maybe that's your cue to stop trying?"

Alex looked away from the glint of sunlight on Lee's collarbones. "Maybe."

A server appeared at the far end of the pool, effectively putting an end to their conversation. He approached to inquire whether they needed anything from the bar or kitchen in a slightly accented English, his smile bright. They shook their heads, and when he turned to leave, Lee seemed to watch him go for a second longer than necessary. Alex followed the direction of Lee's gaze—admittedly, the guy was fairly young and fit, his lean body tanned from the sun.

So what if Lee found him attractive? It didn't matter to Alex.

“How about a walk?” Alex asked, and Lee's attention returned to him.

“And they say romance is dead.” Lee appeared to regret his playful tone almost immediately, the corners of his mouth tilting into a frown. “I mean, yeah. Sure. Haven't really made time to explore the grounds yet, and hopefully we'll be here for a few more weeks, so...”

“Hopefully,” Alex echoed.

They traded small smiles, and when Alex turned to the stairs that exited the pool, it wasn't just his imagination that Lee's gaze lingered. The warmth that sparked in Alex's belly had very little to do with the pressing afternoon heat.



AFTER SLIPPING on their T-shirts and sandals, they followed a winding stone pathway to a cobblestone courtyard lined by rosemary and lavender bushes, palm trees above their heads and the manicured golf course visible just beyond. The silence that hung between them was thoughtful, and Alex wasn't quite sure how to pick the thread of their earlier conversation back up.

It was Lee who spoke first, gesturing ahead. “You ever play?”

“Golf?” Alex snorted. “With a father like mine, what do you think?”

The smile Lee flicked him held genuine warmth. “Didn’t want to presume.”

“Since when?” Alex bumped their hands together to show that he was teasing. “Golf, polo, cricket, sailing—I’ve done it all. Football is the only thing that stuck.”

“Well, you’re bloody good at it.”

Even though it wasn’t the first time Lee paid him a compliment, it made Alex duck his head. “Thank you.”

Another quiet minute followed as they ambled towards the trail that curved through the golf course, lush green contrasting with the bright blue of the sky.

“I guess there’s also...” Alex paused to sort through words in his head that he’d never put out there before. “Sorry—mind leap, back to what we talked about before. Like, me being bi. Some people think that just means I’m too scared to be simply gay, or that I can’t make up my mind. Or that I just don’t care where I stick it.”

“Yeah.” Lee swayed his head from side to side. “And some people think the Earth is flat, so...”

“But one of those things is an outdated belief that no one in their right mind would state in public.”

Lee pursed his lips, expression grave. “You mean that bisexuality is just a cowardly, promiscuous version of homosexuality? True.”

Alex let one corner of his mouth twitch upwards. “You’re not taking this seriously.”

“I’m taking it exactly as seriously as it deserves.” Lee’s frown smoothed out and he stopped walking, shielding his eyes against the sun. “And just so we’re clear, I don’t have a problem with you looking both ways. That’s not what my reaction was about.”

“So it was really mostly about—well, a little about the whole...” Come on, it wasn’t that hard. “The whole kissing you thing. But mostly about how I didn’t tell you sooner.”

“Yeah.” A pause. “I kind of get it now, though. It’s not easy, first time you tell someone.”

“No kidding. It took me days to work up the courage, and then I still messed it up.”

“Just a little.” Lee held his thumb and forefinger apart by a small margin. “Anyway, though—I guess I’m honoured to be your first, so to speak.” A sly glance before Lee continued. “Why not Jeff, though? There’s no way he’d have an issue.”

“No. But he’d appoint himself my one-man army and would take offence easily.”

Lee chuckled. “Yeah, I see how that could be the case. He’s a good friend, isn’t he?”

“The best,” Alex said with emphasis. “I know he can come across as, you know ... a lot. But if you need someone to have your back? He’ll be there with waving flags and a marching band.”

There was something assessing in Lee’s eyes as he studied Alex, and it took a moment to click. Then Alex laughed, feeling his entire body lighten with it.

“No. Just ... *no*. I love the guy to bits, but not like that.”

“Just checking.” Lee’s eyes were bright, and holy hell, he was beautiful. Alex dragged a hand through his hair and focused on their surroundings—the undulating hills of the golf course, a stone bridge crossing a stream.

“Who did you tell first?”

“My sister Kira—she’s four years younger.”

“The one who studies biology, with the ticklish rats?”

“The very same. It was just before I left for Milan, so I was twenty-two, I guess. A bit younger than you now.”

About two years after Lee and Alex had first met—meaning that was how long it had taken Lee to move from realising he was gay to telling anyone about it. Alex had known he was bisexual since seventeen or so, and he’d needed six years to work up the courage. Then again, his closet might have left him with a tad more room given that dating women wasn’t a hardship.

“How did it go?” he asked.

The corners of Lee’s eyes crinkled. “She’d only just taken down her poster collection of hot guys—told me I could take my pick.”

Alex grinned. “Generous.”

“She thought so too.” Affection warmed Lee’s voice, and it wasn’t like Alex didn’t have people he could turn to—Jeff, for one, and a few friends from his childhood and Harrow who hadn’t grown into entitled pricks—but it must be different with a sibling. Not that Alex had an excessive habit of turning to people anyway.

“Which poster did you pick?”

“Yours. Who else’s?” Lee’s smarmy tone deserved a ‘slip hazard’ sign.

With a laugh, Alex started walking again, Lee falling into step. “Were you scared?” Alex asked. “When you told her.”

“Shitless.”

“Well, I was scared this morning.”

“You really thought I might react badly?” Lee sounded as though he was considering whether to take offence.

“Did you really think your sister would react badly?” Alex slid Lee a sideways glance, so he caught the moment Lee’s brows, previously knitted together, softened.

“Not rationally,” Lee said.

“But fear isn’t rational, is it?”

“I guess not.” A small chuckle. “Still, as far as coming out methods go, kissing your same-sex friend is not industry standard.”

“Industry standard?” Alex shook his head as they crossed the stone bridge, a thin rivulet trickling below. “You sound like some Football Association bureaucrat trying to justify that our jerseys are made wherever it’s cheapest, screw ethical standards.”

“Touché,” Lee said. “My point stands, though.”

“I just ... couldn’t find the right words.”

“Let me help you out.” Lee grasped Alex’s elbow, pulling both of them to a halt. His serious expression was at odds with the impish sparkle in his eyes. “Repeat after me—‘Lee, I’m bi.’”

“Lee.” Alex lowered his voice. “I’m bi.”

“There you go.” Quieter now too, Lee’s fingertips still light on Alex’s elbow, and Alex was right back at the edge of that diving board, rapid pulse fluttering in his throat. He inhaled on a measured breath.

“When I kissed you... You didn’t hate it, did you?”

“Not one bit.” There was something deliberate about the way Lee held Alex’s gaze. “Doesn’t make it a good idea.”

“Why not?” What Alex had intended as a challenge came out as a murmur.

Lee cleared his throat. “Other than how I used to fancy you?”

“Don’t see why that’s a bad thing.” Alex aimed for a smile that brought out his dimples, and Lee’s gaze dropped down to Alex’s mouth.

“You really need me to spell it out?” Lee’s voice sounded slightly husky.

“Please do.”

Tension stretched thick between them—and snapped when Lee looked away, removing his hand from Alex’s arm. “One.” The word was soft. “We’re here to win the bloody World Cup. Can’t afford to get distracted.”

He had a point. But also, “I’m distracting?”

“Fishing for compliments, Beaufort? So unbecoming.” Lee shot him an amused glance. “Two, we’re teammates, and we’re rooming together. Throw sex into the mix, and you’ve got a recipe for disaster. Especially if for one person it’s just a fun little experiment, while it’s quite real for the other.”

Alex drew a slow breath. “What do you mean—real versus not?”

“I mean that for me, being with a guy isn’t just something I try behind closed doors before I go back to women because that’s the family way.”

“That’s...” Not fair. Except ... was it? Maybe, a little? Because the expectation always had been that Alex would marry a suitable woman from a good family, and their children would continue the family line. “It could still be real.”

“Yeah, I’m just not so sure about that.” Lee shook his head, voice softening. “Also, I used to fancy you a bit, which puts us on uneven ground. It’s just not a good idea.”

Rationally, Alex could see where Lee was coming from. But that didn’t stall the acid burn of disappointment in his stomach. “For the record” —Alex let his gaze drift past Lee, over to a row of manicured hedges— “it wouldn’t be just a fun little experiment with the first guy who happens to be conveniently available. I like you. And I think you’re very attractive.”

Wow, could that have come out any more awkward? Usually, Alex was much smoother than that.

“Thank you.” It was quiet, slightly delayed. When Alex chanced a look at Lee, he found Lee looking at him already, eyes a little sad. Which—hey, Alex had just paid him a compliment. Shouldn’t Lee be looking much happier?

“So, uh.” Alex pressed his lips together. “A bad idea, then?”

“Yes,” Lee said firmly.

Alex huffed out a half-formed laugh and averted his gaze. “All right. I guess I’ve just been shot down, huh?”

“First time?” Lee’s tone held a trace of humour—no meanness in it, though, and when Alex glanced at him once

more, Lee's frown hadn't faded entirely. "You'll deal, babe."

Babe?

"Some sympathy would be nice."

"Eating a thick slice of chocolate cake would be nice too, but you don't see me doing that either, do you?"

All right, back to wheelchair-accessible emotional territory. Alex could do that. "My earldom for a pizza."

"Double cheese," Lee said, reverent.

"With salami. And none of that whole-grain crap."

Lee's chuckle was quiet. "You know, I'll probably inflate like a balloon once my active career is over."

"Nah, you'll always be hot."

"Such a charmer."

"Learned it from my father."

"And on that note..." Lee pulled a face. "I need to scrub my brain with bleach."

Alex's smile came easily, his lungs no longer quite so narrow. "You're welcome."

For a moment, they watched each other in comfortable silence. Then Lee ducked his head, the warm afternoon sun highlighting the slant of his cheekbones. "For the record? It's mutual. The attraction and all."

Funny how it didn't change a thing—and yet it did. Alex exhaled through the tiny flutter in his stomach. "Good to know."

"Yeah." Lee was quiet for a second. "We're okay?"

Alex nodded. "We're okay."

They were. Even if Alex wanted more, even if each time he blinked, he still felt the weight of Lee's body against his, Lee's fingernails digging into his waist...

They were okay.



POSTED BY @AlexanderBeaufort (June 21, 6:48 p.m.):

At some point in the near future, I will eat an entire pizza with extra cheese, and it will be glorious.



DINNER THAT NIGHT took place under a magnifying glass.

At least that's what it felt like to Lee—heads turning as they sat down together, subtle glances flickering their way. Faking obliviousness seemed like the best course of action, so Lee ignored everyone else as he reached for the bottle of water on the table. "Want some?" he asked Alex.

"Yeah, thanks." Alex seemed to have drawn the same conclusion. He kept his gaze on Lee, his smile wide, hair artfully tousled.

"Is it just me" —Lee smiled back— "or are we suddenly the most interesting people on this terrace?"

Alex heaved a dramatic sigh. "The burden of fame."

"All right, lads?" Oliver asked, dropping into a free chair at the table, Jeff following suit.

"All right," Lee told him pointedly, and Jeff grinned.

"So you kissed and made up, then?"

It was just Jeff being Jeff. Still, Lee might have flinched the tiniest bit, shooting Alex a quick look just as Alex glanced

over, too. When Lee pulled his attention away, he found Oliver staring at him with wide eyes.

Well, shit.

Lee gave Oliver a tiny headshake just as Alex laughed, a beat delayed. “Something like that,” Alex told Jeff, voice light.

The conversation moved on from there. Jeff retold his brother’s stories of a crowded pilgrim’s trail that appeared to rather resemble a pub crawl in some places, and after that, Oliver described what it felt like to play in the Santiago Bernabéu Stadium when it nearly burst from the deafening racket of eighty thousand fans. It was a surefire way to get Alex’s nerves buzzing ahead of their match against Morocco.

Under the table, Lee nudged his foot against Alex’s. Before he could wonder whether that was too familiar when their unsteady friendship had only just crawled back out of a temporary hole, Alex nudged him back. Lee hardly tasted the rest of their dinner, too focused on Alex right beside him—his low laugh and the occasional brush of their knees, how each time their gazes caught, it took a second before one of them looked away first.

A bad idea.

For Alex, it would be an experiment, claims to the contrary notwithstanding. Lee, though? Lee risked putting his heart on the line. And yeah, maybe that was a little dramatic, but with Giovanni, things had been easy from start to finish, right up until they’d said goodbye at the airport. With Alex, on the other hand, easy didn’t even seem to feature in Lee’s vocabulary.

He'd made the right call. Even if it didn't really feel like it, not when his attention kept tripping over the bow of Alex's upper lip and the gentle curves of his biceps, over the subtle scent of his cologne. What was it Alex had said—he'd been bred for desirable physical qualities? Well, it would have been a breeze if it had been just the looks, but it was more than that. It was Alex's understated sense of humour too, and how they'd found a rhythm that worked for them. How, initial impressions aside, Alex didn't need to be the centre of attention at all times. The way he listened, and that he didn't shy away from difficult topics. That he was smart.

Jesus, Lee needed to get a grip.

He uttered a "Gracias" when his plate was taken away and leaned back in his chair as he looked around the terrace. The air was heavy with an impending rainstorm, dark clouds gathered over the nearby mountains about to swallow the evening sun. Some of their teammates had already wandered off, the terrace slowly clearing around them, Kieran in the process of making his usual goodnight rounds.

When he stopped by their table, Lee braced himself for a remark, and the way Alex sat up a little straighter suggested he did the same. It seemed like Kieran had already drawn his own conclusions, though. He merely told them to get a good rest and that he'd see them at breakfast tomorrow before he moved along.

Unfortunately, Oliver appeared rather less convinced that things had been sorted out—or maybe he'd drawn his own conclusions as well, but they pointed him down a different path. Either way, when they all got up shortly after, Oliver held Lee back with a hand on the shoulder. "A word?"

Briefly, Lee met Alex's eyes. Then he nodded at Oliver. "Yeah, sure."

As Alex and Jeff ambled off together, speculating about which movie the team would be shown tomorrow for a surprise advance screening, Lee propped his hip against the table, crossed his arms, and tilted his head to signal that he was listening.

Oliver's brow creased. He waited for another few seconds until Alex and Jeff were safely out of earshot. "You and Alex," he started, then stopped. "Did you, like ... make a move on him? Is that what this thing was about?"

Ah, shit.

Alex's sexuality wasn't Lee's information to disclose. But then, given the fairly impermeable state of Lee's closet, getting to kiss a guy, any guy, was kind of a big deal for him personally, and Oliver was his best mate. Lee wasn't in the habit of keeping secrets from him.

"Who says it was me?" he asked in an undertone.

Oliver blinked. "Hang on. Are you..." He trailed off, glancing at where Alex and Jeff had disappeared. "So Alex is..."

"Bisexual," Lee finished.

"Since *when*? I mean—" Oliver shook his head. "I didn't mean it like that. Just, wow. So you guys..."

"Are friends," Lee said firmly.

Oliver's eyes narrowed. "Friends with benefits?"

"Just friends."

"You fancy him, though."

“Yeah.”

“And he fancies you?”

“Yeah.”

“But you’re just friends.”

“Well.” Lee hesitated. “Yeah.”

“*Why?*” Oliver sounded genuinely confused when he, of all people, should get it. He was the captain of the bloody team, after all.

“Because it’s a potential for disaster?” Lee raised one hand, palm up. “Because this isn’t a dating show—we’re here to win the fucking World Cup.”

Oliver shrugged. “Don’t see why one has to exclude the other. Given the circumstances, rooming with Alex will be a distraction anyway, so why not make the most of it?”

That was ... something. Unexpected, mostly, and uncharacteristically reckless for Oliver, who tended to check both ways on a one-way street.

“Since when are you so—” Lee cut himself off as a server approached to clear the remaining glasses off the table. They’d overstayed their welcome, it seemed. Fair enough.

Oliver had clearly drawn the same conclusion. “Quick walk before we head to our rooms?” he asked.

“Sure.”

They directed their steps towards the gravel path that Lee had followed earlier with Alex, although now the light was fading, clouds swallowing the last rays of the evening sun. Time to get ready for bed pretty soon, and Lee hoped that he

and Alex would manage to skip the awkward readjustment stage and fall right back into their routine.

Routines were safe—he'd learned that young. They didn't drag him out of bed at three in the morning to pack for an impromptu trip to France even though he had a maths test the next day.

“What was it you were about to say?” Oliver asked once they'd walked in silence for a minute.

“Just wondering why you're so enthusiastic about this whole thing.”

“You're in the closet.”

Lee sent him a sideways glance. “Tell me something I don't know.”

“The point is” —Oliver's voice was serious— “how many chances do you get to fall in love?”

Lee stopped dead in his tracks. “Now, hold on a second. I'm not in love.”

“I didn't say you were.” Oliver shrugged. “Just that it's a possibility.”

It bloody isn't.

The words wouldn't quite come, and that was a problem for another night. Lee resumed walking, gravel crunching under his feet, the path curving towards a stone fountain that had fallen silent for the evening. “Alex isn't even on the market,” he told Oliver. “Seems like Daddy Duke will pick out a lovely bride for him, and there's his happily ever after.”

“Okay, fine. So it won't be forever.” Hands shoved into his pockets, Oliver shrugged again. “But it could be good for now.”

Lee frowned at the hulking silhouette of the mossy stone fountain, not quite sure how to respond. Oliver wasn't exactly wrong because Alex posed a distraction no matter what, but leaving the friends zone would multiply the potential for disaster by a factor of approximately a lot.

"You deserve to feel good, Lee." Oliver's voice had softened. "You deserve something that's, you know—something that's just for you. Not for your sisters or your mum. Just you."

Lee bowed his head, dragging his hand along the back of his neck. "Bloody hell, mate."

Oliver bumped their elbows together. "You deserve to be happy."

"Who are you—the motivation fairy?"

Blessedly, the question served its purpose because Oliver's tone was much lighter when he replied. "Far as I can see, there's only one fairy here, and it isn't me."

"Hilarious," Lee said flatly even as the corners of his mouth tugged upwards.

"Just think about it, yeah?" The earnestness in Oliver's eyes was unsettling for reasons Lee couldn't quite explain. It was as though Oliver worried that Lee's life was lacking when it really wasn't—sure, being in a relationship had been nice, but Lee didn't need a boyfriend to fill some gaping emotional void. And as for sex, well. Right now, his own hand in the shower did the trick. Not quite the same, granted, but easy and consistently available.

Oliver was still watching him with that concerned gaze, so Lee sent him a half-smile. "I'll think about it."

"Good."

They finished their walk in silence because not all spaces needed to be filled with words. Daylight was fading rapidly by the time they separated, off to their respective rooms. Lee fully intended to forget about Oliver's comments because, just, *no*. But they proved rather hard to simply ignore, much like the sting of a wasp—and Lee had experienced his fair share of those playing barefoot football at a nearby park when he'd been little.

Nothing had changed, though. Starting anything with Alex still wasn't a good idea.

Right.

Right.

When Lee returned to the room, Alex was already sprawled on the bed, his bare back a lovely curve that ended with the waistband of his boxers. A book was open in front of him, and the familiar sight of it settled something in Lee's stomach.

"All right?" Alex arched his back in a way that emphasised the swell of his bum, glancing over at Lee with a subtle spark in his eyes. Ah, so he really was doing it on purpose—strutting around near-naked, showing off his body at least partly for Lee's benefit. They were athletes, of course, and changing around each other came with the territory, but Alex seemed to have developed an aversion to clothing that exceeded normal levels.

Lee closed the door. "Yeah, all good."

"So Oliver only wanted to talk?"

"Something like that." Lee crossed the room and tugged off his T-shirt because hey, two could play that game. Alex's gaze dropped before it returned to Lee's face.

"Something like that' means...?"

"He, uh." Fuck, Lee really should have figured out how to break the news to Alex. "He figured it out, sort of—that

something happened between us. So I told him.” Lee turned to face Alex fully. “I know it wasn’t really my secret to share, but he’d half-figured it out already, and he’s my best mate, Alex. I trust him without question.”

It took a few seconds, then Alex sighed. “It’s fine.”

“Yeah?” Lee asked quietly.

“I knew there was a good chance you’d tell him.” Alex’s lips twitched into a slight upwards curve. “I mean, a mind-blowing kiss like that—of course you’d want to tell your best mate about it.”

Lee snorted. “You’re taking this better than I expected.”

“I’m not... It’s...” Shaking his head, Alex snapped the book shut and rolled onto his back. “I’m not *ashamed*. I swear, that’s not it. It’s just personal, and telling people feels...”

“Scary?” Lee suggested gently.

“Yeah. That.”

“I can vouch for Oliver—he won’t tell a soul.”

“I trust your judgement.”

It sounded an awful lot like ‘I trust *you*’, and Lee wasn’t quite sure what to make of the little zing of pleasure that warmed his face at the thought. To hide his reaction, he walked over to his bed and switched on the small reading lamp beside it, identical to the one that bathed Alex in a golden glow. “Glad to hear it.”

“Yeah, well.” Alex didn’t immediately continue. “So how did he react?”

“Told me to get lucky.”

“Sounds about right.” The words carried a stifled grin, Alex propping himself up on his elbows in a way that drew attention to the line of his torso and the trail of dark hair that disappeared into his boxers. Cheeky bastard.

Lee sighed as he pulled his gaze away. “Can you not?”

Alex’s laugh blended with the quiet evening, humid air flowing in through the open balcony door. “Just following captain’s orders.”

Lee spared Alex another look. “Still a bad idea.”

“I thought” —Alex batted his lashes— “you trust him without question?”

“Within reason.”

“Oh ye of little faith.” Alex’s voice lightened, and he dropped all pretence. “Anyway, so I figured it out.”

“You figured what out?” Lee asked carefully.

“Why you won’t tell me what it is that you’re reading.”

Oh, that.

Lee countered Alex’s smile with an unimpressed eyebrow raise. “Is that so?”

“It’s gay erotica.” Alex gave the statement a second to settle, grinning up at Lee. “Which—I’m not judging, right? But since you won’t give me the time of day, the least you can do is share so I can live vicariously through your pages.”

Lee fought the upwards tug of his lips. “It’s not gay erotica.”

“Must you break my heart?” Alex fell back onto the bed with all the flair of a second-rate actor miming a deadly shot, and this felt different—the impish gleam in his eyes, the

playful curve of his mouth. As though they'd found a new kind of balance, now that everything between them was out in the open.

"You'll live," Lee told him dryly.

"But what a sad and empty life it will be." Alex let his head loll to the side so he could send Lee a pitiful look. "So what is it, then?"

Ah, what the hell.

"Right now? *Thinking, Fast and Slow.*"

"That's that Nobel Prize guy, right? Daniel ... something? A psychologist of some sort."

"Daniel Kahneman, yeah." Lee loved Oliver, but Oliver would have struggled telling Daniel Kahneman from, say, Djingis Khan. That Alex had at least a vague idea was ... really quite attractive. "It's about how we make judgements and decisions. Like, we think we're much more rational than we really are. For example, we like and trust a company more if it sounds familiar, even if we have no clue what they do, and we trust a politician more if we happen to smile when listening to their speech. And they had people count the passes in a basketball match, and about halfway through, some guy in a gorilla costume walks in and pounds his chest—and half the people missed it completely because they were too focused on counting passes."

Alex's smile was slow and sweet.

"What?" Lee asked.

"That might be the most words I've heard you say in one go."

"Sorry." Lee ducked his head, and Alex's smile widened.

“I wasn’t complaining.”

“Right. I guess I get a bit nerdy about stuff like that—psychology, how the brain works.”

For a few seconds, Alex was quiet. Then he shifted up against the headboard, and this time, it didn’t seem like a ploy to draw attention to his body. “Your mum,” he began, stopped, and started again. “Your mum being bipolar—is there a genetic component? Like, are you worried about yourself? Or your sisters?”

“Straight for the jugular, huh?” Lee drew a measured breath and sat down on the edge of his bed. “Answer’s yeah, a bit. Estimates vary, but it’s maybe fifteen per cent hereditary.”

“So between the three of you...” Alex’s teeth tugged on his bottom lip, his entire focus on Lee. “That’s a pretty big chance that one of you may have inherited it.”

Lee’s worst nightmare, dragged into the light. He drew another breath. “Yeah.”

Alex didn’t immediately reply. When he did, it was close to a whisper. “I’m sorry you have to worry about that.”

“It’s like... It’s this *thing*, you know?” Lee tucked his hands between his thighs and looked away from Alex. “Me, there’s a good chance I’ll be fine—low prevalence among pro athletes, and half of all cases start before twenty-five, so...”

“You worry about your sisters, though.”

Lee swallowed. “Yeah.”

“I’m sorry,” Alex repeated, low. He seemed to hesitate for a moment, then he got up and closed the gap between them for a gentle touch of Lee’s jaw. “I’m so sorry.”

There were plenty of things Lee could have said. ‘Thank you’, for one, or ‘Not exactly your fault, is it?’ or ‘I really, *really* like you’. In the end, he simply nodded and closed his eyes for a second, leaning into the contact. When he straightened and looked up, there was something painfully soft about Alex’s expression that Lee chose not to examine too closely, his brain already caught up in the memory of Alex saying, “I like you, I find you attractive.”

Instead, Lee cleared his throat. “It’s getting late. Guess I should get ready for bed.”

Nodding, Alex stepped back, his hand falling away. “Yeah. That’s ... uh, yeah. It is getting late.”

They stared at each other for a beat, then Lee exhaled and smiled. “Hey, Alex? Thank you.”

“Anytime.” The dim twin glow of the reading lamps brought out the brown undertones of Alex’s eyes. It was Lee who looked away first, chest a little tight.

He’d made the right call. Hadn’t he?



WITH TENSION RUNNING HIGH AHEAD of their final group-stage match, dinner was a loud affair. Lee sat back while Jeff dissected the strength and weaknesses of various Moroccan players, Oliver chiming in on occasion with his own opinions, and Alex notably quiet after a phone call he’d taken halfway through the meal.

Once servers started clearing away the fruit platters, Jeff trundled off to “talk to a girl”, wink wink nudge nudge, Oliver leaving soon after to call his wife.

“And then there were two,” Lee commented idly.

“Seems that way.” Alex’s tiny smile just about broke Lee’s heart. “We should head off too, I suppose.”

As if he’d get even a wink of sleep if they got ready for bed now.

“How about a quick walk first?” Lee suggested, and relief washed over Alex’s features.

“Sounds great.”

“You know...” Lee scooted his chair back and got up. “For someone who comes across as fairly confident, you sure are terrible at asking for things.”

Alex rose as well, sending Lee a small frown. “What do you mean?”

“There’s no shame in saying, ‘Hey, Lee, would you be up for a walk? I need to clear my head and could use the company.’”

“Hey, Lee?” The left side of Alex’s mouth twitched. “Would you be up for a walk? I could use the company.”

“There you go.” Lee shot him a grin. “Wasn’t so hard, now was it?”

“Six out of ten, I’d say.” While Alex grinned back, it faded rather too soon.

They headed for the pool, turquoise water shimmering in the quickly fading light, the crunch of gravel under their feet mixing with the soft, repetitive whistles of an owl.

“So,” Lee asked after a minute had passed in silence, “want to tell me what’s wrong?”

Alex exhaled, running his fingers through brown, wavy hair that fell over his forehead. “I talked to my parents, and it’s

like... They're hosting a dinner party next week, and the way they're talking, it's like they fully expect me to be back by then." Even just at the mention of his parents, his enunciation got crisper. "As though we're guaranteed to lose tomorrow."

Lee scoffed. "Right, sure—because they've become overnight football experts."

"They might be right, though."

"They won't be." Lee made sure to wrap the words in certainty, for his own sake as much as Alex's. "We didn't win against Japan because we got complacent. We won't make that mistake again."

Alex glanced over, the light that illuminated the pool edging his features in blue. "You really think we'll make it?"

Lee straightened his spine. "We will. You can dress me in a suit and tie if we lose, which, you know—even the idea is painful. But not a problem because we'll *win*."

"I think you just gave me an incentive for losing." Alex's soft chuckle blended in with the rising darkness. "But seriously, growing up like you did, how the hell did you turn into an optimist?"

"Well, hey." Lee aimed for a cheesy tone. "I'm part of the glitter brigade. Why would I want to paint things black?"

"Because The Rolling Stones told you to, and their word is law?"

"You make a valid point." Lee paused, and when he continued, he did so much more quietly. "Really, though—not many boys get the chance to actually live their dream of becoming a professional footballer. You and I are bloody lucky, and I don't want to forget that, ever."

For a heavy beat, Alex simply looked at Lee, shadows softening the details of his expression. When he smiled, it was sudden and real. “You know, I’m really glad we’re friends.”

Fuck, he didn’t make it easy to stay away, now did he?

Lee ignored the way Alex’s dimples pressed deep craters into his cheeks, also ignored how nicely Alex’s shirt hugged his torso, how his tailored jeans clung to his legs. “Me too,” Lee told him.

It wasn’t a lie, but it wasn’t the whole truth either. For years, Lee had built Alex up into this mythical guy, the one who’d rejected Lee right when he’d been at his most vulnerable—and while Lee had resented him, he also hadn’t been able to fully shake the instinctive flare of attraction each time he’d come across Alex’s name in the papers, each time he’d caught sight of him during a post-match interview on the telly.

But Alex wasn’t that mythical guy. Once you peeled away the persona he presented to the public, he was much quieter than Lee had expected, less secure, his innate charm genuine rather than polished. And Lee liked him all the more for it.

“Hey,” Alex said right into that thought. “Can I ask you something? In the interest of honesty.” There was something secretive tucked into his voice, a tinge of anticipation that had Lee narrow his eyes.

“Ask away.”

“The match in Liverpool.” Alex’s teeth sparked in the darkness. “Did you take a dive?”

It wasn’t what Lee had expected. He huffed out a laugh and started walking again, towards the golf course that was tastefully lit. “I did not.”

“*Really.*” The word carried heavy scepticism. Not resentment, though, and when Lee slid Alex a sidelong look, he found Alex watching him with a faint smile.

“Really.” Lee inclined his head. “Can’t say whether you made contact with the ball, but you did touch me. Could I have fought harder to stay upright? Maybe, yeah.”

Alex seemed to take a moment to digest this, then he bumped their hands together. “So you admit that the ref’s call could have gone either way?”

“Possibly.” Lee let a deliberately smug smile curve his mouth. “It went my way, though.”

Alex coughed. “Teacher’s pet.”

Ha.

“Gladly. From what I remember, the ref was fit.”

“Taking one for the team, Taylor?” Bright amusement coloured Alex’s tone, and Lee far preferred it over the quiet hesitation that had been brought on by Alex’s parents. Duke or not, if Lee ever got the dubious pleasure of meeting Alex’s father, titular reverence would be the last thing on his mind.

“Sometimes you just gotta do what you gotta do, Beaufort.”

“That’s Earl of Clydesdale to you, mate.”

“In your fucking *dreams*, mate.”

“Oh, rest assured...” Alex let his voice dip down, honey-smooth. “My dreams are far more interesting than that.”

Bloody hell.

“Can we go back to when we expressed our mutual appreciation for our friendship?” Lee asked weakly, and Alex

sent him a gleaming smile.

“But why?”

“Because it’s safer.”

“Less fun, though.” Alex looked as though he’d surprised himself with the statement.

“You sayin’ that life isn’t just eat, sleep, train, repeat?” Lee drawled because let’s face it, they were two peas in a pod—neither of them would be here if they hadn’t put in the extra hours. For Lee, that made sense given he’d had little else in life to make him feel competent. Alex, on the other hand? He could have done anything. Why choose a side path that veered off the well-paved family road?

“Of course not.” Alex wiggled his fingers. “That’d be blasphemy.”

“Glad we’re on the same page, then.”

“Definitely. Which book, though?”

“*The Unbearable Lightness of Being.*”

“You just picked that for the title.”

“Guilty as charged.” Lee glanced up at the palm trees above their heads, darkly silhouetted against the sky. “Hey. Feel better?”

Alex’s response came with a slight delay, a smile shining through his voice. “I do. Thank you, Lee.”

“My pleasure.”

For a second, it looked like Alex was going to say something else. Then he simply nodded, shifting closer by the smallest margin so their arms brushed every few steps. Lee could have moved away to make a point.

He didn't.



CAMP NOU.

The stadium was a football cathedral—close to a hundred thousand people filling the stands, and Alex fought to control his breathing as they lined up for the national anthems. If they lost today...

