The Thing About Ollie

Levi Thomas



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Content warning:

The Thing About Ollie contains graphic sexual content, self-harm (including graphic depictions), depression, self-hatred, anxiety, panic attacks, and homophobia.

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Dedication:

I would like to dedicate this book to my parents; their unwavering support is the only reason I was able to write this.

I would also like to thank Lin-Manuel Miranda and the entire original cast of *Hamilton*. I watched *Hamilton* 24 times while writing this book and when I wasn't watching it, I was listening to the soundtrack.

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Prologue

Saturday July 16 2011

Bubbly ferment ran down my throat, the icy liquid moving through my chest and into my stomach. My hand numbed the longer I gripped the cold glass. The lights turned the bottle green, red a moment later, then back to blue as it was a moment before. I leant my head back, neck resting on the back of the couch. My eyes were closed, knees spread, beer bottle freezing my crotch.

The couch shifted as a weight shuffled in beside me. The heat of another body slowly lifted me from my buzzed funk. A pointy shoe tapped my jeaned leg, and a hand with long, delicate fingers fell along the inside of my thigh. Eight days since my seventeenth birthday meant a hand resting that close to my crotch made my dick twitch. I finally opened my eyes. Aubrie…

Aubrie was my best friend. Although we were dating now, I think. It made sense. I was a boy, she was a girl, we'd known each other since we were ten, right around when Aubrie's parents got divorced. She'd essentially lived at my house for a few years until the custody battle was settled, but we didn't start dating until recently. She said she had always liked me, but that she only now had the courage to tell me. I supposed that made sense. I was as attractive as anyone, I guessed. I liked her, I think. She was very pretty with her blonde hair, although it was red when we were younger. Blue eyes, boobs; I would say average to bigger. I'd only ever seen hers, so I didn't have a whole lot to go off. We'd never had sex; we kissed and made out a bit since she told me she had always had a crush on me, but this party…

I was slowly getting more and more inebriated, her hand was trailing closer and closer to my dick… I couldn't see why we wouldn't be having sex tonight.

My friend Josh leant over, his hot breath in my ear. “You’re gonna get some tonight,” he said in a sing-song voice.

He used his hands to grab the air and hump it. I rolled my eyes and huffed. Anxiously, I chugged the last bit of my beer.

“Her tits are perfect, her pussy must be so wet,” Josh continued.

He’s drunk, he wouldn’t talk like this normally. He’s drunk.

Josh handed me a joint. I took a long drag. A hand sprung in front of me, asking for it. I took another long puff and handed it on. Aubrie’s lips hit my cheek, the sticky lip gloss clinging to my stubble. Her fingers interlocked with mine, wet with condensation, before she pulled me off the couch and into the crowd.

In the kitchen, Aubrie poured herself another Coke. *No drinking while I’m studying*, she would always say. She was so focused on getting somewhere. She didn’t care where, she just knew she wanted to be in charge, wanted to be the boss, wanted to be in control.

A shot glass filled with a clear liquid stood on the kitchen bench. I didn’t know whose it was, or what was in it, but I drank it. And then I poured another, and another.

Aubrie’s front was pressed into my side, my ribs fitting between her loosely held boobs. Sheer pink fabric was held together by a tiny gold ring between her nipples. My arm wrapped around her waist. A hand rested on her butt, right where it joined her back. It was big and soft. Her dress clung to her body, showing the red G-string under it.

A few drinks later and a couple more puffs on that joint, Aubrie’s hand gripped mine, her acrylic nails digging into my hand.

I thought about my dick, willing it to get hard while this toasted. I couldn’t have my sober “girlfriend” getting dicked down by my soft cock.

She dragged me into a room—a bed, a dresser, a fancy light shade. Generic though, and with storage boxes. A spare roo—

Uh. That’s a hand on my crotch. My breath hitched as I felt her grip tighten.

I knew she wasn’t a virgin, but I didn’t know how the fuck to do this. Good news was that Aubrie knew I was drunk, so hopefully my lack of experience would be unnoticeable beneath my inebriation.

Our lips connected, tongues tangling. *I know how to do this. I’ve done this part before. I think I’m doing good.*

“Mmh,” Aubrie grunted.

That meant good… okay, okay. I put a hand on her neck, pulling her in closer. I hoped we could stay here for a while. I was gonna need a minute to get myself all the way there.

"Do you have a condom…?" she whispered in my ear. *Fuck*, her voice took the little rigidness from my dick.

"Aren't you on the pill?" I asked, because no, I didn't have a condom. I thought this—sex—might happen, but I was kinda hoping it wouldn't. I didn't know if I was ready for this yet. Although I was a seventeen-year-old boy, so I should be fucking. I mean, wanking was good, but actually sleeping with a girl just didn't seem that appealing. I was gonna have to do it at some point. Might as well be while I was kind of unaware.

"Yeah but, like, I don't wanna get anything."

"Oh, um… I'm… I've not done this with anyone else."

Part of me thought—expected—that would be the end of it. Her face changed; she looked pleased with the answer. I had heard condoms were bad for the guy, but maybe they were bad for her too. Or did she like that I was a virgin? I didn't fucking know. Then she pecked my cheek.

"Really? No worries then." Her voice turned sultry before diving back into my face. My eyes stared straight ahead at the blank walls. *For fuck's sake*. I just wanted something to look at while she gobbled on my throat.

Her hands slid from my hips up the flanks of my torso, her fingers curling into the edge of my shirt until she pushed it up and off my body. It was okay; she'd seen me without a shirt before, like when we went swimming, or sometimes I'd get changed in front of her.

And that's my nipple.

My nipple was between her teeth. I thought getting your nipples played with was supposed to feel good. It kind of just hurt.

I put my hands on her shoulders, rubbing them gently. They were soft. She was the kind of person who shaved, exfoliated, and moisturised her whole body.

She turned around, head leant back on my shoulder, ass pressing against my dick. He was finally getting hard, thank god. She panted as my hands drifted around her hips.

"Unzip me," she huffed.

I found the zip on her back and slowly pulled it down, my fingers running over her spine. She reached up and pulled the straps off her shoulders, slipping the dress lower. Now that her boobs were out, she kept

sliding the dress down, her butt right in front of me. She did have underwear on, but the G-string was more like a scrap piece of fabric than an actual item of clothing.

Am I meant to grab her ass?

That felt like sexual assault.

She turned to face me, her soft breasts shaking against my chest as she moved. We started kissing again. She grabbed one of my hands and put it on her ass. If she put it there, I guessed it was okay. She held my other hand and dragged me to the bed, falling onto it. I stood in front of her as she unbuckled my belt, pulling it through the loops quickly until it whipped against my stomach. My jeans fell to the floor, my dick long and hard against the inside of my thigh. She pressed her palm on it through the cotton of my underwear.

"I've imagined this so many times," she whispered.

As she pulled my underwear down, she leant forwards and started licking my dick—the tip and up the shaft. I let my eyes close as she continued to work it with her mouth. I looked down for a second, seeing her lips stretching as she put my whole dick in her mouth. The sight made me feel disgusted, so I locked my eyes shut again. I grabbed her shoulders and pushed her onto the bed.

A sigh of relief sprung from my throat. Seeing her lips stretching, her eyes watering, I felt like I was hurting her, damaging her. I loved her, I didn't want to cause her pain. I crawled on top of her and leant my head against the bed as she licked and chewed my ear lobe and neck. I shivered.

Lowering my hand, I felt her clean-shaven cooch. It was wet—Josh was right. I rubbed my finger along the top of it. *I think that's where you're supposed to be*. She started breathing faster and digging her fingers into my shoulder. I guess that's good?

"I want you," she sighed into my ear.

Okay.

Thankfully the alcohol hadn't completely killed my sex drive so my dick was hard. I had to look down to try and find the hole; I was very concerned I was going to miss. When I slipped it in, it slid pretty easily but I tried to go really slow.

"Tell me if it hurts at all," I said as I moved my hips and pushed all the way in.

She moaned gently, moving back and forth, back and forth. She breathed deeper, with slightly more grunting. *Okay, keep going.*

I came pretty quickly. Maybe three minutes of back and forth. I rolled off her and covered my dick with my hand, suddenly self-conscious.

"Sorry," I said.

"No, it's… That was fun," she said with little enthusiasm.

"But you didn't come."

"No, but I only come about half the time anyway." She got off the bed after that, getting dressed and standing by the door.

"Where are you going?" I asked. I thought you were supposed to lie together after. I was excited for that part. I loved being close to Aubrie. I loved her.

"Home. It's late, I have a study group tomorrow."

"Okay… Thanks," I said.

Isn't that what you're supposed to say?

"Bye," she replied before drifting out of the room. The door closed behind her.

***

Two weeks later

Aubrie and I had barely spoken or seen each other. She said she was studying, but she didn't even have a test coming up. She just seemed to always have an excuse not to see me. When I saw her call come through that evening, I was very excited.

"Hey," I answered.

"I'm pregnant."

Holy fucking shitballs. No. What the fuck. No.

"I think I wanna keep it," she added.

What, why…? No, I… This wasn't what I…

A few deep breaths later. "That's okay."

"I don't want to be your girlfriend anymore either."

We were both just breathing over the line for a while.

"I have something I need to tell you." I had thought a lot about that night. I sat on the bed with the phone in one hand, tears welling in my eyes.

"I know…" Aubrie said. "It's okay, I know."

Tears rolled from my cheeks. My hand lay over my thigh, rubbing the bruised flesh where the denim of my jeans snagged against the blooming scabs.

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Part 1: The Beginning

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Chapter 1

Tuesday 17 May 2016

A cold morning. I only ran the heater if it was absolutely necessary and it made a really irritating tapping sound.

“Too much money when we have thick coats and blankets,” I said as I wrapped my four-year-old son up in a sweater, then a puffer. Four layers total. “What should we do for lunch, buddy?”

The small red-headed boy shrugged, his thin, pink lips stretched into a yawn.

“What’s the matter?” I asked. I tilted my head as my eyes bore into him. I tried to keep them soft but the frustration was certainly evident. “Well, we have ham,” I finally stated.

I wandered into the kitchen, leaving my boy standing in the middle of the living room. I grabbed bread, ham, and mayo out of the fridge. Three sandwiches: two for me and one for him. I stuffed our bags with the same extra snacks: a banana, a packet of chips, and a cheese stick. I slipped a knife below the top of the banana to make it easier to peel before I dropped it into the Spider-Man lunch box sitting on the kitchen bench. Some biscuits to finish it off.

I shoved it into a black JanSport backpack, far too big for poor Ollie, but it was his only option after his old backpack ripped. I had promised to get him a new one, but my next paycheck didn’t come till Friday, so this would have to do.

My food went into the plastic shopping bag that I had begun using after mine became a hand-me-down.

“Ready to go, buddy?” I managed to work the cheer back into my voice. It wasn’t Ollie’s fault I was in a foul mood.

I reached out a hand and he took it. I had to lean down a little to reach it. Ollie was a little small for his age, quiet too… especially when he was cold, or around people he didn’t know.

Down from our apartment, I lifted Ollie into the car. He couldn't quite climb into my ute. He wasn't particularly athletic—I had tried, though—he just preferred his playdough and Velcro foods. He was getting quite good at buckling himself in; he was always so proud of himself when I checked it and didn't have to fix anything.

I dropped him off at preschool, always a little earlier than I was meant to. "Have a good day, buddy. Mummy is going to pick you up after school and then bring you to school tomorrow."

"Okay. Bye, Daddy."

"Love you, buddy." I waved a little as he waddled in.

***

I pulled up to the construction site where I worked right now. I liked that it was only five minutes from where Ollie's preschool was. It made me feel like he was safe.

I was a tiny bit late, as usual. I only had three more months of apprenticeship—three more months till I started earning a proper wage.

Aubrie and I both finished college, but we knew full well both of us needed jobs if we wanted to keep Ollie alive. I was never that good in school so I went and got an apprenticeship. My dad had suggested construction as a way for me to provide while Aubrie took care of Ollie; I don't think it was in his plan for Aubrie to go to university and work as a server part-time, but at least he was proud of me for supporting them rather than caring about what I wanted. It'd been quite a struggle the past few years, but Aubrie finally had a full degree and a good-paying job. To be honest, I didn't even understand what she did; all I knew was she had a boss and she was someone's boss. She wore a suit, sometimes with a skirt and sometimes with pants, and she was always getting phone calls.

I walked onto the site, little spots of rain falling onto my hoodie. I pulled my orange vest and hard hat on as I continued.

"Ooh, it's the young-un," a man holding a cup of coffee yelled.

I continued walking and sat down on a pile of wood with four other guys. We all looked the same: white guys, taller, average weight but strong, three brunets—including me—two blonds, all wearing jeans and a hoodie and the orange protective gear like an ugly accent. The five of us sat around, looking at the plans. We were building some random house for some random family.

After working all morning, we stopped for lunch. A few of the guys went to the bakery across the street for a pie. Me and one of the blonds pulled out our packed lunches and started eating.

“My wife always packs my lunch. She’s so good in the kitchen.” George, his name was. “Your wife pack your lunch?” he asked.

I shook my head. I hadn’t worked with George for long; it had only been a week since he joined, and this was my first time speaking with him alone.

George pulled out a container of quiche, and the smell shot out. I bit into my sandwich, thinking of my son doing the same just a few blocks away.

“So what’s your deal, man?”

“What do you mean?” I mumbled.

“You married, divorced, girlfriend, dog maybe?” He chuckled, and a bit of egg flew out of his mouth.

I tittered, mostly to buy myself time. “Single, no dog,” I stuttered. I didn’t want to lie, so I didn’t. The stuttering came from the fear of a follow-up question.

“You’re not a man of many words, are ya?” he spoke again.

I wished he would stop. I could tell he wasn’t from here. I figured somewhere out in the wops—he seemed like he hadn’t been well socialised.

“I’ve been the youngest one here since I was a teenager, so I guess I learned to keep my mouth shut.” Honesty.

Now shut up and eat your fucking quiche.

The boys who had gone to the bakery were now wandering back. “What are you two fags yapping about?” one of the guys, Kaden, asked.

George turned back to me and opened his mouth to speak, confusion filling his face. “What’s your name, man?”

“Tyler.” My voice came out so much quieter and meeker than I meant it to.

George’s hand landed on my right shoulder, digging into the achy muscle. “Tyler here was just telling me how he’s single, I was about to set him up with my sister.”

They sat all around us. I was in the middle; I was the focal point.

“Really? I try to set Tyler up all the time, he’s always talking about how his son takes up too much of his time to have a relationship,” Quinten began. “If I’m being honest, I thought you would get back together with your baby mama, she’s got a good pair of tits.” They were all chortling as if someone had given them a cue.

“Hell, I thought he was gay or something,” Tyron chimed in.

I laughed along. God forbid someone was *gay*. I didn’t like lying to these guys; they were my friends. Or the only people I talked to that weren’t Aubrie, Ollie, my sister, or my parents. But from my first day, I realised that if I told them I was gay, or anything about myself, I would never hear the end of it. Case in point—I told them about Aubrie and now they were saying these awful things about her.

“Have you seen his outfits? He doesn’t wear enough colour to be a fag.” Kaden slapped my back playfully as he laughed.

I just kept forcing a chuckle whenever someone else did.

Whatever it takes to get through the day, to get that paycheck.

***

I was finishing up in the bathroom, getting ready to go home for the day when my phone rang. I hoped it was my sister, she was always having boy problems I got to sink my teeth into instead of thinking about my own life.

But it wasn’t Willa, it was Aubrie. I answered, one hand rubbing down my thigh as I attempted to dry it off.

“Hey.”

“Hey.” Her voice was as snappy as it usually was on working days. I assumed it was because I had changed the schedule. My work was more routine so I had Ollie on weekdays, and she had him on weekends. But I had worked that weekend too and didn’t get a chance for a break, so I had asked her if she could take Ollie tonight. She seemed fine with it at the time. Huffy, but fine.

A long silence had gone by. “Everything okay?” I heard her rustling with a piece of paper. “Did you see this permission slip thingy? It was at the bottom of his school-bag. Well, your bag, I guess. It says he’s going to the zoo on Friday and apparently he volunteered a parent helper.”

“Fuck,” I sighed. I squished the phone between my ear and shoulder as I rubbed a hand over my face.

“I can’t do it. I have to work,” she said matter-of-factly.

“I have work too, and you had him Friday night. You should’ve checked his bag.” My voice was rising. It had been a long day.

“Don’t put this on me. If you can’t do it, I’ll have to call the school. I have to work,” she demanded again.

“No, it’s fine. I have holiday days saved,” I grumbled.

“Okay. Bye then,” she sighed.

“Bye. Tell Ollie I love him.”

I walked over to Rob, fidgeting as I waited to catch his attention. He was talking to someone, and I just stood beside him like a kid asking if their friend can stay for a sleepover.

“Yes, Tyler?” he asked, his eyes glued to some blueprints.

“Can I take Friday off? I’ve gotta go on a school trip.”

He hummed in thought. “Shouldn’t your baby mama be doing that kinda thing?”

I hated when people called her that. Aubrie and I might have a delicate relationship, but she was worth a lot more than these men gave her credit for. “We take turns doing the kid stuff. It’s my turn, y’know.”

“I guess that should be fine. My wife’s tryna get me to do all that stuff too. Although I guess your baby mama’s not your *wife*.”

“Thanks, Rob. See you tomorrow.” I headed to my car with my now single-handled plastic bag in tow. I shoved myself in my car with a few deep breaths so I could get on with my night and forget about this day.

***

I got home and undressed in the hallway. Dry mud, sweat, and saw-dust chipped off the fabric of my clothes and onto the floor. I threw them into the washing basket and got in the shower. Hot water ran over my back and shoulders. I twisted my softening joints in the steam, then scraped the dirt from under my fingernails one at a time. Water, soap, exfoliation—both arms, both legs, ass, crotch, feet, face, not in that order.

I got dressed: trackpants and a singlet. I cleaned the water off the floor then put my towel and bath mat into the washing basket. I clipped my nails and moisturised.

I started cleaning the rest of the house: vacuuming, wiping down the surfaces, picking up all of Ollie’s toys and putting the washing on. After about an hour of that, I slumped on the couch. I was ready now. I needed to relax, to work for my free time. I opened Grindr.

I messaged a guy whose profile I had been watching for a while. Vers69—real original. He said he was twenty-four years old and a vers bottom. His profile picture was just his abs. They were nice though. His bio said that he was down for pretty much anything.

TopT: Hey, wanna meet up tn?

Vers69: Sure.

TopT: You have a place?

A few minutes later, he sent me a time and a place. A hotel in ninety minutes. Okay, I had showered, cleaned the house. It would take thirty-four minutes to get there. I'd need to stop on the way, so forty-five to be safe.

I went to my bedroom and picked an outfit. I put on my nice jeans, with the only belt I owned that wasn't torn up. Blue and white sneakers. No, brown sneakers. No, blue and white were better. Black socks matched best.

I pulled my singlet off, staring at my naked torso. I lost focus from deciding what to wear as I realised my abs were not quite as defined as his were, and they were covered with patchy hair from my chest to my dick.

I grabbed a button-down, a patterned one. It looked good. Too cold for it, though. I took it off.

I put on a dark green cable-knit sweater. My sister had bought it for me. She said I needed to start wearing "non-work clothes." I hadn't worn it yet, even though she'd given it to me almost a year ago. It was soft and warm. I looked good in dark colours, but it was too much.

I put on a brown T-shirt and a dark grey zip-up hoodie. Pant cuffs, rolled or not rolled? Not rolled.

Before my shower, I had taken off my watch and chain. I put the watch back on, a plastic digital one, nothing special. I put my chain back on too, but it felt too blingy, so I took it off and left it on my bedside table beside the orange and blue pony bead bracelet I usually wore.

I stood by the door. I patted my left pocket—phone, my right pocket—wallet, my front pocket—keys. I kept standing in front of the door the way I did every time I did this; I would always be ready a little early and just wait, pondering the possible consequences. I was big and strong enough to protect myself, and I'd never had an unsafe experience. I wasn't scared of being hurt. It was something else. I was twenty-one years old, I had a job and a child who was being taken care of. I was allowed to have sex without guilt, so why did I feel like I was doing something wrong?

I reached for the door handle and walked out of my apartment, locking it behind me, then jiggling the door handle to check I had done everything properly. I crept down the hallway. It was only ten past eight, but I acted as though it was midnight, walking with the gentlest of feet so as to not draw attention.

A woman came around the corner; she and her dog walked past me, we made brief eye contact. I breathed a sigh of relief. I patted my left pocket—phone, my right pocket—wallet, my front pocket—keys.

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Chapter 2

Tuesday 17 May 2016

The night was even colder than the morning. As I jumped out of my car about three blocks from the hotel, I realised that I was not wearing anywhere near enough clothes. My nipples were hard as rocks through my brown cotton shirt. They felt sharp enough to slice through it. I grabbed the edges of my zip-up sweater and wrapped them like a robe around my body.

A few steps from my car and I was in an all-night pharmacy. I squinted as the dark street turned to fluorescent lighting. The shelves were lined with products and reduced-price stickers… everywhere.

Are the products really on sale if the whole store is always on sale?

I looked down each aisle I passed. There were a few people waiting to pick up prescriptions, but no shoppers. It was a big pharmacy, but it was pretty much empty. I went down one particular aisle, I thought for a second, but then someone passed the aisle.

I grabbed the things I needed quickly and scurried out of there without looking at anything but the floor. My big hands were able to conceal the items pretty well without concerning anyone that I was trying to steal. I made it to the front desk and stood in line. There was only one person in front of me. I stared at the ground, counting the carpet squares. Refusing to let anyone see my face until it was my turn, I dropped my items onto the counter. The man scanned them and looked up at me.

I gulped, the lube and condoms staring at me from their position on the counter. My mouth opened to speak as I whipped my card out from my pocket, but it froze, jittering while it decided whether or not to talk.

I tapped my card to pay, shut my mouth, grabbed my purchases and said, “Girlfriend’s birthday.” A smile forced itself onto my cheeks. I felt disgusted with myself.

With my pockets filled with NSFW items, I wandered down the street. I was suddenly worried I was going to get robbed, not so concerned about my

wallet as I was the other items. I shook my head as I thought about the interaction I'd just had. I shouldn't have said anything—I was such an awful liar.

I kept walking through the cold. My breath came out like smoke as I hiked up a hill to get to the hotel. I walked through the lobby, past the front desk, hoping to god that, if I didn't look in their direction, they wouldn't stop me and ask what I was doing here.

As I stood outside the door of the room, I reached for my phone. Room 301 on the door, room 301 on the phone, room 301 on the door. I knocked.

"Come in."

I went in. He was sitting on the end of the bed—bare feet, sports shorts, a grey singlet, but the kind that was a T-shirt before the sleeves were cut off.

"Hey, I'm Patrick." His voice was low. He looked his age.

"Zayne," I replied, surprising myself with the speedy lie. I really should have pre-thought of a name. I usually did, but I never used the same name twice and I was running out of options that sounded true.

"You want a drink?" he asked.

"I'm good. Thanks, though." Fuck, that was way too polite. I didn't want this guy thinking I was a fucking pushover.

Patrick poured himself a drink—dark liquor. He sipped it. I just watched as he rolled the alcohol around his mouth, licking his lips. He took another swig, bigger this time, then put the glass down and walked over to me. His hands landed on my forearms. He rushed in for a kiss, but instead of kissing me, he spat the liquor—whiskey, I now knew—into my mouth. I tried to hide my disgust, both with the choice of alcohol and with the fact that he'd just spat in my mouth. Although I was likely going to have his dick in my mouth at some point, so I should probably get over it.

His lips slipped onto mine. The first kiss was soft, like dipping a toe in a cold pool, but then he dove straight into the icy water. His tongue went deep, his saliva mixing with mine.

I usually let them take the lead until they pushed a boundary. It wasn't that I liked being told what to do, it was just easier that way.

When he took a step back and started undressing, I did the same. His eyes grazed over my body, stopping for a second over the scars on my thighs, but he swiftly moved on. Quick hook-ups really were about sex. I would say that I missed the foreplay, and the afterplay, or whatever you called it… but I'd never really had that.

He lay on the bed; I stood at the foot of it. He shifted forwards, now sitting in front of me and my mostly hard dick. He reached a hand to my crotch and massaged my balls. His touch was soft and he was gentle. He tugged at them a little as he took my dick in his mouth. My hand reached into his salt-and-pepper hair where I grasped a fistful.

He was a bit young to be going grey. Maybe he was older than he'd said.

I was firm as I directed his head for the movement I wanted. His willingness to go first allowed me the courage to tell him *how* to go first. My teeth dug into my bottom lip as I stifled a groan. He noticed, and his lips only got tighter and moved faster after that. I was so focused on the pleasure I kinda forgot what was happening.

Fuck. I put both hands on his shoulders and pushed him back. As I did, his hands ran forwards from the back of my thighs to the front. A wedding ring sat on his finger.

"Are you married?" I asked.

"Not anymore. Honestly, I forgot I was wearing it," he said as he pulled the ring off and chucked it on the bedside table. "We broke up when I realised I was gay."

"It was a woman?"

"Yes?" he questioned my question. "What, you've got your gold star then?" he said with a defensive sigh.

"No, I just… I don't want to sleep with someone who's married."

"Well, I'm not… So come on, I'm so fucking horny." His smile grew sultry and he pulled me onto the bed so that I fell on top of him. My body was almost crushing him; his frame wasn't much smaller than mine, but he didn't have much muscle or mass. I kissed his neck, suckling on it as I reached down between his thighs and stroked his cock. It was firm and wet from his pre-cum.

"Put your fingers in me," he asked. It wasn't a demand—it was a request.

I got the lube and slicked up a few fingers, then teased one along his crack. His head rolled back and his hands gripped my shoulders, his nails marking me. I slipped my finger in, curling it and swirling it around. I added a second, felt him stretch around me. He sighed into my ear. A hand reached down my back almost to my ass and scratched all the way back up. I used my other hand to wrap around the base of his cock and squeeze. He squealed at that but I kissed him quiet. A third finger entered and twisted,

and when I felt his prostate, I gently brushed over it. He tried to moan again, but my mouth stuck on his kept it perfectly muffled.

"Are you going to fuck me now?" he mumbled.

Yes… I didn't reply. I tore open a condom, slipped it on and then added a line of lube down the shaft. I held his sides and dragged him to the end of the bed, gripping his thighs and spreading them as far as I could. I aligned myself and slowly pressed in, trying not to think.

"Tell me if anything hurts," I uttered a sentence I repeat every time I have sex. From the first time to the one, two, however many times I'd had sex—that and not touching my ass have been the only constants.

He nodded. I gently pressed the tip of my dick deeper, then let it slip out. I began again, slipping it all the way in this time, dropping my weight on him so I could get as deep as possible. I sat there for a moment until he started pushing back into me. Then I started thrusting.

It was slow at first, then I looked forwards. His ring finger was gripped around a pillow, the indent of the wedding band still there. I was angry, so I thrust harder and harder as he gasped and squealed. I slapped a hand over his mouth.

He reached an arm around and started stroking my ass. When his finger wandered into my crack, my movement slowed as my focus turned to fear. I grunted unintentionally. He pulled his fingers back to his face and relief rushed over me. But then he spat on them, brought them back to my ass, and pushed one inside. The moment his finger entered my hole, I froze. I could feel my ass tighten around it, my quads clenching.

"Oh, you like that," he said.

No, I don't. That's a crossed boundary.

But I was too confused, or focused on the task at hand, or something, so I couldn't turn the feelings into words. I gripped his hand against my ass, at the very least stopping him from moving his finger or adding any more.

I just needed him to finish. If he finished, I could leave. I pounded as fast and hard as I could, feeling it building. The heat in my stomach got lower and lower. I was about to scream. I leant forwards and dug my teeth into his shoulder blade, stifling myself as I came. A tear stung my eye as he pulled his finger out of me to jack himself the rest of the way. I rolled away from him when his cum spurted over me. I couldn't wait to put some distance between us.

***

I stood in the hotel shower, my filled, tied condom in the bin beside me. It became harder and harder to make it out as the steam rose. My soap-covered hand ran down my back, over my ass and between my cheeks. Physically, the feeling had been fine. I didn't think I had let him get far enough to find my prostate. But I wished he had asked.

My fingers rubbed over the hole, back and forth. I'd known I was gay for over five years, yet the idea of playing with my asshole had been something I'd avoided.

As a finger slipped inside, I sat with it for less than a second before I ripped it out, finished showering, and wrapped a towel around my waist.

I left the bathroom. Patrick was still naked on the bed. I got dressed awkwardly in the corner, but with my dick to him. Like that would help me forget he just violated my ass.

"Thanks, that was amazing…" he drawled.

I smiled, but I couldn't even bring myself to respond. I slipped through the door and into the hall. I patted my left pocket—phone, my right pocket—wallet, my front pocket—keys.

I got into the lift, leaning onto the mirrored walls. The generic music felt fake, like I was in a dollhouse. It was almost eleven thirty. I went down one level. The lift stopped, the doors opened. An older man walked into the lift and stood against the back wall, a ruler distance between us.

Ten seconds into the ride, he asked, "Are you on holiday? I'm from the UK. New Zealand is beautiful, innit it?"

"Uh, yeah," I replied.

"So where you from?" he continued, turning to me with a warm smile. I kept my eyes on my shoes.

"The South Island," I lied. "Just visiting up here for a bit." I nodded as I waited for his reply, as I waited to see if he believed me. The lift reached the second floor, and when it dinged, the older man left the tiny room.

"Ah well, guess I'll see you around then," he said, giving me another smile. He reached out a hand and I shook it. I hummed and forced a smile onto my face. He walked down the hall.

Another fucking lie.

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Chapter 3

Friday 20 May 2016

A week after my hook-up and I couldn't stop thinking about him, and not in an enjoyable romcom way. When I walked into that room, I didn't know what to expect, but that was normal—to just go with whatever happened, whatever was expected. Being a top, no one had ever tried what he did. I guessed it was normal; even straight guys liked getting their ass played with.

I was getting a bit sick of these hook-ups. Honestly, wanking pretty much did the same thing. The only reason I started doing them was because wanking often made me really lonely. I wanted the warmth of another human before and after the orgasm. The actual sex part was whatever, but then I went for these hook-ups and I realised no one else wanted that connection. So I would wander back to my house and bury myself in digital media in a desperate attempt to convince myself that other people's love was mine.

I had tried dating a few times, sorta. I had no opportunities to meet other gay people in the circles I ran in. And I was not "gay enough" for gay clubs; the queer people—I think I can say that now—always talked about things I just didn't understand. I didn't know about video games, or gay history, or politics. I didn't know any other gay people of any description so I'd never known the right language to fit into those groups. Maybe those were excuses because meeting people wasn't something I wanted. Meeting people meant talking to someone about myself.

I was on Tinder; sometimes I used it when Grindr felt a bit too risky. But after the hook-up the other night, I had changed my profile to say "looking for a relationship." I left the *I have a four-year-old son who I co-parent and he's my whole world, and as much as I want a relationship, I'll never love someone as much as I love him* part out. The one time I did have a hook-up

that then asked if I wanted to go on a date freaked out the second I told him, “Wednesday won’t work, I have my son that night.”

“Daddy.” The pony bead bracelet tightened on one side and then flicked back against my wrist. “Daddy!”

My head snapped down and I looked at Ollie as he pulled me towards the corrugated iron sculpture of an elephant.

“We’re doing a class picture, Mr Miller,” a woman’s voice—Mrs Jenkin—called.

“Tyler,” I replied before letting Ollie pull me in front of the sculpture for a photo.

Smile, we’re having fun, smile.

Ollie looked up at me. When I looked down at him, my smile spread naturally.

Once we reached the little balcony where you could see into the giraffe enclosure, the kids formed a line for feeding them. When Ollie got to the front of the line, he climbed the ladder, but even with it, he wasn’t quite tall enough. I lifted him into the air, his twiggy arm reaching out with a piece of carrot. The giraffe’s big black tongue enveloped Ollie’s whole hand to pull out the carrot. Ollie giggled and clapped; he was so happy.

I set him down, and the next kid went. The giraffe did the same but the kid broke out into tears. Her cheeks were red and wet, her throat scalded by her own voice. Ollie, even surrounded by kids he spent every day with, hid behind my legs.

I wished I could’ve run behind someone’s legs. I didn’t like kids, never wanted one. Then I got Ollie. I actually liked him. I was very worried I wouldn’t, but he was perfect. He was the only person under 18, or other than Willa, that I genuinely wanted to spend time with.

Over at the meerkats, all the other kids were running into the tunnels, their heads popping up in the glass domes inside the enclosure. Ollie was still a bit stunned from that little girl having a meltdown. He had moved out from behind my legs but had his hand gripped on the front pocket of my jeans—my nice jeans once again. I usually only saw Ollie’s teachers from the sitting position of my ute, so I wanted to make a good-ish impression.

I felt a tug on the hem of my T-shirt. “Daddy, can you lift me up?” Ollie’s tiny voice whispered. I knelt down, heaving him up and pointing him towards the meerkats.

“No, Daddy, that way.” Ollie pointed behind us.

My right shoulder ached as I spun around. I was stunned when I turned behind us to see a porcupine slowly drifting through the sand and driftwood that surrounded him. Ollie was mesmerised. The pain slowly moved down my arm.

"I gotta put you down, buddy," I whispered. Ollie obliged, grappling his way down my body. As I stretched out my shoulder, another little kid ran past me and I almost hit them in the face.

For fuck's sake.

Ollie was gone. I imitated a ballerina as I tried to figure out where he'd run off to. My eyes scoured through a sea of children, but then drifted to a single little boy, alone, four or five metres to the right. His eyes were staring into another sandy enclosure, but this one had a lot of green. I breathed a sigh of relief.

I stood behind him and saw that he was watching the turtles. He quickly became more vocal than usual, something that happened when it was only me and him at home.

"Daddy, look! Turtles." Ollie tugged on my jean pocket again. "Daddy, they're eating the leaves," he exclaimed. "Look, he's running. I thought turtles were slow but they're going so fast… Daddy! Are you looking?"

Another parent helper and—I assumed—her daughter walked over. Ollie's excitement seemed to draw a little attention from the meerkat tunnels. She stood next to Ollie who had become silent again.

"Ollie's your son, right? Your wife's lovely," the woman said.

My eyebrows raised. *Wife?*

"Your wife, Aubrie?" she repeated.

Stress rose in my shoulders. "Oh, no, Aubrie's not my wife. She's Ollie's mum, but we aren't together."

"Oh, sorry. I shouldn't have assumed." She was very bashful.

I shook my head to tell her not to worry about it. We stood in silence as we observed our kids watch the turtles. The little girl was talking, and every word made Ollie inch further and further away until he shushed her rather aggressively.

"You're going to scare them away," he whispered.

"Ollie." His head turned to me. "You're right, but ask nicely next time."

The woman looked at me too, knowingly. She seemed to respect my parenting style.

Everything was silent for a while.

“So, does Ollie have a stepmum?” she asked. I shook my head. “I’m single too,” she added. “It’s so hard dating with a kid, right?”

Direct questions require direct answers. “Right.”

“So are you seeing anyone? How do you even meet people these days?”

Was she hitting on me? Surely not. Maybe she was just making conversation. “No, too busy.” I added a smile so I seemed friendlier, still trying to make a good impression.

We walked across this rickety bridge to get through the wetlands. Ollie was gripping my hand the whole time, but I was glad for the comfort. It seemed very unsafe. It was only after we got off the rope and wood that I realised we could have just gone around.

After looking at all the big cats, we made it to lunch. The kids were exhausted. I had the stamina to keep standing but I needed a refuel so I could continue to stop myself from yelling at all the kids. We made it to a big gazebo and sat under and around it. Ollie and I found a spot while the mum and daughter from earlier and three other kids all sat in a circle with us. We had a catered lunch—little bags with juice, fruit, an ANZAC biscuit and a sandwich. Ollie reached in and started eating the apple the way kids do: like a rabbit, scraping out little chunks with his front teeth.

I opened my sandwich, pulled out all the cucumbers, chucking them back into the bag, then closed my sandwich back up and munched. I was gonna have to get a burger on the way home. Why did they feed the adults the same amount of food as the children?

Ollie had an elbow on my knee. I was sitting cross legged in the grass while he chatted with another kid. I wasn’t sure what it was about. All little kids had their own language. I could understand Ollie, but not his friends; it all sounded like gibberish when they spoke.

“You’re a wonderful dad,” the woman from earlier said as I tore open the biscuit packet for Ollie.

“Thanks,” I said.

I was just doing the parent thing, but sure. *She is just trying to be nice, stop reading into stuff.*

She turned to the kids and joined their conversation. My phone pinged, then again, and then a third time. I pulled it out—Tinder. I leant back on the wall of the gazebo so no one could see my screen, although the crowd was starting to thin out as the kids got up to run around on the grass.

Ethan: Hey Max, wanna meet up sometime?

I was Max in this equation. It was just the name I had put on the profile when I made it for hook-ups. I forgot it was there.

Max: I was actually hoping to hang out, not hook up.

Max: No worries though.

I put my phone away. The end. Another ding.

Ethan: Oh sorry, that's what I meant, meet up for a date!

Max: Sure.

Max: I'm free this weekend. And btw my name is Tyler, I just had Max for privacy

Ethan: How's Saturday Tyler? Six o'clock?

Max: Sounds good, where?

Ethan: I'll find a place and send you the address. I can't wait!

I "liked" the message. Dry. *Fuck me.*

"I think we're going towards the monkeys now," a woman said, catching my attention and popping my bubble of hope. Horror ran through me as I felt all the negative consequences of the plan I'd just made. All the ways it might get fucked.

As we walked to the monkeys, the warmth of Ollie's hand in my pocket disappeared. He had walked in another direction, to find Galapagos tortoises. I followed behind him.

"Daddy, it's huge," Ollie said with one finger pressed against the glass.

That's what he said, I thought.

"They are, aren't they, Ollie?"

His eyes were glossy and wide open as he watched the tortoises. "These ones *are* slow."

"How heavy do you think they are?" I asked him.

He looked at me. "How much heavy am I?"

"You weigh fifteen kilograms."

"And how much are you?"

"Eighty-four kilograms."

"So the tortoise prolly is like…" Ollie thought for a minute. "A hundred."

I chuckled to myself, but I didn't reply because I honestly had no idea how much a Galapagos tortoise weighed.

Next we went into this big tree that had been hollowed out and had tarantula enclosures in it. I looked into one. The tarantula was sitting there,

covered in hair, ready to shoot it at anyone who came near. His own built-in protection technique.

I tried to lift Ollie, but my shoulder ached. I lifted a knee, standing on one leg, and sat him on it so he could see into the enclosures.

“Daddy, it’s hairy like your arms,” he said, patting the arm that wrapped around him.

“Spot on, buddy.”

We finally made it to the spider monkeys. Ollie was pretty invested, but I was far more concerned by the fish in the pond beneath the monkeys.

“Hey Siri, do monkeys eat fish?” I whispered into my phone.

“Not common for most primates.” I breathed a sigh of relief.

My focus moved back to the monkey’s.

“Look, it’s throwing mud!” one kid yelled.

I was far too much of an adult child to be around actual children. The only reason Ollie and I worked was because his sweet little face was like a buffer to make my mind pure. But Ollie was somewhere in the crowd of whiny, dirty, snotty children.

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Chapter 4

Friday 20 May 2016

Ollie sat in his car seat, watching the raindrops flow down the window beside him. We had taken the bus back from the zoo to the school, and now we were driving from the school to Aubrie's house. A paper bag with KFC plastered on the front sat in the backseat beside Ollie who had his hand deep in a box of popcorn chicken.

"Daddy?" he whined.

"Yeah, buddy?" I sighed as I glanced in the rear-view mirror.

"I wanna go home," he said.

"I know, we're almost there."

I kept a tight grip on Ollie's hand as we walked up the steps to Aubrie's house; they always got slippery in the rain. His feet dragged over the moss covering the brick. I unlocked the door using my key. Sometimes Aubrie wasn't home and Ollie didn't quite have the patience to wait to enter the house he lived in, nor should he have to.

He ran into his house and straight down the hall. His footsteps lightened as the tiled floor changed to carpet, and he got into the hallway and then his bedroom.

I moved into the kitchen, reaching for a glass of water. After a few sips, I still couldn't hear anything in the house.

"Hey, Aubrie! You here?"

I looked around. There were way too many plants in this house. I swore there were more every time I came over. A few minutes later, she wandered down the hallway, wet patches on each shoulder of her grey T-shirt where the ends of her hair lay. Her face was flushed and bare. She rarely let people see her without makeup.

"I was just showering. Where's Oliver?"

"In his room, I think." I began scrubbing my glass clean.

Aubrie moved into the kitchen and pulled some leftovers out of the fridge. “How did it go?” she asked. I knew she cared, but she was tired.

“It was good. Kids are fucking annoying though, ay?”

“You’ve gotta stop cursing… but yeah. They are.” She rolled her eyes and started scooping what looked like chilli into a bowl.

Ollie came waddling back into the kitchen. “Mummy!” He reached his arms up.

Aubrie picked him up and held him on one hip, then stuck her dinner into the microwave. “Are you hungry, honey?”

Ollie shook his head, dipping his face into Aubrie’s neck. Aubrie turned to me. “Do you want to sit for a bit?”

I nodded and we drifted to the couch—Aubrie with her dinner and Ollie with some random toy he pulled from under the couch.

“Did you have a good day, Oliver?” She always called him Oliver. I loved his name. I mean, it was my idea, but I never actually called him Oliver. It felt like I was scolding him every time.

“Mummy, there was so many turtles—”

“And tortoises,” I interrupted. Aubrie gave me a look—probably for interrupting Ollie, maybe for correcting him, or because she couldn’t have corrected him. There were a million things I could’ve done wrong just now.

“Mummy,” he said again as he tugged on her shirt, trying to get her attention. “There were little ones and big ones. And Daddy said they probably are very, very heavy, and we got to feed the giraffes.” As Ollie spoke, he got more and more excited, moving around, talking faster and with fewer breaths. “They have these big black tongues and it feels like the ground, like the steps outside.”

“Rough, darling, the giraffe’s tongue was rough.”

Right, so *she* could correct him. She was so intent on getting his vocabulary good. He was fucking four. Maybe I should care more, but he was obviously smart and he described the feeling pretty well with the words he had.

Ollie ran out of the room, presumably into his.

“So it *was* a good day then?” she asked.

“Yeah, it was good. It was just long, and there were so many parents to talk to and kids to avoid stepping on.” I huffed. “I kinda wished just me and Ollie had gone.”

"*Okay*? Well, I'm sorry being a parent was such a hard ask for you. I would've loved to go, but *I* had to work," she said snarkily.

"I'm not complaining, you asked me how it was. That's how it was. And I had to work too. I used a vacation day."

"But I'm busy at work, only *I* can do my job. I have to put in a notice at least a week before, ideally two."

"Aubrie, come on. I know your work is important, but we both have jobs we need to keep." I tried to take a deep breath.

Yes, she made significantly more than I did, but we still needed my salary to feed our kid, and just because she thought my job was designed for a simpleton didn't mean I wasn't good at it or that they didn't need me. Sometimes I felt like she thought she was so superior for going to university and getting a "real job."

"I know. I just wish I could've gone, and sometimes I feel like you take having him all week for granted. I mean, you gave him back to me on Tuesday night."

There it was. It was always this. She found some way to subtly belittle me because she was convinced she didn't do enough as a mother—which she absolutely did. It was so stupid.

"I worked all weekend; *my job* has been very busy lately too. I just needed a night to myself. And you said you didn't mind!" My hands thrashed in the space between us. "And besides, it's not like you could even have him during the week. You work constantly."

"I have to work. You're the one who can't afford a new backpack for your son. You get your evenings to yourself. Your son goes to bed at fucking six o'clock, but it wasn't that, was it? I know full well you didn't spend that evening alone. You couldn't wait; you had to put it on me."

I said nothing. There was a long pause—one where all we could hear was the rustling of Ollie rearranging his toys in the other room.

She said it was fine.

"You should have prioritised *your son*," she said, finally calmer.

"I did, four years ago, when I took a job I didn't want so you could go to university and we could still feed our child." My words dragged out slowly. I saw her anger growing. Aubrie was a boss, used to getting her way, used to yelling at people and getting what she wanted. "And…" I couldn't speak. "I'm allowed to have sex with people whenever I want." My voice lowered. "People who aren't you."

I regretted that immediately. When Aubrie and I had gotten together, she told me that she had dreamt of us for years, that she couldn't wait to settle down, to have a house and babies and a dog. It wasn't my fault I didn't love her like that, but honestly… I think I would've stayed with her if she had asked. I hated what I did to her, and I hated what it did to me. The only thing in my life I was happy with was Ollie. And there he was, streaming back into the room with a drawing.

"Look Mummy, I drew the turtle so it's like you were there too."

Aubrie took the drawing from his hands and admired it. "It's wonderful, darling." Aubrie stood and walked to the fridge. She sat her empty bowl next to the sink and pinned the drawing there with a magnet. Ollie ran back out of the room. Aubrie's eyes followed him down the hall as she sat back down next to me. She was waiting until Ollie was in his room before she spoke again.

"That was fucking low and you know it. I'm sorry I fell in love with you. And I know you're gay…"

Please stop.

"I know you can't change that. But it's not like you're trying to move on," she said, trying to keep her voice low.

"Neither are you." My brain made me say it before I had finished processing.

"I may not be in a relationship, but I have a good job that I'm moving up in. I'm renting a nice house with enough space and all working appliances. On the nights I do have free time, I go out with my friends, and although you don't know, I *do* go on dates. I just don't tell you about them because I don't want to brag when I know you don't."

She was fucking right. I knew she was, she knew she was. It was fucking infuriating.

Ollie sprung back into the room, this time with a dinosaur toy he had strapped a tiny top hat—that he stole from a teddy bear—onto its back with a hair tie. "Look Mummy, I made a turtle."

Aubrie grabbed Ollie's hips and pulled him into a hug. I could see the pride. I was right; he was a smart kid.

She started feeling his pockets. "What've you got in here?" she asked as she reached deep into them, pulling out a handful of lint, sand, some leaves, and a fry. "So this is why you aren't hungry." Her head tilted as she made a face at me.

“We got snacks in the car because Daddy was hungry.” Ollie had a big smile on his face. Aubrie mirrored his happy face, nodding until he disappeared from the room again. “I’m going to make *another* turtle!” he yelled before he left.

“KFC? Really? He’s four.” She got up from her seat on the couch to clean her plate in the sink.

“I was hungry. What was I supposed to do? Eat it alone in front of him?”

She didn’t reply. She just huffed and scrubbed her bowl harder.

“Can you stop getting at me? I’m doing the absolute best I can right now.” My voice was pained as I begged her to just leave me the fuck alone. I just wanted to be alone; and I would be for the next two and a half days until I picked Ollie up from preschool on Monday afternoon.

“I’m sorry. I’m tired and I feel guilty for forcing you to go to that thing. I know you’re not really a social butterfly.” She gave me another look, this time sympathetic.

“I didn’t hate it. Ollie was there, and he’s right about how cool turtles are __”

“And tortoises,” she corrected with a finger in the air.

We were silent for a minute. I was ready to leave but instead I joined her in the kitchen. “Something else happened today.” I didn’t know why I brought it up. I think I felt hopeful and thought it might make her nicer. “I planned a date for tomorrow night.” Aubrie looked deeper into my eyes. “A real date. We are going to talk to each other, I think.”

“And what insect-borne disease pushed you to do that?” she joked.

“I don’t know, I thought I wanted to try dating again so I made a profile,” —she didn’t need to know that I already had that profile— “but I didn’t think anyone would actually message me for a proper date.”

“What’s his name?” she asked. “Are you going to share plates or order separately?”

“I can still cancel. I’m not sure I want to go.”

“Have you met you? You’re never going to want to go. Go or don’t, but if you don’t go tomorrow, you probably never will… And I’m not mad at you for being gay, I’m mad that I’m not the right person for you, but you can’t be mad at me either. I was sixteen and planning my whole life with this idea that I would tell you how I felt and then we would be together forever.” She looked teary-eyed. I felt it too, but I was not about to cry.

I leant forwards for a hug. “You’re a good mum and a good friend.”

We were honestly really good friends. We always had been. I just wished we didn't bicker so much. It had taken time to build our relationship back to this point, but it would never be the way it was when we were kids. She broke the hug, dried her eyes and then finished washing her dishes. "Oliver, Daddy is going now!" she shouted.

Ollie came running back into the kitchen. He jumped up into my arms and I hugged him tight. "I love you, Ollie," I whispered in his ear before kissing him on the cheek a few times.

He giggled in my arms. "I love you too, Daddy," he whispered in that way kids do where you don't really hear anything and they just spit in your ear.

I was slow going down the steps and to my car. I started driving, made it about half a kilometre, then had to pull over. I cried and cried; my tears came fast. This was weird. This never happened. Aubrie was a bit harsh, but she wasn't completely wrong. She had a life was what she really wanted to say. She had a life and I didn't.

I pulled my phone out, desperately drying my eyes with my sleeves so I could see, and typed into the Google search bar: "How much do turtles cost?" *Up to four hundred with the enclosure, plus ongoing costs for lighting and feeding.*

I searched just the word "turtle." I looked under the shopping tab and found some turtle bed sheets. I hit the order button—a lot less than 400 dollars.

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Chapter 5

Saturday 21 May 2016

There were two hours until this date.

I spent the morning vacuuming the house, and then I saw some crumbs under the fridge so I pulled it out and deep-cleaned the entire kitchen. I was exhausted. Somehow I could work on my feet lifting stuff all day and feel physically fine, but do it at home and my body hurt.

The Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials was playing on the TV in the living room. I had seen it in September when it came out in theatres and was rewatching it now. I knew this was controversial, and maybe it was because I hadn't read the books, but I preferred it to the first; I thought Jorge was the funniest character.

"Walking After Midnight" was drifting in from the living room as I ruffled through my drawers. My good jeans, with my good belt laid on top, were already sitting out on the bed. I had messaged Aubrie that morning:

Tyler: The restaurant he picked is called White & Wong's, can I wear jeans?

Tyler: It's on the viaduct, but if I can't wear jeans, I'll have to borrow some pants from my dad or something.

Aubrie: Jeans are fine. Have fun ;)

I picked out that same sweater I almost wore the other night and put a long-sleeve black and blue pinstripe button-up under it, with the collar sticking out just a little. I put my chain on and even reached for the rings I owned. Two—one on each hand. All these items were from my sister. She made a comment every time I showed up in jeans or track pants and a hoodie. I made sure to take off the pony bead bracelet. I sat in my outfit and finished watching the movie, then got up to put my shoes on.

I should go to the toilet before I leave.

As I buttoned up my pants and caught my reflection, my heart beat harder, faster. I went to my room, ripped off my top half and my rings, and

pulled on a plain black T-shirt. As I left, I put on my brown bomber jacket. That with just the chain was definitely better. Less noticeable.

I pulled into a car park—I actually managed to get pretty close. I was 20 minutes early, and it was about a five-minute walk from here.

That's fine, I'll just sit.

Even so, I arrived at the restaurant two minutes early.

"Reservation for two, under Ethan?" I asked.

"This way, sir," the server said.

