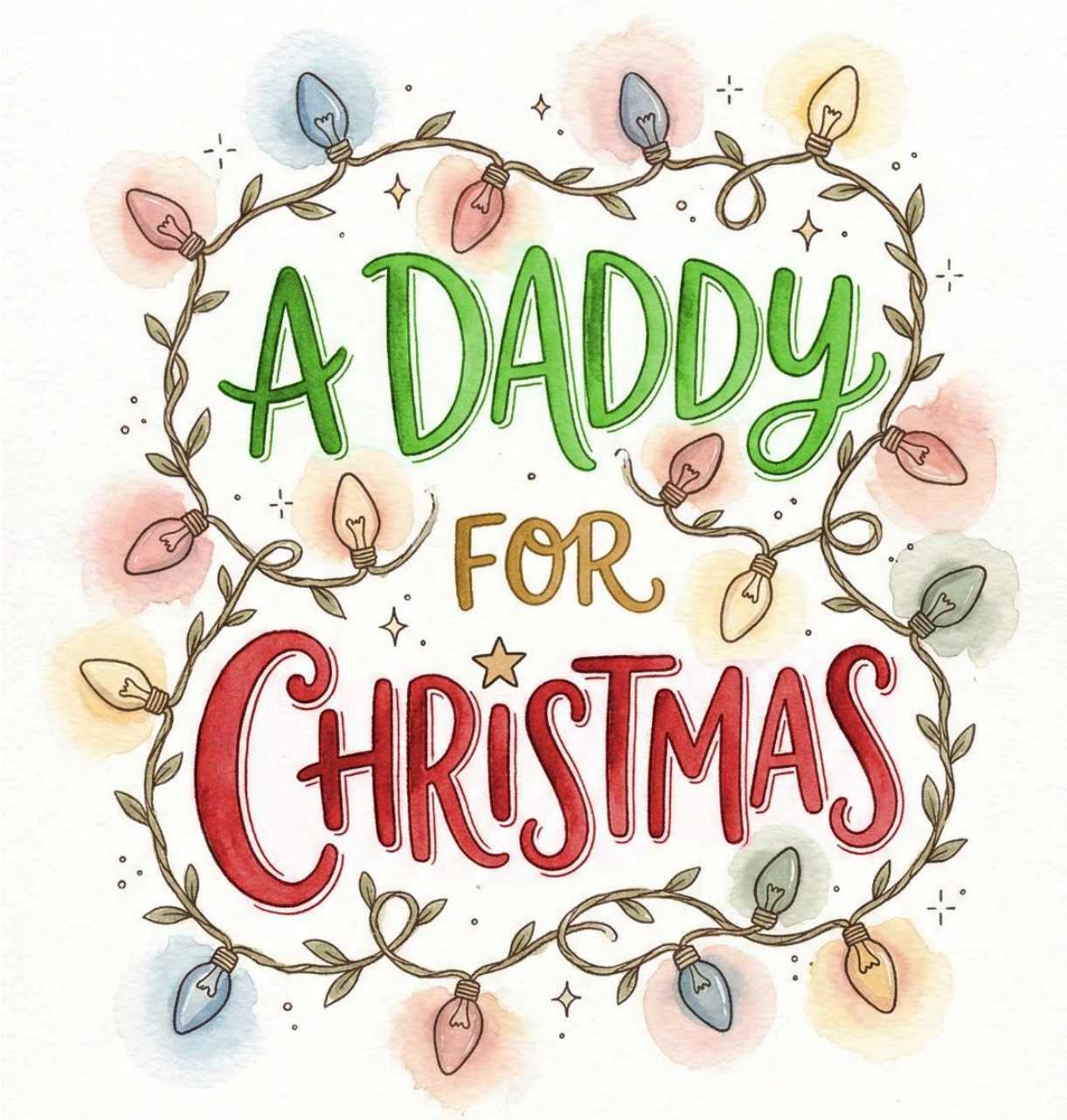
LIZZIE SPRIGGS

A DADDY for Christmas





Lizzie Spriggs

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Out of little brain rot, mighty oaks do grow

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Playlist

Lucas's Christmas Soundtrack

- Buy Me Presents – Sabrina Carpenter
- All I Want for Christmas is Nudes – Trixie Mattel
- Santa Baby – Eartha Kitt
- Step into Christmas – Elton John
- Christmas Wrapping – The Waitresses
- All I Want For Christmas – Mariah Carey
- BONUS TRACK - Date Your Dad – Bellah Mae

Sid's Christmas Soundtrack

- Yule Shoot Your Eyes Out – Fallout Boy
- In the Bleak Midwinter – Annie Lennox
- Fairytale of New York – The Pogues
- Lonely This Christmas – Elvis Presley
- Blue Christmas – Johnny Cash
- Last Christmas – Wham!
- BONUS TRACK - Somebody To Love – Queen

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Content Warning

! Contains Spoilers !

This book includes the following content which may be triggering or upsetting to readers:

Unless otherwise noted, these acts are by characters other than the MMCs and are not endorsed by the MMCs, or the author.

- Cheating/Infidelity
- Emotional abuse in the form of neglect/manipulation.
- Gaslighting
- Parental neglect and abuse in the form of verbal insults and disownment.
- Homophobic language.
- Racist comments.
- Classist comments.
- Drunk driving.
- Misogynistic attitudes towards gender roles.
- Physical violence (one MMC punches another character).
- Fatphobic comments and attitudes.

For clarity – The definition of 'Daddy' in this book is unrelated to the 'Leather Daddy' subculture and there is little/no 'Daddy Kink' involved. The term here relates to the more recent definition of 'a typically masculine presenting older man who is financially secure, sexually experienced and provides nurturing, stability, care, guidance, emotional security and resilience to a younger partner.'

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Chapter One
LUCAS

Lucas's boyfriend rang just as he was putting away the last of his washing up. He smiled at the sight of Julian's name on his phone screen and swiped to accept, fumbling with his wireless headphones a second later.

"Hi babe, how was work?" he asked, flicking the kettle on.

Nothing said *'well done for washing up'* like dirtying a mug with a fancy hot chocolate with all the trimmings. It made him perversely happy, knowing he could do so without hearing his father's angry call of '*I just washed up!*' from the other room, as he had throughout his childhood. It was the little things that made the festive season merry and bright.

Julian's rich-as-hazelnut-cream voice came down the line. "Oh, it was OK. Mostly just talking about tonight's party. Thankfully, I've got the morning to sleep it off before driving up to Mum and Dad's."

It was the night of Julian's work Christmas party. His firm did a whole three-course dinner event every year, followed by enough alcohol to ensure that dinner ended up in the five-star hotel's toilets before midnight. Lucas's colleagues at the library, however, had gone to Pizza Express last week, and he'd been home by ten. Libraries weren't known for attracting ravers, which suited him just fine.

"Sounds like it'll be a good time. Have fun! Um... about tomorrow..."

Julian sighed. "Luc, you promised you'd invite him. Christmas is only a week away, and you've already put it off for ages. I've tried reminding you, but... it feels like you're trying to make sure he won't say yes."

Lucas winced. That was sort of his exact plan. Julian had asked him to invite his dad five months ago, and he'd been trying to get out of it ever since, without blowing his entire relationship up over it. Though even if he left it as late as possible, the prospect of free drinks and a chance to humiliate Lucas would probably still tempt him. It had been years since he'd had the chance to bully him face-to-face.

"I know. I'm sorry... it's just I don't think you know what it's going to be like. Having my dad there for Christmas. With your family. It's going to be a nightmare."

"You keep saying that, but you don't know for sure. The man's a retired police detective—surely he didn't get that high a rank by being a nightmare," Julian said, sounding tired.

They had, to be fair, been having this same conversation since July. It was the first Christmas Julian had invited him home for in their three-year relationship, and he wanted to make it a whole-family affair. Lucas's 'whole family' was just his dad, and honestly, he'd have rather been an orphan. He hadn't seen his dad since he left for university, and their last phone call had ended in a row and three homophobic slurs. One of which was so niche he'd had to Google it. He didn't even think of Clive as his dad most of the time. He was just... Clive.

"I do. I grew up with him. He basically kicked me out of the house for being gay when I left for uni. He didn't want me back. He's not going to handle Christmas with my boyfriend and me with even the tiniest trace of tolerance."

"If he's going to say no, why can't you just ask him?" Julian asked.

Damn him and his logic.

"Because he won't say no!" he admitted. "Even if I invite him on Christmas-bloody-Eve, there's a good chance that as soon as he finds out it's in your parents' fancy house in the country, he'll want to come—for the free food and booze if nothing else. He'll get pissed and be a nightmare. Why can't you just trust me when I tell you that?"

Julian sighed again. "Luc, he's family. It's Christmas. We're all meant to get together and get on. Just for one week out of the year. I don't think it's much to ask. And it really puts you on the wrong foot with Mum and Dad if you show

up and immediately tell them you've cut your only living parent off. It tells them you don't value family... and that's kind of a deal breaker."

"A... deal breaker?" Lucas repeated. This was a new part of the argument they'd never reached before. "You mean, you're going to break up with me?"

Julian let out a frustrated sigh. "I just... if you can't do this one thing for me, what are we even doing? You know how important this is to me. If you can't trust that I'll help you handle the situation—won't even let me meet your dad—we can't get serious."

Get serious. As in... long term, as in... marriage?

They'd been dating for three years now, and Lucas was certain he wanted to spend the rest of his life with tall, gorgeous, and sophisticated Julian McKinley. His first proper boyfriend—not a hook-up who got a good look at him in daylight and bolted before you could say, 'No fats, no femmes.' A proper boyfriend who had a job in London and a family in the country, *and* who was finally taking him home for Christmas. It was all perfect, except for Clive. Lucas couldn't inflict him on his future in-laws. He just couldn't.

"I need an answer, Lucas." Julian sighed. "I love you. But if you're going to write off your own family, how can I make you part of mine?"

Oh my god, he *was* talking about proposing. Holy shit.

"Julian, it's different with him. Your family is probably normal, *nice*. He's a monster. He's... Clive. I can't stand to be in a room with him, and I grew up in his house. He'll ruin everything."

There was a long silence on the other end of the line. Then Julian spoke again.

"Maybe you coming to stay for Christmas is a mistake. You're not ready... Let's just come back to it next year."

"Next year?" he echoed.

No. He couldn't do another Christmas alone, not now he had a boyfriend and no nosey housemates to relish the time away from. Christmas, for the past few years, had meant being stuck in his flat in the silence by himself. He couldn't do that again. It was so depressing, and all he ended up doing was missing his mum and crying into a family-sized trifle by noon on Boxing Day.

He wanted the Christmas Julian was offering—fireside carols with the family, cosy mornings with breakfast in bed, winter hikes followed by film nights, happiness and jokes from crackers… a family. A proposal. He wanted it more than anything in the world. But he knew bringing Clive along would ruin it. Not just for this year but forever. That one ruined Christmas would haunt every future celebration. Once his future in-laws met his piece of shit father, that was all they'd think of when they looked at him.

"No! Look… can I not just come along this year, and… maybe we can invite Clive next time?" Lucas pleaded.

You never knew, Clive might get hit by a bus or something. He deserved a little Christmas miracle.

"It won't happen, though, will it?" Julian said sternly. "I know you. If you can put it off, you will. Every time. You've stalled enough this year."

"I know, but you don't understand." Lucas pressed his forehead against the kitchen cupboards. "It's just complicated, and I can't explain in a way that you'll get it."

How could he tell Julian everything that his dad had put him through? He knew about the homophobia, the fact that he'd basically told him not to come back from uni. The twice-yearly phone calls that always ended in arguments. But Lucas had never been able to make Julian understand how it felt. How it had affected him, to not only be picked on at school for being so obviously gay and a bit chubby but to walk through the door and hear it all again, but worse. To have nowhere that was safe. That was why he'd come to love the library so much—it was the only place he could go where no one talked to him, let alone called him a slur or shoved him. A place he could read the few books that actually had gay people in them and not feel so fucking alone. How could he make Julian—with his apparently perfect family and lifelong low body-fat percentage—understand that?

"I'm sorry, Luc," Julian said. "I'm not going to give in. Either you invite him… or I think we need to take a break. I'm getting on the tube, I have to go. Just… call me tomorrow and let me know what you've decided."

"Julian…"

But he'd hung up.

Suddenly, the idea of having a hot chocolate made him feel very sick. He couldn't believe it had come to this. An ultimatum, about Christmas. Fuck Clive. He had one good thing in his life—Julian—and now it was all going wrong because his stupid dad had to be the worst person alive.

He couldn't invite Clive to Christmas. It wouldn't just be a disaster; it would be excruciating. He'd not only get wasted and swear and say racist shit like he always did, but he'd point out every flaw Lucas had. Every deficit and deficiency. By the end of the week, Julian wouldn't know what on earth he'd seen in him. It would be the end of them anyway.

With that depressing thought circling his brain, Lucas got ready for bed. He didn't want to think anymore. Just sleep through some of the pain until he inevitably had to break up with the only person who loved him because he had the misfortune of being fathered by a shitty person.

He'd finally gone to sleep, snug as a cinnamon roll under a duvet and two blankets—*thank you very much, Mr 'Storage Heaters Are Good Enough For The Likes Of You' Landlord*—when he heard the unmistakable sound of his front door being unlocked. A door to which the only key—or so he'd thought in blissful ignorance—was in his trouser pocket on a nearby chair.

He sat up and blinked into the gloom, chest going tight at the sound of his creaky hinges giving a tiny warning before the front door banged closed. A stranger's voice muttered, "Fuck," as if startled by the noise they'd just made.

Oh god. Was he being burgled? A mental and quite disappointing list of his valuables skated through his still half-asleep brain. Aside from a second-hand Xbox, a viral beaded pillow from TK Maxx that he'd nearly been trampled for, and the three-wick Jo Malone candle on his coffee table, he wasn't exactly prime burglar bait. His laptop was ten years old and wheezed like an old man when he fired it up, for god's sake.

Reality slammed into him. There was a stranger in his flat! A possibly armed, drugged-up stranger looking for someone to do something creative and *Shudder* subscription-worthy to his body with a... trowel or something.

Heart pounding under his ribs, Lucas scrambled out of bed and cast about for anything he could use as a weapon. Cardboard standee of the ninth doctor? Nope. Artisanal pottery planter? Possibly, but the giant monsterra in it would

make hefting it a bit difficult. Pedicure set? Stabby but small. He grabbed a resin statuette of *The Witcher*. Both sexy and weighty. That would have to do.

Brandishing Geralt of Rivia in one hand, Lucas crept to the bedroom door and listened. He could hear footsteps. Someone moving around, possibly searching for cash (Lucas last saw actual folding money three years ago) or drugs (allergy nasal spray probably wasn't going to cut it). He heard a scuffle and wondered if the burglar really just tripped over the corner of his rug or if he was mistaken. He wasn't a very good burglar if so. Not that Lucas was going to be leaving a review. Unless that really was something you could do online nowadays —*"6/10: Took my vintage* Doctor Who *paperbacks but didn't shit in my sink."*

Maybe he could just wait it out. As long as whoever was out there didn't try to get into his bedroom, he could stay quiet until they left, then report anything stolen on his insurance. If it was worth doing. There was no point in confronting the stranger and risking injury over his ailing Xbox. A second replay of *Baldur's Gate 3* wasn't worth dying over.

Probably.

He heard the distinct sound of a tap running, and his plans to cower sensibly went out of the window. His insurance would not help him if the flat got flooded and ruined everything. His coverage was measly for one thing. Also, the rental agency would probably blame him and then evict him. Which would be unfortunate because, as Lucas well knew, good flats in Blackpool were hard to come by and not cheap when they could be found.

Silently, Lucas pressed down the door handle and summoned all his A-Level drama training. He threw the door wide and, in his deepest, most aggressive voice, yelled;

"ARMED POLICE. GET DOWN ON THE GROUND!"

He had about two seconds to spot the dark shape in his kitchenette before it flailed and fell to the floor with a loud bang.

"Jesus fucking Christ!" he heard the intruder curse into the carpet. "What the fuck are you doing in here?!"

"Sleeping!" Lucas snapped. "Because it's *early*."

"Why are you in my flat?" the stranger slurred, still flat-out on the floor.

"It's my flat! Now get out before I ring the police… the other police. Because I am… also police—and armed." There, a faultless recovery. Mr Dixon would take back that lousy predicted D grade if he could see him now.

"'S my flat," the stranger insisted, now picking himself up off the floor.

Much to Lucas's relief, he wasn't very tall. Maybe five-nine, and Lucas was six-one in bare feet. His odds were looking up if this turned into a fight. Which it didn't seem about to, given that the stranger was now pawing through his jacket pockets and weaving on the spot.

"I have a key, look—" He held up a tinkling bundle of them. "And my name's on the buzzer, so there."

Lucas frowned, vague memories stirring. "You're… Sidney?"

"Sid." The man stumbled to the sofa and collapsed onto it with a groan. "This is different."

"Because it's my sofa," Lucas seethed, lowering the statuette now he felt as though danger was no longer imminent. "I'm Lucas. You know, the person you rent this place to?"

He'd never dealt with 'Sidney Shale' directly, but he knew his name was on the contracts he'd signed and was still on the buzzer downstairs. Lucas lacked the time, energy, and inclination to change it. Flat Three—that was all he needed on there for God, Amazon, and Just-Eat to find him.

He flicked the nearest lamp on and got his first good look at his landlord as he squinted in the glare. He was maybe mid-forties, just starting to go grey at the edges of his hair, with a neat beard. The rest of his hair was darker than Lucas's own auburn-ish curls and combed back off his face. Or it had been. Now it showed signs of being tugged at or possibly dragged through a bush. He was built, as if to compensate for the lack of height. Lucas was no longer sure he'd win a fight if it came to that. Sidney was in a jacket too beaten and creased to be anything but real leather and a vintage band T-shirt for some group Lucas had never heard of, clinging to the muscles of his chest, peppered with little holes and worn so thin in places he could see the dark chest hair beneath.

He noticed Sidney—Sid—giving him the once-over as well. Not that there was much to look at. He'd gone to bed in grey joggers tucked into a pair of Nike

socks and a T-shirt with a kitten on it that said *'Fluff You'* in big pink letters. An impulse buy at his last Comic Con.

"You don't live here," he explained patiently to a man at least a decade his senior. "You're... drunk. And lost. Go home."

Sid tipped his head back against the sofa and groaned. "Can't go home."

"OK... why is that exactly?" Lucas asked, against his better judgement. Because at heart, he was just a messy bitch who loved the merest whiff of drama.

"He... cheated," Sid muttered and looked so much like a kicked dog in doing so that Lucas relented a little, despite himself.

That sucked. He remembered the feeling well. There were many failed relationships before Julian came along. He wasn't exactly everyone's type, and he was also into the nerdiest of nerdy shit.

"That sounds rough." Lucas sighed.

"With my boss." Sid shut his eyes as if pained. "On our sofa, in our fucking house."

"Yikes." Lucas winced and shifted from foot to foot.

What to do in this situation? Sid obviously wasn't going home tonight, and who could really blame him? But Lucas was exhausted from the argument with Julian, and he really just wanted to crawl back into bed and not wake up until he was good and ready this time.

"Can you get a hotel?" he asked, then realised there was no real point in floating that idea.

The flat wasn't remotely near the tourist areas where hotels could be found. Given the state of the industry and the time of year, he'd be surprised if there was one still open to the public this late. Maybe a Premier Inn or something, but that would be further out of town, and Sid was in no condition to find his way there. As was confirmed when the man in front of him let out a loud snore, his head rolling to the side.

Wonderful.

Lucas sighed and relocked the front door, then grabbed a throw from the end of the sofa and tossed it over his uninvited guest. It appeared, from the look of the kitchen, that Sid had been trying to get himself some water when Lucas

burst in. So he filled a plastic tumbler up and set it on the coffee table, along with a big bowl, just in case of a vomit situation.

He briefly considered putting Sid into the recovery position. But he didn't know it, and his phone was in his bedroom. Googling it and coming back felt like too much effort. He'd probably be fine.

As much as he didn't want to go to sleep with a stranger in his flat, the alternative was waking him and trying to get him outside. Then he'd have to worry about what exactly had happened to him—not ideal. Or he'd end up ringing the police and telling them there was a stranger in his house. Which would not only mean getting his landlord arrested and therefore speed running himself to homelessness, but he'd also be likely to encounter some not-so-nice attention from said police. They'd probably assume he'd brought Sid back here for sex, and it had gone sideways. Lucas wasn't exactly big on giving police the benefit of the doubt when it came to homophobia. His dad was one, all his friends, too, and that told him everything he needed to know.

So instead of doing something more sensible, he rammed a doorstop under his bedroom door and got back into bed. He'd deal with Sid in the morning—if by some miracle he didn't wake up and scuttle off in shame before then. Like any sane person would.

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Chapter Two
SID

Ow.

That was his first thought as he managed to pry his eyelids open a razor's width. Sunlight tried to gouge its way through his lashes and into his unprepared retinas, and he slammed his eyes shut again. Not good. Very not good. *This is why you don't fucking drink, Sidney,* he reminded himself. *You're too old for this hangover shit.*

He rubbed his face against the soft thing he was lying on, trying to ease the ache between his temples. He hadn't been hungover like this in years. Hated it. Hated being sick in general, but especially when it was his fault. This was most definitely his fault. It was all coming back to him now.

He'd come home from work early. Normally, Friday was one of his gym days. He went straight from locking up the shop to the bus stop, then to the gym, and finally took the bus home. But yesterday, he hadn't been feeling it. Not because he was ill but because work had been unusually shit, and he just wanted to get home and forget about it. He was used to people shouting at him about their computers and phones that needed fixing, or getting arsey about the price he was allowed to offer for second-hand electronics, but yesterday had been something else. He'd fixed up an iPad for a woman who'd handed it straight back to her kid in its buggy. Then said kid had immediately thrown the bloody thing onto the floor again and smashed the new screen he'd put on it. Cue Mum wanting a new screen at no charge, fitted while she waited. It had taken him twenty minutes and the threat of calling the police to get her to leave.

So he'd gone home right away and turned up two hours early. Just in time to catch Frank and Baz, his boss, going at it like rabbits on ecstasy. In the living room, no less. He supposed it ought to make it sting less that it wasn't in their bed of sixteen years. But it didn't. It really didn't.

It wasn't the first time he'd suspected Frank of hooking up with someone else. But he'd never asked about it, tried to forget it when he noticed little hints here and there. Frank never left him for anyone else, which was enough. Until he walked in and saw it happening with his own eyes. Heard it. That was too much even for Sid's impressive levels of denial.

He'd just walked out, gotten the next bus back into town, and gone into the first place he saw that sold alcohol. It was cheap and busy, crammed with people on a Friday night. He'd ignored all of them and ordered drink after drink until they made him leave. Then he'd stumbled home.

Fuck. Home.

That meant he was passed out on the sofa. The same sofa where Frank and Baz had been…

That was enough to have him jerking bolt upright. Hangover or no hangover. It was only when he managed to coax his eyes open that he realised he wasn't on the sofa where Frank had put a bullet in the head of their relationship —he didn't know where he was, but it wasn't home.

Peering around, Sid took in the green velvet sofa, the IKEA-looking bookshelves full of comics and DVDs, and those little plastic men with big heads that they sold in HMV these days. He nearly jumped out of his skin when he saw a man standing in the corner. But after a few stomach-churning seconds, he realised it was a life-sized cardboard cut-out, the kind Poundland used in place of actual security guards. Only this one was of some bloke he recognised from TV.

Sid planted both hands on the small of his back and cracked it with a grunt. He was not built for sofa sleeping anymore. At forty-six, the only place he was built for sleeping was in his own bed, in his own home, with his partner. His heart slid miserably down inside his chest when he thought about how that was probably never going to happen again.

Or worse, it would, because what was his life without Frank?

He leant forward and put his head in his hands. That was when he recognised the flooring. It was the same laminate of terracotta tiles he'd seen every day for years when he was growing up in this part of Blackpool. His head shot up.

It was his mum's flat. Different furniture, different... everything. Even the walls were painted white now. The old floor was half hidden under a big rug, but now that he was looking at the layout with his eyes properly open, there was no doubt. He'd come home, but to the wrong house. The place he'd been living when he met Frank all those years ago.

Of course, his mum had been gone for years, bless her. He'd let her place out when he and Frank decided to buy somewhere together. As much as he'd hated the idea of being a landlord, there was just no other way to afford the mortgage payments at the time. He'd been trying to make a go of being a sound engineer, and Frank was still a guitarist getting paid in shares of the door after a long night. Now they both had regular jobs, or at least Sid had one yesterday. He wasn't sure if he could show his face at the computer repair place again after seeing Baz with Frank.

A shuffling noise attracted his attention moments before the door across the room opened. There stood a younger guy in joggers and a cropped T-shirt showing a sliver of soft belly, looking at him as if he was fundamentally disappointed to find him there.

"Oh, you're still here," said guy said, twitching his head to shift a stray auburn curl from his eyes. He had his hands on his hips, which only made them look more generous than the rolled-down joggers already did.

"Yeah, I am... Sorry, who are you again?" he asked, because as much as the sight of him was stirring a vague memory, it wasn't bringing a name to mind. Had he...hooked up with someone and couldn't remember it? The idea was horrifying, even if he was objectively hot. Far better looking than Sid would have thought he could pull even if sober.

"Lucas," he said with a long-suffering sigh. "Lucas Hart, your tenant. You let yourself in here last night and passed out on my sofa. Which I am hoping you didn't throw up on?"

He glanced around him, mildly relieved that he hadn't drunkenly revenge cheated. "Seems clear. Sorry. I don't normally drink like that. I just..."

"Got cheated on. Yes, I am aware. You told me you caught your boyfriend with your boss."

Jesus. How drunk had he been? That was information that he wouldn't have revealed on pain of death had he been sober. The slightly pitying look on Lucas's face chafed his already frayed nerves.

"Yep, that was yesterday, so... sorry and everything. I'll get out of your hair." He picked himself up and promptly sat back down again, hard. The world was spinning now, and he was beginning to worry that his vomit-free status was about to be downgraded.

"Bowl!" Lucas grabbed it off the table and thrust it into his lap. "Hang on, I'm gonna get you some painkillers."

Unable to do much to stop him, Sid resigned himself to perching pathetically on the sofa and looking down into the depths of the plastic bowl. A green creature with pointy ears looked back at him.

"Here, soluble aspirin and a fizzy orange vitamin." Lucas thumped a glass down on the table. "Cheers."

He picked it up and took a moment to steady himself before downing the lot in one go. It tasted foul, bitter and sweet at the same time, the fake orange flavour coating his tongue. But after a few hairy seconds, he managed to keep it down. Just. When he dared look up from the bowl, he found Lucas perched on the arm of the sofa, watching him.

"I'll go in a minute... Thanks."

"Mmhmm... sure thing. Um... this isn't going to affect my rental agreement, is it?" Lucas asked, crossing his arms. "You're not going to have me evicted because you came in here and embarrassed yourself?"

He winced. That was about the size of it, to be fair. "I know I did, and no, I'm not planning on giving the rental agency a ring and having you kicked out over my mistake."

"Cool." Lucas seemed to cheer up at that, but then his shoulders sagged. "Even though you need somewhere else to live now that your boyfriend cheated?"

"Jesus fucking Christ," Sid groaned. "Are you always like this?"

"What?" Lucas tilted his head. "Direct? Refreshingly upfront?"

"Tactless as fuck," Sid corrected.

"Oh… Sorry. I just didn't get much sleep—thanks, by the way—and this is about me having a home for the foreseeable future, so I'm a bit keen to have the facts really nailed down." Lucas pulled a face. "I mean, I did think my boyfriend was about to propose to me, so I'd have been moving out anyway, but… that's unlikely to happen now."

"Why?" Sid asked before he could think better of it.

It was nice to no longer have Lucas delving into his own sore points with a diamond drill bit and flawless aim. He wanted to turn this conversation around and get himself off the back foot.

"Ugh, he… We had an argument over something," Lucas muttered, turning pink in hectic patches across his otherwise creamy skin.

With a face like that and big soft eyes that expressive, he'd bet Lucas couldn't lie for shit. Not like Frank, who could tell you the sky was green and insist on it for hours without giving anything away. His Frank, the audacious, generous liar. He felt sick all over again.

"Yeah, well, you're right, I will probably be needing the place back," Sid muttered. "Can't exactly see myself going home today and telling Frank I'll be moving my things to the spare room but that he and Baz can have the run of the rest of the place with my blessing."

Lucas snorted. "Who the hell is even called Baz?"

"Blokes that don't want to be a 'Barry'," Sid muttered acidly. "Balding, irritating fucks who pay you peanuts and then go sleep with your partner of sixteen years behind your back. That's who."

Lucas hisses through his teeth. "Ooof."

"Yeah. Big fucking ooooof," Sid agreed, spotting the cup of water on the table for the first time and gratefully chugging some of it. "Why do your cups and bowls have a little frog man on them?" he asked, trying to change the subject.

"Frog… That's Baby Yoda. Aka, Grogu. You know, *Star Wars*?" Lucas looked at him like he'd just asked him who the king was. "Have you been in a coma or

under a really big rock?"

"I've seen *Star Wars,* and that thing wasn't in it," Sid grumbled. "What do you mean 'Baby Yoda'—since when was Yoda married?"

"Since when did you need to be married to have kids?" Lucas retorted. "Anyway, he's not actually Yoda's baby. He's just a baby that looks like Yoda, because they're, like, the same race. He was in *The Mandalorian*? Please tell me you've watched that? Just for the Pedro Pascal of it all."

"...I don't understand most of what you just said."

Lucas looked at him like he'd just admitted to a crime. "You are missing out —as a fellow gay nerd."

"I am not!" Sid protested hotly.

"You've already told me your partner's called Frank."

"Yeah, I'm gay. I'm not a fucking nerd." Sid managed to stand up to defend himself, the room only swirling slightly now.

"Babe, you've seen *Star Wars*. In your age bracket, that makes you a nerd. Sorry, not sorry." Lucas shrugged. "Nothing wrong with being one either. I mean, hello, you've been in here long enough to have seen my collection."

"Yeah, you've got a lot of... stuff," Sid admitted, looking around. "Maybe that's why you're still renting at your age."

"Ouch. Very 'buy less avocados' of you. Anyway, I suppose I won't be renting here much longer now that you need the place back." He seemed to deflate a little when he remembered that. "Even if I can patch things up with Julian, moving everything is going to be a pain."

"How quickly can you do that?" Sid asked. "Patch things up?"

"Why, you feeling guilty about making me homeless?" Lucas raised an eyebrow. "As well you should. Unfortunately... it's not really the kind of fight you can just patch up. If I wanted to make things work, I'd have to do something I really, really don't want to do. Something that would potentially hurt me, or both of us."

Sid couldn't help it; he snorted. "Best to work out a safe word in advance, in my experience."

"Wow, aren't you just the funniest intruder?" Lucas sniped. "It's nothing like that... He wants me to invite my family to Christmas with his parents."

"The horror," Sid said, frowning as he tried to work out what the issue was.

"Well, seeing as how my mum's dead and my dad's a raging racist misogynist who basically told me not to come back when I left for uni after years of bullying me for being incredibly gay... I don't see that going well. Do you?" Lucas shook his head. "Even if Julian's family wasn't incredibly posh—which they are—there's still no way in hell I would invite my dad to their house. I never want to see him again. Unless he's in a box... Maybe not even then, actually."

Sid raised his eyebrows. Yeah, that did sound like a lot to be dealing with. "Just tell him that then—Julian."

"I've tried! But he's Mr 'You Only Get One Family', and his parents and brother must be really supportive because he just doesn't get the whole 'not accepting your gay kids' thing. He doesn't think my dad could possibly be as bad as I think he is. But while there's even the slimmest chance that my dad would come to Christmas, I refuse to ask him. It would be hell." Lucas tipped his head back and groaned. "So that's me and Julian finished because there's literally no way around..."

"What?" Sid asked when it became clear that Lucas was frozen in place, looking up at the ceiling.

Slowly, the younger man tilted his chin down until he was looking at him, wide-eyed. "I need... a favour."

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Chapter Three
LUCAS

"Are you fucking insane?"

Quite possibly, Lucas thought. But what were his other options at this point? Up until now, he'd been staring at two doors, one marked 'Lose Julian', the other 'See Dad'. Neither door had been promising. It was really a case of the tiger or the tiger. No lady to be found. But now he had door number three, tantalisingly labelled 'Lie Your Arse Off'.

"Do you have a better idea?" he asked Sid, who, while at least no longer greenish-grey, had clearly not recovered from the night of heavy drinking.

"Do I...? Yeah, how about I leave now, and we both pretend that you didn't just ask me—a complete stranger, mind you, and your landlord, technically—to be your dad."

"Only for a week!" Lucas put in and waved his hands for emphasis. "Think of it this way—you wouldn't have to worry about finding somewhere to stay for the next seven days. You wouldn't have to see Frank."

That worked a bit, he could tell. Sid knew as well as he did that evicting someone, even if they didn't fight it, wasn't a short process. In fact, Lucas could keep stretching it out for months if he chose to. All the while, Sid would either have to pay for a hotel, find somewhere else to live, or go back to the house he shared with Frank.

He was actually feeling a bit curious about Frank, specifically about what he thought he was doing. He had to be reasonably attractive—Sid was good-looking in a sort of older, scruffy Han Solo way. But still, it seemed unlikely that

Frank had found someone hotter than Sid to cheat with. Especially someone called Barry. That just wasn't a sexy name. Maybe Frank was having a sort of midlife crisis? Either way, it was clear Sid loved him a lot and was devastated by what had happened. His face went all scrunchy and sick-looking whenever he heard Frank's name.

"Also," Lucas continued, when Sid just avoided his gaze and offered no counterargument, "it's Christmas next week. You don't want to be alone on Christmas. I've heard that's, like... really hard for the elderly. There are sad adverts, with hymns sung by children."

That got Sid's back up, which amused Lucas no end. He'd rather he be angry than morose. It made him feel less guilty about strong-arming him into this.

"I am forty-fucking-six," Sid ground out. "Which is exactly why I can't be your fucking pretend daddy."

"Ah! But you could be if you were, say, fifteen when you got my mum pregnant," Lucas declared triumphantly. "Julian has seen pictures of my dad, but I'll tell him you're my bio-dad and that Clive is my step-dad. That you recently tracked me down and we're reconnecting, and I wanted to bring you to Christmas."

He was really very pleased with himself at how quickly he pulled that all together. It was a wonder he hadn't managed to make any progress on his novel manuscript since he got a full-time job at the library. All his creative synapses were firing, like when he was putting together his initial world-building notebook for his sci-fi epic.

Sid, however, did not look impressed. "And you're fine to just... lie to your boyfriend to get him to marry you? What happens next time you need to invite family to something?"

"I've thought of that." Lucas rolled his eyes. "It's only a teeny white lie. I'll introduce him to Clive when it's not a family Christmas. Just Julian and my dad. That way, he can see what an arsehole he is without it tainting an entire family's Christmas. And I won't make a bad first impression on Julian's family. I'll just tell him that you've decided to take a step back and aren't ready to take on a parental role with me. Presto—no more talk of inviting my family to things."

Sid was regarding him with unmistakable judgement, but if Lucas wasn't completely delusional, he also looked a little impressed. "You're a devious little shit, you know that?"

"Not hearing a no," Lucas said. "The best part is—if Julian gets back together with me and he proposes, you can have the flat back ASAP. And... if you don't help me, I might have to tell the rental agency or the police or something that you broke in here drunk last night." He pulled an '*I'd really rather not, but still...*' face and watched as Sid's eyes narrowed.

"Devious," he repeated. Then sighed. "Fuck it. I'm in."

"Really?" Lucas couldn't help the exclamation that escaped him. "As in, you'll really actually do this for me?"

"For you? No. But I'd rather not spend Christmas drinking myself into a stupor to get away from my cheating ex, so... any port in a storm. Speaking of, where do they live, these posh people you're trying to impress?"

"York," Lucas said. "A big house in the country. Julian is meeting me there because he's at his firm's Christmas party in London this weekend. So, that gives you the rest of today to get home, clean up, and pack anything remotely suitable to wear... You have smart clothes, right?"

Sid rolled his eyes. "No, I mostly wear potato sacks. They go with everything. Course I've got 'smart clothes'. Smart enough, anyway," he added, under his breath.

"Amazing... OK then. Let me just change, and you can give me directions to your place." Lucas almost laughed at the deer-in-headlights look on Sid's bearded face. "You didn't really think I'd let you go that easily? I mean, if I let you out of my sight, you might run off and never come back again. I'm meant to be leaving early to get to York in time for lunch."

"It's only like two hours away," Sid frowned.

"Yes, but my van's a bit shaky at speeds over fifty miles per hour and... Look, I like having extra time just in case. Plus, I want to stop and get coffee on the way, perk of a road trip," Lucas shrugged.

Sid heaved a put-upon sigh. "I'm not going back home with you in tow. Things'll be fucked up enough with just me and Frank, let alone trying to explain who the hell you are and what you're doing there with me."

"I could be your toy boy." Lucas wiggled his eyebrows and was amused when Sid turned red under his weather-beaten façade. "I'd make him really jealous."

"You are not young enough to be a toy boy," Sid said, folding his arms. "What are you, thirty-five?"

It was Lucas's turn to gasp in outrage at being mis-aged. "I'm thirty-one, you leathery old tosser!"

Sid laughed, displaying even white teeth. Surprising for a man who smelled sweetly like tobacco and coffee. "Maybe invest in some moisturiser."

"Maybe invest in some new T-shirts," Lucas retorted, gesturing at the holey one doing little to hide the bushels of chest hair beneath. "Who are they, anyway?"

Sid looked down at himself. "Who are *The Zombies*?"

"Yeah... never heard of them." Lucas shrugged. He, of course, had heard of 'Time of the Season' like everyone else in the English-speaking world and probably a lot further. But he was finding it very fun to wind Sid up. It was not only easy, but it was also incredibly rewarding, as he seemed to almost vibrate with energy when his back was up.

"Jesus wept." Sid shook his head in disbelief. "You know what... here." He took out his wallet, flipped through it, then pulled out his driving licence and held it out.

Lucas took it between his fingers and checked it.

"Now I have to come back. Also, you have my address," Sid pointed out. "Shitty musical education aside, I think you're... decent enough. I want to help you, and I'm getting something out of it, too. Just let me go get my stuff on my own, and I'll be back by the time you leave at..."

"Eight," Lucas supplied. "As I said, I need extra time."

"Jesus... fine. I'll be back here, sodding... bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, alright?"

"With smart clothes?" Lucas pushed, just to watch Sid's eye twitch. It was like dangling a toy out of reach of a small yappy dog.

Sid clearly struggled to swallow a curse but finally said, "With smart clothes."

"Great, I'll see you shortly then." Lucas stood aside to wave him through to the front door. "Oh, and Sid? Please Google *The Mandalorian*, then we'll at

least have something to talk about on the drive."

Sid swore under his breath but left anyway. When the door closed behind him, Lucas felt his excited energy start to drain away. It was like he'd binged an entire new season of *Doctor Who* and now had nothing to do and no one to talk about it with. A bit flat and empty. Still, he had a plan now, and all he had to do was ring Julian and tell him he'd had a change of heart and his dad would be joining them.

Sid's words came back to him—said in jest and with just a little bit of reluctant admiration, but still—was he being devious? He didn't want to lie. But Julian just wouldn't take no for an answer on the dad question. His family were the kind who still went on holiday together as adults, who had spare rooms perpetually ready for spur-of-the-moment visits. Julian had sent him a picture last Christmas of all of them in matching pyjamas, drinking hot chocolate made to their special recipe. No wonder Julian didn't understand where Lucas was coming from.

He thought of the last Christmas with Mum, when things at home had still been bearable. Turkey roast, foil decorations, Dad complaining through the entire *Doctor Who* Christmas special that he *'didn't understand this rubbish'*, and his mum too busy washing up to sit down for a second. He'd asked for a Cambridge satchel, and they'd got him a Reebok backpack because *'no son of mine's going to wear a handbag'*. They'd argued when Lucas asked for the receipt as tactfully as possible. His mum had cried and told him he had to try harder to get on with his dad. For her.

Only six months later, his mum had an aneurysm and dropped dead mid-shift on the Tesco checkouts. That was their last Christmas as a family. The following year and every one after right up until he went to university, his dad worked on Christmas. Lucas watched all the festive specials alone and cooked his own oven-ready dinner. It was peaceful by default, because no one was there to fight or cry or set fire to the paper towels instead of the Christmas pudding. But it was awful in its own way.

When he met Julian and things got serious, he started to think he'd never have to spend Christmas alone again. Even though Julian went to spend it with his family, there would still come a day when Lucas would be invited along.

When he'd be family. He was so close, and he was not going to lose out on his new family because of his dad being a miserable prick.

He wiped a stray tear from his face, unsure when he'd shed it, and tapped his phone to dial Julian. He answered after quite a few rings, as if he'd been in two minds about picking up at all.

"Luc?" Julian said hesitantly. "Listen, I can't really do this right now..."

"I've invited him."

There, he couldn't take it back now. There was a short silence, and then Julian spoke again, sounding more present and alert.

"Really? He's coming?"

"He is. I'm giving him a lift down... The thing is, um... you know, I said it was complicated, and I couldn't explain?"

"Yes..." Julian said warily.

"The thing is. What I couldn't explain... I know I've always talked about Clive like he's my dad. And he is the only one I knew, the one who brought me up. But I've recently got in touch with my other dad. My birth dad."

"Oh... I didn't realise he wasn't... That's a surprise," Julian said. "Why didn't you tell me that?"

"I wasn't sure what he wanted from me. Or if he was going to end up being worse than Clive. I wanted to tell you about him before, but I've been so anxious about Christmas and which one of them to invite, and I wasn't sure if my actual dad would want to come, so... I've been trying to delay it without telling you. And he was a stranger, I mean, he still is basically, but I thought if I'm trying to get to know him, it could be nice to spend Christmas with him? And you wanted me to invite my dad, so..."

"I know. I did sort of mean your actual dad, not... I mean, I know if Clive isn't biologically..."

"I get it," Lucas interrupted gently. "I will introduce you to Clive. But... I don't know, I suppose I thought this might be a sort of... stepping stone. To him? He's really difficult, and I'd just feel a bit more prepared for that after I've met your family and they've met Sidney."

"Sidney?"

"My dad."

“Right, sorry, got a bit confused.” Julian seemed to think for a while, then he asked, “What does he do—Sidney?”

“As in a job?” Lucas panicked but tried to sound collected. “He’s… retired. Early retirement, good financial planning, I guess. He’s only in his forties.”

Now he had to remember to tell Sidney that. He’d have to make a note on his phone.

Julian seemed to consider for a moment. “I think that sounds… reasonable. I’m sure Mum and Dad would like to meet him.”

“Thank you,” Lucas said, feeling both more devious and shitty with each passing second. “I knew you’d understand.”

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Chapter Four
SID

You'd have thought that, having been without a car for over a year now, Sid would have become used to taking the bus everywhere. He was not. If anything, the past twelve months had only made him more wary of public transport. He'd been left stranded in the town centre one too many times thanks to a breakdown, road works, or buses apparently just evaporating into thin air. That was why he had begrudgingly downloaded Uber and started using Frank's account as a last resort.

Travelling on a bus with a hangover was just about the worst thing he could think of. Only the thought of throwing up in an Uber and ruining his score had kept him from ordering one. However, the jolting, the gushes of cold air from the doors, the smells... he was truly being tested, and he feared, as they went at speed around a tight corner, that he was about to fail.

Their car—his and Frank's—had been put out of its misery last year after a failed MOT and an astronomical repair bill. The thing had barely been worth two hundred quid as scrap. It had been Frank's idea to give up on a car entirely. It would save them money, be good for the environment, and keep them healthy. Now, covered in a cold sweat on the Number 49, Sid reflected that perhaps the whole point of going carless had been to buy Frank more time to have his affair. Had it been going on that long? Was Baz the first one he brought to the house? He both wanted to know and hoped he never found out. It would hurt too much.

After spending his twenties bed-hopping in the music scene before he aged out of being 'cute', Frank had been it for him. A gorgeous, tall guitarist with long hair and low-slung jeans that had taken an interest in him—scruffy, short, and puffing around under half a hundredweight of sound equipment. It was like a miracle. A dream. One he'd tried to stay in despite Frank's questionable fidelity, until he was cruelly woken yesterday.

He got off the bus one stop early, hoping the walk would settle his roiling stomach. The house they'd bought together was in a nice little cul-de-sac with a view to the seafront if you stood on the landing when it wasn't raining. Sid wasn't really one to get involved in community stuff, but over the years, he'd settled into the patterns of other people's school runs, trick-or-treating, and Christmas mornings, seeing kids out on new scooters and bikes. It had felt like the very essence of being a proper adult—having a nodding acquaintance with his neighbours and taking down his Christmas lights on time. Now he was going to be the sad sack back in his mum's old flat. Single and bothered by traffic noise, the kind of weird loner families avoided at Tesco. Christ.

He smoked two cigarettes on his way home. One to make his head stop aching and one to distract himself from the confrontation to come. He'd never been good at holding his own with Frank, who could get around him with puppy eyes and promises until he just gave up. It was easier to give Frank what he wanted, to be towed along in his bright wake. Frank was a buoyant, bright hot air balloon, and Sid was the bag of wet sand that kept him down to earth. That was how it worked. How it *had* worked, anyway.

Feeling very aware that he was in last night's clothes, smelling like sticky bar tops, cigarettes, and the public bus, he put his key in the lock and let himself in. The first thing he spotted was his work bag, which he'd put down right before he looked into the lounge. Frank hadn't moved it.

He had to force himself to move through the hall and glance through the brick arch into the living room. The room was empty, but the ghosts of Baz and Frank were still there, humping away on the sofa. He looked quickly away.

They'd seen him yesterday. He'd frozen, speechless, unable to move. Baz had spotted him first, because he wasn't the one face down on the sofa, moaning into an IKEA cushion they'd bought together on a random Sunday.

"Fuck! Sid," Baz had sputtered, his hand abandoning Frank's hair to grab another cushion to try and hide behind. Not that it could cover even half of his tattooed belly, which had been straining out of the jeans pooled around his knees.

Baz, who was three years older than him, yet apparently his earring wasn't 'embarrassing', unlike Sid's, which was in a drawer somewhere at Frank's insistence. Baz, who was at least three stone heavier than him, yet probably never got one of Frank's casually cruel *'you're getting out of shape, man'* comments. Fucking *Baz*.

That was when Frank had looked up, beautiful face covered in creases from the sofa. His mouth had fallen open, then closed again with a snap of teeth. No words offered in his defence, no denials. What would have been the point in that? Sid had seen him. He'd seen everything—the half-empty bottles of *his* fucking IPA on the coffee table, the lack of a condom wrapper, the haze of weed in the air.

He'd left, and Frank hadn't even called after him. Hadn't said a word. Fuck, maybe they'd kept going after that intermission. He hadn't hung around outside to see if Baz left after him. He'd seen his car, though, parked right outside as if it belonged there. Like he wasn't even trying to hide it. How blind had he been not to notice it before? Any of it.