As if by accident, Jeff tapped the side of his foot against Alex's. When Alex glanced over, Jeff winked. "If you need to throw up, wait until we're shaking their hands."

"Not helping," Alex hissed even though it did, just a little.

On Jeff's other side, Lee leaned forward just enough to flash Alex a smirk. "But imagine your father's face when his pals in the House of Lords ask why his son is making a spectacle of himself."

"*Really* not helping," Alex told him but found he had to bite down on a smile.

They all fell silent as the first solemn notes of Morocco's national anthem poured from the speakers. Alex counted the beats and matched his breathing to them in a way that had become familiar from the guided meditations Lee did most mornings. By the time *God Save the Queen* poured from the speakers, the sickening quiver in his belly had quieted somewhat.

The game started out frantic. While England could afford a draw, Morocco needed a win to safely progress to the round of sixteen, and they came out strong, throwing themselves into every confrontation, pressing high and swarming any England player who had the ball.

It took several minutes before Alex and Jeff managed to gain proper control of the midfield—quick touches and constant rotation between the two of them and Declan, Lee a little further ahead, darting in and out of the Moroccan defence line. Alex lost himself in the flow of the game, his sense of time suspended, the noise of the crowd receding to the back of his mind.

Fifteen minutes in, or twenty. Thirty, maybe.

Jeff on the left, onside, a Moroccan player just a step behind him. Lee, just up ahead. Toby, wide open on the right. Alex passed and dashed forward, got the ball back and sliced it through a gap between two defenders, Lee sprinting to intercept it.

Perfect.

No chance for the goalkeeper. The ball slotted into the upper right corner, hit the back of the net, and Alex was still running, threw his arms up and slowed down just as he collided with Lee, laughing, both of them laughing, then Jeff and Declan and Toby, the crowd exploding into screams and thunder.

Lee's hand slid from Alex's shoulder down his arm, fingertips grazing Alex's wrist. Hyperaware, Alex stepped back to let other teammates crowd in, caught Lee's gaze, the bright happiness in his eyes. Alex sucked in a breath and another, heart thudding high in his throat.

He checked the time—nineteen minutes down. The match was far from over.

Jeff seemed to have run the same calculation because he shouted, "Stay sharp, everyone! We snooze, we lose!"

Shouts of agreement as the group broke apart. The Moroccan team huddled nearby, players gesticulating, words urgent. As Alex trotted back to his starting position, Lee caught up with him.

“Brilliant pass.”

“Brilliant goal,” Alex returned.

Lee’s grin showed a neat row of white teeth. “Let’s keep it up, yeah?”

Nodding, Alex grinned back. “Let’s.”

Play like you’re one goal down, Kieran’s voice told him in his head, the man himself hovering at the very edge of his coaching zone, in an animated discussion with Jeff.

Seventy-one minutes left.

Go.



POSTED BY @AlexanderBeaufort (June 25, 11:03 p.m.):

ROUND OF 16!!!



“LOOKING GOOD.” Shelly whistled, sitting cross-legged on Lee’s bed. Tonight’s hotel, just outside of Barcelona, was all sleek, modern lines, and his room followed the same concept, with some Catalan-inspired art the only nod to their surroundings. “Trying to impress someone?”

Lee finished buttoning up the white shirt Alex had gotten him a couple of weeks ago, and maybe this was a bad idea. They’d won—*they’d fucking won*—so Lee was under no obligation to dress up in any way, could have just stuck with the standard-issue team wear. And yet.

“Who would I be trying to impress?” he asked because he wasn’t, but maybe he kind of was. Except Alex already liked Lee, already thought he was attractive, so why did Lee feel a need to go the extra mile?

“Oh, I don’t know.” Shelly brushed pink hair out of her eyes and inserted a calculated pause. “Alex Beaufort, maybe? Since he turned you gay and all.”

What the hell.

“One” —Lee gave her a pointed stare— “he did not turn me gay. I *am* gay, he just happened to be my shortcut to realising it. Two, I never told you that.”

Shelly looked perfectly unbothered. “You told Kira.”

“In confidence.”

“Eh. It all stays in the family, right?” Shelly angled her head to assess him. “So. Is he the reason you’re getting all pretty?”

Lee might have partially raised both Shelly and Kira, but it didn’t grant him immunity from their teasing. “I can neither confirm nor deny that.”

“I’ll take that as a yes.” Shelly’s smile showcased sharp incisors. “And I commend your taste—he’s hot. Does he play for your team, though?”

“Obviously,” Lee deadpanned. “Given the whole, you know, representing England at the World Cup thing.”

“You know what I meant.”

Since Lee also knew how to pick his battles, he sighed as he kneeled down to lace his shoes. “Alex isn’t too particular about the choice of team.”

“So what you’re saying is that I could try my luck?”

“Don’t you dare.”

“Territorial, huh?” Shelly looked positively delighted.
“That’s cute.”

“You do realise I’m seven years older, right?”

“Sure. But I’ve had three boyfriends, and you’ve had just the one.”

“Some of us are in the closet.”

“Fair.” Shelly rolled off the bed and slipped into her sandals. At the door, she turned to look at him, her expression a lot softer all of a sudden. “I’m glad you found someone you like.”

“It’s not...” Ah, hell—first Oliver, now Shelly. Lee was *fine*. “We’re not anything, Alex and I. Nothing more than friends, I mean. Alex is an earl, right, and his family expects him to date certain people, certain *women*, along with a traditional marriage and all that.”

Shelly made a considering noise. “Do you want to marry him?”

“What? *No*.”

“So what’s stopping you from having a little fun? As long as he’s not dating some family-approved woman right now...?”

Lee rose into a stand. “He’s not.”

“Well, there you go, then.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“Why not?”

Lee was starting to feel like a broken record, what with telling the same old story first to Alex, then to Oliver, and now to Shelly.

“Because...” With a shake of his head, he trailed off.

“Because?” Shelly prompted after a couple of seconds.

“Because I like him.” He swallowed and repeated, much more quietly, “I like him.”

Something changed in Shelly’s stance. “Oh. So you’re scared.”

“I’m not scared,” Lee said quickly. “Just reasonably cautious. I don’t want to get sidetracked by something that won’t go anywhere.”

Shelly tipped up her chin. “You’re scared you’ll care more than he does.”

“We’re at very different points. He has zero experience with a guy and is kind of curious—which I get, right?—and me, I might actually want to come out at some point. Not tomorrow or anything, but at some point.”

“That’s a non-answer.”

“It’s the only answer you’ll get.” Time to shut this down. Lee wasn’t opposed to unpacking his emotions, but if it exceeded the frame of what was relevant to his performance on the field, he preferred to do so with a cold beer in his hand. Or a shot of vodka.

“For now, maybe.” Shelly’s smile was sweet enough to induce a sugar coma. “Let’s see how you feel when the party’s over.”

“Speaking of...” Lee opened the door and motioned for Shelly to get a move on. “We’re late.”

“Late? To a *party*?” Shelly tossed him a haughty look. “You don’t get out much, do you?”

“I’m not sure which part of ‘professional athlete’ suggested heavy drinking and partying to you—”

“Didn’t the Mexican team invite, like, thirty hookers to some team event a few years back?”

“Exceptions prove the rule.”

They took the lift down to the ground floor and exited into a tiered garden, olive trees lit against the night sky, string lights woven among their branches. A bar was set against the backdrop of the sea, soft music playing from speakers, players and their families mingling with the team’s support staff.

“This is what counts as a party?” Shelly asked in an undertone.

“We only made it to the round of sixteen,” Lee told her. “It’s back to training tomorrow, and no one wants to do that on a hangover, trust me.”

“Lame.” She was smiling, though, and when he slung an arm around her shoulders, she leaned into him for a moment. “Congrats, by the way. Two goals—not bad for such a loser.”

“That’s what I said,” Alex commented from behind them. “Also, nice outfit.”

Which was when Lee realised a gross oversight on his part, namely not developing an emergency plan for when Shelly would meet Alex. Not that Alex didn’t already know that Lee fancied him, but, still. This was some kind of disaster just waiting to happen.

Shelly shrugged off Lee’s arm to turn around, and Lee turned with her.

“Alex, right?” The predatory edge to Shelly’s grin suggested she knew exactly who Alex was. “My brother keeps mentioning you.”

“That’s a gross exaggeration,” Lee protested.

“Well, seeing as we’re sharing a room...” Alex affected a self-deprecating shrug, the gentle glow of string lights above them sparking in his hair. “Hopefully nothing too incriminating.”

“You’re sharing a room?” Shelly fixed Lee with a hard stare, and shit, he’d hoped to get away with not mentioning that. His sisters’ teasing would know no mercy. “But you always share with Oliver.”

“Coach’s orders.” Lee shifted his weight, scratching his cheek as he avoided Alex’s eyes. “Kieran thought Alex and I needed a nudge to...”

“Learn how to like each other,” Alex finished, warmth tucked into his voice. “Worked like a charm.”

“Who says I like you?” Lee asked.

Alex flashed him a radiant smile. “You did.”

Lee was relieved from having to answer when Jeff joined them, Marco in tow who’d returned for the match. Oliver and Sanna weren’t far behind, followed by Lewis with his girlfriend, and then there were toasts to the gods of football and laughter and rehashing of particular scenes. A mix of relief and gleeful expectation hung in the air, another group starting to chant about how it was coming home even though they weren’t even halfway there, would need four more wins to the title.

Knockout stage. No second chances, no do-overs. Drama and penalty shootouts and the pressure cranked up to thirteen,

tens of millions watching every game.

Five days to the next match.



AT SOME POINT, Lee drifted a small distance away to look out at the sea just below the hotel's garden terrace, a wrought-iron railing protecting him from the steep drop. Alone, for the first time since well before the game.

They'd done it.

They were through to the knockout stage, and God, it felt ... amazing, yeah. Still surreal, though, hadn't sunk in properly yet, Lee's head filled with wool. Each time he blinked, he heard the final whistle, adrenaline still ringing in his ears.

"Hey," Alex said quietly.

Lee glanced over his shoulder and found Alex hovering a couple of steps away, the night washing out his features. "Hey," Lee echoed.

"Needed a moment alone?"

"Sort of." Lee shoved his hands into the pockets of his black jeans, and maybe he *was* trying to tell Alex something by wearing this outfit that Alex had picked because he'd thought Lee would look good in it. "Still processing, you know?"

"Same." The glint of a smile as Alex made to walk away. "I'll leave you to it."

"Stay," Lee said—rushed, almost desperate.

Slowly, Alex turned back around. "Thought you wanted to be alone?"

“You don’t count.”

Alex grinned a little. “Oh, ouch.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.” On a chuckled exhale, Lee motioned for Alex to join him. “I just meant that I’m so used to being around you that it’s not—you’re not *people*. As in, it doesn’t take up energy, being around you.”

After hesitating for a beat, Alex stepped into the space next to Lee. “I guess that’s a good thing?”

“It’s a very good thing.”

“Well.” Amusement coloured Alex’s voice. “Good.”

“*Good.*”

“*Very* good.” With a velvety laugh, Alex propped his elbows on the railing, a light breeze tangling in his hair. “Hey, did I mention I chose well with that outfit? You look great.”

“Thank you.” Lee had thought he’d overcome any lingering trace of shyness when he’d moved to Milan with no knowledge of the Italian language beyond a few hours of Duolingo and no connection to the country other than some stranger’s genetic material. Not so.

“Just to be clear” —Alex glanced over— “you look great in jogging bottoms too.”

Christ, was this what it looked like when Alex turned on his charm? Because whatever he was selling, Lee was ready to put in a bulk order.

He played with the collar of his shirt, cheeks warm in spite of the comfortable night-time temperature. “Why go all personal stylist on me, then?”

“I thought you might enjoy the way it makes you feel.”

“Huh?”

“Polished and in control.” Alex’s voice dipped down.
“Sexy.”

Alex wasn’t completely off, was the thing—Lee hadn’t missed Marco openly checking him out both tonight and after the match against the Netherlands, hadn’t missed Alex subtly doing the same some minutes ago while everyone else had been focused on Jeff and Lewis reenacting the second goal. Admitting as much, though? Admitting that Alex might have a minor point about how fashion wasn’t entirely irrelevant? That would have felt like stepping right into a stereotype.

“I should probably pay you back for the clothes,” Lee said instead. “Now that, you know... I mean, they’re not entirely awful. So. Let me pay you back?”

Alex laughed. “Newsflash—I can afford it.”

“Clearly, you didn’t pay attention to Kieran’s lesson about bankruptcy.”

Another laugh, Alex shifting just the tiniest bit closer. “You’re not very used to people doing nice things for you, are you?”

Lee leaned his hip against the railing, briefly sidetracked by the playful curve of Alex’s lips, the happiness tucked into the corners of his eyes. “You barely even liked me when you bought this.”

“I liked you just fine,” Alex protested.

Lee let a dubious look do the talking, and Alex chuckled.

“All right, I was *starting* to like you just fine. And” —Alex leaned in, glancing up through his lashes— “I thought you were hot the instant we met.”

Lee found it really bloody hard to remember the line he'd drawn. But really, what was it good for anyway? Alex posed a distraction no matter whether they kept their hands to themselves or not. Might as well indulge, then. And yes, maybe that was residual adrenaline talking, with Oliver and Shelly cheering from the sidelines, but fuck it.

"Same here, and it hasn't changed." A quick glance reassured Lee that no one seemed to pay them any attention. He smiled, slow and deliberate. "You know, this will be the first time in weeks we don't share a room."

Alex's gaze flicked to Lee's mouth and back up. "I'm aware."

"Planning to put the privacy to good use?" Lee's question came out as a murmur, hardly loud enough to carry over the hurrahs and good nights as people began trickling away to their rooms. Alex swayed closer, just enough for Lee to notice.

"Maybe."

I want to kiss you.

Lee inhaled deeply—lavender in bloom and the fresh, salty aroma of the sea, mingled with the faintest hint of Alex's cologne. "I want to kiss you."

Alex's lashes swooped down in a near-hypnotic blink, the night turning the hazel of his eyes a dark grey. "What's stopping you?"

"Other than the obvious?" Lee indicated their surroundings without looking away from Alex. "It may still be a bad idea."

"Entirely possible." Alex tagged a private smile onto the words. "Kieran did tell us to work on our chemistry though, didn't he?"

“I doubt that’s what he had in mind.”

“Eh, I don’t know. Think he’s pretty open to unconventional methods.”

Lee leaned back slightly to run his gaze down the length of Alex’s body, then back up, lingering on where the partially unbuttoned shirt granted a generous glimpse of Alex’s throat and the dip between his collarbones. Alex’s skin gleamed faintly in the distant glow of string lights. Dear *God*, Lee wanted him—might have sunk to his knees right this moment if they’d been alone out here.

He met Alex’s eyes. “Define unconventional methods?”

Something in Lee’s tone must have given him away because Alex swallowed. “Whatever feels good.”

“Vague,” Lee admonished softly.

One corner of Alex’s mouth curled up. “Well, you’re the experienced one. I was hoping you could show me.”

Christ, Lee had never been one to salivate over virgin porn and shit like that— inexperience was not a turn-on for him, thanks. Yet something about Alex’s tone worked for him, or maybe it was a twisted throwback to when they’d first met and the two years Lee had on Alex felt much more substantial than they did now.

“Does that innocent act ever actually work for you?” Lee asked, striving for an even tone. He missed the mark if Alex’s smile was any indication.

“On occasion, yeah.”

“And what—”

“Hey!” Shelly said brightly, and Lee realised with a jolt that he and Alex stood just a tad too close. He took half a step

back and turned to face his sister.

“Hey.” He cleared his throat to counter the tinge of awkwardness. “Ready to turn in?”

Shelly glanced at Alex before she fixed Lee with a curious look. “Not really, but everyone else is leaving. Something about how there’s no rest for the wicked, show must go on, blah blah blah.”

“Guess we should call it a night too.” Alex sounded relaxed, certainly not like he’d basically asked Lee for gay sex lessons just a minute ago.

“I guess we should,” Lee echoed.

The moment Shelly turned to lead the way back to the hotel, Alex threw Lee a wink. ‘Tomorrow?’ he mouthed, and Lee shrugged, then nodded. Alex’s smile was brilliant.

They separated in the hallway in front of Alex’s room, Lee’s a little further along, and this time, there’d be no knock on Lee’s door. It was true what Lee had told Alex earlier—he’d grown so accustomed to Alex’s presence that it was strange to go without him for even a night.

Not a thought to share with Shelly, mind.

They got ready for bed quickly, Shelly already sprawled on her side of the bed when Lee slipped under the covers and flicked off the light. He was about to mumble a good night when she beat him to the point.

“Hey, Lee?” Her voice was gentle in the darkness.

Lee made a questioning noise and rolled onto his side to face her.

“I like Alex.” A pause. “I like the way he looks at you.”

For a second, Lee didn't know how to respond. "Me too," he said then, quiet like a secret.

"So you'll stop being a wuss about him?"

Lee snorted. "Shut up, brat."

"Never." Her giggle reminded him of when she'd been much younger, in a silly mood as she was getting ready for bed, dancing with her toothbrush sticking out of her mouth while Kira sang some pop song and garbled half the words. There'd been tough times, yeah, but they'd had fun too.

"Love you," he told her, and even in the dark room, he caught the spark of her smile.

"Love you, too." She reached over to poke him in the cheek. "Night, Lee. Proud of you."

"Thank you." He caught her hand to prevent another poke, releasing it after a squeeze. "Now go to sleep, yeah?"

"Yes, sir."

"Brat."

"Loser."

Settling into the pillow, Lee closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths until the world slowed down around him.

Round of sixteen—already, they'd made it further than four years ago.

And it was just the beginning.

Something had shifted between them—again, caught up in a river of their very own making with change as the only constant.

At breakfast, Alex sat with Jeff and Marco, Lee a few tables away. Each time their eyes met, anticipation pressed thick against the back of Alex’s throat, a dizzying tangle of nerves and elation. He spent the trip back to the team hotel in Alicante with his headphones in, trying to catch up on sleep that had been elusive last night because ... *well*. With things about to get real, he’d only meant to do a few minutes of research, brush up on his knowledge of guy-on-guy mechanics since gay porn didn’t seem like a reliable source of information. Turned out the internet was a rabbit hole. *Surprise*.

Back at the hotel, they had just a few minutes to drop off their bags before they were due for a strategy session. About to leave the room, Alex snagged Lee’s elbow to stop him from opening the door. Lee turned slowly, with a tentative smile, and Alex suddenly didn’t know what to say.

Several seconds of silence stretched between them, then Lee huffed out a small, amused breath. “So. This is awkward.”

Which was when Alex remembered that he was meant to be the charming one. “Not awkward, no. Just different.”

“Different, huh?” Lee tilted his head, smile growing.

Charming, right. Alex could do charming.

“Different,” he repeated, letting his voice tilt down a little. “For example, I can do this now.” He shuffled closer, tucking himself up against Lee’s body as he slid his hand down to tangle their fingers, nosing along the curve of Lee’s cheekbone.

“Not a girl,” Lee protested, but he didn’t sound genuinely upset.

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

“We’ll be late.” Lee made no move to pull away—angled himself closer, in fact, and Alex pressed his grin against Lee’s cheek.

“I know that. Anything else?”

Lee turned his head just enough for their lips to brush, the contact so light it barely registered. “I want you.”

Jesus.

Alex cleared his throat. “Warn a guy.”

“Where’d be the fun in that?” Lee ran a hand down Alex’s back to cup his arse, pulling him in for a sweet, leisurely roll of Lee’s hips, and okay, Alex was coming to see the appeal of loose training shorts. Especially when Lee bumped Alex away right after, gently but firmly.

Alex blinked. “Hey. I was enjoying that.”

“Me too.” Lee’s voice had dropped by a margin. “We’re already late, though.”

So what?

Alex was about to say as much when he realised that Lee would have spent years herding his sisters, managing their schedules along with his own, making sure they made it to school on time. Funny how Alex's initial assumptions about Lee had been so far off they'd landed on a different continent entirely—too cool for school, messy, aloof. Wrong, wrong, and wrong.

With a sigh, Alex took a step back and tugged his jersey into place. "All right, let's go."

Lee nodded, hesitating for just a second before he smiled. "Later?"

Alex smiled back. "Later."

Later, as it turned out, amounted to a total of twenty minutes before dinner, hardly enough time for both of them to get clean and change. Alex left the bathroom door deliberately open before he stepped under the shower, and maybe Lee would have done something about it if his mother hadn't chosen that moment to call. While Alex made a half-hearted attempt to tune out the conversation, he found it impossible to ignore Lee's voice—quiet and careful, younger than usual.

The phone call had ended by the time Alex exited the bathroom with just a towel wrapped around his hips. Unusually conscious of his near-nakedness, he found Lee in one of the armchairs by the window, expression absent as he frowned at the landscape.

"You okay?" Alex asked.

Lee started slightly and glanced over. Briefly, his gaze dropped from Alex's face down to the towel. "My mum wants to come to the next match."

“You said she’s stable, right?” Alex reached for a pair of boxer briefs and the jeans he’d left on his bed, but he didn’t move to pull them on just yet.

“Yeah.” Lee scrubbed a hand down his face, looking abruptly tired. “But routines and regularity are good. Stress and excitement? Not so much.”

“Can’t blame her for wanting to see her son play in a bloody World Cup, though.”

“I guess not.” Lee drew a long breath before he got up. For a few seconds, he simply stood there, watching Alex with a strange kind of intensity before he smiled. It didn’t quite reach his eyes. “All right, I’ll get showered too. I’ll be quick.”

Alex considered asking whether Lee would like some company—but really, not the moment for it. It felt like Lee could use something to lighten the mood, though. “You know what I should get you? A short-sleeved denim shirt with black trousers. It’d go great with your casual vibe but would still be a bit more effort than whatever T-shirt you found at the bottom of your wardrobe.”

It did the trick because Lee’s shoulders relaxed. “Trying to model me into the kind of bloke who could meet your parents?”

Alex was startled into a laugh at the mere thought of his father’s face. “Yeah, that’ll be the day. Think I like you too much for that.”

Something sparked behind Lee’s eyes, gone before Alex could analyse it. “Do you?”

“Yes.” There was more Alex could have added. Time was ticking though, and Lee disliked being late and Alex still couldn’t quite read his mood. So Alex left it at, “Especially

when you're all nice and half-naked after a shower. On that note, I wouldn't mind getting my mouth on that tattoo on your hip."

"Such a sweet-talker." A hint of amusement curled the corners of Lee's mouth, and Alex reflected it tenfold.

"Plus, I'm pretty—according to you."

Lee's smile turned real. "I'm never gonna live that one down, am I?"

"Never," Alex said with conviction. "We'll be old and grey and my mind will slip at times, but that part I won't forget."

"Glad I made a lasting impression." Any lingering trace of heaviness had dissipated from Lee's posture, and only now did Alex acknowledge to himself that it was what he'd been aiming for ever since he'd caught sight of Lee in that armchair, staring at nothing.

"Unforgettable," Alex said with all the dramatic flair of a cheesy pop ballad, and Lee snorted but didn't deign it with a response. When he brushed past Alex on his way to the bathroom, he paused just long enough to curve one hand around Alex's waist, leaning in for a gentle neck bite while Alex stood completely still, breath catching in his throat. Jesus.

With a tiny grin that said he knew exactly what he was doing, Lee moved on. Alex was left staring at the closed bathroom door, the shower starting to run a moment later.

Wow, okay. Alex might have accidentally jumped into the deep end, but fuck if he wasn't going to figure out how to swim. His heart was still beating a tad too fast when he pulled on his clothes, stomach hot with anticipation at the uncharted waters ahead.

And somehow, he was loving it.



ALEX WASN'T SHY.

He might have been shy once, when he'd been little, but it wasn't a trait well-suited to the Earl of Clydesdale and future Duke of Eastwyck, so he'd been trained out of it. Social situations didn't scare him anymore.

Making his way back to the room, Lee right next to Alex just like he'd been all throughout dinner—Alex wasn't *scared*, no. But he did feel uncommonly shy. He hovered an arm's length away while Lee tapped the keycard against the lock before he held the door for Alex, and had he done that before? Alex couldn't remember.

He sent Lee a quick smile as he walked past him into the room, then drew to a halt not far from the foot of Lee's bed. Too close? He didn't want to seem desperate, but he also didn't want to come across as overly reserved.

"Cat got your tongue?" Lee asked quietly, and Alex spun around.

"No!" He cleared his throat, shook his head. "No."

Casual? Nailed it.

Lee left his shoes by the door before he padded closer, eyes serious. "Okay, so... Talk to me?"

"Um." Alex tugged on his ear, then remembered it was a nervous habit he'd ditched years ago. "Sure. About what?"

"Anything." Lee walked past Alex and sat down on the edge of his bed, silent for a beat before he looked up at Alex with a cautious tilt to his head. "Like whether you still want to do this."

“Yes.” Too desperate. Alex dialled it down a notch. “I do, I swear. Just a bit nervous is all.”

Something twitched around the corners of Lee’s mouth. “Okay, here’s the plan: we’ll start with you depthroating me, and then maybe I can give you a quick rim job, get you ready to take my cock. Then let’s do it all again, but switch roles.” Another twitch of Lee’s lips. “How’s that sound?”

“It’s not funny,” Alex told him with as much dignity as he could muster, sudden laughter tickling the back of his throat.

“Oh, but it is.” Lee’s grin emerged in full—bright and almost sweet as he leaned forward, hands laced between his thighs. “Look, it’s not a race, okay? Or a test. When I said I want you, I didn’t mean immediately, right this second, drop your trousers, what are you *waiting* for? Not that I’m opposed as such, but it’s certainly not my expectation.”

Alex exhaled and chuckled softly. “Right, yeah. That makes sense.”

“Then how about you take off your shoes” —Lee waved his hand— “and sit down next to me? And then we just see.”

“Sounds good.” It did. So Alex toed off his trainers and lined them up near the entrance, then glanced at the balcony door they’d left half-open before dinner, golden evening light spilling in. Just a few days past the peak of summer daylight.

When Alex crossed the room back over to where Lee was sitting, he felt calmer, anticipation curling warm in his belly, but no longer edged with jittery excitement. He paused in front of Lee to take in the dark eyes and prominent slant of Lee’s cheekbones, the subtle upwards curve of his mouth. Fucking gorgeous. Lee leaned back on his hands and met Alex’s gaze, simply waiting.

Somehow, it settled the last of Alex's nerves. "Hi," he said softly.

The corners of Lee's mouth tugged up more. "Hi."

"Come here often?" Alex took a deliberate step forward, and Lee's legs parted to make room.

"Every now and then." Lee sat up straight and slid his hands along the backs of Alex's thighs, tilting his head to watch Alex's face as his voice took on a playful note. "Can't say I've seen you round here before, though. I tend to remember beautiful things—and you, my friend, top the list."

Alex grinned. "Another line you stole from porn?"

"Yeah. Is it working?"

"Like a charm." With that, Alex moved to straddle Lee's lap because he wasn't a blushing virgin, for Christ's sake. Holding hands and kisses on cheeks were all well and good, but he'd moved past considering that a feature-length film at the age of fifteen and hadn't looked back.

"And they say porn doesn't reflect reality." Lee's voice had roughened just a little as he stared up at Alex, face awash in bronze light. He wasn't moving though, and that just wouldn't do.

"It would be an even better reflection of reality if you kissed me," Alex said. "Just, you know. Throwing it out there."

"Yeah?" Lee ran his fingers along the outside of Alex's leg and around, skimming over Alex's arse before he untucked the shirt and flattened his palm against the small of Alex's back. "What about this, then?"

"It's a start," Alex allowed, lowering his head slightly.

“A start.” Lee’s lips quirked into a smile, the gust of his exhalation feathering over Alex’s chin. “Thought you wanted to take it slow?”

“Slow, yes. But not at the speed of a continental drift on a lazy Sunday.”

With that, Alex finally dipped his head and brought their mouths together. It started out with just a gentle brush of their lips, warmth and a breath shared between them. Lee was the one who deepened it—fingertips digging into Alex’s back, his other hand coming up to cup Alex’s jaw so he could change the angle, tongue licking into Alex’s mouth. Alex opened willingly, clutching Lee’s shoulder to steady himself against the kaleidoscope of colours behind his lids. *Oh.*

He circled his hips down and swallowed Lee’s gasp. Screw slow—this was better. When Alex pulled back a little, just to get some air, Lee chased his mouth and Alex let himself be drawn right back into the kiss, back into Lee. He shoved at Lee’s shoulder, and Lee fell backwards, Alex following him down.

“Okay?” Lee asked, just before he claimed Alex’s mouth for another kiss.

“Brilliant,” Alex said even though they were hanging half off the bed, threatening to slide off. That changed when Lee rolled them onto their sides and shuffled up the mattress, hauling Alex along. Alex had never been manhandled before—it was a bit of a turn-on.

Lee broke their kiss. Alex made a plaintive noise that turned into a groan when Lee ducked down to nip at Alex’s throat, and honestly, what was up with Lee’s penchant for using his teeth on Alex?

“Sure your dad was Italian?” Alex tipped his head back for better access. “Could’ve been a vampire too.”

Lee raised himself up slightly. Heavy-lidded, with his face flushed and a smile dancing around his mouth, he was just about breathtaking. “You asking me to stop?”

“Not at all. Nope. Wouldn’t occur to me.”

“Well then.” Lee slid lower, pausing to unbutton Alex’s shirt so he could get his mouth on Alex’s collarbone. That was ... good, yes. Very, very good. Alex closed his eyes, surrounded by the soft rustle of sheets, the scent of the hotel’s detergent and a faint whiff of Lee’s deodorant. His own hands found their way under Lee’s T-shirt, one tracing the bumps of Lee’s spine, the other flat against his stomach to feel each breath he took.

It wasn’t sweet, not exactly, but it was bright and unhurried—minutes sliding by as Alex learned the shape of Lee’s torso by touch, the delicious sting of Lee’s teeth on Alex’s skin until Alex got his fingers into Lee’s short hair and drew him up for another kiss. Alex was hard, could tell that Lee was too, but there was something exquisite about dragging it out, the luxury of sharing this space for a few more days at least, about taking their time.

Alex wasn’t sure whether he was the one who slowed down first or whether it was Lee, the gaps between kisses lengthening like the evening shadows around them. Eventually, they were just breathing together, close enough for the details of Lee’s features to blur.

“Enough continental drifting for tonight?” Lee asked, voice a murmur.

“In the best way,” Alex replied, just as quietly. He propped himself up on one elbow to grin down at Lee, stomach giving a pleasant twist at the way Lee’s focus dropped to Alex’s mouth. “Should probably get some sleep, but perhaps we can aim for third base tomorrow?”

Lee grinned back. “It’s a date.”

“Right, then.” Alex lingered for another beat before he rolled off Lee’s bed, the partially unbuttoned shirt flapping open. He didn’t have to glance over to know that Lee was watching but he did so anyway, catching Lee’s eyes.

They brushed their teeth side by side at the double sink, hips bumping on occasion, the silence comfortable. It didn’t feel vastly different from any other evening they’d done this, and yet it was—Lee’s hand briefly settling between Alex’s shoulder blades as he passed, Alex leaning in to press his nose against Lee’s neck for a deep intake of air, a new resonance to it when they said good night across the gap between their beds.

For once, Alex didn’t need to know where things were headed, was fine to just go with the flow. They might have just a few days left, after all.



LEE HAD NEVER BEEN in love. Not until now, anyway. Maybe it wasn’t love though, just infatuation—that blinding softness washing over him when he woke up and rolled over to look at Alex, still asleep in the diffused light of morning, lashes feathered out against his cheeks.

This had the potential to hurt.

The first time Lee had nurtured a crush on Alex, he’d barely known him—he’d seen a pretty face and the radiant

charm of a boy who had everything going for him. Now, he knew what Alex sounded like first thing in the morning and tired after a training session, the difference between a practised smile and one that was real, his clever brain and dry sense of humour, the taste of his skin, and how his breathing sped up when he was turned on. Walking away would be so much harder this time.

There's always someone who wants more than the other.

Lee just hadn't thought it would ever be him. With Giovanni, it had been easy. They'd liked each other, but mostly, it had been convenient, and returning to the UK had been a decision Lee hadn't even considered discussing with Giovanni before he'd made it. Alex, though? He knocked Lee sideways, a little breathless at even just the thought of stripping Alex fully naked and getting his mouth on all that smooth, creamy skin. It couldn't be further from casual, the way Lee felt about him—which might make this a horrible idea, pull the emergency brakes *now*.

Except Lee didn't want to. If a few more days was all that he'd get, well, he'd take it. And who knew? Liverpool and Manchester were just an hour apart, so...