Back corner, back corner, back corner, please, please… Yes!

I sat with my back to the wall towards the rear of the restaurant, tapping my fingers on the table. Fifteen minutes later, a man walked in. About five seven, with fluffy light brown hair. I could see his eyes—almost green, but not quite—through the round frames of his glasses. He was wearing corduroy pants, dark brown. A stripy short-sleeve button-down was tucked and belted into his pants. His arms filled the rolled sleeves, and the shirt was tight across his chest.

"God, sorry I'm late." He shed a leather jacket and hung it on the back of the chair. "I got a work call and they would *not* stop talking."

He sighed deeply, stress relieving from his shoulders as he settled into the chair. "Sorry, I'm being so rude. I'm Ethan. Tyler, right? I was so excited to see your profile. The same five guys have been on there forever." He chuckled.

His voice was so smooth. I couldn't stop looking at him, my eyes slowly trailing down to the jewellery around his neck—a necklace with what looked like little crystals and not beads, a chain that I presumed had a pendant as I could see a little lump under his shirt, which was only buttoned up to his sternum.

Say something.

"I'm so thirsty," he said as he opened the drinks menu. "Ooh, I could go for a cocktail."

He had boundless amounts of positive energy. It rushed over me and I bit into my lip to hide my smile.

Say something.

My eyes went down to his hands. He had rings on both of them, two bracelets and a watch stacked up on his left wrist. Tattoos were scattered up his arms, but not enough that I couldn't see his freckled skin.

Say something.

“Do you want something to drink?” he asked me, finally making strong eye contact.

Direct questions require direct answers.

“Um, yeah. Let me have a look.” The second I spoke, a knowing smile spread on his face. I grabbed the drink menu and used it to hide the lower part of my face, watching as he flagged down a server.

“Hey.” At the sound of his voice, the woman flashed an immediate grin. “Can I get the Orchard Road cocktail, please?”

“And for you, sir?” she asked me.

Answer!

“Ginger beer.” *Breathe out.* “Thanks.” Her smile left when I spoke.

She left the table with our orders.

“Not a drinker? I don’t have hard liquor all that often anymore. A very heated game of Battleship to blame for that,” he rambled.

“Sometimes. Not tonight, though.” Should I have ordered a drink? I didn’t want to get buzzed, but those fancy cocktails always looked so interesting and they had barely any alcohol in them. Too late now, though.

“Ahhh, gotta stay sharp.” He winked, but his smile dropped after I didn’t reply.

Jesus fuck, I was on the floor. He was so effortless as he spoke. I looked over at him again—he looked amazing. I looked about as average as I could be.

“So, when you’re not drinking ginger beer, what are you drinking? You a beer guy, or a cocktail guy like me? Or wine, maybe?”

“Beer usually, though I, uh, I don’t really drink… like, ever, come to think of it. Only really at Christmas.” My reply came out naturally, thank god. His smile returned with a giggle.

“I’m really glad we’re having dinner tonight,” he said sultrily. “I am very hungry,” he added, full of humour. I couldn’t help but crack a smile. He seemed proud of himself for getting me to laugh, and it was genuine too.

The server came back with our drinks. “Thank you,” Ethan said.

My god, she was smitten with him.

“Have you been here before? I haven’t, but my mum comes a lot and she’s always telling me I should bring a date here.” Ethan smiled again.

A date.

I shrivelled up. “No. I, uh, haven’t been before.” I didn’t know how he did it. He just talked and it just flowed.

“Should we order some things to share? I wanna try everything,” he exclaimed.

Everything he said was joyful, full of excitement; and sometimes when he smiled, his cheeks would raise so high his eyes went all squinty and his glasses shifted up. I was expecting him to burst into song.

“Sure. I don’t know what most of this stuff is, but I’ve never met a food I didn’t like.” That felt smooth, and I was finally breathing without thinking about it.

When the server came back, Ethan rattled off some dishes. “Hello again. Can we get the salt and pepper squid, kingfish sashimi, the beef shumai, the roti, and ooh, this salad.” He pointed to the menu. The woman’s wrist flicked back and forth to keep up with Ethan’s voice before she walked away.

“What’s in your drink? It looks very fancy.”

“Blood orange gin, sake, and elderflower.” He waited for my reply. “You can try it if you want.”

He nodded, so I nodded. I took the weirdly shaped cup and took a sip.

“Oh… Yeah, I, uh.” I started laughing. “Yeah, I hate that.”

Ethan joined in on the laughter. It seemed like something he did a lot of.

The server came back with the food, having to do two runs for all the plates we ordered. The first time she approached, our conversation completely came to a halt—my fault. I was obviously a man on a date with another man, but I couldn’t speak when I was aware of that fact.

What’s wrong with me?

She said the full name of each dish as she placed them on the table. I tried to move to make it easier for her, but I just ended up kicking Ethan in the shin. I looked under the table to adjust my feet without further hurting *my date*. Even in my head, I had to whisper that last part.

Ethan wore loafers with little silver details. His legs were crossed and his jeans rode up, showing his white ruffle socks. Ethan started grabbing food off the plates and putting them on his little side plate.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Yeah… ah, is your shin alright?”

“Oh yeah, barely felt it.” He waved me off.

Picking up a piece of squid with his fingers, he took a bite. His fingers were shiny with grease. Granules of salt fell from them as he brushed his lips.

“What’s this one?” I asked, pointing to a plate.

“Shumai. Fancy name for a dumpling.”

I picked up the “dumpling” and ate it. It was amazing. I grew up having lamb, potatoes, and peas for dinner everyday, sometimes curried sausages or spag bol. Ollie and I still ate pretty simple—chicken, rice, pasta, and still peas.

“So, what do you do for work?” he asked.

“Um, I do construction. I have a few months left on my apprenticeship.” I shoved something else in my mouth, which made it his turn to talk.

“Was that you just gently telling me that you’re fucking ripped?”

I just laughed as a reply, swallowed my food, and then asked, “How ’bout you?”

I remembered something Aubrie had mentioned years ago when I had told her I was going on a date. It was a hook-up so her advice wasn’t really helpful till now. *Anything they ask you, just ask them the same thing. People ask stuff they want to talk about.*

“I work with charities to help them get funding and resources, sometimes from the government and sometimes from other charities. I basically recite sob stories all day so people will give me money. But I love it a lot, and I get to work from home like seventy percent of the time.”

I was quiet for a bit. Not super long, but long enough that it was awkward. “So you just wanted me to know you’re a philanthropist.”

He laughed, about as much as he could with his mouth full. “Well technically not, I do get paid… but yeah, basically I’m just a wonderful person.”

“And that’s work, so what do you do for fun?” He leaned in, his eyes suggestive.

I didn’t know if he wanted me to actually give a dirty answer or if he was just the kind of person who made dirty jokes all the time.

“Uh, well, my sister and I hang out sometimes,” I chattered. “Do, uh, do you have siblings?” *Good job, turn it on him.*

“No, I’m an only child, but I usually leave that till date three. Sometimes it rubs people the wrong way. My mum and I are really close, but like, not in a way where I have mummy issues. She’s just cool and has a never-ending string of awful romantic experiences she always wants to chat shit about.”

As he spoke, I put a spoonful of salad in my mouth and my face turned foul.

"You don't like hearing about my mum?" he said with comedic offence.

"No, no… no, of course not." I gulped down the salad, leaving all the digestion work to my intestines.

"I was kidding," he said amid my freak-out.

"No, it's just, there's cucumber. That's the one food I don't like. I hate cucumbers."

Ethan just started laughing as he scooped the rest of the salad onto his plate and started scarfing it down.

"Are you from here?" I asked the first question I had come up with all by myself.

"Original," he joked.

My face fell at that. He was focused on tearing a roti, so he didn't notice.

"I am from New Zealand, but we moved around a lot, mostly down the bottom of the North Island, but I've been up here since I was a teenager. And of course, ditto?"

"My whole life in Auckland, although I lived a bit more west between moving from my parents' place and now." *But then my baby mama got a good job and rented a nice apartment and I wanted to be closer to my son so I moved to a more expensive place and now I can barely afford to live.*

"Why'd you move?"

Fuck me.

I saw the server coming. "Ooh, dessert is here!"

We'd ordered the coconut and matcha sago crumble plus the galangal, lychee, elderflower and strawberry sorbet for dessert. Jeez, it was a mouthful, but it was delicious.

"What even is this green stuff? It's a lot better than cucumber," I said as I scooped more of it into my mouth.

"Matcha, my guy. You gotta get on that shit. But you have to get the Japanese stuff, otherwise it tastes like straight up grass," he said as a little strawberry ice cream dribbled down his chin. I reached a hand out and wiped it from his chin, almost instinctively. I couldn't tell if it was because it's something I did for Ollie, or if it was just because I really wanted to touch him.

What the actual fuck is going on right now?

Somehow I’d lost all ability to control myself. I chugged the last of my ginger beer.

We went to pay, and as I was deciding how to ask if we could split it, Ethan tapped his card and covered the whole bill.

“Oh, I was gonna… split it,” I said.

But Ethan was already headed for the door, and I followed him out. It was a relief that he had paid, but I didn’t like it. It made me feel… It made me feel less.

“Don’t worry about it. I only pay on dates where I actually had a good time,” he reached out and rested a hand on my shoulder, looking at me.

My body was tense to his touch as we stood on the dark but still bustling viaduct.

Please don’t kiss me, please don’t kiss me.

His hand lifted from my shoulder and gave it a pat. “See you later,” he said as he turned and walked away.

More like see you never.

I had completely fucked that.

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Chapter 6

Saturday 28 May 2016

I lay on my back and did my best to push the bar up. I stared into the gym lights, and it felt like they were radiating my brain.

One more rep. Okay, last one now. One more.

The bar came tumbling onto my chest. I managed to push it off me, and it hit the ground with a bang. It was six in the morning on a Saturday, so luckily no one else was here to see me fail. I rubbed my chest as I felt the bruise developing, then moved to the lat-pulldown machine and sat on it. A man walked behind me to the treadmills. I shivered.

As I finished my set, there were about three other people in the gym now. I would usually do a warm-down on the treadmill, but I decided to just leave.

Driving home, I thought about how I should've done those three k's before I left. I got out of my car and did three laps of the block my apartment was in before I went inside.

Silence.

I showered, brushed my teeth, and washed my face. Then I cleaned the bathroom, refilling the toilet paper and the soap.

Rain came down outside as I dumped three eggs whisked with milk and some spices into a hot frying pan. The yellow liquid rushed up the sides. I stirred back and forth, then dumped the eggs on top of a single piece of toast.

I sat at the kitchen bench alone as I ate and checked Tinder. Ethan and I never exchanged numbers. No messages. He said it went well, but I wasn't convinced. I knew I didn't talk enough, and when I did, it was either the advice Aubrie gave me or just copying whatever he did. I fucking copied the joke he made about my job. Why did I do that? And I told him I didn't like his drink, and I made that awful face when I ate the cucumber. I didn't even know why there was cucumber in that. It just ruined everything. I

loved sushi, but when I had it for the first time at twelve when my sister had taken me, there was cucumber and it was awful. I didn't try it again till the day Ollie was born. It was all Aubrie wanted after giving birth. I lost six years of eating sushi because of that god-awful vegetable, and now it might have ruined my date.

Maybe I should have told him to kiss me—even though that hadn't felt safe in the moment. Not with words, but I could have given him a sign. I think he wanted to kiss. You were supposed to do that after a date. Or maybe I should've invited him back, although I didn't know where *he* lived, and I lived a while away from the restaurant, so he probably would've had to stay the night. This "relationship" was meant to be more than sex. Also, we would've had to drive separately and I would've freaked myself out being alone for that long.

I remembered his hands—they had veins and they were big. Each knuckle was defined, but not in a malnourished way. In a strong way. And his outfit—he looked so good. I looked awful, boring. To be fair, though, that was how I looked in my profile pictures so I was sure his expectations weren't overly high.

Oh shit, my profile pics.

Maybe he thought he was being catfished. They were from so long ago—back when I had what was trying really hard to be a beard.

For the rest of the morning, I cleaned the house, then stopped for some two-minute noodles for lunch. Beef, of course. I put on *The Lobster*, a Colin Farrell movie from last year. It was… interesting, to say the least. When I had finished it, I pulled out my little leather diary and added my thirty-eighth entry of the year.

> Saturday 28 May, 2016
>
> *The Lobster*, Yorgos Lanthimos. 3.5/10
> It was rather slow and a bit boring and took a lot of focus to follow. Their relationship was sweet. I did not understand why the woman from the hotel thought it was okay to kill that dog. Colin Farrel is pretty cute tho. At one point in the movie I just assumed they didn't have sex because of that butt rubbing thing, did not get it, but maybe that's just me. I did enjoy the ending and the fact that they still had their matching ailment, although that running theme seemed very odd. I think this would have done better as a book because I think it

needed a bit more explanation. How did this world come to be? WHY, was it natural selection, or was it for the blood, I have no idea.

***

Sunday 22 May 2016

The following day was almost the same.

Gym in the morning—I left a little earlier so I managed to finish everything I wanted this time. I jerked off in the shower; I had become quite efficient. Breakfast was the same: eggs and a piece of toast. Changed my sheets and did the laundry. A packet of two-minute noodles for lunch, but I put chicken nuggets on top for a change. No movie with lunch today. Instead, I opened Netflix, my one streaming service, the cost of which my sister and I split. Ollie loved Daniel Tiger's Neighbourhood. I found a sitcom called Crashing which had the girl from Fleabag, a show I never watched, and it was only six episodes so I figured I could finish it in an afternoon. It was funny, and it also had a gay character. Most shows nowadays did. I guessed that was good, but I liked to use media as an escape. It wasn't often I wanted to think about being gay when I watched TV.

I finished the first few episodes with my lunch and left it running while I did all my dishes—you could easily see the TV from the kitchen. Life without my son was rather mundane. Usually, I would go for a hook-up on a lonely night, but it never really helped, and I already wanked today. It was a lot of stress for little reward. It was okay when I was younger, but it became more and more of a let down the older I got.

I got a message.

Ethan: Do you want to go to a party? All my friends who are going have dates so I thought I would bring mine.

Ethan: I know it's weird for a Sunday night but so are my friends.

I read it once, twice, three times. *Mine, my date.*

A party with his friends. This was too much. He was going to be so disappointed when he found out I had a kid he'd never be able to get my attention from. And I didn't know how to party. I hadn't been to a party since before Ollie was born.

Tyler: Sorry, busy tonight.

Ethan just "liked" the message.

I went back to my show. They all lived together in this abandoned hospital, they partied and supported each other. One helped another get a job, another helped their friend get a boyfriend. They had a curry night. Even as a kid, I wasn't surrounded by people. As much as I didn't have a desire to be around people all the time, a few might have been nice. I always had one or two friends—just whoever was in my class that year—and Aubrie. We always had each other. I wish I had gone to university. I mean, what would I have studied? Business? Aubrie did business and her school seemed miserable, but she had friends she made there. Somehow, with a kid, she still managed to make and keep friends. I guessed playing with her baby treated their baby fever enough to encourage them to use a condom. She had her group of business ladies from uni, and I had no one.

It was about four-thirty when I opened my phone to order some dinner—pizza, probably. I was going to look at the Pizza Hut app and order in advance. That way, when I went to get it, I could spend as little time in the shop as possible.

Pepperoni… Do I really want to spend tonight eating pizza alone in my house?

I didn't know if I had it in me to be good at a party. And I really shouldn't be leading him on like that.

Tyler: When's the party?

Ethan: I'm leaving in a minute, I can pick you up if you like?

He can pick me up if I like.

I told him to pick me up at the petrol station near my house. He then replied letting me know he was only… 20 minutes away. How the fuck was I supposed to get ready in that amount of time? I guess it gave me less of a chance to back out.

I went into my room. Nice jeans, nice belt.

Okay, that was easy.

I pulled off the black tee I had on and just stared at my closet.

I was about to meet the friends of the guy I guessed I was dating.

I couldn't show up as awfully dressed as I had the other night, but I didn't want him to think I hadn't cared about our date by dressing better for this.

I opened his Tinder profile and scrolled through his photos. They seemed pretty recent. His friends looked gay—at least the ones he had pictures with. They all had bright colours and weird haircuts. Cool but weird.

I went through my drawers. Literally, what options did I even have here? I searched on Google: “man party outfit.” After a quick scroll, I felt pretty hopeless, although it seemed you could layer a long-sleeve and a button-down. I convinced myself I hadn’t worn a short-sleeve button-down because it was too cold and not because I thought it made me stand out too much. I guess if that was true, I had no excuse tonight.

I stood by my front door. A button-down layered with a grey long sleeve. I put on the same brown jacket because it was my only nice option. I wore my non-work sneakers—still kinda gross because I wore them to the gym, but better than the sawdust– and concrete-crusted Asics. I patted my left pocket—phone, my right pocket—wallet, my front pocket—keys.

I left my apartment, checked that it was locked, and made my way down the hall. One ring on each hand actually made it out of the house.

I walked to the petrol station, trying desperately to clear my mind, to make my hands stop sweating. I rolled up my sleeves and felt the orange and blue pony bead bracelet I had been wearing all day. I pulled it off and stuffed it into my pocket right as Ethan pulled up. His car was a grey hatchback that had a bumper sticker that said “nice truck sorry your dick is small” with a picture of a ute. Couldn’t help but take that a little personally. There were a few scratches on the outside, a bunch of dangly shit around the mirror, and trash on the passenger side floor. Exactly what I was expecting.

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Chapter 7

Sunday 29 May 2016

About twenty seconds into the car ride, Ethan got a call and spent the entire car ride talking into the phone, mouthing apologies at me.

We arrived at the house party. Street parking always made me nervous.

"Sorry about that, my mum went on a date the other night, but the guy hadn't texted her back and then asked if she was DTF and she didn't know what that meant," he chuckled after he hung up the phone. "God, she's so funny."

"Yeah, I'm not sure my mum would know what that means either," I uttered my first words since I got in that car and said "hi."

"Okay, so, it'll be super chill… *But*, I'm driving, so we're gonna get you a drink." He stared into my blank face. "If you want, I mean."

My face still felt blank, but I must have been smiling because Ethan was now too. We walked down the steps, and when we were right outside the door, Ethan turned to me. "You look cool tonight, by the way."

Cool… Cool? Cool, okay, cool, I guess.

Ethan didn't even knock on the door; he just opened it and waltzed in. I waddled behind him, attempting to hide myself a little but completely failing behind Ethan's shorter stature. My eyes were wide as I looked around. The house opened directly into the kitchen. There were no lights on in the house and it was dark outside, but there were lamps, light-up speakers, candles, and a TV playing Simply Nailogical on super low volume. It wasn't like any party I had been to. It was noisy, but not loud. It was full of people without being crowded. Everyone was in little groups like a party always had, but no one was standing on the outskirts of those circles.

The party proprietor was a South Asian girl around our age who was dressed like she lived in a van… *long-term*. There was a ring between her

boobs holding her dress together. A memory from the last party I was at flooded into my mind.

The girl had fairy tattoos on her midriff and a belly button piercing that had caught into the waistband of her skirt. She ran out of the living room and into the kitchen to greet us.

“Oh my god, Ethan, you finally have a da-ate!” she sang. “And he’s cute,” she whispered not-so-quietly before winking at me.

“I’m Ayesha. Tyler?” She gripped my hand in a handshake. “It’s so great to meet you. Ethan has been single since I met him. And he’s a bisexual so he has double the options, there’s really no excuse. Also, and I’m sure you can agree with this, he’s super-hot and very fashionable, and a philanthropist—”

“Technically not,” I said.

“Ooh, I like him,” she said, pointing at me. “Anyway, I’m thrilled you swept him up, and I’m only slightly jealous… Can I take your jacket? I keep it pretty warm in here.”

She talked more than Ethan, and very quickly too. I took my jacket off and handed it to her. She threw it over the back of a chair. *I could’ve done that.*

“Okay. So, tell me about that thing with that guy,” she said as she walked to the fridge.

“Wow, that was real specific,” Ethan replied.

Ayesha pulled out an unopened can of reduced cream. She handed it to me—just to hold, I guessed. She was so enthralled in her conversation with Ethan she didn’t even make eye contact with me to let me know she was handing it to me. It was cold and damp in my hand. Another memory from that party flooded my mind.

“To be fair, though, he is just trying to help people,” Ethan continued.

“Yeah, but just because his charity isn’t ‘for gay people’ doesn’t mean he should be mean to you for trying to help him,” she said, bringing a new perspective to the issue and handing Ethan a bowl and spoon.

“Ah, he wasn’t mad that I was helping him. He was mad that they matched him with a coordinator who was bisexual and not straight.”

“How did he even know you’re a fag?”

I flinched at her words.

Ayesha reached for a cupboard.

“I was trying to be a nice guy and relate, and said, ‘One of my old boyfriends also had gastrointestinal issues,’ la-di-da, and he was like, ‘A what, a boyfriend?’ He was very upset, but then I found him a couple grand of funding and he decided he could handle my bisexuality,” Ethan explained.

I was listening, but I was also watching Ayesha struggle as she reached and reached for that cupboard. “Can I get that for you?” I finally piped up.

“Thanks. What a gentleman,” she said to Ethan. “My partner is usually around to get the top shelf, but I don’t even know where they are.”

I pulled two packets of chips from the top shelf. Ayesha was particularly short. I was still holding the tin in my other hand.

“Can you just put that in there?” She gestured to the bowl. I opened the tin and shook it into the bowl. She dumped in a packet of French onion soup powder in with the reduced cream and stirred it vigorously.

“Okay, let’s go to the living room, I need to paint my nay-alls!” she sang again.

The living room was big. It had rugs that looked like the clothes Ayesha was dressed in, covered in tassels and strange patterns. Ayesha sat on the floor by the coffee table where some girls were painting their nails.

Ethan looked up at me. *Shit, did I do something wrong?*

“Are you having fun?” he asked, with so much hope in his eyes.

I nodded. A little smile. It wasn’t a lie; I was having a good time. I just didn’t think fun was the right word. I didn’t really know what I was supposed to be doing, or if this was it—standing and sitting around.

“Yeah?” he checked.

I pulled my smile back out but stayed silent.

“Okay, then. So it’s Ayesha’s house, and that’s her partner, Orla. Elliot and Jax have been together since they were 15. Casper and Sophie are also here somewhere, but they’re on-again, off-again. When you see them together, they’re fighting, and when they’re both missing, you can assume they’re making out. Sometimes fucking, but we all know Sophie prefers a dry hump.”

I nod slowly, trying to remember all the names, faces, and details, and connect them all.

What do I do now?

“Let’s sit,” Ethan said, eyeing my face again. He was always looking at my face.

He took my hand and pulled me towards the girl painting everyone's nails. It was only now I looked at his hand in mine. We were touching for the first time. We hadn't even shaken hands. I felt the need to pull away, but then I looked around the room. Everyone was touching or kissing or, as Ethan had pointed out, quite possibly having sex in the other room.

We sat around a coffee table with a million bottles of nail polish, and the remnants of many nights like this one stained into the wood.

"This is Tyler, Ethan's new man," Ayesha said.

Ethan rolled his eyes. A smile tugged at my lips.

"And Tyler, this is Orla, my bae." Ayesha had a huge grin as she leant in and kissed Orla.

Orla was unlike anyone I had ever seen before. She had an orange and purple mullet with two long rattails. Her face was full of freckles, some of which she had painted into stars. She wore a crewneck sweater and jorts, and she never stopped smiling. Ayesha fell into conversation with another girl who had appeared in the living room—I caught her name as Loni. But Ayesha kept her hand tightly gripped on Orla's thigh. Orla took Ethan's hand in hers and started spreading a bright yellow along his nails.

"So how long have you guys been together?" Orla asked.

I choked.

"Technically, this is our second date," Ethan said. "But I'm having fun so far." He smiled, and Orla's smile widened. I didn't think it could get any bigger.

"And Tyler, what is your favourite movie? I have to ask everyone I meet because I'm kinda a cinephile, and Ayesha doesn't watch movies so I'm always looking for someone to watch with," Orla said.

Man, do all these people talk a lot. *Direct questions require direct answers.*

I cleared my throat. "Uh, I don't know. I just watched *The Lobster* but it was a bit too weird for me."

"I've not seen that one yet. I'll have to put it on my list because I love weird shit." She finished speaking and just looked at me like she wanted something.

Is it my turn to speak again?

My lip quivered as I spoke, "Um, but my… My favourite movie is probably *The Truman Show*, or actually, I do love *Good Will Hunting*."

Orla opened her mouth to speak.

“Oh and my so—” I stopped myself. Took a breath. “When I was a kid, I loved the *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids* movies.”

“*The Truman Show* is great,” she agreed. “So you like old stuff? You should watch *Edge of Seventeen*—the 1998 one—or *The Outsiders*, or *A Home at the End of the World*.”

“Orla, you can’t only recommend queer media,” Ethan whined.

“That’s the only kind I watch, though.” She laughed. “Oh, shit, fucked that one up, let me grab a Q-tip.” Orla ran from the room.

Ethan turned to me. “That’s the most you’ve ever spoken.” He laughed. “Why didn’t you tell me you like movies?”

“I dunno, she was just so nice. And… wait no, not that you’re not nice. I just—I don’t know,” I stuttered, desperately clawing myself out of the hole I had jumped into.

“I’m kidding. We’ve had one and a half dates, I’m sure there are loads you don’t know about me. I’m very mysterious. Also, just by the way, Orla is non-binary, so when you talk about them, say ‘they,’ not ‘she.’”

“Oh, sorry.” I’d heard of that before. *Wasn’t David Bowie like that?*

“Nah, it’s all good. You had no idea, and they are a queen so…” he said as he smiled at me, looking at my face again, but this time it felt good.

Orla came back into the room and fixed the mistake on Ethan’s nails. “Shall I do yours now?” they asked me.

My mouth hung open. Not in shock, but in fear. “Um, I—uh.”

“Tyler works construction, so they would probably just get ruined,” Ethan jumped in.

I wasn’t sure if he thought that was the truth or if he was trying to save me from admitting the fact that my co-workers would hate me if they knew I was gay. I hadn’t told him that, but it didn’t take Sherlock to figure it out.

“Construction, ay? That must be hard given your… gayness,” they said.

Point proven. My mouth clenched shut.

“Let’s get a drink,” Ethan said, popping up from his spot on the floor. He took my hand again and pulled me back to the kitchen.

Elliot and Jax were standing in the kitchen now. Elliot was shaking a shaker above his head, the muscles in his shoulders and arms tensing. He had scars thrashed over his left forearm. They were all healed and tattooed over, but there were a lot of them—I wondered if that was the only place on his body they lived.

When Elliot saw Ethan, he handed the shaker to Jax and pulled Ethan into a hug. Ethan dapped up Jax, who then poured the drink.

"This is Tyler. He wants the fanciest, most extra cocktail you can make," Ethan explained. "Elliot's a bartender, and he's great."

"Actually, I'm gayt," Elliot corrected while making a random mix of alcohol. "Like great but it's gay… gayt." Everyone was silent. "Come on, I'm funny," he insisted.

Elliot poured the drink, handed it to Jax to hold, and reached into a container for a garnish.

"Ah ah ah. No cucumbers," Ethan demanded.

He garnished with some mint instead, sprinkling the green flecks over the foamy top of the drink. The orangey colour radiated down the stem of the glass in Jax's hand.

"Māu tēnei," he said as he handed it to me.

I knew it was Māori, but I didn't know what it meant, and I didn't know how to hold the glass. I took a sip. "You may not be very funny, but you can make a good cocktail," I said to Elliot.

Ethan laughed. He laughed. He laughed at something I said—something I said without thinking about saying it.

Jax pulled out a bag of cookies from his hoodie pocket. "I made cookies! But these ones" —he pointed to two cookies he had dyed red— "don't have any weed. Just for you, my sober bestie." He fist-bumped Ethan.

"Do you like weed?" Jax asked.

"Sometimes, when I was younger, but I've got a drink already and I have to work tomorrow," I explained.

"Wow, you've found yourself a working society man," Elliot joked.

"The fuck are you talking about? We all have jobs. We just care about ours," Ethan mocked.

"Dude, I am *literally* working right now. And I meant that he has like a nine-to-five *man's job*. He's probably buff as fuck under those clothes." He winked at Ethan.

My eyes sprang to the floor.

Two drinks in and I was buzzed and socially checked out. I felt like I did pretty well overall, but I had mostly stopped speaking. Even when I was asked direct questions, which required direct answers, I let Ethan answer them if he could.

His voice vibrated through the air. My hand was in his, held tight and close. My other hand slipped into my pocket. My fingers ran over each pony bead: orange, blue, baby blue, navy blue, orange.

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Chapter 8

Sunday 29 May 2016

I sat in the passenger seat of Ethan's car. All I could think about was a few minutes ago when the heat of his hand in mine broke away so we could actually get in the car. I felt the alcohol cruising through my system. I was still well aware, but things felt easier.

"Stargazing?" Ethan chuckled, peeking over at me.

My head had tipped back and rested on the window I was looking out of. There were so many stars. It made me think about Ollie, how I had taught him to make a wish every time the stars were out.

Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight. I wish I may, I wish I might, have the wish I wish tonight.

Thinking of Ollie made me feel guilty. I didn't owe Ethan my personal information, but the longer I left it, and the longer our relationship went, the worse it'd be.

"Tyler?"

My head snapped up, my eyes locking with Ethan's for only a second before his eyes returned to the road. I made a noise. A grunt.

"I had fun tonight. Thank you for inviting me." I smiled.

Ethan was being a responsible driver, so I couldn't see his eyes—just the arm of his glasses.

"Everyone loved you, I could tell. And I know they talk a lot and quickly and they're all super gay—which I'm sure you have gay friends too, but I know it can get kinda overwhelming with all the separate conversations going on at once. They're such great friends. It's always a good vibe. And… and I know I don't have any grounds for this, 'cause we only just met, but you seemed kind of anxious the other night. I thought maybe a different environment would loosen you up."

I loved the way he chuckled at the end of the sentences he was a little unsure about. Like laughing would make whatever not-okayness existed in

the sentence go away.

“But it turns out” —he slapped the steering wheel in time with his words — “movies! Movies get you talking. I’ve hardly seen any so I’m not sure how helpful that is but…”

It took a minute of my mind running before I found something I wanted to say. “I think I’m not used to people wanting to talk to me… wanting to hear about my interests. And she— ah, sorry, they were like genuinely wanting to know.” I huffed a breath. “I’ve never met someone who is ‘they’ before. I kinda don’t get it. But they were really nice.” I lowered my voice. “I don’t get that often.”

“To be honest, I don’t really understand using they/them pronouns either, but it’s not that hard, and I’ve seen the difference in Orla’s happiness since they switched to them. I guess not understanding is just the privilege of not having to question your own gender.” Ethan was so expressive.

I could sense his hand gestures through the pointer finger that moved ever so slightly as he spoke, even while he refused to take his hands off the steering wheel.

“Were there any other people who use they/them pronouns there?”

“Not any other non-binary people, but—and usually I wouldn’t out someone like this—but Elliot is the most openly queer person I’ve ever met, and I know he won’t mind. He is a trans guy.”

I liked that Ethan didn’t talk to me like I was stupid. I didn’t really understand the topic—non-binary was a term I had heard only about one other time, and I’m pretty sure he knew that. But at least he spoke to me like I was competent.

“Did you ever question that? Y’know, like, your gender?” I hoped that I didn’t come across like I was questioning my gender. I genuinely wasn’t, but when you tell people you’re a man that is attracted to other men, they tend to think you’re this feminine being. Maybe I was; I had no idea who or what I was. But the idea that I should be feminine, or that being feminine would become my whole identity if I was, wasn’t something I wished for.

“No. I grew up with my mum letting me do whatever I wanted in regards to gender. I’ve worn dresses, makeup, played with Barbies, and enjoyed those things, but at the end of the day, I’m just a guy.”

“Just a guy,” I repeated. Then I waited a moment. “When did you know you were *gay*?”

Ethan made a face at my hesitation with that word, but he seemed to move on pretty quickly.

"Not gay, bi," he said. "And it wasn't like an 'aha' moment as such. It was kinda just growing up. Y'know, I was supposed to have a crush on Gabriella, but I thought Troy was equally as hot. Looking back, I'm not sure either of them actually were, but I was a very hormonal teenager—only slightly less now." He let out that same chuckle.

Although this time, I think he was worried he might have said something to make me uncomfortable. I didn't take it as a request for sex, but I could see how he could see how I could see it that way.

"Was it like that for you?"

As those words came out of his mouth, I wondered if I had asked him because I was interested or because it was a question I subconsciously wanted the chance to answer.

"It was not." I sucked in some air. "I mean, I had my suspicions, but… I didn't know until my—ah, my high school girlfriend" —I made air quotes with my fingers— "and I had sex. We didn't talk for like a week after, and then we had a phone call and… and we both knew." *Ollie*.

"Right, so no gold star for you then."

Was that a problem?

"I mean, I've dated more girls than I have guys," Ethan continued. "Guys aren't the best communicators, and, well—women aren't either. Honestly everyone sucks. There is no perfect person but I reckon you can get pretty close. That's why I was so excited when I saw your profile—talking to as many people as you can is the fastest way to find the good ones."

I looked back at him but didn't reply.

"This girl you slept with, was she nice about it?"

My saliva was thick as I tried to force it down my throat. "Uh… um, well, as well as a girl who was apparently *head over heels* in love with me could've taken it." My tipsiness could really be heard in that sentence.

"You guys were close?" he asked.

Oh god, here we go.

"She was my best friend. Since primary school." A moment of eye contact soothed me. "Turned out she had a crush on me for a while, and when we were 17, we started making out. That was really all it took to go

from friends to a couple, and then we had sex and it ruined everything. And it's never been the same." I could feel my freeness turning to sadness.

"Do you guys still talk?" he asked.

Now or never, I guess.

I reached a hand into my pocket and played with the pony beads: orange, blue, baby blue, navy blue, orange. "Um, yeah. That night had a lot of inebriation on my part, and too much trust in the pill on her part… so now we're kind of forever connected by… our son."

Only the sound of stones flicking up from the gravel road could be heard.

"You have a kid?" As soon as he spoke, relief flooded me. But that was all he said, and the dam was built back up.

I pulled the bracelet out of my pocket. "His name is Ollie. He's four. He's so smart and kind. Quiet, too." *Good job, slip that in there, real smooth.* "He's the only reason I didn't get hung up on ruining my relationship with the only friend I've ever had."

We fell into silence again. Ethan's eyes were glued to the road—so much so that he wasn't even checking his mirrors or dipping his headlights when cars came driving towards him.

"He sounds sweet." Ethan's voice had become high, coming out slower than I had ever heard it. "My, uh, my last relationship was with a girl, Leila. She was gorgeous, so kind. We were only together for six months, and I was getting ready to propose. Everyone said, 'You're too young, it'll never work.' I knew it would, though. But I didn't want kids, and she did, and so we didn't… we didn't get our chance. It kind of is a dealbreaker a lot of the time—me not wanting kids."

I stared straight ahead.

What the fuck does that mean?

Was he trying to break up with me when we weren't even together?

"Y'know, Ollie's with his mum on weekends. It's like having a kid only half the time." Did that make me sound like an awful parent, or did it make me sound like a desirable boyfriend?

Oh god, I was trying to make myself more desirable. I wanted to date him. I liked him. He was gorgeous and funny and sexy. His glasses, his little tattoos, his fancy outfits.

I had to stop. I had to stop looking at him, talking to him. I had to get out.

My hand scratched at my chest as I tried to find my breath. I felt the bruise where I had dropped the weight the other morning. I felt a heaviness, a heat on my thigh. Ethan's hand had planted itself on top of my leg, his thumb rubbing back and forth, back and forth. I still had Ollie's bracelet in my hand: orange, blue, baby blue, navy blue, orange.

The car ride became sombre. Silent. Almost peaceful, like we both knew it was over but we didn't want it to be, so we just didn't speak. Over, like we were ever together. But it felt like that. It felt like it could've lasted a bit longer. I couldn't stop thinking about Ollie. I loved him so much, but I could only imagine how different my life would have been without him.

I would've taken a gap year, worked at McDonald's, or maybe a Cotton On. I might've moved out, maybe to live with my sister. We would spend the evenings talking about boys and sex. Or I could have lived alone and watched movies. Had parties, maybe. Got a boyfriend. Maybe we would've broken up, but my friends—from work or from the football team I had joined—would've consoled me. I would be partying or relaxing, having fun. I could have experimented with sex; I wouldn't have rushed into it. I would have waited till I was ready and with someone I liked, and I might have actually enjoyed it beyond the physical. I might still be single or might be in a proper relationship. My apartment would be nicer, I would have more money, less stress, less pressure, less need to please and always do the right thing.

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Chapter 9

Monday 30 May 2016

The throbbing in my head only worsened as I stepped out of my truck and the sun started drilling into my skull. I had a bottle of blue Gatorade in one hand and was shoving a blister pack of paracetamol into my pocket with the other. I walked up a dense clay, mud, and sand bank. The ground caked onto my shoes with every step, making them heavy on this fine morning. My feet stuck and slipped on the earth, my balance was askew, and I could barely make it to the solid ground where my co-workers stood.

"Morning," I whispered.

"You're late," Rob said. He looked me up and down. "Well, now that our most important Tyler is here, we can all get to work." His eyes bore into my head. Everyone dispersed. "You're late, you're hungover. What is this? Your apprenticeship is almost over. What are you doing?" His voice was accusatory, yet sympathetic.

"I'm sorry. I went out last night, drank, and then came home and drank some more." I left out the part about me being gay and my kid, whom I love, ruining a relationship I was actually invested in. And that after the best night I'd had in as long as I can remember, I came home and drank myself to sleep.

"Don't do it again… Just do your work, and do it well."

I dragged my feet along the ground, clods of mud forming like hooves as the gluggy floor stuck to the toes of my shoes. I made it to where I was meant to be and started working. George—I guessed we were kinda friends now—started talking to me.

"Hey, man… Girl get you down?" he asked. "Or was it that kid? I don't have one yet, but man, they seem tricky."

His chuckle was a giggle.

"Something like that." Tricky. He was tricky, but he was perfect.

“Well, you should give me a call when you’re free, we can go out on the town, find you a fox,” he said.

Disgusting.

“Uh, yeah, maybe.” I tried to turn my focus back to my measuring, to make it clear that I was done with this little chat.

“Well, we should make it official. When you free—?”

“I need those measured and cut,” Tyron said as he walked over. “Your pencil lines aren’t even straight, dude.”

“Sorry, I—” I wanted to go home, I wanted to leave, I wanted to die.

“Is that fucking glitter on your face? You really are a fag.”

George’s face quivered as the other man spoke. My hand whipped to my face and started scratching and rubbing, trying to get whatever was there gone. I just wanted to be normal.

“There were a ton of girls there, I guess they, uh… they rubbed off on me.” *Yeah, let’s be a misogynistic prick. That’ll help cover up the fact that the glitter on my face came from fags and not women.*

To my surprise—although I wasn’t sure why I was surprised—the three men now standing with me started spitting out whistles and howls and awful words.

I closed my eyes, slapped a smile on my face, and finished my day.

***

Monday 30 May 2016

The following Monday, I showed up sober—in my body at least; my mind wasn’t where it was supposed to be. I hadn’t heard from Ethan since the party. I missed him. I missed talking to him. I missed the serenity of the car ride before I told him about Ollie.

I wasn’t mad at him. It was his choice to not want kids, and I knew it was a long shot, but it was nice while it lasted, I guessed.

Towards the end of my lunch break, I got a phone call from the school.

F*or fuck’s sake.*

“Hello,” I answered. My voice was cheerful and excited as if every parent didn’t know that getting a call from the school in the middle of the day meant, for whatever reason, your kid needed to be picked up. Did he hit someone or sneeze on someone?

“Hi, is this Tyler Miller?” Her voice was shrill and irritating.

I wanted to reply with, *"Oh my god, yes, it is! How did you know? Oh, probably because you called me, you fucking idiot.*" But I didn't. "Yes" was all I said.

"I'm so sorry to interrupt, I'm sure you're a very busy man."

Fucking get to the point then.

"I'm just calling about your son, Ollie."

That would *be why you're calling, seeing as you're a school and I have one child named Ollie.*

"We did call Aubrie, his mum," she continued.

Obviously.

"She hasn't picked up. You see, Ollie, he is… Well, he's not very well. The poor thing, he's thrown up in class. Yeah, everywhere. So we are going to need you to come and collect him."

I sighed. "Um, yeah, I can probably be there in about an hour," I said.

"Okay, well, any sooner would be great, but like I said, I know you're a very busy man."

"Alright, bye." I hung up. That was rude, I know, but I was about to fucking scream at her. That anger came out in huffs as I walked back to Rob.

"Ollie's been sick at school. They need me to pick him up." I was fidgeting with my fingers, a few steps behind Rob, as I always did with authority.

"I can't be having this. You coming and going. Your child has a mother—why isn't she helping more? Honestly, I don't understand why you two aren't just togeth—"

"Can I leave or not? I can try calling my sister, but she's about three hours away." Sob story it up, that will help. I couldn't listen to another lecture from a man with a wife, a side piece, a nanny, and a housemaid.

"Yeah, just go. But this week it's this, and we had you hungover last Monday. You gotta get it together, man." Rob rubbed his eyebrows as he flipped a page on the blueprints he was studying.

"Thanks." I ran off before he could change his mind or lecture me some more.

***

By two o'clock, I had Ollie hanging over my right shoulder, my left arm supporting him like a seat. Even with most of his weight off my right

shoulder, it still ached, deep and growing. One step after the other, I trod lightly as I tried not to wake him.

He had vomited a total of three times, so he probably didn't have anything left in him to come up. He'd been pale and almost asleep when I had arrived to pick him up.

"Oh, Mr Miller, it's a pleasure to see you again. Such a wonderful father," the nurse had said.

Wonderful father. More like a parent who showed up.

I wiggled my arm beneath Ollie as I manoeuvred my key in the lock. I knocked the door open with the toe of my shoe, leaving a splotch of mud on it. I needed to remember to clean that.

Flicking my shoes off in the entrance, I trudged to his room, knelt beside his bed, laid him in it, and pulled off his shoes and his vomit-covered shirt. I dragged his blanket over him, put an empty ice cream container next to his bed, and filled his water bottle with fresh water.

I opened my phone to see Ethan had sent a meme… four hours ago. Fuck.

It was a picture of a kiwifruit next to a slightly hairy baby's head with a kiwifruit sticker on it.

Funny.

I replied with an emoji, then went to clean my sneakers. I scrubbed the big chunks off them in the sink, which I then cleaned. I put them in the washing machine, along with Ollie's shirt. Maybe you weren't supposed to do that, but I wasn't going to do a whole separate load of laundry for one shirt.

The door.

I did start with the fresh mud, but I somehow ended up polishing the hinges and the door handle. I found some white paint and started patching some other little marks.

My phone—that was no longer on Do Not Disturb now that I was at home—dinged. Another meme: a kid with the word "me" and a cannon aiming straight for another kid that said "Mondays."

Tyler: That's so true. I just had to pick Ollie up from school early for being sick.

Good job, nice reply. Sweet, but reminded him I still had a kid.

I was settling in, ready to watch a movie when my phone started buzzing—and buzzing. It was Ethan. I answered after the fourth ring.

“Hello,” I said.

“Hey,” he said.

What now?

“I’m sorry,” he broke our silence. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have ghosted you.”

“I should’ve told you earlier. I was having a good time with you, and I knew telling you would ruin it.”

“You didn’t ruin it,” he rushed to add. “You just changed it. I’d never imagined myself with a kid, but I also never imagined myself with a person who works in construction, or who has a strong hatred for my favourite vegetable. But I had a really great time with you, and I hadn’t actually planned on messaging you, but… I couldn’t stop thinking about you and just… just wanting to see you again,” he stuttered, as if afraid I was going to say no.

“I would like to see you again too, if you like,” I said, although now I was worried he would say no to me.

“How about dinner? Tonight or tomorrow, maybe? Or actually, I have a meeting tomorrow, so tonight? At mine. I’d love to cook for you. Unless you think that’s too soon,” he explained. I heard his smile through the phone. I hoped he could hear mine.

“I, uh… Well, I would love to, but… Ollie is sick, so I can’t tonight.” *Please give another suggestion. Don’t let this be the end.*

“Well, what about Wednesday?”

“Yeah, if Ollie is feeling better by then. Let me call and see if Aubrie can take him for the evening. I’ll message you and let you know.”

“Sounds good!” Ethan said.

My ears were either awesome or I was delusional, because I was pretty sure he was smiling even bigger now.

I called Aubrie. “Hey, can you take Ollie on Wednesday night if he’s feeling better? I’m trying to plan a third date with that guy,” I spat my words out super quick, as if that would give her less time to protest.

“You’ll probably be sick by then too. I wouldn’t plan anything.” Her voice was calm and logical, even though her logic was all off. I knew she just didn’t want Ollie that night.

“Aubrie—”

“Don’t say it,” she whined. She must have still been at work, because I heard people talking in the background.

“Aubrie,” I huffed. “I don’t get sick. Literally in all the time I’ve known you, I’ve not been sick once.” She was silent, as if trying to think of a rebuttal, but she knew I was right.

“Okay then, *I* can’t get sick. I have to work. And it’s not my night. Get a babysitter or wait till the weekend.” She sounded done with the conversation, and so was I.

I took a deep breath. “Yeah, it’s fine, I get it. I’ll work something out. Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m sorry, Tyler, but we have a deal. Breaking it is confusing for him.” Her voice had calmed down again. And she was right, but I really wanted her to be wrong.

“I know, it’s okay.”

“Is Ollie okay?” she asked after a minute of breathing on the line.

“Yeah, he’s fine. I checked on him a little while ago, and he was already looking a bit better. I’ll take the day off tomorrow. Rob’s already pissed with me.”

“Thanks for getting him. Goodbye, then.”

“Bye.”

I hung up and opened my bank app. How much did a babysitter cost nowadays? Definitely not twenty dollars—the amount I had for discretionary spending for the rest of the week. My sister and parents were too far away. Aubrie was all I had.

I texted Ethan.

Tyler: I would really like to have dinner but you’re going to have to come here, Ollie will be asleep but otherwise we’ll have to wait for the weekend.

Ethan: Yes that’s good too.

Ethan: I wasn’t going to tell you this, but I offered my house first because I noticed you didn’t seem to want me at your house.

Ethan: Like the other day when I picked you up from a petrol station.

Ethan: …

Ethan: …

Ethan: I’m bringing dinner.

Tyler: See you then.

I felt bad—bad that I had made him pick me up from the petrol station, bad that he knew, bad that I had a kid. I just felt bad.

A loud noise came from the hall, and then the doorbell rang. I went to the door and opened it. A box.

“Daddy.” Ollie’s tiny, sleepy voice came from behind me.

“Don’t worry, buddy. Let’s go back to bed,” I said.

With the box under one arm, I reached for Ollie’s hand with the other.

“What is it, Daddy?” he asked.

“I’m not sure.” I put the box on the kitchen bench and lifted Ollie into his seat. I cut the box open and pulled out a dark blue fabric covered in turtles.

“Turtles!” he exclaimed.

“Turtles!” I yelled back, matching his enthusiasm. “They’re bedsheets. So you can sleep with the turtles.”

“Can we put them on, Daddy? Please!”

I nodded.

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Chapter 10

Wednesday 8 June 2016

“Daddy, this one is named Taylor, and this one is Tim, and this one is Tom, and this one… this one is called Tess,” Ollie commanded as he pointed at each turtle on his sheets.

“Good job, buddy. If you go to sleep, you might get to dream about turtles,” I said, desperate to convince this suddenly energetic child to go to sleep.

Ollie had gone to school today, but he still wasn’t one hundred percent better. He had fallen asleep watching TV, and I had carried him to bed. But then he woke up, and now I was trying to reason with a little kid. I glanced at the digital clock next to his bed: six fifteen in the evening. Ollie yawned.

“Come on buddy, you’re tired.” I rubbed his tummy.

Ollie shuffled down in his bed. I pulled his blankets up over him and drew circles on his back as he adjusted his pillow. His hands were gripped tight around one of the turtle toys he had made after we had been to the zoo. A few minutes later, he started drifting. I slowly snuck out of his room, gently clicking the door shut. I turned the hall light off and sat for a minute in the living room.

I was wearing track pants and a hoodie. Should I change? I had that sweater…

I ended up with a long-sleeve T-shirt and track pants. I had put the heater on tonight. I did put it on in the evening; I wasn’t going to let my son freeze.

I kept my pony bead bracelet on and made sure it wasn’t concealed by my sleeve. Then I just waited. I cleaned up the kitchen a little and was doing a final wipe-down of the bench when the doorbell rang.

Open it, but not too soon. Wait a few seconds so he doesn’t know you’ve been waiting for him… Okay, now seems long enough. Go.

Ethan was standing there. Jeans, a big coat, a beanie and a rather large pot that he seemed to be struggling to hold while one hand also gripped a shopping bag. I let him inside and he heaved as he swung the pot onto the bench. He had this big grin on his face when he turned back to me and offered a hug. I took the offer, although it was somewhat awkward.

I didn't know how to hug full-sized people.

He broke the hug and shed his coat. Handing it to me, he said, "I didn't put any cucumbers in it, I promise. It's a little bit spicy though," he continued as he pulled his beanie off, which I then draped with his jacket over the back of the couch. "But either you'll be fine, or I'll get to laugh at you for having no spice tolerance," he chuckled.

"I'm usually not too bad at spice. I always put wasabi on my sushi," I said.

I looked him up and down. He had a band T-shirt—not one that I had heard of—jeans, and sneakers. It definitely felt more relaxed of an outfit, but the shirt hung off his shoulders and caught on his chest. It wasn't tight, but it showed everything, and it was a little short for him so when he lifted his arms to put the pot on the bench, I saw his midriff and that gorgeous snail trail.

"Where are your plates?" he asked, and I just pointed towards the cupboard.

He pulled out two and put a bowl on top of each. Then he pulled a brown paper bag out of the reusable shopping bag he had brought with him.

"Now, ideally, we would eat straight from the dish," he explained as he scoped the red mixture into each of the bowls, "but I only have this stupid pot. I can't wait until I can afford a Dutch oven. Le Creuset haunts my dreams."

I didn't know what that was, and apparently, that was evident.

"It's like a really big, heavy pan. But it's cool. I don't know how to describe it, but I really, really want one."

He riffled through some drawers and found a serrated knife. He pulled what I thought was sourdough out of the brown paper bag and added a few slices to each plate, topping our bowls with some extra salt and pepper and parsley.

"Okay, I'm so excited for this. I love it, but it really needs to be shared, and none of my housemates like it."

We sat side by side at the bench. “What is it?” I asked as Ethan tore his bread.

“It’s called Shakshouka. It’s like if marinara was Middle Eastern and had poached eggs on top. Just dunk the bread right in and—” He took a bite and moaned a little as he chewed. “It’s so good.” I think he said that—his mouth was full and so was his smile.

I ripped my bread and dunked it in the bowl. The egg yolk split open and oozed onto my slice. I took a bite. It was smoky and tomatoey and warm—very warm. It was getting warmer. Hot. It was hot. Burning hot.

