a match and a fuse

by waveydnp

Summary

Phil is twenty six years old and stuck in a dead end life. He works at Starbucks and may or may not be carrying a torch for his best friend of eight years. He doesn't know who he is or what he wants--or how to go about figuring it out.

That all starts to change when he happens upon the resume of a certain law school grad named Daniel.
Chapter 1

“Grande caramel machiatto for… Shelly? Sally?”

For God’s sake. It’s no wonder the whole world takes the piss out of the penmanship and spelling abilities of baristas. He squints his eyes in concentration but he just can’t fully decipher the name scribbled out hastily in black sharpie on the side of the cup. Luckily the afternoon rush is coming to an end and the store’s not that busy anymore.

“Sherry,” a middle-aged woman says humourlessly as she claims her coffee.

“Right,” he says cheerfully, smiling. Trying to anyway. Hopefully it looks something like a smile. “Have a great day--or night, I guess. Evening.”

All he gets in response is a vaguely annoyed glare. He’ll take it. It’s better than the open disgust he’s been to known to receive on occasion. His painted on grin drops from his face the moment she turns to leave the shop.

“Smooth, Phil.”

He looks down the bar to see the assistant manager, Rory, smirking at him.

“It’s not my fault you’re writing these names out in Greek. What’s the point in annoying customers by asking for their names if you make them impossible to read by scribbling them like a toddler?”

“As if yours look any better.”

He smiles, and this time it’s genuine. “Fair enough.”

“Do a bus and then take your break, Lester.”

He grabs a cloth from the little tray of milk-murky sanitizer water underneath the espresso machine, rings it out and walks around the bar to wipe down the sticky tables that furnish the small lobby. He picks up a few empty cups off the floor and brings them to the garbage can. He’ll never understand how people can have so little consideration for people like him, people who work shit jobs with shit hours for shit pay. Is it really that hard to just throw your rubbish in the bin?

“Ror, will you make me a drink, please?” Phil asks as he refills the drink lids on the condiment stand. He’s meant to stand in the queue and use his partner card to get his free drink, but there’s no one else in the store at the moment and he can’t be arsed. He knows Rory doesn’t care. She lets him get away with a lot. He tries to avoid thinking about why that is.

“What do you want?”

He shrugs. “Surprise me.”

She cocks an eyebrow. “You sure, white boy?”

His stomach tightens a little. He hates when she flirts. He wouldn’t know how to reciprocate even if he wanted to. “Of course. I trust you.”

She makes him something strong and sweet because they’ve worked together a long time and she knows what he likes. It’s iced so he can get it all drunk in the fifteen minutes he has to sit in the dingy office chair in the cramped back room. The noise from the industrial sized fridges is loud in the
small space and the steam from the sanitizer makes it feel hotter than it should for an evening in mid October.

“Is it good?” Rory asks, leaned up against the doorframe, arms crossed loosely over the green apron that clings to the curves of her chest. The contrast of her dark skin against the bright white of her polo shirt makes it hard for Phil to avert his eyes from the cleavage revealed by the low cut. It’s not strictly dress code to show that much skin, he thinks.

He hopes she hasn’t noticed him staring. It doesn’t mean what she’d probably assume it means.

“Course. Thanks.”

It really is turning out to be a slow night. It’s just the two of them and they’ve already checked off half the items on the closing to do list. She doesn’t usually have time to chat with him on his break.

“Did you hear Dylan quit?” she asks.

“Really?” Phil takes a long sip of his drink, mostly disinterested. It’s the nature of retail work, really. People come and go all the time. Not Phil, of course. Some days he wonders if he’ll end up a Starbucks lifer. The thought makes his gut clench. “Why?”

She sighs. “Who knows. He’s a teenager. He probably only applied because his mum was mad at him that day and insisted he get a job.”

“He was kind of a wanker.”

“Yeah, but now I have to replace him,” she says, sounding defeated.

“Isn’t that Laura’s job?”

“Yeah, which means she’ll bugger off and make me do it.”

“You’ll do a better job anyway,” Phil says, pushing his glasses up his nose. He’s trying to make her feel better but he’s also telling the truth. Their manager really is shit. “The last person she hired was Kyle.”

Rory scrunches her face up in disgust. “God, you’re right.” She turns around when she hears the door to the cafe open. “Ugh, who do these people think they are, coming in here and making me do work?”

Phil chugs the rest of his coffee and throws his apron on around the back of his neck. He’s still tying it up at the back when he steps out onto the floor to help her.

“That wasn’t fifteen minutes, Phil.”

He shrugs. “Looks like you need me.”

“I don’t,” she says, smiling, “but thanks.”

He takes the cups she’s marked and sets about making the drinks. Maybe, he thinks, maybe it’s stuff like this that keeps her looking at him just a little too long sometimes. Maybe she’s confusing flirtation for what is genuinely just his personality. It’s the only thing that makes sense really. He’s awkward and she’s gorgeous.

He can see that, clearly, even if it doesn’t translate into the feelings he knows he should probably feel. The colour of her skin is deep and rich like the quad espresso misto he hands off to… Liza?
Lisa? Lise? Phil shakes his head. She may have a glowing complexion and amazing short, dark curly hair, but Rory can’t write for shit. He doesn’t even bother trying to read out the name.

“You’re just trolling me now, aren’t you?”

She giggles. “Maybe a little.”

They get a little busier after that. They spend the next few hours trading off the cash and bar positions and getting the store ready for closing.

“Will you train whatever poor soul I end up hiring?” she asks later, once all the customers have left and she’s locked the doors behind them.

He nods. He’s up for pretty much anything that means he doesn’t have to plaster on a fake smile and force awkward small talk upon customers who just want their caffeine fix as quickly as possible. “If you do it I’ll have twice as many illegible scribbles to try to decode.”

“Don’t you have a degree in linguistics? Isn’t that like, your thing?”

Phil laughs. It’s a bitter sound, almost completely devoid of warmth. “Right.” Truth be told, his credentials had begun collecting dust the moment he’d graduated. Now it’s four years later and the only remotely brave or cool thing he’d done since was move to London. He’d been hoping to find a job, and technically he had. He’d figured Starbucks could pay the bills until something better came along. Now he’s twenty six years old and he’s still waiting.

He thinks she picks up on the chill in his tone and they both grow quiet, focusing on getting everything sanitized and set up for the next day. They’ve both been working here long enough that when they want to, they can get it done with impressive speed. It’s almost midnight by now and Rory still has to take the tube to get home. Fortunately, Phil doesn’t. He lives just a few blocks away-part of the reason he’d taken a job here in the first place.

He leans against the counter as she locks up the safe. “So are there any prospects yet?”

She punches in the alarm code and they make their way to the exit. “I’ll probably look through resumes and call some people tomorrow. You gonna be here?”

Phil nods.

“Ace,” she says with a grin, putting on a thick, exaggerated Northern accent. There are few things she loves more than making fun of Phil’s accent. Not that he really even has one anymore.

“Oh, shut up.” He smiles. He really does like her. She’s fun. She’s nice to him, which sounds simple but means a lot, especially given some of the other people they work with. He wishes his smiles for her carried the same weight as the ones she gives him, but he thinks it’s been long enough now that she must know. Really, after almost four years of working together, of ignoring the soft touches against his arm and warm cadence of her voice when she talks to him, he hopes she’s accepted that all they’ll ever be is friends.

They give each other a wave and go their separate ways. Phil shivers and zips his jacket up under his chin, hurrying his long legs against the dirty pavement, anxious to get back to the safety and warmth of his flat.

He gets home quickly, huffing a little harder as he climbs the many flights of stairs up to the fourth floor. The lift’s been broken for a month and still there’s been no indication that the landlord plans to take any steps towards getting it sorted. He shouldn’t complain--it’s the only exercise he gets
apart from hauling bags of milk from the back room and mopping the floors in the lobby. Which is precisely why he hates it so much, why he’s so thoroughly winded by the time he slides his key into the lock on his front door.

It’s actually quite a nice building--nicer than he should be able to afford, anyway. Luckily Jimmy has something akin to a proper job and likes Phil so much that he’s willing to pick up some--a lot--of the slack.

The flat is dark when he steps inside, which makes sense. Jimmy has to be at the station at 9am, a perfectly respectable time for an adult to be starting their work day. Meanwhile, Phil sleeps in till noon most days, then plays Mario Kart or Final Fantasy or just trolls the internet mindlessly until 3pm when it’s time to drag himself back to his little coffee-scented prison cell. Maybe that’s an exaggeration. He does have friends and he does go out, but he’s long since stopped actively trying to better his situation.

He kicks his mocha streaked shoes off, leaving them next to Jimmy’s perfectly clean ones. Tom’s are there too, Phil notices. Not an uncommon occurrence these days, but one that always leaves Phil feeling slightly disappointed. He can’t crawl into Jimmy’s bed and snuggle up next to him when that space is already being taken up by his boyfriend.

He goes to the kitchen and opens the fridge to find Jimmy’s left him a chicken bake from Gregg’s. He smiles and shakes his head. The man has a problem, Phil thinks, but at least he can always be counted on for a tasty, horrendously unhealthy snack at the end of a long day. He’s even careful to make sure the pasties he buys for Phil don’t have cheese. Phil grabs it and eats it cold in four monstrous bites. Apparently he’d been hungrier than he thought.

He can’t sit in the lounge and watch telly or play games like he wants to because he’s a good friend and a good flatmate. The walls in this place are almost literally paper thin and Jimmy’s not a heavy sleeper. Phil has a day shift tomorrow anyway, so he goes to the bathroom and brushes his teeth. Once in his room he strips off his clothes, tossing them on the floor and climbing into bed in nothing but his Sonic pants.

He turns on his phone and scrolls through twitter for a little while, and then tumblr. After the fifth unexpected video of graphic porn appears on his dash between the Marceline and Bubblegum fan art and cute gifs of corgis, he clicks his phone off and tosses it onto his bedside table. He doesn’t follow any porn blogs, so he doesn’t understand why that shit keeps popping up. Sometimes it feels like it’s all anyone really cares about--all the ways people’s parts can be combined, the myriad ways people can use each other’s bodies to get to the cumshot. He wishes he could understand. He thinks it would make life a lot easier.

He pulls his duvet up over his naked shoulder and snuggles his head deeper into his pillow. It’s cold. He should’ve put pjs on. He could get up of course, but that would mean expending energy and he’s not cold enough to eclipse his laziness. He wishes Tom had stayed at his own flat. He misses the warmth of Jimmy’s slender yet solid body next to him. Perhaps it’d been unwise to grow so accustomed to it. It had always been inevitable that Jimmy would find someone to share his bed with, someone who was capable of more than just snuggling.

He’d definitely felt a little twinge of something all those years ago, when they were young and fresh and sharing a cramped dorm room in York. He could count on one hand the number of times he’d felt that twinge before meeting Jimmy and they’d always been for girls. They’d been fleeting, brief hints of the feelings and sensations he’d heard described in seemingly every show, every movie, every song he’d ever heard. He’d been young and unsure, so scared of ruining those friendships that he’d swallowed those feelings down, pushed them aside until those girls found other boys who
weren’t awkward and afraid.

And then there was Jimmy. They’d become very close very quickly, sharing a wide variety of interests, similar senses of humour and and a lack of personal space. In truth, the twinge had been stronger, more defined and less easy to ignore the more they got to know each other.

But he’d pushed it away again, that time for a different reason. Jimmy was a boy. A man. He was tall, long-legged, with dark hair and striking eyes and a jawline that Phil found harder and harder to ignore the more time went on. But he did--he ignored it. He couldn’t handle those feelings in the first place, let alone process the fact that he was feeling them for a man. Nothing--absolutely nothing in his life up until that point had prepared him for the possibility that he could be queer.

He’d made a lot of bad decisions in the following years, spurred on by fear and doubt and denial. He’d shared his bed and his body with people he truly felt no connection to, no desire for--first women and then, bewildered by those astounding failures, confusion eclipsed by desperation, men. It was always tense, uncomfortable, embarrassing, always followed by a shame so deep he’d swear that was the last time. And eventually, with Jimmy’s help, it was.

“Maybe it’s just who you are, Phil,” he’d said one night, cradling Phil’s head in his lap, gently swiping the tears from his cheek with his thumb. “Maybe you’re asexual or something.”

Phil wasn’t sure that was it, but it was enough. Enough to cling to for the time being, to explain why he couldn’t relate to most people, why he couldn’t get it up at the thought of a pretty girl. Maybe that twinge was something else, something he just didn’t have a name for yet.

He still feels it sometimes, when he looks into Jimmy’s bright, sea green eyes or hears him laugh. He feels it, but it’s dulled, like a headache that’s just about gone. He’s used to it now and he doesn’t regret anything. He wouldn’t trade their friendship for the world, and it warms him to see how happy Jimmy is with Tom.

He just wishes that happiness didn’t have to mean slowly giving up cuddles with his best friend.
Chapter 2

When Phil wakes up the next morning, it’s too early. He rubs his bleary eyes and squints at the too-bright screen of his phone: 6:30 am--way too early. He rolls over and pulls his duvet around himself tighter when he hears it, the quiet yet unmistakeable sound of the two men in the room next to him. He laments for what feels like the millionth time choosing an apartment with such bloody thin walls.

He squeezes his eyes shut and tries to forget he’s heard it--it’s not loud by any means, not in any way obscene or offensive, but it’s just not what Phil wants to hear before he’s even really able to properly open his eyes. He could play some music on his phone to drown it out, but that would mean getting up and fetching his headphones from the jacket he’d been wearing last night. He can’t do that, because Jimmy would hear him and he’d know that Phil had heard it. Then Jimmy would feel guilty about it and Phil doesn’t want that because he’d have no reason to feel guilty. Phil loves Jimmy and he’s grown to like Tom and he doesn’t want to feel responsible for making two grown men who love each other feel guilty for enjoying some early morning sex.

He doesn’t quite understand it, because Jimmy hates mornings almost as much as Phil does, and this isn’t the first time he’s awoken to noises like this. Maybe he should start wearing earplugs to bed. He wishes he could just be normal, laugh it off, knock on the wall that separates their rooms and shout ‘keep it down, lovebirds’ and go back to sleep. He wishes he didn’t have to be this grown man who never could wrap his head around the concept of attraction and love and sex.

Because the thing is, he’s kind of fuzzy on all things love and attraction, but sometimes, usually at the most inconvenient, baffling times, his cock will remind him that it’s capable of experiencing arousal. Unfortunately, his traitorous body has chosen now as one of those times. He feels the uncomfortable swelling sensation between his legs and bites his lip. He doesn’t want to deal with this right now. He just wants to go back to sleep.

It’s just another thing he simply can’t understand. He could watch all the porn in the world and feel nothing but perplexed and perhaps slightly queasy, but the quiet breathy moans that filter through his bedroom wall are enough to make him stiff. He could take care of it pretty quickly and just get it out of the way. Sometimes he can find pleasure in the release, but most of the time it’s more an obligation than anything else. He’s come to accept it as another one of those mildly inconvenient yet satisfying bodily functions, like sneezing or needing a wee.

But he absolutely draws the line at wanking to the sound of his flatmate sighing his boyfriend’s name into his pillow. He sticks his fingers in his ears and crosses his legs tightly and waits it out. He must really be tired because when he opens his eyes again, his ears aren’t stopped up and he can’t hear anything anymore. He reaches for his phone: 8:00 am. It’s hardly better than half six, but he figures it’s better to get up now than to fall asleep again and have to rush to get ready for his shift at noon. He reaches out and fumbles his hand across the bedside table until he finds his glasses. He’d given up on contacts long ago, tired of sticking his fingers into his eyeballs and getting lashes trapped behind the lenses every day. And anyway, Rory says he really suits the glasses.

He shuffles to the bathroom and then to the kitchen and is surprised to see Jimmy sitting at their little kitchen table, a mug of tea in front of him.

“Morning,” Jimmy says, running a hand through the damp hair cascading in messy waves over his forehead. “Bit early for you, innit?” He really lets his brummy accent come out thick in the morning, before he’s had time to school it into something more appropriately southern.
Phil just yawns in response, not trusting himself to contain the slight awkwardness he feels remembering what he’d heard a few hours ago.

“There’s water in the kettle for your coffee.”

“Thanks,” Phil croaks. “Where’s Tom?”

Jimmy looks up from his tea, confused. “How’d you know Tom was here?”

Phil turns away to make his coffee. “I… saw his shoes last night.” He cringes.

There is silence for a moment. “You heard us this morning,” Jimmy muses. “That’s why you’re up so early.”

“No idea what you’re on about,” Phil says, reaching into the cupboard for a mug.

“I’m really sorry, Phil.”

“For what? It’s your flat too.” It’s not like I had to plug my ears like a child or anything.

“Still.” Jimmy chugs the rest of his tea and stands up. “I’ve gotta go. I’ll see you later, yeah? Tom can stay at his own place tonight.”

Phil smiles, stirring instant coffee powder into the hot water in his mug. “Yeah.” He could lie and say no, it’s fine, bring Tom over, but the truth is it’s been a while since he had Jimmy to himself and he misses him. He does get lonely at night, especially when he knows Jimmy is just on the other side of the wall, unreachable in the arms of his lover. Phil’s not jealous, really--he doesn’t want Jimmy like that. Probably. He just really doesn’t like sleeping alone.

“Soz, Phil, seriously.” Jimmy touches Phil’s arm lightly and places his mug in the sink. “Have a good shift today.”

“You too.”

On his way out the door, Jimmy shouts, “Water the plants, please!”

Phil smiles. “Mhm.” It’s his turn to tend to the many houseplants of which they share custody. He feels a little bad taking any of the credit, because if it wasn’t for Jimmy constantly reminding him to do his part, those plants would all be dead in a matter of days.

He drinks two cups of coffee and eats a huge bowl of cereal before he feels ready to water the plants and have a shower and straighten his hair and steel himself for another long day of painting on a smile and making overpriced lattes for rude strangers.

He stares at his reflection in the floor-length mirror that’s leaned up against the wall as he drags his straighteners through his long black fringe. It’s the one vestige of his emo days that he just can’t seem to leave behind. It’s a little less ridiculous now, the fringe is shorter and the sides are shaved, but people still make fun of him for it sometimes. Rory tells him he’d look good with a quiff but he’s woken up with one pretty much every day of his adult life so he knows how it makes him look--old. Old enough that he should have at least one aspect of his life figured out by now. Maybe if he keeps styling his hair like a teenager from 2004 and wearing pokemon shirts he can pass for someone who shouldn’t be embarrassed that they work in a coffee shop and play video games all day.

Unfortunately, he doesn’t actually have time for gaming today. He gives his sweatpants a wistful look as he tugs his black dress pants up his thighs, cursing the corporate coffee goons who insist on
such a strict and soulless dress code. He pulls on his socks, one pink with little green cacti, one blue with sharks. It’s his one petty act of rebellion, wearing bright socks that should be black. He’s not usually one to dissent from the rules, but he draws the line at boring socks. Besides, no one can actually see them under his trousers anyway. He pulls his green York hoodie over his black polo, hand reaching up automatically to straighten out his fringe. He thinks absentmindedly that his hair really ought cooperate after all these years of being arranged in exactly the same way.

The autumn air is crisp enough on his short walk to work that the rush of heat as he steps into the shop feels nice. The rich smell of coffee fills his nose and for a split second it’s comforting, intoxicating, before his brain connects it to burning his fingers on hot carafes and scrubbing milk skin off the counters of the bar. There had been a time when going to Starbucks had been fun. He looks up and sees Rory behind the cash and gives her a smile. Maybe it’ll be a little fun today.

Then he hears a posh male voice from behind the bar--definitely not going to be a fun day. He hates that voice, and the right wanker of a person it belongs to. He changes his mind about getting a drink before his shift. The less time he spends hearing Kyle’s voice and seeing his stupid face, the better. Phil’s chest tightens pathetically just at the sight of him. He walks behind Rory, heading for the back room.

“Kyle’s here,” he hisses.

“Yeah.” She gives him a sympathetic look. “Don’t worry, I’ll make him work cash all day.”

Phil gives her a conspiratorial smirk. “Thanks.”

He can’t talk to her as much as he’d like because it’s nearly noon and the store is full of sour-faced, smartly dressed business people waiting impatiently for their lunchtime caffeine hit. He walks to the back room, pulls off his hoodie and ties a green apron around his waist. It’s not technically time to start his shift, but the busier he stays, the faster the day will pass. He types his partner number into the ancient computer sat on the rickety desk and steels himself for another shitty eight hours.

Luckily, the store stays busy for hours, keeping them all busy and ensuring that Phil doesn’t have to speak more than two words to Kyle or any of the other people he works with. With one glaring exception, he likes most of them well enough, but that doesn’t mean he wants to stand around making forced conversation with them. They’re all younger than him and he’s never really been good at social interaction anyway.

That doesn’t include Rory, of course. He’s always grateful for the days when it’s Rory’s voice calling out the drink orders and telling him what to do. The rest of the management team is incredibly corporate and humourless. They don’t put smiley faces on the cups or let Phil get away with not tucking in his shirt.

When the lunch rush has died down, she comes up behind him and whispers, “Do you wanna be bad with me, Lester?”

He chokes out a laugh. He never seems to get used to her casual flirtation. “I dunno, do I?”

“You do. Go do a quick bus then meet me in the back.”

His gut clenches a little, just for a split second before he schools himself. She doesn’t mean it the way it sounds, he knows that. He doesn’t know what she has in store but it’ll be fine--she’s not going to try to snog someone who’s technically her subordinate in the backroom while they’re both still on the clock.
Once he’s restocked the toilet paper in the loo and changed all the garbages in the cafe, he makes his way to meet her, but not before Kyle has a chance to give him a look. It’s a quick up and down, a flick of the eyes and a curl of the lip, a subtle, nearly imperceptible sneer that takes not but a moment to give, but that cuts into Phil deeply every time. It’s the kind of look he’d gotten all through high school, and even in university, a look that says you’re different and I don’t like it. He hurries past and into the back room, trying to brush it off. Rory never gives him that look.

She does give him a look though. It’s very different—warm and soft and tender and honestly, almost as uncomfortable as Kyle’s, but for a completely different reason. He ducks his head down and returns with a weak smile of his own. “What are we doing, then? Staging a revolt?”

She pulls out the chair next to hers, laughing. “I wish. I’ve still got bills to pay.”

He sighs, sitting. “Me too. I’m so glad I spent all those years getting multiple degrees.”

She looks at him with such sincerity that he has the sudden urge to bolt. “I’m sorry, Phil. You’ll figure something out eventually.”

“Oh, uh, yeah.” He chuckles nervously. “It’s fine. I love making coffee, it really is my calling, don’t you think?”

She rolls her eyes. “Definitely. Are you going to help me now, or what?”

“Anything for you,” he says without thinking.

Luckily she hasn’t seemed to read into it. She opens the desk drawer and pulls out a thick folder of papers, presumably resumes. “I need to start looking through these and calling people in for interviews.”

“Yeah,” Phil says thickly.

“Do you wanna help me pick out some poor soul to join us in our suffering?”

“Really?” He holds his hand out for the file.

She nods. “You’re a good judge of character.”

He smiles. “You just don’t want to have to read these, right?”

“How very dare you accuse me of such a thing.”

He looks at her expectantly.

She loops one of thick black spirals atop her head through her finger, twisting it with an exaggerated look of innocence. “Look, it’s bad enough I have to do the interviewing. Help me out here, mate.”

“I’m just joking,” Phil assures, leaning back in his chair and throwing the ankle of one foot over the knee of the other. He pulls a handful of resumes out of the file. “I’d love to look through these. Anything is better than being out there with him.”

“What’d he say?” Rory asks softly.

Phil shakes his head. “Nothing. I just hate being around him.”

“Yeah,” she sighs. “Me too. That’s why you gotta find me someone better, yeah?”
Phil nods.

“Don’t tell Laura, though.”

He snorts. “Like I would. She’s never even here.”

She leaves him to it. He reads through page after page, picking out typos in nearly every one. Maybe that degree hadn’t been a waste after all.

After a while, they all start to blend together, forming an image of a singular individual in his mind—young, little prior work experience, just graduated high school and looking for a job to keep them in cheap food and tube fare while they chisel away at the mountain of debt quickly accumulating as they attempt to squeak out passing grades and obtain a qualification with which they’ll ultimately do nothing.

Until. Until his eyes stop on something notably different. Something that reminds him of himself, sending a shooting spark of hope through his stomach. Maybe he doesn’t have to be alone in his particular brand of quarter life crisis anymore.

“Ror,” he hisses, trying not to catch anyone’s attention but hers. He doesn’t want to get her in trouble. “Rory, c’mere!” he says when she looks at him questioningly. She holds up her index finger to say, yes I heard you, Phil, I’m trying to work here.

He skims over the page again as he waits for her, shocked that someone with credentials like these would apply to work somewhere like this. Then again, he’d have said the same about his own resume.

“Find something good?” Rory asks, standing behind Phil and leaning her head over his shoulder to take a look. Her thick curly hair tickles his neck. She smells good, like coffee and some kind of musky perfume.

He points at the section that says education. “Look.”

Her eyes widen. “He’s a lawyer.”

Phil laughs. “He has a law degree--doesn’t mean he’s a lawyer. I wish it worked like that. I’d be a linguist and a radio presenter and maybe even a filmmaker.”

She puts her hand on his shoulder and squeezes. “Do you want to give him a call?”

Phil turns to look at her. “Me?”

She shrugs. “I mean, I can do it. I just thought you might like an excuse to stay back here a little while longer.”

He bites his lip, considering. He knows he’ll somehow manage to make the call awkward, because that’s just what he tends to do when he speaks to strangers, but if it means even a few minutes less with Kyle, it’s worth it. He nods. “How many people should I call?”

“Just call this one if you want. Ask him when’s the soonest he can come in. I want to get this over with.”

“Like, today?”

She’s already walking away. “Yep!”
He takes a deep breath and picks up the receiver of the weathered old phone on the desk and dials the number with slightly shaky fingers. He’s not actually that nervous. He just has shaky hands. He always has.

The phone rings three times before Phil hears a deepish, uninterested voice say, “Hello?”

“Uh, hi. Is this…” he looks down at the paper again to double check the name. “Daniel?”

“Dan, yeah. Who’s this?”

“Dan,” he says. “I’m Phil.”

He hears a quiet chuckle crackle across the line. “Hey, Phil.”

“Hi.”

“What can I do for you, mate?”

“Right, sorry, I’m not normally the one to make these calls. I’m from Starbucks.” He hadn’t been wrong. Definitely making things awkward.

“Oh that’s right, I left a resume there, didn’t I?”

Phil twists the phone cord around his finger absently. “Yeah… are you still interested?”

“Will I get to work with you? You don’t sound… well honestly, you don’t really sound like a barista.”

Phil smiles, leaning back in the old office chair and swivelling side to side a little. “What does a barista sound like?”


“Nope,” Phil says breezily. Something about this stranger has made him feel instantly comfortable. “I may not sound like one, but I am in fact a barista. Just a humble, lowly barista. And if you take the job, you’ll definitely be working with me. Probably more than you’d like.”

“Let me be the judge of that, Phil the barista.”

Phil grins. “So you’ll come in for an interview?”

“Of course.”

“Can you come in today?”

Dan laughs. “Ok, maybe you are a little eager after all.”
Chapter 3

“Why did that take so long?” Rory asks when Phil reluctantly dons his apron again and joins her at the cash. “Is he coming in today?”

“Sorry, we… talked? For a little while?” Phil shrugs his shoulders a little, sheepish and conciliatory. “He’s coming in tomorrow. You’ll be here, right?”

She shakes her head slowly, but she’s smiling. “You’re lucky I like you, Lester.” She reaches out and flicks him on the arm. “I’ll be here. You won’t though, will you?”

Phil leans back against the counter, crossing one ankle over the other. They’ve hit the late afternoon lull and the store is nearly empty. “No, I finally have a day off tomorrow.”

“I guess it’s up to me to size the guy up, then.”

Behind him, a timer on one of the coffee urns starts beeping. He turns it off and lifts the urn off the stand, carrying it over to the sink to dump what’s left inside. It used to kill him, dumping out perfectly good coffee just because the higher-ups at corporate had decided that after half an hour it was trash and no longer worthy of being served to their customers. He’d watch it swirl down the sink and think sadly about how many people had worked tirelessly to grow the cherries and pick them and wash them and roast the beans and… eventually he just had to let it go. He’d tell himself it was ok, those people get paid whether or not a customer actually gets to enjoy the fruits of their labour. Not enough, surely, but he can’t let himself get torn up about that. There are too many people in the world with too many problems. He can’t let himself feel each and every one so personally.

He places the empty urn back on the stand and sets about brewing a new batch. “Sorry. He couldn’t make it in today. But I’m sure he’ll be great. He sounds great.”

He feels her eyes on the back of his neck as he ladles ground coffee into the filter.

“Yeah?” she asks.

“I mean he sounds nice.”

When he turns around, she’s leaning back against the register, arms crossed over her chest. She’s looking at him intently, the set of her mouth and furrow of her brow communicating some emotion he can’t name but knows he doesn’t really like.

“Are you ready for that kind of competition?” she asks.

His heart stutters. “What d’you mean?”

“I mean, you’re the resident nice guy here. Are you prepared to have competition?”

He chuckles, relieved. “Oh. He can have it, if I’m honest. I’ve been wanting to try out the whole asshole thing.”

At that, she beams and the whiteness of her teeth is blinding against her dark skin. He registers yet again that, yes, she’s beautiful. Way too beautiful to be smiling at him like that. Too beautiful, too good for the honey-sweet smoothness of her voice as she steps closer and says, “I told you you wanted to be bad.”
His throat is tight as they stand there looking at each other. This time there really isn’t anything he can say. She’s never flirted with him this aggressively and he feels trapped, paralyzed. He knows that’s not what he should be feeling. He should be feeling excited or nervous or hell, maybe even turned on, who knows. He shouldn’t feel like a deer in the headlights, cold dread creeping up his spine. He really likes Rory. He doesn’t want to hurt her feelings, and he doesn’t want to lose the only friend he has at this place.

Then a customer walks in and Rory is forced to tear her eyes from Phil’s and turn around to take their order.

She marks a cup with the order and hands it to Phil. “Tell Kyle to do a bus and go home, yeah?”

Phil takes the cup and nods, walking over to the bar to take Kyle’s place.

“Rory wants you to bus before you go home,” he says gruffly, pouring milk into a pitcher and setting it under the steaming wand.

Kyle grins lasciviously and jerks his head in Rory’s direction. “Mate, did you see that?”

Phil frowns. “What?”

“She definitely wants to fuck you.”

Phil’s gut clenches. “No she doesn’t.” He doesn’t know what’s worse—the crudeness of Kyle’s words or the fact he’s almost certainly right.

“Yeah, I don’t get it either,” he says, giving Phil that cutting look again. “I guess some birds are into that.”

“We’re friends,” Phil says coldly. He lines the shot glasses up under the machine and presses the button to pull two shots of espresso.

“Are you fucking gay, Lester, look at her. She looks like fucking… Rihanna or something. Look at that ass.”

Phil pours the shots and then the hot foamy milk into the cup. “Venti latte,” he calls loudly, putting the drink up and forcing a smile at the elderly man who claims it. “Have a good one.”

He keeps his back to Kyle, hoping he’ll take the hint. He wishes he was brave enough to tell Kyle to fuck off. He wishes he had the courage to tell him not to talk about his friend like that.

He doesn’t. He clenches a fist and stays perfectly quiet. He doesn’t turn around until Kyle gives up and walks away.

He spends the rest of his shift quietly stewing and avoiding eye contact with Rory. She leaves an hour before he’s done and gives him a cheerful goodbye before heading out the door. He’s glad he has the day off tomorrow.

When he gets home, all the lights are on this time and the only shoes on the mat are Jimmy’s.

“How, I’m home,” he calls out.

Jimmy comes out of his room, thick-rimmed glasses resting low on his nose, hair even more dishevelled than usual. He’s wearing a York hoodie of his own.

He yawns widely. “My husband has finally returned from war. Did you miss me, love?”
Phil smiles. He’s glad Jimmy’s kept his promise that it’d just be the two of them tonight. He needs this. “Yes, dear. What’s for tea?”

They scrounge up some food and eat it at the kitchen table like proper adults. They don’t even really talk that much. It’s quiet and peaceful and the feeling of safety and acceptance that he always feels when he’s with Jimmy washes over him, easing the tension of the day from his tired body. It really has been a long time since they’ve done this.

“Do you work tomorrow?” Jimmy asks as they stand side by side over the sink, Jimmy washing the dishes and Phil drying.

“No, thank god. Today was so crap.”

Jimmy hands a dripping plate to Phil. “Normal crap, or extra crappy crap?”

“Extra.”

“What happened?”

Phil rubs the towel in slow circles over the clean plate. “Nothing really.”

Jimmy turns and gives him a look. Phil shrugs. “I just don’t like people that much.”

“That’s not true. You just don’t like the shit ones.”

Phil doesn’t respond. Jimmy’s really only half right. Of course Phil hates people who deserve to be hated—people like Kyle. He hasn’t quite learned yet how to let that kind of stuff roll off his back. If someone says something mean or rude it bothers him. Might even make him angry.

But sometimes he feels like it’s even harder to be around the lovely people. Because the shit ones are easy to spot and easy to dismiss. They’re easy to understand, in a way.

For Phil though, it can be hard to read the nice people, the ones who give him easy smiles and kind words, because it takes time to discern what those smiles and words really mean—what the motivations behind them really are. Once he’d realized what Rory’s meant, it was too late. He’d been returning the smiles and words too enthusiastically for too long not to do damage, not to give her hope that he might feel the same way.

“I do work with a very shit one,” Phil agrees, because it’s easier than trying to explain the unique intricacies of human interaction when your brain doesn’t work the way everyone else’s appears to.

“What did he say this time?” Jimmy asks.

“He was just talking about Rory.”

Jimmy turns his head and looks at Phil over the top of his tortoise shell glasses with a raised eyebrow.

“Like a lad,” Phil clarifies.

“Like an asshole,” Jimmy translates.

Phil nods.

“Did that make you… jealous?”
“No, of course not. She’s just my friend. He was talking about her like a piece of meat. He’s gross.”

“You’re too pure for this world, Phil.” Jimmy smiles fondly.

“I know.” He’d meant to say it jokingly but his tone betrays a little of the sadness he feels knowing that Jimmy’s kind of right.

Jimmy bumps his hip against Phil’s, the kind of quiet reassuring gesture Phil has become addicted to over the years.

“He said I’m… gay. If I don’t…” he hesitates, not particularly wanting to repeat the specific framing of Kyle’s words. “Sleep with her.”

“What’s wrong with being gay?”

“Nothing obviously.”

“But he said it like an insult, right? And it bothered you?”

Phil kicks himself internally for bringing this up. It doesn’t bother him in the way Jimmy is implying.

“He meant it that way because he’s a numpty.”

“And it bothered you because…” Jimmy’s voice is gentle but Phil can feel the eggshells beneath his feet.

Phil looks down at the wet dishtowel in his hands. “Because I don’t know if he’s right or not.”

“Would it bother you if you were?”

It’s strange, but Phil can’t recall ever really having this conversation with Jimmy before, nor with anyone else. He’s not generally emotionally available to anyone, but anything he’s ever been willing to share with another human being he’s shared with Jimmy. Jimmy knows about Phil’s tragically failed uni hookups, and he knows that they hadn’t all been with women. They’d not really ever discussed it beyond that.

“Not at all,” Phil says, and he thinks it’s probably mostly true. If he was gay, that would mean he’d figured himself out. He wouldn’t have to wonder anymore why things that seem to come easy to everyone else might as well be impossible for him.

“So.” Jimmy turns his head away from Phil, voice hesitant. “You’re not then?”

Phil just nods.

Jimmy turns his head and locks his bright turquoise eyes onto Phil’s. It’s such a stupid word, turquoise, but it’s the one that springs to mind whenever Phil sees Jimmy’s eyes like this, wide and intent and illuminated by the white lights of their kitchen.

Phil feels an odd pulling sensation in his stomach. It’s faint, but definitely there. So, maybe not fully gay, but definitely not fully straight either. And probably not one hundred percent asexual, as Jimmy had suggested all those years ago. What must it even feel like to be sure enough to assign oneself a label, Phil thinks.

“Still?” Jimmy asks quietly.

Phil just nods.
It’s not that often that Jimmy is lost for words, but Phil can tell that now is one of those times.

Phil forces a smile. “It’s fine. He’s an ass. Nothing new. I’m just glad I don’t have to see him or anyone else tomorrow.”

“No one?” Jimmy asks.

Phil rolls his eyes. “I’ll ask Martyn if he wants to get coffee or something if it means you won’t give me that look, mum.”

“Family members hardly count,” Jimmy protests, flicking soap suds up onto Phil’s black polo.

“Oh.” Phil flicks back. “Course they do.”

Later, they’re sat beside each other on Jimmy’s bed, tucked up under his soft white duvet. Jimmy is working away at something on his laptop, while Phil reads The Shining for the tenth time. It’s become his annual tradition to read as many horror novels as he can get through in the run up to Halloween, and The Shining is always at the top of his list.

He snuggles down a little further into the bed until his head is lying on the pillow, then tilts it to the side to rest against Jimmy’s waist. Jimmy reaches his hand down and pats Phil’s head, not unlike a dog.

“I don’t mean to act like a mum,” Jimmy murmurs, picking up their conversation like no time had passed. “I just worry about you.”

“I know.”

Jimmy lets his hand stay resting atop Phil’s head. “I worry about you… being alone all the time, yeah?”

Phil’s heart jumps a little, but he tries to play off the sudden sadness he feels. “I’m not alone. I have you.” He looks up at Jimmy and smiles.

Jimmy smiles back, but it doesn’t even come close to touching his eyes. “Yeah…”

He doesn’t say anything else, but Phil hears clearly the words Jimmy leaves unspoken--I can’t stay with you forever.

Phil swallows over the dryness in his throat because he knows it’s true. Jimmy’s already stayed with him well after he’d probably been ready to move away and get his own place, or now, a place with Tom.

“Do you ever film anymore?” Jimmy asks, after they’ve let the awkwardness of the unacknowledged truth corrode the previously peaceful nature of their silence.

“No.”

“Maybe you should,” he suggests. “You used to love it so much.”

“Yeah,” Phil replies woodenly. “Maybe.” He closes the book and lets it drop onto the floor. There’s no way he’d be able to concentrate on it now.

He rolls over onto his side and pulls the blanket up to his ears. He can’t quite bring himself to care how obvious it is that Jimmy’s upset him.
Phil hears a click and the room goes dark. There is rustling and movement beside him as Jimmy snuggles down and slots his body up against Phil’s back.

He digs his chin into the fleshy space between Phil’s neck and shoulder. “I’m sorry, Phil. I’m being a twat.”

Phil doesn’t say anything— not yet. His chest is still a little tight, a little too full of the regrets and insecurities that Jimmy has inadvertently brought right up to the surface.

“I’ll shut up, I promise. I just remembered how happy it used to make you and it made me realize I haven’t seen you look like that in a long time.”

“I thought you were shutting up.”

“Right. Fuck. Shutting up now.”

Phil smiles, and he makes sure it seeps into his words. He’s not actually mad at Jimmy. He’s never actually mad at Jimmy. “Great. Thanks.”

“I just love you is all.”

“I know,” Phil sighs dramatically. “You too.”
Chapter 4

Mercifully, there are no amorous noises to wake him up this morning and he sleeps soundly until half ten, at which point he shuffles to the kitchen, makes a large soup bowl full of coffee and brings it back to his own room. A small part of him is disappointed he hadn’t been up to see Jimmy off to work, but mostly he’s relieved the sleep has made him feel a little more clear-headed than he’d been the past couple days. He reopens his book and settles back against the headboard to caffeinate and get lost in Stephen King’s masterful maze of paternal angst and dysfunctional familial relations.

He tries not think about any of the things Jimmy said last night, but reading a novel he’s read nearly enough times to have committed to memory at this point leave room for a litany of wandering thoughts. Horror had been his main inspiration back then, after all.

He closes the book in annoyance and reaches under the bed for his laptop. He shouldn’t do this. It never leads to what he hopes it’ll lead to—fond nostalgia, motivation, inspiration. All it does is remind him that he used to have potential. He used to be the kind of person who could conceptualize a story and write a script and film himself—and sometimes others—bringing that story to life. It reminds him, as Jimmy had said, how happy it made him and it highlights the stark contrast to his current situation. Lonely. Confused. Scared.

Stuck.

He locates the file on his computer marked ‘vids’ and opens it. He’s greeted with a row of thumbnails of his own face, sometimes with a mask or face paint or horrendously fake-looking blood. He clicks the first one and lets it play.

He looks younger, face a little softer, hair a little longer. The videos are kind of terrible, but he remembers how enthusiastically he’d made them, eager to practice all the things he was learning while completing his degree. He watches through each and every single one, watches them get progressively, marginally better.

It’s just another to add to the long list of things he’d slowly abandoned after graduating and moving away from the bubble of safety he’d enjoyed in York. He’d quickly discovered that living in London is fucking expensive and actually, his parents had been right and there wasn’t much you could do with a degree in linguistics and film post-production. Not that he’d ever really tried that hard to find anything.

Jimmy had managed to turn his first class history degree into a job in radio and tv presenting and find the love of his life. Phil had taken the first job he could find to pay the ludicrously high bills and avoided interaction with countless people who could have meant something to him had he not been terrified of his inability to sustain relationships that were any step beyond platonic. In the end he’d found it easier to steam milk and grind beans and spend his nights in with his flatmate or on the phone with his mum than try to actually live his life.

He tells himself he’s being dramatic. Nothing is as pathetic as he makes it out to be in his head. He has friends. Granted, most of them he knows through Jimmy or are uni mates he only ever speaks to through email anymore, but still. It’s not nothing. He also has his brother and his mum and Rory. There are lots of people who care. He has no reason to feel lonely.

He does, though. He feels alone in a prison of otherness. Usually it doesn’t bother him too much. He’s gotten pretty good at shutting these kind of thoughts down before they have time to creep their way into his gut. But he knows something is going to change soon. He can feel it, and it terrifies him.
He knows Jimmy is going to leave. He’s always known that of course, but now he feels it acutely, painfully, every time Jimmy looks at him with sad eyes when he thinks Phil can’t see. Every time he asks Phil why he doesn’t know who he is yet or why he doesn’t do the things that used to bring him joy. He doesn’t have a good answer. And he’s not ready to live without Jimmy.

Maybe he should move back to Rossendale, or maybe Manchester. Maybe he should go back to school. Maybe he should—he jumps, startled by a vibration underneath him. He shoves his hand under his pillow and grabs out his phone. He has a message from Rory.

*Rory: Your friend was late for his interview…*

Phil has to read it a few times before he remembers what she’s talking about.

*Phil: he’s not really my friend. I don’t even know him yet*

*Rory: yet*

Phil is glad this is a text conversation and she can’t hear the annoyed sound he makes or see how far back he lets his eyes roll.

*Phil: how late? too late?*

*Rory: probably if it’d been anyone other than me. I’m very chill philip*

*Phil: I know. You’re the best.*

He hits send a millisecond before he realizes it’s the kind of thing he really shouldn’t be saying to her. He quickly sends another one to dilute the impact.

*Phil: does he seem nice? did you give him the job?*

*Rory: I don’t know if I’d use the word nice but he’s not terrible. Doesn’t seem too jazzed about being a barista that’s for sure*

*Phil: does anyone?*

*Rory: yes, actually. You did.*

*Phil: I was desperate… so did you hire him?*

*Rory: should I?*

*Phil: isn’t that your job lol*

*Rory: it seemed like you liked him*

Phil frowns at his phone screen. He can’t tell if she wants him to deny it or if she’s genuinely just trying to do something nice for him. He chooses his words carefully.

*Phil: he seems like the kind of person we wouldn’t hate to be stuck with all day, you know?*

*Rory: if you say so mate. He seemed kind of weird to me but I trust your judgement*

*Phil: weird can be good sometimes*

*Rory: yeah. You’re right. Weird can be really good.*
Phil: *mean, you’ve probably spoken to him more than I have now so it’s still totally up to you. All I really know is that he has a law degree and thinks baristas are annoying*

Rory: *well I guess he’ll find himself annoying now. I’ll call him back and tell him he’s hired if he wants. I’m just gonna schedule him to work with you for the next few weeks so you can train him up real good, k?*

Phil: *that’s too much pressure!*

She tells him it’s fine and that she has to leave because it’s a busy day and they’re down a person. She doesn’t ask Phil to come in even though he thinks she probably wants him to and he doesn’t offer. He needs this day. He’s grateful for her timing though—her texts had distracted him at just the right time to stave off a complete emotional spiral.

He hauls himself out of bed and into the shower, determined to find something to do today to make sure he doesn’t allow himself to pick up where he left off. When he gets out of the shower, he towels off quickly and dresses in his ubiquitous black skinny jeans and a blue plaid button up. He checks his phone and sees he has a message from Jimmy that reads simply:

*ring martyn*

He rolls his eyes but does as he’s told. Unfortunately his brother is his opposite in nearly every way and as such, definitely doesn’t have time to get coffee with him in the middle of the day in the middle of the work week, but he lets him down gently and promises they’ll catch up soon. Phil moves on to plan B, which is to call his mum.

He ends up spending half the day just chatting with her and can’t even bring himself to feel embarrassed about that—he loves him mum. Maybe he will go back up North when the inevitable break up happens.

He decides to be properly productive until Jimmy comes home and actually do some tidying up. He tends to leave his stuff all over the place and he knows how much Jimmy hates that. He starts in the kitchen, closing all the cupboard doors he’d left open making his early afternoon breakfast and washing the dishes. He goes from room to room collecting wayward socks and earmarked books.

He’s sat on his bed, just finishing folding his freshly washed laundry when he hears the key in the lock at the front door.

“Hey babe,” Phil shouts, stepping out into the lounge.

The voice that responds is the wrong one.

“I didn’t know we were stepping this up to a triad, but I think we’re down, right James?”

Phil rounds the corner and sees Tom kicking off his shoes.

“Hey Phil,” Jimmy says, smiling. “I’m sorry my boyfriend is such an enormous wanker.”

Phil waves his hand dismissively. “I’m used to it.”

“How dare you,” Tom laughs.

Phil flops down onto the sofa in the lounge, any hope of a pleasant evening with Jimmy gone. It’s not that he dislikes Tom—not at all, really. He just likes Jimmy better and doesn’t get to see much of him when Tom is round there’s.
“What’d you do today?” Jimmy asks, flopping down beside him. “Did you see martyn?”

“No, he was too busy having a life and being a functional adult human being.”

“Adulting is overrated,” Tom says, heading for the kitchen. “You lads hungry?”

“What he meant to say,” Jimmy says, glaring in Tom’s direction, “is that you are perfectly functional.”

Phil snorts. “He doesn’t know me that well yet.” He turns his head and shouts towards the direction of the kitchen, “Yes, very!”

“So you stayed in, then?” Jimmy asks, not bothering to mask his disappointment.

“Yes, but I did laundry. That’s gotta count for something, right?”

Jimmy frowns.

“I also talked to my mum for like three hours,” Phil says, giving up on trying to save himself sounding like a complete and total loser.

“For fuck’s sake, Phil, I love Kath as much as anybody but--”

Phil claps his hand over Jimmy’s mouth. “I know, I know. I did say I wasn’t functional, didn’t I? It’s fine, anyway. I’m right back to work tomorrow.”

Jimmy sets those eyes on Phil and he feels that strange pulling sensation in his gut again and quickly removes his hand from Jimmy’s mouth. “I have to train the new guy, so I’ll be busy.” He gets up then and joins Tom in the kitchen. Tom is safer. He doesn’t really know anything about Phil, and that’s just what Phil wants right now. He’s sick of Jimmy’s bright eyes and crunching eggshells with his feet.

“So what are we cooking?”

He goes to bed early that night and reads. Reads with a focused intensity borne of pure self-preservation. Reads to distract himself from the ever growing frequency of pointed looks from Jimmy, from the crushing realization that their break up is probably going to come much sooner than he’s ready for.

He lies in bed and reads for hours, until he hears Tom groan, “Yeah, yeah, right there babe,” and he has to toss the book aside and quickly jam his headphones down over his ears. He opens itunes and jabs his finger on the screen, selecting something at random, desperate to drown those goddamn noises out as fast as he possibly can. He jacks up the volume and pulls his blue and green duvet up over his head. We Can’t Stop by Miley Cyrus pumps into his head so loudly it hurts. He absolutely loathes this song, but it’s still better than the alternative. It’s still less painful than listening to what’s happening on the other side of his bedroom wall.

In the morning, he waits until he hears Jimmy close the front door before getting out of bed. His shift doesn’t start til three, so he has all the time in the world to get ready and he doesn’t think he can repress his feelings about last night enough to hide them from Jimmy’s all seeing eyes.

The bright side of constantly being forced to snuggle down under the covers every night and hide from reality is he’s getting a lot more sleep than he normally does. So maybe he’s a little sad and a little annoyed when he shows up at work that afternoon, but at least he’s well rested. His shoulders only tense a little when he sees Kyle’s blond hair behind the bar.
They relax as soon as he steps into the back room and he sees Rory with her head leaning back over the edge of the rickety office chair, eyes closed, hands folded in her lap. Her legs are stretched out and crossed at the ankles, resting against the edge of the desk. She’s wearing black Docs and purple lipstick and there’s a thin gold hoop in her nose. She obviously hasn’t started work yet.

“Hey,” Phil says and laughs when she jumps and makes a strangled noise.

“Jesus Christ, Lester.” She clutches her chest and looks up at him with accusatory eyes. “I think you’ve literally killed me.”

“Sorry, couldn’t resist.”

She pulls her feet off the desk and sits up. “I hate you.”

“Mhm,” he says, yanking off his hoodie and hanging it up on the little hook on the wall. He reaches up to fiddle his fringe back into place. “Have I got any splinges?”

She smiles. “No Philip, your hair looks just fine. It looked better a second ago, though. You should leave it quiffed.”

He rolls his eyes. “I know you hate the fringe. You just need to let me cling to the last vestige of my youth, alright? Let an old man have this one comfort, I beg you.”

“Oh shut up,” she says. “I’m older than you and the quiff is hot.”

He decides to focus on the first half of that statement. “No you’re not. You can’t be.”

“I am.”

“By how much?”

She smiles. “I’ll never tell.”

“You’re just like Jimmy. You guys would get along great.”

She opens her mouth to respond but Phil sees her eyes shift to focus on something behind him.

“Hi?” She looks a little confused.

A strangely familiar voice responds. “Hello.”

Phil turns around and there’s a person stood almost directly in front of him. A tall person. A person who’s taller than Phil. That happens very rarely, so Phil feels a little weird that he has to tilt his head upwards slightly to make eye contact.

“Dan,” he says, before his brain has time to process how intensely weird it is not only that he recognizes this stranger’s voice after speaking to him over the phone once, but that he remembers that stranger’s name.

“Phil,” the stranger responds with a chuckle.

“Oh fuck, you’re the new guy, I completely forgot,” Rory says, standing up out of the chair quickly, before clapping a hand over her mouth. “Oh shit, I said fuck.”

“And then you said shit,” Phil points out most helpfully.
Dan is grinning. He has a dimple so deep it looks like his cheek may split in half. “Now you’ve both said shit.”

“Now you’ve said it too,” Phil says.

Rory’s covering her eyes with her hand, slowly shaking her head.

“We’re all in this together I guess,” Dan says. He’s looking at Phil.

Phil smirks. “Is that a high school musical reference?”

“What a great impression I’ve made,” Rory mumbles, ignoring the two absolute dorks in front of her.

“I’m more offended that you’ve forgotten me already,” Dan says. “You just interviewed me yesterday.”

Phil turns to look at Rory, who’s biting at her purple lip. “That is pretty bad, Ror.”

“I’m so sorry,” she says. She shakes her head again and her tight curls bounce across her forehead. “I’m a little hu— I didn’t get a lot of sleep last night.”

“Profane and hungover,” Dan laughs. “I like you already.”

She buries her face in her hands. “God. I’m going to run away and get changed now and pretend like none of this ever happened. You know what to do, right Phil?”

Phil’s pulse quickens a little but he nods. He’s trained countless people over the years. So why does he feel so nervous about training this one?
Chapter 5

Phil is sat on a small wooden chair with his back leaning against the side of one of the giant milk fridges. Dan is sat next to him in the luxury of the office chair, headphones over his ears and a bored expression on his face. The first part of training a new barista means making them watch through over an hour of horrendously boring instructional videos on the shop’s clunky old laptop. Some about safety, some about ‘building the perfect drink,’ but mostly just pure, unadulterated Starbucks propaganda.

When he’s finally sat through the last one, Dan pulls the headphones off and looks at Phil.

“Is it too late to jump ship?”

Phil smiles and picks up the ancient laptop from the desk and returns it to the dusty shelf from whence it came. “It’s really not that bad, don’t worry. Rory’s here nearly every day and… well, you met her.”

“She’s definitely something.”

“She’s not usually that lacking in chill, but she makes the days suck a lot less.”

“Are you two dating, then?” Dan asks.

Phil frowns. “No. We’re just friends.” It’s becoming an altogether too frequent distinction he has to make for people. Maybe he’s still not doing such a great job of coming across strictly friendly.

“Why?”

“Sorry. You just seem close.”

Phil forces a smile. Dan doesn’t know all the reasons this makes Phil’s insides squirm with anxiety. “We’ve worked together a long time. She makes this place tolerable.”

“That thing I said about jumping ship…”

“No, no,” Phil assures, “It’s fine, really. It’s alright most of the time.”

Dan cocks an eyebrow.

“Look, the training process here takes a long time. We both get to take it easy for the next few weeks if you stay. If you’re gonna quit, wait til then. At least you’ll get a few weeks pay and some free coffee out of it.”

Dan smiles. Phil notices his lips are chapped and there are little teeth marks along the bottom. They’re pink, so pink Phil wonders if he just might be wearing lipstick or something.

“T’ll just taking the piss. I kind of need this job.”

Dan reaches up and twiddles the dark brown hair that falls in loose but defined curls over his forehead. It reminds Phil of the way he adjusts his own hair. In fact, their haircuts are quite similar, though Dan’s sides are more closely shaved than Phil’s.

Dan chuckles quietly. “I keep forgetting I don't really have a fringe anymore. My hair used to look almost exactly like yours, actually.”
“Let me guess, you grew up and realized it looked daft.” Apparently not even a stranger was going to let Phil’s outdated hairstyle go unmocked.

“No, actually I gave up on my straighteners because I could never get it to look as good as this,” he says, gesturing to Phil’s fringe. “I would’ve killed for this hair a year ago.”

“Oh.” Phil is honestly a little lost for words. He can’t remember the last time someone complimented the emo fringe. “Thanks. I think you suit the curls well, though.”

Dan reaches up again and twists a curl around his finger. Phil sees a flash of pale pink from beneath the soft brown of Dan’s hair. He stares for what he realizes is an uncomfortably long amount of time, admiring how pretty it looks and what exactly the source of the colour is.