There was a chance. A small one, but a chance nonetheless.

He'd take it.

“I know it’s not France or Brazil.” Kieran leaned forward, his expression uncommonly serious, no trace of his usual smile. “But let’s not underestimate the US here. It’s been a decade since they made it past the round of sixteen, granted—but we don’t want to open the door and tell them to walk right on through to the quarter final. Their style has evolved, their players are internationally successful, and their coach knows what he’s doing.”

Well, *yeah*.

Alex didn’t think anyone in the room really needed to hear that. Then again, complacency was why the Japan match had ended in a tie, so maybe they deserved this reminder.

Across the table, he caught Lee glancing at him and let the corners of his own mouth tug up in response. He’d forgotten to set his alarm for the first time in years, and by the time Lee had gently shaken him awake, Alex had been running twenty minutes behind schedule. A ten-second, toothpaste-flavoured snog against the door had been the extent of their morning action.

“So,” Kieran said right into the little quiver of remembered heat in Alex’s stomach. “Gentlemen, I need you *sharp*.”

With just a hint of guilt, Alex focused back on Kieran.

The next hour was spent reviewing key players of the US team, along with the strategic cornerstones of how they'd played their three group-stage matches, two of which they'd won. Alex spent the team's half-hour break with Jeff, debating the best ways to navigate the possession-oriented style of their upcoming opponent, along with rumours that Prince Joshua would show up for the match. Since Alex's father hadn't called to bemoan the prince's lack of decorum, Alex rated the likelihood as fairly low.

Training started with an *Economist* article on sportswashing, which was slightly awkward given the national team encompassed players from both Manchester City and Newcastle United, proudly owned by Abu Dhabi and Saudi Arabia. It did lead to possibly the most spirited discussion so far though, from the pros and cons of holding major sports tournaments in autocratic countries that wanted to polish their image, to star athletes being offered ridiculous sums to attend events in questionable locations.

"Everyone's got a price." Lee was the one who'd stated it. "It's a lot easier to turn down three million dollars to play in some Saudi golf tournament if you're Tiger Woods than it is to turn down one million if you're a player with a net worth of, say, five per cent of what he's got. For Woods, three million might mean hush money for another waitress, but for some other guy, one million could be setting the parents up for retirement."

"What's *your* price, then?" Lewis asked with a massive grin.

"Much more than you can afford, mate," Lee returned.

Kieran gave them a minute to sling some insults around before he clapped his hands and called an official start to practice. As they split into smaller groups for the warm-up exercises, Alex brushed by Lee. It was the kind of thing that happened a dozen times with teammates during training, but they both paused for a beat and a smile before they kept moving.

Ninety minutes later, they returned to their room to shower and get changed before lunch. Alex hesitated at the foot of his bed, then slowly turned to watch Lee close the door to the hallway. They were both sweaty and covered in grass stains, which put them on equal footing.

So Alex walked right into Lee's space, stopping just before making contact. Lee's response consisted of a head tilt combined with a raised eyebrow that conveyed an unspoken challenge.

"Tell me, then." Alex hooked a finger into the waistband of Lee's shorts. "What *is* your price?"

Eyes darkening, Lee angled his hips forward just slightly. "I'm open to negotiation."

"Are you." Alex made it a statement rather than a question and pressed closer, Lee's hands coming up to grip his waist. "Price of a joint shower?"

"On the house." Lee grinned, a mischievous edge to it. "Help the planet by saving some water—it's a win-win."

"Oliver would approve."

"Oliver does, in fact, approve." One of Lee's hands slid under Alex's jersey, smoothing up along the curve of Alex's spine. "He's the one who told me to give this a shot. Shelly did, too."

So that was why Lee had changed his mind? Alex owed Oliver one, it seemed.

“You’ve got excellent taste in friends and siblings,” Alex told Lee just before he kissed the spot under Lee’s ear and found salty skin, Lee’s breath escaping in a rush.

“I’m pretty gross,” Lee warned even as he angled his head to grant better access.

“So am I. Hence, shower.” Alex lifted his head and smiled in a way that brought out his dimples—he’d worked hard on his ability to be charming, might as well put it to good use.

With a snort, Lee removed his hand from Alex’s waist and brought it up between them. “I bet” —he poked a dimple— “that this got you out of all sorts of trouble when you were little.”

“Eh. I was a pretty quiet child.”

“You were?” Lee seemed to slot a new mental puzzle piece into place.

“Are you psychoanalysing me?”

“Only a little.”

“What’s the diagnosis?”

“High need for affiliation.” Lee correctly interpreted Alex’s pointed look and elaborated. “Heightened need to belong, to the point where you risk conforming to your parents’ and other people’s expectations at the cost of your own needs and desires. Sensitivity to rejection, even if it’s perceived. Struggling with decisions that could disappoint others.”

“Jesus, don’t mince your words.” Alex retreated a little, and Lee drew him back in, smiling.

“Great team player.” Lee’s voice was warm, possibly even fond. “Nowhere near as comfortable with attention as you pretend to be, and one of those rare and wonderful players who are just as happy to assist in a goal as they are scoring it themselves.”

“You’re just glad I’m helping you score. Also, you just made all of that up.” Yet Alex couldn’t help but smile back, leaning into Lee’s fingers carding through his hair.

“One, I am hoping to score.” Lee raised both eyebrows to convey his meaning. “And two, nope, I didn’t. Told you I read up on some psychology stuff when I started suspecting that my mum’s behaviour wasn’t just down to substance abuse. Need for affiliation isn’t a diagnosis, though. Just something that’s part of the human condition, but some people have it more than others.”

Huh. Something to consider, but not today.

“In that case...” Alex pressed closer, chest to chest, noses bumping. He lowered his voice. “A joint shower might satisfy my need for affiliation.”

“How opportunistic, Beaufort.” Lee’s hand skimmed down Alex’s back, then cupped his arse to pull him in, their hips aligning. For just a second, Alex lost his focus.

“Shower?” he asked, and he didn’t care if that wasn’t clever, didn’t care if he sounded breathless.

Lee’s gaze dropped to Alex’s mouth, his voice honey-slow. “Shower. Yeah.”

It felt *good*—being the sole centre of Lee’s focus and the way Lee’s eyes narrowed when Alex wet his lips, instinctive rather than calculated. They didn’t have much time before

lunch, so Alex started moving backwards, pulling Lee along towards the bathroom.

“Boots off,” Lee protested, and somehow, it cut through the seriousness that had settled over them.

“Glad you’ve got your priorities sorted.” With a huff of laughter, Alex kneeled to unlace his trainers and align them next to the door, ditching his socks too, before he headed for the bathroom and peeled off his jersey as he went. Lee followed, clothes hitting the floor—his body leanly muscled, his abs outlined by the overhead light. Alex’s attention rested on the tattoo on Lee’s hip before he let his gaze dip down further. Of course it wasn’t the first time Alex had seen a guy naked, what with having spent a portion of his formative years in locker rooms, but, well. This was different. The slight curve of Lee’s erection and how Lee paused, unabashed, so Alex could look his fill.

“Can I…” Alex didn’t quite know how to finish the sentence, and Lee’s grin softened into something more intimate.

“Answer’s yes.”

“You don’t know what I was going to ask.”

“Answer’s still yes.” Lee tilted his head and drew closer. “Although we’re on a bit of a deadline, so the answer might be yes, but later.”

“Good point.” Alex reached back blindly to turn on the shower, focus still on Lee, and then they were pressed together, naked skin and Lee’s fingers trailing down Alex’s arm as they stumbled under the spray of water, the light dimmer inside the shower stall. Alex wasn’t sure if he was the one seeking out Lee’s mouth, it didn’t really matter—he just

closed his eyes as he gripped Lee's waist and allowed Lee to walk him back against the tiled wall, solid and cool against his shoulder blades, Lee warm along his front, water surrounding them.

When Lee slid to his knees, Alex sucked in a breath and opened his eyes, watched Lee watching him. Lee blinked against the water as he brought his hands to the backs of Alex's thighs. "Yeah?" he asked, a secretive murmur that made something tighten in Alex's chest, his centre of gravity tipping sideways for just a moment.

"Please."

Lee moved Alex so most of the water hit Alex's chest and didn't break eye contact as he dipped his head. Alex didn't look away either. The first brush of Lee's mouth was gentle, lips catching on the tip of Alex's cock, tongue darting out for a quick taste. Alex inhaled, legs shaky in spite of the wall behind him, reaching out to touch Lee's jaw before he brought his hand around to lightly cup the back of Lee's head.

A sudden smile lit Lee's eyes, and when he leaned back in, there was no hesitation, no gentleness—steady pressure and a wicked flick of Lee's thumb, water dripping from Alex's wet hair into his eyes, the rest of the room slipping away because Lee was all Alex could see. A rush to the head each time Alex blinked, biting his lip to keep quiet, spiralling higher and trusting Lee to catch him.

Close.

Jesus, *so* close.

Just a little more, please, *yes*.

Alex tried to nudge Lee back and met resistance. With both hands, Lee trapped Alex's hips against the tiles, limiting

Alex's movements to tiny shudders as Lee's tongue flattened against the underside of Alex's cock. The tiniest sting of pain, Lee's nails biting into Alex's waist, and maybe that was what did it or maybe it was just *Lee*—Lee and the way he kept blinking water out of his eyes, glancing up at Alex every so often.

Alex's orgasm pulled him under, irresistible. He was loosely aware of Lee steadying him, swallowing, and then Alex slid to the floor and reached for Lee, wasn't quite sure about the protocol until Lee kissed him, the slight taste of salt and a hint of sweet bitterness shared between them. Somehow, Alex got one hand around Lee's cock.

"Whatever you're comfortable with," Lee whispered, almost lost in the rush of the shower.

"This is good." Alex didn't wait for a response, just twisted his wrist in a way he liked himself. Lee's hips jerked with a tiny moan that Alex swallowed.

The angle was slightly different, but the weight and silky warmth of skin wasn't, water making it an easy slide. It didn't take long at all for Lee to gasp into Alex's mouth, clutching Alex's shoulder as he spilled sticky-warm between them. Maybe that meant something—how little it had taken, how close Lee had already been by the time Alex got a hand on him.

Maybe.

That was a question for another moment, though. For now, Alex was happy to lose himself in more kisses shared between them, urgency fading as the water grew cooler.

Lunch could wait a little longer.



SO THAT WAS ... a thing now.

Sex with Alex.

Kissing too—quick and close-mouthed in the morning, deep and slow in the evening, and whatever they could get away with during the day. The night before the match against the US, Lee talked Alex through his first blowjob. It wasn't perfect, of course it wasn't because Alex needed a moment to find his rhythm and he took a few breaks, loosely circling Lee's cock with one hand, grinning up at Lee as he mouthed at the head—but God, it was *Alex*, and that was enough to make Lee bite his own hand when he came so he wouldn't give them away to the entire team.

He hadn't planned for them to fall asleep together after that, naked and tangled on his bed. When he woke up in the morning though, Alex tucked up against his side, it felt like the most natural thing in the world, as inevitable as gravity. Alex blinked his eyes open some minutes later, sunshine brightening the tips of his lashes because they hadn't bothered closing the curtains last night, and found Lee watching him. His smile was soft and sleepy, no surprise at their proximity.

“Creep,” he mumbled, and Lee chuckled.

“It's not every day I wake up with an earl in my bed.”

Could get used to it. Lee didn't say that.

The corners of Alex's eyes crinkled. “You complaining?”

“Not even a little,” Lee told him before he leaned in for a lazy kiss, morning breath be damned. They were the last ones at breakfast, and Oliver shot Lee a knowing look that Lee countered with a sheepish grin, ducking his head.

He should have known it was too good to last.

It was their first match in Madrid, and Alex spent most of the train trip staring blankly out the window while Jeff, Lewis, and Lee slagged off the US in general and American portion sizes and accents in particular, even Oliver chiming in every now and then. When Jeff launched into a made-up country song about a rusting truck and a regrettable lack of beer, Alex cracked a brief grin that faded all too soon. Jeff clearly noticed and turned up the volume on his attempts to distract Alex, teasing him about his pretty face and his popularity on social media. For a little while it worked, but as soon as Jeff left their compartment to call his new girl who was going to be at the match tonight, Alex fell back into morose silence.

Only once Lewis left as well did Lee get a chance to reach over and cover Alex's hand with his own. "Hey."

Alex looked up sharply, gaze sliding to Oliver. At Oliver's sunny smile, Alex relaxed and turned to Lee, tangling their fingers. "Hey."

Wrong. Too quiet, lacking Alex's usual energy.

Oliver appeared to think so too. He got up and grabbed his phone, pointing a thumb at the corridor outside the compartment. "I'll be just outside, yeah? Give Sanna a quick call."

"You'll stand guard for us?" Lee aimed for an obnoxious smile. "That's real kind of you, mate."

"Keep it family-appropriate."

"Boring."

Oliver tossed Lee an unimpressed look before he stepped outside, closed the door, and turned his back on them, leaving the compartment in thick silence that was underlined by the

steady hum of the train. Lee shifted to face Alex properly, taking in the tense line of his jaw and the way he wouldn't quite meet Lee's eyes.

"How are you doing?" Lee asked in an undertone.

"I'm" —Alex dragged in a breath— "nervous."

"You weren't nervous last night."

The faintest quirk of Alex's mouth. "I was otherwise occupied."

"By all means." Lee slid a little lower in his seat and tilted his hips up with a small grin, keeping his hold on Alex's hand as he gestured at the fly of his jeans. "Help yourself. I don't mind taking one for the team."

It had the desired effect—the tension around Alex's eyes eased slightly. "Oliver would kill us."

"As our captain, Oliver will understand that sometimes, it takes unorthodox methods to get the job done."

"You are so full of shit." Yet the upwards quirk to Alex's mouth was more noticeable now, and when Lee pulled him in for a kiss, Alex turned into it, the pace languid. Even as they separated, it wasn't by much, foreheads resting together, breathing.

"Want to tell me what's going on in that head of yours?" Lee asked softly.

Alex sighed. "Nothing you wouldn't have guessed already. Could all be over tonight, you know?"

"Could be." Lee let their noses brush as he nodded. "We might lose and come home to a barrage of criticism. Been there, done that."

“That’s not helping.”

“I think it is. It’s a possibility, so might as well get it out there, right? After all, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is scarier than Lord Voldemort.”

A near-smile. “Nerd.”

“Thank you.” Lee inclined his head. “But my actual point is—I don’t think so. This team? It’s better than four years ago. We’re a *team*, not just a random assortment of players, and Kieran’s got a way of making everyone feel valued and seen, even the guys who haven’t had any playtime yet.”

Alex was silent for a beat, then he exhaled, leaning further into Lee. “You’re not too bad at pep talks.”

“Plenty of practice with my sisters.” Lee caught Alex’s mouth for a brief kiss, then kept talking against his lips. “I mean it, though—we’re good enough. *You’re* good enough. And you and me, babe?” He nudged Alex’s nose with his own. “We’re magic.”

“You’ve got a bright future as a motivational coach,” Alex murmured. He didn’t give Lee a chance to reply before tugging him in for another kiss, a hint of urgency now, open mouths, *oh*. Lee nipped at Alex’s bottom lip and momentarily lost himself in Alex’s tiny moan before he remembered that their privacy was fragile at best.

He tangled one hand in Alex’s hair, squeezed Alex’s fingers with the other as he slowly, feathery kiss by feathery kiss, pulled away. The way Alex stared at him, eyes dark and dazed, was everything.

Lee swallowed. “So, uh.” *Casual*. “You’ve already met Prince Joshua, right? So you can help me prepare. Is he as tall as he looks on the telly? Does he like his guys athletic?”

“You’ve got a crush on him?” The way Alex’s gaze narrowed hadn’t been part of the plan, but oh, did Lee delight in it. He bit down on the inside of his cheek to stifle a grin as he held his thumb and forefinger apart by a small margin.

“Teeny tiny bit. It’s my nobility kink, you see? The fancier the title, the more I want to get on my knees.”

“His husband might have something to say about that.” Then Alex seemed to notice the grin Lee couldn’t quite suppress anymore. “Also, are you trying to make me jealous?”

“Is it working?”

Alex didn’t reply immediately, lips pursed into a frown. “Maybe,” he said then, with a glance from underneath his lashes that made something sweetly disorienting catch in Lee’s throat.

“Well, lucky for you, I like my men a little younger than me. Say, by a couple of years or so.”

“Now you’re just taking the piss.” The corners of Alex’s mouth curled up though, and Lee pressed his thumb against the slight indentation of a dimple.

“It’s how I show my love.” *Tad* too close to the mark, so Lee tagged a cheesy grin onto the end. “But rest assured, babe, that you are the fairest of them all.”

Just as Alex was about to reply, Oliver rapped his knuckles against the glass. Alex and Lee dropped back into their separate seats moments before Jeff barged back into the compartment to announce that they’d arrive in fifteen minutes —“Let’s get this show on the road!”

Lee couldn’t help but notice that Jeff stuck close to Alex for the rest of the journey, poking and prodding him, keeping him distracted with random chatter. It was at odds with the

devil-may-care image Jeff presented to the public, and it didn't take long until Alex started smiling for real, countering Jeff's playful insults with some of his own even as he kept glancing at Lee.

Just before they headed out onto the pitch, the distant roar of the crowd like rolling thunder, Lee bumped into Alex in a way he hoped would look like an accident. "You help me score tonight" —he lowered his voice even further, the commotion around them guaranteed to cover it up— "and I'll consider adding a couple of fingers next time I blow you."

Alex inhaled sharply, a challenge in his eyes when he turned his head. "Deal."

With a grin, Lee kept walking.



COMMENTATORS LIKED TO TELL STORIES—A match was either a nail-biter or it was an open-and-shut case, one team dominating the game and leaving their opponents without a chance, clear winners and dejected losers.

Reality, Lee found, was hardly ever that black or white. Yes, there was the occasional match when one team was so clearly and vastly better that a victory was a foregone conclusion. Mostly, though, there were moments when things could go either way and it was only hindsight that made the outcome seem obvious.

Their match against the US was such a case. They won, three goals to the Americans scoring one against them, but there'd been minutes here and there when the English defence had looked vulnerable, when Lee hadn't been able to shake off the guy who'd been tasked with marking him, when the timing of Alex's passes had been off by just a tenth of a second. And

then there'd been that stretch right at the beginning of the second half when everything just *clicked*, two goals in nine minutes that kept their dream alive.

"I look forward to collecting my prize," Alex told Lee in a murmur, the locker room in a riot.

Lee shot him a dirty smile. "Arguably not as much as me."

Alex's reply got cut off when some security type of person entered to announce the impending arrival of His Royal Highness Prince Joshua, and could everyone please ensure an appropriate state of dress? Shorts and jerseys, please, no bare chests.

Well, that sucked. As Lee grabbed his jersey off the bench, he tried to hide his annoyance—not at the prince and his entourage, but at the fact that this appeared to be a necessary precaution. It was fairly common for heads of state and other political figures to visit locker rooms of their respective national teams after matches, naked torsos and all, and that held true even if the head of state happened to be a woman. But a gay prince? Uh-oh, better hide those athletic bodies so the media doesn't smell a story where none exists.

It made a sad sort of sense.

They were all presentable by the time Prince Joshua made his grand entrance along with his husband and a couple of friends, including a model Lee recognised from an ad campaign for some cologne. The prince carried himself with the kind of posture that reminded Lee of Alex—shoulders back and head held high, a likely result of the kind of training Alex had received too. Maybe it was what they taught at posh school, along with the Queen's English.

The prince's speech was short and sweet, his voice somehow quieter than Lee had expected, "congratulations" and "we're all rooting for you back home" and "it's a real pleasure to see this team coming together". He made the rounds afterwards, as did his husband and friends. Lee was surprised to find that the Prince Consort—"Leo, please"—held rather astute opinions on their next opponent, listing several French key players who had yet to hit their peak form so if there ever had been a time for miracles, it was now. When Alex joined their discussion, he and Leo exchanged a greeting that confirmed what Alex had told Lee, namely that he'd met the prince and his husband before, and that they were on friendly but superficial terms.

This was Alex's world. Lee had almost forgotten, over the course of the last few weeks.

He might have gone a bit quiet after that because Alex tried to rope him into the conversation multiple times, Lee contributing just enough to pass cursory inspection. He wasn't prepared for Prince Joshua himself to slot into their circle, personally congratulating Alex on his clever moves and beautiful passing before he turned to Lee. Christ, even in his thirties, the prince maintained the boyish kind of charm that had made him popular with the general public, until his coming out had separated the wheat from the chaff. Maybe he wasn't quite as pretty as Alex, but few guys were and Lee was biased.

"Gorgeous goal," Prince Joshua said in that slightly husky drawl of his. "Your second one, I mean—someone should nominate you for a royal award. As far as I'm concerned, that was a real service to the country."

Lee blinked. The prince's deep, slow voice made it hard to tell whether he was joking, and a glance at Alex didn't provide Lee with any clues. "Thank you, I think?"

Blessedly, Leo laughed, blue eyes dancing as he leaned forward as if to share a secret. "Do ignore him. He's nowhere near as funny as he thinks he is."

"I'm very funny," Prince Joshua protested, but the tug of amusement around his wide mouth suggested he didn't actually mind. "Everyone says so."

Leo snorted. "That's because they've been paid to stroke your ego, love. Me, I do it for free."

"You don't stroke my ego."

"I stroke other things," Leo said with a waggle of his eyebrows that clearly conveyed his meaning, and this was ... awkward? Not really, no. Unexpected, more like, because somehow Lee hadn't counted on Prince Joshua and his husband to act like a normal couple. Must be the familiarity of Alex's presence that humanised them.

Lee glanced at Alex just as Alex glanced at him, a quick smile passing between them.

"I apologise for Leo," the prince said, all dignity. "Anyway, seriously—great game. Seems like the team is really coming together this time around."

"It feels like it," Alex said.

"Good." Prince Joshua seemed to hesitate for a fraction of a second, his eyes weighing Alex. "Listen, Alexander, it's been a while since we got to catch up. How about Leo and I give you a ride to your hotel, have a little chat?"

The way Alex's brows puckered suggested that this was quite outside the realm of what he'd expected. His gaze slid to Lee, just for a moment, before he returned his attention and smile to the prince. "Sure, that would be great. Thanks for the offer."

"Our pleasure," Leo replied in Prince Joshua's stead, and something about the careful focus he directed at Alex prompted a flare of unease in Lee's stomach.

Something wasn't right.

But whatever it was, Lee could hardly insist on coming along for the ride, now could he? Also, Prince Joshua had a reputation for being kind, even sweet, which... Okay, which maybe didn't mean all that much, could be just the mask he presented to the public. That wasn't the impression Lee had got, though, and Alex seemed more confused than concerned, so maybe it was some nobility thing that Lee simply didn't understand.

He still didn't like it when Alex left ten minutes later, trailing in the wake of the prince's entourage. It would be fine, though—Lee would see Alex back at the hotel, and they'd keep their hands to themselves during the afterparty and would probably fall into bed overtired, too exhausted for more than a slow, lazy snog.

Lee couldn't wait.

The armoured limousine moved through the night like a ship, tinted windows hiding the world. Shifting in his seat opposite Joshua and Leo, Alex waited for them to kick off the conversation. Of course he'd talked to them before—they were actual football fans, with Leo holding particularly strong opinions on teams he liked and didn't—but it had always been in passing, a few bites of small talk at a social event. This was different, and Alex wasn't entirely certain of the protocol.

It was Leo who broke the silence, his attention heavy on Alex even as the shadowed interior of the car swallowed all details. “How do you feel about Qatar?”

Uh?

Alex considered his response. “You mean how they bribed their way into hosting a World Cup?”

“They do seem to have a penchant for bribery.” Leo's gaze didn't waver. “You may have heard about the EU Parliament's Qatargate?”

Was this some kind of test?

“Vaguely.” Alex fluttered his hand. “Something about a number of politicians being arrested, I think? Money stored in

flats, suspension of some air transit agreement that was considered too favourable to Qatar?”

“Roughly accurate,” Leo said while Joshua was quiet, simply watching. “You may also be aware that the UK is in the process of negotiating a free trade agreement with Qatar?”

Um.

Not really?

Alex tried to mask his confusion as he maintained a straight back. “I’m afraid I haven’t been following things that closely. Politics is my father’s domain, not mine.”

“What about—”

“I think that’s enough,” Joshua interrupted gently, one of his hands coming to rest on Leo’s knee. Leo studied Alex for a moment longer before he nodded, his stance loosening quite suddenly as he turned to smile at Joshua.

“Yeah, all right. I was just making sure.”

“I know.” Joshua smiled back before he turned to look at Alex. “My apologies, Alexander. You’re probably wondering what’s going on.”

“Alex, please.” Alex fought the impulse to shift under the full weight of Joshua’s regard. “I prefer Alex, if that’s okay. And yes, this is all a bit ... odd.”

“Alex.” Joshua inclined his head. “See, here’s the thing. A few days ago, the Head of Royal Communications received an anonymous tip, namely that Qatar may be trying to skew the trade negotiations in their favour. Leo took it to his old team for further investigation—I don’t know if you’re familiar with James Boyle?”

Alex swallowed, suddenly queasy. James Boyle was an institution, professional fixer and dogsbody to those who could afford his services. While Alex had never personally run into the man, he was well familiar with the rumours. Competent, ruthless, thorough—Boyle and his team didn't mess around.

“I don't...” Alex cut himself off. Anything he said could be used against him, right? Except the prince and his consort weren't the police, and no allegations had been launched against Alex himself. It didn't take a genius to figure out where this was headed, though, and should Alex jump to defend his father? Because that, *that* was the entire point of this conversation. Wasn't it?

Oh God.

“Alex?” Joshua prompted, his voice still kind.

“I know of James Boyle,” Alex managed. “Never met him, though. Is this... If you're saying what I think you are, shouldn't this be a matter for the police?”

“It will be as of tomorrow, when we hand over the evidence.” Leo sounded calm and precise. “Given the sensitive nature, we simply wanted to do our homework first rather than needlessly risk the reputation of several people, including some who are perceived as close to the Crown.”

“And, um.” *Speak succinctly, Alexander.* “I take it the evidence holds up?”

“I'm afraid so.” Joshua sighed softly, the sound nearly lost in the sickening rush of the driving car, of wheels slapping the road. It hadn't seemed quite this loud before, and Alex sucked in a breath, and another.

“We're not here to accuse *you*,” Leo said, and something must have shown on Alex's face because Leo chuckled

without much humour. “Honestly, we’re not. Just crossing some T’s and dotting some I’s, that’s all—no one seriously thinks you’re involved.”

That was ... good, yeah. But it still meant... It still meant that Alex’s father was, quite possibly. Why would he do such a thing? They didn’t need the money, so why, *why*?

Alex shook his head against the dizziness. “But then why all this?” He gestured at the car, at Joshua and Leo, at himself. “Why come to the match and talk to me?”

“One” —Leo’s grin showed sharp teeth— “we actually wanted to see the game. Good seats on short notice are a perk of marrying into royalty, you see. Secondly, we wanted to check whether you knew anything at all.”

“I don’t,” Alex said quickly. “I don’t know if it’s true—it’s not like we ever talk about politics because we sure don’t see eye to eye, but... Just, we may not have the best relationship, but he *is* my father. So.”

“I’m not asking you to implicate him.” Joshua paused, glancing at Leo for a moment before he continued. “The reason we wanted to talk to you—the *main* reason we wanted to talk to you—is that you deserve a fair warning. Once this breaks, you’ll be in the spotlight. Not because you yourself are a suspect, but because you’re linked to this. You’re a prominent figure, and the media will show no mercy.”

Alex blinked against the spots flitting through his vision. No words would come.

“Listen, mate.” Sympathy coloured Leo’s voice, his earlier brashness gone. “The best you can do is turn into a broken record. Just keep repeating, again and again, that you have never been involved in your father’s politics. If you have to

say it a dozen times, say it a dozen times. If you have to say it a hundred times, say it a hundred times. Other than that? Play your fucking *heart* out.”

That made sense. Right?

“Do you have people in your corner?” Joshua asked gently.

Alex thought of Jeff, of Lee. Of a couple of friends from school that would stand by him, scandal be damned.

“I do.” He cleared his throat. “At least I think so.”

Joshua smiled. “Good. Keep them close.”

Keep them close.

Somehow, Alex managed to smile back. Even if he couldn't feel his face.



ISABELLA, Jeff's girl, was everything Lee was not—poised and beautiful, well-spoken, and dressed with a touch of class. It was easy to picture someone just like her by Alex's side, and maybe Lee needed the reminder because that was how it would end, wasn't it? With Lee, alone.

He stuck with Oliver and Sanna for a little while, then drifted between groups of teammates scattered around the hotel's outdoor terrace. The city setting hardly registered, the noises that defined Madrid at night filtered by the park-like green space that surrounded the hotel.

Still no sign of Alex.

Lee considered sending him a quick message, but he didn't want to come across as needy. They weren't boyfriends, so checking up on each other wasn't something they did, no

matter how much Lee wanted to. Alex was fine—probably, almost certainly.

The first players were already heading off by the time Alex finally showed. A smile was pasted on his face as he suffered some good-natured ribbing for having friends in high places, and he countered all speculation about what had taken him so long with variations of, “It’s classified.”

His eyes were hollow.

Jeff, about to leave with Isabella, didn’t seem to notice. He pulled Alex in for a tight hug, grin wide enough to split his face in two as he let Alex go with a, “We did it, mate. Can you fucking *believe* it?”

“We did,” Alex agreed, genuine joy washing over his face that was gone all too soon. Tension formed a thick knot behind Lee’s ribs. He smiled through it, keeping an eye on Alex even as he teased Jeff about turning into a sensible person who left before the party was over.

Jeff draped an arm around Isabella’s waist. “It’s the company I keep.”

Her laugh was surprisingly loud and just a hint wicked as she leaned into him. “I think we have yet to decide whether this is a ‘keep’ kind of situation.”

“Is that a challenge?” Jeff looked rather happy at the idea, and Isabella sent him a bright look.

“What do you *think*?”

They left soon after that, and Lee drew Alex over to the side of the terrace, where softly illuminated trees and blooming hedges granted them a hint of privacy. “What’s wrong?”

For a second, Alex's façade cracked. "I'll tell you later."

Lee glanced around before he lowered his voice. "They didn't, you know... They didn't hurt you or something?"

"What? No." Quickly, Alex shook his head, surprise in his eyes. "*God* no. They're not—they're good people. Why would you even think that?"

Lee exhaled. "Because you're not okay."

"I'm..." Alex's gaze slid away, voice dropping to a whisper. "It's family stuff."

"Family stuff?" Lee repeated slowly, taking in the miserable tilt to Alex's mouth, the tired slump of his shoulders. "What—did your dad instruct the prince and his consort to inform you of your impending engagement?"

"I wish." The response was so quiet that Lee wasn't sure whether he'd been meant to hear it.

"Alex?"

With a shaky breath, Alex dragged a hand through his hair. "Can I come over in a bit?"

"Is that even still a question?" Lee asked, and God, he wanted to touch Alex. Kiss him, unbutton that shirt and ease it off his shoulders, down his arms—but even more so, he wanted to find out what was *wrong*. "I'm in 412."

"Oh." The corners of Alex's mouth pulled down. "I'm on the third floor."

Mildly inconvenient, but nothing they couldn't navigate. "Just bring yourself, then." Lee shrugged. "Nothing odd about you wandering the hallways fully dressed. There are pillows for two, and we can share the cover."

A tiny, relieved smile flickered over Alex's face. "Fifteen minutes?"

"Great." It felt inadequate, but everything else that Lee could think to add seemed like either too much or too little. So he settled for shoving both hands into the pockets of his jeans as he repeated it. "*Great.*"

"Yeah." Briefly, silence descended before Alex added, "Thank you."

"For...?"

"Caring enough to notice that something's wrong." The words were close to a whisper, contrasting with the sudden laughter rising from a group that contained Lewis. "Joshua asked whether I have people in my corner and told me to keep them close." Alex's eyes met Lee's with a strange intensity. "I intend to."

It didn't *feel* casual. It felt big and bright, like something that could crush Lee if he didn't proceed with caution.

He didn't care.



THE KNOCK WAS SO quiet that Lee might have missed it if he hadn't been waiting. He let Alex into the room, closed the door, and turned to face him—only to be dragged into a deep kiss that was fed by an edge of desperation, Lee's back hitting the wall, Alex's fingers digging into his shoulders. He fell into it for the length of a breath and wound his hands into Alex's hair, Alex's body solid along his front.