Ethan was staring at me, waiting for my review.

“It’s really good… but it’s definitely hot.”

Ethan looked proud of himself. “Do you like the bread?” he asked.

“Did you make the bread too?”

He nodded. “Did you think I would bring you store-bought bread? So rude.”

“The bread is amazing! It’s all good. But you did undersell the spice.”

“What can I say? I am very, very spicy.” Ethan winked.

We ate in silence for a bit. I realised I hadn’t offered him a drink, so I got us both a glass of water—that was all I had. I got used to the heat after a while and the water definitely helped, but while we sat, I realised I really had done nothing. We were drinking water, I didn’t have dessert, we were eating a dinner he made, and he’d travelled here.

“Have you watched any movies lately?” Ethan asked.

We reached the point of eating where you were about halfway through and no longer felt hunger so deep you had to shovel the food into your mouth like someone would take it away.

I gulped down the food. “Um, yeah. Well, after talking to Orla, I thought I should watch some more… *gay* stuff, I guess. So I watched *The Normal Heart*. And it was so well done, and like, really interesting. I think the older politics in the States are very interesting.” I lowered my voice a little, “And Matt Bomer is really hot.”

“Oh, I did see that one. My mum has a thing for Mark Ruffalo, and she’s always trying to be more woke.” He laughed. “I like it, but it was just so tragic. Queer stories always are, which I get because it is kind of a tragic life we’ve lived, like, in the past. Although I wouldn’t say I’ve lived too tragically. You know what, I do love *The Broken Hearts Club*. It’s gay but a romcom, just a bit more light-hearted.” His bread flew around as his

expressive hands pinched it. “I’m going to tell you something, and I want no judgement. I love musicals. *Funny Girl*, *Mamma Mia*, oh my god, I love *West Side Story*. I was Rafiki in *The Lion King* when I was in high school and I did a wonderful job at it. Musicals are the gayest thing about me by far.”

“Oh my god, have you heard the *Hamilton* soundtrack?” I spat out. “It’s so good. But I’ve not listened to all of it because when I eventually get to see it, I don’t want to have ruined it for myself.”

“Okay, so we’re going to Broadway together. I’m telling you right now, it’s a deal,” Ethan demanded.

His hand reached out and landed on my forearm. It made me anxious, but I let it sit for a few seconds, and then it made me excited. Those emotions were like bananas and blueberries. Same but different.

We sat talking about movies, some music stuff, although I didn’t listen to much and Ethan’s taste was a lot of white girl music: Carly Rae Jepsen, Maroon 5, and all that.

His hand was on my arm, then my thigh. I didn’t know how he got his chair closer to mine without getting off it, but he had managed to. He was touching my arm again when I heard a little peep.

“Daddy.” Ollie stood in the hall, turtle plush in one hand, rubbing sleep out of his eye with the other.

I jumped away from Ethan. *Fuck*. “Hey, buddy.” I was already off my chair and halfway across the room. “Are you okay?” I said as I approached him and knelt in front of him. “You have a bad dream?” I asked as I grabbed hold of his hands. His skin was warm and soft.

Ollie leant in and whispered, “Who’s that?”

I lifted him up, my shoulder throbbing as his weight came through it. “Um… Ollie, this is Ethan, Daddy’s friend.”

Ethan gave a little wave from his seat at the bench. I couldn’t tell if he was mad, uncomfortable or happy. I had no idea what he felt or what he was thinking. Ollie nuzzled his head into my neck.

“I’m just going to put him to bed, and then I’ll…” I gestured. I didn’t even know what I wanted to say, but Ethan nodded.

He didn’t seem to mind. Ollie settled quickly, and I came back into the kitchen about fifteen minutes later.

“Sorry about that, I—He usually sleeps all night.”

“It’s no worries. How often do you have him? You co-parent with Aubrie?” Ethan asked.

“I have him Monday night through Friday morning. Aubrie takes him from school on Friday afternoon and then to school on Monday morning.” I was fidgeting, pulling the sleeve of my shirt over the bracelet.

“He’s a cute kid,” Ethan said. He had a forced smile with a little twinkle in his eye. “Like, I know you have a kid, but I hadn’t seen it. It’s weird seeing someone so young with a kid. He sure is cute though. He has your eyes.”

I felt my expression soften, and all the tension ran out of my body. “Yeah, he is.” I sat back next to Ethan, adding some distance. I was suddenly very aware we weren’t alone—not just in this house, but everywhere. There were people everywhere in the world.

“Can I ask you something?” he said.

I shrugged, and I think my head moved in a nod.

“Does Ollie know you’re gay? Or am I… Am I the first man you’ve been with? You just seem a bit…” Ethan searched for the right word, as if to describe what he thought without offending me. “You seem a bit anxious.”

I was quiet for a bit, my jaw opening and shutting as I decided what I wanted to say. “No. Well, kind of no, on both counts.”

Ethan’s brows curled together.

“I’ve tried relationships, but people aren’t a huge fan of me having a kid.” I smirked at him. “My usual version of relationships is more about a meeting of needs, if you know what I mean.”

“I do. So you never did anything with a guy before Ollie or Oliver?”

“Ollie,” I said to buy myself time. “Not with a guy, no. First time I had sex, he was the result. I had sex with a guy before he was born, but raising a kid, especially when they’re a baby, takes literally all the possible time you might have.” I shut my mouth quickly, feeling like I’d said too much in a crime investigation.

“And he doesn’t know you’re gay?” Ethan asked.

How do I answer this?

“I don’t know. I feel like he’s a bit young for that, no?”

Ethan’s face told me that was not the correct answer.

“You don’t have to explain how anal sex works to tell someone you like boys,” Ethan said, and I felt my face turning red.

“It just hasn’t really come up. He knows about fairy tales and stuff. I don’t know, it just hasn’t been an issue. He’s a child.” I felt really defensive, like Ethan was telling me I was a bad father.

“Hey, I’m sorry. It’s not my place. I could just feel your stress when he saw us together. Even though nothing was happening,” he said with a hand landing flat on the table, reaching towards me.

Now I felt bad. He wasn’t trying to hurt me, just to understand. My eyes were prickly as I blinked, again and again, trying to will my tears away.

“Have you told anyone you’re gay?” he asked.

I stayed silent for a while. My voice was squeaky and broken when I spoke, “Ollie’s mum knows, obviously. And my older sister. My parents know, but I never… I never told them. It’s like they know, and I know they know, and they know I know they know, but we don’t talk about it.” I gulped, bringing myself away from the edge of a breakdown. “I work with a bunch of misogynistic men… it’s not something I offer up a lot.”

Ethan took a few deep breaths. “I have a really accepting circle, so sometimes I forget that not everyone has that.” He reached his hand out further, but this time, it landed on my hand, not my forearm. It was warm and soft too. Kind and gentle. We had drifted closer again. I was looking at his eyes, the freckles along the bridge of his nose. His cupid’s bow was somehow incredibly clear and defined without standing out unless you were looking for it. His lips were red, not pink. He had some acne scarring on his cheeks, and a three- or four-centimetre scar under his right eye. I only noticed that now that our faces were so close.

Then his lips were on mine—hot, tender, wanting. My tongue broke the barrier between us and the kiss turned to a deep need, a desperation. My hand sat on the back of his neck for a moment before we broke apart.

“I’m so glad I know what that’s like now. Staring at your lips and not knowing what they feel like has been killing me,” Ethan whined with a chuckle in his voice.

Ethan had left by ten. He said he had a busy week with work but that he would text me. I had put the dishes away and checked that Ollie was still asleep.

I was lying in my bed in my underwear, alone but unable to shake the feeling of his lips on mine. My hand slowly moved from my chest down my stomach, around my sides and my ribs, tickling my skin. I slipped my hand under my waistband and gripped my dick, stroking it. My other hand

moved to my face, touching my lips as I tried to memorise the feeling of that kiss.

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Chapter 11

Friday 17 June 2016

Ethan and I had planned a date for tonight. It was Ethan's birthday in a little over a week. He had tickets to a concert with Elliot on the day and was super busy this week. He had mentioned his birthday, but not in a way where it felt like he wanted me to acknowledge it. I did think about getting him a present, but I had no idea what, how much I was supposed to spend, or if I was even supposed to. I had asked Willa, and she said to leave it. We hadn't been together very long and we hadn't had sex. We had only texted since the dinner—mostly memes.

Ethan was working on a charity start-up, which he said was, "always the busiest time for a charity, and as such, for me." It wouldn't be over until a few weeks after his birthday. He had been repeatedly apologising for being so busy and unavailable, promising it wasn't always like this. I wasn't worried. I still had a job and a kid. A full-time relationship on top of that might have been a bit much anyway, not just time-wise.

I was driving to Aubrie's house after Ollie and I had visited my parents this morning

Ollie screeched the first line of "When Will My Life Begin?" from *Tangled* as it started playing from the Spotify playlist I had made for our car trips.

Ollie was crunching on some Potato Stix. I could practically feel the oil being rubbed off his fingers and onto his car seat.

I filled in the next line, listing a bunch of chores I didn't complete nearly as often as I should.

"Keep going, Daddy." Ollie's words were mumbled as the potatoes swirled in his mouth.

Our voices combined for the next line. Mine was basically just speaking, Ollie, however, was screaming at the top of his lungs. I loved that we could

make all the time we spent together special. Even menial tasks like driving made me feel safe and free and happy.

I soaked up every last drop of this moment. I knew one day he wouldn't get excited to sing Disney songs with his dad.

Our duet was interrupted by a phone call. Aubrie.

"Hey, we're about ten min—"

She panted over the line even before I could finish.

"I'm sorry, but it's just—" I heard her rustling around her house, switching her phone between shoulders, jangling her keys. I knew the upshot of what was coming. "Dad's had a fall and I've got to go help because his *wife* is a useless pack of shit."

"Aubrie, you're on speaker," I said, light-hearted as I was, still stuck in my Disney songs mindset.

"Sorry… Anyway, she can't drive. Which honestly puts so much pressure on Dad and is probably why he's been drinking so much," she rambled.

"He's been drinking for as long as I've known you." That happiness was starting to drift.

"I know," she sighed. "I just hate her… anyway, I have to go pick her up and take her to the hospital, because she's too useless to climb into an ambulance."

"She's old, and so is your dad." I wasn't happy any more, but I was still calm.

Other people's problems were a nice distraction, although I guessed this was now becoming my problem.

"I don't need you to be reasonable right now. I'm just fucking angry because I was going to do that thing with that person tonight."

She had planned on taking Ollie to a night-time ice rink thingy. A kid in Ollie's class had gone, and Ollie hadn't stopped talking about it since.

"It's okay, you can reschedule it. This is why we didn't tell the person. No one is disappointed. I can take him for the weekend," I said. I wanted to yell at her because I had a date planned. But this wasn't her fault, and obviously she had to go. She was the perfect daughter.

"Oh god, I hope this is over by tomorrow. Maybe me and that person can just watch a movie or something tomorrow night. I gotta go, that *woman* is trying to call me." She hung up.

“Hey, Ollie.” I glanced at him in the rear-view mirror. “Grandpa Ben had to go to the doctor’s, so Mummy can’t hang out tonight. You okay to stay with me?”

He nodded. “Is Grandpa Ben okay?”

“Yeah, he just got hurt, but the doctors are gonna help fix him up.”

Dammit, Aubrie hated when I said things needed to be fixed. She always said it created a “negative emotional reliance on perfection.”

“I’m just going to call my friend Ethan, and then we can keep singing, okay?”

I saw him nod in the rear-view mirror.

“Hey, Tyler,” Ethan answered. This time the phone was *not* on speaker—it was sandwiched under my chin.

“Aubrie’s dad had a fall, he’s fine and all, but now Ollie and I are going to be hanging out!” I said with an appropriate amount of forced joy in my voice.

“So he’s in the car, ay?” he asked.

“Yes. I’m sorry. I was excited.”

“I really wanted to see you. We can do it next week.”

That wasn’t at all what I wanted. “I get it if it’s too much too quick, but I’d really like to see you, if you’re okay for him to join us.”

“Uh, yeah. I guess that would be okay, if—if you’re comfortable with it and all. I’m not really around kids much, so I can’t promise I’ll be good with him but—”

“He’s in a good mood today, so I think it’ll be fun. Can we meet at the beach club instead?”

“Honestly, I could fuck up some fish ’n’ chips right now.” He laughed. “Although Ollie doesn’t know we’re dating, so maybe you should tell him… if you think that’s a good idea.”

I loved it when he laughed at things that he said, and it was nice to focus on that rather than the words that came after, even though I knew he was right.

I grunted as a reply before adding, “Thanks for changing the plans. Seriously. I’m excited to see you.”

The phone call ended, and Ollie and I finished singing “When Will My Life Begin?” Although Ollie had sung it enough times to have all the words memorised, he had not memorised the pitch. But he was four so I’d let it slide.

“Ollie,” I said.

He looked over to me.

“Y’know my friend Ethan? You met him a while ago when you woke up and we were having dinner in the kitchen. Do you remember?”

Ollie nodded, but I wasn’t sure he actually did. “Anyway, Ethan… well, Ethan isn’t just Daddy’s friend. He, uh, he’s Daddy’s *boyfriend*.”

Ollie made a face that said *I don’t really understand*.

“Kind of like how Nanny and Poppa love each other.”

“But I thought Ethan is a boy?” Ollie stuttered.

“He is, but sometimes girls fall in love with boys, or girls fall in love with other girls, and sometimes boys fall in love with other boys.”

Love, love… Love.

“Do they get married too?” he asked. His voice was soft, curious. He had so much to learn about the world. He had been alive for so little time. He knew so little about so many things.

Tears prickled my eyes. “Yeah, they do. If they want, I mean.”

“Daddy?”

I looked at him in the mirror again.

“Do you love Ethan?”

We were making the strongest eye contact we’d ever had. I wasn’t sure if I initiated it or he did, but I doubt he noticed.

“I… don’t know yet. Sometimes you meet someone and you like them, but you have to hang out with them again and again to figure out if you might love them. So we’re getting dinner—us and Ethan.”

“Will they have chippies?” Ollie asked.

“Oh, for sure,” I breathed out. I could feel that my tears were still there, but they weren’t begging to fall anymore.

“Daddy, play!”

I took the command and hit Play on the music. The next song was “For the First Time in Forever.” Ollie started singing, his voice squeaking up and down. He mumbled sometimes as the lyrics got too fast or if they were words he didn’t know very well. He was perfect.

“Daddy, this is your part!”

I wiped away a tear that had slid down my cheek. “Sorry.”

I began singing.

He was always Anna, I was always Elsa, but we both sang “Let It Go” together.

***

I held Ollie's hand as we walked into the restaurant. A surf club, actually. Ollie ran to a table with booths on one side and chairs on the other and claimed it by stuffing his butt into one of the chairs. I think he picked it because it had colouring pencils. He immediately pulled out the kids' menu and flipped it to the colouring page side. I sat opposite him in the booth as he scribbled away when a server walked up to the table.

"Can I get you guys some drinks?" he asked.

We should wait for Ethan.

"Daddy! Daddy, can I have a fizzy drink, please? Daddy, please?"

"Could I just…" I stuttered holding a finger up to the server.

Then Ethan came through the door.

I looked at Ollie. "No fizzy drinks, buddy, but what about a milkshake?"

Ollie nodded.

"Okay, can we get a kids' chocolate milkshake, and then can I just have a lemonade…"

Ethan shuffled in beside me. "We doin' drinks? Put a Coke Zero on there, no ice. Thank you so much, I'm so fuc—uh, very thirsty."

Ethan's knee bumped against mine.

"Daddy," Ollie whispered, reaching and tugging on my sleeve. "Can you pass the green one?"

I rolled the green pencil over to Ollie. "Say hi to Ethan," I coached him.

Ollie kept his focus on his colouring page. "Hi," he said in the lowest voice possible. I didn't think there was any vibration in his vocal cords.

"Hi. It's nice to see you again," Ethan said.

Ollie didn't look up or respond. Ethan looked at me with worry.

"He'll warm up," I whispered. Although I wasn't sure he would. My knee started fluttering up and down.

The server brought our drinks over.

"Thanks," I said.

"Would you guys like to order?" he asked.

I looked at Ethan, who nodded.

"Could I have the chicken schnitzel please, and a kids' cheeseburger?"

"And I'll just have the fish 'n' chips, please," Ethan said with a huge grin.

A few minutes later we were still sitting relatively quiet. Ollie started reaching for another pencil, this one closer to Ethan.

"Can you pass the purple?" His voice was still almost silent as before, but I was proud of him as is.

Ethan used his pointer finger to push the pencil across the table to Ollie.

"Thank you," Ollie whispered.

"What are you colouring?" he asked.

Ollie looked at me for a second before he replied, "It's a crab surfing, but I put it in green so it's a turtle now."

"Can I help?"

Ollie nodded, then handed Ethan a blue pencil and me a yellow one. "You do the sky, and you do the sun," he said, his voice still soft and quiet.

As we got close to finishing our colouring, the server brought our food. Ethan picked up his fish and crunched through the beer batter as I cut up Ollie's cheeseburger. He quickly dropped the fish and waited for us to all be ready before he started again.

"I'm so hungry. I've had a shi—busy day. This is awesome."

I forgot some people just weren't used to being around kids. Ethan took a drink of his Coke, but it dribbled down his chin and chest.

Ollie smiled, starting to giggle.

"Having trouble there?" I asked.

Ollie's smile was so big. "You're so silly," he said.

His first unprompted, regular-volume words. Even Ethan laughed. We were all laughing.

The conversation ran better after that. Ollie was distracted by his cheeseburger enough for the three of us to have a conversation. I had cut it into quarters; he ate the four pieces of top bun, the four pieces of meat and cheese and then the four pieces of bottom buns. A unique choice.

Ethan would sometimes put a hand on my thigh or nudge my foot, sometimes even my shoulder.

"So your favourite princess is Rapunzel?" Ethan asked.

Ollie nodded.

"I think my favourite princess is Mulan, but my favourite movie is *The Little Mermaid*."

"Daddy likes *Brave*," Ollie giggled.

"Does he now?" Ethan looked at me. "Really? A movie about bears… boring."

Do it, do it, do it.

"What can I say, I like what I like," I added with a raised eyebrow.

Ethan did his best to stifle his smile. It made me wonder.

Ethan wasn't a bear, obviously, but was he hairy? I hadn't seen his legs, but his arms were pretty hairy. His chest too. His face was stubbly now but was usually kept clean-shaven. I wondered about the hair over the rest of his body.

"I'm glad Daddy has a new friend because Daddy doesn't have any friends, except Aunty Willa and Mummy. And Mummy is like a princess, but Mummy and Daddy aren't in love like a prince and a princess are. You're like Daddy's princess and Mummy is just another princess in the town," Ollie babbled.

Our plates had been cleared and we were about ready to leave. I was always grateful Ollie was a good eater. Sometimes he didn't want veggies, but neither did I most of the time

"Do you want to go wash your hands, buddy?" I suggested, pointing to the bathroom.

Ollie nodded and popped up from the table, skipping down the hall.

"I didn't know kids could colour in the lines like this," Ethan said, turning the page in his hand to examine it. "I don't hang out with kids, so I have, like, zero reference of what they're supposed to be like."

"He's better than most kids at drawing, but he gets really nervous around people. It's frustrating because he's very funny and polite when he does talk, but nobody knows because he hardly does."

Ethan put his hand over mine, our clasped hands now on my thigh. "I think he's cool. And I've seen it, how polite and funny he is." Ethan leant in to whisper in my ear, "And yes, there's hair."

Blood rushed into my face and my jaw tightened. He winked as Ollie came back from the bathroom.

"Should we get going?" Ethan asked.

I just sat frozen in the booth before Ollie grabbed my hand and pulled me. Ethan took Ollie's finished colouring sheet and we all left together.

When we went our separate ways and I settled into the seat of the car, I got a text.

Ethan: I think this is going to work out : D

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Chapter 12

Saturday 9 July 2016

Ethan was coming over. Ollie was with Aubrie. Everything was going to be perfect.

There was an underlying pressure, though. We hadn't said that we were going to have sex, but it felt like it was going to happen. Usually when we'd hang out, we'd plan what we were going to do, but today we had nothing planned. We didn't even talk about potentially watching a movie. It seemed like tonight would be the night.

I knew it was something I wanted. Sex, I mean. But sex always complicated things. And I couldn't run away this time after it happened. I couldn't just put my clothes on and leave. I would have to sit afterwards with whatever I was thinking and feeling.

I made sure I had condoms and lube—even if it didn't happen, I didn't want to be unprepared.

Ethan arrived, looking gorgeous as ever, with loose denim jeans hanging from his hips. He shrugged his jacket off. The fabric of his sweater stretched across his shoulder blades while he reached to hang it on the hooks I had recently installed.

He tugged down on one of the empty ones. "Guess you really are a construction worker then." His voice was ardent as he perused the living room.

"You thought I was lying?"

I knew he didn't think that. Unless he did? Sometimes his constant sarcasm made him hard to read.

"You'd be surprised how far people would go to look desirable, but I guess your desirability is natural." He gave me nothing, no eye contact; he didn't touch me as he approached. I fell onto the couch. I couldn't stand that close to him without touching him.

He sat beside me. "You been busy today?"

It was almost six o'clock, but no, I hadn't. "Went to the gym, watched a movie, y'know."

He just kept staring straight ahead.

The look on his face was suggestive; he made it pretty frequently, but he had never held it this long. I suddenly felt like this was the last place I wanted to be. Like I was ugly. Like I was the least sexually appealing person in the world.

Ethan put a hand on my thigh. He turned to look at me, but I looked away. I tried to act natural—I wasn't sure how well I did. I felt my face twist and sour. I tried to force it right, but it was like a cramp you just had to sit through. My jaw tightened, my eyes burned. I squeezed them shut, my eyelids like dams. His hand touched my shoulder.

Ethan's whole demeanour had changed. "What happened? I thought maybe tonight we might…" His voice was so unsure as his hand rubbed my shoulder. It soothed the low ache that sat in it.

"I'm sorry," I said, feeling a tear roll down my cheek. I could feel myself choking as Ethan waited for me to say more. Say what? I didn't know what was wrong with me. "I thought that too. I don't know what's wrong with me. I do want to, and you're here and I've got all the necessary *things* but I think it might—I think it won't be right. Like after it, everything will be different." Was that an adequate expression? It felt like my mind had nothing in it the whole time I spoke.

"What do you mean it won't be right?" Ethan asked, turning his body to face mine. "Are you worried having sex will change something?"

"I don't know. I just—" I wasn't crying; there were no tears. But my voice whined a little, a huffed sound as I spoke, close to a laugh. This was so ridiculous. "I guess I've never had, like, a proper relationship before. I've only ever had sex, and I've not always loved it, but it didn't matter because it was one and done."

"So do you not like sex?"

"It's not the sex. Obviously, I like sex. It's how it makes me feel."

Ethan put a finger on my chin and turned my face to look at his. "Well, not everyone likes sex, but it's good to know you do because I do too." He had humour in his voice as he tried to lighten the mood. "It doesn't make you feel good?"

"It makes me feel… dirty, like I'm doing something wrong. *Fuck me*, this doesn't make any fucking sense." I huffed, giving up on my thoughts.

Untangling them was too much.

"This might sound stupid, so don't laugh at me." His expression shifted, a mix of a joke and I'm-about-to-say-something-risky. "I think hearing this will help you." He put his hands on my knee. "It is okay to be gay. And not in an 'it's okay to like boys' way. In an 'it's okay to be a man who has sex with other men' way." His eyes were digging into me.

I finally managed to look at him. "I want to have sex with you. Seriously, I do. I know I'll enjoy it in the moment, but those feelings are gonna be there. I love you and I don't want to associate you with being disgusted. I'm worried that having sex will make us feel less normal."

"Tyler, I'm gonna say some more really corny stuff, but I've been in therapy my whole life and it made me far too emotionally aware. Like, I don't want to know *that* much about myself?" he asked. "I know you didn't grow up where it was celebrated, but it feels really good to feel gay. It feels really good to be touched by someone who knows how to touch you back. Straight relationships are great, I've had them and they're awesome. But the feeling of a gay relationship is special. It's not always easy to have it safely, so when you do, it's romantic in a different way. A way I can't explain without showing you." He looked back at me.

"But I've had sex with other men." I didn't want to disagree with him, but he was my guy—the guy I exchanged memes with and who cooked me dinner. I didn't want to lose all that.

"Right." A grin spread on his face. "But you've never had sex with someone you loved? I don't know if you realised that you threw that word in there earlier."

"Was kinda hoping you hadn't noticed." I watched as he waited for me to continue. "But I loved Aubrie, and it didn't feel good."

"Tyler, you're gay. It wasn't going to feel good even if you were fucking bloody Anne Hathaway."

What?

"Haven't you seen *Brokeback Mountain*? You know what, that's an issue for another day… The point is, I'm having a good time with you, and you with me. We won't know till we try. You're worried you won't like it, but what if I don't like it? You might be awful at sex."

His flippancy returned, and I was suddenly comfortable again.

I stared at him, a bested look on my face. "You convinced me a while ago. I just needed a minute to, y'know, sort it out in my head."

Ethan leant in and kissed me—a benevolent smooch. “I wouldn’t do anything you didn’t want. I hope you know that.”

“I do.”

Ethan reached for the remote. He scrolled through Netflix and put on *Mean Girls*. I’d seen it, I’d liked it.

“I usually go straight to chill,” I said.

“We’ll get there.” Ethan kissed my temple and settled in beside me.

***

We were twenty-odd minutes into the movie when my hand drifted onto his shoulder, then his chest. It sat there for a long time. It was dark, with only the light from the TV. I felt safe. Comfortable. My mind wasn’t racing anymore. It was too distracted by the feel of his skin against my fingertips

His knee nudged against mine as my thumb rubbed back and forth over his clavicle—which was as far down as my hand could reach. I slipped my hand under the collar of his shirt.

“Kiss me. Properly,” I asked.

He rolled his hips off the couch and straddled my lap, placing a hand on each of my cheeks as he clasped them and looked into my eyes. He pulled my face in and just looked at me for a moment before he swooped in.

He kissed me *properly*.

His tongue was hot and rough as it scraped along my own. His lips slipped into my mouth, then out again as I searched for more depth, his hands moving from my cheeks to my neck. My arms wrapped around his hips and I pulled him closer, hard against my waist. He suckled on the corner of my mouth, and I felt the blood trying to figure out if it should rush to my lips or my dick first.

I was overwhelmed as his hands begged me to take my shirt off. Ethan pulled it over my head, my nipples hardening as his thumbs brushed over them. I looked over his wide chest—desperate to have it bare and pressed to mine—my eyes fell to the divot at the base of his throat, observing his Adam’s apple bob as he breathed. His fingers lifted to my sternum, to each of my nipples, down to my ribs that poked out with each breath. Then my abs, not overly defined but definitely in existence. He looked hungry as he stood and watched me. My breath was shaking with every inhale. He then lowered himself onto the bulge in my pants. I guessed the blood had figured out what it was doing.

I put my hand on the back of his neck and pulled his face to mine. He moaned into my mouth, or maybe I moaned into his. The harder I kissed him and the more effort I put in, the more his hips moved against mine.

“Should we go to the bedroom?” I asked. I knew this was supposed to be sexy, but I couldn’t help the grin of pure joy from growing on my face. His forehead rubbed against mine as he nodded.

He followed me to the bedroom, but we didn’t touch. My room was dark, only the street lights and the moon lighting it up. A blue glow shone over my chest as I stood in front of the bed, with Ethan standing opposite me.

I pulled his shirt off—I wanted to have my turn at admiring him. The thick hair on his arms stopped around his elbows, but it was full and purposeful over his chest and down his stomach. I put my hands on his arms, drifting my fingers up and over his shoulders, then down his chest and hips. He was thick and stocky in the most beautiful way.

He grabbed me and dragged my face to his. I was kissing it, then his neck, his ears and chin—it didn’t matter where.

Ethan gently guided me onto the bed, gentle, then lay beside me as he kissed up and down my torso. His fingers slipped into my waistband, and he looked up at me with heavy eyes. I nodded. He pulled my sweatpants down, then got off the bed and took his pants off before climbing over me and palming me through my underwear. His firm package stretched under the cotton of his own.

“Please, touch me.” It was embarrassing to say it, but I needed it; I had never felt like I needed it before.

Ethan smiled and slinked his warm hand into my underwear, wrapping it around the shaft, stroking it up and down. It was far more direct and commanding than the rest of his touches.

His tongue ran over my belly button, down to my pelvis.

“Can I?” he asked.

I threw my head back and nodded as I forced my underwear down, my thumbs running over the bumpy lines on my skin. For a minute, I was pulled out of the gleeful haze I had been in, but Ethan’s breath was hot against my hip, and I let him pull them the rest of the way down.

His view raked over the scars. Only for a second did his breath hitch and his face drop before he caught himself and started kissing just beside them, on the inside of my thigh.

He took my dick in his mouth. It felt different than it usually did. Better. He used his tongue and his lips and his hands, as if a wet ballet dancer was on my dick. I was afraid to look down, to see him like that, but I did. His eyes were closed, his mouth was full of me without being stuffed. He was doing just enough to keep us both happy.

After a few minutes, I placed a hand on his shoulder and dragged him back up.

"Was that good?" he asked.

"You looked gorgeous," I said.

His face drew back. "What? I don't anymore?" It morphed into a grin a moment later.

"Of course you do," I said as I pushed his hair out of his face. "Can I fuck you now?" My hand kneaded his meaty thigh.

Ethan nodded and slipped his underwear off. His pubic hair was just as thick as the rest of his hair, although it had certainly been groomed. My hand found its way back to his thigh, and my thumb fell into the crease of his groin, enveloped by him as he moved his leg to wrap around me. Our skin rubbed together as we kissed.

Reaching towards the bedside table, I found the lube, then wrapped an arm around him and rolled him so he was underneath me. I kissed down his body and gave his dick a small lick. I lathered my fingers with lube and started rubbing over his hole.

"Tell me if anything hurts," I said as I pushed the tip of my finger in.

Ethan bit his lip, closed his eyes, and nodded. My finger went past the first knuckle, then the second. I gripped his thigh with my other hand and spread it. A second and a third finger worked their way in as I curled and twisted them until I found his prostate.

"Oh, god," Ethan moaned.

"Tell me when you're ready," I said.

"Now, I'm ready now," he demanded, grinning and red.

I took my fingers out, put a condom on, and lathered my dick. I grabbed Ethan's thighs and pulled them apart. Lining myself up, I looked at Ethan and pressed in.

Ethan's mouth dropped open and his eyes squeezed shut as I moved, slowly and gently until he adjusted. He held my shoulders and pulled me close. When he started pushing back into me, I took that as an ask and started moving, carefully using Ethan's noises as my instructions.

We found a rhythm, our eyes connecting as we rocked. Ethan's hand trailed my back, my thighs and hips, landing on my ass where they grasped.

"Can I touch you here?" he gasped.

I froze. "Um, yeah."

Ethan moved his hands up to my back and started scratching and pulling our chests together.

He didn't touch me there.

We both came, almost at the same time. I stayed in for a moment before I gently rolled away.

He laid with his head on my shoulder. "I love you too, Tyler."

His voice vibrated through my ribs and into my heart.

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Chapter 13

Sunday 25 December 2016

I had stayed at Aubrie's house the previous night. I liked to be with Ollie for Christmas Eve. I think I liked to be with Aubrie too. I always got lonely around Christmas. I mean, I was always lonely, but I felt alone around Christmas.

Aubrie worked less over the holiday break, so Ollie ended up spending four days a week with her and three with me over the summer. We did hang out, the three of us, though I could feel the passive-aggressiveness that radiated from Aubrie every time, so I often avoided it. It felt like a battle over who was the better parent. *I* thought we were even, but she was convinced she wasn't a good mum. It meant she sometimes tried too hard, and sometimes she'd get upset when she saw me being a good parent.

Ollie was readjusting the decorations on the Christmas tree to fit the new ornament he had just unwrapped—a turtle toy Aubrie had bought and tied a string to. She was a good mum.

"Ready for the next one?" Aubrie asked as I polished off the last of "Santa's" leftover cookies. Aubrie and I had to do a lot of coordinating to make sure we didn't double-buy—Ollie's tastes were very specific.

Ollie nodded from his spot beside the unlit fireplace. The idea was there, but it was twenty-seven degrees.

The paper ripped from the gift, and Ollie squealed with excitement. "Moana!" he yelled. "Daddy, it's Moana, look." He lifted the Moana doll into the air, waving it around before he passed it to me. "Show Mummy," he demanded as I gave the doll to Aubrie, who was perfectly amazed.

We had seen the film in theatres when it came out, and it might have overtaken Rapunzel as his favourite princess.

Aubrie pressed a button on the doll, and "How Far I'll Go" started playing. It was a great song—Lin was a lyrical genius—but I had been hearing that song four or five times a day, five days a week for as long as I

could remember. My ears were burning just slightly as the pre-programmed verse finished up.

“Oliver, can you see if Santa brought anything for Mummy and Daddy?” Aubrie asked. He ruffled under the tree and pulled out two presents: One said Mummy, the other said Daddy. We were very committed.

Aubrie opened hers first. “Oh, my gosh! Thank you, Santa. This is my favourite nail place.” Aubrie flicked the gift voucher through the air as she celebrated my thoughtful but highly predictable gift. It was either nails or Kmart at fifty dollars, for Christmas, her birthday, and Mother’s Day. But she was always pleased.

I opened mine next. Socks and underwear. “Thank you, Santa. Glad it wasn’t rocks,” I said to Ollie with a big grin on my face. *Thanks*, I mouthed to Aubrie.

I was grateful. I hadn’t needed to buy socks or underwear for about five years. I wore through socks pretty quickly, but I got new ones on Christmas, my birthday, and Father’s Day every year.

We made pancakes for breakfast. Aubrie and I had stayed up last night to make little Santa hats out of strawberries and white chocolate. Ollie loved them.

We put the Grinch on while Aubrie got Ollie’s toys out of their packets and full of batteries, and I cleaned up. Aubrie would have left it for days. No judgement—it was her house, and she could do what she wanted, but I couldn’t relax till it was done.

I got going at around eleven to my parents’ house for dinner.

***

On the way, I stopped at Ethan’s. I hadn’t left early from Aubrie’s, I just planned on showing up late to dinner. Ethan and his flatmates had some rolls, coleslaw and a rotisserie chicken laid out in the kitchen for lunch. It was a rather small kitchen for how much Ethan cooked.

The drawing Ollie had done at the surf club was pinned to the fridge with a magnet. Ethan lived with Sophie and Casper—I had met them briefly at that party—and another guy named Mathew.

We sat in the living room, eating our rolls. I had felt happy this morning, but now it felt right, complete. Like this Christmas was the best Christmas could get. Ethan was whispering into my ear, his skin glistening in the sunlight that was coming in through the window.

“I can’t believe I had to let them move in.” Ethan lowered his voice; Sophie and Casper were right across the room. “They’re great people, but they will not stop sucking each other’s faces… Look at them,” he said. He was giggling, his face close to mine, his hand on my thigh.

Casper was dangling a piece of chicken into Sophie’s mouth. They were feeding each other, sitting on each other. We were watching—not in a weird way, more in a car-crash way; you couldn’t not look.

“And then when they stop” —Ethan looked back at me— “it’s fighting. I don’t know how they make it work, fuck. I just want peace, y’know. Not fucking arguing.”

My jaw quivered as I searched for something to say. All I could see were his lips and his clavicle poking from his shirt.

“But the sex is probably great. I mean, it must be. They’re basically eating each other.”

Sex.

The last time we had sex was two weeks ago—only four times total now, though with a smaller gap each time. Ethan and I had been talking for about six months, and we had only seen each other every couple of weeks over that time.

“Hey,” he said. “I didn’t mean anything by it.” He rubbed my thigh.

My mind came back to the room.

“Can I kiss you?” Ethan asked.

My eyes darted around the room. Mathew was enthralled with the kitten Ethan, Casper, and Sophie had gotten him for Christmas, and the other two were certainly busy.

“Can we…” I stuttered.

Ethan grabbed my hand, stood, and said, “My boyfriend and I are going now, because we can’t fathom staying in a room where cannibalism is happening any longer.”

Sophie snorted at him.

“Seriously, it’s morally wrong.” He dragged me out of the living room and to his bedroom.

As soon as the hallway concealed us, I wrapped my arms around him and lifted him from the ground, his legs hooking around me as I carried him to his bedroom.

We fell onto his bed. I reached for his glasses, which sat wonky on his nose, and gently placed them on the bedside table. While we kissed, I

pushed my hands up his shirt, feeling the divots of his ribs as his chest tightened. I was desperately trying to pull him closer to me.

We both got our shirts off pretty quickly; it was hot, and our skin rubbed together—our chests, our shoulders being grasped and scratched and kissed. I ground into him. Embarrassed as I was, I didn't stop myself. I needed the friction.

"Just take them off," he huffed.

I ripped his shorts and underwear down together. His thighs begged to be grabbed. I pulled them around my waist, wanting him close. I moved the waistband of my pants down, just enough to get my dick out. He grabbed it and started smoothing up and down it, easing the slide of his hand with the pre-cum from the tip.

His gentle movements and firm grip made my head fall to his shoulder. "Ethan," I sighed.

He kept a steady grip with a slowly speeding stroke.

I was gasping in his ear—he smelt like hot musk fighting with a bar of soap—when I spurted over his fist. His release landed over my stomach and his fast a few moments later

"Thank you," I uttered.

Ethan snickered as our bodies relaxed. I sat, breathing for a few minutes while Ethan cleaned himself up a bit. Then we sat naked on his bed.

Once I had returned to my body, I found the ability to speak again. "Merry Christmas to us."

Ethan shook his head. "No, I wanna give you your real present." Ethan clapped his hands together. I could see all his teeth, and his cheeks were pink. He lifted a little blue bag that he had tucked behind a bookcase onto the bed. "Open it!"

I followed his order and pulled out a white T-shirt. "Wow," I said as my eyes scanned over Matt Bomer's face. So much of Matt Bomer's face.

I looked up at Ethan and his infectious smile and gave him a hug, our bodies fitting together as I held him close. The shirt was cool, for sure, but I was just so happy he remembered, that he had thought about it.

"So… you gonna tell me what's in the giant box you've been carrying around my house?" he said as he tried to lift it onto his bed. "Fuck, it's heavy."

We got it on the bed and he slowly took the lid off, I wasn't sure why, since his eyes were squeezed shut.

“Okay, I’m ready,” he announced before his eyelids flung open. “Ho-ly shit. Holy shit. This is amazing. A Le Creuset Dutch oven! Are you serious right now?” His eyes were wide and bright, and somehow, I saw even more of his teeth. “I am going to cook so many things for you in here.” He carefully looked it over.

“It’s second-hand and a little chipped. I scrubbed it pretty good, though.” *Pretty good*. It had been caked in brown gunk. I had bought about five different products to scrub it with, but I got it clean, and it was worth it—to see that face.

I glanced at the time on the alarm clock next to Ethan’s bed. “I should get going soon.”

Ethan looked at me, his expression mirroring mine. His toothy grin was now gone.

“I’m going to see my parents and my sister for Christmas dinner. It’ll be fine, but I’ve had such a good day and I just don’t want to end it with them.”

“Are you going to tell them? About me, I mean.”

“I probably should, since we’re boyfriends and all now.”

Ethan didn’t let me change the subject like he always did; his eyes forced me to say more.

“My sister knows I’ve been seeing someone, but I couldn’t even tell her your name… I called you *they*.” My head hung low. “She knows I’m *gay*, and I couldn’t even tell her I was dating a boy.”

“It’s okay,” Ethan said, but I could see he was hurt.

“It’s not you I’m ashamed of.” My cheeks went red and hot.

Ethan settled his forehead against mine, our noses brushing together.

“I know.” He kissed me, long and slow.

“Are you seeing your parents? Or is your mum still… Where is your mum?” I asked.

Ethan pulled back. “Well, she and Paul are in Indonesia now, I think. I spoke to her last night, though. They’re having a great time. I think we’re just going to hang around here the rest of the day. Christmas has never really been a holiday I loved.” Ethan started putting his shirt on.

He was awkwardly backing away from me as he talked about his family. I knew the dislike of Christmas had something to do with his childhood.

“No? Me neither,” I said as I passed Ethan his shorts and underwear, still inside each other.

“My parents split when I was young. They never meant to have me. I’m pretty sure I was the downfall of their marriage. My dad was an asshole, he didn’t hurt us or anything, just refused to pay child support and was generally dickish. My mum and I had fun, but we didn’t have a lot of money or other family.”

Ethan hadn’t spoken much about his family, and when he had, it was almost always in defence of his mum—be it her parenting choices when he was young or the closeness of their relationship. I could tell he was used to having to prove his mother was a good person. I believed him; if he loved her, I did too.

I reached out for his hand, holding it in mine. “This is the best Christmas I’ve ever had.”

He looked at me with a smile and kissed me; it was short and sweet, just like Ethan.

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Part 2: The Middle

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Chapter 14

Monday 13 February 2017

“I love your kid to bits, but I’m really glad Aubrie has him on this fine morning,” Ethan said as he drew circles over my bare chest.

He was naked and pressed into me. I felt the closeness and the comfort. Although sometimes his inability to be serious irked me, other times it was nice and gentle—but this time it just wasn’t what I needed.

I tried to ignore it. “I just hope he’s okay. Aubrie’s better at organising these things, though. She’s going to have to meet his teacher, and I would just be awful at that. I’m glad too, is my point,” I rambled.

It was seven in the morning, and I knew that just a few kilometres from me, Ollie was getting his new uniform on, that he would be ouching and squirming as Aubrie combed his hair.

He was so excited for his first day of school. I remembered my first day of school: I went, we talked about letters and numbers and colours, and then I went home. It was nothing special, but that was a long time ago. Kids before used to just ignore the weird ones, but nowadays they singled them out. Being ignored was definitely better.

Ollie was small and quiet; he liked books and turtles and Disney princesses. The books were Aubrie, but the other two were all me. What was going to happen to him when they sat in their little circle and the teacher said, “Tell me three fun things about yourself,” and Ollie replied with, “My favourite princess is Moana, I love turtles, and my mummy and daddy don’t live together”? It’d be my fault when he was made fun of. And what would happen when he was older, telling people about his weekend and saying “my dad’s boyfriend”? How would people treat him then?

Ethan put a hand on my chin and directed my face to his. “He’ll be okay.”

A fitting response once he figured out the tone of the moment. I was surprised by how quickly Ethan had come around to me having a kid. The

way he acted with Ollie made me think it wasn't the kid part he didn't like—it was the responsibility. He was fine when Ollie was just a person he was around, but he got awkward when he saw how much of a child Ollie was, how much he couldn't do for himself and how much he didn't know about the world. When he was reminded I was responsible for him. Sometimes I thought he worried that the deeper into the relationship we got, the more likely that responsibility would fall on his shoulders.

"I know," I said before I kissed him. Looking at Ethan reminded me sometimes things worked out for the best.

***

It was ten o'clock, and Ollie was about to have morning tea. I was in the living room working out. I had taken the day off work; my shoulder had really been bothering me and I didn't trust myself with a saw today.

Four more hours till I could ask him how his day went.

Ethan was making himself a coffee in my kitchen. I saw him watching me out of the corner of my eye. Sometimes I would look up and his head would flick back down to his coffee as if he hadn't been looking.

Ethan came and sat down on the couch right in front of me.

I finished my last few push-ups and joined him, shirtless and a little sweaty. Our knees sat pressed together, like they were their own couple.

"I love you," I said, giving him a kiss on the cheek.

"I'm glad I don't have any work to do today," he said. "You're being so weird." He brushed the hair that had stuck to my forehead back.

"I tell you I love you all the time." I shrugged.

Ethan just looked at me. He was right; I was being weird.

"I love Ollie, how he is right now, and I don't want him to change."

"I loved you exactly how you were when we met, but I love you more now." Ethan put his hand on my cheek. "And trust me when I say that you've changed. Are you really saying you don't like that he doesn't wake up screaming a few times a night, and crawling away at every chance, and eating stuff off the ground anymore?"

"He still eats stuff off the ground pretty frequently. And so do you."

"Why do you think you love us both? We're very similar." Ethan kissed my cheek then ran out of the room.

When he came back, he was holding a little yellow bag. "I thought, seeing as we're not going to see each other tomorrow and you very clearly

need a distraction, I could give you your Valentine's present now."

Ethan was leaving to go down to Wellington for a work dinner this evening. He dangled the bag in front of my face. I loved how he was always so proud of the gifts he picked out for me. I grabbed my bag off the floor and dug out a handful of clangy little things, keeping them concealed.

"Okay, I'm ready now," I said, feeling almost as proud as Ethan looked.

He handed me his bag and I dropped the handful of things into his cupped hands, his eyes closed tightly.

"One. Two. Three," he counted.

On three, he opened his eyes and I opened the bag. We both took a second to figure out what we had been given.

"Wait, are these all pins?" he asked.

"Yeah, I found them all around, I thought you could have them for your bag," I said as I pointed to the messenger bag he always carried with him.

"And these," I began as I lifted the glass jar full of craft supplies into the air, "are flowers—"

"Yes! But they're made of pipe cleaners so they'll never rot."

"Like our love," I mocked.

"Shut up." Ethan shook his head and kissed me, hard and warm.

***

I stood just outside Ollie's classroom. "New Entrants" was written on a sign above the classroom door. A ton of other parents stood around, all looking as anxious as me. Except for one woman—she had her mobile phone in one hand and a baby in the other.

The school bell rang. I was watching the door like you watched a pavlova on Christmas morning, as Ethan had told me on a tangent he went on the other day. Kids started walking out of the classroom, wobbling and wiggling as they walked, their school bags half the size of their bodies. Their teacher was standing in the doorway making sure that every kid walked away with an adult.

Then I saw Ollie—he didn't come out of the class, he was just looking from the doorway, scanning for me. When he saw me, he started running. It was something I had never seen before: He jumped into my arms. I lifted him and gave him the biggest hug, and a big wet kiss on the cheek.

"Daddy!"

The teacher walked up to me and offered a hand. “I’m Miss Hill. I believe I met your wife this morning.”

I switched Ollie to hold him in my left arm so I could shake her hand. “Not my wife, but yeah. Was he okay?”

“Oh yeah, he did great, I just like to meet the parents. He’s a little reserved, but I think he’ll open right up once we start doing some more group activities.”

“Okay, thank you.”

“Nice to meet you...”

“Tyler. And it was nice to meet you too,” I said before I turned to leave.

***

Thursday 18 February 2017

“So it was a good first week, then?” I asked.

We were sitting in the park, each of us with an ice cream in hand. Ollie nodded as he devoured his.

“What was your favourite bit?” Ethan added.

“We got to go to the library at school and Miss… Miss…”

“Miss Hill,” I filled in.

“She said that next week when we go, we can take a book home!”

“That does sound pretty great.” Ethan and Ollie were nodding at each other.

Ollie put the end of his ice cream into his mouth. “Daddy, can I go on the slide, please?”

“Only because your manners were so nice,” I said as I wiped Ollie’s face and hands with a napkin.

He ran, and Ethan and I followed after him, watching as he played all over the park. A woman with a dog walked by, and I saw Ollie eyeing her.

“Daddy, can I pat the dog?”

“You’ll have to ask its owner first.”

“Hi, can I pat your dog, please?” I heard Ollie say.

“Of course, darling,” the woman said before walking over to us. “Your son is very polite.”

I didn’t say anything. She was just staring, her jaw moved like she knew she had said something wrong but wasn’t quite sure what. The dog’s leash was long enough that Ollie couldn’t really hear what was going on.

“Thank you!” Ethan said, with his usual cheer.

He turned to me and reached for my hand, but I brushed it away.

***

“I’m sorry about the park. I didn’t know what to say,” Ethan said once we were in bed that night.

“You didn’t do anything wrong. Two men who touch pretty frequently, walking around with a kid who calls one of them “Daddy.” Someone was going to think that at some point,” I said, but I couldn’t look at him.

“Did it bother you?”

“I don’t know.” I rubbed my hand over my face.

“Was it that she thought I was Ollie’s dad, or that she knew you were gay?”

Fuck him for knowing what I was thinking without me telling him. “I don’t know… I feel like, in my life, I can’t just be a person—I always have to be a *gay* person.” I still whispered that word. “I wish I could be me without it being important.”

I took a few deep breaths as my thoughts formed a sentence. “Am I meant to invite everyone I know and tell them all? I don’t even know that many people. It’s the random people. I’m not going to call you my girlfriend—I don’t want that—but if I say partner, they know anyway so I might as well say boyfriend, or just not talk about you at all.”

“You don’t have to talk about me.”

He was right, I didn’t, but I wanted to a lot of the time. “I did tell my sister. About you, I mean. I told her your name, showed her a picture. She thinks you’re ‘super cute.’” I imitated my sister quite well, I thought. “I was asking to see if the pins were enough for your Valentine’s gift, and she said, ‘I’m going to need more information on this mystery man.’”

“What’s her name again? Lily? You always say *sister*.” He chuckled.

It was kind of funny, but it also made me realise how reserved I had trained myself to be. How practised I was at keeping myself closed.

“Willow. Willa. She always has a different boyfriend on one arm and some sugar-filled fancy coffee that doesn’t really have any coffee in it on the other.”

“Tyler, I love you.”

“Now you’re the one saying it out of the blue.”

“It’s true, though.”

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Chapter 15

Thursday 31 August 2017

It was my first time being invited to this carpenters' conference. Now that I had finished my apprenticeship, Rob said it would be a good idea. It was all talks about health and safety, proper building techniques, that kind of thing. I didn't really want to go, for a few reasons:

1. I had never been on a plane and didn't really want to.
2. I had talked to George about Ethan—nothing deep, just brought it up in conversation—and he had mocked it a bit. Then he told some of the other guys, who either completely ignored me or joined in on the mocking. So I didn't really want to spend more time with them than I had to.
3. I didn't want to leave Ollie or Ethan.

I also knew that if I didn't go, it would only give them more to ridicule me about. Ethan tended to be a people-pleaser while I just avoided the people—no need to please them if you aren't near them—although avoidance seemed like it would only make this situation worse.

Ethan had convinced me to go. He offered to stay with Ollie on Monday—a teacher only day—and take Ollie to school on Tuesday morning before Aubrie would be able to take him. Ethan had been staying at my house four or five times a week lately, and as much as they had bonded over mocking me, I was still surprised by the offer; it seemed like a big deal but he seemed excited about it, and Ollie had been enjoying his first year of school, so I thought it would be okay. In Ollie's words, "I can't wait to hang out with Ethan, his dinner is better than Daddy's." I couldn't argue with that, so I said yes.

Ethan had called me a few times a day to talk and one time because he thought he had lost Ollie (he was in the bathroom). Overall, they seemed to have fun together, and there was a certain level of comfort I had leaving Ollie with Ethan that I didn't know would be there.

I went down the escalator with one giant backpack I had borrowed from my dad strapped to my back. My eyes were droopy and my arms hung limp at my sides. The trip wasn't bad; it was a little boring, very long, and there were definitely some unnecessary comments.

"Who are you texting, Tyler?" George had sung at me while we were on the plane ride there.

I ignored him.

"Are you texting your boyfriend?" he dug at me.