"Sid?"

He jumped, turned, and saw Frank at the end of the hallway, leaning in the kitchen door. He'd obviously not long gotten out of bed. He had on boxers and no shirt, his full chest and both sleeves of tattoos on display, hair a tangled mess over his shoulders. The heating was turned right up, or else he'd have been freezing. Sid had joked a few times that Frank was cold-blooded, like a lizard. That he was happiest basking in the dry heat of the electric fire. Just then, it didn't seem that funny.

"I'm not stoppin'—just came to pack some stuff," Sid muttered and headed for the stairs.

He reached their bedroom before Frank caught up with him, standing in the doorway with that same lost look to him. As if he were haunting the house.

Sid found his gym bag and started going through drawers, stuffing things right on top of his clean gym gear and trainers. Smart clothes. He might have overstated the condition of his wardrobe to Lucas before. He wasn't usually in need of anything smarter than unripped jeans and a shirt. But he had a few grey and navy jumpers that looked 'family Christmas card' if you squinted and some long-sleeved T-shirts and plaid shirts that would work. He shoved his walking boots into their plastic bag just in case. He was going to the countryside after all.

"Where did you go?" Frank asked after a few minutes of watching him decant clean underwear into the bag. "Terry's?"

He snorted. Terry was his friend—his only real friend by Sid's standards. They'd known each other for twenty years, and if Terry hadn't moved to Spain six months back, he might have gone there. The fact that Frank hadn't remembered that only had him throw things into the bag harder.

"I went for a drink," Sid muttered.

"Or twelve," Frank said. "You didn't text."

"You didn't either."

"Well, I thought you might not want to talk to me." Frank sighed.

"Correct." He zipped the bag up and threw it over his shoulder, heading for the bathroom to grab some essentials like deodorant and his shaving stuff. "Terry's in Spain, by the way."

"So where are you going?" Frank asked, following him to the bathroom. "We need to talk about this."

"Talk about what?" Sid turned, brandishing his electric toothbrush. "You fucking Baz in our home, on our sofa? Fucking my *boss* in the middle of the day? I mean, Jesus, Frankie, did you want to get caught? Is that it? You wanted me to see that?"

"Of course I didn't!" Frank folded his arms, brows pinched in annoyance. "I was just…"

"Do not say bored. Don't you dare say it," Sid hissed, stuffing the side pockets of the bag with the few bits he needed from the bathroom at speed.

"I wasn't going to."

"Bullshit, that's always what you say." Sid shouldered the bag and glared at him, hangover nausea and lovesickness congealing inside him like rancid oil. "It's

why you quit every job and drop every hobby. It's why the band went from rock to bluegrass to techno. You just flit from one thing to another as the whim takes you, and I naively thought it would never be me ending up on that pile of junk you were bored with. That you wouldn't turn around and be bored of our life together."

"Well, Christ, aren't you?" Frank exclaimed. "I mean, we used to roll home at four in the morning with our gear and stay up talking. We used to go out and party and have fun. Remember when we went down to London just because? For the night? Remember when you told your manager at that coffee shop to go fuck himself?"

"Yeah, I remember. I remember that we were nearly twenty years younger and we didn't have a mortgage or bills. We were stupid kids who didn't think we'd make it to forty because we were living off Red Bull and poppers. But we did! We grew up, and we got a nice life for ourselves. A comfortable life. And you threw it away for *Baz*." He spat his name like a curse.

Frank shook his head angrily. "I used to rock the stage, man. Now I work in a fucking supermarket, and we do a gig a month if I'm lucky. I've got a job. A boring, suffocating job, and you're, what, just... happy like this?"

"I was."

The heat in the air vanished as if all the windows had been blown out, letting in the December chill. Frank looked down at the floor between them, still shaking his head.

"It's not enough," he muttered.

"It was for me," Sid said, feeling his throat grow thick. "You were always enough for me."

When Frank seemed unable to respond to that, Sid sidestepped him and made for the stairs. He needed to get out of the house. As happy as he'd been, as content, Frank was right—it was suffocating him to be there now. He just wanted to get out into the fresh air and shake off the part of him that was desperate to just give in. To forgive him and convince himself that no matter what Frank got up to, he was the one he'd always come home to. The urge to keep Frank at any cost was making his throat burn with acid. He hated himself for even considering it. For being that weak, that stupidly in love.

“Sid, where are you going?!” Frank yelled after him from the top of the stairs, as Sid scooped up his work bag and liberated his phone charger and a packet of paracetamol, which may as well have been made of gold for how happy he was to see them just then.

“Away for a bit,” he called back.

“But where? When are you coming back?” Frank was coming down the stairs now, bare feet gleaming with chipped black polish from the last time Sid had painted them for him, those long legs draped over his lap on the sofa.

“I’ll be gone for Christmas… I’ll work it out when I come back,” he said, pausing with his hand on the door handle. “Don’t call me, don’t text. I don’t want to hear from you. I just need to get my head together and… think about what comes next.”

“But… we always spend Christmas together. And… I love you,” Frank said, eyes wide and pleading, mouth downturned.

“Do you?” Sid heard himself ask, hating the crack in his voice. “Really doesn’t feel like it, Frankie.”

He opened the door and stepped out into the blasting December wind before he could change his mind. It was like a slap in the face, chasing away the familiar smell of home—of Frank’s aftershave and their laundry and the stupid gingerbread air freshener he’d bought a week ago in a random fit of festive cheer. Outside, he could think clearly; with every step away from the house, he was outpacing his own longing to stay there. To just go back to how things were before.

Sid thought about last Christmas, the same as every one they’d spent together. He’d been happy to have the time off from work, nowhere to go and plenty of cheese and crackers to polish off over some classic films after a frosty morning hike. Frank was alright with it at first—but he got restless before the end of Boxing Day. He wanted to go clubbing, fuck, paint the stairwell, rip out the kitchen. All that energy shut up in the house with nowhere to go. They always argued, they always made up, and it was Sid who’d be driving to B&Q as soon as it reopened for new cabinets. Cabinets he’d spend the rest of his holiday installing by himself while Frank buzzed on to the next thing. He was sad to see the holidays end. Frank treated it like being released from prison.

A prison, Sid thought morosely, *of his company*.

He practically ran to the bus stop, and thankfully, no one else was there to see him throw up into a bush. Sid sat down wearily on the nearby bench and closed his eyes, aware that he looked exactly as pathetic as he felt.

He had to wait for fifteen minutes for the next 49 bus back into town. And in all that time, he kept looking down the road, wondering if Frank would follow him out into the cold. But he never did.

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Chapter Five
LUCAS

Despite keeping a firm hold on Sid's driving licence, Lucas had started to worry that his prospective dad wouldn't come back. After all, a licence was easy enough to replace if you didn't mind a bit of bureaucratic wankery. Not that Sid looked like the kind of person who'd be able to fill out a government form without swearing at it and possibly rushing off to find his reading glasses.

Still, when Sid showed up at the front door to the building and buzzed at the appointed time, Lucas was relieved. He'd already packed some cute festive outfits and had been sitting on the sofa, worrying for half an hour. He had also possibly overdone it on the Lush Christmas collection, if the way Sid recoiled on the doorstep was any indication.

"Did you shag a gingerbread house while I was gone?" Sid asked, taking a cautious second whiff.

"It's just my shampoo."

And shower gel, lotion, body spray, dusting powder, and deodorant. Maybe he'd overdone it. He hoped Julian didn't mind. He wasn't big on strong, sweet scents. As the many *Bulldog* and *Lynx* toiletry sets he'd gifted Lucas could attest.

"Festive," Sid said, deadpan, following him upstairs.

He looked dreadful, Lucas noted. Apparently, having a shower hadn't entered his head while he was home, and he had the pasty, slightly sick look of someone in the grips of a hangover. He hoped he wasn't going to be sick in the van.

"Did you have to rush off?" he asked, after appraising him and the clothes he'd been wearing since yesterday. "You didn't change."

Sid looked down at himself and sighed. "Didn't have much of a chance."

He didn't elaborate, and despite his desperate urge to pry, Lucas was convinced that if he did, Sid would run off. He had to get him into the van and keep a speed where the other man couldn't jump out, like a *GTA* mission. That was going to be key to getting him to York, he felt. So instead of asking the ten or so questions he was burning to have answers to, he said:

"You can use my shower. Just make it quick—there's a spare towel in the cupboard in the corner."

Sid sighed but didn't offer any resistance. Apparently, even he was aware that he looked like cold sick decanted into a takeaway cup and then thrown at a statue of Margaret Thatcher. Lucas followed him upstairs and let him into the flat, retaking his seat on the sofa to wait. Sid shut himself in the bathroom, and a moment later, he heard the water running.

To keep himself occupied, Lucas checked his eBay listings. He had quite a bit on his watch list at the moment. For clothes, he went to Vinted, where the cool second-hand stuff was. But for memorabilia and collectables, eBay was where it was at. Currently, he had his eye on an original, if unboxed, Tricorder, a *Lord of the Rings* chess set, several job lots of *Star Wars* mini-figures, and the most exciting auction—a set of *Doctor Who* cassette tapes.

He'd actually owned some of them before. They'd belonged to his mum, who'd bought them before he was born. But they were part of his collection that had been too much to take to uni on the train, so he'd left them at home. Shortly after he left, his dad had cleared out *'the junk you left all over the place'* and done something with it. Taken it to the tip, sold it, given it away. The end result was the same. Lucas had lost most of his mum's old fandom stuff. The few bits he'd taken with him were now more precious to him than his degree certificate.

Sid surfaced from the bathroom while Lucas was debating whether or not he had time for a coffee. He turned to ask Sid if he wanted one before they left and had to fight the impulse to let his jaw hang open.

OK, so Sid cleaned up well. He'd lost that greyish pallor and was slightly pink from the hot shower. He'd combed his damp hair back off his face, neatening his

beard in the process. The crumpled, slept-in clothes were gone, replaced by clean jeans, a black V-neck T-shirt, and a dark grey cardigan. A waft of unfamiliar cologne followed him out of the bathroom, rich and spicy.

"Your extractor fan's broken," Sid said, apparently not noticing that Lucas was standing there speechless. "You ought to report that."

"I have. They said I was probably overusing it, and they'd have to charge me for a new one."

Sid huffed. "Fuckers. They never tell me about any of this shit. Knew I should have managed the place myself."

"The woes of being a landlord." Lucas couldn't help the eye roll that accompanied his words, and Sid looked suitably uncomfortable.

"Never set out to be. This was my mum's place. Too small for Frank and me, but I didn't want to lose it. Plus, it helped pay for our place together. Maybe I always knew I'd end up back here, eh?"

It was Lucas's turn to feel uncomfortable. He hadn't meant to insult Sid. Well, OK, he had. But not for just holding on to a piece of his mum. Lucas could understand that. It wasn't as if Sid was sitting at home getting fat off the rental profits. Literally. Aside from a tiny belly rounding out his T-shirt, he was in good shape, considering the smoking and drinking.

Lucas cleared his throat. "Right, well, time to get moving."

He showed him to the van—a boxy Mercedes Sprinter Cargo van in basic builder white. Sid looked a bit surprised that he drove it, presumably imagining something more like a little post-uni runabout, like a Fiat. But he looked even more confused when Lucas opened the rear doors to put their luggage inside.

"Fucking hell, did you do this?"

Lucas fought the urge to preen. "I did sort of, yeah."

The van's interior was mostly converted into a camper. He'd done the work himself based on YouTube tutorials and some advice from various forums. It was nothing crazy—no entertainment setups or LED strip lights. Just a small bed with storage underneath, some fairy lights, a little kitchen area with a rechargeable sink pump, and a two-ring gas hob. He'd put up shiplap to cover the insulation and put in some wood-effect lino for the floor. There was a chimney, but he hadn't gotten around to installing a wood burner under it.

That had been on his to-do list when Julian convinced him the van was a waste of time and money.

"Do you go camping much?" Sid asked as they got into the front seats, screened from the back by a heavy-duty thermal blackout curtain.

"Um... I suppose," Lucas hedged, clipping his seatbelt. When he looked over, he found Sid regarding him with a raised eyebrow.

"You've never been out in it, have you?" Sid asked, though it wasn't really a question.

Lucas felt his face heating.

"I meant to," he started, sorting out the sat-nav to avoid Sid's gaze. "The idea was to live in it. I had some money saved up that my mum left me, and I was going to save more by camping full-time and doing a bit of freelance copyediting. Then I'd have time to work on my novel."

He waited for the scoffing and disbelief, but Sid didn't say anything. Lucas looked his way and found him waiting for him to continue.

"Um... but then I got this job offer at the library, and it was a stable income, so I had to take it, and that meant staying local, and it's kind of hard to have an 8-6 job and live in a van, so... I stayed in the flat."

The sleeping bag and all the kitchen stuff were still in the back, too. He'd kept putting off unpacking it until it had stopped occurring to him. He just changed out the dehumidifier block every month, and the rest of the time, he ignored the back of the van.

It had been the right choice not to go, really. Julian had been right about everything—the money was pretty good, and eventually he'd find the time to work on his novel. He just got so tired by the weekend that it was all he could do to take care of himself and the flat, ready for the next week. But it wasn't as if the novel was going anywhere. He'd get to it eventually.

"I've been meaning to sell it for a while," he rambled as he manoeuvred out of his parking space and cruised away from the flat. "It is a bit impractical, and as you said, I've never been out in it."

"You should," Sid said. "Sounds like it'd be a lot of fun. You're only young once."

"Not sure I still count as young," Lucas muttered. "I'll be forty soon enough."

"In nine years," Sid exclaimed. "Trust me, it goes quick. You could be published by then, writing books full-time. Or you could still be at the library. Which is fine, if you're happy there."

Was he happy? He hadn't really thought about it. He wasn't *un*happy. So surely all that was left was to be happy with how things were. He didn't mind the library, even if some of the customers were very hard to deal with—the place functioned increasingly like a drop-in centre where he and the rest of the staff picked up the pieces of the underfunded social sector. If he'd returned Mr Lambert to the care home once, he'd done it thirty times, and fielding complaints from parents about the motley collection of alcoholics in the reading room was a daily chore. But he wasn't miserable. It was easy, doing the same thing week after week.

"I don't know. I'll discuss it with Julian. He should be involved, I mean, if we're getting married," Lucas said, annoyed by his own fence sitting. When had he become one of those people who couldn't make a decision without asking his boyfriend?

"And he is proposing this Christmas?" Sid asked.

"He's hinted that it's a big deal to have me this year, and he wanted Clive to come. So, yes. I think it's happening this year. If we can get through this week without this little sham blowing up in my face."

"Better make sure we keep it going then." Sid sat up straight in his seat. "Do we need to learn each other's backstories? Hobbies? Habits?"

"Well, we're meant to be recently reconnected, so… plenty of wiggle room on that front. But we should probably cover the basics. You know, how you met my mum, what she was like, why you left… why you came back. Oh, and also, I told Julian you're retired."

Sid sniffed. "Great. Anyway, why I left seems easy enough. I mean, I'm gay, so that probably would put the kibosh on it, even if I wasn't fifteen when you were born. As for why I came back… well, not likely to have any more kids now, am I, so maybe I thought it was time to get to know the one I already had. God, that makes me sound like a piece of shit."

Lucas laughed. “No more so than my actual father, don’t worry about it.”

“Is he really that bad?” Sid asked.

“Yes. Absolutely. I mean—you’re older, don’t tell me your dad was super supportive when you came out,” Lucas said, needled by the suggestion that he was judging his father too harshly.

Sid seemed to consider for a moment. “For the time, he was, I suppose. Sort of agreed on a don’t ask, don’t tell policy. Bit harder when Frank and I moved in together, but if Dad ever had to talk about him, he’d just call him my ‘friend’.”

“Hmmm,” Lucas hummed. “Probably helped that you’re all blokey.”

“Blokey?” Sid repeated, clearly amused.

“Yeah—you know, you’re all…” Lucas mimed swagger as well as he could while keeping both hands on the wheel. “You probably drink beer and like football and… play darts. Julian is the same. But more in a posh way—he has rugby friends, and they can talk for literal hours about microbreweries and tennis.”

He caught the sight of Sid’s wrinkled nose out of the corner of his eye.

“Well, I do drink beer, can’t stand football—find it boring as fuck, to be honest—and I haven’t played darts since a caravanning holiday in Wales about… thirty years ago. Can’t say I’d get on with Julian and his mates either. Tennis is worse than golf.”

Lucas laughed. “Oh, don’t say that to him. Julian and his dad golf all the time when he’s down for a visit. With his brother, Christopher. He keeps threatening to let me join them once I’ve met everyone properly, and I have no idea how I’ll get out of it.”

“Fatal grass allergy?” Sid suggested. “Trypophobia only triggered by small holes in turf?”

Another laugh bubbled out of him. “Can you imagine? Right, so you’re not into football or darts. What do you like? What does Sidney do of a weekend?”

Sid actually seemed to consider for a while. “I dunno… just… stuff. Normal stuff.”

“Very helpful… also suggests you’re protesting too much about being ‘normal’,” Lucas pointed out.

"I just mean..." Sid huffed. "I go do the shopping, I dig over the garden and cook roasts. I go round the charity shops or to car boots and try to keep fit."

"Gym?" Lucas asked, remembering how nicely those jeans had clung to Sid's legs and the way his biceps strained against the rolled-up sleeves of his T-shirt. He was fit, despite the little belly he was sporting, which was actually kind of cute on him. Cosy in a way Lucas knew his mega-thighs were not.

"Most weeks. I used to drive out to Kincraig or Beacon Fell to hike, but we lost our car, so we haven't done much of that recently. Failed the MOT," he added, as if sensing Lucas's next question. "And I used to like going to gigs. That's how we met. Frank and me. He was lead guitar, and I did sound for the open mic nights."

Sid lapsed into silence as if the mere mention of Frank had doused any spark of conversation. Which wasn't ideal, considering they had a long drive ahead of them, and Lucas wanted to unearth as much as possible to try and help sell the ridiculous scheme he'd concocted.

He cleared his throat, determined to fan the flames of discourse into life again.

"I don't know much about music. I just like what I like, and I don't really bother with seeing things live. But I do like live shows—for podcasts and things?"

Sid nodded, but it took a moment before he replied. "How did you meet—you and Julian?"

"Oh, we just met." Lucas shrugged. "Online, you know. The apps. I don't have a great dating history. Lots of short-term, not a lot of people sticking around for my glowing personality." He laughed, trying to play it off, but it came out more self-conscious than self-deprecating. "Anyway, he was the first person to look past the nerdy stuff and fancy me, so... here we are."

"Here you are," Sid echoed, and Lucas didn't like the way he made it sound. Like Julian was a spur-of-the-moment flight he'd booked, and now he was standing at a foreign airport asking himself, *'Now what?'*

"I'm going to stop at the next services for coffee," Lucas said. "You can get out and smoke then if you want."

"Sounds good," Sid muttered, then turned on the radio.

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Chapter Six
SIDNEY

The services they stopped at were huge but not that busy, considering it was a week from Christmas. Apparently, Lucas's need for 'extra time' was good for that at least and they were early enough to be missing a lot of the traffic. Sid rolled a cigarette as Lucas parked the van and dug around for his wallet.

The van was cool, he had to concede. He was impressed by the level of finish that had gone into it. Sid wasn't handy with anything that wasn't electrical. Those spur-of-the-moment kitchen cabinets had been a pain in the arse. He wondered whether Lucas had considered a solar panel setup and whether he wanted advice on putting it together. He could offer, maybe, as a bit of payback for not calling the police when he stumbled into his flat.

The air outside was bracingly cold after having the heater blasting him in the face for the past hour. It was, however, free of the sweet, gingerbread scent of whatever Lucas had bathed in or sprayed on (rolled in?). It had hit him when Lucas opened the flat's downstairs door for him. A waft of bakery-fresh vanilla and spices. Having only previously seen Lucas in his pyjamas, it was also a bit of a shock to see him all dressed up.

Lucas had answered the door in tight grey tweedy trousers, rolled up at the cuffs, over his brown boots. On top, he'd had a navy jumper dotted with beaded holly, under a dark red velvet blazer. Like he was dressed for a winter wonderland and not a car journey. It looked good on him, though Sid had tried not to notice as he climbed the stairs behind him. But even in the wake of serious heartbreak,

he could still appreciate a generous arse and graspable hips—especially when they were at eye-level and wrapped up like a present in tight trousers.

Funnily enough, despite very much being an arse man, when he and Frank got together, Frank had been straight up and down like a pole. He had that underfed rocker look, hip-bones sharper than glass and deceptively strong, lean, arms—hard and cool as a beer bottle. Comparatively, Lucas was a gingerbread man come to life, soft and warm all over, with the scent to match.

"Do you want coffee?" Lucas asked, disturbing his slightly inappropriate thoughts better than any December gale. "I might as well queue for the two of us."

"Alright, but I'll pay you back," he said. "Or get snacks or something."

"OK, cool." Lucas pulled on some hand warmers and hunched his shoulders under his blazer. "Let me guess, you want plain black 'normal' coffee?"

He rolled his eyes. "Latte, please. Cinnamon, if they've got it."

Lucas narrowed his eyes. "Are you just saying that because you don't want me to be right?"

He raised an eyebrow. He wasn't lying, actually. He normally brewed his own and chose his beans carefully, grinding them himself. But takeaway coffee was so average-to-terrible that he liked it with plenty of sugar and milk. As for the syrup, he was suddenly craving something sweet and spicy.

Still, it was entertaining to wind Lucas up.

"Fine," Lucas huffed. "If you're getting snacks, please make sure some of them are salty and some are sweet. Oh, and some cheesy. I like a range."

"It's barely another hour in the car," he pointed out, amused as they started to walk towards the entrance.

"And back again at the end of the week," Lucas protested. "Also, I'm not sure what the snack situation is at Julian's parents' house. What if they're those weird people who only have plain almonds and dark chocolate on hand?"

"At... Christmas?" Sid felt the need to point out.

"Who knows!?" Lucas threw up his hands. "I am not looking to find out that they're raw vegans or seaweed cracker enjoyers after a four-hour festive hike, with no dinner in sight for the length of a family film—are you?"

He had to admit that did sound pretty miserable. Much of his enjoyment of hiking came from the pub lunch or fat doorstop sandwiches afterwards. He couldn't imagine coming in from the cold to be greeted by sugar-free brownies or ketogenic sausage rolls.

"You know I'm right," Lucas sing-songed, apparently reading his expression. "Plenty of snacks, please, chop-chop."

"Alright then, but I think fairness demands you get me a biscuit or a scone or something with the coffee. Even Starbucks doesn't cost enough to offset a van full of snacks."

"You drive a hard bargain, but I accept." Lucas rolled his eyes again and stepped through the automatic doors. "Off you pop."

Having received his marching orders, Sid was annoyed to find the 'supermarket' in the service station was an M&S Food. The prices were hair-raising, and the brands he was familiar with were entirely absent. He was desperate for a bag of McCoy's, not 'hand-cut sea salt and cider vinegar crisps'. Still, he filled a basket and went through the self-checkout with enough food to keep them going even if Julian's family were planning to fast through the festive period.

He found Lucas waiting for him in the entryway by a plastic train that played obnoxious music. Lucas seemed oblivious both to the annoying soundtrack and the fact that two men at a nearby KFC table were eying him up appreciatively—chicken thighs not the only kind on their minds. Sid felt an unaccountable surge of annoyance at them and quickly stepped into their eye line on his way to Lucas.

Lucas caught sight of him and smiled. He'd done something to his mouth since they'd split up—his lips were shiny and tinted reddish, some kind of lip balm with glitter in it. *It probably has a flavour, too*, Sid thought. Something festively themed, no doubt, like mulled wine or sugar plums. He licked his own slightly windburned lips automatically.

"Here you go." Lucas handed him a tall burgundy cup. "Starbucks was heaving, so I went to Costa. They're better anyway, but don't tell anyone, or they'll take away my millennial card. Give me a bag."

He handed over one of his shopping bags and took the cup, holding it carefully so the wrapped biscuit on top didn't fall. A gingerbread man. Of course.

They walked back to the car to stash the snacks in the back of the van, then Sid wandered over to a couple of picnic benches under some trees where he could light his cigarette. He set the coffee on the table and sat with his legs outstretched as he lit up. He wasn't expecting Lucas to follow him, but he did, climbing up to sit on the table itself after grimacing at the water droplets that had fallen from the underside onto the seat when Sid sat down.

Sid looked at the cellophane-wrapped gingerbread man on top of his coffee cup, sporting a jaunty icing scarf and annoyingly knowing eyes. Had Lucas bought it on purpose? *Of course not*, he told himself, irritated. Lucas wasn't to know he'd been sniffing his body lotion or whatever it was all the way here. That the sweet waft of it had chased the last traces of Frank's body spray away. If he knew he'd also been thinking about his arse, he'd probably have left him at the side of the road by now.

"So, what do you do?" Sid asked, tapping ash onto the damp grass. "Aside from working at the library and the nerdy stuff in your flat?"

"Hey, your first love was into that 'nerdy stuff', so be careful what you say," Lucas joked, but there was a slightly defensive undertone to it. Sid made a note not to call it that again. "But I suppose I'm like you—I just do stuff. Not hike, thank god. I love a mooch, you know what I mean? Around TK Maxx or a fancy market mostly, but you are correct that charity shops and car boots are also perfectly mooch-worthy. I go to marches—mostly queer causes, government protests, anything where I can use a megaphone and put glitter on to shout at bigots, really. Oh, and I love a trip to London, specifically to the big Lush on Oxford Street. It's like a pilgrimage." Lucas gave him a look. "You don't know what Lush is, do you?"

"It's the shop I had to leave when I got jumped by five people before I could find a bar of fucking soap," Sid said flatly. "Smells a lot like you do right now."

"Delicious?"

Yes. Absolutely. Annoyingly.

"Strongly."

Lucas rolled his eyes but continued. "And I love brunch. Brunch is the only thing good about Sundays. But you probably don't go in for that either."

"I've brunched," Sid said, mildly offended. "It's just a late breakfast. Not that special."

Lucas clapped a hand to his chest. "It's a completely different menu! A different vibe! Breakfast is like, 'My eyes aren't open, but I guess this'll keep me alive until lunch', but brunch is... leisurely. It's about enjoying yourself. You mess around in bed before you get up, put on a nice outfit. Basically, brunch is how people like us get a taste of what being posh is like every day."

Sid snorted. "Only if a butler brings it to you on a silver tray, with an ironed newspaper."

"What are you, Hercule Poirot?" Lucas raised an eyebrow. "Oooh, I hope Julian's family like to watch a Poirot at Christmas. Nothing better to sofa-rot to while you eat too much cheese."

Sid was about to ask him which one was his favourite, hoping that it wasn't one of the god-awful new ones, when Lucas's phone made a loud noise. The younger man dove for it immediately, almost knocking over his coffee in the process.

"You're keen," Sid muttered, suspecting it was a text from the mysterious Julian himself. "Ask him about the TV schedule."

"Mmm? Oh, it's not Julian, it's..." Lucas trailed off and went even pinker than the cold wind had already made him.

"It's?" Sid asked, pressing lightly on the pressure point.

"I have an eBay auction ending, and I didn't want to miss it. That's why I'm lingering here, in case you wondered—free Wi-Fi, my data limit is shockingly low." Lucas swiped at the phone and frowned. "But it's just become too expensive for me to justify. Crap."

"What're you bidding on?" Sid asked as he put out his cigarette and started unwrapping the gingerbread man that had been leering knowingly at him all the while. "Darth Vader's pants?"

"Ha. Ha. Ha," Lucas deadpanned. "It's just this set of tapes I wanted. *Doctor Who* stories. Kind of wanted to hear them again, but the recordings aren't on Spotify or anything. Not the same ones, anyway. I want to hear the voices again

—the same exact ones. My mum gave me hers before she died, and my dad got rid of them while I was at uni."

Sid felt a sharp stab of anger directed solely at Lucas's excuse for a father. "What a prick," he said before he could think better of it.

Lucas, mid concilliatory coffee sip, nearly spat out a mouthful of drink. "Sidney Shale—you wash your mouth out." But he looked amused.

"Well, it's true, isn't it? Can't believe he got rid of that stuff when it's yours and obviously so important. S'just prick behaviour," he grumbled and took a mouthful of gingerbread to shut himself up.

"Hmmm," Lucas hummed. "He was pretty much done with me the second I left for halls, to be honest. I didn't expect him to keep my room as a shrine or anything, but I'd have appreciated the chance to go back and get some things. I haven't actually been home since. No point."

Sid swallowed the gingerbread, which was suddenly heavy in his throat. "Not at all? Where'd you go for Christmas then?"

"At uni? First year, I went home with a friend to her family, and that was really awkward, so after that, I stayed in student accommodation and just had a bit of a break from everyone. That's sort of been my tradition, until now, of course. I just veg out, eat snacks, and nest, then hit the sales."

Sid couldn't quite believe what he was hearing. "He just lets you spend Christmas alone?"

"As I said, I haven't been home, haven't seen Dad in years, so..."

"I mean Julian," Sid interrupted, appalled. "How long have you been together?"

"Just three years, only two Christmases." Lucas shrugged, but it was stiff with fake indifference. Sid could see it bothered him.

"Two Christmases that he's left you to go home to his family?" Sid said, unable to keep from spelling it out because it just beggared belief.

"People have separate Christmases all the time. It's not like we're married," Lucas muttered.

"Yeah, if they have somewhere else to go. Not..." He cut himself off, not wanting to push the point home that Lucas had no one and nowhere to go.

"It's honestly fine—like I said, that first Christmas with my friend was a bit awkward. Being a guest at someone else's family Christmas. It just felt off. So, I prefer relaxing at home. I get to watch the *Doctor Who* Christmas special and eat my entire trifle in peace. And Julian invited me this year because we're going to be family, so... that's different."

Sid thought of all the years he'd spent Christmas with Frank. He'd taken him home to see his dad a few times, and despite a bit of awkwardness, it had been OK. They'd not stayed over, and his dad hadn't asked them to, but that was just how it was. Frank's family were more open but chaotic, and their Christmas visits to them had been marked by boozy parties and infighting, though generally fun. He couldn't imagine for one moment leaving Frank at home all alone for Christmas. Only, of course, he just had.

He wondered if Baz would join him this year. Take Frank out for a roast and a pint or pop round to make mulled wine and watch the old films on TV. The way they used to. If he'd stay for the inevitable arguments when Frank got frustrated that nothing was open and there wasn't even any post to break up *'the monotony'* of it all. As far as he was aware, Baz was divorced, so he didn't have anywhere else to be but in Sid's house, with his newly single boyfriend.

"You're thinking about him," Lucas said, breaking through his thoughts. "Frank."

"I know who 'him' is, thanks," Sid muttered. "I was just thinking about what he'll do on Christmas. We haven't spent it apart since we got together. Even if we went to his family or mine for a bit, it was always us two going."

"Sounds nice," Lucas said, his eyes clouded with thoughts of his own that he didn't seem inclined to share.

"It was. Mostly." Sid cleared his throat. "Then he fucked it all up, didn't he? Anyway, we should get back on the road. News said it might snow this week, and I am not looking to get stuck at a service station that only has a bloody M&S. I'd be bankrupt by Boxing Day."

Lucas seemed to brighten at that poor attempt at a joke. "Fine, back to the van then. Are you going to finish that?"

Sid looked down at the headless gingerbread man resting on top of its wrapper. "Nah. You have it. Bit sweet for me."

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Chapter Seven
LUCAS

Even after they were back on the road, Lucas couldn't shake what Sid had said to him about Julian. He'd seemed so shocked and downright appalled that Lucas had spent the past two Christmases alone despite being coupled up. He'd never really thought of it that way, to be honest. After all, if he'd had a family of his own to go to, Lucas would probably have done so, at least the first year. Maybe the second, too. It wasn't Julian's fault that he didn't have somewhere to spend the festive period.

But... it would have been nice, in retrospect, if Julian had invited him or offered to spend at least some of his time off in Blackpool with him. Instead, Julian had, for the last two years, headed across to York the week before Christmas and stayed there until New Year. Unlike Lucas, Julian's job allowed for remote working and closed their offices for most of the Christmas period, so he had the time off to spend there.

He did enjoy his Christmas peace and quiet. He had enjoyed it at least back when he lived in a shared uni house, and the day-to-day was noise, bathroom queues, other people's laundry, and washing up cluttering the place. Having a whole house to himself after months of that was blissful—he'd taken long baths in the finally clean bathroom, taken his duvet to the living room, and enjoyed sole custody of the television. Not to mention, he could stay in his pyjamas all day and drink Baileys in his morning coffee with no one to judge.

Since moving into his own flat, however, being alone all the time had become his default state. He didn't relish it as much, especially around Christmas when

it wasn't as easy to connect with people for a top-up of socialisation. The shops, cafés, and pubs were all shut, and the town centre was a chilly ghost town. But he'd never voiced that to Julian. That would have felt too clingy, bordering on emotional blackmail.

Anyway, this year, he was invited to the McKinley family Christmas, and if all went well, he would be for many years to come. Whatever traditions they had, he was only too happy to join in on. It wasn't as if he had any of his own to miss. Well, maybe one.

When his mum was alive and times were better, they'd stay up late and watch Poirot—his favourite was *Death on the Nile*, the 1978 version with Peter Ustinov. But they'd loved some Suchet, too. He'd have a wine glass of Fanta (très sophisticated), and they'd spend the advert breaks rushing to fill their plates from the kitchen buffet or explaining their theories to each other. His dad wasn't in these memories—he'd probably been at work or asleep off-shift. Ideal, really.

Sid seemed preoccupied on the drive, too. Not that he'd been especially chatty before they stopped, but he was looking out of the windshield now and barely blinking, lost in thought. Lucas suspected he was thinking about Frank. He wondered what he was like, Sid's boyfriend of sixteen years. Why had they never gotten married? Fair, it had only become legal in 2013, but that was still nearly fourteen years ago. They'd had plenty of time to get used to the idea that they could, if they wanted. And there had been civil partnerships even before that. Maybe they just weren't into the idea.

As they drew closer to the McKinley family home, Lucas started to get anxious. What if they didn't like him? What had Julian told them about him, really? He knew he was a bit (OK, a lot) full-on sometimes. Julian had told him as much. He was the human equivalent of one of his jazzier TK Maxx shirts—loud, bold, and not to everyone's tastes. All he knew about Julian's parents and his brother, Christopher, was that they were quite sophisticated people. They were from somewhere called 'the home countries', had a wine cellar, used to breed spaniels, and occasionally rode horses. Lucas had grown up in Blackpool and never spent more than ten pounds on wine. He'd never even seen a horse in real life.

"Are you nervous?" Sid asked out of the blue, making him jump.

"No. Of course not. Why?" he snapped back.

"That's the second left turn you missed."

He looked at the sat-nav, which was crankily re-routing him. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"I did. You were miles away... like we are from where we're going," Sid said.

Lucas used a side road to turn around and head back the way they'd come. The sat-nav settled down and stopped huffily telling him to 'turn around where possible'.

"You don't need to be nervous," Sid said, once they'd safely taken the right turning.

"Yeah, I kind of do." Lucas sighed. "I'm meeting my boyfriend's family for the first time, and I'm about to lie to them, and him, about who you are. This was a terrible idea."

"Maybe... but we're in it now, so what can you do?" Sid shrugged. "Anyway, that's not what I meant. You're worried you're not good enough for them."

"I... Maybe, a bit," Lucas mumbled when he realised denying it wasn't going to wash with the man sitting next to him.

Sid had already clocked his nervousness, and they were both from the same sort of background, so he probably understood at least some of it. Though on top of that, Lucas was regretting wearing a sequinned jumper—Julian hated it when he wore sparkles, why would Christmas be any different?

"They're really posh," Lucas said. "And Julian is very... straight-laced. They might not be expecting someone quite like me. What if they don't think I'm good enough?"

"Pssht." Sid waved that idea away. "Look, you're clean, you're polite, and you're employed. If my son brought you home, I'd be happy. Even if you do smell like the bakery section of Sainsbury's fucked about a hundred scented candles."

Lucas laughed despite himself. "OK... fair."

"Not saying it's not nice, mind," Sid allowed. "Better than rolling up stinking of weed."

"That a Frank thing?" Lucas couldn't help but ask.

"That's a Frank thing," Sid muttered, looking suddenly dour.

Lucas wished he could take it back. Instead, he decided to distract him.

"I can't imagine any son of yours wanting to date me," he huffed.

"I can't imagine having a son." Sid shrugged. "But if he passed on you, I'd be having a word with him."

Lucas fought a smile. Sid was just being nice, but it was working, and he didn't feel as nervous anymore. Sure, Julian's family were the kind of posh that had a holiday cottage in France and a room in their house called 'the library', but that didn't mean he wasn't going to be welcome. Julian loved him, and surely that was all that mattered?

As for the lie, well... it was a white lie for Christmas. He was sparing them the ordeal of enduring Clive for the festive season. He was sure that given the choice between his deception and hearing one of his dad's *'can't go anywhere without seeing a hijab these days'* rants, they'd pick Sid every day of the week. He was really just trying to save Christmas. Wasn't that a nice thing to do?

"Fuck me, is this it?" Sid asked when they reached the curved wooden gates that separated Julian's family home from the public road. "Talk about Christmas murder mysteries, feels like we're in one."

Lucas couldn't help but agree, especially when he opened the window to use the intercom and a voice told him, "Come in, Mr Hart, we're expecting you." He wondered if the McKinley family had a butler. There had been something about the slightly bored fancy voice that had reminded him of Croft Manor and shutting the poor polygonal butler in the freezer as a kid.

The house was definitely giving *Tomb Raider*, though not in PS1 graphics, thankfully. It was red brick with sandstone accents, and the winter sunshine made the whole thing glow. The leaded glass windows sparkled down at him as he drove the van up the drive, and smoke rose from the chimneys on the roof, projecting cosiness and warmth.

"Well, if you don't marry him, I will," Sid said, taking it all in with raised eyebrows. "You never said he was loaded."

"He's not. His parents are... and he never said their house was like this," Lucas admitted.

It wasn't a stately home or anything, but the National Trust would probably still wedge a café into it and call it a 'hidden gem'. As he pulled up—wishing he'd

put the van through the car wash before setting off—the glossy green front door opened, and four people trooped out. The whole family.

"OK... game faces," Lucas muttered, trying to make himself sound less freaked out than he felt. "You, Dad. Me, charming future son-in-law."

"Got it. Now give 'em plenty of tits and teeth," Sid hissed back and smiled at the gathered McKinley family members, offering a wave through the windscreen.

All traces of his dour, heartbroken fug were replaced by cheerfulness. He had a nice smile, Lucas was relieved to discover. It made him light up, younger and cheekier than you'd expect. It also made Lucas feel a little less nervous.

"Welcome! You must be Lucas. Julian has told us so much about you!"

He'd barely got out of the van before Julian's mother was pulling him in for a double cheek kiss, squeezing his shoulders. "I'm Eva, this is Julian's father, Aaron."

"How do you do?" Aaron, a taller, older version of Julian with ruddy cheeks and clipped back hair, stepped forward to shake his hand. His all-navy tweed suit instantly made Lucas feel underdressed. Eva was wearing a fluffy white jumper almost the same shade as her bobbed hair, accessorised with gold and pearl earrings.

"Nice to meet you both," Lucas said, smiling in a way he hoped was natural and not showing how overwhelmed he felt. "This is my dad, my biological dad, Sidney. Sid."

"Hi." Sid shook Aaron's hand and submitted to a double kiss from Eva, who amusingly was slightly taller than him. "Thank you for having me."

Sid hadn't said anything about his mum on the drive down, but it was clear he'd been raised right. Lucas couldn't imagine it was his dad who'd taught him such good manners, though perhaps he was wrong to assume that and was basing it entirely on his own father's bullish behaviour.

"You are very welcome, it's lovely to meet you," Eva was saying to Sid. "And this is Julian's brother, Christopher, and his lovely girlfriend, Magda."

Christopher had his mother's white-blonde hair and his father's ruddy cheeks. He was built like a rugby player and dressed it—his shirt sleeves rolled up to expose muscular forearms. Magda was willowy and dressed in a red coat,

which Lucas could tell was cashmere even from this distance. Her hair was straight off Princess Kate, and her bag was Prada. He was already jealous.

Lucas shook Christopher's hand (*ow*) and then Magda's. Sid followed suit, and Lucas clocked Christopher's raised eyebrow as he took in the impressive height difference between the pair of them. Lucas would have to claim it came from his mother's side of the family.

"Let me show you to your rooms. Christopher will help with the bags," Eva said. "Sidney, I have you in the guest cottage in the gardens, if that's alright? We only have the four bedrooms in the house. Lucas, you'll be upstairs in the room next door to Christopher and Magda."

"Right..." Sid said after a short pause.

He glanced his way, and Lucas knew he had just done the same mental maths he had. Four bedrooms—one for Mr and Mrs McKinley, one for Christopher and his girlfriend... and apparently Julian and Lucas would be in separate rooms. Hence why Sid was being put in the garden cottage.

"I'm sure I can manage the bags," Lucas said, hoping to forestall any comment from Sid about the surprising sleeping arrangements. He also didn't want Christopher to see inside the van and comment on it being a camper, something he suddenly felt very self-conscious about. As well as the pile of snacks back there.

"I'll give you a hand," Sid said and joined him in rounding the van to quickly extract their luggage.

"Are you OK with that?" Sid asked under his breath. "The bedroom thing?"

"What about it?" Lucas forced himself to sound chipper, as if it hadn't put a twist in his stomach.

"Uh, the fact that their straight son is sharing with his partner, but they've split you and Julian up?" Sid said, not taking the hint to leave it alone. "Seems a bit... puritan."

"Well, some people are funny about unmarried couples sharing," Lucas muttered, slamming the door.

"They're not married," Sid pointed out unnecessarily, because Lucas had been right there when Eva said 'girlfriend'.

“Whatever, it’s their house,” he hissed and plastered a smile on as they walked back around to the front of the van. “All sorted.”

“Wonderful. Well, Sidney, Aaron will show you to the cottage, and Lucas, why don’t you follow me to your room?”

“Sounds great.” Lucas stepped away from Sid, hoping this would be the end of the discussion. “Right behind you.”

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Chapter Eight
SID

He was already getting tired of this 'Sidney' bullshit. Only his mum ever called him that, and only when he was in a lot of trouble.

It was, however, less irritating to him than the obvious unfairness of the sleeping situation. Lucas might be putting a brave face on it, but he'd seen the little spasm of surprise and hurt cross his face when he'd realised he was sleeping in a separate room to Julian. Hurt that was perfectly justified in Sid's view. Either it was alright for unmarried couples to sleep together or not. Sure, maybe some parents were a bit freaked out by the notion of their adult kids shagging under their roof. God knows his own dad had never wanted him and Frank to stay the night, but that had to be a rule for everyone, even Sid's straight cousins. It didn't exactly endear Aaron and Eva to him.

"And here is the guest cottage." Aaron gestured to the neat little wood-clad building at the end of the lawn.

It was surrounded by what was probably an orchard in other seasons. Bare, gnarled trees currently draped in white Christmas lights probably produced apples or pears in warmer weather. It was less a cottage and more a sort of summer house with a large glass sliding door, but he wasn't looking down on it. It was nicer than the spare room he'd been expecting.

Aaron unlocked the sliding door and handed him the key. "There's a kitchenette. Obviously, you're welcome to come up to the house for anything you need, but Eva had it stocked up with the essentials for you. More convenient that way."

The room beyond the sliding door was a lounge. A large corner-group sofa faced a flat screen on a white wall. Beyond it was a kitchen with shiny SMEG appliances and a closed door, which was probably a bathroom. There were wooden stairs leading up to a loft bedroom overhead, tucked under the roof that wasn't quite tall enough for a second floor. There wasn't much decoration—some watercolours of the countryside and some probably very expensive blankets and cushions in tweedy patterns. It all had a sort of hunting lodge feel—especially when he clocked the umbrella stand stuffed with walking sticks, the antler hooks over it ready to hold any number of Barbours and Dry-Robes.

"Looks great, thank you. Love the um… fireplace." He gestured at the electric fire under the TV, which was on and glowing with almost realistic flames.

"Thanks. Got a great deal on it," Aaron said proudly. "So… you're a little younger than I was expecting, if you don't mind my saying. You must have started young, eh?" He nudged him jovially, and Sid forced a smile. The alternative was wrinkling his nose at the overly chummy behaviour.

"Yeah, I was fifteen when Lucas was born. Can't believe it's taken this long to get back in touch with him, really. Time's just… flown by."

"Oh, it does—seems like just yesterday Julian was learning to walk, and now he's managing hedge funds!" Aaron laughed uproariously, which was impressive as he hadn't said anything that funny.

Sid reflected that he could only think of two things he liked less than overly friendly posh people: parking tickets and food poisoning.

No, wait—three things: parking tickets, food poisoning, and people who were in denial about being homophobic. Aaron was definitely in that camp. He could just sense it, had been around enough of it to know. His dad might have been tolerant of him, but Lucas was right, it had a lot to do with the fact that Sid was 'blokey' enough for him to pretend 90% of the time that he wasn't queer. If he'd been as… expressive as Lucas was, his dad would have had a lot more to say about it.

"I take it you and Lucas's mother weren't together very long?" Aaron asked while Sid tried to mentally usher him out of the cottage.

"Oh, no. We weren't really compatible." Was he going to do it? *Fuck it, might as well.* "I came out not long after she got pregnant, so…"

"Oh..." Aaron's salt and pepper eyebrows rose, and his politely boisterous voice rose an octave or so in surprise.

Sid bit his tongue to suppress a smirk. His prediction had been dead on.

"So you're... also..." Aaron said, leaving a gap for the word 'gay' as if they were playing some kind of ad-libs game.

"Gay. Yeah," he said, enjoying the nervous way Aaron swallowed for a second before feeling bad—not for the squirming posh bloke in front of him but for Lucas. And maybe a bit for Julian, too.

This was not the face of acceptance. It was the face of tolerance. Begrudging tolerance at that.

"So are you... married?" Aaron asked, after clearing his throat.

"No," Sid said, no longer in the mood to bait him. "Just broke up with someone, actually. How long have you and Eva been married?" he asked, shifting attention away from himself.

Aaron seized on the opportunity, thankfully.

"Thirty-two years," he said proudly. "We were together a year before having Christopher, and then Julian followed shortly after."

It made sense. He and his wife were easily in their fifties, though they looked younger than Sid expected in some ways. *Must be all the good living, and maybe a squirt or two of Botox.*

"I'll leave you to get settled in, then do please join us for a coffee if you fancy it," Aaron said with a smile and then left him to it, probably desperate to find his wife and tell her about this latest development.

Sid watched him go and then slid the door shut.