Then he shoved Alex back, if gently. "Talk to me."

Alex stared at Lee's mouth for a moment before he slowly raised his gaze, eyes wide. He stayed silent.

Family stuff. What the hell did that mean?

Lee glanced at the oriental-style bed with its gold frame and plush pillows—too intimate—and the velvet armchairs—too far apart. The sofa it was, then. More like a diwan, really, set against a wall with an array of cushions serving as its backrest. Lee nudged Alex towards it with a, “Sit.”

Alex sat.

Lee perched on the other side of the diwan, taking in the low light slanting over Alex’s face. He looked younger than he had in years. “Talk to me,” Lee repeated, much more quietly. “You said something about family stuff?”

Alex seemed to come alive with a rough intake of air, his smile a caricature as he met Lee’s eyes. “Yeah, so, turns out my father dabbles in political puppetry.”

Alex’s father ... what? What did that mean—bribery? Blackmail? Based on Alex’s dark expression, it had to be pretty fucking bad, yet Lee couldn’t help the burst of relief that buoyed him because who bloody cared what Alex’s pompous arse of a father did? *Alex was okay.*

Lee shifted closer, tucking one foot under his thighs. “What, exactly, does that mean?”

“It’s...” Alex’s shoulders sagged, his painfully fake smile fading. “Apparently, he’s been taking money from Qatar. Or maybe not money, maybe just favours, tit for tat—I don’t even know.” Alex shook his head and looked away with a dejected shrug. “Some other people did too, I guess. I just—I don’t know.”

Okay, that was ... something. Quite something, in fact. Lee squashed the instant, impulsive anger at Alex’s father helping

himself to an extra serving of cash just because he could, which, what the fuck?

“The prince told you that?”

Another shrug. “Someone tipped off their team.”

Lee exhaled, staring at Alex as he worked through the implications. From what he’d gathered, Alex’s parents were loaded, but some people wanted their bread buttered on both sides, and an old, sprawling manor didn’t manage its own upkeep, now did it?

“Hang on, though.” Lee raised a hand and dropped it again. “Isn’t your dad all about traditional values and the good ol’ days when the Great British Empire ruled the world?”

“Doesn’t get much more traditional than Qatar, does it? *They* wouldn’t stand for a gay prince over there, that’s for sure.” Alex snorted, his eyes empty. “Conservative values for the win, right? Oh, and also, reducing societal hierarchies? Not so popular in Qatar, I bet. And my dad’s not exactly a fan of discussions around reforming the House of Lords either, or abolishing it completely—I’m sure that’s another thing where he might see eye to eye with Emir Whatshisname. Let commoners rule the country? Heaven forbid.”

Lee frowned. It was still sinking in, exhaustion mixing with disbelief because it just seemed... It seemed ... well. Foreign countries trying to influence other political systems was an everyday occurrence, sure, but in the days of social media, deep fakes, and state-sponsored hacker groups, it seemed almost quaint to buy individual favours.

Then again, wasn’t that how Qatar—a country with a poor human rights record, no football tradition, and sweltering

summer temperatures—had become the first Middle-Eastern host of a World Cup? By buying individual votes? Allegedly.

Lee reached out to give Alex's elbow a light squeeze. "You're sure it's true, then?"

Alex ducked his head. "I'm taking Joshua's word for it."

"Why would someone like him get involved?"

"There are some thirty dukes in the UK, and less than a hundred hereditary peers in the House of Lords." Alex paused, voice lower when he continued. "This is a big deal, Lee. It could reflect on the aristocracy as a whole."

On people like you. On you.

"If it's true," Lee said.

"They would have made sure it is."

"Have you asked your dad?"

"No. I mean, fuck—what would I even say? 'Hi, dad, been hanging out with some suspicious characters lately?'" The line of Alex's mouth flattened. "I'm not all that close to them—my parents, I mean. But they're still my *parents*. You know?"

"I get it."

"Yeah." Alex's brows drew together. "I guess you would. So, you know. All I did was go to my hotel room and try not to throw up, until I realised I needed to show my face at the party—at least briefly."

They were quiet for a few moments, an echo of the earlier crowd's noise still ringing faintly in Lee's ears, the thunder of ten thousand voices when he'd scored his first goal. It was disorienting, his mind pulled in three directions by Alex's

news mixed with an alert kind of exhaustion, a weird hollowness that lingered after the adrenaline had drained.

“Anyway,” Alex said softly, “could be that my phone is tapped. Left it in my room.”

It cut through the scattered commotion in Lee’s brain. “Wait, you think your phone is tapped?”

“I’m not a suspect or anything, I think.” Alex paused. “But I’m close to it, at least on paper, and this is the royal family—they don’t work with amateurs.”

Fuck, that was...

Fuck.

Alex didn’t deserve this. He did not fucking *deserve* to be caught in the wake of his father’s decisions, sink or swim. This time, when Lee reached for Alex, he didn’t let go—pulled Alex into an embrace that Alex fought for just a moment before he sagged into it with a shuddery exhale against Lee’s neck. Oh God, Lee loved him.

He—shit. He didn’t, no. They were temporary, weren’t built to last. Love had never been part of their deal.

“You know what’s funny?” Breathing through the nausea, Lee tightened his arms around Alex. “You do like your political thrillers. Now you’re living one.”

Alex’s laugh was weak and a little watery. “Turns out I prefer the theory.”

I think I’m a little bit in love with you.

Lee swallowed around the shards of glass in his throat. “Do you know when the story will break?”

“Not exactly.” Alex straightened a little, his gaze focused on a point just above Lee’s shoulder, his distant tone at odds with the heaviness that hung around him like a cloak. “They’ll hand the evidence to the police tomorrow, and then it’s all bets off, I guess.”

“Will your dad be stripped of his title?” Not that Lee cared, but it seemed like a thing that might matter to some people. In fact, Alex wasn’t an earl in his own right, was he? There were rules about that sort of thing, and until Charles Beaufort died, Alex was merely borrowing his father’s secondary title.

“I don’t know.” Alex lifted one shoulder, still gazing at nothing. “I don’t think that really happens anymore but... I mean, maybe? I don’t know.”

He sounded so lost that Lee’s heart ached just a little for him. They were still touching, turned towards each other on the diwan with Lee’s knee digging into the side of Alex’s thigh, and all Lee wanted to do was pull Alex back in and hide him from the world, at least for a day or two. Or a week, a month—until the dust started to settle.

It wasn’t Lee’s place, though.

He circled Alex’s wrist in a loose grip and waited until Alex looked at him. “You know I’m here, right? Whatever you need.”

Alex blinked a few times, voice rough. “Thank you.”

“Of *course*, Alex.” Lee let the words sit for a moment before he asked, “What are you going to do?”

“Keep my head down. Play football.” Alex pressed his lips together. “Talk to my dad at some point, I suppose? My mum, too.” His shoulders dropped as he glanced away, eyes wet. “Fuck, I just—I don’t *know*, Lee. I don’t know.”

Lee tightened his hold on Alex's wrist, and God, he wanted to tell him it would be fine, everything would be fine, but how could he promise what he couldn't control? "Have you told Jeff?"

"No." Alex's chest rose with a deep breath. "I didn't want to ruin his night."

"Mate, he'll be mad at you for keeping this from him."

"Yeah. But until then, he'll have a nice time with a girl he seems to really like. Not an everyday occurrence, you know?"

Fuck, Lee liked him. So much. Here was this boy, this *man*, who'd just received some life-altering news—and instead of leaning on his best mate for support, he put on a smile to protect others' good time. How could Lee not kiss him for that? Alex sank into it immediately, clinging to Lee in a way he wouldn't normally, faint taste of mint and the whiff of his cologne, all familiar by now. Behind Lee's closed lids, the room spun on its axis before it righted again.

Even as they slowly drew apart, they stayed close, dim light washing over Alex's features, sapping the colour from his hazel eyes, the tips of his lashes bleached after a month under the Spanish sun.

"First thing tomorrow" —Lee skimmed his thumb along the line of Alex's jaw— "we get Jeff, Oliver, and Kieran together. Once this breaks, it will affect the team to some extent, subject us to media attention that's got nothing to do with sport."

"Do you think..." Alex's voice dipped by a margin. "Should I return home? To protect the team."

"No." Lee put emphasis behind the word and made sure to hold Alex's eyes. "Please don't. You're a fantastic player, and

this team is better with you. Hell, you set up half my goals. We're all adults here, aren't we? The team can handle a bit of media heat."

And I want you here.

While Lee didn't say that last part, something might have shown in his eyes because Alex released a slow breath, his face softening. "Yeah?"

"Yes." Lee let a smile shine through. "Now, you've had a bit of a day. How about we get ourselves to bed?"

"Just..." Alex's gaze slid to the four-poster and its richly patterned brocade covers. "I know we—and I do, yeah? But I'm just so fucking *tired*, so..."

It took Lee a second to work through Alex's meaning, then he shook his head. "I honestly just meant that we should get some sleep, Alex."

"Oh." It was barely an actual word, Alex tilting a little into Lee as he released his breath in a rush. Lee brought his arms up around him and held on for a few moments, the noise in his mind finally quieting down.

"Sleep?" he murmured.

"Please." Yet Alex didn't immediately move to extract himself.

They stripped down to their boxers before sliding into bed, the mattress leaving plenty of space between them as Lee flicked off the light to plunge the room into darkness. It was Alex who shifted closer and tucked himself up against Lee's side, one of his hands coming to rest flat on top of Lee's chest. Lee covered Alex's hand with his own and closed his eyes.

“Thank you,” Alex whispered into the small gap between them.

“Anytime.” Lee chose not to be scared by how much he meant it.

This, now, was enough.

“WELL, FUCK HIM.” That was Jeff, and maybe Alex should have expected him to go off like a firecracker, but it somehow still caught him by surprise. He tucked his hands between his thighs and stared up at Jeff who was pacing, backlit by the morning sun that streamed into the empty hotel bar.

“Innocent until proven guilty,” Kieran said calmly. Oliver, perched next to him on the very edge of a beige leather sofa as if ready to jump into action, stayed quiet. As did Lee, who stood by the seating group with his arms crossed and an air that suggested he was ready to shoo away anyone who dared to approach. He’d been hovering since they’d got up that morning, always within reach as though Alex was a fragile flower that might break at the slightest breeze. Alex wasn’t quite sure whether it was sweet or insulting. Both, maybe.

He was ... not fine, no. But better than he’d been last night.

“He’s *so* fucking guilty.” Jeff dropped into one of the armchairs. “He’s an entitled prick—no offence, Alex—who would have found some way to justify his actions if he thought there was something to gain. Teaming up in defence of value and tradition or some shite like that.”

“Mate,” Lee cut in with an edge of humour, “don’t hold back, yeah? Tell us how you really feel.”

Jeff sent him a shrewd look. “Shut it, *mate*. Can’t believe Alex told you before he told me.”

“I was conveniently available.”

“You’re also my *friend*,” Alex corrected Lee even though that hardly began to describe it. To Jeff, he added, “And I didn’t know you felt so ... strongly, I guess. About my father.”

“You weren’t supposed to know,” Jeff said. “That party your parents hosted, where I met Isa? I swear I didn’t mean to get into it with your dad. But I made a casual comment about equal rights, and he just *couldn’t* let it slide because apparently, gender-inclusive language and allowing gays to marry equals the downfall of Western civilisation. That’s how Isa and I got talking in the first place—no credit where it’s undue.”

“And you didn’t tell me?”

“It wasn’t my place to add fuel to your already bad relationship with him.”

“Yeah, well. Not sure where that’s headed now, so...” Alex looked down at his lap, aware of Oliver and Kieran watching him with quiet sympathy, Lee still exuding protectiveness, while Jeff jumped up again from his armchair as though sitting still was a concept best served in small doses. Two big steps, and he was by Alex’s side and pulled him into a hug.

“I’m sorry your dad’s a dickwad,” Jeff said when he let Alex go, and fuck, Alex needed to duck his head to blink away the threat of tears. He did feel calmer this morning than he had last night, but his ribcage was still encased in a thin layer of lead that weighed him down.

“Me too.” He huffed out a hollow laugh. “Guess I may have to apologise to the general public about that very soon.”

“You’re not responsible for your parents’ actions.” Of course Lee would feel strongly about that.

“I agree.” Kieran leaned back into the sofa. “No apologies—this isn’t your fault. Last I checked, we don’t pick our parents in a reality game show.”

“You should pitch that idea to a producer, might just get some traction.” Jeff didn’t wait for a reply before he addressed Alex. “Now, just so we’re clear? You and I will have *words* about how you delayed telling me because you didn’t want to put a damper on my date. Appreciate the intention, but some things matter more than my sex life.”

“Definitely on the list of things I never expected to hear from Jeff,” Oliver contributed. The unusual occurrence of snark from their gentle-mannered captain lifted Alex’s spirits, at least for a moment.

“What he said. Also...” Alex felt his smile fall away. “You didn’t tell me how much you hate my dad. I think that makes us even.”

“Me hating your dad is hardly life-altering information.”

Life-altering.

It was, wasn’t it—Alex’s father under investigation for political corruption? Possible prison time, loss of social standing, and Alex’s mum would get caught in the tailwind of it too, irrespective of how she’d tended to stay out of politics. Alex had spent more time with various nannies than with his parents, and he’d gone off to boarding school once he’d turned twelve. And still... Jesus, they were still the only close family he had.

“Hey.” Lee’s hand landed on Alex’s shoulder, and Alex leaned into it without thought before he realised they had an

audience. He glanced around to find Oliver suppressing a smile and Jeff looking mildly curious while Kieran didn't seem to have noticed, expression thoughtful, his usual cheer absent.

"I don't want to be a distraction to the team," Alex told him. "If you want me to go home..."

Kieran looked up sharply. "Don't be silly, Alex. No one wants that—not unless it's your preference."

Well, Alfie might beg to differ given it would free up a spot in the starting eleven. Alex shook his head. "No, I want to stay. Of course I do."

"Good. So that's settled." Kieran's tone marked the matter as closed. "Then let's discuss how we can best protect you from this mess."

"Bloody Charles," Jeff muttered to no one in particular. "Duke of fucking Arsehat County, Earl of Go Fuck Yourself, *Sir*."

It wasn't all that funny. And yet Alex laughed—tinged with a hint of hysteria, tickling the back of his throat in a way that was mildly nauseating, but somehow he still felt better for it.

"Interesting perspective," Kieran told Jeff with a perfectly blank face and humour dancing in his eyes. "I'm gonna go ahead and *not* nominate you as the team's spokesperson on this issue."

"Inconceivable." Jeff's grin was unabashed.

"Here's my thinking, to be confirmed with the comms team once the story breaks." Kieran fixed Alex with a heavy look. "First off, we'll reinforce security around the hotel—don't want any self-appointed investigative journalists

sneaking in. Secondly, I don't think there's any way you can fully avoid addressing this."

Alex sucked in a breath and nodded. He'd thought as much, had even briefly touched upon it with Lee this morning before he'd snuck back to his own room. Lee had been adamant that it was Alex's right to say nothing, fuck anyone who didn't respect that. "You're not here to be universally liked," he'd pointed out. "You're here to play football."

Maybe. But being liked made it so much easier.

"My suggestion," Kieran continued when Alex stayed silent, "is that once this breaks, we get you on the podium for our daily press conference. And then you simply keep repeating that you don't know anything and your focus is the World Cup until they get bored. You'll be with Oliver and me, so we can warn off anyone who comes on too strong. And we remove you from the post-match interview roster."

A plan—a concrete way forward.

Alex swallowed. "Thank you."

"You're part of this team, Alex." The way Oliver said it suggested that it was no big deal, that of course Alex would get the support he needed—why was it even a question? Chances were that Oliver hadn't grown up with parents who refused to speak to him if he broke a glass or brought home less-than-perfect grades. Since it had taught Alex to push himself, he wasn't *complaining*, but... God, it was nice. It was nice to have people in his corner.

"Need a tissue?" Jeff asked in a tone that walked the line between affection and mockery.

"Piss off," Alex told him and meant the opposite.

“If you think you’ll get rid of me that easily, think again.” Jeff smirked. “Look on the bright side, though—you won’t be facing any pressure to attend another fancy party anytime soon.”

“You’re just glad you won’t have to weasel out of being my plus one.”

“Babe, I’m nobody’s plus one. Not even yours.”

Alex could have come up with at least three celebrities who’d make Jeff change his stance, but that wasn’t the point, was it? So Alex settled for a smile that didn’t feel entirely fake, that didn’t slide into the empty spaces between his ribs and weigh him down even further. It took just a moment for Jeff’s smirk to soften into an answering smile.

“All right. Keep looking at me like that and I’ll reconsider.”

“Is it physically impossible for you to stay serious for more than fifteen seconds?” Oliver asked Jeff, sounding genuinely curious.

Jeff shrugged. “Pretty much, yeah.”

“All right, lads. So we’ve got a rough plan.” Kieran got up from his armchair. “Let’s get packing, yeah? Alex, thanks for trusting us with this.”

“Thanks for hearing me out.”

“That’s literally what I’m here for.” Kieran lifted one shoulder. “Remember what I said on day one?”

“You consider yourself responsible for us as more than just athletes.” Lee was the one who replied, and it gave Alex an excuse to look up at him—just a couple of seconds to take in his dark eyes and the prominent slant of his cheekbones, his

plush mouth that Alex was coming to learn so well. Alex had thought him gorgeous even when they couldn't stand each other, and now that he actually knew Lee, it seemed harder and harder to look away.

He had to though, and so he did.

A moment after Oliver got up, Alex did as well. He thanked Kieran again, and when Jeff draped an arm over Alex's shoulders, it meant so much—friendship and comfort and gratitude.

Yet it didn't come close to how Alex felt when Lee stripped him naked that night, one hand on Alex's cock and the other carefully working a lubed finger into him, refusing to give him more than that. Lee kissed all protest and demands from Alex's mouth until Alex spilled over Lee's hand, clutching at Lee's bicep, silent fireworks as he shook with his release.

"I could have taken more than one," Alex said later, after he'd come down, after he'd brought Lee off too with his hands and mouth.

"Another time," Lee said and it sounded like a promise, as though the future was theirs.

Alex swallowed the words that pressed against the backs of his teeth and smiled.

The rumours started after dawn raids at the homes of four Members of Parliament and two Lords, including the Duke of Eastwyck's manor. Arrests on unclear charges. Corruption? Foreign influence? Stay tuned.

Lee stuck close to Alex throughout their morning training session, and he could tell that Jeff did the same. Their gazes caught at some point and they exchanged a quick nod before returning to their respective exercises. Alex, for his part, kept his head down and followed Kieran's instructions with single-minded focus, feigning ignorance to the curious glances from teammates.

He was quiet as they headed back to their room, then stepped out onto the balcony to call his mother. Lee made it a point to give him space, busying himself with a shave that he'd skipped earlier that morning, careful not to nick his skin with hands that were slightly less steady than usual. Half his attention was on the murmur of Alex's voice that carried distress even though Lee couldn't make out individual words.

It took conscious effort not to rush out there and just ... do something, anything. Lee had always hated feeling helpless.

He stepped under the shower to remove himself from temptation, the rush of water in his ears blocking out Alex's

call. With his eyes closed, head ducked under the spray, he didn't hear Alex come into the bathroom until the shower door slid open and Alex pressed himself up against Lee's back, warm and solid. Lee leaned into him, covering Alex's hands with his own.

"How did it go?" he asked softly.

He could feel Alex's chest rise on a deep intake of air. "About as well as I expected."

"What did you expect?"

"A request to come home immediately and help defend my father's good name."

Because clearly Alex had no life of his own—the fucking *nerve*. Lee bit back a sharp comment. "So she believes he's innocent?"

"I think she neither knows nor cares as long as he gets away with it."

"And does she care that you are part of this team and we want you here?"

"Is that so?" Alex's voice dipped, the question followed by an open-mouthed kiss to the back of Lee's neck. "You mean the team in general, or you in particular?"

"Both." Lee hadn't intended to be this honest, but it was hard to think with Alex all up against him, one hand inching lower towards where Lee couldn't quite hide his interest in the proceedings.

"Good." Another open-mouthed kiss to Lee's back that came with just a hint of teeth.

Focus.

“Are you all right?” Lee asked.

“I think” —Alex gave Lee’s cock a light squeeze, thumb swiping over the head— “you should fuck me.”

Bloody hell. Lee hung his head, breathing through the flash of arousal. “Not an answer.”

“I don’t really feel like talking right now.” To underline his point, Alex thrust gently against Lee, his erection slipping between Lee’s thighs. Lee moved into the contact, couldn’t help it, and God, this was not the time, so not the time. Alex was upset, and lunch was in an hour, and also, just... Maybe it was stupid and sentimental, but Lee didn’t want to be the first guy to fuck Alex by mere default, because he happened to be a conveniently available body with the right equipment. He wanted to be Alex’s first because Alex wanted *him*. Lee. Lee, and not just anyone.

He was in too deep.

“Alex...” Lee stifled a groan when Alex gave another slippery thrust in time with his hand moving along Lee’s cock.

“Yes?” A smile coloured Alex’s voice, as though he’d already won this fight. Lee inhaled deeply, blinking water out of his eyes before he spun them around and walked Alex back against the wall of the shower. Alex went easily, pliant, canting his hips forward.

Lee stopped a breath’s width away from a kiss. “Are you all right?”

Alex opened his mouth and hesitated, eyes veiled, water clumping his lashes together. “I’m fine.”

He obviously wasn’t.

Lee framed his face with both hands and kissed him, sweet and soft. When he pulled back, Alex chased his mouth, and Lee gave in for another few seconds before he rested his foreheads against Alex's. "You're not fine."

The rush of water nearly swallowed Alex's, "I have to be fine."

"Not the same thing."

"So?"

"So, *are* you fine?"

Alex shifted out of Lee's grasp, sudden harshness in his tone. "Look, what does it matter? I came in here because I could use a distraction, but clearly that's a lost cause."

"Alex—" Lee reached for empty air.

"I'll be on my bed. Come find me when you're ready to stop it with the twenty questions." Without so much as a backwards glance, Alex wrenched the shower door open and left Lee alone under the spray. On his way out of the bathroom, Alex grabbed a towel off the rack, then slammed the door.

The fuck?

All right, fine, so Alex was ... hurting, for sure, and probably a bit scared. That did not give him the right to treat Lee like his emotional rubbish bin, readily available for a hearty kick so Alex could make himself feel better. Lee had been trying to help, and yeah, okay, they weren't boyfriends, fine—but they were *friends*, for fuck's sake. And with that came a certain expectation of honesty. If Alex couldn't honour that? Well, screw him.

Lee took his damn time finishing up his shower, refusing to think about Alex in the next room, about Alex's body pressed up against him only minutes ago, the taste of his mouth and the way he always seemed to move into Lee's touch without even realising it. *Refused.*

After towelling off, Lee paused to stare at his own face in the mirror—the frown he hadn't even been aware of, the grim twist to his mouth. Naturally, he hadn't brought any clothes into the bathroom with him, so he wrapped the towel around his waist, straightened his spine, and opened the door.

Alex was on Lee's bed.

Lee stopped and narrowed his eyes. He didn't want to speak first because it was Alex who needed to apologise, but also, "That's my bed."

"Yeah." Alex hadn't bothered getting dressed yet, completely naked on top of the sheets as he watched Lee. On his stomach, he'd propped himself up on his elbows in a way that turned his back into a beautifully distracting curve.

Lee forced his attention away. "Why?"

"It smells like you." Alex said it without fanfare, a casually stated fact that required no further elaboration.

"If you think this counts as an apology, you may want to go back to the drawing board."

Alex nodded slowly. "That's fair. And, yeah. I'm sorry. I'm scared, I guess, and I took it out on you."

Lee felt his irritation slip through his fingers like fine sand, tried to hold on to it and already knew it was a lost cause. "Scared," he repeated flatly.

With a sigh, Alex sat up, tugging the sheet into his lap. His mouth tilted into an unhappy curve, voice low. “What if everyone hates me now?”

Oh, for fuck’s sake—there went the last, lingering dregs of Lee’s anger. He exhaled and sat down as well, perched on the edge of Alex’s bed, facing him. “Listen, first off, you’re not your father, and most people will understand that. Secondly...” He spread his fingers. “Why do you need everyone to love you?”

Was it ironic—Lee asking that when he kind of maybe did, just the tiniest bit? Love Alex, that was. Although irony wasn’t the correct word anyway, right? Bittersweet, maybe.

“Yeah, well.” Alex’s smile was self-deprecating. “Supposedly, when we learn early on that we are not enough, it can inspire an overstated desire to please people.”

Okay, that wasn’t the answer Lee had expected. “Did you read that somewhere?”

“This guy I know told me a few days ago that I suffer from a high need for affiliation.” The words were warm. “I decided to look it up.”

Lee pinched his bottom lip between thumb and forefinger. “You don’t go out of your way to please me,” he said slowly. “Hell, you just started a fight for no good reason when I just wanted to make sure you’re fine.”

“Maybe it’s because...” Alex trailed off, frowning. “Maybe it’s that I trust you to stay and fight instead of walking out on me.”

Lee took a moment to digest that. “I guess that’s a good thing.”

“It is a good thing.” The words were quiet, soft around the edges.

“Didn’t feel very good where I was standing.”

“I am sorry.” Alex studied Lee for a moment, slender fingers playing with the sheet in his lap. God, he was pretty. Lee should be used to it at this point, should have worked up some kind of immunity, but it still hit him every now and then. “And I’m not fine,” Alex continued in an undertone. “But I need to fake it till I make it.”

“Don’t fake it with me.” Lee considered it, then grinned. “Don’t fake it with Jeff either. He’ll kick your backside, which I happen to rather like.”

A slow answering grin quirked Alex’s mouth. “Perhaps you should come over here and touch it a bit, then.”

Lee shifted, suddenly glad for the towel wrapped around his hips. Christ, it wasn’t *fair* how easily Alex could turn him on—a few words and a flirty look, and Lee was halfway there. He strove for a light tone. “From zero to innuendo in two seconds flat? Impressive.”

Alex’s eyes narrowed, his grin persisting. When he tossed the sheet aside and moved from one bed to the other so he could straddle Lee’s lap, it was with a certain languidness that gave Lee a chance to protest. He didn’t—simply tipped his head back and placed his hands on Alex’s waist, waiting.

Alex erased the gap between them, gently coaxing Lee’s mouth open with his own. It felt like falling, like giving up and in, like trusting Alex with a piece of himself that he might not get back.

Somehow, the fear wouldn’t come.

~

POSTED BY @AlexanderBeaufort (July 4, 11:43 a.m.):

I have no information beyond what various online news sources claim. Seems like the best I can do is focus on tomorrow's match against France so we can get England into the semi-final - and beyond.

~

"ALEX, the Duke of Eastwyck is your father. Have the police released him?"

"I don't know. I haven't been able to speak to him yet."

"When was the last time that you did speak to your father, Alex?"

"Before our match against Morocco."

"Is it fair to say, then, that you are not close?"

Alex must have looked mildly panicked because Kieran tapped his microphone. "Can I just remind everyone to please keep your questions relevant to what we're all here for—football?"

Unhappy murmurs of acquiescence from the assembled crowd of reporters.

A few questions followed that centred on their strategy against France, on strengths and weaknesses, on whether Finley would recover from a mild training injury in time for the match. Alex let Kieran and Oliver handle most of the questions and only chimed in once he was asked directly about his on-field chemistry with Lee—quite the evolution after their last Premier League encounter had led to a hotly debated penalty, wasn't it?

“True.” Alex let his gaze sweep over the journalists and their microphones, seated in neat rows in a space that had all the charm of a small-town petrol station. He cracked a grin that didn’t feel wholly wrong. “When Kieran assigned us to room together, it took some five minutes before we found our footing. We have, though. At this point, I consider Lee one of my closest mates, and I guess that translates on the pitch.”

One of my closest mates who also happens to give me orgasms, and vice versa. Alex didn’t say that part.

“It is quite amazing to see the rapport Alex and Lee have built over these weeks here in Spain.” Oliver’s face was perfectly straight, only his eyes hinting at silent amusement. “We’re just waiting for them to start finishing each other’s sentences, honestly.”

Another journalist was called on and introduced himself before he addressed Alex. “Given what’s happening at home—how do you keep your mind on the game?”

It was a fair question, so Alex countered Kieran’s look with a tiny nod before he turned back to the journalist. “The way I see it, I can only control certain things in life. How I handle distractions is something I control, what’s happening at home is not. When I accepted Kieran’s invitation to join this team, I made an implicit promise that at least right now, there is nothing more important. I intend to fulfil that promise.”

“What if your parents want you home?”

Alex kept his smile in place. “I represent England on the world stage. My parents understand what an honour that is.”

As if.

“As a matter of fact, the accusations against the Duke of Eastwyck suggest that maybe he wouldn’t understand what an

honour it is to represent England's best interests.”

“I'm sorry—was that a question?” While Alex had aimed for a light tone, a hint of snark might have crept into it.

“All right, everyone!” Oliver stepped in before another reporter could raise their hand. “I think this is about all we've got time for today, so thank you, everyone. We'll see many of you at our press conference before the match tomorrow—Finley McAllister will join Kieran and me for that one.”

When Oliver got up, Alex followed suit. More questions flew at him, and he ignored them, keeping his head high as he filed out of the room between Oliver and Kieran. As soon as they were safe in the car that would take them back to the team hotel, he sagged into the backseat and closed his eyes. “Man, that sucked.”

“You did well,” Kieran told him. “It's tough, being in the spotlight for the wrong reasons.”

“Maybe I could just slowly stab my eye with a pen next time.” Alex exhaled. “Thank you both for the backup in there, by the way.”

“That's what we're here for.” Oliver's tone implied that it was nothing special.

“Well, I've been taught that” —Alex let his voice go crisp and precise— “in the grand tapestry of life, one can trust only the stitches one's own hand has sewn.”

“Being an earl isn't all it's cracked up to be, huh?” Kieran asked lightly, and Alex snorted.

“It's a great conversation starter at parties. Which, you know—I doubt my parents will host one of those anytime soon.”

“Oh no,” Oliver drawled. “Think of all the champagne you’ll be missing out on.”

“Tragic,” Alex agreed.

“Would you like us to raise some money for you?” Oliver asked, and Alex nodded.

“That would be much appreciated.”

“You know,” Kieran told Oliver, “I don’t remember you being quite this sarcastic.”

“It’s the company I keep,” Oliver said.

They passed the hotel gate and turned into the driveway, the familiar castle-meets-modern-architecture structure just up ahead. When the car stopped, Kieran hopped out first and led the way into the lobby, where he turned left to join the coaching staff in reviewing some footage. Alex and Oliver turned right, heading for the lifts, and Alex caught a glimpse of his own face in the mirrored wall. He looked pale in spite of his tan.

“Hey, just to let you know...” Oliver cleared his throat. “If you ever want to talk—about *anything*... I’m here, yeah?” To his credit, he sounded only marginally uncomfortable, none of that matey lad vibe a lot of footballers projected. He might just have a point, too.

“Lee said your wife’s a therapist?” Alex asked.

“She is.” Oliver sounded personally proud of it. “I expect she’ll keep me in style once I retire from football and spend my days bumming around the house.”

There were some teammates Alex could definitely picture vegging out on the couch after their active career. Oliver—not so much. A stay-at-home dad, maybe. Anyway, not the point.

They exited onto their floor. In the hallway, Alex stopped and turned to face Oliver. “Would it make sense for me to talk to her? I know we’ve got Richard on staff, but it’s... I’d prefer someone a little less ... on the team’s payroll.”

“I get it, yeah.” Oliver shoved his hands into his pockets, seeming to consider Alex for a moment. “Okay, so it’s typically not best practice to choose a therapist who’s in your social circle, right? But this feels like a special case, so I’ll ask her what she thinks. Otherwise, I’m sure she can recommend someone good and discreet.”

“Thank you.” Alex released a long breath. “That would be great.”

“At the risk of sounding patronising and courtesy of the four years I’ve got on you,” —Oliver winked— “you’re doing really well with this mess.”

Alex blinked against the sudden sting of tears. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Oliver lowered his voice. “Also, and again at the risk of sticking my nose where it doesn’t belong— you and Lee seem good together. I’m glad you guys can have that, at least for now.”

At least for now.

“We are good.” Alex scrubbed a hand through his hair and glanced away. “It’s ... yeah. It’s good.”

Eloquence, Alexander. Somewhere in a prison cell, Alex’s dad was probably sitting up in a cold sweat.

Jesus, Alex’s dad was in *prison*. Had been in prison earlier today, at least, and maybe he still was. They’d likely released him by now, though. How high would they set the bail for a duke?