"At least someone wants to fucking date me."

That was a bit mean as George's wife had recently asked for a divorce. *Good for her*.

I scanned the crowd of people in the airport—crying, hugging, sleeping. I found Ethan playing peekaboo with a baby in a stroller. Once he spotted me, he grinned. I didn't want to be one of *those* people in the airport, but I lost that thought when I saw him—he had grown out a little moustache. I felt so much relief; I was so tired and I just wanted to sleep in his arms. I didn't run, but I walked very fast until I wrapped my arms tightly around him, squeezing all the air out of him and lifting him a few centimetres off the ground. He put his hand on my neck, his nails digging into my skin.

"I missed you," Ethan whispered.

I wanted to kiss him. My lips barely brushed his cheek as I pulled him closer.

"Aww, did you guys miss each other?" Kaden yelled, and George cowered behind him.

This idea that we were friends seemed to make him think he could be homophobic and it would just be okay. Ethan readied his hand to pull the finger, but I stopped him.

We walked out, arms and shoulders brushing on our way to get Ollie from Aubrie's house. As I got in the car, I pulled my hoodie off and threw it to the back seat.

"What happened?" Ethan asked as he put the car in drive.

His eyes were on a bandage on my left biceps. I had honestly forgotten it was there.

"I, uh… I cut it on some—some corrugated iron." That was the truth—not the whole truth, but enough of it, and I knew it wouldn't happen again, and it really wasn't a big deal.

“Is it okay?” he asked, looking over at it again. “It’s a weird place, like, so high on your arm.” Ethan was looking at my face for far longer than was safe for someone in the driver’s seat.

“Oh yeah, well, it was a safety seminar and they hadn’t followed the rules properly. Don’t worry about it. Work makes sure my tetanus is all up to date and stuff.” I took his hand and planted a kiss over his knuckles.

When we neared Aubrie’s house, Ethan said something funny. “Do you think Aubrie likes me?”

“Yeah, why?” That was my immediate response, although I understood why he asked after spending a second thinking about it.

“Well, we haven’t met, but Ollie said she told him that he shouldn’t give his drawings to me and that she didn’t want them in my house, which I didn’t even think you’d noticed.” He was sort of laughing but I could tell he was internally freaking out.

“I knew I shouldn’t have mentioned that to her. I was just so happy when I saw it.”

Why does she always do this?

“Well, it was a great evening,” he said.

“She gets jealous. It’s not about you.”

“How is she jealous of me? We haven’t even met. I’m not upset, I just don’t want to overstep or something. Ollie’s her son. I don’t want to be his parent, you know that.” Ethan’s words were logical, but he sounded worked up, like he had been thinking about this for days.

“Y’know how I always say that I love Aubrie?” I said, and Ethan nodded. “Well, she *actually* loved me. She’s jealous of you because I love you romantically and she’s always wanted that. She’s also convinced herself she’s a bad mother, so when Ollie talks about hanging out with you, you looking after him while I was away—even just for a day because she couldn’t—it makes her feel like a bad mother.”

Ethan sat with it all. His eyes changed from concern to understanding. “Does she not date?”

“She does, but she’s busy. And she hasn’t had much luck. She’s got a kid, which is hard, and she’s so focused on her work.”

“I guess it can’t have been easy for her.”

Huh?

“You, I mean. Loving you or whatever, and then you end up gay. It’s not like you didn’t love her and she could move on—you do love her, y’know.

And then she had to stay around you because of Ollie."

This was another reason I hadn't wanted to tell her about Ethan. Why couldn't she just let me have this? She probably didn't even realise what she was doing. I just wished she could get over herself and accept that she was doing her absolute best and that she didn't need to berate herself all the time.

Ethan had stayed in the car when I went to get Ollie from inside. I didn't want to push Aubrie.

I lifted him into the back seat. "Fuck me," I huffed under my breath, but Ollie still giggled at it.

"You alright?" Ethan asked as I jumped back into the car.

"Yeah, just my shoulder."

"Still?"

I nodded.

"How was school?" I asked Ollie as we pulled out onto the road.

"Mummy got me a new purple book bag, so I got to get more books." Ollie opened the bag and pulled out a picture book. "Can you read this one tonight?"

"What's it called?" I asked.

"Grandma, M… M… Mc… McGarvey. Grandma McGarvey t… tac… tay… takes a… dive." His little voice knew exactly what to do.

***

I was crouched on the floor beside Ollie's bed, putting him to sleep. Ethan was picking out a movie for us in the bedroom.

"We've had this word a lot. Do you remember?" I asked with my hand under the word, covering everything else so he could focus.

"Sssss…said! Those two together are tricky," he said, pointing to A and I.

He wasn't wrong. As Ollie was learning to read, I was realising how stupidly designed the English language was. Most of his incorrectness when reading, writing, and spelling was complete common sense that we had trained out of ourselves because it was "technically" wrong.

"How was the book?" Ethan asked as I walked into the bedroom.

"Oh, very good, and he was sure to tell me there were at least five more in the series, so we've plenty of content." I fell onto the bed beside Ethan.

He had picked out *Call Me by Your Name*, a movie he had seen before because he had some work to do before bed. I'd been excited about watching it for a while, but it switched languages a lot so I hadn't found the motivation for it. I was lying beside Ethan, my head gently pressed against his right biceps. It tensed on and off as he typed away on his laptop.

"Is he gonna fuck the peach?" My face scrunched as the words fell from my mouth.

"Yeah," Ethan sighed. "I knew you wouldn't like that part."

I kept watching. "I'm not sure I'll ever be able to eat a peach again."

"Really?"

"Obviously that's a lie, I love stone fruit," I huffed back at him, craning my neck to see his eyes.

It wasn't all that often I saw his eyes behind his glasses. His sight really was awful without them, but my god, they were gorgeous.

"Not as much as Timothée Chalamet, obviously." His eyes were glued to his screen as he tried and failed to not laugh at his own joke.

Ethan finished his work in time for the end of the movie. I turned to him and started kissing his neck and chin as the credits rolled. His head tilted back as I kissed down his clothed torso to his pyjama pants. I slipped the checkered fabric off—his dick was still mostly soft as I took it in my mouth. I pressed my tongue into the slit, tasting him. I pushed a finger into Ethan's mouth and let him suck on it for a moment before I slipped it between his ass cheeks.

One hand fingered him, the other was pushing his shirt up. I grabbed his tit, squeezing and pinching his nipple which awarded me with a giggly moan. His hand landed over mine on his chest, his head flinging back as he whimpered and shook beneath my touch. We had done this enough times for me to know he was ready.

"Fuckin' take your clothes off," he said just as I pulled off him, giving him a moment of relief.

He was naked on the bed watching me as I tore my clothes off as quickly as possible. I opened the drawer to grab the lube. "There's no condoms left," I huffed.

"You fuck anyone else? I wouldn't love it, but we never actually said 'don't do it.'" Ethan's eyebrows raised with mirth. A second later they were pleading, his chest red as he panted.

He was so desperate he had started fingering himself with one hand and reaching for me with his free hand.

“I haven’t, have y—”

Ethan urgently shook his head and pulled me into him. His hairy upper lip rubbed against my cheek. The feeling was exceedingly enjoyable—I hoped he would keep it.

The lube and pre-cum mixed together over Ethan’s ass as I pushed in, feeling him clench around my dick. One of his fingers was still inside of him.

I’d never seen something sexier. “Holy shit.”

I kissed him. Pressing my tongue into his mouth and licking his palate. His lips quivered as he breathed through the pleasure. God, I had missed him. I could smell his musk as he pulled my head into his chest.

“Harder,” he tried to demand, but he was too far gone.

I bent a knee and put my foot on the bed, snuck a pillow under his pelvis, and thrust harder. My hands grabbed his thighs hard enough to leave marks. His fingers trickled into my hair and pinched tightly around the strands. We both came, although we had managed to ride it for quite a while. I rolled out of him a little too quickly, and my cum dripped onto the sheets.

We lay side by side, panting and sweaty.

“I’ll get the sheets while you get the shower started.”

I nodded at Ethan with a grin so large I couldn’t possibly have spoken.

We were naked in our bed, clean—both us and the bed. Ethan was half asleep beside me as I scribbled in my leather notebook with the light from my cell phone torch.

“You have got to get a yellow lamp. The white light is too much.” His voice was muffled, his face pressed into a pillow.

“I shall put ‘lamp’ on the shopping list.” I was still smiling.

“What are you doing, anyway?”

“Writing about the movie. I’m almost done, go to sleep,” I whispered as I rubbed my hand down his back.

Thursday 31 August, 2017

Call Me by Your Name, Luca Guadagnino 5/10
This movie was very neutral. My boyfriend loves it but I think he just has a crush on Timothée Chalamet. There are so many cheating tropes with bisexual characters, I can’t understand how being

bisexual would make you any more likely to cheat on someone. The monologue in the end : (i hope i never have to feel the pain to remember what I had. Maybe I didn't like this movie because I'm in a relationship that's actually working out and this was just ruining my romance, not the peach though. The peach definitely helped the romance.
Also, I am very pro-mustache but Timothée it’s really not for you.

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Chapter 16

Friday 21 October 2011

As I walked down the concrete footpath, I thought about what was going to happen. I was about to do something that I couldn't go back from. There would be before tonight and after tonight.

I had only had sex with a girl once. It could've been a bad experience. Maybe I'm not gay, maybe being high and drunk when you have sex just made it awful, or maybe Aubrie just wasn't right. But I loved Aubrie, she was awesome.

Sex was all the same, wasn't it? I'd never kissed a boy's lips, but they didn't seem that different from a girl's. And neither did buttholes and coochies. They all seemed mostly the same. Maybe I just hated sex. That was a real thing for some people. But I did *want* to have sex. I did. I knew it could feel good. It felt good when I wanked; I just wanted that but with the warmth of another person.

All I had to do was walk in, say hi, take my clothes off, let him give me a blow job and then have sex. Should *I* give *him* a blow job? I didn't think I would be bad. I mean, I never gave Aubrie head, but that was because I thought it would be awful. You were supposed to reciprocate that type of thing, though. They always did in porn; it's always one and then the other. Although sometimes the bottom would give a blow job and didn't get one back. That would be ideal, but I kind of hoped we could just skip that part altogether.

I hoped he read my whole profile. I used Grindr—another thing I learnt from porn—and I put in the description that I wanted to top. I didn't want someone on top of me, holding me down, doing something to me. It felt like I would have no ability to do anything in that situation.

Shit, maybe this was a bad idea.

I had also heard it hurt. I would rather keep it simple. I just needed to confirm I was… whatever I was and leave.

I stood outside the room. I patted my left pocket—phone, my right pocket—wallet, my front pocket—keys.

I knocked on the door, but when it opened, I panicked. *I know you.*

"So Ryan was a front then, Tyler," he said. I felt the confusion plastered on my face. "We had Level 2 maths and Level 3 health."

Lewis? Lewis from Level 2 maths and Level 3 health is gay?

"Oh, yeah," I breathed out.

"I'm not going to tell anyone about this. I'm going down to Wellington for school in January anyway." He smiled at me. He grabbed the front of my jacket and pulled me closer. "I'm ready for this."

He sounded excited. Then he started kissing me. His lips were rougher than Aubrie's—the skin and the way he kissed. Our tongues tangled together, his hands moving to my chest and sliding up over my shoulders, pushing my jacket off. I put my hands on his chest, my fingers tickling his collarbone. His hands moved back down my flanks and started tugging at the bottom of my T-shirt. He gently edged it up my body and over my head. I was cold, even though the room was warm. I desperately unbuttoned his shirt and flicked it off.

Yes, better… Now it's fair.

His chest had thin hair that lay in perfect patterns. It was soft, like a greyhound. His nipples were hard as my palms brushed them. My dick was hard; I hadn't thought about it until it pressed up against his thigh.

The kissing turned more intense as he started unbuckling my jeans, but I pushed his hands away and did it myself, slipping everything off as he did the same. His dick was hard and long. It wasn't particularly thick, but it had a lot of hair. It was different from mine and different from the other penises I had seen. I stood there, naked, facing another naked man.

It was weird to be in a situation where I could look, but I did. My eyes cast over his body, taking it all in.

He lowered to his knees and sucked me. His mouth engulfed my cock, one hand gripping my thigh and the other sliding between my legs, tickling my ballsack. I looked down at him—his eyes were closed, his lips swollen and shiny as he applied more pressure. He looked more at peace than Aubrie had, like he had done this a thousand times before. My head tilted back as I gripped his hair, feeling myself nearing the end of my rope.

"Stop," I gasped. I *needed* to have sex tonight.

He stood up to kiss me. I tasted myself on his lips—a lot sweeter than I had expected. He put his hands on my chest and walked me back to the bed. I quickly spun us around so I could choose how this happened, and as I did, I realised that was going to be hard because I didn't even know how to. I stopped.

"What is it?" he asked, giving me a peck as he tried not to let the mood slip.

"How—How do you…"

He lay down on the bed and pulled me on top of him, then reached for the dresser and handed me a condom. Fuck me, I should have practised this. I tried to do it as well as I could, to not look like I had no idea how. It took about ninety seconds which was sixty seconds too long. He giggled beneath me. I stuck my mouth on him to stop it, to pull us back to how it was before, hot and needy. We were kissing, I was above him.

"I already did all the hard work," he whispered and gestured to the bedside table. A slicked-up butt plug sat there.

Well, good thing, because I did not know what I was doing there. I lined my dick up and slid it in. It was tight and warm. His legs wrapped around my body and pulled me close. I slid all the way in, to the base of my cock, my balls sitting against his ass. It was different from the last time—it felt stronger, hotter, more intense. I was way more anxious than last time, but I felt more relaxed, like there was less emotional pressure. Yet I felt like I was going to cry.

"Tell me if anything hurts," I said.

I tried to smile at him but his eyes were closed, back arched, head rolled back as he bit down on his lip and nodded. His face turned from a grimace to more of a smile, and I took that as a signal to start moving. And thank god, because all my body wanted was friction. I pulled my dick out, so just the tip was in, then used my body weight to push all the way back in. My dick slid across a hot, small ball, and he let out a groan. It was an encouraging sound, so I thrust harder, using his groans to tell me what he liked and didn't like. I finally felt like I was doing right when his hands gripped my ass cheeks and started squeezing and massaging. He grabbed the lube from the bedside table and put some on his fingers. He rubbed his fingers under my balls, then moved them over my asshole. It made me shiver. He rolled his finger around the opening. I lost all sense of pace,

safety, heat. I just wanted it to be over. I scanned my brain for ways to stop it.

I grabbed both his wrists and pinned them above his head. He seemed to like it. I did not. There was no part of me that had any interest in pinning down a person so I could fuck them, but pinning down a person so they couldn't touch me felt like the only option right now.

I pumped as quickly as I could, using just one hand to hold him down and the other to massage my balls, to get me done as quickly as possible. He cried out before he came all over the both of us. I hadn't thought about that—not having the cum contained—and now it was everywhere. I rolled off him, flat on my back, thinking about the after.

I was in the after now.

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Chapter 17

Wednesday 6 December 2017

“Do you have a plan for Christmas?” I asked.

Ethan and I sat across from each other on my couch. Ollie was on his last day of school, and Aubrie had insisted on picking him up and taking him out for a celebration. She had been so excited her work finished for the year before Ollie’s school did, and as much as I would’ve loved to pick Ollie up from his first last day of school, I wasn’t going to take that pride away from her.

“Same as last year, why?” Ethan asked.

He was typing on his laptop, sending a passive-aggressive email, I could tell. I had one knee pulled to my chest as I picked at the pills on my sock. It was dead silent except for the clacking of his keys and my breathing.

“Not seeing your mum?”

My question seemed to cause a droop. “I thought I would, but no,” he sighed. “She said she’s going to stay in Europe for a while. Italy first I think. Apparently, they really like it there, although she gets bored so quickly I doubt they will stay there for longer than a few weeks before she’s done with it.” He shut his laptop and pushed it to the side.

He wiggled his shoulders and huffed out a breath, then leaned in and started pecking my cheek. “I am all yours until January!”

“I was thinking of inviting you to my family Christmas.”

Ethan leaned back and looked at me.

“My parents are going on holiday this year, so we’re doing Christmas on the…” I pulled open the text thread with my mum. “Twenty-second.”

The truth was that Willa knew about Ethan already, and Ollie had mentioned him to my parents last time we visited. I was so lost in that moment, but it was Ollie’s life too, and he was five—it wasn’t his job to keep my secrets. I managed to get out of it because we were in a rush.

I didn’t really want to go and deal with all that on my own. I knew if Ethan came, at the very least they would get to see how great he was instead of him just being this guy their son was sleeping with, and they might be nicer with a guest.

“So you told them about me then?” Ethan asked. His hand was trailing my arm; I could tell what he wanted the answer to be.

“Ollie mentioned you, but the exact nature of our relationship was not discussed.” That was not what he wanted. “I thought I would see if you wanted to come first, and then if you did, I could text them so they have time to think about their reactions.” I let out an anxious, huffy laugh. “My sister will be there and she knows, and she really wants to meet you, and my parents love her, so I feel like that’ll help. And Ollie will come too, and they are way less likely to say anything stupid if he’s there.”

“Do you think they’ll say something rude? Your parents, I mean?”

“Not in a ‘you guys don’t belong here, you suck’ way. It’s more the subtle comments and facial expressions. They would never admit it’s not something they love.”

“They do know, though… don’t they?” Ethan’s voice was also joylessly chuckling. At my blank stare, he reiterated, “They know you’re gay.”

“They know,” I stated.

“But it hasn’t been said. Tyler,” he sighed. “*You* can’t even say it. It’s okay, I know it’s hard, but you need to be able to say it. You’ve accepted me, and you’ve accepted that you love me, but you need to do the same for yourself.” Ethan took my hands in his. “Say it. Do it now.” He was jiggling my hands. “Come on, it’ll feel so good to just say it.”

My jaw quivered. “I’m… gay.”

“Yes, you are. You’re gay.”

He kissed me soft and quick, rubbed my shoulder and then said, “Your plan is very well thought out and kids do make great bodyguards… I’m very proud of you. And I would love to come to Christmas with you.”

***

Thursday 21 December 2017

“We need to leave at eleven tomorrow if we’re going to get there for lunch.”

“I thought it was dinner?” Ethan asked as he rearranged the contents of his duffel bag and then left the room.

I honestly didn’t know why he wasn’t just living here at this point, although I guessed I would have had to ask him for that to happen.

“It is!” I shouted from my bedroom. “But I want to get there early to help, and we’ll probably have some, like, crackers and shit before we have dinner. It’s just better for us to be there earlier.” *Less for them to berate me about.*

I heard Ethan go to say something but he stopped himself from trying to convince me it would be okay—he knew it wouldn’t help. I just wanted this to go well. Not only was I basically coming out, I was also introducing them to my very cool awesome hot boyfriend, who I did think might just be slightly too gay for them.

“Can you just stay the night? Then we can sleep a little longer and I don’t have to be stressed about the salad. Are you still okay with doing that? But I don’t have the salad stuff here, so maybe you should just go home.”

Ethan walked back into the bedroom and put his hands on my forearms. “I can get the salad ingredients, and I was under the impression I was making a cake too. But don’t worry, I have it all sorted. I’ll go to the supermarket later.” His hands gently rubbed over my skin. “Have they said anything else?”

“No, only ‘OK’ after I asked if you could come, and then every other conversation, they just completely ignored your existence. I can’t figure out if I like them ignoring it or if I wish they would acknowledge it,” I said.

“That’s their problem, not for you to worry about,” he said, brushing my hair out of my face.

I always felt conflicted when he did that. I loved the touch and care, but sometimes it made me feel small.

“What you do need to worry about is what you’re going to wear. I’ve picked out mine—a good ‘I’m your son’s boyfriend but I’m cool and just a normal guy’ look,” Ethan said as he left the room then returned with a handful of clothes. He held up some cargo shorts, a green denim. “For the bottom, and then…” He lifted a white singlet and a surfing Santa button-up. “For the top. And look, the socks I picked out have little reindeers on them. Because I’m a fun guy, y’know.”

“Very respectable,” I said.

“What about you?”

“I have no fucking clue.”

Ollie’s head popped into the room. “Daddy, can I watch *Boss Baby*?”

“Again? I guess…” I looked at Ethan. “Can you put it on for him?”

Ethan’s eyes begged me not to.

We had seen *The Boss Baby* at least four times a week since it came out. And it had only gotten worse since school finished.

“Of course I can!” Ethan said, and then they walked back into the living room.

I dug into my closet trying to find… *something*. I pulled on a pair of grey shorts, but they stopped at my mid-thigh. I went into the living room and lifted my arms. *How’s this*?

“I have literally never seen those shorts, and I think they might be a little tight on you. And you are actually going to wear a shirt, right?” he said with an uptick in the corner of his mouth.

“Yeah, Daddy, you have to wear a top.” Ethan and Ollie high-fived.

“I’m obviously gonna put a shirt on, guys,” I shouted as I went back into my room.

I found some slightly longer shorts, light blue denim this time. My dark leg hair was thick and obvious on my legs. *I liked that*.

“Okay, is this better?” I asked.

I didn’t even care anymore.

“Yes! Very summery, go pick a shirt.” Ethan guffawed at me.

I came back again, this time holding up two shirts—one plain black and one plain white. “I think the white one,” I said.

“Don’t you have that green one?” he asked, tilting his head at me. I could see him searching for a cake recipe on his laptop. “Do you think this one looks good, Ollie?”

“Daddy, we’re going to make the cake together!” Ollie said as I left the room again to find “that green one.”

Now dressed, I came back. *Please be the last time*. Ollie was looking at the cake recipe on Ethan’s laptop; he seemed to be reading, but he was definitely just looking at the pictures.

“Yes! It’s a bit long though, give it here,” he demanded. “If I shorten it a little, we—*as in me*—can see those lil’ hips.”

I whipped the shirt off and threw it at him. He pointed at me up and down. *You look good*, he mouthed.

I felt myself blushing as he started cutting the shirt. I sat beside Ollie on the couch, giving him a hug while Ethan hemmed my now shorter shirt.

***

Friday 22 December 2017

Ethan was lying on top of me in bed, his chin on my chest. We had underwear on, but it was far too hot for blankets. We weren't asleep, but we certainly weren't awake yet. His head rolled around as the sun shone through my bedroom window.

"Do you think it'll be okay?"

"Obviously it'll be okay, and besides, what other possible answer would I give you right now?"

I rolled him over and pinned him to the bed as I kissed him. Then I rolled off him and lay beside him. "I gotta get Ollie up for breakfast."

"Yeah, we gotta ice the cake and make the salad," Ethan replied.

"You're okay with him helping? You can tell him no if you need."

"Have you seen that kid? He loves it. I really don't mind. To be honest, he just stirs and helps with cleaning. Not too shabby."

About half an hour later, Ethan and I walked into the kitchen, hair wet, still on a high. Ethan started making coffee while I went to check if Ollie was awake.

"You ready for breakfast?" I said as I walked down the hall.

He came running out of his room and into my legs. I looked down at him. *Fuck*.

Ollie had started dressing himself over the past few months; he had been doing very well. So well, in fact, that I forgot that for certain events he still needed his outfit picked out for him. He was wearing green and yellow striped *leggings* and a dinosaur T-shirt, which was fine, but it was red and clashed hard with the leggings and his unmade orange hair.

Ethan had made us both coffee and poured Ollie's cereal by the time I had gotten back into the kitchen.

"So we have a few things I forgot. Gotta dress Ollie, his clothes haven't been washed, also his hair… I forgot about that." I kept my voice steady, but my whole body was shaking.

How could I literally forget about my son as a whole? I was so concerned about making sure Ethan and I were dressed properly and ready

to make a good impression. This was exactly why I shouldn't be in a relationship. Ollie was the only thing I should be concerned about.

"Hey," Ethan said with a hand over my white knuckles. "You pick out an outfit while we ice the cake. Then we can all get dressed and we'll make the salad while you fix Ollie's hair." Ethan moved his eyes from mine to Ollie's. "Come on guys, let's get going, it's Christmas!" he cheered.

I smiled as he spoke. I found Ollie's outfit: orange fabric shorts and a grey dinosaur shirt. Still colourful, but much more cohesive. The cake had been iced, and we were all dressed. Ollie was standing on his little step stool mixing olive oil and balsamic vinegar in a small dish as Ethan sliced some olives. I was standing behind him combing Ollie's hair. It was getting so long that I had to tie it up or Ollie would be aggressively brushing it out of his face for the rest of the day. I hoped my parents wouldn't think it was too long. Or that it was long because I was doing some kind of gender-fluid child-rearing technique. Ollie just hated having his hair cut and didn't mind it being long. I figured as long as he let me tie it up, it didn't really matter.

Before we left, I put a ring, very clearly on my right hand, slow-rolling the jewellery without accidently making my parents think we had gone and got engaged. That would be exceedingly unhelpful.

I patted my left pocket—phone, my right pocket—wallet, my front pocket—keys.

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Chapter 18

Friday 22 December 2017

My childhood home was gone. My parents had knocked it down shortly after I moved out and built a new home. Sometimes I thought they wanted to prove to everyone around them that they were an honourable family, even after their son got a girl pregnant and then didn't even stay with her. Honourable with their fucking bay windows. The older I got, the angrier I became.

I shouldn't have to contact them if I wanted to talk to them any time that isn't a holiday. Every time I talked to Willa, she would say something like "Did Mum tell you?" or "Did you hear that Dad…" The answer was always no.

We were standing outside my parents' house. Ethan had a cake in his hands; Ollie had a salad in his; my hands were empty. Ollie had cut up the cucumber and the red onion—with assistance, of course. I had felt so proud watching Ethan holding his hands over Ollie's as they chopped. I felt a bit useless standing there, both in the kitchen and now at the door. I knew I hadn't contributed as much as I should have.

The door swung open to my mum standing there. Her hair was a silver bob now, and she wore a floral blouse, jeans, and a big gemmy necklace. She was young for a grandma, not quite so unstylish, pretty average for a woman in her fifties.

"Hello, Ollie!" she exclaimed.

"Gramma! Look at my salad," he commanded, thrusting the salad in her face.

"Your grandad's in the backyard," she said before taking the salad and watching Ollie run through the house. "Tyler," she said. She looked me up and down before coming in for a hug. She gave me a weird pat on the back. "And you must be Ethan."

“Yes, it’s lovely to meet you. I’d shake your hand but, y’know.” Ethan gestured to the cake.

“Well, come on in, you two,” she said after a moment of awkward silence.

She ushered us in and slammed the door behind us. I jumped at the sound. *Trapped*.

We walked into the kitchen where Ethan set the food on the bench. My mum, Jenny, went over and started peeling potatoes when my dad, Charlie, and Ollie came in from the yard.

“Sorry, all, was just getting the pellets for the grill. Ollie’s getting so big now, ay?” he said, patting his head. “Needs a haircut, though.” My dad shook my hand. “How are you, son?”

“Good, yeah.” I stuttered.

“And you’re Tyler’s friend… Ethan, right?” he said, shaking Ethan’s now empty hand.

Ollie’s eyes were searching between Ethan, my dad and me. My five-and-a-half-year-old son knew there was something off about the phrase my father had just said.

My dad pulled a tray of meat out of the fridge and started brushing a glaze over it.

“Is that barbecue?” Ethan asked.

“Oh no, I would never use bottled sauce. It’s a homemade honey soy glaze,” he explained. “Don’t worry, Tyler, your simple taste buds will be pleased with the roast chicken your mother is doing. Do you barbecue?” he asked Ethan.

“I would love to, but I live in a pretty small flat with a lot of flatmates, so there isn’t really room,” Ethan explained. “I do love a good roast, though,” he said to my mother.

My mother and Ethan continued to talk while my dad put the meat on the grill. She put Ethan to work boiling the potatoes. Ollie was playing on the carpet in the living room with the cat, Scruffy. My mum was *super creative*. With my boys taken care of, I went to talk to my dad.

“You wearing rings now?” he asked when I used my hand to pass him a pair of tongs.

I shoved my hands into my pockets. “Can you not call Ethan my friend? That’s not the truth. It’s confusing for Ollie when I tell him one thing and he hears another thing from someone else.”

“Are you sure that’s what’s confusing for him?”

“Willow’s here!” my mother’s voice called from the kitchen.

“Oh my god, Tyler, he’s even cuter in person!” Willa said. She had a hand on Ethan’s shoulder, who was blushing. “And you, you look great. I’ve missed you.” Her arms wrapped around me, tight and warm. “And where is my nephew? Tyler, have you seen your son lately?”

Ollie was giggling from behind the couch.

“I have not, my dear Willow.”

“Where could he be?” She rubbed her chin.

“I’m right here, Aunty Willa!” Ollie ran out from behind the couch and she crouched for a hug.

“Is that a dino on your shirt?!” Her eyes were wide.

“Did you know that turtles are as old as the dinosaurs?” Ollie said.

“I did not.” Willa returned to her full height, looking over the table as she picked an olive from the salad Ethan made. “Is this Greek? I love Greek,” she said, picking at the salad again.

“Ethan made it,” I announced.

“He’s a cook.” Willa raised her eyebrows.

“I had a lot of help, right?” Ethan said, pulling Ollie’s attention from that damn cat.

“Yeah, I cut up the onion and the cucumber. And I cracked *both* of the eggs without any shell. Ethan has been helping me practise. And did you know that turtle eggs are soft, not hard like chicken’s?” Ollie explained just as my dad came back inside.

My mum made eyes at him, using their own stupid secret language to talk about us in front of us.

“So, when’s dinner then?”

Thank god for Willa.

Ethan and I sat on one side of the big table on the deck, Willa and Ollie on the other, Mum and Dad at either end. Ethan was always polite, but he had never been this polite. I appreciated his attempt to please them. We passed the dishes carefully around the table. Ethan reached past me to grab the Greek salad.

“Tyler might want some?” mum said as her eyes bore into Ethan.

He was just grabbing the salad, Mum, leave him alone.

“Oh no, Tyler hates cucumbers.” Ethan’s voice was calm and he chuckled as he spoke. “I said, ‘Tyler, I can make a different salad’ but he

knows this is the salad I make when I get invited for a meal." He gave me a big toothy grin.

Ollie talked about his school, about how his first year had gone. He mostly talked about the library and one spelling test he had done that he did so well on he had gotten to show the principal. He went on about how he got an award at the end-of-year assembly. I loved how proud he was, how unafraid he was to tell people how amazing he was. My parents just nodded along. My dad finished cutting Ollie's chicken which he then shoved in his mouth, shutting himself up.

"So how did you two even meet? Tyler never really told me." Willa asked.

I take it back, do not thank god for this woman.

Ethan looked at me.

Stuttering, I said. "Just a dating app, nothing special."

"It was fun, though. We went to White & Wong's and got like a little potluck of different things to try. Shit—" Ethan's hand slapped over his mouth. "Jeez," he corrected. "That was almost two years ago." His face turned to all teeth again.

"Did you get a goodnight kiss?" Willa hummed.

I did the eye thing my parents usually did at her.

What? she mouthed.

"Not that night," Ethan politely added.

"Two years is a while," my mum said as she stabbed some potatoes. "Could've said something."

"Willow, how's it going with the fine young man?" My dad, the master of the subject-change. "Willow is dating a fireman. Very respectable profession." He looked right at Ethan.

"Willow *was* dating," she corrected. "And if Tyler didn't tell you about his relationship immediately, that's fine. I've had a few boyfriends I've never mentioned. He didn't tell me at first, either. Funnily enough, his relationship isn't about you."

Thank god for Willa.

Ollie and Ethan were making faces at each other across the table; Ollie's giggling was shaking the table. He was perfectly distracted from our arguing.

Thank god for Ethan.

Dinner was long, dessert was quiet.

We sat throughout the living room. Ollie was opening gift after gift—the only grandchild, getting spoiled. Ollie was happy to open presents, but the gifts weren't quite right. The dino toys would definitely get played with, but I knew the monster trucks would sit in their unopened packets, and that the action figures would become zoo patrons. Willa had bought him a book with one hundred and one facts about turtles which he was deeply enthralled with while the rest of us exchanged gifts.

I got socks from my parents. Willa had a cheeky grin as I opened her gift—it was a self-help book.

"Coming from the girl with a new boyfriend every week." I laughed.

"Tyler, your sister is doing very well in her career. She works for the top event-planning company in the country."

I rolled my eyes, even though my face was turned towards the TV, the black screen a mirror showing me my Christmas.

Ethan handed my parents an envelope. "I hope you can enjoy this."

My mum opened the gift: a movie theatre voucher. "Thank you very much Ethan, that's very sweet," she said as she placed it on the side table.

Next, Ethan handed a gift to Willa.

"These are so cute!" she said as she pulled out a set of matching candles in handmade pottery wrapped with a pipe cleaner flower.

"Yeah, my friend makes them, and the way Tyler talks about your whimsy, I thought you'd like them."

Willa's nose was deep in the candles. She was smiling and sniffing, admiring the pottery. "Thank you, Ethan."

We put on *Home Alone* and got comfy on the couch for the evening. I was hoping Willa would sit next to me, but she sat in the armchair beside the two-person couch I was sitting on in an attempt to get me to sit with Ethan. I wondered if she was being nice or if she wanted to piss off my parents.

Ollie was squeezed between me and the arm of the chair. Ethan sat on the other side of me. I was finding it fucking hard not to just put my arm around him, kiss his cheek, brush my hand through his hair.

Every so often, my dad looked over from the couch he was sitting on with my mum. His arm was around her; he would kiss her cheek and comb her hair with his fingers.

Ollie fell asleep halfway through the movie, so I carried him to his bed on the guest-room couch, right beside the bed Ethan and I would sleep on.

As we left to go to bed an hour later, my mother pulled me aside. “Are you sure Ethan doesn’t want the couch?” She was nodding at her fantastic idea. “It might be a bit uncomfortable with all three of you in there.”

“Ollie’s fine on the couch, and it’s a double bed, plenty of room for us.”

“Yeah, but it’s a little uncomfortable…” Her nose scrunched up as she nodded at me. A Mum nod—*a listen to me because I’m right, because I’m your mum nod.*

“Nope, we’re all good,” I said firmly once I realised what she was implying.

I left before she could say anything else. I took Ethan’s hand in mine and dragged him to the room.

Fuck you, I’ll fucking fuck my boyfriend if I fucking want to.

Obviously, I wasn’t actually going to have sex in a bed next to my child.

Ethan held me that night. He knew I was sad, and he knew I didn’t want to talk about it.

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Chapter 19

December 29 December 2017

The week after Christmas was always confusing—no work, Ollie was with his mum, and after *my* Christmas, I was feeling so out of it. I couldn't stop thinking about the stupid shit my parents had said.

I had decided to build a pan holder for Ethan's cupboard. He tried to cook for me a few months ago and broke a tile in his kitchen when a bunch of pans fell out of the cabinet. I had been sanding it down in the kitchen, getting it ready to be oiled.

I was sweeping the floor as Ethan walked in.

"The cat still alive?" I asked.

"Yes. Fuckin' scratched me though." Ethan rubbed the long red cut on his arm.

He was feeding Mathew's cat while he was away for New Year's; that cat was feral against anyone who wasn't Mathew. Ethan stood behind me, wrapping his arms around my bare torso, his head resting between my shoulder blades.

"You look good," he said. "Ooh, is it done?" His eyes had caught on the almost-finished pot rack.

"Almost. I'll stain it tomorrow. Can we watch a movie or something? I'm so tired." My head rolled back onto his shoulder.

He made me feel safe, until I realised the way he touched me and treated me was the reason why. Then I would start feeling weak.

"Of course. I gotta put something on this though, it's pretty deep." He twisted his arm to look at the ink the scratch cut through. "I hope it doesn't scar my tattoo. That was one of my favourites," he said as he walked to the bathroom.

It didn't seem that deep. I guessed he wasn't used to having cuts and scrapes; I had three splinters from this project alone. I pressed the tips of

my fingers where I had plucked out the shreds of wood into the benchtop. It stung beautifully.

I was lying on my bed. My underwear stuck out from the top of my track pants, and my snail trail ran up my stomach from there. Ethan came into the room, his wound tended to. He sat beside me and turned the TV on.

“What do you want to watch?” he asked.

“Something funny.” I pinched his thigh and raised an eyebrow at his soft features.

Ethan picked out *Hot Summer Nights*, a Timothée Chalamet film again. I didn’t think Timothée Chalamet was hot, and I really didn’t see how Ethan could be attracted to him *and* me, but I supposed he was more adventurous with his potential mates than I was.

“This movie has a great score,” I said about halfway through. Ethan had his leg draped around mine. I appreciated the touch. I wanted to be held but I didn’t want to feel cared for.

“So do you,” Ethan added.

“Was that an attempt at a dick joke? And I do specify ‘attempt,’ because it was awful.” I gripped his thigh and pulled him over to me. “Usually when you want sex, you just ask.”

“Usually, yes, but you’ve been down since we saw your parents, and I know sometimes—”

“I’m good,” I said with a smile painted on my face. He was going to say he knew having sex reminded me I was gay, and I didn’t really need another reminder right now. But I didn’t want it said out loud.

“Yeah?”

I kissed him hard, forcing him onto his back as I sucked his tongue into my mouth. “I love you so much,” I mumbled between his lips.

He moaned as my hand gripped his hard length through his shorts.

My tongue ran over his Adam’s apple, his chin and cheeks. His skin was warm and prickly. I tugged his shirt off and over his head. For the brief moment we weren’t kissing, I missed him. My hands ran over his chest, soft like the flocking on a Sylvanian Family toy. His sides trembled while my tongue circled his nipple.

His ability to let himself go made me feel able to do the same. He was free, so I could be too. It felt fair.

I slipped my fingers into the waistband of his shorts and pulled them down, his dick springing out. It was girthy and had a pile of hair at the base

that spread like a butterfly across his stomach. I rolled my tongue over the head. Slowly pulling it in and out, I tangled my fingers around the hairy base and started pumping it. His hands dug into my shoulders, squeezing and pulling at the flesh. I massaged his balls and pulled his thighs apart as I licked the shaft.

"Fuck me," Ethan huffed.

I kept pumping his dick while kissing his perineum, my thumbs tight on his ass. Ethan had his hand on my head, tugging lightly at my hair. When I pressed my fingers inside, I kissed his stomach. His pre-cum and my saliva had mixed, so they slipped right in. One after the other, I was gentle so as not to hurt him, but firm enough to keep him enthralled in the intensity. I lifted my hips from the bed, reducing the friction on myself at all costs.

By the time he was breathing in just the way he always did—slow, chest shaking with the hard beats inside it—I had his dick in my mouth and two fingers inside him when he came down my throat. I threw myself beside him on my back and cleaned my fingers with a tissue from the bedside table.

"You keep getting better…" Ethan was still out of breath. "Your turn," he said as he slipped his fingertips into my underwear.

I wrapped my fingers around his wrist and pulled it up to my face, kissing it gently. "I'm good." My hand rubbed back and forth over his chest.

He propped himself up on one elbow. "C'mon, I haven't had a chance to give you anything since before Christmas." He pressed on my semi through the light grey fabric of my trackies.

My eyes closed; the friction was too good to stop. His hand went into my underwear and rubbed firmer. His hand slipped out of my underwear, his nails scratched my skin as he hooked his fingers into my waistband. I grabbed his wrists again, fiercer this time.

"Stop!"

Ethan's hands sprung off my body. He was still sitting close to me, but he made sure none of him was touching me. He pulled a blanket over his lower body.

Stop, everything needs to stop.

"It's okay. It's not… I'm sorry, you don't need to…" *You're beautiful.* "You can—" I groaned.

"I can go if you need a minute," Ethan said.

He was a shell of himself. All his joy and giggles and smiles had left. His eyes were glossed over, the muscles in his chest tense.

“Please don’t go… I don’t want you to go.” I reached out for him with one hand and covered my face with the other.

“Okay.”

“Please, don’t go anywhere,” I begged. I felt so small in that moment I wanted to disappear. I pulled him in so I could squeeze my fears into his body.

“I’m not, I’m not,” he assured me with a hand rubbing up and down my back in a swift, firm motion. “What happened? Did I hurt you?” His voice was soft and desperate.

I couldn’t see his face, but I knew it was blank, with bright red cheeks. He squeezed my shoulder as my eyes glided over the room.

My voice was shaky. “No… I did.” The words fell out. I didn’t want them to. I had tried to keep them in, but I knew he would find out eventually and I couldn’t handle trying to keep it a secret anymore.

Ethan didn’t say anything. He didn’t move either. He started breathing heavier, turning my shoulder hot, damp. He stayed there for a while before he leant away, his eyes pink. He looked right at me and said, “That’s okay. Can I see it or…? I just want to know it’s okay.”

I pulled my track pants down and my underwear up. My thigh was pale, apart from the pink and red streaks that flew across it. Ethan laid his hand over my thigh. The pain was tingling, prickling as I adjusted to the subtle pressure. A hot, wet drop rolled over my face.

“When did this happen?” he asked while I covered myself back up.

“Some the day after we saw my parents, and some a few days ago… I don’t know why I did it. Christmas wasn’t that bad. I’m sorry.”

He scrunched his face and squinted as he tried not to let the horror into his expression. “You might need some more support… more than just me, I mean.”

“No. It’s fine.” I sat back from him. Now I did need space.

“Tyler, you just told me you don’t know why you did it, and that the thing that you think caused it wasn’t even that bad.”

“So?” I got off the bed.

“So, you might want to do it again. You need some help.”

“No! It won’t happen again. I don’t even understand the big deal… it’s not that bad.”

“It’s not that bad…? Tyler, you have cuts—five-centimetre-long cuts across your skin!”

It was like he had chosen anger as the only possible way to react. I guessed this was his reaction to scary things when he couldn’t make jokes.

“I get hurt all the time at work. It’s just a few cuts! Can you just stop?” I didn’t want to be yelling.

“No! It starts with a few cuts… And then you—you… you do something —” Ethan’s anger slowed as mine grew.

“I won’t! I won’t do anything.”

“Tyler, I love you, but I cannot watch you do this to yourself. When you hurt yourself, you’re hurting me too.”

“So you want to break up then?”

“No. That’s nowhere near what I want…” Tears slid down his cheek. “I can’t help you here. I need you to help yourself. Please,” he begged.

Fuck, no. Just leave me alone.

I paced the room, my fingers tangled in my hair, tugging on the strands and knocking my knuckles into my skull. “Stop! Stop, stop, stop!”

Ethan forcefully wrapped his arms around me, pinning my arms to my body and trapping me. I thrashed. My eyes rained onto my chest as I flailed back and forth.

Stop touching me, stop being near me, I just want to be alone, I just want it all to stop. I… I…

I screamed out with my last breath.

My hands wrapped over Ethan’s. I felt the fine hair on his arms, I smelt the musk of his slightly sweaty skin, I felt his chest rising and falling against my back. Ethan pulled me onto the bed and continued to hold me as I cried, while I wished and hoped I would just disappear.

***

When I woke up, it was dark outside. My eyes were tight and dry as I looked over the stars out of my window. My head hurt, and so did my chest and my throat as I breathed. Ethan walked in, holding two bowls of pasta.

“Hey,” I tried to say. My voice was hoarse.

“I’m sorry I yelled at you.” He sat beside me on the bed. “Are you okay?” He handed me a bowl but didn’t look at me.

“Are you still angry with me?” My hand pressed on my throat as I spoke.

“No. I was never angry *with* you.” He looked out the window and into the night.

As we ate, all we could hear were the screeching cicadas and the scraping of metal on the ceramic dish.

I thought about Ollie, how he always repeated that rhyme when he saw the stars. I thought about how proud he was every time he succeeded, or even just did well at something. I thought about how much he loved what he did, and how he would always try things and then be completely, brutally honest when he didn’t like them. He didn’t live for anyone but himself. His life was all about doing what he wanted to do. I envied my own child.

“I’ll go.”

Ethan’s head snapped to me as I spoke.

“I’ll go to therapy,” I said.

Ethan’s shoulders dropped. He put his fork down and pushed his bowl aside. His face was broken. “Tyler, you’re going to be okay, and I’ll be with you.”

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Chapter 20

Tuesday 9 January 2018

We were on a couch in the hallway of an office building. I was sitting with about three centimetres between Ethan and me. I wondered if the plant in the corner was real—it was so green, so shiny, so perfect. It couldn't be real.

A man in a suit walked down the hall. My hand flung into Ethan's once he was a few steps past us. I squeezed it.

"Do you want me to wait, or I can go until you're done?" he whispered. The hallway was silent, so it suited.

"Um, can you stay? Just in case I hate it." I hoped he didn't think I was pre-emptively giving up. I wasn't. I just needed the safety net of an escape plan.

Ethan had a leg thrown over his knee, his foot wiggling as he looked around. His eyes scanned over the signs for different offices, then passed over the flyers for substance abuse help, for domestic violence. I wondered if causing emotional pain counted as domestic violence. Ethan stopped his day to bring me here. He did the research to find a therapist that might suit me. I felt like I constantly needed help, like I couldn't accomplish anything on my own, like I was useless.

A hand thrust in front of my face. "Tyler, I'm Elijah. It's good to see you here," said the man.

Whatever happened to saying "Nice to meet you" even though you had just met and didn't know if it was actually nice yet? That was easy to reply to.

"Hi."

He wore a sweater and straight-cut jeans, had a wedding ring, and was probably in his forties. His facial hair was grey although the hair on his head was still a deep brown. His eyes were soft, and there were marks from

glasses on his nose. I stood, but I hadn't let go of Ethan's hand and it stretched our arms between us.

"I'll see you later," Ethan said when I turned back to him.

I gave a forced smile although I could feel how shaky my eyes were.

"Come on in." Elijah's voice was cheerful yet quiet, happy and soft all at once. It was the strangest tone of voice I had ever heard.

Thud!

The door shut behind me. There was no lock on it though. I couldn't tell if that was good or bad. Good because I could get out, bad because anyone could come in. There were two chairs on one side of a small coffee table and a two-person couch on the other. I sat in the middle of the two person couch, knees spread, hands clasped and resting over the zipper of my pants. Fidget toys peeked out from a little wicker basket. Colouring pages and magazines rested on the table. He was just watching me from his seat, a notebook splayed over his lap.

"Do you do therapy for kids?" I asked.

"No, mostly people your age or older, but it helps to have distractions sometimes, so why not have fun distractions?" He smiled again.

He didn't say anything. He just stared at me. I was pretty sure he was supposed to ask me questions. My eyes darted over the space, but all the decorations looked like they belonged in a hotel room.

"Are you having a good day today, Tyler?" Another smile.

"Mmh." I nodded.

His smile was like a flashing light, appearing for a second before his face relaxed again.

"Did you make your bracelet, or was it a gift?" he asked with a nod at my wrist.

I looked down at the orange and blue pattern. My face toyed with the idea of smiling. "No, um, my son did."

"Oh, how old is he?" Elijah's questions came so quickly.

"He'll be six in April. Ethan didn't tell you?"

"No. All Ethan told me was that he wanted to get his partner some help."

"Ollie, my son, made it on his first day of preschool." I felt so proud as I pinged the elastic against my wrist.

"Where is Ollie today?"

"Uh… he's with his mum."

He scribbled something in his notebook. “I assume you two aren’t together anymore.”

“No, Ethan’s my boyfriend.” *Partner, he had said partner, does he not know I’m gay? That seems pertinent.*

“I know, but relationships can be complicated. You and Ollie’s mum co-parent Ollie then?”

“Aubrie, yeah. I usually do weekdays and she does weekends. It just works out better with job schedules and stuff.”

He scribbled something else down. “What do you do for work?”

I didn’t reply.

“I’m just keeping track of the people and things in your life. You’re welcome to read my notes anytime you like.” Another flash of his teeth.

“Oh… I… do construction.”

“That must be an interesting dynamic, being a queer person in that kind of field.”

I shuddered as he spoke.

“Is queer not a word you’re comfortable with? I’m happy to use a different word.”

“No, it’s fine,” I lied. “I guess. I don’t know.”

“The other people you work with are fine with it? You dating a man, I mean?”

“I try not to bring it up.” I was finished speaking on that topic, but he seemed to be waiting for me to say more. “They mock me a bit, but that’s just guy banter. They mock each other about all sorts of stuff.”

“Yes, but it’s a bit different being mocked for your sexuality than for having your shirt on backwards or getting a bad haircut.”

His words swirled in my head as my jaw tightened.

“Is there something else you’d rather talk about?” His head tilted.

That’s when I realised his head was only tilting so he could follow my eyes, which were attached to my head, which was also tilting. I shrugged.

“We can talk about anything you want. We can talk about what you had for lunch or we can talk about your deepest secrets. I don’t mind.”

My head straightened and my eyes flew ahead.

“You can’t say anything that would surprise me… I’ve had people tell me about everything under the sun. People have told me about their biggest shames and their biggest triumphs.”

I gulped.

“Is there a specific reason you came to see me?”

“Christmas…” That was all I could say. We sat in silence for probably a minute.

“Did something happen at Christmas?”

I nodded.

“With your family?”

I nodded again.

“Holidays can be hard. Having to see your family, even if you like them, can be tense.”

“They prefer my sister.” My voice was jittering.

“They? Your parents?”

I nodded. “I don’t know why. I mean, I understand why they don’t like me, but I don’t know why she’s so amazing. She’s a fancy event planner, but that’s not like a career you brag to your friends about your kid having, and she has a new boyfriend every week. Willa’s great, but she’s not so great that my parents should be that overly proud of her over me.”

“You said you know why they don’t like you?”

“Yeah. I mean, I think it’s pretty obvious.” My eyes hung on a thread sticking out of Elijah’s chair.

“Because you’re gay?”

“Yeah, but before that. When I got Aubrie pregnant, and then *didn’t* even stay with her.”

“But you didn’t leave her, you stayed. From what little I’ve heard and seen.” He looked at the bracelet again. “You’re obviously a good father. You haven’t said anything negative about Aubrie, which single fathers almost always do about their children’s mothers, warranted or not. I assume Ollie wasn’t a purposeful pregnancy… You made one mistake as a teenager that ended with a child you obviously love. If they are upset about that, it’s them that should be disappointed in themselves.”

I took a deep breath. My hands moved to my sides, almost like giving myself a hug.

“Was there anything your parents said at Christmas that particularly hurt?”

“Just stupid comments. Not Willa, though. She tried to defend me.” My lips were pinched together as they twisted from side to side.

“Is there anything else you want to tell me about Christmas?” His pen stood tall, ready to write, already halfway down the page.

“You said… you said people tell you about their shame.”

“That’s right.” He nodded, his smile staying on a second longer than it usually did.

“I did something that made me feel like that when I was younger, and again after Christmas. Something I shouldn’t have.”

Something.

“You self-harmed?”

I nodded, then blinked, hard and fast to try and dry my eyes.

“Do you remember why you did it the first time? When you were younger?”

If I spoke, I would fall apart. My knees had made their way together, my arms wrapping around myself as my body tensed. Elijah slid a box of tissues across the table and waited. He just waited.

“I, uh… I think it was…” My tears didn’t get past my cheeks as I rubbed them away with the sleeves of my jumper. “It was after Aubrie and I had sex.”

He gave me a moment to breathe before he spoke again. It was like he wanted me to suffer with my words in silence.