He thought he'd be married by now, actually. He'd asked Frank. Twice. Once before it was legal, when they'd have just been civil partners, and again once marriage equality came into law. Frank had turned him down flat, both times. The first time, he'd said it was because he didn't want some *'half-arsed version of marriage'* and that accepting that would be condoning the government withholding the real deal. The second time, he'd said *'c'mon, mate, that shit's for the straights',* as if the whole concept of marriage was something he wanted nothing to do with. Sid had tried to believe it, but even at the time, he'd

wondered if it was him that Frank couldn't be arsed with, not marriage itself. Now, of course, it stung all over again.

Sid took his bag upstairs and unpacked his clothes into the built-in wardrobe. Everything was very white in the cottage. He kept checking the cream carpet and the white walls, paranoid that the colour would leech out of his socks or his hands would spontaneously produce grime to mark the paintwork. He got twitchy around nice things, normally in shops. It always felt like he was tempting fate to go near anything breakable, expensive, or special. He could always hear his mum in his head: *'Don't touch that, Sidney, we can't afford it.'*

With his bag unpacked, he wrenched the duvet out from under the mattress. It had been tucked hotel style, and he didn't want to fight his way out later. That done, he went for a quick look around the kitchenette. Apparently, 'the essentials' weren't just milk, tea, and coffee. The fridge held ciders, a Christmas cheese selection, and butter. The countertop bread bin was full of scones, croissants, and, of course, sourdough bread. In the cupboards, he found a lot of jams, honey, and even Marmite in tiny hotel-sized jars. Maybe Julian's parents let this place as a holiday home. It was certainly nice enough for it.

The sound of the sliding door rolling open made him jump, and he guiltily shut the cupboard. Like he'd been caught burglarising the place. But it was just Lucas—pink-cheeked and looking so jittery he was in danger of falling over his own feet.

"Everything alright?" Sid asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Did you tell Aaron you were gay, just, right off the bat?" Lucas asked, folding his arms.

"It came up." Sid folded his own arms and leant against the kitchen counter with a nonchalance he didn't really feel. Something about Lucas's tense expression was making him feel like he'd put his foot in it, and they'd only been here fifteen minutes.

"Did it? Or could you just not wait to poke the bear?" Lucas retorted. "I knew as soon as they told us about the bedroom… thing you'd get all offended."

"Because you know me so well?" Sid rolled his eyes, annoyed that Lucas had basically guessed right. It had gotten under his skin, and he'd slightly enjoyed baiting Julian's dad with the knowledge that his son's future in-law was also gay.

"I said it's fine—their house, their rules."

"Well, their rules are fucking stupid."

They glared at each other for a second, but Sid was the first to look away. Not on purpose, mind you. He was distracted by his phone going off in his pocket. When he pulled it out, he felt his teeth scrape together in annoyance. Baz was calling him. It didn't take a genius to work out why. He declined the call, but it rang again immediately. So he blocked the number. Fuck it. He was not dealing with that mess right now.

"Is it Frank?" Lucas asked, drawing his attention back to him.

"No. It's my boss."

"The one who…"

"Yeah. The one who fucked my boyfriend," he shoved the phone back in his pocket. "Blocked him now, too."

Lucas shifted from foot to foot uneasily. "You're not worried about your job?"

"I'm worried about a lot of things. Most of them in the future. So, I'm focusing on now." Sid shrugged, uncomfortable under Lucas's gaze. "Let me get through Christmas, then I'll go back to reality and start sorting out the mess I left behind."

"O…K…" Lucas drawled. "But please, can you try not to aggravate Julian's family? This is really important to me."

"If me being gay aggravates them, that says more about them than me." Sid sighed, feeling childish even as he said it.

His activist years were behind him. He was long since past the age where a funny look or a muttered comment used to fuel his disregard for what others thought. He'd grown up and stopped rising to every bit of bait. He was just feeling a bit thin-skinned at the moment. The posh house and the posh people weren't helping.

"I'll behave myself," he amended. "Alright?"

Lucas seemed to relax a little. "Thank you. I know it's not…" He pulled a face. "I know they're being unfair, and it's a bit backwards, but… at least they're letting me stay. That's something, isn't it?"

Sid swallowed back a retort that being barely tolerated wasn't exactly praiseworthy. There was something about the pleading look on Lucas's face that told him not to push it. From what Lucas had said about his father, basic tolerance was probably new to him. Preferable to what he had at home. Which got Sid riled up all over again. Lucas ought to know he deserved respect; his dad should have taught him that instead of being his first lesson in bigotry.

"They're obviously trying," Sid allowed, and Lucas smiled warmly with relief. He just hoped the family's tolerance wasn't just skin deep.

"Are you coming back up for a coffee?" Lucas asked.

"Sure."

They walked side by side back up to the big house, the remnants of autumn leaves scattering on a light breeze in front of them. Lucas kept up a steady stream of chatter about the house, the family, and the weather. It was like he was afraid that if he stopped talking, Sid might interject with some of his opinions—ones he didn't want to hear. That was pretty accurate, Sid had to admit. So far, his impression of the McKinley family was somewhere just south of favourable. He suspected they felt much the same way about him.

At the house, they went through a back door that Lucas had presumably exited through. He seemed familiar with it at least. Sid copied him in taking off his boots and hanging up his coat amongst the others. The predictable crowd of Hunter wellies and flat caps battled for space around them. Lucas handed him a pair of navy slippers that looked brand new. On closer inspection, a white basket was tucked under the shoe rack, labelled 'guest slippers'. Lucas already had a pair on.

"Be nice," Lucas hissed as he steered him from the mud room into a bright kitchen featuring hanging copper pans, an AGA, and a scrubbed pine table.

Suddenly, he felt like he'd fallen into one of the Mary Berry Christmas programmes he usually skipped over on the TV. Just being in there made him feel more hungover and scruffy.

Still, one look at Lucas's pleading expression had him pasting on as friendly a smile as he could muster. He could make nice for one week. For Lucas's sake.

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Chapter Nine
LUCAS

After a bit of a rocky start, Sid seemed to calm down and at least try to be nice to Julian's family. Lucas could admit that he'd been a bit taken aback by the bedroom arrangements himself, but he'd quickly squashed any bad feeling over it. Maybe Magda and Christopher had been together longer, that was all. It didn't have to be a gay thing. Julian would have said if they weren't happy to have him stay.

They had coffee in a sitting room where a roaring fire awaited them. It turned out that the voice that had greeted him by intercom at the gate belonged to Stevens, a sort of 'butler of all work' who made coffee for them and then excused himself to finish packing.

"It's his last day before the Christmas break," Aaron said once Stevens left. "We're fending for ourselves this week, as per usual. He goes back to Manchester to stay with his daughter."

"Leeds," Eva corrected.

"No, it's Manchester," Aaron said, then frowned. "I think."

Lucas didn't dare look Sid's way. He could only imagine what he'd say about the McKinleys not knowing where their employee was from. The most basic information. Lucas knew where his library colleagues were from. Hell, he even knew the names of the weekday afternoon baristas' kids at the nearby Costa. But maybe that was just him being overly friendly. Julian always said he could start a conversation in an empty room. He'd made them late a few times, nattering away to someone at the help desk at work.

"It's very nice in here," he said, looking around at the wood panelling and chintz wallpaper. The furniture was old, dark wood, and it all felt very cosy in there. Despite his love of a TK Maxx find, Lucas had always been a bit partial to old things—antique furniture, vintage electronics, retro prints and styles.

Eva smiled. "Thank you, I imagine it's a bit different to a trendy flat."

He realised she was talking about where he lived. There wasn't much 'trendy' about it in his opinion. It was alright, but he wasn't allowed to make any real changes to it, and he'd put off buying any non-flat-pack furniture in case he moved out and had to get it all in the van.

"So, Julian tells us you're a librarian," Aaron said.

"Library assistant," Lucas corrected, then wished he hadn't when Aaron frowned. Correcting one's future father-in-law was probably a no-no.

"What's the difference?" Christopher interjected.

"Librarians have more training, sometimes a degree. I just lucked into working there, to be honest. But I enjoy it. It's always nice and busy."

Was he rambling? Why did it feel like he was in a job interview?

"But you do have a degree?" Aaron prompted.

"Yup, undergraduate and a master's. I saved up and went back for a year."

"In what?" Eva asked pleasantly.

"Creative writing."

There was a sort of awkward silence. Lucas winced internally. He was aware it wasn't exactly a well-regarded subject. When he'd signed on at the job centre to get housing benefit after he graduated the first time, the adviser had looked at him like *'what did you expect?'* But the fact remained that he enjoyed writing, and it had a lot of transferable value. He was happy he'd spent his student loan on something that interested him instead of plunking for something safe and 'career-focused' like accountancy.

Sid sat forward into the abyss of silence. "I'm proud of him—first person on my side of the family to go to uni once, let alone twice." He patted Lucas's knee, and Lucas felt a rush of relief that he wasn't sitting in this room alone. Where was Julian?

"Really? And what is it you do, Sidney?" Aaron asked, eyebrow twitching upwards.

Lucas fought to maintain a casual smile. Aaron was really starting to rub him the wrong way.

"Sid," Sid corrected. "Only my mum called me Sidney. And I'm… I was a sound engineer by trade. Before I retired."

"Don't sound guys work with bands and things?" Magda chipped in for the first time, looking up from the phone she'd partially concealed in her lap. "Anyone famous?"

Sid laughed easily. "Nah, not really. Mostly nightclubs, open mics, local bands, and venues. I did some work for an Oasis gig once, years ago. Can't say I saw much of them—thank god. Bunch of posers."

Lucas snorted and quickly turned it into a cough. Snort laughing was not something he wanted to do in front of the McKinleys. Thankfully, Sid jumped in before Aaron or anyone else could fire off another interview question.

"And what do you do?" Sid asked.

"I'm retired," Aaron said, with the slightest air of someone who thought this question was beneath them or that the answer should have been obvious.

Sid just nodded politely and shifted his gaze to Eva, who looked surprised.

"I volunteer reading with children at the primary school," she said, waving this off as nothing particularly special. "I haven't worked since before the boys were born."

Before Sid could get to Christopher and ask the same thing, Eva jumped in. "And is there a Mrs Shale?"

Lucas caught the look that passed between Christopher and Aaron. He'd heard them in the mud room, talking about Sid and his 'revelation', as Aaron had called it. But apparently, he had not informed his wife that their guest was: 1) gay, and 2) newly and unfortunately single. Lucas couldn't help but hold his breath as he waited for Sid to come out with some sharp retort or other.

"Sadly, no," Sid said, with a charming but rueful smile. "I'm glad Lucas didn't inherit my luck in love."

Lucas sensed he wasn't the only one relieved by that easy non-answer. Aaron seemed to relax a bit, and he caught Magda looking askance at Christopher. Apparently, he'd said something to her about Sid. Just not to Eva. Maybe they

hadn't thought it was relevant. Lucas wanted to believe that. Instead, he worried that they hadn't felt it was 'seemly' to discuss with her.

He decided to breeze over it.

"Christopher, Julian told me you're a surveyor," he said brightly.

"I own and manage an independent real estate consultancy," Christopher said, slowly and clearly as if he thought Lucas was particularly thick. Which maybe he was because he wasn't sure how that fit with Julian's talk of surveyors.

"Sounds really interesting," Lucas said and left a pause for Christopher to fill in with just what exactly was interesting about it. But he didn't offer any details, and after an awkward silence, Magda flipped her phone over and offered him a small smile.

"I run a shop in the town centre. Chris was consulting during renovations, and we just clicked."

"What sort of shop is it?" Sid asked, apparently interested.

Lucas couldn't blame him; it was the first detail offered up by the McKinleys that felt concrete. You knew where you were with a shop. *'Independent real estate consultancy'* was one of those sorts of made-up jobs that didn't make or do anything a normal person could get a grip on. Sort of like how Lucas felt when Julian tried to explain his finance job.

Though, he realised belatedly, if Magda had a shop locally, she presumably also had a home nearby. So, why was she bothering to stay over with Aaron and Eva?

Magda brightened as if this was the first time she'd ever been asked this question. "I sell a range of locally sourced artisanal items—from candles and knitwear to furniture and jewellery."

"Wow." Lucas nodded encouragingly. "Well, we'll have to have a look around. I'm sure we'll be popping into town this week. That's if it's open?"

"It is." Magda smiled. "Until Christmas Eve. Then I absolutely have to give my staff some time off."

"Staff?" Christopher laughed. "You employ one person, Mags."

"And Poppy is the best staff I could ever ask for." Magda smiled, either not sensing or ignoring the mocking tone of her boyfriend. "She's been with me since we opened."

"How long have you been open?" Sid asked.

"Six months," Magda lisped, with a small cat-like smile of pride.

Right. So, she and Christopher hadn't been seeing each other longer than he had been with Julian. Lucas wondered if Sid had asked her that on purpose to make a point. But there was no way he could have known the excuses Lucas was dreaming up to try to explain Julian's parents' house rules.

From outside came the crunch of wheels on gravel, growing louder as a car came up the drive. Lucas's heart flipped over. No one had gotten up to answer the intercom; it had to be someone with a fob or code to get past the gate. Which meant it was probably Julian.

Why was he suddenly nervous? Glancing sideways at Sid, he realised he was a bit apprehensive about the two of them meeting, which was ridiculous. Sid wasn't his real dad. He wasn't his anything. In the end, it didn't really matter if he and Julian got along beyond a few forced pleasantries because they were never going to see each other again after this week. Still, his stomach flip-flopped as Sid met his eye and offered him a small smile of reassurance. It was going to be fine.

"That must be Julian." Eva stood up and smoothed her skirt. "I expect Stevens is all packed and ready to leave. I'll go make some more coffee."

"I can give you a hand?" Sid offered when no one else did. She looked surprised at the offer.

"Oh, I can manage." She left in the direction of the kitchen, and Lucas spotted Christopher checking his watch.

"Mags and I should be going—we have reservations for dinner, so we'll be back late," he said, almost apologetically, but not quite managing to sound anything but relieved to be going. "I expect we'll be seeing you tomorrow. Julian has booked *Roots* for dinner."

Whatever this was meant to mean to Lucas, he wasn't sure. Christopher looked a little scathing as he added, "The restaurant," as if that wasn't obvious. What kind it was and why this was so important, Lucas would just have to Google later. If he ever got the Wi-Fi code. It felt rude to just ask for it.

Sid got to his feet, and Lucas followed Aaron to the front door. The car had pulled up outside, and he could hear the door and then the boot slamming. He

felt tingly with anticipation or nerves—he couldn't tell which, really—as Aaron opened the front door, and he caught sight of Julian outside.

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Chapter Ten
SID

First impression? Julian was about as much of a twat as the rest of the men in his family.

He'd just about decided Eva and Magda were alright, if a bit hard to relate to. They were at least trying to be polite and friendly. In their stiffly posh way. Aaron—the dad—and the brother were not putting in much effort. He'd been around enough people who thought they were better than him to hear it in every question they asked and every answer they gave. They weren't impressed by him, and the feeling was mutual. He only really took offence to how rude they were being to Lucas, who was the one they were meant to be welcoming into their family.

Julian wasn't as blond or bulked up as his brother. He'd inherited more of his dad's looks and had mid-brown hair and sharp green eyes. He was dressed as if he'd come straight from an office somewhere, London, he remembered Lucas saying. He certainly looked like he belonged in a pub in the city—from his beige trousers to the three-quarter zip fleece and gelled hair. He had on one of those smart watches with a gold metal strap, like a Rolex.

Lucas hung back while Julian shook his dad's hand, acting as if his boyfriend wasn't waiting for him on the doorstep. When he finally looked Lucas's way and smiled, Lucas trotted down the front steps and hugged him. Sid caught the look Julian gave his dad. A sort of winced apology as if Lucas was being embarrassing. That was what clinched the diagnosis of 'twat'. That and the fact that he didn't hug Lucas back, just squeezed his shoulder and ducked away.

Sid stood in the doorway and watched as Julian gestured down at Lucas's slippers with a laugh. *Inside shoes on the front steps? Oh, the horror.* Then, Lucas —his excitement dimmed like a broken Christmas light—pointed his way, and Sid felt himself become the subject of a smooth once-over from Lucas's boyfriend.

Apparently, the disappointment was mutual.

Sid had been hoping that, despite what Aaron and Christopher were like, Julian would have some redeeming qualities. That he might be the black sheep of the family and possess the kind of cheer and sparkle that would match the Lucas he'd been getting to know today. But so far, he wasn't wowed. It seemed that whatever impression Julian had formed about Lucas's dad, Sid was also falling short.

"This is… Sid." Lucas brought Julian over.

He was a tall bloke, not as tall as Lucas himself but probably just scraping six foot. He had the broad, flat chest of a swimmer and a square jaw. He could see why Lucas might find him attractive, if you were into that sort of thing. The sort of clean-cut, Hollywood thing.

"Lovely to meet you," Julian said, in the same plummy southern accent the rest of his family had. "Lucas only recently told me Clive was his step-father, or I'd have asked him to invite you sooner."

Sid offered a smile. "Yeah, we've only just gotten back in touch. Don't really blame him for not talking about me. He's told me a lot about you."

That was a bluff, really; he didn't know much about the man in front of him, but it felt like the right thing to say. Lucas looked a little relieved to hear it anyway.

"I'll go put your car in the garage," Aaron said and climbed into Julian's BMW before he got an answer. Lucas's van was still sitting on the drive, as if he'd just stopped by to deliver a parcel, not stay the week. Apparently not worth the effort of protecting from any weather.

The brother and the girlfriend must have left by a different door (how many did one house need?) because the sitting room was empty when they returned to it. Julian took a leather armchair, and Lucas hovered awkwardly before perching

on the matching footstool, reaching for his boyfriend's hand. Julian gave him a thin-lipped smile and allowed it. Sid struggled to remain neutral.

"Are you local to us?" Julian asked, looking at him with a furrowed brow.

"Blackpool? Yeah, all my life." Sid retook his earlier seat, conscious of the Lucas-shaped void on the other side of the sofa. For the first time since arriving, he felt like he was on his own, without an ally.

"Can't believe you two have never run into each other, it's such a small place. Not like London." Julian laughed. "Were you police, too?"

Sid snorted before he could stop himself. "Uh, no. No, I was not."

"Sid was a sound engineer," Lucas put in. "For musicians and stuff."

"Right..." Julian gave him a head-to-toe look again, and Sid wondered how he looked through his man's eyes.

He could guess: supermarket clothes, no watch or designer belt, the same haircut he'd been getting for fifteen quid six times a year since he was thirty. Beard he trimmed himself, irregularly. Dimpled ear from the healed-over piercing. A no one. An unremarkable middle-aged bloke with a bit of a stomach that the gym couldn't seem to shift the last of.

He wondered if that was what Frank saw when he looked at him these days. Nothing special. A boring old fucker.

"Welcome home, darling," Eva breezed as she arrived with a fresh tray of coffee. "How was the drive?"

"Not bad. Not bad at all. Thanks, Mum." Julian tweaked his hand free of Lucas's and took a mug of coffee.

"And you've met Sidney," Eva smiled, apparently forgetting to call him 'Sid' or just doing her best to introduce him properly. "We've put him in the cottage as we've run out of space in the main house. So you're in your old room, and Lucas will be in the Blue Room."

Sid watched Julian for even a flicker at this news, but he didn't look the least bit fazed by the idea that he and Lucas would be sleeping separately. He had to know that with the number of rooms available, his brother was sharing with his girlfriend of six months. But he didn't say anything. Avoiding a confrontation or just didn't care? Sid couldn't tell yet.

"So you live in Blackpool?" Sid asked once they were all sipping coffee again. "Seems like a long commute to London."

"I work remotely a lot," Julian explained. "If they need me to come in, they have one of the PAs book me at the Hilton and arrange my train. I only drove from Leeds."

Sid nodded as if this was interesting. So far, Julian seemed about as interesting as a fish paste sandwich.

"Have you been to Lucas's place?" Julian asked, glancing at his boyfriend as if amused. "He's got quite the collection in there."

Lucas seemed to have shrunk since Julian's arrival. He hadn't said anything since introducing them, Sid noticed. He was just observing and listening, and when Sid looked his way, he glanced down at his lap as if suddenly shy.

"I have, yeah. It's impressive," Sid said, meeting Julian's eye again. "He gets that from his mum. I'm more of a music nut than a film buff."

"Film buff is one way to say it." Julian laughed. "I've never seen another adult with that many toys on display."

Lucas's mouth opened as if to protest but closed again. Sid recognised it as conflict avoidance. This felt like a comment Julian had made before and which Lucas no longer attempted to refute.

"Amazing, the stuff they make," Sid said pleasantly. "Probably be worth a fortune one day. *Doctor Who*'s been massive since I was a kid, and that was a long time ago." He shot Eva a smile to loop her in with some generational solidarity, and she laughed.

"It used to frighten me out of my mind," she admitted with a chuckle. "All those robots and aliens. I suppose you two haven't seen the original programme —the black and white. It wasn't as impressive as the adverts for the new ones."

"I have!" Lucas brightened considerably. "I have every VHS the BBC ever released. Not that they're all in the best condition, and obviously I have the DVDs as well, but there's just something about analogue that just feels right, you know?" Lucas's cheeks went pink, and he glanced sideways at Julian. "Anyway... I have seen it is what I'm saying. When it came back in 2005, I was so excited for the first episode that I nearly cried."

Julian pulled a face. "Really?"

"Well... I was only ten. And a bit," Lucas said, drooping again. "It was exciting."

"You were excited about things like that, too," Eva told her son. "I remember a certain someone being desperate for tickets to see that wizard film."

"Harry Potter—and I was a literal child," Julian muttered. "Slight difference between the biggest thing in children's fiction for decades and a TV show with polystyrene rocks and monsters covered in tinfoil."

Lucas had scrunched his nose up slightly at the mention of Harry Potter. Sid couldn't blame him. He wasn't really on social media, but even he knew about the accusations of transphobia, racism, and all the rest of it that clung to the franchise. Sid had spent his formative years in the queer community surrounded by all kinds of queers, including trans people. He'd have had to be dead to not know about the hurt being done to the community in recent years.

Their eyes met, and Lucas shook his head very slightly. Sid quirked an eyebrow. He wasn't about to get on his queer issues soapbox, and he suspected Lucas knew it. But still, the warning stung.

"Anyway," Lucas said cheerfully, "there's a lot of that stuff in York, isn't there? Wizardy things? I actually saw they've got some anime merch shops, too."

"That's the university's influence," Aaron came in on the tail end of Lucas's sentence and dropped into a seat beside his wife, nearly jostling the coffee out of her hand. "Too many bloody Chinese restaurants, too. All those foreign students to blame for it."

Oh, he's a bit racist. Wonderful.

Again, just like with the sleeping arrangements, Julian didn't say anything. Sid fought not to roll his eyes. He'd talked about this stuff with his dad before the drinking caught up with him, and he was over seventy at that point. Old people didn't get a pass in his book.

"Well, we'll have to pop into some. I think I saw a Pho place, actually, as we were driving through," Sid said. "Could be nice for lunch if we're in town one day."

Lucas started to say something, but Julian cut him off. "I've booked *Roots* for dinner tomorrow. You won't want to fill up beforehand." He paused. "My treat, obviously," he added.

The words weren't objectionable, but the tone was. The same quick flick over him as before. The message was clear: *'You can't afford it anyway.'* He forced a smile.

"Cheers."

"We've got a lovely beef stew for dinner," Eva said, as if sensing some tension and wanting to dispel it as quickly as possible. "Stevens put it in the AGA earlier, and Magda brought some gorgeous-looking sourdough to go with it."

"Are they here?" Julian asked. "Chris and Magda?"

"No, they left just as you were arriving," Aaron said, shaking his head as if this was a damn shame indeed. "Chris has a key. They'll come back after dinner, I expect. She probably wanted to go look at her little shop before it closed for the day."

Julian scoffed, and Sid bit down hard on his tongue. A quick look in Lucas's direction made his annoyance fade into concern. Lucas was looking between Julian and his father as if he'd met both of them for the first time twenty minutes ago. Maybe that was sort of accurate. Sid knew he was a different person around his dad—you always were around your parents. He had always gotten a bit sulky, like his teenage years began again as soon as he got within fifteen feet of his childhood home.

It was hard to believe that Lucas had fallen for the man Julian was in that moment. He might only have known Lucas for a day and a bit, but he was polite, cheerful, occasionally sarcastic, but not mean-spirited. Not snobbish or judgemental.

Away from his family, Julian might well have been prince-bloody-charming, but right now, he was coming off as a spoiled little rich boy with a silver spoon up his arse. Sid couldn't say it was an attractive look, but that didn't matter really, did it? He wasn't Lucas's actual dad. What he thought of this prick didn't matter. Not one bit.

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Chapter Eleven
LUCAS

OK, Lucas would have had to plunge his head into the pot of beef stew and shove baby carrots in his ears to ignore how much Sid and Julian weren't getting on. They weren't arguing or anything; everyone was being very polite and pleasant. Still, Lucas could feel the energy crackling off Sid like he was a feral stray cat that had just been shaken about in a nylon sack. Julian was smiling and laughing at all the right moments, but Lucas couldn't help but notice how flat it sounded and how his smiles didn't reach his eyes.

In terms of first meetings... it could have gone better.

His only solace, really, was that things would have been going worse if he had invited his actual father to this. If anything, this first evening had cemented in his mind that while he was doing an underhanded thing, it was definitely for the best.

For example, if Clive had been in Sid's seat, he and Aaron would have had a long talk about the number of foreign students and all the Japanese and Chinese restaurants that had popped up. Clive would have rolled out the story he swore was true, about the buffet place where they'd found all those frozen dogs in a raid, and Aaron would probably have taken offence. Because that was taking things too far into 'professional' as opposed to merely 'casual' racism. Only one of which was welcome at this table.

Clive would have applauded the separate bedrooms arrangement and bemoaned the plight of having a gay son. Maybe he'd have asked Eva if she breastfed Julian—Lucas's mother hadn't, and according to his father, *'that's*

where the trouble started.' By the end of dinner, he'd have been drunk, having asked for bottle after bottle of wine to be opened, and loudly talking about the plague of small boats and pronouns.

Comparatively, Sid had done rather well. He'd had one glass of wine, complimented the stew (which was gorgeous), the dining room décor (hideous), and asked Eva if she had the latest Nigella cookbook, which turned out to be a perfect way to get her talking for the next half hour. He had no idea how Sid had known this, but maybe he'd spotted other cookbooks somewhere. He certainly seemed to be taking everything in.

He had noticed that Sid wasn't really talking to Aaron or Julian much. He answered questions (they asked a LOT) and asked a few back, but it felt more like an interview they were conducting on him rather than a conversation. Lucas attempted to jump in occasionally, but Julian kept giving him 'the look', which meant *'you're talking too much.'* So he'd ended up focusing on his stew and giving one- or two-word answers when Sid tried to draw him into conversation.

"I'll help clear, if you like?" Lucas said cheerily when dinner was over and Eva started going around stacking everyone's plates.

Julian and Aaron looked at him like he'd just offered to lick each plate clean personally. He glanced at Sid and saw him taking in the other men's expressions with a barely concealed look of disgust.

"Oh, it's fine. I'm just popping everything into the dishwasher," Eva said. "You should let your dinner go down."

"Lucas, why don't you walk me back down to the cottage?" Sid said unexpectedly. "I think I need an early night. Sorry, everyone."

"No apology necessary," Aaron said. "I'm sure you're tired from the journey down. I meant to ask, actually—is that your van?"

"It's mine," Lucas said, despite Julian's sharp look his way. "Seemed a bit pointless us both driving down separately."

"You have a van?" Aaron asked sceptically. "What for?"

"Dad, shall we go light the fire in the other room?" Julian asked, interrupting this new round of interrogation, for which Lucas was grateful.

He didn't think Aaron would look kindly on any sort of camping, especially not the freewheeling permanent kind Lucas had been planning to do in the van.

It had all felt very sensible and well-planned when he'd explained it to Sid earlier, but he doubted he could make a good enough case in front of Julian's dad.

"Good idea," Sid put in. "Lucas, shall we...?"

They changed out of their slippers, and Sid said goodbye to Eva, who was clearing up the kitchen. She seemed a bit overwhelmed by the dishwasher, and Lucas wondered how familiar she was with it or if Stevens usually did the tricky business of turning it on. He'd jump in and help if she was still stuck later.

Outside, the air was sharp with the promise of frost, and Sid's breath streamed out in a white fog even before he lit a cigarette. Almost at once, one of the small kitchen windows squeaked open.

"Oh, I hope you don't mind, but please don't smoke in the cottage," Eva called out. "The smell, you see."

"No worries," Sid called back, smiling. The window closed, and he turned away from the kitchen. "It's 2026, I'm not going to just assume I can light up indoors. What does she think I am?"

"She's just being..." Lucas couldn't think of a word for 'uptight' that didn't sound mean to Eva or condescending to Sid, so he let it drop. "Anyway, let's get you to bed old-timer—not sure why you needed me to walk you back—night vision going is it?"

"I don't need help, you tit. I just thought we should exchange numbers so when they ask you to check if I'm up tomorrow, you can, without raising suspicion. Besides, I wanted to have a word away from the gentrified Gestapo."

Lucas nearly laughed. Nearly. He caught it just in time. "Don't be rude—they've been nothing but nice to you. Give me your phone."

Sid scoffed as he handed the phone over, and Lucas avoided his eye by typing in his number and sending a text. Yeah, he should have known that wasn't going to wash.

"Well, they've at least not been completely rude," Lucas amended under the weight of Sid's look.

"Outright, no. But Jesus..." Sid shook his head as he accepted the phone back and they walked across the lawn, lit only by the white string lights threaded through the bare tree branches. "I wouldn't be surprised if they're in there

fingerprinting my glass and running a credit check. Bit full-on, considering it's the first time we're meeting."

"They just... care a lot. Which I have almost no experience with, but I think it's normal for good parents, you know, to give a shit about who their child is dating and what their family is like." Lucas jammed his hands into his pockets.

"Maybe," Sid allowed, but he didn't sound convinced.

Lucas didn't feel it entirely either. They had been a bit aggressive with how they'd questioned Sid. It had felt a little frosty, like they were disappointed in him. Julian hadn't seemed impressed either.

"Is he normally like that?" Sid asked as they neared the summerhouse where he apparently was staying. He'd left the inside lights on, and Lucas could see the big sofa and a tartan-edged sign that said 'Bless This House' hanging under the TV.

"Not sure, only just met him." Lucas shrugged.

"I meant your bloke, Julian." Sid stopped at the door to finish off his cigarette, looking at him searchingly. "He's a bit... up himself."

"He is not!" Lucas swatted his arm, hard. "He's just nervous, probably, about introducing me to his parents. I'll admit they're a bit... stuffy, so he's probably anxious—not to mention he just came all the way from London with a hangover. He's stressed. Tomorrow, he'll be more like himself."

He hoped. Julian around his parents was a whole different thing from the Julian he knew. He didn't normally ask such pointed questions or make snide comments like the one he'd come out with towards the end of dinner, when he'd asked Sid what he thought of the wine and then responded to *'it's good, yeah'* with *'I forgot not everyone cares what's in their glass as long as it's 3% or more.'*

"Hope so," Sid said. "Or this is going to be a long week."

Lucas bristled. "You could also be nicer."

"Yeah, I probably could be," Sid agreed, which only annoyed him more.

He'd been hoping Sid would get offended and say something mean about Julian so he could push back. Then it would feel more like he and Julian were a team against the 'parents' rather than like he and Sid were the interlopers amongst the rest of them.

"Well...try," he said lamely and turned to go as Sid put his cigarette out on the wet grass.

But Sid didn't seem to be done with him yet. "Did you catch that about the girlfriend—Magda? About her shop?"

"What about it?" Lucas turned back and crossed his arms. "Sounds cool. I hope we get to look around it."

"But it's here," Sid emphasised. "In York. So she must live around here."

Damn it, he was hoping Sid wouldn't have picked up on that. "And?"

"Bit odd that she'd come to stay just because... after only six months and all."

The meaning was clear. Lucas had been binned off for a solo Christmas two years running and several hours' drive away, while Magda was invited to the family Christmas after far less time and living so close that she could have simply popped by on the day. He didn't want to start picking at that. He wasn't sure he wanted to know why he had to wait so long for his invitation, or if it had anything to do with the fact that he and Julian were in separate rooms while Magda and Christopher got to share.

"Not really my business." Lucas shrugged, and Sid nodded, thankfully letting it drop. "And you're not going to ask tomorrow."

"Aye aye." Sid saluted sarcastically. "Any more orders, son?"

Lucas rolled his eyes, then noticed that although Sid had finished his cigarette, he hadn't gone inside yet. He was just standing there holding the extinguished end of it.

"Are you... going to be alright?" he heard himself say, without quite thinking it through.

"What do you mean?" Sid asked, too quickly to be casual.

"Just... this is sort of your first night on your own, right? Since..." He trailed off and waved a hand to encompass *'since you walked in on your partner with someone else, got blackout drunk, and pitched up on my sofa.'*

Sid blew out a visible cloud. "I'm a big boy. I'm not scared of sleeping by myself."

The fleeting flash of concern vanished under a wave of annoyance. "I was just asking. You did sort of freak out for a while there—and ended said freak out with some breaking and entering."

“I didn’t break anything.” Sid shrugged. “I’m good. Shouldn’t you be heading back up to the main house? I expect his parents’ll want to lock you in for the night. Make sure there’s no chance of unconscionable hanky-panky.”

“Hanky… Whatever.” Lucas turned on his heel and waved over his shoulder, hoping the darkness hid the way his ears were burning. “Night, Sid. See you tomorrow.”

“Night,” Sid muttered, and a moment later, Lucas heard the sliding door of the cottage open and close.

He breathed a sigh of relief. That was that over with. Now he just had to face Julian and ask him what the hell was going on with the separate bedrooms thing. He’d been making out to Sid that it didn’t bother him much, and to be fair, it wouldn’t have, if the same rules were being applied to Christopher. As much as he didn’t want to rock the boat or ruin the first Christmas he was invited to, he deserved at least an explanation.

He found the kitchen empty when he got back. The dishwasher was on, so score one for Eva. In his slippers, he went and found the three of them in the front room, drinking wine by the freshly lit fire. Lucas mustered his most convincing fake yawn and smiled regretfully.

“I think I need to turn in, too. Long day…”

Julian met his eye and nodded with understanding. “No problem. You’ll want to be fresh for tomorrow. We’re spending the day in town, after all.”

He waited for Julian to offer to walk him upstairs or come out to say goodnight. He didn’t. Lucas began to feel awkward just hovering in the doorway, and from the frown forming on Aaron’s face, he wasn’t the only one feeling the tension.

“Um… can I just see you for a sec?” Lucas asked, going for a light tone but hearing it come out weirdly stagey.

Julian sighed but levered himself off the sofa and put down his wine glass. As he left the living room, he pulled the door closed behind him, giving them some privacy in the hallway. Or hiding them from his parents. Lucas wasn’t exactly sure.

“Um… I just wanted to ask about the whole room situation,” Lucas said, keeping his voice low. “We’re not sharing?”

Julian frowned. “Well… no. We’ve got the space, so…”

“Right, but just because there are rooms to fill doesn’t mean I wouldn’t have, you know, liked to be with you,” Lucas said. “Then Sid could have stayed in the house.”

“Is he not happy with the cottage?” Julian raised an eyebrow. “Because Mum and Dad charge over a grand per week to stay there, you know. It’s normally booked solid all year.”

“It’s not about that. He’s fine, I just mean… why aren’t we sharing a room like Christopher and Magda? Why is she even staying at all if she’s local and they’ve only been together a few months?”

There, he’d said it. Julian looked at him a moment and then sighed.

“It’s dicey driving around the lanes when it’s frosty and dark so early. It makes sense for her to stay here. And, come on, Lucas, you know why we’re not sharing. Mum and Dad… they’re just uncomfortable with the idea.”

“Of us sleeping in the same bed?” Lucas challenged, a nasty churning sensation starting up just below his diaphragm. He could almost hear Sid’s outraged huff in his head. “What do they think we’re going to do that Christopher and his girlfriend won’t?”

Julian’s jaw tightened. “You know exactly what. And they deserve to feel comfortable in their own home without worrying about… hearing or seeing anything that might make them… not comfortable.”

Somewhere at the back of his mind, a voice that sounded suspiciously like Sid was asking if that meant Christopher and Magda were also barred from doing anal, but he shoved that retort away.

“I suppose I’m just surprised that they’re uncomfortable. You always made them sound so… accepting.”

“They are.” Julian looked hurt. “They know exactly who I am, and they support me. That doesn’t mean I have to go and rub it in their faces, does it? It’s just a few nights in separate rooms. We don’t even live together, anyway. What’s the difference?”

He wanted to insist that there was a big difference between having their own flats and being expected to sleep apart under the same roof. But maybe Julian was right. His parents had invited him to spend Christmas with them and were

housing him and feeding him for the duration. They obviously didn't have an issue with him being their son's boyfriend. They just wanted to keep their personal goings on at a distance. It wasn't even half as bad as what Clive was like. Still, Lucas felt a bit wrong-footed by it. He just didn't want to push and make Julian unhappy.

"I suppose it's just this once," he muttered, and Julian's expression lightened.

"Exactly. Just for the week. We don't have to be all over each other in front of my parents—that's weird, right? Even for straight people."

"I suppose."

Julian gave him a quick kiss. "Night, Luc… I'll see you tomorrow, OK?"

He marshalled a smile for his boyfriend and then took himself off upstairs to the room he'd put his bag in earlier. It was a nice room—a queen-size bed, a walk-in wardrobe, and an en-suite bathroom with underfloor heating. But he'd have traded it all for the privilege of sleeping cosied up to Julian. They didn't get to spend many nights together, as Julian's work commitments were already demanding. Despite what he'd said to Sid, he was in London a lot and too tired from work the rest of the time.

Lucas got ready for bed and pried the hospital corners of the duvet out from under the mattress with a twinge of annoyance. Who did that to a bed? What was the point? Then he got in and lay under the feather quilt, looking up at the ceiling. For the next hour.

He wondered if Sid was having as much trouble drifting off as he was.

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Chapter Twelve
SID

The clock on his phone said it was just after midnight, and Sid still hadn't slept a wink. He'd meant it when he told Lucas he wasn't worried about sleeping alone. But apparently, he'd been kidding himself. After sixteen years of spending every night with Frank—in their own home lately but on sofas, floors, and the inside of vans in their younger years—he wasn't used to sleeping by himself.

He rolled over for what felt like the thousandth time and looked across the expanse of empty bed. Normally, Frank's long hair would be spread out over the pillow next to him, smelling like cloves and cigarettes. He'd be hogging the duvet and lying with his long legs spread out, one casually hooked over Sid's own to anchor him. The bed felt too big and too cold without Frank in it, the room too quiet without his sleep mumbling and snoring.

Sid got up and used the bathroom, trying to reset his subconscious into thinking it was time to fall asleep. He hunkered down under the rustling feather duvet and willed himself to simply become unconscious. He'd been battling a hangover for half the day, and now he could finally rest, yet his brain would not cooperate. No, his brain wanted to bring him images of Frank, of Baz, and of Christmases past. Wonderful. He didn't even have the Wi-Fi password, so scrolling mindlessly was out of the question.

The hum of his phone drew his attention. He'd blocked Frank and Baz's numbers but could still see in his call log that 'blocked number' had been

ringing him all day. That didn't trigger a notification, though. Instead, a new number was texting him.

Lucas: You awake?

Lucas: This is Lucas, btw.

He could have ignored it and made out he was well away into a good night's sleep. Instead, he tapped out a reply.

Sid: Yeah, I'm awake.

Lucas replied almost immediately.

Lucas: I can't sleep either. Too quiet.

Sid huffed.

Sid: I know what you mean—who made the countryside this quiet? Feels unnatural.

He smiled to himself when Lucas replied with a laughing emoji.

Lucas: Ikr, needs more drunk people and car horns. Can you get that on YouTube, you think?

Sid rolled over onto his side.

Sid: Don't know. I've got no internet out here.

Lucas: UGH. The worst. I'm in the same boat. My data allowance is awful—seemed rude to ask for the password, and they didn't offer it. I feel like in 2026, that's up there with telling guests where the toilet is. GIVE ME WI-FI OR GIVE ME DEATH.

Sid: Dramatic.

Lucas: Thanks, I try. Got a D at A-Level.

Sid: Got a D, hmm?

Lucas: Grow up :P

Sid laughed to himself.

Sid: I didn't do A-Levels, wanted to. Left school at sixteen and got a job.

Lucas: What was the job?

Sid: Apprentice electrician. Left before I qualified, though wanted to get into the music scene. Obviously, that went really well.

Lucas: As a musician, or did you always want to be on the tech side?

Sid: Production side. But that doesn't pay the bills unless you're really lucky. You know how it is.

Lucas: Nah, not really. Clearly, I'm living the high life on my creative writing degree. Did you not see my gold-plated Porsche?

Sid: Must've been behind the van.

Lucas: Tsk, I've told my chauffeur to park it on the driveway.

Sid: Can't get the staff these days.

There was a long pause with no messages. It went on for so long that Sid put his phone down on the bedside table and assumed Lucas had fallen asleep or gotten bored with him. But when a message did come through, it was a very different kind from the ones they'd been sharing.

Lucas: I asked Julian about the bedroom thing.

A weight settled in the pit of his stomach. That couldn't have gone well. He knew Julian's sort. They were the ones who popped up on TV news occasionally—the one gay Tory MP or what have you. Conservative gays who thought pride was 'embarrassing' and drag queens made 'the rest of us look bad'. The kind who basically wanted to be straight, just with a boyfriend. As if that would get them accepted by the kind of people they pandered to by denouncing anything 'too queer'.

Sid: And?

Lucas: It's fine. He doesn't like it, but... it's not a big deal.

Sid: So why tell me? If you're both fine with it, that is.

Lucas didn't reply for a full three minutes. Enough time for Sid to ask himself what exactly he thought he was doing, poking that sore spot all over again. It was between Lucas, his boyfriend, and the future in-laws. He wasn't part of this situation. Just because he'd rather go to a shit hotel than be told to abide by rules straight people didn't have to, that didn't make that Lucas's view.

Lucas: Just letting you know it's sorted.

Sid: OK. Good to know.

Lucas: You OK?

Sid: Yeah.

They left it at that, and Sid turned over again, ignoring his phone. Lucas didn't message again, and shortly after that, he must have fallen asleep, because the next thing he knew, he was waking up in an unfamiliar bed.

Once the disorientation of waking up somewhere new had faded, Sid got himself out of bed, washed, and into clean clothes. In the kitchen, he made himself a coffee and took it outside so he could have a cigarette with it. It was early, still dark, but the edges of the sky were getting light in that stark wintery way that promised clear, frosty skies and a crisp, dry day. The countryside really was too quiet. He could hear birds, and that was pretty much it. Not so much as the rumble of an engine or the bang of a car door in the distance. Maybe by the end of the week, he'd find it restful. Currently, it was just... suspicious. Like something was hiding just out of sight, waiting for him to let his guard down.

A light went on in the main house, and he saw a silhouette against it that had to be Lucas. It moved like him—loose-limbed and expressive. From the looks of things, he was stretching on his way to the bathroom. Sid had almost finished his cigarette when his phone went off.

Lucas: Morning. I see you're already doing your part for lung cancer.

Sid: Peeping, are we?

Lucas: Says Mr Shadow-Face, lurking in the orchard like a serial killer.

Sid: Serial killers are all tucked up in bed this time of day.

Lucas: Good to know. Are you coming in for breakfast?

Sid: Afraid to face it alone?

Lucas: No.

Lucas: But also... please?

Sid sighed ruefully and downed the last of his coffee before replying.

Sid: I'll come. Let me know when you're done primping.

Lucas: I do not PRIMP.

Sid: Could've fooled me, curly.

Sure enough, when he got the green light from Lucas to head up for breakfast, he found him once again Christmas-scented, and some of it appeared to have had glitter in it, which sparkled in his springy chestnut hair. His lips were also shiny and red again, with whatever balm he was using.

"Don't primp, my arse," Sid said as he put his slippers on, just loud enough for Lucas to hear.

"Some of us are just blessed with taste. Did you even comb your hair?" Lucas hissed back, then ruffled his hair.

Sid glowered at him, but honestly, it hadn't made a difference. He'd neglected to pack anything to slick it back with while rushing to get out of the house. He'd have to buy something in town later.

Breakfast was fairly tame compared to the night before. Judging from the looks of them, Julian and Aaron had been on the wine for a few hours before going to bed. Sid was just happy it wasn't him with the hangover. He never wanted to feel that shit again. Eva was fresh enough but not too chatty, just the usual *'How did you sleep? Did you find everything OK?'* host spiel. He made sure to compliment the quality of the guest mattress.

"And you, Lucas?" Eva asked.

"Oh, yeah, I had a great night's sleep." Lucas smiled at her, caught halfway through tearing up a croissant and applying liberal amounts of strawberry jam. "The duvet's really cosy."

"They're duck feather," Eva said, apparently very pleased he'd noticed. "We bought them last year from John Lewis. Half off."

"Oooh, bargain." Lucas seemed sincere, leaning in as if to share a secret with her. "I got an amazing deal on this amazing ceramic lamp from there last year. Well, it was originally from there, but I found it in the British Heart Foundation —a hundred and fifty pounds down to twenty-five—original tags still on it and everything. The stuff people donate blows my mind sometimes." Lucas waved his hands in an excited flourish and nearly swatted over the honey pot.

Sid shifted it over a few inches without comment but caught Julian sharing a look with his dad. One which said, *'See what I mean?'* He wondered what had been said about Lucas after he went to bed.

He was going to give this bloke one more chance today to not be a prick, or else he'd... do what exactly? Sid frowned at himself. This wasn't his business. He was here on false pretences to escape his shit show of a relationship for a bit. Nothing more, nothing less. Lucas was an adult in his thirties—he could decide for himself who he wanted to be with and how much to put up with from them.

"I'll drive," Julian announced after breakfast when they'd all reclaimed their outdoor shoes and trooped around to the front of the house.

Eva and Aaron were staying at home, but they were meeting Christopher and his girlfriend in town. They had apparently elected to sleep in and had missed

breakfast.

Julian's BMW was pretty fucking swish, even Sid could admit that. Very clean as well. He'd never liked a messy car, had argued with Frank about it almost constantly before they gave theirs up. Frank was the kind to live out of his car, tossing empty Red Bulls and Monsters into the footwell, leaving change, cigarette ends, and parking tickets scattered around the front and discarded jumpers, food wrappers, and packaging in the back. Sid used to clean the thing out every Sunday like a ritual—doors open and music playing as loud as he could get away with.

He felt like the odd one out as they parked up at a multi-storey and walked over an impressive stone bridge into the centre of York. Lucas was wearing a long green scarf and matching hand warmers, a red and green jumper with a real velvet bow, and jeans. Julian was slightly less colourful, but in a clearly expensive pea coat, a green-and-navy tartan scarf, and leather boots. Sid had dressed casually because it was just shopping, and he had limited 'nice clothes' for fancy stuff. He'd chosen jeans, a Motörhead T-shirt, and a grey cardigan he could do up for this posh restaurant later. The couple looked Christmas card ready, and as he trailed behind, he began to start feeling his age—scruffy, out of date, and embarrassing.