“That’s good,” Oliver told Alex with an amused quirk to his mouth, and it took Alex a moment to remember the context. Then he ducked his head with a tiny grin.

“It is.”

They split up in front of the room Oliver shared with Toby, Alex continuing onwards to his own room—to Lee. He quickened his steps, swiped his keycard, and pushed the door open, caught a glimpse of Lee on the bed. The time it took him to enter and close the door was enough for Lee to cross the space that separated them.

Alex’s back hit the wall, Lee’s hands in his hair. He sank into the kiss, tilted his head for better access, eyes already closed—when had he closed them?

A minute later or maybe five, Lee drew back just enough to ask, “How was it?”

“I’m fine,” Alex told him, and it wasn’t quite the answer to Lee’s question but in a way it was.

Lee’s gaze narrowed. “Really?”

“Mostly,” Alex amended, and when he reached out to pull Lee back in, Lee came easily.

At least for now.

Alex tightened his hold on Lee’s shoulders and stopped thinking.

Alex thrived under pressure. Oh, he didn't enjoy it—got nervous beforehand and struggled with temporary insomnia—but when the time came, he was *on*. If the combined weight of his dad's mess and the quarterfinal against France wasn't pressure, Alex didn't know what was.

Turned out that all it took for him to sleep through the night was Lee's body tucked up against his back, a heavy arm slung around Alex's chest. Miraculously, it meant that when their alarm went off, Alex felt rested, ready to face the day along with the toughest national team he'd ever gone up against.

Instead of making his habitual beeline for the shower, Alex turned in Lee's arms to kiss him awake, familiar by now with Lee's slow drift into wakefulness. While Lee muttered something about morning breath, he seemed all too happy to give in, gently pawing at Alex's waist without any real intent behind it.

They showered together, a lazy orgasm tricking Alex's brain into a sated sort of complacency. Not for the first time, they were the last ones to make it to breakfast, and Alex could tell how much it cost Oliver to swallow a comment when they

sat down in the two chairs that Oliver and Jeff had saved for them.

“You’re late,” Jeff told them with a haughty look.

Alex reached for the fruit plate in the middle of the table. “A wizard is never late, Frodo Baggins. Nor is he early.”

“He arrives precisely when he means to,” Lee jumped in, and Alex sent him a bright grin that Lee returned.

“You know,” Oliver said mildly, “I was joking yesterday at the press conference, about the finishing-each-other’s-sentences bit.”

“No take-backs,” Lee said.

“What’s done is done,” Alex agreed. He looked over just in time to notice Jeff glance at Lee, then back at Alex with a curious tilt to his head. And ... oh, hell. Not only was Jeff Alex’s best mate, no, he also didn’t have a homophobic bone in his body. Why the *fuck* was Alex keeping him in the dark? Sure, he had his excuses, mainly that he didn’t trust Jeff to choose discretion over fighting the good fight. That was an utter load of crap, though.

Alex needed to tell him. He would.

After the match.



LEE DIDN’T TYPICALLY GET nervous before games—excited, yes, but not nervous. But his mother would be there tonight, and while of course she had attended his matches before, it had all been Premier League, everyday kind of business. This? This was the World Cup.

And in spite of everything, just like any other boy, he wanted his mum to be proud of him.

“If she isn’t already proud of you,” Alex told Lee on the train to Madrid, the compartment all theirs for the moment, “that’s on her, not on you.”

From one son to another, huh? Lee slid lower in his seat and stretched out his legs, one foot bumping Alex’s, seated across from each other as they were. “I’d say the same thing about your parents, except that one’s definitely on them.”

“Yeah, well.” Alex’s gaze skittered away. “Continuously falling short of expectations since birth, I guess?”

“What could they possibly be disappointed with?” Lee gestured at Alex’s general being. “You performed well in school, you’re a great athlete, you’re bloody *fit*...”

Alex’s face cleared slightly, distant humour colouring his tone. “Well, I was a baby once, which I think came as a bit of a surprise to my parents—you know, the whole crying thing, diapers, demanding attention... Basically all the reasons why the rich invented nannies.”

“Hold your tears of sympathy,” Lee said dryly, and one corner of Alex’s mouth quirked.

“Indeed. Then, after I outgrew the baby stage, I turned into a child—cue getting dirty, falling down, talking too loudly and too quickly...” He waved a hand. “Then it was this, then that, then that other thing. Like choosing the wrong friends, getting into football instead of cricket, like how I don’t excel in social situations...”

Uh.

“But you do,” Lee said.

“Now, yes. But it was something I needed to learn, not something that came naturally.” Alex flashed his dimples at Lee. “Plus—and I’m sure this won’t come as a shock to you—

my political views don't exactly mesh with my dad's. Once I started questioning his perspective at the dinner table... Let's just say that critical thinking wasn't welcome."

Yeah, based on how the Duke of Eastwyck carried himself in public, it was hardly a stretch to imagine he wouldn't be particularly patient with an independent-minded child.

"Sounds like a recipe for some fascinating dinners," Lee said.

Alex shook his head. "It honestly wasn't very exciting. I asked something, he answered, and if I then questioned even just minor aspects of what he'd said, I was treated to pointed silence for the rest of the meal."

"You know what really connects us—you and me?" Lee didn't wait for a reply. "We both won the healthy family dynamics lottery."

Alex's lips curved into a sad kind of smile. "It all seems normal until you realise that it's not how other families operate."

"True."

They were quiet for a moment. Then Alex leaned forward, elbows on his knees as he watched Lee. "Listen, though. Your mum is *here*. I know it's complicated, but she came for you, and you said she's been stable for a while now, so..."

Lee inhaled, exhaled. "You think it's time I forgive her?"

"That's not my call to make." Quiet and even, Alex's gaze still on Lee, and Lee ducked his head and glanced away.

"Maybe, yeah? It's like..." He grimaced. "I know it's not fair, holding something against her that in so many ways isn't

her fault. But it's hard to just snap my fingers and get over it, what with how it, you know..."

"Impacted you?" Alex offered.

"Yeah."

"I get that. I do." Alex seemed to consider his next words carefully. "But she's making an effort, isn't she? Sticking to her treatment regimen, regular therapy, and she's here to see you play. That's something, isn't it?"

"I guess it is." Lee didn't know what it meant to admit even as much. It didn't feel bad, not exactly—maybe even like a relief to let a tiny slice of resentment slip away.

Alex's response consisted of a quick glance at the empty corridor outside their compartment before he leaned across the gap between their seats, one hand on Lee's thigh as he brushed their mouths together. He was smiling when he pulled back, and maybe Lee was too.

Alex made him want to smile a lot of the time, and yeah, that meant something—Lee knew it did, also knew what it meant. He also knew that there was no *point* because Alex's plans for the future did not include a boyfriend.

Didn't stop Lee from wanting more than he was entitled to, though.



ON PAPER, England stood little chance against France's star-studded ensemble. They were outranked in experience, market value, and individual class, so their only hope lay in working as a team, in coming together as a unit that was bigger than its pieces.

Ninety minutes separated them from the semi-final.

At halftime, they were down by one unlucky goal off a disputable free kick. Kieran told them he was fucking *proud* of them, and to keep up what they were doing because they were the better team today, and the gods of football needed to sit up and pay attention. Lee was slumped on a bench next to Alex, the locker room's air-conditioning blasting them with a cool breeze, and fuck, Lee wished he could reach over and wipe that frown off Alex's face. Since he decidedly couldn't, not with the rest of the team around, he settled for a murmured, "Hey, you're doing well, yeah?"

Alex shot him a glance from underneath his lashes. "Thank you. You too—just a matter of time until you score, just a bit of bad luck until now."

"Yeah." Lee let his lids drift shut, sinking into the familiar sounds of a halftime locker room for a moment—lowered voices of teammates, the faint hum of the air-con. "By the way, did you see some of those posters? The ones addressed to you?"

"The only title that matters is this one', with a big picture of the World Cup trophy?"

"And the one that's got 'Son of a duke' crossed out for 'A king on the pitch'."

"I didn't see that." Alex's face brightened a little. "That's cute. Just not sure they'll still feel that way if we lose."

"So we win, then," Lee told him. "Easy."

"Right, good point. That should have occurred to me." The lightness on Alex's face lingered, belying his sarcasm, so Lee considered it a success.

The second half started with a near-goal for England—Alex to Jeff to Lee and back to Jeff, who missed by a hair's

width, the ball bouncing off the post. *Try again.* They did. And then again until finally, Alex's surgery-precision pass intersected with Lee sneaking past two defenders, and then the ball was *in*.

1-1. Twenty-one minutes to go.

The game was still tied by the time the final whistle blew. Extra time—two additional fifteen-minute periods, Kieran gathering them in a circle as they swigged water, sweaty and exhausted, breathing hard. Minor adjustments to the strategy, Alex moving higher up the pitch, their fullbacks farther up the wings, dial up the pressure. "Let's give them hell!" Kieran declared, eyes bright, an expression that said he believed they *could*.

And so they fucking did.

Lee's shot, on target but intercepted by the French goalkeeper. Alex was there to net the rebound.

2-1.

2-1.

Lee was the first one by Alex's side, tackling him in a full-body hug, laughing against his cheek. *I love you*, he thought and didn't say, and then Jeff barrelled into them, Declan and Finley and Toby yelling their triumph as they joined the huddle, and somewhere in between, Lee had to let Alex go. So he did.

France came at them hard and fast after that, hardly any space to breathe. Along with the rest of the English team, Lee threw himself into defending, also managed to break away with the ball a couple of times, move into those gaps that opened up in the French defensive line now that they were throwing everything they had at Oliver's goal. Two minutes to

the end, he slid the ball past the goalkeeper, watched as it went in, brain lagging behind reality. He didn't quite realise what had happened until Alex and Jeff caught up to him, happiness shining on their faces as they wrapped their arms around him.

3-1.

Semi-finals!

The short bus ride to the already familiar hotel in the city centre was loud—jerseys waving in the air like flags, Lewis dancing in the middle of the aisle to a chorus of “Here we, here we, here we fucking go!” led by Jeff. Alex, in the seat next to Lee, was radiant, his knee pressed against Lee's as if by accident, and God, Lee wanted him so fucking *much* it was nearly blinding. Since no one was looking, he dug his knuckles into the outside of Alex's thigh, and Alex turned to him with bright eyes, face shining.

For a few seconds, they stared at each other, the happiness in Alex's features slowly fading to make room for something heavier, much more serious.

Then Lewis bumped into Alex, and the moment broke as Alex turned away to give Lewis a playful shove coupled with an insult to his lineage.

“That's rich, mate,” Lewis told him, cackling. “Coming from you, that is. I hear a title isn't all it's cracked up to be, eh?”

He didn't mean anything by it, just Lewis being Lewis and saying whatever came to mind, smacking a kiss to Alex's cheek before he danced away. Since Lee was paying attention, he caught the brief flash of misery before Alex pasted another smile onto his face, a little less radiant now, not quite touching his eyes.

Lee still wished he could hide him away from the world—just for a little while, until things had settled down. He couldn't, though, so he settled for bumping their shoulders together. Alex's smile grew a little more real as he leaned slightly into Lee.

It was enough. For now, it was enough.



“SWEETHEART, YOU WERE *AMAZING*.”

Lee turned at the declaration, and Alex did too. The woman heading for them was beaming, her smile just like Lee's, her auburn hair cut short. Lee's mum Lisa then, with Kira, the older of his two younger sisters, right behind. Both women hugged Lee while Alex stepped back to give them space.

“You did okay,” Kira told Lee, aiming for a flat tone even as she blinked a couple of tears out of her eyes. “For a total loser, I mean.”

Lee caught her in another hug and messed up her hair with both hands, ignoring her shrieks of protest. “Love you too, midget,” he said when he released her, voice thick with affection.

Alex was about to slip away and leave them to their family reunion when Kira glanced over and right at him, a sly expression settling on her face. “Hi. Alex, right?”

“Yes.” He offered his hand and wondered what Lee had told her. Likely quite a bit given that she was the first person he'd come out to. “Kira, is it? And” —he smiled at Lee's mum — “Ms Taylor. Thank you both for coming out to watch the game.”

“Lisa, please.” Lee’s mum squeezed his hand in a light grip. “What a pleasure to see you boys doing so well. Especially you.” The last part was directed at Lee, and he ducked his head with a sheepish look that couldn’t quite hide the happy twist to his mouth.

“*Mum.*”

“I’m your mother, Lee. It’s my job to be proud of you to an embarrassing degree.” Lisa’s attempt at humour didn’t fully land, a mildly awkward slant to her shoulders, and neither Lee nor Kira offered more than dutiful grins in response.

Time for Alex to make himself scarce. He needed to find Jeff anyway.

After dishing out some pleasantries, he left Lee, Lisa, and Kira by the side of the hotel terrace and grabbed Jeff, who was holding court next to the food buffet. “I was telling a story to a captive audience,” Jeff protested even as he followed willingly. “I was just getting to the bit where I freed the squirrel from the mailbox.”

Alex had heard the story before, so he knew all about the unfortunate squirrel that must have mistaken Jeff’s mailbox for a bird feeder and snuck in with the mail delivery, only to realise there was no food and a closed latch that prevented escape. Fortunately, Jeff had retrieved the mail the same day and got jumped on by a confused squirrel that sensed danger afoot and landed on his arm, dug its tiny claws in, and then made its great escape.

“I’ve got a story for you too,” Alex told him, unrepentant. “Meant for an audience of one.”

“Your father left a written confession before he fled the country?” Jeff trailed Alex into the park-like hotel garden,

well-tended cobblestone paths snaking between trees and hedges.

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“You’re joining a convent and have taken a vow of celibacy?”

“Certainly not.”

“Prince Joshua is getting a divorce to marry you instead?”

“What?”

“*What?*”

“What even *is* your brain?” Alex didn’t wait for a reply, just tugged Jeff over to a bench that faced a softly illuminated fountain, no one else around and the murmur of water a welcome backdrop to mask their voices. “No. Although you accidentally got, like, five per cent right. In a roundabout way.”

At the faint taste of gossip, Jeff came alive like a hound smelling blood, sitting up eagerly. “Which part?”

Okay, no time like the present.

Alex took a deep breath. “The part where a gay marriage is a very, *very* vague possibility for me. At some point in the extremely distant future.” Well, that wasn’t quite how he’d meant to make his grand announcement. He thought about amending the statement, then didn’t and simply waited for Jeff to work through what looked like exceedingly complex mental calculations.

“So what you’re saying,” Jeff said slowly, several seconds later, “is that Lee’s magic dick turned you gay?”

There were about fifty things wrong with that statement—and yet it was perfectly Jeff and exactly what Alex had needed to hear.

“Bisexual,” he clarified, laughter tickling the back of his throat. “And it is a very nice dick. No magic tricks though, not as far as I’ve seen. No turning me anything either—just the first time I have a chance to act on... It’s the first time I get to safely explore things with a guy.”

“Could have told me, you know.” Rather than make it a reproach, Jeff’s voice remained light. “I would have volunteered my brother. The virgin sacrifice is a time-honoured tradition.”

Alex snorted. “Marco is hardly a virgin.”

“I meant you.”

“I lost my virginity when I was sixteen.”

“Not your gay virginity, apparently.”

“I’d ask you to define that but...” Alex shook his head. “The answer would probably be offensive.”

“Probably,” Jeff agreed, sounding rather happy about it.

“It wasn’t a compliment.”

Jeff shot him a bright grin before he sobered. “Is that why you didn’t tell me—because I might say something offensive?”

“No. I mean, I *knew* you’d say something offensive—I’d expect nothing less from you.” Alex brought one knee up to his chest, a gentle breeze chasing the lingering heat of the day out of the city. “No, I think what it comes down to is that I wasn’t one hundred per cent comfortable with the idea of being ... a little outside the norm.”

“Until Lee and his magic dick came along,” Jeff supplied, and Alex laughed softly.

“I have no idea how you didn’t become a poet.”

“My soul couldn’t stand the thought of commercialising my art.” Jeff perched cross-legged on the bench so he could face Alex more comfortably. “Now, straight answers, please —”

“Is that a pun?” Alex asked, and Jeff gave him a gentle kick.

“Of course not. My puns are far better than that.”

“Disputable,” Alex said, “but do continue.”

“You and Lee—boyfriends? Fuck buddies? Friends with benefits?”

Neither of these options sounded quite right. Alex paused at the sound of voices not too far away and waited for whoever it was to move on. Only then did he reply with a quiet, “I guess we have yet to put a label on it.”

“Fair enough.” Jeff pursed his lips, nodding. “So how did it happen?”

“He came out to me after our match against the Netherlands. Remember that whole pretty boy thing I told you about—how I thought he was making fun of me, back in the Under 21s? Well, turns out he was trying to flirt and thought I’d gone all homophobe on him. So... Dot, dot, dot, cue years of mutual dislike.”

“And the award for biggest idiots goes to...”

“I mean, yeah. Maybe.” Alex lifted one shoulder, briefly listening to the sound of running water before he continued. “Not sure how I would have reacted even if I had realised it

was flirting, though. I sure wasn't ready to try anything with a guy back then. Even now, after he came out, it took me a few more days to work up the balls to tell him about me." He huffed out a chuckle. "Except I couldn't actually get out the words, so I just kissed him."

Jeff's laugh was loud, ringing clear over the fountain and the distant city soundscape. When he spoke, though, it was quiet. "Listen, mate, if that's your preferred method?" He leaned in, eyes glinting with amusement, and puckered his lips. "By all means."

"Nah, I'm good." Alex reached out to pinch his chin. "Thank you, though. For not making this weird."

Jeff flashed him a grin. "Why would it be weird? You're my best mate, and you're still the same person. Just a little more honest with yourself and me."

"So we're okay?" Alex knew they were, but he somehow still needed to hear it out loud.

"Of course we're okay." To illustrate the point, Jeff launched a lightning-fast attempt to twist Alex's nipple, Alex slapping his hand away. "However," Jeff said once foiled, voice dipping into much more serious territory. "One day, you and I will have a talk about your exaggerated need to fit in. Life is so much better when it's your own."

"Sounds like a calendar motto."

"Maybe. Doesn't make it untrue, though."

"Run that by me again when I'm fully awake."

Jeff's reply was a hearty yawn. "Deal. Let's head back to the party and see who's left, but my bed is starting to seem pretty damn appealing."

“Same.” Alex grinned. “My bed, not yours.”

It would indeed be Alex’s own bed since Lee had his mother and sister staying with him—he’d have precious little time with them as it was, so shipping them off to some other hotel would have made no sense. Alex totally got it, even if it had been a while since he’d slept on his own. No big deal, of course.

Still not a big deal when Alex caught Lee’s eye for a quick smile before he headed upstairs to his room. The silence felt deafening once he closed the door, the bed enormous for just one person. He brushed his teeth while scrolling through congratulatory messages from friends, limiting his responses to those who’d been there with supportive words when the story about his father had broken. The others, well, he wasn’t ignoring them—he was merely reshuffling his priorities.

Unsurprisingly, his social media accounts had exploded over the last few days, the uptick in his followers a likely combination of England’s successful run as well as front-page articles about his dad that mentioned him. It gave some credence to the old saying that there was no such thing as bad publicity.

Alex posted a slightly subdued, *‘Semi-final against Belgium coming up! For now, nothing else matters.’*

Then he shut off his phone and the light, and closed his eyes. Sleep proved elusive, but he must have drifted off eventually because when he woke up, it was to sun peeking through a gap between the curtains.

Four days to the semi-final.

Lee had fancied himself busy in the past. Honestly, he hadn't known the bloody *meaning* of the word.

The days leading up to the match against Belgium were ... not frantic, no, because that would discount the fact that there was a method to the madness. They were tense, though. Crammed. Regular training sessions and gym workouts competed with sponsoring and publicity commitments, strategy sessions and hours of footage about their opponent that needed to be reviewed, some of it by the team as a whole and some of it based on what positions they played. Oliver studied players' penalty preferences while Alex got an in-depth course on the Belgian midfield with a minor in their defence and offence, and Lee learned whatever he could about their key defenders and the primary goalkeeper, plus a little about their respective backups.

As a side effect, Lee found that his time with Alex had dwindled to stolen kisses in those ten minutes before they were expected at lunch or dinner. It was strange to miss someone who slept next to him every night, and yet he did just a little throughout the day, when they were almost constantly surrounded by the rest of the team.

What was theirs, though, was the hour after dinner before they turned off the light, and Lee wasn't about to waste it. He was learning Alex by heart, by taste, pressing him into the sheets while their bodies slid together, Lee's mouth on Alex's dick and Alex's hands in Lee's hair until Alex rolled them over, deep kisses and wandering hands. There was a song that Lee couldn't quite name, just that there was a line he'd never understood before but now he did—*I'm gonna love you like I'm gonna lose you.*

Because he would, wouldn't he? He'd lose Alex, and so he would love him now, before their time ran out.

The night before the match, just as they were finishing up dinner—Jeff and Oliver arguing over the nutritional value of beer, Lee himself contributing just enough to keep them going because it was amusing to see their fake annoyance with each other when they actually got on quite well—Alex's phone rang. His quiet “Oh, fuck” made the table fall silent.

“What?” Jeff asked.

“It's my dad.” Alex got up as he said it, pale under his tan and clutching his phone like a snake he'd accidentally got his hands on and wasn't sure how to deal with now. “I need to take this.”

“You don't have to do a fucking thing,” Lee told him, and Jeff nodded his chin at Lee.

“What he said.”

“It's my *dad*,” Alex said, low and urgent, eyes wide. With that, he accepted the call and turned away from them, heading for the stairs that led from the hotel terrace into the garden. They only just caught his “Hello, dad” before he was gone.

“Well, fuck. That’s not good.” Jeff was the one who stated the obvious.

Frowning, Oliver laid down his cutlery. “Bad timing, yeah. But you can’t blame him for not wanting to ghost his own father.”

“I’m not blaming *Alex*. His father, though? Hell yeah, I can blame the man for calling today, of all days.” Jeff’s voice had risen of its own accord, and after a glance at the other tables, he lowered it again, leaning forward. “Headlines say he’s been home for two days, and he picks tonight to finally give his son a call, just before our match against Belgium? Fuck that man with a very sharp object.”

“That’s hardly fair to the object,” Lee put in, and Jeff sent him an assessing look.

“Valid point.”

A few seconds of silence followed as they all watched Alex weave along one of the hotel’s gravel paths, head ducked, face averted. Then Jeff sighed and tapped his knuckles against Lee’s. “I guess that puts you on Alex duty tonight. Do you think you can handle it?”

For once, it didn’t come with an edge of innuendo. Ever since Alex had clued Jeff in after their win against France, Jeff had made it his mission to insert as many lewd comments into any given conversation as he possibly could. To his credit, he chose his moments with care, never let anything slip when there were other teammates around. While Lee would never admit it out loud, he loved how it made this thing with Alex feel real in a way it hadn’t before. Lee didn’t know if it meant something that Alex had told his best mate—maybe all it meant was that Alex had grown more comfortable with himself.

And yet Lee hoped it was more than just that.

“Of course I can handle it,” he told Jeff. “From one traumatised son to another, right?”

Jeff tilted his head. “At least you’ve got a pair of siblings and a mum who’s trying.”

He had a point.

Lee said as much before he changed the topic to the other semi-final that pitted Brazil against Spain, and even though he kept an eye on Alex, he soon lost him to sprawling hedges and trees. Alex didn’t return to their table, so Lee didn’t know what to expect when he unlocked the door to their room. It sure hadn’t been Alex sprawled naked on Lee’s bed like an offering—although Lee should have learned by now that Alex had a tendency to substitute difficult conversations with sex.

“Hey.” Lee entered and closed the door, hesitating for a moment before he pulled off the T-shirt that Alex had made him order at lunch a few days ago because “it will look bloody amazing on you, okay?” In just his jeans, he crossed the distance to the bed while Alex watched him with a faint smile, the dim glow of a spectacular sunset washing the room in muted colours.

“Hey,” Alex returned, eyes half-lidded as he raised his arms above his head, his focus on Lee. Jesus, he did know how to present himself, didn’t he?

Lee draped himself over Alex’s body and buried one hand in his hair as he pulled him into a kiss. He intended to keep it short and sweet but lost his resolve when Alex opened his mouth and licked along the seam of Lee’s lips. *Just for a minute.* Tongues tangling, Lee sinking further into Alex, settling firmly between Alex’s spread thighs.

With a gasp, Lee tore his mouth away even as he kept a hand on Alex's cheek, thumb against the corner of Alex's eye. "What did your dad have to say?"

Alex's gaze slid away before it returned to Lee's face, humour in his tone that Lee didn't quite buy. "You trying to ruin the mood?"

"Nah." Lee dropped a kiss to Alex's mouth and pulled back before Alex could tempt him into another escalation. "I fully plan to make you come at least once tonight. After you talk to me."

Alex treated Lee to a calculated display of dimples. "Orgasms first, talk later?"

"No deal." To soften the words, Lee dipped his head to rub their noses together. "Making sure you're okay first, then orgasms. Those are my conditions because priorities."

The sudden softening of Alex's features marked the moment he gave in. "I'm mostly okay."

Lee nodded. "Great, and I mostly believe you. So, what did your dad want?"

Cynicism twisted Alex's lips. "My public support, what else?"

"And what did you say?"

"I asked him whether the accusations were wrong." Alex turned his face into Lee's touch and closed his eyes, lashes fanning out against his cheeks. "His response was that he didn't take any money and would never betray England's interest."

Lee processed that. "That's not the same as saying he didn't collaborate with Qatar."

“No, it’s not.” Alex’s chest rose with a deep breath, obvious where they were still pressed together along the full length of their bodies. Lee shifted just enough to relieve some of his weight, Alex slinging an arm around his waist to keep him close. As if Lee was going anywhere.

“What do you figure he meant?” he asked after a beat.

“My best guess?” Alex blinked his eyes open, a greyed-out hazel in the dim light. “He didn’t take any money—in his own way, he’s a very principled man. I think they asked for a friendly baseline attitude when the time came to discuss a UK-Qatar free trade agreement in the Lords. In return, they offered him a way to get certain things on the agenda in the House of Commons.”

“Certain things?”

“Ultra-conservative pet projects.” Alex smiled without any humour. “Protecting traditional family values and structures. Immigration control. Fox hunting.”

“You’re saying he might have sold us out just so he and his pals can go back to setting a bunch of hounds on a poor fox that will eventually be torn to shreds?”

“It’s the principle.” Alex’s hand flattened against Lee’s back, absently travelling along the curve of his spine. “In his mind, it’s all about defending traditions and well-earned privileges.”

“He said that?” Lee asked.

“I can read between the lines.”

“I know he’s your dad, but he sounds like a terrible person.”

Alex's brows drew together, his throat moving as he swallowed. "Honestly, yeah, I think he might be a terrible person. I just never thought about it because he's ... you know. He's the only father I have."

There wasn't anything Lee could say, nothing that would have made a difference. So instead, he rolled on top of Alex and proceeded to take him apart with his hands and mouth, taking his sweet time as he brought Alex to the brink only to pull back, kissing the protest from him until Alex was clutching at Lee's shoulders, firmly rooted in this, in them. When Lee worked his way back down Alex's body, it was to a backdrop of Alex's gasps and stifled sighs, Alex alternating between watching Lee and throwing his head back, gorgeous against the sheets.

The light had faded by the time Alex shook through his orgasm, all tension draining from his muscles. Lee kned his way up the bed to bring himself off too, a few quick strokes, Alex watching him with soft eyes, one hand moving over Lee's chest and stomach as he murmured quiet words of encouragement.

Usually, Lee would look away, close his eyes—this time, he held Alex's gaze when he came, adding to the mess on Alex's belly. Alex drew him into another kiss right after, both of them still breathing harshly, sticky skin and wandering hands, tiredness creeping in around the edges. They stumbled into the shower together and brushed their teeth side by side, hips bumping, exhaustion turning Lee's vision a little hazy by the time they fell into bed. He slid up against Alex's back and curved an arm around his chest, Alex tangling their fingers.

It should be enough.

“I don’t want this to end.” Lee hadn’t meant to say it out loud, but now that he had, there was no turning back. He pressed his nose against Alex’s neck, eyes closed. “No matter what happens tomorrow, whether we win or lose—I don’t want this to end.”

He could feel Alex’s chest rise with a deep breath, then Alex twisted around to catch Lee’s mouth for another kiss, slow and deep. Maybe it was an answer or maybe it wasn’t—either way it was all Alex offered.

Lee fell asleep with Alex in his arms and a dozen questions pressing up against the back of his mind.



THE SOFT PATTEN of rain woke Alex. They must have moved during the night because he remembered going to sleep with Lee tucked up behind him while now it was Lee lying on his back, Alex curled up against Lee’s side with his head in the crook of Lee’s neck. He inhaled—warmth and a faint trace of the hotel’s shower gel.

I don’t want this to end.

The words crept through the cracks of Alex’s lingering sleep haze and broke it apart. *Whether we win or lose—I don’t want this to end.* But it had to, of course. This wasn’t *real*. It was a bubble, and they couldn’t just pretend that it wouldn’t burst once it collided with reality. Maybe it was different for Lee because he didn’t have family expectations resting heavy on his shoulders. But Alex did, and he had, and—and—

Except his father might go to prison.

Something clamped down on his chest because what did that mean? What did that fucking *mean*?

Alex inhaled through his teeth, brief dizziness washing over him. He needed ... air. Needed space to breathe. It was too hot in here, and Lee was too close, too much.

He slid out of bed like a thief in the night, pulling on whatever clothes he found on the floor, the jeans his own, the T-shirt not. After grabbing his phone off the bedside table, he paused for just a second to stare at Lee's peaceful face.

Was there a way for Alex to keep him?

Alex padded out of the room on socked feet, quietly closed the door, and laced up his trainers in the hallway outside. Jeff's room lay further along the corridor, but he was sharing with Mason, another striker, and Alex didn't want a random teammate to witness his epiphany with a healthy side serving of freaking out. So instead, he unlocked his phone and sent a *'You up?'* to Jeff.

Since Alex didn't want to linger in the hallway, he headed for the lifts. Jeff's response came just as Alex exited into the lobby. *'Part of me is,'* it said, followed by an aubergine emoji.

Trust Jeff to take any harmless question straight to the gutter.

'That could be mistaken for an invitation,' Alex replied. After a nod at the receptionist, he stepped out into the fresh morning, the rain that had woken him no more than a misty drizzle by now, dense humidity more than actual drops.

'Ah, I wouldn't want to compete with Lee.'

Lee, yes. Lee, who'd said that he didn't want this to end. Lee, who Alex was maybe kind of in love with—because what else was he supposed to make of the radiant warmth that fluttered in his belly at even just the thought of him? And God, that sounded like a song, didn't it? A sweet and slightly cheesy

song that could be on the soundtrack to an old black-and-white film.

Get a fucking grip.

Alex tipped his face into the drizzle and took a slow, controlled breath. Already, he could feel the heat of the day lurking just out of sight, ready to press in as soon as the sky cleared, sweltering temperatures predicted for the match tonight. Hopefully, the humidity wouldn't linger.

He set back into motion, replying to Jeff as he walked. *'Can we talk? I'm by the pool.'*

'It's raining.'

'It's barely raining and there's a canopy for the wimps among us.'

'Insulting me isn't half as cute as you seem to think it is.'

Alex stared at his phone for a second before he replied. *'Please?'*

Three little dots showed that Jeff had started typing an answer. Then they disappeared, only to return a few seconds later. When the response came, it was simple. *'There in 5.'*

The drizzle had stopped completely by the time Jeff arrived, flashes of blue sky showing between the clouds. He plopped onto a lounge chair next to Alex's with a, "You called, my love, so I came running."

Alex meant to counter with something suitably light, he did. "Thank you," he said instead, much heavier than intended, and Jeff's attention zeroed in on him.

"All right, talk to me. What's going on?"

“Okay, so...” Alex faltered, struggling to pick just one of the half-dozen thoughts swirling through his brain. “So, what you said a few days ago—about how life is much more fun if it’s my own. What if I took control?”

“Sounds generally good to me.” Jeff nodded his approval. “What exactly does that mean, though?”

Alex wished he had a ready-made answer rather than fragments of one. “It’s like... There are all these expectations, right? And I’m so used to letting that define me. But I’m already defying my parents—it started with football, and now, with this whole mess, I’m refusing to do as I’m told. So why not go all the way?”

“All the way?”