“That’s the *when*. What about the *why*?” his voice lowered as my tears dropped.

I didn’t reply.

“Was there something about the sex specifically that made you feel like you needed an outlet?” His face was so normal as he spoke. Not a single word made him quiver or hush his voice. “Tyler, when did you realise you were gay?”

Apparently, this man was a fucking magician because he figured all that out without me saying any-fucking-thing. “That night,” I forced out.

“Did the sex confirm what you already thought? Maybe it felt like that was your last shot to be straight?”

I nodded.

“That can’t have been easy, and then having a child resulted from that. Not that you don’t love your son, but you probably didn’t have much of a chance to figure out who you are, to become okay with it, before he was here.”

He was silent for a little while longer before he changed the subject. “Does Ollie know you’re gay?”

It felt a little out of the blue. “Yeah, he does. But I don’t, like, push it on him. We don’t touch in front of him too much or anything.”

He hummed before scribbling in his notepad. “So it was Ethan’s idea for you to come to counselling?”

“Yeah, he found out what happened and said I had to go.” I felt my brokenness turning into anger.

“Are you upset with him?”

“I love him.” It was a firm statement—the one thing I knew was true.

“I don’t doubt it. I love my wife, but she does stuff that makes me angry or sad sometimes.”

“He went to therapy as a kid. Sometimes he acts superior, like going to therapy made him a better human.”

“I agree that you might benefit from some counselling. It’s hard to love other people to your full potential when you don’t love yourself.”

I scoffed.

“You don’t have to come back to see me again, but before you leave, I want to do a little test. Don’t worry, you’re not going to be graded, and even if you are, every answer is the correct one,” he said. “Can you name five things you like about your son?”

“He’s smart, he’s good at learning, he’s not a whiny kid, he likes what he likes and is not afraid to say when he doesn’t like stuff. And he’s short for his age so I don’t need to keep buying him new clothes, which is nice.” I chuckled as I added number five.

Elijah laughed too. “Okay, what about Ethan?”

“He’s an amazing cook, he has a job he loves that he’s good at. I love watching him work, he’s always so focused. He always gives the most thoughtful gifts—he’s not concerned about money when giving or receiving, it’s always about what someone will genuinely enjoy. And, uh…” I gave him a look as I stuttered over my last thing.

“You can say it,” he said with a nod.

“He’s really hot, especially when his hair is all a bit ruffled.” I grinned.

“And how about five things you like about yourself?”

My grin vanished and I sat in silence. “I… I—”

Fuck.

I didn’t remember the rest of what happened before I left, swiftly grabbed a silent Ethan’s hand and walked quickly to the car. I moved it into reverse and pulled out of my parking space.

Ethan put a hand on my thigh. “Are you going to go again?”

“Mmh, probably.” I looked at Ethan for just a second and flashed a smile much more pained than the ones Elijah had given me.

My eyes were on the road. I had one hand on the wheel, and the other fell awkwardly on my hip—not in its usual place over Ethan’s hand. My vision started to blur. My face and chest got hot and I felt trapped.

“Tyler!” I heard Ethan shout.

I managed to make my way into the shoulder of the street, less than a kilometre from the counsellor’s office. My face fell into my hands. My sleeves were still wet from earlier tears, which were probably mixed with snot and the sweat from my palms. I couldn’t breathe. I felt a weight on my upper back, which I swatted away. My nails dug into my knees so hard I could feel the sharpness through the denim. I was crying so hard my ears needed to pop; I knew how loud I was without being able to hear it. My chest was shaking. The weight reappeared, over my hand on my knee this time. It was awful, uncomfortable, overwhelming, but I left it. I didn’t have it in me to shake him off. I cried and cried until, eventually, I stopped. My head was on top of Ethan’s hand, on top of mine, on top of my knee.

I was breathing. I was okay.

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Chapter 21

Wednesday 30 May 2018

“I’m a bit nervous,” Ethan admitted, readjusting the bunch of flowers he was holding.

My foot skidded as the moss on the footpath squelched beneath my sneaker. I rubbed my toe into it while I waited for Ethan to catch up.

“It’ll be fine,” I said.

That was as comforting as I could be right now. I was exhausted. I had been going to therapy fortnightly. My last session was yesterday. I had told Elijah about this dinner that Aubrie had invited us to—to meet her new boyfriend, Everett. I had originally said I would come alone, but Aubrie insisted I bring Ethan.

She had been frustrated with me when she yelled, “You’ve got to get over yourself, Tyler. You’re the only person who’s worried about the fact that you’re gay.”

Ethan was mad at me because I was mad at him and I didn’t know why.

“It’s just,” he started as he closed the metre gap between us to walk side by side. “They’ve only been dating two months and she already wants you to meet him. It must be serious.”

“I guess.” I shrugged.

Ethan reached for my hand, but I’d managed to shove both of them deep inside my pockets before he could grab hold. “We’ve been dating two years and you never invited Aubrie to meet me.” Ethan was looking at the ground. It was his turn now to dig his shoes into the loose gravel.

“Can you not right now?” I huffed. “I don’t have it in me to fight.”

“I’m not trying to fight, it’s just, I feel like you’re ashamed of us even when you’re around people who are accepting. I get not wanting to advertise your sexuality all the time, but refusing to hold my hand while walking three fucking steps to Aubrie’s house. It’s—”

“It’s what, Ethan?” I stood still and turned to him.

“It’s a bit fucking ridiculous.”

“I know you live in your little fantasy world where everyone is *gay* and happy all the time, and everyone accepts everyone, and we all shit rainbows that say *love*. But I live in the real world. Do you understand the fucking bullshit I hear every day? Bringing up Aubrie creates a shitstorm of misogyny. I can’t talk about you, and even without bringing you up, they spout all this homophobic shit.” My arms flew around in the crisp air. “It’s not always easy for me to be *gay* all the time, just out in front of people!”

“You still can’t even say it,” Ethan mumbled.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I go to therapy and I just feel worse. I try to talk to you and I just get angry.” I moved my hand onto my thigh, rubbing and pressing—that glorious, bruising pain where it’s awful if it gets touched, but if you’re in control of the pain, it’s refreshing and grounding.

Ethan’s hand rested on my forearm. “I know.”

My eyes flicked to his hand, and it fell off my arm straight away. “I know I’m being a dick. I don’t know how to stop it.”

I raised my arm to reach for the doorbell, but a sudden pang of pain shot through my shoulder, making me groan before it fell back to my side. Ethan rang the doorbell instead.

Ollie opened the door. “Ethan!”

“What am I, chopped liver?” I said as I opened my arms for a hug. Ollie fell into them.

We walked inside to Aubrie, who was standing over a frying pan. She greeted us and took the flowers to put in a vase.

“People don’t buy flowers enough nowadays.” I heard Ethan say.

Everett, I assumed, was setting the table. He was tall, at least one hundred and ninety centimetres, and he was Asian. Japanese, I thought. He had glasses like Arthur the aardvark. He was very good looking, with dark tailored jeans and a navy knit sweater, hand made for sure. His hair was gelled in just the right way, his skin was perfectly smooth, and you could see how toned his arms were from the veins that drifted out of his rolled-up sleeves.

“Everett,” he said, extending a hand.

“Tyler,” I replied, shaking it. “This is Ethan,” I said as they shook hands too.

Ollie was curled in a ball on the carpet as he flicked through books. He had about four open all at once when Aubrie set the last dish of food down

on the table. Ethan and I sat on one side of the table. His thigh bumped into mine as he slid into his seat.

“Ollie!” Aubrie called.

“Sorry, Mummy, I was just putting all my books away.” He climbed into his seat. “Ethan said when we get books from the library, we have to be extra careful.”

“Ethan said that?” Her voice had no discernible tone—like the different emotions competing in her voice all cancelled each other out.

“Yeah, when we went to the library last week,” Ollie added as I tipped some potatoes onto his plate.

“You and Daddy and Ethan?”

“No, Daddy was at work. Ethan took me after school. And then we had Subway. It’s Ethan’s favourite,” Ollie said.

Aubrie’s head tilted, her eyes boring into my face.

“So Tyler, you work in construction?” Everett asked.

I wasn’t sure if he was oblivious to the tension or painfully aware of it and trying to move on. “Mmh.” I nodded.

“And what about you, Ethan?”

“I work with charities to help them get funding. Do you work with Aubrie? I feel like I remember Tyler saying something about you guys meeting at work.” Ethan had a chuckle in his voice.

“We don’t work together, but our companies do, so we met that way.”

“Oh, how cute,” Ethan said.

“You two met on a dating app, right?” Everett asked back.

“Yeah, not super romantic, but our date was so fun. Actually, I remember a few months later, maybe our fourth or fifth date, Tyler told me that before he came he had messaged Aubrie to check if the restaurant we were going to was relaxed enough for jeans—”

“That was like three years ago?” Aubrie announced.

“It was two years and ten days,” I whispered.

“Have you been dating that whole time? I thought this was like a year, a year and half. And I thought it wasn’t that serious until recently,” Aubrie said.

“I told you about it a year and a half ago, when it got serious.” My voice was firm as I corrected her.

“You could’ve told me when you first started going out.” Aubrie’s eyes were glued to her food, her jaw tightening. “I called you after our first date

just to tell you how great it had been." Her hand landed over Everett's.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. *It's just not the same.*

"How's your work going, Aubrie?" Ethan asked.

His palm landed on my thigh in an attempt to provide comfort. My eyes tightened, and my teeth dug into the brussels sprout in my mouth. I pushed his hand down to my knee. He looked at me, his eyes full of solace. He knew.

Aubrie went on and on about her work, and Everett had the same level of excitement and pride when he talked about his. As Ethan asked more and more questions, I realised all they had in common was their work and their fairy-tale level of immediate love.

Ethan seemed to get along with Everett, and he really tried with Aubrie. A few times I saw Everett give looks to Aubrie as she made slightly passive-aggressive comments towards Ethan. I busied myself with eating my food and chopping Ollie's, only talking when I absolutely had to. *Direct questions require direct answers*.

"Oh, I uh, I don't cook, but Ollie's getting very good."

"Ethan's been teaching me!" Ollie exclaimed.

After dinner, Everett showed Ethan his comic book collection on his phone, swiping through photo after photo. Ethan had an infinite amount of *oh my god that's so cool* faces.

The ceramic dish I was holding was warm as I dried it and placed it in the cupboard. Water flicked at me as Aubrie thrust another plate into my hands.

"Ethan and Ollie have certainly gotten close. I hope Ethan isn't taking over." Aubrie's knuckles whitened as she gripped the scrubbing brush.

"Of course not," I huffed. "Ethan doesn't do anything with him without asking me, and besides, they like hanging out. And it's less of a fight to ask Ethan to pick him up from school when I get busy than to ask you."

"Well, I'm working. What am I supposed to do?"

"I'm not blaming you. All I'm saying is sometimes *I* need to work late, or I just need a break from turtle facts for two minutes. And Ethan likes it."

Ethan had actually said it was nice to have a friend whose biggest problem was what someone else was making him for dinner.

She finally looked at me. "I feel like you should've asked me first."

"Maybe, but this isn't Ollie and Everett's first time meeting, is it? You didn't ask *me* if it was okay."

She turned back to her sink of water. “It’s different.”

“It’s not though, is it?”

She dumped the spoon back into the water and gripped the edge of the bench. “I know. But you didn’t even tell me when you first got together.”

“We’ve been together for a while, yes. But did you ever stop to think that maybe it wasn’t about you? Maybe *I* didn’t want you two to meet?!” I was angry, yet my voice was barely above a whisper.

“Were you worried that I wouldn’t want to meet him because he’s gay? Because I don’t care about that. You can let me know you’re in love. It wouldn’t be easy, but I’m not going to fall apart knowing you’re with someone.”

“Oh my fucking god. It’s not always about you!” My hands cut through the space between us as I gestured sharply. “Just because *you* don’t care that I’m *gay*, doesn’t mean *I* don’t care.”

Aubrie dried her hands off and turned to look at me. Suddenly, it was me who was hyper-focused on the dishes. “I think that’s the first time you’ve ever said you were gay. Like, actually. You always say that you date men, you never actually say it… You’ve been acting differently lately. You’re sad. But you’re more… I don’t know, you’re just different.”

I lowered my voice even more, as quietly as humanly possible. “I’ve been going to therapy a bit.” My lips tasted of iron as my teeth dug into them.

“Y’know, I go to therapy too. I started when Ollie was three. I thought you were too much of a *macho man* to understand.” Aubrie laughed.

I appreciated what she said, but I didn’t want to talk about it anymore. “I like Everett. You guys make sense together.”

She was smiling. “And he’s hot, right?”

I hadn’t seen that smile in a while. My lips pinched into a line and I nodded.

“Ollie needs to get to bed,” I said as I walked out of the kitchen.

I found Ethan still enthralled in Everett’s pictures. “We should get going,” I said, smiling, although I felt like I was going to cry.

Ethan stood. “Well, it was lovely to meet you.”

Aubrie walked into the room. “And you too, Aubrie.” Ethan smiled. Aubrie gave Ethan a hug. He tensed in surprise for a moment until his arms wrapped around her.

I stood up after re-tying my shoes and grabbed Ethan’s hand. He was smiling.

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Chapter 22

Thursday 21 June 2018

It was almost four o'clock by the time I was driving my ute back from work. I was always grateful when the air began to smell of petrichor—that smell meant I got to leave, at least while we were working on these clay-mud terrains. The dumping rain had flooded the streets in a few places, turning my thirty-minute drive into an hour-drive. I was sitting in traffic when I got a phone call from Ollie. When Aubrie had suggested getting our six-year-old his own iPad, I had been pretty against it, but now I was kind of loving it. He had screen time limits and didn't even know how to download apps. He'd been taking photos of stuff constantly and he loved the responsibility to call me or his mum anytime he wanted to talk.

"Hey buddy, whatcha' doing?" I felt myself smile as I heard him asking Ethan how to put the phone on speaker.

"Say hi first," Ethan whispered to Ollie.

"Hi Daddy. Ethan was a bit late picking me up so I got a bit wet waiting but it's okay because we are home now," he babbled.

"Oh no. I got wet at work today too."

"And me and Ethan went to the supermarket and now we're in the kitchen and we're testing a cake recipe for Ethan's birthday."

"Ethan's birthday?" I exclaimed. "Is that coming up? I must've forgotten." Ethan's snicker crackled over the line.

"Daddy, it's in eight sleeps." Ollie's voice was so commanding.

"I'll be home soon, okay, guys?"

My thumb tapped over the steering wheel as I thought of the time I was wasting sitting in my car while my boys were baking together.

I practically skipped down the hallway of my apartment building in wet socks, holding my muddy boots in one hand and a backpack in the other. I

came into the kitchen.

"Aww, you look like a little drowned rat," Ethan said, as he measured out some flour.

My lips pursed and I nodded. He was absolutely right. "Nice to see you too," I said before leaning in to kiss him. "Where's Ollie?."

"Oh, he's just changing his clothes again. The sleeves on his shirt wouldn't roll up. I just put the washing on so there's still time to chuck all your stuff in." He nodded at the bottoms of my muddy jeans.

"I'm gonna go shower."

"That seems like one of your brighter ideas." Ethan laughed as he pulled a leaf out of my hood.

The hot water hit my back, rolling over my shoulders and down my thighs. My scars were mostly healed. I hadn't self-harmed in almost a month, although I had thought about it, and I still cried every time I left therapy. Sometimes I looked at the scars and felt like I was a failure for cutting, and sometimes I felt like a failure for not cutting. Like, if I'd stopped, why was I still in therapy? Was I being dramatic now? Was I taking resources from people who really needed them?

Ethan had been staying over five nights a week for the past few months. *I should really invite him to move in*.

I turned to wash the shampoo out of my hair, but my foot caught as I turned and I fell onto my right side.

POP!

I screamed as I felt a sharp pain through my right shoulder. I tried to reach for… for something. Fuck me. "Ethan!"

"Don't touch the oven, Ollie!" Ethan yelled as he opened the bathroom door. "What's wrong?"

He looked at me—naked, dripping, shivering, hunched in a ball on the floor of the shower.

"What happened?" He shut off the water and reached down to help me up, but as his hands landed over my right arm, I yelped again.

He sat me up, not touching my hurt arm, and slowly guided me to stand. He grabbed my towel and wrapped it around me.

"I can't feel my arm." My left hand gripped my right elbow to tack it to my body.

"What?" Ethan guided me to sit on the closed toilet lid.

“I… I slipped, and when I fell, it, like, cracked or something.”

Ethan rubbed me dry with the towel. “Fuck!” I yelled as his hand ran over my right shoulder. “Sorry,” I quickly added as his hands lightened. “It popped and it hurt a bunch but it doesn’t hurt as much now. It’s more like a bruise.”

“It doesn’t hurt?” he asked, lowering the towel and drying my thighs.

“I can’t feel it.” My whole body shook, and tears rolled down my face as the words sunk in.

“It’s okay… It’s okay,” he kept saying as cupped my face and dragged a thumb over my cheek.

I couldn’t tell if he was trying to convince me or himself. He helped me get dressed. I hated it.

My crumpled-up, weak, and immovable body was being handled by my boyfriend while he tried to help me. I was shaking, I felt ill, but I felt no pain. That seemed bad. I mean, it didn’t seem that bad until I told Ethan, whose face said that’s bad.

“Don’t tell Ollie,” I said as he zipped up my sweater.

I couldn’t get a shirt on so I put my left arm into the sweater and just wrapped it around me.

“Well, we have to tell him something. We need to go to the hospital, he’s not stupid.”

“Is he okay?”

“Tyler, he’s fine… I think you’re in shock. Just come sit on the couch while I get a few things and then we’re going to go to urgent care.”

“I think it’s okay. It hardly hurts.”

“I know, but we’re going to go,” he said with a firm nod.

***

The fluorescent lights in the ER were bright and shiny. Glowing and pulsating. An IV in my left arm that they had put something through was sticking out of my left arm, and now I was hooked to a drip. I held a cardboard bucket over my lap, and my mouth was dry. My head rolled around.

“You okay?” Ethan asked. I only knew it was him from his voice. My eyes were barely open. The soft skin of his hand rubbed my forearm. My right arm was strapped to my body with a bandage.

“Yeah,” I said as I forced my eyes open. Ollie was sitting on the end of the bed, colouring on a little wheelie table.

“What happened?” I asked.

“You vomited as soon as we got here and then you passed out. About an hour ago.” Ethan’s voice was soft and whispering.

“I’m cold.”

Ethan found a blanket on a chair and draped it over me. “Aubrie will be here soon to pick up Ollie.”

I think I nodded. The warm weight of his touch moved from my arm to my left shoulder where it shook back and forth.

“Hey, they’re going to do an MRI soon,” he said.

I remembered Ollie leaving. He tried to give me a hug but it just hurt. I remembered being wheeled over some bumps, which hurt. I remembered being moved onto the MRI bed, that hurt. The pain wasn’t in my shoulder, it was like a tingly sting through my whole body. I remembered when I came back down to the ER feeling worse. I was in more pain and felt more nauseous, and I was more aware of that.

“I’m sorry,” I said. I saw Ethan this time.

“Why?” Ethan’s voice was full of concern.

“I ruined your cake…” I started crying. I felt ugly and ridiculous.

“Ollie was far more concerned about that cake than I was, and he forgot it was happening as soon as the nurse gave him crayons.”

“Okay…” I said, my squeaky voice choking. “I feel sad.”

I felt high—a feeling I only remembered from high school, a feeling I didn’t enjoy. It simultaneously made me insecure and an oversharer. I wished I had passed out again.

Ethan grabbed my hand, kissed it all over. “If it makes you feel any better, you’ve been shirtless for a long time and I haven’t stopped looking.”

I laughed. It hurt, but it did make me feel better. When the glass door slid open, Ethan let go of my hand but kept it on the side of the bed.

“Tyler Miller?” the doctor said. “Good to see you awake.” She was smiling. “Now the results from your MRI. Your rotator cuff is torn, specifically your subscapularis, teres minor, and supraspinatus tendons. I think you’ve had the injury for a while, but the fall did the rest of the damage. Your partner tells me you’re quite active, so I think the best thing is to do surgery to repair it and then six to twelve months of physical therapy to get you back in fighting shape.”

Surgery meant no work, no exercise, no lifting stuff, becoming a useless rotting burden with nothing to contribute. I reached for Ethan's hand. My squeeze probably hurt him.

"Is that… is there anything faster? Do I have to have surgery?" I stuttered as my brain ran through every possibility of the rest of my life. Every single one left me as a worthless piece of shit.

"With the severity of the injury, without surgery I doubt you will ever get half of your mobility back without pain… I know it seems like a lot, but we can't do your surgery for a week and half anyway, so you have some time to adjust. Obviously, if you really don't want surgery, we won't do it, but you're young and healthy. Surgery is low risk, and leaving it will give you permanent damage with worse results."

I was sent home later that night. I didn't want to go home, I didn't want Ethan to be left looking after me and my life. It wasn't his job to take care of me.

They put me in a sling and told me to "drink water, and move your shoulder as much as you can without pain, and take paracetamol if the pain gets bad, see you in twelve days." I was silent the whole way home.

***

Friday 29 June 2018

It was Ethan's twenty-third birthday. Ollie and I tried to bake the cake they had decided on, but Ollie still needed more help than I could give him. I had emergency-called Aubrie at eight o'clock yesterday to help. It had been completed though, around midnight. Ethan showed up at two the next day for a slice of cake with Ollie and me.

I gave Ollie the day off school. He was really proud of his cake, and he had stayed up way too late to go to school anyway.

"Did you have a good morning?" I asked after Aubrie had picked Ollie up for the weekend.

Ethan and I were just sitting around on the couch; it was the perfect kind of cold where you're not shaking but you do want to sit close to someone for warmth, and that we did.

“Yeah. I called my mum. She actually is still in Europe, so I guess I was wrong about her coming back.” He sighed. “And then Sophie and Ayesha and Orla took me for brunch, which was nice.” His head was on my left shoulder as he tangled my chest hair with his finger.

“I will come next time,” I promised him.

“I missed you, but restaurants have dress codes, and I’ve seen you try to put on a shirt with that shoulder.” He laughed. “Not that I’m complaining.”

“Ah, but I had to last night.”

Ethan looked at me with a surprised *really* on his face.

“Yeah, I had to ask Aubrie to help with the cake.”

“You shoulda called me,” Ethan whined.

“You don’t bake your own birthday cake, even if you probably could’ve done it better,” I said, and the truth was I just wanted to do something nice for him, even if I had basically failed at it.

“It was perfect.” Ethan straddled my waist and held my chin with his whole hand as he kissed me. “Do you need to shower?” he asked.

My nod was like a reflex. We hadn’t had sex since I was in the hospital and we wouldn’t for a while after my surgery, but his birthday was the perfect time. Maybe this I could get right.

The shower was barely big enough for both of us. I dropped to my knees, gently licking his thighs before taking his dick in my mouth. Ethan rested one hand on my left shoulder and his other on the wall. He got harder the longer I held him in my mouth. I kept my jaw loose, allowing my tongue and lips to do the work until his breathing quickened to an unsafe pace. I licked and pecked at his dick before I sucked at the base.

***

Our hair was damp as we sat in our bed with Battleship boards between us —Ethan’s favourite game, which I refused to play after he beat me four games in a row a few months after we met.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t give you proper sex for your birthday.”

“I’m not kidding when I say that was the best blow job I’ve ever had… I mean, you were there, you heard.”

“It was a new sound,” I laughed. “E four.”

“Miss. Besides, if we never had sex again, I wouldn’t care. H ten.” His eyes were hopeful as he waited for my reply.

“Miss. We both know that’s not true. But until I have my arm back, you can have as many blow jobs as you want. A four.” My finger ran along my board. I think I was trying to do some kind of calculation.

“Miss. I six.”

“Miss. I am kind of concerned how we’re going to afford everything while I’m off work though. C four.”

“You gotta stop guessing fours,” he said with a shake of his head. “It’ll be okay. I just got that promotion, and you’re getting ACC. It’ll be absolutely fine. G three?”

“Miss. I guess,” I said.

Maybe you should just move in and we could save all that money on rent.

“B four,” was all I could say.

“Fuck you… hit,” he snarled back at me.

“I knew it was a four.” I danced as I put the red pin on my board.

“I think the bigger worry will be keeping you occupied. I’ve never seen you bored before, and I don’t want to know what it’s like.”

“It’s usually a lot of exercising,” I said before getting another hit.

“Yeah, you’re gonna crush physical therapy!” he exclaimed. “Just think, in a few weeks, you’re going to be killing it at multiple kinds of therapy.” He laughed and we kissed.

I love you.

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Chapter 23

Tuesday 3 July 2018

The scratchy fabric of the hospital gown being the only thing between me and the world was all I could think about as I sat in the pre-op area. I held Ethan's hand because I had just read the paper with all the possible complications: infection, bleeding, blood clots, allergy to medication, possibility of consciousness during procedure, scarring, nerve damage, chronic pain, foreign objects left in the body, stroke, and death.

I signed it.

"Tyler Miller?" a nurse said.

I let go of Ethan's hand and looked up.

"Come on through," she said as I stood. "Should be about three hours."

He hugged me as tight as he could without hurting me. "I love you," he whispered.

"I love you too." I kissed his cheek as our hug broke. A reflex.

***

Ethan had finally got me settled in bed later that night. It wasn't hard because I was in pain or because I was tired, it was hard because I desperately needed help but I didn't want it.

"You were a fucking toddler," he told me the next day. "Like a toddler who weighs eighty kg's". He laughed because he thought all of my behaviour came from my meds, and because somehow, no matter how fucking awful I was, he wouldn't leave me. He loved me in a way I never knew someone could.

We ate breakfast in bed, both naked and hungry as we chowed down on the eggs Ethan had made.

"So what shall we do today? More Battleship, or a movie? What are you feeling?" He was so happy, so expressive.

He tickled my thigh as he listed more options of things we could do. His words had faded into mush. I think he had started talking about the movie he had watched on his phone while I was in surgery.

"Will you move in?"

Ethan stopped talking.

"You basically live here anyway, and I want you to be here all the time."

"Don't you need to talk to Aubrie?" Ethan asked.

"Yes, probably, but it's more I need to tell her and she'll have to get over it." I was getting more and more nervous he was going to say no.

"Do you think Ollie will mind?"

"What? No. He loves you. You—you don't have to. Like, you can say no and I won't be upset, or I will, but I'll understand." I wanted more opportunities to love him.

"Tyler," he said and paused, as if searching for the words he wanted to use. "I want to live with you, but I'm not moving from one tiny, dingy flat to another… Let's buy a house."

My eyebrows raised as I stared him down.

"Yeah! Between both our KiwiSavers and my mum's fund for me, we can do it."

I kept looking at him.

"Or not?" he asked.

"My parents have a fund for me too. I just hope they'll actually give it. They made it when I was looking at a picket-fence life." My head dropped.

"I'm sure they will, and even if they don't, we don't need a huge house."

I smiled, I nodded, I kissed Ethan with everything I had. I had this huge pang of hope. He didn't just want to move in with me—he wanted to buy a house with me.

He opened his laptop and started searching for properties. I felt so hopeful and excited.

"Looking for houses will keep you busy for the next however long you're not able to work. Yes. I'm so excited!" Ethan announced.

All his teeth were showing, the tops of his cheeks pushing his glasses up. He seemed genuinely excited for more future with me. I just wanted him to be happy, and it seemed like he was.

"You start looking, I'm just going to go to the bathroom." I squeezed his thigh goodbye, grabbed a pair of underwear and some track pants, and left.

I sat on the closed toilet lid, my knuckles turning white as I gripped my knees. My jaw clenched, my toes curled. Everything in me was tight and painful, like a pot about to boil over. There were too many feelings, too many thoughts.

I tore the cupboard open and pulled out my razor, dragging the blade along the flesh on my thigh.

It hurt. Everything went silent. I kept cutting.

One more, one more.

Last one.

I was six cuts deep when I stopped. Tiny beads of blood gathered on the surface. The red pooled, filling the splits in my skin, blooming into thin, stinging tracks. My thumb and pointer finger landed on either side of one of the cuts, pulling the skin taut. It bled more, dripping off my thigh.

As my adrenaline dropped, I felt repulsed by the thought of myself. By the thought of what I had just done.

I bundled a wad of toilet paper over my hand and pressed it firmly against the skin. It painted red lines into the white tissue. I flushed it, took another layer and bunched it over top of the cuts before I carefully pulled my underwear up to hold it in place. I pulled my track pants up and walked back to bed.

Ethan had put pants on too. I wasn't sure if he was cold, like I was ready to pretend to be, or if he just didn't want to be the only one with his dick out.

"D'you find anything?" I asked as I slowly settled back down in bed. I groaned as my weight shifted. My underwear rubbed, pulling on the hair that was caught in the drying blood.

"Are you feeling okay? You're a bit flushed," Ethan asked. He was still gleeful, even though he sounded concerned.

"Mmh." I nodded.

"Here's one. Two beds, big backyard though. Nice kitchen too," Ethan said, pointing all around the screen.

"It's a bit far."

"Yeah, and the shower is as small as the one we have now," Ethan said with a wink.

***

Tuesday 17 July 2018

“How have you been feeling since your surgery?” Elijah asked.

I was sat in my regular spot on the couch.

“Fine.” I shrugged.

“You’ve had no feelings in the past two weeks?” *Really?* his eyes asked.

“My shoulder’s pretty sore still. A bit weak too.” My voice shook.

“Is it your shoulder that’s making you feel weak? Or maybe being unable to do much is making you feel that way?”

“I did mean my shoulder.”

“I know but, the way you said it made me think it wasn’t just your shoulder. I mean, you can’t be doing the things that usually make you feel strong… masculine. Ethan’s been taking care of you?”

“Mmh.” I nodded.

“Has that made anything different in your relationship?”

“I love him.”

“Tyler, I know you do. You’re very focused on protecting him in my eyes, but I wonder sometimes if you feel okay—if you feel comfortable—when he protects you?”

He scribbled something in his notebook. Not sure why, since I hadn’t said anything in a solid minute. “How does it make you feel?”

I stayed quiet. I knew the words, but I didn’t want to say them. “Helpless, useless… like I don’t contribute anything to the relationship. Like I don’t know why he’s with me.”

“But he obviously wants to be with you. He clearly loves you, just how you are. And he knows you’re trying to help yourself. He’s just trying to help you too. And when you help Ethan, you don’t think he’s useless… Or less of a man, perhaps?”

“No,” I replied, sticking to my one-word answers.

“You help him because you love him. When we love someone, it is our job to help them. Society tells us that men aren’t supposed to be looked after. But it’s not true—you need to allow yourself time to care for yourself and to be cared for. And while you’re recovering from your surgery, well, it’s the perfect time to take a minute for yourself.”

I told Elijah that I had cut again. I mean, more like he pulled it out of me. He was like a psychic. He already knew everything and forced me with his eyes to say it.

“Did you tell Ethan?” Elijah asked.

“No. I don’t want him to think it’s his fault or something.”

“Why would he think that?”

“Because… because when… when I did it, we were looking at houses.” I reached for a strange, sticky, squishy ball that had been left on the couch.

“Do you not want to move in together?”

Why was everything he said a question? Take a breath between your interrogations. “I do! That’s why I’m so angry.”

Elijah did take a breath this time. He took many breaths as he waited for me to continue.

“Because I want to live with him. We basically already live together! But I want to feel like it’s his home too, and he was so excited. And then… and then I went and did that.”

“Are you worried that if you move in together something bad will happen?”

“No.”

“Are you worried something good will happen?”

My jaw quivered. I pulled on the little jelly spikes on the ball, stretching them and hoping they wouldn’t break.

“Sometimes, Tyler, when you’re depressed and your life seems good, it looks like the life of a person who isn’t depressed. You feel the need to prove to yourself that your mental health issues *are* real.” He crossed his legs as he spoke, his pen rolling between the pages as he clasped his hands and looked at me.

“Depressed?” I said to myself.

“Yes. I would say you’re depressed, but you’re doing all the right things and it’s not your fault. It’s no one’s fault. It’s just a really unfair thing that happens.”

“Why, though?” I asked as goosebumps ran down my body.

“Some people have a genetic predisposition to it. For you, I would say that you have dealt with a lot of internal struggles that you never properly worked through. But you can. I’ve already seen it,” Elijah said.

“What do you mean? Ethan made me come here because I… I did that, and I’m still doing it. And I still feel like shit.” There was a tear on my face but I just left it.

“Yes, but you are choosing to come back again and again. Whether or not you’re self-harming isn’t really a good measure of your progress. Today you played with a fidget toy—the ones you always stare at but never pick up. As much as you don’t like being taken care of, you are letting him

because you know you should be allowed to be looked after. That's you working through it. You're moving in with your boyfriend, you've introduced him to Aubrie. These are all things that are hard for you, but you still did them. You've even started telling me what you're feeling. Sometimes in full sentences. Doesn't mean you enjoyed them, doesn't mean you're 'fixed,' but when you make progress as slowly as you are, sometimes you can overlook it completely."

He watched me while I sat on the couch. He watched me put the ball aside, grip my knees. He watched as tears dripped down my cheeks, slow like a leaky tap.

"Crying makes you feel better, ay?" he asked after a few minutes. "Sometimes I feel my tears building up so I purposely watch a sad movie so I can have a good cry."

I wiped my eyes and chuckled as he handed me the tissue box.

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Chapter 24

Thursday 25 October 2018

I was sorting cutlery into a drawer as Ethan carried a box through the kitchen. The scars on my shoulder were three months old. I wish I could say the same for the scars on my thigh.

Ethan heaved the box onto the benchtop.

"I'm finally getting a chance to show off my muscles!" he said, flexing a little. "Okay, so this is the last kitchen box, and then it's just our clothes." He shuffled his bum onto the bench.

I tried to breathe away my feelings of inadequacy. "I can do the clothes, if you like. I figure you're going to do most of the cooking so you should probably decide where everything goes."

"Mmh," Ethan nodded, leaning in to kiss me.

"Daddy!" Ollie ran into the kitchen.

"Don't run on the tiles, buddy. What is it?"

"Daddy, I can't find my turtle book," he said, holding a book in each hand—one a cooking book and the other with a turtle on the front.

"And what's that?" I asked, pointing to it.

"Daddy! *This* one… is about tortoises."

Ethan hit my chest, shaking his head. "Obviously *that* one is about tortoises."

"Don't worry, buddy." I chuckled. "It's either at your mum's or in one of the boxes we haven't opened yet. We'll find it."

"C'mon, we'll go get the last of the boxes," Ethan said.

Later, I sat on the couch folding and unfolding towels, trying to decide the best way to fit them in our rather small linen cupboard. Ollie and Ethan came in carrying a box together; Ollie was definitely making it harder, but his head was held high as he "helped."

"Watch your head on the counter," I called out, my mind running through all the possible ways he could get hurt in this new house. I was sure

there were hazards I hadn't even discovered yet.

Ethan smiled at me. "You go back to your folding. We only have two boxes to go." He took a hand off the box to hold up two fingers. The box tilted and Ollie yelped before Ethan caught it again. "All good," he said in response to the concern on my face.

A whole wall of windows and a sliding door filled the kitchen and living room with white light, but the foliage that surrounded the house kept it from getting too hot or from getting a yellow tinge in the afternoon. The house had three bedrooms, and one and a half baths. The third bedroom was pretty small and empty. The whole place was pretty empty. It was mostly my stuff, some of Ethan's, but he didn't have a lot of things in his flat that were actually his. There was a small deck and maybe seven or eight square metres of grass. It was fresh and green, and there was a lemon tree, which Ethan said was perfect because:

"Y'know *500 Days of Summer*? It's like in IKEA—they always have a bowl of lemons in their big fancy kitchens."

Now, our kitchen wasn't quite IKEA level, but it was nice. The house had been built in the nineties and done up in the early two thousands. It had been on the market for a while; the realtor said it being so close to the high school and it having chicken wire window screens was making it hard to sell. Ethan had already talked about finding some kind of climbing plant to grow over the chicken wire, which is when I reminded him that I install it relatively frequently.

"I reckon I can reverse engineer the instructions."

Ollie had been really excited when we told him we were moving. We gently brought it up but didn't actually tell him it was happening until we had picked out a house. We put tape on the floor in the living room to show him how big his new room would be. It wasn't that much bigger, but Ollie was small so it seemed like a massive space. He had positioned his bookshelf and his beanbag chair in the little green tape rectangle. He was so excited to pick out a colour to paint his room now that we owned the house. Originally, he had picked out neon green, but we were able to talk him out of it. Aubrie suggested a light sage green, I then kindly added how turtle-like the green was was, which really got him on board.

"Wow, it's very clean," Aubrie said when she came to collect Ollie. He was going to have to stay with her for a week or so until his new bed arrived.

“Not for long with these two,” I said.

Ethan was actively cleaning vanilla extract off the floor after the glass bottle had slipped from his fingers while putting it away.

“At least it smells good.” Aubrie walked around the house, admiring it. “This is gonna be good for you,” she added once she had stopped in front of me, then gave me a hug. “Come on, Ollie, we gotta get going!”

***

Ethan and I sat on the couch eating stuffed-crust pizza. Now it was the moonlight pouring through the glass keeping the room lit, making the slightly sweaty skin on our chests shine. We had left the sliding door cracked for a breeze on this humid summer evening. Ethan’s hair shifted in the wind, moving anywhere it hadn’t been stuck to his forehead. He pushed his glasses up his nose between bites. Tonight was our first night in this house. We had started moving in two days ago, but now we finally had our bed set up.

I was eating the last piece of pizza when Ethan announced he had one thing left in his car. He came back into the living room with a wooden shelf. It was wavy, asymmetrical, and looked like it belonged in a funhouse, minus the plain wood.

“What is it?” I asked.

I was extremely confused, but I was trying to stay grateful because Ethan had that same prideful look he always did when he gave me things.

“Okay, are you ready?” He pulled a shopping bag out from behind his back. “It’s a DVD stand,” he said, pulling a few cases from the bag and stacking them.

I didn’t know how to react. I knew I was smiling, but I really should’ve said something.

“And I found all of the original *Honey I Shrunk the Kids* movies on DVD!” Ethan hadn’t noticed my lack of reaction because he was so busy telling me about his very special shelf.

Suddenly I was on my feet, Ethan was in my arms, and we were kissing. “It’s a little bit weird-looking, but I love it…”

“No more sagging shelves!”

“No more sagging shelves, and no more ugly brackets.”

“No more screws in the walls!” Ethan added.

“Maybe this was a way bigger problem than I realised,” I said. “There was something else I was thinking about.”

“Mmh?”

“Seeing as I can’t go back to work for ages, I was thinking, what if I just don’t go back?”

“Well, it’s not really my choice but I’ve seen how much more relaxed you’ve been since you stopped. I don’t think you liked it very much.”

“Neither. But if I don’t work, I don’t want to just do nothing… and there’s a film course that starts in January.”

“To study film? Like, to write it or make it?” Ethan leant out from our embrace to ask me.

His hands on my back made me feel so safe. “It’s a bit of everything? Do you think that’s a good idea?”

“Definitely,” Ethan said. He looked proud. “Should we christen the house now?”

“Definitely,” I said before I kissed him again.

His skin stuck to mine in the heat. Our bodies stayed close on the couch, pressed together, desperate for friction. Even once we were both naked, I felt like I couldn’t get our bodies close enough. I lay on top of him and wrapped my legs around his, pulling his body into mine. It was like putting two halves of a geode back together—sharp and exact as we gripped each other. His nails were in my back, scraping my shoulder blades as I jerked him. His chin dug into my shoulder as he pulled my head down to his chest, where I sucked his nipple.

By the time Ethan was ready for me, I was rock-hard against the inside of his thigh. He was holding my dick and pushing it into himself before I even had time to line myself up. He stretched around me as my hips thrust. All my muscles tensed to keep my body weight off him but still efficiently fuck him.

“Tyler…” he moaned.

“Are you close?” I whispered in his ear. I knew he was. Getting him there so quickly made me feel strong again.

Ethan nodded against my chest. “Are you? I wanna see it.” I nodded. I wanted him to see it too.

I worked harder into him, maybe ten more seconds before I felt all my muscles breaking apart. I pulled out and we both came over Ethan’s

stomach. My weight fell over him, our breathing and heartbeat aligned. I suddenly noticed the sticky warmth between us.

"We should get cleaned up." I sat up and saw blood on my dick.

"What's wrong?" Ethan asked.

"You're bleeding," I said, looking at the blood dripping out of his ass. I suddenly felt a pang of hatred—hatred that I had felt strong and masculine while doing something that hurt him.

"Am I?" Ethan said as he sat up. He looked at my face, planting a hand on my cheek. "Hey, it's okay. We haven't had sex in a while, and I just went a bit quick."

"I'm so sorry," I said, stroking his hips.

"It's fine. It's happened before. Not with you, but the first time, there was a lot. I should've let you work me a bit more first. You just had me so desperate."

"I'm still sorry."

"Thank you, but taking me to the shower and getting me clean so we can slip into fresh sheets will be a far better use of your time." Ethan smirked.

I pulled him up, hands on his shoulders as I guided him to the bathroom.

I loved him so much.

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Chapter 25

Sunday 25 December 2018

“Well, I think you look cute!” Ethan said.

We stood in the bathroom in front of the mirror wearing matching Christmas shirts. Mine was green and red, his was red and green.

“Ethan, my parents are coming. They don’t need another thing to mock me about.” I pulled the shirt off and pulled on a blue and green button-down that Willa had picked out for me. “I’m sorry,” I said.

Ethan sighed. “I know. I’m just trying to make it feel festive.”

I knew he was upset about the shirt, but he didn’t have the huffiness or the joking tone he often did when he was annoyed with something I did. I rubbed his shoulders and copied Elijah’s stare—the one that said *tell me what’s wrong*.

“My mum hasn’t called me. She usually calls me on Christmas.”

I wasn’t sure what to do or how to support him. I leant in and gave him a kiss. “Is there something I can do?”

“No, I just want to cook and hang out with you,” he blew out.

“Hey, Tyler!”

Aubrie’s voice echoed from the living room. I gave Ethan a peck on the cheek and took his hand to drag him out there. Aubrie and Everett stood there; she had Ollie’s hand in hers, and they were carrying about four plates of food between them. Ethan opened the oven and a cloud of steam flowed out.

“Chicken’s almost done.” His glasses were foggy as he hugged Aubrie. “Glad my sous-chef is here!” he said to Ollie.

“And I made cream stew,” Everett announced, holding up a bowl of root vegetables in béchamel. “My mum always makes it for Christmas.”

“Your parents are still coming?” Aubrie asked after Ollie and Everett had gone to the kitchen with Ethan.

“Yeah…” I sighed. “My dad said he had to ‘come see this house I paid for.’” My voice turned gruff and my arms moved in a robotic way as I imitated him. “Did you bring your white elephant gift?”

“Mmh.” She handed me a wrapped package.

Ollie was showing Everett his room while Ethan handled most of the cooking and Aubrie began a glass of wine.

“No, I’m not drinking today,” I said when she offered me one.

I was wrapping the last of the white elephant gifts in our room. When I had asked my mother to bring two generic gifts she had scoffed at me. Ethan and I ended up having to buy two extra after she had said, “The hosts do that kind of stuff. Maybe you should just let us host, or ask Aubrie for advice, honey. You and Ethan just don’t have the same know-how.”

They weren’t even invited. They invited themselves after Willa let it slip that I was hosting Christmas—and then went on holiday with her new boyfriend and didn’t even show up as a buffer.

My hands shook as I wrapped the gifts, trying to make sure that every fold, every corner, was exact and sharp.

“Tyler!” Ethan’s voice rang from the kitchen. “Tyler!”

I came running. My foot slipped through a half-melted ice cube. “Fuck me,” I said as I saw the overboiled pot on the stove.

Ethan was desperately trying to turn the heat down. I grabbed his shoulder and moved him out of the way as I lifted the pot off the element and dumped it into the colander that was in the sink.

“Oopsie!” Aubrie said as her and Ollie’s attention was pulled from the toy they were trying to get out of the packaging.

“I must’ve put the heat too high,” I said.

“Ya think?” Ethan asked. “I was outside, cooking the prawns. I only left it for a second.”

Ollie left for the bathroom as the steam cleared, revealing the completely naked Cheerios. Ethan’s face turned at the same time mine did before we both burst out laughing.

“Oh god, they look like penises!” Ethan said, his hand falling on my shoulder as he doubled over with giggles.

“Fuck. God, they do, don’t they?” I was out of breath as I tried to speak while laughing.

I hadn’t meant to kill the Cheerios, but I was kind of glad I had. Ethan’s gorgeous cheeks went as red as the Cheerios were supposed to be.

“This is a really gay Christmas,” Aubrie very unhelpfully added.

I scowled at Aubrie, who turned away with her fresh glass of wine.

“Don’t worry about it.” He put his hand on my face and kissed me quickly. “Just finish wrapping the presents and set the table. I will sort this out. I already have a plan, it’s going to be great!”

My parents arrived just before lunch, which was still half an hour later than I had asked them to come.

My mum gave me a big wet kiss on the cheek. She smelt of sugar and flowers as her arms wrapped around me. “Your dad’s just parking the car. Quite a tight driveway… Aubrie!” Her focus shifted as she and Aubrie hugged and fell into conversation.

Ethan had gotten a quick wave in before pouring the wine into my mother’s glass.

“Merry Christmas—oh no, we’re supposed to say happy holidays these days aren’t we.” my dad said to me when he entered. “God this generation,” he muttered.

His eyes lingered on my neck and chest. He moved straight through to the kitchen where Ollie was, giving him a hug before he, too, was dragged to Ollie’s room for ‘the tour.’ My hand flew to my chest. Feeling the metal through my shirt reminded me I had put on a necklace: a thin chain with a little *O* charm on it. When I bought it online, I had sat with an *E* in my cart for a few weeks before I took it out and hit order. It felt too much—it felt like I was claiming him, and as much as I wanted him to be mine, I didn’t want to trap him with me.

We sat around the dinner table for our Christmas lunch, paper hats atop all our heads except for my father’s.

“Ollie, do you want to tell everyone what we made?” Ethan asked.

I love how Ethan loved to cook and how he showed Ollie how to love it too. I held Ollie’s hand as I helped him stand on his chair. He had a little piece of paper he was reading from.

“Roast chicken, salad Mummy made and salad Ethan made. I don’t really know the difference. Potatoes, prawns, and curried sausages.” Ethan winked at me after Ollie announced that last one. “And then Everett brought cream stew.”

“Let’s eat!” Ethan said. “Thank you for ruining the sausages,” he whispered to me. “My mum always made curried sausages for Christmas. It’s perfect.”

The bowls were passed around, conversations went on, and glasses clinked. I was cracking pepper over my food as my dad moved from his conversation with Everett about cars to ask me, “So when are you going back to work then? You seem to be all good now.”

I looked at my food. “Um… I’ve actually applied for some uni courses. For January.” I shoved a potato into my gob.

“So what? You’re quitting?”

“Well, I still can’t lift my arm above my head and I can’t lift nearly as heavy as I could,” I explained.

“You’ve just gotta keep working at it, son.”

“I am, but I want to study something instead of sitting around and waiting.” I filled my mouth with more food.

“How are you going to pay for that? I gave you money for this house. Are you just going to live off Ethan? You need to provide for your family. You can’t just change your career halfway through your life, you have responsibilities.” As my dad spoke, every other conversation slowed.

“You’re not the only one who helped pay for the house…” I said under my breath. “And I already applied and got in. To media and film studies.”

“That’s not even a real degree… construction is a proper job. You never stick with anything,” he said, looking at Aubrie.

“C’mon Tyler, you’re not really going to become a director or something,” my mum added. She had this voice that said she was trying to de-escalate the situation.

“There’s lots of different jobs you can get with a film degree, and besides, Ethan has a good job and I’m getting ACC right now,” I said.

“I think it’s going to be good, like these curried sausages,” Aubrie said with a sausage on her fork. A drop of curry flicked onto the white tablecloth.

I pulled out a napkin, dipped it in my water, and started rubbing it.

“We’re just trying to be realistic, Tyler. You can do whatever you want with your life,” my mum said as she carefully speared a piece of carrot from the cream stew, inspecting it with a screwed up nose.

“Aubrie, are you still going on that work trip next month?” Ethan asked.

“Maybe. The clients are on and off every day, not knowing what they want,” she drawled.

I rubbed at the table cloth harder as the turmeric sank in and stained it. The napkin was breaking into little pencil shavings.

Construction is a proper job. It was an awful job. Physically destroying myself, getting mocked for who I was, and getting paid like shit.

***

I stayed in the kitchen doing dishes for as long as I could until Ollie was begging to open presents. We played white elephant, and after Ethan spent about twenty minutes explaining the rules to a drunk Aubrie and my pessimistic parents, Ollie opened the first gift.

"Look, Daddy!" He held up the box of Favourites and scratchies. "A scratchy-scratch!"

My mum opened the next one. "Oh, a candle and fluffy socks. Lovely." She set the gift aside.

While Aubrie was deciding between a new gift or a steal, my mum waved her gift in the air, begging Aubrie to take it.

Just take it and make her stop…

Aubrie opened a new gift and was thrilled with the throw blanket she got. My dad decided not to risk a new gift and instead took the chocolates and scratchers from Ollie, who had slumped at the realisation he couldn't get his gift back. Ollie stole the blanket from Aubrie after Ethan had whispered, rather loudly, "That looks like a perfect fort roof."

Aubrie opened another new gift despite my mum talking very loudly about how good her candle smelt as she shook it in Aubrie's face. Aubrie's gift was a waffle maker that printed Spider-Man into the waffles. Everett's jaw dropped.

"Obviously, I'm going to steal the waffle maker!" Everett announced, grabbing it from her.

"Fine!" she said. "I want the scratchers then," she said, taking my dad's gift.

"So now what?" he sighed.

"Now, Mr Miller, you can steal a gift from someone or open a new gift."

He stole the nature calendar I had opened. I then opened some refillable magnetic water balloons.

Ethan and Ollie were whispering before Ethan's turn. "Well, I suppose I'll take the fort roof!"

He took the blanket from Ollie, who made an effort to fake cry before he turned around, smiled and stole the water balloons from me. He and Ethan high-fived, wearing big smiles.

The majority of us left happy, but my parents got into a deep discussion about how unfortunate the game was because you were never really going to end up with something you wanted—even though everyone but them had left rather content. They left just around five, and I was relieved.

After I put Ollie to bed, I slipped into my bedroom and put on the matching shirt. I came back into the living room where we were getting ready to play some games. Ethan had this big grin as I walked in. He ran over to me and stood with his arm around me.

“Take a picture!” he yelled to Aubrie who was snapping her fingers from the couch.

He kissed my cheek and held me tight through our first game.

Our fourth game was a very heated version of charades.

“Bear! Dog! BDSM! Elephant!” Aubrie screamed.

“Ten seconds!” I yelled.

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck!”

“Time’s up!”

Ethan groaned. “It was cigarettes.”

“Huh?” Everett asked.

“I was being a camel after pretending to smoke didn’t work.”

“Oh, I thought you were giving a blow job at the start,” Aubrie said, taking a sip of her drink.

“That’s not how he gives blow jobs,” I said.