They stopped to get takeaway coffees—Lucas walking away with a confection topped with cream and sprinkles—and ambled towards the older part of town, away from the big chain shops. He spotted Christopher and his girlfriend before the other two. They must have either skipped breakfast or gotten it to go. Both were dressed up as if for a Christmas catalogue; Magda even had a furry scarf like an ice skater.

Because he saw them first and he was walking behind Lucas and his boyfriend, he got a good look at the moment Julian spotted his brother and grabbed Lucas's hand, which had been hanging neglected at his side.

Lucas didn't seem to twig for a second, just turned and smiled at him. But Julian was already striding forwards and giving a hearty hello to the other couple, towing Lucas along. Sid decided not to make a thing of it and to try to forget that Julian had only grabbed his boyfriend's hand when his brother was there to witness it. It wasn't his business.

But it didn’t bode well for the rest of the day.

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Chapter Thirteen
LUCAS

He was surprised when Julian grabbed his hand. He wasn't normally one for public displays of affection. But maybe it was the Christmas spirit of it all. Everything felt slightly magical and exciting. Walking hand in hand with Julian through the historic streets of York felt like a perfect start to the day. Especially with a deluxe hot chocolate in his other hand. He felt festive and ready to have a good potter round the shops.

But even with the hand-holding, as soon as Christopher appeared, it was like a switch flipped in Julian. The laid-back man he knew disappeared, and this back-slapping, posh boy took his place. Julian talked to Christopher or to the group at large, not to Lucas. Sid and Magda didn't get a look in either. Though Magda seemed used to it. She floated along beside Christopher, his arm around her shoulders as she looked into the windows of shops she didn't get to go in.

Every time Lucas looked Sid's way, he was studying signs or shops or looking intently into the distance. *Almost*, Lucas thought with a sinking stomach, *as if he is purposefully avoiding giving any sign of how he feels about our day out thus far.*

Still, it was York at Christmas time, and Lucas wasn't about to ruin the day by being precious about getting lost in a group dynamic that pre-dated him. Julian and Christopher were brothers and had known each other their entire lives. Of course they were going to focus on each other around new people they weren't sure of yet. He was still holding his boyfriend's hand and enjoying the Christmas vibes.

After a while, though, Lucas wished Julian would let go and that Magda wasn't wedged under Christopher's armpit, as he'd have liked to chat to her a bit. She had an amazing scarf on and was wearing some glittery lip oil he thought he might just be able to get away with during the festive season.

They wandered through The Shambles, the crooked medieval street that was really trying to make bank off its connection to the Harry Potter franchise. Lucas wasn't too interested in most of the shops there, aside from the cute ghost merchants. But the line was already down to the end of the street by the time they got there, and he could tell no one else wanted to wait around. Well, Julian and Christopher didn't, and they were the ones leading the group. It was just a silly ornament shop. No biggie.

Then there was the market, and they all got mulled wine to sip. Not much interested Lucas at the market to be honest—aside from the food, but they weren't stopping for that sadly. The breakfast croissants had been nice but not exactly filling. The hot chocolate would just have to see him through until dinner. He did spot a few cool pins, but he already had too many, so it was probably a good thing that Julian walked right by them to get to a jeweller's watch display, letting go of his hand in the process.

Lucas realised he couldn't see Sid and turned on the spot, hunting for him. He was just the right height to vanish into the crowd, and in his all-black and grey ensemble, he didn't exactly stand out. Lucas kind of wished he could do that whole 'cool and sexy without even trying' thing that Sid pulled off so well. He'd thrown on a T-shirt and tousled his hair, and that was it—instant sexy rocker vibes. Lucas had spent twenty minutes 'primping' and consequently felt overdressed and as if he'd tried too hard.

He was about to get his phone out and text Sid to find where he'd gone when Sid reappeared beside him, holding a greasy paper bag. A bag that smelled amazing.

"Are those doughnuts?" Lucas asked, and Sid nodded, popping a freshly fried mini doughnut into his mouth and sucking sugar off his thumb.

"Yeah, want one?" He held out the bag and shook it. "Croissant didn't really fill me up."

He helped himself and hummed appreciatively as his teeth sank into the crunchy sugar and warm dough. "God, that's good. I used to beg my mum for these when we went to car boots—you know, there's usually like a van that does them? A really sketchy one you can smell from miles away. Always doughnuts or —"

"—fried onions," Sid finished, and Lucas nodded.

"Exactly. Oh my god, what I'd give for a dirty burger van right now. But with the requisite safety and hygiene certificates, because I'm no longer ten, and I have to worry about horse meat and hepatitis."

Sid laughed, and Lucas accepted a second doughnut as they walked towards the others, who he could just about see through the crowd. Sid finished the last doughnut in the bag and crumpled it up to toss into a bin as they passed. Lucas caught a glimpse of him dusting sugar out of his beard and pressed his lips together to keep from smirking.

"There you are," Julian said as they got within earshot. "You wandered off."

"Sorry, my fault," Sid said. "Lead the way."

Julian looked for a moment as if he was about to say something else, then he just sighed and waved them onwards. They left the market behind and meandered through progressively narrower streets. Then Lucas spotted a familiar logo.

"Oh! *Travelling Man*!" He was met with four expressions of confusion, two genuinely curious and two more withering.

"I buy a lot of my manga and comics from their online shop," Lucas added, feeling a bit deflated. "Didn't realise they had a physical shop here."

"Manga?" Christopher said, the way Lucas might say *'5-in-1 shower gel.'* "Isn't that the tentacle porn?" He sniggered.

"It's the type of Japanese graphic novels," Lucas said flatly, glancing Julian's way. Julian had seen his collection, had heard him talk about it. But he wasn't saying anything in his defence.

"Right," Christopher said. "Of course it is." Turning to Julian, he added, "Magda's shop is just down here. Otherwise, there's really nothing of interest down this way."

Lucas felt small and childish as the pair of them turned and started walking away, Christopher towing Magda along like a bright balloon. He almost started to walk after them but noticed that Sid hadn't moved either.

"Hold up," Sid called suddenly. "I'll join you in a minute. I just want to have a look around here." He was gesturing to a metal gate a few feet from the comic shop. One with rain-damaged laminated signs zip-tied to it.

Julian and Christopher stopped and turned back.

"At what?" Julian asked, sounding frustrated.

"The church. It opens in, like, five minutes. I just want to pop in." Sid gestured to the gates. "There's a plaque for Anne Lister in there."

"Who?" Christopher was looking at him like he'd just said he was stopping for a piss down an alley.

"Oh, like the TV show?" It was the first time Magda had spoken. "I knew she was real. I didn't know she was from here."

"What are you talking about?" Julian interrupted.

"Anne Lister? Well-known lesbian. Made her vows to Ann Walker in this church in the 1800s. Considered the first gay wedding performed in this country? Possibly the world? Milestone of queer history?" Sid said, tilting his head. "Any of this ringing a bell?"

Christopher raised his eyebrows. "In a church?"

"Yeah." Sid crossed his arms. "Why not?"

"Well... it's not..." Something about Sid's expression made Christopher trail off.

Julian cleared his throat. "Fine, just catch up with us."

"I'll wait with you," Lucas heard himself say before his brain could protest. "I don't mind."

Julian shot him a look that was both irritated and impatient. "Fine. Just don't take forever."

"It's the shop with the purple awning," Magda said, apparently oblivious to the tension in the air.

The three of them headed down the street without a backward glance, and Lucas crossed over to where Sid stood by the gates.

"Sorry... about that," Lucas said, wincing at the steely way Sid was watching Julian and his brother walk off.

"You've got nothing to apologise for," Sid said, still glaring at Julian's back. "I assume you know your own fucking history at least."

Lucas winced. He did, as it happened. He knew about Anne Lister—not just from the TV show but from books about queer history and from the protest groups he'd been part of. The fight for marriage equality had been a long one, and he'd only really jumped onto the end of it given when he was born, but he knew about its milestones. He could tell from the way Sid's expression warmed that this was clear from his face.

"Might as well pop in the shop while we wait," Sid muttered and headed for the doors to the comic book shop without a backwards glance.

Had he done all that just for an excuse to visit the shop? Lucas wasn't sure, even as he followed Sid inside. He could have just stood up for himself, obviously. Sid could also have just made a big deal about it and said they should look around. But that would have put Lucas on the spot, so he was glad he hadn't. There was something about the way he'd looked at the church gate, though, which said he did care about going in there. Lucas just couldn't work out why, if he already knew the history.

The inside of *Travelling Man* was just as exciting as Lucas had hoped. The shop had displays of everything manga-related, from the well-known likes of *Chainsaw Man* and *My Hero Academia* to debut titles by new authors and more niche collections. There were shelves of comics, both Marvel and DC, as well as smaller imprints and displays of general nerd merch, *Dungeons & Dragons* figures and dice, mugs, keyrings, and card deck booster packs. Lucas was in heaven from the moment he set foot inside.

It wasn't until he browsed his way to the raised section at the back of the shop, where manga was sorted alphabetically, that he realised Sid wasn't looking at anything. He was just sort of hovering and casting a general eye over everything.

"You have no interest whatsoever in being here, do you?" he asked sheepishly, aware they'd been in the shop for at least ten minutes, and Sid had to be bored out of his mind by now.

“I don’t really know anything about this stuff,” Sid said with a shrug. “But feel free to keep looking. I’m not in a rush.”

Lucas hesitated. He knew from experience that Julian hated being dragged around shops like this and had very little patience for them. So he’d learned to just either wait until he was on his own or to duck in, find what he wanted as quickly as possible, and then check out. But Sid didn’t seem like he was in any desperate hurry to leave.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“Yes.” Sid raised an eyebrow. “Unless you have any recommendations for me? As I said, I don’t know where to even start.”

“Oh!” Lucas blinked in surprise. “You want a book?”

“Well… didn’t bring one with me—sort of packed in a rush. Could use something to read. But none of this stuff is sorted by genre, so…” Sid trailed off with a shrug.

“Well, what are you into? Action? Adventure? Probably not romance…” He had so many recommendations that he didn’t know where to begin. No one had ever asked him to pick out a manga for them before. Even at the library where the graphic novel section was, despite his best efforts, only two or three titles away from complete non-existence.

“Don’t pigeonhole me, I could be a romance buff,” Sid groused sarcastically. “But… horror, I guess? I like zombie books, crime… scary shit.”

Lucas couldn’t hold back a grin. “Oh, well then, do I have the books for you.”

It didn’t take him long to gather a selection of titles he thought Sid would like. As he was adding the last one to the small pile to hand to him, a shop assistant came over.

“Did you need any help finding anything?” he asked, looking doubtfully at the two piles of manga Lucas had put together.

“Uh… do you have *Brain Damage*?” he asked.

“I don’t think you can just ask people that,” Sid muttered.

“By Shintaro Kago,” Lucas added, for his benefit. It was a recent addition to his TBR, and despite some mixed reviews about some parts of the collection, he still wanted to give it a read.

"I think so," the assistant said haltingly. "We had a copy, but it might have gone. Let me check for you." He hurried off, and Lucas picked up his book stack to take to the till. He was surprised when Sid followed suit.

"You're getting all three?" he asked, eyeing the pile.

"Yeah? Well, they won't take that long to read, and we're here for the week." Sid was turning over a Junji Ito collection and looking at the cover illustration with interest. "This looks freaky."

"It is. *The Enigma of Amigara Fault* gave me nightmares when I stumbled across it online, you know, as a kid," he admitted. No need to specify that by 'as a kid' he meant 'at the age of sixteen when he was too old to get scared shitless by pictures on a page'. "But my favourite is *Uzumaki*. It's the most mainstream for a reason."

"I don't have that one," Sid pointed out after checking the titles in his hands.

"Well, it's like thirty quid in hardcover," Lucas said. "I have it at home. You can always borrow it when we get back."

Sid cocked his head to one side. "We forming a book club after Christmas?"

"Yeah... if you want," Lucas said, feeling his face flush a bit. "I mean, we're sort of... friends now? Maybe?"

"Yeah, I'd say so." Sid shrugged and headed for the till before Lucas could embarrass himself further, for which he was grateful.

Where had that come from? They were at best co-conspirators, and he'd only known Sid for a few days. But still, it felt weird to imagine going home and just never seeing him again. He was surprisingly OK, for a landlord.

Lucas had grabbed the newest volume of *Gannibal* for himself, as well as the copy of *Brain Damage* the shop assistant had been able to find for him and a new queer romance that looked promising. For Sid, he'd picked a Junji Ito collection, *Manhole* volume one (Sid had snickered at the title, but it was a good detective story with plenty of body horror), and the first volume of *PTSD Radio*. They left with heavy carrier bags, and Lucas was already excited to get tucked up in bed and start reading.

Sid stopped by the church gates, which were now open to the public. Beyond, Lucas could now see the graveyard, unusual and very rural-looking, considering where they were. The church on the other side was clearly old and

looked like it belonged in a little village, not in the centre of a city. On a wall just inside the gates was a large round plaque with a rainbow border. *Anne Lister 1791 – 1840, of Shibden Hall, Halifax. Lesbian and Diarist; took sacrament here to seal her union with Ann Walker, Easter 1834.*

"Do you want to go in?" Lucas asked hesitantly when Sid didn't make a move to cross the threshold of the gate.

"Yeah..." Sid said, almost inaudibly, then cleared his throat. "There wasn't a plaque last time I was here."

"Oh, right." Lucas followed him towards the church. "When was that?"

"A while ago."

Something was up, and Lucas wasn't sure what it was. Inside the church was just like every other small church he'd ever been in—which was a lot, given the historical site-focused holidays his family had gone on. It was stone, stained-glass, and polished wood as far as the eyes could see. There were flowers on display, and it smelled of lilies and beeswax candles. Pleasant enough and quiet, too. There was only one other person in there, some sort of tour guide or general volunteer keeping an eye on the place.

Sid walked down the aisle and took a seat in one of the front pews. Unsure as to whether or not he wanted to be alone, Lucas sat down in a pew on the other side, leaving the aisle between them. The heavy, fragrant silence felt less peaceful now and more tense. Sid was looking at the altar, but not seeing it. He wasn't even blinking as far as Lucas could tell.

"It was stupid to come in here," Sid said at last, under his breath. "Just felt like... like it'd be weird or something, not to. To just walk past."

"This isn't about Anne Lister, is it?" Lucas hedged.

"Well, that was why I chose it. Originally." Sid sighed, still looking towards the front of the church. "This is where I proposed to Frank. The first time. Before it was fully legal—sort of felt appropriate."

He'd proposed. More than once? So obviously Frank hadn't said yes the first time. Or the second, judging by his status as boyfriend or partner whenever Sid talked about him and the lack of a ring on Sid's hand. *Ouch.* Lucas wasn't sure what to say to that, and apparently, Sid was done with the church because he

stood up and headed for the door decisively. Lucas trailed after, unsure what to think.

He didn't catch up to Sid until they were back at the gate, where he caught his arm. Sid looked at him, surprised.

"Hey... are you OK?" Lucas asked.

Sid looked mildly embarrassed. "Shouldn't have dragged you in there. Sorry."

"It's fine—it's... I just don't want you to feel crappy." Lucas's mind was racing, hunting for something to say to make Sid feel better. "It was a really thoughtful place to propose. He was a fucking idiot not to say yes."

Sid snorted softly, looking away. "Yeah, well... he didn't think so."

"Like I said, idiot." Lucas nudged him gently. "His loss."

Sid managed a slight, crooked smile, and Lucas was relieved.

"Let's go catch up with your fella then," Sid said. "See what this shop is all about."

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Chapter Fourteen

SID

He was grateful to Lucas for dropping the church subject so quickly. Though, to be fair, Lucas was probably just as embarrassed to have been given that glimpse into his pathetic past. He wasn't sure what had gotten into him, just that when he saw the gates, all those memories came flooding back. The hope and excitement before the proposal and the crushing awkwardness afterwards. They'd gone to fucking *Wagamamas* for the most awkward dinner of his life afterwards. The reservations he'd made for a post-engagement dinner had gone unused.

Still, going in there, sitting where it happened, it had felt like the right thing to do. Returning to the scene of the crime. It had, if anything, made him more certain that leaving Frank had been the right thing to do. That it had been coming for a while. He'd just been prolonging the inevitable. Frank had never wanted him, not really. He was just a safe base from which Frank could go off on adventures with other people.

Lucas looked at him as they got near the shop. "We can just wait out here if you want?"

Ah, OK, so maybe they weren't dropping it. Not that Lucas had specifically referenced it, for which he was grateful. It gave him the option to pretend Lucas was worried about crowding the shop or getting too hot in there.

"Nah, it's fine. I want to have a look around. Need to get the hosts a gift, I suppose."

Lucas looked surprised, but he nodded. Then they reached the shop, and there were thankfully a lot of distractions for Sid to focus on. The place was packed with stuff. All of it arranged very nicely into wire pigeonholes or wooden racks, but still, a lot to look at. It also meant the shop had plenty of little nooks and corners to get lost in. Ideal for a little time and space away from everyone else. As soon as they stepped inside, he shuffled off into a little side area full of handmade candles, bottles of colourful matches, and snuffers.

He picked up a chunky candle, looked at the price, and carefully set it back down. Thirty-five quid, for one candle, which smelled like... He bent to sniff. *Wax.* He checked the nearby brown paper label: *Hand-poured soy wax, unscented*. On the shelf below were several small concrete cylinders, each with holes presumably for candles. Price: Seventy pounds. Eighty if you wanted one with a thin, wonky gold line painted on it. Jesus Christ, this place was insane.

At least it had taken his mind off Frank. Until just then. *Damn it.* Like a well-trained dog, his thoughts always eventually circled back to Frank.

He wandered for a while, looking at handmade felt slippers, glass and driftwood decanter sets, braided rugs, and soap made of goat milk. It was all the kind of fancy shit that he couldn't believe anyone would actually buy. You just looked at it in shops—shops you only seemed to find while on holiday—called your friend over to exclaim over the price, and then walked off, shaking your head to go spaff a tenner on a pasty.

"Have you seen the prices?"

He turned to find Lucas at his elbow, muttering out of the corner of his mouth. "I could make a tea cosy out of unicorn skin for less than that." He gestured at the price tag on a tea cosy that appeared to be made of undyed sacking—yours for only fifty eye-watering pounds.

Sid snorted and gestured to a white fuzzy pair of slippers on a nearby wooden plinth. "Someone beat you to it—unicorn mules, only a hundred pounds."

"I think those might actually be rabbit, which is more upsetting." Lucas pulled a face. "Poor Thumper."

"Luc, come look at this." Julian's voice came from somewhere towards the back of the shop.

Lucas pulled an apologetic face and started to work his way through the cluttered shop towards his boyfriend.

Sid looked around a bit more, ending up at what looked like an old farm gate that was being used to display scarves. He stroked one that was a bold berry red. They were, in fairness, very soft and apparently made of locally raised alpacas. But *how* local was the question. He tried to imagine someone walking an alpaca down York high street of a morning, flat white in hand, and found it depressingly easy to do so.

He was trying to work out whether the pattern on one of the scarves deliberately looked like a placenta or was just an unfortunate accident when he realised he could see Lucas on the other side of the gate.

Through the forest of scarves, Lucas and his boyfriend were bunched together over a display of amber-coloured jars and stainless-steel bottles. Smellies —that was what his mum would call that stuff. Soap was the white bar by the sink that actually got you clean. Smellies were the fun, colourful bottles and cartoon character shapes that you got in your Christmas stocking, along with colouring pencils and chocolate coins.

As he watched, Julian held up a bottle for Lucas to sniff appreciatively, then whispered something in his ear that made him laugh. Lucas, in turn, dispensed some lotion onto his hand to try, and Julian took over, rubbing it into his hand, leaning in for a kiss.

A sour feeling made itself known in the pit of his stomach. Since they'd arrived in York, he'd been annoyed, yes, but also sort of... relieved that Lucas's relationship didn't exactly seem overly demonstrative. To put it another way— one which made his insides twist guiltily—he'd been almost glad that Julian was such a twat because it made him feel less alone in the 'shit relationship' corner.

But away from prying eyes, the two of them looked... in love. Happy. The kind of cute gay couple that the BBC would put in a Christmas advert. Maybe he'd had Julian all wrong, and he just wasn't into public displays of affection, especially around his backwards parents.

He turned away from them. Cold reality had swept in all at once. He and Lucas weren't the outsiders here, on the same team amongst the upper-middle-class bullshit. He was the odd one out. The single, miserable tosser who was here

as part of a hare-brained scheme. He wasn't Lucas's friend or... book-club buddy. He was just useful for the moment. It wasn't a pleasant feeling, but he had to hold onto it, internalise it. Not let himself forget again. Lucas didn't want to hear his relationship troubles or his thoughts on anything. He was never going to see him again after this week.

He was ducking towards the door to get some air when Magda appeared beside him. She smiled and handed him a small brown paper bag with dried grass tied around the handle.

"Here, you absolutely have to have it, on me."

He looked inside and saw the scarf folded up neatly. The red one, which had reminded him of Lucas's shiny lips and velvet bow.

"I saw you looking at it," Magda was saying blithely. "It's so wonderful being here and watching people fall in love with things you've picked to go on the shelves. I think it's my favourite part of owning the shop."

"You don't have to..." he managed.

"Rubbish. The other good thing about owning the place is I get to give people things," she said conspiratorially. "Especially as you've put up with the boys all day."

He met her eye, surprised, and saw a sparkle of amusement there. "Chris and Julian aren't the easiest pair to be around—brothers, you know? It's nice to have someone else around to share the load."

"Sure," he said. "Uh, thanks."

"You're welcome—it'll suit you. I have an eye for these things," she said, then darted off towards a display where several customers had gathered together to discuss the merits of hammered copper versus brass trays.

Clutching the bag, Sid escaped to the street and leant against the wall out of view of the window. He lit a cigarette and watched people walking past, carrying their last-minute Christmas shopping and steaming cups of hot chocolate. He saw a flash of long dark hair threaded with grey and thought for a second it was Frank. Which was stupid. Frank didn't even know he was in York, and he probably wouldn't come even if he did. Still, it made his chest ache.

His phone felt heavy in his pocket. He should call, really, or at least text. Tell Frank he was alright at least. In case he was worrying. He could let him know

where his presents were—wrapped already and stashed at the back of the wardrobe in the spare room. Otherwise, he'd have nothing to open on Christmas Day. Unless, of course, Baz dropped by with gifts of his own.

Sid threw the cigarette down and crushed it under his foot. Suddenly, being out and about wasn't the distraction he'd hoped for. He'd have been better off staying in that guest 'cottage' and wallowing in peace instead of playing gooseberry to two couples. Stomping around like the Grinch over everyone's festive good time. Fuck, he still had dinner with them to get through. He wondered if it would be out of the question to order an Uber back to the house and claim he was feeling a bit shit. They'd probably be relieved to see the back of him.

"Sid?"

He nearly jumped, hadn't noticed Lucas approaching. He was flushed from the warm shop and carrying a larger version of the brown bag Sid had in his hand. It clinked and rattled—he'd obviously bought a lot of the smellies he and Julian had been looking at. Even out here on the street, Sid could detect a whiff of something peppery and sharp with lemon. Nothing like the sweet gingerbread scent Lucas had been doused with since they met. It only intensified the sour feeling that was eating him alive.

"We're heading towards the cathedral to take some pictures. Also, I need to sit down because my feet are killing me," Lucas said, pulling a face. "We can get a coffee if you like.—Magda's going to take about a thousand pictures, and Julian needs to make a work call, so—"

"I think I'm gonna go for a walk by myself," Sid said, interrupting him.

Lucas's bright expression dulled slightly. "Oh. OK... if you want. Uh... do you want me to drop you a pin for the restaurant to meet us later, or will you catch up before then?"

"Might as well, yeah." He was just full of the overwhelming need to escape from him. From all of them. To be by himself. "Send it, and I'll see you... later."

"OK." He wasn't looking at Lucas's face, but he could hear the confusion in his voice. Confusion bordering on hurt.

Before he could reconsider, Sid ducked his head and joined the throng of people heading back towards the Christmas market and *The Shambles*. The

busiest part of town and the easiest one to get lost in. That would be good… for a while. Though his feet were hurting as he walked away, shouldering a path through the crowds, the thought of sitting on a bench with Lucas and a hot coffee seemed almost tempting enough to drag him back.

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Chapter Fifteen
LUCAS

Sid was being weird, and it kept him preoccupied the rest of the day. He couldn't enjoy dropping in to *Lush* or *Socktopus* or any of the other places they visited. Although they walked around for literal hours, he never caught sight of Sid slouching his way through the crowds of shoppers. Didn't see him on a bench smoking or in the window of a café. Wherever he'd ended up, it was off the beaten path.

It was so strange. He'd thought they were getting on well, considering how they'd met. Lucas had really enjoyed the visit to *Travelling Man,* and he'd thought Sid was having a good time too. He'd bought the books he recommended and then shared something really personal and downright intimate with him in the church. Then, suddenly, in Magda's shop, it was as if a switch had flipped, and the light inside him had gone off. He was suddenly this stroppy stranger who couldn't wait to get away from him. Maybe he was just hurting after the whole church revelation, but Lucas wished he'd have stayed and talked to him about it.

The silver lining of the afternoon was that whatever had been up with Julian since he arrived in York was apparently wearing off. He'd found him in Magda's shop and insisted on taking him into the toiletry department to pick out a load of items. OK, so maybe that was because he wasn't the biggest fan of Lucas's current line-up of body products, but even so. They'd gotten close over the jars and bottles, and he was reminded of how sweet and funny Julian could be when it was just the two of them.

As Julian put his arm around his shoulder to hold the door of *Roots* open for him, Lucas told himself that he needed to remember that not everyone showed their feelings in the same way he did. Julian wasn't usually one to hold hands in the street or wrap an arm around his waist while they queued for coffee. That didn't mean he didn't love him, and he was clearly making an effort today. He was just more reserved than Lucas. And how many people were comfortable kissing and cuddling in front of their parents—even if they weren't gay? Exactly. That was just how Julian was raised, and Lucas felt privileged to be the one to see his softer side in private.

Roots was in a gorgeous half-timbered building on the corner of one of York's winding streets. He'd never been before and in fact hadn't even really heard of it, but judging from the way everyone kept saying the name of the restaurant, it was a big deal that Julian had booked it for them.

Normally, Lucas always Googled the menu of wherever he was going because otherwise it took him ages to decide, and he'd been shouted at one too many times by his dad for taking too long to chance it. But with the lack of a Wi-Fi password at the house, he'd not been able to. Data had let him down in the town centre, and the sample menu wouldn't load on his ancient phone. So he went in blind, a little panicky, as they were shown to their table.

"Shall we get a bottle?" Christopher said, already reading the wine list. "A white and a red for the table?"

"Sounds good." Julian looked at the menu for a few seconds and then pushed it away decisively. "Well, I know what I'm having. Luc?"

"Umm..." He hadn't even looked yet. "I'll have the same."

Julian nodded. "Good choice."

What had he chosen? That was the thing. Julian didn't tell him, and it seemed weird to ask after agreeing to get it. He only hoped it wasn't the chicken liver parfait, which he'd just spotted as a starter. The main and dessert were set, so he was at least safe there. He was not a big liver person. No liver was the ideal amount as far as he was concerned.

"Your dad's late," Julian said once the wine had arrived and there was still no sign of Sid. "Where did he go off to?"

"I'm not really sure. I did give him the address." Lucas shrugged, trying to be nonchalant when inside he was anything but. Anxiety was brewing in his blood —where had Sid gotten to?

"Sorry I'm late," Sid said behind him, escorted to their table by a waiter. He busied himself taking off his coat and hanging it over the chair, so he missed Lucas's sharp glare.

"We were just wondering where you'd got to," Julian said.

"Oh, just around." Sid sat down in the chair left open between Christopher and Lucas. "Lost track of time. Reading. Went round a few charity shops."

He gestured to the shopping bag he'd stashed under the table. The one he'd acquired at *Travelling Man*, stuffed with manga. Had he really been reading? Lucas detected a faint waft of beer—nothing gross, but it suggested Sid had maybe ducked in somewhere for a pint while they were separated. A drink and some reading time sounded pretty good, actually. He also wished he'd gotten to go around the charity shops, which Julian and the others had walked past as if they weren't there. He didn't want to drag them in if they'd just hate being there.

"Which one were you reading?" he asked while Sid looked over the menu and the waiter hovered, ready to take their food orders.

"Mmm? Oh, the police one—about the people stuffed down manholes," Sid said. "I'll have the mushroom velouté, please, mate, and... just a fizzy water to drink. Thanks."

"Two liver parfaits," Julian told the waiter. "You do know velouté's soup, right?"

Lucas realised that the last comment was aimed at Sid, who tilted his head to the side. Lucas winced sympathetically. He hated it when Julian talked down to him about this sort of thing. He hadn't known it was a soup, but there were nicer ways to check with someone.

"It's actually a sauce," Sid said, pleasantly enough but with a bit of bite in his smile. "*Mushroom* velouté is a soup—thickened with a roux, like the sauce. Sounds good to me after a chilly walk around York." He looked quizzically at Lucas, who blinked, having not been expecting it. "Do you like liver?"

"Uh... not really," Lucas confessed. "Sorry, can I change my parfait to a garlic brioche?"

The waiter nodded, apparently keeping note of their orders mentally instead of writing them down.

Julian leant over and whispered, "It's eighty-five pounds a head, Luc. You can't have bloody garlic bread as a starter."

"It's on the menu, it's fine," Lucas said back, and Julian rolled his eyes.

"We'll have the salmon," Christopher said, and the waiter left them to it, probably glad to have gotten that out of the way.

Magda, he noticed, was looking off into the middle distance as if mentally scrolling through her phone. He had felt like doing just that a few times while walking around town with Julian and Christopher. They were very much in 'brother mode' at the moment, paying little attention to him or Magda. He'd sort of missed Sid for that very reason. It was less fun not having someone to make fun of the stupid prices of things with.

"So, where did you go in France?" Julian asked, laying his napkin over his lap with a flourish. "You must have been to know so much about the food."

"Just watch a lot of cooking TV." Sid shrugged. "Been to France once or twice, but that was mostly for ciggies and cheap wine, back in the day."

Lucas cleared his throat. "So what do you think of *Manhole* so far?"

Sid switched his focus to him. "It's good. Wasn't expecting the nudity right out the gate."

"Oh yeah." Lucas laughed. "Sorry, I forgot."

"What's this?" Julian asked, brow creased in apparent annoyance at being left out.

"Oh, I recommended some books to Sid when we stopped in at the manga shop. I forgot one of them has this naked zombie guy right at the start," Lucas explained.

"You read that stuff?" Christopher asked, just tuning in clearly.

"Not really, but I didn't bring a book with me, so I thought I might as well give it a go," Sid said in the same easy tone he'd used since sitting down.

He'd stiffened a little bit, though, and Lucas could tell he wasn't enjoying Christopher and Julian's interrogation. Their questions felt pointed even to

Lucas.

"You ever read any?" Sid asked Julian and Christopher.

"No." Christopher laughed.

"God no—I leave the nerd stuff to Luc," Julian said. "Chris, did you see that new Omega in the jewellers by the cathedral?"

They started talking to each other, and Lucas almost breathed a sigh of relief. He'd sensed a potential explosion on the way. Sid was definitely smouldering with quiet annoyance. He sort of got it—being asked lots of questions was a bit tiresome—but he also wished Sid could just let it go instead of pushing back and making Julian irritable.

The food started coming out soon enough, though, and that was a pleasant distraction. Lucas's honey garlic brioche was delicious, and Sid seemed very happy with his soup. The main, a fancy roast beef with all the trimmings, was almost too much, but Lucas couldn't resist it; he'd never had food this good out before. It was likely he never would again if it were up to him to pay for it, too.

By the time they'd polished off the sticky parsnip pudding (weird idea but surprisingly moreish), Lucas was feeling sleepy and full of tasty dinner. The perfect festive state to be in, in his opinion.

They said goodbye to Madga and Christopher, who were making their own way home, and the three of them walked back over the river towards the NCP car park. As they rode up in the lift, Sid cleared his throat.

"Do you want me to drive back?" he asked, almost carefully neutral.

Lucas knew what he was getting at. Julian had drunk almost the entire bottle of red to himself over dinner. Christopher and Magda had split the white (odd with beef, but Lucas wasn't one to criticise), Sid had stuck to water, and Lucas had sipped half a glass—he wasn't really a wine person.

"I'm perfectly able to drive," Julian said and took his keys out to twirl in his fingers.

Sid looked his way, as if to get some backup. Lucas didn't meet his eye and hurried to keep step with Julian as the lift doors opened, and they stepped out into the car park.

"Alright then," he heard Sid mutter under his breath.

Julian must have heard too because he started walking even faster, clearly offended. They reached the BMW first and were already inside when Sid climbed into the back. He looked out of the side window—looking a lot like a moody teenager, Lucas thought—while Julian started the car, stalled twice, and finally backed out of the space in a fast lurch. Lucas didn't even breathe in case it sounded like a judgemental sigh. Sid appeared to be biting the inside of his cheek.

Julian drove slightly too fast all the way home, taking corners with a lot of wheel action as if to prove he was in total control. How acting like a rally driver was meant to do that, Lucas wasn't sure. He parked up on the gravel drive, and Sid climbed out without a word, then Julian shot off around the back of the house, leaving him there.

"Can you believe how rude he was?" Julian said as soon as they'd driven away. "I know he's your dad, Luc, but Christ. And you think Clive would have been worse than *that*?"

"Well, given that Clive is a racist and a homophobe who hates my guts..." Lucas pointed out. "Come on, Sid's alright."

Julian scoffed and pulled into the garage at the rear of the house. "Let me see, he kicks up a fuss about some stupid church. Then he wanders off for hours without even telling us where he's going, turns up late for dinner, and then acts like a petulant child every time one of us tries to speak to him."

Lucas winced. "OK, so maybe it was a bit rude for him to just go off on his own. But he did tell me he was going. And he wasn't that late. Barely a few minutes."

"Because he was too busy boozing," Julian said with a disbelieving shake of his head. "Absolutely reeked of beer."

"Maybe a bit, but..."

"And didn't even pay for that scarf from Magda's shop. The manners are just... Honestly, I can hardly see how you two are related."

A flash of panic washed over him. "Well... he didn't raise me or anything."

"Thank god for that." Julian pulled a face. "Or you'd be a beer-swilling misery, too. Who goes out to 'go round' charity shops, for Christ's sake? And he didn't even offer to pay for his meal."

"You did say it was your treat the other night," Lucas pointed out.

"That's not the point!" Julian climbed out of the car and looked at him across the roof once Lucas had scrambled out after him. "It's just the decent thing to do! And then he made that crack about my driving…"

Lucas wanted to point out that he was probably right—Julian had drunk too much. Sid, with his one or two beers over several hours, was probably the better choice. But he didn't want to add fuel to the fire. Julian was already fuming, and if he wasn't careful, the whole fiction could crumble around him.

"I'll talk to him," he said as a sort of olive branch. "He's probably embarrassed about it. I think he was just feeling… out of his element. You know?"

He thought no such thing, but it seemed to calm Julian down a bit to hear.

"Fine. Look, I do want to get on with him." Julian sighed. "I just think maybe it would have been better to invite your actual dad—you know, the one you grew up with. I know you think he's this monster, but he was a high-ranking police officer. He has to have a better grasp of decorum than that… shabby upstart."

Lucas bit his tongue and tasted parsnip pudding. "I'll go talk to him now."

He left Julian to take his shopping inside and headed down the garden towards the guest cottage. As much as he thought Julian might be taking things a bit far, Sid had been pretty rude to him. He really needed the rest of this week to go well. So, like it or not, Sid was going to have to be a bit more easy-going and a lot less… himself.

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Chapter Sixteen
SID

Well, thank fuck that is over with.

Sid set his shopping bags down on the sofa and collapsed next to them, head tilted back and eyes squeezed closed. One more minute in the car with that pissed-up twat and he'd have insisted he pull over so he, and ideally Lucas, could walk home. What had the pair of them been thinking? Julian was in no state to drive, but being outnumbered, there wasn't much he could do about it short of wrestling Julian to the ground and taking his keys. Which would probably have ruined what was left of the day.

As lovely dovey as the pair of them had been at the shop, he still wasn't sold on Julian. Not that he needed to be. His opinion clearly meant nothing as far as Lucas was concerned, and why should it? Lucas was a young, attractive guy in a stable relationship. What did he need advice from a recently cheated on, well past his prime, middle-aged, sad sack for?

His phone vibrated against his leg with a notification, and he winced. While he was off on his own, he'd gone into a pub to get a beer and use their Wi-Fi. He'd sat and read his new book for a bit, but he hadn't been able to avoid temptation for long. Halfway down his pint glass, he'd unblocked Frank and sent him a text to tell him he was alright. Frank had messaged back right away, demanding to know where he was, and he hadn't stopped since.

He checked the latest messages.

Either come back now or tell me where you are. I mean it.

Sid, we need to talk properly.

I miss you.

Did he, or was he just… safe? Maybe what Frank really missed was having someone around to do the food shopping, fill prescriptions, clean the house up, and generally keep the machinery of his life moving. To be there when Frank wanted to vent or someone to cuddle up to at night.

He put the phone on the table without answering the texts. He knew if he did that, Frank would eventually get the information out of him. That or he'd find himself booking a National Express coach or a train back to Blackpool in time to get a Christmas dinner together for the pair of them. He wouldn't mean to; it would just happen. Like it always did when he tried to hold firm with Frank.

The sound of the sliding door rolling open made him look up. Lucas was there, looking tense and a little aggravated. Not what he wanted to deal with right now.

"Can I get just an hour to myself?" he said, and it came out harsher than he intended.

"Well, you did go off on your own for hours earlier, so I think you can spare a minute or two now," Lucas said and crossed his arms. "Julian isn't happy."

"Shocking." Sid put his boots up on the coffee table.

Lucas was turning pink and paced around to stand in front of him. "You were really rude to him in the car park…"

"By trying to keep him from killing the three of us and other people, driving drunk?" Sid raised his eyebrows. "Oh yeah, I'm a fucking prick."

Lucas shoved his booted feet off the table, and Sid sat up, angry now. "Oi!"

"Oh, stop sulking like a teenager—you got dumped. Boo-hoo. There's no excuse to act like a dick to Julian and his family," Lucas hissed.

"*I'm* being a dick?" He couldn't believe what he was hearing. "I was doing my best to tolerate the pair of them all day while they marched me around without a stop for food or even to ask if I wanted to go anywhere specific. Sue me if I needed a break from following them around town while they ignored everyone else and talked about watches and their fucking jobs."

"That's just them being… brothers," Lucas snapped. "If any of us really wanted to stop somewhere, they would have, but I didn't make a whole thing

about it, and neither did Magda."

Sid's temper flared. "Sure, like they were going to stop at that comic shop? The one they were taking the piss out of right in front of you?"

"Not everyone likes comics," Lucas countered.

"Not everyone's a prick about stuff they don't like!"

"And not everyone eats an eighty-five quid meal and doesn't say thank you afterwards," Lucas snapped. "You were late, you did nothing but snipe at Julian —"

"I was a downright delight compared to the shit your boyfriend pulled, Mr 'Do You Know That's Soup' and 'Where Have You Been In France'. Jesus Christ. He couldn't leave anything alone. Just had to be the big man every chance he got. Sorry, I forgot to say thank you for the big show-off meal he insisted we go out for. I was a little preoccupied by how much wine he was putting away."

Lucas threw up his hands. "Ugh! Will you stop it with the driving thing? Yes, it was stupid of him, but if you hadn't wound him up, he might have let one of us drive."

"Psssht, sure." Sid rolled his eyes, shoved himself up from the sofa, and stalked to the kitchen. He didn't particularly want a coffee, but it gave him something to do that wasn't looking at Lucas's furious face.

"Why can't you just be civil to him? That's literally your one job here," Lucas said, trailing him to the kitchenette.

"That was me being civil," he turned and leant against the counter. "If I were being honest, I'd have called him a chinless elitist prick with less redeeming qualities than a dog turd. I'd tell you to get a spine and stand up to the prick, because you can do better. And I might have asked him if he was even gay, because he sure as fuck likes to pretend he's not."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Lucas blinked at him like he'd just grown an extra head.

"Oh, please, you've noticed. I know you have. You and him might as well have been strangers. He only wanted to hold your hand because his brother had his girl tucked under his arm. Before then, he barely acknowledged you were there."

Lucas was flushed red now, and his mouth moved for a second before he found words to throw back at him. “He’s just not into PDA. What, you think he’s embarrassed to be seen with me?”

“Yes!”

The hurt that flashed across Lucas’s face made him feel physically ill. He hadn’t meant it like that. It was about Julian, not him. Lucas was nothing to be embarrassed by, but he’d obviously taken it that way.

“I mean…” he started, but Lucas interrupted him.

“I don’t care. This is none of your business—my life, my relationship, Julian, and his family. None of this concerns you, OK? I mean, who even are you to say this stuff to me?”

The silence was sharp and sudden. And into it, his phone rang.

Lucas glanced down, saw the name on the screen, and scoffed.

“You already unblocked him, then. That didn’t last long.”

Sid wanted the floor to open up and drop him forty storeys down to hell. Shame turned him hot and cold, and he crossed the room to turn his phone over. But the damage was done.

“You want to talk about growing a spine?” Lucas said. “How about not crawling back to the man who cheated on you only days after you caught him at it with your boss? Hmmm?”

He couldn’t think of a single thing to say. Lucas was right, and he hated it. Hated himself for falling so easily back into the familiar, well-worn pattern of Sid and Frank. Sixteen years of baggage was heavy, but it was also solid and comforting.

“Julian might have a tendency to try and be ‘the big man’,” Lucas continued when Sid didn’t manage to dredge up a word in his own defence, “but at least he doesn’t try and pretend he has all the answers to life, love, and everything in between after rocking up pissed out of his mind and passing out on a stranger’s sofa. You are a mess, Sid. And as soon as Boxing Day’s over, you can go back to your messed-up life and do whatever you want with it. Until then, you owe me at least trying to keep it together. So be polite, and please don’t offer me any relationship advice, because honestly? Coming from you, it’s embarrassing.”

Lucas turned and stormed back through the living room. Sid watched him go, a heavy weight in his stomach. Lucas was right. He was an embarrassment, and he had no right to say any of the shit he'd just come out with about his boyfriend.

"And this is going back to Magda. I can't believe you stole it." Lucas grabbed the bag off the sofa.

"I didn't—"

But Lucas was already slamming the sliding door back across so hard it bounced and storming off across the garden. Sid stayed where he was, leaning on the kitchen counter. The kettle finished boiling and clicked off.

Across the room, his phone started to ring again.

He shut his eyes.

"Fuck."

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Chapter Seventeen
LUCAS

OK, so there was a chance (a teeny, weeny one) that he'd crossed a line. Lucas had been full of righteous indignation and anger when he stormed back up to the house. OK, so he'd also managed to nearly slip over on what he thought was probably goose shit, but still. He'd had truth, justice, and anime on his side as he changed into his slippers and went upstairs to Julian's room.

"I talked to Sid," he said once Julian opened the door. "He's... Well, I think he's going to behave himself now."

"Good, thank you." Julian smiled at him, apparently relieved. "It's Christmas. Family should try to get along."

"I know. I'm sorry." Lucas reached out to rub his arm, and Julian let his hand linger there for a second before looking up and down the landing. Lucas swallowed, trying not to let it bother him that Julian was so clearly worried someone was going to see them just standing near each other. No, not someone —his parents.

"Anyway... goodnight," he said and leaned up to kiss Julian.

He didn't shy away, but it was a quick brush of lips, and then Julian was shutting the door, and he was left to go back to his own room, alone. Not the festive cuddle by the fire he'd been imagining when he thought of spending Christmas with his boyfriend. There'd be no croissant and coffee breakfasts in bed either. Or apparently hand-holding for longer than five minutes.

Once he was alone in his room, the full extent of what he and Sid had said to each other really started to hit him. He kept hearing his own voice snapping, *"How about not crawling back to the man who cheated on you only days after you caught him at it with your boss? You are a mess, Sid... Please don't offer me any relationship advice, because honestly? Coming from you, it's embarrassing."*

He sank down onto the bed. Had he really said all that? It was so mean. So incredibly personal and hurtful. Of course, what Sid had said to him wasn't exactly sweet and kind. *"If I were being honest, I'd have called him a chinless elitist prick with less redeeming qualities than a dog turd. I'd tell you to get a spine and stand up to the prick, because you can do better."* That was one thing, but that emphatic *"Yes!"* when he'd asked if Sid thought Julian was embarrassed to be seen with him would stick in his mind forever.

He wasn't stupid. He knew Julian found him to be a bit... much, sometimes. That he would like him to dress more casually, or at least tone down the colours and patterns he wore. Julian sometimes shushed him when he was a bit loud or winced if he gestured too widely or flamboyantly. When that happened, Lucas was sort of worried that Julian was embarrassed by him. That he would like him more if he were a bit less... well, just less. But to hear it from someone else just hurt. If Sid could already see it after only two days, then surely Julian's family would, too. They'd know he wasn't good enough for Julian. That he was an embarrassment.

Still, though, as he tucked himself into bed, Lucas regretted losing his temper. He'd been really horrible to Sid. Maybe Sid had deserved it a little. But that didn't mean he was right to sink to his level. Tomorrow, he was going to rise above and be the bigger person. He was also going to try to present a united front with Julian—that meant not giving him any reason to pull back from him or be embarrassed. He'd show Sid what a real couple was meant to look like.

When he woke up and went down to breakfast, he took the little brown paper shopping bag with him. Magda was already down there when he arrived, sitting on her own and eating a round of toast with Marmite and a cup of green tea.

"Morning." She flashed him a quick smile, then went back to her phone. "Looking forward to the hike today?"

"The... Right, yes." Lucas remembered it being mentioned in passing as one of the McKinley family activities. The family Christmas hike. He had not really been looking forward to it. He enjoyed a nice long walk, but mostly around shops or along paved towpaths with convenient pubs and cafes, no mud or branches to trip over and make a fool of himself.

"I need to give this back to you," he said and put the shopping bag on the kitchen table before pulling out the soft red scarf to show her. Magda looked at it for a second and then glanced up at him in confusion.

"Why? Didn't he like it?"

Lucas hadn't been expecting that. "Uh... I don't know, but he didn't pay for it, so I thought..."

"No, I gave it to him." Now Magda looked confused that he was confused. It was all too much to be dealing with pre-coffee. "I don't charge family. And he was looking at it so intently that I thought he must really like it."

He thought of the pile of toiletries Julian had 'bought' him yesterday. Had he put them on Magda's tab? If so, why lie about Sid stealing from there when he obviously hadn't? And Jesus, Lucas really ought to have known because 1) what thief also took a carrier bag, and 2) in the brief time he'd known Sid, he hadn't seemed the type to take so much as a free pen without asking.

"Oh, right. Sorry, I think I got my wires crossed," Lucas muttered. "I'll give it back to him. He does really like it," he added to try to smooth things over.