“What?” Dan says nervously.

Phil squints. “Are you wearing… nail polish?”

Dan’s expression changes immediately—his smile drops and his eyes narrow. All the warmth has disappeared from his face.

“Yeah, so? Does it bother you?” His voice is cold.

Phil opens his mouth to respond but Dan doesn’t give him the chance.

“Does it threaten your heteronormative view of the socially constructed rules of masculinity?”

Phil feels the blood drain from his face.

Dan continues. “Or does it turn you on? Because—”

“No, no,” Phil splutters, finally finding his voice again. “It’s nothing like that! I mean, it looks good, it’s a really nice colour, it’s just not—”

Dan folds his arms dramatically and frowns even deeper.

“It’s not dress code,” Phil says.

Dan’s furrowed brow relaxes instantly. He bites his lip. “Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“Fuck. Sorry.” He drops his gaze down towards his lap where his hands are sat, fingers wringing. “I guess I’m a little overly defensive sometimes. My housemates are…”

Phil waits, but Dan never finishes the thought. Phil doesn’t push it.

“Yeah, sorry, the dress code is pretty strict here. Did Rory not tell you?”

Dan smiles sheepishly. “I’m sure she did. I was probably tuning her out by then. I remembered the basics, I think,” he says, gesturing to his outfit. “Black or white collared shirt, black or khaki on the bottom, black socks, black or brown shoes, right?”

Phil’s eyes run down Dan’s long legs, taking in his impossibly tight black jeans.

“Yeah,” he says hesitantly. “Not allowed jeans, though.”
“Bloody hell,” Dan mutters.

“I know,” Phil agrees sadly.

“How will I express my carefully cultivated androgyny? My aesthetic is already being compromised enough as it is in this place.”

Phil nods. “It sucks.”

Dan looks at Phil then, lets his eyes rake down Phil’s body. “You’re not a rule breaker then, I reckon?”

Phil smirks, lifting his pant leg slightly to reveal a bright orange sock covered in cartoon pumpkins.

Dan’s eyebrows raise a little, a grin stretching across his face. The corners of his eyes are just a little bit crinkly and Phil can’t bring himself to look away. “Shit, man. Rebellious and seasonally appropriate. Two of my favourite qualities in a man.”

Just then, Rory sticks her head round the corner. “How’s it going, boys? Training going well?”

“Oh yeah,” Dan replies, smiling at Phil. “I’m learning loads.”

She smiles and her head disappears again around the corner.

Phil shakes his head. “I guess I should actually try to teach you something.”

Dan shrugs. “If you must.”

They don’t have much more in the way of conversation for the next hour as Phil begins the painstaking process of teaching Dan the recipe for each drink. It’s more complicated than anyone is ever prepared for and there are a lot of drinks on the menu.

“I’m never gonna remember any of this shit,” Dan groans after a little while.

“You will eventually,” Phil says reassuringly. “Don’t worry, we’re gonna do lots of practicing together over the next few weeks.”

Dan’s eyes snap up and lock onto Phil’s. They’re dark and rich—like coffee, Phil thinks. His brain is utterly ridiculous sometimes. It’s kind of true, though. They even look warm somehow, the lashes long and thick as Dan stares at Phil with a little smirk on his lips.

“That sounded wrong, didn’t it?” Phil asks after he’s played back what he’d just said in his head.

Dan shakes his head, smiling. “Not wrong. Mildly suggestive maybe, but definitely not wrong.”

Phil can’t seem to tear his eyes from Dan’s. He thinks he recognizes Dan’s words as flirting, but for some reason it doesn’t make him squirm like it does when Rory does it. Maybe he’s just reading too much into it.

They’re still staring at each other when Kyle appears.

“Lester, Rory wants you—oh,” he cuts off when he sees Dan. “Who’s this then?”

“I’m Dan.”

“This is Kyle,” Phil says, not bothering to disguise his distaste.
Kyle looks down at Dan with a slight sneer. “She hired another bloke?”

“I guess so,” Dan says, and Phil thinks he can already tell that Dan’s going to agree with him about Kyle being kind of an asshole.

“So, Rory wants me…” Phil prompts, wishing for this exchange to end as soon as possible.

Kyle snorts. “You know what, I think she does. I don’t get it, but it’s pretty obvious. She’s barking up the wrong tree though isn’t she, Lester?”

Phil can feel heat in his face.

“Maybe she’ll have more luck with this one,” Kyle says, jerking his head in Dan’s direction. “Maybe that’s why she hired him.”

“I’m not the right tree either, mate,” Dan says then. “She might have to settle for you.”

Phil looks at Dan, admittedly a little shocked. Dan gives him a wink. Phil’s heart swells with relief. Emboldened by Dan’s attitude, Phil looks at Kyle and says, “Nah. She doesn’t go for dickheads.”

“Oooh,” Dan says, mouth open wide in gleeful surprise.

Kyle’s eyes go dark. “Oh, fuck you.”

“You wish, honey,” Dan says.

Phil’s absolutely sure now that he’s never taken such an instant liking to another person in his whole life.

“Fuck off, I’m not a fa--”

“Kyle.” They all turn to see Rory standing in the doorway. Her voice is hard, harder than Phil’s ever heard it. It’s a manager’s voice. “Go home.”

Kyle grabs his coat and walks out without another word.

Rory’s still stood there, arms crossed tightly over her chest. She doesn’t look happy.

“What the fuck was that, Phil?”

Phil winces. She’s never cursed at him before. “Sorry. I’m really sorry, Ror.”

“Was he really about to say what I think he was about to say?” she asks, a little more softly this time.

“I think so.”

She shakes her head. “I should’ve let him say it. Then I could have fired him on the spot. I’m so sorry, Dan.”

Dan smiles up at her. “It’s alright. I’m used to dealing with people like that.”

Phil wonders if that means what he thinks it means. He also wonders why that matters to him at all, why he has the sudden urge to ask. He suppresses it.

His hands are shaking a little. Dan notices.

“You ok?”
Phil nods. “I kind of hate that guy,” he mutters.

“I can see why.”

“You guys should go on break, ok? Take your lunch.” Rory takes a few steps forward. She squats down and puts her hand on Phil’s shoulder. “Are you really ok, Phil?”

He nods again. “I… I called him a dickhead.”

Rory grins. “You didn’t.”

“He did,” Dan says in a way that Phil can only describe as proud. “It was great. I don’t even know the guy, but I can already tell Phil was totally right. That guy’s definitely a dickhead.”

Rory nods. “That was a bad call on my part, hiring him. I’m thinking he probably won’t last much longer anyway.” She squeezes Phil’s shoulder. “I’m glad you finally stood up for yourself,” she says softly.

Rory gets called out then by someone out on the floor. Dan waits til she’s gone before looking at Phil and saying, “He’s a dickhead, but he’s not wrong.”

Phil’s stomach flips. “What? About what?”

“She’s definitely into you.”

He breathes a sigh of relief. “Oh. Yeah. Maybe.”

Dan chuckles. “Beautiful, smart, funny women not your thing, Phil?”

Phil doesn’t answer. He has no idea what to say at this point. He knows he’s making it more awkward than it needs to be but he can’t help it.

Eventually a look of horrified realization crosses Dan’s face. “Oh, god. I’m sorry, mate, I didn’t… shit. I’m an idiot—”

“We’re just friends is all,” Phil says quickly.

“It’s fine, please,” Dan says. “You don’t have to explain yourself to me, I’m just the wanker who pushed you into a fight on my first day.”

Phil shakes his head. “I’ve been wanting to tell him off since the first time I met him. You should have heard the things he’s said about Rory.”

Dan’s looking at him intently. “You’re a really good friend, aren’t you, Phil?”

Phil shrugs. “I try.”

“She’s lucky,” Dan says before standing up and stretching his arms up above his head. “So did I hear you say something about free coffee earlier?”

They both get psl’s, because Phil is a sucker for a festive themed drink and Dan wanted whatever Phil was having. They sit on the patio shivering a little and watching the sun set in the distance.

Dan takes a sip of his drink and scrunches up his nose.

“You don’t like it?” Phil asks incredulously.
“It’s not my fave, tbh, but Rory told me I have to try every drink on the menu, so I can describe them to customers if they ask. Figured I might as well start with this one.”

Phil laughs. “You don’t have to order drinks you hate on your break. We’re going to be making every single drink together as part of your training. You can try them then.”

Dan takes another sip and looks thoughtful. “It’s growing on me.”

“You’re just getting high off the sugar.”

They don’t say much for the rest of their break. They both scroll through their phones casually and drink their liquid pumpkin pies. Phil waits for it to feel awkward but it never does. They watch the sky grow pink and orange as the sun slips behind the London skyline. It’s cold and beautiful and peaceful. Phil can’t remember the last time he felt peaceful at work.

Dan shivers and wraps his arms around himself. “It’s bloody freezing out here now.”

“It’s ok, we have to go back in anyway.”

The rest of the shift passes rather quickly and uneventfully. They don’t have to stay til closing and there are no more Kyles to cause trouble.

Rory pops her head round the corner and says, “Ok boys, time to go home.”

“Thank god,” Phil says. At this point he’s been teaching Dan drink recipes for almost seven hours and he’d love nothing better than to go home and crawl in bed and think about something else. He’ll probably be seeing white cups in his dreams tonight. He reckons Dan will too.

“Oi, my company’s not that bad is it?” Dan teases.

“Ask me again in a few days. I haven’t made up my mind yet.” Phil gives Dan a cheeky grin.

Dan pushes Phil’s shoulder. “Thanks, you spork.”

Phil thinks he catches the look on Rory’s face before she goes back to work, and if he’s seen it correctly, it’s not a happy one.

“You working tomorrow?” Dan asks as he zips up his jacket.

“Are you?”

Dan nods.

“That means I am too.”

“So are you the only one who does the training, then?”

Phil sighs dramatically. “Pretty much.”

“You must be good.”

“I’m not. I’m just too nice to say no.”

Dan pushes Phil’s shoulder again. “As if you’d wanna say no to seeing this face every time you come into work.” He grins.
“I told you, I need a few more days.”

They step outside. It’s dark now and significantly colder than it had been a few hours ago.

“Alright, well I’ll see you tomorrow then,” Dan says giving a little wave.

Phil waves back. “Yep.”

They both start walking in the same direction.

Dan laughs. “You going this way?”

“Yeah.”

“Me too.”

Phil frowns. “Are you sure you’re not stalking me?”

“No,” Dan replies instantly.

“No you’re not stalking me, or no you’re not sure?”

Dan drops his head down, obviously trying to hide his smile. In the glow of the streetlights Phil sees a little patch of rosy skin low on Dan’s cheek. “If I say I’m not stalking you can we walk together? At least as long as we’re going in the same direction?”

Phil can’t help giggling nervously. “You afraid of the dark or something?”

Dan bites his lip. The patch gets a little redder.

“You are!” Phil shrieks.

“Look,” Dan says, shoving his hands in his pockets, “Are you going to walk with me or not?”

“Of course. I’ll keep you safe from the monsters, Dan.”

Phil knows Dan’s trying to play it off, but the expression on his face is one of pure relief.

“My hero.”
Chapter 6

It turns out they only live one block away from another. There are only so many places in the heart of London that can be afforded by people with such shit jobs, after all, and most of them happen to be located in the same area.

Phil, ever the softie, agrees to walk Dan all the way to his door.

“You don’t have to,” Dan insists, when it comes time to turn onto his street.

Phil can see right through Dan’s weak attempt at nonchalance. “You want me to though, don’t you?”

Dan digs his hands deeper into his pockets and looks down at his feet. When he speaks, Phil can barely hear what he mumbles. “Yeah.”

“Alright then.” Phil gestures to the darkness of Dan’s quiet street. “Shall we?”

“I’m such an idiot,” Dan says. He’s shaking his head, but he still follows Phil’s hand and turns onto his street. “Who’s still scared of the dark at twenty two?”

“My flatmate is scared of birthdays,” Phil muses. “And I’m twenty six and scared of horses. That one makes a lot less sense than the dark.”

“I’m also scared of trees,” Dan admits.

“Ok that makes no sense at all.” Phil laughs. “I’m scared of the sea.”

“That one’s not that weird.”

“The moral of the story here is that we’re all scared of at least one thing that makes no sense. My question is,” Phil says, pulling his hood up over his head, “what are you going to do when I’m not here to escort you?”

Dan smiles. “Lucky for me it’ll be at least a few weeks before I have to worry about that, right?”

Phil nods. “I guess you’re right.”

Dan stops in front of a rather nice looking building. “This is me.”

“This is nice.” Phil doesn’t quite manage to disguise the surprise in his voice.

“I share with four other guys and I can still barely afford it.”

“Sounds fun.”

Dan’s expression darkens a little. “It’s not. I don’t know any of them. I was going through adverts. This was just the first one that panned out.” He looks at Phil. “I already know you better than I know any of them.”

“Did you just move in recently?” Phil asks.

Dan nods. “Couple weeks.”

“Where were you before?” Phil doesn’t know what’s gotten into him. He’s never engaged in
conversation with a stranger actively enough to actually ask questions. Not to mention the fact that he’s bloody freezing and can barely feel his toes anymore. There’s something different about Dan, though. He feels familiar, somehow.

“Manchester, actually.”

“No way,” Phil says, with probably more excitement than is warranted for the situation. “That’s where I’m from. Well, close anyway.”

Dan grins. “I could kind of tell.”

“What? How?”

“Your accent, mate.”

“My accent’s not that strong!” Phil insists.

“Who told you that?” Dan asks. “Cause they were lying to you.”

Phil ignores Dan’s teasing. He sounds just like Rory. “You must have been there a while to be able to pick out the accent.”

Dan nods. “Four years. Got my degree there.”

“You law degree,” Phil says.

Dan laughs. “Did you memorize my resume?”

“It’s just not something you see that often in people applying to work at a coffee shop,” Phil says in his defence. “It’s actually why I chose you.” He winces. Weird way to phrase that. He hopes Dan won’t notice.

“Chose me?”

“Chose your resume,” Phil corrects.

“Are you a manager?” Dan asks.

“No. Rory just exploits me. Too nice to say no, remember?”

“Right.” Dan looks down his dark street. The lamplight from the porch falls softly over them. Phil sees a glint of something in Dan’s earlobe when he turns his head—a delicate little gold earring in the shape of a triangle.

“I’d hoped that person would be a little more like me than the others,” Phil says softly.

Dan turns his head back to look at Phil, his expression one of surprise.

“Like you?”

Phil nods.

“How so? Do you have a law degree too?”

Phil snorts. “No way. Not anywhere near smart enough for that. English language and linguistics. And some other stuff after that.”
“I’m not smart,” Dan says, probably more sadly than he’d meant to. “Just too scared of failure to drop out. What other stuff?”

“Film stuff,” Phil mumbles. “Don’t make me say it all. It’s embarrassing and makes me sound cooler than I actually am.”

“I doubt that,” Dan says quietly. Before Phil can argue, Dan asks, “Did you go to Manchester too? We would have just missed each other I guess, if you’re twenty six.”

Phil shakes his head. “York. Wanted to get away from home for a while. Why’d you choose Manchester?” He shoves his hands into the pouch pocket of his hoodie and balls them up into fists, sighing as the warmth from his palms spreads down his fingers.

Dan reaches up and runs his fingers through the soft looking curls atop his head. “I kind of… followed a girl. You know how it is when you’re young and stupid…”

Phil doesn’t know why of all the thing’s Dan’s said today, this one surprises him the most. “Oh. Yeah. Right.”

“Stupid being the operative word there,” Dan says, tugging on his curly fringe a little. Phil can see Dan’s breath spreading out from those chapped lips, a thin mist in the darkness when he speaks.

“Didn’t work out?”

“ Took me entirely too long to figure it out, but no.”

Phil looks at Dan and tries to think of something to say. This is really not his area of expertise. He opens his mouth to offer some kind of bland platitude when his phone buzzes in his jeans, making him yelp.

Dan laughs. “Someone missing you?”

Phil pulls his phone out and sees a message from Jimmy.

Are u dead? I’m all alone and i can’t sleep. Plz come home if ur not dead

Phil smiles. He won’t have to sleep alone tonight. “Just my flatmate wondering if I’m dead.”

“Shit, I guess it is pretty late, isn’t it?” Dan takes a step back. “Sorry for being ridiculous.” He takes another step back and up onto the stone steps leading up to the porch of his building. “Thanks for walking with me. See you tomorrow?”

Phil nods. He feels a strange disappointment watching Dan walk away. He’s never really gotten on with someone so effortlessly, especially not after knowing them just a few hours.

“See you tomorrow,” Phil says with a little wave. He turns and starts to walk away when he hears Dan’s voice again.

“Hey Phil?”

Phil turns around and looks up at Dan, who’s at the top of the steps now.

“Sorry. Just… if I’m ever suddenly a bit… different? Don’t take it personally, ok?”

Before Phil can respond, Dan spins around and disappears through the doors to his building.
Phil walks home slowly despite the cold biting painfully at his cheeks. He’d gotten so used to his days being more or less the same. Today was different. Dan was different.

How much different could he really get? And why had he felt the need to warn Phil about that?

For once he’s glad for the trek up the stairs to get to his flat. He can almost feel his toes again by the time he unlocks his front door and steps inside.

“Phil?” Jimmy calls from his bedroom down the hall. “You’re not dead after all.”

Phil realizes he’d never actually texted Jimmy back. “I don’t think so,” he calls, pulling off his shoes. “I’m a bit frozen though so I can’t really say for sure.”

“Come to bed?”

“Hungry,” Phil shouts as he makes his way to the kitchen.

“Gregg’s in the fridge.”

It only takes him a few minutes to devour the cold pasty and then brush his teeth. He stops by his own room quickly to change into pjs before slipping into Jimmy’s room and crawling into bed next to him. He shudders at the sudden warmth that blankets his chilled body.

“Fuck me, Phil, your toes are bloody freezing.”

Phil smirks and flattens his feet against Jimmy’s calf. “I told you it’s cold out.”

Jimmy flinches, but nevertheless lets Phil warm himself against his skin. “How long were you out there? I thought you were supposed to be getting off at 11.”

Phil wonders if it’s entirely normal that they have each other’s schedules memorized. “I did.”

“It’s past midnight.”

“What are you, my mum?”

Jimmy mimics Kath’s thick accent perfectly as he says, “Where were you young man?”

“I walked the new guy home.”

At that, Jimmy turns over to face Phil. There’s no light in the room, so Phil can’t see the expression on his face.

“Why?”

“He wanted me to,” Phil says simply.

“Why?” Jimmy asks again.

“He’s afraid of the dark.”

“Does Starbucks hire eight year olds now?”

“Oh shut up,” Phil laughs. “It wasn’t a big deal. He lives like five minutes from us.”

“Is he pretty by any chance?”
Phil sighs. “You know it doesn’t really work like that for me.”

“I didn’t ask if you fancied him. I just wanna know if he’s fit.”

Phil thinks about it, remembers the soft pink light of the sunset falling over Dan’s curls, the deep dimple in his cheek when he smiled.

“He’s fit.”

Jimmy clicks his tongue knowingly, but doesn’t say anything else. Phil snakes his hands up under Jimmy’s shirt and splays his frigid fingers against Jimmy’s back, in retaliation for the teasing.

Jimmy squawks and flinches away. “This is not why I wanted you to come to bed.” He flips over so his back is facing Phil again.

Phil laughs and removes his hands from Jimmy’s warm skin. “What were you hoping for?”

“Cuddles.”

Phil shuffles forward and wraps his arm around Jimmy’s chest. “Better?”

“Much.”

Phil can feel Jimmy’s hair tickling his nose. He can smell his shampoo. His pushes his knees into the backs of Jimmy’s thighs and squeezes his arm around his chest a little tighter. He doesn’t feel any pulling in his stomach or fluttering in his chest. No twinges, no longing, just contentment.

It feels better to fall asleep with another person. It feels good to fall asleep next to Jimmy. They’ve been doing this for the better part of a decade now. Jimmy’s had boyfriends come and go, but they’d always felt secondary to the bond he and Jimmy had forged. He’d always felt like Jimmy’s top priority.

But Tom is different. Tom is much more than a boyfriend to Jimmy—he’s a partner, and Phil can’t compete with that. Tom gives Jimmy everything Phil ever could and more.

Of course it’s not a competition really. Phil knows Jimmy will always love him and they’ll be friends for the rest of their lives, but he also knows nights like these are numbered. He needs to savour this, to commit to memory the smell of Jimmy’s hair and the warmth of his body.

It’s the closest he’s ever been to another person, both physically and emotionally, and he can’t even really fathom what could be more intimate that this. “Does Tom know that we do this?” Phil whispers.

“Do what?”

“Sleep together.”

Jimmy chuckles. “That makes it sounds naughty.”

“You know what I mean. Sleep in the same bed. Cuddle.”

There’s a long pause before Jimmy answers. “He knows. He knows everything about me, Phil.”

“And it doesn’t bother him?”

“Why would it?”
“I don’t know. I don’t know how these things work. It seems like the kind of thing a boyfriend would get jealous about.” Phil knows Jimmy doesn’t have those kinds of feelings for him. He doesn’t even really know what those feelings are, but he knows Jimmy has never felt them for him. But Tom doesn’t necessarily know that.

“He knows I love you and he also knows I love him. He knows there’s a difference.”

_There’s a difference_. Phil wonders what it means that those words don’t make him feel anything. If Jimmy really does mean more to Phil than he’s let on over the years, shouldn’t the admission that Jimmy doesn’t feel the same way be painful?

“He trusts me,” Jimmy says softly. “And he knows he has nothing to worry about.”

“Why? Did you tell him about… me?” Phil’s words are vague but he knows Jimmy will understand.

“No. I don’t even know what I would say.” Jimmy puts his hand overtop of Phil’s. “It’s not my story to share anyway.”

Phil doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t know what he would say either.

“You’re being really weird tonight,” Jimmy whispers. “What’s going on?”

Phil wishes he was the kind of person who could just talk about his feelings and ask Jimmy every question he has simmering under the surface. He wishes he could ask him when he’s finally going to move out. He wishes he could ask him what it feels like to be in love, and how you know when you want something more than just cuddles. What does it mean when you feel a twinge? What does it mean if you only feel it every once in awhile? What does it mean that you want to spend all your time with one person but the thought of kissing them never really crosses your mind?

He wishes these were things he could talk to Jimmy about. He wishes they were things he could talk to _anyone_ about.


He listens as Jimmy’s breaths become slower and deeper. He finally hears soft little snores and knows it’s safe to release his grip on Jimmy’s chest and roll over onto his back. He stares up at the ceiling and matches his breathing with Jimmy’s.

What is wrong with him? Usually lying next to Jimmy is as good as a sleeping pill. But ever since Tom came around, ever since Phil began to understand that this was likely to be the last boyfriend Jimmy ever had, he’s felt off. Questions lurk in the corners of his mind, questions that somehow never seemed pressing before. Questions of what it is Jimmy really means to him. It’d never really seemed to matter that much. It didn’t matter that he didn’t really understand the tugging in his chest he sometimes felt when he looked at Jimmy because it wouldn’t change anything anyway. They’ve walked through life together since Phil was eighteen years old.

But now that he’s staring down the barrel of losing this life he’s known for the last eight years, the feeling that he’s missed out on something important is gnawing at him. Is he actually in love with Jimmy and just too stupid to realize it? Had he missed out on what was meant to be the love of his life?

He knows he loves Jimmy. He just doesn’t know if he’s _in_ love with Jimmy. And now it’s too late either way.
Chapter 7

Jimmy’s gone when Phil wakes up. It’s almost a relief. He hates how different everything feels now.

He doesn’t have time to let himself spiral back into the uncertainty of last night, though. As soon as he stretches his long legs out under the sheets he realizes he’s hard as a rock. His body seems to have missed the memo that he’s going through something of an emotional crisis right now.

He decides that actually, this is a perfect distraction. He forces himself out of bed and into the shower where he has a quick, incredibly utilitarian wank. He comes after just a couple minutes and it’s undeniable how much better he feels. His head is clearer, his muscles loose. He tips his head back and sighs as the warm water rolls down his face.

He spends the three hours he has before work drinking coffee and playing Final Fantasy VII. It’s an old game and he’s played it more times than he can count, but it never fails to make him feel calm. It reminds him of being a kid, of simpler times when all he had to worry about was what his mum was making for dinner and what game to play after school.

He’s still feeling relaxed as he makes his way to work, hands shoved in his pockets and feet crunching the dead orange leaves that litter the pavement. He’s dreading his shift a lot less than usual today. In fact, he may even be looking forward to it.

“Hey Phil,” says a voice just behind him.

Phil jumps, whirling around and nearly crashing right into Dan.

“Shit, sorry, did I scare you?” He asks, grinning.

Phil clutches his chest. “So much I can’t even speak.” His voice comes out little more than a squeak. “I thought you said you weren’t stalking me.”

“I’m not! We’re basically neighbors and we work at the same shop with the exact same schedule. It’d honestly be weirder if we didn’t run into each other.”

Phil narrows his eyes and looks at Dan with mock suspicion. “I’m gonna be keeping my eyes on you, mate.”

Dan smiles. “My plan is working, then.”

“I’m sure there are more interesting people to follow around.”

“Haven’t met any yet,” Dan says. “Come on, don’t want to be late on my second day.”

“You don’t mean that literally, do you?” Phil asks as they continue walking. “You’ve not met anyone more interesting than an over-educated, socially awkward barista in London? How long have you been here?”

Dan shrugs. “About a month.”

“That explains it,” Phil chuckles.

“That’s literally a perfect description of me too, though. Over-educated, socially awkward barista. We’re two of a kind now.”
“Can you call yourself a barista if you’ve not made a single drink yet?”

Dan claps his hand to his chest and makes a pained face. “Ouch. That was savage.”

“Sorry.” Phil grins, feeling the tip of his tongue poke out between his teeth. “You’ll be one after today, for sure. We’re going to make so many drinks you’ll see them in your dreams. Literally. Half my dreams involve steaming wands and shots of espresso.”

“Kinky.”

Phil cocks an eyebrow. “You’ve got some strange kinks, Howell.” He almost surprises himself. He can’t recall the last time he made even a slightly sexual joke, and when he had it’d only been to deflect from how extremely uncomfortable he was with the subject. He doesn’t feel that now. He actually kind of wants to keep talking about it. Something about Dan puts him at ease in a way he’s never really experienced with anyone, except maybe Jimmy. Although he still doesn’t make jokes like that with him.

“You’ve no idea, Lester.”

Phil looks at Dan in surprise. How does he know his last name? Is he just joking about stalking to hide the fact that he actually is stalking?

As if he’d read Phil’s mind, Dan smiles and says, “The asshat from yesterday.”


“You remembered mine too,” Dan reminds him.

“We need to put our over-education to better use,” Phil says, shaking his head.

Dan’s expression shifts to something Phil can’t quite place. “I’m supposed to be avoiding stress at all costs right now, actually, so barista-ing is just what the doctor ordered. Literally.”

Phil has no idea what that means. He waits for Dan to elaborate, but he doesn’t. He senses in Dan’s tone that it’s probably best not to push this particular subject. Instead, he tries to bring that smile back to Dan’s face.

“Don’t be so sure about that. Middle aged business ladies can be vicious.”

It works. Dan grins. “Nothing could be worse than my jurisprudence prof. I can handle it.”

Phil is surprised when he looks ahead and sees they’re stood in front of the café already. “You’ll have to teach me your ways,” he says, pulling open the heavy glass door and gesturing for Dan to go first. “The Sherries of the world terrify me.”

Dan looks back at him. “You scare easy, Phil?”

“No, actually. Horror is kind of my thing. People on the other hand…”

“Yeah,” Dan says, nodding. “People are the worst.”

Phil waves at Rory as he and Dan make their way to the back room. It’s late morning, so the store is fairly quiet, in between the morning and lunchtime rushes. She calls someone over to take her place at the cash and follows them back.

“Did you boys come in together?”
“He’s stalking me,” Phil says.

“Shut up,” Dan giggles.

Phil catches a glimpse of her reaction—she’s definitely not smiling. She recovers quickly, though, when she notices Phil looking at her. “Careful, Dan. Phil is a weird guy, you might find out some freaky shit you weren’t ready for.”

“Even better,” Dan says, grinning.

Phil doesn’t know how this is really happening. It feels like he must be living someone else’s life right now. There’s no way he’s standing in between two people actively flirting with him, right? But he is. They are, and he’d like nothing more than to run away from it.

“Is Kyle in today?” He asks, desperate to change the subject as fast as possible.

“He called in sick, actually,” Rory says gleefully. “I think you may have scared him off.”

“I reckon you should’ve stood up for yourself sooner, huh Phil?” Dan says.

Phil thinks about what he’d said to Kyle and how much he’d deserved it. He also thinks back to all the times in the past when Kyle had said similar things or worse, how many times Phil had longed to tell him off. Then he remembers what it was that had given him the courage to finally speak up. He wouldn’t have been able to do that without Dan.

“I should’ve,” he says quietly.

Someone on the floor calls out for Rory, then. “You ready to start drink training with him?” she asks.

Phil nods.

“I’ll keep half the bar open for you.”

They take off their coats and punch in on the computer. Phil hands Dan an apron. “You have to wear this now. You’re about to become a real barista.”

“I can’t believe the day has finally come. Losing my barista virginity.”

“Hopefully it’ll go better than my first time,” Phil mumbles as he ties his apron up in the back.

Dan looks a little taken aback for a second. “First time barista-ing or first time first time?”

“Both,” he says, before he has time to realize what he’s saying. Dan seems to have a strange effect on him. He’s saying things we would never in a million years say to anyone else.

“Shit,” is apparently all Dan has to say in this moment.

“You’ll do fine,” Phil says quickly, hoping yet again to change the subject, or at least dispel the awkwardness he’s created. “You have the best teacher. They call me Latte Lester.”

Dan snorts. “Do they?”

“Well, no. But they should.”

“Careful what you wish for. I will literally call you that.” Dan rolls the collar of his shirt over the green strap of the apron that wraps around the back of his neck.
His long neck, Phil notices. He doesn’t usually notice things like that, but Dan has a very long neck. It’s a good neck, as far as necks go. It must be, because Phil’s still staring at it when Dan says, “You ready, Latte Lester?”

“Oh, you’re right, never call me that again. You’ve shown me the error of my ways.”

They walk out onto the floor and tuck themselves away, at least as much as they can while still technically being very much in the way. They’ll need to use up half the bar and a lot of the paraphernalia needed to make drinks, but luckily the store isn’t busy at the moment so it doesn’t matter much.

“We’ll just go down the menu, k?” Phil says, pointing to the intimidating list of drinks split up over two giant signs that hang from the ceiling. “We’ll start basic and work our way up.”

“That’s what she said,” Dan says instantly.

“Maybe that’s why my first time was so terrible. Skipped the basics.” Phil smiles, shaking his head and looking down at his feet. What is happening to him?

“You’re such a strange person.” Dan’s voice is full of fondness.

They start plain and simple with a latte. Phil shows him how much milk to pour in the pitcher, how to position the steam wand to achieve the perfect foam.

“It looks like shaving foam,” Dan says, running his finger through the thick froth.

“Exactly,” Phil says. He shows Dan how to get the perfect shot, how long it should pull for and how to mark it with milk or syrup right away to keep it from getting too bitter. He makes Dan drink a fresh shot and then one that’s been sitting for thirty seconds.

“This tastes like fucking--whoops, sorry--battery acid.”

“Yep.”

“I didn’t know making lattes was so complicated.” Dan frowns.

“Don’t worry, it gets easier.”

“Does it? Isn’t this like literally the most basic drink there is?”

Phil bites his lip. “Technically, no. Iced coffee is easier. All you have to do is pour it.”

Dan honestly looks a little distressed.

“It does get easier. I promise. And anyway we still have weeks of practicing before you have to do it for real.”

Dan bites his lip. “Remember that thing I said about being scared of failure?”

Phil nods.

“I wasn’t really joking.”

“If I can do it,” Phil says, touching Dan’s forearm gently, “you can. Trust me.”

Dan’s eyes snap up from the spot on the bar they’d been staring at blankly to bore into Phil’s.
They’re big and brown and focused so singularly on Phil, it feels like they’re attached to him somehow, like he’s being pulled in by them.

“I do, I think,” Dan says softly.

“What?” Phil feels dazed, his head floating liked he’d just woken up.

“Trust you.” Finally, Dan looks away, down at his feet.

“Oh. Right. Well it’s your turn to try, then,” Phil says, bringing the pitcher over to the sink and rinsing out the leftover milk. He hands it to Dan.

Phil’s right of course, Dan gets the hang of it quickly. They slowly make their way down the massive drink list. Phil makes sure Dan tries each one after he’s made it. When Dan takes a sip of a chai latte, his eyes widen and then squeeze shut and he moans.

Proper moans, like the sounds Phil’s heard through his bedroom wall when Tom stays the night. For some reason it doesn’t bother him as much when Dan does it. Maybe because he knows it’s just about tea and milk.

“That good?” he asks, chuckling.

“Shit, sorry. I get inappropriately excited by sugar sometimes. This is really good.”

“I told you it’s not so hard.”

Rory walks over then and tells them to take their break.

“You can drink the whole thing,” Phil says.

“I’m coming for your title, Phil. They’re gonna be calling me Hot Drink Howell in no time.”

Phil laughs, grabbing a cloth from the sanitizer bucket and wringing it out. “That was terrible.”

“You’re just jealous.”

Phil shows Dan how to do a bus before they put on their coats and go outside to sit on the patio. Dan’s coat is black like the rest of his outfit. It’s long, reaching almost all the way down to his knees and tapering at the bottom.

“You look like a ringwraith,” Phil says, before he has time to process how nerdy that makes him sound.

Dan puts his hand on his chest and smiles. “Thank you. That is honestly all I aspire to. My outside matches my inside.”

“What about your ‘carefully cultivated androgyny?’ Ringwraiths are pretty overtly masculine aren’t they?” Phil asks. He might as well accept at this point that Dan is some kind of strange wizard who causes him to say whatever the hell pops into his head without giving it a second thought—things he’d never say to anyone else.

Dan grins. “You remembered.” He holds his hands up and wiggles his fingers a little to show Phil that his nail polish is gone. “I decided to follow the rules.”

“Rules are stupid,” Phil says. He lifts his pant leg to show Dan today’s selection of colourful mismatched socks.
“I have other ways of telling gender stereotypes to sod off, don’t worry.” Dan smiles cheekily.

“Like what?”

Dan laughs. “I don’t know you well enough for that yet, Lester.” He winks.

Phil feels the blood rush to his cheeks. What does that even mean?

“You look good with some colour in your face. I should tease you more often.”

“Wannabe emo goths don’t need colour, Daniel. We hate colour.”

Dan raises his eyebrows. “Your socks beg to differ.”

“The only thing we hate more than colour is following rules.”

They spend their whole break making terrible jokes and poking fun at each other. Their fingers are cold and the tips of their noses are red when they go back inside. Phil is just hanging his coat up when Rory comes into the back room.

“I forgot to tell you, Phil.” She stands with her back to Dan. Phil’s not sure if she’s done that on purpose or not, but it certainly doesn’t feel like an accident. “I’m having a party next Friday. You’re coming, right?”

His stomach tightens uncomfortably. “A halloween party?”

“Yes, Philip, a halloween party.”

“Do I have to dress up?”

She rolls her eyes. “Of course. That’s like, the whole point.”

He wishes she’d asked him over text so he could take a few minutes to think up a good excuse. But he’s on the spot, and he has no good reason to say no, nothing besides ‘I don’t want to,’ and he knows that won’t be a good enough reason for her.

“Don’t expect me to put in much effort,” Phil says.

She grins. “I’ll put in enough effort for the both us. You’re gonna shit when you see my costume.”

“Not literally I hope,” Dan laughs.

Phil looks at Rory, waiting for her to invite Dan as well. She doesn’t say anything. He raises his brows and widens his eyes at her, jerking his head a tiny bit in Dan’s direction. He can almost hear the sigh that she’s certainly making in her head.

“Dan? Do you want to come?” She is conspicuously less enthusiastic than she had been inviting Phil.

“Oh, uh…”

“You should come,” Phil urges. “It’ll be fun.” He sees Rory’s face darken a little. He turns away from her to look at Dan.

He smiles. “Ok, yeah. Why not. Thanks.”
“It’s gonna be at my parents’ house. Their place is massive and they’re going away for a few weeks.”

Phil looks back at her and she’s smiling again. He feels a little twinge of guilt. She’s a good person and he’s known for a long time that she has feelings for him. It’s not her fault he doesn’t know how to reciprocate. He wishes he could, maybe in this moment more than ever before.

“So we’re gonna play Scrabble and drink red wine all night, right?” Phil asks.

“That actually sounds like a perfect night,” Dan says, slipping his apron back on.

“You can do whatever grandma things you want when you throw your own parties, lads. Mine’s going to be a proper party and you’re going to like it.” She pokes her finger into Phil’s chest. “You’re gonna drink and dance and play some stupid games with me and my friends.”

Phil opens his mouth to speak but she cuts him off. “Not Scrabble.”

“I’m too old for such things,” Phil complains.

“We’ve been over this,” she says, crossing her arms over her chest. “I’m older than you.”

“Only in years.”

Dan laughs. “What else is there?”

“Spirit, or soul or something. My soul is old.”

“Your haircut says otherwise, mate.” She looks up at his fringe and smirks. “Talk to me when you embrace the quiff.”

“I have to go back to work now,” Phil says, pouting. “I don’t have to take this abuse anymore.”

He and Dan go back to the bar and resume their tour of the drink menu. They fall into something of a rhythm, Phil showing Dan how to make each drink and Dan following suit rather effortlessly. Eventually they don’t even need to say anything. Dan is a quick study and they work with remarkable synchronization.

Phil finds himself watching Dan’s hands as he works. They’re big, almost comically so, his fingers long and thick, his palms broad. But there’s something so gentle about the way he moves them, the way he picks up the cups, the way he scoops the foam. Phil is completely engrossed, something close to hypnotized--so much so that he jumps a little when Dan says, “Holding my thoughts in my heart?”

“Huh?”

“You’re humming,” Dan says softly. “It sounded like that song from seven.”

“Oh, uh, yeah. I was playing it this morning.” He looks at Dan and frowns. “You recognized that?”

Dan’s grin is wider than Phil’s seen it yet. That dimple is ridiculous, he thinks.

“I’ve spent an embarrassing chunk of my life playing that game,” Dan admits.

“Me too. We should play together sometime. Jimmy isn’t particularly keen on video games and I can’t exactly play bubble bobble by myself.” Phil shakes his head as soon as he’s said it. Yet again he’s surprised himself. He keeps saying things he usually just thinks about. Something about Dan
just puts him at ease, makes him feel more like himself somehow, like the person he would be if he wasn’t afraid all the time.

“Definitely. I don’t have anyone to game with here either.” Dan says, reaching up and fluffing the curls that fall across his forehead. “Who’s Jimmy?”

Phil can’t be sure, but it feels like Dan’s trying to ask that question a little more casually than he actually manages to.

“My flatmate,” he says. It feels like the wrong word, like a lie by omission. “My best friend.”

“My flatmates all suck so feel free to call me up whenever. I’d be down to crush you at mario kart or halo anytime.”

“Good luck with that, I’m the mario kart master,” Phil says. “Plus I don’t have your number.”

“Are you asking me for my number, Phil?”

Phil surprises himself once more by smiling and saying, “I guess I am, yeah.”
Chapter 8

Phil follows Dan out the door once their shift is over. He’s looking down, still fumbling with the zipper on his coat, so he doesn’t see who’s stood there waiting for him.

“Phil.”

Phil snaps his head up. It’s Jimmy, looking put together as always, wearing a black hoodie with a denim jacket overtop. He pushes his long, wavy fringe out of his eyes and he’s grinning, obviously delighted at succeeding in surprising Phil.

“Who’s this, then?” Jimmy smiles at Dan. “The new guy?”

“Dan,” Phil corrects him. “I did tell you that.”

“Right, sorry mate.” Jimmy holds his hand out for Dan to shake.

“Are you Jimmy?” Dan asks, accepting the handshake. Phil can’t help but notice the way Dan’s hand engulfs Jimmy’s.

“That’s me.”

“You talked to your friend about me?” Dan asks, turning to face Phil as he releases his grip on Jimmy’s hand.

Phil smiles in embarrassment.

“I wanted to know why it took him so long to come home,” Jimmy says. “I’m a very high-maintenance flatmate.”

“Oh god,” Dan says covering his face with his hands. He looks at Phil from between his fingers. “You didn’t tell him, did you?”

“That you’re afraid of the dark?” Jimmy asks cheekily. “He told me.”

“Phi-il!” Dan whines.

“I’m sorry! You never told me it was a secret!”

“Sorry, Dan, Phil tells me everything.”

Phil looks at Jimmy in surprise. There’s an undercurrent of possessiveness in that comment that Phil’s not really ever heard from Jimmy.

“Not anymore,” Phil says, pushing Jimmy’s shoulder lightly. Jimmy doesn’t get to make him look like an asshole in front of his new friend. He makes them so rarely, he’d like to hang on to this one. “Besides, I told him you’re afraid of birthdays.”

“This is blasphemy,” Jimmy says.

“I won’t tell anyone if you won’t,” Dan says to Jimmy.

“Deal.” Jimmy turns to Phil. “You ready?”
“For what?” Phil laughs. “You never told me what you’re doing here.”

“Do I need an excuse to pick up my favourite guy from work?”

It’s a surprisingly painful question. Phil doesn’t know if he really is Jimmy’s favourite guy anymore. “Yes, I think you do. You’ve never done it before.”

Jimmy pouts. “I missed you is all.”

“You want something.”

“To spend time with my Philly!”

Phil cocks his eyebrow and just looks at him expectantly.

“Oh, fine, it’s possible I want to go big Sainsbury’s and I’m afraid I’ll get lost.”

Dan laughs. “What’s big Sainsbury’s?”

“It’s literally just a really big Sainsbury’s,” Phil says.

“It’s a magical place,” Jimmy says. “You can choose from a thousand different cheeses.”

“‘All the more reason not to go,” Phil mumbles.

“You don’t like cheese?” Dan asks incredulously.

“Ridiculous, right?” Jimmy asks.

“That’s worse than my fear of the dark.”

“I won’t stand here and listen to this abuse.”

“Good,” Jimmy says. “Because we’re going to big Sainsbury’s.”

Phil rolls his eyes. “I guess it’d be good to have something in the house to eat besides Gregg’s.” He turns to Dan. “See you tomorrow?”

Dan smiles. “I think we have the day off tomorrow actually.”

“Oh, right.” Phil thinks about inviting Dan over, about saying it’s a perfect opportunity for a gaming day, just like they’d talked about. He doesn’t though, because he’s waited a beat too long and Jimmy’s stood there watching him and, as always, he’s just that little bit too awkward to say what he wants.

“Sunday, then,” he says, and turns away with a little wave.

“Wait.”

Phil turns back around, heart beating more than a little faster.

“Give me your phone.”

Phil reaches into his pocket and hands it over. He watches Dan type something out quickly and then hand the phone back. He smiles. “Now you have my number.” He turns around and starts walking down the street.
Phil finds himself wishing he could follow.

“What the fuck?” Jimmy asks, the moment Dan is out of earshot.

“What?”

“You said you didn’t fancy him!”

“I. I don’t.” Phil starts walking in the direction of the entrance to the underground.

Jimmy elbows Phil gently in the arm. “He just gave you his number.”

“Yeah… we’re friends. I told him I have no one to game with and he said he wouldn’t mind.”

“He wouldn’t mind,” Jimmy says skeptically. “Doubt those were the words he used.”

“Oh shut up. I made a friend, you should be proud.”

Jimmy smiles. “I am. So proud. Just don’t go replacing me, yeah?”

Phil links his arm around Jimmy’s. “Never.”

“You weren’t wrong by the way. He’s definitely fit.”

“Yeah,” Phil agrees. It’s not difficult for Phil to admit. He’s never had a problem appreciating the aesthetics of attractive people.

“Those dimples?” Jimmy says.

Phil nods. “I know.”

“His hair is like mine but better.”

Phil laughs. “Yours is fine.”

“When are you going to let yours be who it wants to be?”

“Never,” Phil says defiantly. “I’ll have you know Dan actually likes my hair just the way it is.”

“Of course he does.”

Phil chooses to ignore that. “Why are we going to big Sainsbury’s, James?”

“Tom is taking me home to meet his parents, Philip. I want to bake something.”

“Oh, god.”

“What? I’m a great cook.”

Phil laughs. “Where?”

“Oh, fuck off. How hard can it be?”

“It can be hard. It can be really hard. Remember that time we tried to make meringues?”

Jimmy’s face falls. “Shit.”
“Yeah.”

“Well, you’ll help me right?”

Phil rolls his eyes. “I guess.”

“Tonight?” Jimmy asks, looking up at Phil through his lashes and pouting a little.

“When are you leaving?”

“...Tomorrow.”

Phil sighs. “Guess I don’t have much choice then, do I?”

Jimmy grins. “Love you.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“So are you gonna bring Dan round sometime soon, then?” Jimmy asks as they troll the aisles of big Sainsbury’s, chucking every baking ingredient they can find into their trolley. Turns out Jimmy hadn’t even looked up a recipe—he hadn’t even really thought about what he wanted to bake.

Phil shrugs. “Hadn’t thought about it too much,” he lies. He’s been thinking about it all evening.

“You should. I’ll be gone all weekend.”

Phil reaches up and gabs a tin of cocoa powder off the high shelf. “I can actually take care of myself you know. I’m nearly thirty.”

Jimmy swats his arm. “You are not, don’t say that. If you are then I am, and then I’d have to kill myself.”

“That makes no sense. Isn’t fear of death the whole point of dreading getting older?”

“Not entirely. Look at this,” Jimmy says, circling his index finger around his face. “Look at this face. This face was not meant to grow old and wrinkly. It needs all the help it can get.”

“You’re an idiot,” Phil says, smiling. They’ve had this particular conversation more times than he can count.

“You distracted me from my point,” Jimmy says, tossing a bag of caster sugar into the trolley. “I don’t want to be feeling guilty the whole time I’m gone. Therefore I need you to ring Dan later and tell him he’s coming round tomorrow.”

“Tell him? You don’t think maybe it might be more polite to ask?”

“Doesn’t matter. He’ll come.”

Phil thinks about arguing. He thinks about telling Jimmy to stop worrying about him all the time, that he’s perfectly fine on his own. But then he remembers the turn that conversation had taken last time they’d had it and decides it’s easier to just agree with Jimmy than to think too hard about the reason he wants Phil to make new friends so badly.


“Good boy.” Jimmy beams. “Now can we get out of here? This place is too bloody big.”
Later, after they’ve spent hours in their tiny little kitchen, measuring and stirring and pouring and standing in front of the oven watching their creation bake up into something that just might be edible, Phil lies in bed next to Jimmy. They both smell like chocolate. Jimmy’s got flour in his hair.

“We did it,” Jimmy says tiredly.

“I think we did. It’s a miracle.”

“Do you have your phone?” Jimmy asks.

“Yeah, why?”

“Because you need to text Dan. Don’t think I’ve forgotten.”

“Oh. Yeah.” He pulls his phone out from under the pillow and turns it on. “What do I say?”

Jimmy laughs. “Fuck’s sake, Phil. Just be yourself. He obviously likes you already. Just be your normal, strange self. I’m going to sleep.” He rolls over, away from Phil and pulls the white duvet up over his shoulder. “Goodnight.”

“Night,” Phil mumbles. He considers just opening up tumblr or twitter on his phone for a few minutes and pretending to text Dan. He could just spend the day tomorrow in bed, eating and reading and bingeing horror movies. He could. It’d be easier.

He checks the time. It’s late, really late--late enough that Dan could easily be asleep. He jabs his finger on Dan’s number in his contact list and types out a message before he can change his mind.

Phil: You up?

He cringes, literally, the second it’s sent. It sounds like something someone says as a prelude to a booty call or something. He shoves his phone back under his pillow, assuming he won’t be getting a reply tonight. Or ever.

He jumps, knocking Jimmy’s leg with his knee when his phone vibrates beneath his cheek a moment later.

“What are you doing?” Jimmy mumbles sleepily.

“Nothing. Sorry.” He pulls his phone back out and opens the message.

Dan: shit you caught me don’t tell my therapist

Interesting, Phil thinks.

Phil: your secret is safe with me

Dan: yeah? even from jimmy? (this IS phil right?)

Shit. Maybe Dan is actually mad about that.

Phil: (oops sorry yeah) i’m sorry about that :(  

Dan: im just taking the piss phil no worries everyone who knows me knows im afraid of the dark

Dan: i have to admit i didnt think youd text me this quick
Phil: i’m old, i don’t know know the rules anymore

Dan: there are no rules lol i just wasn’t expecting a message from you at one in the morning

Phil: maybe im secretly an owl

What the fuck? Phil rolls over and buries his face in the pillow. Apparently he’s still the same awkward kid he was fifteen years ago. He feels his phone buzz in his hand and waits a full minute before gathering up the courage to check the message.

Dan: my guess was vampire actually have you seen how pale you are you’re practically translucent

Phil giggles, then claps his hand over his mouth. He does not need Jimmy to hear him giggling right now.

Phil: excuse you, it’s called having an ivory complexion.

Dan: forgive me

Phil: i’ll think about it

Phil: by the way, your texts are super hard to read. The english language major inside of me cringes at your lack of grammar and punctuation

Phil types the next message and sends it quickly, somehow still nervous despite how obvious it is now that Dan’s not just going to blow him off.

Phil: also do you want to come over and game tomorrow?

Dan: punctuation is ugly though and yes i do

Phil: ok cool

Dan: XD

Phil: never again

Dan: i was using it iRoNiCaLLy ^^

Phil: you’re uninvited

Dan: no ‘t(( reinvite me please ill make it up to you

Phil: how?

Dan: um

Dan: good question tbh

Dan: with the pleasure of my company?

Phil: -.-

Dan: its literally all i have to offer

Dan: but you did one too so now we’re even
Phil: fine

Dan: reinvited?

Phil: yeah

Dan: when should i come

Phil: whenever you want. I'll be here

“Phil?” Jimmy murmurs groggily.

“What?”

“What are you doing?”

“What you told me to.”

Jimmy turns over and squints his tired eyes at Phil. “What?”

“Texting Dan.”

Jimmy frowns. “Why’d you wait so long?”

“I didn’t.”

“You’ve been texting this whole time?”

“Yeah?” Phil checks the time again. It’s been half an hour.

“Go to sleep you nutter.” Jimmy shuffles back a bit to press himself against Phil’s side. “You can talk to your new boyfriend all you want tomorrow. Tonight you’re mine.”

Phil rolls his eyes. “He’s not my boyfriend.” It is late though. He really should be getting to sleep. He looks down at his phone to say goodnight to Dan, who’s sent him another couple messages.

Dan: can i come now?

Dan: jk jk

Phil: you’re that anxious to lose at whatever we play? Haha

Dan: im that anxious to *win

Phil: we’ll just see about that mate

Dan: i guess we will

“Phil. Cuddle me. Now,” Jimmy huffs impatiently.

Phil: i have to sleep now so i can keep my eyes open tomorrow while i crush you. You should sleep too young man

Dan: ok fineeee dad goodnight

Phil grins stupidly at his phone.
Phil: night XD
Chapter 9

Phil allows himself a lie-in that’s luxurious even by his standards, only waking up when Jimmy
ducks his head into the room to say goodbye.

“When are you coming back?” Phil asks, voice hoarse.

“Saturday.”

Phil sits up. “You’re leaving me for a whole week?”

“Trust me, I’m not that excited about it either.” Jimmy walks over to the bed and leans down to place
a kiss on the top of Phil’s head. “Be good.”

“Always am,” Phil grumbles. It’s happening already, the moving apart. He’s still not ready.

He flops back onto the pillow as soon as Jimmy’s gone. He checks his phone. It’s almost noon and
he has a message from Dan.

Dan: so we have a problem

Phil: what??

Dan: i don’t know where you live

Oh right, Phil thinks. He sends Dan his address.

Phil: you’re not coming over right now are you?

Dan: haha no i just woke up

Phil: same.

Dan: i’m not supposed to stay in bed all day anymore though is an hour long enough for you to get
ready

Phil: yep

Phil throws the duvet off his legs. Dan’s impending arrival has given him the energy he needs to get
up, shower, shave, brush his teeth and get dressed. He chooses black jeans as always, and his black
triceratops jumper. He sits cross-legged on his bed and watches himself in the full length mirror as he
straightens his fringe.

When he thinks he looks as good as can be expected, he makes his way to the kitchen, which is still
a disaster from his and Jimmy’s midnight brownie baking extravaganza. He’s lucky Jimmy is
something of a neat freak or else he’d have a lot more of the flat to try to tidy before Dan gets here.
For some reason though, the kitchen is the one thing Jimmy never cleans.

He’s just filling the sink with hot water when he feels his phone buzz in his pocket.

Dan: did you eat yet

Phil: no i’m prioritizing cleaning this place up for you
Dan: you really don't have to anyway I'll be there in 10

Phil: k

Phil feels a little nervous flutter in his stomach. It’s been a long time since he had anyone over who isn’t his brother or one of Jimmy’s friends. He wonders if it’ll feel different. It hasn’t been awkward with Dan yet, which in itself is a surprise, but that could always change. Phil would never put it past himself to make social interaction more uncomfortable than it needs to be.

He only gets through a couple sticky, chocolate coated bowls before his phone buzzes again.

Dan: can you buzz me in

Phil does and waits by the front door like a crazy person. His heart is thumping uncomfortably. Why does he always have to be like this? He’s having a friend over. A friend he gets on with really well even though they’ve basically just met. It’s probably only going to get easier, too. He shouldn’t be nervous. Unfortunately his body has never been particularly good at reacting according to logic.

He hears a light knock on the door and has to remind himself to wait a moment before opening it, lest he give away the fact that he’s stood directly on the other side like a creep. He counts to ten before turning the handle and pulling the door open.

Dan is stood there holding a drink tray with two coffees and a greasy paper bag. He’s wearing fitted black sweatpants that taper around the ankle and a very soft-looking baby pink hoodie. His hair looks fluffier than Phil’s seen it before and he has small black studs in his ears.

He’s breathing heavily as he hands the tray to Phil. “If you’d told me your lift was broken and I’d have to do actual exercise to get here I’d probably still be in bed.”

Phil takes the tray and takes a step back to let Dan in. “Maybe that’s why I didn’t tell you.”

“I brought donuts,” Dan says, holding up the bag. “They’re not from Starbucks.”

“Even better.”

Phil bends down to place the tray on the coffee table. When he stands up, Dan’s looking at him with what Phil can only describe as an adoring smile.

“Phil,” Dan says, and his voice is full of warmth. He reaches forward and swipes his thumb across Phil’s cheek.

Phil is once again taken aback by the gentleness of Dan’s big hands.