“What if I came out?” It sounded ... God, it sounded big, said out loud like that. Really fucking scary. Alex forced himself to push on regardless. “Someone’s got to follow in Ben Jimmer’s footsteps eventually, right? And maybe, if Lee is—I haven’t asked him, mind. Hell, I barely know what the fuck I’m saying. I just... I’m so tired, Jeff. I’m so fucking *tired* of being what others want me to be.”

“*Good.*” With that, Jeff scooped Alex up in a brief but heartfelt hug. “I’m all for it, yeah?” he said when he pulled back. “I’ll be right here cheering you on with my pom-poms and all. Just making sure, though, because it’s a bit sudden and all... What brought this on?”

I don’t want this to end.

“Kind of ... everything, I think?” Alex made a sweeping gesture. “My dad facing a corruption charge, me being in this bubble for all those weeks and away from my daily routine.

Starting to feel like I actually belong here, like I've earned this." He cleared his throat. "Lee."

Jeff's smile was huge. "You finally put a label on it, then?"

Had they?

"In a way," Alex said. "I think? Lee told me last night he doesn't want it to end, the thing with us—that even if we lose tonight—"

"Let's not," Jeff interrupted.

"Let's not," Alex agreed. "But even if we do, he said he wants to ... keep going. So."

"And what did you say?" Jeff asked.

"I mean, well." Alex thought back to the night before—darkness wrapped around them, Lee's solid warmth against his back and the velvety murmur of Lee's voice, the words slotting into the gaps between Alex's ribs and settling in for the long haul. "I didn't really, uh ... say anything? It was just before we fell asleep, and it wasn't like Lee asked for an answer or anything. He just put it out there, and then we kissed and went to sleep."

Jeff narrowed his eyes. "And what did you say this morning?"

Alex was starting to get a bad feeling about this. "Lee was still asleep. I needed to sort myself out first, hence our chat here."

"So let me get this straight." Jeff's tone was dangerously patient. "Lee says that to him, this thing between the two of you matters—you say nothing. And then you sneak out before he wakes up."

Alex scuffed a hand through his hair. “It sounds bad when you put it like that.”

“You *think*?”

“I should...” Alex pointed at the hotel, and the sharpness in Jeff’s eyes faded slightly.

“Yeah, you really should. Oh, just one more thing? Whatever happens with you and Lee—something great, hopefully—it doesn’t mean you have to come out immediately.”

Okay, true. But there was a part of Alex that felt eager to just fucking *do* it—rip off the bandaid and jump in the deep end and learn how to swim across the bloody Atlantic.

That didn’t make it a brilliant idea, though.

“Point taken.” Alex rose from the sun lounger and paused for a smile. “Thanks, mate. You’re the best.”

Jeff looked pleased. “Eh. You’d do the same for me.”

“I would,” Alex said. “Anytime you face some life-altering decisions? Just give me a call and I’ll be there.”

“I’ll hold you to it.” Jeff made a shooing motion, eyes bright. “Now go, yeah? Get your man before he realises you’re kind of an idiot and finds someone a little less ridiculous.”

“I’m going.” Two steps, then Alex turned right back around and gave Jeff a hug that Jeff returned, laughing. When Alex made his way back to the hotel, he felt weightless, damn near invincible.

This was his life, and he intended to finally act like it.



LEE WOKE UP ALONE.

The pillow was dented on Alex's side of the bed, but Alex himself was nowhere to be seen, the room silent. He'd never slipped out without a word before. Something ugly unfurled in Lee's stomach that wasn't quite dread, wasn't quite anger. Disappointment maybe or betrayal, a heavy sense of *I fucking trusted you*—Brandon all over again, deciding that he couldn't hack a nutjob girlfriend, shame about the children.

Lee rolled out of bed and stood in the middle of the room until it stopped spinning around him. Then he got dressed and went to brush his teeth against the bitter taste of bile, pushing away the memory of last night, of telling Alex—

Fuck.

When he heard the door open, Lee set his toothbrush aside and sucked in a shaky breath, avoiding his own eyes in the mirror as he fought the panic flooding his system.

He'd always expected Alex to walk away.

It was a fool's hope that had prompted Lee to speak up last night, and now he'd pay the price. If he couldn't protect his heart, though, he would at least protect his dignity. He'd be protecting Alex too, saving him from the awkward knowledge that Lee wanted more than Alex was willing to give—something that could also translate into tension on the pitch when they needed to put the team first.

The smile refused to sit quite right on Lee's face, but it was the best he could do. He focused on the effort needed to maintain it rather than the weight in his chest as he left the bathroom and found Alex by the door, toeing off his trainers. Alex quickly rose to his feet and faced Lee, shoulders straight, his expression conveying a steady kind of resolve that his smile couldn't fully mask. "Hey. Sorry you woke up alone."

“No worries.” Lee leaned against the wall next to the bathroom and crossed his legs at the ankle. “Listen, about last night—now that I’m awake, I realise that maybe that came across the wrong way.”

Alex’s brows drew together, his tone careful. “What do you mean?”

“Like, when I said I don’t want this thing with us to end?”
Smile. Fucking smile. “I didn’t mean that I’m falling in love with you or anything. Just ... I don’t get that many chances to safely fool around with a bloke, now do I? And same for you, of course.”

Three seconds of silence that Lee felt acutely, the room tilting slightly on its axis. Then Alex shook his head. “I don’t believe you.”

Lee felt his smile drop, the careful hold he’d had on his expression slipping for perhaps just a blink of an eye before he clawed back control. “Excuse me?”

“I don’t believe you,” Alex repeated, much more confidently now, and why was he fighting the easy way out that Lee offered? It could be their implicit little deal, a mutually beneficial agreement to pretend that Alex believed Lee, staving off any awkwardness and giving Lee a chance to nurture his bruises in peace.

So why didn’t Alex give him that much, at least?

Lee couldn’t look at Alex anymore. He pushed away from the wall and sat down on the edge of his bed—the one they’d shared last night and the nights before, so maybe it had become their bed, just a little, and—and Alex didn’t believe him. It didn’t make *sense*, not after Alex had slipped out this morning. Did it?

“Why don’t you believe me?” Lee asked quietly.

“Because it doesn’t make sense,” Alex said, just as quietly. He took half a step closer, then halted. “I think you’re lying.”

“Well.” Lee’s chuckle turned out watery, and he dropped his head. “Screw you, then.”

Alex took another step closer. “Historically speaking, you seem to have a habit of jumping to conclusions.”

Lee shook his head but stayed quiet, head ducked so Alex wouldn’t see his face.

“Also…” And now Alex’s voice was tinged with a hint of warmth. “I really very much *want* you to be lying about how you didn’t mean what you said.”

“You want—” Lee looked up sharply, and Alex was smiling at him, this small, tentative thing that grew the moment their eyes met. “But you *left*,” Lee said, and he hated how helpless he sounded, how needy, when he’d learned early on that he was better off relying on only himself.

“I did, yeah. For a chat with Jeff.”

“So you didn’t freak out?”

“No, I did, just a bit.” Alex perched at the bottom of the mattress, watching Lee for a moment before he continued. “It’s scary when you realise your whole life’s about to change, you know? Even if it’s for the better.”

Alex’s whole life?

Lee frowned. “What do you mean? I didn’t ask for, like… I don’t know—your hand in marriage and your father’s blessing. Oh, and a unicorn, while we’re at it.”

“Yeah, I know. But when you said that you don’t want this to end...” Alex shuffled up the bed and touched Lee’s wrist. “When you said that you don’t want *us* to end—up until now, I always assumed we had to because that’s just the way it is. And then, when I woke up this morning, I realised that it’s up to me.” His smile brought out a lone dimple. “Well, to us, obviously. But I realised that I don’t have to blindly follow a certain path just because my parents paved it before I was even born, guardrails and all.”

It hurt, how much Lee wanted him. He exhaled through it, staring at Alex’s fingers that were still loosely clasped around his wrist. “What exactly are you saying?”

“I’m saying that this thing here?” Alex waved his free hand between them. “I’d like to make it real.”

Something in Lee’s chest loosened abruptly, and finally, *finally* he could fit enough air into his lungs. “It’s already real,” he told Alex.

“Let’s put a label on it, then.” Alex’s second dimple staged an appearance, and Lee didn’t know why that was what swung it for him, his disbelief melting away. He turned to drag Alex closer, pushed him over onto his back so he could stretch out on top of him. Alex went easily, grinning, his legs coming up to frame Lee’s body. Up close, the hazel of Alex’s eyes was speckled with flecks of green.

“So.” Lee dipped his head to let their lips catch, aiming for a cheesy tone. “Wanna go steady?”

“Yes.” Alex paused. “On one condition.”

“You already said yes.”

“On *one* condition,” Alex repeated. “Next time, you don’t just jump to conclusions. Ask me, all right? Let’s fight about it

if we need to. But don't just give up.”

It triggered a faint memory of Alex saying that he counted on Lee to not just walk away, trusted him to stay and fight. Lee would have. Of course he would have—if he'd realised there was anything to fight for.

He curved a hand around Alex's jaw and kissed him, slow and deep, until Alex was pliant under him, fingers loosely fisted in Lee's T-shirt. Only then did Lee pull back slightly, just enough to meet Alex's eyes. “I wasn't giving up just because, yeah? I thought I was doing you a favour, giving you an easy way out. Also saving my dignity, and protecting the team from any fallout.”

Alex tipped his chin up. “Because you jumped to conclusions.”

“You didn't say anything last night and you were gone this morning. What was I supposed to think?”

“That between the mess with my dad and this thing with us, my life's been tipped upside down and I needed a moment to process?”

Okay, that was fair.

“Yeah, guess that could have occurred to me.” Lee glanced away. “I'm just not—I don't ask for things. From people. But I asked *you* for something, and then you were gone.”

Alex brought one hand up to cup the back of Lee's neck, the touch warm and light. When Lee looked back at him, Alex's eyes were serious. “Why did you ask, then?”

Lee paused before he replied. “Because I was even more scared to lose you.”

It wasn't quite an admission of just how much Alex had come to mean, but it was pretty damn close. Lee pressed his tongue against the roof of his mouth as he watched Alex's face, holding his breath as he waited for a reaction. He got it in the form of Alex uttering a soft, "*Lee*," before they were kissing again, minutes melting away against the faint buzz of voices that passed outside their door.

Fuck, Lee loved him.

It didn't feel heavy anymore. Instead, it filled Lee with a bright sense of calm, like underwater rays of light. Even if Alex wasn't there yet—well, Lee could be patient, now that the deadline looming over them had faded away.

They'd get a short few weeks off after this, before they'd have to return for pre-season training with their clubs. Lee had intended to spend part of that time travelling with his sisters and part of it relaxing at home, but he hoped there was room for a change of plans. France, maybe? Or a week in Sweden or in the Alps? Escape the summer heat, rent a little cabin by a lake or a mountain chalet that was just for them?

A loud bang on their door startled them apart.

"Breakfast!" Jeff called out, and Alex huffed out a laugh as he met Lee's eyes. Alex's cheeks were flushed, hair a mess, and Lee suspected he himself didn't fare any better. They'd need a moment before they went down.

"Coming!" Alex yelled in the direction of the door.

"TMI, mate." Another knock underlined the statement. "Make it quick—I'll save you both a seat." With that, Jeff presumably moved on.

Alex snorted, voice pitched for Lee's ears only. "Fun fact? If this was anyone but Jeff, we'd have been outed just now."

He didn't sound terribly upset at the idea, and that was something they'd need to discuss because while Lee wasn't in a rush to come out publicly, he could see wanting to do so eventually. He had no idea where Alex stood.

A conversation for another time, though. Today, they needed to focus on Belgium.

So all Lee said was, "He's your best mate, and I'm judging."

"They do say we become an average of the five people we spend the most time with." Alex's soft laugh tempted Lee right back into another kiss, just one more, before he rolled off Alex and onto his back, taking a moment to adjust himself in his shorts.

When he glanced over, Alex was watching him with open interest. Lee grinned, couldn't help it. "Hold that thought."

"Right." Alex nodded, gaze still focused south of Lee's belly button.

"Breakfast," Lee told him gently, and Alex nodded again, then blinked and looked away, shoving a hand through his hair.

"Right, yes. Breakfast."

Predictably, they were the last ones to arrive.

A torrential thunderstorm hit some sixty minutes into the match.

At first, it was just a few thick drops. Moments later, they turned into a wall of water, visibility reduced to a few metres. As soon as the referee's whistle called the game to a halt, Lee shielded his eyes against the rain to watch lightning throw multi-branched patterns across the sky.

"The gods must be angry tonight," Alex shouted, his silhouette distorted by the rain, and Lee laughed.

"Not sure what kind of crap they teach at posh-boy school, but the gods have nothing to do with this." He paused for effect. "It's cloud giants, rearranging their furniture."

"Oh," Alex said. "I like you—you're *smart!*"

They were grinning at each other as they trotted after the other players towards the inner concourse while spectators flocked to the sheltered parts of the stadium. Part of it was adrenaline, the fact that they were ahead by one goal—a beautiful combination kicked off by Jeff who'd found Alex further up the pitch, and then Alex and Lee had passed the ball back and forth like a fucking *dance* until Lee had sealed the deal. Part of it, yes. But it was also because even though they

hadn't had a private moment since before breakfast, Lee could feel that things between them had changed. It was small glances and near-invisible touches, deliberately brushing up against each other like it was an accident.

Drenched as they were, the air-conditioned locker room was on the chilly side. When Alex dropped onto the bench next to Lee and peeled off his wet jersey, Lee reminded himself that they were in public. He kept his attention on Alex's face.

"Hey—we win this, I will voluntarily don a nice button-up later."

"You say that like you'll be doing me a favour." Alex emerged from behind the towel he'd used to dry his hair, wavy strands sticking up in odd little tufts. "Admit it, you like the way it makes you feel."

"On occasion," Lee allowed, and it was true that there was something fun about dressing up once in a while. Even more fun when Alex undressed him slowly afterwards, undoing buttons one by one, working his way down Lee's chest.

"I'll take that as a yes," Alex said.

Lee reached for his own towel. "Sure, if it makes you happy."

"It makes me very happy."

"Lads." Jeff plopped down next to Alex. "Gentlemen. *Fellas*. Let's take this home."

For some reason, that was the moment it sunk in—they might win this. They might actually *win* this, and then they'd be in the bloody *final*, one step away from the title. No matter what Lee had told Alex in the past, he hadn't really, truly

believed that they stood a chance. Now? God, maybe they did.

Lee could feel the room buzzing with barely suppressed excitement as Kieran used the unscheduled break for another warning about staying sharp, they were ahead by just one goal, *don't get cocky, guys. Remember Japan.*

They were back on the pitch half an hour later, the grass soggy and slippery from the downpour, making it much harder to control the ball. Lee lost track of time—all that counted was here and now, the next touch and the next, Alex and Jeff and Declan and Finley moving around him.

A corner kick to Toby. Header. *Goal!*

Final whistle.

Lee collapsed where he stood, flat on his back in the damp grass, laughing at the sky as wetness soaked through his jersey. Alex piled on top of him a second later, then Jeff and Oliver and others, a happy, shouting pile of guys Lee had come to know so well over all these weeks. One of Alex's cheeks was pressed against Lee's, flushed from the match, their eyes catching for a moment, weightless, blood rushing in Lee's ears. In public, they were in public, and then Jeff yelled about how "We fucking did it, guys!" and Lee dragged his attention away from Alex's mouth even as he dug his knuckles into Alex's thigh.

They'd done it.

A short bus ride took them back to the sleek, modern hotel they'd stayed at before, with its tiered olive garden that overlooked the sea. Lee stopped in his room just long enough to shower and change, then joined the party outside. To exactly no one's surprise, Alex wasn't there yet, always taking

a few extra minutes to get ready—but when he showed, he looked and smelled amazing. God, Lee was so fucking into him he couldn't see straight. How long, exactly, did they have to stay?

He floated from group to group for a while to keep up appearances, always aware of his position relative to Alex's. They finally intersected a few steps away from everyone else, and Alex pulled Lee in for a one-armed hug.

"I've got fond memories of this place," he told Lee in an undertone, a secretive grin curving his mouth. "It's where you finally succumbed to my charm."

I want to kiss you.

Lee remembered it—the two of them side by side at the railing, overlooking the nighttime sea, and the tipping point when he'd put it out there. Alex's smile, *what's stopping you?*

"I'd succumbed—as you so nicely put it—way before then," Lee said. "Here's just where I admitted it out loud."

"That so?" Humour glinted in Alex's voice. "Tell me more."

"How about" —Lee glanced around to make sure no one paid them any mind— "we take this conversation somewhere more private?"

"Are you ashamed of our love, Lee?" The humour in Alex's voice lingered, and our love, our *love*.

It was the first time either of them had used the word in even just a joking manner—except it wasn't a joke, or at least it wasn't to Lee.

Since he couldn't quite read Alex's expression, he tilted his head, letting his lips tug up into a smirk. "Is that a dare?"

He took a step closer. “Because I have no problem planting one on you right here and now. Just say the word.”

Alex laughed. “You wouldn’t.”

“Sweetheart, I *would*.” It was true. Lee hadn’t realised it until now, hadn’t even thought about it before because it was still sinking in that this was real. But if Alex wanted to come out? Lee was game.

“You’re bluffing.” Alex didn’t sound entirely certain though, and Lee let his smirk widen.

“Come on, then. Call my bluff.”

For a second, it looked as though Alex would, staring at Lee. Then his features relaxed and he exhaled another laugh, low and sweet. “Bloody hell, I think you actually are serious.”

“Yup.” Lee paused. “Except I might hesitate because of you. Me, I’d be fine—my sisters would cheer me on, and my mum doesn’t know yet but she’d be okay with it, and with Ben as my coach and Oliver as my captain back home, I’d be all set. You, though? Your dad might just disown you.”

A shadow crossed Alex’s face. “I ducked his calls twice today, so, you know. If I wasn’t the heir with no spare, he’d already be on the phone to his lawyer.”

“His loss.” It was easy for Lee to say that, of course—much harder for Alex to feel it.

“Maybe.”

Since Lee didn’t like the sombre expression in Alex’s eyes, he clinked their bottles together. “To doing things our own fucking way.”

“Hear, hear.” A smile slid over Alex’s face. “The final, Lee. Can you fucking *believe* it?”

“Not really, no. Pinch me?”

Alex proceeded to do just that, except Lee caught his wrist and trapped it—which of course meant that Alex set his bottle down and tried again with his newly freed hand. They grappled for a few moments, grinning wildly, Lee spilling non-alcoholic beer over both of them while Alex protested loudly and dramatically. When Jeff started cheering for Alex, it prompted Oliver to do the same for Lee, and then a good number of their teammates and supporting staff were flocking over to witness the excitement, drawn like moths to a flame, placing imaginary bets, shouting tips and encouragement. The whole thing ended when Lee managed to trap Alex against him, Alex’s back to his front, Lee’s arms tight around him and Alex laughing too hard to put up much of a fight.

“And this,” Lee said smugly, “is where state-school education beats posh-boy school.” He very nearly punctuated the statement with a kiss to Alex’s cheek before he remembered their audience—amused faces and applause for Lee, with only Jeff and Oliver clued into how this was more than just two teammates grappling for a good laugh.

It was kind of amazing what they could get away with in public.

“I didn’t pack my wrestling blazer,” Alex countered, dusting off his shoulders once Lee released him. He was smiling, eyes bright and happy even in the dim glow of lights strung along the olive trees.

Now that the action was over, the cluster of people around them drifted away. Lee waited until it was just him and Alex before he tilted his head, watching Alex from underneath his lashes. “So. My place or your place?”

“Whichever’s closer.”

“Excellent choice.” Lee nudged their elbows together.
“Leave soon?”

“How soon is now?” Alex asked.

“I can grab my stuff and come over in ten minutes or so?”

At Alex’s surprised glance, Lee realised it would be the first time he’d be the one sneaking into Alex’s room. Before he could add anything to that effect, Alex sent him a beaming smile. “It’s a date.”

It wasn’t, really—just the two of them hiding away in their own little corner of the world while Lee swallowed back words that Alex might not be ready to hear just yet. And still it was brilliant, better than anything Lee had ever felt before. Granted, his experience was limited, but ... fuck, this was *it*.

The big one.

But Alex had pulled away once already, if briefly, and Lee couldn’t even blame him. Between the mess that Alex’s dad had created and the fact that this was Alex’s first practical foray into gay territory, all against the backdrop of the World Cup... It was a lot to take in. So if Lee had to tread carefully? He would do just that.

“Sounds good,” he said lightly, returning Alex’s smile.

Lee could be patient.



THE NEXT EVENING, Brazil annihilated Spain with a 4-0 victory.

Silence reigned after Kieran muted the match to now soundless images of celebrating Brazilians that were juxtaposed with those of Spaniards lying on the ground, covering their faces. The Spanish coach shook hands with the

Brazilian one before he went to console his players even though he looked close to tears himself.

Holy *crap*. Alex shifted on the sofa that he shared with Lee and Jeff, leaning into Lee just enough for their shoulders to press together. The room, filled with a variety of seating options for the team and supporting staff, was lit only by the screen up front, colours changing along with the images—a yellow glow cast over the scene as the Brazilian captain stopped for a post-match interview, red and green as the camera zoomed in on Spanish players on the grass.

“All right.” Kieran got up and switched on the overhead light, sudden brightness flooding the room. “Let’s start with the positives. One, I don’t think anyone here is at risk of underestimating our next opponent. Two, we won’t have the entire host country rooting against us in the final.”

Lewis snapped his fingers. “You mean no one’s gonna spit in our breakfast eggs.”

“No mosquitoes deliberately released in our rooms,” Jeff added.

“No caffeine pills mixed into our dinners.”

“No itching powder dusted over our clothes.”

“No marching band practising under our windows in the middle of the night.”

“I think we get the idea,” Kieran said mildly although he was smiling, clearly attuned to how the atmosphere in the room had relaxed just slightly. “Get some sleep, lads. We’ll pick this back up tomorrow.”

Subdued chatter rose as everyone filed out of the room, Alex quiet while Lee, Jeff, and Oliver discussed the third goal—a beautiful free kick that had curved over the wall and

slammed into the upper right corner, no chance at all for the goalkeeper. “The only way,” Oliver said, “he could have got his hands on that is an educated guess.”

Jeff whistled. “You know it was a brutal loss when it’s four goals against you, and it’s not because the goalie had a bad day.”

They split in the hallway in front of their rooms, Alex following Lee into theirs. As soon as the door closed, Lee turned and walked Alex back against the wall, bodies aligning. “Been waiting for this all day,” Lee murmured. They’d had ten minutes to themselves earlier this afternoon—not enough. Never enough. Alex carded a hand through Lee’s short hair and slotted their mouths together. It was all familiar by now, Lee’s smell and the tiny sounds he made, small gasps as they caught their breath between one kiss and the next, a half-sigh as their hips aligned.

Alex pulled back just enough to say, “I really want you to fuck me.”

Lee snorted. “Such a romantic.”

“Make love to me, then.” Once they were out, the words resonated oddly in Alex’s stomach. Love. Was this love? It felt like the songs and movies—huge and bright, a golden ache behind his ribs.

Lee didn’t seem to notice anything out of the ordinary, his voice easy and a little amused. “You know I’m versatile, right?”

Lee’s tone reminded Alex of something—weeks ago, the briefly registered confusion at how Lee seemed to be quietly laughing at something Alex simply didn’t get. “Wait, hang on.” Alex narrowed his eyes at Lee. “The first time Kieran

paired us for a drill and I asked you which position you wanted to play first... You said you can go either way. Were you making a *joke*?”

“Probably. Can’t say I remember.” Lee grinned. “Since you didn’t actually know I’m gay, it turned out to be a joke for one.”

“It’s funny in hindsight.” Alex slid a hand down the back of Lee’s shorts. “And I’m not picky—let’s do both.”

“We will.” Lee inserted a meaningful pause. “Once we’ve got more than a half hour between team practice and lunch or whatever. It’ll be your first time, and it’s been a while for me, too.” The left side of his mouth lifted into a lopsided smile, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “This isn’t porn, so spit and a prayer aren’t gonna be enough prep.”

Alex heaved a sigh. “*Must* you bring reality into this?”

“Somebody has to.”

“Somebody is a spoilsport.”

“Spoilsport?” Lee’s low laugh was barely more than a puff of warm air against Alex’s lips. “Really—is that the best you’ve got?”

Oh, it was *on*.

“Not at all.” Alex clasped Lee’s shoulders with both hands and gave a quick shove that toppled them both onto the bed. Grinning, he straddled Lee’s hips, making sure to bear down with his whole weight. Lee was laughing under him, halfheartedly trying to buck him off without putting any real effort into it.

“Found your wrestling blazer?” he asked, and Alex leaned down to rub their noses together.

“It was never missing—I just let you win before.”

The momentary sharpening of Lee’s focus was all the warning Alex got before his world tilted sideways, Lee’s legs tight around his upper body as Lee flipped them over. Alex landed on his back with a gasp of laughter, Lee’s triumphant face above him. “Still gonna claim that you let me win, babe?”

“Truth hurts, *babe*,” Alex volleyed back and timed it to coincide with his hand slipping into Lee’s shorts, cupping Lee’s cock through his briefs. Lee sucked in a harsh breath, lashes fluttering.

“So that’s what they teach at Harrow School?”

“Just about. I mean, what did you expect?” Alex gave Lee’s erection a friendly squeeze. “It’s an all-boys school, and we shared rooms. Puberty is a thing.”

“I think—” Lee broke off for a stifled groan when Alex tucked two fingers down the front of Lee’s briefs, scratching his nails over the coarse hair at the base of Lee’s cock.

“You think?” Alex prompted with a smile.

“I think you just gave me enough wank material for a year.”

“Whatever you’re thinking?” Alex gave a regretful shake of his head. “The truth is nowhere near as wild. Most I’ve ever done are side-by-side wanks with minimal peeking.”

“Nope.” Lee squeezed his eyes shut as he shifted into Alex’s touch, one of his hands flat against Alex’s chest. “Don’t ruin the fantasy—please, and thank you.”

It was light and silly, laughter woven into the words, and yet somehow, a sudden swell of affection nearly robbed Alex’s

breath. He brought his free hand up to cup the back of Lee's neck and draw him into a kiss, everything that wasn't *this* and *now* and *Lee* fading to the furthest corners of Alex's mind.

Freefalling.



TWO DAYS TO GO. At this point, Alex could have recited the stats on his key opposing players in his sleep.

Heat maps. Pass completion rates. Tackles and interceptions.

It had rained halfway through their afternoon training session, the air heavy with humidity and the grass slippery during a hard-fought practice match. Kieran was shouting instructions from the sidelines, and Alex stopped for a second to get the full picture: Jeff over on the right wing, Lee in the centre, both of them closely marked; Finley and Toby passing the ball back and forth as they neared the halfway line; Alfie about to steal the ball from Toby.

Alex darted forward to put himself in Toby's line of sight—and suddenly his ankle gave out on him, studs caught awkwardly in the soggy turf. Hot pain flashed up his leg.

Fuck.

He rolled with the fall just like he'd learned, chin tucked against his chest as he tried to land on his side. Oh, but it fucking *hurt*, and he blinked up at the grey sky for a moment until the world shifted back into focus.

“Alex?” Lee, yeah, that was Lee—Alex's name uttered in harsh concern.

“Shit, mate.” Finley. “You okay?”

“Fucking hell.” Jeff, crouched beside Alex. “Talk to us.”

Talk, right. Alex could do that.

He sat up, reaching for his foot, and hissed when his hand made contact. “Twisted my ankle a bit,” he gritted out. “Can’t be too bad.”

“I think I’ll be the judge of that,” Lachlan said as he appeared by Alex’s side. Alex was about to protest that he didn’t need a doctor because he was *fine*, but Kieran’s grim expression made him swallow the words back down.

Alex was fine, though. He had to be.

Still he couldn’t suppress the sharp intake of breath when Lachlan probed his ankle. Fucking ... *fuck*. He ducked his head so he wouldn’t have to see Lachlan’s frown, Lee’s wide eyes, and the tension that radiated from Jeff and Oliver. Centuries slid by while Lachlan made an excruciatingly thorough assessment, Alex biting his lip against any further expressions of pain. If Lachlan didn’t know it hurt, he wouldn’t make a big deal out of it. Right?

Finally, Lachlan sat back on his heels. “I’m so sorry, Alex. I’m afraid it’s a sprain.”

“A sprain,” Alex repeated flatly. It didn’t quite compute.

“We’ll get you iced and wrapped immediately.” Lachlan nodded at someone off to the side, Alex’s focus too narrow to see or care who it was because ... a sprain. A sprain?

“No, listen.” Alex leaned forward. “You must be wrong. It’s just a twist, okay? I’m sure it’s just a little twist. Some ice and a bit of rest today, and I’ll be fine tomorrow.”

“Alex,” Oliver began, and Alex turned to look up at him, blindsided by the concern he saw not just in Oliver’s eyes but in Kieran’s too, and in Jeff’s. Lee was pale under his tan, bottom lip tucked between his teeth, and shit, why was Alex

still sitting on the ground? He needed to get the fuck up and show everyone he was fine, well and truly *fine*.

The moment he made a move to rise to his feet, Lee's hand landed on his shoulder. "Please don't," was all Lee said, worry so thick in his tone that Alex sank right back to the ground.

"Please?" he asked Lachlan without much hope.

As expected, Lachlan shook his head, regret etched into his weathered features. "I really am sorry, Alex. But you know as well as I do what this means."

"Fuck." Alex dropped his chin against his chest, blinking against the leaden pressure of tears. He wasn't going to cry. He was not going to fucking cry.

Disbelief lingered as he watched ice and a bandage appear from somewhere. Then Lee and Jeff helped him to his feet, refusing to let him put any weight on his injured ankle as they carried more than walked him back to his hotel room in abject silence. God, things had to be bad for Jeff to lose his words.

"Maybe..." Alex sat down on the edge of his bed. "Maybe Lachlan is wrong and it'll feel a lot better tomorrow?"

Jeff's reply took the form of a snort, at odds with the sad twist to his mouth.

"Look, babe." Lee sat down next to Alex and, after a brief glance at Jeff, placed a hand on Alex's knee. "This sucks, and if you wanna punch a pillow, I'll hold it for you. But you're not playing. Not on a sprained ankle."

Fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

Alex blinked back the renewed threat of tears. "What—are you a doctor now?"

“No, but I know how to listen to one.” Lee gave Alex’s knee a gentle squeeze. “You’re not playing, sweetheart. Even if you were miraculously able to walk on this tomorrow, no one here would let you take a risk like that.”

Jeff nodded sharply. “What he said.”

“But it’s the *final*,” Alex countered, desperate. “I can’t just sit it out.”

“You can,” Jeff said firmly, “and you will.” He didn’t give Alex a chance to respond, just gathered him in a hug, unceremoniously seating himself on Alex’s thighs. Lee shifted a little to make room, slinging an arm around Alex’s waist, and that was how they stayed for a few seconds before Jeff slid off.

Alex stared at the ice pack tucked against his ankle. “But it’s the final,” he repeated, much quieter now.

“And we’ll fucking *miss* you on the pitch,” Lee said, equally quiet. “Sometimes, life just kicks you in the nuts.”

“On the bright side,” Jeff put in, “you can now drink all the beer you want.”

“I’d rather be playing.”

“Sorry, that item’s been taken off the menu.”

“Let’s elevate your foot,” Lee said before Alex could complain once more about the unfairness of it all. Yes, he realised he was being repetitive but ... fuck. It was the final, and he’d be watching from the sidelines.

It sucked. It just really, really *sucked*.

Silently, he complied when Lee prompted him to shuffle up the bed and lean against the headboard, Jeff grabbing a couple of pillows to raise Alex’s foot. Alex stared at the

unsightly lump that was his ankle distorted by an ice pack, and told himself he wouldn't cry. Because what was the point? It didn't change a thing.

“Fuck, if there ever was a time for a few shots of vodka...” Jeff shook his head, arms hanging by his side.

“Is there anything we can get you?” Lee asked Alex.

“A time machine?” Alex tried for a smile that he managed to maintain for a whole second. It was a start, though—because if he really couldn't play, well, what was it Lewis had said? *Right now, my job is to cheer the team on.*

“Ah, I'm afraid we're fresh out,” Jeff said. “But how about this lovely remote control for the telly? It's a state of the art technology that gives you immediate access to mind-numbing daytime TV as well as cat videos on YouTube and niche-interest documentaries on Netflix.”

“Yeah, all right.” Alex bit the inside of his cheek before he forced another smile. “You guys should get back. Two more days, right?”

Jeff handed over the remote control. “You sure?”

“Of course I'm sure,” Alex told him with all the confidence he could muster. After all, dreams died every day, and there'd be another World Cup four years from now, so...