I’d had about six beers and some wine. Aubrie was giggling beside me as Ethan fell onto the couch and gave me a hot and sloppy kiss.

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Chapter 26

Tuesday 2 April 2019

It was Ollie's birthday. I bought him a turtle. I had gotten off ACC and I had a part-time job stacking shelves in some warehouse. I'd been working there since I started my course, for about twenty to twenty-five hours a week. He had been so excited and named the little guy Sebastian. His tiny freckled face had lit up at the sight of his very own turtle—his own friend.

I had told Aubrie the plan and she was mostly on board. She knew, however, that I had an awful fear of things that swam. I wasn't really sure where it came from until Aubrie reminded me about the tadpoles we raised in primary school. And that once they became frogs, one of them jumped on me and I had a very public meltdown. It only affected me when they were in close proximity or just loose out and about, which worried Aubrie because that was essentially what was happening; but I knew she would never have the time to take care of a turtle, or any animal for that matter, and it was all Ollie had asked for, year after year. After mentioning the word *pet* in front of Ethan, he lit up, perhaps too quickly and without thinking it through.

"That turtle has stolen my sous-chef." Later that evening Ethan was making dinner, spaghetti bolognese. Ollie requested it, but only if Ethan made it.

He asked me to grate some carrots while he diced an onion.

"Well, I feel like I'm doing a pretty good job," I said.

"Hold the carrot in a fist, not with your fingertips." Ethan held his hand over mine. His other hand rested on my hip. "Now you're doing it perfectly," he said and kissed me on the cheek.

Ethan was stirring the sauce, now with the carrot. "Fuck!" he yelled as the red sauce jumped out of the pan and onto his arm. I carefully turned the heat down and dragged him to the sink, sticking his arm under the tap and turning it to cold.

“You have to keep stirring it!” he demanded. He huffed and groaned as his arm turned red, still only concerned about the end result of dinner.

“Yes, yes, but stay there.” I scurried over and stirred the sauce.

“Can you put the spinach in?” Ethan asked, waving over the pile of ingredients he had already laid out.

“This seems like a lot?” I hesitated as I went to tip it in.

“I put a bag of spinach in everything I cook. It shrivels up and you think it’s herbs.” He tilted his head at me with a smirk.

I tipped the spinach in and left the sauce to simmer. I also gave the pasta a twizzle. Ethan’s arm was bright red beneath the cold water, like a big mozzie bite. He pulled his glasses off for a minute and scraped his hand through his hair, resetting himself after the adrenaline rush. A bead of sweat slid down his forehead.

“Can you put a tablespoon of balsamic vinegar in there too?” Ethan said.

“What?”

“Just the, uh…” He took a deep breath as he winced at the pain, then pointed. “Just the black bottle.”

I grabbed one of the bottles that sat on the lazy Susan in our cupboard and tipped it in. Ethan sighed as he got comfortable on a stool beside the sink.

“I should cook with you more. It’s a lot easier when you do all the thinking for me.” I smiled. I left the sauce and leant over the bench, facing him. “Is it okay?”

“Still red, but I think it’ll be okay with some ice. And I get a good view when you’re at the stove.” Ethan snickered.

I looked over at Ollie. He was watching Sebastian, comparing him to the turtles in his books. I wiggled my hips as I stirred the bolognese. Ethan giggled behind me.

When we settled at the dinner table with the food, I brought some ice over to Ethan. I used a towel to strap the ice to Ethan’s arm as I served out the food. Luckily, pasta was able to pull Ollie away from his new pet.

“Thank you for the help,” Ethan said as I scattered parmesan over his dinner.

“Thank you for letting me.”

Ollie was at the table with us, twirling his pasta.

Fuck it.

I kissed Ethan—just a quick peck on the cheek, and then I sat back in my seat. I rubbed my foot against his leg under the table.

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Chapter 27

Saturday 29 June 2019

I stared at my laptop in the living room. Honestly, the course wasn't that difficult, it was mostly just fun. It really did mean I got to watch movies for school. It made me feel smart when I wrote something and got positive notes from my teacher. Her notes were like riddles, things like "Interesting way of looking at such a query" or "How did you analyse such a piece of media without contacting the creator?" Sometimes I couldn't tell if her notes were positive or negative, especially with most of my classes being online so I couldn't go based on her body language.

I did have to work on this assignment—I would be exhausted tomorrow and I had a shift on Monday.

Ethan ran out of our bedroom. It was only the afternoon and we weren't going out for drinks until six, but Ethan was so excited for his birthday he was currently picking out an outfit. With all his work lately and my school, we hadn't done much together. Our hanging out had turned into aggressively typing on our laptops beside each other and having sex in the evenings after Ollie was asleep.

"Do you think it's too cold for shorts?" Ethan asked.

I saw him holding some different pants options up in my periphery, but I knew the answer to his question without taking my eyes off my screen. "Yes."

"Really? Because I think shorts would look great."

"They would, but you get cold too easily to wear shorts in the height of winter." I typed what I said onto my document and had to spend a few seconds backspacing.

"Okay," Ethan huffed. He was about to go back to the bedroom when Ollie yelled for him.

"Ethan, I got eggshell!" Ollie wanted to stay on Friday night instead of going to Aubrie's like he usually did. Everett was moving in, and Ollie

wanted to make him something so he would feel at home. “I was just separating them,” Ollie explained to Ethan who helped him figure out the technique.

Ollie had spent the previous night looking up Japanese baking recipes on my laptop. He picked out a fluffy yoghurt cake, which involved just the yolks, which wasn’t something he had done before. But he was very determined and up until now had done all of the other steps himself.

Ethan did make it back to the bedroom but not for long when he came out with different shirts. “So if I have to wear pants, I’ll probably just wear my jeans. I’m wondering, a T-shirt or a button-up? Or like, a sweater? Or I could do layers?”

I did look up this time. That was a lot to process without seeing his options. “Um. Try the white T-shirt under the other shirt.”

Ethan took his top off in the middle of the living room. He pulled a long-sleeved white top over his head and then a grey graphic tee. He splayed his arms out and did a slow spin.

“No. Try the sweater instead,” I said, my attention flicking back to my laptop to finish the question I was on. He changed into the sweater.

“Yeah. That’s good,” I said.

“You’re lying. It’s not right yet,” Ethan said and left the room again.

He ended up in dark denim cargo jeans, a white long-sleeved button-up layered with a sweater that he then folded the collar over. He rolled up his sleeves a little, showing his arm hair and tattoos. He had rings and a few necklaces and looked so hot. I wanted to take all his clothes off and kiss him till we couldn’t breathe.

But I had to help get Ollie’s cake in the oven. The one issue with our kitchen was that the oven was in the wall and Ollie couldn’t reach it. Even with his little step stool, it wasn’t safe, and he got so frustrated when he physically couldn’t do something he knew he had the capacity for.

We sat at the coffee table working on a puzzle—we had started always having one on the go—when Ethan came back into the room.

“You should do something for your birthday. C’mon, you’re twenty-five in less than a month and you don’t want to do anything,” Ethan announced from the hallway.

I just want to do you.

“Dinner and a movie and some *exercise* is seriously all I want.” Honestly, sometimes not being able to talk about sex or how hot we were

for each other only made it hotter when we did. It was like we were playing a game of taboo.

“Daddy, I’ll make your cake!” Ollie announced.

“But what if I don’t want cake? What if I want cupcakes?” I said with just as much enthusiasm. I found that was a good way to talk to Ollie—he wasn’t the best at explaining his feelings, so I would just imitate his energy to keep us on the same page.

“We’ll have to practise with the piping bag,” Ethan said as he plopped down to the coffee table. “Which colour?” he asked, holding two nail polish bottles in front of his chest. Blue, and dark purple.

“Can I have some?” Ollie asked.

My jaw shook as I decided my answer.

Ethan was looking at me, a little bit of disappointment behind his eyes as he jumped in. “Which colour would you like?”

“Blue!” Ollie yelled.

Ethan reached out and took Ollie’s hand in his, inspecting his tiny nails. “All of them?” he asked. “I’m going to do all of mine, but sometimes I just do a few.”

Ollie asked for all of them and Ethan got to work.

When Aubrie knocked on the door to pick up Ollie, his nails had dried in a royal blue. He had his cake on a plate and was holding it proudly in front of him.

“Happy birthday, Ethan!” Aubrie said as she came into the house. She handed him an envelope. “Just a little something.”

It was a Subway voucher. Ethan ran his purple fingertips over the card. I noticed a smile tugging at his lips as he seemingly realised Aubrie liked him.

Ethan’s phone started buzzing. “It’s my mum,” he said before disappearing from the room.

“Ready to go, honey?” Aubrie asked. Ollie nodded. “Go hop in the car then. Don’t drop the cake, love,” she said as he walked past her. Her eyes flicked over his little hands that gripped the plate.

I could tell she was exhausted from the move to her and Everett’s new place. “Sorry about the nail polish. Ethan was doing it and he asked and—”

“Tyler, I don’t care. I’m an evolved human. He can wear a bloody dress for all I care. You’re the only one who cares.” She huffed. “I just hope that your own issues with this stuff don’t get put on him. Even if he’s not the

one that wants to wear nail polish, I would hope he knows it's okay for him or anyone else."

Aubrie left just as Ethan came back from his phone call. I was standing still, Aubrie's words rolling around my head. I was so concerned about being gay damaging my kid that I might have damaged him anyway.

"So what are you going to wear?" Ethan asked, before he had a second to look at my face.

"Um." My voice was a bit shaky. I kept my back to him until I had control of my expression. I went to the bedroom, and he followed behind me. "I think just my normal jeans."

"You have got to get another pair of pants," Ethan laughed.

"No, I like my one pair of going-out pants, one pair of shorts, and one pair of trackies," I responded, imitating the emotion that fit the moment. "And then I have a white sweater and my brown jacket." I took my shirt off to get changed.

"That's the jacket you wore on our first date. Do you remember that?" Ethan said as he pulled me close and kissed me.

"Of course I remember our first date, just not what I was wearing. I remember what you were wearing, though." I kissed him again, then continued changing. "Your present is in the drawer." I nodded at my side table.

"Ahh, with the lube," he joked as he opened it. It was a palm-sized cardboard box. "For your necklace?" he asked after opening the box and finding the little E charm.

I nodded, and his eyes welled up. I handed him my necklace so he could put the charm on, then turned so he could fasten it back around my neck. He placed his hand over it and my bare chest.

"I love it," he said.

"Before we leave…" I began.

Ethan looked up at me through his eyelashes. "Mmh?"

"Can you do mine?" I held my hands out to him. One thing I could do.

***

We walked into the bar, hand in hand. It was the bar where Elliot worked—he couldn't get the night off so Ethan decided to just go to his bar. It wasn't a gay bar, but it had various multicoloured flags and a lot of gay people in

it. It was somewhat comforting, going to a bar that clearly catered to gay people but wasn't actually labelled as such.

Jax and Elliot were already there, and so were Sophie and Orla. Casper and Ayesha had carpooled as they had recently started working in the same building, but Casper's car wasn't the most reliable.

"Ethan!" and "Hey!" were yelled in various forms as we walked in. Ethan let go of my hand for hugs; I did a few handshakes but hung back a little as this was Ethan's night.

We sat at the bar eating truffle oil chips—they were so good I ate a whole bowl myself—and various other deep-fried things. I drank a fancy cocktail that Ethan said I might like. Of course, he was correct. It was made with peach liqueur.

As Ethan slid it over to me, he said, "Elliot calls it the *Call Me by Your Name*."

I almost choked on my first sip laughing. I only had one though as I was driving so Ethan could drink as much as he wanted, and he took that opportunity. I liked that he felt safe enough with me to get shitfaced. It was about one in the morning when I stood behind my stumbling boyfriend as he walked to our car. After I quit my job, Ethan sold his car and we bought a new one together. I leaned him against the hood of the car while I unlocked it. Ethan was a very happy drunk person. He got even more giggly and romantic than usual.

"Do you need me to do your seat belt?" I asked after he had been sitting for a while just gazing at me.

He shook his head. He was biting into his lips and looking at me through his heavy lashes.

Then he gripped the lapel of my coat and rolled onto my lap, straddling me. I reached down and pushed my seat all the way back. I glanced at the backseat, I wished I could do him laying down but Ollie's carseat was in the way. I quickly forgot the idea when he licked up my neck and behind my ear.

I did have a passing thought about not sleeping with a drunk person, but Ethan's lips were on my cheek when he said, "I love you so much… Will you please fuck me for my birthday?"

His hard length was pressing into my thigh. I let him kiss me hard. His teeth scraped against my stubbled jaw, as his tongue drew circles on my cheek. He gripped my chin with his thumb and index finger, then he pressed

his tongue to my lips. I sucked his bottom lip into my mouth and gnawed on it.

“Fuck, Ethan.”

My tongue drifted over his lips and chin as he started forcing my shirt up so he could put his hands on my abs. I slipped my jacket off and pulled my shirt over my head. He licked my chest and pinched a nipple between his teeth. His sweater was lost and his shirt was unbuttoned in seconds. I nipped at his chest, it was so thick. Then he licked over my shoulders and up my neck.

“You’re so fucking sexy. I’ve wanted to tell you that so many times,” I said as I sucked on his meaty triceps.

He unzipped my jeans and pulled them down as far as he could. My dick sprung out and rubbed against his, which had come out at some point. My purple fingernails wrapped around our lengths. Ethan spat in his hand and rubbed it over his dick, before he started fingering himself. I breathed into his throat as I watched. I felt a deep ache at the elegant way he held himself.

He lowered himself onto me and started bouncing up and down. He put his hand on the back of my neck and pulled me into an embrace as he rolled his hips, then he put his feet on the seat to get me deeper inside him. There was a dense slapping sound coming from between our bodies while the car windows fogged in the cool night.

“Tyler! Fuck.”

Ethan came over my stomach, the sight of it only made my balls tighter. I wrapped an arm firmly around his relaxing body for a few last thrusts before I came inside him.

“Happy birthday,” I sighed into his ear. My lips planted a kiss on his cheek as I leant back in my seat—which was made of leather, thankfully.

“We should do that more often,” he sighed as he rolled off me.

His eyes were red and wet, his cheeks pink, his lips plump, a magenta spot living on his shoulder—drunk on a whole different drug.

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Chapter 28

Friday 14 February 2020

“So do you think Ollie is benefiting from that?” Elijah asked.

Ever since Aubrie had mentioned that my own insecurities might be affecting Ollie, I had been freaking out. I didn’t want to hurt him, but at the same time, I didn’t know how to fix it. Elijah had been helping me figure out how I could be better. He kept saying things about how I had to learn to love myself; he kept doing the five things exercise which I hated and never had the answers to. Sometimes I would say that I was enjoying school right now, and he would complain that that was something I liked about my life, not about myself. Elijah suggested that, with Ollie being almost eight and seeing Everett and Aubrie together all the time, it was okay for me to be affectionate towards Ethan in front of him. I had started holding his hand, kissing on the cheek—even a peck on the lips one time—when Ollie was around. Every time I did, I would spend days trying to hype myself up for it and then it would happen and Ethan would smile, I felt safe, and Ollie didn’t fucking care.

“He doesn’t seem to notice,” I replied.

“He doesn’t react or say anything when you’re affectionate?”

I shook my head before Elijah continued, “That’s because we live in a world where kids see people kissing and holding hands all the time, constantly. Ollie doesn’t notice it because it’s normal.”

“But he hadn’t really seen it before.”

“Even if he hadn’t seen you kiss, he knew you two were together and in love. When people feel like that, they’re usually not as subtle as they think. You may have only just let him see the two of you kiss, but the way you talk and look at each other, the way your demeanours change around each other, he would have noticed all of that.” Elijah wrote in his book, then studied my face.

I remembered in our first session when he said I could look at his notes whenever I wanted. Maybe I should ask to look, although there was probably more information about me in there than I wanted to know.

"Is there anything else on your mind? I mean, it's Valentine's Day today. Are you doing anything?" he asked.

Everything in me shifted. I went from a feeling of discomfort and unease to a joyous anticipation. I looked at the clock and started calculating how much longer till I left here, and how long it would take me to get home and through the door.

"Yes. Ethan's picking Ollie up from school and they're making me dinner. I think I'm just going to get Ethan some flowers. Are you doing anything?" I asked, because I didn't want him to unpack my evening. I had it in my head how perfect it was going to be and I didn't want him to ruin it with some homework or having me "just keep something in mind."

"My wife and I are going out… So, Ollie's going to be there tonight?"

So we're back on me. "Um, yeah… Aubrie and Everett had him last year and they really wanted to go out. Ethan and I were going to stay home anyway."

"Does it worry you, having your son home on an evening where there is a lot of pressure to be romantic?"

I stared at him. "Do you mean sex?" I asked.

"If that's what you would usually be doing, then yes."

Why can't he just answer the fucking question? "No, we have sex when Ollie's in the house all the time. He's there four nights a week."

Elijah didn't say anything.

"Is that wrong?"

"Do you think it's wrong?"

Well, I didn't until you made that face. "I didn't. We hardly ever had sex when he was home until we moved, but now we do… I mean, he's always asleep. He's never, like, seen it or anything."

"I think it's a positive thing that it doesn't make you anxious. It used to. A lot. I think it shows a lot of progress on your part," Elijah said with a smile.

All his words did was make me think about a whole lot of scenarios and feelings and possibilities that I didn't want to think about.

***

The cellophane that wrapped around the green stems of the flowers I picked out crinkled. I wasn't even sure what kind they were; I just picked the ones that reminded me of Ethan—orange and yellow. When I was deciding on what flowers to get, there were a few other men there and a woman. I wondered if she was a lesbian or if she was just buying flowers for a man. I also wondered if any of the other men there were gay, or maybe they were buying flowers for girlfriends and wives. Were there any people just buying flowers for themselves?

My key hovered over the lock as I heard Ethan and Ollie chattering inside.

I came through the door. "Hey, guys!"

Ollie was setting the table in the kitchen. Ethan had his hands on a bowl of orzo pasta bake. He quickly set it down on the table and came over for a hug. I shut the door behind me with the toe of my shoe then wrapped an arm around him. His hands were hot from the bowl as they held my neck, and his hair was soft and it smelt good. I liked seeing the effort that he made; I hoped he saw that I was trying too. He looked at me for a minute, his eyes flicking to my lips and back—desperate to kiss me. I glanced at Ollie, and then kissed him on the lips. It started slow, but our tongues quickly got involved. I was lost in it when Ollie called out.

"Ew, you guys are almost as gross as Mummy and Everett!"

Hearing those words pulled us from the moment. Ethan laughed. He gave me one last quick peck before he took the flowers from my hands, popped them in a vase, and put them on the dinner table. Ollie carefully closed his book and tucked it away before we all sat for dinner.

"Everything's hot, so be careful," Ethan said as he scooped some orzo onto my plate. "This is a tomato and feta pasta. It's Finnish," he added. "And then salmon, but I thought asparagus wouldn't be the best idea."

"I am very cool with that," I replied as I tried to steady my laughter at the thought of the effects of asparagus.

The food was salty and creamy, fatty and delicious. Ollie was picking at his salmon, not trusting the darker part of the fish where it was closer to the skin.

"And I was standing on the footpath when Ethan came to get me, but he was *five* minutes late! But then I got in the car and we went to the supermarket and when we got home, he helped me scrub my hands because we made butterflies in school and I had yellow paint on my hands."

I nodded at Ollie and made eyes at Ethan as he told his story. My mouth was filled with warm delicious food, my son and boyfriend were getting along, and I felt like a bad person. It felt like I hadn't done enough for tonight. When Elijah cancelled our appointment, I shouldn't have rescheduled for his open spot on Valentine's Day and had Ethan pick Ollie up. This was his Valentine's Day too, and he had to deal with my child.

"Oh, and Daddy?" Ollie said, pulling my focus back to the dinner.

"Mmh?" I nodded.

"I was getting the mail, and there was a pink envelope and it left glitter on my hands." Ollie giggled as he spread his fingers and held his hands up.

"Do you wanna show me?" I asked.

Ollie ran to the kitchen and came back with the square, light pink envelope. Glitter stuck to my fingers too as I examined it. I opened the envelope with a finger slipped under the lip.

You've been invited to Aubrie & Everett's wedding on September 5th 2020.

It kept going with information and words and food options, but I didn't read it. I just turned the card around and said, "Mummy's getting married."

Ollie started clapping and talking about how excited he was to go to a wedding, that he'd only seen them on TV and was so excited to get a suit. Ethan and I just kind of looked at each other. I felt like we were having the exact same thoughts, although I honestly didn't know what I was thinking.

"I didn't even know they were engaged?" Ethan asked.

"Neither did I." My teeth ground together as I spoke.

"A spring wedding will be beautiful though, and Aubrie looks great in those pinks and yellows," Ethan rambled.

He seemed uncomfortable with the idea of it. I wasn't sure why he was. I was uncomfortable with the idea because it felt quick. Aubrie always talked about how she would fall in love, spend years with a man and then get engaged and married. I supposed she hadn't told me if that plan had changed since Ollie was born. If I was being totally honest, I didn't think they would stay together. Anytime Aubrie talked about him, she seemed content but not excited. It felt like she had decided he was "the one" the first time she mentioned him, even though she didn't seem head over heels like most people ready to spend the rest of their life with someone they just met were.

"Yes, I think they will be very happy together," I said with a smile.

We could discuss this later, but fuck me if I was going to say anything negative about my child's mother in front of Ollie. I never wanted him to feel stuck in the middle, to feel like he had to take sides. I watched Aubrie in that situation all her life.

We watched *Knives Out* that evening. One of Ollie's first grown-up movies. I was worried it might be a bit scary for him, but he fell asleep about halfway through so I guessed he was fine. I gave it nine stars in my notebook. Ethan laughed so much at Benoit's accent that I had to shush him so he didn't wake Ollie.

I laid my sleeping son in his bed, burying him beneath the covers as Ethan washed up the last few dishes. I was about to put my pyjamas on when Ethan came in and kissed me, his hands running up my bare torso. I held his hips and let him kiss me as I stood.

"What's wrong?" he asked about thirty seconds into it.

"It's just… ugh. Fuck. Elijah always messes with my head." I sat on the bed.

"I'm pretty sure he's not supposed to do that," Ethan said, although after my lack of amusement, he put a hand on my thigh and rubbed.

"It's okay," I said and moved his hand off my thigh to hold it. "We were talking about Ollie being in the house while we have sex, and he was saying it's totally allowed but I had stopped being worried about that for a while. And then I was thinking about what to do if he sees. What do I say?"

"You would figure it out, and I could help if you wanted. He's getting older, he's going to learn eventually. He's asleep in his bed, our door is closed, and most importantly it's Valentine's Day, it's eleven o'clock, and I want to have sex before I fall asleep in your arms."

We ended up naked and wet in the shower, holding each other. The water and soap slicked our bodies, making it hard for me to maintain a grip on him. I jerked him with one hand and fingered him with the other. My back was up against the wall and I held him close, with my leg hooked around his waist.

"I love you, Tyler. I love you so much."

"Fuck, you're perfect."

"I'm with you, Tyler, for as long as you'll keep me," he breathed into my ear.

I wanted to keep him forever.

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Chapter 29

Friday 20 March 2020

I was at my third in-person lecture. I hadn't talked to anyone in the last two except the professor who, even after talking to her in person, didn't help me at all to figure out her comments. There weren't many people in the class—about twenty of us, but we were in this huge room spread out like beads from a broken keychain on the concrete. I sat with my backpack in front of my knees, which knocked into the bottom of the desk I was hunched over. I was writing everything down in my notebook, almost verbatim as she said it.

"Okay, everybody, that is it for today. But the last project for this semester will need to be done in pairs. It's a simple connections project but with four to six texts and you'll…"

The professor went on and on as my eyes scanned the room.

That girl and that guy seem like they're already friends so they will probably work together. There was a girl but she was way too young; it'd be weird for a twenty-five-year-old to ask an eighteen-year-old to come to his house. There was a guy who didn't seem to know anyone, but he was at least in his forties, I didn't want that.

I was counting the options I had. There were about five more people, but I didn't want to end up with someone who wanted me to do all the work. Fuck, I had missed the rest of the instructions. I closed my notebook and got ready to go speak to the teacher.

Hi, I'm just wondering if I can do the project on my own, or if I have to have a partner? Yeah, that was a reasonable request, I decided as I walked down the stairs.

"Hey," a voice behind me called out. I turned to see a guy with brown hair waving at me. "I was just thinking, if you don't have a partner, we could pair up?"

“Um…” *Can I just ask the teacher first, or is that rude?* I guess she did want us to be in pairs. “Yeah, sure,” I replied.

“Oh, thanks,” he sighed. “I’m Brooks. I don’t really know anyone here so…”

He never finished that thought. “Tyler,” I said as I put a hand on my chest. We stood awkwardly on the stairs. I looked around to see all the other pairs were sitting and talking about the project. “Should we sit?”

He nodded and we sat beside each other. I pulled out my laptop to take some slightly more official notes.

“She said she was going to post the project, but that we should start discussing what texts we want to use and our connection themes.”

I wrote down headings based on what he said and shared the document with him.

“I like the idea of looking at how outside perspective affects people’s ability to be themselves. Like have you seen *Gifted*, or *God’s Own Country*, or *Me Before You*? Or even *Call Me by Your Name* would be a great one,” he rambled.

“Um, yeah, I think that’s a good idea. I’ve seen *Call Me by Your Name*, but I’ve not seen the others, although my boyf—partner really wants me to watch *Me Before You*.” I wrote down the movies he suggested as I tried to keep my shit together.

He kept talking about stuff, and I gave replies when necessary. We had a pretty solid plan towards the end when my phone chimed. The message was from Ethan, written in all caps with a lot of exclamation points. I smiled and my breath hitching with an excited gasp as I read the text.

“What?” asked Brooks.

“Oh, it’s just, um. Apparently, there’s going to be a filmed version of *Hamilton* released on Disney Plus. It’s a musical I’ve been dreaming of seeing for years.” I put my phone down again before it dinged a few more times with more details from Ethan.

After checking the last text, I set my phone down on the desk unlocked, and Brooks’s eyes flicked over it.

“Is that your boyfriend?” he asked, looking at the home screen photo of Ethan and me. I purposely kept Ethan off my lock screen for this very reason.

“Uh, yeah,” I stuttered.

“My last girlfriend and I broke up because she was leaving town for work and that was almost *three* whole years ago. I’m a hopeless romantic,” he babbled.

I just looked at him. I wasn’t sure what he was thinking, and so I wasn’t sure how to reply.

“I actually saw *Hamilton* on Broadway a few years ago. It was phenomenal, but it wasn’t the original cast like the one that’s coming out. I heard about it last week and I am so excited!”

So even if he wasn’t gay, he liked musicals. That and the zero hesitation at asking if the guy in the photo was my boyfriend kind of signalled that I was okay.

I am okay.

“Well, Ethan, my… my boyfriend said he wants to do a watch party at our house, if you wanted to join?” I didn’t know why I said this. The first person I’d met in my class, the first person I’d spoken to. He was going to feel so pressured to say yes because he already told me he wanted to watch it.

“It’s a while till it comes out, but if I’m allowed to sing, then for sure. Why don’t you give me your number so we can work on the project?” He smiled.

We exchanged numbers and I walked to my car. I needed a minute to calm my excitement. I was twenty-five and I think I just made my first ever friend.

***

Saturday 4 July 2020

Ethan had spent all day cooking. I had tried to help, but after I put too much food dye into the frosting, I switched to decorating. We were going all out. I had put yellow paper stars on the walls and now I was positioning couches and chairs, with pillows and blankets all around. Ethan had made me label all the cups so no one drank from the wrong one. It was a very serious event.

Ethan put all his cooking on the coffee table. We had Aaron Burr-gers, cannonballs (olives), chips and dips (with a sign that said “I come back with more chips and dips”). There were cupcakes with pink, blue, and yellow frosting. A fruit platter labelled “Three Fundamental Fruits,” and fries with

a sign that said “History Has Its *Fries* on You.” He was very proud of the little signs that he had pleaded me and my neat handwriting to write out.

“Don’t forget to feed Sebastian,” I said to Ethan as he iced one last cupcake with all three colours of leftover icing.

“Oh, yeah,” he said, muffled by the cupcake he had mashed into his mouth.

The doorbell rang. It was Brooks. He was a few minutes early, super excited as he wandered into the house.

“I can’t believe people our age have their lives together. Like, you own a house and have a kid. And a turtle too, apparently.”

“I wouldn’t say that. I’ve locked myself out of the house four times this week,” Ethan said, reaching out a hand to shake.

Sophie, Elliot, and Jax all walked in together. Orla and Ayesha were on a trip to Tokyo, and although she would never admit it, we all knew Ayesha didn’t really like musicals.

“Guys, this is Brooks, Tyler’s friend from class. Brooks, this is Elliot, Jax, and Sophie.”

Brooks turned to Sophie. “Hi,” he said. His words were projected to the group but Sophie was the only one who got the attention of his eyes.

Ethan and I exchanged a look. When I directed everyone on where to sit, I sat them side by side. Sophie had been a bit low the past few months because Casper moved down south for his job and they officially broke up. She was definitely sad, but Ethan said that she seemed more stable since their relationship had officially ended.

We all tucked into the spread as the movie started. Jonathan Groff’s fake British accent told us to silence our phones right as I sat down beside Ethan. The whole couch shifted under my weight, making Ethan slide into me. We were touching the whole way down the sides of our bodies, glued as his head fell onto my shoulder. I brushed my hand over his arm after it wrapped around his shoulders. His hand was on my knee, tapping and rubbing it in time with the music.

“She’s so in love,” Ethan said as Eliza sang about Alexander.

He watched in awe as they got married and as Eliza desperately tried to convince Hamilton he was good enough for her. I leant down and kissed him on the cheek.

“I love you so much,” I said and pulled his face to mine, kissing him on the lips. I felt like I was able to give him so much more love than I ever had

—loving him in front of other people and letting him love me back.

There hadn’t been nearly as much singing and dancing as I thought there would be; everyone was so in awe of the musical. The songs flowed so naturally, there was this wonderful undertone of empowerment to women and people of colour, which Ethan kept whispering into my ear about. The choreography was phenomenal, as Sophie had pointed out.

It was almost ten o’clock when the musical finished. Ethan was in my arms, Jax was in Elliot’s, and Sophie and Brooks were sitting next to each other awkwardly, although they had spent the night whispering.

I slept well that night, humming as I fell asleep with Ethan’s nipple against my cheek.

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Chapter 30

Saturday 25 September 2020

Ollie stood in front of a floor-length mirror, his back to it, facing me. I was kneeling and shifting his collar, tugging at his lapels. We had just eaten lunch and I felt it sitting in my throat while I tried to hold Ollie still as I fixed the wrinkles in his shirt. Ollie had been practising his walk all week, doing laps in our hallway in his dress shoes while holding stacks of books.

The door swung open. “I did give you the ring, didn’t I?” Everett asked. His cheeks were red, and he was a bit sweaty.

“Yes,” I said, patting the front pocket of my suit jacket.

“Okay… okay, ’cause the ceremony is in an hour so we really need to be getting everything ready.”

I nodded at him as he rushed out of the room again. I combed Ollie’s hair and pulled it back into a little ponytail.

“Daddy, can I still go to the toilet?” Ollie asked.

I could tell he was anxious; he had been so quiet today. “Yes, just uh, don’t let your pants touch the floor at all, and use a paper towel to dry your hands, not your clothes.”

Ollie nodded and left for the bathroom. I used the moment alone to put my cufflinks on, but my shaky hands were making it very difficult. My suit was rented—Ethan had really wanted to buy them but we didn’t quite have the budget for it. Although I had a feeling he wanted to buy them because he wanted to get married too. It did seem like the next logical step, even though we already had a kid, a turtle, and a house. Everything we did was already in the wrong order, so why do it the right way now?

Part of me wanted to marry him, but I didn’t want all this. Some big show. I just wanted him. I didn’t want him to be trapped with me. I had him now, but he could go if he wanted. He was in a spot where he could go if he decided he didn’t want to be with me anymore.

Ethan was in the other room with Willa, which was where I left Ollie before I went to Aubrie's bridal suite with a glass of champagne. I knocked on the open glass door before slipping through the sheer curtain. Aubrie sat in front of a vanity with a woman powdering her face.

She took the glass of champagne before saying, "Stay for a minute."

Her friends were all busy getting dolled up and drinking and snacking. I pulled a chair up beside her. "Your dress is lovely," I said in response to her silence.

"You don't know this dress from a dirty sock… But thank you, it is lovely. How's everything going with Ethan?"

"Good… Why?"

"I was talking to him earlier. He mentioned that he wants to get married." She took a sip of her champagne. "He said he's worried it might spook you."

Why was he talking to her? She was my friend. He had his own.

Fuck. "Mmh," I grunted.

"What is 'mmh'? He loves you—he loves you for you, not for what you give him… He wants to spend his life with you because he loves you beyond what you represent. I don't know why you won't just ask him to marry you. I'm telling you he will say yes. Unless you don't want to, or maybe I've spooked you now." Some champagne spilt from her flute as she waved her hand through the air.

What was that speech? *He loves you beyond what you represent*. For fuck's sake. "I'm not spooked, and I do want to stay with him forever. But marriage feels like a trap—for him, not me. It feels like he's staying with me because he has to, not because he wants to."

"He's not trapped with you. He said he wants to be able to call you his husband, he wants you to be his. It's important to him… which, to be honest, I'm surprised about, because it's all so heteronormative and he's so… not." Aubrie was flailing when the makeup artist gripped her chin to hold her still.

"But I don't know how. Am I supposed to do it? Does he want to do it? And what if he wants a wedding or big sparkly rings?" I felt the contents of my stomach rising in my throat, tears in my eyes.

"He loves you. He won't make you do anything you don't want to do, but he wants this, so if you want it too, I don't see why not."

***

The ceremony was relatively quick; they had their own vows, which were short and definitely found on Google. Ethan and I sat close to the front in the first row with Ollie, who did a great job as ring bearer. Ethan had shed a tear at their rather unromantic vows. I placed a hand on his, squeezing it as he wiped his tear. My mother glared over at me.

During the reception, I sat with Ollie, Ethan, Willa, and my parents, as well as Willa's new boyfriend, Steve.

We ate our dinner—fish and vegetables all stacked and cut weirdly. My finger slipped into the collar of my shirt and tugged on it for an extra centimetre of breathing room. Ollie asked if he could go sit with his mum. I nodded, because it was his mum's day and he wanted to be with her. I nodded, even though I knew that without him, my parents had no reason to hold back the comments that were begging to come out.

"So Steve, what do you do?" I asked as my mother opened her mouth to speak.

"Oh, I uh, I work on the farm a bit, doing a lot of stuff with the—the cows, and hay and stuff." His lips moved about as much as Ennis Del Mar's did—one night after I misunderstood yet another *Brokeback Mountain* reference Ethan had stopped his work and made me watch it.

I nodded as a reply. I really shouldn't be surprised by anyone Willa brought home. My parents, on the other hand, could at least notice his clear lack of interest in… well, it seems to be anything other than kissing or touching Willa, but they were asking him all sorts of questions about his job and his family, gaining more information about him in ten minutes than they had about Ethan in four and a half years.

"When are you two getting married then? Or is that not… in the books for you?" Willa asked Ethan and me.

I had completely zoned out on the conversation. As she spoke, everyone's faces dropped, and mine lit up with fear. I could tell she had started kind of jokingly but then realised that maybe our "abnormal" relationship wouldn't have that as the expected ending.

"Uh, yeah, I don't… I dunno know when or if… there's, there's a lot of…" I cleared my throat and twizzled the neck of my flute. "There's a lot of different factors." I coughed and turned to Ethan, who was as silent as I

really should've been. "H-have you been married before, Steve?" I think he said no, although I was too busy wondering why the fuck I asked that.

Ethan put his hand over my thigh. My face winced, and it moved down to my knee where he gently squeezed. I could see his face drop from comforting to disappointed as he realised what had appeared beneath my pants over the last twelve hours. He had dissociated from the conversation when my mother decided it was her time to shine.

"Well, I think it's fine if you don't want to get married. Doesn't really make sense for you two anyway," she said, stabbing a carrot with a fork.

"Mum, you can't say that." Willa rolled her eyes.

"It just… it doesn't make much sense when they already live together, and divorce is pretty common for people like them. It would be a bit of a waste of time," my dad interjected before my mother could respond.

I wonder what she would have said, if she would've admitted it was a rude fucking thing to say or if she would've said exactly what my father had said.

Willa asked if Steve wanted to dance and dragged us with them. "Sorry," she said once we were out of earshot.

We were in our hotel room by ten. We'd left early because I needed to sit down and I didn't want to get trapped in a conversation the second I did. My parents had taken Ollie home, which concerned me more and more. I'd heard what they said about me to my face, I worried about what they'd say behind my back, and how much of it Ollie heard.

"I'm sorry about what happened tonight," Ethan said as he plonked onto the bed. "They really do go at it."

I untied my tie and it hung on either side of my neck as I turned to look at him. "Is that all?" I said. I didn't think I had meant it that snarkily, but my voice thought otherwise.

"What do you mean? You should be sorry too. I'm with your family all the time, and they're always rude and awkward." Ethan straightened his back, putting his guard up.

"Yeah, *my* family. You were talking to Aubrie about our relationship."

"She asked. I didn't know it was a secret. And you know full well I've been thinking about us getting married. And you don't seem to want that." Ethan's voice rose.

"I was surprised *you* wanted to! You paint your nails and date boys and girls and don't want kids. It's not screaming marriage. I don't want to trap

you with me.” I was yelling now too.

“What the fuck does my identity have to do with getting married? It’s legal for us, and it’s what I want. And it’s not entrapment. We’ve been together for four years, we live together, and I know Ollie is not mine, but we are basically raising a child together.” Ethan stood up, his voice harsh and firm.

“I know!” I screamed. It didn’t really make sense, or add anything, but I *did* know everything he was saying. “I want to be with you but I don’t want you to decide you want to leave me in five years and then have to get a divorce. My dad is right, gay people get divorced all the time. I’m not that fun, I’m not open, I’m not good at being… at being *queer*.”

“Gay people do, yes, but so do straight people. And Tyler, when I tell you I love you and I want to be with you, it’s the truth. I know it’s hard for you to believe, but it’s the only thing I can say.” Ethan’s eyes were red. “And I know I shouldn’t act like your family is mine, we *aren’t* married, but you’ll notice my mother is nowhere to be found. I’ve not seen her for almost as long as we’ve been together. You *are* my family!”

“I’m worried that as I try to figure out… stuff, I’m going to change and you’ll decide you don’t like the changes. What if one day, when I do meet your mum, she hates me? She matters to you hugely. It would be fair to leave me in that situation,” I said. My voice was still angry but it was soft and less of a yell.

“You’ve changed so much since I met you. You barely spoke on our first date… You—you hated yourself. You’ve changed so much, and so have I, so has Ollie. We are all changing all the time and we still love each other,” Ethan said as he cupped my cheek. “And my mum will love you… because we love all the same things. I just want to be with you. I want to be married so I can settle all the way into our life. I trust you more than anyone, and I love you more than anyone.”

“Okay,” I deadpanned.

We stood in silence for a minute. The anger and sadness slowly left our faces as we realised we had kind of come to a conclusion. We might have yelled about it, but we had talked and I felt better. He was starting to smile.

“So, are we engaged then?” I asked, I could taste the warm saline dripping into my mouth as I spoke.

“No. That wasn’t romantic enough.” Ethan laughed before he fell into my arms so I could hold him close to my chest.

Fuck me, I wanted him. I wanted to marry him. I wanted to fall into a life with him.

***

Later that evening, Ethan was naked and sitting in a bubbly bathtub when I walked in with a dish of tiramisu—a dish I loved but Ethan had refused to make because it always left his fingers smelling of coffee. I placed it on the bath shelf in the middle of the tub and turned around to pull my underwear down.

"I know today wasn't really fun for either of us, but I'm glad we had that conversation, and I'm glad it's over and we can just sit here with our dessert." As he spoke, the water sloshed and I felt his wet hand reach over the edge of the tub and grab mine.

I turned to him. He could see all of me, he didn't look at the red slashes, he just looked at my face. The bathwater stung at first, but then it softened as we fell into a blissful warmth. We talked and laughed and held each other. We weren't engaged, but we knew we would spend the rest of our lives together; we knew that we had comfort and safety within our relationship. That anything could happen and we could figure it out.

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Chapter 31

Sunday 28 March 2021

My thumb rubbed over the hair just above Ethan's wrist, the rest of my fingers lost in his. The smell of salt was in the air, but with each step, the smell of fried breads and grilled meats overtook it. Ethan was a few steps in front of me, pulling me towards the crowds of people standing around, folding tables and gazebos, ready for the Sunday market.

I had talked to Elijah about what happened at the wedding, and he and his stupid wisdom suggested, "Perhaps now that you are becoming more comfortable in your identity and self, getting married, a heteronormative practice, may internally feel like a step back. And we both know you have a feeling of inadequacy, but that's internal, and you trust Ethan on everything else except for when he tells you that you are enough."

To which I said, "Obviously not." But he was probably right.

Ethan said he didn't need to be proposed to, and neither did I. So instead, we decided to pick out rings together and then sign the papers later. Ethan said he wanted to be engaged for at least a few months before we got married, but we agreed to no wedding. Not that we could afford one anyway. Ethan had said his mum would definitely come back if we had a wedding, but he seemed like he was trying to convince himself of that fact.

I was lost in my thoughts and the feeling of Ethan in my space when I bumped right into him. He had stopped in front of me, his eyes glazing over a table of produce. Ethan bonked me on the head with a cucumber. A double entendre, perhaps.

"Don't worry, it's a zucchini. I wouldn't hurt you like that," Ethan chirped.

He pulled a compact, foldable shopping bag from his pocket, opened it up, and handed it to me. He dumped his "not cucumber" in it. He added an eggplant, some big heirloom tomatoes, and a few capsicums.

"Does Ollie prefer strawberries or raspberries?"

“Hm. Get both.”

He added a punnet of each to the bag. I glanced around at all the other stalls as Ethan grabbed all the produce. There was a stand of little crochet animals, a whimsical clothing stall, and someone with handmade stickers who shared their stall with two girls selling mānuka honey. I let go of Ethan’s hand for a second as I drifted over to the stalls. Ethan was behind me a minute later, stuffing a receipt into my pocket as I handed some coins to a young woman and took a crochet turtle from her table.

“Oh, that is so cute,” Ethan said, smiling at the woman.

“Thank you,” I said to her before we continued down the line of stalls.

We stopped in front of a stall of cured meats and hanging sausages. I took a toothpick with a little piece of sausage on it. Ethan looked at the stall next to me, our fingers laced together, stretching our arms in the distance between us. Then I had another sample of a slightly different sausage.

“Fuck,” I muttered. “Ethan.” He turned to me. “Try this one.” I handed him a toothpick.

“Oh yeah, it’s great… Get a couple for dinner,” he said with a smile. Ethan asked the man at the stall how to cook them as he packed some into a bag for us.

We went on to another stall. “Hope that’s not the only sausage I get tonight,” Ethan quipped.

I sighed, slight disappointment in his lazy joke that was quickly overtaken by amusement and deep desire. I calmed myself and nodded at him. He lifted our hands and kissed them. I could tell he wanted to kiss me, but he was always so careful not to push me, so I did it instead. I kissed his cheek… and no one noticed.

I trailed behind Ethan again when his walk turned to a skip as he hurtled towards a table.

“Kia ora!” an older woman said as we neared the table. “Kei te pēhea koe?”

I looked over at Ethan.

“Kei te pai!” he replied.

I wasn’t sure what they were saying, but it seemed positive. “Hello,” I said in response to the first phrase. I did know that one.

“Is there something I can help you with? We have all sorts of jewellery, and it’s all ethically sourced and handmade. A lot of these metals end up in landfill, so I dig them out and turn them into something new. Helps to

protect our whenua.” She was so joyful and sweet—so in love with what she was doing.

She glanced at our joined hands on the other side of her table, but I didn’t let go of him. We scoured her wares.

“Well, we need some rings,” Ethan said with a huge grin, his cheeks pushing up the bottom of his glasses, shifting them around on his nose.

“Ooh! Wedding, promise, engagement, just for fun?” she asked before she pulled a wooden box of rings out from under her table.

“I think engagement-wedding, just one set for the whole affair,” Ethan explained.

“Well, I have these ones, and… and I have these ones, they would look great with the green in your eyes!” She pulled different rings out of the box and held them up to us.

“I like those,” I said, pointing to a little set of decorative rings—some kind of silvery metal with all sorts of shapes and engravings.

“Yes, they’re a bit thicker, which I think is nice, and they’re actually made from spoon handles,” she said, pulling out a few more styles of rings all made from cutlery handles.

We shuffled through them, trying them on our right hands. I ended up with a plain silver one with a lot of engravings, and Ethan had a similar one, but his was wrapped around in a spiral so it was a little thicker. The woman packed them into a little felt ring box and handed it to me.

“Ka kite anō!” she exclaimed before we left.

“E noho rā,” Ethan replied before linking his arm in mine and pulling me through the crowd.

Next, we stopped and got some fritters. We got two mussel, two corn, and two whitebait. The way Ethan smiled at me made me feel proud of myself. I could tell he was on a high after our morning, and so was I.

We walked along the grassy bank beside the beach before finding an empty picnic table and sitting down. We were away from the crowds, our bodies sandwiched together in the cool breeze.

I pulled the ring box out and grabbed Ethan’s hand. “Ethan, will you marry me?”

He nodded. “Yes.” I put the ring on his left hand and kissed him, but he pushed me back slightly, grabbed my ring and said, “Tyler, will you marry me?”

“Of course,” I muttered with a smile.

He put my ring on and we kissed properly. My hands cupped his face as he wrapped his arms around me.

“Do you want to do it with other people or just us?” Ethan asked as he bit into one of the whitebait fritters.

“Hmm, I think probably… with only the people we like,” I said with a smile.

“So your parents won’t be coming.” Ethan chuckled.

“No, but Willa can. I think maybe if we call it a wedding party, they won’t be so upset when I don’t invite them.”

“I’m saying yes to the idea of a party, but like a fun party with fun stuff to do, games and drinks and snacks and stuff. And because it’ll be cool, and not because it will make your parents feel good.”

“Okay.” I looked at him coyly.

“We could do a mini wedding ceremony thing, like, say *I love you* and sign the papers and then get wasted.” Ethan grabbed my hand with so much excitement as he spoke.

“Yes. That sounds nice… Do you think we should have a honeymoon? Nothing too big, just a little road trip where… where we could like do some things, fun stuff together.”

“Are you asking me to go on a cute romantic road trip with you where we hold hands in a field that we then fuck in?” Ethan asked with as straight of a face as he could keep.

“I love you, Ethan.”

“I love you.” It was a statement not an agreement.

“Are you okay? I feel like there’s something making you less… you.”

He took a deep breath. “I miss my mum.”

I used a trick out of Elijah’s playbook: I looked into his eyes and nodded.

“I know she loves me, but like, where the fuck is she? She’s in love and she’s travelling but she left as soon as I wasn’t her responsibility anymore and she had found someone to go with. Like I was holding her back my whole life. And we talk once a month-ish, but I don’t feel like she knows me anymore. And she’s the only person I have from my life. I mean, I have you and my friends, but she’s been with me my whole life and I miss her. I miss her so much, and it makes me so disappointed that your parents *are* around, and they suck.”

He had started crying by the end of his speech. His cheeks were pink and he was turning away from me a little, so I stopped looking at him for a

minute. I looked out onto the beach, at all the happy pairs—some had kids and some had dogs. I put my arm around Ethan and pulled him into my chest. I kissed his forehead and took his glasses off so I could dry his beautiful eyes.

“Should we get a dog?” I asked him.

“Huh?”

“I think, after we are officially married, we should get a dog. It would be like our baby. Ollie’s getting older, we need some new chaos running around,” I said, pointing to the animals running along the sand.

“Okay, although Ollie was never really that chaotic.”

“You think a dog will be more work than a child?” I put his glasses back on his soft cheeks.

“Have you met your kid? His biggest issue is when he forgets to eat because he’s reading a freaking book.”

Ethan pressed his head deeper into my shoulder. He was perfect.

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Part 3: The Rest

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Chapter 32

Saturday 21 August 2021

I turned to Ollie, who was tugging on the front pocket of my jeans. “Yes, buddy?”

“Can you help get the sausage rolls out of the oven?”

“I can help!” Ethan yelled.

He kissed me as he drifted past me into the kitchen. His lips barely touched me as he passed, yet I felt the connection linger. I was wearing my necklace with their initials, which hung in the middle of my chest between the collar of my unbuttoned shirt.

Ethan had undone the top three buttons after I put it on. “It’s a gay party wedding, not a Mormon wedding,” he said as his fingers brushed my throat.

I had bought new jeans; Ethan was so excited he threw my old, *good* jeans in the bin. I did dig them out because they were still perfectly fine, but it was interesting, buying new jeans for my wedding and throwing away the jeans I wore on our first date. Which I then realised was more than five years ago. We stopped celebrating our anniversary by year three, but a wedding anniversary was something I was very excited for.

We had spent quite a lot on the party, but nothing compared to a wedding. It was about two thousand total, and literally all of that was just food and drinks. We had flowers around the house and a few “just married” and “wedding” banners, plus some balloons Ollie had insisted on buying after learning how to blow them up at school. He, Aubrie, and Everett had come a little early to help set up and had been greeting and opening the door. Well, Ollie had—he was very invested in the hosting aspect of this party. Nine years was old enough to handle hosting a wedding… and he really, really wanted to.

Jax and Elliot, Orla and Ayesha, and Sophie and Brooks—who arrived hand in hand—were all in attendance. Willa showed up late, which was no surprise. She didn’t bring a man though, which was a surprise. We decided

to do a little mini ceremony that was supposed to be at seven but ended up pushed to seven-thirty because of my sister's late arrival. We had signed the papers earlier that day, but Ethan had really wanted to write vows, and although I knew my writing skills weren't good enough, I wanted him to know how much I loved him. I had been very clear to Ollie to not move the hard liquor to the drinks table until after the vows. Before then, it was all wine and beer and nibbles.

Tink, tink, tink went Ethan's glass as he tapped it with a knife. He grabbed my hand and pulled me under one of the banners.

"Thank you everyone for coming! Tyler and I are so excited for today, and all the other days, and I hope this is the most fun wedding you've ever been to. Sorry, Aubrie, you can have most beautiful." He raised his glass at her. "Now we will read our vows, and I will go first!"

Ethan pulled out two pieces of paper that had been stacked and folded down to a Post-it note size. He fumbled with them as he found the start of his speech, then cleared his throat. "Tyler, when I met you five years ago, I thought you were very hot. Not in your dating profile. No, those photos were awful. But when I saw you and talked to you, I realised that profile was the worst presentation of yourself possible. I think back to how quiet you were that day, and how much I didn't know when to shut up, and wonder how it's possible you got any words in. A lot has happened in that time… more than anyone other than us knows but you were there the whole time, and I wouldn't trade any of it—except maybe for a man who actually wants to play Battleship with me, rather than doing it begrudgingly. I am only going to make one promise and that's to never, ever make you eat a cucumber. Tyler, I am so proud of you, I am so lucky to be with you, and I love you…" He sniffled and wiped a tear. "Also, your kid is fucking awesome." He tried his best to sound excited but his voice was broken up. "And now it's your turn," Ethan said, stuffing the papers back into his pocket.