“You’ve got chocolate on your face,” Dan laughs.

“Oh, Whoops. Is it gone?” Phil touches his fingers to his cheek.

Dan nods.

“I was doing dishes like a responsible adult. Me and Jimmy made brownies last night. From scratch.”

“After big Sainsbury’s.” Dan smiles.

“Yeah. After big Sainsbury’s. Our kitchen looks horrendous now.”

“Why didn’t you just buy them?”
Phil rolls his eyes. “He wants to impress his boyfriend’s parents.”

Dan’s smile definitely gets a little bigger then. “And you helped him.”

Phil shrugs. “I always do.”

“You’re a good friend.”

It’s not the first time Dan has said that to him. Maybe it’s true.

“Did you want me to help you finish them?” Dan asks.

Phil frowns. “What?”

“The dishes, you spork.”

“Oh, uh…”

Dan grabs a coffee out of the tray and makes his way toward the kitchen. “Come on. Let’s do your dishes.”

So they do. Dan washes and Phil dries and it actually doesn’t take them very long before every dish in Phil’s kitchen is sparkling clean and put back where it belongs. Phil is reminded of doing this same thing only a few days ago with Jimmy. Strange that it feels just as natural with someone he’s only known a few days.

Dan pulls the plug out from the drain once they’re done. He looks at Phil. “By the way, you didn’t have to get Rory to invite me to her party yesterday.”

“I didn’t,” Phil says rather unconvincingly.

Dan tilts his head in disbelief. “She doesn’t seem to like me very much.”

“She just…” He honestly doesn’t know what to say.

“It’s fine, Phil, I get it,” Dan turns around and leans back against the counter. “She seems quite fond of you and I’ve been taking up all your time the past few days.”

Phil wants to lie, to reassure Dan that he’s just misread the situation. He doesn’t, though. Something about Dan makes him feel exceedingly honest. “It’s possible she has a little… crush on me, or whatever. Or at least maybe she thinks she does.”

Dan nods. “It’s pretty obvious. I’ll just make up an excuse so you two can be alone. It was nice of you and all but--”

“No,” Phil interjects. “No, it’s not like that. For me.”

“No?” Dan sounds surprised, but there’s a ghost of a smile on his chapped lips.

Phil shakes his head. “We’re friends. She’s just flirty. I’m sure it doesn’t mean anything.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure,” Dan muses. “It probably could if you wanted it to, mate.”

“I don’t,” Phil says before he has time to think better of it.

Dan looks at him like he wants to say more, but he doesn’t.
“I’ll be glad to have you there,” Phil says, both to fill the loaded silence that follows his last statement, and also because it’s simply the truth. “I’ll be glad to have a friend there. She has a lot of friends and I don’t know any of them. And I’m not great in large groups of people I don’t know.”

“I’m not either,” Dan laughs. “Probably much worse than you, honestly.”

“We can be awkward together.” Phil hangs up the dish towel and motions for Dan to follow him into the lounge. “Thanks for this. Future Phil will be glad to have a clean kitchen.”

“So I guess I need to come up with some kind of costume, then,” Dan says, following Phil out of the kitchen.

“Oh, yeah. Me too.”

“Got any ideas for me?”

Phil shrugs. “I’ll probably just throw on some ears and call myself a cat.”

“Good to know we’ll be half-assing it together,” Dan says. “So what are we playing?”

They settle on Mario Kart. They sit on opposite ends of the small sofa with the bag of donuts between them. Phil sits cross-legged and Dan stretches his long legs out on the coffee table.

“You’re going down, you know that, right Lester?”

“You just wait,” Phil says.

A few minutes later, Dan’s grinning ear to ear and Phil’s shaking his head.

“Beginner’s luck,” Phil insists.

“Uh huh, definitely,” Dan chuckles, barely able to contain his glee. “I definitely haven’t spent half my life wrecking people online. That’s definitely not me.”

“I was just being polite because you’re my guest and you brought me donuts,” Phil says, grabbing one out of the bag and taking a giant bite. Sugar falls onto the triceratops on his chest and he brushes it away sheepishly. “Now begins my journey to complete and total domination, are you ready?”

“So ready.”

Dan wins the next five consecutive races. By a lot.

“Oh, what hell,” Phil says dejectedly. “This is abuse.”

Dan laughs. “I did warn you.”

“My whole life has been a lie.”

“Should we play something else?” Dan doesn’t appear to be even attempting to keep the smirk off his face at this point.

“No. I need to redeem myself.”

An hour later, Phil chucks his controller at Dan and shouts, “I give up! You’re the Mario Kart master. My dignity needs a break from this.”
“You got a bit better at the end there,” Dan says.

“Oh, shut up Howell.” He gets up off the couch and over to the rack that holds his games. He flips through until he finds the one he’s looking for, pulling it out and holding it up for Dan to see.

“If you beat me at this, I will eat my damn controller.”

“Mortal Kombat?” Dan asks

Phil nods. “I used to kick my brother’s butt at this game all the time when I was like eight or whatever. You absolutely cannot beat me at this.”

“I’ve never even played it,” Dan says. “I used to watch my dad play when I was like five.”

“Our parents were so irresponsible,” Phil says, putting the game into the ps1. “I used to have nightmares about Sheeva. All those arms…” He shivers theatrically.

“Well I know who I’m playing as,” Dan says.

Phil rolls his eyes, but he’s smiling.

“I actually don’t know what I’m doing at all, Phil,” Dan says as the game loads.

“Button bashing usually makes you win, so you’ll probably do fine,” Phil reassures him.

Over the next ten minutes, the flat is full of screeches and laughs and shouts of:

“Shin kicks, shin kicks, shin kicks!”

“Stop, stop, fuck off!”

“Suck my uppercut!”

“Get away from me, get away from me!”

“Take my fist!”

“Suck my powertoe… said some fetishists,” Dan shouts.

Phil laughs. He never laughs at jokes like that.

“Drink my pain!”

“Kill him!”

“My neighbours are going to call the police,” Phil laughs, even as he loses another round to Dan’s goddamned button bashing.

“Yeah, they are, because I’m about to straight up murk you, Phil.”

“No! No! I’m not gonna die on the game I’m good at! No!” Phil shouts as, a minute later, he does just that.

Dan laughs loudly. It’s pitched up almost to the point of being shrill, and it should be annoying, because Phil’s just lost yet again, but it’s not. He’s annoyed that he lost, but he thinks maybe it’s worth it if he gets to listen to that laugh.
“I could murder you in real life,” Phil croaks, biting his controller.

“On no, what a shame, oh those like, four decades of experience you had before I was born, Phil,” Dan boasts. “Shall we try a different game?”

Phil reaches across the sofa and shoves his palm in Dan’s face, pushing against it lightly. “Actually shut up. We’re playing until I win.”

Dan just laughs. They continue playing for hours. It never gets any quieter or less competitive. Dan wins far more often than he should for someone who really has no idea how to properly play the game.

Eventually, Phil tosses his controller in Dan’s direction again and says, “I need a break from having my ass handed to me. I’m hungry.”

Dan grins. “Me too. I burned a lot of calories killing you so many times. What are you feeding me?”

Phil stands up and stretches his arms over his head. “Uh, good question.” He realizes even though he and Jimmy had just gone to the shop yesterday, they hadn’t really bought anything other than loads and loads of baking supplies. “All I really have is an abundance of flour, butter and sugar.”

“Bake me a cake, then.”

Phil looks down at him. “I’m serious, I have like no food.”

“I am too,” Dan says, standing up. “Bake me something.”

“If I’m baking, you’re helping me. I’m a terrible cook.”

“I am too. This should be fun.”

They walk to the kitchen and Phil opens up the cupboard, searching around as if inspiration will jump out at him from behind the sugar.

“What’s like, the easiest thing we could bake?” he asks.

Dan is silent for a moment before snapping his fingers. “I’ve got it. Do you have marshmallows?”

“Of course. A staple in the Lester-Hill household.”

“What about Rice Krispies?”

Phil laughs. “Cereal and marshmallows are literally my two favourite things in this world.”

“We’re making crispy cakes,” Dan says.

“That’s technically not baking.” Phil reaches back into the cupboard and pulls out the cereal and the marshmallows.

Dan opens the fridge and takes out some butter. “Are you complaining?”

“...No, I guess I’m not.” Phil smiles with his tongue between his teeth, something he seems to be doing a lot of since he met Dan. He grabs a pan and the cereal and hands them to Dan, before hoisting himself up to sit on the counter beside the stove. He crosses his legs beneath himself and looks at Dan expectantly.
“Shall I get started on my own, then?” Dan laughs.

“I reckon you owe me for beating me up so many times.” Phil opens the bag of jumbo marshmallows and pops one into his mouth.

Dan shakes his head, but puts the pan on the hob and turns it on. Phil continues to snack on dry cereal as he watches Dan stir the melting butter and marshmallows.

“This looks like scrambled eggs,” Dan says, scrunching up his nose.

Phil leans over and takes a look. It really does look like eggs. “I’d eat that for breakfast.”

Dan snorts. “Why am I not surprised?”

Phil doesn’t hop down from the counter until it’s time to mix in the cereal. Because apparently they’re nothing more than overgrown children, they get sticky marshmallow goo everywhere—smeared all over their hands, the countertop, their pants. Some even manages to find its way into Phil’s hair.

Dan reaches up and tries to brush it away. “This might as well be superglue, Phil. It’s never coming out. It’s just part of your hair now.”

“Is it a good look at least?”

Dan’s eyes flit upwards and he bites his lip. “It looks like… something.”

“Wha… oh,” Phil says as realization dawns. He shoves Dan’s shoulder. “Shut up.”

They sit on the sofa once the sticky rice krispies have been pressed down onto a baking sheet. They don’t even bother trying to cut them into squares—they just take turns digging chunks out with forks as they watch American Horror Story.

“Those were actually really good,” Phil says, after he’s eaten the last little bit of cereal from the baking sheet that sits between them on the sofa.

“I can’t believe we ate the whole fucking thing.” Dan puts his hand on his stomach. “I didn’t need that.”

“I did,” Phil says happily.

Dan frowns a little, leaning his head back into the couch. “I’m not supposed to eat like shit anymore.”

Phil wants to ask what that means, but he senses it’s not the kind of thing Dan wants to elaborate on. Not right now anyway. He opts instead for humour. “I’m sorry. We’ll have salad next time, I promise.”

Dan turns his head and looks at Phil. His curls look so fluffy Phil has the sudden urge to reach out and run his fingers through them.

“Next time?” Dan asks. “You’re willing to have me back after today’s humiliation?”

“Of course. I need to redeem myself.”

They lapse into a comfortable silence after a while, continuing to watch the telly sleepily. Phil looks over at Dan at one point and notices he’s wearing pink Hello Kitty socks.
Eventually Phil yawns and Dan says, “Shit, it’s late, isn’t it? I should probably go.”

“You don’t have to,” Phil says quickly, and he means it. There’s a sense of ease that falls over him when Dan is around. He wouldn’t mind hanging on to it a little while longer.

Dan shakes his head. “You’re too nice for your own good, Phil.” He stands up and stretches his long arms above his head. “I’m sorry for taking up the entirety of your day off.”

“The only thing you need to be sorry for is not letting me win a single round of mario kart.”

Dan walks to the front door and Phil follows. He pulls his soft pink hood up over his curls and looks at Phil a little strangely. “So.”

It’s the first time Phil’s felt even a hint of awkwardness between them. “So,” Phil echoes.

“I’m just gonna… go home now.”

“If you want.”

Dan puts his hand on the doorknob. “Just going to walk home.”

“Good plan,” Phil says.

Dan pulls open the door and steps out into the hallway. “Going to walk home. In the dark. Thanks for having me over, Phil, it was fun. I’ll see you to--”

“Dan.”

“What?”

“Do you want me to walk you home?”

Dan’s cheeks redden in those little patches above his jaw. “Course not, I’m totally fine.”

Phil rolls his eyes. “Just let me get my coat.”
“It’s bloody freezing out here,” Dan says, pulling the sleeves of his hoodie down over his fists.

“It’s nearly November,” Phil says, watching his breath float in a thin mist from his mouth as he speaks. “You need more than a jumper.”

“Life is just conspiring to ruin my aesthetic all the time,” Dan grumbles.

“Do you want to go back to my place? I could find you a coat to wear, or a hat or something.”

Dan laughs. “Fuck no. I’m embarrassed enough as it is forcing you to walk me home.” He looks over at Phil. “But thank you.”

“You didn’t force me. I offered.”

“Because you already know how pathetic I am,” Dan says, looking down at his feet. “That’s almost worse.”

“If we see any horses on our travels I’ll expect you to return the favour.”

They only walk for a couple minutes before reaching Dan’s street.

“Can I ask you something?” Dan asks as they round the corner. “It’s kind of random.”

It really is a very dark street. Phil can hardly blame Dan for being wary.

“Go on then.”

“Why’d you move to London?”

Phil has to stop himself sighing. There’s no answer that doesn’t make him sound like a bit of a loser, so he decides instead to just be honest. “Jimmy, mostly.”

“Oh. Did you two used to…?”

“Oh, no, no, nothing like that. We were flatmates all through school. Just friends,” Phil says quickly. “Always just friends.” He rubs over his jaw, wishing he had a better answer. “He knew what he wanted to do when we graduated and I didn’t. All I knew was that I didn’t want to go back to Rossendale and I didn’t want to lose my best friend to the big city. I figured London was as good a place as any to try to… figure myself out, I guess.”

“Yeah,” Dan says, nodding his head. “Makes sense. So did you?”

“Did I what?”

“Figure yourself out,” Dan says softly.

Phil turns his head and sees that Dan is looking at him quite intently. Their eyes lock for what feels like a long time. Phil can’t respond until he finally breaks the contact, looking down at his feet.

He shoves his hands deep into the pockets of his jeans. “Definitely not.”

“You still have lots of time.”
“Yeah,” Phil murmurs, wondering how they got here. They’d been laughing and joking just a moment ago and now he feels the all too familiar tightness in his chest, the feeling that had mysteriously disappeared the moment Dan showed up at his door that afternoon.

“What about you?” Phil asks, eager to shift the focus off himself. “Why’d you move to London? You figuring yourself out too?”

Dan pulls his sweater paws a little tighter. “Kind of I guess. More like… starting over?” His voice sounds small somehow.

Phil frowns. He’s desperate to know more, but he also knows it’s the kind of confession you really don’t push. “Yeah?” he asks. He thinks that’s an appropriate response. It leaves room for Dan to share as much or as little as he’s comfortable with.

“I wanted to go somewhere no one knows me. Somewhere I could be whoever I want to be without all the baggage and bullshit.”

“Baggage and bullshit,” Phil repeats. “That sounds like the name of a whiny early 2000’s pop punk band or something.”

He regrets it the moment he’s said it. He looks over at Dan, ready to apologize but sees that actually, he’s grinning ear to ear.

“You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you Phil?” Dan reaches over and tugs gently on Phil’s fringe.

“Abuse.”

“Am I wrong, though?”

Phil shakes his head. He can’t even contain the smile that’s broken out across his face. “So how’s it going, then? The starting over.”

Dan stops. They’ve reached the outside of his building. He turns to face Phil, who can see in the soft yellow lamplight that Dan’s cheeks and nose are rosy from the biting chill in the air.

“Good, now.”

“I’m glad,” is all Phil can think to say.

Dan frowns, leaning in close. “Oh god, Phil. Your lips are blue.”

Phil’s hand flies up to his mouth, his thumb running along his bottom lip. “Are they?”

Dan nods. He looks a little pained. “I shouldn’t have made you come out here.”


“I would invite you in to warm up…”

“It’s fine, Dan, really. I’m good.”

“Ok. I’ll see you tomorrow, right?” Dan asks.

Phil nods. “Go inside and get warm.”
Dan nods and turns to walk up the steps to his flat. It’s not until he gets to the top and turns back around that Phil registers he’s been stood rooted to the ground, watching Dan walk away.

“Thanks, Phil. Thanks for today.” He turns around and walks through the doors.

It’s then that Phil really realizes just how bloody freezing he is. He needs to start wearing a warmer coat. Maybe even a hat. He turns around and starts up a quick pace that eventually turns to a half-jog. He gets home in no more than five minutes and sighs in relief as he steps through the doors of his building, feeling the warmth seep into him, relaxing the tensed muscles in his shoulders.

He ignores the new mess in the kitchen in favour of brushing his teeth and getting dressed in his coziest pjs. He crawls into bed and checks his phone for the first time in several hours. He’s gotten a slew of messages from Jimmy.

Jimmy: these brownies aren’t half bad actually

Jimmy: i think we need to open up a bakery

Jimmy: phimmy’s treats? jil’s sweets?

Jimmy: wait no, def not jil

Jimmy: are u hanging out with dan

Jimmy: u’d better be hanging out with dan and not just ignoring me

Jimmy: does he take your phone when you lot are together or what

Jimmy: text me if ur not dead plz why am i constantly worrying about this lately

Jimmy: i see how it is. i told you not to replace me :(

Phil smiles. Maybe it’d been longer than several hours. Maybe he hadn’t actually looked at his phone since Dan had texted asking to be buzzed in.

Phil: we might have to call it three lads bakery. me and dan made crispy cakes

Jimmy: oh look who’s decided to bless me with their presence. kind of

Jimmy: also, crispy cakes are the primary school of baking. it’s not even baking actually

Phil: you’re just jealous

Jimmy: i’m not, i have brownies

Jimmy: so did u have a good day?

Phil: yeah, really good

Jimmy: did he try to kiss u

Phil: -.-

Jimmy: soz but it’s a valid question

Phil: it’s not, i dont even know if he’s into guys
Jimmy: he is

Phil: you dont know that

Jimmy: i do

Phil: well it doesnt matter either way now shut up please

Jimmy: i'm glad you've made a friend

Phil: ok thanks mum im going to sleep now BYE

Jimmy: love u

Phil: love you too

The next two days go by quickly. He sleeps in and reads and texts back and forth with Jimmy. He showers and drinks coffee and calls his mum. He continues to ignore the hardened smears of marshmallow all over his countertop and the dishes piled up in the sink. There’s no one here to tell him off for being a slob. Not this week.

He works long shifts both days, but they don’t really feel that way. While the rest of his co-workers run around brewing coffee and serving customers, he gets to spend all his time tucked into back corners with Dan, teaching him the subtle art of upselling and how to provide ‘legendary customer service.’

“You’re shitting me, right?” Dan asks.

“I wish I was. I can’t believe you haven’t heard that yet actually. It’s probably because Rory’s so chill. I heard it every single day when I first started.”

“What does that even mean?”

They’re sat on the floor of the back room, squeezed shoulder to shoulder in between shelves stacked high with giant bags of coffee beans. They’d been banished from practicing drink-making when the line of cups for actual paying customers started to wrap around the bar and towards the cash registers. Phil’s not sure Rory had really been thinking when she’d scheduled training on a Sunday afternoon.

“It means you have to make a ‘genuine connection’ with every single customer you serve. Basically they want you to be smiley and bubbly and super talkative.”

“So, everything I’m not,” Dan mumbles.

“I dunno,” Phil says, knocking his knee into Dan’s. “You seem to smile quite a lot.”

Dan goes and proves him right immediately. “Shut up.”

“It’s not me either, though,” Phil says. “There aren’t many people more socially awkward than me.”

“That’s definitely not true. You’re not awkward at all. Not with me, anyway.”

Phil tries to temper his grin. “You don’t know the real me.”
Dan looks at Phil thoughtfully. “I think I do. Maybe you just don’t know yourself. Maybe you’re just hanging out with the wrong people.”

Phil snorts. “You have to hang out with people to hang out with the wrong people.”

“I guess I’m safe then,” Dan chuckles. “You’re the first friend I’ve made since I moved to London.”

“I’m the right kind of people?” Phil asks. He’s not above fishing for compliments, not when they’re floating just below the surface, ready to bite.

Dan doesn’t make it that easy. “I’ll let you know.”

“Guess who’s going to be walking themselves home all alone in the dark tonight?” Phil teases.

“Alright, alright. You’re good people, Lester.”

Phil smiles. “Yeah, you’re alright too, I guess.”

They take their breaks together outside, sipping psl’s and people watching and playing ‘guess the crime’ every time they hear a siren. When their shifts are finished, Phil walks Dan home without teasing him.

On Tuesday they have the day off. Phil calls up his brother and spends the day at his flat with him and his girlfriend. He spends half the time on the sofa, texting with Dan.

On Wednesday, he’s about to put his coat on and head to work when he gets a text from Rory.

*Rory: looks like you have the day off, you lucky bastard*

*Phil: what, why?*

*Rory: dan called in sick. i assumed you knew.*

*Phil: no.*

*Rory: well, you’re welcome. you can come in if you want, but you were scheduled for training so you don’t have to*

*Phil: do you WANT me to*

*Rory: i mean, i always like seeing you, but it’s not that busy today*

*Phil: call me if you need me.*

He flops onto his sofa and frowns at his phone. He goes into his messages to check if he’s missed one from Dan. Nothing.

It’s odd. They’d been texting back and forth all day yesterday, but today, when Dan’s apparently feeling too poorly to go to work, nothing. He doesn’t want to pry, so he tries to make himself busy to distract from his confusion and curiosity. He finishes his book. He makes himself some food. He even goes so far as to do the washing up from his and Dan’s attempt at crispy cakes.

Eventually he caves and sends Dan a quick, hopefully casual message.

*Phil: heard you were sick, you ok?*
He never hears back. He spends the rest of the day bored and slightly unsettled, messing about on the internet and texting Jimmy every once in a while to avoid spiraling into the all too familiar space of despairing at his current station in life.

He sleeps in Jimmy’s bed again. It still smells so much like him.

He’s awakened early the next morning by the ringing of his cellphone. He answers still half asleep, not even thinking clearly enough to check who’s calling.

“Hullo?”

The voice that answers is dull. Flat. “Hey.”

Phil sits up, suddenly feeling much more awake. “Dan?”

“Yeah.” His voice is wrong, like a facsimile of its normal tone.

“What time is it?” Phil asks. He really needs to get a proper clock. Well, Jimmy does.

“Fuck. I dunno. Sorry. Forgot to check.”

Phil digs the heel of his palm into his eye, waiting for Dan to explain this bizarre call, to say something that might explain the lifelessness in his voice. He doesn’t. All Phil can hear is slow breaths on the other end.

“Is everything alright?” he asks timidly.

Dan doesn’t answer the question. Instead he asks one of his own. “What are you doing today?”

“What’s today? Thursday? I don’t think we’re scheduled to work today, are we?”

“No.”

Phil fumbles on Jimmy’s nightstand for his glasses. He needs at least one thing not to be blurry right now. “Well then I’m not doing anything.”

There is silence between them for so long that Phil pulls the phone away from his ear and checks that he’s not accidentally hung up. He hasn’t. He’s about to ask Dan what’s going on when he hears him clear his throat.

“Remember a few days ago when I told you not to take it personally if I ever acted different?”

“Yeah…”

“I have a really strange request.”

Phil pulls his knees up to his chest. “Let’s hear it.”

“Can I come over and watch you play Zelda all day?”

Phil’s first instinct might have been to laugh if Dan’s voice didn’t sound so utterly somber. He wants to ask what that means. Badly. But it seems immediately obvious that something is wrong and he’d rather not scare Dan off. “Sure, if you want.”

“Thanks, mate.” He sounds infinitesimally less miserable. “Can I come now? I… I don’t want to be alone right now.”
“Yeah, of course. Give me like five minutes to shower.” Phil says, throwing the duvet off his legs.

“Shower. Right. I should probably do that too.”

Phil can’t help himself. “Are you ok, Dan?”

He’s quiet a minute before he answers. “I will be. See you soon. And thanks.” He hangs up.

Phil doesn’t waste any time brushing his teeth and hopping in the shower. He pulls on black sweats and the first t-shirt he can find. He’s just putting the kettle on for coffee when he hears a knock at the door. He hasn’t even had time to do his hair yet.

He opens the door and Dan is stood there, looking rather like a shell of himself. His hair is obviously still wet and curling wildly. He’s wearing red plaid pyjama pants and his ringwraith jacket. His eyes are cradled by little half moon bruises, his lids heavy.

“Hey, Phil,” he croaks. His lips are dry and cracked.

Phil lets him in without a word and watches him take off his coat and head straight for the sofa in the lounge. He folds himself into the corner and lays his head down against the armrest, hugging his arms around his legs.

“Do you want a coffee?” Phil calls to him from the kitchen.

“Yes please.”

He comes back a few minutes later with two mugs and hands one to Dan, who seems grateful. He takes a long drink before saying, “Thanks.”

Phil has to physically bite his tongue. It’s perfectly obvious now that something is wrong, but Dan doesn’t seem sick in the typical sense--no cough, no sneezing, no runny nose. He just looks… different. Like he’s far away, even though they’re sat right next to each other.

Phil watches Dan down his whole mug before he’s even had two sips from his own. “Did you want another one?” Phil asks.

Dan puts the mug on the coffee table and looks at Phil with glassy eyes. “I’ll have another later if you do. Thanks. Can I get myself some water?”

Phil nods. “There’s Ribena in the fridge if you want.”

Dan’s face remains passive but he says, “Great. Thanks.” He goes to the kitchen and returns with his coffee mug full to the brim with Ribena.

Phil watches him down that too. “Dan…”

“Sorry. Thirsty. Forgot to drink.”

“Today? Or…”

Dan puts the mug back down and curls up into the corner of the sofa again. “I’m alright,” he says.

Phil takes a sip of his coffee, trying to will his his erratic pulse to slow a little. Working at Starbucks for so many years, he’d long since stopped feeling the jittery effects of caffeine.

“So you wanna play Zelda?” Phil asks.
Dan shakes his head. “Don’t wanna play anything. Just want to watch.” He looks at Phil pleadingly. “If that’s ok.”

So Phil puts in the game and starts playing. He tries to focus, but it’s hard. He still hasn’t even checked what time it is. The situation is just so bizarre that he can’t shake the feeling that he should be doing more to try to help Dan.

At one point Phil looks over at Dan. He’s curled up along the armrest of his sofa with his arms wrapped around himself. He’s shivering a little.

“Are you cold?” Phi asks, honestly a little horrified.

Dan shakes his head. Phil pauses the game and shuffles sideways a little, placing his hand on Dan’s arm and feeling the goosebumps that travel along his skin.

“Dan, what the hell? You’re freezing.”

Dan just shrugs.

Phil gets up and goes to his room, grabbing a hoodie out of his wardrobe. He comes back and tosses it to Dan. “Put this on, Howell.”

Dan holds it out in front of him, inspecting it. It just so happens to be Phil’s bright green York hoodie. “Really not my aesthetic,” Dan murmurs. He turns to Phil and gives him just the slightest hint of a smile.

Phil chokes out a laugh. “Beggars can’t be choosers. It’s this or a bright blue one that says ‘pugs not drugs.’”

“This’ll do,” Dan says, pulling it over the mess of fluffy curls atop his head.

“Better?”

Dan nods, pulling the hood up and tucking his knees tight to his chest. “Thanks, Phil.”

“Do you want a turn now?” Phil asks, holding the controller out in Dan’s direction.

Dan shakes his head. “Just wanna watch, if that’s ok.”

“Ok. Let me know if you change your mind.”

He plays for another hour before his stomach starts growling. He’d forgotten he hadn’t actually had a chance to eat yet. He pauses the game and looks over at Dan, who’s still staring blankly at the screen.

“Dan?”

He turns his head lazily in Phil’s direction. “Hmm?”

“Did you by any chance forget to eat, too?”

Dan frowns, his hand moving up to lay against his stomach. “I think so. I can’t remember eating anything.”

“Today?”
“Uh… I don’t… I can’t remember.”

Phil tries to swallow down the strange spike of panic that threatens to overtake him then. “Ok. Can I make you something to eat? I’m hungry anyway.”

Dan shrugs. “I’m not really hungry.”

“If I make you something, will you eat it for me?” Phil asks, trying to keep his voice from wavering. “Please?”

The shakiness in Phil’s poorly disguised pleading seems to stir something in Dan. He lifts his head from the armrest and sits up. “Yeah, of course. Sorry. Can I help you?”

Phil shakes his head. “You should rest. It’s not a problem. I still don’t really have anything super healthy but I can make you a sandwich?”

Dan nods and smiles a little. He tries to anyway. Phil can tell it’s forced, but it’s better than the unsettling vacancy of before.

“K. Be right back. Do you want me to put something on for you?” He gestures to the tv.

Dan shakes his head and stands up. “Don’t wanna be alone. Coming with you, if that’s ok.”

Phil grabs their empty mugs and they walk to the kitchen together. Dan sits at the kitchen table and Phil pulls out whatever he can scrounge together to make them each a sandwich. He also puts more water in the kettle.

He sets the food down in front of Dan the instant he’s finished making it. The desire he feels to watch Dan eat is all-consuming at this point. He looks pale and his shoulders are hunched and Phil can’t seem to shake this overwhelming suspicion that Dan has been neglecting even the most basic of his needs.

“Eat,” he commands when Dan makes no moves to pick up the food.

He waits, watches until Dan has eaten half the sandwich before getting up and making them each another coffee. When he sits down and slides Dan the mug, he’s relieved to see that the food is gone and Dan has a hint of colour in cheeks.

“Drink this.”

Dan actually gives Phil a little chuckle at that, but he picks up the mug and takes a long swig.

“You know your coffee kind of tastes like shit right?”

Phil sighs. He’s heard this from Jimmy countless times. “I know. It doesn’t appear to be stopping you from drinking it though, does it?”

“Beggars can’t be choosers, remember?” Dan continues to drink it, even as he’s slagging it off. “Can’t you get a pound of free coffee a week or something from Starbucks?”

“Yeah. But I like it like this better.”

Dan gives him a horrified look.

“Blame my mum, ok? She ruined me. She used to give me instant coffee as a child to get me out of bed in the morning. I never stood a chance.”
“Wow. Mrs. Lester gave no fucks, did she?”

Phil shrugs. “She’s very northern."

Dan does another little half smile. They’re quiet as they drink, sat across from each other at the small kitchen table.

“You know I’m only kidding, right?” Dan says softly after a while. “This is great. I needed this.”

Phil can’t seem to do anything but nod, looking down at the grainy dregs at the bottom of his mug. He’s afraid if he opens his mouth, the questions he’s been biting back all morning will spill out. He doesn’t want to scare Dan away, not when he’s so obviously fragile.

“You’re not taking me personally, are you?”

Phil looks up from his mug and into Dan’s eyes. They look a little more aware now, a little brighter, but worried.

“Of course not,” Phil says. “You told me not to.”

“People don’t usually listen to me.” He sounds so small.

“I’m good people, though, remember?”

Dan smiles then, a real one that creases the corners of his eyes and dimples his cheeks. “That’s true.”

“Do you want to, like… talk about it?” Phil knows he sounds awkward and stilted, but he thinks it’s worth it if he can help in some way.

Dan shakes his head. “Not right now.”

“Are you still hungry?”

Dan laughs. “No. I wasn’t really hungry before.” He seems to notice the look Phil gives him and quickly qualifies. “It’s good you made me eat though. I’m not supposed to go so long without eating.”

“It seems like you have a lot of rules to follow,” Phil says quietly. He can’t even remember all the times he’s heard Dan say the words ‘I’m not supposed to’ over the past week.

“Yeah.”

“Would you be breaking any if you played Mario Kart with me?”

Dan smiles. “No.”

“Do you want to?”

“Yeah. Today might be your only hope of actually beating me.”
Chapter 11

Phil beats Dan three times in a row before asking if he’s ok.

“I am.” He puts down the controller and wraps Phil’s sweater around his fists. “I’m just really tired. Sorry. I thought I could do it.”

Phil frowns. “Do you want me to take you home?”

“No,” Dan replies quickly and emphatically. “I really don’t. Not unless you want me out.”

“Dan.” Phil feels a pang in his chest when he thinks of how many people must have pushed Dan away in the past for him to be so expectant of rejection. “You can stay as long as you need to.”

“Thank you.”

“But seriously, do you want to take a nap or something? You can take my bed, or Jimmy’s. Or even right here if you’d prefer.”

Dan shakes his head. “I just wanna watch you do whatever you’d be doing if I wasn’t here,” Dan says, tucking himself up again and resting his head against the arm of the sofa.

Phil chuckles, picturing Dan watching him chatting with his mum or re-watching his cringey amateur horror movies from uni.

Dan seems to misunderstand the reason for Phil’s laughter. “I mean… not that!” He buries his face in the crook of his arm. “Not pervy stuff!”

“I wasn’t thinking that!” Phil insists. “I don’t do pervy stuff!”

Dan looks at him incredulously.

“I don’t!”

“Shut up, Phil, we all do pervy stuff sometimes.”

Phil bites his lip, suddenly feeling that particular clench in his gut that reminds him he’s not like everyone else. It’s the first time he’s felt it in Dan’s company. He hates it even more than he usually does.

“Maybe I’m different.” Phil surprises himself. He doesn’t say things like that to anyone but Jimmy.

Dan definitely notes the lack of joking in Phil’s tone. He just looks at him for a while with a little crease between his eyebrows. “You are,” he says finally. “That’s why I’m here. That’s what I like about you.”

They stare at each other for a long time before Phil looks away.

“What would you be doing if I wasn’t here, Phil?”

He thinks about it. He wishes he had a better answer. “Probably watching The Shining.”

“Really?”
“Yeah, I just finished reading the book again and I like comparing the two. They’re both so good but the movie is so different it’s hardly even the same story. It’s amazing, really, all the little things Stanley Kubrick managed to sneak into the film without anyone really noticing. Every time I watch I notice something new. It’s one of my favourite Stephen King novels. It’s also one of my favourite films but for completely different reasons, which I just think is really fascinating…” He trails off when he realizes he’s rambling properly and probably boring Dan to tears.

“Sorry. Sometimes I let my inner horror fanboy and over-educated film nerd combine and it’s just not good for anybody.”

“Let’s watch it,” Dan says. “You can point stuff out to me.”

“Really? We don’t have to. That’d probably be so boring and annoying for you.”

Dan shakes his head. “I want to. It sounds perfect.”

“But aren’t you tired?”

Dan looks down at his sweater paws. “Yeah. But… it’s hard to explain. It’s comforting to watch people doing something they really enjoy, you know? And that’s what I really need right now.”

“Ok,” Phil says softly. “Do you need anything first?”

Dan laughs. “No, Phil. God, you’re gonna be such a good mum someday. Put on the movie.”

So he does. He puts on the movie and turns off all the lights in the flat. “Proper mood lighting is important,” he tells a smiling Dan. He pauses it every couple of minutes to point things out and rant about the film’s genius.

About an hour and a half into the film he pauses it to explain the importance of a certain prop when he looks over at Dan and sees that he’s fallen asleep. He still has the hood of Phil’s green sweater pulled up over his head, but now, in unconsciousness, a few stray curls have managed to slip out and rest gently against his forehead. His lips are parted slightly and his breaths are slow and deep.

He looks impossibly young like this, too young for whatever’s happening to make him look the way he had when Phil had opened the door this morning.

Phil gets up carefully and fetches his duvet from his bedroom. He lays it gently over Dan’s curled up body before resuming the film. He turns down the volume a little and watches the remaining hour in peaceful silence.

When it ends he goes to the kitchen and starts washing the small pile of dishes beside the sink. He’s just washing the last mug when he hears a rather deep voice right beside him.

“I fell asleep.”

Phil jumps, splashing water onto his shirt.

Dan laughs. “Sorry.”

Phil clutches his chest. “You can’t do that to a person who’s just watched a horror film in the dark.”

“Sorry,” Dan says again. He’s still got Phil’s duvet wrapped around his shoulders. “And sorry for falling asleep. After I said I didn’t want to nap, too.”

Phil shakes his head. “It’s ok. You obviously needed it. Feel better?”
Dan yawns. “I do, actually. Loads. You’ll have to show me the rest of the film sometime, though. I need to see how it ends, as narrated by Phil Lester.”

Phil snorts. “You don’t have to pretend you were interested. I know I’m ridiculous.”

“You’re not. And I was. It was really interesting. You obviously know a lot about horror films.”

Phil dries the mug and places it in the cupboard. “Wanna hear something embarrassing?” He almost can’t believe he’s about to say what he’s about to say.

“Always,” Dan says.

“I tried to make some when I was still at York.”

“Make some what?”

“Horror films.”

“No way.”

Phil starts walking back towards the lounge and Dan follows. “Yeah. Mortifying.”

“Do you still have them?” Dan asks.

He really wants to say no. He doesn’t think he could survive the humiliation of showing them to Dan. Why did he even bring this up in the first place? Why is he so incapable of being anything but his painfully authentic self when Dan is around?

“Maybe,” he mumbles.

“You’re not going to make me beg, are you Lester?”

Phil pushes his glasses up his nose. “I think I’d literally rather die than show those to another living soul.”

“I’m barely living, tbh.”

“Oh shut up. You look much better than before,” Phil says. It’s true. The dark circles under his eyes are nearly gone. His cheeks are pink and his eyes are clear. Even his voice sounds different.

“Ouch, mate.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Stop trying to distract me. You have some films to show me.”

“They’re not like actual films. More like… short films I guess. I really hesitate to use the word film. It’s an insult to proper films.”

“You can’t tell me something like that and not show me,” Dan whines. “I promise I won’t judge you. Next time I’ll bring you over the paper I wrote on tort reform. That’s worse than anything you could show me.”

Even as Phil’s shaking his head, he’s walking toward his bedroom to grab his laptop. He thinks he’s remembered a perfect way to compromise. He ducks into his room and grabs his macbook. Dan follows him in and plops himself down in the middle of Phil’s unmade bed.
“I’ll show you something I made before uni. It’s actually probably better anyway.”

Dan raises his eyebrows. “Before uni?”

Phil sits on the edge of the bed and opens up the video file. “I may have been twelve.”

“You made a horror film when you were twelve?”

“Not just me. My friends helped.”

“Still,” Dan says, pulling the duvet tighter around his shoulders. “I didn’t even have friends when I was twelve, let alone ones who’d make a movie with me. I was even worse off then than I am now.”

“I loved being a kid,” Phil says. “Everything felt easier.”

“Believe it or not, I’m much happier now,” Dan says. He reaches up and fiddles nervously with his fringe. “I just have the odd day every once in awhile.”

“Days like today?” Phil asks quietly. He doesn’t want to scare Dan off, but the questions are starting to burn him up a little.

“Like yesterday actually.”

“Oh.” He doesn’t know what else to say.

“Yeah. Sorry I didn’t answer your text, by the way. I didn’t actually see it til this morning. That’s actually why I called you.”

Phil hesitates a moment before saying, “You can call me right away next time. If you want. You don’t have to wait til the next day.”

Dan turns his head away from Phil then, chewing on his bottom lip.

Phil’s stomach sinks. He’d done exactly what he’d been trying not to do. He’d pushed it too far. “Sorry--”

“No,” Dan says, looking back at Phil. “I appreciate that. It’s just…”

Phil looks at him expectantly. “What?”

“I don’t wanna get too deep here,” Dan laughs apprehensively. “We like, just met and I’m already making it weird. Fuck.”

“You’re not. I’m the one who asked.”

“It’s just a lot. Those days. They’re intense.”

“All the more reason not to go through them alone.”

Dan tilts his head to the side a little and just looks at him. “Are you even real?” he asks quietly.

Phil looks down at his computer, shaking his fringe into his eye, trying to hide his smile. He doesn’t know what to say. He doesn’t trust himself not to say something nerdy and awkward--though that hasn’t seemed to bother Dan yet.

“Are you going to show me this video or what?”
Phil’s finger hovers above the trackpad, ready to press play. “You’re going to owe me after this, Howell. Big time.”

“I already do,” Dan laughs. “Just add this to the list, mate.”

“Just remember, I was literally twelve and Martyn was like thirteen or fourteen.”

“Who’s Martyn?”

“My brother. He helped me edit this monstrosity together. Badly.”

“I promise not to laugh. Too much.”

Phil opens his mouth to make some more excuses, but Dan cuts him off.

“Please, show it to me. I’ll die of curiosity now if you don’t.”

“I’m doing this to give you a laugh because I feel like you need it. It does not reflect my actual skills.”

“Play it!” Dan squeals.

He laughs all the way through the six minute video. It’s quite a bit worse than Phil had remembered, but he still finds himself strangely proud of himself. It’s amateurish in every conceivable way, but it’s still technically a film. He and his friends had written, shot and edited it in a few days with a 90’s camcorder and the pure desire to create something. He wishes he still had that kind of passion, that kind of drive.

“You promised not to laugh,” Phil whines after it’s over.

“Too much,” Dan says, swiping at his eye. “I said I wouldn’t laugh too much.”

“You’re literally crying you laughed so hard.”

“Sorry. I tried.”

Phil closes his laptop and tosses it onto his pillow. “Did you?”

“Not really. But you said you were trying to give me a laugh. It worked.”

“It did.”

“But no, really, it was great. It wasn’t half bad for a group of kids. I can’t wait to see your uni ones.”

“Never happening,” Phil says, standing up off the bed. “Never ever.”

“I’ll get you to cave eventually.”

“Never,” Phil repeats.

“Oh, God,” Dan says suddenly, slapping his palm over his open mouth.

Phil’s heart thuds against his chest. “What?”

“Tomorrow’s the thirty-first isn’t it?”

“Yeah…”
“Halloween.”

“Yes, Dan, very good,” Phil laughs.

“Rory’s party.”


Phil sits back down on the edge of the bed. “Do you still want to go? I can tell her you’re not up to it, you don’t have to worry.”

Dan runs his fingers through his curly fringe, pushing it back off his forehead into something of a quiff. “Are you still going?”

Phil sighs. “I have to. She’ll kill me if I don’t.”

“I’ll go then. If you promise not to abandon me for all your cooler friends.”

Phil snorts. “Right. I think I told you she’ll have a million people there and I won’t know any of them.”

“I guess I didn’t really believe you?” Dan says uncertainly.

“Why not?”

Dan shrugs. “So we’re going?”

Phil smiles. “Yeah, we’re going. Do you have a costume?”

“Kind of. I’ve had it since I was like fifteen for when I get dragged to parties. I don’t usually get that into Halloween. Do you?”

“Not going to parties. Jimmy and I usually just marathon all the Scream movies and eat sweets til we’re sick.”

“That sounds much better than going to a party,” Dan muses. “Can we do that instead?”

“Only if you want to find a new place to work,” Phil chuckles. “We could…” he lets himself trail off.

“Could what?”

Phil pulls his phone out of his back pocket and checks the time. It’s not that late yet, but it’s getting there. “I was going to say… no, wait.”

“What?”

“You said you’re not supposed to stay up all night anymore.”

“Did I?”

Phil nods.

“Ok…”
“I’m guessing your list of ‘not supposed tos’ has something to do with preventing days like yesterday?” he asks softly.

Dan nods slowly.

“So you probably shouldn’t marathon the Scream movies with me tonight, right? Because there are four of them.”

Dan bites his lip.

“Did you stay up all night last night?” Phil asks.

Dan nods again.

“And you will again tomorrow because of the party.”

Dan laughs. “Unless it’s the one Halloween party in history that’s going to take place before the sun goes down.”

“I guess…. You should get to sleep early tonight, then, yeah?”

Dan’s still sat in the middle of Phil’s bed with the duvet wrapped around himself like a burrito. He looks cozy, at home. He looks like he doesn’t want to leave. Phil realizes that he really doesn’t want him to leave either.

“I did have a nap…”

Phil smiles. “True. And you can have one tomorrow.”

“We don’t work?” Dan asks.

Phil shakes his head. “What if…”

Dan laughs. “Fuck’s sake, Phil. Quit leaving me hanging.”

“Maybe we could do something to balance out the not sleeping,” Phil says, pulling his feet up off the floor and crossing them underneath himself. “Something on the ‘not supposed to’ list. I mean, unless you’d rather just go home and sleep.”

Dan smiles, shaking his head. “I definitely don’t want to go home. I’m not supposed to be alone on days like this if I can help it.”

“So we’re already off to a good start.” Phil grins. “What else can we do? What else are you not supposed to do?”

Dan bites his lip. “Eat like shit.”

“Oh, yeah. Well we can eat something healthy, instead. I don’t need any more sweets in my body, anyway. What else? What are you supposed to do?”

“Exercise.”

Phil scrunches up his nose.

“I know,” Dan says. “Trust me I know. I’m not doing too well with that one.”
Phil takes a minute to think. “I’ve got it. We can go for a walk first.”

“If we have to,” Dan says, but he’s smiling.

“Yeah, it’ll be good. We can go to the shop and get something not shit for you to eat.”

“Alright.” Dan pulls out his phone then and looks at it quickly before sliding it back into his pocket. “It really will be late, though. I don’t want… Don’t feel like you have to do this. I’ll be alright.”

“I want to,” Phil says firmly. It’s not a white lie. It’s not simply a kindness he’s trying to do so that Dan doesn’t have to be alone when he doesn’t want to be. He wants to. “You could…”

Dan rolls his eyes. “Phil, I swear to god…”

“You could stay over. If you want. Jimmy’s not here, like I said, so you can take his bed. It’s nicer than mine is.”

“Yeah?”

Phil nods. “That way I don’t have to walk you home in the dark, either.”

“Oi.”

“Just admit that it’s a good plan,” Phil says smugly.

“It’s a good plan.” Dan brings his thumb up to his mouth and starts biting on the nail. “There’s just one thing. One more ‘not supposed to.’”

“What?”

“Not supposed to skip a day taking my pills. And they’re at home.”

“Oh, ok. Well… we could go pick them up? And anything else you need? Then you could sleep like all day if you want and we can go straight to Rory’s from here?”

Dan beams. It’s almost a little ridiculous, Phil thinks, how happy Dan looks right now. He’s quickly becoming addicted to being the cause of that kind of happiness. It’s such a stark contrast to the look on Dan’s face when he’d showed up on Phil’s door just this morning that Phil has to ask himself if he’d simply imagined Dan’s sallow skin and sunken eyes.

“Sounds good,” Dan says. Phil is pretty sure he thinks it’s more than good. Those dimples say something a little more than good.

“Alright, then,” Phil says, standing up again. “Shall we?”

Dan groans and flops face down into Phil’s mattress. “Ugh. I hate exercise.”

“I think walking is like the very bare minimum physical activity that could even be considered exercise,” Phil chuckles.

“Still,” Dan says, voice muffled by the sheets.

“Come on.” Phil pulls the duvet from around Dan’s shoulders. “Let’s just get it over with.”

They bundle up as best they can. Dan keeps Phil’s hoodie on underneath his jacket. Phil digs through his closet until he finds his metallic-looking winter ‘space coat.’ Dan laughs and tells him he
looks like an astronaut.

“Maybe that’s exactly the look I was going for,” Phil retorts.

It’s cold out so they both move their long legs quickly, arriving at Dan’s house after just a few minutes. Phil waits on the porch while Dan fetches his things. He returns quickly with a backpack thrown over his shoulder. He’s still wearing the red plaid pj bottoms.

“You got your costume?” Phil asks.

“Oh bloody hell.” Dan spins on his heels and goes right back inside. “One sec.”

The walk to the shop takes a little longer, but Phil finds he doesn’t mind. It’s cold, but the quick pace of their feet helps him keep the feeling in his toes. Leaves crunch beneath their feet and the air smells crisp and slightly smoky and Phil remembers how much he actually loves this time of year.

“No so bad, right?” he says, looking at Dan.

His cheeks are rosy, his hands shoved deep in the pockets of his jacket. “It’s kind of nice. The cold air feels good. I always forget that,” Dan muses. “I forget about all the things I like on the bad days.”

They go overboard at Tesco, loading a basket up with every kind of fruit they can find. “It’s just a different kind of sweet,” Phil explains.

Dan sheds his jacket and tucks himself up into the corner of the sofa as soon as they get back to Phil’s flat. Phil puts on the movie and they eat grapes and oranges and bananas until a small mountain of peels rises up from the middle of the coffee table.

It’s very different from halloween movie marathons of years past, but Phil is coming to realize he doesn’t mind. In fact, he kind of likes it. No one will ever replace Jimmy. He knows without a doubt they’ll be friends for the rest of their lives. But now, for the first time in his adult life, Phil is starting to think he can have more, that maybe there isn’t actually anything wrong with him. Maybe Jimmy isn’t the only one capable of tolerating him.

They make it through the first film and half of the second before Phil feels Dan’s foot press into his calf. He turns his head, thinking Dan’s trying to get his attention. He’s not. His head rests against the arm of the sofa, his hands nestled up under his chin. His dark eyelashes are fanned out across his cheeks and his breathing is slow and quiet. Phil smiles, wondering how long Dan’s been asleep while the shrill sound of screams blare at them from the telly.

Phil checks the time on his phone—it’s really not all that late. He gets up carefully, just as he had earlier in the day for Dan’s first nap, and turns off the movie. He stands between the sofa and the tv for a while, unsure of what to do next.

In the end he decides it’s probably best just to let Dan sleep. He can’t really pretend to know what Dan’s gone through the past couple days, but the stark contrast of his vacant stare this morning and the rosy tranquility that blankets his features now pulls at something in Phil’s chest.

He fetches his duvet and drapes it over Dan’s body before going to brush his teeth and climbing into Jimmy’s bed once again. He falls asleep before he even has time to remember he hasn’t texted Jimmy once all day.
Hey guys so I just have to add a little trigger warning for this chapter for brief mentions of past self-harm behaviour. It's nothing graphic at all, but I still thought I should add a warning.

He wakes up fairly early the next morning—early for him, anyway. He yawns, stretches, checks his phone. He has messages from Jimmy and Rory, messages he doesn’t really want to check before he’s had coffee. He knows Jimmy will be miffed at being ignored all day and Rory will be talking to him about the dreaded party. He checks them anyway and promises himself he’ll respond to them soon.

It takes him a moment to remember who’s asleep on the sofa in his lounge. When he does, he springs up nervously. He puts on his glasses and walks down the hall as quietly as he can. Dan’s still sleeping, buried under the blue and green of Phil’s duvet. All Phil can see is a socked foot sticking out one end and Dan’s fluffy curls on the other.

Phil takes the opportunity to brush his teeth and take a quick shower. When he returns, Dan’s still sleeping. He must really have needed that sleep, Phil thinks, glad in the end that they hadn’t stayed up to watch all four films.

He goes to the kitchen and puts water on for coffee, trying to be as quiet as he can. He’s just reaching up into his cupboard for a cereal bowl when he hears Dan padding into the kitchen.

“Guess I don’t need to sleep all day after all. Sorry I fell asleep so early,” he says, voice deep and gravelly. His hair is wild, curls sticking out in every direction and his eyes and lips are puffy with sleep. In his half-awake state, he still retains something of the look of youthful innocence Phil had noticed yesterday as he slept.

“Don’t be,” Phil says. “You clearly needed it. Feel better?”

Dan nods. “Thanks for the blanket.”

“You want coffee?” Phil asks.

“Always.”

Phil takes out two mugs. “It’s still the same crappy coffee as yesterday.”

Dan chuckles. “It’s fine.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t wake you up last night and help you get to an actual bed. You just looked so…”

“It’s fine, Phil. Your sofa is pretty cozy. I didn’t even wake up once.” He stretches his arms up over his head. He’s still wearing Phil’s sweater.

“Hungry?” Phil asks.
They drink coffee and eat cereal on the sofa while watching an episode of Adventure Time.

“Do you want me to clear out?” Dan asks, after the episode ends and another starts loading. “You’re probably so sick of me.”

“No,” Phil’s answer is immediate. “Not at all.” He decides right then and there there’s really no point in being coy or nonchalant. He doesn’t have to pretend not to want to spend time with someone he actually does want to spend time with just to maintain some ridiculous pretense of cool. He’s not cool—never has been and never will be. He’s enjoying his time with Dan. Quite a lot actually. So why would he act like he’s not? “Not unless you want to.”

Dan shakes his head. “I don’t.”

“Ok. So,” Phil says, after he’s drained the last of his coffee and watched Dan do the same. “Is there anything else on your ‘not supposed to’ list you want to cross off today?”

“Oh, right,” Dan says, and reaches for his backpack. He pulls out a small prescription bottle. “Thanks for reminding me.”

“Anything else?” Phil asks after Dan’s taken his pill.

“Can I have a shower?”

Phil laughs. “Of course.”

While Dan showers, Phil straightens his hair and responds to Jimmy’s increasingly annoyed messages.

_Jimmy: i’m going to have to have a word with this boy if he insists on keeping you from me like this
Phil: how’d you even know he was here?
Jimmy: when else do u ignore me like this
Phil: fair enough
Jimmy: was he there all day or what
Phil: he still is actually
Jimmy: he stayed over??
Phil: yeah. he slept on the couch
Jimmy: i’m not gonna say anything
Phil: good. Don’t
Jimmy: can i tho
Phil: -.-
Jimmy: i’m just curious
Phil: we’re friends. He’s only been in london like a month. He doesn’t really have any friends here yet_
Jimmy: except for you

Phil: right

Jimmy: and that's all it is?

Phil sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. Even Jimmy has trouble with this, even after all these years.

Phil: yes. i’m still just me. i didn’t just magically become normal overnight.

Jimmy: you are normal

Phil: ok. i’ve got to go

Jimmy: don’t be mad. i’ve just not seen you like this before.

Phil: i’m not. just gotta get ready

Jimmy: for what??

Phil: rory’s party :/

Jimmy: phil lester is going to a party?

Phil: shut up

Jimmy: have fun!!! tell me all about it later!

Phil: i will. Miss you

Jimmy: you too babe

Phil goes out to the lounge to wait for Dan, who joins him a few minutes later wearing a black t-shirt and black sweats.

“Is that your costume?” Phil asks.

Dan sits next to him on the sofa, and it’s the first time he doesn’t curl up and tuck himself into the corner of it. “Is that yours?” he asks, gesturing to Phil’s plaid button up and black skinny jeans.

“Pretty much,” Phil chuckles. “Just need to add the ears when it’s time.”

“Rory’s going to be so disappointed in us.”

Phil shrugs. “I warned her.”

Dan grins. “Alright, Lester. I need to redeem myself at Mario Kart after yesterday, you in?”

The day passes quickly. They make more coffee and play mario kart for hours. Phil even manages to win a few times. Phil insists they eat more fruit for lunch and take a walk afterwards.

“You’re going to be staying up late tonight,” he reminds Dan. “We need to keep the ‘not supposed tos’ to as much of a minimum as possible.”

Dan gives him a smile so warm Phil feels the urge to look away. He doesn’t though. He just smiles back and tosses Dan his coat.
They come back rosy-cheeked and invigorated from the cold and the sun. Phil checks his phone and sees he has two missed calls from Rory. They both flop down onto the sofa.

“Crap. I should call her back.”

Dan pulls out his own phone while Phil dials her number.

“Hello?”

“Hi,” Phil says sheepishly.

“Where’ve you been, Phil?”

“Sorry, sorry. Just busy.”

She sounds distracted. There are voices intermingling between hers. “Are you still coming tonight?”

“If you still want me to.”