Ugh.

Maybe he'd have a little cry once Lee and Jeff left, yeah, but until then he'd do his bloody best to smile. Fake it till you make it, right?

“I could stay,” Lee offered. “Help you take the ice pack off in a bit, keep up a running commentary on whatever's on the telly?”

Alex reached for his hand and tangled their fingers, just briefly, before he released his hold. “No, seriously—go. It’ll be Alfie instead of me now, so the more time you can all train together, the better.”

“Okay.” Yet Lee sounded deeply unhappy about it, lips tilted into a downwards curve. He glanced from Alex to Jeff and back before he leaned in to kiss the corner of Alex’s mouth—except Alex turned his head just in time for it to become a proper kiss, comfort and warm familiarity as he let himself indulge for a few beats before he gently pushed Lee back.

“Go.”

“You’re really, absolutely sure?” Lee asked while Jeff was smiling a little, and Alex realised that this was the first time Jeff had seen the theory of Alex’s bisexuality executed in practice. Clearly, Jeff was fine with it. Alex hadn’t harboured any actual doubts, but with how shitty this afternoon had gone, it was a relief that at least it hadn’t skittered downhill even further.

“I’m really, absolutely sure,” Alex confirmed.

Lee hesitated for another moment before he sighed and slid off the bed to join Jeff. With a promise to be back as soon as practice was done, they left, Lee pausing for a long, sad look before he closed the door.

And then it was just Alex, alone with the sickening weight in his stomach. He buried his head in his hands and tried to take deep, even breaths while his childhood dream came apart at the seams.

Just a minute, that was all. One minute to mourn his loss, and then he’d raise his head and smile and be fine because he

had to be—for the team and for Jeff, for Lee.

Just one minute.

Posted by @AlexanderBeaufort (July 12, 4:37 p.m.):
Sprained my ankle, at least ten days of rest.
I am GUTTED.

~
POSTED BY @AlexanderBeaufort (July 12, 4:39 p.m.):

But I will also be the loudest of all voices cheering on the team - even if it's from the sidelines.

~
IT WAS Lee's turn at the daily press conference later that afternoon. Sat between Oliver and Kieran, he strove for an upbeat air as he dealt with the questions directed right at him, starting with one about his chances of taking home the Golden Boot, followed by another about the loss of one third of the Lee-Alex-Jeff triangle that had proven so effective in previous matches.

“Alex is a brilliant player, and it's just terrible timing, honestly. He's pretty bummed about it.” Could Lee say ‘bummed’ in a press conference? Too late. “But as a team, we have to be stronger than just one player. There are great guys waiting to step up.”

“It will require a slight adjustment of our strategy,” Kieran jumped in. “We may need to adapt the team in a small number of other positions to account for the change.”

Lee sat back as Kieran expanded on the qualities of several players, most notably Alfie who’d almost certainly fill Alex’s position. Alfie was good, really very good, or he wouldn’t be here—but his first instinct was to defend. That worked well for his home club, but England’s success so far had been founded on a strong offence. With only two days left until they were up against Brazil, it wasn’t enough to overhaul a system they’d spent weeks perfecting.

That time machine would come in really bloody handy right now. Where was Doctor Who when you needed them?

Lee got back just before dinner and helped Alex hobble down to the restaurant terrace. It hurt to see Alex quietly devastated, tension in his shoulders and a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “Show must go on, right?” he told everyone who came up to him. “With or without me on the pitch—we’ll bloody *win* that trophy.”

If it had been Lee with a sprained ankle, he’d have tried to hide his frustration too, tuck it out of sight so it wouldn’t affect the rest of the team. And yet he hated watching Alex put himself through it.

“It’s not so bad,” Alex claimed when Lee brought it up, back in their room. At Lee’s silent, pointed look, Alex shifted on the bed before he hung his head and shoved a hand through his hair. His voice dropped. “Okay, it is bad. Like, I kind of want to cry, and I kind of want to hit something, and I’m so fucking *mad* at myself for twisting my ankle, and—”

Lee caught him in a hug, half on top of him, careful not to jostle his ankle. “I’m so fucking sorry, babe.”

Alex stayed silent but for a hiccuping breath, face against Lee's neck. They sat like that for a few moments, the enormous fan above their heads whirring softly, daylight fading by the second.

“Do you want to scream into a pillow?” Lee asked eventually. “Or we go down to the gym, lock the door, and you take it out on a punching bag.”

Alex's laugh was watery. “Tempting.”

“Or I could stomp the hell out of the patch of grass that tripped you up.”

“Not sure it has the intellectual capacity to grasp the error of its ways.”

Lee was about to reply when Alex's phone started buzzing. When Lee tried to move away so Alex could more easily dig it out of his pocket, Alex slung an arm around Lee's back to keep him close. He managed to retrieve the phone with his other hand, then stilled, staring at the display.

“What is it?” Lee asked after a beat.

Alex drew a breath. “My dad.”

Ignore him.

Lee didn't say it but God, he wanted to—as far as he could tell, nothing good had ever come of Alex speaking to his dad, at least not in those weeks they'd spent together. The last thing Alex needed right now was a kick while he was down. It was Alex's call, though. Literally.

Waiting, Lee rubbed his thumb over the sensitive skin on the inside of Alex's elbow, back and forth, back and forth.

“Maybe,” Alex said in a tiny voice, “he heard about my ankle? And he's actually calling to see how I'm doing?”

“Yeah.” Lee wanted to grab the bloody phone and throw it out the window. “I guess it’s possible.”

“Yeah.” Alex didn’t sound like he really believed it himself, but he moved to accept the call—only he put it on speaker, holding Lee’s gaze. “Hello, dad.”

“Good evening, son.” Crisp pronunciation and an authoritative air—nothing in Charles Beaufort’s voice suggested that the man was facing allegations that could land him in prison. “I heard about your accident.”

“You did?” Alex cleared his throat. “The timing is terrible, of course.” It was fascinating, the way his words gained definition in what seemed like an automatic reaction triggered by hearing his father.

“Of course.” Beaufort didn’t sound particularly concerned. “Now, since there is no reason for you to remain in Spain, I assume you will be flying home tomorrow?”

Alex’s brows drew together. “I’m part of the team, dad. Even if I’m not playing, I’m still part of the team.”

“You’re needed at home.”

“I’m staying.”

“You have obligations, Alexander. It’s time you start taking them seriously.”

Alex exhaled and closed his eyes for a moment. “You didn’t even bother to ask how I am.”

“A sprained ankle is hardly a matter of grave concern.” Beaufort’s tone was brisk bordering on impatient, and he didn’t get it. He just honestly didn’t get it, did he—his world view distorted by either aristocratic grandiosity passed down

through generations or a narcissistic personality. The latter would, in fact, explain a lot.

“It only costs me my dream,” Alex said flatly, a painful twist to his mouth that made Lee want to end the call right there and then. “But no big deal, I guess.”

“No need for melodramatics,” his father chided, and really, that was the final fucking *straw*.

“Are you actively trying to be a prick,” Lee jumped in, “or does it just come naturally? Fucking hell, man. You’ve got a brilliant son, and you should be so fucking *proud* of him. But seems like you have no idea because you can’t get out of your own bloody way.”

It was quiet for a second.

“Who even are you?” Beaufort drawled, his tone implying that he was not impressed.

“I’m—”

“My boyfriend,” Alex cut into Lee’s response.

Holy shit.

Lee widened his eyes at Alex, and it wasn’t even that this was the first time either of them had said the word out loud—no, this was Alex, having just come out to his dad on an impulse. Fuck, what if he ended up regretting it?

“You are not gay.” Beaufort’s voice had dropped to a dangerously low level, and Lee sat frozen, waiting for Alex’s next move.

“No, I’m not.” Alex raised his chin, meeting Lee’s eyes as he continued. “As a matter of fact, I’m bisexual.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Alexander.” Beaufort sounded long-suffering, and really, the bloody *nerve* of him. “I thought playing football was your form of teenage rebellion. Aren’t you getting a little old to play these games?”

“Teenage rebellion?” Alex repeated slowly. He’d been tense before, but now he was positively thrumming with suppressed energy. Lee placed a hand on his thigh in the hope that the contact would be grounding somehow. “Football wasn’t a teenage rebellion, dad. It’s the only thing I’ve ever wanted for myself—the only time I didn’t just go along with whatever you asked of me. I’ve spent my whole *life* trying to please you when I should know by now that it’s simply not possible.”

Beaufort sighed. “Again with the melodramatics.”

Alex took a shaky breath, his eyes unfocused even as one of his hands settled low on Lee’s back. “Tell me, dad...” Alex’s voice was barely louder than a whisper. “Can you remember a single moment when you were proud of me?”

“What kind of question is that?”

“Can you, dad?”

“I fail to see how this is relevant to the conversation we are presently having.”

“*Can you?*”

Maybe the gravity of the moment finally registered because for the first time, Beaufort sounded cautious when he replied. “Of course I’m proud of you, son.”

Huh. Lee had mistaken him for a better liar.

“Just give me a single moment,” Alex insisted, and Lee wanted to interfere because it seemed like Alex was

determined to run straight towards the place where it hurt the most—but that was his right. It wasn't Lee's job to protect him, only to be there for what seemed like an inevitable fallout.

My boyfriend.

“There are plenty of moments,” Beaufort stalled.

“Just one will suffice.”

Brief silence, then Beaufort mumbled something about Alex doing well in his A levels. It drew a humourless chuckle from Alex.

“And yet you didn't make it to my graduation ceremony.”

“I'm a busy man,” Beaufort said.

“Well, so am I.” With that, Alex unceremoniously ended the call, then stared at his phone, shadows in his eyes.

Lee tipped his chin up with a finger. “Hey. Talk to me?”

Alex inhaled and held the air in his lungs for a few seconds before he released it in a whoosh. “Fuck.”

“That's one way to summarise it, yeah.”

“Did I just—I just hung up on my dad. After coming out to him.” Alex's eyes widened. “Shit, Lee, I didn't *think*. I should have asked you first, but I was just so...” A sweeping gesture. “He doesn't know it's you, though. He'd have no way of knowing. So, you're safe.”

“That is honestly the last thing on my mind right now.” Lee tipped their foreheads together and tried not to read the incoming darkness as some kind of omen. “God, Alex. Are you okay?”

“I'm...” Alex hesitated. “I am, actually.”

“Really?” Lee didn’t bother toning down the scepticism in his voice, surprised when Alex pressed a smiling kiss against his cheek.

“Yes, really,” Alex said. “I mean, yeah, that sucked—but it’s really nothing new, you know? It’s just the confirmation, in a way, of something I’ve known for a while. Kind of a relief to get it out in the open.”

Lee drew back enough to get a proper look at him, twisting sideways to flick on the lamp on the bedside table. While Alex’s smile was small, nowhere near enough to even hint at his dimples, his eyes were clear and calm in the warm glow of lamplight.

“You really are fine?” Lee asked, just to be sure.

“Well, no. Still got a sprained ankle, so...”

“But other than that?”

“Yes.” Alex exhaled, nodding slowly. “I really am fine.”

Lee believed him. But... “What if he goes to the press?”

“Like I said, he won’t have any way of knowing it was you.”

“It’s not me I’m worried about.”

“Oh.” It seemed to confuse Alex—the idea that someone was more concerned for him than they were for themselves. Lee’s heart broke just a little. “I don’t think he’ll go to the press,” Alex said after a few seconds of consideration. “Like, the way he talks about Prince Joshua? It’s all, ‘well, if you must entertain certain preferences, you should at the very least refrain from flaunting them in public.’”

“Flaunting?” Lee repeated, mildly incredulous.

“Yeah.” Alex shrugged. “In his eyes, my sexuality would be an insult to the family legacy.”

Christ. Lee’s mum wouldn’t win any lifetime parenting awards, but at least she was *trying* to be there for her children, now that a mix of medication and cognitive behavioural therapy kept her on a steady track. Alex’s dad, on the other hand, couldn’t be bothered to see further than his own fucking nose. And as for Alex’s mum, did she even exist outside of her husband’s aura? The one time she’d called Alex, it had been to demand that he come home immediately to help sort out his dad’s mess.

“Your dad’s a fucking idiot,” Lee told Alex when what he really wanted to say was, *I love you*. Alex was a people pleaser though, always at risk of bowing to others’ wishes and expectations—and so Lee would hold his tongue until he could be certain the feeling was mutual.

“He is, yeah.” Alex pressed his lips together, brief sadness washing across his face. “Unfortunately, he’s the only dad I have. Starting to wonder how much that really means, though.”

Since there was nothing Lee could say in response, he settled for wrapping both arms around Alex, holding on until Alex exhaled and relaxed into it, his face buried against the crook of Lee’s neck.

It was enough. At least for now, it was.



UNLIKE HIS FATHER, Alex wasn’t in the habit of delivering speeches. While he’d picked up the necessary skills at Harrow School, he didn’t delight in forcing his thoughts on the room,

all eyes on him—but when he got up halfway through dinner, it wasn't about that.

Tomorrow, they'd be facing Brazil. And all Alex could offer were words.

“All right, everyone.” He propped his bum on the edge of the table to take weight off his bad ankle. “Let me just start by saying that I am fucking *heartbroken* that I won't be on that pitch with you tomorrow. However.” He paused. “This isn't about me. It isn't about any of us individually—it's about the team, isn't it? Because that's what got us here.”

“I reckon it was the non-alcoholic beer,” Jeff called out, and Alex grinned.

“Right, so it was the team along with the buzz-less taste of free beer.” His gaze swept over the hotel restaurant's terrace—Oliver and Lewis, Kieran, Finley, Jeff, and Lee, and behind them the gentle slopes of the golf course, already illuminated against the darkening sky. “But here's my point: we made it this far because we're more than the sum of those eleven players who are actually on the pitch at any given moment. They're just the tip of an iceberg that is largely underwater, and sure, the tip is what the public will see—but there'd be no tip without a strong base to carry it. That's our assistant coaches and our performance analysts, our equipment managers and medical staff, our benchwarmers...”

“Hear, hear!” Lewis said.

Alex pointed at him. “*Exactly*. It's people like you who've been carrying this team. It's in how you've been cheering everyone on even though you know that Oliver is unlikely to give up his spot.”

“Damn right.” That was Oliver, of course, and right after he’d said it, he got up to high-five Lewis. “It’s an honour to have you breathing down my neck, mate.”

“It’s an honour to keep you on your toes, mate.”

Scattered applause and whistles. God, Alex was so very grateful to be part of this team.

“And it’s an honour,” he said loudly, “to be here with you all. I am so fucking *proud* of you, of us. No matter what happens tomorrow—this one’s going to stay. I’ll be old and grey, and all the other pensioners at the retirement home will be bored to tears by me telling the same old story over and over again.”

“We’ll tell it together!” Jeff put in, and Alex smiled at him, then at Lee right beside Jeff, watching Alex with a soft kind of brightness.

I don’t want this to end.

Alex pulled his attention away and his thoughts back on track. “What I’m trying to say is...” He waved a hand to include everyone on the terrace. “There’ll be eleven players on the pitch tomorrow, but the rest of us will be right there with you in spirit, plus the royal family and thousands more in the stands, and *millions* back in the UK. So let’s bring it home, guys!”

He wasn’t sure what sort of reaction he had expected. It wasn’t everyone swarming him for a group hug though, teammates and entourage all coming together, people clapping each other on shoulders and backs. Kieran was right in the middle of it all, and when he reached Alex, he paused for a moment to assess him with a serious look before a beaming

smile crinkled his eyes. “You’ve done some proper growing up, lad. Way to bring a spark of joy to an old man like me.”

Alex was pretty sure that his father would beg to differ given there’d been no attempt to get back in touch after that disastrous call. This wasn’t about Alex’s dad, though.

“You’re not old,” Alex told Kieran.

Kieran laughed. “Nah, I’m not. Just wanted to hear someone else say it.”

“How manipulative.”

“I prefer resourceful, myself.”

God, Alex would miss him. Since that would have been a weird thing to tell his coach, he kept his mouth shut and returned Kieran’s one-armed hug. As soon as Kieran moved on, Lee bumped into Alex’s side, mindful of Alex’s dodgy ankle as he slung an arm around his shoulders.

“Nice speech.” He sounded like he meant it.

“You don’t think it was too cheesy?” Something in Alex shivered when he caught Lee’s gaze—the softness in Lee’s eyes felt too intimate for where they were, surrounded by people.

“It was just cheesy enough,” Lee told him. “Five out of five, would hire for another pep talk.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely.”

Alex relaxed a little into Lee’s proximity. “Oh, good. I wanted—I didn’t want to hog the spotlight, but it felt like I needed to say *something*, you know? Didn’t exactly plan it, so I’m glad it didn’t turn out wholly ridiculous.”

“*You* jumped in without a meticulously detailed plan?” Lee asked with a teasing quirk to his mouth, and Alex nudged him.

“Shut up. Plenty of things I didn’t exactly plan, these last few weeks.” He lowered his voice. “No regrets.”

Lee’s response consisted of drawing Alex just the tiniest bit nearer, nothing that would register for anyone who didn’t watch closely. Warm, rich silence connected them while people around were laughing and shouting, Jeff and Lewis arguing about football anthems while Kieran recounted a drunken night out when he’d played his last World Cup, hotel staff waiting for things to quiet down so they could do their bloody jobs.

Alex took it all in and realised that this, *this* was who he was. This was his life, what he stood for independently of his father. If they stripped away his title along with his right to inherit a legacy that seemed more burden than honour, at this point?

Let them. He honestly couldn’t care less.

It wasn't the first match Alex watched from the bench, but he'd never worn street clothes before—officially ineligible to play. Surrounded by substitutes in their team kit, he rose for the national anthems.

The stadium exploded into cheers once the music died, and had it been this loud at the other matches, too? Alex couldn't remember, must have been too focused on himself to notice. He stuffed his shaking hands into the pockets of his shorts, attention drawn to Lee only to find that Lee was looking at him already.

Alex smiled and thought, *I'm in love with you.*

No surprise coloured the realisation, just an easy sense of acceptance, maybe even inevitability. Yeah, he was in love with Lee—had been for a little while, most likely. It didn't scare him. Should it, though? Veering so far off the path he'd mistaken for his own? It still didn't.

Lee's answering smile was tiny, meant only for Alex to see. Then Lee turned away to take his position, Alfie in Alex's usual spot, Oliver shaking hands before he swapped pennants with the Brazilian captain, and then... And then the match began.

The final. The fucking *final*.

And Alex was forced to watch from the bench.

God, it was torture—his knee bouncing with nervous energy, keeping quiet even as he wanted to shout, “There, *there!*” He didn’t fancy himself superior to those on the pitch, but removed from the action, he had an easier time spotting gaps and opportunities, and it was painful to see them slide away.

“Sucks, doesn’t it?” Lewis said dryly, sat next to him.

Alex dug his fingers into his thighs. “Yeah.”

“See, that’s why backup plans like me should be allowed to drink a proper pint now and then.”

“Really starting to see—” Alex cut himself off and leaned forward, dimly aware of the stadium quieting behind and around him, tension weaving into the summer night air. No, *no*.

Oliver snatched the shot out of the air, and Alex could breathe again.

Noise welled up again from the stands as Oliver threw the ball to Alfie, who passed it on to Jeff. *Follow him, for fuck’s sake!* Alfie was slow to do so, trotting after Jeff where Alex would have opted for a sprint, but it didn’t matter—Jeff found Lee, already far into the Brazilian half. Lee curved around one defender and dropped a second, only the goalkeeper left to beat. A feint to the right, the keeper swayed, and then Lee used his slightly weaker left foot to slide it in.

Goal!

“Yes!” Alex jumped up along with the others on the bench and only just remembered to keep most of his weight on his

good leg. He threw up his arms, cheering and laughing, hugging whoever was closest, and God, he wanted to be right there on that pitch and feel Lee up against him, even if it was only for a second.

Lee stopped by the coaching zone on his way back to the English half, face radiant as he collected an embrace from Kieran. When Lee's gaze found Alex's, they looked at each other for a beat that twisted in Alex's stomach, hot and heavy, very nearly disorienting. But it still didn't scare him.

It was at the seventeen-minute mark that the match kicked off again—England one, Brazil zero. Early into the game, still early, but oh, it was one step closer to making the dream come true.

Moments before the first half ended, Brazil scored to make it even. A wave of yellow and green rolled through the stands while Alex watched, helpless, as Oliver fished the ball out of the net with an expression so grim Alex could tell even from here. Oliver had stopped the first shot, but it had bounced off Finley and right in front of a Brazilian player who'd wasted no time booting it. And it had gone in.

Fuck.

Alex spent the break patting shoulders and doling out praise, sitting with Jeff for a few minutes before he moved to Lee's side, pressing their shoulders together. "Beautiful goal," he told him. "Score another, and I'll owe you a favour."

Lee slid Alex a meaningful look. "A favour?"

Alex lowered his voice. "Whatever you want."

"And how" —Lee glanced around the room to confirm that no one paid them any mind— "is this conducive to my concentration?"

Alex sent him a sweet smile. “And how is it my fault if your mind chooses to take a dip into the gutter?”

“The innocent act might work a lot better on someone who doesn’t see you parade naked around our room most mornings.” The tension around Lee’s mouth had relaxed though, and that had been Alex’s aim all along.

“I’m an angel,” Alex said, dignified.

“Lucifer was an angel, too.”

It startled a genuine laugh out of Alex. “Such a charmer.”

People started trickling out of the locker room, and Alex fell in line, right by Lee’s side. Back on the pitch, they separated after a quick glance that lingered bright in Alex’s mind even as nerves knotted up his belly.

England came out strong, pressed high for a second goal, only to be overrun by a lighting-quick counterattack some ten minutes later—two against one, the ball grazing Oliver’s fingertips. And then it was in.

Alex covered his face with his hands, inhaled through the gaps between his fingers, and released the air in a whoosh. There was time yet, plenty of time to tie the game, even score a couple of goals and bring it home. He raised his head and found Kieran already shouting instructions, toeing the very edge of his coaching zone.

Come on, lads!

Jeff kicked them off again, and then England tried. And tried. And *tried*. Yet each attempt was stopped by the Brazilian goalkeeper or by a defender, by a foot or an elbow, the game turning nastier by the minute. Another interruption, another free kick that didn’t find its way through the Brazilian wall, and Alex sat on the edge of his seat, fists pressed against his

mouth. Please, *please*. Just one goal to carry them into extra time. Just *one*.

Eighteen minutes left. Eleven. Nine. Five, then three. Injury time—another six minutes that trickled away like water, gone too fast.

The final whistle.

It was over.

Alex sagged in his seat and tipped his head against the backrest, reality filtering through in stuttering bits and pieces—the hush that had fallen over the English bench while Brazilian players shouted their triumph, tumbling over each other in celebratory piles. The way Jeff dropped where he stood, falling backwards into the grass as though shot. Lee, simply standing there, staring at his feet.

Slowly, Alex got up and made his way onto the pitch, disregarding the mild discomfort as he put weight on his bad ankle. He was dimly aware that a camera operator trailed him because apparently, drama made for good TV and, injured or not, Alex had a notorious dad and a face that played well on camera. Some other day, he might have cared while now, it hardly registered.

Jeff was closer and on the way to Lee, which saved Alex from an impossible choice. He draped himself over Jeff in an octopus tackle and gave it a few seconds, providing a visual shield from the cameras so Jeff could wipe at his eyes. Then Alex pulled Jeff to his feet and, collecting Oliver along the way, over to where Lee had come unfrozen. Lee was still blinking a little owlshly, a deep frown etched into his forehead, but he nodded at a couple of passing Brazilian players who patted him on the back in consolation before they returned to their celebrations.

In spite of his ankle, Alex got there half a step before Jeff and Oliver, wrapped both arms around Lee and whispered, “I’m so sorry, babe. I’m so sorry.”

Lee swallowed and turned his head, his cheek damp against Alex’s. Jeff bumped into Alex’s back and joined their huddle, Oliver hesitating for a moment before Lee reached out blindly to pull him in with them. “Fuck,” Oliver muttered—*Oliver*, who Alex couldn’t remember ever swearing before.

“Yeah,” Jeff agreed in an undertone.

“We just—” Lee cleared his throat. “We got so fucking *close*.”

“If I just,” Oliver started, and Alex stepped on his foot.

“Shut up. Not your fault.” He raised his voice just a little. “Not anyone’s fault. Someone had to lose, and today, it was our turn.”

He could feel Lee’s rough intake of air, could feel Jeff trembling with aftershocks of adrenaline, Oliver visibly gathering himself before he straightened. “Showtime,” was all he said.

Alex held onto Lee for a second after Jeff and Oliver let go, then he stepped back as well. They spread out, Alex sluggish as he moved around the pitch to comfort teammates and congratulate opponents because it was all part of the job, wasn’t it? Winning, losing—sometimes you were up, and sometimes you were down.

And sometimes it just sucked.



THE OFFICIAL CEREMONY equipped them with silver medals, and wasn’t it funny how second place would have sounded

like an amazing accomplishment to Alex just a few short weeks ago? Now, it was a disappointment. He shook hands and nodded at one FIFA official after another, then some political figures, the Queen, and Prince Joshua, who sent Alex a sad smile. “Sorry about your ankle.”

“Sorry about my dad,” Alex replied, and Joshua chuckled.

“We don’t get to pick our parents, do we?”

Alex was moved along before he could answer, but the words stayed with him—off-handed advice from a near-stranger that didn’t offer anything new, but hearing it out loud made a difference somehow. By the time they were finally ushered onto the bus, tiredness was dragging at Alex. He sunk into a seat with Jeff beside him, their silver medals already packed away, Jeff uncharacteristically quiet.

The rows around them filled with players and staff, darkness thick outside the windows as the bus left the underground garage, replaced by city lights once they turned onto Madrid’s roads. The hotel was just a short drive away, its park-like property already familiar from the other two times they’d stayed here after a game, the white Belle Époque facade bright against the night sky when the bus pulled up. It was where Alex had come out to Jeff, wasn’t it? It seemed like a century ago.

Alex was about to get up when Kieran took to the aisle and clapped his hands. “Lads. A minute of your attention, please?”

What little talking there had been tapered off.

“No one feels like a party right now, and that’s fine.” Kieran inserted a deliberate pause, and when he continued, his voice was serious. “But I want you to know that I’m so

fucking *proud* of you all. We didn't lose the World Cup, okay? We won second place. Germans have this term that translates to 'vice world champions'—that's us, and that's bloody amazing."

Alex glanced around at tired, disappointed faces. Jeff slid lower in his seat with his arms crossed, chin tucked against his chest.

"I know," Kieran said. "It doesn't feel amazing right now. I get it. But I hope that when you wake up tomorrow, you'll start to appreciate it. And" —a wicked smile— "in four years? We'll give them hell."

It drew some scattered applause and a few nods. Kieran seemed unsurprised at the lacklustre reaction, his smile softening.

"All right, guys. See your families, get some sleep, and I'll see you all in the morning."

There was no one waiting for Alex. Of course there wasn't —there never had been. He'd be alone tonight, Lee tied up with his mum and sisters, and Jeff with his parents, brothers, and Isabella. Alex knew that Jeff would happily invite Alex to hang out with them, but Jeff introducing a girl to his family so soon was kind of a big deal, and Alex didn't want to get in the way of that. It was fine.

He parted with Jeff after a hug and caught Lee's eyes for a brief smile as he made his way towards the room where he'd already dropped his stuff earlier, Lee helping him with his suitcase so Alex wouldn't overexert himself. "Best boyfriend ever," Alex had told him with a wink.

"Only boyfriend ever," Lee had countered, and there was that.

“Best romantic partner ever.”

Lee had laughed softly, almost like he didn't believe Alex when it was *true*—Alex's previous relationships hadn't been bad, not at all, but they'd been ... superficial. Fun and mutual attraction, never anything that chipped away at the protective layers he'd wrapped around himself. It might have been his fault entirely, keeping everyone at arm's length in a way he simply hadn't managed with Lee. Hadn't wanted to, maybe.

Before Alex could argue the point, Jeff had barged into the room to speedtalk about some thing or another, the way he got before important matches. Since Alex wasn't about to declare his romantic notions where Jeff could hear and make fun of him, it had put an effective end to whatever he might have told Lee otherwise.

It felt like a missed chance, now that their last night in Spain brought reality crashing in. Yeah, they'd agreed that they didn't want this thing between them to end and Lee had called Alex 'babe' a handful of times, hadn't corrected Alex referring to them as boyfriends either—but they'd made no plans for after. They'd been busy, though.

Silence spun out when Alex closed the door to his suite. He didn't turn on the light, just ditched his duffle bag by the bed and stepped up to the window front, the multi-coloured glow of the city keeping the darkness at bay. Bone-deep tiredness weighed him down, but his mind was still buzzing, snatches of the day replaying behind his lids each time he blinked—Lee's goal and Oliver's face as he'd retrieved the ball after Brazil had taken the lead; Jeff on the ground and Lee just standing there; the weight of the silver medal as it had been placed around Alex's neck. God, he didn't want to be alone tonight.

Suck it up.

Since he wasn't about to sleep anytime soon, Alex sat down in an armchair, propped up his foot, and dug his phone out of his pocket. Might as well do some research, right?

Just ... in case.



A QUIET KNOCK some ten minutes later made Alex look up. It came again, so he got up and crossed over to the door, checking the peephole. *Lee*. He was looking off to the side, discomfort twisting his mouth, and Alex quickly let him in, bodies brushing as Lee moved past Alex into the room. After a quick glance to confirm that the corridor lay empty, Alex closed the door and turned with a smile.

“Hey. I didn't expect to see you tonight.”

“Good surprise?” Lee asked, like he was honestly not sure. Huh.

“Great surprise,” Alex told him, and the line of Lee's mouth relaxed slightly in response. “But I thought your mum and sisters were staying over?”

“They are. Bit of a tight fit, though—four people to a bed, and I didn't want Shelly to sleep on the carpet. She said she didn't mind, but, you know.” Lee lifted one shoulder in a shrug, and Alex nodded, not quite sure what he was supposed to do with his hands. Put them in his pockets? Put them on Lee? The air felt heavy with something Alex couldn't quite pinpoint.

“What did you tell your mum?” he asked, partly to fill the space between them. “About where you'll sleep tonight, I mean.”

“The truth.”

“You mean...” Alex trailed off because—the truth. Did that mean to Lee what it meant to Alex? “How did she take it?”

A faint smile quirked one corner of Lee’s mouth. “Gave me a hug and told me to be with my boy.” The words, said lightly, were at odds with the weight of Lee’s focus on Alex’s face.

Lee’s boy.

Was this a declaration of some sort? It felt like one—and he’d told his *mum* about them. Granted, Alex had told his dad, but that had been less about Lee and more about blatant defiance.

Come to think of it... Well. How often was it Lee who’d jumped first—came clean about his sexuality and his mum’s condition, admitted he’d had a crush on Alex back when they’d first met, told Alex he didn’t want this thing to end? Lee, Lee, and Lee again. And as for Alex...

He’d kissed Lee first. But how big of a risk had it really been when he’d known that Lee found him attractive? Oh, it had backfired initially, sure—and even though they hadn’t discussed it down to that level of detail, Alex didn’t think it was just because Lee had been upset about Alex taking the long way towards honesty. No, it was more than that, wasn’t it?

It was... Okay, so Lee had mistaken it for Alex using him as a gay experiment. But even after, once they’d cleared that bit up, Lee had been reluctant to act on their mutual attraction, had held on to the notion that for Alex, it was a convenient way to explore a side interest, just a bit of fun with an expiry

date. And then, Christ, how quickly Lee had leapt to conclude that Alex wanted an easy out—that morning when Alex had slipped out to talk to Jeff. All Alex had needed were a few seconds to sort out his head, and by the time he'd returned to the room, Lee had been ready to let him go.

“Alex?” Lee asked, and right, yes, they were having a conversation.

Alex blinked. “Sorry. Just thinking.”

“Thinking.” Lee repeated it slowly, a careful undertone to his voice.

“Yeah.”

“About?”

Okay. *Okay*. Alex could do this—be the one to take the plunge, for once. He sat down on the edge of the bed and patted the space next to him, smiling. “Here, let me show you.”

Lee was watching Alex closely as he approached and sat down, their knees bumping together. Alex unlocked his phone and passed it over. “Here.”

It took a moment—Lee's eyes narrowing at the display, a frown washing over his face. Then he glanced up sharply, eyes clearing. “Is that...?”

“Some thirty-five minutes.” Alex nodded, still smiling, and fuck, it felt *good* to put himself out there. “Give or take—traffic, for one, and I didn't have your exact address. But it's not like Knutsford is that big, right?”