"Ethan, you are everything. You have taught me so much about myself and the world, and sometimes I wonder if we might break up, but I know I wouldn't care…" *Oh fuck*, I really should've rehearsed my speech. This sounds terrible out loud. "Because! Because of the wonderful time we spent together." I choked.

"*Fuck me*." I muttered

Ethan raised his eyebrow at me as if to say "if you want."

“Um…” I looked back down at my paper, which was actually my leather notebook. It only had one page left and I started it a few months before we started dating. It had kind of become a diary of our relationship, as most of the movies I watched after we met, I had watched with him.

“I am grateful for how you’ve always supported me, how you’ve always pushed me to do the things I was too scared to do without forcing me when I wasn’t ready, how you accepted every part of me without hesitation. I promise to be the best person I can be, and I promise to make you happy wherever I can. You are the love of my life, Ethan,” I leant down so my hot breath was gentle on his cheek. “And sometimes—most of the time—when I look at you, I want to take a bite out of your gorgeous body.” I turned back to everyone.

Ethan’s face was red and wet and had a huge grin. I pulled him in and kissed him, sucking his tongue into my mouth in front of all my friends and the family that I liked. I was happy and free.

The crowd clapped and whooped.

Ethan held my hand as we walked over to all the food where I started stuffing my face. He was then pulled aside to play a round of some card game.

“That was lovely,” Aubrie said, screwdriver in hand. Elliot and Jax had been making some drinks for everyone.

“Was it? I feel like I did awful… He’s awesome though, isn’t he?” My lips pulled into a smile as I gazed over at him.

“You did fine, and you’re right, he is awesome.”

“Fuck, well at least the important part is over. You’re in charge of the kid and I’m not driving, so I can get wasted.” I grabbed the flute of orange liquid from her hand and gulped it down. “This is just orange juice. Why is this just orange juice?”

Aubrie scowled at me. “Use your fuckin’ head.” She scoffed.

It took me a lot longer than it should’ve. “Really? Wow. Can I tell Ethan, or is it still a secret?”

“Whatever, I’m about to get all fat anyway…” she whined. “I am happy, though. Was worried I’d be all dried up.”

“You’re, like, twenty-six.” I poured myself a drink.

“Yeah, and it’s been nine years since I had a baby. I don’t know how all that works.”

“Y’know what, I just started thinking about it, and I don’t like it. I haven’t had to think about uteruses for a long time and I’m not about to start now.”

I brought a rum and coke for me and a drink Elliot had made for Ethan over to where he was playing a very intense game of Chameleon. One of my hands settled on his knee and the other on his hip. I pulled my chair all the way next to his and squeezed myself into his side. I was lost in the music and the lights as I slowly got buzzed.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!”

I jumped as Ethan yelled.

“I think it’s time to move from this bullshit to drinking games,” Ethan announced as he got up from the table where he had just lost… again.

Everyone was laughing at his frustration before they all went to sit in a circle in the living room.

“I’m gonna get us refills quickly.” I kissed Ethan and dipped into the kitchen.

“Bye, Dad,” Ollie said from the entrance door, putting on his shoes. Aubrie and Everett were right behind him.

Dad and *Daddy* had become interchangeable, which I didn’t love, and Mummy was fully out of the picture now—which secretly made me feel better, although I would never point it out.

“Have a good sleep, buddy.” I kissed his forehead before Everett took him to the car.

“I hope your sleep’s not too good.” Aubrie winked as she trailed along.

I added myself to the circle, right between Ethan and Willa. Ethan leant into me, our backs against the couch as we settled in on the carpet.

“Okay, never have I ever… had sex on the beach,” Ethan said, then whispered to me, “Not that I really want to, sand and all that.”

Willa drank, so did Brooks and Sophie, which would have been a fun revelation, but after their drinks, they said in unison, “Not together!”

“Okay, okay, my turn. Never have I ever called my sibling for help cooking for my *lover.*…” Willa drawled.

“Fuck you.” I glared as I took a sip.

“I don’t remember that?” Ethan said.

“Yeah, ’cause it was awful and I ordered takeaways.” I laughed.

Ethan looked at me with a sneaky smile. “That means it’s your turn, Tyler,” he sang.

“Okay, um… Never have I ever gone skinny dipping.” I looked at Ethan, who was nodding at me. We were both surprised by the perfection of the question.

Everyone but Ethan, Elliot and me drank.

“Never have I ever wanked with someone else in the house,” Orla shouted over the laughs.

Most people drank, including me.

“Really? You dirty hoes,” they yelled. “I would never.”

“I know full well that happened, like, last week,” Ayesha added and then gave Orla a wet sloppy drunken kiss. “Never have I ever… fuck, I can’t think of something I haven’t done,” she looked at Jax. “Never have I ever eaten out of the rubbish bin.”

Jax scowled and chugged the last of his drink. Elliot had lain down, his head on Jax’s lap. “Well, my drink is gone, and it’s almost midnight, so I think we’re gonna head out,” he said as he stroked Elliot awake.

Eventually, it was just Ethan, Brooks, Sophie and me sitting around with water and food. Ethan lit a candle and told me how much he loved me as we fell into conversation.

Apparently, Sophie and Brooks had hooked up the night of our *Hamilton* watch party. They had gone to a bar and had sex after. Sophie had cried the next day over the anxiety that came with sleeping with someone new after only being with Casper for seven years. Then she went on to describe how loving and caring Brooks was, but that they were taking it slow.

Ethan had essentially lain on top of me, and then me on top of him, intertwining our bodies on the couch. My hand slipped under his shirt and drew circles over his waist. Maybe it was the alcohol or the high of having just got married, but I didn’t care that I was touching my husband in a romantic way in front of our straight friends. I only cared that he was smiling up at me with pure joy, that my friends were across from us looking smitten with each other and perfectly comfortable with the way we were interacting.

They helped clean up before they left, got the dishwasher stacked, and put the leftovers in the fridge. Ethan took the rubbish out and then we were alone in our clean husband-filled house. I had had a great time but I was thrilled to be all alone in my house with Ethan.

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Chapter 33

Sunday 22 August 2021

My wedding ring sat confidently on my finger. I knew I should be tired by now, but it was a little past midnight on my wedding day—or the day after my wedding day—so I was nothing but eager.

I circled the kitchen island to hold Ethan in my arms when he turned to me, took a deep breath and looked into my eyes. “Do you want to play a game?”

“Not really,” I drawled as I wrapped my arms around his waist and pulled him towards me. All I wanted was him in our bed for as long as possible.

He placed his hands on my chest, creating a barrier so we couldn’t get close. “It’s a fun game, I promise.” He grabbed my hand and pulled me to sit at the breakfast bar. Our stools faced each other, but we weren’t even close enough for our knees to touch.

I missed him.

“What’s the game?” I asked as my arm spread along the bench, begging to be close to him, to touch him.

“Truth or dare,” Ethan said. “But if you don’t do it, you take something off,” he said with a sneaky grin.

The idea made me anxious. I feared he would dare me to do something I didn’t want to do. Although I suppose I would just strip, but I didn’t want to let him down.

I wondered about him touching my ass. Sometimes I looked it up on porn sites or Reddit. Of people alone, I mean. So I could practise.

It wasn’t that I didn’t trust him, I was just scared, and we had good sex without it. I wasn’t *drunk* drunk, but I certainly wasn’t all there. I wasn’t sure if it was something I would ever want, however I knew I didn’t want it tonight, but I didn’t want to tell him no on our wedding night.

“Truth, I guess,” I said, realising the level of trust I was comfortable with meant I could tell this man anything.

“Hmm… Have you ever had a threesome?”

Fuck me, did he want a threesome? “No.”

“It took you like, three whole seconds to answer. I think you should take something off,” he said, tugging at the bottom of my shirt. I unbuttoned the front and slid it off my shoulders. “Okay, I pick truth too.”

“Have *you* ever had a threesome?” I asked.

“How rude, stealing my question. I did once. Well, I tried. A couple—a girl and a guy—asked me to join them, and I was freshly out as bisexual so I thought that was supposed to be the dream, but I was really stressed out and left before we even started getting naked.”

I could tell he was telling the truth, but I knew he had seen the panic in my face after he asked the question; he had wanted to make it clear that wasn’t why he was asking about it and that I didn’t have to worry. And it worked.

“This time I’m daring you,” he said. “Truths will get us nowhere. We are both far too honest.”

He had figured out my plan. I was about to start freaking out when he demanded I do a handstand. In response to that, I pulled my jeans off, my legs spread open, only a thin layer of cotton between me and the world and my still fully dressed husband.

“I dare you to… lick your elbow,” I said.

“Fuck you, you know I can’t do that!” he shouted as I started licking my elbow in front of him. He took his glasses off.

“That does not count,” I said as I unbuckled his belt and made him take off his pants.

I was pleased to see, even in his loose boxers, that he was starting to get hard too. He watched carefully as I raked my eyes over his body.

“I’m done with this game,” he said and completely changed his demeanour. He dragged his chair next to mine so he could pull me into a messy, boiling-hot kiss.

My hand gripped the back of his neck and my teeth scraped on his chin and lips as I tried to pull him closer. He crawled over me and sat in my lap. My fingers dug into the flesh of his back. I was desperate to feel his body against mine, but I couldn’t feel it enough. I had to let him go to rip his shirt

off so I could pull him into me. It wasn't enough—I wanted to crawl inside his skin, I wanted us to be one.

Ethan leant out to catch his breath. He had red splotches over his chin and face as he raked a hand through his hair, as if to come back to reality. "Do you want to do something different tonight?" he asked.

No, no I don't. I just want you. I don't want anything different.

"Have you heard of edging?"

I laughed while mountains of pressure fell off my shoulders, then sighed in relief. "Yes," I huffed. "I am a grown-up too… Is that what you want?"

Ethan's teeth dug into his bottom lip as he nodded. We started kissing again. Every now and then, I would open my eyes and see his pink skin splattered with chestnut flecks. I wanted to kiss and worship each freckle individually; I wanted to list all the parts of him I loved.

"Ethan. You're so beautiful. Your eyes." I gasped for air. "Your cheeks." I grabbed his ass, although I did mean his face. "Your freckles are made up of so many different colours?"

Ethan ignored me and started kissing and sucking my shoulder instead, over my surgery scars and across my chest. "Can I leave a mark?" he asked.

He asked…

"Please," I moaned.

My skin burned hot beneath his mouth, just under my collarbone. He finished it with a peck—it was dark purples and pinks speckled with red. Then he grabbed my hand and led me to our bedroom.

He pulled his underwear off and lay on the bed—legs apart, arms reaching out for me. I crawled over his body, licking his stomach. I sucked a mark onto his pelvic bone as he squirmed beneath me before I started kissing over his dick. I sucked a testicle into my mouth and tugged at it. I gripped his hip with one hand, squeezing and pulling at the muscle as my fist worked the base of his cock. My jaw slackened to take him deeper, my tongue swirling the tip as he tugged at my hair. He was shaking beneath me, his hips thrusting up into my mouth. I took a step back to stand at the end of the bed and he huffed a pained moan.

"Don't look at me like that. This was your idea." I laughed, guilty and amused.

Ethan nodded at my hard on. I palmed at it through my underwear, gently adding pressure while he looked up at me from the bed. He nodded again, and I pulled them down. I still got anxious every time he saw me

naked, that he would see the scars that covered both of my thighs as if he hadn't a million times before. Sometimes his eyes glazed over them, sometimes he would touch them. He always made me feel like he could acknowledge them without feeling pity, disappointment, or disgust.

I stood at his feet, jerking my cock. His breathing had slowed to a normal pace when I crawled over him again. We flipped over and he sat next to me on his knees as he tugged at my cockhead and sucked on my nipples—something that we had discovered got me close quickly. It didn't fail this time either.

When he pulled off me, he licked the little bit of pre-cum off his fingers. He kissed my stomach and up to my face so I pulled his tongue in my mouth again. Our hips fought as they tried to grind together, but we wouldn't let them. My hands ran over his ass and thighs, over the tiger stripes that spread over his skin. I wanted to trace them, to burn the lines into my brain. I kneaded all up and down his sides and eventually, despite our best efforts, our dicks were rubbing together.

"Tyler…" Ethan moaned. "Touch me," he begged, grabbing my hand and pulling it between his ass cheeks.

I liked his idea, but in my asshole-finagling research, I became quite indulged in the idea of a rim job. I rolled him over and lay on top of him.

"Can I use my tongue?" I shot my breath onto his neck.

"Yes!" His breath was excited, getting faster and hitching as I ran my lips down his spine.

He seemed giddy like a toddler at the idea. It made me excited too; I felt proud that I could try to please him with something new. My tongue circled his tailbone, the hairs clumping together as my saliva ran over it. It slipped between his cheeks just a little at first, but the sound he made forced me to get serious real quick. I got on my knees, using them to spread his legs apart. I grabbed a pillow and stuck it under his pelvis then put a hand on either hip, my nose rubbing his crack as I circled his hole with my tongue. My lips brushed against his ass while I kissed and sucked and tasted him.

He was making noises, saying things, but his voice was muffled by the pillow he had his face shoved into. It wasn't until he declared how close he was that I leaned away, flipped him over and just watched him. He was lying on his hands to keep them from touching either of us, looking at me through his eyelashes while his mouth hung open.

I stayed away for as long as I could, which admittedly wasn't that long. I went to speak but Ethan beat me to it.

"Are you feeling pent up enough? 'Cause I am, and I'm dying down here."

I nodded. I pushed my hands under his knees and pulled him to the end of the bed then threw his legs over my shoulders and haphazardly squirted lube over my throbbing dick before I lined myself up. I had one foot on the floor and my other leg leant into the bed. I had never had sex from this angle before, and I was quite excited to try it.

"Tyler… you're everything." Ethan nodded at me.

I pressed into him, gently at first, although it didn't last long. I thrust quicker and harder as Ethan groaned beneath me. His hands shook as he tried to pull me down to him.

"More," he gasped.

I pulled out for a moment. Ethan reached down and tried to finger himself but I grabbed his wrist and twirled him so he was sitting up. I sat on the bed with my back against the wall and pulled him over my lap. He was on his knees, kissing me in an instant as he lowered down. He bounced, gripping my shoulders and pressing his forehead into mine. I looked over his staunch, rugged, hairy body, at the beads of sweat dripping down his chest. His arms were so thick… I felt the need to do something, something I had wanted to do for a long time but never did. I wanted to ask, but I didn't know how. Ethan's head was tilted back, his eyes closed and his mouth open. He was moments from the end of this night and so was I.

Fuck it. I leaned in and gently pressed my teeth into his arm, the muscle dense in my mouth.

"Oh god," Ethan yelped with bliss as I bit harder.

Hot streams of semen fell over my stomach, slipping between us. I came shortly after. His arm dropped out of my mouth as my head dropped back against the wall. He fell onto the bed, and I followed with our feet dangling off the side.

"Fuck, that was amazing," he said as he brushed his finger over the mark I left on his biceps.

We were panting, red, sweaty, our fingers interlocked. "It wasn't too much?" I asked.

"It was perfect. Like you." He slid a hand over my chest and abdomen, drawing gentle circles as my stomach rose and fell.

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Chapter 34

Tuesday 5 October 2021

I rushed down the hallway, a backpack hung over one shoulder. I gripped it to keep it from sliding off as I shuffled along the compact carpet, past doors with nameplates, potted plants, and desk after desk of receptionists.

“Sorry I’m late…” I heaved as I slipped into Elijah’s office and plopped onto the couch.

“Oh, no worries.” He waved me off.

He settled into his spot in his chair with a cup of tea. I hadn’t seen him in a few months while he was on paternity leave. Not since before Ethan and I got engaged. Although I did send him a message about it, which at first I thought was an overstep, but he had said to message him with anything I was “having strong or confusing emotions about.”

There were other times I thought about messaging him… the day after our wedding when I got a phone call that ruined my whole glowy romantic feeling. But I didn’t, because I knew anything I messaged him about I would have to talk about, and I didn’t want to talk about it, because the urge to cut myself that came with the phone call was not something I wanted to feel again.

“I honestly don’t know how you did it. I knew a kid would be hard, but I’m almost forty in a committed relationship with two steady incomes and it’s still a struggle,” he said, all the while opening and flicking through the pages of his notebook. “So, how’s married life?”

The muscles in my face strained as I tried to conceal my joy. “I love him.” I reached for a little cube in the basket on the coffee table. It had switches and spikes and little rolly balls, like a deodorant bottle. “Ollie was so excited when we told him. He said it meant Ethan got to stay forever.” I was excited for the same reason. “Ethan makes fun of me sometimes because I messed up my little speech to him, but I think he preferred that over the mushy romantic stuff I had tried to say.”

“Do you feel like it was romantic? Did it feel like what you wanted?” Elijah asked as he gulped down a mouthful of tea.

Sometimes I felt like he was trying to convince me Ethan was bad. I think sometimes, when I talked about him, it made him seem controlling, but he wasn’t. He just always knew what he wanted and I didn’t, or I did, but didn’t know how to tell him. I often liked when he chose what happened. It made everything feel easier and simpler.

“Mmh.” I nodded. “I think—I forgot what I wanted. Or what I didn’t want… It was just such a perfect night. It was like I had forgotten that I was kissing him and touching him in front of all these people.”

“Like you forgot you were gay?”

I nodded. Although the way he put it made me feel guilty. I didn’t try to forget, I wasn’t excited I forgot, it just felt more like I was in love than a gay person in love. Like the gayness wasn’t even a factor. “But I know I am.”

“You would hope so.” He chuckled. “I think it’s good that you’re feeling more comfortable being romantic in front of people. Not only on your wedding, but any time. We live in a place and time now where you, a gay man, can go out in public with your husband and touch and kiss the way all the straight people do and no one should give a shit.”

I thought it was good too, but it made me sweat and shake. “We’ve been doing that, like holding hands ’n’ stuff. When we’re out, I mean,” I stuttered as I stabbed the spikey side of the cube into the pad of my thumb. I wasn’t scared, but I felt unsafe.

“Have you told anyone else? Maybe at school or even at the supermarket? Or when you’re alone?” Elijah asked, staring at me. “Sometimes you might buy, I don’t know, what does Ethan like?”

“Sometimes I buy him lunch.”

“Okay, so you’re at some coffee shop—”

“Ethan likes Subway.”

“So you’re in Subway. And the sandwich artist says, ‘Oh, I see you in here all the time.’” Elijah made his voice deep and gruff. “And you say, ‘Oh, my husband loves Subway.’”

“Why, though? Like, why would I say that to a stranger?”

Elijah stared at me. He seemed disappointed, or like he thought I was stupid. “Tyler, people talk about their partners because they love them and want people to know. It’s different for you, I know, but it’s something I

think you should try out. Mention your husband. You could say partner if that feels safer, but say it to someone random."

I did love Ethan, even if I didn't tell people all the time. "It doesn't… I didn't tell anyone… Like, I was careful not to tell people."

"It doesn't feel natural? That makes sense. That's why I want you to try. Practise until it becomes natural. If you hate it, you can stop, but I don't think you will. And I think it will help how you feel about yourself in a lot of scenarios," Elijah went on.

I felt like he spoke in another language sometimes, but I did somehow understand exactly what he was saying. As if it was processed far, far back in my brain.

"Let's go back to your wedding. Sometimes the excitement gets built up, and when it's over, it can make you feel flat. Did you feel that at all?" Elijah and I held a long, painful bit of eye contact. "It's fine if you didn't."

"I feel like I was excited for the after more than the party. Like I wasn't overly desperate for that part. It was a great night, but I hadn't expected it to be so… Like, my expectations weren't that high, or…" I trailed off. I didn't really know what I was saying. I knew what I wanted to say, but it wasn't coming out right. I thought maybe Elijah would figure it out and tell me, but he never did. "We are planning a trip. A honeymoon, I guess," I announced.

"Where to?"

"A road trip, I think. I told Ethan all I wanted was to be away for a while, completely alone. And he's been texting me loads of different activities and I just send yes or no back. He really wants to go tree climbing. I think I'll go, but I said that if we do, he has to drive for at least half of the time."

Now it was Elijah with the short answers. "You don't like driving?"

"I do, but I always drive, and we're going to drive through some cool places and I don't want to be driving the whole time and miss looking at stuff. And I think tree climbing will be good. I haven't done any 'fun' exercises in ages. I'm getting kind of bored at the gym. It's not as much of a stress relief anymore."

"Do you think maybe it's not feeling like stress relief because you're not as stressed?" he asked. "When was the last time going to the gym helped you relax rather than just being a workout?"

My lips twisted and tightened on my face. I wanted to lie because I knew the truth would force me to talk about that phone call. "The day after… the

wedding.”

“Did something happen that day?”

My jaw tightened as he waited for my reply. “You’re allowed to be hurt sometimes, by anything or anyone,” Elijah said. “You can’t control how things make you feel.”

“My mum… She called me.” I put the cube in my fist and squeezed. “Ethan and I woke up. And it was perfect. He got up to start making breakfast, and she called me.” I wrapped my other hand around the fist and added more pressure. “She asked me why she and dad weren’t invited. I told her we were getting married but that we weren’t having a wedding, and she was very upset. I didn’t really care, or I tried not to, but she said my dad was really angry about it. That gay people are so desperate to get married and then they don’t even have weddings. I told her like six times it was a party and not a wedding and that’s why she wasn’t invited. And she just got angry with me. I hung up on her. I’d barely been talking to her, and that’s what she said when she heard I had gotten married.” I took a deep breath to keep the feeling of tears from rising in my throat. “This is so fucking stupid,” I huffed. “Part of me even thought she was calling to… to congratulate me or something.”

“It’s hard when we give people chances to redeem themselves and they don’t.”

“She doesn’t even need to be redeemed. I just want her to be fucking normal.” I dumped the cube onto the couch, rubbing my thumb over the divots it left in my palm.

Elijah nodded. “So you went to the gym after your phone call?”

“Mmh… I wasn’t going to that day, I was going to stay with Ethan all day, but he was talking to his mum on the phone and it only made me feel worse to know that she had called to congratulate him, so I went… It was even worse because he’s been so sad about not seeing his mum and he was so happy to talk to her. I didn’t want to ruin the first time he got a chance to talk to her for a while. We argue a bit sometimes because my parents suck and are around, and his mum is awesome and never there, so we just end up jealous of each other or we’re both kinda petty about it. And he had such a big smile talking to his mum… and I needed to go, or I was going to… I wanted to, y’know… to cut.” I was looking straight at the floor. My whole body was frozen as I realised everything I had just said.

“You’ve been feeling a bit better lately, so I’m not surprised that getting that phone call pulled you that far down when your wedding had brought you so far up.”

I looked at him. “But I feel bad. I feel bad for feeling bad.”

“I think the important part of all this is you knew you felt bad, you knew you felt the urge to self-harm, you knew if you talked to Ethan you were going to fight, and you found a healthier coping mechanism,” he said. “Tyler, that’s good. And fighting about your family is normal in a relationship. You’re both in tough positions with your family. It would be great if we could sort out every little part of our life and be okay with it and not be petty or jealous, but that’s just not how people work.”

I walked back down the corridor, my heart pounding in my ears. Even when counselling helped me to know what was going on, I still felt drained and exhausted after. I felt like I was too much, like I had so many issues that it was all too much, and it wasn’t fair to Ethan. Ethan had his own issues, but he always seemed to tell me about them and cry and have a hug and be fine after. Elijah said that it was because I was depressed—that when bad things happened, they affected me for longer. I hoped that would end soon. He did suggest medication, but I was worried it’d make me feel awful—a different awful than I felt now.

I wasn’t supposed to feel awful. I was supposed to feel happy.

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Chapter 35

Wednesday 12 January 2022

I had one foot on the floor and the other up on the passenger seat. My head was propped back on the headrest as I gazed down my cheeks beneath my sunglasses. A cool breeze flowed through the cracked window, the smell of grass was in the air, the earthy aftertaste of the kumara chips I had just eaten lingered on my tongue. Ethan was beside me, his hand resting over my thigh.

“We’re going to have to stop for petrol soon,” he said as his thumb stroked lines across the inside of my thigh.

I nodded and turned to him. I was smiling, and so was he.

I had finished my studies and passed my degree. I had a paid internship lined up to help with writing and story-editing for a directing company. I knew my life was ready for me when I came back, all set. Sometimes it freaked me out that my life was good, because it meant my still feeling sad and empty didn’t make sense, which then only made it worse. I had everything… there was no getting better.

I held the petrol pump in the fuel door. Ethan always made me fill the car. He hated the smell, and I wasn’t going to lie, I’d loved it since I was a kid.

“All done,” I said as I knocked on the window.

Ethan looked up from his phone and slipped out of the car. I held his hand as we wandered into the petrol station. “Do you want a pie?” he asked.

I shook my head while Ethan scooped a pepper steak into a little paper bag. I grabbed a Snickers bar and some Reese’s cups. Ethan joined me in the line. There was one person left in front of us when I realised I was hungry. “Can you get me a sausage roll?”

Ethan rolled his eyes, handed me his pie, and begrudgingly returned to the cabinet. The clerk started scanning my things.

“Cash or card?” they asked.

“Oh, um… my husband is just grabbing one more thing,” I said.

The clerk smiled at me, and we stood in silence until Ethan joined us. “I’m so hungry,” he whined.

An hour later, we pulled into a treetop rope-climbing car park in Rotorua. “Gonna take me a while to get used to the smell,” I said as we walked towards a cabin that said “Front desk.”

“What, you don’t love boiled eggs and farts?” Ethan asked as he grabbed my hand.

It freaked me out, but I let him. “I know it’s snooty, but I’m glad we live north.” I squeezed his hand.

“Hello folks, what are you here for today?” a thin man—who could’ve been twenty or forty—rasped. He had dreadlocks and no shoes.

“Level seven for two, please,” Ethan said, then let go of my hand as he examined some wood rounds and carvings they had for sale.

“Seven? Out of how many?” I asked.

“Seven of nine.” Ethan tapped his card, and the man handed us harnesses.

“Okay, so you just get those on, and then we’ll get you some helmets. I’ll show you how to use the carabiners and then you’ll follow the signs to level seven.”

I stepped into the harness and tightened it. I had worn a million harnesses when I was working construction. Ethan barely had one leg in the harness by the time I was clicking my helmet on. The guy was outside, shuffling through some kids trying to get out of their harnesses. I grabbed Ethan’s harness and pulled it up his hips. I adjusted all the straps and made sure he was tight and safe. Then I plonked his helmet on and gave him a kiss.

“You are very good with harnesses.” Ethan winked.

I huffed a laugh.

We were ready to climb the first ladder, following the very important highly reiterated rule of checking that your partner’s clipped in properly. The constant demand of how important that was made me really anxious as to how strong these carabiners were.

“I’m kinda nervous. Maybe we should’ve started with an easier level,” I said as I stepped onto the first rung of the wobbly rope ladder, unsafe like the ones at carnivals, except there was no airbag beneath us.

“No, they will be too easy for you. Besides, there are kids on number eight. We can do this,” Ethan said as he started to climb.

I made it to the first platform while Ethan was still making his way up the ladder. I settled into being up high. I didn’t mind it. It was January, but it wasn’t too hot; it felt safe under the canopy of trees, in the shadowy air with bolts of light that made their way through the gaps in the leaves.

Ethan joined me on the platform. “So are you… are you—” He looked straight down. “Are you still feeling nervous?” His eyes darted around the trees as his knuckles whitened around the ropes and wires.

“No,” I said. I placed a hand on his shoulder. “It’s nice and quiet up here. Are *you* nervous?” My hand rubbed over his back.

“I’ve not really been up high before.”

I held his hand, snickering a little. I loved that he was fearless until he was actively doing the dangerous thing. He had zero qualms while booking and getting the harness on, no concern when I suggested something easier, but now that we were up here and I had realised it wasn’t so scary, he had done the opposite.

“Come on then. This was your idea and I’m having fun now.”

Ethan forced a smile as we moved onto a bridge. It reminded me of the zoo trip Ollie and I had gone on all those years ago while I held his warm hand as we wobbled along a rope bridge.

Ethan gripped my hand with more force than I knew he had as I pulled him along. He didn’t seem to use his lungs until we were on another platform. The next bridge didn’t have sides, just a wooden log that swung side to side like a hammock. I ended up walking backwards across it, holding both of Ethan’s hands to get him over it.

“Tyler, I think we should stop,” he said after the fourth bridge. “The ground keeps getting further away.”

I gripped his forearms with a grin on my face. “Ethan, isn’t it so freeing being up here? We’re alone in the forest. And you have to get down somehow. You’re almost halfway anyway.”

He nodded. He held my hips over each bridge that slowly became more and more rickety and less and less bridge-like. Sometimes I would grab his hand for a minute as we stood on the platforms. His palm was sweaty and shaky.

“So do you want to go first, or should I go first?” I asked awkwardly as we reached the last part of the “rope climbing experience.” It was a zipline.

We were twenty-five metres off the ground. He looked around, saying nothing. “To be fair, I didn’t even know this was coming. *You* planned this!” I teased. I was trying his make jokes in serious situations tactic. He smiled, but it didn’t seem to ease his anxiety.

“You should go first. I’m gonna want a hug at the bottom.” He nodded at me.

I clipped myself to the wire, sat into my harness, and let go. My stomach dropped. The sweat that coated my skin dried as the air rushed over me. A beaming grin covered my face and a sudden spike of something rushed in me when my feet hit the ground.

Fuck, that was amazing.

Ethan was in my arms two minutes later. I held him as his breathing slowly returned to normal, his cheeks pink and splotched.

“Ready for some food then?” I asked.

Ethan held two little sandwiches he had bought at the front desk. He was telling me about how amazing the actors on the brochure must have been since they seemed to be genuinely enjoying their time. I could tell he had relaxed again by the way he rambled. He opened the sandwiches and took the tops off, pulling the cucumbers out of one and shoving them into the other. He put the tops back on and bit into his double cucumber sandwich while I bit into the other.

“Do you want to do any more ziplines? There are some longer ones over there,” I said.

“Y’know what.” His voice was muffled by the sandwich in his mouth. “I think I would love to watch you do some!”

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Ethan was angrily texting on his phone as my arms shook holding the bags outside our Airbnb. It was hot and we were sweaty and irritated by the house that would not let us in.

“I already tried the frickin’ code,” he huffed. “This is why keys should still be a thing.” His fingers rubbed over the crease between his eyebrows. “Okay. They reset it.” He punched in four numbers.

“Yes!” we both celebrated.

Once inside, we dumped our bags down and drifted into the yard. Ethan saw some fresh tomatoes and started munching them.

“Try one,” he demanded as he threw a red, marble-sized ball at me. Ethan was enjoying his tomatoes too much…

He yelped when I sprayed him with a hose I found. “Fuck off,” he chortled with tomatoes in his mouth.

“It’s hot, isn’t it? And we aren’t having sex till we get all the sweat and dirt off us,” I said before I turned the hose on myself. My hair stuck to my forehead and my shirt went see-through as the cool water showered over me.

“Fine,” Ethan huffed. “For sex, I guess.” He stood like a *T* and I sprayed him with the hose as he took his clothes off. We switched and moved our naked, wet bodies inside to hunt down some towels.

Ethan lay over me on the bed. His hair was still damp as I combed my fingers through it and he took my dick in his mouth. I held him as I came close then grabbed his shoulder and pulled him up so I could kiss him, holding onto him. I worked his dick with my hand while he straddled my waist and kissed my throat. He held my back and my ass, pulling at me, running his fingers over my spine.

“Can I touch you here?” he whispered into my ear.

My hand had lost all thought of what it was supposed to be doing. He hadn’t asked that in a long time. I wondered why now, whether he thought the honeymoon was the right time, or maybe he was sick of our sex. I wanted to say yes. I wanted to try. I knew I felt safe here, with Ethan on top of me. I knew he was kind and would take it slow. Everything told me now was perfect… right?

“No,” I replied.

“That’s okay,” he huffed out as he distracted himself by sucking on my nipple. He was smiling up at me with sultriness, and I moaned under him. He pressed his hand into my pelvis as I plucked at my balls.

***

Ethan had showered and was getting dressed in the corner while my ravaged body lay spreadeagle on the bed.

“I’m going to order us some dessert and pick a movie,” he said, giving my hand a quick squeeze before he left the room.

I got into the still steamy shower and turned the water on. Finally able to properly scrub the dirt off my body, I thought more about that question. The

words danced around my head. His careless return to the activity when I said no.

I rolled my hand around to my backside and slipped a finger over my hole, pressing and massaging the soft skin. I closed my eyes and pushed a finger in. Gently and slowly, the way Ethan moved when we had sex, when he knew how to treat me the first time I did something. I added another finger, pulled them out and pushed back in, rolling them over the inside. I brushed over a certain spot, and my other arm flung forwards against the wall of the shower.

I saw why Ethan wanted me to try this. I rubbed over the spot again, gently tickling. I thought about the sex that we had just had and wondered what it would be like if I had included this. I didn't bring myself to the edge. I stopped after a few brushes, when I was suddenly overwhelmed by the thought of actually being fingered or fucked by my husband.

I finished my shower and joined said husband in the yard, where there was a red and orange crackling in the fire pit. He had chocolate mousse and pillows ready when I settled down beside him. I lay on his chest, listening to his heartbeat as the sun set.

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Chapter 36

Saturday 10 December 2022

I was trying to open a cardboard box without scratching the contents or triggering the screeching sound that came with unboxing flat-pack furniture. The sound made me nauseous as I tried to wiggle the heavy contents out of the box. The little white foamy plastic scattered itself over the floor, spreading like sand, or glitter.

Ah, the joys of Styrofoam… all worth it for a giant pile of metal and fabric and wood paired with instructions in every language except the one I understood. I could make things from scratch, but it'd been a while since I built a piece of flat-pack furniture.

My knees burned as they dug into the hardwood floors while chasing a screw that rolled under the couch. I carefully and slowly pushed all the rubbish to one side to get rid of that sound. I had to use every limb and part of my body to hold all the parts up at the right angle to get the screws in.

I was tightening the screws on the base, hoping I had done everything right when Ethan burst through the front door with shopping bags in both hands.

"Oh my god. Baby shit is so fucking cool!" Ethan dumped his stuff down on the kitchen table and held up some baby clothes.

He was rifling through his bags, showing me each item with so much excitement I had all of three seconds to look at each thing he had bought.

"Ethan, if you want to wear a red and white striped romper, you're more than welcome to," I said with a perfectly straight face.

"Yeah, but they don't make it in my size," he whined.

I approached the table and looked over his purchases. "I feel like I asked you to get three or four toys and a blanket. Y'know, she has clothes, and bottles and… is this a snot sucker thingy."

Ethan held up the elephant-shaped nasal aspirator with a desperately charming smile.

“You don’t even need these things. Use your fuckin’ mouth, those things are just for lazy people.”

“Wow… that’s gross. Although I guess kids are kinda made from a penis booger. Sometimes I forget you have a kid that was, like, a baby. I would’ve loved to see you taking care of a little baby Ollie,” he said as he pulled the tags off and organised his shopping. “I think I gotta sterilise this stuff first.”

I rolled my eyes at my sweet, inexperienced boyfriend. When Ollie was a baby and he dropped his dummy, Aubrie would boil it. I would just pick it up and suck the dirt off it before I shoved it back into his mouth.

He would have loved to see me as a dad to a baby…

Ethan had been pushing for this evening; he was so excited and ready for it. Aubrie and Everett would be here with Ollie and baby Janey soon. They said we had to wait till she was six months old before we could babysit, but Ethan convinced them they could go away and we could look after her even though she’s still only five months old. I was thoroughly excited to see their baby again. She was super cute, far louder and more active than Ollie was. And besides, Aubrie and Everett needed a little break.

I finished putting the bassinet together and put a big pile of books in it. I knew that wasn’t exactly “science,” but it stayed standing so I figured it could probably handle a baby.

“Hi, Dad.” Ollie sounded bored as he spoke. “Hi, Sebastian!” It was like when someone opened a birthday card and they had zero reaction until they saw the money.

Aubrie was explaining Janey’s schedule and giving a bunch of breast milk to Ethan for the fridge. Everett was standing behind her like a kid waiting for his parents to finish talking to his teacher during after-school pick-up. He had a diaper bag over one shoulder. I was just playing with Janey. She was still clipped in her little carrier as her tiny hand gripped around my finger.

After they left, I handed the baby to Ethan. “I hope you know how to change a diaper.”

We ordered takeaway curry for dinner. It’s what we had every time we let Ollie pick. I think he liked it because he and Ethan both had surprisingly high spice tolerances, and I didn’t.

I huffed a breath out between bites.

“Do you need some more cheesy naan, Dad?” Ollie asked.

I fully blamed Ethan for teaching him how to be sarcastic. Janey was rolling around in her bassinet that we had placed right beside the table. She screamed and whined and made little noises all the time. At one point, she lifted a ring toy and dropped it on her face, letting out a seagull-like screech.

"She sounds just like you," Ethan said.

His lips rolled together as he tried to keep his smile to himself. Ollie burst out laughing, and they high-fived.

"Shut up, you two. You did this on purpose." I scooped up the last of my dinner.

I loved when we all had dinner together. I liked when they mocked me together, and loved seeing how they really were such good friends.

Ollie was reading one of his books to Janey. "In this one, he's climbing a mountain," he prefaced before turning to the next page of his Bear Grylls book.

I bought him the full set of twelve for his tenth birthday. They are a little easy for him, but he reads way more than most kids, so I was happy for him to read anything. I watched his tiny fingers try to brace the book so he could hold it with one hand as I scrubbed a dish. I mindlessly handed it to Ethan before starting the next plate. I chanced a peek at Ethan, who was also watching them—watching how sweet he was with her and how nice it was to have little kids just enjoying life in our living room.

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I kissed Ollie goodnight and tucked him into bed, gently clicking the door shut and moving into the yellow light of the hallway. It was dark outside; the curtains were pulled shut and Janey was asleep in her bassinet.

"Aubrie said the last bottle was at nine o'clock, but it's a bit warm so I put it in the fridge. It's been forty-five seconds," he said, looking at the clock on the oven.

I grabbed the bottle out of the fridge and squirted it onto my wrist. "Nah, it's fine."

"Yeah, *now* it's fine. Forty-five seconds ago, it woulda scalded the inside of Janelle's mouth," Ethan said with a snarky chuckle.

I handed the bottle back to my husband and he headed to the couch where Janey was. I licked the milk off my wrist and followed him to the living room. He lifted Janey out of the bassinet and carried her to the couch.

Her eyes stayed closed as she sucked, milk dribbling down her chin and into her neck rolls.

Ethan's lip rolled into a pout. "Aww. My god, she's so cute." He stroked her cheek as her eyes barely blinked. "She looks drunk," he whispered as I sat on Ollie's little bean bag beside them.

I was in awe as I watched them.

"It's crazy how this came out of a person," Ethan said.

"Not gonna lie, watching it is pretty gross. I remember—" I chuckled. "They asked Aubrie if she wanted *a mirror*… and she said yes. And then they gave it to her and she started screaming so much more than she was before."

"I meant the milk… Like, she eats food and then goes to work and milk just comes out of her," he said, twisting the bottle a little and examining the milk inside.

"It's good, too. Sweet. Kind of weird 'cause I tried it when it was very fresh so it was *warm*…"

Ethan's face was doing a lotta things as I spoke.

"You had some?" he asked.

"When Ollie was born, Aubrie's uni friends were over and she was passing a little cup of it around." I laughed.

"My husband, a man who has tried every bodily fluid," he said with a wink.

I huffed. "Ethan, that's disgusting."

"It's true, though, isn't it?" He smiled.

He wasn't wrong…

I watched him feed Janey her bottle, stroking her and caring for her so deeply. A baby that wasn't his, the way he had so much empathy and ability to nurture people no matter who they were. He had these eyes when he looked at her.

We were lying in bed that night, Janelle in her bassinet at the foot. We were awake, side by side on our backs.

"Tyler, can I ask you something?" he whispered.

After all tonight's events, I was terrified of that question. I remembered Ethan telling me, *It kind of is a dealbreaker a lot of the time, not wanting kids*. I remembered the heartbreak I felt that night and the relief I felt when he sent me that meme a few weeks later… I was genuinely going to be a little annoyed if he turned around and said he wanted a baby. Aside from the

fact that that was not what I wanted to happen and it very well might ruin everything, the mind-changing would irritate me. It would force me to think my son was the problem, that he'd just become okay with it and then waited eight years before asking for more.

"Mmh." I nodded.

"I saw how you were tonight. Like with Janey, and seeing me with her, and Ollie with her. It kind of… freaked me out."

I turned my head to look at him. That… *that* freaked him out. What did that even mean?

"I know it was a long time ago when I told you I didn't want a kid, and I love Ollie, and obviously I love Janey… but that still stands."

"Oh, thank god," I gasped. "I thought you wanted one… a baby. I already did that and I don't want to do it again."

"Fuck. I was really worried about that, dude." Ethan broke into a laugh. "I can't believe you thought *I* wanted one. I'm cool being a fun uncle."

"Same, but I can't believe you thought *I* wanted another one! You saw how good I got it the first time. I don't want to tempt fate or whatever," I said with bursts of giggles as I thought about it. "I love you, Ethan. I love you so much, but I don't want your babies."

Ethan kissed me.

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Chapter 37

Saturday 13 May 2023

Steam poured out of the cracked bathroom door. My buckle was cold against my bare torso as I fastened it. Necklace with the initials, Ollie's bracelet, new sneakers Ethan got me for Christmas… When he had given them to me, he had been very clear that they were for going out and *not* for exercise. I was about to put my sweater on when his damp hair tickled my back. His warm hands wrapped from my sides around my stomach. He squeezed his cheek against my shoulder blades.

"You okay?" I asked. My hands lay atop his and rubbed the soft skin on his arms.

"Mmh," he moaned into my neck. "Tired… anxious."

"Y'know, anxiety and excitement are like bananas and blueberries—they're the same." I tilted my head to try and look at him, checking if he understood my reference.

"They're both berries, I get it."

"It'll be okay. It's a lot of pressure, having not seen her in ages. I don't have to come if that's making it more stressful."

"No. She knows all about you. And you make me feel better. You're the one who's been around this whole time, not her." He was defensive. He'd been having strange reactions to things all day. When he let go, I turned to face him. "God, I sound so petty. She's just enjoying her life, and I've been fine without her."

"You have been fine." I rubbed my hands over his shoulders. "But you missed her. You're allowed to be upset. But we're going to brunch, and you *love* brunch."

"I do love brunch." He tightened the towel around his waist.

I pulled my sweater on and it ruffled my hair. I ran my fingers through it, catching a glimpse of myself in the mirror. My eyes lingered on my body for a few minutes.

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Ethan's mum, Grace, was digging around in her purse as she wandered into the café. I was excited to meet her. I had met her once in passing over FaceTime and had listened to her voice flowing through our house out of Ethan's tiny phone. Her voice had the whine of an Australian accent with the rasp of someone who just scream-sang "Since U Been Gone" into a karaoke mic. She was heavier and shorter like Ethan, she had freckles like Ethan and glasses like Ethan. It was like a gender swap, although Grace was twenty-five-odd years older. The man that trailed behind her was a similar age, with a similarly relaxed body. He was bald, dressed all in grey. He had a little white moustache like he had just had a sip of a milkshake, and just below it was a kind smile with a gold tooth.

"Oh, there you are, love!" she said as she hurried over to a standing Ethan. She wrapped her arms around him and hugged him tight. "Oh, I've missed you." Her lips pressed into his cheek, making a sloppy sound.

Ethan was smiling, grinning, but he wasn't speaking. That was extremely out of character. Then again, this was the first time I was seeing him with his mum. Maybe he was different with her. Or maybe he was just really anxious.

"You must be Tyler. So sorry it took so long to meet you! Ethan talks about you constantly," she said as she ignored my offer for a handshake and put her little arms around me. "Wow, he is strong, isn't he?" She winked at Ethan while squeezing my shoulders.

Ethan huffed.

"And this is Paul," she announced. She grabbed Ethan's hand, as we all sat down, admiring her son.

I held Ethan's hand under the table; his palms were clammy. "So how was your trip, Ms Frank?" I asked, opening the menu.

"Oh well… gosh, it's been long. The last year was in Amsterdam though, that was just lovely, wasn't it?" Grace started. She went on and on, back and forth with Paul about their trips and tours. She barely took a breath when the server came to take our order.

"Can we have two eggs benny, but can you do one with fried eggs?" I ordered for Ethan. Not something I usually did, but he seemed anxious. The server left with her little notepad. "And you were in Germany for a while, right? Did you see the Bavarian Alps? I would love to see them," I said.

“Oh yes, it was lovely.”

A few moments later, she whipped out her phone and started flicking through pictures. Paul would add a few words here and there, mentioning the most random of—as he called them—“fun facts.” Nodding, smiling, and every now and then a wow came from Ethan and me.

The server brought our plates. I switched around the plates so Ethan had the fried eggs one. He had gone off poached eggs a few years ago when Ollie had become obsessed and we ate them every day for a year.

“Mmm, so,” Grace said after swallowing the first mouthful of her keto toast. “You have a young son? I just remembered Ethan never wanted kids.”

“Mum,” Ethan scolded.

“Oh no. I’m sure he’s happy now, I just meant before.”

“I do have a son. His name is Ollie. He just turned eleven. He and Ethan co-parent his turtle. And Ethan taught him to cook, and he’s really good. They both are,” I said with a huge grin, admiring his nerve-wracked face.

“Yeah, we just made a lemon meringue pie.” Ethan looked at me as he spoke. He smiled, suddenly full of life as he recounted our life.

“Oh, yummy,” Paul added. “So you two are living around here?”

“Mmh.” I nodded. “We bought our house a while ago now. I have a temporary job at the moment, but it keeps getting lengthened so if that becomes permanent, we might move again. The commute is a bit far sometimes. Although I love the job, I really love our house. Have you guys got a place to stay now that you’re back?” I took a bite of my bacon, holding it between my fingers.

“Well, I rented out my house when I left so we’ve moved back in there, but we might move somewhere else, get our own place.”

“You’re going to sell the house?” Ethan’s face snapped up from his plate.

“Sweetheart, I offered it when you two were buying your house, but you didn’t want it.”

“It was too small for us.”

“Right! Which is why we’re selling.”

“Okay,” Ethan said as he took a sip of his coffee.

I could tell he wanted to say more. He loved his childhood home, but she did have a point. He didn’t want it and she didn’t want it. They couldn’t just keep it.

“And Paul, what do you do?” I asked with a big smile on my face.

“I do customer service. It’s great, y’know. Get to talk to all sorts of folks, and a few emails and phone calls and I’m done with work for the day. Get to be with my Gracie.”

Ethan talked to his mum a bit more while I talked to Paul. Our conversation was active, but I was honestly more focused on Ethan and his mum. Ethan started talking about his job, and then about us and our honeymoon. He seemed to relax as she started to understand the changes to Ethan’s personality and life—all the things that have become different since she left.

Sometimes she would interrupt him with something like “Ethan, you’re so handsome,” or “You’ve really grown into yourself, matured.”

She spoke a lot.

I think she realised that maybe her being gone for so long had changed their relationship, and that you couldn’t effectively understand someone or keep up with their life for ten years over the phone. As I listened to her, I could see where all of Ethan’s comfort in himself came from. She supported him so well every time he mentioned a struggle or something he succeeded at.

She leant in at one point and whispered, “He’s very polite. And kind. I’m glad you found someone who loves you as much as you deserve.”

I grinned when she complimented me. It was strange getting a compliment from a parent, even if I wasn’t meant to hear it, even if she wasn’t my actual parent. I was worried, as they got to know each other again, that I would feel a little jealous of how they were able to support each other, even if it was a bit forced at first. But I didn’t. I was only glad that he was getting his mother back.

“Leaving your job, getting a degree, following your passion. It’s all very brave and impressive.” Her eyes were sympathetic and her voice was soft as she turned to me and merged our conversations.

“I was just lucky I had Ethan to support me.” I was quite chuffed with that reply.

She seemed to be too, rubbing Ethan’s hand with pride.

“Well, should we get going?” Ethan suggested. He had started becoming quite drained so I took his hand and stood to support his need for space.

“But we should definitely do dinner sometime.” Grace smiled.

Ethan’s hand was in mine as we walked out of the restaurant. When we got to the car, I didn’t start it. I just waited a minute to see if Ethan had

something to say.

“Was it okay?” I asked after a long silence.

“Yes,” he said firmly. “Yes. But it wasn’t how I thought it would be. This stupid, stupid part of me thought, as much as I was nervous, that I would fall back into our relationship like it was completely normal. And it feels like my dad leaving did such a number on her she’s trying to get rid of all the memories of him. I don’t even really care about the house, I just wish she hadn’t sprung it on me. And now I feel guilty for not fully enjoying seeing her, when my mum didn’t really do anything wrong. It was just kind of awkward.”

“But you did it. You saw her. You had a decent enough time. It wasn’t perfect, but you’ll get there.”

“I know. I’m so glad you came. She likes you. That’s all that really matters anyway.” He grabbed my hand, lifted it to his lips, and kissed me.

My god, I loved him.

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Chapter 38

Sunday 31 December 2023

I always went to bed early on New Year's. The holidays were so stressful and I just had to get to sleep before the fireworks started. I never went to parties in high school; they were always long and boring. I never knew what to do there, but at least I could leave. New Year's parties I couldn't escape from until after midnight.

Christmas had been hectic and we'd barely been alone all December. Grace and Paul had come for Christmas, and we had visited my parents a week before. I guess it didn't sound that wild, but Everett and Aubrie had been on a work trip so we took care of Janey for a week before all the celebrations, which meant we fell behind on presents and food organisation. Not to mention I had been trying out different antidepressants and had been a bit all over the place.

This year I went to watch a fireworks show with Everett, Aubrie, Janelle, Ollie, and Ethan. We left right after and went to Sophie and Brooks's New Year's party. They had just moved in together and insisted on hosting.

We were out of there by ten.

We drove to the nearest McDonalds. It was dark, with only the street lights and fireworks lighting the sky. Our melting McFlurries sat in a brown paper bag on Ethan's lap. I drove through bends and turns, carefully manoeuvring around potholes and little animals. The warm air rushed through the cracked windows. Morepork calls and cicada screeches drowned out everything in and around me. I didn't know where we were going. Ethan had been directing me; he said we were going to the perfect place.

I drove our car onto a grassy clearing. There were some trees behind us, but a cliff everywhere else. I parked the car and kicked the driver's side door open. Resting my foot against the frame to prop it wide, I stretched out as I begged for fresh air. We talked about so many things that night. It was

strange being *so* isolated. I had talked about Christmas and confessed that I wanted to self-harm after seeing my parents but didn't. That Elijah had said I maybe shouldn't have gone but that I wanted Ollie to have a relationship with his grandparents and that I had been okay in the end.

At the very beginning of December, the drug I was trying out completely dried me up, mentally and physically. I was on a different antidepressant now, and it was strange. It seemed to make me feel better but my mouth had been extremely dry, and I was rather sweaty. I would probably talk to Elijah when I saw him next month. But right now, I could handle the side effects if it meant I got to feel generally better.