“Don’t be a twat, of course I do.”

“I’ll be there, then.”

“Ok,” she sounds pleased. Phil can practically see her smile through the phone. “Do you know how Dan’s doing? Do you think he still wants to come?”

Phil grins and looks over at Dan. “He’s alright. He’s still coming.”

“Are you talking about me?” Dan asks, looking up from his phone.

“Is that him? Are you with him right now?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh. That’s… cool.’ She doesn’t necessarily sound like she thinks it’s cool. She gives him the address to her parents’ place and reminds him how to get there. “See you tonight.”

They decide to finish the movie they’d been watching last night and then the third. It’s possible Phil snacks on marshmallows straight from the bag.

“Do we have time for the fourth?” Dan asks as the credits roll.

“Not unless you want to be super late,” Phil says, though he really wishes they could just stay here instead.

Dan shakes his head. “I like having a job.”

“We’d better get ready then,” Phil says grudgingly.

Dan grabs his backpack and heads for the bathroom. Phil goes to his bedroom and rummages around his wardrobe until he finds what he’s looking for--a black velvet headband with plaid kitten ears.

“Are we putting our costumes on now or no?” Dan calls from the bathroom.

“I think so,” Phil shouts back. He places the headband on his head and looks in the mirror, rearranging his fringe until he has it the way he wants it.
By the time he returns to the lounge, Dan’s already there, wearing ripped black skinny jeans and a fuzzy brown shirt with matching wristbands. His curls suddenly look less fluffy and more defined. He’s got black studs in his ears again and Phil thinks he sees some kind of dark makeup on Dan’s eyes. It’s subtle and Phil’s not exactly an expert so he doesn’t know if it’s mascara or liner or shadow, but it’s something. Something that makes Dan’s warm brown eyes pop.

Phil can’t help but laugh, though. It’s such a strange combination, the tight jeans and the gorgeous hair with the fluffy shirt.

“What are you supposed to be?”

Dan holds up his hands and makes claws with his fingers. “Rawr. I’m a bear.”

Phil covers his eyes with his hand and shakes his head.

“Jealous?” Dan asks, smirking.

“Hold on,” Phil says, ignoring Dan’s question and leaving to fetch something out of his bedroom. He returns with a sharpie and pops the lid off. “Give me your face.”

Dan laughs but he steps forward into Phil’s space, close enough for Phil to take Dan’s chin into his hand gently. He leans in and draws a black circle on the tip of Dan’s nose and little black spots on his cheeks.

“There,” he says, releasing Dan’s chin and taking a step back to admire his handiwork. “Now you look like a bear.”

“Thanks.”

Phil holds the sharpie out for Dan to take. “Here, get me on, would you?”

Dan snorts.

“Get them on me!” Phil corrects, giggling. “Get them on me!”

This time it’s Dan’s turn to lean in and take hold of Phil’s jaw. He wonders if Dan can tell that he hadn’t bothered shaving this morning. Even through the stubble he can feel that the tips of Dan’s long fingers are incredibly soft. Their faces are so close. He feels the cold sharpie against the tip of his nose and it’s flooded with the sharp, chemical scent.

“Ugh,” he says, once Dan’s stepped away and put the cap back on the pen. “I hope Rory doesn’t mind us showing up to her party high on sharpie fumes.”

They both go to the bathroom to check the artwork on their faces.

“People are gonna think we planned this,” Phil says, tracing his finger over the whiskers Dan’s drawn him.

“It does kind of look like a couples costume,” Dan agrees. “But only because of the sharpie. I mean I thought my costume was bad.” He rakes his eyes down Phil’s body. “That’s not even a costume.”

“Course it is,” Phil argues. “I’m embodying the ‘give no shits’ essence of a cat by giving no shits about my costume.”

Dan laughs. “Fair enough.”
“You ready?” Phil asks.

Dan nods.

It’s already dark out by the time they leave Phil’s flat but slightly less cold than a few days ago. Dan’s furry shirt and wristbands are covered by his long black coat—Phil isn’t sure if that makes the haphazardly scribbled bear face look more or less strange.

The tube is packed with people, many of them already drunk. A few of them are wearing costumes, but not enough for Phil not to fear he and Dan stick out like sore thumbs. He’s glad he’s not the only one, at least. His costume probably would have been even more lame if he didn’t have Dan there for solidarity.

They stand next to each other, shoulders pressed together, holding the bar above their heads. Phil still finds it odd to be shorter than someone, even if it is just an inch or two. As the train jostles along, getting closer and closer to their destination, Phil begins to feel the familiar fluttering of nerves. He’s on his way to thirty and still doesn’t know how to do social gatherings without getting heart palpitations.

He’s glad Dan’s here, but he can’t seem to help fearing he’ll be ditched as soon as they get there. He doesn’t know why that thought sends a cold shot of dread down his spine. It’s just a party. Not a big deal. Rory will be there, maybe a few other people from work. He’s not so hopelessly awkward that he can’t make small talk with strangers. He just really really doesn’t want to.

“I should warn you,” Phil says, because he feels like acknowledging his shortcomings before they’re on display will protect him from judgement, “I’m bad at parties.”

Dan turns his head and smiles. “So am I. I feel like we talked about this before.”

“Yeah, but I wasn’t joking.”

“I wasn’t either,” Dan says.

“So you’re not going to ditch me?”

Dan frowns. “Obviously not. Why would I?”

Phil shrugs.

“Have you not noticed how hard I’ve been stalking you? I literally slept on your couch last night because I didn’t want to leave you.” His eyes widen a little, like he’s let something slip he hadn’t necessarily intended. “Didn’t wanna go home,” he adds quickly.

“Here I was thinking I just had a super cozy sofa.”

“You do,” Dan says, pushing a curl out of his eye. “Everything about you is cozy.”

Just then, the train lurches to a stop and Phil is thrown to the side with such force that he feels himself flatten against the solidness of Dan’s tall frame.

“Hello,” Dan chuckles.

Phil actually manages to remain relatively calm as they walk up Rory’s street. Something about the look on Dan’s face when Phil’s body had pressed into him makes Phil feel safe he’ll be able to hang on to his buddy for the night.
“How crazy is this party going to be?” Dan asks.

“I can only really guess,” Phil admits. “I’ve always managed to find ways to avoid them so far.”

A few minutes later, they reach Rory’s house. There are a few people mingling on the porch, laughing and smoking. The front door is propped open and they can hear music from where they’re stood out in the street. It could probably be a lot worse.

“Might be alright then, I reckon,” Dan says.

Phil sends a text to Rory to let her know they’ve arrived.

Rory: k just come in, i’ll find you. yay!!

“Let’s go find out I guess,” Phil says, pocketing his phone.

Inside, the lighting is dim and there are fairy lights strung up in every corner. There are a fair number of people milling about, but not as many as Phil had been dreading. Everyone appears to be wearing some sort of costume and most seem to have gone to a little bit more trouble than Phil and Dan. He sees a ‘sexy’ nurse, Daenerys Targaryen, some sort of zombie business man type thing and even a pikachu, and that’s just with a quick glance around the room.

“Suddenly I feel a little underdressed,’ Dan mutters, shrugging off his coat.

“What?” Phil unzips his space coat. “No way. We’re cat and bear.” He sees a pile of coats beside the base of the staircase and tosses his onto it. Hopefully it’ll still be there later.

Dan laughs, chucking his coat in the heap, right on top of Phil’s. “Cat and bear sounds like a superhero duo or something. Like Batman and Robin. Cat and bear save the world.”

“We could,” Phil says, smiling. He reaches up and fiddles nervously with his hair. He feels incredibly awkward all of a sudden. The music is fairly loud and there are people he doesn’t know everywhere and so far he’s seen no sign of Rory. Actually, he doesn’t even know if that’s a bad thing or not. He might feel even more out of place when she eventually finds them.


Phil looks over at him. His hands are shoved into his pockets, his back hunched forward ever so slightly. He’s chewing his bottom lip and looking at Phil expectantly. He looks just as awkward as Phil feels. Thank god.

“I was hoping you knew,” Phil says, but he feels relief flood his chest.

Until he hears a familiar voice shriek from the top of the stairs, “Phil!”

If he weren’t suddenly on edge again, he’d probably laugh as he watches her descend. He could swear everything is suddenly happening at half speed. The first thing he sees is a black platform boot, so ridiculously high and over-the-top it looks straight out of the 90’s. His eyes travel up her body as she gets closer to the bottom of the stairs, and that makes sense. That’s what it’s supposed to look like. 90’s and over-the-top and instantly recognizable.

The next thing he sees is the velvet cheetah print that wraps tightly around her legs and up around her hips, that splits open just below her belly button, and then wider to display a very revealing black bra. She’s wearing a fucking velvet cheetah print bodysuit--a bodysuit that looks like someone took a knife to it, slicing it from neck to navel. Her curls are even bigger and bouncier than usual, with two
buns in the front that could only be described as horns.

“Holy shit,” Dan mutters.

Phil definitely agrees, though he can’t seem to verbalize his acknowledgment.

She gets to the bottom of the stairs and wraps her arms around Phil’s neck excitedly. The platforms give her a good boost—she’s tall to begin with, so she’s nearly as tall as he is now.

Phil hugs her back awkwardly. There’s no way not to be awkward right now. She looks incredible. Her hair brushes against against his cheek. She even smells incredible.

“You look fucking amazing,” Dan says then.

“Thank you! But I think you mean ‘scary,’ right?”

“I was sure. I know it’s not your thing.”

“Uh huh,” she says. “You’re a baby. Usually babies like… well, baby. Especially white boys like you.”

“I’m offended,” Dan says, hand on his chest. “Baby is my least favourite.”

“True,” she murmurs.

He has to physically stop himself from taking a step back. He doesn’t want to be rude. She’s probably already a little bit drunk. It doesn’t mean anything, the way she’s looking at him with heavy-lidded eyes, the way her body is angled towards his, leaning in. It doesn’t have to mean anything. He can take it.

“I always thought that was the wrong name for what was clearly the best spice girl,” Dan says.

“I wasn’t sure. I know it’s not your thing.”

She cocks an eyebrow. “Were you even born then?”

“Oi. I’m twenty two.”

Phil and Rory share a look.

“Your costumes are shit,” she says, looking at the smudge of ink against the tip of her finger and rubbing it against her thumb. “Even worse than I was expecting.”

“It’s more than I would have worn for anyone else,” Phil says.
“Same,” Dan adds.

“Well, thanks then, I guess.” She takes a step back. “Did you find the drinks yet?”

Phil shakes his head. He’d really like to. He thinks it’ll probably help.

She grabs his hand and starts pulling him toward what he assumes is the lounge. “Come on,” she says. Phil looks behind him and gives Dan a look. A pleading look. He grins, following.

She brings them to a large table full of all manner of booze. “I have to go say hi to more people. But I’m going to come find you later and you’d better be ready for some games that involve shots and embarrassing confessions.”

His pulse quickens, but Dan answers before Phil has a chance to protest. “Can’t wait.”

She spins around and Phil definitely notices Dan watching her walk away.

“Bloody hell,” he mutters. “Remind me again why you two are just friends?”

His stomach sinks. It’s not the kind of thing he thought he’d ever hear Dan say. But maybe he shouldn’t have formed such opinions so quickly. He’s only know Dan a week.

“She’s all yours,” he says, surprising even himself with his icy tone. “Though she probably wouldn’t appreciate being eye-fucked like that.”

Maybe he’s overreacting. He probably is. He just can’t shake the bizarre sense of disappointment he suddenly feels. He grabs a plastic cup and scoops some red liquid sloppily out of the large glass bowl in the middle of the table. He feels a little dribble run down his arm as he lifts the cup up and turns to walk away, to find some quiet corner to hide in and try not to cry.

He doesn’t understand what’s gotten into him.

He feels fingers wrap around his wrist, stopping him from walking away.

“Phil.”

Phil turns to look at Dan. His brows are knit with concern, panic in his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

Phil pulls his arm free of Dan’s grip. “Forget it.”

“No. Please.” He actually sounds a little desperate. “I never say shit like that. I don’t even know why I said it.”

Phil frowns. Does Dan even deserve to feel as bad as he clearly feels now? Why is Phil so put off? He had probably been looking at her in just the same way. She really is a sight to see tonight, even Phil can admit that.

He grabs a beer off the table and shoves it into Dan’s hand. “Come on,” he croaks, and makes his way out of the lounge.

They walk down a hallway until they come to a quiet little room with no other people in it. It looks to be some sort of study. There’s a desk with a computer and a printer and several plush-looking chairs. There’s even a piano in the corner. Phil’s not too upset to take note that Rory’s parents are apparently rich.
Phil ignores the chairs and plops himself down on the floor, leaning his back up against the wall.

Dan sits beside him gingerly. “I’m sorry,” he says quietly.

Phil shakes his head, taking a sip of his drink. He winces. It’s strong, acrid and sweet at the same time, like cheap vodka mixed with juice-box cranberry juice. “I am.”

“I didn’t mean to sound like…”

“Like a lad?” Phil offers.

“Yeah,” Dan says, wrapping his fingers around his pint. His giant hands dwarf the green bottle. “I’m really not one, I swear.”

“I know.” He takes another long swig of his drink and it tastes just slightly less terrible than the last time. “I totally overreacted. It just reminded me of… something.”

“I was making a stupid joke. Wasn’t thinking.”

Phil looks down at his own hands, feeling incredibly embarrassed now. “I’m really not interested in her,” he says quietly. He needs to fill the crushingly uncomfortable silence immediately, and it’s the first thing that pops into his head. “You can go for it.”

Dan snorts. “I’m really not interested.” He twists the lid off the bottle and brings it to his lips. He scrunches his nose as he-swallows. “Fuck. I hate this.”

“Well cheers then, mate” Phil says, holding out his cup for Dan to clink. “I hate mine too.”

He sees Dan looking at him, but keeps his head facing forward.

“What’s up Phil?” Dan asks softly. “I don’t want to pry but… she obviously likes you. Even that asshole at work could see it. And you seem very protective of her.”

Phil sighs, running his hand down his face. “She’s my friend.” It’s his standard answer at this point. “Right.”

Phil turns his head then to look at Dan. “Why are you really not interested?” he asks. “What does that mean?”

Their eyes lock like they’re magnetized. Phil doesn’t blink once. Dan’s eyes look darker in this light, like they’re almost black.

Dan’s the one to look away first. He takes another swig from the bottle. “It means I’m not supposed to be doing that right now.” He looks at Phil again. “But even if I was, it wouldn’t be her I was interested in.”

Phil frowns. His head is starting to spin and he doesn’t think it’s because of the booze. He hasn’t even drunk half the cup.

“What are you not supposed to be doing right now?” Phil asks quietly, because it’s the much easier statement to address.

Dan sighs. “Dating, I guess.”

“What are you supposed to be doing?”
Dan sighs, running his hand through his curls, fluffing them up a bit. “We don’t have to do this do we?”

It seems Phil’s not the only one with a secret of sorts. He melts when he notices the tiny freckles scattered across Dan’s cheekbones, beneath the inky black spots Phil had drawn on his face.

“No. I’m sorry.”

“I am too,” Dan replies instantly. “I guess I’m just… not--”

“It’s fine,” Phil says. “You don’t have to--”

“I really like you, Phil. You’re the only person I’ve met in London I’ve wanted to spend more than five seconds at a time with. I don’t wanna fuck up… whatever this is. This… friendship.”

Phil laughs. The situation is just so ridiculous. A tiny misunderstanding blown way out of proportion by Phil’s fear. Fear of what, he’s not sure exactly. Of Dan finally discovering why he can’t just accept the affection offered to him by a beautiful woman? Maybe. Maybe that’s part of it.

He doesn’t feel like a freak when he’s with Dan. He doesn’t feel the stifling aura of judgement when Dan looks at him. He’s not exactly keen to mess that up.

But that doesn’t explain the knot he’d felt twisting in his gut watching Dan watching Rory. He wants to pretend he’s just a protective friend, ready to defend her honour, but he knows that’s not it. Her honour had never been in jeopardy. Not from Dan.

“I don’t either. We literally just met each other. We don’t have to share all our deepest darkest secrets right away.”

“You have dark secrets, Lester?”

“Well I don’t know about dark…”

Dan smiles. “Well now I’m curious.”

“But you don’t want to do this, right?” Phil asks quietly. He looks over at Dan, who’s looking down at his beer. He’s sitting cross-legged, and the rips in his jeans are stretched to reveal quite a bit more skin than when he’d been stood.

Phil can’t tear his eyes away from the pale flesh of Dan’s thigh that peaks out from beneath the frayed black denim. He’s almost as pale as Phil. Phil has the urge to reach out and slip his fingers into those rips and stroke along that smooth-looking skin. Maybe just because he knows he shouldn’t.

Then Phil sees them--thin little silvery lines of scar tissue raised up a little from the rest of Dan’s skin, three of them. At least that’s how many he can see in the little window his jeans provide. They’re ruler-straight and thin and almost perfectly parallel.

Phil feels his heart in his throat. He doesn’t know if they’re what he thinks they are, and obviously Dan doesn’t want him to ask. It’s not the kind of thing you bring up casually with someone you’ve just met.

The vodka and cheap juice churn in his stomach. He can’t look away, even when Dan looks at him and follows his eyes down to where they’re all but burning a hole into Dan’s thigh.
Dan places his hand slowly over the rip in his jeans. He knows Phil’s seen and Phil apparently doesn’t even have the decency to correct himself, to pretend he hasn’t seen.

“It’s not as bad as it looks,” Dan whispers. “And it was a long time ago.”

Phil nods. He honestly feels like he might be sick at any moment.

“Phil.”

Phil finally wrenches his head up to look in Dan’s eyes again. “What?”

“I still don’t want to do this. Not yet. Ok?”

Phil nods, swallowing down the bile that threatens to erupt.

“I never wanted you to know at all. That’s not… that’s not what this is about. I never meant for you to be my… I just…”

Phil takes a sharp, deep breath. Dan needs him to be stronger than this now. “We don’t have to do this now. Or ever. It’s none of my business at all.”

Dan buries his head in his hands, digging his elbows into his knees.

“I didn’t want it to be like this here. I moved here to start over. To get better. I am better.” He pauses.

“Getting better.”

“Ok,” Phil says gently. He hopes Dan knows he’s not going to push anything.

“I shouldn’t have called you yesterday.”

Phil puts his hand on Dan’s shoulder. “You should’ve. I’m glad you did.”

Dan shakes his head. “I didn’t want you to see me as… this. I just wanted to be normal for once.”

“I don’t see you as anything other than my friend. And normal is boring.”

Dan looks up at Phil. He’s biting his lip and his eyes glisten wetly. “So you agree I’m not normal?”

Phil laughs. “I’m not normal either, trust me. I’m really, really not normal. And you’re not either. But it has nothing to do with… this,” he says gesturing to Dan’s leg. “It has nothing to do with yesterday or whatever happened the day before yesterday.”

Dan sniffles and rubs his nose against one of his fluffy wristbands. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Phil rubs Dan’s shoulder lightly. “You’re not normal, you’re different. In a good way. Everyone else is boring and you’re different. I’ve only known you a week and I can tell already.”

Dan laughs like he’s surprised he even could, like he’s releasing whatever it was he’d been holding back. “How can you tell?”

Phil frowns slightly. He has to think about his answer. He has to think of a way to say it that won’t make him sound completely crazy. He’s not even sure he can.

“Because you don’t make me feel like I’m not normal. Not normal In a bad way, I mean. You make me feel like the good kind of not normal. Which is not how I’m used to feeling.”
Dan’s smile fades. He looks like he might cry again. “Fuck. I guess we’re kind of doing this, then, aren’t we?”

Phil shrugs. “I still have secrets.”

“Do you want to tell me yours?” Dan asks.

Phil shakes his head. He doesn’t even really talk about this with Jimmy, and he feels quite certain he’ll never attain that level of trust with another human being in this lifetime.

“You can trust me,” Dan says quietly. “I won’t tell anyone.”

“It’s not that,” Phil says, pulling his legs up and resting his chin against his knees. “It’s like what you said. I don’t want to mess this up.”

“You wouldn’t,” Dan says. “You couldn’t.”

Phil thinks that’s probably true. It’s probably not a big deal to anyone but him. But he still doesn’t really want to talk about it.

“You’d think of me differently.”

Dan frowns. “Do you think of me differently now?”

Phil opens his mouth to refute, but Dan doesn’t give him the chance.

“Be honest.”

Phil snaps his mouth shut. He can’t honestly say everything feels the same now, but he doesn’t know how to verbalize that without saying the wrong thing.

“Not in a bad way.”

Dan sighs. “I was young and confused and alone and I didn’t know how to process…it. I was terrified. I couldn’t… I couldn’t feel anything.”

“It’s alright,” Phil murmurs.

“Things are better now. I take my medication and I see my therapist and I try to do the things I’m supposed to do. I haven’t done… that… in ages.” He looks away. “I was never trying to… I just wanted to feel something other than empty. It was fucking stupid and I hate that I ever let it get that bad. But that was a long time ago.”

He looks in Phil’s eyes and he’s searching, somehow Phil can tell he’s looking for approval, for some sort of absolution.

“It wasn’t your fault. And you’re doing the right thing now.”

Dan sniffles again, and then he laughs. “Fuck.” He digs the heels of his palms into his eyes and swears again. “Fuck! Makeup.” He rubs the skin beneath his eyes and looks at Phil sheepishly.

“Do I look like a raccoon?”

Phil tilts his head to the side, considering. The black ink from the sharpie is seriously smudged everywhere, all over his face and whatever dark makeup he’d had around his eyes has definitely seen better days. “Not really.”
Dan knocks his knee against Phil’s. “Shut up. I’m a bear.”

“That you are.”

Dan sighs and takes a sip of his drink. “We’re not even drunk. We have no excuse for all the emotions that just happened.”

Phil laughs. “I think I’m ready to get there now, though.”

“Alright,” Dan says, and he starts to stand up.

Once he’s up he holds his hand out to help Phil get up too.

“Will you tell me someday?” Dan asks.

“What?”

“You secret.”

Phil shrugs. “It won’t be as interesting as you think.” He slips his hand into Dan’s and it’s warm and a tiny bit rough on the back. His hand wraps around Phil’s and squeezes gently as Phil stands.

“Everything about you is interesting to me, Phil.” He’s still holding Phil’s hand.

Just then, a loud voice startles them both. “There you are! What are you—oh,” Rory’s smile disappears when her gaze falls on their hands.

Phil lets go quickly.

“Am I interrupting something?” she asks.

“Nope.” Dan tips his bottle back against his lips and chugs the rest of his beer. “We were just about to come out there and get pissed.”

Phil smiles weakly and nods.

“Good,” she says, though she still looks a little wary. “I was just coming to find you. We’re gonna play some drinking games now and I warned you Phil. I told you you were going to have to do this.”

He rolls his eyes good naturedly. “I know. Shots and embarrassing confessions, right?”

“Exactly. Come on,” she says, and turns to return to her party.

Dan waits before she’s left the room to turn back to Phil.

“We’re good, right?” he asks.

Phil smiles. “We’re good.”
They’re sat on the small sofa in the lounge with Rory crammed in between them. Phil has to put in a real concerted effort to stop himself staring at her. It’s not even sexual. She just looks exactly like Melanie Brown and it’s almost scary. Dan keeps looking over at her too, but Phil just assumes it’s for the obvious reason. But Phil doesn’t blame him. He’d gotten that well and truly out of his system. Besides, he can tell Dan is trying not to look either.

There’s a bottle of Malibu and many shot glasses on the table in front of them. People sit all around them, on chairs and end tables and even the floor. A girl with a short blue wig is sat at Phil’s feet, leaning her head back against his knees. She’s definitely drunk already, Phil thinks. Or else just very unaware of the common sense rules of personal space. Some shit song that Phil can’t identify plays in the background, loudly but regretfully not enough to drown out this game he’s been forced to participate in.

It’s alright, he tells himself. Just because the game is about admitting things you may not want to admit doesn’t mean he actually has to do that. There’s no one here who’ll know he’s lying. He can’t help but hope that thought hasn’t occurred to Dan, though. He wouldn’t mind hearing some of that boy’s more light-hearted confessions.

Unfortunately, the further they get into the game, the drunker Phil gets. Turns out he’s done a lot more things than he’s given himself credit for. The warm clumsiness that seeps through his body keeps distracting him from the comfort he’d taken earlier in the knowledge that he doesn’t have to answer honestly if he doesn’t want to.

He looks over at Dan, whose eyelids are heavy and face is flushed pink. He’s biting the fleshy bit at the tip of his thumb. He looks to be just as drunk as Phil feels. Turns out he’s done a lot of things too.

Nothing all that shocking or embarrassing yet, though. Phil remembers well enough from uni parties in York that those questions don’t come til everyone is wasted.

They’re getting close.

“Never have I ever sent nudes.”

Almost everyone drinks to that one, including Dan. Except Phil of course. Shit. Maybe he should have lied, but it’s too late now.

Rory puts her hand on his knee and smiles. “Why am I not surprised?” She says it quietly, just to him. She’s teasing, like she always does. It’s obviously not meant to embarrass him, but it still kind of does. He doesn’t look over at Dan.

He’s glad he’s drunk. Everything feels just that little bit unreal. Rory’s hand is still on his knee. Her nails are painted black with glitter on top. Her fingers are long and thin and elegant looking. They give his leg a squeeze so faint he’s not even sure it’s real or if he’s imagined it.

Since when does he get so fixated on people’s hands? Has he always been like this and just never noticed?

Does he like this? Does he like her hand on him like this? Is there ever any hope of him being normal if he doesn’t like this? What possible reason could he have for not liking this?

“Phil?”
He looks up at her. She pulls her hand away.

“Are you listening?”

“No.”

Everyone laughs.

“The questions was: never have I ever had a threesome.”

Phil laughs. The idea is literally laughable to him.

“No?” she asks in mock surprise.

“Not yet,” he says. He must be drunker than he thought. Usually he’s content to hide in plain sight. It’s not often he’ll flat out lie just to feel like he fits in. Not anymore anyway.

He looks at Dan, who looks taken aback, to say the least.

“Too bad you missed everyone else’s answers,” someone says.

He hadn’t thought of that. Not that it matters, but he wonders if Dan’s just taken a drink or not.

“Dan’s turn,” Rory says.

Dan bites his lip and frowns, thinking. He looks at Phil. “Never ever have I kissed a boy.”

Rory laughs before taking her shot.

Dan doesn’t take his eyes off Phil as he takes his shot. Phil wonders if Dan’s seeing things through the same haze he is right now, if he would’ve asked that question if they weren’t both like five shots in.

Phil’s heart pounds as he takes his shot.

He doesn’t look at Rory. He’s still looking at Dan, who somehow doesn’t seem to have any sort of reaction to the thing he’s just learned about Phil.

They refill their shot glasses.

“My turn,” Rory says softly. “Never have I ever kissed a girl.”

Phil watches Rory and Dan take their shots before he takes his. They’re both looking at him rather intently.

“I think we have some stories to tell each other, Philip,” she says. Her voice is floaty and warm and far-away-sounding even though she’s sat right next to him.

“I’m drunk,” he mumbles.

Dan laughs. He thinks a few other people do too.

“We should probably stop,’ Rory agrees. She gets up and Phil watches her walk to the other side of the room.

It feels darker than it had been when they’d gotten there, the only illumination coming from the fairy lights on the wall. He leans his head back against the sofa and closes his eyes. Is it considered rude to
sleep on your friend’s couch in the middle of their Halloween party?

All of a sudden the music is louder. It’s louder but softer, slow and melodic and… sexy? Like something playing in the background of a film during a love scene.

“Phil.”

He opens his eyes and looks up. Rory is stood in front of him.

“Dance with me.”

He snorts, actually full-on snorts. Surely she must be joking?

She grabs his hand and pulls. “I’m not joking.”

Can she read his mind now?

“I can’t,” he pleads.

“You can.” She pulls a little harder. “And you will. It’ll be fun.”

“I literally can’t.” His insides are all in a knot and twisting tighter as he realizes she’s not going to take no for an answer.

“You don’t really have to do anything. Just come sway with me.”

“I’ll stand on your feet.” It’s a last ditch effort that he knows will fail.

“I’ve got boots.”

“This will not be a pretty sight.” He stands up reluctantly.

“I’m pretty enough for the both of us.” She smiles.

“True.”

He looks at Dan, willing him to do something, to save him from what is absolutely guaranteed to be a deeply humiliating experience.

Dan just shrugs, grinning and leaning back into the cushion of the sofa. “Have fun.”

She’s still holding his hand, leading him away from the sofa and towards the middle of the lounge. There are lots of other people there, Phil notices, dancing rather drunkenly. Why hadn’t he noticed that before now?

She turns around and links her wrists behind his neck. He puts his hands on her waist awkwardly. She laughs and moves them down to wrap around her hips and rest on the small of her back. He sends a silent prayer of thanks up to the universe or mother earth or destiny or whoever wants to claim credit for striking Rory with the desire to ‘dance’ to a slow song and not a fast one. He could never be drunk enough for that kind of indignity.

She presses herself into him, laying her cheek against his collarbone. He feels the tip of her nose against his neck. She’s true to her word, though. They’re not doing anything more than swaying. If anything, they’re holding each other up and moving vaguely in time with the song that plays loudly but smoothly around them.
“You smell good.” She giggles.

“So do you,” he says, because she does and he doesn’t have the wherewithal to edit himself as he normally would. “You always do.”

One of her hands travels down to rest against his chest. “Why are you and Dan wearing matching costumes?”

“Coincidence,” he mumbles. He wonders how many people tonight have assumed they planned the coordination.

“You guys are pretty good friends already then, yeah?”

Phil catches a glimpse of Dan sat by himself on the sofa, ink smudged all over his face. He looks so long and loose with his arms up over his head, legs sprawled out and crossed at the ankles. He looks sleepy. Phil thinks he looks a little lost.

“Yeah,” he says. “We get on pretty well.”

Phil is trying not to look down at Rory’s costume, or rather, the lack of costume--the vast expanse of exposed skin between her neck and her stomach. It’s much harder to ignore when all that skin is pressed up against him. The velvet of her bodysuit is so soft against his hands.

“We learned some things about each other tonight,” she murmurs.

“Did we?” He’s bluffing, hoping she won’t try to analyze him now. “I barely remember. I took too many shots. You’re a bad influence on me, Ror.”

“You did,” she agrees. “More than I thought you would. Maybe you’re not so nice after all.”

“I am,” he says.

She sighs. “Yeah. You are.” She moves her hand back up and slips it around the back of his neck, scratching her nails gently along the nape.

He isn’t prepared for how good that feels. Maybe… maybe something is happening here, something he’d long since stopped believing was possible. Maybe a belly full of rum was what he needed all along to shake off whatever had been holding him back.

She slides her fingers up a little and into his hair. He looks down and she looks up and their eyes lock in the dim light.

“You’ve kissed boys, Phil?” she asks softly.

His heart thuds. “You’ve kissed girls.”

“I’ve kissed a girl.” She tilts her head up a little higher. “I prefer kissing boys.”

He knows what’s about to happen. He can feel it in his bones. He knows he needs to do something right now, right fucking now if he doesn’t want it to happen.

Instead he moves his hands to grip her hips, dragging his fingers across the velvet. The tips of his fingers are still slightly numb and he has the urge to press them more firmly into her flesh, but he resists.

“Who do you prefer kissing?” she whispers.
Phil doesn’t answer and she doesn’t wait. She stands on the tips of her toes and pulls gently on the back of his neck and he lets her. He lets her pull him down until her soft lips ghost his, until their mouths are pressed together and he can taste her lipstick.

Somehow, she presses herself against him even tighter and frames his bottom lip between hers.

Objectively, it feels nice. Her lips are full and smooth against his and her hands are in his hair and she smells like expensive perfume. She’s warm and present and opening herself up to him in a way he doesn’t deserve, a way he doesn’t think he’s earned. He hasn’t been honest with her a single day since they met. He’s known for just about forever that this is what she wanted and he suddenly realizes he hasn’t done anything to make her feel like he didn’t want it too. Maybe because he hoped someday he would want it too.

He doesn’t. It feels wrong, like kissing a stranger, like lying without ever uttering a single word.

He moves his hands back up to her waist and pushes her away gently, so gently.

She opens her eyes and frowns. “What’s wrong?”

He takes her hands in his and pulls them from his neck. “I’m sorry,” he chokes. “I can’t.” His skin is on fire and his throat is tight and he knows he needs to be anywhere but here and as quickly as possible.

“Phil…”

He shakes his head and turns away, but not before the image of her face, hurt and confused, is branded onto the backs of his eyelids so he can’t escape what he’s done, the way he’s hurt her.

He doesn’t dare look at Dan. He just spins on his heels and walks away, willing himself not run. He returns to the room with the desk and the chairs and the piano. He leans back against the wall and slides down to sit on the ground. He pulls his legs up and hides his face in his knees.

He can still feel her lips on his, can still taste the chalkiness of the lipstick. He rubs at them harshly with the back of his hand. All he can think of is every other pair of lips he’s ever had on him, all the times he’d been too afraid to push away and say no. It shouldn’t feel the same, because he loves Rory, he really does. She’s a truly lovely, beautiful person that anyone would be lucky to kiss.

But right now it feels exactly the same. His skin crawls as he starts to remember those other times, how kissing had been just the beginning, how far he’d let himself go, how many sets of lips had travelled even the most intimate parts of him.

He doesn’t have time to let himself truly spiral, as he hears feet pad quietly into the room. He doesn’t look up. He’s not ready to face her quite yet. He needs to put himself back together, to school his face into something other than a grimace. She deserves more than that. She deserves to know that it honestly has nothing to do with her. This is all him, it always has been.

She doesn’t say anything. Phil’s heart pounds against his chest. Is she so gutted that she can’t even speak? Or maybe she’s angry. He doesn’t even know what would be worse. At least being angry would make sense. He doesn’t know if he can forgive himself if she’s heartbroken.

He hears the noise of wood scraping against wood as the piano stool is pulled out. He needs to say something. He needs to try to explain.

He can’t. He doesn’t know how. He hears the faintest sound as she sits on the stool.
He waits, braced for the sound of her voice, for which particular brand of disappointment it will contain.

Instead, he hears the piano. A beautiful sound, deep and complex and melancholy. A perfect sound to encapsulate how he feels right now. It sounds familiar.

“I didn’t know you knew how to play the piano,” he mumbles against his arm, still not looking up.

The voice that answers is the wrong one. “I reckon there’s still a lot you don’t know about me.”

Phil jerks his head up to see Dan sat on that stool, his shoulders slightly hunched. His hands are spread out wide over the keys. He doesn’t look at Phil, just continues playing.

“What’s the song?” Phil asks quietly.

Dan nods. “I’m still learning.”

“It’s nice.” Phil lays his head against his arm and watches Dan play. He breathes deeply until his heart stops hammering quite so painfully.

Eventually Dan stops. He looks down at Phil.

“You alright?”

Phil shakes his head. He doesn’t have to lie to Dan. He could kind of use some comfort right now. Or some tough love. Or someone to yell at him and tell him he’s an idiot. Whatever, really. He kind of deserves all that and more.

“Come here,” Dan says, shuffling to the side of the stool to make room.

Phil stands woozily. His head feels heavy. He sits next to Dan and looks down at the black and yellowed white of the keys. It’s obviously an old piano, maybe even an antique.

“What happened back there?” Dan asks softly.

All Phil can bring himself to offer in response is a shrug. He’s beginning to feel a lump forming in his throat. Probably everyone in that room had been witness to what he’s just put Rory through. The thought makes his stomach turn.

“You kissed Rory.”

Phil looks over then. Dan’s already looking at him. Phil’s too drunk or too sad or too embarrassed, or who knows, maybe just too fucking stupid to understand the expression on Dan’s face.

“I thought you said you weren’t into her,” Dan says, even more quietly.

“I’m not.” Sad. It’s definitely sadness that Phil’s experiencing right now.

“Then wh--”

“She kissed me.” It comes out sharper than he’d intended.

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”
“So she’s into you.”

Phil huffs out a bitter laugh. “Probably not anymore.”

They’re quiet for a while.

“Can you play it again?” Phil says, when he can’t take the emptiness in his head anymore.

Dan brings his hands back up to the keys and Phil watches them as he plays. Just for tonight, he’s not going to wonder why he can never look away from Dan’s hands. He’s just going to keep staring, transfixed as they spread out, graceful despite how thick they are, and push down on the keys.

Eventually Dan stops again. “That’s all I know. Haven’t figured out the end yet.”

Phil just nods.

“Why’d you kiss her back?” Dan asks suddenly.

Phil bites the inside of his cheek, wondering just how deep his confession will go before the end of the night. He doesn’t even know where to begin answering that question.

“She’s nice,” is what he comes up with.

“Yeah…”

“Thought I’d give it a go.”

Dan frowns. “Even though you’re not into her.”

Phil sighs. “I guess… I wanted to be sure?” It sounds bad, he knows that as soon as the words have left his mouth.

Dan’s voice is quiet, but not particularly warm. “That’s kind of fucked up, Phil.”

His heart sinks. “I know.”

“I don’t get it.”

Phil looks over at him. “What?”

“It’s just… it’s not you. It’s not something you’d do.”

Phil laughs that bitter sound again. “How do you know what I’d do? You don’t even know me.” And again it comes out much harsher than he’d intended.

“Do you want me to leave you alone?”

“No,” Phil says, panicking. “No. Please. I’m sorry. I’m being a--”

“Dickhead,” Dan offers.

“Yeah.”

“But… why?”

Phil looks away, biting his lip again.
“Look, right. If you really don’t want to talk about it that’s fine, I’ll stop asking. But you seem upset.”

Phil swallows over the lump. “I am,” he croaks.

“You learned something pretty fucking huge and scary about me tonight,” Dan says. “And I didn’t push you away.”

Phil nods. He really hadn’t. Phil doesn’t know if he’d fully absorbed the true weight of Dan’s bravery–and trust–until this very moment.

“And you just listened. You were great,” Dan says softly. “I want to do that for you, too. If you’ll let me.”

“You wouldn’t understand.” Phil’s voice wavers.

“You don’t know that.”

“No one ever does.”

Suddenly, Dan yanks at the velcro of his wristbands and pulls them off. He uses them to wipe at the ink that’s smeared all over his face, then shoves them into his pocket. “Have you told a lot of people?”


“And does he understand?”

Phil pauses. “No. We never really talk about it anymore.”

“Is it that bad?”

“I don’t know. It feels like it, sometimes,” Phil whispers.

“Please tell me, Phil. I’m scared now.”

Phil shakes his head. “I don’t even know what I would say.”

“But it has something to do with kissing?”

Phil shrugs. “Kind of?”

“Even though you’ve kissed girls and boys?”

Phil whips his head back round to see Dan’s cheeky expression.

“Shut up,” he says, but for the first time since before the kiss, he’s actually smiling.

“How’s my face by the way?” Dan asks, rubbing over his cheekbone with his thumb.

“It’s a good face,” Phil answers without thinking.

Luckily Dan just laughs. “Thanks, mate but I meant the sharpie.”

“Oh, right. It’s everywhere.”

“Fuck.”
Phil laughs. “How’s mine?”

“How’s mine?”

“I meant my face.” Phil grins.

Dan raises his eyebrows. “Phil Lester. Are you flirting with me?”

“No. I just want someone to say something nice about me. But I guess it wouldn’t necessarily be nice—”

“It’s a good face, idiot. Your cheekbones could cut glass.”

“My career crisis is solved,” Phil laughs. “Glass cutting is my new calling.”

“Phil,” Dan says gently, his entire demeanor shifting into one of quiet concern. “Is this your way of telling me you don’t want to talk about it?”

“I think… I feel like I’ve made it into too big a deal now in my own head.”

“Tell me.”

“I guess… I just… don’t… date?” It sounds stupid. It’s a gross oversimplification that really does nothing to encapsulate the nights he spends awake staring at his ceiling and wondering if there might actually be something wrong with him.

“That’s it?” Dan asks, clearly confused. “You don’t date? Like, ever?”

Phil shakes his head.

“But you fuck?”

Phil splutters.

“Sorry, sorry. I mean, kiss. You kiss?”

“I have,” Phil replies looking down at his hands. “A long time ago.”

“I’m sorry, Phil, I really don’t get it.”

“It… it’s never gone well.”

“And you thought it might with Rory?”

“I don’t know what I thought. Maybe I just wasn’t thinking at all. Maybe I’m just sick of thinking about it.” He feels heat behind his eyes.

“Oh,” Dan says softly. He bumps his shoulder into Phil’s. “That’s not a big deal, you know that right?”

Phil looks at him. He doesn’t want to be annoyed with Dan, especially not after what he’s been through the past couple days. But he’s had people tell him this before, people who mean well but don’t understand that it goes beyond having had a few awkward dates and bad kisses.

Then again, he supposes it’s still better than being told he’s a freak, which is exactly what he feels like right now.
“I’m twenty six,” Phil says, hoping that’ll be enough to communicate to Dan that actually, yes, it is a big deal.

“Yeah.”

“I’m a freak.” He’s being dramatic, he knows that.

“You are not. You just hadn’t met the right person yet.”

Phil is too distracted by that particular phrasing to be annoyed at the meaningless platitude.

“Hadn’t?”

“Haven’t.”

“What if I never do?”

“You will.”

Dan says it with such certainty, Phil can almost believe it’s true, even if it does feel more dismissive than he’d like. He knew Dan wouldn’t really understand, but at least he’s trying to be nice about it.

Dan presses down on a single key and Phil feels like he’s having a flashback to 2006.

“Why does that make me think of MCR?”

Dan chuckles. “Because I hit the G, Phil.”

Phil doesn’t know what that means, but he smiles anyway.

“You wanna get out of here?” Dan asks.

“Fuck yes.”
The tube is much less crowded on the way back—they can actually sit next to each other. Dan pulls out his phone, plugs in his earbuds and hands one to Phil.

“What you in the mood for?”

“Whatever you want,” Phil replies tiredly. “Surprise me.”

“Seriously, Phil, give me something to work with or we’ll be listening to Kanye for the next hour.”

“Kanye West?”

Dan snorts. “No, Kanye East.”

Phil knocks his knee into Dan’s. “Shut up, bear.”

Dan looks confused at first, then laughs. “That was weird.”

“What?”

“Just you calling me bear.”

“Why? You are one. Or you were. Now you kind of look like a coal miner, actually.”

“Rude.”

“I’m sure I do too,” Phil says, slouching down in the seat.

“My whole family calls me bear. I thought you were psychic for a second.”

“I am, actually. My grandma too.”

Dan throws his ankle up onto the knee of the opposite leg. “Oh, yeah? What’s in my future?”

Phil closes his eyes and leans his head back against the glass of the window. “Probably a hangover.”

“Nah, I’m still young and spry. And I didn’t actually drink that much.”

Phil opens one eye and looks at Dan suspiciously. “You didn’t? What about the game?”

Dan grins cheekily. “I made my shots really small.”

“Why? Didn’t you wanna get drunk with me?”

“Wanted to,” Dan says, looking down at his phone. “Not supposed to, though.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.” Dan scrolls through his phone. They both have an earbud in, but nothing is playing out of them yet.

“I guess that makes sense,” Phil says.

“I can still drink if I want, it’s not like an official rule or anything. It just sometimes makes it worse,
and I’m still not fully… recovered. From the last… thing.”

“You’re not?” This is honestly a surprise to Phil. Dan’s seemed so happy today. Until they got to that bloody party, of course. Phil feels a rather intense wave of guilt then, remembering the look on Rory’s face.

“Almost, but not all the way. It’d be much worse if I’d been on my own, though. So cheers for that.”

“Anytime,” Phil mumbles. He wishes he could go back in time and skip the party. They’d been having such a nice time before it. The last few hours had separately reduced them both nearly to tears. Actually, Phil’s pretty sure he will cry tonight, once he’s dropped Dan off on the porch of his building, once he’s gone home to his empty flat and crawled into his cold empty bed.

“Play me some Kanye East,” he says.

They’re still listening after they’ve gotten off the train and reached Dan’s street, which means they’ve been walking slowly, arms pressed together to keep from ripping the earbuds out. They stand on the pavement, neither making a move to actually turn and walk down Dan’s street.

Phil doesn’t really want to walk Dan home. At least, not to Dan’s home. He wants them to keep walking, down this street and into his lobby and up all the goddamned stairs and maybe even into Phil’s room. He doesn’t want to cry alone in his bed, hating himself and replaying that kiss over and over. He wants a warm body next to him tonight, a kind voice to tell him he’s still a good person. He wants Dan.

He must still be quite drunk, he thinks.

“You keen to get home?” Dan asks finally. “I can be brave if you’d rather not walk me all the way.”

“I’m pretty keen,” Phil says.

Dan’s face doesn’t betray even a hint of emotion, but his voice sounds a little sad. “Alright, Lester, get home safe. Drink some water before you go to sleep, it’ll help the hangover.” He tugs gently on the headphone wire and Phil’s earbud pops out. “See you.”

“Wait,” Phil says when he watches Dan turn to leave.

Dan turns around and looks at Phil expectantly. “What’s up?”

“Are you sick of me yet?” Yep, definitely still drunk, Phil thinks.

“No.” Dan’s answer is immediate.

“Do you miss your own flat?”

“Never.”

“Do you want to…” He clears his throat. Maybe just this once, when he knows absolutely for sure what he wants, he can go ahead and ask for it.

“Would you stay over at mine again? You can sleep in a bed this time, I promise.”

The corner of Dan’s mouth quirks up just a little. “You want me to?”

“Yeah.”
Dan shrugs, allowing the smile he’d clearly been trying to contain to break out across his face. Phil can’t see anything but teeth and dimples and it makes him feel a strange warmth in the pit of his stomach.

“Let’s go then,” Dan says. “It’s bloody freezing out here and I really want to take these stupid jeans off.”

“Do you want to grab anything from yours first?”

Dan looks down the darkness of his street. “Not really. I can just wear my stuff from yesterday.”

“I have pjs you can wear,” Phil says quickly, not caring about what that might sound like to Dan. “Payment for keeping a sad lonely man company on halloween.”

Dan looks into Phil’s eyes then. “Are you sad, Phil?”

What’s the point in lying? It’s never gotten him anywhere. All it’s gotten him is hurting the people he cares about, including himself. “Yeah.”

“Do you wanna talk about it?”

Phil shakes his head. “I don’t think so. I just don’t want to think about it.”

“Ok.” He holds out the earbud for Phil again. “Let’s go do something fun.”

Turns out fun means both of them getting dressed in Phil’s pjs bottoms and wrapping blankets around their shoulders and making popcorn and watching Donnie Darko.

Halfway through the film, Phil sees his phone light up on the coffee table. He leans forward and grabs it, assuming it’s Jimmy whining again about Phil being kind of MIA the past few days.

His heart leaps up into his throat when he sees that’s really not the case.

His hands start to shake a little. Dan notices. He pauses the movie and sits up a little straighter and asks, “What’s wrong?”

“I got a text.”

“Ok.”

“From Rory.”

“Have you read it?”

“No,” Phil says shakily.

“Well, go on.”

Phil closes his eyes and scrunches up his nose. “Do I have to?”

“No,” Dan says. “But if you don’t it’ll just make you feel worse. Anyway, I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“What if it’s not?”

“Phil, please don’t make me laugh. I’m trying to be supportive right now and laughing would make me look like an asshole.”
“Why would you laugh?”

“Because you’re being a huge drama queen. Trust me, if I’m calling you a drama queen, it’s bad.”

“She’s going to hate me.”

“She’s not. At worst she’ll be a bit sad for awhile. It’s not like you left her at the altar or something.”

Phil buries his face in his hands. “Then why does it feel exactly like that?”

“Just read it, Phil, or I will.”

Phil swipes his thumb across the screen to open his phone. He knows Dan’s right, he just really doesn’t want to face this right now.

Rory: you left without saying anything

Ok, Phil thinks, definitely not as bad as it could have been, but definitely not nothing.

Phil: sorry

Rory: i have to ask you something, don’t be mad

Phil’s gut twists.

Rory: are you gay?

He looks over at Dan, who’s actually already staring at him intently.

“What did she say?” he asks.

Phil simply hands his phone to Dan and slumps down deep into the sofa.

Dan scans the message quickly and then holds out the phone for Phil to take. Phil just shakes his head, so Dan leans forward and places it on the coffee table.

“Just tell her what I say when people ask me that.”

“What’s that?” Phil mutters.

“That it’s none of their business.”

“Right.” Phil would never say that to anyone, much less a woman he really and truly cares about.

“Are you, though?” he asks, yet again proving his thoughts have absolutely no filter when Dan is anywhere in his vicinity. He braces himself for the impending ‘fuck off.’

It never comes.

“Sometimes,” Dan says simply. “Are you?”

“I have no idea,” Phil says, and he thinks it may be the most honest thing he’s ever said to Dan.

Dan turns to face Phil before pulling his legs up and sitting on them. “It doesn’t matter.”

“What d’you mean?” Phil mumbles.
“I mean, it doesn’t matter if you don’t have a word for how you feel. That’s all it is—a word. It doesn’t change anything. It doesn’t define who you are. Labels really only exist for other people, to help them put you in a box. People aren’t meant to fit into boxes, if you ask me. We’re… like, blobs. Formless blobs. Or we should be.”

Phil smiles. It’s a nice thought. It sounds like a nice world. What Dan doesn’t understand, though, is that Phil’s not even sure he has anything to put in a box.

“What if I don’t even know what I feel?” Phil says to the ceiling. He can’t look at Dan right now. He can’t face the judgement. “What if I don’t feel anything.”

“Are you… Is that how you feel?” Dan asks.

Phil actually laughs then. “Were you about to ask me if I fit into a certain box, Daniel?”

“Shut up. I corrected myself, didn’t I? That’s how brainwashed we all are. All I’m really doing is proving my point.”

“Alright,” Phil chuckles.

Dan sticks his foot out and digs his toes into the side of Phil’s thigh. “So what are you gonna tell her?”

Phil sighs. “I don’t know. Maybe I should just say yes. It’d make things easier. Maybe she’d even forgive me.”

“Phil, there’s nothing to forgive. She kissed you.”

“I didn’t stop her though.”

“You did.”

“Not soon enough,” Phil says. He doesn’t even know if he’s being too dramatic or not dramatic enough.

“Haven’t you been friends for years?”

Phil nods.

“Has she always liked you?”

“I think so, maybe.”

Dan’s voice gets quiet all of a sudden. “And you’ve never felt the same?”

Phil shakes his head.

“You know what I think?” Dan asks.

Phil raises his eyebrows in question.

“You need to talk to her.”

“Ugh,” Phil groans.

“I know. Talking to people about your feelings is the worst. But I think she deserves that. And you
deserve not to feel guilty anymore.”

“Do I?”

“Yes, you do.”

Phil looks over at Dan and into his big brown eyes and he feels that feeling again. That warmth. A tugging.

A twinge.

“Can you tell me please?” Phil whispers, his throat tight.

“Tell you what?” Dan says, voice soft.

“Just… what do I deserve?” He’s not making any sense, he knows that, but he can’t pretend anymore that this isn’t exactly what he needs. What he wants, for someone to tell him he’s still good. For Dan to tell him.

“You deserve everything.”

Phil has to look away and swallow hard over the burning in his throat. He can’t cry right now, he just can’t. His breaths are coming in quick and shallow.

He looks at the telly, watching the faces on the screen and taking in exactly none of what’s actually happening. He keeps watching until his breathing has returned to normal and he knows the tears aren’t going to fall without his permission.

“You do too,” Phil whispers.

He opens his bleary eyes, confused, and Dan’s standing over him, a hand on his shoulder.

“What?” he mumbles.

“You fell asleep,” Dan whispers. “The movie’s over. Thought you might wanna save your back and move to a proper bed.”

“Oh. Yeah. Thanks.”

Dan looks sleepy. And soft. His hair is fluffy again. Whatever he’d put it in it earlier to make the curls more defined must’ve been rubbed off. Phil’s eyes won’t open more than halfway, so he can’t be sure of anything, but he thinks Dan might be the prettiest damn thing he’s ever laid eyes on.

Phil stands up and hugs his blanket around his shoulders tighter. He starts walking with heavy, uneven steps toward his bedroom. He doesn’t hear any footsteps behind him, which confuses his half-asleep, totally-not-rational-decision-making brain very much. The part of his brain that filters out all notions of boundaries and awkwardness and over thinking and skips straight ahead to what he really wants.

He turns to look at Dan, who’s sat on the edge of the sofa, watching Phil walk away.

“You coming?”

Dan looks properly shocked. “You want me to?”
“Of course,” Phil says confidently. “Come on.”

He turns back around before he can see whatever Dan’s reaction is. He hears footsteps now though. He climbs into his bed and flops down face first into his pillow. He groans. Bed is good. It takes him a good few minutes before he processes that the bed hasn’t dipped with the weight of another person.

He rolls over and sees Dan stood there looking uncertain.

“What?” he asks. “There’s room, see?” He pats the empty space next to him.

“I don’t want... Do you actually want me to? Are you still drunk?”

“Dunno.” He’s so tired and hazy, he might as well be, but he’s not going to say that.

“What are we doing?” Dan murmurs.

“Cuddling,” Phil says automatically. “Sleeping.”

“That’s all?”

Phil frowns. “You wanna read me a bedtime story first?”

Dan laughs, blowing air out through his lips in surprise. “Alright, Lester. Shove over, will you? I’m a large man.”

Phil smiles tiredly and shuffles over a little more.

There’s no choice but to press against each other. Dan lies flat on his back and keeps his arms tucked close to his body, but Phil can still feel him from shoulder to foot. His bed isn’t all that big and Dan really is much bigger than Jimmy.

But that’s not the only reason this feels completely different than it does with Jimmy. Phil doesn’t know why it feels different, but he knows it’s about more than just the physical space Dan takes up.

“You don’t have to,” Phil says, realizing it’s what he should have said while they were still in the lounge. “You can sleep in Jimmy’s bed if you want.”

“I don’t,” Dan says quietly. “This is good.”

“You like cuddling?” Phil mumbles sleepily. He’s lying on his side facing Dan.

“Yeah.”

“Then why aren’t you cuddling me, Danny.” He’s loopy with exhaustion, and maybe still a little of that Malibu.

Dan grins and fuck, there’s that warmth again. “Danny?”

His voice is soft and even with this floaty feeling in his head Phil can discern the fondness.

“Danny,” Phil confirms.

“What size spoon do you want me to be?” Dan asks.

“Definitely big.” He wants to be held. More than anything, actually.
“Turn around,” Dan whispers.

He does and feels Dan wrap his arm around his waist and pull him in a little. His heart does a weird fluttery thing. He wonders if he’s going to remember any of this in the morning. He wonders if this warmth and this twinge and this fluttering will still be there in the morning.

He hopes they are.
Chapter 15

He wakes up shivering a little, his naked foot hanging off the bed. The only part of his body covered by blanket is one arm. He opens his eyes and the first thing he sees is Dan.