"Good." Magda beamed. "The colour suits him—he could use more of it, to be honest. And he can wear it today. It's cold out. Fortunately, it's boys only, so I get to stay here, but you'd better get a move on because Chris said he wants to get moving within the hour. There's a match on this afternoon. Rugby," she added when he looked confused.

Lucas tried not to wince at both the news that the weather was chilly for the dreaded hike and at the reminder that Sid would be coming along. After last night, he wasn't sure it was a good idea for them to go off into the wilderness with Julian and no witnesses. Aside from Christopher and Aaron, whom he doubted Sid liked any more than Julian. Or him, right now.

While the kettle boiled, he took out his phone and texted him.

Lucas: There's a family hike today. Are you coming?

He waited, made himself a cup of posh instant coffee, and was hunting around for some bread that would fit in the toaster when a reply came in.

Sid: Am I invited?

Lucas sighed, jammed two bits of artisanal bread into the toaster, and tapped out a reply.

Lucas: Yes. Can we talk before?

Sid: Fine. Down here or up there?

Lucas: At yours.

Sid: I'll be there soon. Will text.

He frowned. Was Sid ignoring him? It was fairly plain he'd said to meet at the cottage. He didn't want them to be overheard arguing by a member of the family. Just in case things got loud. Best to head him off at the pass. He stuffed the scarf into his hoodie pocket and shoved the bag into the kitchen bin.

Lucas ejected his... warm bread, slathered it in jam, and took both it and his coffee to the back door. After stuffing his feet into his outdoor shoes, he nudged the door open and almost immediately wished he'd gone back upstairs for his coat. A hoodie just wasn't enough protection against the cut-glass frosty air. But he wasn't about to turn around now and go through the whole 'shoe changing' performance all over again.

There was no sign of Sid on the way down to the cottage, which confused him. If he were on his way up the house, surely he'd be taking the same route Lucas was. But maybe he'd been exaggerating his preparedness and was still having his morning coffee. He felt a pang of worry that maybe after the argument last night, Sid had messed up the cottage, and that was why he didn't want him to go there. But he quickly dismissed those thoughts. Sid wouldn't do that, he was sure of it.

When he pushed open the sliding door and saw the cottage still in pristine condition, he was annoyed at himself for even considering it. However, there was also no sign of Sid in there. The kitchenette was empty, and so was the sofa.

"Sid?" he called, sliding the door shut behind him and setting his breakfast down on the coffee table.

He rubbed his arms, trying to get some warmth back into them. There was no answer from upstairs. Maybe Sid was in the bathroom?

Perched on the edge of the sofa, Lucas ate his now-cold bread and jam and sipped his coffee. He probably ought to go grab some snacks from the van for the hike. There was nothing worse than low blood sugar and being miles away from anywhere.

He nearly choked on a piece of jammy crust when Sid appeared outside. He'd apparently gone out jogging—in shorts and a dark grey T-shirt, his phone in a day-glo armband. Lucas swallowed hard to dislodge the potentially lethal bread lump in his throat. So that was what he'd meant—he was nearly back at the cottage.

Sid had come to a stop outside and was breathing hard, sending clouds of white breath into the air. Lucas watched as he pulled up his shirt to wipe the sweat from his face. He had not expected to see so much muscle under there. Despite the slight curve to his belly, Sid was... solid. Built. His bare arms and legs sinewy and strong.

Lucas realised his mouth was open and closed it with a clack of teeth. What the hell was that about? Like he'd never seen a fit man before.

The door slid open, and Sid came in, toeing off his trainers. "Oh, you're here. I was gonna text you after I had a shower."

"Right... I didn't realise you meant you weren't here. I thought you meant you'd come up to the house."

"Not the brightest idea. If there's gonna be shouting." Sid shrugged. He was flushed and sweaty, hair standing up in damp clumps.

"Is there? Going to be shouting?" Lucas asked.

Sid shrugged again. "Dunno."

They stood in silence for a moment, then Lucas sighed and took the scarf out of his pocket.

"I'm sorry."

"I was being a dick."

They both paused and looked at each other. Then Sid laughed.

"OK, me first. I was being a dick. Sorry."

"Thanks." Lucas offered him the scarf. "I'm sorry I accused you of stealing, and... I was out of order."

Sid accepted the scarf and carefully folded it before laying it on the back of the sofa. "You were right, though. Not my place to go around giving advice. 'Specially not after I messaged Frank—like a fucking mug."

"Yeah, not the best move, but I get why you did. It's hard—breakups and being cheated on suck. And I had no right to make an issue over it." Lucas put his hands into his pockets and shrugged. "So... are you coming on the hike? Please don't make me go by myself."

Sid seemed to relax a little. "Sure. Let me just get showered, and I'll meet you up at the house?"

Lucas nodded. He had been about to say he was happy to wait, but something about the idea of sitting there while Sid was in the shower only a few feet away felt... weird. So he gathered his half-eaten breakfast and headed out the door.

When he got back to the mud room, Julian was already in there with Christopher. Aaron was waiting for them outside. All of them were wearing Barbour jackets, carrying polished wooden walking sticks, and had tucked their trousers into dark green Hunter wellingtons.

Julian looked over his Trixie Mattel hoodie and lavender jeans, then tilted his head as if to say, *'Come on, really?'* Lucas blushed. He'd thrown this on for breakfast, not as the outfit of the day.

"I'm just going to get changed. Sid's having a shower, he'll be here soon."

"Hurry up, or else we'll be back late for the match," Christopher said.

"Do you have boots?" Aaron asked, looking at his baby blue Vans with concern. "You can borrow my spares."

"Thanks." Lucas forced a smile, rushed to take off his trainers, and ran upstairs to get changed. He threw on a pair of dark jeans, a retro gaming sweatshirt and his coat, then rushed back down to accept a pair of muddy old wellies from Aaron, along with a pair of long pink knitted socks.

"Those are Eva's spares," he said. "They stop the boots from rubbing."

Lucas didn't want to start an argument; he shoved the knitted socks on over his Nike ones and pretended he didn't notice Christopher sniggering in the background. Wow, so funny—a man wearing pink socks. Lucas had been to drag shows that would blow that arsehole's mind.

“Morning.” Sid’s voice made him look up. He’d changed into the jeans he'd worn yesterday, a dark green jumper, and pulled his shearling-collared leather jacket on over the top, finished with the red scarf. Very… festive.

“Do you need boots, too?” Aaron asked.

“Eh, these are for hiking. I don’t mind if they get a bit mucky.” Sid lifted the baggy leg of his jeans to show the battered leather hiking boots laced over thick woollen socks. “Shall we?”

Aaron took the lead, and they all fell into line behind him. Sid bringing up the rear. Lucas tried to catch Julian’s eye and smile, but he was already marching ahead after his dad. Oh well. Plenty of time for them to fall in together later on. It was going to be a long hike, after all.

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Chapter Eighteen
SID

It wasn't the kind of hike he was used to.

Normally, when Sid went, he went alone at a reasonable pace, stopping to take pictures or to have coffee from his thermos. Just soak in the calm and the quiet. Maybe skim a stone on a pond or pick up some litter if inconsiderate fucks had left some behind.

When he went with Frank, they talked about anything and everything. Sometimes, yes, Frank got bored and wanted to turn back. Sometimes they argued about that, or about something else, like why the fridge was left open all night yesterday or who forgot the thermos. But for the most part, they walked together and enjoyed the route as a pair. They didn't split up.

Julian's family hiked almost competitively. He wasn't entirely surprised, to be honest. There had definitely been an air of one-upmanship yesterday. The expensive meal, the struggle over who did the driving, who knew more about fucking French soup. It was clear that Julian and the rest of his family liked to feel superior. Julian had probably been a bit put out that Sid wasn't the kind of person to get all spark-eyed and grateful over a plate of overpriced roast beef that someone else had chosen to go for. He'd have been happy with market food.

It was still weird to see in practice. Aaron went striding off as if he were leading an invisible tour group. Christopher and Julian were right behind him, powering along and talking at top volume about the rugby match they were going to watch and how annoying their mother was. Mostly, as far as Sid could

tell, she was trying really hard to make Christmas nice for everyone, which required some work on their part. *The horror.*

Lucas was behind the brothers, wellies slip-sliding a bit in the muck. They weren't the best shoes for walking, he'd found. They tended to just pick up mud, forming caked-on second boots that weighed a tonne. Sid was quite glad he'd packed his walking boots—good ankle and arch support and plenty of grip in the sole. The McKinley men weren't sliding as much, but mostly because they had walking sticks, better wellies, and were more used to tramping over the muddy ground this way, apparently.

It wasn't a difficult hike. More of a walk. It went slightly uphill, bordered some fields on a muddy bridle path, then curved through some woods and onto a public footpath that sloped down through fields left unploughed. They passed dried thistles and bushes hung with rosehips and rain-spangled spider webs like natural Christmas decorations. It was nice. Ordinarily, he'd have been enjoying himself. Of course, ordinarily, he'd have had a bit of peace and quiet and the chance of seeing some wildlife. But the sheer volume of boorish conversation was probably scaring off every fox, deer, and pheasant in a five-mile radius.

So Sid slowed down, bit by bit, until the McKinleys had marched ahead enough that he could mostly pretend they weren't with him. The path was more winding now, following some ancient byway first made by a drunk idiot. It wound around ancient oaks and hilly ground covered in moss and toadstools. A stream ran somewhere nearby, probably just runoff from the rain-soaked fields, but it sounded pleasant. Peaceful. He was sort of enjoying himself.

Then he turned a corner in the winding path and saw Lucas ahead. Just Lucas.

He was clearly struggling with the almost liquid mud on the path's surface, slithering around. Only the vague drone of the others' voices filtered back to them. They'd gone off and left him lagging behind. Which Lucas hadn't decided to do purposefully, as Sid was doing, but because he couldn't keep up. And they'd just fucked off.

Sid scoffed in annoyance and picked up his pace. Soon, Lucas heard him and turned around, almost falling over in the process.

"Oh! Hi, I thought you'd gotten fed up and turned back," Lucas said, regaining his balance.

"Nah, just taking my time. Enjoying the scenery."

Lucas gave him a look. "Avoiding the others?"

"Sort of key to the 'enjoying' part," Sid muttered. "You alright?"

"Mmm? Oh yeah, I just thought I'd embrace nature by walking in a Bambi-esque way. It's totally not hurting my legs at all," Lucas said with an eye roll. "How do farmers walk in these on a daily basis?"

"I think it's like being at sea, you just get used to slidin' around." Sid shrugged. "Also, theirs aren't made of plastic on the bottoms."

"Ugh, great." Lucas looked up the path and sighed when he realised he'd lost sight of his boyfriend and the others. "I'd turn around, but I'd never hear the end of it. You can pass me, it's fine. I'll scream if a wildebeest comes for me."

Sid snorted and then turned his gaze to the surrounding woodland. "Gimme a sec."

He climbed up the bank in two strides and eased through the overgrown bushes until he reached a nice hazel tree. He hunted about on the ground until he found a stick that wasn't rotten through and held up when he leant on it. A quick dust off in case of snails or mud, and he returned to the path to present it to Lucas.

"Artisanal walking pole—only one like it, 100% organic," he muttered as Lucas took it and tested it on the ground. "Come on, didn't Aaron say there's a good view from the top? Don't want to miss that."

He wasn't purposefully slowing down to keep pace with Lucas. After all, he'd been lagging behind him before. But he wasn't exactly in a hurry to abandon him on a trail that, while not dangerous, could still result in a twisted ankle or a fall. The stick at least seemed to be helping him stay upright and propel himself over the stickier patches.

Sid took out his cigarettes after a while and lit one, just to make the most of being outside. He caught Lucas looking at him.

"I know, I'd be walking faster without these." He gestured with the cigarette.

"Probably," Lucas agreed. "I was mostly wondering if you thought to bring any snacks. I only had a bit of bread for breakfast."

"That was silly," Sid said mildly, then took pity on him and dug several biscotti out of his pocket, wrapped up in kitchen roll. "Courtesy of the jar Eva thoughtfully put in my kitchen. I think she made them—or someone did, anyway. Maybe the butler."

Lucas accepted two and bit into the first with a muffled exclamation of relief. "You're a lifesaver."

Sid huffed a laugh. "God forbid you ever actually need saving. I don't think a few biscuits'll be much help."

They walked along for a while, and Sid was dusting crumbs off his new scarf when a thought occurred to him. He turned to Lucas as they reached the stream he'd been hearing, now wider and burbling around several stepping stones already bearing the muddy footprints of the others.

"Why did you think I stole this?" He held up the scarf between thumb and forefinger, like he was showing off a fancy tie.

"Oh...um..." Lucas had been looking anxiously at the stepping stones; now, he looked guilty, too. "Julian just thought you had. I don't think he realised Magda gave it to you, and... you know, it wasn't the sort of shop I thought you'd spend money in."

"Because it's posh?" Sid felt a spark of annoyance.

"Because it's overpriced," Lucas corrected. "Come on, I wouldn't spend that much on a scarf unless, you know... Tom Baker wore it. Or Tom Daley knitted it."

That eased the flash of offence. "Yeah, well, I don't steal things. Except complimentary biscotti. That's a grey area."

"Noted," Lucas said. "And I sort of realised that afterwards. I mean, I know we haven't known each other very long, but you don't seem like a thief to me. You're actually pretty decent... for a landlord."

"Enormous praise," Sid said. "Right, let me cross this first, and I'll give you a hand over. Don't want you to slip and bash your head in on a rock."

"Obviously... Who'd pay you rent then?"

"Well, exactly," Sid said and carefully negotiated the slippery stones to the other side of the bank. He turned and held out a hand. "Just take it slowly."

“I’m not completely incompetent, you know,” Lucas said conversationally as he started on his way over the stream. “I just wasn’t expecting to compete in the Tough Mudder challenge today… Ah!”

He caught him, just. Lucas’s mud-caked boot had skidded across the slick rock, and he’d tipped forward. Thankfully, right into Sid’s waiting arms. He gripped him tightly and pulled backwards, sending them both stumbling away from the water.

“Nature, why?” Lucas said, catching his breath. “I promise I’m not as unathletic as today is making me look. If this were a paved path, I’d be powering through.”

“You’d be alright if you had the right shoes,” Sid said, realising he was still holding Lucas in his arms and forcing himself to let go, despite the impulse to keep hold of him. “See.” He raised a boot to show how his soles were still mostly mud-free and able to grip the path.

“Oh, look at you, Mr I’ve Got The Right Shoes On.” Lucas rolled his eyes, then blinked as if surprised. “You do have the right shoes.”

“I definitely caught you, so this brain damage isn’t my fault, to be clear,” Sid said.

“No, I mean… Shut up. I mean, you like to hike. You told me. You do it all the time.”

“Yes?”

“So why are you all the way back here with me?”

Sid shrugged. “I’m avoiding the rest of them. Told you so.”

“Yeah, but you could have left them in your dust—or… aerosolised mud, anyway. You could probably have already made it to the end and had a nice, long rest in the peace and quiet.” Lucas was looking at him with dawning horror. “Oh my GOD, you feel sorry for me!”

“I… do not.” Sid struggled to sound genuine, and apparently, Lucas noticed because his face only grew more appalled.

“You do! You’re lagging back with the… weakest member of the herd! In case I get picked off by my natural predator… slightly slippery rocks.”

Sid scoffed. “You’re fine. I’m just… not interested in getting to the end first.”

Lucas pulled a face. “Is it some sort of weird hiking philosophy thing? Is the journey more important than the destination? Do you have that on a T-shirt?”

It was Sid’s turn to roll his eyes. “No, it’s because if I did ‘leave them in my dust’, it would put your bloke’s nose out of joint, and then you’d accuse me of pissing him off on purpose.”

Shit. He hadn’t meant to say it like that. The light, bantering tone was stone dead, and Lucas blinked at him like he’d just told him the biscotti were poisoned.

“What?” Lucas said, dumbstruck. “That’s not what he’s like.”

He didn’t want to carry on with this thread of conversation, but he also wasn’t about to lie. “Yeah, he is. It’s… Look, it’s none of my business. It’s fine. Whatever. Let’s just go.”

He took a step, but Lucas grabbed his jacket sleeve and held him back.

“No, explain,” he said.

Sid sighed. “Look… he’s… competitive. That’s all. He likes to win. Likes to feel like he’s the best. It’s not a big deal. I just knew that it’d piss him off if I got ahead of him. Just like it annoyed him when I knew what fucking velouté was and I wanted to drive us home. He thought I was competing with him, and he didn’t like being shown up.”

Lucas scoffed. “He is… so not like that.”

“Yeah, he is.”

Silence fell on them, and Sid clicked his tongue, trying to dispel the awkward atmosphere. He didn’t want to reopen yesterday’s argument and upset Lucas all over again. They’d both said some out-of-pocket shit to each other. Not that it hadn’t been true, mostly. But that didn’t mean it needed to be dragged out all over again.

“I bet you, he isn’t,” Lucas finally said. “I bet that when we catch up with them, the only thing he is worried about is what took us so long.”

“I’m not betting…” Sid started, trying to diffuse things.

“Worried you’re going to be shown up?” Lucas said pointedly.

Alright then. Game fucking on.

“Fine. What do you bet?”

Lucas looked taken aback; he obviously hadn’t really meant it as a proper bet. More of a figure of speech, but he scrambled for something anyway.

"When I win, I get that scarf."

Sid looked down at it. "Why?"

"Because it's fancy, and it's the nicest thing you have with you… and it's my signature colour." Lucas crossed his arms. "And if you win—which you won't—you get to keep it."

"Very generous. I win what I already have," Sid said.

"Well, what else do you want?"

He thought about it for a second. What did he want when he won? Because he was going to win. He knew the kind of person Julian was, and he knew Lucas had love-blinders on. The same ones that he'd been wearing around Frank for a long time.

"If I win…" he said slowly, trying not to think about how Lucas had felt pressed against him and how much he'd like to hold him again, "I get a night off from that lot. Dinner in the cottage, no questions asked. Bit of peace and quiet."

"Fine." Lucas held a hand out, and Sid shook it. "Get ready to have a slightly chilly neck."

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Chapter Nineteen
LUCAS

His legs were aching a lot by the time they heard the others waiting at the end of the trail up ahead. His stupid borrowed wellies kept slipping around, and he had to work twice as hard to walk in them. Several times, embarrassingly, he'd ended up unable to get any purchase at all on the slick, muddy ground, and Sid had linked arms with him to help him move forward.

Sid—the bastard—wasn't even tired. He'd been jogging that morning, smoked three cigarettes on the walk, and wasn't even slightly out of breath. Though, to be fair, he wasn't making a big deal out of it. He just kept to an easy pace and occasionally stopped to admire the view, which Lucas eventually realised was Sid giving him a chance to breathe. He also blamed the boots when he had to help him out of a slippery bit of mud, instead of being amused by his flailing. Or, if he was finding it funny, he was at least keeping it to himself.

The only really dicey moment had been crossing that river or whatever it was. Slipping on that stone had been one of those heart-in-the-mouth, 'oh shit!' moments. Like the time he stepped backwards and accidentally fell off a high kerb into the road. His stomach lurched, and his arms windmilled, and then Sid caught him. One arm scooping under his, the other wrapping around his waist to pull him towards him, away from the icy water.

OK, so it was only a few inches deep, but still—wet jeans all the way back to the house? No, thank you.

It had taken a moment or two for Sid to let go. Probably because he was worried Lucas might flail his way back into danger if he did. To be honest, Lucas

had just been in shock that Sid was that strong—the way his arms locked around him and just pulled like that. It was surprising, that was all, considering Sid was so much smaller than him. And it had been a bit startling, suddenly being that close to him, able to hear him breathing, and feel the heat through his clothes.

He'd been startled. That was all.

Then Sid had to go and make that comment about Julian, and it reminded him all over again why he was so angry at him yesterday. Like Sid knew Julian better than he did after three years of dating. Please.

Still, as he caught sight of Julian and the others waiting up ahead at the viewing spot they'd been heading for this entire time, Lucas felt slightly nervous. He'd been absolutely certain of himself when he'd made the bet with Sid. Had been looking forward to proving him wrong and strutting off with that scarf, which had felt so soft when he'd accidentally grabbed it during the whole 'nearly fell in the river' situation. Now, though, he was maybe only 99% sure. 95% and dropping.He'

"Come on, you two!" Aaron called down the slope to them, so boisterous and P.E. teacher-y that Lucas winced. "What's taking so long?"

"Did you get lost?" Christopher added, chortling along with his father. And Julian.

They reached the viewing spot, where several benches made from logs were set, offering a wide view of the countryside. All those brown and yellow fields lay out in a patchwork stitched together with fences, roads, and hedgerows. The odd cloud of smoke rose from a distant cluster of miniature-sized houses. Birds of prey swooped and dove through the clear blue winter sky.

It was nice. The cold air and the sweet scent of dead leaves added to the feeling of being on top of the world. Up where it was peaceful and quiet. Or it would have been without the three men already waiting there.

Julian nudged him in the ribs. "Should have warned you the walk isn't for the weak—one year, I almost didn't make it up here. Though I did have the flu, so..."

Lucas did his best to smile. "Yeah, these boots were a bit of a let-down—you said it was a walk, not uphill mud-skating."

"Aww, come on, don't blame the boots." Julian laughed. "You're just not used to the country or walking somewhere without an escalator. Hey, maybe when we move in together, we should go for an apartment with a gym, eh? That way next year, you can keep up." He lowered his voice a little, tone teasing. "Though I'll still beat you. Beat Chris this year. Third time running."

His smile waned substantially. "Well, thankfully, I didn't hold you back."

Julian didn't seem to catch the implication of his comment. "Yeah, we made good time this year—two minutes faster than last time. And we should make it home for the rugby, thankfully."

"Thankfully," he echoed.

He turned back to the view and noticed Sid sitting on one of the benches. Not nearby but near enough to have heard their conversation. His cheeks momentarily warmed in the chilly air. Perfect. Just what he needed. There was no way he could lie to Sid now and pretend he'd won the bet. Julian was being competitive; there was no denying it. He wasn't even being particularly gracious about 'winning' the country walk.

Lucas told himself that it didn't matter. Julian was with his family, and this was part of their tradition. He was obviously keen to beat his brother to the top. They'd probably been competing like this since they were children, and it was just a holdover now that they were adults. Who was he to start judging their traditions? Who was Sid, come to that?

Besides, Julian was keen on the gym—he went in London and in Blackpool, sometimes twice a day on his lunch break, and after work—so it was only to be expected that he took pride in his fitness and liked to show off.

Still, he was reminded of Sid's arms, wrenching him onto the bank, and the sight of him with his shirt pulled up after his run that morning. He clearly took care of himself but didn't need to rub everyone's face in his muscles. Or whatever. His face went hot again—a face he was not imagining anywhere near anyone's muscles, thank you very much.

As they left the lookout point and ended up on a thankfully paved lane to loop them back to the house, he covertly poked his thighs and stomach through his coat pockets. Maybe Julian had a point. Lucas was by nature a little bit soft in the middle… and many other places. His hobbies were sedentary, and he liked

snuggling down under a blanket and watching *Star Wars* more than he liked running on a little machine in a loud gym. Julian hadn't really complained before, but now he was thinking about it, this wasn't the first time he'd alluded to them going to the gym together. Something that really didn't appeal to him.

If they could go on walks instead, maybe. But he'd want to go at a more comfortable pace and enjoy the scenery. Maybe chat a bit and have fun in the process. That would be nice.

Sid fell back again on the walk home, and Lucas, freed from the muddy trail, tried to keep up with the others. He didn't manage it, but he ended up at a sort of halfway point between Sid and the McKinleys. Which was fine, he liked the quiet and having time to think his own thoughts. Though said thoughts were telling him that had he not made that stupid bet, he wouldn't be too embarrassed to walk with Sid now, and they could be having a nice chat or something.

They arrived back at the house with over an hour until the rugby. Lucas honestly didn't know what they'd been so het up about. It wasn't as if they couldn't just set it to record. But the one time he'd said this to Julian about a match, he'd looked at him like he was mad and told him it'd spoil it because he'd already know the score. Why he couldn't just not check said score on his phone was a mystery to Lucas. When the last *Star Wars* film came out, he'd dodged spoilers for two months before the UK release. A few hours off his phone was easy.

"Dinner's going to be at six," Eva said once they were all in the mud room. "Magda and I shall be out of your way, watching a film upstairs."

"Oooh, what film?" Lucas asked, because anything was better than rugby. Even the allure of sweaty, filthy men fighting over a ball was not enough to sustain his interest for that long.

"Oh..." Eva looked taken aback. "It's just a girl's film. Nothing you'd be interested in, I'm sure."

"I don't know—maybe Lucas wants to do face masks and manicures with the ladies." Aaron chuckled.

Lucas was sharply reminded of his dad, and for a second, he couldn't formulate a retort. Behind him, Sid cleared his throat.

"I could go for a film, especially if it's got Sandra Bullock in it."

"You're gay, aren't you? What do you care about Sandra Bullock?" Christopher asked, apparently legitimately confused.

"I don't really pick films based on how much I want to fuck the actors," Sid said, flatly. "She's funny."

The F-bomb having been dropped in the mud room seemed to sour things a bit. Eva was the first to rally.

"It's *The Holiday*."

Jude Law, hard pass, Lucas thought. He wasn't much of a romance person, really, only if it was really, really funny. Which, Sid was right, Sandra Bullock was usually good for. He'd much rather some cosy crime, though, or sci-fi. Obviously. It seemed as if Sid wasn't going to push to join the movie contingent, which was to be expected, considering the bet.

Remembering the bet, Lucas turned to glance at Sid. "Didn't you say you were going to have a nap or something after the walk? Have a quiet evening in?"

Sid looked at him for a moment, considering. "I don't want to be rude to our hosts."

"Oh, it'll be fine, right, Eva? I'll even bring your dinner down to you," Lucas pressed. Sid had won, fair and square. Why was he drawing it out by making him work to give him his prize?

"If you're sure," Sid said neutrally.

"Completely."

Was it his imagination, or did Sid look mildly crestfallen? Probably wanted to stick around and make pointed comments through dinner or find more ways to poke fun at Julian. Well, too bad. Lucas wasn't going to let that happen. Sid wanted the night off? He was getting the night off.

"You don't want to watch the game?" Aaron asked, as if this was completely foreign to him. Not that Lucas had been invited to join them.

"Nah. Not really a rugby person." Sid shrugged. "Cheers for the walk. I'll see you all tomorrow then."

"For the Christmas market!" Eva enthused. "The village market is so much nicer than the more commercial one in town. They're raising money for the church roof this year."

“Sounds like one I’d be mad to miss.” Sid smiled, then waved them off and headed out towards the guest cottage.

“Probably for the best,” Julian said, sotto voice to his brother. “Did you see how far behind he was the whole walk? Must have tired him out.”

“Maybe that’s where your boyfriend gets it from,” Chris muttered back, and Lucas pretended he hadn’t heard, because what else was he meant to do?

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Chapter Twenty
SID

Well, that was him told.

Sid hadn't really been about to hold Lucas to the whole stupid bet thing.

On the walk home, there had been a lot of tension in Lucas's shoulders as he hurried along ahead of him. He hadn't looked happy, and he wasn't about to abandon him with—and he was being charitable here—some of the worst people he had ever met. But Lucas was obviously keen to get him out of the way, so off to the cottage he went.

He was due for a rest, really. A full-on run and then a long, if fairly leisurely, walk had left him with a pleasant ache and the urge to watch some telly with his feet up. He made himself a coffee, popped his feet on the coffee table, and started looking through his options on the TV. Once he'd found a Christmas *Midsomer Murders* to bung on, he went for a forage in the kitchen. If he found anything likely looking, he could text Lucas not to bring him dinner. That would probably be a relief for him.

Having discovered that the sourdough bread was still good, and he had plenty of croissants, jam, and even some eggs to work with, Sid took his phone out—ignoring the fourteen missed calls from Frank's now blocked number—and texted Lucas.

Sid: I'm sorted for dinner, don't worry. Stay in the warm.

That done, he spread out on the sofa with a sigh, picked up one of the books he'd bought yesterday, and started to read, keeping half an ear on the goings on of John Nettles.

He'd finished *Manhole* and was a good way into *PTSD Radio* (Jesus Christ, he was not going to be able to sleep tonight) when there came a tap on the door. He very much did not jump out of his skin at that. Or clutch his chest.

He got up and went over to open the door to Lucas. He was standing outside in just his jumper again, shivering slightly and trying to pretend he wasn't. He was also carrying a glass oven dish covered in scrunched foil.

"I said stay inside. I've got plenty of food," he said, quickly stepping aside and letting Lucas in. "And get a bloody coat on. You'll freeze."

"It's a garden—not the Arctic Circle," Lucas said, rolling his eyes. "Anyway, it was all the way upstairs, and my legs have seized up. Also, when did you say not to come over?"

"I texted." Sid took the tray from him and set it on the coffee table.

"Oh... I didn't get it. The signal's pretty bad out here." Lucas shrugged. "You're welcome for me bringing you dinner, by the way. It's some kind of fancy macaroni cheese... thing."

That did sound good, actually. Much more tempting than the eggs on toast he'd been planning. But Sid wasn't really thinking about that. He was thinking about how the phone signal had been just fine the past two times he'd been texting with Lucas. Also, despite having handed off the tray, Lucas was still standing in the cottage living room.

Something was up.

"Oh, are you reading that now?" Lucas gestured to the open copy of *PTSD Radio*.

"Yeah. Not sure I'll get much sleep... What're you up to at the house?"

Lucas shrugged. "Not much. Bit of reading, took a post-hike shower... Everyone's watching rugby or films so..."

Sid felt an unpleasant cramp of irritation. They'd not bothered to include him in either, in other words. Pricks. Well, not the girls obviously—to be fair, Eva had seemed like she was semi-offering Lucas or indeed himself a place in the rom-com viewing. But the others, his bloody boyfriend, had apparently not. Clearly, some of this irritation made its way to his face because Lucas frowned.

"Don't start."

"I'm not starting anything," Sid said.

"OK... good, because it's completely fine." Lucas folded his arms. "I mean, I'm sure if I took my book down to the den, they wouldn't turf me out or anything. They're just a bit... loud." Lucas's gaze crept to the television. "Are you watching... *Midsomer Murders*?"

"Christmas marathon on ITV. The TV down here's only got the free apps."

"You don't have your own Netflix or Amazon or..." Lucas trailed off.

"They're all Frank's accounts. I don't know the passwords," Sid admitted. He just paid for them. "Not like I can ring him up and ask."

"Fair..." Lucas nibbled his lip. He'd put that shiny stuff on again, probably after his shower. His hair had gone curly and soft, wafting that gingerbread scent. "You know... I have Apple TV."

"Right... well, if you wanted to, you could... I mean, we could... watch something?" Sid said, stumbling a little because Lucas was probably going to say no and head back up the fancy house where his boyfriend and all the Christmas shit were.

Lucas swayed slightly as if thinking. "Sure, if you want... I did bring down enough pasta for two. You know, just in case you wanted leftovers or... something."

Oh, so it was like that, was it? Sid suppressed a smile. Apparently, Lucas had been fishing for an invite to stay. Should he be offended that he was basically the last choice? Possibly. But it was sort of nice, after a few hours of being on his own, to have someone else there to talk to.

"I'll bung it in the oven then," he said, picking up the baking dish. "Have a seat and pick something to watch."

Lucas sat down, picked up the remote, and started downloading his app onto the TV. "Any preference?"

"Something murder-mystery-ish?" Sid was frowning at the unfamiliar oven controls, some of which were worn off. "Nothing with Chris Pratt."

"O...K..." Lucas laughed. "Any reason, or just because he's kind of... the way he is? And also everywhere."

"Yeah, mostly that." Sid picked some random settings and put the dish of cheesy pasta into the oven. Fuck it, he'd rescue it when it smelled done. Once

he'd set out plates and cutlery, he returned to the sofa and found the TV paused on the opening scene of... something.

"Nothing says Christmas like Poirot," Lucas said, but there was a trace of uncertainty, as if he was half expecting Sid to disagree and request something else.

"Couldn't agree more. Not one of the new ones, is it?" he asked. He was fairly certain it wasn't just from the production logos that played as Lucas started the film. Lucas looked horrified.

"Never! Original *Death on the Nile* all the way. It's my favourite."

"*Evil Under the Sun* for me," Sid said. "If we're talking Ustinov."

"That's a good one. Ugh, my legs hurt so much," Lucas griped. He had propped his socked feet up on the coffee table—socks which had little sparkly Christmas puddings all over them, which made Sid smile slightly.

"It's those boots—all that slipping and sliding puts strain on your leg muscles," Sid said. "For next year, you want to get some hiking boots. Or borrow some. Wellies, even the non-plastic ones, not the best for walking."

"Mmm... and also maybe work on said leg muscles a bit," Lucas muttered.

Sid shrugged. "If you like, I can send you links to the walking paths I use—they're nice any time of year. Bit of fresh air's always good, too."

Lucas hummed again. "I think Julian is going to look for a place for us with a gym. So we can go together, and he can sort of... help me out."

Sid's bullshit senses lit up like a Christmas tree. Sure, Julian was a fucking dipshit, but was he really so much of a prick that he'd floated the idea of a gym membership to his perfectly healthy, never mind hot, boyfriend at Christmas?

"Working out as a pair's good... if that's what you want?" he said, trying to sound neutral. At this point, he deserved an Oscar for it because it was getting harder and harder not to just shout *'Are you fucking kidding me?'* every time Julian said or did anything. Did he not know how lucky he was? How far above his weight he was punching with a guy like Lucas? If he kept on like this, Sid was going sit him down and *tell him*.

Lucas had scrunched himself up inside his jumper, as if trying to hide himself away. Which was just fucking heartbreaking to witness. He'd sort of become

used to Lucas being bright and glittering, full of wisecracks and passion for so many things.

"I don't know. Seems like it might be necessary," Lucas muttered, eyes fixed on the screen. "I've been getting a bit... fat."

Maybe it was the strain of having to hold in his Julian-related opinions for most of the day, but Sid couldn't help the words that flew out of his mouth.

"Oh, fuck off!"

Lucas's attention snapped from the screen to him, sculpted eyebrows soaring to his hairline. Sid felt himself redden but didn't back down.

"I mean, I am," Lucas muttered. "It's not a bad word, it's just accurate."

"I know it's not bad, depending on who says it and how. But it's not accurate."

The smell of browning cheese gave him the excuse to get off the sofa and into the kitchenette. He rescued dinner from the oven and set it on a trivet to cool slightly before dishing up.

He was trying very hard to find the right words to say what he was thinking. "Lucas... please tell me you know you're hot."

Lucas's mouth fell open, and he seemed genuinely lost for words for a second before sputtering. "I... No, I'm not!"

"You bloody well are." Sid had picked up a spatula and now pointed it at him authoritatively. "I mean, Jesus, I know everyone's got their type, but you're a lot of people's type is what I'm saying. I mean, look at you."

Lucas still looked a bit confused, to be honest. Sid was inwardly fuming. Who the fuck had done such a number on him that he just couldn't see what a catch he was? Was it his dad, Julian, or someone else he'd dated? Whoever it was needed their attitude adjusting. With a car.

"Look, feel free to tell me to fuck off or that I'm overstepping here," Sid said, setting the spatula down to tick points off on his fingers. "But you're smart, funny, stylish..."

He could see Lucas already scoffing. He could practically read his mind—those were qualities that were great to have. But they weren't sexy.

"You've got a gorgeous smile, great hair, you're tall, you've got fucking rugby player shoulders, and an arse you could park a bike in."

“So… a massive arse?” Lucas sounded unimpressed, but he’d gone slightly pink.

“Yes! And it’s fucking hot!” Sid threw his hands up. “I’d kill for it. I’ve got literally nothing back there. I bet you don’t even have to wear a belt.”

That startled Lucas into a laugh, which grew and bubbled over into a snort. He covered his face. “Oh my god.”

“I’ll keep going—haven’t even gotten to your legs yet,” Sid said.

Lucas batted at the air as if to slap the comments down.

Sid chuckled. “Just agree with me, it’s easier.”

“Fine. I’m… hot,” Lucas said.

“And don’t you forget it.” He picked the spatula back up, stomach fizzing slightly with something… he wasn’t going to examine too closely. “Now, pasta?”

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Chapter Twenty-One
LUCAS

He had pasta. It was really good. He'd have to ask Eva for the recipe. Though he wasn't sure if she'd made it or if Stevens had pre-prepared and frozen it. Either way, it was top-notch. And after Sid's... somewhat aggressive body-positivity talk, he enjoyed it much more than he thought he would.

They were approximately halfway through the film (Angela Lansbury had not long been bumped off) when it occurred to him to reciprocate. After all, Sid had very recently been dumped, and he probably also needed a bit of reassurance in the 'confirmation you're above average-looking' vein.

Which he was. By a wide margin, if Lucas was being completely honest. Not counting when they first met, obviously. Drunk and then hanging out of one's arse weren't good looks on anyone. But once he was cleaned up, Sid was actually kind of... hot. *Smoking hot*, Lucas amended, remembering the brief glimpse he'd gotten under Sid's shirt.

OK, so 'short king' wasn't everyone's vibe, but Lucas had never really cared about height, which he supposed was the luxury of being over six foot. He'd never really had to think about it. But Sid didn't give off the insecure, spikey 'little man' aura, and that was endlessly appealing, really. Add to that the solid build of him, the threads of distinguished steely grey in his hair, and the way his eyes twinkled mischievously over his slightly crooked nose... Lucas could see the appeal. He just worried that maybe Sid didn't.

It had been nice of him to compliment him, really, Lucas knew. It had been welcome after the day he'd had. Especially when Julian and the other two men

went into the snug to watch TV, and Julian tossed a 'see you at dinner' over his shoulder. Dismissing him, effectively. Sid was probably the one person he'd spoken to today who hadn't made him feel like he was out of place and doing something wrong just by existing.

So when Sid paused the film to go make them cups of tea, Lucas leant back on the sofa and cleared his throat.

"Thank you. For... before."

Sid, kettle in one hand, mug in the other, looked at him in confusion. "For what?"

He felt his cheeks warm. "Just... saying nice stuff. And not abandoning me on the walk as well, I suppose."

Sid pulled a face that said it was no big deal. Maybe to him it wasn't. He was just sort of naturally thoughtful. Which was another thing to like about him. He wasn't just hot (*with very, very strong arms*, Lucas's brain supplied, along with a full sensory flashback to the moment by the river), he was just... nice. Really nice. Lovely, if he had to put a label on it. Kind.

"You're um... I mean, you look good, too. By the way," Lucas said, watching himself from outside his body and rolling his eyes because, Jesus, what the hell was that?

Sid looked up from the mugs and gave him a crooked smile that only partly eased the self-conscious softness in his eyes. "Cheers."

"I mean it!" Lucas insisted, his face now a beacon of embarrassment. "I'm not trying to be nice or make up for being such a dick yesterday. You're hot." He crossed his arms defiantly. "Deal with it."

"Oh, I'm dealing," Sid said, pouring hot water with exaggerated concentration, as if it were liquid nitrogen. "Well, thank you for saying it."

Lucas sighed and pushed himself up off the sofa, heading over to lean on the opposite side of the breakfast bar counter to Sid. "You're going to make me provide examples, aren't you?"

Sid barked a surprised laugh. "I'm really not fishing. It's fine. I believe you—there, see?"

Lucas narrowed his eyes, then held up a finger. "Item one..."

Sid blew out air and shook his head as he turned to the fridge to get the milk. But his ears were pink. And he hadn't specifically told him to shut up, so Lucas opted to continue.

"The beard. Item two, your general facial… configuration. Including the dimples."

Sid emerged from the fridge, affronted. "I do not have dimples."

"Oh, please, you know you do. You whipped them out on that poor waitress who brought our coffees at *Roots*." Lucas raised an eyebrow. "She probably still hasn't recovered."

Sid looked at him like he was insane. Lucas continued undaunted.

"Three, arms and chest, you know, that general… region. Very strong, toned. You look like you could carry a freshly felled Christmas tree home through the snow… or something."

Was he going too far? Maybe. Was he going to stop? Probably not.

"I'm not a fucking body builder," Sid muttered, ears now the same shade as his scarf.

"How much can you lift?" Lucas challenged, though he knew nothing about what weight was considered impressive. Anything above three four-pinters of milk would earn a smattering of applause from him, to be honest.

Sid pulled a nonchalant expression. "I don't know… a hundred and fifty kilos?"

Lucas's jaw dropped. "That's more than I weigh! By a lot!"

Sid looked amused by this for some reason. It took a moment for Lucas to register why.

"I wasn't like… asking you to pick me up."

"Thanks for clarifying."

"But you could, is what I'm saying," Lucas added, the back of his neck burning. "If you wanted to. That is a thing that you could physically accomplish."

"I would ask first," Sid assured him. "Unless you slipped over into another stream. Then I'd probably proceed under the assumption that it would be OK."

"Good plan… You're trying to distract me." Lucas narrowed his eyes.

"It was working," Sid pointed out, sliding his tea across the counter at him. "Besides, you're probably out of nice things to say. But thank you, that was... nice of you."

"Ugh, I'm not being nice, I told you." Lucas was starting to get frustrated. What would it take to persuade Sid that he wasn't just trying to give him a confidence boost and that he genuinely meant it? Was this how Sid had felt when he loaded up his own compliment shotgun and nailed him with it?

"Did you use to have an earring?" he asked, because he'd been looking closely at Sid for a minute or two and had just noticed the tell-tale mark of a piercing on his lobe. Sid reached up and rubbed at it automatically.

"Yeah... while ago. I took it out. 'S probably nearly healed up."

"Shame, really... Bet it was cute on you." He knew it would be—that dimple and sparkling eyes with an earring? Ugh. Forget the waitress, Lucas would never recover from that.

Sid snorted. "Got a bit old for it."

Someone had definitely told him that. Frank, Lucas would bet money on it. There was no way Sid would organically decide he was too old for an earring that he must have had for years.

He decided to give it one last shot. "It's not just the physical hotness, by the way. You're like... funny and nice, and to be honest, I think Frank must be stupid or blind because you're kind of a great catch."

That Sid scoffed at. "Yeah, right. I mean, thanks and everything, but you haven't seen Frank. He's... He was always the one people looked at. I mean, he was the frontman of the band, for fuck's sake. Everyone wanted him."

Lucas was sceptical. There were a fair few lead singers he'd never really seen the appeal of. They were talented, sure, but nothing special to look at, and if the news was to be believed, a lot of them were kind of trash people. He didn't think Frank would buck the trend, given what he already knew about him.

"Show me a picture," he said, without fully considering it before he blurted it out.

"You what?" Sid looked confused at this sudden left turn.

"You must have a picture of him on your phone. Show me." Lucas blew on his tea, trying to appear as nonchalant as possible in case Sid was about to tell

him to fuck off. “I mean, I’m giving you a reality check that you’re hot, and you don’t believe me. Your perspective is incredibly skewed, clearly, so… let me give you my honest and frank assessment of… Frank.”

For the first time since they started this conversation, Sid actually looked slightly uneasy. Like he wasn’t so certain if he wanted to be part of it.

“Obviously not a sext,” Lucas prodded, hoping to lighten the mood. “Those you can just… keep.”

Sid huffed, like he couldn’t believe they were still talking about this. But he did hesitantly take out his phone and slowly swipe at it before looking at the screen with a wistfulness that was almost painful to witness. It was clear that despite the disastrous blow-up in his relationship, Sid still cared a lot for Frank. There was a pained kind of affection in the crinkles around his eyes as he looked at the image on his phone. Lucas barely had time to school his face into a neutral expression before Sid was holding the phone out.

“Here.”

He took the device and turned it around. The picture was slightly blurry at the edges, clearly taken while Frank was on stage. He looked… intimidating. Lots of slightly greying long dark hair and deep dark, almost soulless eyes. He was also shirtless and screaming, which didn’t help. He had a lot of tattoos, covering both arms and parts of his chest and shoulders in a swirling, inky patchwork of tribal patterns, Celtic knots, and skulls. Lots of skulls.

He could see what Sid saw in him, sort of. He was angular and ropey in an Iggy Pop sort of way. Lived-in and cool with a capital ‘C’. If they’d gone to school together, Lucas would have been scared to talk to him. He was… still kind of scared of him, to be honest. He just had something wild and unpredictable about him, which he supposed was sort of accurate—what said unpredictable more than fucking someone else in the middle of the day, in the house you co-owned with your boyfriend?

“See, told you,” Sid said. He didn’t sound that pleased to be right. It was a sort of grim confirmation—as if he’d told Lucas it was going to rain, and now they were both drenched and waiting for a bus that almost certainly wasn’t coming.

Lucas held the phone out. “Eh, he’s OK.”

"OK?" Sid echoed, indignant now. "He's more than OK!"

Lucas scrunched his nose. "Sure... if you like that whole... middle-aged *Guns and Roses* tribute band look. Kind of sad sack behaviour from him, really."

"I'm middle-aged," Sid sputtered.

Lucas scoffed. "Yeah, but you're a daddy."

He wasn't sure which of them was more gobsmacked by that proclamation. He hadn't meant to say it; it was one of those times where the connection between his brain and his mouth was like a ski slope, and things just shot down it faster than he could stop them. He needed barriers or something, sturdy stands of pine trees to catch the rogue embarrassing things before they could jump out of his mouth, bobble hat pompoms merrily waving.

"Shall we watch the rest of the film now?" he said quickly.

"Yep," Sid said at once, quickly locking his phone and returning it to his pocket. "Can't wait to find out who did it."

It was a blatant conversational life raft, and he grabbed onto it with both hands. "Sid, the film came out in the seventies. And you've seen it before."

"Yeah, well, sometimes things can surprise you," Sid muttered before quickly leaving the kitchenette and reclaiming his seat on the sofa.

Lucas followed, and once he'd settled back onto the sofa and dragged a nearby blanket over himself for extra cosiness, Sid restarted the film.

He expected it to be a bit awkward. Well, it was for a second there. But after a few moments, Sid chuckled under his breath, and then their eyes met, and the chuckle turned into a laugh.

"Alright, oh my god." Lucas, laughing himself now, picked up a cushion and lightly hit him with it. "My brain was obviously suffering some sort of cheese overdose. It won't happen again."

Sid managed to stop laughing long enough to say, sounding only slightly strangled, "I don't know, sexually harassed by my own fake son on Christmas. What is the world coming to?"

Lucas hit him again, and by the time Hercule Poirot gathered everyone together to reveal the identity of the killer(s), things felt comfortable and normal again. Almost as if he'd never let his mouth run away with him at all.

"*Evil Under the Sun*?" Lucas asked tentatively as the credits rolled.

“If you can find it somewhere,” Sid said easily, leaning back and resting his arms along the back of the sofa in a big stretch. “Fancy a jammy scone?”

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Chapter Twenty-Two

SID

The thing that woke him, oddly enough, was the snoring.

After sixteen years with Frank, you'd have thought he'd have become used to it. But maybe the past few nights had whittled away at his tolerance. He'd quickly adapted to the almost eerie quiet of the countryside, so the presence of a rogue snore was now unusual enough to draw him out of his sleep. Slowly, but inescapably.