Music played softly in the background of our conversations. Our fingers danced together over the centre console. This was going to be a good year. A year where we all had the things we wanted and needed. A year where we looked forward to every day.

"I just feel like next year's gonna be good," I said. I had a stupid grin on my face; I knew it was cheesy as fuck but it was how I felt, and it wasn't something I had ever felt before.

"Twenty twenty-four. It's going to be good," Ethan agreed with a nod while he leant in to kiss me.

His hands were a bit clammy as one wrapped around the back of my neck and pulled me close, loving me. My tongue slipped into his mouth, my hands on his thigh. The centre console fought to keep us apart, the hard plastic of it digging into my hip bone. I gripped his collar and pushed myself into him; I didn't know why he was so far. His hand slid up my shirt, his nails scratching circles into my back as I came out of the kiss for a gasp of air.

He bit his lip as he looked over my glossy lips. "You're so beautiful."

I climbed over the seats to the back. I had thought about having sex in the back seat of the car a million times. Ollie didn't need a car seat anymore, so it was finally an option.

Ethan sat up tall, ready to follow me. He unbuttoned his shirt, one button at a time. His fingers moved slowly, rubbing against his chest hair before he shrugged it off his shoulders and dropped the shirt. I saw him without a shirt every day, yet I still felt so excited, so full of ecstasy and pride when I looked at him. He was a fucking gorgeous man. He made me hungry and desperate to be everything he wanted and needed. Everything he deserved.

His arms had thickened since he'd joined me at the gym. I had stopped using it as stress relief like I used to and had invited Ethan to join me. That's when I found out that my perfectly raised, perfectly comfortable with himself, perfectly self-aware and careless of other people's opinions boyfriend had never been to the gym because he knew he "seemed gay" and found it intimidating. We went together and kept going back. It was a nice way for us to hang out, and it felt nice to be able to do something he couldn't, to have something to teach him.

Ethan climbed over me, straddling my legs, our stomachs touching with each breath. I pulled my shirt off. The breeze had become cooler. Despite it being the middle of summer, the sun had finally been low long enough for the heat to subside, although the air was still tacky with humidity.

I kissed him, and it wasn't slow anymore. It was desperate, animalistic. I felt hungry even though my stomach was full. My teeth scraped his tongue and his lips brushed my nose.

"Take your pants off," he commanded.

I nodded beneath him and unbuckled my belt, then slid my pants down, underwear and all. Ethan just scoured over me as his hands fell to my chest. They shuffled down my ribs and flanks, over my hips and thighs. My breath shuddered as his thumbs reached my self-harm scars. I was finally at a point where they had faded to tan—no more pink or red. He brushed over them gently at first, and then he gripped my hips and dove towards my pelvis. He suckled my hip bone; it hurt as the blood pooled at the surface. It hurt more when his thumb planted into it so he could readjust himself and pull his pants off. It was awkward as he tried to half stand and kneel and pull them off, but he got there.

I giggled into his mouth by the time we were kissing again. Our packages danced between us, getting thicker and slick. I lay there, so overwhelmed by the way he treated me. He made me feel strong even when I was trapped beneath him, being completely overtaken. He was the only person I felt completely safe and seen with.

His muscles tightened and relaxed as he touched and kissed me. Watching him made me feel out of control, overtaken by a need to be completely enveloped by him, wanting to be closer than we ever had been.

I wrapped my hand around our lengths and started moving them, twisting and pulling. Ethan's fists rammed into the leather seats on either side of my head as he tried to stabilise himself. His face was directly above

mine. He was panting and moaning, his eyes closed as I watched his stunning face.

"Ethan?" I whispered. My hand slowed.

"What is it?" he huffed as his head dropped beside mine.

"I think I want to try it."

"What?" he asked.

"I want you to… I don't know." I could feel my face getting tingly and hot. I didn't know exactly what I wanted. All I knew is I felt really safe, and I wanted him. "I think I'm ready."

"For penetration?" he questioned again.

I winced at the word, but nodded. I could tell Ethan was happy, but he was trying so hard not to look too happy, not to pressure me.

"I can just do my fingers, and if you want me to stop you have to tell me." The sultriness had left his voice, and his face had become serious.

I nodded. I wasn't sure what to do now, but I trusted him. I was anxious, but anxiety and excitement were like bananas and blueberries.

Ethan kissed my nipple, his tongue running down my sternum and stomach. It swirled over my belly button and licked over my pubic bone. He grabbed one of my legs, pulling it out and away to open me up to him. His fingers spread over my stomach, feeling each breath.

"Relax," he said.

He dug into his pants pocket and pulled out a little sachet of lube. It was cold on my asshole as he smeared it on.

"You have to breathe."

I took another deep breath, closed my eyes, and waited. There were a million thoughts swirling in my mind, I was scared of so much, but I felt like it was something I needed, desperately. His thumb rubbed over my hip, his other hand rubbing between my cheeks. It was slow and careful, unlike the hunger we felt five minutes ago. His finger pressed against my hole, firm yet calm and waiting.

"Relax your thighs," he whispered.

I tried, I tried so hard. Part of me felt that if I really wanted it, I wouldn't be scared. But I knew I did—I had thought about it, I wanted it.

I curled my toes and squeezed my eyes before I let all my muscles unclench. His finger pressed in, and my eyes sprung open. It was very different from when I had done it. He knew exactly how to manoeuvre it so

it gently slid in. His finger stayed still for a few seconds before he moved it, twisted it inside me.

“Are you okay?”

My lips pinched together. “Yes,” I huffed out.

He added another. It stung for a moment before it adjusted to a wonderful closeness, only furthered when his body lay over mine and his mouth ran over my chest. His fingers brushed the inside of me, giving me a sudden pulse of pleasure.

I moaned, looking straight at him.

“Sorry.” He stilled his movements.

“No. It was good,” I said with a short kiss.

He kept moving his fingers, three total. He never asked for anything more, and neither did I. I wasn’t sure that I wanted all that tonight, not when I felt so exhilarated and proud already.

He had started working his dick with his other hand. His fingers stayed in me until the tightness in my stomach had reached its peak. Until I was gasping for air and whimpering beneath him. My eyes flicked to the centre console: eleven fifty-eight at night.

I came over his chest and he followed shortly after.

He lay on top of me as the fireworks cracked. I held him close and tight, staring straight up and feeling the most euphoric I had ever felt.

I was optimistic and elated. I had waited so long for that experience, for that to be an awful experience, thinking it would be terrible or something I would be forced into, something that would leave me feeling more detached from myself. Instead, it made me feel whole—it made me feel pure, and like the love I had for Ethan—the love I had for another boy—was worth something more than just us. Like it was worth the world, the most important thing ever.

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Chapter 39

Sunday 21 April 2024

Ethan had left the house this morning and hadn't been back yet. He said he was doing a secret project. I knew it wasn't anything weird or anything I wouldn't like, because he had told both Ollie and me about it, and he wouldn't have mentioned it to Ollie if he had any concerns I wouldn't like it. I was still a bit scared. I hoped it wasn't furniture. I really liked our house at the moment. And it wasn't a special day—not an anniversary, not a birthday. I honestly didn't know what the hell this was. It was entirely possible he had driven really far to get some fancy pancakes or something.

Ollie and I were anxiously waiting on the couch, shifting puzzle pieces around on the coffee table. Ollie sat on his knees, fidgeting around and then falling onto his bottom when I gave him the "don't sit on your knees like that" look. He got it about four or five times a day.

"Daddy?" he asked.

I was so glad he hadn't stopped using that word. I knew he would eventually, but hearing him say "Dad" made me feel old, like he didn't need me so much. And I still needed him.

"Mmh?" I said, raising an eyebrow.

"Do you think it's for me or you?"

"It might not even be a present. Could be anything," I said.

Although Ethan had told us both about it, which made me think it was likely to be a group thing, I was trying to keep Ollie's expectations low so he wouldn't be disappointed if it was a wine rack or something.

"Well, I think it's a present."

"What are you on about? You just had your birthday." I smirked in response to his sweet grinning cheeks.

"Yeah, but I feel like we all deserve presents all the time… Well, not everyone. Some people suck. But us definitely." The light in his eyes was going out.

“Who sucks?”

“Just people.” Ollie grabbed another puzzle piece.

“Has something happened?”

“Not really… just dumb kids at school.” He sighed. “This boy asked me what it was like to have three dads, and if I was growing my hair out to be gay like my dad. And I didn’t know what to say.” His lips twisted.

“How’d they even know?” I hated that my first thought was defensive, like it was better to hide than stand up for ourselves. Like the issue wasn’t the mean person, but us existing.

“I was telling Wesley about how Ethan helped me with my Treaty of Waitangi project, and another kid asked who he was. And I didn’t think it would matter so I said that he was my dad’s husband. They didn’t say anything then, so I thought it was fine. But then they told a bunch of other kids. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have told anyone.” Ollie looked like he might cry.

“Oh no, buddy. I’m sorry.” I rubbed his shoulder. “You’re allowed to tell people about our life. It’s your life too. It’s just that some people don’t like it. And not because it’s wrong, just because they don’t understand. Stick with Wesley and Blake, and tell the teacher or me if it happens again.”

“They were both at soccer practice when it happened,” Ollie said. “Maybe I should join.”

“Maybe, but not if you don’t want to.” I knew full well not only did he not want to play soccer, I didn’t want him to get bullied more, and showing off his sport prowess was certainly the way to get more “are you gay like your dad” comments. “Maybe you could go and watch them play or head to the library next time.”

“Yeah…” he agreed.

“I know it’s frustrating, but it’s probably about them, not you.” My phone chimed and I checked it. “And you can’t be sad now, Ethan just messaged and said he’ll be home in a minute.”

Ollie nodded and gave me a hug. I rubbed his back and kissed his cheek. I felt awful, but I was trying to remind myself that this shouldn’t even be an issue, and it’s not our fault for living our life.

The handle jiggled and clicked, and a fluffy mutt came barrelling through the door, straight through the kitchen and into the glass sliding door. Ethan and I rushed over to help the now dazed dog.

“You alright buddy?” I asked as my hands dragged over his silky fur.

“Uh,” Ethan stuttered. “Surprise!”

“A dog!” Ollie shouted before his arms were around the pup.

I looked up at Ethan, still kneeling next to the dog. My chest got hot as the glee and excitement rose in it. I had always wanted a dog, a lifelong friend. I was so glad he remembered that I wanted to walk along the beach with my husband and my son and my dog.

“He’s an Australian Shepherd, and his name is Bomer.”

A grin crept onto my face. “Like Matt… Matt Bomer?”

Ethan lost his anxiety over whether or not I would like his gift and nodded with a big smile.

“Daddy, he’s so fluffy!” Ollie nuzzled the dog’s neck.

Ethan knelt and started scratching Bomer’s butt. “I wanted to get you a present—”

“Told you!” Ollie yelled.

Ethan flashed a gentle smirk at Ollie before returning to his thought. “Because you’ve been working so hard to get that job, and then you got it, and I was so proud of you. He’s not even a year old yet, and he was so cute on the SPCA website and I thought you would like him.”

“I do.” I smiled, desperate to kiss him. *Thank you*, I mouthed.

***

Ethan and I held hands, walking through the park on a busy Sunday afternoon. We wandered over the pathway, *one step per concrete slab*. Ollie was playing fetch with Bomer using a hexagonal rubber ball. He would throw it and chase after the dog, scratching him and tickling him as his teeth wrapped around the ball. They would come back sometimes for the treats Ethan had stuffed in his pocket, or when Bomer pooped and the two of them agreed that technically it was *my* dog so *I* had to pick it up.

We approached the fountain to get Bomer a drink. An elderly woman with a loud blouse, Velcro sandals, and a sun visor had her feral-looking tiny white dog drinking from the fountain. She gave us a gentle smile. When Bomer got his turn at the fountain, Ollie turned to me, pointing towards the parking lot.

“Daddy, can I get a Mr. Whippy please?”

I nodded and handed him a five-dollar note from my wallet. He ran off towards the truck.

“You two have a very sweet son,” the woman said as she clicked the leash onto her snarly pup.

“Thank you,” I immediately said.

Ethan withdrew from the conversation, looking around, seemingly very interested in the grass. The woman left and I asked him if he was okay.

“Sorry. I know people are going to think I’m his dad, and I don’t know why it bothered me. I obviously love him. I’m sorry,” Ethan said, grabbing my hand again.

“It’s okay. I can understand getting freaked out by people saying stuff.” I kissed him on the cheek as Ollie came skipping back with a cup of ice cream and a handful of coins. I took the coins with one hand and plucked the Flake off the top of his ice cream from the other. I took a bite, held it out to Ethan for a bite and then stuffed it back into the ice cream.

“Tax,” I said with a playful eyebrow raise.

Ollie rolled his eyes.

I slipped into the bathroom, leaving Ollie and Ethan on the bench just outside the stalls with Bomer at their feet. I heard them talking from inside the stall.

“Am I your son?” Ollie asked. “Like, are you my dad? Am I supposed to call you that? Sometimes people tell me you’re my dad, but I already have a mum and a dad, and you’re my best adult friend, but I don’t need another dad.”

I smiled at the specification of “adult” friend.

I could sense the anxiety and stuttering coming from Ethan like steam off soup. “I love you, Ollie, and I love your dad, and we’re married so according to society, I’m your stepdad… but I’ve never followed any of the rules society told me. I would much rather be your friend, if you’re cool with that.”

When I came out, Ollie was hugging Ethan.

I felt a certain pride. I remember how broken and sad I was when I met Ethan. I didn’t even know how happy I could be. Seeing my perfect son and my perfect husband hugging on a park bench with our new dog was just the most precious sight. I wanted to cry.

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Chapter 40

Friday 19 July 2024

My hands wrapped over the plastic beam of the trolley. I leant my weight into it as I drifted down the noodle and pasta aisle. It was late, nearly nine o'clock. Outside, the pitch-dark cold pressed against the bright, winding-down supermarket. Most of the people around were in pyjamas, buying stuff for dinner or late-night snacks. Ethan and I had taken Ollie strawberry picking out in the wops. It was meant to be an afternoon thing, but there had been a huge accident trapping us in traffic for the past six hours. Ollie really needed the toilet, and our plans to go out for dinner had already been spoiled by the restaurant closing, so we stopped into the mall.

I wasn't sure what I was looking for in the aisle. When we went grocery shopping, we rarely had a list, we would just dump things in the cart as we found them. Tonight was no different, but we didn't even have a base of things we needed. Was there milk? Bread? Ham?

Did we have pasta? I wondered as I grabbed some farfalle and stacked it into the cart. I wasn't sure where Ethan and Ollie had disappeared to. They went to find yoghurt a while ago and hadn't returned yet. I was so tired, my neck rolling as each step took me further to the end of the shelves. I felt like I was drunk-driving as I passed a woman and tried not to hit her trolley. When I made a U-turn at the end of the aisle and went up the next one, I noticed two people standing in front of the biscuits, having a calm argument over Shrewsbury and Super Wine. Both great options, but there was a clear piece of missing information: snacking or dipping? Now that I thought about it, I would probably pick Shrewsbury either way.

I slowly neared them and got this weird feeling. Two men, fully dressed and put together at nine o'clock at night, well groomed, definitely gym goers. It was the way they stood and the way their hands moved as they spoke. The way they gently caressed and touched each other as they argued over something so menial. They were gay men, definitely in a relationship.

I still got nervous around gay people I didn't know. I knew some people had gaydar—whatever that meant—and I wondered if they could tell I was gay. Especially when I was alone. Holding hands with another man, it was pretty clear, but did people know I was gay when it was just me existing?

My trolley slowly rolled past them, and one of them turned to me. "Hey, can you settle a debate? Shrewsbury or Super Wine?" He waved the biscuit packet in my face to get my attention.

"Uh, yeah." I lifted my head and looked at the painfully familiar man. "I, uh, I'd probably do Shrewsbury, but if it's only for dipping, Super Wine are softer, and they're half the thickness of a Shrewsbury, so you can eat twice as many."

"That's what I said!" one of the men said.

The other man was staring at me, confused in the same way that I was. We knew each other. I wracked my brain, trying to figure out where from.

"Let's just get both," the non-familiar man suggested.

The other man nodded gently and I started turning away.

"Tyler!" he suddenly said.

I turned back.

"It's George. We used to work together."

Oh my fucking god. George. *George*. George was gay? "George," I finally said after a few seconds of staring.

"Hey, I, uh. I know it's been a long time, and… and I can't really redeem myself now, but I just wanted to apologise for how I treated you. I was struggling myself and I put that on you and it wasn't okay." George took the hand of the man beside him. "I've been dating James for three years now and, and it's been amazing and I'm really sorry for not understanding that back in the day."

My mouth hung open a little, I stared straight ahead. I was so confused, and then I was sad for a minute, which quickly turned to anger and frustration.

"There you are." I heard Ethan's voice. Ollie was following behind him. "We found the yoghurt, we just couldn't pick a flavour so we ended with vanilla bean, fancy, and—"

Ethan was already beside me by the time he saw my blank face and stopped talking.

"Is everything okay?" he asked.

“Uh, yeah.” I shook my head as I tried to find my words. “George. I used to work with him, back when I was doing construction. This is my husband, Ethan and my son, Ollie,” I said as I grabbed Ollie’s shoulder and pulled him close.

The sudden urge to hold them close, to keep them safe, overwhelmed me. Ollie stood beside me, hanging off the end of the trolley.

“Oh, yeah. I remember you,” Ethan said. He had a huge grin but his voice was sour. “Your life seems to have changed quite a bit.” He chuckled.

“Yeah, I guess I should be apologising to you too. I wasn’t in a good place and I’m sorry for the things I said and did,” he said. He had such sincerity in his voice.

“Mmh.” Ethan nodded as he grabbed my hand.

I was silent, white as a ghost. I wasn’t sure what was happening but I felt sick. I squeezed Ethan’s hand, tighter and tighter, probably hurting him.

“You two have a good night,” Ethan finished the conversation.

We walked out of the aisle and Ethan leant into my ear. “It’s okay, you’re okay. Let’s get a chicken and head home.”

I mindlessly nodded as Ollie ran to the warming station and gripped the plastic handles of a rotisserie chicken bag.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what happened, I just really freaked out.” Watching Ollie happily skip to get our chicken reminded me that what had just happened didn’t matter, it hadn’t changed anything, everything was still how it was meant to be.

“I know,” he said with a smile and a nod. He kissed my cheek before we left the supermarket.

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Chapter 41

Friday 15 November 2024

“Daddy?” came Ollie’s voice. It was finally strong enough to sound like a boy and not a mouse.

When he first started intermediate, he was being mocked a lot, mostly because I was gay and kids said that both his long hair and *reading*, for some fucking reason, were gay. I had him moved to a different class. Although I didn’t specifically request it, his new teacher also happened to be a gay guy. Or I guess he could be bisexual, but he had a husband. Ollie stopped being mocked almost immediately. Perhaps the teacher being a man had scared off the other kids, which I realised sucked but at least my kid wasn’t being bullied anymore. In fact, he loved school. His friend Wesley also moved class, and now he had a few others. The new class seemed a lot more accepting—he had friends of different races and both boys and girls. All the minority kids, I guessed, or just the kids who were different in some way, got moved to the gay teacher’s class. Not the best way to handle that sort of situation, but Ollie really loved school now and was super excited to go every day, so I got over it.

“Yes, buddy?” I was sitting on the couch with a snack while *The Office* blared from the TV.

“Can I cut my hair?” he said as he pulled it out of the braid I had put it in for school.

I immediately paused the show, moved my bowl of raspberries and granola—which Ethan had made from scratch—to the coffee table, and turned to him.

I looked at him closely. “If you’re being bullied again, we have to change schools.”

“No, Dad.”

That word. Dad was being used about fifty percent of the time now. At least it was being phased in slowly.

“I just—it’s really long. And it gets tangled… and I can’t wash it but I feel like I’m too old for my dad to still wash my hair.” He seemed so nervous as he spoke.

“Well, as long as it’s because you want to, then sure. Although you should probably ask your mother first,” I said, popping another little piece of granola in, my teeth crunching it down as Ollie spoke again.

“I did, and she said that I could, but that my hair was so long and silky and beautiful and that I shouldn’t cut it unless I absolutely had to.”

“Ah, right. So you’re asking me so I’ll say yes, and then you can say ‘no, Mummy don’t worry, Daddy said I could.’”

“So can I cut it or not?” He moved so he was standing directly in front of me. He pulled out his little pout and his glossy eyes.

“Yeah, I can call the barber and see if they have a spot tomorrow.”

“Can’t you just cut it? I don’t want some random person putting their hands all through my hair.”

“I won’t… but Ethan can. He’ll be home in an hour or two,” I said.

My eyebrows raised as I waited for the next words. Ollie looked like he was trying to find the courage to tell me something.

“Also, don’t forget about Wednesday night,” he said, no eye contact.

“Wednesday night?” I tilted my head to try and show my disappointment in the fact that we both knew there had been zero mention of Wednesday night.

“I have the school dance. So… well, I told Mum, and she said she would tell you, but she was working so I think she wasn’t properly listening. But Everett took me to get some nice pants, so I’m basically ready, you just have to take me.”

“And you wanting to cut your hair has no relation to the pressure to ‘look nice’?”

“I don’t know, I just want to cut my hair!”

“Calm down,” I said, ushering him to the couch. “I’m more than happy to let you cut your hair, and I’m more than happy to take you to the school dance. But you seemed like I wouldn’t want to take you, like maybe there’s something I wouldn’t like about it?” I put an arm around my son.

“I want to ask this girl… to go with me?” His voice started losing its strength.

“Do you like her?” I asked with a smirk.

“Yeah, we’re both in the top English group, and I think she’s… pretty.”

“So ask her. I’m sure she’ll say yes. You’re very handsome, you know,” I said, brushing a hand over his cheek.

“You’re not upset?” His lips turned as he spoke, like he was afraid he was about to get in trouble.

“Is there a reason you think I would be upset? Because I’m not.”

“I just—I thought maybe you would be upset that I want to ask a girl, not a boy. I’m pretty sure I’m straight and I just didn’t want to disappoint you.”

“Oh, buddy. No, I would never be upset about that. Straight or gay, it doesn’t matter as long as you’re happy and kind, which you are. If you change your mind, that’s fine, and if you don’t, that’s fine too. I don’t care.” I was on the verge of laughter.

It was rather ironic, the idea of Ollie basically coming out as straight, and me feeling bad for making him feel like he couldn’t tell me. I felt like an awful parent. Maybe I had pushed my gayness on him.

“I just didn’t want you to think I was mad at you, or that I didn’t like that you’re gay.”

“Two people can have different sexualities and still be friends. Like me and Mum, or me and Everett, or me and Willa. Happens all the time, actually.”

“I know, I’m sorry.” He nodded.

Three hours later, Ollie had a towel pegged around his shoulders and was sitting on a stool in the middle of the kitchen. Ethan stood behind him, an electric shaver vibrating in his hand.

“Just do it,” I said, looking at Ollie’s grinning face.

“You said Aubrie’s not really on board. I can’t.”

“I’ll tell her I did it!” I demanded.

“Please Ethan, I don’t trust Daddy to do it,” Ollie whined.

Ethan took a deep breath and ran the head of the shaver over the side of his head, carefully holding his ear down. He switched to scissors and snipped the hair on the top and back. I used my phone as a mirror so Ollie could check each cut for perfection.

Ethan brushed the little red hairs from Ollie’s neck. It was still bright orange, not a blonde hair in sight. Part of me was pleased—I wanted it to stay the same forever. It was such a gorgeous colour. I couldn’t imagine him with blonde hair.

He ended up with a fluffy mullet thing, very similar to Ethan’s own hair, which he also cut himself.

***

“How are you today, Taylor?” I said as I moved the car into drive and pulled away from the kerb.

Taylor had a purple dress with little sparkles on it. Her headband was made in the same fabric and it wrapped around her dark, braided hair.

“Hello,” she replied quickly and quietly.

She and Ollie were whispering in the back seat, talking about Ollie’s new haircut, and how pretty she looked. I was quite proud that he had immediately complimented her. Anytime he was polite, I felt proud, like I had done something right.

“Have a great night, guys!” I shouted as the two kids—a twelve- and thirteen-year-old—climbed out of the car.

“Bye, Dad!”

She had a little flower corsage that Ollie had given her—the same one I had given Aubrie for our high school formal. He took her hand as they walked in. I watched as Ollie did his best not to start skipping like he always would when he was happy. Ethan sat in the passenger seat beside me, watching my expressions in silence.

“You okay?” he asked after a while of sitting in the parking lot. Ollie was long gone into the school hall where we had watched him perform as Market Person Number Three in *Aladdin* a few months earlier.

“Yeah. Y’know, everything has always been about him.”

Ethan’s hand landed on the back of my neck. “I know it’s sad to know he doesn’t need you so much, but maybe it can be a good thing. You can still support him the way he does need but with some more time for yourself.”

I nodded. I knew he was right. Elijah had said essentially the same thing. But neither of them really made me feel better. I felt like time moved too quickly, like I didn’t have time to process and appreciate the things that were happening before they became a distant memory.

We went out for dinner—something for me, for us. I took Ethan home so he could feed Bomer and let him out for the toilet and then drove to get Ollie. Despite Ethan and Ollie having a great relationship, I did purposefully try to spend one on one time with Ollie at least once or twice a month. He would fall back to his childhood self, saying silly stuff and overloading me with random facts.

He hopped into the car around eight thirty at night.

“Hey, buddy. Did you have a good time?” I watched the rear-view mirror to see his seat belt click.

“Yeah, it was fun,” he sighed.

“Are you sure?” I asked as we came up to the main road.

“Yeah, I just… I don’t think I like parties.”

“That’s okay, I don’t really like parties either.”

Ollie didn’t reply.

“Did you have a good time with Taylor?” I added.

“She’s nice but I don’t think she actually likes me. She spent most of the night dancing with her friends. I tried to talk to her while we had dinner and she, like, wasn’t replying very well, and she didn’t really care about what I was telling her… and like, I did ask her questions but she just answered with one word.”

I was suddenly glad that Ethan hadn’t left me after our first date being almost the same. Me not talking and him trying so hard to pull words out of me. That was honestly what the majority of the conversations I had between the ages of seventeen and twenty-two looked like. I never felt like I had anything real to say, and even if I did, I didn’t think anyone wanted to hear it.

“At least you tried, and now you know,” I said.

It was how I felt after my date with Ethan. I felt like at least I had tried, at least I knew I wouldn’t be able to find someone. I hoped Ollie wouldn’t feel that, that he knew he would find somebody too, just like I had—if he wanted.

“Do you want to get a pie?” I asked him.

He nodded, looking up at me, finally a smile on his face. The same smile he had since the day he was born.

I drove to the nearest petrol station.

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Chapter 42

Saturday 22 March 2025

Ethan was adjusting my bowtie, pulling on either side of the bow and brushing my shoulders off as I stared blankly into the empty space around me. He wasn't speaking or joking the way he did in most serious situations. He knew his jokes wouldn't help like they often did. He knew if he spoke, I would break apart.

I sat on the end of the bed. Ethan left the room in his dark suit. I heard him and Ollie talking in the other room—something about Ollie's shoes not fitting properly. Aubrie and Everett's voices were there too. Bomer put his head on my thigh. I ran my hand along his soft fur. My jaw was tight, my mouth was dry; it seemed all the water had moved to my eyes.

"It's time to go," Ethan whispered as he took my hand and pulled me off the bed.

An hour later I was in a church, front row with Ethan beside me. I wanted to hold his hand, to get a hug, for him to hold me and tell me everything was going to be okay. But I didn't. I held myself tall in silence as the pastor spoke. My hands shook and sweated inside my pockets. The smell of burning candles drifted past my nose, the flames flickering in the corner of my eye. I had a paper note folded and shoved in my pocket. It reminded me of my wedding night. I had that paper, my hands were sweating, I was anxious. Except that was the start of my life. I didn't know what this was.

My sister's speech was so sweet, talking about how her dad always took care of her, how he always supported her and loved her. How he was the perfect, loving, caring father. My mother's speech was essentially the same: "I'll miss him, I'll always love him, he was the perfect husband and man."

His friend made jokes about what a funny and thoughtful friend he was, that they were glad he was out of the way so they could "have a chance at the ladies."

I went last. I didn't know if that was better or worse than going first.

The pastor called my name. I wished Ethan could stand with me, could read it for me, could just make it all stop. But he couldn't.

When my sister had called me to tell me what happened, I had snapped at Ethan, yelling that I didn't want him to come. I felt awful, even though he knew I didn't mean it. He knew going to a church with my husband, with my whole family, for my dad's funeral wasn't going to be easy for me. Ethan had lain with me that day while I cried. He rubbed my back and let my fingers dig into him. Having him close helped me come to my senses. I knew I needed him to come, because without him, I had no real support in this scenario.

I was glad he was here now. He was the only thing I looked at while I readied myself to speak. I uncrumpled the paper, softened from the writing and erasing, from the sweat that had dripped from my palms. My knees felt like they would buckle beneath me, so I put a hand on the podium to stabilise myself.

"Hello, everyone," I croaked. "I'm Tyler, and Charlie was my dad." I adjusted the bendy microphone on the podium. "Thank you all for coming today. If I had to describe my dad in one word, I would say he was very wise."

When did I settle on wise? I read over what I said and had no memory of writing it. I think *wise* came from a quick Google search of how to write a eulogy.

I cleared my throat before I continued. "When I think of my dad, I think of how he supported me… in my first job, in buying my first house, just in growing up. He… He always pushed me to be better—a better father, a better son. He supported Aubrie and me when Ollie was born, and that only continued."

I re-read what I had said. I stood in front of all these people who loved my dad and I felt such guilt for lying. But what was I supposed to do? Tell them my dad was an asshole, that he was a little bitch that didn't like me wearing a fucking ring, or the length of my son's hair?

"He used to drive me to my football games. My mum would make orange slices and he would watch the whole time. If I scored a goal, he would take me for ice cream after." That hadn't come out how I wanted. "I remember one year for Christmas, when Ollie was two, he dressed up like Santa and Ollie was so excited." I felt my voice steady with the mention of

my son. “He was a wonderful grandfather, and will leave a hole in all of our lives. Dad, your life will always be a part of mine, and I will cherish and appreciate our memories forever. Thank you.”

I sat down. It was awful. That speech was awful, forced, short. I tried so hard to write something kind, but I felt like no one believed my fake sincerity. The pastor went back up to speak. His words were muffled. I was seething in my seat. Everybody talked about this wonderful man… Why couldn’t they see? Did they feel like guilty liars too?

My hand sat flat on the pew right beside Ethan’s thigh, begging for contact. I shuffled closer to him and he tucked his hand behind my back. The second he did, I wanted him to stop. The touch sent tears streaming down my face.

The funeral ended, and everyone around me stood and shuffled towards the door. I wasn’t sure what was happening, my knees shook and my hands gripped into the dark wood I sat on. I sensed Ollie a few metres in front of me, his hand in Aubrie’s.

Ethan was tugging at my shoulder. “We’re going for the reception now.”

Why are weddings and funerals structured the same way?

I stood and followed him, our bodies bumping together in the crowd. Tiny whispers and the clicking of heels filled the space. I instinctively gripped Ethan’s hand in the sea of people, and he led me out.

I was standing on the concrete steps just outside the church. My mum held my sister in her arms as the crowd walked to another building. I looked over the field of headstones. A dead body beneath each one, rotting.

What happens when we run out of space for all the dead people?

My back was turned to the last few people coming out of the church.

“Are you okay, Daddy?” Ollie asked.

“Yeah.” My voice broke. “I’m okay, buddy.” I nodded but kept my back turned. My thumb ran over the creases in my forehead.

“Why don’t you guys go for some food?” Ethan whispered to Aubrie and Ollie.

Water dripped onto the dry concrete below me. The sky was clear. The footsteps retreated, and Ethan’s hand warmed the centre of my back. My face scrunched as my tears fell. His hand rubbed up and down. I felt the silence.

I paced down the steps and walked out into the grass, towards where my father was buried. The dirt was raw under my feet. There were other plots

just as fresh. I forget people die as frequently as they do. It felt dangerous and unsafe.

I stood over my dead father's grave, crying, but I wasn't sad. I was so, so angry.

I knew Ethan was behind me. I wasn't sure what he was thinking, or what he thought I was thinking. My hands landed on my hips as I looked out into the pale blue sky, questioning everything. It was like I was seeing my whole life through a kaleidoscope.

My knees finally gave out and I fell onto the grave, the dirt rubbing into my pants. His headstone would be placed on top of the berm soon, it would say a bunch of things, none of which I believed. I couldn't tell people what I felt because I *should* be sad, but I was just angry. This man created me, was always a little bit disappointed in me and wanted me to be better. Taking care of my child was the only thing he was truly proud of, and he still found ways to poke holes in that. Sometimes when I spoke to Ollie, I would feel so frustrated, because it was so easy to be a kind and supportive father. I wasn't even a perfect father, I said stuff that wasn't quite right, but I did my best to be supportive and it wasn't very hard. It would have taken more effort to be the way he was—rude and unnecessarily critical. I wondered if he knew how damaging all the things he said and did were, or if he was that fucking oblivious.

"Why?" I whispered over the soggy ground.

My tears flowed down my face. My mouth opened to scream, but nothing came out. My throat strained as I felt a deep pain.

Ethan knelt beside me. His hand was on my shoulder for less than a second when I swatted him away. My scream finally came out, loud and harrowing. My knuckles whitened as I gripped the concrete of the cemetery berm. I let go a moment later and balled my hands up. My fists slammed into the hard, rough stone, hitting it back and forth. Ethan laid his hands on my shoulders. It was so overwhelming. My knuckles burned and stung.

"Stop, stop… It's okay. Stop," Ethan begged.

I couldn't. I was so angry. My tears streamed and my voice roared through the graveyard.

"Stop," he demanded as he grabbed my arms and tried to hold them still.

I buckled over and my forehead fell onto the blood splattered berm. Ethan clasped his arms around me. Overwhelmed, stinging knuckles, we had fallen to lying in the dirt as he gripped his body around mine. He

stroked my wet cheek as my breath shook with each inhale. My arms were outstretched in front of me, hands shaking in the cold air. My knuckles became tight as they swelled.

“I’m sorry,” I choked after I caught my breath.

“No. No. Your dad just died, this is allowed,” he said. His hands slid down my arms and lay flat against my palms. “But I need to take you to the hospital.”

I peered down at my blood-covered hands. I couldn’t move them, they were purple and red, and there was dirt and gravel clumped in the open wounds. I tried to straighten my fingers.

“Fuck.” I felt like all the time I had gone without cutting was over. I had just drowned in the air around me.

Ethan helped me up and took me to the car. He was quiet while driving me to the hospital. I caught a glimpse of myself in the rear-view mirror. My whole face was puffy and red. My eyes were bloodshot.

“I think it’s okay.” My throat burned when I spoke.

“No.” His voice was coarse. “You’re still actively bleeding… we should get some tissues.” Ethan dug them out of his pocket.

“You just had these?” I laid the tissues over my knuckles and groaned at the bruising, stinging pain.

“We went to a funeral, needed the tissues for hay fever.” His voice lightened.

“Huh?”

“Y’know, all the flowers,” he added, desperate to make his joke work.

“I think you’ve lost your touch.” I looked at him, admiring how he had found his way with words. He knew me so well now that he made jokes at all the right times. Not just to make me feel better, but for him too, as a magical way to lighten the air.

“Alright. It’s been a long day.” He smiled.

I smiled back at him.

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Chapter 43

Tuesday 22 July 2025

Elijah had a new couch in his office. The old one had a grey fabric with tiny weaves. This couch was mustard. It was a lot less structured, and he had some new throw pillows on his chair to match. He also had some new fidget toys to choose from. I shuffled through them and found a little jelly dinosaur. Ollie had a ton of these little jellies in his room that he wouldn't let me touch. He complained that I always left them covered in hair.

"How are your hands? You don't have the splint anymore," Elijah stated.

Statements don't require responses.

"Yeah, finally finished physio. It was weird being there again. I had the same physio as when I tore my rotator cuff, except this time we talked about our husbands and not our kids."

I had felt like a completely different person in that physio's office. I wore my ring and my necklace and my bracelet, and when the physio asked me what had changed since I saw her last, I told her I had gotten married to my husband Ethan. He even picked me up the first few times when I couldn't drive because, according to the internet, driving with a broken hand was "not advisable."

I stretched the fingers on my right hand in and out a few times. It wasn't quite as loose as it used to be but it didn't hurt anymore. My arm had been through quite a lot.

"Did you tell your mum or your sister what happened? I know you were planning to go see her last time we had a session. How was that? First time since the funeral?" His voice was soft and calm, like it always was.

"It was different than normal." He was looking at the top of my head as I looked at the toy in my lap. "Mum was really nice. I went alone. She complimented my eulogy and then she said, 'I know that was hard for you, but I was proud of you, I've always been proud of you.' I was really confused when she said that."

“Do you think she was being honest?” he asked.

God, he’s so irritating. “It seemed like it. She’s a different person. I called Willa after and she told me that Mum had said she felt like Dad had been harsh on me growing up.” Of course, she gave no mention of her part in it all, but she did seem to feel guilty, or perhaps I’d just never seen sincerity from her.

“Do you think, maybe—and I’m not trying to defend her—she was a bit of a follower in the relationship? That maybe sometimes she was belittled by him too, so she followed along to keep him happy, even if she did it unconsciously?”

“I mean, not that I noticed.”

“But you do live in a happy, fair relationship. One free of gender roles. Maybe that idea doesn’t seem as plausible to you?”

I did not appreciate the idea that I was out of touch or that I didn’t understand struggle.

“As much as queer relationships are tricky, and my goodness, inside and outside forces make them that way, you do have some advantages. And certainly in your relationship, your only experience of a long-term relationship. Feeling pressured or unsafe in a relationship, emotionally or otherwise, isn’t something you’ve experienced.”

“No.” All the times as a child when my mum would tell me I was just like my father ran back into my head while guilt washed over me. “But she was still not… not supportive or whatever.”

“You’re right. She didn’t support you or defend you. That’s not how being a parent works. It seems maybe she’s realised that, but she might be too embarrassed to admit it. You know how Aubrie always thinks she’s a bad mother?”

“Less so lately. I think Janey and Everett helped her be more confident in her parenting, but yeah?” I rambled. I felt a need to show I wasn’t stupid and lacking emotional intelligence.

“Well, because women are told their whole lives that they are put on this earth to have babies, they can be, understandably, sensitive about their parenting skills. A lot more than men, who have little social pressure to be good fathers because their kids have mothers anyway. We’re in a heteronormative society in this explanation, by the way.” He chuckled.

“So what do I do then?” I knew he was building to a point and I wish he would just fucking say it and get it over with.

“So you can either forgive her, or not. You could go to lunch, or invite her for dinner. I know Ollie’s not really into sport, but he’s going to be in that school production next month. Maybe you could invite her. Slowly rebuild the relationship. If you want. There is no pressure, but I think it could be good for you, and her, and even Ollie if you give her a second chance—or whatever number you’re on—now that your father isn’t around to influence her. But your mental health comes first, always.”

I nodded. Always my go-to when I knew he was right and had nothing more to add. I would just wait for his next question. I was sure he was writing them down during our sessions so he was ready to remind me of all my problems at the next one.

“What other feelings have you been experiencing? You seem more relaxed,” he said while he added another scribble in his book.

“Um, I guess so. I think… I think I like being gay.”

Elijah put his book aside and started clapping. “Yes!” he shouted.

My face went hot.

“Do you know why that is?” Elijah asked with a knowing grin. I just looked up at him. “It’s because there is no one left in your life you feel like you need to impress or perform for. You can just be you, one hundred percent of the time, which means you can learn to enjoy it… to the full extent.”

A grin broke through the redness of my face. I was really proud of myself.

Elijah settled back in his chair. He sighed. “Don’t you just love days where you feel like you succeeded. You should be feeling that right now. I’m so proud of you, Tyler, and more than that, I’m really happy for you.”

His breath returned to normal by the time he spoke again. “And we also need to acknowledge that if the feelings don’t last, you still had them, and three or four years ago, you didn’t. So no matter what, it’s still progress. How are the new meds?” he asked.

I had stopped trying different antidepressants when I ran out of options. They all made me sick, made my dick stop working, or made me feel dead inside. We switched to an anxiety med that I just took when I was feeling stressed.

“Um… yeah, I took them before I saw my mum, and for a dinner when Ethan had a client over. I think they help, and I haven’t noticed any side effects so far.”

I had also taken one on a day when Ethan had gone away for the weekend with his mum and Ollie was with Aubrie. I did it on a no-stress day in case it gave me side effects, and more importantly, so I could wank and make sure that wasn't going to be an issue. I didn't want to put sex on such a high pedestal—and Ethan kept assuring me that finding a med that worked was more important—but it was important to me, to my relationship, and to my identity.

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Saturday 23 August 2025

My hand sweated inside Ethan's as we walked down the footpath in Ponsonby. He was staring at Google Maps as he read every sign to make sure we found where his usual tattoo shop had moved to.

Ethan was adding to his collection. *It's stupid as hell*, I told myself, but I was very flattered. He was getting a tattoo of my bite mark on his biceps. It was completely his idea… but I didn't try to stop him. When he mentioned it, he was talking about how he needed to figure out where exactly to put it because of the five-centimetre scar near his shoulder. When he was eight, he climbed along a brick retaining wall after his mum had told him not to four or five times, and fell and split his arm open. That story became far more detailed after a few more lunches with Ethan's mum.

I had asked him why they couldn't tattoo over the scar. He said they could, that they did it all the time, but the scar was too cool and hardcore to get rid of. I then mocked him about the story and how it wasn't hardcore at all, all while thinking about the fact that I had scars—ones I would be happy to cover.

My stupid ass said that out loud, and now I was walking hand in hand with my husband to get my teeth tattooed on him, and my self-harm scars—or at least one thigh-full—covered. Ethan had assured me that Tom did these types of tattoos all the time and that I didn't need to be worried about judgement, but of course, that did nothing to ease my anxiety.

The backs of my thighs stuck to the black leather table. I was now in underwear with a random man—a man my husband had effortless conversation with—standing over me. He had shaved my thigh and was placing the stencil. Ethan was sitting on the bed opposite to me, swinging his feet like a child as they didn't reach the floor. He was so excited. I was

too. I had always wanted to get tattoos. I was just never brave enough. I also didn't know what I wanted, but this idea had me excited.

Not completely, because I knew if people knew I had a tattoo, I would have to show them, which would mean showing them the scars. So I hadn't told anyone but Willa. I was a bit sad to have a tattoo that I didn't want to show off, but apparently when you get one tattoo, you suddenly want a ton more. So I guessed I wasn't done and people could see the next one. There was also something sexy about having a tattoo on my thigh as an homage to my relationship, that only my husband and I know about. And my sister, I guessed…

"Are you scared?" Ethan taunted from across the room.

"Of course I am," I said with complete honesty.

I was now lying on my back. I knew it was weird to think about, but this man's face was right over my dick as he leant forwards to touch the needle to my skin. I was suddenly mad that my anxiety meds didn't stop my dick.

I didn't know how my body would react to being repeatedly stabbed just beside my groin.

I squeezed my eyes shut, clenched my teeth and fists. *Brace for impact*.

It tingled. Mildly. My face dropped to normal.

"What, it doesn't hurt?" Ethan asked.

It didn't, but I didn't want to say that. Saying that it didn't hurt was like admitting that I had hurt that part of my body so much that the pain of the tattoo was nothing in comparison, and that all the scar tissue had created a thick barrier. "Not really, like, it definitely does, but not as bad as I expected."

"Aww man, I was hoping I could mock you for it. I don't think they hurt much either, I was so excited to one-up you. But nope, my husband is far too brave for that!" he joked.

Ethan's tattoo was completed in only fifteen minutes—mine took two hours—it was perfect. I couldn't wait to bite into it in two weeks.

My thigh was red and swollen, just like it was all those times I had cut. There were a few drops of blood that reminded me of the euphoria and guilt I always felt afterward. But when I focused on the design, I remember that day.

The redwood and rimu trees spread over my thigh, punga ferns decorating the ground around them. A rope bridge stretched out between the trees. I remembered how scared I had been that day, and then how fine I

was while Ethan was freaking out. Every day was like that now. Full of love.

As we stood to leave the plastic wrap around my thigh crinkled. Ethan went to grab my hand as we stepped onto the bustling footpath, I stopped and patted my left pocket—phone, my right pocket—wallet, my front pocket—keys.

“Are you alright?” Ethan asked.

My head turned up to him. “Yes. I’m great.” I kissed his forehead, took his hand, and walked down the street. My life full of all the love I never thought I’d have.

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Epilogue

2026

Ethan had made pancakes. He did that once or twice a week—blueberry and oat this time. He had decided everyone in the house needed to eat more vegetables, so that meant blueberries and oats?

I wasn't complaining, his cooking always tasted good. Ollie flipped them as I watched Ethan whip the cream… by hand. I was helping too. Setting the table, and all. I was highly distracted as I watched Ethan's arm flick back and forth, the metal whisk scraping the glass bowl.

"Do you have your laptop?" I asked Ollie after breakfast.

I had a fourteen-year-old now. Apparently, fourteen-year-olds needed laptops for school. He ran around and finished packing his bag. Ethan took him to school. He usually took the bus, but Ethan was taking Bomer to the park anyway, so he got a ride today.

I was answering emails at the kitchen table. I finally felt like I was doing well at my job. I was writing for a TV show, I worked with my co-workers over video calls and emails. I felt like I understood the lingo, that I was finally *in* and could use emoticons to say thanks sometimes instead of ending my email with *kind regards*. I actually had work colleagues.

Aubrie called me in a rush when she was between meetings.

"Can I pick Ollie up from school today? Everett's taking Janey to see his sister so I thought we could see a movie or something."

"Sure," I replied.

I heard a smooch and a sweet nothing whispered in Everett's relaxed tone. I knew she loved her performative marriage in the office, it helped them both seem respectable. A mutually beneficial marriage.

"Thank you, Tyler," she sang before she hung up.

Ethan came through the door. Bomer barrelled past his legs for a pat and a drink of water.

"You two have fun?" I asked.

“Oh, yes. He only pooped three times. I had to keep untying and retying the bag,” he spoke like you did in front of a kid—making everything sound positive.

He roamed through the room and sat on my lap, putting all his weight on me and resting his back on my chest as he sighed. Bomer was a very active dog.

I kissed his neck gently as I wrapped my arms around his waist. “Ollie’s going to go to Aubrie’s tonight,” I said.

“Mmh. Should we watch a movie?” Ethan suggested, twisting in my arms to look at me.

“Yes,” I breathed into his neck. “I have about forty minutes till I have to do a call.” I said with a pump of my eyebrows.

Ethan understood. He kissed me, turning in my lap so he could face me, gripping my face and pulling it into his. I put a hand under each of his thighs and lifted him, his muscles thick beneath my fingers. I felt his weight in my shoulder. I hadn’t told him this, but I had been keeping track of how much I could lift in the gym so I could lift him again, and now I could.

His legs wrapped around my waist as I took him to the bedroom.

We were on the same page about doing different things. We did our best to not fall into a pattern with sex, never doing the same twice in a row.

Ethan lay beneath me, pulling my sweats down. I kicked them off my ankles as he wiggled out of his shorts. Our bodies slid together as I pushed his shirt up and off. My thumb rubbed over the remnant of a hickey on his clavicle. Ethan grabbed my shoulders and rolled us. He took my shirt off, then started digging inside the drawer of the bedside table.

He pulled out the bottle of lube, then kissed down my stomach and licked over my pelvis. My pubes stuck to my skin as they mixed with his saliva. I twirled my fingers into his hair as his tongue ran over my balls. His cold, slicked finger ran between my cheeks. He nipped at the shaft of my dick as he pushed his finger in. It didn’t last long till I could see him thrusting into the bed.

I pulled him back to my face. “Fuck me,” I whispered.

He kissed me hard; it was a fight to see who could get their tongue deeper in the other’s mouth. It wasn’t the first time we had done this, but it wasn’t the most common occurrence. I still preferred to top most of the time, but sometimes I craved that deeper feeling and I knew he liked to pull those squealy moans from me.

He pushed his knees under my thighs to spread my legs. His forehead pressed into mine as the head of his cock nudged forwards. I breathed out slowly when the first shot of pain came through me. It hurt less and less every time.

"You okay?" Ethan asked.

He always asked, and I always knew I could say no and still be safe.

"Yes," I huffed. My hot breath ricocheted off Ethan's face.

He started thrusting, and it quickly became uncontrollable. It was so overwhelming. I was sweating and shaking, ecstatic, with a deep tingling pain in my stomach.

Ethan's face was beautiful—red with beads of sweat, his teeth dug deep into his lip. I used everything in me to tuck his hair out of his face, pull it down to me and kiss him.

The end was in sight. My teeth found the tattoo, digging in just beside it, leaving a mark like a shadow after we had both come.

He collapsed on top of me, and I felt him… everywhere.

Fifteen minutes and a quick shower later, and I was on a Zoom call in the kitchen. Ethan was pottering around at the other end of the table. We really needed to make a home office instead of sharing a kitchen table as our desks.

Bomer slept beneath my chair as I spoke to my boss through the computer.

"Yes. Definitely. I think giving him that need will foreshadow what happens in episode three well, and I can add that into the party scene pretty easily," I said, calm and serious.

"If you think you can make it work. I mean, you always seem to," my boss said with a laugh and a curl of her red lips.

Ethan smiled and gave me a thumbs up from the other side of the table. I did my best to not respond.

"Yes, it should be easy."

"Well, I think that's it," she added. "Get that back to me ASAP. Have a good day," she said before signing off.

I sighed and leant back in my chair.

"She seems to like you." Ethan winked. "'*Yes, I think I can do that, foreshadowing and such,*'" he mocked.

"Oh, fuck off. You do it too, y'know."

Ethan put a hand over his chest as if he were offended.

“You do. You make your voice all deep and serious. ‘*Well of course, yes, that’s a very important thing to remember when working with children, I will make sure it gets done for you*.’” My arms flailed around the way Ethan’s always did when he spoke.

He smiled at me and returned to his work.

It was dark outside by the time we had our dinner: homemade vegetable-loaded taco bowls. We sat on the couch with our food. My third leather diary sat on the side table, ready for after the film. I flicked on *Bugonia*—also directed by Yorgos Lanthimos like *The Lobster* had been all those years earlier—a new release on Netflix. Ethan wasn’t big on sci-fi, but he was big on Emma Stone, and so was I after he made me watch *La La Land*. No regrets there.

The movie started, and Ethan sat with his back pressed into my chest. I stroked his hair and kissed his head.

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About The Author:

Levi Thomas is a born and raised New Zealander. He wrote his first book when he was thirteen and quickly realised he loved it. He then went on to write three more books before finally finishing one for publication. He enjoys writing books with mental health and queer representation, as that is the representation he needed and still needs. He loves all kinds of media: books, movies, music, and art. And he has created all of them throughout his life. He also loves to cook and eat. He loves animals and has quite extensive numbers of fish as well as a dog and a bearded dragon.

COMING SOON, *What You Gave Me* by Levi Thomas

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