Dan’s messy tangle of curls. The little dusting of freckles across the tops of his cheeks and the bridge of his nose. His chapped pink lips parted slightly and releasing slow deep breaths.

He’s still there and he’s still asleep and no, it hadn’t all been an elaborate dream. He’s still there, still with his arm thrown across Phil’s chest.

He’s still there, he’s still gorgeous, and Phil still feels warm when he looks at him.

Not literally, though, because Dan’s stolen pretty much all of Phil’s duvet.

He’s about to reach out and try to pull it back over himself without waking Dan up, when that becomes kind of moot. Phil’s door flies open and his heart stops for a moment. He sits up in terror. Dan jerks awake too.

“Darling, I’m ho-ome,” a loud voice chimes.

Jimmy’s eyes go wide when he sees the scene before him.

“Holy fuck.”

Dan’s clutching his chest. Phil feels a little queasy. He should probably say something, but he’s not even sure he remembers how right now.

“Oh, sorry mates. I’ll just… you want coffees? I need a coffee. Sorry. Carry on.” He shuts the door quickly.

Phil flops back down onto his pillow.

“Jesus christ,” Dan mutters.

“Sorry,” Phil squeaks. “Was not expecting that.”

“I’m dead. I died. I’m a fucking ghost.”

Phil nods. At least he’s too busy trying to teach his heart how to start beating again to be nervous about that fact that he’d woken up with Dan in his bed.

“How do you feel?” Dan asks after they’ve been lying in silence for a few minutes. “Last night was… a lot.”

“I think I’m ok. You?”

Dan nods. “Do you remember everything?”

Phil chuckles. “I wasn’t that drunk, was I?”

“I don’t know,” Dan muses. “You kissed a girl and then took a boy home to bed with you.” He winks.
Phil groans. If it was possible to die from embarrassment, he’d definitely be dead now. He rolls over and buries his face in the pillow. “I’m sorry,” he mumbles.

“Don’t be. It was fun. Mostly.” Dan pulls the duvet up over Phil’s shoulders. “Sorry, I think I stole the covers in my sleep.”

Phil turns his head to the side to look at Dan. “Thanks.”

Dan sits up then, looking a little nervous. “So remember that thing you learned about me last night?”

Phil nods.

“I don’t really want you to… tell anyone. K?”

“Of course not,” Phil assures. “I’m good at keeping secrets. Except my own from you, apparently.”

“I won’t tell anyone yours either.”

Looking at Dan’s puffy morning eyes, Phil actually forgets for a minute the shitstorm that’s waiting for him in his kitchen. He thinks he’d like very much to just stay here in bed forever and never have to deal with the bombardment of questions he knows he’s going to get the second Dan leaves.

“Is Jimmy gonna be cross?” Dan asks.

“What? No. Why would he?”

Dan shrugs. “I don’t know what your deal is with him.”

“He’s my friend. He’s definitely not going to be mad. Shocked, probably, but not cross.”

“Why shocked?”

“This,” he gestures in Dan’s direction. “Doesn’t happen.”

“Ever?”

“Not since we moved here. The only person who ever shares this bed with me is him.”

Dan raises his eyebrows.

“We’re cuddlers,” Phil says quickly. “He has a boyfriend. And I’m… well, you know, now.”

“Not really,” Dan murmurs.

“Well I don’t either, to be fair.”

Dan nudges Phil with his elbow. “Don’t forget what I said about boxes. I meant it. It doesn’t matter.”

Phil smiles weakly. He appreciates the gesture, he really does. It doesn’t change how much he wishes there was a box he could visit every now and again. “Yeah.”

“So I guess the longer we stay in here, the weirder it looks to him, right?”

“I mean, he’s probably freaking out a little bit, but that’s what he gets for barging in here without knocking.”

“I just missed you!” Jimmy’s voice is muffled by the door.
Dan’s hand flies up to cover his mouth

“James!” Phil shouts. “Bugger off! Stop listening!”

“Ok, sorry, sorry. Come out here, though. You don’t have to hide.”

“We’re not hiding,” Phil says crossly. “You gave us heart attacks. We’re just trying to recover.”

Dan is biting his lip, obviously trying not to laugh.

“I’d apologize, but this is just what he’s like.”

Dan pushes the duvet off his legs and scoots to the edge of the bed. “I should get going.”

Phil feels a weird feeling in his chest, a feeling that tells him he really doesn’t want Dan to leave.

“Really? You don’t want coffee?”

“I do,” Dan says, standing up and stretching his arms above his head. “But I’ve been here for days now and he obviously wants to talk to you. I’m guessing it’ll be easier for you if I’m not here.”

“You can stay, it’s really fine.”

Dan smiles, but shakes his head. “I want your friends to like me, Phil. I’ve been taking up a lot of your time and he obviously misses you. Plus, I reckon you’ve a lot to talk about. Last night, with Rory and all… it was… a lot.”

Phil frowns. “I’d forgotten about that.”

“Did you ever text her back last night?”

“I don’t think so. Shit.”

“Do we work today?” Dan asks. “I can’t remember.”

“No,” Phil says, and a fresh wave of guilt washes over him. “Rory made sure we were off so we’d have the day to recover.”

“Fuck,” Dan mutters.

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry, Phil. You should talk to her. Sooner than later, probably.”

Phil nods. He’d really rather eat dirt, but he owes it to her. He owes her so much more than what he’d given her last night.

“I’m scared,” he says quietly.

“It’ll be ok,” Dan assures. “She’s lovely. And she loves you. I’ve only known the two of you a week and I can see that.”

Phil turns around to look at Dan and catches him just as he’s pulling Phil’s star wars pj bottoms down his thighs. He forces himself not to be weird. It’s not weird, just a mate getting changed.

It’s just that he hasn’t seen anyone in their pants in a very long time. Except Jimmy, of course, but he barely counts anymore.
Phil’s eyes travel down to Dan’s thighs before he can stop himself, to the row of thin horizontal lines raised up from his pale skin. He looks away after hardly more than a moment, but not in time for Dan not to notice.

“Sorry,” Dan mutters, yanking the ripped black jeans from last night up his legs.

“No, it’s fine.” Phil doesn’t know what else to say. He feels a sudden heaviness in his chest, a sadness at the realization that Dan has to carry the scars of the darkest moments of his life like tattoos on his body. “It must suck,” he says, before physically wincing at just how awkward and unkind and ignorant that must have sounded.

Somehow, Dan smiles. “Eloquent, Phil.” He shakes his head when Phil opens his mouth to apologize again. “It doesn’t bother me as much anymore. They’re like… battle wounds. Like proof I went through hell and made it out the other side mostly intact. Now when I look at them, I’m just reminded of how far away I am from that place.”

Phil nods. “That’s a nice way to look at it.”

Dan buckles his belt and picks Phil’s pjs up off the floor. “It’s kind of another one of my rules.” He folds the trousers and places them on Phil’s bed. “I’m supposed to be kind to myself. I’m supposed to try to forgive myself.” He looks down at his feet. “It doesn’t come naturally but I’m trying.”

Phil doesn’t know what to say. Honestly, he’s slightly in awe of Dan’s strength. He suddenly wishes they’d known each other longer so it wouldn’t be completely weird for him to walk around the bed and gather him up in his arms and just give him a big hug.

Then he remembers that he’d literally fallen asleep in Dan’s arms and he wonders why it feels so different now, in the light of day. Maybe because he’s stone cold sober and now the tugging in his chest feels less warm and more terrifying.

There’s a light knock at the door then.

“Jimmy, I swear to God…” Phil murmurs, closing his eyes and shaking his head.

“It’s ok,” Dan says, and he makes his way toward the door. He opens it and gives Jimmy a cheeky grin. “He’s all yours.”

“You’re not staying?” Jimmy asks.

Dan shakes his head. “You two have a lot to catch up on.” He looks back at Phil. “See you… do we work tomorrow?”

“Yeah.”

“See you tomorrow, then. Thanks for… well thanks for everything.” He turns back around and gives Jimmy a little wave.

“You don’t have to leave,” Jimmy says. “You can ask Phil, here, I’m really a nice guy.”

“You’re a pain in the ass,” Phil adds.

Dan chuckles. “It’s alright. The introvert inside of me needs to recharge itself after last night.”

“What the bloody hell happened last night?”
“Bye!” Dan shouts and he walks down the hall out of sight.

Phil waits til he hears the front door shut to look at Jimmy and say, “I hate you.”

“How the fuck was I supposed to know you had a bloke in your bed!”

Phil gets up off the bed. “Don’t say it like that. You make it sound like something happened.”

“Did it not?”

Phil glares at him. He hadn’t thought he was actually cross, but maybe he is, just a little bit. After everything that had happened last night, it really wasn’t the way he wanted to say goodbye to Dan.

“Do you really need to ask that?” Phil says quietly.

“Woah, hey.” Jimmy walks over to Phil and wraps him up in the kind of tight embrace Phil had been tempted to give Dan. “I’m really sorry, yeah? I thought you’d be happy to see me.”

“I am,” Phil says, burying his face in Jimmy’s neck, his chill melting away instantly. This is Jimmy, his Jimmy. He hadn’t meant to be such an enormous twat. “It’s just been a weird week.”

“Will you tell me about it, please?”

Phil nods. “Need coffee first.”

They make coffee and tuck themselves into the sofa. Jimmy looks good. His hair is extra wavy and he’s wearing his contacts so his eyes are extra bright and he looks like he hasn’t shaved in like three or four days. He’s wearing a black North Face hoodie Phil’s never seen before. He looks fresh and awake and clear and everything Phil’s not right now.

Phil feels hungover and grungy and murky. And confused. And yes, terrified.

He takes a big sip of his coffee and folds his legs under himself and closes his eyes and waits for Jimmy to do the talking. He doesn’t really want to think about what to say or where to start.

“I’m going to ask something and you’re not allowed to get mad.”

Phil sighs. “Fine.”

“You guys really didn’t fuck? You can tell me if you did.”

Phil opens his eyes and glares at Jimmy. “I already answered that.”

“You didn’t really, though.” Jimmy’s voice is quiet, cautious.

“We didn’t. Obviously we didn’t. We’re friends.”

“But he slept in your bed.”

“Yeah. So do you.” Phil sits up a little straighter. He can already sense that this isn’t going to be a lounging around type of conversation. “All the time.”

“That’s different,” Jimmy says.

“How is it different?” Phil’s not exactly sure why he’s being so hostile. He could actually really use a good chat with Jimmy right now. Maybe even some advice.
“Why are you so angry?” Jimmy asks.

“I…” He doesn’t know what to say. A common theme today, apparently. “I kissed Rory.”

“What?!”

Phil rubs the back of his neck nervously. “Well she kissed me.”

“Did you kiss her back?” Jimmy asks.

“For a sec.”

“And?”

Phil winces at the memory of the taste of Rory’s lipstick and the look of confusion on her face when he’d pushed her away. “It was… terrible.”

“Isn’t she like one of your favourite people?”

“Yeah. It wasn’t terrible like… it wasn’t objectively terrible. She’s beautiful and lovely and she’s a good kisser and everything. It just felt… wrong.”

“This was at the party?”

“Yeah.”

“And what happened after that? Does she know you weren’t into it?” Jimmy asks.

“I pushed her away and said ‘I can’t’ and then me and Dan snuck out without saying anything.”

“Jesus Christ, Phil…”

“I know. I’m freaking out. She texted me later asking if I was gay.”

Jimmy narrows his eyes. “What did you say?”

“Literally nothing. I never ended up responding.”

“You need to talk to her.”

Phil groans. “I know.”

“We’ll come back to her, but I still wanna know about what happened with Dan.”

“What d’you mean? Nothing happened.”

“He slept in your bed. And don’t tell me it doesn’t mean anything because I sleep in your bed all the time and I’m your friend. It’s different and you know it.”

“It wasn’t though,” Phil says weakly. It wasn’t meant to be. Phil hadn’t thought it would be. But something had shifted last night, ever so slightly, and it had been different. Definitely. He’s not even near ready to tell Jimmy that, though. He’s not even sure he’s ready to admit it to himself.

“You’ve only known each other, what? A week?” Jimmy asks.

“A little more, but yeah, basically. Yeah.”
“And you don’t see why I’m just a little bit confused?”

All Phil can do is shrug.

“Did you guys kiss?”

“Jimmy.”

“I’m sorry but it’s just fucking weird, Phil. He’s basically a stranger.”

“He’s not,” Phil says defensively. “We know a lot about each other already. It’s like… feels like we’ve already know each other a long time. We click. It feels good.”

“But you’re just friends.”

“Yes.”

“Because that, what you just said… like, I’m sorry, but that’s the way you describe a boyfriend.”

“Well it doesn’t matter anyway,” Phil says crossly. He feels tears of frustration prick his eyes and he blinks them back furiously. “That part of me is broken and you know it.”

“Phil.” Jimmy sets his mug down on the table and crawls across the sofa. He takes Phil’s mug out of his hands and puts that down too. He nestles his head against Phil’s chest and lies down on top of him. “You’re not broken. Don’t ever say that.”

Phil wraps his arms around Jimmy’s shoulders and lays his cheek against the top of his head. He’s glad Jimmy is back.

“I am, though,” he whispers.

“You’re not. You’re different.”

Phil breathes in deeply, breathes in the scent of Jimmy’s hair. It feels so right and makes him feel so safe, if only for a moment.

“Actually, you know what?” Suddenly Jimmy sits up again and looks into Phil’s eyes fiercely. “Fuck that. You’re not different. Who decides what normal is anyway? You’re Phil and you’re the best. Things are harder for you sometimes, but you are just the way you’re supposed to be.”

“You think?”

Jimmy tucks himself back up under Phil’s chin. “Yep.”

“I wish I was supposed to be a different way,” Phil murmurs.

“But then you wouldn’t be my Phil.”

For some reason, Jimmy’s words cut through all the layers of bullshit and pretense Phil’s been building up for months and stick in his ribs, reminding him exactly how much it’s going to hurt when he can’t have this anymore.

“When are you leaving?” he whispers.

“Leaving?” Jimmy sounds confused, as he should, really. “I just got back.”
“I mean,” Phil says, resting his chin on the top of Jimmy’s head, “when are you going to get a place with Tom and leave me here all alone?”

He shouldn’t have said it that way. He isn’t trying to make Jimmy feel guilty. He just wants to be prepared. He wants to have some idea of when exactly life as he knows it is going to change forever.

“I’m not,” Jimmy says.

“Of course you are. You’re not going to live with your prudish mate forever when you could be living with the man you love. A man who’s nor--”

“Don’t,” Jimmy says sternly. “Stop that. What are you on about today? Where is this coming from?”

“I’m always on about this,” Phil says. “Just usually only inside my own head. We both know you can’t stay here forever.”

Jimmy sits up again and Phil is kicking himself. He could have just shut his mouth and enjoyed the solid weight of Jimmy on top of him, but instead he’s doing this--pushing him further away with every word.

“No, not forever,” he says quietly.

“So when?” Phil asks again, because he’s gotten this far, which is further than he’s ever been brave enough to get before. And even though it hurts, and he doesn’t want to hear Jimmy say the actual words, he needs to. It’ll hurt less if he knows it’s coming.

“I don’t… I mean, we’ve talked about getting a place, I guess, but like… we don’t have plans yet or anything. Something like that… that’s a big change, innit?”

Phil nods.

“You know how I feel about change.”

Phil gives him just the tiniest hint of a smile. “I do.”

“I’m like a child,” Jimmy reminds him.

“You are.”

“We’ve been living together my whole adult life, you and I.”

“Yeah,” Phil says sadly. “That’s why I want to know. So I can be prepared.”

“You don’t think I would talk to you first?” Jimmy asks. “You think I’d spring something like that on you?”

Phil shrugs. “It just seems… inevitable? You guys are almost always together now. You could afford a nice place together.”

“This place is nice,” Jimmy says defensively.

“It’s nice enough, yeah. Mostly I think it’s nice because it’s ours,” Phil says quietly.

Jimmy frowns. “You’ve done the thing again.”

“What thing?” Phil asks.
“The thing where you let something that’s bothering you fester in your head for ages and never saying anything about it until you’re about to go mad.”

Phil has to laugh at that. It’s exactly what he’s done. “Yeah, I guess I have.”

“Don’t do that! You’ll do yourself in.”

“I just don’t understand why you’re denying it.” Apparently Phil remains determined to bring the mood back down anytime Jimmy offers up a little levity. “I’d like to hear the truth, not just what you think I want to hear.”

Jimmy looks away, biting at his thumbnail. “We’re thinking about it,” he says eventually. “Especially after being together this whole week.”

Phil nods. Despite already being absolutely sure that this was the case, it stings. It does. “Right.”

“It’s just thinking. There are no plans yet.”

“Ok,” Phil mutters.

“I don’t want to leave you alone. Ever,” Jimmy says softly.

“But you will.” Phil’s voice breaks right at the end.

“No,” Jimmy says, taking Phil’s hand in his. “You’ll find someone. Hell, maybe you already have.”

Phil frowns. “Dan?” he asks disbelievingly.

“Yes, Philip, that’s the one.”

“We’re friends,” Phil repeats. Perhaps he should just get it tattooed on his forehead at this point.

“Whatsoever you are, you seem to be quite fond of each other.”

Phil thinks about that warmth he’d felt last night, how good it felt to have Dan’s arm around him. He doesn’t know what it means, exactly, but he certainly can’t deny the truth in what Jimmy’s just said.

“Yeah.”

“You’ll be fine,” Jimmy says confidently. “You’ll be begging me to move out in like a month.”

“Never,” Phil says humourlessly.

Jimmy rolls his eyes. “Since when are you such a drama queen, Phil?”

Phil pushes his glasses up onto his forehead and digs the heels of his palms into his eyes. “I don’t know. It’s been a long night. I’m hungover. I feel like shit.”

“Drink your coffee,” Jimmy demands. He waits til Phil’s had a few swigs before saying, “One more serious thing to say and then that’s it, we have to do something fun, yeah?”

Phil nods. He could use some fun with Jimmy.

“No matter what happens, you and I will always be friends. You’re like the brother I never had, Phil. I love you. Nothing will ever change that.”

“I know,” Phil says simply.
Jimmy snorts. “That’s it? Where’s my declaration?”

“I already gave it to you by begging you not to leave me. I feel pathetic enough as it is.”

“Fine,” Jimmy says, scooting back to his corner of the sofa and picking up his mug. “I see how it is.”

Phil’s about to retort with some stupid remark when he hears his phone ping from his bedroom.

All of a sudden he remembers who he has yet to text back.

“Oh god,” he groans.

“What?” Jimmy asks.

“What if it’s Rory?”

“Oh, fuck. I’d forgotten. Shit, Phil. What’re you gonna do?”

“Ugh. I don’t know. Can I just go back to bed and hide there forever?”

“No,” Jimmy says, putting his mug back down again. “I can’t afford the rent by myself.”

“What do I say to her?”

Jimmy stands up. “Tell her the truth.” He walks away and returns a minute later with Phil’s phone.

“Here. You got a text from her.”

“I hate you,” Phil mumbles. “Why won’t you let me hide from my mistakes?”

“Because I love you and I want you to stop feeling guilty. Read it.”

“Do I have to?”

Jimmy sits back down and folds his arms over his chest. “Yes.”

Phil’s insides are twisting in painful knots as he opens up his phone.

_Rory: God i’m so sorry please please pretend i didn’t ask you that last night fuck. I was so so drunk i don’t even remember sending it. Can we talk. Please_

Phil hands his phone over to Jimmy, who scans the message quickly.

“What did she say again?”

“She asked me if I’m gay.”

Jimmy hands the phone back. “Oh, right. What are you gonna say?”

“I don’t know. Maybe nothing. She said to forget it.”

“No, I meant about talking.”

Phil sighs. “I don’t know, Jim. I really don’t want to think about anything right now.” He chucks his phone onto the coffee table. “I’m so tired of thinking.”

“Alright,” Jimmy says gently. “Let’s do something?”
Phil nods. “I’m hungry. All we have is apples and baking ingredients.”

“Go have a shower,” Jimmy says. “We’re going to Gregg’s.”

Somehow, Phil finds it in himself to laugh. Of course they are.
Phil pulls out his phone as he steps outside. It’s a shitty, grey day, cloudy and cold and damp. He pulls the hood up on his space coat as he types out a text for Dan.

*Phil: i’m picking you up and you’re walking to work with me*

*Dan: are you and am i*

*Phil: yes*

*Dan: k*

*Dan: why exactly*

*Phil: do you mind?*

*Dan: course not just wondering*

*Phil: maybe i just enjoy the pleasure of your company*

*Dan: well of course but i suspect you have ulterior motives*

*Phil: i’m slightly terrified*

*Dan: of what mate*

*Phil: rory -.-*

*Dan: did you not talk to her yesterday*

*Phil: no*

*Dan: jfc phil*

*Phil: i know. i’m a horrible person*

*Dan: youre not but youre only making it harder for the both of you*

*Phil: she said she wants to talk*

*Dan: and?*

*Phil: i ignored her. i didn’t mean to, i just didn’t know what to say and then it felt like i’d waited too long and i just really didn’t wanna talk to her. still don’t tbh*

*Dan: why*

*Phil: don’t really know what to say*

*Dan: just be honest?*

*Phil: that’s what jimmy said*

*Dan: he’s a smart guy*
Dan: was he weird yesterday btw

Phil: you mean about barging in on us sleeping together

Dan: lol that makes it sound very different than what it was but yes

Phil: um

Phil: a little yeah

Phil: like i said, that never happens

Dan: i feel strangely honoured

Phil: you should. Now come outside i’m waiting for you and it’s cold.

Dan comes out a minute later, looking curly and rosy and rather happy to see Phil.

“I could get used to having an escort every time I go out.”

Phil smiles. “It’s gonna suck when we have different shifts.”

“Oh god. I hadn’t thought of that.”

“You’ll have to brave the terrors of the London streets at night all alone, Dan.”

Dan punches him lightly in the arm. “Shut up, don’t remind me.”

Phil sighs. “I’m not looking forward to having to do actual work again, either.”

“Don’t act like you won’t be missing me Lester.”

“I’m sure I’ll see you around once in awhile,” Phil says. He’s obviously joking, but the panicked look Dan flashes says he hadn’t understood that.

“I’m only joking,” Phil says softly. “You’re coming over every day off you have. I won’t rest until I beat you properly at Mario Kart.”

Dan smiles, relief flooding his face.

“Plus you know all my secrets already.”

“You know mine too,” Dan says. “But we can’t just sit on our asses all day, as much as I’d love to.”

“What d’you mean?” Phil asks. “Sitting on my ass is what I do best.”

“Well I mean, you can, but I still have my list of rules to follow,” Dan reminds him. “And there’s one that I’m seriously failing at.”

Phil frowns.


“Oh. Right.”

Dan laughs. “Is it too much to hope you’ll come to the gym with me?”
Phil cringes but says, “I’d do that for you. That’s the kind of friend I am.”

“Wait, seriously?” Dan asks, sounding genuinely surprised. “I was kidding. You actually would?”

Phil shrugs. “Why not?”

Dan’s eyes lock onto Phil’s, boring into them like he’s searching for something. “You really are something else,” he murmurs.

Phil’s not even completely sure he’d meant to say it out loud. “We’ll get hench together.”

Before he knows it they’re stood outside the doors of Starbucks. His heart starts beating a little faster with the knowledge that Rory could very well be in there. Dan opens the door and holds it for him.

It’s the first time in the history of his Starbucks career that his heart actually sinks at the sight of her curly black hair and white-toothed smile. He feels even worse when she spots him too, and the smile drops from her face instantly.

“Shit,” he mutters under his breath.

Dan just gives him a sympathetic look. “Come on.”

They walk past her silently and into the back room. They’ve just taken off their coats and hung them up when she comes back and looks at Dan. “You feeling better, Dan?”

Dan’s face goes blank. “Uh…”

“Just wondering if you were still sick.”

“Oh,” he releases a breath and smiles. “Yeah, definitely better, thanks.”

“Good. I need you to work on your own for a bit today if you think you’re up for it?”

Dan’s smile falters a little, and Phil wishes he could step in and tell her it’s too soon for that. He can’t, because pretty much all his energy is focused on what he thinks is coming.

“Um, I guess…”

“It’s not busy right now and it won’t be for too long,” she assures. “I just need to borrow Phil for a few minutes.”

Phil feels a fresh wave of panic course through him. He’s completely and utterly unprepared for this conversation. He still doesn’t know what he’s going to say or how much of the truth he’s actually willing to reveal to her.

“Ok,” Dan says nervously. “I’ll try.”

“Call us if you needs us.” She turns to Phil. “Put that back on,” she says, gesturing towards his coat. “We’re going outside.” She grabs her own coat and walks out.

Phil gives Dan a pleading look as he shrugs his coat back on.

“Good luck,” Dan says quietly.

“Thanks. If she kills me, tell my mum I loved her.”
Dan laughs as Phil walks out of the back room, behind the cash registers and to the door. He pushes it open and braces himself for the world’s most awkward conversation.

She’s stood just outside the doors waiting, arms folded against the cold. Her dark eyes meet his right away, without a moment of avoidance. He’s glad. He’s grateful that at least one of them is going to be direct. She doesn’t look sad or angry like he’d been fearing, just expectant. Ready for an explanation. Phil hopes he can come up with one.

“You’re avoiding me,” she says.

“No.”

“Phil.” She gives him a incredulous look. “This will go a lot faster if we’re honest. You’re avoiding me.”

“I…” He doesn’t know what to say. Already. He absolutely has been avoiding her.

“Look, I know I fucked up with that text. I was out of line and I’m really sorry. I can’t really blame you for being angry.”

“I’m not angry,” Phil says quickly.

“Then what?” she asks. “You left the party without a word and didn’t text me back all day. Since when do you ignore me?”

“I just… didn’t know what to say.” It’s a bullshit answer and he knows it, but it’s not actually a lie.

“About… what I asked you?”

He looks down at his feet. “About any of it, I guess.”

“Phil?”

He looks up.

“Are you? Is that why you didn’t want…?”

He shrugs, trying not to let the anxious clenching in his stomach paralyze him completely. He wants to work this out with her.

“You said you’ve kissed boys,” she says softly.

He nods.

“So you’re into boys, right?”

“I don’t… I don’t really… date. I’m not… dating right now.” Again, utter drivel, but not technically untrue.

“But when you do, it’s with boys.”

It would be so easy to just say yes. He really should just say yes.

“Sometimes.”

Her face falls a little at that. “So you’re just not into me.”
“It’s not like that,” he says quietly, gathering up all the courage in every hidden corner of himself to look into her eyes. “It has nothing to do with you. You’re lovely.”

“But you don’t want to kiss me,” she all but whispers.

“Trust me,” he says, looking away. “I’m doing you a favour.”

She laughs a bitter sound he’s never heard fall from her lips before. It sounds fucking awful, and he could cry that he’s the cause of it. He may well yet, before this conversation is over.

“Well thanks, I guess.” She walks past him, reaching her hand out for the door handle to go back inside.

He can’t leave it like this. He can’t. He can’t lose her friendship over something like this.

He grabs her arm. “Wait.”

She looks at him and finally there’s anger there.

He lets go quickly and mutters, “Sorry.”

“If you want to say something that makes any sense, I’m all ears. Otherwise, I’ve got work to do and so do you.”

He stares at her, eyes travelling all the curves and dips of her lovely face, taking in the dark eyes and the long lashes, the full lips and the curls that fall across her forehead. He’d be so lucky to have any little part of her. Anyone would, and here she is trying to give him her heart, and he can’t even think about accepting it. How can he possibly explain that to her? He can’t even explain it to himself.

“I thought,” she whispers, her expression softening. “I thought there was something there. I thought you cared about me.”

“I do. Of course I do. You’re one of my best friends.”

“And that’s it?”

He doesn’t answer, but he doesn’t allow himself the cowardice of looking away, either. He keeps staring at her, because he just can’t bring himself to speak words that will hurt her.

“You can just say it,” she says eventually. “It’ll be better if we can just say what we need to say so we can both move on.”

He looks away. “I don’t want to… hurt you.”

She laughs, then. Still not the sweet jingling sound it normally is, but at least a lot less acidic than a moment ago. “Don’t flatter yourself, Phil. If you’re not into me that’s fine. I’ll get over it. I’m more upset that you seem to value our… friendship, or whatever… so little that you won’t even talk to me.”

“I’m sorry,” he says weakly. He’s not ready to laugh. “I just… I shouldn’t have kissed you. I didn’t mean to--”

“You didn’t kiss me, I kissed you.”

“I kissed you back,” Phil reminds her.
“You did. It was… I mean, I thought it was good.”

“It was. You’re… good. You’re always good.”

She frowns. “Then what the fuck?”

Phil shrugs.

“Look, if you’re into Dan, you can just say so. I’m not gonna be like, an asshole about it. And I won’t tell anyone if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“That’s not… I’m not. We’re just friends.”

“You and I are friends,” she says.

“Yes. Of course.”

“You and Dan are not just friends. Maybe you don’t know that yet. I mean, you’ve proven yourself to have terrible judgment,” she smiles for the first time today, “so maybe you honestly don’t realize it yet. But it’s pretty bloody obvious.”

He bites the inside of his cheek. He doesn’t even know now what the truth is. He can’t deny he feels something tugging at his insides now when he sees those dimples, those curls, those broad, always slightly hunched shoulders.

“I shouldn’t have kissed you that night,” she says, when yet again he fails to say anything back. “I can’t blame that on you. I was drunk and being stupid and jealous and I thought…” she trails off.

“Jealous of what?” Phil asks.

“Of the fact that I’ve been flirting with you for years with nothing much to show for it and then some pretty boy comes along and a week later you’ve forgotten all about me.”

“I haven’t,” he protests. “We just get on.”

“That’s my fucking point, Lester. I always thought you’d been flirting back in your own way until I saw the way you look at Dan. The way you were looking at him at the party. It’s my own fucking fault for being an idiot, I guess. I knew it wasn’t me you wanted to kiss that night, but like I said. I was jealous.”

“It’s not like that,” Phil says quietly. Not yet anyway. He’s not so sure anymore what it’s going to be like from now on.

“So you really are just an idiot,” she chuckles.

“Oh course I am,” he says shaking his head. “Have you met me?”

“Yeah, I have.” She smiles sadly. “Let me ask you a few things, ok? And please just tell me the truth. I promise I won’t be mad or heartbroken or anything ok? I just don’t want to let this ruin whatever weird friendship thing we have going on here.”

He nods. He can do that. He needs to do that. He doesn’t want to lose her either. “Can I ask a few as well?”

“Of course.”
He folds his own arms over his chest. It’s starting to get bloody cold out just standing here. “Go on then.”

“You knew I liked you.”

He nods.

“And you never felt the same.”

He looks down at his feet and shakes his head just enough for her to see it. He doesn’t want to lift his head and see her reaction.

“You feel something for Dan.”

His head snaps up then despite himself.

“You promised to be honest,” she says softly. “I’m not saying you’re in love with him. But there’s something there.”

He looks at her a long time before nodding and saying, “Something.”

“Ok,” she whispers. “Thank you Phil.”

“My turn now?” he asks.

She nods.

“Were you lying about not being heartbroken?” He feels like a twat to even ask, but he has to know.

She snorts. “No, Phil. It’s not like I’ve been locking myself up waiting for you. I just think you’re cute. I have a thing for skinny white guys with good manners and stupid haircuts.”

“I’m not skinny,” Phil protests. “Look at these Shakira hips.”

She laughs. “So are we good? You won’t be weird and avoid me anymore and I won’t flirt with you anymore? We can just be the friends we were always meant to be?”

“As long as you don’t like, act weird about…”

“You and Dan?”

He nods.

“I won’t. I can’t pretend I’m not still going to be a tiny bit jealous for a while, though.”

“You don’t have to be. Everyone who sees you thinks you’re fit. Kyle said you look like Rihanna.”

“He’s a git.”

“He is,” Phil agrees.

“But I am hot.”

Phil smiles. “You are.”

She cocks her head to the side. “I don’t understand you, Philip.”
He sighs. “No one does.”

“Except Dan?”

He frowns. “You said you wouldn’t be weird.”

“I’m not!”

Just then, the door to the shop opens from the inside and Dan pops his head round the corner. “Help,” he whimpers. “I’m not ready for this.”

“Coming,” Phil sing-songs. He turns to looks at Rory and hisses, “Don’t be weird.”

She rolls her eyes. “Come on, your boyfriend needs help.”

Phil shakes his head, but he can’t keep the grin off his face. She’s going to be weird. Of course she is. He shouldn’t have expected anything else.
“Remember when I said we’d get hench together?” Phil gasps, doubled over in the middle of the pavement, clutching his chest.

Dan grins. “You mean yesterday? Yes, Phil, I remember.”

“I think I lied. I think I’m actually going to die.” Phil wipes the dampness off his forehead with the sleeve of his hoodie. It’s November and he’s sweating. He’s very much regretting agreeing to join Dan on his morning jog.

“That’s what I thought too when I first started training. It gets easier.” He’s breathing heavy too, though, and his curls are a little curlier than they’d been when he’d picked Phil up a half hour ago. “A little.”

“Not if you’re dead.”

Somehow Dan’s grin gets even wider. “We don’t have to jog. We can just walk if you’d prefer. It’s not actually about getting hench, for me. I’m just supposed to do something physical enough to get a hit of those sweet sweet endorphins.”

Phil straightens up. “I don’t want to drag you down to my level.”

“You’re not. Thirty minutes of jogging is good. And I’d probably still be in bed if I didn’t have someone to do this with so I should be thanking you.”

“I hate it very much, but I guess it’s probably good for me too,” Phil admits. “I can’t even walk up the stairs to my flat without getting winded.”

“Stairs are different. No one can do stairs. Come on, let’s walk or you’ll get a stitch.”

“I already have one,” Phil whinges. “My whole body is made of stitches right now.”

They walk for a few minutes and eventually Phil can breathe again without wanting to lie down and curl up into a ball.

“How do you feel about yoga?” Dan asks.

Phil groans. “Are you serious?”

Dan nods. “It’s not so bad. I can almost do the crow pose.”

“Do you like, go to a class or…?”

Dan laughs. “Me? Go out? Never. I just do it in my bedroom. You can find pretty much anything on YouTube.”

“You’re a better man than me. I just sit in my pants all day eating marshmallows and playing katamari.”

“That’s not true,” Dan says. “You also make lattes and help Daniels stick to the rules of their recovery.”

“True. I’m a man of many talents.”
“Oh, you also make top notch horror films. Most of which I’m still waiting to see evidence of by the way.”

“You’ll be waiting a long time, Howell.”

“If I had something equally cool to show you, I would.”

“They’re not cool, trust me,” Phil says.

“If they came from your brain, they must be.”

Phil reaches up for his fringe, as he always does when he’s nervous or looking for a distraction from how awkward he is. He really doesn’t know what to say to that one. It’s too close to a compliment and he’s never learned how to accept those gracefully. His hair is damp and probably unsalvageable at this point, so instead of trying to fiddle with it and fix the many splinges he finds there, he pushes it back and up off his forehead. “My brain is a mess, just like the rest of me,” he says.

Dan looks at him pensively. “You know when Rory said something about you and a quiff?”

Phil nods. “She never lets me forget about me and a quiff.”

“Well, she’s not wrong.”

Phil laughs nervously. Another compliment. He feels the irrepressible urge to negate it. “I look like a dad with a quiff.”

“Exactly.”

Phil can feel himself blush, physically, viscerally feel all the blood in his body rush to his face.

Dan laughs. “Sorry, mate. I don’t need to subject you to my weird kinks.”

“You have a dad kink?” Phil asks, too relieved for the focus being taken off him to feel squirmy and uncomfortable about the particular subject matter of Dan’s joke. He thinks it’s a joke anyway.

Dan smiles and shakes his head, covering his eyes with his hand. “It’s called a daddy kink, Phil, god.”

“Sorry. I’m not too well-versed in kinks.”

“It’s alright. I’m only joking. Mostly.” He looks at Phil’s face again and then up to his hair. “It’s definitely a good look, though.”

“Don’t get used to it,” Phil says, pulling up his hood. “I’m too young to be a dad.”

Dan smirks. “Not too young to be a daddy, though.”

If there was any blood lingering in places in his body besides his cheeks, there certainly isn’t now.

“Sorry, sorry. It’s all these bloody endorphins, they make me weird. I went for so long without them my body doesn’t know how to handle them anymore.”

“Well get used to it. I’ve decided the only thing worse than jogging is being called ‘dad.’ We’re going to jog the dad away.”

“Can we yoga the dad away instead?” Dan shivers. “It’s getting too cold for jogging and that way I
don’t have to go outside.”

“T’m litro the most clumsy person on earth. You’re going to regret everything,” Phil says.

Dan shakes his head. “Nah. It’s gonna be great.”

Weeks pass just like this, with banter and laughter and hangouts in between long shifts at Starbucks.

They do yoga in Phil’s lounge. They have to push the sofa against the wall and follow the lady on the telly and Phil keeps falling over and Dan keeps laughing harder and harder every time and screeching “Phi-il, what is wrong with you?!?” In the end Phil feels like he’s gotten a good ab workout from all the laughing more than anything else and he says as much and Dan agrees but insists it’s alright because laughing releases endorphins too and if your muscles are sore the next day then it still counts as exercise.

They play countless hours of mario cart and crash bandicoot and sonic 4 and donkey kong. Phil makes Dan play bubble bobble and they spend an entire day curled up on the sofa trying to get to level 100, pausing every so often to make coffee or eat something or use the toilet. Phil falls asleep that night humming the theme tune, which he somehow still isn’t sick of.

Every night he texts Dan and says, ‘go to sleep, you’re not supposed to be up this late,’ and Dan always texts back, ‘shut up dad,’ and they proceed to text for the next hour before Phil says, ‘ok go to sleep for real, I don’t want you to have a bad day tomorrow,’ and Dan says, ‘fine but you too,’ and Phil finds himself falling asleep with warmth in the pit of his stomach and it’s growing a little warmer every day.

Phil picks Dan up before every shift and walks him home afterwards, whether it’s dark or not. He’s getting used to spending a lot of time stood at the bottom of the steps to Dan’s building, chatting and laughing and wishing they didn’t have to say goodbye.

Dan always looks a little different every day. Sometimes he wears nail polish if they have a few days off in a row and sometimes he wears flowery earrings or glittery eyeshadow or purple socks or something pink on his lips. Sometimes he wears ripped black jeans or black studs in his ears or black jumpers or Kanye merch. He always has curly hair with closely shaved sides and a lightly freckled nose and slightly toned-looking forearms and a laugh that never fails to trigger that tugging in Phil’s chest.

Phil still spends time with Jimmy every chance he can get, and it’s good time--the kind of time that he can well and truly enjoy. He can play board games or cook food or do the washing up or just sit on the sofa and talk with his friend and fall asleep in his arms without wondering quite as much what it means and how he feels and how much longer it’s going to last.

He doesn’t feel quite as much apprehension when he comes home and sees Tom’s shoes on the mat. He still doesn’t love listening to the sounds of them fucking through the rice paper walls, but now it’s softened by the knowledge that Jimmy’s not replacing him. It still hurts when he pictures a future without Jimmy on the other side of his bedroom wall each and every night, but he knows it won’t be the end of them, and that makes every part of his life feel just a little less hard.

He’s happy. The happiest he’s been in years and nothing’s really changed. He still has a shit job and no idea what he wants to do with his life. He’s still not sure what Jimmy means to him and now he’s got another gorgeous man in his life to add to the confusion. For some reason, though, it feels like a good confusion. A fun confusion. The kind that gives his days a little extra sun, a little extra reason not to dread having to waking up and get dressed and go to work.
“When are you gonna have Dan round?” Jimmy asks one morning as they’re sat at the kitchen table together, drinking coffee and tea and eating hot cross buns and rubbing the sleep from their eyes.

“He’s round like all the time,” Phil replies.

“I mean like properly. When I’m here.”

Phil takes a sip of his coffee and eyes Jimmy suspiciously. “Why?”

“Because you’re spending all your time with him and I want to meet him properly and maybe get to know him a little bit?”

“I do not spend all my time with him,” Phil protests.

“Don’t try and change the subject Philly. I want to talk to your boyfriend.”

Phil rolls his eyes. “He’s not and you know it.”

“No I don’t. I don’t know anything. You haven’t told me anything.”

“There’s nothing to tell. I made a friend. You should be happy.”

“I am! I’m well chuffed. But I miss you.”

“I’m right here,” Phil says softly. “I’m always right here.”

“You’re different,” Jimmy says from behind his steaming mug. His glasses fog up for a moment before he adds, “Not in a bad way or anything. Just different.”

Phil shrugs. “I’m having fun.”

Jimmy cocks his head to the side a little. “You know you can talk to me, right? I know things are different now than they used to be, but you can still tell me anything.”

Phil stares at Jimmy’s sleepy face. He’s right--things are different now. It used to feel like it was just the two of them, Phil and Jim against the world. They’d moved to London together with no money and no prospects and managed to snag a halfway decent flat and turn it into something almost all the way decent. They’d painted all the walls brilliant white and filled it with houseplants that stayed alive almost entirely thanks to Jimmy. They’d scrounge together what little they were making for rent and bills and sometimes even had enough leftover to buy bread and coffee. They lived on toast and caffeine for what felt like years.

Eventually Jimmy found a proper job and made other friends and met Tom. He never stopped making time for Phil, but there’s no denying how different their life looks now.

“What do you want to know?” Phil asks.

“Everything.”

Phil chuckles. “I need something a little more specific.”

“I want to know about him, Phil. Don’t act like I’m being weird. I’ve never seen you like this before, ever.”

“Like what?”
Jimmy sets his mug down. “Don’t get angry.”

“I won’t,” Phil says, confused.

“Promise,” Jimmy demands.

Phil holds out his pinky finger and Jimmy loops his own around it.

“So, like what?” Phil repeats.

Jimmy picks up his tea again. “Like you have a crush.”

Phil doesn’t say anything. He looks down at the crumbs on his plate. It’s not like he has anything to hide. He just honestly doesn’t know what the answer is.

“Do you?” Jimmy asks quietly.

Phil looks up. “I… don’t know. I don’t know what that means. I don’t know what that feels like.”

Jimmy gives him a crooked little smile. “That’s still more than anything before, right?”

Except you, Phil thinks. Maybe.

“I guess,” is what he says out loud.

“That’s great, Philly.”

“It’s not great. It’s not anything.”

Jimmy scoffs. “Don’t be thick. It’s progress.”

“It’s one more thing for me to be confused about.” It feels like a less fun confusion when he has to try to put it into words for someone who doesn’t really understand.

At that, Jimmy stands up, walks around the table and plonks himself right into Phil’s lap. “Will you shut up, please?”

Phil laughs and wraps his arms around Jimmy’s waist. God, he loves this man, Phil thinks. In whatever way, he just really fucking loves this man. He nuzzles his head into Jimmy’s chest. “Ok, fine. Sorry.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself all the time. He likes you and you like him and there’s no rush, right?”

Phil nods. “You think he likes me?”

Jimmy sighs, draping his arm across Phil’s shoulders. “Didn’t I tell you not to be thick?”

“Yes.”

“And I believe I also told you to shut up.”

Phil smiles. “Yes.”

“Brilliant.” Jimmy rests his cheek against the top of Phil’s head. “He’s a lucky guy either way. I hope he realizes that.”

Phil can’t help but picture Dan’s smile, the one that comes out when Phil says something stupid or
trips over his own feet or bites the controller after losing the fifth round of mario kart in a row. He thinks of the way Dan doesn’t even have to ask anymore if Phil will walk him home or how Dan is always the first person to text him in the morning and the last person to text him before he goes to sleep at night. He remembers the look on Dan’s face when Phil had sat him down at the kitchen table and forced him to eat when he was too sick to realize it was what he needed.

“I think he does.”

“Good. I’ll have to have words with him if he’s not treating you right.”

“I don’t think you have to worry about that,” Phil says softly.

“I always worry about you,” Jimmy says.

“I know. You don’t have to.”

Jimmy sighs and stands up. “I have to go to work.”

“Yeah. I have to get ready for work,” Phil says glumly.

“Being an adult sucks. I don’t want to do it anymore,” Jimmy whinges as he gathers his plate and mug and brings them to the sink. “Tom’s staying over tonight, by the way.”

“Alright.” Phil still feels a pang, but it’s definitely not as strong as it used to be. He follows Jimmy out of the kitchen and towards the front door with his mug still in hand.

“I’m serious, though,” Jimmy says as he pushes his arm through the sleeve of his coat. “Bring him over here soon, yeah? Maybe we can have like, a double date dinner party.”

Phil snorts. “I thought we were trying to escape from our adulthoods.” He gives Jimmy a light little shove. “And I told you, we’re not dating.”

“Whatever you want to call it then,” Jimmy says.

“I’ll think about it. I don’t want you to make him feel weird.”

Jimmy screws up his face in mock horror. “I would never.”

“Goodbye, James. Have a good day. See you later.”

He finishes his coffee and has a quick shower before getting dressed head to ankle in black with a cheeky pair of yellow and green socks which he promptly hides with his black shoes. He sends a text to Dan as he makes his way to work.

Phil: enjoy your lie in you lucky sod

It had been a sad day when Dan’s training had come to an end. Now they have their own schedules with their own individual shifts. The worst is when one works in the morning and the other in the afternoon, because those are the days they don’t really get to talk or see each other at all. He thinks he may almost be at the point where it’s not completely and totally unbelievable that he feels weird if he goes a whole day without seeing someone who isn’t Jimmy. Almost.

He’s surprised when his phone buzzes. He’d assumed Dan would still be asleep.

Dan: i was until you woke me up mate i fell asleep with my phone in my hand last night and i guess i rolled over onto it in the night because it vibrated in my ass just now so thanks for that i guess it
makes up for the ridiculously fucking early wake up call

Phil: it’s 10am

Dan: yes

Phil: i hope you don’t take your privilege for granted.

Dan: i dont im loving my life right now lying in my tiny ass bed in my tiny ass room listening to one of my housemates and the girl he brought home in the middle of the night..

Phil: i know the feeling well

Dan: da fuq

Phil: jimmy and tom

Dan: oh

Phil: yeah

Dan: i actually wish i was going to work with you right now instead of stuck here

Phil: me too

Dan: when are you done

Phil: 6:30

Dan: wanna do something after

Phil: yeah

Dan: k cool im gonna try to go back to sleep now

Phil: don’t stay in bed all day. Make yourself some food and have a shower and drink some water

Dan: ok dad have a good shift see you after XD

Phil: you’ve gotta stop with that

Dan: youll have to pry it from my cold dead hands mate

Dan: ps youre gonna pick me up after work right :D

Phil: yes but you have to promise me if you dont go outside at all today that youll do yoga or something like that in your room

Dan: i promise

Phil: k see you tonight
Chapter 18

His shift goes by agonizingly slowly. Kyle is there and Rory and Dan aren’t so he feels every single minute pass as if in slow motion. Kyle doesn’t bother him anymore, though. He doesn’t even talk to him. Hell, he doesn’t even look at him if he doesn’t absolutely have to.

Things with Rory are better. It’s still a little uncomfortable sometimes but she doesn’t flirt anymore and Phil feels like he can be himself more around her. They usually exchange at least a few texts every day and he can tell she tries very hard not to be weird about Dan. She doesn’t always succeed but Phil doesn’t really mind. He can’t really blame her, or Jimmy for that matter. They really do spend quite a bit of time together.

It’s already dark when he steps outside at the end of his shift. He’s still not quite used to how early the sun sets now it’s almost winter, and it makes him feel like it’s much later than it actually is.

For once, he’d brought clothes to change into after work. He’s wearing tight black jeans as always and his grey jumper with little foxes on it. Usually he’d just get changed at home, but he’d remembered as he put on his coat to go out in the morning what Jimmy had said. Tom’s staying over tonight.

Phil had known that Dan had the day off, and he’d suspected they’d hang out at least for a little while. He’s kind of hoping tonight might be the night Dan invites him to hang out at his place instead. He’s just not sure he’s ready to spend a whole evening with Dan and Jimmy together.

*Phil:* you ready?

*Dan:* if by ready you mean lying in bed in my pants watching sloth videos on youtube then yes

*Phil:* what did you do today?

*Dan:* so many things

*Phil:* name one

*Dan:* i brushed my teeth

*Phil:* nice. Anything else?

*Dan:* oh wait fuck i actually forgot to brush my teeth shit

*Phil:* are you serious?

*Dan:* … course not....

*Phil:* you are

*Dan:* ask me again in two minutes

*Phil:* i’m disappointed

*Phil:* also put some trousers on, i’ll be there in a sec

*Dan:* fuck really ok i’ll just come out and let you in for a sec im super not ready
Phil: are your housemates home?

Dan: don’t think so dont hear anything they go out a lot which is nice because theyre all cunts

Phil: i’m here

Dan: k

Phil waits at the top of the steps. It feels odd—he usually waits at the bottom. He’s still never seen Dan’s flat. Dan appears a minute later wearing his fitted black sweatpants slung low across his hips and a cozy looking black jumper with white and pink roses on it. Truth be told it’s not a piece of clothing Phil would have ever given a second thought to, but it looks fucking amazing on Dan.

Actually, Phil’s slowly starting to learn that everything looks fucking amazing on Dan. This ensemble is particularly striking though. It brings out the rosy glow in his cheeks and somehow, the broad stretch between his shoulders.

He holds the door open for Phil. “You coming in, mate?”

Shit, had he been staring? “Yeah.”

“Hi,” Dan says, bumping his shoulder into Phil’s as they walk towards the lift.

“Hey.”

“How was work?”

“Boring. Lonely.” Phil slings his bag up higher on his shoulder. “Glad it’s over.”

They step into the lift and Dan punches the button for the third floor. “What d’you wanna do tonight?”

Phil clears his throat a little nervously. “Something we can do here?”

Dan looks at him with a tiny little crease between his brows. Phil has the strong urge to reach out and smooth it with the tip of his finger.

“Here?” Dan asks, clearly confused. “Why? My place is a shithole.”

“Is it?”

“Not really, I guess, but I share it with people I hate so I only ever really hang out in my room and there isn’t really anything to do. I don’t have a lot of stuff here yet.”

“You have a laptop?”

Dan rolls his eyes. “Obviously.”

“Then we’ll be fine.”

Dan starts biting at his thumbnail, something Phil’s come to recognize as Dan’s instinctual reaction to low levels of stress.

“What’s wrong?” Phil asks.

“Nothing. Just… you’re gonna get bored of me soon, I reckon. All we do is watch movies and play
“video games.”

“That’s not true,” Phil argues. “We also do yoga and go jogging and make lattes.”

“We only went jogging once,” Dan reminds him. “And we usually don’t even get to make lattes together anymore either.”

“Are you bored?” Phil asks.

“No!” Dan says quickly. “No, not at all. That’s pretty much all I ever want to do anyway.”

“Well, same, so shush.” Phil smiles.

“Why don’t you wanna go home?” Dan appears to have seen through Phil’s admittedly weak attempt at nonchalance.

Phil sighs. He knows Dan’s probably going to take this the wrong way, but he doesn’t want to lie. Not to Dan.

“Jimmy and Tom are there.”

The crease between Dan’s brows deepens. “Ok… are you like, ashamed of me, or…”

“I just know he’s gonna be weird.”

“ Weird,” Dan repeats.

“He’s going to want to ask you questions and stuff and like… I just want you to myself for now.”

It was the right answer. Dan beams.

“Yeah?”

Phil nods. “Plus I am not kidding they have sex all the time and my ears need a break.”

Dan sucks air in through his teeth. “Can’t promise you won’t hear any of that here if I’m honest.”

Phil chuckles. “It’s ok. It’s probably less weird if it’s people I don’t actually know.”

“Let’s just hope they stay out late.”

When they’re stood outside the door to Dan’s flat, he turns and looks at Phil. “You’re not allowed to judge me. The place is a mess and my room is tiny and I don’t have any stuff really. I don’t even have a bed.”

“You don’t? Where do you sleep?”

“I have a mattress. I just don’t have a frame for it.”

“Oh. That’s fine. I didn’t have anything when I first moved to London either. We could barely even afford food.”

“Shit, I don’t have any of that either.”

“Dan…” Phil’s voice has gone soft with concern and just a hint of disapproval. “Have you eaten anything today?”
Dan rolls his eyes, turning the key in the lock. “Yes, dad. I just don’t really have anything I can give you.”

“Thought you’d just come round mine and eat all my food then, did you?”

Dan grins. “You caught me out.” He turns the handle on the door. “Remember, no judging.”

“I promise.”

They go inside, and Dan’s right—it’s a mess. There are beer bottles scattered over tables and the sofa looks unclean and it smells more than a little like cigarettes. Phil wonders idly how Dan always manages to smell so nice when he’s coming from here.

“Let’s just go to my room. It’s at least nicer than out here.”

Phil nods and lets Dan lead the way.

Dan’s right about his room too—it’s tiny, but he’d failed to mention that it’s actually quite nice. The walls are painted a light grey and they’re strung up in all corners with tiny white fairy lights. His mattress is a single and it lies in the corner of the room. Just as Dan said, there’s no frame, but the bedding is all black and it’s made up neatly. There’s a small desk in the other corner with his laptop and a small keyboard and stacks and stacks of books. The small closet appears to be overflowing with clothes and shoes.

Dan sees Phil looking. “Clothes are my vice, ok? Some people drink, some smoke… I buy clothes.”

Phil smiles. “I didn’t say anything.”

“Give me your coat,” Dan says. “I’ll hang it up.”

Phil cocks one eyebrow playfully. “You sure there’s room?” he says, as he shrugs himself out of the space coat.

“Shut up,” Dan mumbles as he takes the coat off and shoves it in into his closet. “See? Fits.” He turns around.

Phil watches Dan’s eyes travel down his body and then back up. Dan reaches out and tugs on the hem of Phil’s jumper. Phil’s heart does a little fluttery thing.

“This is so you,” Dan smirks.

Phil clears his throat. “So is yours.”

“I’m taking that as a compliment,” Dan says, his eyes boring into Phil’s.

“I meant it as one.” He can’t look away. Dan’s eyes are so dark in the low light of his bedroom and they’re fixed so intently on Phil’s.

“You can just get comfortable if you want,” Dan says finally, breaking the contact and heading towards the door again. “Gotta go brush my teeth. I’ll be right back.”

Just as he’s about to walk out the door, Phil blurts out, “Dan?”

Dan turns around expectantly.

Phil can feel that his face is probably pink. Hopefully pink and not just full-on red. “Sorry, just… I’m
not going to get bored. I don’t want you to think that. You don’t have to worry about being entertaining or anything like that. I just like spending time with you. It doesn’t matter to me what we actually do in that time.” He’s not looking at Dan. He’s looking down at his feet and wondering what the hell has come over him.

Dan’s voice is full of warmth when he replies, “Me too, Lester.”

Phil flops himself down onto the bed the moment Dan’s gone, throwing his arm over his eyes and sighing. Is this what it feels like to have a crush?