God, that was a good sleep. Sid shifted slowly and took a deep, slow breath. He was very warm, and something smelled like... ginger, vanilla, and sugar.

Gingerbread, he thought vaguely. *Very Christmassy.*

The soft snoring was coming from somewhere south of his shoulder, weirdly, given that Frank had never liked to cuddle, even (especially) after sex. His fingers twitched and stroked through someone's hair. Not long and wild but soft and curling against his fingers.

Sid woke up fully in the space of thirteen seconds. Holy shit.

He'd fallen asleep on the sofa. They had fallen asleep. Lucas's head was resting on his chest, arm around his midsection, one leg hooked over Sid's. Their socked feet tangled up on the coffee table. Sid was far from innocent in the snuggling stakes, he realised. His own arm was resting around Lucas's shoulders, fingers tangled in his... ridiculously soft hair. His other hand was almost but not quite touching Lucas's, where it lay on his stomach.

He couldn't remember when exactly he'd fallen asleep. Sometime after they put on the *Suchet* series? Their discarded scone plates and mugs were still on the

table, and the TV had turned itself off at some point in the night. Watery winter sunshine was creeping in through the sliding doors and across the floor. And Lucas was humming in his sleep, rubbing his cheek against his jumper while his hand kneaded at his stomach like a cat's paw.

It was... nice.

Lucas's hips rolled against his thigh and he sighed contentedly.

Fuck, he had to get up.

Lucas's fingertips wriggled under the hem of his jumper, and the moment they brushed his skin, a pleasant shiver he'd not felt in... far too long to admit forked down between his legs.

He was up and off the sofa faster than he had any right to move at his age after spending the night on a sofa. But age was exactly the point, wasn't it? Too old to be waking up with a man fifteen years younger than him. Too old to be feeling... fizzy and unsettled around someone new.

Lucas slid down into the space left by Sid's sudden exit and frowned sleepily as he woke up, blinking at him. The stitching of Sid's jumper was imprinted on his cheek, his hair every which way, sparkling slightly with residual glitter.

"Mmm... morning?" Lucas pushed himself up and looked around. "I don't remember falling asleep."

Sid cleared his throat, trying his best to look and sound normal. Everything was normal. Nothing had actually happened. Just a bit of sleep. God knows he'd crashed on his share of sofas and floors in his day with half the band, a bit of the backstage crew, and a few randoms. It didn't mean anything. It wasn't... intimate in any way.

He could still taste gingerbread in the back of his throat. Looking down, he realised he had tiny traces of gold glitter on his hand from Lucas's hair.

Right, so a shower was probably a good idea.

Lucas stretched and gave him an awkward smile. "Sorry for overstaying my welcome, I guess."

"No problem, any time," Sid said. "Uh... do you want a tea before you..."

"I should probably get back to the house. I've got a Christmas market to get ready for." Lucas got up and planted his hands on his lower back, stretching

again. “Plus, I am on the wrong side of thirty to be sleeping on a sofa—even a nice one. I need to crack into my emergency stash of name-brand ibuprofen.”

Sid laughed despite the absolute chaos going on in his head. A sort of nausea-inducing mixture of anxiety, shock, and… wishing he could go back a few minutes and curl back up on the sofa for a bit.

“See you in a bit then. I hope you’re in the mood to look at overpriced patchwork tea cosies and a lot of art made out of wood pallets.”

“Sounds good,” Sid said and waited for Lucas to put his shoes on, then realised there was frost outside, and he still didn’t have a coat. “Hang on, take this.”

Lucas took the scarf from him, bewildered. Then he seemed to realise that there was no way in the world that Sid’s jacket would fit over his shoulders. Sid hadn’t been exaggerating when he said they were rugby player worthy. But the scarf was quite wide and was better than nothing.

“Thanks.” Lucas took it and wrapped it around himself. “But it’s just a loan, right? I mean, you did win the bet.”

“Shouldn’t have made it to begin with,” Sid said, feeling sheepish. It had been a stupid thing to do, really, and he should have known that it would end in Lucas getting his feelings hurt.

“Eh, I started it.” Lucas shrugged. He seemed to wait for a moment, as if considering whether or not to say something. Then he smiled and turned to go. “Thanks for the scarf anyway. See you outside in a bit—we’ve got a church roof to partially fund.”

With that and a burst of icy cold air as he opened the sliding door, he was gone. Sid stood in place for a moment or two, then slowly retrieved the crumpled blanket from the sofa and folded it away on the arm. Once the plates and mugs were in the dishwasher, along with the pasta dish, it was as if nothing had happened at all.

Not that anything had happened. Not really. It just felt like it had. Or as if it nearly had. Which was insane, because there was no planet or reality where Lucas would have, for even a minute and a half, entertained the idea of anything happening with him.

Sid went upstairs, stripped off, and took a shower. Quick, practical, and with absolutely no derailments into anything aside from cleanliness. Afterwards, with the residual glitter and gingerbread scent safely consigned to Eva and Aaron's spotless plughole, he put on a red jumper, jeans, and had a quick breakfast before heading up to the main house to meet everyone outside the house for the drive to this Christmas market.

Everyone else was already there, except for Eva. Lucas had apparently showered and was wearing a cream cable knit jumper and the red scarf with the velvet blazer he'd worn on the drive down. Amongst the rest of them—in shades of forest green and posh wanker mustard—Lucas stood out like a robin on a Christmas card. He caught Sid's eye and waved with the tail end of the scarf. Like it was a secret joke between them. Sid half-smiled, then caught himself. No secret jokes. No secret anything. The last thing he needed in the middle of the Frank chaos was to lose his head over someone literally young enough to be his son.

Eva came rushing out of the front door looking flustered. "Sorry, sorry, everyone. I was trying to find the buffet things in the outside freezer. Then I couldn't, and I had to phone Stevens to ask where he'd put them, but he didn't answer, so I had to leave a voice message."

Aaron tsked. "Bloody Stevens, eh? Well, let's not waste any more time. It's always a nightmare getting parked."

With that, he climbed into his Land Rover with Eva.

"You're with them," Julian said, a bit too abruptly for Sid's liking, frankly.

Aaron beeped the horn as if in confirmation.

"Cheers," Sid muttered and got into the back.

As they drove off, he saw Lucas watching them go, face pinched into a slight frown. Probably not looking forward to being stuck in the BMW with the McKinley brothers. Magda, at least, was alright. In the brief time he'd spent with her, she'd been vague but at least nice and somewhat friendly. What she was doing with that bellend Christopher was anyone's guess. Then again, maybe he had the same magically redeeming quality that kept Lucas with Julian. Fantastic shag, perhaps.

He regretted thinking that as soon as the image zipped across his mind. None of his business. That was what he had to remember. None of his fucking business.

He wasn't paying that much attention to where they were driving. Only half listened to the conversation Aaron and Eva were having—something about sausage rolls, vol-au-vents, and whatever else she hadn't been able to find in the freezer. Sounded like if Stevens didn't phone back, it was going to be a bit of a lean Christmas buffet.

They arrived at the little village where the market was set up and parked in a gravel-speckled, very potholed car park by a small football pitch. The air was blisteringly fresh, and Sid was happy he'd decided to throw on his leather jacket at the last minute, plus the black woolly hat he'd found in his pocket. He was just about warm enough, even if a certain someone did have his scarf. He smiled slightly, then told himself sternly to stop it.

"The stalls are this way," Eva was saying, directing his attention away from the frosty football pitch and down a narrow path that led towards the main road.

"Are we not waiting for the others?" Sid asked.

"They'll find us, don't worry. It's crowded, but there's only so many places to go," Eva assured him.

"Feel free to wander off," Aaron added. "We'll all meet back at the war memorial. At three. Do it every year."

Whether it was a dismissal or a genuine offer of some free time, Sid decided to grab hold of it with both hands and make a quick getaway. He could smell interesting wafts of grilling meat and something that was unmistakably mulled cider. Merry bloody Christmas to him.

He nodded a farewell to Aaron and Eva, then followed the path until he reached what appeared to be the centre of the village. It was crammed with wooden huts decked out in pine boughs and white lights, steam and smoke rising from different food booths and other huts displaying glass ornaments, handmade ceramics, and a million other things that no one really needed but that were, nevertheless, nice to look at while you crunched fresh mince pies outdoors.

He was having a wander, looking at the decorations on the flint-studded cottages and sipping a paper cup of mulled apple juice (alcohol still held a bit of a sour place in him after the night he'd broken into Lucas's flat), when he noticed an A-frame blackboard shoved over to one side, draped with a balding string of tinsel.

Church jumble sale 10-2 – Bargains, cake sale, and raffle tickets!

Before he could think better of it, he snapped a picture of the sign and sent it to Lucas.

Sid: Seems like this could be right up your street.

Surprisingly, he got a message back almost immediately.

Lucas: Oooooh! Don't get all the good stuff before I get there! We've detoured to get the car washed.

He'd added a series of eye roll emojis after that, and Sid couldn't help copying the expression. Who the fuck needed their car washed to go to a Christmas market—with an unpaved car park no less?

Well, he could at least have a good look around. The sale had only just started by his watch, and all the market stalls would still be there in a bit. Bargains, however, waited for no one.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

LUCAS

They didn't get to the Christmas market until just gone eleven. Between the necessity of stopping for a full car wash after the BMW went through some muddy water, then a Costa because Christopher didn't want to drink 'shit market coffee', then having to drive slowly around the village before stopping to park half on a verge because all the spaces were taken (car wash now moot), Lucas was wishing he'd stayed in bed a little longer. Or on the sofa.

He'd half woken up in the night and realised that he was still in the cottage and also, slightly more pressingly, wrapped around Sid like a koala. But he'd been so warm and cosy, and he'd missed sleeping cuddled up to someone. Especially someone who was cuddling him back. So it had been easy to convince himself to shut his eyes and snuggle back down to sleep. He'd only woken again when Sid bolted off the sofa like his legs were on fire. But then maybe he was a bit weirded out that Lucas had been all over him—blissfully asleep, wrapped in his scent of cigarettes and leather.

It was only once Sid had left the sofa, jolting him awake, that he realised he'd been half hard. And sort of… pressed against Sid's thigh.

Maybe he hadn't noticed. Hopefully.

He'd made a quick escape back to the house, haunted by residual embarrassment over his aggressive sleep cuddles and the inevitable physical consequences. Poor Sid had probably thought he was being smothered. And that was the best-case scenario. Otherwise, he'd probably think he was a weirdo with unresolved father issues. Which was… only two-thirds true.

Anyway, when they finally got to the Christmas market, it was worth the wait. The stalls in York had been good too, but they had mostly been businesses on the medium side of small with a fair amount of bought-in stock and mass-produced ornaments. The little sheds here were a mix of small businesses and locals selling items for charity, and the vibe was more quaint and laid-back. He wandered past a stall selling fresh mistletoe and holly by the bushel, another run by a local women's group selling cakes, and caught up with the others by a tombola.

"Can't see Mum or Dad," Christopher was saying as Lucas caught up to them. "Probably stopped off to get a mulled wine."

"Sounds good to me." Julian took his hand and braced his shoulders against the slight chill in the air. "Luc?"

"Mmmm?" He'd been half listening, still trying to take in everything around him. It was all so cute, and for the first time since he drove down here, he was starting to feel somewhat Christmassy.

"Earth to Lucas—mulled wine?"

"Oh, sure."

He followed after them, thinking it was a bit early for a mulled wine, but he could grab something non-alcoholic. It hadn't escaped his notice that Julian was holding his hand again, once more in front of Christopher, who was also linked up with Magda. With a sinking feeling, Lucas remembered Sid labelling Julian as competitive. Was that what this was? Christopher had his arm around his girlfriend, so Julian was holding his hand, like he was trying to prove something. It made him feel a bit heavy and sick inside.

As they went, he kept looking around for Sid but couldn't spot him anywhere. He did, however, see the sign advertising a jumble sale, which had piqued his interest when Sid sent him a picture of it. You never knew what you'd find at a jumble sale, especially in a reasonably posh area like this. He had visions of fancy tailored shirts to add to his wardrobe, M&S cashmere jumpers or kitschy bits of décor, and maybe even some vintage memorabilia.

He turned to Julian to mention it and then closed his mouth. There was no way Julian would want to go and look around a jumble sale. He'd probably make

a face at him just for asking. Lucas wasn't sure if any number of bargains would make up for how that would feel. It just wasn't worth it.

They got mulled wine—he got a mulled apple juice and a comment from Christopher that he was 'being boring'—and walked around the stalls. Lucas was half considering what to get Sid for Christmas. It would look weird, after all, if they all opened presents on Christmas Day and he'd bought nothing for his 'dad'. Also, he wanted to get him something. He deserved something nice as a thank you for coming to York and… putting up with Julian's family.

He paused by a jewellery stall and admired the selections of necklaces, bracelets, and earrings on display. They were all somewhat nature-themed—sprigs of oak leaves and acorns carved in oxidised silver. Bronze hares and copper foxes. Gold leaves and cast branches turned into bangles. Gorgeous stuff.

"Looking for anything in particular?" the woman behind the counter asked. She was decked out in mittens and a woolly hat against the cold, cuddling her own cup of mulled apple juice.

"An earring, I think," he said, without really thinking.

He could see the dent of Sid's partly healed piercing in his mind and thought how wrong it was that he'd probably taken it out just because of something Frank said. He deserved to do what he wanted with his own appearance. And anyone who went up on stage to scream in leather pants had no business commenting on someone else's earring. *Look in the mirror, Frankie,* Lucas thought.

"I've got a selection of singles," the woman said, gesturing to a velvet-lined tray on the counter. "Not that many, I'm afraid. But there are pairs, too, if you don't mind having one left over."

But he'd already seen the one he wanted. He picked it up to show her. "That's perfect."

She put it in a little velvet bag for him, and he paid on his card. It was a bit pricey but too nice to pass up. It would look really good on Sid. If he wanted to wear it. As he walked away from the stall, Lucas started to worry a little that he'd overstepped. After all, maybe Sid was perfectly OK with not wearing an earring. But something told him he'd read things right. Sid had seemed to miss it, and Lucas was going with that instinct.

"Buy anything nice?" Magda asked when he rejoined the group.

"Just something for Sid." Lucas shrugged. "I've done all my other shopping."

"From the jewellers?" Julian asked incredulously. Apparently, he'd seen where Lucas had ducked off to. "Does he wear much jewellery?"

"I think he'll like this," Lucas said neutrally. But when Julian went to take his hand again, he put it in his pocket. It wasn't something he really thought about. He just did it, and Julian gave him a look afterwards that he chose to ignore.

He spotted Sid then, wandering their way with—of all things—a cardboard box under one arm. One which had apparently once contained bulk frozen chips. There was a flat white box on top of it, and a cling film-wrapped cake finished off the little pile. Lucas met his eye and smiled, stepping away to meet him halfway. Sid threaded his way through the crowd.

"Been busy shopping?" he asked, indicating the boxes.

"Yep—had to get our hosts a little something. Only seemed polite. Even if I'm not sure what they really go for." Sid adjusted his grip on the boxes carefully and tapped the white one. "That's for them."

"And the cake?"

"Oh, I didn't really mean to buy that," Sid admitted, slightly sheepish. "Got strong-armed into it by a woman on the cake stall. Twelve cocking quid for a Victoria sponge! That church roof better be worth it."

Lucas laughed, and Sid looked pleased to have been the cause. He looked good out in the brisk air—cheeks bitten pink and all bundled into his leather jacket and wool hat. Just missing the scarf that was currently wrapped around Lucas's neck, smelling slightly of him.

"What's in the big box then?" Lucas asked, spotting Julian and the others working their way over to them.

Sid hefted the box. "Just stuff from the jumble sale. Figured I'm going to be kitting out my own place soon enough. Might as well get a few bits and pieces. They had vintage cast-iron saucepans in there. Need a bit of a clean, but I think I can bring them up like new with a bit of wire wool and some Barkeeper's Friend."

"Or The Pink Stuff," Lucas said. "I mean, I don't really clean things, but... I watch a lot of TikToks about it. Very satisfying stuff."

Sid chuckled. “Well, I’ll have to give it a go then.”

“Did you say you went to a... jumble sale?”

Lucas watched that sparkle vanish from Sid’s expression, replaced by a flinty disinterest that he recognised as a form of defence. It was the same look he used around Clive. As if he could lock all the bright, joyful, but fragile parts of himself away and save them from being chipped away at.

Sid turned and looked at Christopher. “Yep.”

Christopher didn’t seem to register the flat expression or voice. He laughed. “Why? I mean... there’s plenty of decent stuff here to look at. You don’t have to go digging through a bunch of old crap.” He lowered his voice slightly, but not enough for it to matter. “Those are for poor people.”

“And for raising money for church roofs,” Sid said, lowering his own voice sarcastically.

Christopher blushed scarlet at the mockery, and Julian gave Lucas a look that said he expected him to jump in and defend Christopher or control Sid. Neither of which he had any intention of doing. If he was being honest, he was enjoying watching someone actually stand up to Julian’s brother. He only wished it could be him.

“Anyway, I think I’m about done here, so... if you see your parents, tell ’em I’ve taken an Uber back to the house,” Sid said. “From the way your dad was putting the mulled wine away, I’d say he’d be best off doing the same.” He eyed the cup in Julian’s hand. “Make sure you get Lucas home safe.”

It sounded like what it was—a threat, albeit in a pleasant enough tone.

Sid winked at him as he turned to go, and Lucas tried his best to suppress a smile.

“Who does he think he is?” Christopher muttered.

“God knows,” Julian said and knocked back the last of his wine. “Another anyone?”

“I don’t think so,” Lucas said and took the cup smoothly from his hand, crumpled it, and dropped it into a nearby bin. “You heard him. Unless you want me to drive the BMW home?”

The look on Julian’s face was priceless. Even if it did make his insides swoop with anxiety. After a mumbled comment that Lucas wouldn’t know what to do

with the BMW, Julian stalked over to the mulled wine stall and ordered an apple juice louder than was necessary.

Lucas just turned his back and rolled his eyes. Inside his coat pocket, he wrapped a hand around the little velvet bag and stroked the soft fabric. Like a talisman.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

SID

The Uber dropped him off outside the main house, and he quickly walked down to the guest cottage and let himself in. He hoped Lucas could look out for himself when it came to keeping Julian off the booze long enough to drive him home. He had his number if not.

He was glad to get a bit of time to himself, really. It was becoming increasingly difficult to tolerate the McKinley clan at large. Besides, he had Lucas's Christmas present to stash away, and it was pretty bloody heavy.

He hadn't been intending to get him something from the jumble sale. He'd had half an idea to get Magda to one side and see if she could pop him round another scarf (he'd pay for it, obviously). But as soon as he'd gone into the church and saw the battered cardboard box half hidden under a folding table, he'd known he was going to be walking out of there with it.

Alone in the guest cottage, he carefully removed the contents and set everything on the kitchen counter. Then he ran some hot, soapy water into the sink and fetched a dishcloth. It needed a bit of a wipe down, but the cassette player looked to still be in good condition. He'd even bought some batteries for it from a stall selling 'Christmas essentials' like tape, scissors, turkey roasting trays, and batteries for all the toys kids would open on Christmas.

The tape player was just a bonus, really. The real find was the tapes that had been dumped into the box with it. A lot of BBC comedy recordings, some radio plays, and eight *Doctor Who* cassettes, which he had bought.

He wasn't sure they were the exact ones Lucas wanted. But if even one of them was, that was at least something. They were a bit dusty, and he carefully wiped the cases clean one after the other. Then he popped the tapes into the player and rewound the ones that weren't ready to play, checking them to make sure both they and the machine worked. They did, thankfully.

Once he'd dried everything with kitchen roll, he wrapped them in the paper he'd bought along with the batteries. Then he put everything back in the box to make the job of carrying it up to the house on Christmas day easier. Next, he wrapped the present he'd bought for Eva and Aaron. Mostly for Eva, to be honest. It was a Christmas wreath made of fused green glass, hanging from a red ribbon. Apparently, the woman at the stall made them from recycled wine bottles. He thought it was nice, and it went with the traditional red and green decorations the McKinleys already had up. So there was that.

The saucepan story hadn't been a lie; there were two pots in the box, and he washed those up, too. Though even with a lot of elbow grease, they didn't come up as well as he'd like. He'd need to get some Pink Stuff and have another go. Though the thought of putting them on the hob in the flat and cooking a sad meal for one wasn't exactly appealing.

Speaking of 'not appealing', he was meant to be going to the nearby pub for carols by firelight and yet more mulled wine. A plan sprung on him by Aaron on the way to the market. Apparently, getting the full itinerary for this week all at once was out of the question. Maybe they were worried he'd run screaming for the hills.

He readily seized on the opportunity for a walk around the grounds in the peace and quiet, then returned to the cottage for tea, toast, and to read the rest of his manga. He'd have to ask Lucas for some more recommendations. He was getting into it now but wasn't sure what to go for next.

As if aware he was thinking of him, his phone buzzed with a text from Lucas.

Lucas: Home now. What are you up to?

Lucas: You'd better not have Ubered back to Blackpool. Deal's a deal.

A picture of Lucas came through, presumably trying to look stern. Sid snorted. He was fucking adorable. That thought made him roll his eyes at himself. He was too old for all that.

Sid: Still here, for my sins. How was the drive home—sober, I hope?

Lucas: I think you got the point across to Julian. I also put my foot down.

Sid: Scary

Lucas: I can be.

Lucas: 1hr until we assemble on ze driveway for carolling and mandatory mince pies.

Sid: I can hardly contain my excitement.

Still chuckling to himself, Sid went upstairs to put on a shirt as a jumper felt like it would be too heavy for a crowded pub with an open fire. It was dark green, which was about as Christmassy as he was getting with his current wardrobe. He put on cologne, tidied up his hair and beard, then scowled at his own reflection when he realised what he was doing. There was no one here he wanted to look good for. No one who'd be remotely impressed.

He wandered towards the house and found everyone else assembled outside again, just like that morning. Only now it was dark, and the fancy Christmas lights on the house were blinking, casting golden light over everyone. Lucas was still wearing his scarf, he noticed, and he looked happy to see him. Which made him the only person there who so much as looked at him.

Aaron was the last to come out of the house, looking irritated. "Your mother's not coming. Apparently, Stevens told her weeks ago that she'd have to finish preparing the buffet food herself, left instructions, and ordered the ingredients with this week's shopping. But she forgot. She's defrosting the pastry he made, but all the fillings still need doing."

Julian and Christopher made disbelieving, irritated noises. Magda, to her credit, looked mildly concerned.

"So she's going to do it all tonight?" she asked. "Does she need help?"

"You burn water, babe." Christopher chuckled. "What are you going to do, provide moral support?"

Magda wilted as all three McKinley men laughed at this 'joke'. He really could not stand another evening with these people.

"I can do it," he offered. "If Eva doesn't mind, she can go to the pub, and I'll stay behind."

Aaron chortled like this was another amazing joke but trailed off when he realised Sid was serious. "You're going to cook?"

"Well, I'm not Gordon Ramsey, but I can follow a recipe. You go to this pub thing every year, right? Would be a shame for her to miss out." He shrugged, trying to be nonchalant, but inside, he was begging whatever God existed to please let him have this evening away from them. He'd much prefer making mince pies and vol-au-vents to trying to keep the peace with Aaron and the two muppets he called sons.

He noticed Lucas was looking at him with a raised eyebrow, obviously fully knowing why he was volunteering. But he'd probably prefer being alone with Julian to having Sid there, trying and failing not to look as judgemental as he felt. Frank always said he couldn't control his face around people he didn't like. It was why he'd never been good at customer service at the shop.

It seemed that Aaron had decided that he'd rather spend the evening with his wife than with Sid. Understandable, really. He opened the front door and called for her. Moments later, she was there, and once he explained that Sid had volunteered, she was out of her apron like a shot. He accepted it, took off his shoes, and headed for the kitchen.

There were pages of handwritten instructions on the kitchen counter. Presumably, Stevens had written them. There were also frozen pastry blocks labelled with what they were for. Eva had made a start on digging out all the ingredients for various fillings, grouping them together on the counters. It looked like they were missing mincemeat, the sausage for sausage rolls, prawn cocktail, egg mayonnaise, and coronation chicken for the vol-au-vents. Could be worse. By the time he finished with that lot, the pastry would probably be thawed enough to roll out and assemble everything.

The sound of the cars pulling away made his shoulders relax slightly. He rolled up his shirt sleeves and put the apron on (it was patterned all over with aggressively cheerful gingerbread men, but it did the job). Bit of music on his phone, nice big cup of coffee, and he'd be in his element. He tied the apron strings and surveyed the recipes. Where to start?

"Got another one of those?"

He nearly jumped but managed to contain it just in time. Still, when he turned around, Lucas looked amused to have caught him unawares.

"What're you doing here?" Sid asked, though it was obvious. He was just a bit flustered by the pleasant jolt in his chest when he saw that Lucas had stayed behind.

"Told them it would be a nice bonding opportunity for us." Lucas shrugged, helping himself to an apron covered in nutcracker soldiers. "Besides, thought you could use the help."

Sid raised an eyebrow. "You think they're all gonna get steaming, and you didn't want to have to fight to drive them home."

"That too," Lucas allowed. "Do you actually know what you're doing?"

"Me? Yeah. I mean... I'm not a chef, but even I can make mincemeat. Which is probably a good thing because I've seen your kitchen, and it seemed... unused."

Lucas put his hands on his hips, which had the unfortunate effect of making Sid look at them. If anything, the apron over those tight jeans was making them look even more appealing. He quickly jerked his gaze upwards.

"I cook," Lucas protested, cheeks a bit pink. Had he noticed him dragging his eyes over him? He hoped not.

"I don't think ready meals count."

Lucas poked his tongue out, and Sid smirked.

"Let's start with the easy stuff—egg mayo and prawns in pink sauce," Sid said.

"Grim." Lucas eyed the boxes of eggs. "How very eighties."

"Hey, I'll make it, but I am not eatin' it," Sid said, turning to fill a saucepan with water. "Sausage rolls, though... those had better come out nice."

Lucas gave him a small salute. "Chef, yes, chef!"

He put the pan on the hob and glared at him. "Just get the eggs in the pot, you."

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Chapter Twenty-Five

LUCAS

As it turned out, Sid could actually cook. He wasn't sure if he'd been being modest earlier or if his own standards were so low that Sid's skills were impressive, but still. It was cool to watch as Sid chopped chestnuts, sautéed onions, and taste-tested his seasoning. Even if it was very funny watching him wince when he tasted the prawn cocktail.

"Did we mess up?" Lucas asked, worried.

"Nah, it's perfect. I just can't stand the stuff." Sid tossed his used spoon into the dishwasher. "Right, mincemeat time."

They had a massive bowl of dried fruit already soaking in brandy and lemon juice. Which had really helped to remove the boiled egg smell from the kitchen. Much to Lucas's delight. He'd had to go stand by it a few times for a breather during the egg-peeling process, which had taken forever.

Aside from the whole egg thing, it was actually nice being in the kitchen with Sid. He was efficient but not too bossy and hadn't complained about the Christmas playlist on Lucas's phone. Even though most of it was probably music he couldn't stand. Sabrina Carpenter was about as far away from rock'n'roll as it got.

He watched Sid's quick fingers as he peeled and cored apples. Ribbons of red apple skin spooling down onto the chopping board in long, continuous spirals. *Show off.*

"You grating that suet or just holdin' it?" Sid said mildly, not looking up.

How did he do that? It was like he could feel Lucas watching him.

"Oh, I just like to cuddle chunks of rendered animal fat—that's a fun fact about me," Lucas sassed, picking up the cheese grater.

"That's your present sorted," Sid muttered, finishing the last apple and sucking juice from his thumb.

Lucas nearly grated his hand but recovered.

"Can you grate the apples next, and in the meantime, I'll roll out the pastry and start lining tins," Sid said, lining up the metal cupcake tins on the side and greasing them with a pat of butter on some baking paper.

"Yes, chef!" Lucas said.

"That doesn't get funnier."

"Does for me," Lucas sing-songed. "You like it, I can tell. You crave the authority... chef."

Sid's shoulders were shaking with silent amusement. Lucas grinned at his back and laughed when he flipped him off over his shoulder.

"OK, I think we need a fancy cutter for the tops of these," Sid muttered. "Must be one somewhere."

"Can't help look, I'm grating," Lucas said, earning him another eye roll as Sid passed him on his way to the pantry, on the hunt for a 'fancy cutter', which Lucas had just spotted hiding behind a bag of sultanas. It was star-shaped. Adorable. He'd give it a minute and then tell Sid.

Just then, Sid's phone, left by the sink, started to buzz. Lucas tilted his head to look at the screen. It was a string of numbers, probably a spam call, but he wasn't taking any chances that it wasn't Baz or Frank calling from a random number. He went over and tried to swipe it away with his elbow, since his hands were sticky with apple and suet.

"Hello?" the phone asked, in a sharp, irritated voice.

Well, that wasn't *decline*, was it? Stupid elbow. That was *accept*.

"Sid? Are you there?" the voice huffed. "Can you talk to me like an adult, please?"

That made Lucas frown. How dare he? He wiped his hand on his apron and brought the phone to his ear before he could think better of it. He'd already held his own with Julian today; he could do the same with Frank—that was who it

had to be. No boss would be ringing him this late, even if they had slept with his boyfriend.

"He's not here right now, and I don't think he wants to talk to you," Lucas said.

There was a brief, almost stunned silence. Then, "And who the fuck are you then?"

His voice was somehow pleasant but threatening. Sharp around the edges like broken glass and just as brittle. It was jarring, and it startled the truth out of him.

"Lucas." It came out automatically.

"Lucas..." Frank seemed to be testing that out, as if suspecting a lie. Or committing it to memory for later, which chilled Lucas slightly. "Put Sidney on the phone, Lucas."

"No." He could feel his resolve weakening.

Frank wasn't Julian. He'd seen a picture of him and could easily imagine him getting into his face and yelling like he did on stage. He was wild and unpredictable. That wasn't the kind of energy Lucas wanted to get on the wrong side of. He'd never been good at confrontation, and he was really wishing he'd just let Sid's phone ring as any normal person would have. Why did he get himself involved?

Well, because however strong Sid was, he'd seen himself just how easily Frank could get to him. Even just the mention of him during their argument had made Sid look small and ashamed of himself. God knew what talking to the man himself would do.

"Get him for me," Frank said, less pleasant now.

"I'm hanging up."

"Are you fucking my husband, Lucas?" Frank asked. "That what this prince charming act is about?"

"Husband?"

And that was when Sid came out of the pantry, triumphantly brandishing a plastic box of pastry cutters. His smug expression dissolved as soon as he saw Lucas holding his phone and heard what he'd said. He visibly aged five years,

turning grey in the face. He set the box down and wordlessly held out a hand. Lucas would have preferred anger to how shaken he looked.

He gave him the phone, which felt like it weighed several kilograms in his hand. Sid walked stiffly out of the kitchen door, letting it fall shut behind him.

Lucas knew he shouldn't listen.

He crossed the kitchen in three steps and paused by the door, ears straining.

"What the fuck gives you the right to call yourself that then, eh?" Sid was muttering, seething, but broken somehow. "You never wanted to fucking marry me, you made that perfectly clear. Twice."

He couldn't hear Frank's side of the conversation. But it seemed like he spoke for a long time. A few times, Lucas heard Sid draw a sharp breath in as if he was about to interrupt. But he didn't. Then, after a long while, Lucas heard his shaky voice.

"You done?"

Another pause while Frank presumably demonstrated that he wasn't in fact done. Lucas wrapped his arms around himself, miserable with the knowledge that he had done this. He was the reason Frank had been able to reach Sid. If he'd just left that phone alone, none of this would be happening.

"I'm not coming back," Sid finally said, so quietly that Lucas almost didn't catch it. "I'm not," he insisted with a bit more bite. "And you leave him out of this. Of course not! Are you fucking serious?"

Lucas flinched. It was obvious that Frank had just asked if he and Sid were together. The sharpness of Sid's response hurt a little, for reasons he couldn't quite explain. Was it really that awful of a prospect? Had Sid's compliments to him just been empty words to try to make him feel better? A bitter taste crept over his tongue at the thought.

"I'm not answering the phone again. You fucked this up, not me... Well, same to you, Frankie."

He heard the thunk of the phone being set down firmly. Then Sid's long sigh. He was poised to dash back to his grating and pretend he hadn't heard anything. But Sid didn't get up, and no footsteps came. Instead, Lucas heard his shaky breathing and eventually realised that Sid wasn't coming back because he was crying.

He didn't hesitate, just pushed open the door.

Sid was sitting on the stairs just beyond the kitchen door, folded in on himself. His elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. He looked up as the kitchen door squeaked and immediately started wiping his face.

"Sorry. Gimmie a minute, and I'll come back to help with the food," he said thickly, swiping tears from his cheeks like he was annoyed they were even there.

"Screw the food." Lucas shuffled forward, and when Sid offered no resistance, he took a seat a step below him. "Are you OK? I'm sorry, I shouldn't have answered the phone."

Sid shook his head. "Not your fault. He'd have gotten to me sooner or later. He's like a dog with a fucking bone when he wants to be."

Lucas chewed his lip for a second before forcing himself to ask. "What... did he say?"

"The usual... Wants to know where I am, when I'm comin' back, did I know the gas bill's due." Sid sniffed, shook his head. "Bunch of insults, bunch of excuses. You know."

It was clearly more than that. He'd never seen Sid this broken, not even when he was hungover and still working through the shock of seeing Frank cheat on him. Now he looked completely destroyed.

Lucas reached out and covered Sid's hand where it rested on his knee. "You can tell me."

Sid shook his head again. "It's not worth you bothering yourself over. It's done."

Lucas stroked the back of Sid's hand with his thumb. "OK... if you're sure. But I'm here if you change your mind. And he can't get to you anymore. You're OK."

Sid managed to flash a small smile for a fraction of a second. "Thanks."

It was so clear he didn't really believe him that Lucas wanted to shake him. Instead, he reached up and unwound the scarf from his neck before draping it around Sid's shoulders.

"I'm gonna make us a cup of tea," he said, giving Sid's knee a parting squeeze. "You come back in when you're ready. And if that's not tonight, don't worry about it. I get it."

He went back into the kitchen, ignoring the bowls of mixture and unrolled pastry blocks. Lucas boiled the kettle, and by the time he was pouring hot water over tea bags, Sid was behind him, offering him the milk from the fridge.

"Let's get this stuff finished," Sid said, finally noticing the star cutter and brandishing it over a slab of spiced pastry dough.

"Yes, chef," Lucas said, nudging him and handing over his cup of tea. "Whatever you need."

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Chapter Twenty-Six

SID

They finished up the cooking in companionable silence, with the Christmas music on low. It was all over, mostly, just the assembly to do. The baking would happen tomorrow, so everything would be fresh for the big day. Trays of mince pies with star-shaped lids covered one counter. Another was all mini sausage rolls with chestnut and apple. The vol-au-vant fillings were in the fridge and the cases cut, ready to bake when they turned the kitchen lights off.

A Christmas miracle. Too bad he was stuck with a ghost of Christmas past. Fucking Frank.

All the while they'd been cooking, little shards of what Frank had said were working their way under his skin, like slivers of glass. *"Are you fucking him? Even from here, I can tell he's too good for you."* That had stung, just slightly. But: *"You're a dead end, Sidney—that's what you've been for me. A waste of time. You should be grateful I'm willing to take you back."* That had hurt, deep, deep down.

A dead end. Was that how Frank saw the last sixteen years? Just a boring road to nowhere? The pair of them getting nothing but older, not building anything or growing anything? Just existing in each other's space while Frank got bored enough to try every side road, anything to get away from him for some fun?

How bad was he that Baz was an attractive alternative? How little did he have to offer that after sixteen years, it was that easy for Frank to cast him off so blatantly?

Frank was right; that was what hurt the most. He was done. If he didn't go back to his life in Blackpool, he'd never find anyone else who'd want him. Not

now at his age and with how *'difficult he was to put up with.'* Boring, old, and set in his ways. He wasn't easy to love. Never had been, and it had only gotten worse.

"You're a dead end, Sidney. For me and anyone else you manage to cling on to. Just a stone around my neck, dragging everybody down."

He couldn't argue with that.

On top of all the shitty feelings churning away in his chest, Lucas had seen him cry. That felt fucking awful. He'd cried once in front of Frank their entire relationship—when his mum died—and Frank had looked so disgusted that he'd avoided it ever happening again. Even when he lost his dad. When it was all too much, and he needed to let it out, he took himself on a long hike and didn't come home until he had his emotions under control again. He didn't want to be a burden on Frank or drive him away by being needy and embarrassing.

His hand crept to the scarf around his neck, soft and warm from Lucas's skin. Smelling like spice, vanilla, and... Lucas. The man himself had his back to him, washing up the large mixing bowls that wouldn't fit in the dishwasher. Sid was meant to be wiping down the counters, but instead, he was just holding a damp cloth, watching Lucas, and... thinking. About Frank, about being there, about what the fuck he thought he was doing.

He didn't want to go back. But he couldn't help thinking that he was going to end up doing it anyway. What else was there for him? It wasn't even about not being alone; he just wasn't worth anything unless he was with Frank—looking after the house and the bills and making sure he got gigs and turned up to them. So he could relive the glory days. He was good for that at least. At being needed. At being part of the backstage crew of Frank's world.

Lucas emptied the washing-up bowl, and Sid quickly wiped off the counter and put the cloth back. He didn't want to think about it anymore. Didn't want to risk embarrassing himself by crying again.

"Time to call it a night, I think," Sid said, stretching. He was exhausted, in pretty much every way it was possible to be. Passing out in bed sounded like the only thing he was capable of right now.

"Yep. Christmas Eve tomorrow." Lucas leant against the counter and grimaced at him. "Carols at the church."

"Did they not do fucking carols tonight?" Sid groused.

"At the pub. Tomorrow is when the slow, Jesus-y carols come out. Less 'five gold rings' more 'save our souls'."

"That's sinking ships."

Lucas shrugged. "Still applies. After an hour in a draughty church, I'll be looking for a lifeboat." He removed his apron and hung it up beside the one Sid had already discarded, then headed for the mud room. "Come on, I'll walk you down to the cottage."

"Worried I'll have a fall?" Sid raised an eyebrow as he followed him.

Lucas was already putting his feet into his trainers. "Yep. Gotta take you home, tuck you in, and get you some Horlicks, or I'll be reported for elder abuse and spend Christmas in the slammer."

Sid snorted, jamming his feet into boots. "Can't have that. Or at least take me with you. I am not doing Christmas Day with these people by myself."

"Deal."

Outside, the air was breathtakingly cold. The night clear and sharp as crystal. Sid watched as Lucas craned his neck back to look at the stars, puffs of white breath bursting free as he admired the sky. Then he stumbled over a mole hill and nearly fell on his arse.

Sid grabbed the back of his coat and kept him upright. "Steady there, do you need to hold my arm, old man?"

"Ha. So funny," Lucas said, getting his feet back under himself. But he did loop his arm through Sid's. Not even his muttered, "If I'm going down, you're coming with me," could spoil it.

They walked together down to the cottage, through the orchard with its strings of lights. Lucas was a warm pressure against his side, holding on to him tightly enough that Sid wondered if he'd even let go when they reached the cottage. Did he want him to? Not really. Which put a sharp ache under his ribs. He didn't want to be alone, but more than that, he didn't want Lucas to go back up to that house without him. He thought of last night, on the sofa, and how good it had felt to wake up with him.

He had no right to want it, but he did, all the same.

They were walking slower now. He wasn't sure which one of them was doing it. Maybe both? Or was that just wishful thinking? But it was definitely Lucas who stopped first, only a few metres from the sliding door into the cottage. He moved in front of Sid but didn't let go of his arm, just shifted so his hand was around his bicep, lingering.

They were out of the glow of the lights now, and in the darkness, it was hard to tell what his face was doing. It felt like he was about to say something, and Sid waited, the silence drifting between them as so much frozen breath. Until he couldn't take it anymore.

"I should..."

"If you want..."

They both stopped. Lucas laughed nervously under his breath. His thumb was kneading lightly at the leather of his jacket, as if trying to unknot a muscle underneath. Or remind himself that Sid was still there. He'd moved closer as he spoke. Sid had, too—to get to the door. But really, he'd just taken a half step into Lucas's space, and Lucas had drifted into his. Until they were barely a few inches apart.

And now he could see him, even in the dark. Saw the glitter of his eyes in the starlight and the swipe of his tongue across his full lower lip. He could hear his breathing stutter and felt the warmth of his body even through the surrounding chill.

Sid's mouth went dry, and his hands itched with the memory of those soft curls against his fingers. How it might feel to sink his hand into them again and pull him closer. To press his lips against Lucas's and taste whatever was making them so fucking shiny.

"I should get to bed," he managed, hardly recognising his own voice.

Lucas swayed slightly closer, and Sid almost raised a hand to his hip but stopped himself with his fingers still in the air. He returned them to his side and clenched them into a fist.

"I was gonna say... I could spend the night. Again," Lucas said. "Like... last night? If you wanted?"

He wanted. Every inch of him wanted right now, that was the problem. He was still all fucked up from talking to Frank, and now Lucas was right in front of

him, and he was... perfect. He was gorgeous and glittering, and there was just no way. No way this wasn't going to hurt. Because Sid was neither of those things—he was not clever or gorgeous or even pleasant to be around. And he was fifteen years older than Lucas, who would either laugh in his face or run away if he knew what he was thinking right now.

"I don't think that would be a good idea," Sid managed to rasp.

Lucas's eyes flicked over his face. He was so close that Sid could feel his breath on his skin.

"Why?" Lucas murmured, barely above a whisper.

They both startled as headlights swept across them, blindingly white. Sid took a hasty step back and turned towards the drive where, through the trees, he could see the lights of the two cars returning to the house. Gravel crunched, doors slammed, and he heard voices raised in wine-assisted revelry.

When he looked back at Lucas, he was too far away to really make out his expression. Sid felt as if a bucket of ice-cold water had just been emptied over him. He cleared his throat.

"You should get back up there—make sure they don't burn the house down trying to make toast," he said.

"Would get us out of carols," Lucas joked, but it fell flat between them, and Sid barely managed to flash a smile before Lucas was practically jogging back to the house, leaving him alone in the dark.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven
LUCAS

Not even being greeted by wine-drunk Julian and his family could stop Lucas's skin from tingling. He felt as if he'd just brushed against a string of faulty Christmas lights and slightly shocked himself. His heart was skipping beats all the way upstairs to bed, and when he got under the duvet and stared at the ceiling, his thoughts seemed to take on all the energy his body was no longer using. They simply would not stop racing.

For a second out there, in the orchard, he'd been sure that Sid was about to kiss him. Not only that, but he'd been about to let him. He'd been so ready for it, silently urging him to just do it already. Had been only a second away from pulling him forward by the bicep and making the first move himself.

Only, the headlights had appeared, bringing cold, hard reality in four unrelenting LED beams. He'd remembered that he was at his boyfriend's family home for Christmas, that he was meant to be excited that Julian would propose to him soon. Not contemplating what it would feel like to be pinned against a tree and kissed stupid by a man he'd blackmailed into pretending to be his dad.

But still... he was thinking about it.

Midnight came and went, and still, Lucas was thinking about it, imagining it —about the rasp of beard against his face, those strong, nimble fingers gripping his waist, his arse. The way Sid's voice would get rougher when he was overcome, growling into his neck.

His brain kept torturing him until he gave in and stuck his hand under the covers. It was not his proudest moment ever. He would definitely feel guilty

about it in the morning, but at least the wank helped him get to sleep.

When he opened his eyes in the morning, though, the guilt and anxiety were waiting. Hanging over his bed like poisonous mistletoe. Sleep deprivation and weird emotional stress could only excuse so much, and he'd definitely pushed well over the line. How he was going to look at Sid in the eye again was anyone's guess. Never mind what he was going to do about Julian.

And he was going to have to do something.

After a shower in which he firmly kept his hands and mind off anything troubling, he went downstairs and found the house deserted. Everyone was still upstairs, sleeping off the wine and late night. Not helpful. He needed to talk to Julian.

Whether it was post-nut clarity or the whole situation with Frank last night, Lucas was certain now that he needed to set things straight with his boyfriend. Things hadn't been right with them since they arrived here—the bedroom thing and then the selective hand-holding. The way Julian had been with him, it just felt off. That was probably what had caused him to form this weird fixation on Sid—a man who'd never look twice at him and who was still hung up on his cheating boyfriend.

But... Sid had been going to kiss him. Or so he'd thought. Maybe he'd just imagined it because he was so desperate for someone to want him, and Julian clearly didn't. Jesus, how embarrassing. He'd nearly thrown himself at poor unsuspecting Sid because his own boyfriend hadn't so much as kissed him properly since he arrived. His boyfriend, whom he was starting to realise, didn't seem to like him all that much.

When Julian finally came downstairs—pale, hungover, smelling of sour coal smoke and the alcohol oozing from his pores—Lucas was beyond desperate to ask him the question that was burning a hole in the forefront of his mind. *Why are you with me?*

"Morning," Julian muttered, feeling his way onto a stool at the breakfast bar with his eyes mostly closed. "Stick the kettle on, will you?"

"Sure." Lucas did so, cursing his own cowardice. But really, how was he meant to start this conversation off when Julian already looked like he was about to throw up?

"You two must've worked up a sweat last night."

He turned around, clutching a mug so tightly that his knuckles clicked. "What?"

Julian waved a hand to encompass the kitchen. "There's stuff everywhere. We probably won't be able to eat it all." He burped and winced. "I actually don't think I can handle the sight of it."

Lucas was also, as it happened, feeling a bit overwhelmed by the trays of mince pies and sausage rolls laid out under cling film. Not because he was nauseous from mulled wine, but because it felt like being surrounded by Sid. By memories of last night. He'd felt so inadequate, trying to console Sid. Who'd obviously been embarrassed by his own tears. But Lucas hadn't minded, god knew he'd cried enough in his life—and been told that 'proper men' didn't. Sid was about as much of a 'real man' as he could imagine, and still, he'd cried in front of him. It had felt strangely validating and intimate in a way he couldn't quite put words to. He only wished he'd been able to do more to help.

"Actually." Julian had peeled himself off the breakfast bar and was shuffling towards him. "Can we go outside for a bit... I need to talk to you about something."

"Oh, right... What about?" Lucas asked.

"Let's just get outside first," Julian said. "Don't want to disturb anyone."

Lucas wondered what that meant. Apparently, Julian was worried this conversation would get loud. Was he really worried about waking people up, or that they'd hear whatever it was they were going to talk about? For a horrible millisecond, he wondered if this was going to be the proposal, but he doubted Julian was about to get down on one knee. In his current state, he'd probably struggle to get up for one thing. For another, he was wearing his Jack Wills joggers, and he wasn't going to get down in the mud in those.

They shrugged on coats and went out into the grey morning. The sky was tinged with yellow, and Lucas tried to remember his geography GCSE lessons, wondering what yellow-grey clouds meant. He hoped it wasn't nuclear Armageddon. That was really all his current situation needed—mandatory bunker time with the McKinleys and Sid.