“No, it's... Uh. It's not. And I live near Tatton Park.” Lee sounded like words were proving just a little evasive, staring at Alex with what seemed like a mix of hope and uncertainty.

“Tatton Park, right.” Alex took the phone to enter the revised location, and the predicted travel time dropped from thirty-five to thirty-four minutes. He glanced at Lee from underneath his lashes. “So that’s driving from the Liverpool training centre to your place, okay? It’s a bit longer from where you train to my house—some fifty minutes. So it might make sense for us to spend more time at your place than at mine, but I figure we can work out a schedule, see what makes sense. Or maybe, you know, we could look for something that’s kind of halfway, like around Birchwood or so. Not immediately, I mean. But ... eventually.”

Okay, so he hadn’t quite planned to add the part about Birchwood. But fuck it—no regrets. No regrets either about tripping all over his own words, about getting tangled up in discourse markers because he was *done* trying to satisfy his father’s voice in his head.

“Alex...” Lee drew a visible breath, his chest rising with it. He didn’t continue, though, and after a few seconds of silence, Alex ducked his head, a lot less confident all of a sudden.

“I mean—if you want?”

Lee exhaled, the corners of his eyes crinkling with a slow smile that pulled at his mouth. Without averting his gaze from Alex, he locked the phone and placed it next to them on the bed. Still he hadn’t said a word.

“Say *something*, please?”

“So, just before I left my hotel room” —Lee’s smile was fully pronounced now— “Shelly dared me.”

Alex frowned. “Dared you to do what?”

“To tell you I’m in love with you.”

Alex's heart skipped a beat, then jumped up into his throat where it resumed its regularly scheduled service. "And are you?"

There was something intentional about the way Lee held Alex's gaze, like he still needed to gather his courage to reply. Even though his smile didn't fade, his voice was low. "Quite a bit, yeah."

Brightness burst behind Alex's ribs. "So you're on board with keeping a toothbrush at my place?"

"Obviously."

"And a holiday?" Alex gestured at his foot. "Once this ankle's ready for action again because God, I want a *holiday*."

"I'm on board with a holiday too." Lee quirked a brow. "But aren't you forgetting something?"

Alex shuffled around so he could tumble them both onto the bed, legs hanging off the side. He half-draped himself over Lee, grinning down at him. "Like what?"

"You know what."

"Oh, *that*." Alex dipped his head to drop a light kiss to the corner of Lee's mouth. "Right. I love you, too."

It wasn't his first time telling someone that—but before, it had been intended to fill the silence or stall an argument, to satisfy expectations. This, now, was the first time he meant it, *felt* it, and that made the words resonate in ways they'd never had before.

Lee's whole face changed, lit up. "You do?"

"Absolutely," Alex told him and realised that yet again, Lee had been first to take the leap into the deep end of the

pool. But at least Alex had already been holding onto him, just a step behind. He'd work on his timing.

“So you're on board with keeping a toothbrush at my place?” Lee's eyes were bright as he mirrored Alex's earlier question.

Since actions spoke louder than words, Alex decided that kissing the grin off Lee's lips was as good an answer as any. If the way Lee turned into him was any indication, he agreed.

They'd figure out the rest.

One week in the French countryside—one week before pre-season obligations would pull them in different directions. It wasn't much, but it was *something*.

By the time Alex and Lee arrived at the villa they'd rented, it was late in the afternoon. Jeff, Isabella, Oliver, and Sanna would join them tomorrow, but for now, the whole place was theirs. It was the first time since Spain that they had any measure of uninterrupted time together—after the public reception back in the UK, Lee had been travelling with his sisters while Alex had caught up with friends from school. He'd missed Lee an embarrassing amount, told him just that once they'd familiarised themselves with their bed by means of slow kisses and lazy handjobs.

"I'd make fun of you, but basic human decency doesn't allow for ridiculing anything that's said in the afterglow." The softness in Lee's eyes was at odds with his words, and Alex propped himself up on an elbow to smile down at him.

"You saying you didn't miss me?"

"No, I did." Lee smiled back. "Just wanted to look cool."

“I’m sorry—did you or did you not try to pick me up with a line from porn some five years ago?”

Lee laughed, warm and quiet in the sunlit room, the hum of cicadas and a soft rustle of leaves drifting in through the open window. “I’m much smoother now.”

“I beg to differ,” Alex said, rubbing his nose over the 5 o’clock shadow that dusted Lee’s cheek.

Dinner was at a simple restaurant in the closest village, on a terrace overlooking striking ochre cliffs that towered above a pine forest. They were approached a number of times and posed for pictures, just two lads hanging out because they’d decided that there was no need for them to go public just yet.

They’d talked to Ben Jimmer about it just that afternoon, in fact, and if Alex had harboured any doubt about how much his life had changed in a matter of... Jesus, had it really been only three months? Wow.

Anyway, if he’d harboured any doubt about it, getting relationship advice from *the* Ben Jimmer would have put an effective stop to it.

“Give it time,” was what Ben had said, the poor video quality pixelating his face. “It’s much easier to first build something away from the limelight.”

“Like you did with Henry,” Lee had thrown in, and Ben had laughed like it was some private joke.

“I’ll tell you a story sometime. Anyway, point is—would I love for someone to follow in my footsteps? Hell yeah.” He’d waved a hand. “But it should be at your pace because you don’t owe anything to anyone. Oh, and Alex?”

“Yes?” Alex had asked, aiming for casual because Ben was someone he’d admired from afar, yeah, but he had too much

dignity to slip in a puddle of hero worship.

“Whenever you do decide you’re ready—if Liverpool gives you trouble, Manchester United would be *delighted* to make you an offer.” Said with an impish grin that had made it impossible not to grin back. Hopefully it wouldn’t come to that, but there’d been something reassuring about having a backup plan even if offered half in jest.

But foregoing an announcement for now didn’t mean they couldn’t spend public time together. It was nice, in fact—trading what Lee had called a spaceship for something much more tangible, like picking up milk and eggs at the village shop earlier, and now having dinner at this down-to-earth place with a menu that featured salads, burgers, and fries along with the slightly burnt quiche Lorraine they’d both ordered. It felt...

It felt *real*.

“Thanks so much.” The bloke who’d just asked them for a picture handed his phone to his wife. Their accents suggested they were Brits on a summer trip, a toddler and a sleeping baby in tow.

“No worries.” With a smile, Alex moved to lean against the railing, same as for a handful of pictures they’d taken right after they’d arrived. “Is this good?”

“Great.” The man seemed almost shy as he stepped in between Alex and Lee. “Really nice of you to take the time, and sorry again for interrupting dinner. Big fan.”

“It’s really not a problem,” Lee assured him. In fact, Alex thought, this might be a good thing—people spotting them together with a certain regularity, laying the groundwork for whenever they chose to go public.

“Can I ask, though...” It was the wife who spoke even as she raised the phone to snap a few pictures. “With what’s going on back home—Camelgate, I mean...”

She trailed off delicately, but then, it wasn’t like she needed to finish. The Qatar bribery allegations, dubbed Camelgate to parallel the EU’s Qatargate, had turned into the biggest political scandal the UK had seen in a good few years, with four MPs and two Lords caught in its net. A couple of days ago, messages between the group had leaked that betrayed, one, blissful ignorance about cybersecurity, and two, blatant contempt for the Crown and mainstream politics.

At this point, Alex had worked up a certain immunity to strangers addressing his dad’s mess. It no longer made him sick to the stomach, much easier now to breathe through his knee-jerk sense of disorientation at having to come up with some kind of measured response. He could tell that Lee was watching him, ready to deflect, but it was fine—*Alex* was fine.

“My father’s political beliefs differ vastly from mine,” he said firmly. “For one, I don’t think that being born into one family instead of another should entitle me to special treatment, so I’m no longer using my father’s secondary title.”

Right after Alex had removed the reference from his social media accounts, Charles Beaufort had called to remind him that it took more than that to legally disclaim a title—thanks, like Alex didn’t know. He’d cross that bridge when he got there.

It had been the first time they’d talked since Alex’s ankle injury. Alex had asked twice whether the accusations were true, and when he’d received no response other than reproachful comments about his loyalty, he’d hung up.

“So you’re...” The woman frowned, clearly searching for the right word. “Renouncing your father?”

Ha. Last time Alex had checked, this wasn’t Romeo and Juliet.

“Jules,” the bloke muttered, sounding wildly uncomfortable, while Lee remained quiet but watchful. “You can’t just *ask* him that.”

She tipped her chin up. “And why the hell not, Darren?”

“Because it’s impolite.”

“My tax money pays *his* dad for each sitting of the House of Lords. I should think I’m allowed to ask questions.”

If possible, Darren’s discomfort seemed to grow. “He’s not his father.”

“It’s all right.” Alex fished a smile out of his repertoire. “I get it. Really, I do. But I’m not his spokesperson.”

“So you do renounce him.” Jules sounded satisfied, absently equipping the toddler with a pacifier even as her attention stayed focused on Alex.

“That seems like a rather strong concept.” Alex told himself to keep his back straight and his head high, to not shuffle his feet. “I wish him well and hope that things will sort themselves out. That’s about as much as I can say, at this point.”

“Fair enough,” she decided, and her husband jumped on the chance to direct the conversation towards a more innocuous topic, most notably their World Cup performance and Lee’s top goal-scorer award. By the time the couple walked off with their two kids, the tightness in Alex’s chest had faded to almost nothing.

“Are you all right?” Lee asked when they sat back down, and Alex sent him a smile across the table.

“I am. It sucks, thinking my father is guilty of treason” — the word still lodged oddly in Alex’s throat— “but at this point, I just don’t see how he’s innocent.”

Lee pushed his empty plate away, briefly glancing around. “So you do think he’s guilty?”

It was the first time Lee had asked quite so directly. Whenever the topic had come up during their phone calls, he’d been much more concerned about Alex, about how Alex couldn’t be blamed for his father’s actions, and screw anyone who didn’t get that.

“Yes. Even if I don’t think he took any actual money.” Alex let his gaze drift to the ochre cliffs, an intense red in the glow of the evening sun. “Which is probably how he justified it to himself—it’s not bribery if I’m not taking their money. What I think he did take, though, was promises. Like, that in return for him creating a favourable atmosphere at the Lords, Qatar would activate their four puppet MPs when it came time to debate certain issues at the Commons.”

“Right, I remember.” Lee scoffed. “Gender-neutral loos and fox-hunting, that sort of thing.”

“Or reforming the House of Lords, eventually.” Alex sighed. “He’d have found ways to justify it. The greater good and all, you know?”

A wry quirk danced around the corners of Lee’s mouth. “Us humans, we’re excellent at finding stories to justify our actions.”

“And my dad is a master.” It had come out rather more tired than Alex had intended, and something in Lee’s

expression told him that if they'd been alone, Lee would have pulled him close.

“Time to get the bill?” Lee asked quietly, and Alex nodded.

“Yeah, let's head back.” To the villa, where it was just the two of them—no other patrons sneaking glances even as they pretended to be focused on their own food and conversations. Usually, Alex didn't mind the attention, but ... he kind of wanted Lee to himself for a bit.

For the sake of appearances, they split the bill before making their way through the village, quiet now that the day tourists had left. Their rental car was parked on a small road parallel to the main street, squeezed in between other Renaults and Peugeots, a worrying number of them missing side mirrors. Alex handed over the key so Lee could drive them back, their fingers brushing. With the closest streetlamp a few steps away, it felt safe.

What had Ben called it—a chance to build something away from the limelight? Yeah, that.

Reality would come crashing in soon enough in the form of pre-season tours with their respective clubs, in the form of commuting and keeping two sets of clothes in different places, of away games and promo obligations. This, now, was their time.

They'd make the most of it.



THIS EARLY IN THE MORNING, they were nearly alone on the countryside roads, hardly any cars around. Heat already crept up on the rolling hills of the Luberon, their ambling run taking

them past vineyards and olive groves, lavender fields already past the peak of their bloom.

With Alex under strict doctor's orders to only gradually increase the strain on his ankle, they took it easy and walked the last five minutes back to the villa, tucked away behind oaks and pine trees. They stripped their clothes off by the private pool and used the outdoor shower, naked bodies pressing together under the thin trickle of water. God, Lee wouldn't mind dedicating the rest of forever to mapping the muscles of Alex's back. Then again, he had plans—sunlight and a private pool at their disposal, hours until the others would get here.

Yes.

Alex seemed to agree because he paused to simply smile at Lee, wide enough to make his dimples pop, the corners of his eyes crinkling. "So. Come here often?"

It probably wasn't healthy, the way fondness crashed over Lee. "Can't say I do, but for you, I might make it a habit."

"Amazing," Alex said, taking one step towards the pool and tugging Lee along.

Lee agreed, although he wasn't sure he and Alex were referring to the same thing. "What's amazing?"

"How that was a terrible line, but somehow, I still want you to fuck me."

Lee exhaled around the flutter of heat in his stomach. *Fuck* yes. "And they say romance is dead," he drawled.

Laughing, eyes bright, Alex tumbled them into the water. They came back up together, clinging to each other, wetness clumping Alex's lashes. Lee pushed Alex up against the side

of the pool to kiss him, water sloshing around them, minutes slipping away.

“How’s your ankle?” Lee remembered to ask eventually—this had been Alex’s first proper run, and if they still needed to be careful, Lee wanted to know now rather than once he had, say, his dick in Alex’s arse. He planned to make this a pleasant experience, after all.

“My ankle?” Mischief edged Alex’s grin as he reached for Lee’s hand and guided it towards his cock. “It’s fine. Here, why don’t you check?”

“That’s not your ankle,” Lee said even as he ran light fingers along Alex’s erection.

“Oh, really?” Alex tilted his head, widening his eyes. “I guess I was never that good at biology.”

Lee clasped Alex’s cock in a loose grasp, rubbed his thumb over the head, and waited for Alex’s gaze to refocus. “Thought you aced your A levels?”

“Ah, but it’s been a while.”

“All I hear are excuses.”

“All I hear—”

Whatever else Alex might have said got cut short when Lee moved back in to kiss him, sliding his free hand around to cup Alex’s arse. Alex dug his fingers into Lee’s back to pull him closer, sunshine flitting through Lee’s vision, the taste of chlorine on his lips. He could have easily lost himself in the moment, in Alex. *But.*

He broke their kiss and pulled back for a smile. “How about moving this onto dry land?”

“I hope that means you’re planning to have your wicked way with me,” Alex said.

“That’s exactly what it means.”

“Excellent.” With that, Alex twisted free to hoist himself out of the pool, Lee’s attention momentarily caught by the swell of Alex’s arse. God bless the invention of squats.

Alex glanced over his shoulder, gloriously naked, wetness glistening on his skin. “Coming?”

“Not quite yet.”

Warmth shone in Alex’s laugh. “Well, then get a move on.”

Since Alex had a point, Lee did. They moved over to the garden sofa, Lee unfolding a blanket he’d left out before their run, along with lube and condoms.

“You’ve made preparations?” Alex sounded amused and so, *so* fond as he stretched out on the blanket, draping one of his legs over the backrest before he beckoned Lee closer. As if Lee could resist.

He settled between Alex’s thighs. “What can I say? I’m a planner.”

Sunlight and summer tangled in Alex’s eyes, his smile sweet. “Tell me something I don’t know.”

“I love you,” Lee said.

“But I know that.”

Lee poked Alex’s stomach, and Alex laughed.

“Fine, I love you too. Now...” Alex’s thighs fell open, one leg still draped over the back of the couch. “If you think you could *finally* fuck me, that would be splendid. Think I’ve been patiently waiting for about a decade, so...”

“We could also—“

“Do it the other way around, I know.” Alex raised himself up on his elbows to kiss the frown off Lee’s mouth, then fell back onto the blanket. “We will. But this is—I want this, okay? It’s not... God, this is going to sound ridiculous, but it’s something I’ve never done before. And I love the idea of sharing that with you. Because I love you, and I trust you, and I want this.”

Jesus.

Lee shook his head, his stupid heart giving a stupid twist in his chest. “Way to make me feel special.”

“You are,” Alex said simply, and that—he just—it wasn’t *fair*, the way he made Lee feel.

“The reason I waited?” Lee leaned down to rub their noses together, and yeah, that was silly and sentimental. He didn’t care. “I mean, honestly, we could have made it happen at *some* point while sharing a room for weeks, crazy busy or not. But I wanted it to be... I didn’t want to be your default.”

Confusion creased Alex’s brow. “My default?”

“I didn’t want to be your first just because you didn’t exactly have a range of options.”

“You’re a romantic.” Alex sounded delighted by his realisation. It startled a laugh out of Lee, the heaviness of the moment melting away.

“I don’t think anyone has ever accused me of that.”

“It was a compliment.”

“Oh.” Lee considered it, then nodded, his nose dragging over Alex’s cheek. “Good.”

“If that’s quite sorted, maybe we could move things along?” Alex raised his hips to emphasise the point and yes, right.

Right.

Christ, Lee was nervous. Maybe, a little. It wasn’t like Alex would rate the experience on a scale of one to five afterwards, with a detailed assessment of how Lee compared to his previous lovers. *Still.*

Alex grinned at him. “Are you waiting for an engraved invitation?”

“Shut up,” Lee told him sweetly, and then proceeded to ensure that Alex did by sliding down the sofa so he could get his mouth on Alex’s cock. As it turned out, Alex could be convinced, although he switched to mumbled obscenities along with Lee’s name. In the quiet morning air, even Alex’s hushed voice seemed loud, a marked difference from being locked away in their hotel room in Spain.

Lee took his time preparing Alex, liberally coating his fingers with lube, until Alex moved into each touch, gentle gasps and sighs. “Today, if you will?” he complained eventually, and just for that, Lee dragged it out for another couple of minutes before he removed his fingers and shifted up to kiss Alex, heart twisting a little at how Alex turned into it immediately, clutching Lee’s shoulders like that was his anchor.

“Roll over?” Lee asked once they drew apart, and Alex grinned, cheeks flushed.

“*Finally.*”

Lee grinned back. “Oh, excuse me for wanting to make this a pleasant experience for you.”

“Apology accepted.” Alex turned around and reached for a pillow, glancing at Lee over his shoulder. “I got tested, by the way. All negative.”

The view was ... ah. *Distracting*, to say the least. Which was why it took Lee a second to decipher Alex’s meaning. Once he did, he draped himself over Alex’s back and wrapped an arm around him, kissed the nape of his neck.

“Same. Been a while since I did a test, but you’re also the only one I’ve been with since then, so...”

Alex twisted around to meet Lee’s eyes, the gentle smile that played around his mouth at odds with his brisk tone. “Good. Keep it that way.”

“I intend to,” Lee said softly.

“Good,” Alex repeated, much quieter now.

It felt big, the golden morning light spinning out around them and Alex in Lee’s arms, time on their side for once. When Lee lined himself up, he did so with one hand on Alex’s back, slow and steady, forcing himself to focus on Alex rather than how fucking *amazing* it felt, tight heat, easy drag, *God*.

Eyes half-lidded, Alex reached back with one hand to grab Lee’s arse and urge him forward. “Not my first time,” he mumbled, voice deliciously rough around the edges, and hang on, *hang on*.

“But you just said—”

“Marco bought me a dildo.” Alex followed it up with a bright glance that said he knew exactly what he’d just done because Jesus, images. While Alex had mentioned he’d told Jeff’s brother, he’d left out the bit about Marco apparently turning into a sex toy peddler.

Lee stilled his hips, just breathing, breathing. “And you’re telling me *now*?”

“Thought it might drive home the point that I’m not a fragile flower.”

Oh, fine. If that was how Alex wanted it? Lee could take a hint. He shifted back a little before he pushed back in, one smooth glide that made Alex exhale in a rush, head dropping forward.

“Good?” Lee asked, flush against Alex’s arse, hands on Alex’s waist, and oh God, yes, it was—it was *so* good. But this wasn’t about Lee. Or, no, it was—but not primarily, not in this very moment.

Alex adjusted his position just slightly, spreading his thighs further. “Do that again.”

Well, who was Lee to deny him?

“This?” Lee asked and followed it up with a roll of his hips. Alex moved with him, moved into it—deeper, and Lee didn’t quite succeed in stifling a groan.

“This,” Alex confirmed, sounding just a hint smug.

Okay then. All *right*.

This time, Lee didn’t hold back—held onto Alex’s waist for a thrust, and then another, Alex meeting him each time. This, *yes*, and they found a rhythm, sweet curl of heat in Lee’s stomach but not yet, not like this. He wanted to *see* Alex.

Alex made an offended little noise when Lee pulled out, all protest immediately forgotten when Lee drew him up into a kiss. They pressed together, Alex’s fingers digging into Lee’s biceps, open mouths and harsh breaths, cicadas humming in the nearby grass.

“On your back,” Lee said, only to move right back in for another kiss.

It took some manoeuvring so Alex had space to roll over, a pillow under him that would need a wash after. Who the fuck cared, though? Not Lee, that was for sure. All he cared about was the way he fit against Alex just perfectly, how Alex’s body welcomed him right back in. The brightness in Alex’s eyes and Alex biting his lip as he started working his own cock. It wasn’t all new, maybe just a natural extension of what had come before—but it felt different out here in the light, no need to be quiet because there was no one else around.

Just them.

By now, Lee was familiar with the way Alex’s breathing sped up as he got close, hips rising off the pillow to move into every one of Lee’s thrusts. Lee picked up the pace. And oh, it was glorious—watching Alex’s eyes lose focus, his breath coming out in short little gasps, lids sliding shut as he came apart. Lee drank in the sight and didn’t realise how close he was himself until his own orgasm hit just seconds after, washing over him, pulling him under.

He held onto Alex as his pulse steadied, draped half over Alex’s chest, awkwardly twisted yet unwilling to move just yet even though he might be crushing Alex.

“I love you.” He shaped the words against Alex’s throat.

“Thought nothing counts that’s said in the afterglow?” A smile rang bright in Alex’s voice as he slung one arm around Lee’s back, shifting slightly under him into a more comfortable position.

Lee let his lips catch on slightly sweaty skin. “This counts.”

“You can’t just change the rules as you see fit.”

“Who says I can’t?” Lee raised his head to grin down at Alex, taking in the flushed skin and messy hair. God, he was pretty. Resulting awkwardness aside, Lee had been one hundred per cent right all those years ago.

“I do.” Alex grinned back. “But I love you anyway.”

“Oh, good.” Lee aimed for a lofty tone and probably missed by a country mile. He didn’t care—didn’t care about anything except the light in Alex’s eyes and the brightness of the day, how they had another six just like this before reality would scoop them up and spit them out in different locations for their pre-season training. “I mean, given you’re kind of stuck with me and all.”

“You say that like it’s a threat.”

“I guess that depends on your perspective.” Move, right. Lee should, except Alex still had an arm wrapped around him and also, Lee didn’t want to.

Alex made a considering noise. “From where I stand—”

“You’re looking pretty horizontal to me.”

“—it sounds like a promise. Worse blokes to be stuck with, after all.”

“Wow, pretty *and* funny. I must have hit the jackpot.”

Laughing softly, Alex reached up to cup Lee’s cheek. “Do lines like that ever work for you?”

“As a matter of fact...” Lee paused to send Alex a meaningful look. “They do indeed.” And then, because he had no doubt that Alex was about to come up with another smartarse comment, he preempted all further words by covering Alex’s mouth with his own.

Reality could wait.

EPILOGUE

Posted by *@AlexanderBeaufort* (April 28, 1:07 p.m.):
@LeeJTaylor: Looking forward to clashing on the pitch instead of in our backyard, for a change. Just promise not to trip over your own two feet and call it a penalty. ;)

(8,721 reactions)

TOP COMMENT:

@LeeJTaylor (April 28, 1:08 p.m.): As long as you promise to keep your limbs to yourself.

@AlexanderBeaufort (April 28, 1:10 p.m.): No can do, babe - you're just that irresistible.

@LeeJTaylor (April 28, 1:11 p.m.): And this is what I have to put up with on a daily basis. (And I love it!)



WAS it a year ago that they had last faced each other like this, on Alex's home turf? Just about, yes, and at first glance, very little had changed—Alex part of Liverpool's lineup, Lee the

sole striker put forward by Manchester United, his dark green away shirt hugging his chest.

And yet.

They'd made their move a couple of hours before the match kicked off, reactions pouring in by the thousands in a matter of minutes. Putting their phones away almost immediately had been part of the deal they'd struck with both their coaches. "You'll have months and years to obsess over what strangers on the internet say about you," Ben had told them. "Why start now?"

Fair point.

Their teams had been informed in advance so no one would feel blindsided, and by and large, it had gone well. Sure, one or two teammates seemed rather more aware now of where they were in the locker room in relation to Alex, but whatever. They'd come around or they wouldn't—it was no skin off Alex's back. No one had leaked the news ahead of time, and that was something, wasn't it?

And now ... here they were. Waiting for the whistle that kicked off the game, the stands filled to the last seat, the noise of the crowd a chaotic mix of cheers, jeers, and everything in between. Impossible to say whether it meant something more than just typical match day excitement, so Alex didn't try to read between the lines.

Instead, his gaze found Lee, a wide stretch of grass between them—too far to make out the details. But Alex knew him, knew how he carried himself and could read Lee's determination in the proud tilt of his head and his straight-backed posture. Game fucking *on*.

There—the whistle. Alex started forward as the crowd faded to the back of his mind.

It was a tough game from the onset. Liverpool had begun the season on a bad run, and it was only after a subsequent change of coaches that they'd really hit their stride. The new coach, a friend of Kieran's, had moved Alex into an attacking rather than a defensive role, with Jeff on his right and Selim on his left, one striker ahead of them. This, today, was their chance to reclaim a spot in the top three, while Manchester United was battling Manchester City's star-studded Abu Dhabi troupe for the top of the table.

Well, Alex would be damned if he gave Lee so much as an inch. Just like they'd done a year ago, they clashed repeatedly—tough but fair, jostling and weaving, throwing their bodies into each challenge. This time, though, the frustration was absent. It was still personal, yeah, just in a different way. When one fell, the other helped him up with a quick smile before they were off again. Also, no penalties were called, which was a big improvement as far as Alex was concerned.

Liverpool won. 2-1, Manchester United's goal manned by a backup keeper who was good but young, not quite yet up to the level of the injured Oliver.

“Couldn't let me win, now could you?” Lee greeted Alex when they found each other on the pitch, moments after the final whistle with maybe seconds left to spare before reporters would swarm them.

“Oh, please.” Alex wrapped his arms around him, grinning. “You'd hate it if I'd gone easy on you. Nice goal, by the way.”

“You too,” Lee told him.

“Celebrate tonight?”

Lee tilted his head. “But I lost.”

“I beg to differ,” Alex said, and the way Lee’s eyes crinkled at the corners suggested that he agreed.

And then the cameras were there.

Cameras and microphones and questions, reporters shouting at them as security formed a protective ring. Ben jogged over and pushed his way through, liberally using his elbows, and then Jeff was there too, Oliver throwing himself into the fray just moments after. Somewhere in the stands, Lee’s mum and sisters were cheering them on, Ben’s husband with them along with Kieran, Marco, and a handful of Alex’s friends who’d proven themselves. They weren’t alone in this.

Funny how you didn’t truly know your friends until you needed them.

“Ready, guys?” Ben asked, planted in front of them like a human shield, one hand on each of their shoulders, his grip firm and steady. Jeff was right next to Alex, an arm slung around Alex’s waist, and a glance showed that Oliver flanked Lee on the other side.

Alex inhaled deeply and turned his attention back to Lee, found Lee already looking at him. Yes, they were ready—had talked about it for weeks, weighed the pros and cons, late night chats and morning debates over coffee until they’d done it so many times that their conversations had turned into a well-rehearsed set-piece. It was Alex who’d put an end to it. Sprawled in the grass of Lee’s private backyard after a mini match against each other, blue sky and the first truly warm afternoon of the year, he realised that he’d started thinking of Lee’s house as theirs.

“I want to kiss you in public,” he’d told Lee, as simple as that.

“You’re sure, then?” Lee had asked as though this whole time, he’d really just been waiting for Alex to make up his mind.

“I am,” Alex had said, and he still was.

He tightened his hold on Lee, and in response, Lee squeezed Alex’s hip—arms around each other, united against the barrage of reporters. The noise of the crowd was a mere backdrop to the rush of adrenaline in Alex’s ears.

“We’re ready,” he told Ben. “Let’s start with Sky Sports, like we discussed.” Then BBC Sport, ESPN, The Guardian, and BT Sport—five in total, three minutes each, to ensure a mix of immediate broad coverage, thoughtful analysis, and international reach.

Ben nodded, his smile fading into something much softer. Over the past months, he’d become their mentor, something of a father figure they could actually look up to. “Proud of you, lads,” he told them in an undertone, and before they could reply, he turned away to instruct the closest security guard to allow the Sky Sports crew into the circle.

Alex glanced at Lee, their eyes meeting for just a moment. Without even meaning to, Alex started to smile.

This was them, and screw anyone who didn’t like it. Because Alex and Lee?

They would be just fine.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Hello, dear reader! Here we are, at the end of Alex and Lee's journey. I really hope you loved reading it as much as I loved writing it. And if you're so inclined, a few extra scenes will make their way to you via my newsletter and Facebook readers group!

For those of you intrigued by Ben Jimmer's knowing smile about his history with Henry, you can get the scoop in *Pull Me Under*. And if you're wondering about Prince Joshua and Leo, their bumpy road to happiness unfolds in *Wear It Like a Crown*.

Now, on to something that makes the writing world go 'round—reviews! Not only are they like applause for authors, no—Amazon's algorithm eats them for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

The reason I've seen my readership increase so significantly over the last year is because readers like you took the time to rate, review, and recommend my books. For that, I am incredibly grateful. And I would so love for that to continue with Alex and Lee's story. Even one or two sentences can make a world of difference!

Let's stay in touch!

- Check my website www.zarahdetand.com to join my mailing list (there's a free friends-to-lovers 2-hour read waiting for you!) or
- Join my Facebook readers group for book chatter, extra content, and random memes: www.facebook.com/groups/zarahszarlings or
- Find me on Instagram: <http://www.instagram.com/zarahdetand>

Graaaatitude!

Balancing a full-time job and a growing writing career comes with challenges—most notably for my husband, who's been truly wonderful at giving me the time and space to do my thing. Love you, Nick!

I also need to mention **my fab five** who joined me on this journey—thank you. In no particular order:

A big shoutout to **Lisa**, thorough as a forensic scientist and delightful like a rainbow. With your doctor gig demanding so much of you, it's a marvel you still manage to pour so much heart and brainpower into your feedback. You're a gem!

Jana, the sweet dollop of whipped cream on the sundae of life. Your positive vibes and helpful input brighten the page and my days.

A heartfelt nod to **Rebecca**, who bravely navigated through parts of the book that touched personal chords. Your trust means the world to me, and I'm honoured you found it well-handled.

Barbara, my personal ray of sunshine! Your support and generosity consistently lift my spirits—you're basically my human happy pill.

And finally, **John**. You took on technology and won—twice! Thanks for giving this book its final polish, even after the tech gods seemed against us. Your attention to detail is the stuff of legends.

Gratitude doesn't even begin to cover it. Thanks to each and every one of you for being an essential part of this journey.

—*Zarah*

P.S. I should mention that this is a self-published work of writing without any financial resources behind it. While a lot of care went into catching mistakes, some may have slipped through the cracks. If you spot any, I'd love it if you let me know via my website.

ALSO BY ZARAH DETAND

This Shifting Ground: A law student and part-time waiter befriends a new-to-town customer seeking casual connections. This slow-burn MM romance novella combines fast-paced dialogue with a simmering attraction that blurs the lines of friendship until they cease to exist. **Free on my website!**

Wear It Like a Crown: In this MM royalty romance, an ex-noble is hired to handle a blackmailer threatening to expose the sexuality of Prince Joshua, second-in-line to the throne. This is my most popular book and perfect if you want to lose yourself in a long read.

Pull Me Under: After accidentally outing himself, a soccer player enters a fake relationship with an openly gay music student. As they navigate public appearances and the media spotlight, their friendship deepens and romantic feelings emerge, leading to a heartwarming and cheerful tale of love in the limelight.

You're My Beat: In this slow-burn friends-to-lovers tale, a dancer and a rockstar rekindle an old connection during a world tour. Realistically messy feelings meet lighthearted banter for a hard-won happily ever after.

Change My Ticket: A Hollywood heartthrob seeks help from lab researcher to prepare for a movie role as a molecular biologist. Expect a sweet, slow-burning and mostly lighthearted read with just a dash of angst.

...and several more!