It’s exhausting, he thinks. He’s only been here a few minutes and his heart is already racing.

He’s still in the same position when Dan returns a few minutes later.

“You ok there?”

“Oh,” Phil mumbles into his arm.

“You sure you wanna stay here? I’ll try not to be too heartbroken if you’d rather just go home.”

Phil moves his arm and lifts his head to look at Dan, who’s sat at the little desk in the corner. “I wouldn’t.”

“Ok,” Dan says, biting his lip like he’s trying to hide his smile.

Phil wonders if Dan knows that he never actually succeeds at hiding his smile. The dimples always give him away. And the little crinkles in the corners of his eyes.

Dan turns around and starts playing something on the keyboard, something classical and pretty that Phil can’t identify. He lays his head back down and closes his eyes. He’s no musical authority by any means—he went to Martyn—but he thinks he can tell that Dan’s good but not exactly an expert. For some reason Phil thinks that makes it even more sweet, when Dan’s finger slips and presses on the wrong key or he has to stop for a moment to remember what comes next.

Dan stops suddenly after a few minutes. “Ugh. I’m rubbish.”

Phil sits up, frowning. “You are not. That was really nice.”

Dan spins around in the chair to look at Phil. He shrugs. “I’ve done it loads better before. Having an audience makes me nervous or something.”

“You really don’t have to be nervous,” Phil says quietly, while inside his own chest his heart is pounding. “It’s just me. And I don’t know anything about music. You sound like bloody Beethoven to me.”

Dan smiles and stands up. “Move over.”

Phil shuffles sideways until his arm is pressed up against the wall. “You’re not gonna fit,” he mumbles. Dan’s mattress is honestly tiny, and they both are rather large men. Especially Dan. It’s probably not even big enough for just him, but now Phil’s lying on it and there really doesn’t appear to be enough physical space for the two of them. Phil straightens out his legs and his feet hang off the end.

“Sure I will.” He lies down gingerly next to Phil, careful not to actually touch him, which makes no sense. Phil is taking up a lot more than half the bed and Dan is considerably bigger than he is.
Phil turns his head on the pillow to look at Dan. Their faces are so close he can see the soft dusting of freckles in vivid detail. There are more than he’d noticed before.

“Are you hanging off the side?”

Dan chuckles. “Possibly.”

“You can come closer,” Phil says quietly. “I don’t bite.”

Instead, Dan rolls onto his side, propping himself up on his elbow and holding the side of his face in his hand. “Shit, sorry. I thought we’d fit better.”

“Really?” Phil laughs. “Where? Are you sure this isn’t a toddler bed?”

“Oi. Mattresses are expensive. This is the best I could do.” He pushes his knee gently into Phil’s thigh. “Besides, I don’t usually have big tall men in here with me.”

“Oh no? Just small short ones, then?”

Dan looks genuinely surprised and his laugh comes out in a huff.

“Sorry,” Phil says, but he’s not. He’s never sorry for making Dan’s cheeks go all pink like that.

Dan shakes his head. “No, no, it’s just…”

“You’re not dating, right? I remember.”

“It’s not like I can’t,” Dan says, brushing a curl out of his eye. “I’m just not supposed to let anything get in the way of taking care of myself right now. So I haven’t.”

“Right.” Phil tries desperately to keep his face neutral. Dan’s words seem to have caused about a hundred separate and conflicting emotions to course through him simultaneously.

“Short guys aren’t usually my type, though, no.” Dan smirks. The same curl falls into his eye again.

Before Phil can stop himself, he’s reaching up and brushing it across Dan’s forehead. The tip of his finger grazes Dan’s skin.

Their eyes are locked again, Dan’s looking down through heavy lids, Phil’s looking up and open wide. Too wide? He’s not sure. He feels frozen. Or on fire. Something not normal and slightly terrifying but undeniably intoxicating.

Phil’s phone buzzes against his ass in the pocket of his jeans and he jumps.

“Jesus.”

Dan laughs and flops onto his back. Now he’s practically on top of Phil. Parts of him are on top of parts of Phil.

“Jimmy?” Dan asks.

Phil pulls his phone out and looks. “Yup.”

“Tell him I say hi.”

Phil opens up the message.
Jimmy: you’re not here

Phil: you are correct

Jimmy: are you with dan?

Phil: uh huh

Jimmy: are you lot coming here?

Phil: no i’m at his actually

Jimmy: this would have been a perfect opportunity for our double date

Phil: we’re.not.dating.

Jimmy: not yet

Phil: i’m putting my phone away now

Jimmy: wait!

Jimmy: if you’re genuinely annoyed i’m sorry philly. are you boys having fun

Phil: yeah. You?

Jimmy: loads. Tom fell asleep on the sofa

Phil: that’s why you’re texting me. You’re bored

Jimmy: when you say it like that it sounds bad

Phil: putting my phone away for real now.

Jimmy: if i’m not up when you get home i’ll see you tomorrow night, k? You working tomorrow?

Phil: no. day off. I’ll see you tomorrow

Phil: ps dan says hi

“Do y’all ever just send one text and go about your day or what?” Dan laughs. “I’m getting old over here, Lester.”

“Sorry,” Phil says, sliding the phone back into his pocket.

“What d’you want to do? Are you jumping ship now that you’ve seen how small and shitty my flat is?”

“It’s small but it’s not shitty. Your room’s not, anyway. It’s charming. It has character as my mum would say.”

“So much character.”

It hasn’t escaped Phil’s attention just how utterly strange this whole situation is. They’re both lying on their backs, squeezed into a ridiculously tiny space, Dan’s arm overlapping his, their feet brushing together as they dangle off the end of the bed.
It’s not the first time they’ve shared each other’s space in a bed, but they’d both been tipsy and Phil’s bed was bigger than Dan’s and emotions had been running at pretty much an all time high for the both of them. That time had felt like holding each other together, keeping each other from falling apart.

This feels different. Completely. This is a choice. And Phil keeps making it. Dan keeps giving him outs, opportunities to take a step back, or even a number of steps back, and Phil has decidedly ignored them all. He wants to be here.

He’s confused and scared as hell but he knows this is where he wants to be right now, who he wants to be spending his time with.

“I’m hungry,” Phil blurts, because it’s all becoming a little too warm and hazy and he hasn’t really eaten all day and he suspects Dan hasn’t either.

“Me too,” Dan agrees.

Neither of them move an inch.

“What are we going to do about that?” Phil asks.

“I was hoping you’d have an idea.”

“You don’t have anything?”

“Not unless you count beer and baked beans.”

Phil scrunches up his nose. “I hate beans.”

“Me too.”

“Do you want to go out?” Phil asks.

Dan sighs. “No.”

“Did you keep your promise?”

“What promise?”

“To do yoga or something,” Phil reminds him.

Dan bites his lip. “It’s possible I forgot.”

Phil sits up. “Come on, then. We’re going out.”

Dan groans as he rolls off the bed and flops face first onto the ground. “You can’t make me.”

Phil scoots to the end of the bed and lets his feet rest lightly on Dan’s back. “Come on, Howell. Let’s get dinner.”

“Ok.”

Phil laughs. “That was easy.”

“You’re very persuasive.”

“And you’re very strange.”
Dan flips over quickly. Now Phil’s feet are spread out across Dan’s chest. Dan wraps a hand around one of Phil’s ankles and looks up at him.

“I guess we’re a good match then.”

Phil’s mouth goes dry. He can’t seem to move. Or speak.

“Come on Phil,” Dan says after what is probably way too long a wait not to be suggestive in some way. “I can’t get up with your big ass feet holding me down.”

Phil snatches them away. “Sorry.”

Dan grins and holds his hand out. “Help me up?”

Phil stands up and grips Dan’s hand firmly in his own and pulls.

Dan groans again as he stands, pulling right back on Phil for better leverage. He doesn’t let go of Phil once he’s stood.

They’re just standing there, hand in hand, looking at each other yet again.

“Thanks,” Dan says. His fingers are still wrapped around the back of Phil’s hand. He rubs his thumb against Phil’s. “Your hands are really fucking soft.” His voice is nearly a whisper.

“I moisturize every day.”

Dan laughs and drops Phil’s hand then. “It’s working.” He walks to the closet and pulls out Phil’s coat and then his own. “Let’s get this over with.”

They return an hour later, full and freezing. The flat is still empty.

“We might have the place to ourselves for the night,” Dan says, pulling off his coat and shoving it in into his closet. He holds out his hand for Phil’s and shoves that in too.

“Should we go out there where there’s more room, then?”

Dan frowns. “I never do. If they come back and we’re out there…”

Phil’s stomach clenches a little. “Are they that bad?”

“Kind of, yeah. I mean, they wouldn’t do anything. It’s not like that, they’re just homophobic assholes.”

“But we’re not--”

“I know, but you’re a bloke and you’re hanging out with me so you’re automatically a poof. Plus you have an emo fringe. It’d be bad.”

“Dan, Jesus. If it’s that bad you need to find a new place,” Phil says softly.

“I know. It’s not that easy, though. Let’s just hang out in here, yeah? Pretend it’s cozy instead of fucking microscopic.”

“It is cozy,” Phil says, sitting on the edge of the bed. “Look at this adorable little baby bed.”

“Shut up.” Dan sits next to him. “What are we doing now?”
“Do you have Netflix?” Phil asks.

“Does anyone not?”

Phil grins. “Would you say you owe me a favour?”

Dan rolls his eyes. “I’d say I already owe you a lifetime of favours. But they don’t have furry tentacle porn on Netflix, Phil.”

Phil just scoffs. He’s getting used to Dan’s random bursts of filth by now. “That’s your kink, Danny, not mine.”

“Damn. What’s yours then?”

“Get your laptop out and I’ll show you.”

Dan quirks up his eyebrows. “Alright.”

Phil props up one of the pillows and settles himself against it as Dan leans over the end of the bed, fumbling his hands along the floor. He picks up the old macbook and leans back against his own pillow.

“What are we watching?”

Phil takes the computer in his lap and finds what he’s after. He sets up the show and hands the laptop back to Dan.

“Buffy?” Dan asks incredulously. “You have a vampire kink?”

Phil shakes his head. “A slayer kink.”

“Let’s do this then.” Dan bends his knees and rests the back of the laptop against his thighs.

Phil snuggles himself down a little so his head is resting against Dan’s bicep.

“Comfy?” Dan asks fondly.

Phil just nods. It’s not even that late yet but he already feels sleepy.

They watch one episode before Dan pauses it and puts the laptop down on the floor.

“You bored already?” Phil asks, truthfully a little disappointed.

“Not at all. Just wanted to get a little more comfortable?”

Phil chuckles. “I’m so comfortable already.”

Dan bites his lip. Phil wishes he’d stop doing that. It makes his stomach feel weird.

“You’re wearing jeans,” Dan says quietly.

“I didn’t bring anything to change into…”

“Do you work tomorrow?” Dan asks.

Phil shakes his head.
“Do you think you want to, like… stay over?” He sounds so hesitant. Nervous. Maybe more nervous than Phil’s ever heard him before.

Phil nods. “You have pjs I can wear or something?”

“You want some?”

“Sure. Thanks.”

Dan gets up and rummages through the small wardrobe in the closet. He pulls out the red plaid bottoms he’d been wearing that day he’d shown up at Phil’s door looking tired and empty.

He looks nothing like that now. His cheeks are pink and his eyes are bright. His lips are still chapped but Phil thinks that must be because he keeps biting at them and sucking the bottom one into his mouth.

He tosses the pjs to Phil and turns around.

“What are you doing?” Phil asks.

“Preserving your modesty.”

Phil chuckles. “God forbid you see me in my pants.” He expects Dan to turn around and look sheepish but he doesn’t. He unbucks his belt and unzips his fly quickly and awkwardly knowing Dan’s waiting for him. He yanks the jeans off and pulls up the soft red trousers.

“Alright, consider my modesty preserved.”

Dan turns around. “Do you want a shirt?”

Phil shakes his head. “This’ll be fine. Have one under the jumper.”

“I have a spare toothbrush if you want.”

“You do?”

Dan nods. “In case of emergencies.”

Phil actually laughs, fully. “Emergencies?”

Dan shrugs. “I can’t sleep without a minty mouth.”

“You did at my place,” Phil reminds him.

“Those were extenuating circumstances. Come on. My teeth are fuzzy, I hate it.”

Phil follows him to the toilet and they brush their teeth next to each other. It honestly reminds him of the olden days, with Jimmy. At the same time though, it feels different. Completely.

When they get back to Dan’s room, Phil pulls off his jumper and climbs under Dan’s black duvet. It’s almost unbelievable to him just how quickly he’s made himself at home. He watches from the bed as Dan pulls his rose jumper off and leaves it in a heap on the floor.

He’s not got a shirt on underneath. Phil’s not sure if it’d be weirder to keep staring or to conspicuously look away. He doesn’t particularly want to look away. Dan really is rather beautiful. Phil’s always known that, but it feels different now--now that the warmth and the tugging are nearly
“Is this ok?” Dan asks nervously. “I never wear a shirt to bed but I can if it makes you feel weird.”

“No,” Phil croaks. His voice comes out much deeper than he’d expected. “It’s fine.”

Dan crawls under the covers next to Phil and places the laptop back on his legs. This time he snuggles down a little further, so Phil’s head is leaned against his shoulder.

Phil is kind of grateful Dan’s pulled the blanket up over his chest. It’s just less distracting that way. He doesn’t have a slayer kink but he does really enjoy the show. He and Martyn used to watch it together in the pink playroom in the basement.

As the night grows later, Phil’s eyelids grow heavier. He’d had a long shift and an early start and he’s so warm next Dan. His forearm is pressed against the naked skin of Dan’s waist.

He doesn’t want to sleep yet. He wants to enjoy this—the warmth and the softness and the glow of the fairy lights and the smell of Dan’s cologne and the sounds of vampires being sent back to hell. He’ll just close his eyes for a moment, just to give them a little rest.

“Phil,” Dan whispers. “Phil.”

Phil opens his eyes but he can’t see anything. It’s dark and his brain is hazy, but he can still feel Dan pressed up against him.

“Big spoon or little?” Dan whispers.

“Little,” Phil mumbles groggily. Definitely little. He wants to feel Dan’s arms around him again.

“Turn over.” Dan’s voice is right next to his ear.

He shivers.

He rolls over and Dan’s arm is around him, high up across his chest and squeezing a little. He can feel Dan’s breath on his neck, feel Dan’s chin on his shoulder.

He can feel a lot of other things too, all the way down the length of his body, but he’s already starting to fall back to sleep.
He wakes up with Dan’s arm slung across his waist, as if neither of them had moved at all during the night. Maybe they hadn’t. Phil can still feel Dan’s breath against his neck. The bed is small, but they’re still snuggled closer than is strictly necessary.

Phil doesn’t open his eyes. He doesn’t move, he doesn’t make a sound. He can tell Dan is still asleep, and he wants it to stay that way. He wants to stay like this, just like this for as long as he can have it. Everything feels warm and soft and right in a way he’s not sure it ever has before.

He has no idea what time it is, but even with his eyes closed he can tell there’s light in the room so it must be morning. He’s never been so grateful to have the day off.

Dan shifts a little and Phil’s shirt rucks up at the bottom. He can feel the tips of Dan’s fingers brushing against his side. He feels a little jolt in his stomach—something he’s definitely never felt before.

Dan shifts again and his hand moves across Phil’s skin, down, towards his navel and his knees push up into the backs of Phil’s thighs. Phil stays motionless, listening to the sounds of Dan waking up.

All of a sudden Dan stills. He doesn’t move his hand but he whispers, so quietly Phil barely hears him over the rushing of his pulse in his ears.

“You awake?”

Phil doesn’t respond. He tries to keep his breaths slow and measured. He needs a minute. He doesn’t trust his voice not to crack. He doesn’t know how to deal with the sensations coursing through him yet.

“Phil?” Dan’s voice is so, so quiet—more of a breath than a whisper. Dan waits a moment for Phil’s response, and upon hearing none, he presses his forehead gently into the soft space just below Phil’s neck. His thumb strokes Phil’s skin slowly.

Everything is so slow and gentle and soft that Phil’s not entirely sure he’s actually awake. Maybe it’s all been a dream.

Phil waits a minute, until his heart rate feels something close to normal. Dan’s forehead still rests against his neck.

“Morning,” Phil whispers.

Dan jerks his head back. “You’re awake.”

Phil giggles. It hasn’t escaped his attention that Dan’s big hand is still pressed against his stomach, but Dan’s obvious nerves are making him feel a little more at ease. “Yeah.”

“Sorry,” Dan mumbles, and finally he pulls his hand away. He rolls over onto his back.

“For what?”

“I’m all up in your bubble.”

Phil rolls over onto his back, too. He doesn’t look at Dan. For some reason he suspects it’ll only add to the curious swirling in his gut. His arm overlaps Dan’s. “There’s no bubble. I told you I’m a
“You said you and Jimmy are cuddlers.”

“And now you,” Phil says quietly, his half conscious state and the memory of Dan’s fingers on his skin making him much braver than he’d normally be. “Unless you don’t want me in your bubble.”

Dan snorts, but doesn’t say anything. He sits up, turning his back to Phil and runs a hand through his curls absentmindedly. Phil is suddenly reminded Dan’s not wearing a shirt.

“So, what are your plans for today?” Dan asks.

Phil answers with a question of his own. “Are you working today?”

Dan shakes his head. “Then I’m hanging out with you.”

Phil smiles. “Let’s just agree that neither of us is trying to get rid of the other. If you want to leave, you can. But I’m happy to have you here. For as long as you want.”

“Let’s go back to mine, though. There’s no impending threat of assholes. Plus I have food and a tv.”

Phil scoots over to the edge of the bed so he’s sat beside Dan. “So, what are your plans for today?” Dan asks.

Dan nods. “Can I shower first?”

“If you must.”

Dan chuckles as he leaves the room. Phil changes back into his jeans and then lies down to wait for Dan. He stares up at the ceiling and tries not to let his thoughts wander, but it’s as good as impossible.

He pulls his phone out and sends a text to Jimmy. He’s at work and probably not likely to be able to distract Phil with a reply, but it’s worth a shot.

Phil: you still gonna be home tonight?

To his surprise, his phone buzzes a few minutes later.

Jimmy: i snuck off to the toilet to talk to you so make it fast mate. i’ll be home

Phil: tom coming?

Jimmy: no i told him you wanted me all to yourself
Phil: good

Jimmy: is something wrong

Phil: don’t think so, just need to talk

Jimmy: well shit

Phil: see you tonight. bring home wine please!

Just then there’s a knock on the other side of Dan’s door.

“Uh… yeah?”

“It’s me,” Dan says.

Phil laughs. “It’s your room, pretty sure you don’t have to knock.”

“You have to turn around first.”

“Why?”

“I forgot to bring clothes out to change into.”

“Need to preserve your modesty?” Phil asks teasingly.

“Just turn around, Lester, I’m coming in now.”

He’s tempted to stare straight at Dan when he walks through the door, he really is, but he turns around when he sees the door handle turning slowly. He sits cross legged on the bed and stares at the wall while he listens to Dan getting dressed.

“Are you decent yet?” he asks after a few minutes.

“Unless you have a foot fetish.”

“I think we’re safe.” Phil turns around as Dan’s pulling on some bright pink socks. “Nice.”

Dan smiles. “I’m glad the sock master approves. You ready?”

Phil nods, trying not to stare. Dan looks… good. There’s no way around it for Phil, Dan just looks really good today. He’s wearing an oversized, black and white boat neck jumper and rather tight white trousers. Phil’s never seen him wear white trousers. Usually he wears black jeans or black sweatpants. The white is distracting, to say the least. His lips are extra pink and his hair is just as curly and gorgeous as always.

“Yep,” Phil croaks.

Dan tosses Phil’s coat to him before shrugging into his own.

“Can we get coffee?” Dan asks.

Phil nods. “Not Starbucks.”

“Obviously.”

They get coffee from Costa and bring it back to Phil’s flat. Dan makes himself at home on the sofa
while Phil showers. When he’s wrapped up in towels and searching his bedroom for something to wear, he pokes his head round the doorframe and shouts down the hall at Dan.

“Are we going outside again today?”

“Please, dear god, no,” Dan shouts back. “Just let me be lazy for one day.”

“You have to choose between being lazy and eating food that tastes good,” Phil says, grinning.

“You’re evil,” Dan whines.

“Yes.”

Dan takes a minute to think before he replies. “I choose being lazy. It’s starting to rain.”

Phil puts on black sweats and his grey t-rex jumper, which just happens to be the first thing he can find in his closet. If they’re having a lazy day he’s going to go all out, soft comfy clothes and natural wavy hair. He rubs a towel on his head a few times and put his glasses back on.

He joins Dan on the sofa to finish his coffee. They both sit cross legged, quietly sipping and watching rain drops slide down the window. The sky is dark and grey beyond the glass and the sounds of the city are muffled by the sound of falling water.

Dan leans forward to place his empty cup on the coffee table and then looks at Phil.

“Does all your clothing have animals on it?”

“Anything that’s worth wearing has animals on it,” Phil replies, without missing a beat. The teasing banter between them is so natural, it’s like second nature, already, after only a month. It feels like longer. It feels to Phil like they’ve been friends for years.

“So what disgustingly healthy food do you have for me today, Lester?”

Phil smiles. He’s taken almost exclusively to buying food he can feed to Dan with a clean conscience.

“You want oats, oooor yogurt?”

Dan scrunches up his nose. “Yogurt, I guess.”

“I even bought berries to go on on top,” Phil says excitedly, standing up. “Come on.”

They go to the kitchen and Dan sits on the countertop and watches Phil cut strawberries with clumsy fingers. Every so often he reaches over and takes a handful of the fruit Phil’s so painstakingly sliced.

“Oi,” Phil says, swatting at Dan’s hand. “You better watch out or I’ll cut your fingers off. You know I have terrible fine motor skills.”

Dan just laughs and shoves more berries in his mouth. “Worth it just to annoy you.”

“Next time your options are gonna be bran, bran or bran and that’s it. You’ll eat bran while I eat donuts and laugh.”

They eat on the sofa and watch more Buffy. They play mario kart and make more coffee and when they get hungry again Phil makes quinoa. Dan rolls his eyes when Phil hands it to him but Phil knows he’s grateful.
After they eat again they switch to skyrim. It’s one of Dan’s favourite games and Phil really has no idea how to play, so he tells Dan he’s happy to sit back and watch. Phil tells Dan that sometimes his incredibly intense and emotional reactions to the game are more entertaining than actually playing.

And it’s true—but that’s not what Phil’s watching today. He’s not watching Dan play the game. He’s watching Dan.

He’s watching the way Dan bites at his bottom lip in concentration. He’s watching how adept those long thick fingers are as they wrap around the controller, as his thumbs jab at the buttons. He’s watching the way the wide neck of his jumper exposes little flashes of his collarbone when he moves a certain way.

His eyes are roving up and down Dan’s body and he can’t seem to stop himself. He can’t stop staring at the baggy fit of Dan’s striped jumper and the way it seems to bring out the pink in his cheeks and lips. He can’t stop staring at the tightness of Dan’s bright white trousers, the way they hug his thighs and taper at the ankles. Why does he find the look of Dan’s ankles so appealing? Why does he find himself genuinely mesmerized by how small and dainty they look compared to his long, pink-socked feet?

“Phil?”

Phil wrenches his eyes from where they’ve been fixated, on the gold triangle earrings he’s just now decided are his favourite of all Dan’s jewelry.

Dan’s got a hint of a smirk on his face. Phil realizes with a little jolt of embarrassment that the game is paused and he has no idea how long Dan’s been trying to get his attention. How long has he been staring at Dan’s ear like a weirdo, at the patch of closely shaved hair that frames it?

“What?”

“Are you bored? Do you want to do something else?”

“I’m not bored. Are you?”

Dan shakes his head. “Not bored, just wanted to ask you something.”

“Go on then.”

“I was wondering if we’re good enough friends yet that I can demand you show me your uni horror films.”

Phil huffs out a surprised laugh. “Actually, I was hoping I’d never have to show those to you. Or anyone.”

“I will literally die if I never get to see them,” Dan says.

“You’re not dramatic at all, are you?”

“I’m not, I’m just very in tune with my emotions, Philip.”

Phil sighs. “I was really hoping you’d forget.”

“Never gonna happen.”

Phil crosses his arms over his chest. “What are you gonna show me in return?”
Dan smirks, cocking an eyebrow.

“Not like that!” Phil squawks.

Dan’s smile just gets wider. “Sure.”

“I hate you.”

“Uh huh.”

“I officially vow never to show them to you now,” Phil says vindictively.

“Phi-il come on,” Dan whinges. “What do you want me to show you?”

Phil can tell Dan really tried hard not to ask that last thing suggestively.

“Something equally cringe and filled with regret.”

“Hmm,” Dan says. He takes a moment to think about it. “I’m not showing you my browser history, which is definitely the first thing that comes to mind when I hear the words ‘cringe’ and ‘filled with regret.’”

“Why does my mind go straight to furry tentacle porn?” Phil asks.

“Don’t kink shame me, Phil.”

“Stop trying to change the subject, Dan.”

Dan looks away and his voice gets quiet when he says, “I guess I could show you my dream journal thing.”

Phil shouldn’t be surprised that there are still things he doesn’t know about Dan. Just because it feels like they’ve known each other for ages doesn’t mean they actually have. There are probably loads of things Dan still hasn’t shared about himself. Phil still has a few secrets of his own after all.

“You keep a dream journal?”

Dan shrugs. “I’ve been doing it since I was like eight. I don’t even really think about it anymore, I just scribble down whatever’s in my head when I first wake up.”

“You didn’t this morning,” Phil points out.

Dan bites at his bottom lip as he smiles, like he’s trying to hide it. Phil doesn’t think he’s imagining the little rosy patch that forms low on his cheek.

“I’ll still remember that one when I get home later.” He’s decidedly not looking at Phil in this moment.

Phil doesn’t know what to say. He’s thinking again about Dan’s fingers on his stomach, his forehead pressing gently into the back of Phil’s neck. He wonders if that’s what Dan’s thinking about too.

Dan clears his throat. “I call it a dream journal but I guess it’s more than that. It’s basically just a journal at this point, but I feel like adding the word ‘dream’ in there makes it sound a little less embarrassing. I do write down my dreams every morning but I also write down lots of other stuff. Thoughts and feelings and shit like that.”
Phil frowns. “That sounds a lot more personal than some amateur films I made for an assignment.”

“Yeah, I guess it is,” Dan says quietly.

Phil gets up suddenly and goes to his room to fetch his laptop. When he returns he plonks himself down on the sofa right next to Dan, so close that their thighs are pressed together firmly. He opens it up and enters his password.

“Phil, you don’t have to show them to me if you actually don’t want to. I’ve just been so curious.”

Phil ignores him, opening up the file. “Don’t judge me,” he says, looking at Dan. “These were a long time ago.”

Dan nods, a solemn look on his face.

Phil pulls up the first video and presses play before he has time to change his mind. He tips his head back against the sofa and stares at the ceiling so he doesn’t have to watch Dan’s reactions.

It plays through and Dan laughs.

Phil glares at him. “I told you not to judge me!”

“I’m not, I swear.”

“You’re laughing!”

“Because it’s good!”

“Shut up,” Phil groans, tipping his head back again.

“Can I watch another one?”

Despite his better judgement, Phil ends up playing Dan every single video. By the end of the last one, it almost feels alright. He’s barely even cringing anymore.

“You made these all in school?” Dan asks.

Phil closes his laptop and sets it on the table. He crosses his legs underneath him and pulls the sleeves of his jumper over his fists into little paws. “Yeah.”

“Did you enjoy it?”

Phil nods. He had. It’d been one of the true joys of university life, filming and editing those videos. Truth be told, he’d enjoyed making every single video he’d made for his course, even the ones he didn’t have saved on his computer, even the ones he knew objectively were boring.

“Why’d you stop?”

He has to actively stop himself sighing. This is a conversation he’s had a million times, with everyone in his life who means anything to him—Jimmy, Martyn, his mum, even Rory once. He’s been asked this question so many times. He’s asked himself this question so many times. He knows all the answers he’s come up with over the years are basically just bullshit. The truth is buried somewhere between fear and circumstance and just plain laziness.

He shrugs. “Life, y’know?”
Dan nods. “Yeah, I definitely know.” He turns to face Phil and pulls up his own legs and crosses them beneath himself. “Do you ever think about trying it out again? Just for fun?”

“Sometimes,” Phil admits. “But I’ve probably forgotten everything by now. And I don’t even have a camera anymore.”

Dan gives him a considering look. His eyes flit back and forth across Phil’s face like he’s searching for something.

“What about you?” Phil asks quietly.

“What about me?”

“Why’d you stop… lawyering?”

“I told you, the only reason I didn’t drop out after the first day was a debilitating fear of failure.”

This time it’s Phil whose eyes wander Dan’s face. “So what do you want to do?”

Dan stares right back. “I’m happy right where I am for now, actually.”

Phil’s heart does that fluttery thing again. “Me too.”

Just then, they hear a key in the lock and the door opens.

“Jimmy,” Phil says. Is it really that time already?

“Phil,” Jimmy laughs. “And Dan.”

“Hello,” Dan says, slightly awkwardly. He stands up from the sofa and picks up his coat, which he’d left unceremoniously in a heap on the floor.

“Are you leaving?” Phil asks.

“You really don’t have to go, mate,” Jimmy says, kicking off his shoes. He holds up a brown paper bag. “I have wine, and I’m a nice guy. Just ask Phil.”

Dan smiles, shaking his head. “It’s alright. I have an early shift tomorrow.”

Phil stands up and glances quickly out the window. “It’s dark out.”

“That’s what happens at night time, Phil,” Jimmy says, walking to the kitchen.

Dan puts his coat on and walks toward the door. Phil follows.

“You don’t have to go,” Phil says, voice low so Jimmy can’t hear him.

Dan smiles. “It’s fine. We’ve been together like a full twenty four hours at this point. I don’t want to suffocate you.”

“You’re not.”

Dan puts his hand on the doorknob. “I’ll see you tomorrow at work, right?”

Phil nods. He can’t ask Dan to stay again. It’d be weird, probably. He can’t deny the disappointment he feels, though, watching Dan open the door and stepping out into the hall. “Yep.”
“K.”

“Do you want me to walk you?” Phil asks.

Dan laughs. “I’m fine Phil, I swear. Go spend time with your friend. I have to make a phone call, if it makes you feel better. I’ll be distracted enough not to be too terrified.”

Phil frowns. “Dan…”

“I’m kidding! I’ll see you tomorrow, ok? Say bye to Jimmy for me.”

Phil just nods. He’s about to step back inside and close the door, for fear he’ll just stand there like a lunatic watching Dan walk away, when Dan leans in and wraps an arm around Phil’s shoulders, pulling him in close and squeezing. Phil is surprised, so it takes him a moment to register what’s happening, but when he does he wraps an arm of his own around Dan’s waist and squeezes back. He finds he has to stop himself burying his face in Dan’s neck and breathing him in deeply.

Dan digs his chin into the meaty bit of Phil’s shoulder and says softly, “Thanks. For everything. You’re the best.”

Phil doesn’t have time to think of an appropriate response. Dan lets go and gives him a little smile and turns and walks away, down the hall toward the dreaded staircase.

Phil’s heart is pounding.
Chapter 20

“Why’d he leave so quickly?”

Phil steps back inside the flat and closes the door. He’d watched Dan walk all the way down the hall and into the stairwell, just like he’d been trying so hard not to do. He turns around and sees Jimmy sprawled out on the sofa, looking at him quizically. He’s wearing his black Libertines shirt and acid wash jeans with rips in the knees. He looks not to have shaved for at least a few days and his hair is even messier-looking than usual.

Phil wonders idly why exactly all his friends have to be so bloody gorgeous.

“I honestly don’t know,” he says, accepting the rather large glass of red wine Jimmy holds out for him and sitting next to him on the couch.

“You didn’t come home last night.”

Phil kicks his feet out to rest on the coffee table and leans back against Jimmy’s chest. “Nope.” He’s pleased at how casual he sounds, as it’s not how he feels right now at all.

“You stayed at Dan’s?”

“Obviously.” Phil takes a sip of his wine.

Jimmy flicks Phil’s ear. “Don’t be rude young man.”

“Sorry.”

They’re quiet for a while, drinking and enjoying the feeling of being in each other’s company again. Phil thinks this is what he’ll miss most of all when he can’t have it anymore--the way they can sit together and do nothing, literally nothing, and still it feels like all he really wants to do, just sit together in comfortable, peaceful, silence.

He knows it’s not going to last tonight, though. He knows there’s no way Jimmy’s going to let him get away with sleeping at Dan’s flat without a thorough questioning.

“You’ve never done that before, have you? Slept at someone else’s place?” Jimmy asks quietly.

“Martyn,” Phil replies petulantly.

Jimmy ignores him. “Anything you want to tell me?”

“You know exactly what I want you to say.”

“You want me to tell you something happened.”

Jimmy sounds annoyed when he says, “I want you to tell me if something happened.”
“You don’t think I already would have if it did?” Phil asks.

“I don’t know anymore, Phil. I feel like you don’t tell me anything anymore.”

Phil sits up and turns around so he can look Jimmy in the eye. He doesn’t think Jimmy could be buzzed already off half a glass of wine, but something in his voice tells Phil this is going to be the most honest conversation they’ve had in ages. If Phil is willing to go there too. Clearly, Jimmy is. Clearly Jimmy is already there.

“There’s nothing to tell. We watched Buffy until we fell asleep. I didn’t see any point in coming home in the middle of the night just to sleep alone.”

“So you two slept together?”

“Don’t put words in my mouth, Jim. We slept in the same bed. That’s all it was.”

“You slept in another man’s bed for the first time in what, five or six years? And you’re acting like that’s not a big deal. You’re acting like I’m an asshole for thinking maybe it’s kind of a big deal?”

“I made a friend,” Phil says weakly, because he’s not even sure he believes that anymore. “You should be happy for me.”

“Who said I’m not happy?”

“You’re not acting like you’re happy. You’re acting…”

“What?”

Phil turns away, runs his hand through his hair, giving exactly zero shits that he’s pushed his fringe up out of his face. Maybe he wants to look older right now. Maybe he wants desperately to feel like a grown up for once. “Forget it.”

“Are we actually fighting right now?” Jimmy asks, setting his now empty glass down on the table and sitting up a little straighter.

Phil empties his glass down his throat and sets it next to Jimmy’s. He folds his legs up underneath himself. He doesn’t look at Jimmy. “I don’t know.”

“You’re cross with me.”

Phil considers it. Maybe he is. Maybe he resents Jimmy acting like he’s owed an explanation for every little thing Phil does lately. Maybe. Maybe it’s something else entirely. He’s so rarely angry with Jimmy that he doesn’t even know how to process it.

He shrugs.

“Why?” Jimmy asks.

“You’re trying to get me to say something I’m not ready to say,” Phil whispers. “I can’t answer these questions and I thought that was something you understood about me by now.”

Jimmy’s voice softens. “I thought maybe things were different this time.”

“Maybe they are. I don’t know.”

Jimmy reaches out and places his hand on Phil’s shoulder, squeezing gently. “Phil.”
Phil turns his head to look into those sea green eyes and regrets it. Those eyes are like kryptonite to him.

“They are. They’re obviously different. I think I’ve known you long enough to know. This is different,” Jimmy says.

Phil frowns. Usually it gives him a little burst of pride or possessiveness or some other ridiculously misplaced emotion at the idea that Jimmy knows him better than anyone. Right now, though, it’s nothing but infuriating. “How can you know if I don’t even know?”

“Do you not?” Jimmy asks.

“Oh, piss off.” Ok, yeah. Phil’s cross. He’s definitely cross.

Jimmy shuffles a little closer and places his hands on Phil’s thighs. Their faces are so close now.

“What?”

“I’m trying to help you.”

“How, exactly?”

“I don’t want you to let this opportunity slip past you…” Jimmy pauses, like he’s considering whether he actually wants to say what he’d been about to say. “I don’t want you to give up on this… like everything else.”

Phil feels an anger rising up inside him like he possibly never has before. He doesn’t know how to express it though. He’s so bloody mad and hurt and offended he could spit, but he can’t say anything. He can’t even argue, because Jimmy’s not wrong. Not at all.

“Don’t be like that,” Jimmy whispers. “Please. I’m not trying to be a dick.”

Phil doesn’t say anything. He can’t. If he opens his mouth he’ll either shout or cry and he doesn’t want to do that. He still loves Jimmy despite everything. Despite the years of anguished confusion and despite Jimmy’s biting words, Phil still loves him with his whole heart. He wants to get to the place where he and Jimmy can be the friends he thinks they were always meant to be, without all the bullshit of tension and yearning. Be it real and mutual or simply all made up in Phil’s head, there has always been something unspoken between them. Even through his anger Phil can feel that they might be on their way to the truth, if he can just listen to Jimmy and be honest. Honest with Jimmy and honest with himself.

“You are being a dick.”

“I just want you to be honest with yourself.”

Phil shouldn’t still be surprised that Jimmy can apparently just see straight into his head at this point. He doesn’t say anything, waiting for Jimmy to say his peace.

“I don’t want you to ignore this until it goes away because you’re scared and confused. I don’t want you to be lonely and miserable forever.” He takes a deep breath. “I don’t want you to do that again.”
Phil is so shocked he forgets instantly about his anger. “Again?”

Jimmy removes his hands from Phil’s thighs and sits back against the arm of the sofa. “Again.”

Phil’s heart races. He knows of exactly one time he’d ignored feelings because he was scared and confused. The question is, how does Jimmy know that? Are they even talking about the same thing anymore?

“What d’you mean?” Phil croaks.

Jimmy just gives him a look. Just a certain set of his brow and quirk of his mouth but Phil can read it like a book. It says, I know, and you know I know.

“You… you know?” Phil asks, voice trembling.

“Of course,” Jimmy replies easily. “You think you were the only one?”

Phil buries his face in his hands. He wants to cry. He wants to run away. He wants to go back in time and tell himself not to be a moron, not to squash himself down into a sad broken version of himself who couldn’t even recognize his own feelings anymore because he was scared of what it meant to be different. To be queer. To be in love with his best friend.

“Why didn’t you ever say anything?” Phil mumbles against his fingers. He can’t bear to look at Jimmy’s face right now.

“You wouldn’t let me, Phil,” he says softly. “You didn’t want to hear it. You were so lost. Eventually I had to accept that you needed a friend more than you needed a boyfriend. You needed me to be your friend more than I wanted to be with you.”

It’s too much for him, hearing that Jimmy had felt the same all those years ago, knowing how different his life could have been, knowing it was actually him that had hurt Jimmy in the end. It’s too much. He can’t bite back the tears any longer. He sobs into his palms, regret wracking through every cell in his body. Of course he doesn’t know that things would be different now. But the knowledge that they could have been cuts him like a knife.

He feels Jimmy gather him up in his arms and squeeze tightly. He buries his face in Jimmy’s neck and lets the tears dampen that smooth pale skin.

He forces himself to stop after a few minutes. He wants to know everything.

“Fuck,” Phil mutters, pulling himself free from Jimmy’s grip and rubbing at his eyes roughly with his jumper. “Fuck.”

“Yeah,” Jimmy says.

Phil reaches forward and uses a sweatered fist to dry Jimmy’s neck.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

“You knew the whole time.” It’s not a question, but Phil’s still hoping for answer.

Jimmy nods.

“I… I don’t. I don’t know what to do with this,” Phil stutters.
Now it’s Jimmy’s turn to reach a hand up and swipe his thumb gently under Phil’s eye, brushing away the little bit of moisture remaining there. “Use it. Remember it and make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

“How… how am I supposed to move on from this?” Phil asks, voice wavering. “I always thought I was just being an idiot.”

“You were.” Jimmy smiles.

“Tell me what to do,” Phil pleads. “Please. Tell me.”

Jimmy moves in even closer. Their knees are touching and Phil can see the flecks of blue and green that make up Jimmy’s bright eyes. He can see every little spot of stubble on Jimmy’s jaw.

“Tell me what to do,” Phil whispers.

“Shut up,” Jimmy whispers back. “Close your eyes.”

Phil’s heart leaps up into his throat. He closes his eyes. He feels the tips of Jimmy’s fingers brush along either side of his face, feels Jimmy’s palms cup his jaw and pull him forward ever so gently.

Time stops. He can’t hear anything except the rustling of Jimmy’s shirt as he leans in closer. He can’t feel his fingers or his toes. He can’t feel his arms or his legs. He can’t feel anything except the soft sweet brushing of Jimmy’s lips against his.

He doesn’t open his eyes. He keeps them closed and kisses back, opening his mouth and framing Jimmy’s bottom lip between his. He kisses Jimmy like he really wants it. Like he knows what he’s doing.

He kisses Jimmy like he should have all those years ago, pulling back and surging forward again, gentle but insistent, licking against the inside of Jimmy’s upper lip and smiling when he feels Jimmy’s tongue meet his.

He keeps his eyes closed. He reaches up and finds the collar of Jimmy’s shirt and grips it tightly, like it’s the only thing keeping him tethered to something like reality.

Because this isn’t reality—it can’t be. He can’t be kissing Jimmy right now. He can’t be tasting Jimmy’s tongue and breathing in the air that Jimmy’s breathing out. Those can’t be Jimmy’s fingers running through his hair, tugging, pulling him in closer.

It can’t be, but it is. It is, and it’s amazing. It’s hot and wet and deep and everything he could have ever dreamed it would be. It’s everything he’s ever wanted and yet…

All he wants now is to stop.

He opens his eyes and the first thing he sees is that Jimmy’s are open too. It’s not bad. Phil doesn’t feel the crawling in his skin he’d felt when it was Rory on the other end of his lips. He feels warm and loved and content.

He feels at peace because he knows now what it’s like to kiss Jimmy, and he knows that he won’t spend another second of his life wondering.

They pull their lips apart, instead pressing their foreheads together.

Phil feels at peace now because he knows what he wants.
“Jimmy,” he breathes.

“Yeah,” Jimmy whispers back.

“I have a crush on Dan.”

Jimmy pulls back and laughs. “I know.”
Phil sleeps in his own bed that night. It’s been a long thirty hours of confessions and self-discoveries and emotional upheaval and for once he’s craving the solitude of the empty expanse of his blue and green sheets. His bed feels massive after cramming himself in next to Dan on that tiny mattress on the floor. Tonight he can stretch out his arms and legs and still have room to spare.

He can hear Jimmy in the bathroom brushing his teeth. If he closes his eyes and concentrates he can still feel the sensation of their lips pressed together. He smiles at the memory and he smiles because it doesn’t hurt anymore to think of Jimmy, not in any corner of his heart. All he feels now is grateful.

“We missed our chance, I think,” Phil had murmured after the kiss, as they sat on opposite ends of the sofa, both a little dazed.

“We did,” Jimmy had replied. “But I think it’s better this way.”

Phil had looked at him then, waiting.

“You were never going to be ready back then. I would have lost you. This way I never have to.”

Phil had smiled and nodded in agreement. “Biffles is enough.”

Jimmy had laughed. “Biffles is everything.”

Phil had headed to bed not long after. He knows they probably still have words for each other, questions and answers and explanations, but he needs this time. He needs to be alone with everything he’s learned tonight, about Dan and about Jimmy but mostly about himself.

He lies flat on his back and stares up at the ceiling. It’s dark and quiet and exactly what he’d been wanting ten minutes ago. Now all he wants to do is talk to Dan.

But he can’t, really. Because what he wants to talk about is Dan, and he’s not ready for that type of confession. Not yet. This feeling is too new, too uncharted.

He’s absolutely bursting though, with the need to share it with someone.

He can’t talk to Jimmy, not right now. They both need some time to process the revelations of the night.

He can’t talk to his mum because it’s the one thing he’s never told her. He always feeds her that line he hates for people to feed him: *I just haven’t met the right person yet.*

He supposes he could talk to Martyn, but he hasn’t told him much more than he’s told their mum.

He pulls out his phone and sends off a quick message.

*Phil: can i talk to you*

He doesn’t hear back for ten minutes. He’s about to give up and just go to sleep when his phone buzzes.

*Rory: of course. What’s up phil*

*Phil: you were right*
Rory: about what?

Phil: dan

Rory: i don’t mean to be rude or anything, but like… i know. But i’m happy for you. You guys will be great together. I mean you already are

Phil: we’re not together or anything… i just mean, you’re right. I like him

Rory: are you just figuring this out now?

Phil: i think i’m accepting it now

Rory: why were you not accepting it before? Have you not dated guys? I thought you had.

Phil bites the inside of his cheek. All of a sudden he’s not sure why he’d thought this was a good idea.

Phil: i’ve never been in a proper relationship

Rory: shit, really??

Phil: not at all actually

Rory: so you’re kind of freaking the fuck out right now

Phil: basically, yeah

Rory: i’m sure you’ll figure it out. You guys are together like all the time anyway, aren’t you?

Phil: i guess kinda yeah

Rory: so just add like kissing and the occasional bj in there and you’ll be fine

Phil: right, thanks so much

Rory: sorry lester. I might still be like a tad jelly, you know?

Phil: i’m sorry. I guess i’m being insensitive. I’m just feeling weird about it and i think i just wanted to talk to someone who kind of knows us both

Rory: it’s fine. Really. I’m happy for you. I just don’t know how you think i can help

Phil: i just

Phil: do you think he likes me too?

Rory: if you have to ask me that you’re even more daft than i thought

Phil beams. He’s not an idiot. He knows there’s something between them. It just feels nice to hear someone else say it.

Phil: thanks ror. goodnight

“Are you gonna tell Tom?” Phil studies Jimmy over the top of his glasses as he takes a sip of his
coffee the next morning.

“Already did,” Jimmy says casually.

“Is he mad?”

“Nope.”

“That’s good.”

Jimmy pushes up his glasses and turns his head ever so slightly to the side as he looks at Phil. “Why would he be?”

Phil gives him an annoyed little frown. “Because I kissed his boyfriend?”

Jimmy shrugs. “He knows we have… history.”

“You told him before you told me?”

“I tell him everything, Phil. We’re like, in love and shit. It’s what you do, innit?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Phil mutters, not bothering to try and disguise his irritation.

Jimmy closes his eyes and scrunches up his nose. It’s his I fucked up face. “Right. Soz.”

Phil stares down at the coffee in his mug. “Why didn’t you ever say anything to me?”

“I thought it would just makes things harder… for both of us.”

“But you’re over it.” Phil looks up and into Jimmy’s sleepy morning eyes. “Right?”

“Yeah.” He says it quietly but without hesitation. “You are too.” It’s not a question.

Phil waits for a feeling of sadness or regret to sink into his chest, but it doesn’t happen. Instead he feels relief. “I didn’t know I was.”

“That’s why I kissed you.”

Phil laughs. It feels surreal to hear those words coming out of Jimmy’s mouth and directed at him. “I kind of can’t believe you kissed me.”

Jimmy smiles that adorable little crooked smile, that one Phil loves so much. Phil smiles too, because now he can enjoy it fully without wondering if his heart has ulterior motives. He can just love it because it’s a cute smile, one that Jimmy reserves only for a select handful of people and Phil just happens to be one of them.

All of a sudden, he has an alarming thought. “Don’t tell my mum,” he says with a frown.

Jimmy nearly chokes on his tea. He’s laughing. “You think I want to tell Kath I defiled her baby boy? Not in this century, mate.”

“You didn’t defile me,” Phil says, scowling.

“Does she even know? That you’ve… been with… like, blokes?”

Phil shakes his head. “Funny enough, my sex life doesn’t really come up that often. Usually we just talk about East Enders and she’ll ask me how you are and if I’ve started looking for a proper job
yet.”

Jimmy rolls his eyes. “Your mum’s a legend and you know it. She’d probably be fine with it.”

Phil honestly hadn’t given this particular subject a ton of thought. Or any, really. He hadn’t thought it would ever really matter.

“I guess I might tell her someday, if I ever need to.”

Jimmy drains his mug and stands up, stretching his arms above his head. “Tell her before you propose to Dan, yeah? That might be a bit of a shock for her.”

“Shut up,” Phil mumbles, feeling heat in his cheeks. “I don’t even know anything’s going to happen.”

Jimmy gives him a look. A you’re a right wanker look that Phil’s not entirely unfamiliar with.

“Don’t make me come over there, Lester.”

“What? Just because I…” he trails off.

“...Like Dan…” Jimmy prompts, raising his eyebrows expectantly.

Phil feels like a goddamned teenager in a film, the one who’s denying his crush to his teasing friends. “Yeah. Doesn’t mean he does. And it doesn’t mean I know what the hell I’m doing.”

Jimmy smiles. “No one knows what they’re doing the first time they fall in love, Phil.” He says it softly, erasing Phil’s instinct to balk at the word love.

“I’m kind of… terrified,” Phil croaks.

Jimmy walks around to the other side of the kitchen table and stands behind Phil, leaning down and wrapping his arms around Phil’s shoulders. “I know,” he says, resting his chin on the top of Phil’s head. He doesn’t say anything else, but it’s all Phil really needs to hear to calm the sudden racing of his heart.

He gives Phil’s hair a ruffle and says, “Gotta go to work.”

Phil sighs and picks up his coffee again. “K.”

Just before Jimmy leaves, he says, “Just because you’re not in love with me doesn’t mean you’re allowed to replace me with him, you know that, right? I’ll fight him if it comes to that.”

Phil laughs. As if that could ever happen. “I won’t. Please don’t punch him, he’s just a little softie.”

Jimmy rolls his eyes. “You’re gross about him already. Bring him round soon, I’m serious. I want to meet him properly.” He holds out his pinkie. “Promise.”

Phil loops his own pinkie around Jimmy’s. “Promise.”

It only takes a week for Phil to find himself squeezed in next to Dan again on that little mattress on the floor in the corner of Dan’s room. This time, Dan doesn’t have to ask Phil if he wants to stay over. He doesn’t ask Phil if he wants a pair of pj bottoms, just tosses them to him and says, “You’re lucky I did laundry yesterday. It’s a pain in the ass, I have to travel halfway across London every
Phil accepts them with a chuckle and starts unbuckling his belt immediately, eager to free his long legs from their denim trappings. “You can bring it round mine next time, we have a machine.”

Dan turns his back to Phil while he changes. Phil doesn’t understand why Dan does that, and he really doesn’t understand why he finds it so endearing every time. Dan is still wearing a white jumper and tight black trousers. Really tight. Distractingly tight, really. Phil finds his eyes travelling up and down the considerable length of Dan’s legs more than he thinks he should. He has to stop or Dan’s going to notice.

“Really?” Dan asks, back still turned. “Don’t say that if you don’t mean it. You’ll never be rid of me.”

“I don’t want to be,” Phil says as he pulls Dan’s red plaid bottoms up over his ass and sits back down on the bed.

Dan doesn’t say anything, but he turns around and shit, Phil’s staring at his legs again. Shit.

Dan smiles and Phil hopes it’s not because he’s been caught ogling. “Thanks Phil. Shove over, will you?”

“Aren’t you gonna change too?”

Dan looks surprised. “Oh. I was gonna wait. You know, since I usually sleep… without a shirt?”

Phil is looking up and Dan is towering over him and he has a perfect view of Dan’s long lean body and he feels something stirring in him that he’s never felt before. It’s more than an a warmth—it’s hotter. Simmering. He doesn’t want to be afraid of it.

“It doesn’t bother me,” Phil says, voice much deeper than he’d anticipated. “You should be comfortable too.” He’s tempted to say something to make it all into a joke. He’s tempted to smile sheepishly. He doesn’t. He looks up at Dan with a straight face and says, “I usually don’t sleep with a shirt either.”

Dan’s not laughing either. He’s not smiling. He’s looking down at Phil with dark eyes and a look on his face that Phil thinks he’s seen before. He’s never liked it like he does now, though.

“No?” Dan asks.

Phil shakes his head.

“Then why do you still have yours on?” His voice is almost as deep as Phil’s.

Phil’s stomach flips. Ok, yeah, he’s definitely never felt anything like this before.

“Do you want me to strip for you, Phil?”

Phil’s not entirely sure, but he thinks he feels his heart stop.

And then Dan laughs.

And Phil forces himself to laugh too. He shakes his fringe into his eyes and looks away from Dan finally. He’d been dangerously close to answering Dan’s question. He’d been so dangerously close to saying yes.
Dan goes to his closet and fishes out some sweats. He doesn’t ask Phil to turn around this time, but he does turn himself around so that his back is facing Phil.

Phil feels just a hint of shame burn his cheeks as he stares at Dan’s ass the entire time it takes Dan to pull off his jeans and slip the sweatpants on.

What is wrong with him? He’s never done that before. Ever. He’s never stared at someone’s ass and thought how much he’d like to reach out and cup it. And squeeze it. And...

Fuck.

He looks away just in time for Dan to miss it. Thank god.

“We can leave our shirts on for now?” Dan asks.

Phil makes the decision in a split second, before he can second guess himself. He reaches back, gripping his shirt at the neck and pulling it off over his head.

Dan’s eyes go just a little bit wider. It’s impossible for Phil not to notice that Dan is staring at his chest.

“Guess not,” Dan murmurs. He doesn’t reach for his own shirt, though. He’s still stood there staring at Phil.

“That explains it,” Dan says. He reaches behind him to fluff up his pillow and lean back against it. “I never ate my crusts.”

Phil risks a cheeky side eye at Dan’s chest. He’s half covered by the black duvet but Phil can still see a brown nipple poking out.
“Yours is remarkably hair free,” Phil says.

“Oi. Don’t drag me like this. I’m still going through puberty. Can’t even grow proper stubble, for fuck’s sake.”

“You’re lucky. Shaving is a pain in the ass.”

Dan reaches up and flicks a curl out of his eye. “I look like an infant.”

Phil looks at Dan’s face then. It’s true he has a youthful sort of beauty, his features soft and rosy and freckled. But tonight he’s wearing black studs in his ears and his neck is about a mile long and actually, Phil can see a little hint of stubble on Dan’s jaw. “You really don’t.”

Is this flirting? Phil wonders. He thinks it is, because all of a sudden Dan’s got that little red patch on his cheek and he looks like he’s trying desperately not to smile.

“Thanks,” he mumbles.

Phil stretches out his legs under the duvet, so that his corgi-and-shark-socked feet poke out the bottom and dangle off the edge of the bed. He reaches back to fluff up his own pillow when his fingers brush something hard beneath it. He gets a grip on it and pulls it out.

It’s a book. Dan’s eyes go wide.

“Shit, forgot about that.”

Phil turns it over in his hand. “Is this your dream journal?”

Dan bites his lip, nodding. He suddenly looks incredibly nervous.

“The one you said you’d let me read if I showed you my videos?”

Dan’s eyes look into Phil’s pleadingly as he nods. “I did say that didn’t I?”

“You did,” Phil says, handing him the small, worn-looking black notebook. “I won’t hold you to it, though.”

Dan doesn’t take it. Phil’s hand hangs in the air for a while before he lowers in onto the bed.

“You don’t want to?” Dan asks, and Phil thinks it’s possible he actually sounds a little hurt.