Julian led him around the house and towards the big pond in the field behind it. Pond or lake—he really should have paid more attention in geography. It had a little island in the middle with some sort of duck bungalow on it. But even the ducks weren't awake yet. A solitary moorhen was scrabbling over the thin crust of ice at the edges of the water. When it saw them, it jumped in and swam away, as if sensing drama.

There was a little bench by the edge of the water, just two planks on a pair of stumps, really. Very rustic and so damp with melting frost that no one would want to sit on it, but it seemed appropriate to gravitate towards it anyway.

Shivering slightly, Lucas jammed his hands into his coat pockets. "So... what do you want to talk about?"

"Your dad."

Lucas's heart sank, and a guilty little twinge went through him. "What about him?"

Julian sighed. "I just think it was a mistake, you bringing him here. I mean... he's just... He doesn't fit. Does he?"

"He doesn't fit?" Lucas echoed.

Julian seemed to take this as agreement rather than a query. He nodded, warming to his theme. "Exactly. I really don't know why you couldn't invite Clive. The man was a detective inspector—he got the queen's medal, for god's sake. He achieved something with his life."

"How do you know that?" Lucas asked, dumbfounded.

"I looked him up," Julian said, like it was obvious. "I just don't understand why, instead of a decorated police officer, you'd bring some... oik to my parents' house. He's basically just your sperm donor."

"Sid's not an 'oik'," Lucas protested—no way was he even acknowledging the 'sperm' comment. "I know you two haven't exactly hit it off, but..."

"Hit it off?" Julian laughed in disbelief. "He's managed to ruin every single outing we've been on this week. Then last night, he just flat out refused to come to the pub for carolling."

"So he could stay behind and do all the buffet food," Lucas pointed out.

"Which he roped you into. Do you not see how embarrassing it was to be a fifth wheel to my parents and Chris with Magda?" Julian frowned. "You should

have been with me last night, that's why I invited you—to be part of my family's Christmas. I thought that was what you wanted?"

"I did. I do," he corrected himself quickly. "But it seemed like a lot of work for one person."

That was a lie. He hadn't even really known how much work there was until he went into the kitchen after deciding to stay. When it came down to a choice between carols with the McKinleys and making egg mayonnaise with Sid, he hadn't had to agonise over the decision. Something which, now he was thinking about it, was kind of a red flag.

Julian shook his head. "Look, I wanted to ask… is it too late to get your dad—Clive—up here for Christmas Day tomorrow?"

"What?" Lucas almost laughed. "Are you serious?"

"I think that's the only thing that can save this, honestly." Julian seemed fully convinced of this; there wasn't a single ounce of doubt on his face. "Sid's really blotted his copybook with Dad and Christopher. I think they'd be glad to see the back of him entirely, but he can stay, I suppose, just as long as he keeps to the cottage."

"Very generous of you," Lucas said, sarcasm that was apparently lost on his boyfriend.

"I know. But I think we need Clive here, or else… they're going to get the wrong idea about you. Which reflects really poorly on me."

"Whereas an ignorant, homophobic racist will really complete the ideal Christmas vibe you're trying to put together here?" Lucas couldn't help but say.

Julian's eyebrows climbed towards his hairline. "See, this is what I'm talking about. When you're around him, you're… different."

He folded his arms, daring him to keep going. "Different, how?"

"Well, not to put too fine a point on it, Chris said you were being a real bitch at the Christmas market," Julian said, not backing down in the slightest.

"A *bitch*. Wow. Sorry for not wanting us to get into a car crash. I am such a faggy little buzzkill."

"This is exactly the attitude I'm talking about," Julian snapped. "I don't know who this is, but it's not the Lucas I want to be with."

That hit him like a snowball to the face. "What does that mean?"

“It means…” Julian huffed a sigh. “Look, one more scene like yesterday, and I’m not sure this is going to work. I’ve made my peace with you being a bit OTT and your weird fixation on the sci-fi stuff, but I need to be with someone who’s adding value to my life, not drama and certainly not embarrassment.”

Lucas’s mouth clicked shut. He swallowed hard. He’d wanted to talk to Julian today, to try and confront him about the weirdness that had formed between them on this trip. But how could he do that now? Now that Julian has made it perfectly clear that Lucas’s status as his boyfriend was hanging by a thread. The ultimatum was clear—fit into the available space in Julian’s life or be ejected entirely. Lose his first and only real boyfriend, over someone he’d met basically a week ago.

What kind of choice was that? None at all. So why was he struggling?

“I don’t want to invite Clive,” he began and faltered when Julian scoffed. “But! I can get Sid to behave himself, alright? It’s three days, including today. We can make it work.”

“I really hope so,” Julian said. “This isn’t you, Lucas. This person you are around your dad. You’re better than this. Than him. You should act it.”

Lucas swallowed down the bitter taste in his mouth. It wasn’t just about keeping Julian; it was about his first Christmas with a real family since he lost his mum. If he screwed this up, he’d be alone again next year, sitting at home with the silence and the sound of other people’s joy filtering in from outside. He couldn’t do that again. He couldn’t lose this, not now.

He was finally being welcomed into a family. No matter what he had to do to fit, he had to make it work.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

SID

It was a pretty quiet day, fortunately. He needed it after the sleepless night he'd had. Lying in bed and turning the moment before the headlight caught them over and over in his mind. It hadn't exactly made for a restful night.

But after a long run and a shower just on the cold side of comfortable, he was feeling a lot more himself. Whatever temporary insanity had drawn him towards Lucas last night, that was gone now. He was almost at the end of this mad arrangement and was determined to get through it with his dignity intact. That meant leaving the embarrassing little crush that had snuck up on him well behind.

He was just getting himself ready to head to church with everyone else when his phone went off. It wasn't Frank, it was a text from Lucas. But it was just as upsetting.

Lucas: I had a talk with Julian today, and I'd really appreciate it if you could not get at him tonight. I just want everyone to get along.

Sid: 'Get at him'?

Lucas: You know, make comments, digs, etc. I promised him we'd be on our best behaviour.

We. So apparently, Julian not only had an issue with him but with Lucas, too. That jumped up twat. Who did he think he was, treating his boyfriend, not to mention Sid, like naughty children who needed telling how to behave? Given how thoroughly unpleasant he'd been since they met, Sid thought he was doing

a great job of practising tolerance. If he'd come across Julian at a gig, he'd have gone home with a bloody nose and pint over him.

But reading between the lines, Lucas was clearly desperate to avoid anything unpleasant. He could suck it up for one evening and let Julian and his family make all the digs they wanted about him being scruffy, poor, common, whatever. Apparently, it was OK when they did it. God forbid the scum punched up.

Sid: I'll be on my best behaviour. Scout's honour.

Lucas: Were you a scout, though?

Sid: Sure I was.

Sid: Till they kicked me out for fighting.

Lucas either had no response to that or wasn't willing to encourage him. The lack of reply made him edgy as he got ready, wrapping the scarf around his neck for a bit of festive cheer. Besides, Magda was going to the service, and it was only polite to show he appreciated the gift.

Once again, he was sharing the car with Aaron and Eva. Aaron looked to be hungover still, but Eva was full of compliments and gratitude for his and Lucas's efforts in the kitchen.

"Everything baked up wonderfully," she was saying. "All ready for tomorrow."

"He's a good little housewife, your boy," Aaron said.

He clenched his hands into fists under his thighs and told himself to behave. "Gets it from me."

Aaron scoffed but thankfully didn't add anything else that would have made it necessary to tell him to pull over so he could batter him at the side of the road. It was not exactly the kind of attitude he wanted to take into his first church service since his dad's funeral. But it was the best he was going to manage. At least he was smiling on the outside. Ish.

The service itself was... fine. He didn't have much to compare it to. His main opinion was that they should call it what it was—hymns. Carols were loud, fast, and fun. Anything that turned 'joy' into a three-syllable word was a fucking hymn and had no business being touted as a fun time. Still, he got a mini mince

pie on the way out, and that was welcome. Even if his leg had fallen asleep on the hard pew.

He was amused to see that Lucas looked a bit bored, too. He'd looked over at him a few times during the service and caught him looking at the gilded ceiling instead of the vicar—apparently counting the crests between the carved beams. He'd also caught the moment Julian nudged him and scowled, obviously unimpressed by his wandering eyes.

At least the evening was over now, and he could lock himself up in the cottage and stop putting on a pleasant face. That was, until Christmas Day tomorrow. The only bright spot on the horizon was the prospect of handing Lucas's present over to him. He hoped he liked it and that it wasn't too embarrassing for him to have gotten Lucas something when he undoubtedly hadn't gotten him anything in return.

"Where's Julian?" Eva asked once they were grouped around the two cars in the church car park, missing only Julian and Lucas.

"I think he's showing Lucas around the church," Magda said. "He took him up into the gallery."

Sid frowned, a creeping sense of suspicion tickling the back of his neck. It could, of course, all be perfectly innocent, but given that Julian had apparently given Lucas a talking to that morning, he suspected this might be more of the same.

"I'll go," he said and was already walking away before anyone could object.

Behave, he told himself firmly as he slipped in through the still-open front doors of the church. No matter what, there was no need to go flying off the handle.

The gallery ran down both sides of the upper floor of the church, and with the building empty now, the acoustics were such that he heard them before he was even through the porch.

"...sorry it's not a *Star Trek* convention, but it is still important, and I'd hoped you'd pay attention," Julian was saying sharply, somewhere overhead.

Lucas was quieter, and he couldn't quite hear his response. Sid kept to the edge of the pews, hoping he wouldn't be seen from above. That would do him no favours with Lucas or his boyfriend.

"What?" Julian asked.

"I said, you were the one looking at the kick-off times for Boxing Day on your watch," Lucas said, louder now.

"God, you're so immature," Julian hissed. "I'm not the one who's meant to be on my best behaviour to impress my future in-laws."

"Are they, though?"

"What does that mean?" Julian snapped.

Sid spotted the stairs in the corner and moved towards them. Screw not being spotted, it sounded like if someone didn't intervene, this was going to blow up into a row. And as much as he didn't care if Julian got his arse handed to him, he knew Lucas would regret blowing everything up the day before Christmas. Especially when he'd been looking forward to spending his first one with a family in ages.

"It means," Lucas was saying as Sid moved quickly and silently up the stairs, "that I don't think you're going to ask me to marry you. And if we're really being honest, Julian, I'm starting to wonder if you even want to be with me at all. Because you seem to be embarrassed by everything about me."

Julian made a noise of scornful disbelief. "I can't believe you'd say that. I mean, I knew you were insecure, but Jesus, Luc, you really need to get a bloody grip."

Sid stepped out onto the gallery and cleared his throat. "Not the kind of language to be throwing around in church, is it?"

Julian scowled at him, but Lucas looked slightly relieved to see him. And also a bit like he was a second or two away from bursting into tears.

"They're waiting for you down at the car," Sid added, but Julian didn't seem to be listening. He just glared at him.

"I'm starting to think it was a mistake having you here," Julian said finally. "Both of you."

Lucas flinched at that, and Sid snapped.

"And I'm starting to think you're not good enough for my fucking son."

Julian gaped at him. "What the hell does that mean?"

"It means he's worth ten of you, and I'm doing him down with that assessment, quite frankly. And maybe if you weren't so busy trying to win some

stupid game of one-upmanship with your brother, you'd be able to appreciate that."

"Sid…" Lucas interjected.

"You don't know what you're talking about," Julian interrupted.

"Really? Because it seems to the casual outside observer that the only reason you've bothered to invite your boyfriend—who spent the last two Christmasses alone—along to yours this year is that six months ago, your brother got himself a girlfriend to invite, and you didn't want to be left out. So you invited the man you've been stringing along as some kind of placeholder."

"That is… ridiculous," Julian spat. But it wasn't convincing; he was red and not meeting his eye, and Sid really wished it was socially acceptable to just shove him off the gallery and be done with it. He had never wanted to go for someone more. Not even when he walked in on Baz with Frank.

Sid glanced towards Lucas and felt cold when he saw how broken he looked. Anger melting into regret as quickly as snow on a fire. Shit. He hadn't meant to hurt him—not again. But he'd gotten too caught up in his anger at Julian. He'd let his mouth get carried away.

"Is that true?" Lucas said quietly.

"No!" Julian insisted. "He's probably drunk."

"I'm sorry," Sid said, looking only at Lucas now. "I shouldn't've…"

"Julian," Lucas said flatly. "Did you only invite me this year because Christopher had someone to bring?"

"I… No."

"And… did you only want Clive here because you thought having a decorated police detective as a guest would somehow make up for the fact that you brought a man home? A man you've basically been coasting with until someone better came along?" Lucas's voice cracked slightly, but he held firm, looking at his boyfriend. Sid couldn't see, but he was worried he was in tears.

He cringed internally. He hadn't known that about Lucas's dad, but now it made sense. Julian was competing against his brother, and his parents were the kind of people who'd make him and his boyfriend sleep in separate rooms. He was trying to win back the 'points' he'd lost by being gay, with a bit of social currency in the form of Lucas's father's position.

“That’s not what I wanted,” Julian insisted.

“I don’t believe you,” Lucas said simply. “And I don’t want to talk to you right now.”

He walked away from Julian but dodged away when Sid held out a hand towards his arm, instinctively wanting to comfort him.

“Either of you,” Lucas said, and this time, there was no doubt about it. He was crying.

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

LUCAS

He could hardly see anyone as he passed them, ignoring their questions, and climbed into Aaron and Eva's car. Feeling a bit like a sullen teenager, he could hear the muffled voices of everyone else discussing what had happened. Heard Julian's indignant ranting and Sid's low rumble. At least he'd calmed down. Too late, though.

Lucas had known—somewhere, deep down—that Julian wasn't in love with him. Not really. Not properly head-over-heels, want-to-be-with-you-forever kind of love. They got on; they both liked going out to eat and to wine bars after the cinema. That surface stuff that felt normal and grown up. When Julian wasn't in the city, Lucas was there to be around to have sex with. To be his boyfriend. But he was never going to be his husband. He'd been delusional to think that Julian would ever want him as a permanent fixture in his real life and not just as a convenient amenity—like an integrated gym.

No, if Julian did get married, it would be to someone just like himself. A three-quarter zip finance guy with a job in London and family in the country. Someone who liked craft beer and rugby and missionary sex at home, separate rooms at the in-laws. The kind of man who, despite Julian's best efforts to shame and belittle him in a hundred different ways, Lucas would never be.

Finally, Aaron got into the front of the car with Eva. He didn't say anything, just drove out of the car park. Lucas caught a glimpse of Sid watching them go, face haunted in the headlights. Lucas shut his eyes and leant his head on the cold

window. He just wanted tonight to be over. Tomorrow... whatever he was going to do then would have to wait a few hours. He just wanted to turn his brain off.

Merry fucking Christmas to him.

"I don't know what kind of ridiculous scene you caused in there..." Aaron started once they were on the road.

"Aaron," Eva said, but he ignored her.

"...but I think you owe Julian an apology when we get home. And perhaps it would be best if your father got himself to the train station and went back to wherever he came from."

Lucas squeezed his eyes shut.

"Are you listening?" Aaron said sharply.

"Yeah, I can hear you." Lucas sighed. "Don't worry, we won't be staying."

"Oh, dear, you're welcome to stay," Eva said. "You and Sidney—this is all a silly misunderstanding, and it's so late. I bet it can all be sorted out over a cup of tea."

Lucas sat back and looked at her. She was at least trying to be kind. But really, there was no fixing this. Julian didn't want him there; he just wanted someone to be there, and Lucas was the placeholder boyfriend for the job. It would be best if he left now. He could go back to his empty flat, and Sid... Well, Sid would have to find somewhere to go. Guilt gnawed at his insides like a rat. Although Sid had been the one to trigger this awful revelation, he still didn't want him to be alone for Christmas. It wasn't his fault. He'd just been trying to stand up for him. Because god knew Lucas hadn't been doing it for himself.

"And I'm starting to think you're not good enough for my fucking son." No one had ever said he was too good for something before. Let alone someone. But he'd heard the conviction in Sid's voice. He believed it, completely. He looked at Lucas and saw someone who was too good for Julian, too good for his family.

"You're smart, funny, stylish... You've got a gorgeous smile, great hair, you're tall, you've got fucking rugby player shoulders, and an arse you could park a bike in..." He snorted wetly, remembering that. Yeah, Sid had been telling him he was worth more than this for a while. He just hadn't believed him before. Maybe he'd just been trying to be nice, but, Jesus, how long had it been since someone was nice to him? Wasn't that sort of the bare minimum for a boyfriend?

Too soon, they arrived back at the house. The car rumbled through the gates and crunched up the gravel driveway. Lucas looked out over the dark garden to where the orchard lights were twinkling. Had Sid really been about to kiss him out there last night? Everything was so confusing and messed up. Nothing about this week was going as he'd thought it would. He just wanted some space to work it out. To think about what he wanted and whether it was something he could even have.

"Who the devil is that?" Aaron muttered.

Lucas looked up towards the house, picked out in the beam of the headlights. There was a man standing there with his hands in his jacket pockets. Like he had every right in the world to be standing outside someone else's house in the dark at this time of night. His long hair fluttering around his face in the cold wind.

"Frank," Lucas said, to himself, really. "Shit."

"Who's Frank?" Aaron was asking as the car came to a stop.

Lucas grabbed for his phone to text Sid and warn him. But it was already too late. The lights of the other car washed through theirs, and he heard the engine cut off.

The outside lights of the house had clicked on when they drove within range, and in their glow, Lucas saw Frank's face light up with a kind of triumphant glee as he caught sight of Sid in the car.

"Sidney!" he called, boisterous and jolly like a fucked-up Santa. Clearly more than a little drunk. "Did ya miss me?"

Lucas got out of the car, followed by Aaron, who immediately rounded the bonnet.

"How did you get in here? This is private land!" He turned to look at Eva, still in the front of the car. "Call the police."

"Fuckin' 'ell. Relax." Frank laughed. "I'm not here to rob you, just here to get my Sidney back. C'mon, Sid! I got the train all the way out here for you!"

Behind him, Lucas heard car doors opening and closing. Footsteps on gravel.

"It's barely three hours away," Sid's voice floated past him, flat and dull. "Hardly the odyssey."

"Yeah, well... had to get the cab out here, too," Frank said, undaunted. "And climb over the fucking gate."

Aaron made a spluttering noise, and Lucas could hear the others muttering to each other, but Sid's voice rose above the chatter.

"How did you even know I was here?"

Frank gave him a shit-eating grin. "Used Uber, didn't you? Right to this address. Almost like you wanted me to find you."

Lucas nearly groaned out loud. How could Sid be so careless? If they shared an account, of course Frank would be able to access his ride history. Maybe there was some truth in what Frank was saying—Sid had wanted him to come find him. Had wanted him to prove that he was the one Frank wanted. He'd seen for himself what Sid's love for Frank was like—a deep wound that hurt him a lot but was still part of him. A defining part. Was it really so surprising that Sid was unwilling to let it go?

"Lucas, what the hell is going on?" Julian appeared at his elbow, grabbing his arm. Maybe he'd been calling him for a while, and he just hadn't noticed.

Frank's attention snapped to him. He smiled without warmth.

"So you're Lucas? Sidney, Sidney..." He sucked his teeth. "You cradle snatcher."

"Fuck off," Sid practically growled. "It's not like that."

"What is it like?" Frank asked. "I mean, c'mon—what am I meant to think? You go out on a bender, come home just for a bag of stuff, and vanish off the face of the earth... Had to be someone pulling your strings. The Sidney I know doesn't have the balls for a disappearing act like that."

"Do you know him?" Julian demanded of Sid.

"He's my ex," Sid ground out.

Frank stepped closer to him, and Lucas inwardly urged Sid to move away, but he seemed transfixed. Frozen to the spot.

"Ouch..." Frank said, reaching out and stroking his knuckles over the scarf on Sid's chest.

Lucas felt the sudden and alien urge to shove him over and stamp on those offending fingers with his gold oxfords.

"You wanted to marry me, Sidney," Frank murmured. "Fifteen years we've been together... I need you. You know no one else could replace you."

"Baz..." Sid said, but then seemed too choked up to continue.

"Was nothing... just a bit of fun. We used to have fun, remember?" Frank wheedled, wrapping the scarf around his hand like a lead on a disobedient dog. "C'mon, let's go home. I've missed you, babe... I love you so much."

"Sixteen."

For a second, Lucas wasn't sure it was him who'd spoken. But when everyone turned to look at him—everyone except Sid, who was still looking at Frank like he was some ghost of Christmas past—he realised it had been him who spat the word, breaking the spell Frank was weaving.

"You what?" Frank said, hand still anchored in the soft red fabric of the scarf. The one Lucas had put around Sid's neck while he wiped away tears that Frank had put there.

"You've been together sixteen years," Lucas said, because something wild and furious and brave was in control of him now, and he was not going to let this happen to Sid. Not after seeing first-hand what this man had done to him.

Was this how Sid had felt in the church gallery? It was like being drunk and horribly sober at the same time, and the words wouldn't stop coming out. He was just so angry and so afraid that Sid was about to make a huge mistake. One which would hurt him in the long run.

"Which, you know... you'd think someone who loved him *so much* would know," Lucas continued, a ball of ice in his chest. "But then, people that in love tend not to screw other people's bosses right in front of them."

Sid jerked slightly as if slapped, and Lucas hoped he was snapping out of whatever hold Frank still had over him. Mostly because Frank looked ready to tackle him to the ground, and Lucas wasn't sure that Julian would back him up in a physical fight. Or win, even if he tried.

Frank's hold on the scarf tightened. "Sidney... tell your fucking side piece to wind his neck in before I get offended."

Lucas swallowed hard and took a step forward. "How about you take your hands off him before I make you?"

Frank laughed and looked him up and down. "Really? And what's a chubby former twink like you gonna do, hmm? Batter me with your handbag?"

He heard Julian snort behind him, and something just snapped. Lucas strode over the gravel and punched Frank in his grinning face. He landed flat-out on

the gravel, the scarf in his hand. Lucas bent and snatched it back, watching as Frank reached up and cradled his jaw. Only then did the pain in his hand register. Ouch. He shook out his fingers and winced at the ache that was spreading through them to his wrist. He'd never hit anyone before, but his dad had made him do boxing lessons for two awful months. Apparently, some of that had stuck.

He flinched when Frank leapt up from the gravel and dove for him, but suddenly, Sid was in front of him, arms up to catch Frank and push him back.

"Leave it! Frank, back the fuck off!" Sid snarled.

"He hit me!"

"You had it coming."

Frank stumbled back, a look of disbelief on his face. "Sid..."

"I don't want to see you," Sid said, standing ramrod straight, breathing hard like each word was an effort all its own. "I didn't want you to come here, and I sure as shit am not coming back with you. We are done, Frankie."

"You don't mean that," Frank said, back to wheedling now as if that flash of aggression had never happened. "You always come back, babe. You know you do."

Always? How many times had this happened? Maybe not the cheating, not right in his face like that, but something. Clearly, Sid had left Frank before, but it hadn't stuck. Maybe that was why he'd taken Lucas up on his offer—a chance to force himself to leave Frank behind. Like checking into rehab to keep himself from backsliding.

"Not this time." Sid sounded so tired. "The next time you hear from me... it'll be about selling the house."

"That's it?" Frank's expression was one of genuine hurt, and for a second, Lucas thought he could see what Sid liked about him then. Those soft puppy eyes that just begged to be taken care of, to be adored.

"That's it," Sid agreed.

Then the hurt was gone, hidden under a mask of pure hatred and rage. "Yeah, well... fuck you then, Sidney," Frank spat. "You think you can do better? That this one wants you? You're delusional, mate. Fucking sad."

Sid didn't say anything, and Lucas couldn't see his expression, but whatever it was, Frank must have seen in it something that he hadn't before. Some kind of resolve that Sid hadn't shown him. Frank shook his head and spat on the gravel, eliciting a sound of protest from Aaron, who, like the others, had been watching in mute, upper-middle-class horror.

"He'll just drag you down," Frank said, and Lucas realised that he was talking to him now. "You wait and see. Sidney's a fucking millstone, glad to be rid of the sack of shit."

With that, Frank stormed past him. Lucas turned to watch as Julian leapt out of his way, and the others watched him go. Then he went over to Sid, still holding the scarf in his hands like it was some kind of wounded animal.

"Are you OK?" he asked.

Sid certainly didn't look it. He was ashen, haunted, but his jaw was set, and there was something burning in his eyes that looked a lot like defiance.

"Yeah…" His voice was papery. "Thanks for… Thank you."

"You'd do the same for me," Lucas said, then laughed, feeling a bit hysterical. "I mean, you did. Like half an hour ago."

The corner of Sid's mouth twitched, like he wanted to smile but was still a little too shell-shocked to make it happen.

"Do you want to get out of here?" Lucas asked.

Sid nodded.

"Luc?" Julian had come after him, bemused and frowning. "You can't just go. We need to talk about…"

"I don't think there's anything to talk about. I think… Sid and I should just go and leave you to your Christmas," Lucas said, feeling as if something he'd been struggling to hold up had just collapsed, and it wasn't the end of the world after all. It was just a relief.

"It's obvious that neither of us belongs here. I don't think you want me to stay—you just want someone to be here, sitting next to you. And the stupid thing is, I didn't see it. I bent over backwards trying to make this work. I even…" He took a deep breath. *Fuck it.* Truth time—anything to cut the cords and get him out of here faster. "I even asked Sid to pretend to be my dad."

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Chapter Thirty
SID

Well... fuck.

He'd thought nothing could be more awkward than Frank showing up, but apparently, he was wrong. That had been horrible to be fair—feeling all the old reflexes of love and need and devotion waking up inside him. The whispers at the back of his mind that everything could just go back to how it was if he only gave in. Lucas had thrown a bucket of cold water over that, thankfully. Sobering him up just in time before he made a massive mistake. Fucking hell, but Lucas could throw a punch; he hadn't seen that coming.

And now he was setting fire to his own relationship. There was no stopping him tonight. Sid wasn't sure whether to be proud of him or worried. Bit of both, perhaps.

"What do you mean, 'pretend'?" Julian said slowly. "Who is he?"

"That's what I'd like to know," Aaron put in. "Who the bloody hell are you?"

"He's my landlord," Lucas said. "You wouldn't stop trying to get me to bring Clive here, and I told you—I said, so many times—that I never wanted to see him again. That he'd hurt me, and he'd do it again if I let him back in. So... I lied and brought Sid because, stupidly, I thought that would be good enough for you. But it was never about wanting me to have a family to introduce to yours. It was all about scoring points, and only Clive was good enough for that, with his fancy medal. Even if he put me out at eighteen and hasn't given a toss since. You

didn't care what it would do to me to see him. You just had to show off to your family that my dad was somebody, even if I'm not."

Dead silence followed, then Julian looked at him, appalled. "So you're just a fucking stranger?"

"Yeah," Sid admitted. "And even I care more about him than you do."

He hadn't meant that to come out, but he was still all shaken up from Frank being there. Everything felt raw and sharp, and he needed to settle down, or he was going to spill his guts. Needed to get a grip on himself. He was just Lucas's landlord, he'd just said so himself.

"I can't believe you lied to me," Julian was saying to Lucas. "You… I think you need to leave."

"Agreed," Lucas said. "We'll be packed and out of here in ten minutes."

It was almost amusing how shocked Julian looked at that. Clearly, he'd been expecting Lucas to grovel and try to smooth things over.

"But it's Christmas Day tomorrow," Julian said.

"And?" Lucas looked more confused than angry. "Like you want me here for that?"

"We don't," Aaron said.

Footsteps on the gravel warned that Christopher was on his way to join them. "What's going on?"

"Your dad's coming," Julian said.

"What?" Lucas looked completely stunned.

Sid was equally dumbfounded. Who the fuck did Julian think he was?

He didn't even have the grace to look embarrassed. "I found his number on one of your old next of kin forms at your flat weeks ago. I wasn't going to use it, but then you refused to invite him when I asked earlier, and… I called him and bought him a first-class train ticket. I'm picking him up from the station tomorrow morning… It was going to be a surprise."

Lucas let out a startled laugh. "Congratulations, I'm surprised… Well, enjoy Christmas with Clive. I'm not going to be here for that mess."

"But he's expecting you to be here…" Julian tried to catch hold of Lucas as he turned away, but Lucas took a step back and warded him off with a warning hand.

"No, Julian. The answer is no. I don't have to do it because it's expected, and I don't have to stay because you invited me. Or because it would be embarrassing or make a scene if I left. I am going, and you are now single. That's what's happening."

"But..." Julian looked around at his family as if only now realising they were witnessing this. "Lucas..."

"Is he dumping you?" Christopher sniggered. "Aww, bad luck, Julie."

"Shut up, Chris!" Julian snapped.

"I'm going to pack my stuff," Lucas said, making a move towards the house.

"You needn't think you're going into my house unescorted," Aaron said, stepping in. "You already lied to all of us. I'm not about to let you steal, too."

"And I'm not letting you corner him alone," Sid said.

"You're not even his dad!" Julian said, exasperated.

"And you're not his boyfriend."

"Oh my god. Sid, go pack your stuff. I will be fine... Meet me at the van," Lucas said. "If I'm not there, then you can feel free to come and find me, with menaces. OK?"

He'd overstepped, and he knew it. Making things worse was apparently his thing tonight. He didn't want to wind Julian up any further. He just wanted to get away from here.

"Fine. Sure." He still watched as Julian and a very amused Christopher followed Lucas into the house. Eva was still in the car, looking out at them like they were some kind of play with a shocking ending. Sid hoped she wasn't too upset about it. Out of all of them, she was the only decent one, her and Magda, who was still in the other car.

He ignored Aaron as he walked quickly down to the cottage. He hadn't brought much stuff with him, thankfully. He just had some clothes and toiletries to throw in his bag and the cardboard box he'd stashed the presents in.

"I don't know who you two think you are," Aaron blustered, standing in the doorway while he zipped up his bag. Sid ignored him. "You're lucky I don't call the police."

"For what, Christmassing under false pretences?" Sid muttered, slipping past him with a pat on his shoulder. "Hope the mince pies are delicious, by the way.

Worked bloody hard on them."

Back at the van, he found Lucas already waiting. Julian was clearly trying to talk to him and was being blanked. But there were signs of stress in the tenseness of Lucas's spine and how numb his face was. Christopher was watching with undisguised glee, and the two women had sensibly gone indoors into the warmth. Though he could see them watching from the front windows. He wondered what they'd tell Clive tomorrow. If they'd even pick him up. Part of him hoped they'd leave him raging at the station. It was the least he deserved.

He put Lucas's bag into the back of the van with his own and went around to the front to get into the passenger side. Julian was hovering by the driver's door, as if in two minds about trying to physically stop Lucas from leaving. Sid paused with his door open, waiting to see if he'd need to step in.

"Let him go, son," Aaron puffed. "Some people aren't worth it."

Truer words were never bloody spoken.

Lucas got into his seat, and Sid closed the door. Suddenly, they were in their own bubble, cut off from the drama outside. Lucas turned the key in the ignition and 'Last Christmas' burbled from the radio.

"You OK?" Sid asked.

"Not really sure... I just need to not be here," Lucas muttered, looking out at where Julian was standing with folded arms, expression daring them to actually leave. "Then we'll see."

He turned the van around, and gravel spat from under the wheels as he accelerated too quickly towards the drive. The last thing they heard, over the dulcet tones of George Michael, was Julian shouting, apparently desperate to get the last word in.

"Good riddance!"

Lucas just put his foot down, and soon they'd left the McKinley family behind them, in the dark. They left through the gate, and Sid thought for a second he saw Frank at the side of the road. Maybe waiting for a taxi. But then he was gone, and it was just the two of them on the dark road.

"I don't think I can drive all the way home like this," Lucas said after they'd been driving in silence for maybe ten minutes. "I'm too... My hands are shaking. I need to stop and get myself together."

"Understandable... Do you want me to drive?" Sid asked.

"Are you any more together than me right now?" Lucas asked with a weak laugh.

Sid looked down at his own clenched fingers. "Not particularly."

Lucas hummed in thought, and then, when a sign appeared out of the dark, showing a left turn for York, he followed it.

"I'll find a place to park," Lucas said, eyes fixed on the road. "Get a coffee or something, if anywhere's still open this late on Christmas Eve."

"Good idea. We can... talk, if you want?" Sid offered, bracing himself for the inevitable rejection. For the disdain. After all, Lucas had told him he didn't want to talk to him at all, back at the church. And that was before he was the mess he was around Frank. He was probably wondering why he'd let such a pathetic specimen into his life.

"Even from here, I can tell he's too good for you. You're a dead end, Sidney."

Shut up, Frank. He told the voice firmly. But that didn't make it any less true, did it?

"Yeah," Lucas said softly. "That might be good, actually."

Lucas drove through York until he found a parking space at the side of the road. Ahead of them was the pedestrianised area where the Christmas market was on, still lit up even though most of the stalls were closed at this time of night. Drunks and party-goers were weaving their way through the streets. The air was freezing, and the night sky was thick with cloud, hiding every star away. It looked like rain, and the streets were already gleaming from an earlier shower. Figures—a wet, grim Christmas was what he had coming after today.

"Not looking promising on the coffee front." Lucas sighed, clearly trying to keep a brave face on when he looked about a minute away from crying again.

Sid caught sight of a stall with a person still inside, albeit one who was cleaning. "Hold that thought."

He left Lucas on the pavement and went over. The woman cleaning up inside the stall looked at him warily, obviously completely done for the day and not wanting to be bothered.

"I'm closed," she said.

"I know. Sorry. It's just my friend, over there? Just got dumped, and he could really use a hot drink and a chat," Sid said, bending the truth a little bit. He got his wallet out and slid two twenties onto the counter. "Whatever you've got on hand? Please?"

She glanced towards Lucas and sighed, then took the money. "You're lucky that's the first please I've heard in eight hours."

"Thank you so much." Sid waited while she poured black filter coffee from the nearby pot into two paper cups.

"Milk, syrup?" she asked.

"Milk and whatever syrup's closest in both, please."

He watched her pump gingerbread syrup into the cups. She finished up the drinks, and Sid slid her another tenner, as a tip.

"He must be a good friend," she said, raising her eyebrows but accepting the money. The most he'd paid for two coffees ever, in his life.

"I like to think so," Lucas said, appearing at his elbow and making him jump. "Thank you for this. Both of you… and Merry Christmas."

"And to you." She went back to cleaning the machinery.

They walked away down the empty row of closed Christmas stalls, draped in lights that shone off the wet pavement. Lucas nudged against his side like a cat.

"Can't believe you just did that. I've witnessed a Christmas robbery. I'm giving you twenty-five quid when I can get on Wi-Fi."

"No, you are not. I'd pay twice as much to watch you sucker punch Frank again." Sid chuckled. "You hit him like a fucking freight train. How's your hand?"

"Oh, incredibly painful." Lucas held it up and showed the beginnings of bruising on his knuckles. "But he deserved worse. And it was worth it, for when my dad turns up tomorrow and hears that I won a fist fight. That might take the sting out of him having crossed the country for nothing."

He still couldn't believe Julian had done something so stupid. From the sound of it, Lucas was still processing, too. "That was a bit of a shock."

"Yeah… probably about as much as coming home to find Frank on the doorstep." Lucas took a sip of his coffee and sighed. "Are you OK? You seemed a bit… I don't know, like maybe you were considering going with him?"

He had been. For a second or two. Before Lucas cut in and reminded him with one word just who Frank was. The kind of person who couldn't even get the number of years they'd been together right when he was making his big romantic gesture.

"Might have been," he admitted. "Sometimes it's easier to just give in, you know? It's harder, being on your own."

"Mmmm... I'm familiar." Lucas steered them around a corner into another street where the market cabins ended, and it was just shop windows, lit up and glittering. "But having met him... not sure what you saw in him, to be honest. He must've been really good in bed."

Sid laughed. It just came out. "Not really our issue. It was more the fact that he kept getting off with other people. Or that he wanted to anyway—he didn't always act on it. Just had these fixations—crushes—like his head was always on a swivel, looking for someone else."

"Ouch," Lucas muttered.

"Yeah." Sid took a swallow of his own coffee. "Having met Julian, though, I doubt he had redeeming qualities in or out of the sack."

"Wouldn't you like to know," Lucas said, apparently defaulting to sassy before sobering. "Actually, you're pretty much right. He was a big missionary fan. Which is fine, but not my favourite. You know?"

"Which is?" Sid couldn't help but prompt, because he apparently liked to torture himself.

Lucas screwed his face up in embarrassment, then opened one eye to look at him. "Me on top. It's, um... very effective. For me."

Jesus Christ, now that was in his head. Why had he started this? Some attempt at lightening the mood, steering clear of the painful relationship shit they'd just been through. Only now, the mood was heavy again—with something else.

"Good for you," Sid muttered.

"Mmmhmm." Lucas started walking again with a shrug. "But, uh... apparently not an attractive view. On his end."

He stumbled to a stop. "Fuck off."

Lucas kept walking, but Sid stopped him with a hand on his elbow. Saw the self-consciousness hiding under the attempt at a humorous eye roll. Who the fuck even said that to their boyfriend? Ex-boyfriend now. Thank god.

"Unless you're hiding a massive tattoo of a nude Margaret Thatcher, I can't imagine that's true," he said instead.

"Yeah, well..." Lucas shrugged.

It had started to rain slightly, a fine mist turning to drizzle. They were near a fairly deep shop doorway, and Sid shepherded Lucas into it, out of the wet. He set his empty cup on a ledge and leant against the wall, avoiding eye contact. He looked so crushed that Sid wanted to drive back to the McKinley house to punch Julian in the face. He deserved it for what he'd done to Lucas's confidence. He set his cup aside, worried he might crush it if he didn't.

"As previously noted, you're hot. And he's a fucking idiot," he said, admittedly trying to encompass quite a lot of Julian's failings in that one statement.

"What does that make me for spending three years with him?" Lucas muttered.

"Better three years than sixteen," Sid pointed out. "I should've left Frank the first time he strayed, but... I never had to see it before. You know? It was easy to pretend it wasn't happening. And he always came back to me, so I convinced myself it didn't matter... Sounds pathetic, doesn't it?"

"You're not pathetic. You were in love," Lucas said, like it was that simple. Maybe it was. "I thought I was, too. So in love that I ignored a lot. Like, when he looked at me..." Lucas's eyes met his. "Even when he was smiling, there was this part of him that looked at me wrong—like I was this... annoyance he was just putting up with. Like he'd rather I wasn't there most of the time. I tried ignoring it, rationalising it... but I hated being looked at like that."

They were just looking at each other now, in the narrow doorway. The rain pattering down in the otherwise empty street. Lucas's tongue traced over his lip, and Sid realised he was staring at him, just drinking him up like the most expensive coffee he'd ever had.

"I like the way you look at me," Lucas said softly.

He couldn't speak, couldn't find any words to offer back. Lucas shifted closer to him, eyes searching his face.

"Were you going to kiss me last night?" Lucas asked.

"I don't know," Sid said honestly. "It was just…"

"Did you want to?"

He nodded, just slightly. Lucas mirrored him, drawing even closer.

"OK," he murmured.

Then, Lucas's mouth was on his, tasting of gingerbread and awful coffee. And Sid had never wanted anything, or anyone, more.

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Chapter Thirty-One

LUCAS

Call it trauma, call it seasonal insanity, call it being high on gingerbread syrup and throwing his first-ever real punch. Call it whatever. But Lucas couldn't help it. Not with Sid looking at him with those dark, serious eyes, so much want written across his face. How was he meant to resist that?

Still, there was a moment, seconds into the kiss, where he was worried he'd read it all wrong. That Sid wasn't as desperate for him as he was for Sid. That he'd just made a massive mistake to really cap off this disastrous Christmas Eve.

Then Sid kissed him back. And all that worry went away.

Sid's mouth opened against his, one hand anchored on his hip, the other reaching up to tangle in his hair and pull him close—gently but insistently. Lucas moaned against his mouth and pressed his body closer, wrapping his arms around Sid's waist. They stumbled into the wall behind Sid, and he huffed against Lucas's mouth. His chest ached with the need to be closer, as if his heart was trying to burrow out of him and join Sid's under his leather jacket.

They kissed in slow, deep movements—hungry and deep. Sid's hand slid down to his face, so careful as he traced a thumb across his cheek. Lucas thought, with a combination of want and regret, that he had really been missing out, convincing himself that what he had with Julian was anything like this. Sid kissed him like he had lived his entire life waiting for that chance to just hold him like this. Kissed him until Lucas felt lightheaded and his legs were threatening to fold under him. He was leaning hard against Sid and the wall, wishing there weren't so many layers of coats and jumpers between them. He wanted to put

his hands on Sid's body, to feel his fingers on his skin. To make him feel the same way he did—like the only person in the world who mattered. Like he was loved.

Sid slid his fingers into the scarf around Lucas's neck, tugging it loose gently. He kissed a path from his mouth to his throat. Lucas tilted his head back and whimpered, one hand flying to the back of Sid's head to keep him there. Which Sid seemed more than happy with—alternating kisses and soft bites, hot exhales rushing over his damp skin as he caught his breath between kisses. His hands had fallen to Lucas's arse, pulling him against him, kneading. Apparently, he hadn't been overstating how hot he thought that was.

It was becoming harder to remember they were in public. He just wanted so much. He could feel Sid's erection against him, knew Sid could feel how turned on he was as well. When grinding against him wasn't enough, Lucas dropped a hand between them and palmed Sid through his jeans. Sid groaned against his throat, arching into his touch and rubbing his face against his sensitive skin. His own hand slipped down and cupped Lucas's cock, squeezing. He swayed into his touch, one needy nerve stretched too thin, a moan slipping out of him.

Sid turned them, pushing him firmly against the wall and kissing him, hand stroking him through his jeans until Lucas's eyes rolled up. His skin was hot all over, heart thundering. It had been so long since he'd felt this wanted, this needed. Sid kissed him like he'd been craving him for weeks, months. Like he never wanted to stop. Lucas never wanted him to. It felt too good.

But then, abruptly, he did stop.

Lucas hissed in discomfort as the cold air rushed in where there had only been Sid a moment ago. It caught on the damp skin on his neck and around his mouth. His groin throbbed in protest at the sudden loss of Sid's hand, and Lucas struggled to clear his head before catching sight of Sid's expression.

"Sid?"

Sid rubbed a hand over his face. "I'm sorry… I shouldn't've…"

"What? No, it's… I kissed you, remember?" Lucas said, still trying to get his breath back. "What's wrong? Did I do something, or…"

"No. You didn't, it's not you. It's…I can't do this." Sid's shoulders were hunched, as if he were trying to disappear into himself. "It's a mistake."

He was cold all the way through now. All those warm, fluttery feelings completely gone. A mistake? How could he say that? Now, after the way he'd kissed him?

"You don't mean that," Lucas said, hearing how small his voice was.

Sid winced and looked down at the ground. "And you don't want me. Not really."

"I do!" Anger flashed through him before he could get a grip on it. "I am not in the habit of doing this with just anyone... Is this because of Julian?"

"You only just broke up," Sid pointed out.

"And you only just left Frank." Lucas took a step towards him, but Sid backed away, making his chest ache. "I'm not just... using you as a rebound if that's what you're worried about."

"I'm not... or I am, but..." Sid heaved a sigh. He looked more miserable than a man with kiss-swollen lips had any right to look. "You just said it yourself, you wasted three years on him. I don't want you to waste more time on me."

"What if it's not a waste?" Lucas could fully admit that maybe he'd gotten a bit carried away once he finally kissed him. When the last week of guiltily looking at Sid and waking up wrapped around him had stopped being confusing and become incredibly clear. But that didn't mean that was all this was. He liked him a lot. He sort of felt like he knew him in a way that even after three years with Julian, he'd never felt before.

"It would be." Sid smiled at him, small and sad. "I'm a dead end for you, Lucas. You're thirty-one—I've got more than a decade on you. It's not fair for me to do this."

"Isn't that my choice?" Lucas wanted to shake him, to knock loose the things Frank had put in his head. Because this had to be Frank. The same way the whispers about how lumpy and gross his body was had come from Julian. Worming their way into his thoughts until he started to believe it.

"You'll understand later." Sid sighed.

"Oh, do not pull the 'older and wiser' act with me," Lucas huffed, frustrated and angry at himself, at the world and Sid and how unfair this all was. "You are just as much of a mess as me." He reached for Sid's hands.

"That's why we can't do this."

Lucas's arms went limp at his sides. He was really serious about this. He could see it. Sid might be unhappy about it, but that wasn't going to stop him from seeing it through. He swallowed hard, still able to taste him on his lips. How had it all gone sideways so quickly? Lucas took several steadying breaths, looking at Sid. It was just like the moment before he'd made up his mind to kiss him. Only now, they were the other way around, and things felt so much more complicated.

"We should get moving if we want to get home tonight," Lucas said eventually. He sounded flat and defeated even to his own ears.

"Lucas..." Sid moved towards him as if he wanted to fix everything, take it back. But he stopped before he could touch him. That was really all the answer Lucas needed.

"Come on."

They left the doorway and walked back through the drizzle towards where he'd parked the van. The coffee stall was all closed up now, no one else in sight. Just a lonely Christmas market with the lights slowly blinking off one by one. The magic was over, and now only reality and wet litter remained. Fuck Christmas, and fuck miracles and romance and kisses in doorways. That wasn't Lucas's life.

No, his life was eating trifle alone in front of the TV and wishing he had anywhere else to be. He'd been an idiot to think this year would be any different. Even that prospect of the McKinleys spending tomorrow with Clive couldn't cheer him up. He just wanted to go home, crash into his own bed, and try to forget this whole humiliating week never happened.

"I can drive if you want?" Sid offered.

"No. I can do it," Lucas said, and that was the end of that. They got into the van in silence, and even when the radio came on, it couldn't do much to alleviate the tension of all the things he wanted to say but which Sid wouldn't want to hear.

The rain seemed to get lighter as he drove out of the town centre. When he reached an open stretch of road with streetlights, he realised that it was because it had turned to snow. Not much of it, but definite white flakes fluttering down

through the lights. Too little, too late. Christmas magic was not going to impress him now.

They were nearly on the motorway, windscreen wipers clearing the snow away, when Sid broke the silence. "I'm sorry for fucking this all up. The last thing I wanted was to hurt you over it."

"Well... you did." Lucas managed to keep silent for another three seconds before he couldn't stop himself from adding. "Why even kiss me then?"

"You kissed me."

"Oh, fuck off," Lucas hissed.

"No, I mean..." Sid growled in frustration. "You kissed me, and... I wanted you to, I didn't want to stop it."

"Right, because I'm hot or whatever," Lucas muttered. "You want me, you just don't want to be with me. That's fine. Not the first time I've heard that." His eyes were blurry, and it was only partly due to the snowfall, which made the road ahead fuzzy.

There were almost no other cars around this late. Everyone was already where they wanted to be for Christmas. Because everyone else had somewhere to be and people who wanted to be with them.