“I do,” Phil answers immediately. He does. He really does. He’d thought he was being polite, but there’s no point in trying to be diplomatic if Dan is going to be offended thinking Phil doesn’t want to read it. “I was trying to let you off the hook.”

Dan still doesn’t reach for the journal. “I mean… there’s definitely some stuff in there I don’t want you to read. Like… towards the end.” He eyes the book, and then looks at Phil. “But I did promise. And you showed me all your videos.”

“I did. But they weren’t like, my literal hopes and dreams.”

Dan snorts “There’s no hope in there. It’s mostly dreams and sadness. I don’t know why you’d want to read it honestly, but you can if you want.”

Phil leans over Dan’s body slowly and drops the book as gently as he can onto the floor. “I don’t want to be sad tonight,” he says softly. “I want to hear about your hopes and dreams.”
Dan laughs again. “Is that all?”

Phil nods.

“Fuck,” Dan breathes. “You’re going to catch me out now.”

Phil settles back against his pillow again. “What d’you mean?”

“Just… I’ve not thought about it too much. I’ve been so focused on just making it through each day, trying to get better, you know? I’d never really felt ok enough to look ahead.”

Phil nods. His heart feels heavy thinking how hard those days must have been for Dan, those days where he wasn’t getting better yet, where the idea of a future happiness seemed impossible.

“Did you not have anyone?” Phil asks quietly. He doesn’t want to upset Dan, but at the same time he wants to know him. Really know him, like he knows Jimmy and Martyn and his mum. Like he knows himself.

Better than he knows himself, actually.

“I did,” Dan says, pulling the duvet up higher over his chest. “She just… she didn’t get it. She didn’t know how to help me.” Dan starts chewing on his thumbnail and guilt twists in Phil’s gut that he’s made Dan revisit these undoubtedly painful memories. “I don’t blame her. I didn’t know how to help myself.”

“What about your family?”

Dan shrugs. “I guess I don’t see them much since I moved to Manchester.”

“Really?” It’s hard for Phil to fathom being distant from his family. Even now, when they live nearly three hundred kilometers away, Phil still sees them regularly. He still talks to his mum every few days.

“Yeah, why, do you?” Dan asks.

Phil nods. “We’re all pretty close.”

“Do you tell them everything, though? Like the hard stuff?”

There aren’t a ton of things he hasn’t told his mum, but he has to admit that anything he hasn’t has been the stuff he considers hard. The stuff with which he really could use some guidance every once in awhile. “No. I guess I don’t.”

“Did you ever have anyone?” Dan asks. He sounds apprehensive, but he’s looking right at Phil.

Phil hesitates. “Do you mean…?”

Dan nods.

“I don’t date, remember?”

“But you’ve kissed people.”

Phil looks down at the duvet. “Yes.”

“So are you like… not the relationship type, or…?”
Phil looks up. “Are you trying to put me in a box Daniel?”

“Fuck, sorry. I’m not. I’m just… I want to know you.”

It’s strange just how often Phil finds himself wondering if he and Dan have forged some kind of psychic connection. Why does Dan always seem to know what he’s thinking?

“I guess it’s like you said. Didn’t meet the right person.” It’s that line again, one Phil’s heard a time or two, one he quite hates hearing. Or at least, he had, when he’d thought that ‘the right person’ probably didn’t exist. Now he’s not so sure. Maybe there is someone who could be some kind of right for him.

“You?” Phil asks, hoping to deflect.

“What, met the right person?”

Phil nods.

“I’ve met people. Lots of people. None of them were right.”

Phil doesn’t miss the strange hopefulness he feels at the word were. None of them were right. It’s overwhelming, that hope, something he’s never felt before. He doesn’t know what it means. He doesn’t understand how it actually applies to his life or what exactly he’s hoping for. It’s all too new, too sudden.

“Do you feel ok enough now?” Phil asks softly.

“For what?”

“Hopes.”

Dan smiles and looks down at his hands. “Yeah.”
Phil wakes up with his face nestled in between Dan’s neck and shoulder. He yawns a little and realizes in horror that there’s moisture on the side of his mouth and on Dan’s neck—he’s been drooling in his sleep. He knows he should roll over and turn away and pretend he’s been sleeping in his own little corner of the bed, to preserve his own dignity and any sense of decorum and personal space between them, but he really doesn’t want to. Dan’s arm is wrapped around his back and Phil’s legs is hitched up a bit and his knee is resting on Dan’s thigh. Phil’s arm is slung across Dan’s stomach, his fingers brushing Dan’s side.

He doesn’t remember snuggling up like this before they fell asleep, but then again he doesn’t actually remember falling asleep. He remembers lying next to Dan, their heads propped up against their pillows, talking and talking into what he can only assume were the early hours of the morning. About their families and their experiences at university and how terrifying it is to move away from home and live on your own for the first time. About their childhoods and the people they work with and what it’s like to live in London with no money.

Phil never did get Dan to talk about his hopes and dreams, but he did get him to admit that writing in his dream journal has become an important part of his recovery and that dreams are just the beginning of what that little notebook—and the twenty more he’s got stashed in the back of his closet—contains. He tells Phil it’s the one thing he has that’s his, that hasn’t been recommended to him by a therapist, the one thing that can’t be quantified by a professional, that can he do as much of as he wants and as often as he wants. He can write whatever’s in his head with not a thought of ‘not supposed to.’

Phil admits to Dan that ever since he moved to London, he’s felt lost, adrift on a sea of anxiety and coffee beans. He tells him that university was the best time of his adult life, the only time he ever felt a true sense of purpose and sometimes he wishes he could go back. He would have been happy to stay forever, he thinks, adding more and more degrees to his resume, but when it came time to choose between school and Jimmy, he’d chosen Jimmy. He doesn’t regret that decision, but he misses the feeling of knowing exactly what he’d been meant to do.

They’d talked about a lot of things, Phil slowly remembers. And maybe he’s starting to remember inching closer and closer to Dan as the hour grew later. And maybe he’s starting to remember that Dan hadn’t backed away, in fact he’d inched closer as well.

He doesn’t remember slotting himself into the space he now occupies, but he’s glad he had. His chest is pressed tightly against Dan’s side. He watches out of blurry eyes as Dan’s naked chest rises and falls steadily with each sleeping breath. It’s more solid than it looks with the often oversized jumpers Dan likes to cover it with. Solid and broad and smooth.

And inviting, Phil thinks. He can’t deny the urge he has to slide his hand up and brush over Dan’s nipple with his thumb.

It’s this thought that finally gives him the resolve to shuffle back a little, to try to put at least a centimetre or two of space between them. He’s never had an urge like that. He doesn’t know what to do with it.

Unfortunately Dan’s arm is still wrapped around his back, so Phil doesn’t get very far. At least he’s able to extricate his damp lips from the flesh of Dan’s neck.

Dan stirs. “What you doin’?” he asks groggily, tightening his grip on Phil and pulling him in closer.
again. “Come back.”

Phil feels a fluttering in his stomach and he doesn’t resist. “Sorry,” he murmurs.

Dan’s eyes are still closed but he’s smiling a little. “Phil, why is my neck wet?”

Phil closes his eyes and pushes his face into the pillow. “Don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Mhmm,” Dan hums. “You’re a sleep drooler.”

“Am not.”

“Whatever you say Lester.”

“It’s your fault for being such a good pillow,” Phil says.

Dan smiles a little wider. “What time is it?”

“Dunno,” Phil mumbles. “Time to go back to sleep.”

And that must be what happens because the next time he wakes up, he’s in more or less the same position, but now he’s freezing. He forces his eyes open and looks down to see that one of them has kicked the duvet off completely. It’s crumpled in a heap at the foot of the mattress, dangling over the side. He wants desperately to reach down and pull it back up over them, but he knows he’ll wake Dan if he does.

He closes his eyes and tries to drift back to sleep but it’s no use--it’s December now and the air in Dan’s room is borderline frigid. He wonders idly if the heating in Dan’s flat is even on. He slowly and deliberately stretches out his leg, hoping he can grab the blanket with his long toes and pull it up without waking Dan.

He opens his eyes and blinks them a few times, trying to clear away the fog of sleepiness so he can actually see what he’s doing. He squints as he’s not wearing his glasses and looks down--and feels every muscle in his body freeze. The first thing his eyes have chosen to focus on properly is the very obvious bulge beneath Dan’s pj bottoms.

It’s not the bulge that’d been there last night or earlier this morning. It’s decidedly longer and thicker and tenting Dan’s trousers in an unmistakable way.

Phil’s mouth is suddenly dry. His arm is still slung across Dan’s waist, his fingers actually gripping Dan’s side gently. If Phil happened to move his arm in a certain way…

He rolls over onto his back and squeezes his eyes shut. He can feel that he’s lying on top of Dan’s arm. He knows Dan’s going to wake up. Maybe he can pretend he’s still asleep, that he hasn’t seen anything.

Because it’s not a big deal. It’s not like it has anything to do with him. It’s just a thing that happens. Phil wakes up hard all the time. It doesn’t mean anything, just that Dan’s blood has been flowing in his sleep.

Then Dan rolls over and fits himself in against Phil’s side, flopping his arm over Phil’s chest and nuzzling his face against Phil’s shoulder. He hasn’t woken up--not at all. All they’ve done is swap positions and now Phil can feel every inch of Dan’s cock pressing against his hip.

Not just pressing though, Phil realizes after a moment. More like… pushing. Like grinding.
Then Dan lets out the faintest little breathy moan against Phil’s shoulder and his fingers are brushing his collarbone and it’s not a dream, Dan is actually grinding his hard dick against Phil’s body in his sleep and Phil doesn’t know what the fuck to do. He knows he should make Dan stop. Immediately. Because it’s probably still not even about him.

But he doesn’t want to. He’s starting to feel something between his own legs and it feels different, somehow. Different than it ever has before. It feels less like an inconvenience and more like an excitement.

It’s not right though, to let it continue. Phil wouldn’t want Dan to let it continue if it were him in this position. His heart is racing. He needs to think of a way to wake Dan up without making it obvious that he’s been awake and feeling all of it. He doesn’t want Dan to be embarrassed.

So he decides to be bold and rolls over heavily, wrapping his arm around Dan’s back and squeezing so they’re both lying on their sides and facing each other. Phil gives a big yawn and keeps his eyes shut and prays that Dan will wake up and assume Phil has been asleep the whole time.

He thinks his plan works because he feels Dan’s body tense under his arm.

“Phil?” he whispers, clearly a little panicked.

Phil has to use every ounce of restraint he has not to smile. He tries to keep his breathing even and his lips unmoving. He waits.

“Phil,” Dan says, a little louder this time, a little more insistent.

Phil makes a little show of waking up, rolling onto his back again and yawning, rubbing closed fists against the eyes he’s been willing to stay closed this whole time.

“What?” he asks, trying to put on a wounded tone. “‘M sleeping.”

Dan chuckles and Phil definitely hears the relief in his voice. “Sorry mate. You can go back to sleep if you want but I think I have to get up now. It’s probably super late and I can’t mess up my sleep schedule any more than it already is.”

Phil opens his eyes and looks at Dan, who’s got the duvet pulled up to his chest now. “Right, sorry.”

Dan sits up and runs his fingers through his hair, fluffing it up and then smoothing it back down. “Do I work today?”

Phil laughs and shakes his head. “I don’t either. We’re free as birds.”

Dan stretches his arms above his head and groans. Phil notices he’s careful to keep the duvet over himself. “What d’you wanna do today?” He looks down at Phil.

Phil grins and pulls the duvet up to his chin. He’s still cold despite everything. “What we do every day, Pinkie. Try to take over the world.”

“I’ll need a shower then,” Dan says, grinning. He starts to get up from the bed and stops with a little jerk. “Close your eyes.”

Phil laughs. “Why?”

Dan’s cheeks appear to be a little pinker than they were a moment ago.

Phil hates himself for what he’s about to say, but seeing Dan’s nervous little face with his little pink
cheeks and adorable puffy morning eyes is just too much to resist.

“Why, Daniel? Why do I need to close my eyes?” He gives Dan his cheekiest grin.

Dan’s face goes bright red before he hides it in his hands. “You fucking mother fluffer,” he groans. “You said you were asleep.”

Phil laughs, too loudly not to be just a tiny bit mean but he can’t help it. “You woke me up.”

“I hate you.”

“Mmm, don’t think so.”

Dan yanks the duvet off Phil’s body and wraps himself up in it like a burrito. “I’m leaving. Goodbye forever.”

“Don’t forget to bring clothes to change into,” Phil chimes.

“Hardly matters at this point, does it?” He’s trying to sound cross but Phil can hear the hint of laughter in Dan’s voice.

Once Dan’s gone, Phil reaches down beside the mattress and fumbles around on the floor until his fingers find first his shirt, and then his phone. He pulls the shirt on over his head and checks his messages. Unsurprisingly there’s one from Jimmy.

Jimmy: *are you working tonight*

Phil: *no*

Jimmy: *is dan?*

Phil: *no…*

Jimmy: *you should bring him round*

Phil starts chewing on the inside of his lip nervously. *It's stupid. He shouldn't be nervous.*

Phil: *you're not gonna be weird, right?*

Jimmy: *of course not. I want you to be happy phil*

Phil: *i'll ask him*

Phil: *is tom gonna be there?*

Jimmy: *should he?*

Phil considers it. As soon as he pictures the four of them in the flat together his mind rejects it. It looks too much like what Jimmy had said before--like a double date.

Phil: *maybe not? I dunno.***

Jimmy: *it's fine phil you can say no.*

Phil: *next time, k? I think he's intimidated enough just by you*

Jimmy: *he is? Why?*
Phil: *i don’t KNOW that he is, i just think he might be.*

Jimmy: *what have you told him about me phil? Nothing bad i hope*

Phil: *course not*

Jimmy: *alright well let me know what he says*

Phil: *k*

Dan comes back to the room after twenty minutes, smelling like sweet body wash and musky cologne, curls dripping, towel wrapped around his waist. Phil doesn’t turn around and Dan doesn’t ask him to.

“Jimmy wants to meet you,” Phil says, trying to sound casual.

Dan’s rummaging through his closet with his back to Phil. His bare back, speckled with drops of water and also the odd freckle here and there. “I already met him. Like five times.” He tosses something small and red and silky behind him without turning around.

“Yeah, he means like, properly. Like he wants to get to know you.”

Dan flings a pair of black jeans behind him, but this time he does turn around. His eyes are narrowed. “That sounds ominous.”

“It’s not, don’t worry.”

Dan turns back to his search for clothes to wear. Phil’s eyes drift downwards to focus on what he now realizes are a pair of decidedly feminine looking pants. It shouldn’t surprise him at this point, but it still kind of does. He smiles. It reminds him of the first day they’d met, when Dan had nearly bitten Phil’s head off in defense of his nail polish.

“You’re not like… afraid of Jimmy, are you?”

Dan pulls a black t-shirt and then a bright red hoodie on over his head before he turns around to look at Phil, who definitely feels a little twinge of disappointment that all Dan’s lovely skin is now covered up. He looks good, though. Red suits him disturbingly well.

Then again, Phil’s starting to think maybe every colour suits Dan disturbingly well.

“Maybe a little.” Dan bends over and picks up the pants. He looks at Phil. “Turn around, Lester. I may not have much modesty left but I can still at least pretend to have boundaries.”

Phil grins, but does as he’s told. “You don’t have to be, you know. Jimmy’s great. I think you’ll like him.”

“Yeah, but he’s been your best friend forever.”

Phil hears a light thudding noise against the floor, which he can only assume is Dan hopping as he pulls on his skin tight trousers.

“You can turn around now,” Dan says.

Phil does, and takes Dan in from his view on the mattress. He’s growing to like studying Dan from this angle. He’s wearing those ripped black jeans again and the sleeves of his hoodie are pushed up to his elbows. He’s rubbing the towel against his hair.
“Why would that make you nervous?” Phil asks.

Dan tosses the towel on the floor and flops down to sit beside Phil and pull on his black socks. He shrugs. “People don’t always like me that much.”

Phil’s heart twists. How could that possibly be true?

“I want him to like me,” Dan continues, his voice quiet. “I’ve got kind of a vested interest in him not hating me at this point.” He bumps his shoulder into Phil’s.

“As if anyone could.” Phil bumps right back. “Anyway, even if he did, it’s not like he’s my keeper. I’m not twelve and he’s not my mum. I can hang out with whoever I want.”

Dan laughs and Phil has an almost overwhelming urge to push his finger into the dimple that dents Dan’s cheek.

“He’s not going to hate you, though. There’s nothing to hate.”

Dan flops himself backwards and stretches his arms up over his head. Phil can see a tiny sliver of skin between the waist of his jeans and the bottom of his hoodie if he looks closely out of the corner of his eye, which of course he wouldn’t do. Of course not. He definitely hasn’t noticed a little bit of dark hair trailing down below his jeans. Definitely not.

“All right then,” Dan murmurs. “Meet Jimmy I shall.”

“Today?” Phil asks meekly, turning to look at Dan’s face.

“Why not.”

Phil lies down next to Dan and pulls out his phone.

Phil: he’s down

Jimmy: great, see you tonight

Phil pockets his phone and turns his head against the bed to look at Dan. Their faces are closer than he’d thought, almost close enough for his nose to brush Dan’s but he doesn’t move away. They look into each other’s eyes for a while and for once, Phil’s not scrambling internally to think of something to say. He’s enjoying this quiet moment of connection.

Dan seems to be enjoying it too. His mouth turns up in the corners just a little bit.

“Dan,” Phil says quietly, once he thinks it’s been too long to deny that something is happening between them.

“What?”

“You didn’t write in your dream journal this morning.”

Dan turns his head to look at the ceiling before slapping his big hands over his face in embarrassment. “Fuck you Lester,” he says, but he’s laughing a breathy high pitched laugh that Phil can’t resist joining in with.

“What? How do I know what you were dreaming about!” He’s trying not to continue to laugh but failing miserably.
Dan sits up and pushes at Phil’s side. “You’re the worst person in the world.”

Phil’s clutching his stomach now, he’s laughing so hard. Dan’s just so adorably sheepish and blushy, he can’t help it.

“Shut up,” Dan mumbles.

Phil gets a grip on himself and sits up. “Seriously though, are you not going to write it? Do you not write… those kind of dreams?”

“I do,” Dan says, standing up. “But I’ve been having this dream every few days and I don’t need to write about reruns.”

Phil can’t help but notice that Dan is looking decidedly away from Phil when he says this.

“Feeling frustrated?” Phil asks and he can barely believe himself. What exactly does he think Dan’s going to say to that?

And yeah, Dan definitely looks a little taken aback. Then he laughs. “You could say that.” He holds out his hand for Phil. “Come on, I’m starving.”

They bundle themselves up and get coffees and muffins and go for a walk while they have their breakfast, at Phil’s insistence.

“If we do it now we can hibernate for the rest of the day guilt-free,” he says when Dan tries to protest.

Dan just smiles and rolls his eyes but Phil knows it means something to Dan that he always tries to keep him on track.

They walk for an hour before heading back to Phil’s flat, where Dan nestles himself into what is now his designated sofa crease and Phil heads for the shower.

Phil wants nothing more than to wrap himself up in sweats from head to toe, but then he remembers how amazing Dan looks in his ripped jeans and his red hoodie. He’s at the point now where he can acknowledge to himself that he wants Dan to think he looks amazing too. That’s hard for him. He’s not used to giving much thought to his wardrobe.

And it probably doesn’t matter anyway, judging from the way Phil had been woken up the second time this morning. Dan is obviously some kind of into him.

He pulls out his phone anyway and texts Jimmy.

*Phil:* what clothes do i look nice in?

He sits on his bed, wrapped up in towels and staring at his phone for five minutes before Jimmy texts him back.

*Jimmy:* trying to impress someone, philip?

*Phil:* shut up just tell me

*Jimmy:* you look nice in everything. You’re a very handsome young man

*Phil:* you’re sweet but also full of crap
Jimmy: if you actually want to know, you look good in dark colours. Maybe wear a shirt with no dinosaurs on it. And don’t straighten your hair.

Phil: thanks james :)

Jimmy: can i go back to work now?

Phil: yep

He tosses his phone on the bed and dresses himself exactly the way Jimmy had suggested, despite his reservations about the natural texture of his hair.

He’s just pulling on a plain black jumper where there’s a soft knock on his bedroom door.

“Phil are you dead?”

“No, sorry. Coming.”

He opens the door and doesn’t miss the way Dan’s eyes travel down his body and back up before he says, “You look good and all but I’m going grey out here waiting for you.”

Phil smiles. “Let’s go.”

They return to the lounge and spend the rest of the daylight hours as has become traditionl, playing games and screaming obscenities at each other and biting their controllers and laughing until they cry. They only break for food and ribenas and Phil forgets to be nervous about later.

He forgets until he remembers, and even then, he realizes it’s ok, because there really is nothing to be nervous about. Tonight he’s going to spend the evening with his two favourite people. He’s not sure what they’re going to do or what embarrassing stories Jimmy’s going to tell Dan about Phil. He’s not sure if it’s going to be a little bit awkward or if Jimmy is going to say anything to Dan to make him blush, but Phil realizes he honestly doesn’t care.

He’s happy. Right now, he’s just happy, and he’s not thinking about anything else. He doesn’t know what’s going to happen and for once that doesn’t make him nervous or apprehensive or anxious, because he knows that whatever it is, it’s going to be good.
Chapter 23

When Jimmy walks through the door, Phil thinks it feels too early. It doesn’t feel like a whole day has passed. He and Dan are still sat on the couch, long legs outstretched and feet resting on the coffee table, taking it in turns to play sonic 4.

“Lads,” Jimmy says in greeting as he closes the door behind him. He holds up a large plastic bag. “I brought food. And no, it’s not Gregg’s.”

Phil glances at Dan and he definitely looks a little nervous, which gives Phil a little twinge of excitement. He remembers with a smile what Dan had said earlier about vested interests.

“What’d you bring us?” Phil asks, standing up.

“Indian,” Jimmy says, holding the bag out for Phil to take. “Hi Dan.”

Dan stands up and looks decidedly awkward. “Hello.”

Jimmy waves them toward the kitchen. “Let’s eat, I’m bloody starving.”

They follow Jimmy into the kitchen. Phil grabs plates and Jimmy grabs forks and Dan hangs back, radiating a nervous energy.

“Do we still have wine?” Phil asks, rummaging through the fridge. He’s feeling like a little bit of liquid courage is in order.

Jimmy crowds in next to him, pushing Phil’s hand out of the way to reach all the way into the back of the fridge and pull out a large bottle of Merlot from behind the milk.


Dan nods. He’s got his hands shoved into the pockets of his jeans and his sleeves are pushed up again. He’s chewing on the corner of his lip as he watches Jimmy lay the food out on the table.

“Can you get the glasses?” Phil asks him, hoping that giving him a little something to do will help him look a little less lost. He points to the cupboard and Dan nods.

They sit around the small round kitchen table and dish themselves out some food. Phil pours them each a very generous glass of wine.

Luckily, Jimmy has never really had much of a problem conversing with people he doesn’t know. In fact, he’s bloody good at it. He’s made a career out of it after all. He knows how to fill silences that shouldn’t be there, how to get people talking, even if it’s not really about anything at all.

“What’d you boys get up to today?”

Dan’s in the middle of taking a rather large sip of his wine, so Phil says, “Just the usual, getting my ass handed to me by this one.” He jerks his head in Dan’s direction and smiles.

Jimmy raises his eyebrows.

“At gaming, you perv,” Phil clarifies.

Dan snorts into his glass.
“Of course,” Jimmy says innocently. “I don’t even know what else you could have been referring to.”

Phil flicks a grain of rice at him. This probably isn’t what Dan needs to feel more at ease, he thinks.

“I think you beat me a couple times,” Dan says, smiling.

“And those were hard won victories so don’t go patronizing me about them,” Phil pouts.

Dan puts his hand over his chest in mock outrage. “I would never.”

“Well,” Jimmy says, purposefully interrupting their banter, “In case you lot were wondering, I got to interview Lion Babe today.”

Phil says, “Who?” at the same time as Dan says, “No fucking way.”

Phil spends the next half hour smiling while he chews, looking back and forth from Dan to Jimmy as they talk excitedly about music and celebrities and art and all sorts of things Phil doesn’t necessarily know how to have a conversation about. He doesn’t feel out of place though. He barely gets a word in, but he doesn’t feel left out. In fact, he feels something bordering ecstatic watching these two men who mean so much to him creating a genuine, enthusiastic bond right in front of his eyes.

“You had a weird emo phase too?” Jimmy asks.

Dan laughs. “Definitely. It only ended like a year ago tbh.”

“I keep forgetting you’re a baby.”

“How very dare you.”

“I over-identified with the Libertines and Blink-182. What was it for you again, Phil?” Jimmy asks.

“Oh you’re talking to me again?” Phil teases. “I dunno. Muse, maybe? I had lots. Look at me.” He gestures to his hair.

“Actually, your hair looks good today,” Jimmy says, reaching over and ruffling his fringe. “You didn’t straighten it. It’s all wavy.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot.”

“He’s right,” Dan says. “It looks good like that.”

“I thought you liked the fringe?” Phil puts on a wounded tone.

“I do. And I like the quiff too.”

Jimmy chuckles. “It’s almost as if Dan likes you regardless of what your hair looks like. How strange.”

Phil kicks him under the table.

“Who was it for you, Dan?” Jimmy asks, laughing again.

Dan looks at Phil with a grin. “Definitely Muse.”

“Imagine that,” Jimmy murmurs, and Phil wishes he could punch him in the shoulder without being
obvious. He settles for a glare.

They finish up their food and put their dishes in the sink and the leftovers in the fridge.

“Should we do the washing up?” Dan asks.

“This man is a keeper,” Jimmy says. “How soon can you move in?”

“It’s all an act,” Phil says. “He’s trying to impress you.”

“It’s working though, isn’t it?” Dan gives Jimmy a cheeky grin.

“It’s working,” Jimmy agrees. “But no, we’re not going to make our guest wash our dishes. Phil can do that later.”

“Oi.”

“I bought you dinner, Philly!”

Phil rolls his eyes. “I need more wine.”

“Me too,” Jimmy says.

“Me three,” Dan chimes.

Phil empties the bottle into their glasses, filling them all up nearly to the brim.

“Bloody hell,” Jimmy mumbles. “Steady on.”

“It’s fine,” Phil says, smiling. “We’re going to play drunk scrabble.”

“Are we?”

Phil nods. He turns to Dan. “That ok?”

Dan grins. “Definitely. I haven’t played scrabble in ages.”

They go out to the lounge and Phil fetches the game from their little bookshelf in the corner of the room. It’s filled almost entirely with games of both the video and board variety, and very little books. Phil just really loves games. He likes books too but those he keeps in his room.

They push the sofa back a little and sit cross legged on the floor around the coffee table. They lay out the board and each fish out their seven letters from the bag.

“I hope you’re ready to get annihilated by Mr. Linguistics and English Language,” Jimmy says to Dan, taking a sip of his wine. “Phil is obscenely good at this game. I never play it with him anymore because at this point it’s just a farce and he knows it.”

Phil looks at Jimmy and smiles warmly. It feels good to be here like this with him, laughing and joking and slowly getting wine drunk. It feels like home in a way he’s been missing for so long.

Jimmy looks good tonight. He always looks good really, but tonight he looks good in a way Phil knows would hurt him if things were still as they had been. He’s wearing a white button up with thick vertical burgundy stripes. His sleeves are rolled up and his collar is unbuttoned and there’s a little bit of chest hair peeking through. He looks loose and happy and it makes Phil’s heart feel so full.
It’s not the same fullness he feels when he turns to look at Dan, and he’s so happy about recognizing that distinction he could scream and shout. Maybe he should slow down on the wine after all.

Dan looks good too. Really fucking good. Red is his colour, Phil thinks. And the rips in his jeans are always so strangely enticing. And his hair is so curly and floofy and his forearms look strong and his wrists are surprisingly delicate-looking compared to those broad hands with their long fingers. His lips are chapped as ever and even _they_ look maddeningly inviting.

Those lips turn up into a shy-looking smile.

Shit, Phil thinks. Is he staring? Is he really sat here on the floor in his lounge, warm and heavy with wine and staring at his friend’s lips? Right in front of his other friend, who’s definitely not going to let behaviour like that go unmocked later?

“I don’t doubt it,” Dan says warmly, and it takes Phil a good while to remember what they’d even been talking about.

“Phil is very smart,” he adds.

“I dunno,” Phil says finally, tearing his eyes from Dan’s lovely face and looking down at his letters, trying to arrange them into the best word he can. “Dan’s good with words. He’s a writer.”

“Are you?” Jimmy asks.

Phil doesn’t dare look up to see Jimmy’s expression. He can picture it perfectly in his head and he’s already embarrassed enough.

“No,” Dan says, stretching out a long leg to push his foot against Phil’s calf. “Phil’s giving me way too much credit.”

“If you lot are going to continue this disgusting flirting then I’m going first,” Jimmy says, not waiting for a response from either of them. He places a word down in the centre of the board. _Glue_. “Ten points for me,” he chimes.

Phil is so horrified by the mediocrity of Jimmy’s word that he forgets to be mortified about his comment about flirting. “You’re supposed to keep your u’s!”

“Why?” Jimmy asks as he rifles through the little velvet bag for replacement letters.

“In case you get the q,” Dan says.

Phil looks at him in surprise. Which is stupid, really. It’s one of the more basic and well known rules of scrabble strategy, after all. He shouldn’t be impressed. He shouldn’t be feeling all this bloody _fondness_.

“I’ve told you this a thousand times,” Phil sighs as he marks Jimmy’s points down on a little pad of paper. “And ten points is crap, you know that, right?”

Phil stares at his letters for five minutes before Jimmy exclaims, suddenly and loudly, “New rule! No more than two minutes a turn.”

Phil starts to whine. Dan laughs.

“Trust me, Dan, you’ll thank me, otherwise he’ll take fifteen minutes every time it’s his go.”

“Speed scrabble,” Dan smiles. “Sounds fun.”
“He’s just trying to sabotage me,” Phil whinges.

They play a few rounds and Phil’s still winning by quite a lot, even with the frankly ludicrous time constraints and the growing buzz of alcohol that flows through his veins. He plays his word and writes down his disappointingly low score.

It’s Dan’s turn. He gasps, eyes going wide. “Holy fuck.” He shoves a knuckle between his teeth and bites down.

“What?” Phil demands.

“I have. The best. Word.”

“Play it!” Jimmy shouts. He’s definitely a little bit drunk by now.

“I can’t,” Dan says sadly. “It’s not a real word.”

“Who cares,” Jimmy says. “If it’s good you should play it.”

It’s not meant to be mean, just honest. He really doesn’t care and Phil knows that. Anytime Jimmy plays scrabble with Phil, it’s purely on the basis of indulging his friend’s love of words and board games.

“What is it?” Phil asks. “Why’s it not a real word?”

Dan’s still biting his fist, so his words come out a little garbled. “It’s a pokemon.”

Jimmy laughs full-on, eyes shut, mouth open.

“Shut up,” Phil laughs, pushing Jimmy’s shoulder in defence of Dan’s honour. “You can definitely play it,” he says, looking over at Dan. “Pokemon are ok. I’ve decided.”

“The scrabble master has spoken,” Jimmy says, finally recovering from his fit of giggles.

“I’m doin’ it,” Dan says, biting his lip in excitement as he slowly and dramatically lays down his letters. All his letters. On a double word score.

“Pikachus?! Are you serious?!” Phil feels a mixture of outrage and genuine pride in Dan’s abilities, even if it is really isn’t technically a word.

“So that’s nineteen times two for the word plus fifty for using all my letters, right?” He looks over at Phil, who nods begrudgingly. Dan grins. “So eighty eight?”

“I’m deeply regretting my decision.” Phil marks down Dan’s ridiculous score. “And you used your u.”

“I think in this case it was worth it,” Dan teases.

Jimmy’s phone rings then. He checks it and gives Phil an apologetic look. “It’s Tom.”

“It’s fine,” Phil says. “Say hi for me.”

Jimmy stands up and answers the phone. He walks slowly toward the kitchen as he talks, but Phil can still hear pretty much everything he says. He finishes off his wine and tries not to listen.

“No I told you I can’t. I’m here with Phil and Dan… You know, the—–. Yeah, that’s the one…”
Phil sneaks a look at Dan chewing absentmindedly on his thumb nail. Why does it feel awkward all of a sudden? It shouldn’t, Phil thinks. They’re having fun and he’s tipsy and he doesn’t want it to feel awkward.

He reaches out and tugs on Dan’s big toe through his sock, hoping the randomness will make him laugh, or maybe just because he really wants to touch him in this moment.

“He-llo,” Dan says, wiggling the toe Phil’s still got in his grip.

“Hey,” Phil says warmly. He doesn’t let go. In fact, he actually scoots a little closer so he doesn’t have to stretch his arm out quite so far.

They hear Jimmy’s voice again, though it’s a little fainter. Phil turns his head to see that Jimmy’s in the kitchen now.

“I know, but I’m the one who invited him… I can’t, Tom… You know he wouldn’t want to…”

Phil looks back at Dan. “I think Tom’s trying to steal Jimmy and leave us here all alone.”

Dan’s elbow digs into his knee, head resting against his fist. He’s facing Phil and smiling. “God forbid.”

Phil’s stomach swoops.

“Fine, I’ll ask. But when he says no you have to bugger off, love… Yeah, I’ll call you back.”

Dan just raises his eyebrows and smirks, and Phil’s honestly not sure what to hope for at this point.

Jimmy comes back and sits himself down on the other side of the table again. “So it’s my turn, right?” He casts his eyes down to his letters.

“Don’t you have something to ask me, James?”

He looks up in surprise. “You heard that?”

“We did,” Dan says. “Something about not wanting to do something. And buggering off.”

Dan wiggles his toe again and Phil realizes he’s still holding it. Fuck. Had Jimmy seen that? He panics for a split second before realizing that actually, it doesn’t matter. He doesn’t give a shit if Jimmy’s seen. Jimmy already knows everything.

Almost everything. He doesn’t know that Phil had woken up to Dan’s boner rubbing against his hip. And he doesn’t know how much Phil had wished he was the kind of person who could let that continue. Who could have possibly woken Dan up and not pretended he didn’t know what was really going on.

Jimmy also doesn’t know the sensations that had begun growing between Phil’s own legs. But he’s definitely not ready to talk about that yet. He doesn’t even really know what to make of it himself.

He does let go of Dan’s toe though, because it still probably looks kind of weird.

“It’s fine, I’ll just call him back in ten minutes and tell him to go without me.”

Phil sighs. “Stop being passive aggressive and just ask me.”

Jimmy smirks a little. “You’re not going to want to go.”
“Go where?”

“Does it matter? You never want to go anywhere.”

Phil wants to argue, but he really can’t. Jimmy’s right. He’s not really one for going out, unless it involves minimal socializing and maximum food intake.

And he doesn’t want to go anywhere tonight either. He’s a little bit drunk and their flat is warm and already contains the only two people he ever wants to spend any time with so why would he want to leave?

On the other hand, he hates that know-it-all look on Jimmy’s face right now, and he hates to hear himself described so bluntly. You never want to go anywhere. It’s true, but he wishes it wasn’t. He doesn’t want to spend his whole life hiding. He sneaks a glance at the gorgeous boy next to him.

He really doesn’t want to hide anymore.

“Where are we going?” he asks.

“This was Tom’s idea, not mine. And I already told him you wouldn’t want to.”

“Where are we going, James?” Phil asks sternly.

“Yeah, where are we going?” Dan asks. “I’m invited too, right?”

Phil’s head feels a little floaty as he looks over at Dan and beams. Suddenly he doesn’t even care where they’re going to go. “Course you are,” he says softly.

“We’re going to a club,” Jimmy says loudly.

Phil’s heart sinks a little, but he stops himself spiraling into fear and anxiety when he sees the look on Dan’s face.

“I’m going to get to see Phil Lester dance drunk to shitty elecropop? Count me the fuck in.”

“Actually, it’s ‘90s R&B and hip hop night,” Jimmy says. “And I doubt Phil’s gonna dance.”

“Listen, Hill. Don’t underestimate me.”

Jimmy looks a little shocked. “Are you actually agreeing to come to a gay club with me, Phil?”

“You never said it was a gay club but I don’t see how that really changes anything.” He looks at Dan. “Does it?”

“Definitely not,” Dan grins. “The music at gay clubs is always better. Plus the blokes won’t punch you for accidentally brushing against their arm or looking at their girlfriend for two milliseconds.”


“Me?” Phil asks.

Jimmy rolls his eyes. “When will you accept that you’re pretty?”

“Never.”

Dan laughs. “You should accept it, Phil.”
Phil’s glad he’s already a little bit drunk or he’d probably be about ready to jump off the train right now. He doesn’t go to clubs. Maybe he goes to pubs, but only if Jimmy or occasionally Rory drag him. Clubs though, those are a definite no. He has little coordination, no rhythm and even less desire to humiliate himself, even if only in front of drunk strangers. Dancing at Rory’s party had been bad enough.

But then he remembers who’s going to be there and he feels a little jolt of genuine excitement. His shoulder is pressed firmly into Dan’s as they ride the tube to the East End, toward what Phil hopes will be a fun night out with minimal humiliation. A few drinks, possibly some well-timed swaying in a dark corner. He might even be able to sing along to some of the songs. The ‘90s were his childhood after all.

He hopes Jimmy will be wrong and he won’t get hit on, but a tiny part of himself wonders if it won’t look to people on the outside like he’s already taken. The thought terrifies and excites him in almost equal measure. Yeah, he’s glad he’s not sober right now. Otherwise it’d probably be mostly terror in his gut.

As if reading his mind, Dan bumps his hip into Phil’s and says, “You’re not freaking out are you?”

Phil scoffs. “Course not. Cool as a cucumber over here.”

“Good. I’m excited to watch you dance to TLC and Boyz II Men.”

“If you think you’re going to see me dance tonight you have another thing coming, Howell.”

“We’re going to a club, Phil,” Dan says. “You are officially required to dance with me.”

Phil raises his brows. “With you?”

Dan’s cheeks are flushed and his smiles are even easier than usual. He’s definitely not sober either. He doesn’t bother being coy or pretending he doesn’t know what he’s just said. “Yeah. With me.”

“I’m gonna need at least three more drinks before I agree to that kind of indignity.”

“You did just fine at Rory’s party.”

Phil winces. “God. Don’t remind me of that. Besides, that was slow dancing.”

“Yes. Exactly.”

“You want to slow dance with me Dan?” He says it like a joke. He assumes it’s a joke.

Dan’s not laughing. “Yeah, I do.”

It’s not. It’s not a joke. Why had he thought it was a joke? Why does he insist on resisting this thing at every turn?

Dan grins. “I’ll buy you a drink, though, don’t worry.”

Jimmy turns around then from where he’s stood behind them and says. “You don’t have to, Dan. Tom’s buying. I made him promise since he’s dragging us out.”
“He’s not dragging us, but I won’t refuse free drinks,” Dan says. “I’m one broke bitch right now.”

“I’m always a broke bitch,” Phil agrees.

“Well he’s not,” Jimmy says. “He’ll be our sugar daddy tonight.”

Phil cringes and Dan laughs.

They meet Tom outside the club. He’s been there since he called Jimmy an hour and a half ago. He’s a little tipsy too and he’s got a few friends with him that Phil recognizes vaguely from various outings. They all look a little shiny and happy and ready to go back inside where it’s warm. And loud.

There’s a relatively long queue that snakes around the side of the building, but apparently one of Tom’s friends knows the bouncer and they get let in without having to wait. Phil feels like a complete fraud. He’s not this person. He’s not a person who skips the queue at a trendy East End LGBT club because he has an in with the bouncer. He feels like he shouldn’t be here, but he moves in closer to Dan and tries to remind himself that he’s here to have fun. That Dan wants to slow dance with him.

It shouldn’t surprise Phil that it’s much louder inside than it had been outside, but it does. He can feel the bass rocking through the floor, through his feet and up his entire body. If he wanted to talk to anyone right now he’d have to get right up in their ear.

It’s not exactly the kind of music he listened to as a kid, but it somehow still brings him right back. He hadn’t expected to feel nostalgic in a place like this. He almost wishes he knew how to dance without looking like a complete dork.

They leave their jackets at the coat check and follow Tom up a flight of stairs to a room with exposed piping and dark hardwood floors. It’s long and narrow with colourful walls and dim lighting. There are balloons everywhere and a colourful, mosaic-tiled bar.

It’s also packed wall to wall with people of all shapes, sizes, genders and hairstyles. Phil is surprised to find that even though he and the rest of his little party are perhaps a little more clean cut and preppy-looking than most of the sweaty bodies in the room, he doesn’t actually feel out of place. He hadn’t bothered changing out of his black jumper which he kind of regrets now, if only because he’s sure he’s going to be sweating soon, even if he doesn’t actually do any dancing.

Dan’s arm is pressed up against his, red and blue lights dancing over his curls. He’d left his hoodie at Phil’s house. Now he’s wearing the tight black t-shirt he’d had on underneath and his ripped black jeans and black trainers. He doesn’t look out of place at all. It doesn’t escape Phil’s attention that he’s also dressed head to toe in black himself, almost like they’d planned it. Like they’re a unit.

Tom gestures for them to follow him and they make their way through the sea of people over to the bar. Phil has no idea how they’re actually going to be able to order drinks, the music is so loud and there are so many other people waiting. He’s glad it’s not his responsibility to try to get the bartender’s attention. Even just thinking about it gives him anxiety.

Tom leans over the bar and yells something and actually manages it. The bartender comes over and
Tom leans into her ear, presumably ordering for all of them. Phil wonders what he’s going to be made to drink tonight.

Jimmy is stood behind Tom, leaning his cheek against his shoulder, arms wrapped around his waist. All of a sudden something clicks for Phil and he understand why Jimmy ever wants to go to places like this. He looks so bloody happy. So free. He may have accepted himself a long time ago, but that doesn’t mean the rest of the world has. Phil’s never seen him and Tom looking so open and casual anywhere but their flat. He looks around and sees that look on a lot of other faces, too.

Something shifts for him then, and he feels his whole body relax. There’s nothing for him to fear here. He can be himself here, whoever that happens to be. This is where it’s safe. It’s out there, on the street and on the tube and even inside his place of work where he has to pretend. No one is going to judge him here. He turns his head and sees a girl with pink hair making out with a girl with sleeves of tattoos and a shaved head.

He feels Dan’s breath against his neck and his voice in his ear. “You ok, Lester?”

Phil nods. “You?”

“Never better.”

Tom turns around and hands them each a shot glass. “Cheers!” he shouts but Phil can barely hear him.

He looks at Dan and they both throw back the mystery shots.

Phil cringes. Vodka.

“Another?” Tom shouts.

Phil leans closer to him. “Get me something I can sip. Something that tastes good. I’m too old for vodka shots.”

Tom laughs as he turns back to the bar. This time he has to wait longer. He shouts at Phil after a few minutes, “You boys go have fun, I’ll find you when I have a drink for you.”

Phil’s heart kicks up a little in his chest. This is the part he doesn’t know how to do. He looks at Jimmy pleadingly, willing him to save him somehow. He just winks, the bastard. Phil makes a mental note to give him a good shoulder punch later.

He turns to look at Dan and feels a little relieved to see him looking just as awkward and unsure of himself as Phil. He leans in closer, right next to Dan’s ear so he doesn’t have to shout. “What now?”

“If I don’t see you dance by the end of this night I’ll be very disappointed.”

Phil suddenly wishes he was a lot drunker. He wishes he knew how to dance. Or that he was confident enough to just do it anyway.

He pushes the sleeves of his jumper up to his elbows and ruffles his fingers through his wavy fringe. He’s doing any little thing he can to stall.

Then Jimmy slides in next to him and throws his arm over Phil’s shoulder. “You boys look lost. Come on.” He takes Phil’s hand in one of his and Dan’s in the other, dragging them away from the bar and toward the part of the room where Phil realizes people really aren’t doing much more than swaying. He can do swaying.
As if he can hear Phil’s thoughts, Jimmy says, “This isn’t where the dancing happens. This is just the bar. The real club part is in the basement.”

“Of course it is,” Phil mutters, knowing no one will actually be able to hear him.

“We can still dance a little until Tom brings us our drinks.” He leans in closer to Phil so Dan can’t hear him and whispers, “Don’t get scared Philly. Dan’s been staring at you all night. He doesn’t care if you dance awkwardly.”

Phil’s glad for all the other people packed tightly around them, for the bodies pressing into him, pushing him in closer to Dan and Jimmy. It makes the swaying easier, a little less awkward. Not a lot, but a little. He tries not to stare at Dan, at the way the colourful lights travel over his face, at the tightness of his shirt and the way his fingers seem to go on forever. Luckily a song comes on that he remembers the words to and Dan does too and they end up basically serenading each other. Destiny’s Child to the rescue.

“You never fail to surprise me,” Dan laughs when the song’s over.

“Everyone knows Say My Name,” Phil replies. They’re stood close enough to hear each other, which means Phil’s whole body is pressed into Dan’s. There’s not an inch of space between them. He’s still not quite used to the fact that he has to tilt his head up slightly to look into Dan’s eyes when they’re this close.

He could probably take a step back if he wanted to. He could move away so his chest isn’t pushed up quite so tightly against Dan’s. He doesn’t.

Someone taps on his shoulder. Phil turns. It’s Tom with their drinks. Phil takes them both and gives one to Dan. He thinks he sees Tom grab Jimmy’s hand and drag him away but he can’t be sure. He doesn’t really care right now.

“Cheers,” Dan says, clinking his glass against Phil’s.

It’s a much nicer drink, but he’s not really sipping it like he thought he would. He wants to feel the buzz as quickly as possible. He wants that little extra hit of courage. He wants to dance with Dan. Properly.

He tips his glass back and makes eye contact with Dan, who’s mid sip as well. Dan smiles against the rim and raises his eyebrows in challenge. Phil knows exactly what he’s asking and they end up racing to see who can chug their drink back faster.

Dan wins, but not by much.

“Bloody hell.”

Phil turns around to see that Jimmy’s still there.

“Mad lads. Give me those.” He holds his hand out for their glasses. “Wait for me and we’ll go downstairs, yeah?”

Phil nods. His movements feel a little slower, his limbs a little heavy. He’s warm all over and it’s not just the drinks. He turns back around and Dan’s face is right there. So close. And he’s so fucking beautiful tonight.

“Ready?” Jimmy’s back already. How did he get so back so fast?
Phil nods and Jimmy takes his hand again.

“Come on Danny!” Jimmy shouts as he starts moving toward the staircase, dragging Phil behind him.

Phil feels Dan grab onto the back of his jumper and hears his voice in his ear again. “Don’t wanna lose you.”

Phil knows if he were a different kind of the person, the person he’s really starting to wish he was, he’d reach back and take Dan’s hand. Instead he turns his head and grins at Dan and shouts, “Hold on tight.” He thinks it’s still a fairly bold move, one he wouldn’t have been able to do if it were anyone but Dan he was shouting at.

They weave their way through the crowd as Flava in Ya Ear by Craig Mack blasts into their eardrums. Finally they make it to the staircase, and even that is lined with people the whole way down to the basement, where the music somehow gets even louder.

When they finally make it to the bottom, Phil turns around and sees that Tom is behind Dan. Jimmy’s still got a firm grip on Phil’s hand as he shouts at Dan and Tom, “We need the toilet, we’ll be right back!” which is a surprise to Phil. Jimmy must have something he needs to say to him.

Dan lets go of Phil’s jumper and Tom flashes them a thumbs up. Phil gives Dan a shrug.

“Don’t leave me for too long, Lester,” Dan shouts. “I don’t actually know how to do this.”

Phil grins. “That makes two of us. I’ll be right back.”

Jimmy pulls him toward the gender neutral loo. It takes them a while as there are even more people down here than there had been upstairs, and they’re proper dancing. Some of them a real sight, drunk and sweaty and grinding up against each other. Phil wonders what it’s like to be that far removed from your inhibitions. Must be nice.

Phil honestly feels a little scandalized when Jimmy pulls him into an empty stall and closes the door behind them.

“What the hell?”

“Sorry, just wanna talk to you,” Jimmy says, locking the door. “This is the quietest place I could think of.”

“I can barely hear you!” Phil protests.

“Best I could do!”

“Ok… what’s up James?”

“I wanted to make sure you’re alright. With all this. I feel bad for even asking you to come. I didn’t want you to feel pressure or any--”

“It’s fine,” Phil cuts him off. He’s slightly terrified but he’s still glad he came. He’s tipsy enough that he can almost picture himself moving his body in a way that won’t embarrass him too much. Especially since he can hear Gettin’ Jiggy Wit It playing now and it fills him with nostalgia, reminding him of sitting on the sofa with Martyn in the lounge of their childhood home and watching The Fresh Prince. It’s so dark and loud and sweaty and crowded out there that it almost feels like another world, like he could be a different person. “I’m having fun.”
Jimmy smiles. “Are you actually going to dance? Do I need to get my phone out?”

“You’d better not,” Phil says sternly. “If you record me I’ll break your phone, I swear to god.”

“Are you gonna dance with Dan? Like is that actually a thing that’s going to happen?”

“Unless you keep me in the toilet all night and make him think things that aren’t true!”

“Oh my god, Phil!” Jimmy squeals. “I’m so fucking happy right now you have no idea. I’m so proud of you!”

“I’d save it. I’m probably going to make an ass of myself.”

Jimmy reaches out and ruffles Phil’s fringe. “You’re not. You’re gonna do great. I think Dan’s going to love it regardless of your actual dancing abilities. He’s going to have Phil Lester pressed up against him.”

“Shut up.” Phil can feel his cheeks flushing.

“I will, but you know I’m not wrong.”

Phil reaches out and unlocks the stall door, rolling his eyes. “I’m leaving now.”

Jimmy touches Phil’s arm softly. “I’m serious though, Phil, if you’re uncomfortable in any way, come find me. Ok? We can leave whenever you want.”

Phil nods. “I’ll be fine.”

Phil’s slightly surprised that no one stood waiting outside the toilet even gives them a second look. What kind of dodgy shit has gone down in here, Phil wonders, shuddering.

They enter the throbbing mass of gyrating humans again and Phil realizes it’s going to be a real mission to locate Dan and Tom. This time though, it’s Phil who grips Jimmy’s hand and drags him further into the crowd. All of a sudden he’s slightly desperate not to go another minute thinking about what he wants to do instead of just doing it.

After a few minutes Jimmy leans in and says, “There’s Tom.” He points and Phil’s eyes follow Jimmy’s hand and he sees Tom. And a few more of Tom’s friends. But not Dan. He’d assumed they’d stick together waiting for him and Jimmy.

“Where’s Dan?” Jimmy asks.

Phil frowns. He shouldn’t be annoyed. Jimmy’s been nothing but sweet tonight. “I don’t know, James. I was in the toilet with you.” His throat is starting to feel a little raw from all the shouting.

“Right, sorry mate. Let’s ask Tom.”

They make their way over to Tom and Jimmy comes up behind him and wraps his arms around his waist and buries his face in the back of his neck. Phil forgets to be annoyed for a moment. They look good together. Phil feels a wave of happiness and gratitude that he can appreciate Tom for what he is now, the person who makes Jimmy happier than anyone else in the world.

He sees Jimmy whisper something in Tom’s ear before Tom stands on the tips of his toes and scans the crowd. Then he points his finger and Phil follows and his eyes lock onto Dan.

He looks even more ridiculously amazing than Phil had remembered and he’d only been gone five
minutes. The song changes then and Honey by Mariah Carey starts playing and it all feels a little too
much like a scene from a cheesy film, because that’s exactly what Dan looks like right now, how
looking at Dan makes him feel. Warm and sweet and soft and golden.

Phil starts walking towards him when he’s stopped in his tracks. Because Dan, the Dan Phil’s not
been able to stop thinking about for weeks now, the Dan who makes Phil feel things so strongly he’s
actually excited about dancing in a club, is not alone.

He’s really not alone. There’s a man stood right next to him. Not just next to him, but against him.
Pressed up against him like Phil should be right now. Like he would be if Jimmy hadn’t dragged him
to the toilet just when he’d worked up the courage to let himself have a little fun.

This man is almost as tall as Dan. He’s blond and dark-skinned and muscular and dressed in a black
leather jacket and baseball cap and of course Phil doesn’t know, but he can’t help thinking, this man
is everything I’m not.

Phil feels a horrible bitterness churn in his gut as he watches this very attractive man lean in even
closer to Dan, watches his mouth whisper something into Dan’s ear, watches his hand touch Dan’s
arm.

Phil knows he has no right. No right to feel like he does right now. Dan can do whatever the fuck he
wants, and why shouldn’t he? If a hot guy wants to dance with him and won’t be awkward and
confused and hesitant, why shouldn’t Dan go for it? What gives Phil the right to feel the poisonous
tendrils of jealousy curling around his insides?

What gives him the right to roughly push past the people that separate Dan from him, to stand in
front of Dan and look him in the eye and slip his fingers between Dan’s and squeeze his palm?

Nothing. Nothing gives him that right.

But he does it anyway.

And Dan gives him the most blindingly gorgeous smile Phil’s ever seen.
“There you are,” Dan says, leaning in close. “I missed you.”

Phil turns his head and their faces are so close, so damn close he could close that distance in an instant.

“You’re making friends,” Phil says. The man is still stood there, looking at the way Dan’s hand is wrapped around Phil’s.

“Are you…” Dan gives him a cheeky look. “Are you jealous, Phil?”

Phil doesn’t answer. Instead he turns to the blond man and says, “Sorry, mate. This one’s next dance is spoken for.”

The man gives him a clipped smile and turns and walks away.

Dan giggles. Phil can’t really hear it because the music is so bloody loud, but he can see it, the way Dan’s shoulders shake, the way his cheek concaves in the middle.

“I leave you alone for five minutes…” Phil teases.

Dan shrugs. “I can’t help it. My milkshake brings all the boys to the yard, I guess.”

Phil scrunches up his face. “No,” he groans. “Never again.”

Dan laughs harder. He rubs his thumb across the back of Phil’s hand. “So,” he says. “My next dance is spoken for, is it?”

“You said you wanted to see it,” Phil reasons. “I don’t know why you would, because I’m going to be awkward as hell, but far be it from me to disappoint.”

“Do you think I’m not going to be awkward? You think I know how to dance, Phil? Look at me.”

“You’ve been warned, that’s all I’m saying.”

Just then, someone bumps into Phil’s back and sends him tumbling into Dan. Dan lets go of Phil’s hand to catch him.

“Thanks,” Phil mutters. Dan probably can’t hear him.

Now Dan’s basically got his arms around Phil and they’re just stood there looking at each other. Phil wonders if Dan can feel that crackling too. That electricity.

Phil doesn’t know what to do with his hands. Dan’s slide further around him and he’s got his arms around Phil’s waist now. He pulls Phil a little closer and Phil’s stomach flips.