Normally, he'd pull over and wait for the snow to stop, but the idea of prolonging the agony of this journey didn't appeal to him in the slightest. It was like ripping off a plaster—he'd be alone again soon enough, and there was no point in delaying it.

"I do want to be with you," Sid said quietly, after so long a silence that Lucas was beginning to think he wasn't going to speak again. "I just don't think that'd be good for you."

"I can make my own decisions about what is and isn't something I want. And I *want* you. I... want *you*," he repeated, softer. He chanced a look over at Sid and found him already looking his way, though he looked away again almost at once.

"I want this," Lucas insisted. "You're not a dead end, Sid. There are no dead ends until THE end. Just detours that may or may not lead somewhere good. And even if this road comes to an end, then... maybe I'll still be glad I had the right company on the way."

He looked back at the very real road they were still on and saw how thick the snow was coming down. “Not to muddy my own metaphor, but I think we should get off the motorway and wait this out.”

He heard Sid’s reluctant half-laugh. “There’s those services in a mile or so.”

“Perfect.”

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Chapter Thirty-Two

SID

The service station carpark was completely deserted. A blank field of white that had already covered up the road markings. Despite the fact that the building lights were still on, he couldn't see a single soul walking around through the glass walls. They'd probably sent their staff home already. It was Christmas Eve, after all. Everyone had somewhere they'd rather be.

Except for him, maybe Lucas, too. He couldn't speak for him, but as for Sid, there was nowhere else he'd rather be than with the man sitting next to him. Which filled him with as much warmth as it did regret.

That kiss had been... well, it had made him feel alive again for the first time in a long time. He hadn't even realised how long it'd been since he felt like that until Lucas touched him. Until he was reminded what it felt like to be wanted, to be wrapped up in someone who made his heart beat fast and his hands shake. Someone he wasn't half braced to be hurt by.

It was so much. Too much. He'd had to pull back—because Frank was right, he was a burden. His care, his... love, was impossible to bear for anyone, let alone someone so much younger than him. He couldn't be the stone that dragged Lucas down. Not when he'd just set himself free from Julian. It wasn't fair to him.

He'd been sure at the time. Certain that, although it hurt him and clearly Lucas as well, it was for the best in the long run. But then Lucas had given his speech on the road, and he was wavering, despite himself. Frank's dire predictions and Lucas's soft confidence that he wouldn't regret this, regret them,

were warring in his head. He just wasn't sure which was right. Even if he knew which option he desperately wanted.

"This seems… space-esque," Lucas muttered.

"I doubt there's anyone around to ticket you."

Lucas let the van trundle to a stop. He took the keys out of the ignition, and sudden silence fell on them. With the snow outside and the almost deserted motorway beyond, it was so much quieter than it had any right to be at a service station.

"So… what do you think?" Lucas said finally, turning in his seat to face him.

"About…?" Sid could have bitten his tongue. They both knew well enough 'what'.

Lucas gave him a look, and Sid avoided it. "Yeah, I know. I don't… It's not that easy."

"It can be," Lucas said. "I'm thirty-one, not eighteen. It doesn't have to be a massive issue. The age thing."

"It's not just that." Sid shifted around to finally meet his eye. "It's the fact that I just left a sixteen-year relationship, and you broke up with your boyfriend about two hours ago. I think that's a bit fast, by most people's standards."

"Mr Shale, are you calling me easy?" Lucas rolled his eyes and lightly slapped his shoulder. "I don't think you can count tonight as my official break-up. I've sort of been falling out of… what I thought was love with Julian since we got down here. Maybe even from about five months ago, when he started insisting I invite Clive for Christmas. I was just in denial about it. And… if we're being very, very honest—which let the van be a space for honesty at this juncture—I kind of had… thoughts about you before tonight. And not to be big-headed, but I think maybe you did, too?"

He wasn't about to lie about it. Even with a headache and a broken heart in the midst of his hangover from hell, he'd clocked Lucas as attractive the moment he sobered up. Definitely his arse, then the rest of him, from his curly hair to his wicked smile and how good his thighs looked in jeans. The rest of it had come as they got to know each other—until the sight of his name on his phone screen was enough to make him smile. He had it fucking bad and had done for a week now.

"I did, yeah. I do," he corrected.

"Is that maybe why you bolted off the sofa like it was on fire that morning we woke up together?" Lucas said teasingly.

Sid couldn't help but laugh at himself. "Yeah, exactly that. Didn't think you'd appreciate waking up to the sight of me. Never mind having an elderly stranger all over you."

Lucas snorted. "Elderly. Jesus… you didn't notice I was hard, did you?"

He had, in fact, very much not. Sid realised his expression must have been comically shocked when Lucas chuckled.

"Yep… which should've been a big clue to both of us—humble brag—but denial is a bitch. Anyway, the point being… it's not some crazy rebound thing I decided to do two hours ago. I'd have kissed you that night in the orchard. I should have. I definitely should have kissed you when you caught me and saved me from that river."

"It was a stream," Sid muttered. "Barely that, even."

"Still sexy," Lucas persisted, the corner of his mouth lifting in a soft smile. "I meant it earlier—I don't care if this ends up not being forever. Even if I kind of hope it does. But you'd never be a dead end to me. Whatever ends up happening, I think it'd be worth it. It would be part of my life, our lives, that I wouldn't regret. So… can we just take the chance and see where it goes?"

"It's complicated," Sid began.

"Do you want to kiss me?" Lucas asked.

"Yes," he admitted, after a moment's pause. "More than anything."

Lucas expression softened. "Do you… care about me?"

"A lot, yeah."

"And I like you a lot." Lucas shifted closer. "I want to kiss you… so that seems pretty simple to me."

He wanted to so much. But there was still a trace of worry under it all that maybe, like everything else in his life, he was going to fuck this up, too. He'd lost his partner and his job a week ago and was about to sell his house. Everything was changing and falling apart. What right did he have to bring Lucas into that?

"What if we just do it?" Lucas said softly. "We're stuck here, so… can we call this a time-out? From reality and all the scary shit that's making your frown like

that? I mean, it is Christmas, after all."

Snowed in at an empty service station, the windscreen already cocooned in white now that the wipers had stopped, it was pretty convincing. That this could be a time outside of time, where just for once, he could let himself be happy without worrying when it was going to end. Because it already had a definite ending built in.

"It's up to you," Lucas said. "Whatever you want."

This time, it was Sid who made the first move. He leaned in, watched as Lucas's eyes widened slightly, hopefully. He brought his hand up and cupped Lucas's throat, kissing him lightly at first, but giving in when Lucas's fingers caught in his hair and pulled him closer with a whine.

That same breathless want was back, full force. As if it had never gone away. It wasn't long before Sid had slipped a hand under Lucas's jumper, skimming up to his chest. Lucas hissed slightly at the cold and arched up, huffing in frustration when the centre console got in the way.

"We should get in the back," Lucas murmured. "It'll be warmer."

"Right… no other reason." Sid arched a brow and received a Cheshire cat grin in return.

They scrambled through the blackout curtain one after the other. Lucas hit a switch, and a few strings of fairy lights came on, giving enough of a glow to see by. The back of the van was clearly only built with Lucas in mind, and it was cramped, especially with their luggage and the bags of snacks that they'd never unpacked strewn across the floor. Neither of them paid the blindest bit of attention. At least until Lucas tripped on the cardboard box of presents and accidentally tackled Sid onto the bed.

"Oh, shush, I meant to do that," Lucas mumbled into his mouth when Sid chuckled.

"Sure you did." Sid pushed Lucas's coat off and pulled at the hem of his jumper, urging it up and over his head. "Very graceful."

"I try." Lucas threw his jumper over his head. "Less mockery, more stripping, please."

Sid sat up enough to shrug off his jacket and jumper, then pulled Lucas down on top of him, hands seeking the fastening of his jeans.

"I'll squash you," Lucas complained, sounding like he was only half joking.

"Oh no, how will I cope?" Sid deadpanned, looking up while he tugged Lucas's belt open. "Being pinned under all this." To underline his point, he pulled Lucas's waistband down and slid both hands under it, palming his arse.

Lucas blushed, glowing under the string of fairy lights.

"Fuck, you're pretty." Sid ran his hands up Lucas's bare back and pulled him down on top of himself, mouth seeking his hungrily.

The bed groaned under the weight of two people, especially when they wriggled out of their jeans. The wood frame squeaked indignantly, and both of them ignored it.

Sid kissed Lucas's bare chest, hands unable to decide between his hips, arse, and thighs. Lucas was gripping his shoulders, squeezing his arms with an appreciative moan, pressing against him with only their boxers left between them.

"Do not judge me for keeping my socks on," Lucas huffed as Sid pressed a knee between his legs and Lucas hooked a thigh over his.

"Don't blame you." It was a bit chilly in the van without the heater on, but this close to Lucas, it didn't bother him. He was soaking up body heat and the scent of gingerbread. Lucas could put on a party hat, and he wouldn't care.

When Lucas hooked his fingers into his underwear and wriggled out of them, Sid groaned at the feel of him on his bare stomach. Hot and hard against him. He consigned his own boxers to the floor and wrapped an arm around Lucas to keep him from tumbling after them.

Lucas was nuzzling into his neck, kissing and sucking hard enough to make his hips buck in frustration, even as he tipped his head back to allow better access.

"I'd say get on top, but you're gonna brain yourself on the roof," he murmured and felt Lucas's low laugh against his neck, sending a thrill through him that made his toes curl.

"Should have bought a taller van. Anyway, I don't have lube or condoms... which, in hindsight, kind of a red flag I didn't think I'd need them."

"Mmmm..." Sid hummed and rolled them over, so they were side by side on the narrow bed, their legs tangled together. Lucas slid a socked foot down his

calf.

"This work?" Sid asked, one hand stroking down the small of Lucas's back, which was damp with sweat even in the chilly van interior.

"Yeah... oh, that works..." Lucas sighed happily, thrusting lazily against his belly.

Sid cradled his head in the crook of his elbow, then spat into his other hand and slipped it between them. Lucas moaned and sucked his lower lip into his mouth, reaching down to wrap his hand around Sid's and guide his strokes.

The van filled with the sound of harsh breathing, the wet parting of lips and the slick sound of Sid's hand on Lucas's cock. Lucas pawed at his back, arched against him, and kissed him with a desperate hunger. He panted against him open-mouthed as his dick jumped in Sid's hand, groaning as he came until he shivered.

"Oh fuck... Sid..." Lucas's kisses turned lazy, and he rolled limply onto his back at Sid's urging. Sid moaned against his neck, rutting in the wet mess on Lucas's stomach. His skin was on fire now, despite the cold, and Lucas's palms were like brands on his body, scorching him.

Lucas's fingers reached his hair, tugging and sending a spike of pleasure through him. His body stiffened, and he came over Lucas's belly with a moan half lost against his throat. When he collapsed on top of him, Lucas wrapped his arms around him and sighed, rubbing his cheek against the top of his head.

"That was good... Mmmm..."

Sid could only hum contentedly, boneless in his arms. He was vaguely aware of Lucas stroking his back, and he turned his head, peppering lazy kisses against his creamy skin.

"Still worried that was a bad idea?" Lucas asked eventually.

"Mmmpf... the sex? No. Doing it without a shower on hand? Maybe." Sid slowly levered himself up and grimaced at the mess that had smeared over them both.

"Eh, I have wet wipes." Lucas looked down at their bodies and then up at him. "Still think I'm pretty?"

"I think you're the most gorgeous thing I've ever seen," Sid said and meant every word.

“Flattery even after sex, such a gentleman.” Lucas laughed.

“I mean it. You…” He leant down over him. “…are fucking incredible.”

Lucas swallowed, eyes large and liquid, reflecting the fairy lights overhead. “I think you’re amazing, too.”

They kissed, soft and sweet.

“Merry Christmas,” Lucas breathed. “Now, let’s get cleaned up and into a sleeping bag before we freeze to death and cause much amusement for the traffic warden who finds our bodies.”

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Chapter Thirty-Three
LUCAS

Lying in bed, wrapped in the rustling sleeping bag, Lucas hummed softly, watching the fairy lights. Sid's head was resting on his chest, and he was stroking his hair absently, as Sid's hand moved slowly back and forth across his belly.

"I have a present for you, by the way," Lucas said eventually, unwilling to break the intimate silence any sooner. "It's in the front pocket of my bag."

Sid rumbled in acknowledgement. "Shouldn't we wait for Christmas Day?"

"Babe... it is Christmas Day." Lucas laughed and, for once, wasn't worried that his body was shaking or doing weird, off-putting stuff.

Sid turned his face against his stomach and pressed a kiss to it.

"It's, like... two in the morning," Lucas murmured, having a direct view of the little LED clock and temperature gauge he'd put in the back of the van. It was meant to be connected to a solar panel, giving readouts of available power, but he'd never installed the panel, so it now just showed the battery's status where it had charged from driving alone. The lights wouldn't run it down much; he was fairly sure they had enough power to last.

Sid sat up slightly. "I'm not even that tired."

"I think we napped for a minute there." Lucas leant out of the bed and dragged his bag over, rifling through the pocket for the little velvet bag containing Sid's present. "Here... it just reminded me of you, so..."

Sid took the little bag and opened it, carefully removing the single earring inside. It was silver—Lucas had been worried about metal allergies—but

oxidised, so it had a dark patina to it. A hoop earring shaped like a small branch, complete with buds and leaf nodes. It had reminded him of the hike and how much Sid had appeared to enjoy being out in nature. How easily he'd found him a walking stick out in the woods.

"It's, um... cast from a real plant," Lucas explained. "I thought maybe you'd like having an earring again. It seemed like you missed it. I don't know, it's stupid."

"It's great. Thank you." Sid looked genuinely touched. "I do miss it... Can you put this in for me?"

"You don't have to..."

"I want to," Sid said firmly. "But it's gonna be fiddly because it's closed up a bit, and there's no mirror in here."

Lucas sat up and took the earring. Sid tilted his head trustingly and barely hissed when Lucas pushed the post of it past the slight resistance in the piercing and through to the other side. He slid the catch into place to keep it there, stroking the soft shell of Sid's ear.

"Ta-da..." He pulled back and smiled. "It looks good on you. You're just gonna have to trust me until we pass a mirror. But it looks hot, in my incredibly biased opinion."

Sid reached up and touched it, apparently self-conscious. "Thanks."

"You didn't have to get me anything, it's fine," Lucas said quickly. "It's not like we talked about it at all, so..."

"Of course I got you something. You nearly bloody broke your ankle on it," Sid said and ducked down to scoop up the cardboard box that Lucas had tripped on in the gloom. "I also got something for our hosts, but..."

Lucas tore the paper off of the top box and opened it to find a glass Christmas wreath inside. "Awww, that would have gone really well with their whole vibe."

"Right?" Sid said. "Picked it out 'specially... Hang on."

He lifted the wreath from the box and shifted to the end of the bed. There was a nail slightly sticking out of the shiplap wall, and Sid hung the wreath's ribbon on it, letting it hang over the lights, glowing.

"Just remind me to take it down before we drive anywhere," Sid said sheepishly. "But, it's Christmas. Should have some decorations up."

"It's lovely." Lucas smiled at him, at the glimpse of what a softie he was, then he picked up the larger parcel from the box. "Did you… get me an electric grill?"

"You wish—would come in bloody handy back here," Sid joked, but Lucas could see he was a bit nervous. "It's not new, sorry."

He pulled the paper off. "Nothing to apologise for—I love a good find… Oh my god…" The last bit of tape gave way, and plastic cassette boxes slid free over the sleeping bag covering his lap. There were six of them, and four had covers he remembered from childhood. He picked up the black tape player underneath.

"Didn't know if you had one that worked," Sid muttered.

"Sid… these are amazing. Where did you even get them?"

He turned over the cases. *The Ghosts of N-Space*, *The Tomb of the Cybermen*… he hadn't heard some of these since before his mum died. His eyes blurred with tears at the thought that he'd finally get to hear them again. To relive those good memories with her.

"Jumble sale at the Christmas market," Sid was saying. "Hey… don't cry, love."

The soft name in Sid's mouth only set him off more, as did the arm circling his shoulders. He hugged Sid tightly, still holding the tape player in his hand.

"Thank you. This is…" He pulled back, blinking hard to dispel the tears. "You really thought you weren't good for me? Sid… this is the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me."

He kissed him, held on to him until his arms began to ache. Then Sid gently took the tape player from his hand and set it by the bed. They lay back down under the sleeping bag and their coats as the cold started to make itself known.

Lucas reached up and brushed a finger over Sid's earring. "Doesn't seem like enough, after what you got me."

Sid took his hand in his and brought it between them, against his chest. "Without you, I'd have gone right back to Frank as soon as I sobered up that first day. I'd say you gave me something pretty fucking special."

Lucas smiled slightly. "And I did punch him in the face. At great physical cost."

"You did." Sid bent his head and kissed his bruised knuckles. "But if you feel like driving back to York, I can match that and deck Julian or your dad. Or both. I'm having a two-for-one sale on assaults this festive season."

"Tempting… but I think I'm good right here." Lucas looped a thigh over his and tugged him in closer. "It doesn't matter what Clive does tomorrow… or today, I suppose. He doesn't matter. Hasn't for a long time. But this… this might be the best Christmas I've had in years."

"Me too," Sid admitted softly. "Sort of wish they could have all been like this."

"They could be," Lucas said, but it came out like a question.

He supposed he'd sort of meant it as one, to be fair. Because tonight had been incredible, almost perfect. Except for the part where he knew it would have to end. Sid had basically said as much, only kissing him after Lucas told him this could just be for one night.

"Maybe they could be," Sid said.

And it felt like an answer.

He must have dozed off, because he was woken by sunlight creeping in around the curtains on the van's rear windows. The air felt cold and still around him, except for the low sound of Sid's breathing. They were still curled up together—in fairness, the only way to sleep on the small single bed. Lucas blinked away sleep and regarded Sid, where he was lying on the pillow beside him. The faint sunlight picked out the odd strands of silver in his hair, and his face was smoothed out in sleep. Unworried and unbothered by anything. The urge to kiss him was almost overwhelming. Instead, Lucas carefully eased himself up into a sitting position and shimmied down to the end of the bed.

Romance was lovely and all, but he really had to pee.

After covering Sid back up with the sleeping bag and putting yesterday's clothes back on, he let himself out into the snowy wasteland that was the service station car park. It had kept snowing during the night, and there were at least three inches of unblemished powder on the ground. The sky was a clear, blinding blue, and the only sound for miles was his footsteps crunching through the icy crust.

Lucas doubted the services would be open but still tried the doors. No luck, they were firmly locked. He ended up finding a convenient tree and peeing outdoors for the first time since he was about five. *At least my hand sanitiser is Christmas cookie-scented*, he thought as he dashed back to the van, freezing cold.

Sid still wasn't awake but had rolled over into the space Lucas had left, nuzzling his way into his side of the pillow like he missed him. Lucas silently 'awwwed' at this, then got busy digging around in a little built-in cupboard for teabags and UHT milk. He'd nicked a fair few bits from hotels to stash in the van and never emptied it out. Thankfully, Sid had bought bottled water along with the snacks. Tea was very much the only hot thing on the menu this morning.

As the camping kettle whistled on the gas stove, Sid stirred behind him. Lucas turned and felt suddenly shy as the other man sat up, revealing a lot of bare chest and hair tugged into peaks by Lucas's fingers.

"Morning," Sid said, stretching. Then he seemed to realise the state he was in and where they were. "How're you this morning?"

"Me? Good—very good," Lucas said. "You?"

"Also… very good." Sid's slightly anxious expression smoothed out into a smile. "Are you making tea?"

"Yep—sorry, no coffee. But it's hot, and in our current climate, that's probably the most important thing." He busied himself with stirring the camping mugs, and when he turned back, Sid was watching him with his head tilted to one side, a faraway look on his face.

"What?" Lucas asked.

Sid shook it off. "Nothing."

Lucas raised an eyebrow, not buying it for a second. He was getting fairly good at translating Sid's significant looks now. This one had Frank written all over it. He took the mugs over and perched on the end of the bed.

"Were you trying to remember the last time someone brought you tea in bed?" Lucas guessed. "To be fair, I'm cheating because the kettle's only like… eighteen inches away."

Sid chuckled. "There is that, yeah… but have to admit it's been a while."

Sixteen years, he was willing to bet. Give or take. Which was a shame because a freshly woken Sid was something to behold. He was extra-gravelly voiced and tousled. Lucas often thought he himself looked a bit like a traumatised hamster in the mornings, but Sid was built for lazy cuppas in bed.

"Well, happily, that tea-drought has come to an end." Lucas nudged Sid's foot through the sleeping bag. "You wait until I'm not constrained by the whole 'snowed into a van' situation. I'm gonna make you tea, coffee, toast, pastries... maybe some eggs Benedict."

"Fancy." Sid grinned. "Not sure I've ever had that before."

"Oh, yeah, you're with a man who brunches now. The catering standards are high." Lucas handed his tea off to Sid and shuffled up the bed, slipping under the sleeping bag and cosying up to the sleepy man underneath.

"Sounds pricey," Sid murmured, turning to brush a kiss on his cheek as he handed the mug back. "Not sure I can afford that kind of bedside service."

Lucas leant his head against Sid's shoulder with a sigh. "Fortunately, my payment schemes are very reasonable. You can work it off on your back."

"Very fair." Sid wrapped an arm around his back. "This bed you speak of... does it have significantly more headroom?"

"Oh, loads," Lucas promised. "And it's even got two pillows."

"Luxury."

"Mmmm... I try."

They sipped their tea in peaceful silence for a while, then Sid's stomach rumbled.

"Probably a good thing we never unpacked the snacks." Sid looked towards the plastic bags on the floor. "But they are out of arm's reach, so I'm gonna knock a star off your review for that."

"How about..." Lucas reached over him and groped around in his duffel bag before producing a gold tin with pictures of shortbread on the lid. "...homemade mince pies and sausage rolls?"

He popped the lid off, and Sid looked from the tin's contents to him questioningly.

"These are our pies and rolls. Lucas... did you steal these?"

He pulled a face of such innocence that it made his cheeks hurt. "No."

"I've raised a thief." Sid sighed. "The shame of it."

"Oh, hush... Actually, they were a gift. I was coming downstairs while Christopher was giving Julian a hard time on the landing—you know, because he got dumped on Christmas Eve, so I guess he 'lost'—and Eva came out of the kitchen and gave me these. *For the journey*, she said." Lucas selected a mince pie and looked at it contemplatively. "She's a good egg, really."

"She is... mostly because she didn't put any of those fucking prawn vol-au-vents in here." Sid selected his own pie and toasted him with it. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas." Lucas bit into his pie, savouring the homemade mincemeat. "You're making these again next year, I hope you know."

"Only if you help," Sid said. "And we'll have to make our own pastry. Unless we can poach Stevens from them."

"Deal. You have three hundred and sixty-five days left to teach me how to make pastry... like they did in the olden days."

Sid dusted crumbs off his hands. "You little shit."

Lucas laughed and was still laughing when Sid pinned him to the bed and planted a mince pie-flavoured kiss on him.

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Chapter Thirty-Four

SID

It was early afternoon by the time the gritter lorries passed their way. By that time, the snow in the sunniest parts of the car park had already started to thin out and melt. Not that he'd been keeping track other than a quick glance when he went out to piss. They'd found more than enough ways to occupy themselves in the van.

He hadn't been stretching the truth when he'd told Lucas he wished every Christmas could have been like this. Or at least the last sixteen. There were no arguments, no restlessness or boredom. Pretty impressive considering they were confined to the back of a small van with no heating, no roast dinner, and no TV.

Instead, he and Lucas spent the day curled up in bed, albeit in varying amounts of clothing. Almost as soon as layers went on, they found a reason to start peeling them off again. Lucas had to be at least moderately psychic, he reckoned, to have put two packs of baby wipes in his bag before going away. They came in handy.

In between lengthy kisses and the kind of cosy sex he'd not thought could be as hot as it was, they did their best to do some Christmassy stuff. Lucas had bought Eva a crossword book (apparently, she loved them), but obviously hadn't ended up giving it to her. So they passed it back and forth, reading out clues and filling them in before peeking at the back for the answers. As it turned out, Lucas's film and TV knowledge was about as good as Sid's music know-how, so they blitzed through the pop-culture clues.

Lucas used the van's radio to keep track of the traffic news and to listen to Christmas music, and they ate snacks, napped, and talked about anything, really. Everything. Past Christmases, beloved toys, favourite films, songs, and foods. Lucas talked about his mum and all the good memories he had with her, and Sid told him about his parents and shuttling between them after the divorce. They remembered awful cracker jokes, and Lucas attempted to explain the plot of the past *Doctor Who* Christmas specials to him, because Sid admitted he hadn't watched it since the old series got cancelled.

"Pity we can't watch this year's, really. It'll be on iPlayer." Lucas shrugged. "But still, it's my favourite part of the day. Settling in with some snacks and getting a festive *Doctor Who*, then going online to chat about it."

"We might still get back in time," Sid said. "They're gritting this way."

"Yeah... maybe." Lucas stretched and lay down again, pulling the sleeping bag up to his neck in a clear attempt to get cosy again. "Anyway... shall we try the hard crosswords?"

Sid made himself comfortable on the bed beside him. He was still kind of awed that he was sharing a bed with Lucas, that they were really doing this. He kept catching himself smiling like an idiot, and he didn't even care.

"Or... we could put on a *Doctor Who* tape?" he suggested.

"Really?" Lucas eyes were wide and hopeful. "But you don't really care about that stuff."

"You do. Besides, we're not awash with options, and... it'd be nice to, you know, share something so important to you."

Lucas kissed him. "You are a great big softie really, aren't you?"

"Keep it to yourself. I have a reputation to maintain. Or I would if anyone I knew was still in the business around here." Sid watched as Lucas considered the tapes before picking one and putting it in the player. He pushed play, and as the tape whined over blank space, Lucas lay down with his head on his chest and hummed in satisfaction.

Best Christmas, Sid thought. Really, there was no way to top it.

They listened to an entire *Doctor Who* adventure—it was actually pretty good, he hadn't been fussed as a kid, but he could see why Lucas was so into it—and then checked the radio to find that the road had been cleared. Sid was the

one who volunteered to go outside and check, returning with news that the motorway had been gritted and that there were cars on it, albeit moving quite slowly.

"There's more snow forecast for later," Lucas told him when he got back. "We should probably leave now if we're going to beat it to Blackpool."

Lucas looked as disappointed as he felt. As inconvenient as the lack of plumbing and heating was, it had been nice spending time in the van. Now they could leave, and he felt a bit anxious that whatever this was between them wouldn't survive the transition to the real world waiting for them at the end of the motorway.

Still, Sid helped to pack everything away back into the cupboards and nooks of the van. He emptied the kettle out onto the ground and then got into the front seat. It was as if last night had never happened—the two of them in the same seats, looking out at the same view of the service station, only in daylight this time.

Then Lucas reached over and squeezed his hand. "You OK?"

He curled his fingers around Lucas's and nodded. "Yeah… just thinkin' about when we get back."

"Me too." Lucas nibbled at his lip, clearly thinking hard. "You know you can stay with me, right? I mean… there's not going to be a hotel open, and I will literally hog-tie you if you try to go home to Frank, so…"

He hadn't even been thinking about that, to be honest. Only about whether it would be weird between them when they got back to reality. But hearing Lucas say it slightly eased the knot of worry in his stomach.

"Thanks. Hadn't even thought to worry about that," he admitted.

"Well, now you don't have to." Lucas started the van, then looked over at him. "Not that, you know, I'm expecting anything, but… I thought maybe you were… open to the idea?"

"I am. If you still…"

"I definitely still," Lucas said eagerly, then flushed. "There goes trying to play it cool."

"I think the sheer number of wipes we've been through sort of put paid to that," Sid muttered and chuckled along with Lucas, which broke the tension a

little bit. “Can’t say I’m not looking forward to returning to civilisation, though.”

“Fair. And I do, uh, have condoms and stuff at mine,” Lucas said with a terrible attempt at nonchalance.

“Really? Next, you’ll be telling me you’ve got hot water and a working oven.”

Lucas was smirking as he steered them towards the exit to the motorway. “Boy, do I have some good news for you.”

It was surprisingly easy after that. The anxiety was still there, but it was a low-level fizz that he eventually realised was more excitement than worry. The road was mostly empty, given the snow and the fact that it was Christmas afternoon. Still, it took a long time to get home, taking it slowly in case of ice and getting held up by the odd car that had slid sideways and blocked the road.

It was dark when they pulled up outside the flat. As Sid got out of the van, he thought about how long ago it seemed that they’d left for York. How much had happened since then. It was probably the fastest his life had changed in years, and he wasn’t mad about it. Not anymore. Really—in a sort of horrible fucked-up way—Frank had done him a favour. He’d set him free.

They carried the luggage upstairs, and Lucas turned on the lights and bustled around, turning up the thermostat and taking off his coat and shoes. Sid had ended up wearing the red scarf, and he slowly unwound it and put it and his coat on the door hook beside Lucas’s.

“Do you want the first shower?” Lucas asked. “I ask because of the two of us, I think my routine is the more time-consuming.”

Sid snorted. “Fair. Is there hot water?”

“Should be—it’s an electric unit. Which you should know, Mr Landlord.” Lucas waved him towards the bathroom. “Your towel’s still in there.”

“I’m going, I’m going.” Sid took himself off to the bathroom, where he’d washed his hangover off a week ago. The towel he’d used was in fact still draped on the heated towel rack. It felt pleasantly domestic.

After a quick shower, he emerged in a clean T-shirt and jeans and dumped his old clothes back into his bag to sort out later. Lucas had been busy in his absence, and the curtains were now drawn, and a steaming cup of coffee awaited him on the table in the living room.

"Make yourself at home," Lucas said, already ducking into the bathroom. "Not that you needed my permission before."

Sid rolled his eyes. "You're never letting that go, are you?"

"Never," Lucas called through the bathroom door. "That is now the charming story of how we met, you little house-breaker you."

He supposed he was right. He took his coffee in hand and wandered around the living room, looking at Lucas's collection in more detail. He had shelves of manga, DVDs, and games. Sid was pleased to spot some films he knew and loved on the shelf, including the original *Robocop*, *Alien,* and *Demolition Man*.

He drifted through the bedroom door, which in his defence had been left open. There was the promised double bed, neatly made. The bedside lamps were on, softly glowing, and he wasn't even surprised to see the framed lightsabers on the wall above the headboard. He smiled slightly at the sight of them and couldn't help but picture them alongside his signed band posters.

Sid finished his coffee and returned the mug to the kitchen to put it in the sink. The weird frog man cup Lucas had given him with water in that first day was dried up and sitting to one side waiting to be put away. Sid turned around at the sound of the bathroom door opening.

Lucas appeared with a towel wrapped around his waist, using another to dry his hair. He was followed from the bathroom by a waft of sweet, spicy steam. Sid couldn't think of a better sight than this—and clearly Lucas could read it on his face. He lowered the hair towel, cheeks pink from either the steam or self-consciousness.

"Am I getting dressed?"

Sid shook his head, unable to take his eyes off him. "Waste of time, really. Bedroom?"

Lucas flashed him a wicked look and darted towards the open door, with Sid hot on his heels. He caught up with him at the end of the bed, and Lucas squeaked indignantly when he scooped him off his feet.

"You said you'd ask before picking me up." Lucas tapped him on the nose reprovingly.

"May I?"

"Anytime." Lucas kissed him, arms looped around his neck. "But if you want me out of this towel, I'm going to need to be back on my feet."

He lowered him almost at once, and Lucas took a step back. But he hesitated on actually discarding the towel, a wrinkle of a frown appearing between his sculpted brows. Sid realised too late that despite their time shacked up together in the van, he had yet to see Lucas fully naked. He was probably getting in his head about it based on whatever crap Julian had been telling him for the past three years.

After a moment of consideration, Sid pulled his T-shirt over his head and dropped it to the floor. Then he started on his jeans. Lucas's eyes wandered over him, and he bit his lip as Sid shoved his jeans down and stepped out of them. He'd run out of underwear the day before and hadn't bothered with it after his shower.

He had his own issues with his body. Some of them running through his head in Frank's voice. But he wanted to show Lucas he had nothing to worry about. Baring all—flaws included—and showing how hard he was at the mere sight of Lucas's towel-covered body would get the message across. He hoped.

Lucas was breathing shallowly, but he still had that towel around his hips. Sid moved towards him and dropped his hands to the plush fabric.

"You don't have to... but I guarantee there's nothing under there I'm not gonna like," he said softly, teasing a finger under it to stroke against the skin under Lucas's navel, making him shiver.

"I know... I'm just being stupid really..." Lucas muttered.

"Not stupid. Misled, criminally so... by an idiot." Sid took hold of the towel, and Lucas let go, allowing him to unwrap him like a Christmas present. He let the towel drop and ran his hands over him. "Fuck... Lucas..."

He was perfect. Soft and generous stomach, hips with hand-sized dips, and thighs he'd happily get smothered by. A neatly trimmed triangle of pubes and a cock that, despite how it had felt in his hand, was still surprisingly thick, only added to the overall appeal. Lucas wasn't just hot, he was delicious.

Sid couldn't help but drop to his knees by the discarded towel and nuzzle Lucas's stomach, kissing his way lower. Lucas's hands found his shoulders, climbing to his hair and holding him—holding on to him as if afraid his knees

might buckle—while Sid bit gently at the top of that neat auburn triangle, then dropped lower.

"Sid... oooh my god..."

He licked him, from tip to root, tracing one vein with his tongue. Lucas whimpered, pulled him closer, and Sid looked up at him, pressing an open-mouthed kiss to his dick.

"Can I pick you up, Lucas?"

He got an eager nod in response and wasted no time in looping his arms under his thighs, lifting Lucas up and splaying him across the bed. Lucas flailed an arm towards the bedside table and passed him a condom, which Sid made quick work of opening and rolling onto Lucas's dick—achingly hard and desperate against his stomach.

Lucas's silky soft calf slid over his shoulder and wrapped around his back as he bent to get him into his mouth. Lucas moaned breathlessly, canting his hips and offering himself up. Even with the condom, Sid was enjoying himself. He dipped down, working up to taking Lucas into his throat, hands sweeping over his thighs in teasing circles. He swallowed around him, and Lucas bucked a little, trying to get more of him.

"Oh, fuck..." Lucas murmured. "Sid..."

He coaxed Lucas's other leg over his shoulder and reached under him, humming in approval to find him slippery with lube. He pulled back and wrapped his other hand around Lucas's dick, pumping slowly.

"You were busy in there, weren't you?"

Lucas hummed in agreement, spreading his legs wider, all traces of inhibition gone. "Patience is overrated."

"Isn't it just." He pressed his middle finger into him, and Lucas tipped his head back with a thick-throated sigh. Sid sucked him down again, bobbing his head a few times before releasing him, relishing Lucas's thwarted whine. "I have a request, actually."

"Hmmm?" Lucas wriggled on the bed, pushing against his finger. Sid added another to indulge him and received a grateful moan as his reward.

"I'd like to see you on top."

Lucas's eyes flew open, and he struggled up onto his elbows, looking down at him. Sid met his eye, then bent and kissed his thigh. "Only if you want... but you did say it was your favourite... and I've been thinking about it."

"I..." Lucas hesitated. Hissed through his teeth when Sid teased the head of his cock with his tongue. "I like reverse rider, so... are you sure you, uh... want me to?"

"Oh yeah." Sid nuzzled the crease of his thigh. "I think the only way I'd like it more is if there was a mirror in here."

Lucas shifted his legs from his shoulders and sat up, nibbling on his lip. "OK. Yes, I, uh... Yes, please."

Sid chuckled and moved up the bed until they were level. "Very polite."

"Thanks, I was raised right. To a point." Lucas blushed and hastily removed the condom, tossing it onto the bedside table and retrieving another for Sid. "Get comfy then."

Sid obediently rolled onto his back and rested his head against the pillows. Lucas was clearly a little nervous, but also excited as he rolled the condom onto him. Sid groaned at the feel of his hand around him. The light squeeze Lucas gave him had him biting his lip.

Then Lucas was kneeling beside him, ready to turn around and get into position. But he hesitated. Sid hated to see it, especially given how Lucas had said he loved doing this. He deserved to feel good about that. To feel as sexy as he was.

"You're so fucking hot right now," he murmured, and Lucas looked at him like a deer in headlights. "You are. God I can't wait to watch you come."

He leant up and kissed him, hands roaming across Lucas's skin, stroking and groping in equal measure. Every inch of him was perfection under his hands. Lucas kissed him back with renewed confidence, making him hungrier. When he pulled back, Lucas immediately turned and straddled him, arching his back and looking back over his shoulder.

"Fuck me..." Sid murmured.

Lucas reached back and guided him in, sinking down in stages. He sighed and rolled his head across his shoulders as he got used to him. Sid clenched his fingers into the duvet, eyes drifting shut because looking at Lucas was taking him

too close to the edge. He felt incredible, so tight and hot, that he was biting his tongue, worried he'd embarrass himself.

Finally, Lucas's thighs came to rest on his, arse flush against him. He could hear him trying to catch his breath.

"How d'you feel?" Lucas asked.

"Like the luckiest fucking man alive," Sid groaned. "Fuck, you feel good. Too good."

Lucas chuckled breathlessly. "Really? Need a minute?"

The rocking thrust that followed was wholly unfair, and Sid moaned, hands flying to Lucas's hips to slow him. Lucas looked back at him wickedly, and Sid squeezed his arse, hard.

"Go for it."

He apparently didn't need telling twice. *'Very effective,'* that was what Lucas had said, and he had undersold it. Sid had never had the pleasure of seeing anything as arresting as the way Lucas rode a cock.

While Sid held firm to his hips—just as grabbable as he'd anticipated that first day—Lucas bucked and bounced on him. His hands groped his own chest, his hair, and dropped down to the bed to help propel him. Lucas finally seized on his raised knees and increased his pace with the extra leverage. He tossed his head back and moaned, every breath edged in a whimper.

Sid was just clinging on for the ride, and fuck if it wasn't the best one of his life. Just the way Lucas was crying out had heat licking up his spine. The clutching inferno between his legs was hauling him to the edge and forcing him to cling on by his fingernails. He was thrusting up as much as he could to meet Lucas's frantic bounces, and the sound of their flesh meeting was insanely loud. But every time, it made stars flicker behind his eyelids. He just wanted more.

In an attempt to ensure Lucas got off first, he wrapped an arm around his heaving belly and stroked his cock. He managed barely a couple of strokes before Lucas took his hand away and held it to his mouth, sucking on his forefinger.

"I can... I can get there, like this," Lucas panted. "Just... oh my god, just don't stop," he practically sobbed, and Sid would have rather thrown his back out permanently than fail to comply.

He knew Lucas was close when he lost his rhythm, leaning back drunkenly. He was louder now, sounding like he was about to hyperventilate or come his brains out. Maybe both. Sid gripped his hips till his knuckles turned white and pumped up into him.

Lucas shuddered and let out a final sharp cry. Sid pulled him down and held him there, his insides clenching tightly around him, forehead to Lucas's sweat-slick back. He groaned as the aftershock of Lucas's orgasm sent him over the edge.

"Fuck," he panted, wrapping his arms around Lucas's heaving chest, come smearing over his skin. "Holy fuck..."

Uh-hunh..." Lucas chuckled giddily. "Told you... very effective... uhn..." He clasped his hands over Sid's, stomach shivering as he fought for breath. "You're incredible."

"Think you had me beat there," Sid said and carefully slid out of Lucas, guiding him over so he could flop onto the bed in all his flushed, sweaty glory. "You are something else."

He fell on him, kissing and sleepily stroking, until the bedding was beyond saving and they were both too tired to give much of a shit. As they were drifting off to sleep, Sid pressed a kiss to Lucas's shoulder.

"I'll make the tea tomorrow."

"Mmm... two sugars, please." Lucas yawned. "And a blow job, if you're up to it... Daddy."

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Epilogue

ONE YEAR LATER

Lucas sipped his black forest hot chocolate, peering into the estate agent's window. Properties in Cardiff were shockingly expensive compared to Blackpool. But it was still nice to look, and he had time to kill. Sid was on a 'mystery errand' and had said he'd meet him outside the coffee shop, which was next door.

Lucas shifted the tote bag on his shoulder. He'd been taking advantage of the library's Wi-Fi today and so had his laptop with him, as well as his world-building notes. He was another eleven thousand words into the story of the bubbly and sarcastic alien anthropologist and the gruff space mining captain who rescued him from certain death in a wormhole. The two of them were currently attempting to steal a rare artefact from a mansion during a diplomatic ball. It was going comically poorly. He also had some promising emails from an agent sitting in his inbox. Nothing concrete yet, but he knew for a fact that Sid had already bought champagne and hidden it. It was kind of hard to keep secrets when living in a van.

Sid's house sale had gone through a month ago, and they were meant to be looking for somewhere to buy together. It was going to have to be somewhere cheap, so Cardiff was out. They'd been looking at Redcar, because they both loved a seaside town. Blackpool was a possibility, but he knew that Sid still worried that Lucas might run into Frank one day when out on his own. Even though Lucas was bigger than him and prepared to fight dirty. It hadn't happened yet, but mostly because they'd been touring the UK for eight months

and only popping to the flat for a week or so at a time. Mostly for laundry, enjoying hot showers, and of course, making full use of the bed.

An arm hooked around his shoulder, and he felt a brush of beard as Sid kissed the side of his neck. "Missed you."

"Missed you more." Lucas leant into him with a sigh. "Did you get whatever it is you wanted?"

"Yep, and the cables for the new solar panel came through to the post office." Sid held up a package. "I'll get that all plugged in, and then we'll have enough juice for you to watch practically unlimited DVDs."

"The way to my heart." He juggled his cup and tote bag so he could take Sid's hand. They walked together through town and towards the car park where they'd left the van. They had a pitch booked at a more rural campsite. This time of year—late December—a lot of places were shut down, but the ones that weren't had very reasonable prices. Affordability had been a big concern while they waited for the house money to come in. Lucas had quit his library job, and Sid had lost his job due to the whole 'boss screwing his boyfriend' fiasco. Also, he obviously wasn't collecting rent on the flat anymore. Lucas had sold some collectables he wasn't that attached to, and Sid had done some casual work fixing and reselling phones and tablets. But money had been tight. It hadn't mattered, though, not really. The last year had still been one of the brightest and best in Lucas's life.

They were heading back to Blackpool and the flat tomorrow morning. It would be Christmas Eve, and that meant access to an oven and a comfy sofa were paramount. In the new year, they'd also have to pack things up and get the place ready to rent out again. He was looking forward to moving in with Sid properly. There were no worries in his mind that they could make it work. After all, they'd spent eight months living in a van together. A house would be easy after that.

Back at the van, Sid fiddled with the solar panel for an hour while Lucas told him about what he'd written that day. Then Lucas made toasted muffins with scrambled egg and salmon for dinner, and Sid took care of the washing up before they got an early night.

They set off early for the drive home, stopping at a services to switch over so Sid could drive the last leg and give him a break. Lucas was kind of going to miss

the van. Of course, they'd still use it for the odd break. Sid had floated the idea of a summer trip around Europe. But he'd nearly finished his book, and he wanted to get a proper job again and start making a home together while he was querying agents and publishers.

"Are you smiling because you're only about an hour away from a proper shower?" Sid laughed, catching sight of him as he took a left turn.

"Yep, can't wait," Lucas said, only half joking. Of course, he had other reasons to be excited, but he was keeping those close to his chest.



Sid was sort of bricking it, to be honest. When they arrived back at the flat, he focused on unpacking their stuff and putting a wash on while Lucas jumped in the shower. But with that done, he didn't have anything to occupy his hands and started to get anxious. He ended up pacing around the room.

It was slightly calming to see his stuff alongside Lucas's—his record player and crates of vinyl beside Lucas's tape player and ever-increasing collection of audio dramas. Sid's signed *Iron Maiden* t-shirt framed on the wall next to a poster for *Dark Souls*. Lucas had taken a load of pictures at the various *Doctor Who* filming locations in and around Cardiff, and the plan was to put those in a frame at the new house. Once they found one. He'd actually come across a three-bedroom he quite liked. There would be room for him to work from home, fixing computers, and for Lucas to have his own office. It would come in handy when his book got published, which Sid had every faith that it would. Maybe he was biased, but Lucas was also a very hard worker, and he knew that once he got a chance, he'd never let up.

He touched his back pocket, reassuring himself that the box was still there. He'd gone back and forth on the idea of proposing—seemed like the third time probably wasn't the charm in that regard. But in the end, he hadn't been able to resist. He wanted to be with Lucas for the rest of his life, and he had to let him know that. Even if it went as badly as it had the first two times he'd proposed.

Which he was hoping it wouldn't. Lucas wasn't Frank—of that he was supremely grateful.

He'd had the ring specially made. At first, he'd thought about going for the one from *Lord of the Rings*, but although Lucas liked the books and the films, sci-fi was his true passion. None more so than *Doctor Who*, which was how Sid came to be trawling the internet for a way to translate something into Galifreyan and finding a place that would engrave it onto a ring.

Sid had wanted to pop the question somewhere special. Had agonised over where to do it—on a nice hike, at the York Christmas market (too much of a chance they'd run into the McKinleys), or even up Blackpool tower. In the end, though, he'd gone for somewhere significant to them both—the place they'd first said 'I love you', the first place they'd spent the night together, even though it was separately, and the place they'd met: the flat.

Lucas came out of the bathroom wrapped in a fluffy red dressing gown. He nudged up beside Sid on the sofa and draped his long legs over his lap.

"Make me a tea?" Lucas wheedled.

"You're sitting on me now," Sid pointed out.

Lucas smirked. "Make me a tea, and I'll sit on you later, too."

Chuckling, Sid extracted himself and went to the kitchen. *I'll do it later*, he thought. After dinner. He was going to make Lucas's favourite spicy noodles and take care of the washing up. Then he'd do it.

He turned around holding two mugs of tea, and nearly dropped them when he saw Lucas on the floor.

"Sidney Shale," Lucas said, balancing on one knee, soft robe and checked Christmas pyjamas out of place, given how serious he looked. "Will you do me the honour... of being my husband... please?"

He was holding up a ring that matched the earring that Sid had worn every day for the past three hundred and sixty-four days. An oxidised silver band that looked like braided twigs. Sid felt his eyes well and rubbed a hand over his mouth, trying to get control of himself.

"Hoping I already know the answer, but..." Lucas offered him a slightly wobbly smile. "You are really keeping me in suspense here."

Sid set down the mugs and crossed the room towards him, then got down on his knees in front of Lucas and pulled the ring box from his pocket. Lucas gasped, eyes shiny as he opened it and showed him the ring inside. Silver and engraved with several complex circular symbols.

"Of course I will," Sid said.

"Sid…"

"I hope it's alright. And that the engraving's right… It's meant to say—"

"—*May our paths never stray, till journey's end*," Lucas said. "Sid, that's beautiful. You great big nerd."

"So are you. On both counts."

Lucas threw his arms around him. "I'm your nerd now. No take-backs."

Sid wrapped his arms around him and breathed in the familiar sweet scent of gingerbread. "No take-backs required."

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