At that moment, the song changes. It’s a lot less soft and melodic than the last one. Phil recognizes it, he knows it’s Biggie, but he can’t remember what it’s called. Dan’s got a huge cheeky grin on his face though, and he’s starting to move his hips against Phil’s. Phil tries to follow suit in a way that does justice to what he’s feeling in the pit of his stomach right now. Why is Dan looking at Phil like that, biting his lip and trying not to laugh?

Then Phil hears the lyrics *I love it when you call me big poppa*, and Dan bursts out laughing. His
cheek brushes Phil’s as he leans in and says, “It’s your theme song, dad.”

Phil groans and drops his forehead down onto Dan’s shoulder. “Abuse.”

“You like it,” Dan whispers and Phil feels a little chill run down his spine.

Phil picks his head back up, and Dan’s looking at him again. His cheeks are a little pinker for all the laughing. Phil still hasn’t figured out what to do with his hands.

Dan helps him with that. He takes Phil’s wrists and places Phil’s hands on his hips before slinging his own arms around Phil’s neck. It’s exactly the position Phil had found himself in with Rory, but this feels so incredibly different he’s tempted to laugh. He might if his throat wasn’t so tight. He might if his heart wasn’t pounding against his chest like a sledgehammer.

“Don’t worry, Phil. It’s just me, your awkward friend who also doesn’t know what he’s doing but really wants to dance with you.”

Phil chokes out a laugh. It helps a little, even though he doesn’t believe it for a second. Dan’s started moving his hips again and it feels about a thousand fucking miles from awkward.

So he lets Dan take the lead. He takes a deep breath and tries to focus on the little details one at a time. He focuses on his tipsiness, the way it makes the tips of his fingers feel just slightly numbed against the rough material of Dan’s jeans. He focuses on the music and the way the beat and the sheer volume of it makes him feel a little bit like a different person. He looks out over the crowd of people packed tightly together and moving in time with that music and takes note of how free they all seem to look, how many of them have their hands up in the air or their lips attached to someone else’s.

He focuses on the way Dan still smells like he just stepped out of the shower and on the way his fingers are gripping the back of Phil’s neck. He watches the way the red and blue lights travel over Dan’s shoulders.

The one thing he tries not to think about it is the movement of his own body, because then he’ll start to panic that he’s making an ass of himself, and he actually thinks he’s doing alright so far, if the way Dan’s biting his lip is anything to go by. Phil doesn’t know a damn thing about any of this, so he doesn’t know if Dan’s actually doing any better than he is, but he finds he doesn’t care. He can feel Dan’s thigh in between his and for the first time in his whole life, he kind of wishes there weren’t so many layers of clothing separating them.

The revelation hits him hard. It’s not just a crush. He’s not smitten. He wants Dan. He wants Dan to help him figure it out.

It’s terrifying.

Then the song ends and a new one starts and Phil thinks Dan might pull away, but he doesn’t. What he actually does is drop his hand down to slip his thumb into Phil’s belt loop and tug him even closer. Phil has the sudden and frankly disconcerting urge to bite Dan’s long neck, to sink his teeth into the spot just above Dan’s collarbone, but he gets a grip on himself before giving in.

He manages to keep his mouth to himself for another three songs. The muscles in his thighs are starting to burn a little and his head feels floaty.

Phil tilts his head up to reach Dan’s ear. “You said you were awkward.”
Dan leans in and his hair tickles Phil’s cheek.

“So did you. I guess we’re both liars.”

Suddenly, or at least that’s how it feels to Phil, there’s a new song playing and it’s much slower and Phil finds himself disappointed that Dan’s not grinding up on him anymore.

The disappointment is short-lived though, as Dan pulls him even closer and wraps his arms around his shoulders and whispers, “Do I finally get my slow dance?”

Phil nods and wraps his arms all the way round Dan’s waist and Dan rests his chin on Phil’s shoulder. They sway slowly for a minute just holding each other and Phil doesn’t know what’s going on around him anymore because his eyes are closed and his head is just full of Dan and the way they fit together perfectly like this.

Dan’s fingers are on the nape of his neck, sliding up into his hair and Phil feels his heart stop for a moment.

“I’m drunk Philly, are you?” he breathes.

Phil laughs because he thinks Dan’s broken the tension at exactly the right moment, exactly before this all became just too much for Phil to handle. “Yeah.”

“Can you believe we’re slow dancing in a gay club right now? We’re like the biggest dorks on the planet.”

“Well I know I am,” Phil says. “You seem to know what you’re doing, actually.”

Dan tugs on Phil’s hair playfully. “You just have that effect on me, Lester.”

Phil gathers up all the courage afforded him by the drinks and the dark and feeling of Dan all around him to say, “I think you have the exact opposite effect on me.”

“Why’s that?” Dan asks.

Phil squeezes his arms around Dan a little tighter. “You make me, like, very nervous.”

Dan’s lips brush the shell of Phil’s ear. “You think I’m not?”

Phil doesn’t know what to say, so he just lays his cheek against Dan’s shoulder. He thinks that’s answer enough. They stay wrapped around each other until the song ends and Dan pulls away.

“Do you wanna get more drinks and find a corner to hide in and talk and watch people make out?”

Phil laughs and nods. He really does. He doesn’t know how much more dancing he could take right now. He doesn’t know how much more of this feeling he can handle tonight.

He does take Dan’s hand when he offers it though, and lets Dan lead him through the crowd and up the stairs and to the bar where they wait twenty minutes before the bartender even gives them a second glance and another ten before she takes their order and another ten before they get their drinks. They don’t care, because they score two small wooden stools and a perfect view of the freakshow of drunken shenanigans that unfold before them. Lots of excited shrieking and drink spilling and wayward mouths and colourful clothes and intricate tattoos and creative hairstyles.

When they get their drinks they leave their stools and troll the outskirts of the room for a safe place to tuck themselves away. Eventually they find one that’s not too sticky and sit on the floor with their
backs against the wall. They’d each agreed to order a drink for the other without saying what it was. Dan hands Phil a very grown up looking glass filled almost to the top with ice and orange liquid and topped with a cherry and a slice of lemon.

Phil feels rather silly as he hands Dan the drink he’d chosen, hoping it’ll come across endearing and not childish. “You first,” he says.

Dan’s already grinning before he even takes a sip. His drink has a cherry on top as well, but it’s also very obviously just a glorified tropical slushie. And it has a long straw. He takes a long gulp and laughs. “Did you really order me a pina colada?”

“Can you tell me it’s not delicious, though?” Phil says, knocking his knee into Dan’s.

Dan takes another drink. “I cannot.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“Try yours.”

“I’m scared. It looks like a proper drink.”

Dan laughs again. “It still has sugar and a cherry, Phil. It’s not scary.”

Phil takes a sip and crinkles his nose at first. Then he lets the flavour sit on his tongue a moment and tastes the sweetness. “It’s sour,” he says.

“Whiskey sour,” Dan replies, scooping the cherry out of his drink and holding it up. “Cheers, mate.”

Phil fishes out his own cherry and bops it into Dan’s. “To awkward dancing and hiding in the corner.”

“The Dan and Phil clubbing experience,” Dan says and pops the cherry into his mouth.

Phil distracts himself from that strangely mesmerizing sight by eating his own little piece of unnaturally red fruit. If he notices Dan staring at his lips then, he ignores it.

They sip their drinks slowly and Phil is really starting to feel it now. His head feels heavy. He leans it back against the wall for a while. He feels a lovely warm tingling all up and down his arms and legs. He keeps bumping his leg into Dan’s in time with the music.

“You ok there, buddy?” Dan asks.

Phil nods and turns his head to look at Dan. Maybe that was a mistake. His boundaries feel dangerously lowered now and Dan just looks so warm and soft and curly and dimpled and adorable that Phil has the almost overwhelming urge to reach out and just stroke his finger down his nose or something weird like that.

“’M drunk,” Phil mumbles.

“Me too.”

Phil frowns. “Is that ok?” His brain is fuzzy and he can’t quite remember why exactly he feels like it might not be.

Dan smiles. “Yeah.”
Phil allows his undisciplined eyes to travel down from Dan’s face, down his chest and to his long legs, and the skin that shows from beneath the rips in his jeans. It’s almost poetic, Phil thinks, how similar and yet different the circumstances are this time around. Last time he’d been drunk and sat on the floor with Dan wearing those jeans, everything had felt scary and sad and wrong.

Right now there isn’t any room in his heart for fear or uncertainty, and he hopes Dan is feeling the same way. He reaches out and slips his finger under one of the rips because he’s found himself wanting to do that every single time Dan’s worn these goddamn jeans and he just can’t stop himself tonight. He rubs gently against the silky skin of Dan’s thigh and Dan just laughs. He just laughs and closes his eyes and tips his head back against the tiled wall.

“That tickles.”

“Sorry,” Phil says, but he doesn’t pull his finger back, just hooks it around the ripped material and tugs a little.

“Don’t be,” Dan murmurs.

“I’ve been wanting to do that for a long time.”

Dan picks his head up again and looks at Phil. He’s not smiling anymore. His lids are heavy and he’s looking at Phil in a way that makes Phil’s stomach flutter.

“There you are!”

Phil and Dan both spin their heads around to see Tom and Jimmy gripping onto each other, sweaty and smiling.

“We thought you’d left us,” Jimmy shouts. “You guys ready to go?”

“Already?” Phil shouts back.

“We’ve been here for hours, Phil!”

Phil looks at his phone and frowns. Somehow it’s nearly 2am. He and Dan must’ve been sat there on the floor longer than he’d thought. It’d felt like no time at all really.

Dan groans as he stands and then holds out his hand to help Phil up. Phil takes it without hesitation and thinks nothing of holding onto it as Dan leads him forward, through the dwindling crowd and down the stairs to the coat check. They retrieve their coats and Jimmy calls a cab because they’re all too drunk and suddenly tired to even think about trying to take the tube.

It’s freezing and damp outside as it’s mid December now, but Phil barely notices. They wait entirely too long for their taxi, listening to the dull thud of the music that still plays from inside. Every so often Dan bumps his shoulder into Phil’s. Every so often Phil kicks his shoe lightly against Dan’s.

It’s just starting to rain when their ride finally arrives. Tom takes one for the team and sits up front while Jimmy squeezes in the back with Phil sat in the middle. Dan rests his head on Phil’s shoulder the second the car starts moving and Phil can’t help looking over at Jimmy, whose eyes are droopy and tired looking but whose mouth is curled up in a fond knowing grin that Phil returns easily.

“Good night?” Jimmy murmurs.

Phil just nods.
Jimmy closes his eyes and rests his head against the back of the seat and Phil watches rain slide down the windows, reflecting the lights of London at night. Phil’s hand migrates to Dan’s knee where he lets it rest for the remainder of the trip.

Phil doesn’t even bother asking Dan if he’s staying over and Dan never asks if he’s invited. The driver takes them to the Hill-Lester residence and they all pile out of the car and turn out their pockets to pay for their ride. They hold each other up as they make the Everest-like ascent to their flat.

Jimmy digs out the curry leftovers and the four of them stand huddled in a circle in the small dark kitchen devouring it with their fingers. They’ll probably be ashamed of themselves when they wake up in the morning with yellow fingernails but right now it’s delicious and satisfying and exactly what they need after a long night of drinking.

Jimmy and Tom head straight for Jimmy’s room and Phil has little doubt he’ll be hearing the sounds of their drunken debauchery in a matter of minutes. He and Dan stop into the bathroom on their way to Phil’s room. Phil brushes his teeth and Dan rubs toothpaste in his mouth with his finger.

“I told you,” he says when he notices Phil laughing at him, “I can’t sleep unless I’ve got a minty mouth!”

Once the bedroom door is closed behind them Phil suddenly feels an overwhelming wave of exhaustion wash over him. He pulls his jumper off without a second thought, shivering as the cool air hits his bare chest. His jeans are wet on the bottom from the rain and it’s seeping into his socks. He’s got his belt unbuckled and his fly unzipped and his jeans tugged halfway down his thighs before he remembers Dan is stood right behind him.

He turns around, sheepish. Dan’s got his shirt off too and he’s smiling warmly. “Carry on.”

“Shut up,” Phil mumbles, but he keeps pulling his trousers off because he’s already started and it’d be even weirder to stop now. “What happened to modesty and all that?”

At that precise moment they hear the unmistakable sound of a headboard smacking into the wall and a rather loud moan. Dan slaps his hand over his mouth to keep from laughing out loud and Phil just rolls his eyes. He yanks his jeans off all the way and pulls off his damp socks. He doesn’t bother trying to find pjs. He’s still drunk and his eyes don’t want to stay open anymore and it just feels like too much effort. He looks at Dan and says, “I’m going to sleep now. You coming?”

Dan looks unsure. “Do you want me to sleep in my jeans? I didn’t bring anything…”

Phil’s already slipping underneath his duvet and sighing at the soft touch of his sheets. “Course not. Come on, I’m cold.”

Dan’s voice is so small and hesitant. “In my pants?”

Phil’s half asleep as soon as his head hits the pillow. “Mhm. Turn off the light please.”

The room is plunged into darkness a moment later and Phil feels the bed dip and the duvet lift up as Dan crawls in beside him. His bed is bigger than Dan’s but it might as well not be for how closely Dan presses himself up against Phil. He sighs at the feeling of warmth of Dan’s skin all along the back of his body. He curls his legs and puts his feet flat against Dan’s shins.

Dan yelps. “Your feet are bloody freezing!”

“Mhm and you’re warm,” Phil mumbles.
Dan wraps his arm around Phil and pulls him back. It’s a move that’s already starting to feel familiar. If Phil were more awake that thought might scare him a little, but right now it just feels nice.

“I wanna be the big spoon next time,” he murmurs.

Phil’s just letting himself slip into unconsciousness when someone in the next room moans again. He’s too wrecked to know who. Dan giggles. Phil musters up all the energy within himself and shouts, “Shush!”

Dan giggles again.

There is a long moment of excruciatingly awkward silence before a very small, embarrassed voice from behind the wall squeaks, “Sorry.”

Dan thuds his forehead gently into the base of Phil’s neck and Phil can tell he’s laughing even though he’s not actually making any noise.

“Fuck ’em up, Phil.”

“Never done that before.”

“How’d it feel?” Dan asks.

“Mmm,” Phil hums. He’s so tired, he doesn’t even remember how to form words anymore. His eyes are closed and his head is heavy against the pillow. He feels like he’s sinking slowly, like his whole body is being pulled down by some invisible magnetic force.

But Dan’s arm holds him firmly in place and his skin is warm where Phil’s is cold and they fit together perfectly. Surely that can’t be a coincidence. Surely it can’t have been random chance that led him to pick Dan’s resume of all people’s that day in October.

Surely it must mean something that every day he spends with Dan feels too short, that when they’re not together, Dan is always on his mind.

He knows it means he has a crush. He knows that now. But he’s starting to think it might actually be a lot more than that.
He’s not sure whether he’s disappointed or relieved when he wakes up the next morning with a
decided lack of stiff appendages rubbing against his hip. In fact, he doesn’t feel anything. No arm
around his waist, no breath on his neck, no knobbly knees or long toes or wayward fingers. Nothing.

He’s cold, his arm lying on top of the duvet instead of under it. He feels strangely bereft, like the bed
is suddenly massive, a barren wasteland of lifeless cotton.

He opens his groggy eyes and the view he’s greeted with is blurry and disorienting. He reaches up
and rubs those tired eyes awake a little more and squints like he’d done as a child before his mum
had finally taken him to the optician.

When his eyes focus a little more, he realizes that what he’s staring at is Dan, mostly naked still
and stood in the middle of Phil’s bedroom, stretching his arms over his head. Phil stays quiet and
unmoving. He wishes there was a way for him to reach for his glasses without making it obvious
he’s woken up.

Should he feel bad about that? Should he feel bad about how desperately excited he is at the prospect
of sneakily watching Dan get dressed? No, he thinks. He’s just woken up from spending the night
pressed up against that mostly naked body. He’d spent a whole night of casual hand holding and
drunken grinding with the owner of that body.

With Dan, he scolds himself. With Dan, who is so much more than just a body.

Phil can’t deny the loveliness of Dan’s body though, especially as it’s on nearly full display in the
soft morning light of his bedroom. His pants are the tiny red silk things he’d watched Dan toss from
his wardrobe yesterday and he feels his heart rate pick up because they really are very small and very
tight and not leaving Phil much need to use his imagination.

Dan’s legs are so long and his back so broad and dimpled just above the line of his pants and his hair
a big ball of fluff on top of his head. Dan bends over to pick up his jeans and

Fuck.

Phil has to close his eyes like a twelve year old because it’s too much. It’s too much and too hot and
too good and it feels a little bit wrong. The sensation building between his legs tells him it’s a little bit
wrong. It’s a little bit naughty and he shouldn’t be looking at his friend’s ass where his pants don’t
cover it. He moves his hand carefully under the covers and digs the heel of his palm into his crotch,
like somehow it’ll magically stop his cock from growing any harder, which of course is ridiculous
because all it actually achieves is making him want to slide his fingers into his pants and move things
along.

Another first, he thinks, squeezing his eyes shut tighter. Definitely another first. Usually if he’s hard
it’s because he’s woken up that way and he only takes care of it if he’s got time and a fair bit of
patience. It usually ends up feeling good at the end and definitely makes him feel a little more
relaxed, but it’s not something he could ever describe as fun.

This feels like it could definitely be fun. How is it possible that Dan makes everything fun?

He keeps his eyes closed and tries not to breathe too heavily. Eventually he hears the quiet sound of
Dan’s socked feet shuffling closer to the bed. Phil’s pulse quickens a little but he doesn’t move.
He feels Dan’s fingers against his forehead as he pushes his fringe up out of his face. He can’t resist opening his eyes then.

“Morning, you,” Dan whispers, smiling so wide and bright it hurts Phil’s chest a little.

“Morning.”

Dan’s knelt down by the edge of the bed, his hand still holding Phil’s hair up and off his face.

“How’d you sleep?”

“Good,” Phil says, aware that he’s staring into Dan’s eyes with a moony expression. “You?”

“Yeah, really good. Really really good. I didn’t wanna wake you, you looked so peaceful, but…”

“Are you leaving?” Phil asks.

Dan nods. “Got therapy and then work later.”

Phil juts out his bottom lip.

“I know. I really didn’t wanna get out of bed. That was painful.”

Phil studies the look of Dan’s morning face. His eyes and lips are so adorably puffy Phil finds it impossible not to.

“Any good dreams for the journal?”

Dan bites his lip. He actually has the audacity to bite his fucking pink puffy bottom lip and say, “Yeah. Definitely. Lots,” as he looks at Phil’s mouth. He’s not even subtle about it.

The bastard. Doesn’t he know Phil had been using using every ounce of discipline in his still half asleep body to keep his arousal under control? Obviously not. Phil feels another rush of blood moving down his body and he hopes his face isn’t going beet red.

“Will I see you later?” Dan asks.

Phil frowns, trying to remember what’s actually happening today. “I don’t… I think I’m closing tonight?”

“So I’ll see you for a little bit at work then, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Dan lets go of Phil’s hair and stands up, but instead of walking away he sits on the edge of Phil’s bed. “I think I’m working a lot in the next week, actually.”

Phil sighs. “Me too. Christmas rush.”

“Right. I guess it’s good. I need the money.”

“Mhm.” Phil yawns. He’s also being careful to keep the lower half of his body angled decidedly away from Dan. He keeps waiting to calm down but it doesn’t seem to be in the cards. “Are you going back home for Christmas?”

Dan’s face falls a little. “Yeah.”
Phil wants to reach out and lay his hand over Dan’s, so he does. They’ve talked about this, about how alone Dan feels whenever he has to go back to Wokingham, how misunderstood and ignored he feels. And how shit the wifi is.

“It’s ok,” Dan says, giving Phil a weak smile and rubbing his thumb against Phil’s. “It’ll only be for a few days, I reckon. I took off like a week but I figure I’ll spend most of it locked up in my room.”

Phil frowns. He doesn’t like the sound of that. He’s still thinking of what to say when Dan groans theatrically and stands up, pulling his hand out from underneath Phil’s.

“I’ve gotta go. Need to shower the club off me and brush my teeth properly.”

“Fine. Abandon me. I see how it is, Howell.”

Dan grins. “Have a good lie in, mate.”

Phil pulls the covers up to his chin. “Yeah, I will.” He really doesn’t want Dan to leave, but at the same, there’s something he needs to take care of and he’s actually rather excited about it now. Even just the friction of his pants while he stares at Dan’s lips is maddening.

“Thanks for last night.” He picks his coat up off the floor. “It was really fun.” Dan gives Phil a little salute and a wide grin before he closes the door behind him.

Phil closes his eyes. He wants to preserve the slightly blurry image of Dan in his pants, of his floofy hair, of the white of his teeth sinking into the pink flesh of his lip. He wants to do this now, while he’s still a little sleepy and not quite thinking clearly. Before he gets scared or asks himself what this means and what comes next.

He wants to remember the way it felt to wake up with his arms around Dan, the smell of him, the way his pjs tented in his sleep, the look of his smooth chest and his nipples and his studded earlobes and his eyelashes and everything. Bloody everything about yesterday morning, he wants to burn it into the back of his retinas and watch it like a film as he slides his hand under his pants and wraps it around himself.

It feels almost too much, like his hand is too hot or too dry or just like he has no idea how to handle the almost stinging intensity of this moment. He sits up and leans over and opens the drawer of his bedside table, fumbling around for the small bottle of lube Jimmy had insisted on giving him once, years ago, in hopes it’d help him learn to enjoy situations like this a little more. It never had before, and the cleanup afterwards had never been worth it, but now he thinks it might be just what he needs.

It is. It feels even better, which he wouldn’t have thought possible, but it’s softer, slicker, gentler. Less like a shock and more like a slow burn, tingling as he slides his fist up slowly, clinging to the memory of Dan’s fingers tugging his hair and the way the club lights had danced across his cheekbones.

There are so many images running through his head—the smoothness of Dan’s thigh when Phil had slipped a finger into the rip in his jeans, the way Dan had rutted against him in his sleep, the look in his eyes after Phil had taken his shirt off on Dan’s bed. There are too many pictures like this, rushing through his memory, clouding his senses.

So he tries to focus in on one. One that surprises even him with the rush of sensation it elicits. It’s Dan, sat at the desk in the corner of his bedroom, wearing that black, white and pink rose jumper, facing away from Phil and playing the keyboard. It’s Dan walking over to the bed and cramming in
next to Phil, lying on his side and propping himself up on his elbow and looking at Phil with his dark eyes full of warmth.

It’s Dan’s hands, long-fingered and broad and impossibly large, with thin soft wrists Phil suddenly wishes he could kiss.

It’s just Dan, just the way it feels to be near him, to be looked at by him. It’s the way it feels to be cared for and appreciated and listened to by such a strange and glorious creature as Dan. Phil is moving his hand slower than he normally would and every time his fist twists at the top and moves back down he feels the pit in his stomach coiling tighter, the muscles in his thighs tensing.

It’s such a new and terrifying and electric feeling that he’s tempted to stop. He doesn’t want to stop but he’s almost afraid maybe this a fluke, a one-off window into the reality of what sex is like for people who don’t have to work so hard to feel good. He’s worried it’s a feeling that he’ll never be able to duplicate. What if it never feels like this again and he’s left with the agony of knowing what’s possible?

It’s a brief thought that is totally and completely obliterated when his mind focuses in on a new image, one he’s never seen before, one of Dan on top of him, kissing him, holding him and pressing into him and moaning his name. Phil comes right then and there, violently, spurting and twitching and allowing a much louder noise to escape his lips than he would have ever thought himself capable. Suddenly he kind of understands the noises he hears so often from the other side of his bedroom wall.

He lies flat on his back and stares up at the ceiling for a long time. He hopes Tom and Jimmy are asleep and they hadn’t heard… that. He wants to go back to sleep. Now that there’s nothing distracting him he realizes his legs are sore from last night and his head is spinning a little, be it the slight hangover or the force of his orgasm he’s not sure. If his pants weren’t utterly wrecked he’d roll over and close his eyes and let the sweet release of unconsciousness take him again. He’s never felt so satisfied in all his life.

But his pants are wrecked, and it feels sticky and gross. And he could really use some coffee. He grabs his phone to check the time and sees that he already has a text from Dan.

Dan: you’re cute when you’re pretending to be asleep

He’s sat alone at the kitchen table, allowing his coffee to bring him back to life a little when his phone rings.

“Hello?”

“Child!”

“Hi, mum.”

“Alright, love?”

“Yeah, you?”

“You sound tired.”

Right on cue, Phil yawns. “I am, actually.”
“You sound skinny.”

Phil laughs. “What? What does that mean?”

“It means you sound skinny. You’re not eating enough.”

“You can’t hear something like that, mum. You nutter.”

“I can.”

Phil puts her on speaker and sets his phone on the table before standing up. “I’ll make myself some toast right now, yeah? Will that make you feel better?”

“Eggs would be better.”

Phil scrunches up his nose, even though she obviously can’t see him. “I hate eggs in the morning.”

“I know. At least make sure you eat your crusts.”

“I don’t need any more hair on my chest, mum.” He dutifully makes his way over to the cupboard to fetch the bread. “Did you call just to shame me into eating?”

“No, I called because I haven’t talked to you all week, Philip. I was afraid you’d forgotten about me.”

Phil rolls his eyes. “It hasn’t been that long.”

“It has. I’ve been keeping track.”

Phil drops his bread into the toaster. “Sorry. Busy I guess.”

“I’ve heard.”

Phil turns around and gives his phone an accusatory look. “What? What d’you mean?”

“I mean, I’ve heard you’ve been busy.”

“From who?”

“Jimmy of course.”

Phil makes a mental note to give Jimmy a firm shoulder punch later. He’s lost track of how many of those Jimmy is owed at this point. “What did he say?” he asks cautiously.

“That you’ve made a new friend.”

“Is that it? That’s all he said?”

“Yes…” Now she sounds suspicious. “Why? What else is there?”

“Nothing,” he says quickly.

“Right.” She doesn’t sound convinced. “Tell me about this friend, then.”

Phil shrugs. He always talks to his mum like she’s actually in the room with him. “He’s nice. He works with me.”
“He?”

“Yes…”

“So just a friend then.” It’s impossible for Phil miss the disappointment in her tone.

“As opposed to what?”

“You know, a nice girl to take care of you.”

His stomach sinks. He’d never really spent much time wondering what his family’s reaction might be to his probable not-straightness. It’d never felt important enough to worry about. Now that he thinks it could be, her complete inability to even consider Dan as anything other than a friend twists his gut in a knot.

“Right,” he says. He can’t bring himself to echo her estimation of just a friend. He’s scared but right now, he’s also just a little bit angry.

“What’s his name?” she asks, seemingly oblivious to his sudden inner turmoil.

“Dan.”

“How old is he?”

“Twenty two.”

“Where did he go to school? Why is he working at Starbucks?”

Phil feels his jaw clench. His teeth grind together before he forces himself to take a breath and remember that this is his mum. She may not really understand him anymore, but she cares. She cares a lot.

“What’s with the inquisition, mum?”

“Jimmy says you two have been spending a lot of time together lately. I’m just curious, love.”

“You and Jimmy need to stop telling secrets behind my back.” His toast pops up and he drops them onto his plate.

“Bring him up next week.”

“What?”

“Bring him up with you when you come home next week. I’d like to meet him.”

Phil laughs. “He’s got his own family home to go to, mum. I can’t just drag him up to the north at Christmas time.”

“Just do me a favour and tell him that the offer stands, alright?”

“Yeah, alright,” he says, rolling his eyes. “So how’s dad?”

He says goodbye ten minutes later. It’s much, much less time than he would normally spend on the phone with her, but he feels good today and he doesn’t want one of the people he loves most in the world to take that away from him.
“I think it’s about time for a progress report, Philly.”

Jimmy fixes his bespectacled morning eyes on Phil. They’re sat as they always are when they actually have time to speak to each other—at the kitchen table, sleepy shoulders hunched over giant mugs of coffee and bowls of cereal.

“Don’t know what you’re on about,” Phil says, shoving an absolutely enormous spoonful of shreddies into his mouth.

“I feel like I’ve barely seen you since the club,” Jimmy laments.

“I’ve been working a lot,” Phil mumbles, a little bit of milk dribbling down his chin. He wipes it with the back of his ratty old York hoodie. “Took a week off for Christmas so they’re working me to the bone before I go.”

“When do you leave?”

“Day after tomorrow.”

“Say hi to Kath for me.”

“Tell her yourself. You lot are such good friends already.”

Jimmy laughs. “It’s not my fault your mum is cooler than you.”

“She called me the other day asking about Dan, so thanks a lot.”

“Oh, shit. What’d she say?”

“I think she was hoping I’d finally got a girlfriend,” Phil says bitterly.

“Couldn’t you have just told her you’ve got a boyfriend?”

“But I haven’t got a boyfriend.”

Jimmy rolls his eyes. “It’s just semantics at this point, innit?”

Phil just shoots him a look. “Even if I had got a boyfriend, I’m not about to tell that to my mum. Especially not over the phone. You of all people should understand that.”

Jimmy shrugs. “My mum didn’t really make a big deal. I think she’d already known for a long time by the time I told her. I was way more freaked out about the whole thing than she was.”

Phil picks up his coffee and leans back against his chair, nodding. He’s heard that story before. Jimmy hadn’t come out to his family until the second year of uni. He’d told them over Christmas break, texting updates to Phil the whole time.

“I wonder if the relief of knowing I finally wasn’t alone for a little while would negate her horror at me dating a bloke,” Phil muses.

“Horror?” Jimmy frowns. “You don’t think that’s a little dramatic?”
“Dunno, to be honest. Not really keen to find out at the moment either, so stop telling her all my
secrets, would you?”

“There ain’t none to tell, mate,” Jimmy says. “That’s why I’m after a progress report.” He winks.

Phil just stares at him. Jimmy stares back, clearly trying to hide a smirk.

“Why are you such an idiot?” Phil asks. “Why are you like this?”

“How dare you. I’m no such thing.”

Phil pushes his glasses up with his middle finger, not taking eyes his off Jimmy’s. “There’s no
progress to report.”

“That’s a bloody lie and you know it. I saw you two grinding on each other. Also I may have
heard… something. From your room. The next morning…?”

Unfortunately, Phil’s mid-sip at the exact moment Jimmy reveals this little tidbit of information and
he chokes on his coffee in surprise.

“So spill,” Jimmy urges.

“You didn’t hear anything. You were imagining it,” Phil mumbles.

“Nope. Definitely not. Tom heard it too.”

Phil would like very much to run away now. He has no practice with these types of conversations.
He feels unbearably awkward and embarrassed.

But also. He actually would kind of like to talk about it, and he knows Jimmy of all people will listen
and not judge.

“That was… just me,” he says sheepishly. “Dan had already gone.”

Jimmy raises his eyebrows and smirks again. “Phil Lester.”

“Shut up.”

“Philip Michael Lester.”

“Shut up!”

Jimmy laughs. “Well? How was it?”

Phil scowls. “You heard it. How do you think?”

“Did you use the lube I gave you?”

That’s the last straw for Phil. He has to cover his face then, burying it in his hands and mumbling
against his fingers quietly, “Yes.”

“OK, ok, I’m sorry, I’ll stop taking the piss. I’m so chuffed, Phil, honestly. Is it weird for me to ask
you to tell me every little detail?”

“Yes.”

Jimmy blinks his eyelids innocently. “Will you tell me anyway?”
“No.”

Jimmy pouts. He waits a beat and then says, “Can I ask you a question?”

“Can I stop you?” Phil asks.

“No.”

Phil rolls his eyes. “Well go on then.”

“Were you thinking about Dan?”

Phil huffs the air out of his lungs in annoyance. His answer is implicit, and Jimmy knows it because he’s absolutely grinning now.

“Have you done it since?”

“... yes.” Phil’s voice is quiet and reluctant and just a little bit exasperated.

“This is huge, Phil. This is like… groundbreaking shit.”

“I know.”

“What are you gonna do?”

Phil pushes his glasses up onto his forehead and digs the heels of his palms into his eyes. “I don’t know. I’m...” He drops his hands and looks at Jimmy. Maybe it’s time to stop messing about and actually be serious. He could definitely use a little guidance. “I’m scared.”

Jimmy stands up and grabs his chair, carrying it over to Phil and plonking it down beside him. He sits and puts his arm around Phil’s shoulders.

“I know, mate.”

“I don’t know how to… do this.”

Jimmy smiles. “But you want to do it.”


“I could cry right now.”

Phil nudges his shoulder into Jimmy’s chest. “Please don’t. I need your wisdom.”

Jimmy snorts. “You’re having a laugh if you think there’s any of that here.”

“You and Tom are practically married,” Phil points out.

“...Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

“Tell me what to do!” Phil pleads.

“It’s not like a secret or anything, Phil. You just have to talk to him.”

“What if… what if I’m terrible at everything, like the times before… He’s probably got loads more practice than me.”
“One: you’re not going to be terrible at anything--”

“You don’t know that--”

“Yes I do actually. Are you forgetting we snogged not like two weeks ago?”

Phil bites his lip. “Oh. Right.”

“You’re not terrible, Phil. Not even close.”

“Well that’s just one thing. What about like… all that other stuff? I won’t know what to do--”

“You will when the time comes.”

“But what if I don’t?”

Jimmy turns himself in his chair so he’s facing Phil. He grabs his arms gently and squeezes. “Phil.”

“What?”

“Do you think he cares? Is that how you think of Dan? Is that who he’s shown himself to be?”

Phil thinks about it for hardly more than a split second. “No,” he says quietly.

“And is that all you want from him?”

“God,” Phil says, looking down at his hands in his lap. “No. Of course not. But how do I know… like, if he wants me too.” He sounds pathetic and he knows it, but it’s just Jimmy so he also knows it’s ok.

“Phil. Come on. Don’t be thick.”

“I’m not.”

“He wants you. Anyone can see it. Even you can see it, and don’t tell me you can’t.”

“So what do I do?”

Jimmy squeezes Phil’s shoulder. “Whatever feels right when the time comes, Phil. Talk to him. Hold his hand. Kiss him. Profess your undying love. Tell him you wanked while thinking about his sexy butt.”

“Shut up.”

“He’d probably love that. He’s probably done the same thing.”

Phil feels heat in his cheeks. “Shut up.”

“My point is,” Jimmy says, laughing a little. “There’s no one way to do it. You just have to do what feels right, and I can’t decide that for you.”

“Why not?” Phil pouts.

“Because I’m not the one who’s in love with him, you div.”

“Who said anything about love?”
Jimmy rolls his eyes. “Mhm.”

Even though it’s earlier than he’d like to be awake, and it’s so bloody cold out that he can feel the inside of his nose freezing, he’s got a little pep in his step as he makes his way to work. He’s working with a certain someone today after days of opposite shifts and it feels a little bit like Christmas come early, especially after his conversation with Jimmy. He just feels hopeful. Everything looks a little brighter today. A little shinier.

His glasses fog up when he steps inside the shop and his nostrils fill with the scent of dark roast coffee. There are a lot of things he hates about this place, but sometimes it’s nice. On quiet days when he can chat with his coworkers and absentmindedly sip on coffee between customers. Or even on the busy days like today, around this time of year when the shop is jam packed and all the Christmas decorations are up and Christmas music plays softly from the speakers, barely audible over the sounds of beans grinding and drink orders being shouted left and right. It’s chaotic and messy, but sometimes it feels good.

Or maybe he’s just so bloody happy today that he’s romanticizing everything. Even his shit job that he really doesn’t like that much.

He gives Rory a smile and a wave as he walks to the back room.

“I wouldn’t be opposed to you starting right away,” she says with a big fake smile and pleading eyes. “We’re swamped and your man still hasn’t shown up.”

The smile falls from Phil’s face, his whole mood shifting in an instant. “Really? Did you call him?”

She nods. “A bunch of times. Not picking up. You know anything about that?”

Phil shakes his head. It’s actually a little pathetic how suddenly terrible he feels. It’s not just disappointment, though, he thinks. It’s a little bit of something else that he doesn’t want to acknowledge because he doesn’t want to believe in its validity.

“Just let me get an apron,” he says, chest tight.

He sends Dan a quick message before tying on his apron and entering the fray of Starbucks at Christmastime.

Phil: wake up you lazy tyke, you’re super late for work and also i don’t want to be here when you’re not

He spends the next two hours steaming milk and pulling shots and plastering on the fakest smile of all time, while inside his guts are twisting into tighter and tighter knots by the minute. He keeps looking at the door expecting to see Dan, face flushed with the cold and the embarrassment of being so epically late.

All he ever sees is an endless stream of impatient Christmas shoppers.

When it finally comes time for his break, he rushes to the back to check his phone and feels his heart sink when the only message he’s received is one from his brother asking Phil for gift ideas for their mum. He texts back something to the effect of ‘if you don’t know your own mother well enough yet to think of a good gift then you’re on your own’ and then calls Dan.

His heart is beating too fast as he waits, feeling sicker with every ring that goes unanswered. He
doesn’t bother leaving a message, knowing Dan never listens to those until weeks after they’ve been left.

He does answer texts though, at least the ones he gets from Phil, so Phil tries again. He keeps it simple.

*Phil: you ok?*

He doesn’t get a reply before he has to go back to work. He slips his phone into his pocket instead of leaving it in the back like he’s supposed to, praying he’ll feel it buzz against his leg with a string of *fuck fuck fucks.*

He doesn’t. He never hears from Dan though Phil texts and calls on every break, and even a few unneeded trips to the toilet.

Rory tries to call him a few times too. Phil doesn’t know if it’s best to let her believe Dan had blown off work, or to tell her the possible alternative.

“Maybe he’s sick again,” is what he decides on, at least until he knows what’s going on.

She just shrugs and says, “Hope he’s ok. Let me know when he gets in touch with you.”

He’s never felt a shift go by so slowly. When it’s finally over, he punches out quickly and throws on his coat and he’s out the door before he’s even got it zipped up all the way.

He’d love to believe what he’s been trying to tell himself all day, that he’s overreacting, that he’s being clingy and ridiculous and just jumping to conclusions. He can’t believe it though, because Dan doesn’t ignore Phil. Because Phil hasn’t gone a day without speaking to Dan since that first night they texted.

Except one.

And that’s why his steps are wide and quick as he makes his way to Dan’s building. Dan’s fine, Phil tells himself. He’ll be fine. Even if he is having one of those days, the ones he’s described to Phil as lying at the bottom of a deep, dark hole, he’ll be fine. He’s in recovery. Bad days happen, but they’re manageable. They’re survivable.

It helps a little, but not much. Phil still starts jogging once he turns down Dan’s street, a hand pressing his phone to his ear. He just keeps calling, and Dan just keeps not answering. Phil’s not sure exactly how he’s going to get in, but he knows he’s going to be stood here in the cold at the top of the steps to Dan’s building until he figures it out.

He needs to be buzzed in, but Dan’s still not picking up. He waits ten minutes for someone with a key to come and sneaks in behind them. He can’t wait for the lift. He needs to be moving forward. He needs to keep moving toward Dan. He climbs the stairs two at a time and feels his heart in his throat by the time he’s stood outside the door to Dan’s flat.

He knocks. He waits. No answer.

He knocks louder, just to the left of pounding before the door is wrenched open. Phil still feels no relief, as it’s one of Dan’s flatmates. Phil’s never met him before. He hasn’t actually met any of Dan’s flatmates before.

“Who are you and why the bloody hell are you pounding on my door?”
Phil forces the part of himself that cowers at situations like this away, squashing it down until it’s just a thudding of his heart against his sternum. “Is Dan home?”

The vaguely unkind-looking boy shrugs. “Dunno. Haven’t seen him today. You his fuckin’ boyfriend or what?”

Phil’s teeth grind together painfully. He can’t let this asshole scare him away. “So what if I am? You gonna let me in or what?”

He looks a little surprised and Phil has a moment of panic wondering if he’s gone too far and if he’s about to feel a fist smash against his nose but the guy just shrugs and steps back from the door, allowing Phil to come in. “Alright, whatever, mate.” He turns around and heads back towards the sofa.

Phil doesn’t take any time to process the relief of that moment being over because he’s still torn up inside wondering what state he’s going to find Dan in. Or if he’s even here at all. He makes his way down the hall quickly and knocks on Dan’s door as soon as he gets to it.

There’s no answer.

He knocks harder. “Dan,” he says sternly.

“Fuck off.” Dan’s voice is muffled and completely void of malice.

Phil actually feels relief flood through his entire body. “No. Let me in.”

“Go away.”

Phil leans forward and rests his forehead against the door. “No. Let me in. Please.”

There is silence on the other side of the door. And then Phil hears Dan’s bed squeak and heavy muffled footsteps against the carpeted floor.

The door cracks open and there’s Dan in his pants and his pink hoodie, blanket draped around his shoulders. His hair looks unwashed and his expression is completely vacant. His skin is pallid, deep purple circles rimming his eyes.

It takes a while for the hint of recognition to spark life into those dark eyes. “Phil?”

Phil chokes out a humourless laugh around the sudden lump in his throat. “Yeah, who’d you think it was?”

“What are you doing here?”

Phil can’t tell if Dan’s trying to be unkind on purpose or if it’s just a symptom of whatever’s making him look like this again.

“I was worried about you,” he says softly.

“Why?”

“You didn’t show up for work.”

Dan’s stare is so blank and emotionless it’s actually scaring Phil a little. He has a crack down the middle of his bottom lip.

Phil ignores Dan’s question completely. He knows this isn’t Dan. Not really. He can’t take it personally that Dan doesn’t have it in him to fight the delusions of his illness right now. The delusion that he’s not worth caring about.

“Can I come in?” Phil asks.


“I want to help you, Dan,” Phil says slowly, not taking his eyes from Dan’s, even as the dull expression that stares back makes Phil’s gut clench. “Don’t say why again.”

“But… I don’t get it.”

“There’s nothing to get. You’re my friend. I care about you. Now let me the fuck in so I can warm you up, please.”

Right on cue, Dan shivers again and Phil feels a primal urge to engulf his weary-looking body with his own, to rub Dan’s arms and squeeze him tightly, to wrap his hands around Dan’s cold fingers and let his warmth sink into Dan’s skin. He has to do something. He can’t stay stood here another second just watching.

“I’m coming in, ok?”

Dan just shrugs and takes a step back, whether to actually let Phil in or just because he wants to go back to bed, Phil’s not sure but he follows and closes the door behind him.

Dan stands at the side of his bed looking at Phil. The scars on his legs somehow look so much more harsh than they usually do. Phil steps closer and brushes his fingers against the back of Dan’s hand.

“You’re freezing.”

Dan looks down at their hands. “Yeah,” he says blankly.

Phil turns his back to Dan and goes to his overflowing closet and pulls out the first pair of sweats he finds. He throws them to Dan and says, “Put these on.”

Once he has, Phil sits on the edge of Dan’s bed and says, “C’mere?”

Dan sits and Phil wraps the blanket around his shoulders again.

“Have you eaten today?”

Dan shakes his head.

“Water?”

Dan shakes his head again.

“Did you take your pills this morning?”

Dan’s eyes widen a little as he looks at Phil. He looks scared now.

“Where are they?” Phil asks.
Dan points to his desk. “Drawer,” he croaks.

Phil stands up. “I’m going to get water. I’ll be right back.”

Now that the adrenaline rush has worn off and Phil knows at least that Dan is safe, he has space in his head to be terrified of what Dan’s flatmates might say or do. He walks slowly to the tiny, messy little kitchen and opens up three cupboard doors before he finds the glasses. He grabs one and fills it under the tap. He turns around to leave and almost drops it when he sees the guy who’d let him in earlier leaning against the doorframe.

Phil’s just steeling himself for whatever’s about to happen when the guy says, “He alright?”

“Uh.” That’s really not what he’d been expecting. “Not really.”

The guy nods. “Didn’t hear anything from him all day. Don’t think he’s left his room once.”

Phil’s head is nearly spinning. Is this really someone who could be considered, as Dan had so crassly said, a cunt?

“He’ll be alright. Just needs some time.”

“I’m going in a tick. Don’t think there’s anyone else here at the moment, so you lads’ll have the place to yourself for a while.”

“Oh, ok… thanks,” Phil says awkwardly.

“Sorry if I was a dick or something earlier by the way. Dan’s never had anyone over before and he never talks to us so… I just wasn’t sure what to make of you.”

“Right,” Phil says, honestly a little lost for words at this point. “It’s no problem. Just gonna…” He holds up the glass of water. “For Dan.”

“Right. See you.”

The guy, whose name Phil still has no idea, steps out of the way. Phil gives him a very awkward smile as he shuffles past him and out of the cramped kitchen.

He hurries back to Dan and sets the water on the desk before rummaging through the cluttered drawer for Dan’s meds. If the circumstances were different he’d probably have a much stronger reaction to the little blue bottle of tingling lube he sees before he finds a half empty blister pack of pills with Dan’s name on.

“How many?”

Dan’s lying on the bed now, facing away from Phil, so he doesn’t answer. The blanket lies in a heap on the floor.

“Dan,” Phil says again.

“What?”

“How many pills?”

“Just one.”

He pops one out and grabs the water. He sits on the edge of the bed next to Dan and puts a hand on
his shoulder. “Take this,” he says softly, holding out the pill and then the water.

Dan takes a sip and swallows the pill and tries to hand the glass back to Phil, who shakes his head.

“You have to drink it all, k? It’ll make you feel better.”

Dan chugs it down dutifully and holds the glass out for Phil to take. He takes it and places it on the floor against the wall. He gathers up Dan’s blanket and drapes it over his body, pulling it up to Dan’s ear.

“Better?” Phil asks.

Dan rolls over onto his back then and looks up at Phil. He’s quiet for a long time before saying, “Not really.”

“If I made food would you eat it?”

Dan shakes his head.

Phil chews on his lip. “What if I told you had to?”

“I can’t Phil.”

He sounds so broken and tired that Phil doesn’t have it in him to insist. “Can I get you anything else?” he asks.

Dan shakes his head again. He closes his eyes. “Don’t waste anymore time on me, Phil.”

It’s dark outside Dan’s window. The fairy lights that frame the walls are throwing off a soft, twinkling kind of glow that feels too pretty and ethereal for how thoroughly Phil’s heart is breaking in this moment.

“Move over.”

Dan doesn’t.

“Please, Dan.” Phil sinks down onto his knees then and puts his hand on Dan’s arm. “Please.”

Dan still hasn’t opened his eyes. “You’re too good for me. You should just leave. I’m only going to weigh you down.”

“Dan--”

“You should get out now, before…”

Phil hates himself for how badly he wants Dan to finish that sentence. It’s not the time to be wondering if he means what Phil thinks he means.

“I won’t blame you. You’re better off without me.”

“Stop.” Instead of waiting for Dan to move over and make room, Phil climbs up and over him to lie on his side with his back pressed against the wall.

Dan turns his head towards him. “Phil.”

“Stop. This isn’t you.”
“It is though. That’s my point. I’m always going to be like this.”

“You’re not.”

“Not always always. But always sometimes. It’s always a part of me.”

Phil doesn’t know what to say. He understands what Dan’s saying, but he doesn’t know how to communicate to him that he doesn’t care. That Dan means what he means to Phil because of every little thing that makes him who he is—including the days he hates himself. It’s not pretty and it’s not romantic. It’s not edgy or artsy or mysterious. It’s damaging and it’s sinister and it’s destructive, but Dan’s right, it’s part of who he is, and Phil could never fault him for that.

“I like you,” Phil says quietly. “I like all the parts of you.”

Dan doesn’t say anything for a long time. He’s lying on his back and looking up at the ceiling and Phil’s lying on his side looking at Dan. At the freckles on his colourless cheeks and the chapped skin of his lips. All he wants to do right now is take this away so Dan doesn’t have to feel it anymore.

“I can’t feel anything Phil,” he whispers.

“I know. I’m so sorry.”

“I think you’re making a big mistake here. You should choose someone else. You deserve someone else.”

Phil’s heart hammers against his chest. “I didn’t choose you. I never made a choice. I didn’t have to. It’s like…”

Dan looks at him. He looks like a shell of himself. A ghost. He looks flat and dull and wrong, but he’s still Dan. He still takes Phil’s breath away.

“Like you were inevitable. I didn’t make a choice because… there’s no one else. There never has been.”

Dan closes his eyes then. “I wish I could cry.”

“I can cry enough for the both of us if you want,” Phil croaks, because he’s already halfway there.

“Please don’t. I’m going to feel guilty enough tomorrow as it is.”

Phil waits until he thinks he can speak without his voice breaking. “Can I stay here with you tonight?” he asks.

Dan looks away and nods. “Please.”
Chapter 28

Dan’s heavy eyelids flutter shut eventually. “Don’t leave me,” he whispers as he falls asleep.

“Never,” Phil whispers back.

He watches peace blanket Dan’s face as he loses consciousness. He wants to reach out and smooth his finger down the faint impression Dan’s frown had made in the skin between his brows, but Phil won’t risk waking him. Dan deserves this sleep. He needs it.

Phil allows a tidal wave of emotions to rock through him as he listens to Dan breathe, not least of which is a nagging fear that he doesn’t actually know how handle something like this. That he’s made promises to Dan that he doesn’t know how to keep.

Then Dan turns his head and a limp curl falls over his forehead and into his eye and Phil thinks he would do absolutely anything for this man. He can’t resist brushing it aside gently. Dan breathes in a little deeper, but doesn’t wake.

Phil stays still then and just watches him sleep for a while. It’s actually fairly early in the evening and he’s still coming down from the panicked tension of the day so he doesn’t even bother trying to close his own eyes and sleep.

Eventually Dan starts letting out tiny little snores that Phil would find adorable under other circumstances. He feels a little less afraid of accidentally waking Dan up and suddenly much more aware of how uncomfortable he is. He’s lying on top of the duvet, still in his work clothes. Hell, he’s still in his work shoes.

Carefully he works his heels out and kicks them to the floor as gently as he can. He lies on his back for a good five minutes wondering if it would be weird for him to take his trousers off. They’re starting to dig into his hips a little and the bottoms are damp from the soggy winter pavement.

He decides it’s probably alright given everything they’ve been through the past couple months. He pulls his phone out of the pocket and works them off slowly, trying not to move around too much. When he’s finally gotten them down around his ankles he pushes them off the end of the bed with his feet. Then he works his socks off as well and pulls the duvet up over his bare legs. He’s managed it all without waking Dan.

He checks his phone and sees a message from Rory.

*Rory: any news?*

*Phil: he’s sick. not doing well atm*

*Rory: are you with him? Is he gonna be alright?*

*Phil: i’m here and yeah he will, eventually. Probably won’t be able to work tomorrow though if he’s scheduled.*

*Rory: he is. You are too*

*Phil: are you?*

*Rory: yeah*
Phil: will you fire me if I call in sick for the both of us?

Rory: I love you Phil but is this a ploy to stay in bed all day having sex with your new boyfriend?

Phil: no. it’s not my place to talk about it but he’s really not well

Rory: and you’re gonna take care of him?

Phil: if he’ll let me

Rory: he’s a lucky guy. Are you guys together yet?

Phil feels wrong smiling right now, but he can’t help the butterflies in his stomach when he types his next message.

Phil: not yet.

Not yet. He doesn’t think he can deny that anymore, to himself or anyone else.

Rory: I’ll get your shifts covered. You take care of your man

He thanks her profusely and promises he’ll cover any and every shift she needs when he gets back from his Christmas holiday. He slides the phone under his pillow and lays his head down and closes his eyes. Everything is alright now. Dan is alright. He’s going to be alright.

Now he feels tired. Actually, now that the worst is presumably behind him, he feels exhausted. He tries his best given the cramped quarters not to touch Dan too much. He doesn’t actually know what level of contact Dan is comfortable with on days like these. Their shoulders are still touching and Phil’s knees still brush up against Dan’s thigh but he doesn’t wrap his arms around Dan or try to pull him closer. They’re not cuddling. Phil just wants Dan to know he’s there, to know he’s not alone.

He has a thought before he falls asleep and resolves himself to remember to ask Dan in the morning.

His arm is numb, crushed under the weight of his sleep-heavy body. His glasses are askew on his face and digging into the bridge of his nose. He reaches up to straighten them out before he can force his drowsy eyes open.

It’s still dark and there is a face right next to his. Phil’s having trouble getting his eyes to focus but he can see the dark intensity of Dan’s eyes staring at him. He still looks so tired and pale and defeated. But maybe there’s just a little bit of something else too, something that hadn’t been there before.

“You’re still here,” Dan says softly and he sounds genuinely surprised.

“Of course. I told you I would be.”

Dan closes his eyes. “I don’t deserve you.”

“You do.”

Dan doesn’t say anything.

“Remember what you told me?” Phil asks. “After the party when I was feeling shit about Rory and just… everything? And I asked you what I deserved?”
Dan keeps his eyes closed and his lips unmoving.

“You told me I deserved everything,” Phil says. “And now I’m telling you.”

“I’m so tired, Phil.”

Phil pulls the duvet up a little higher, until it’s right under Dan’s chin. “Let’s sleep.”

“Stay,” Dan murmurs, already half asleep again.

“Always,” Phil promises.

Phil wakes up with a jerk to the sound of Dan cursing loudly.

“Fuck. Fuck fuck. Fuck.” Dan’s phone is in his hand and he’s throwing the duvet off of them both and leaping up out of the bed.

“What? What’s happened?” Phil asks, brain still groggy from sleep. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m late for work. Again. Fuck. I can’t get fired, I need this job. Shit.” His fingers comb through his hair, gripping at the root and tugging in frustration. He’s looking around the room rather frantically. Probably for trousers, Phil assumes.

He looks absolutely wrecked, still.

“You’re not,” Phil says, as soon as his mind is clear enough to remember his conversation with Rory last night.

“Not what?”

“Not late.”

“I am, I was supposed to start at nine.”

Phil sits up. “I called in sick for you. Well, texted in sick technically.”

Dan’s hands drop from his head. “You did? When?”

“Last night.”

Dan flops back down onto the edge of the bed. Suddenly Phil fears he may have crossed a line. Maybe he should have asked first.

“Sorry,” he says quickly. “You were asleep and you looked so… I didn’t know how you’d be today and I thought the more notice I gave--”

“Phil.”

“What?”

“Thank you. That was…” He doesn’t finish that thought. Instead he slips his legs back under the duvet and lies down next to Phil wordlessly.

“How do you feel?” Phil asks eventually.
“Pretty shit.”

“Better than yesterday?”

Dan nods. “Thanks for staying with me, Phil. You didn’t have to.”

Phil lies down again. “I wanted to.”

Dan rolls over onto his side to face Phil. “When did you get here yesterday?”

“Like half six. I would’ve been up earlier but it took awhile for me to figure out how to sneak in.”

“Why didn’t you call me?”

“I did.” Phil would laugh, but the memory of the fear he’d felt is still too fresh. “Like a million times.”

Dan leans over the bed and grabs his phone off the floor. He checks it and his eyes go wide and then scrunch closed. “Oh my god Phil. I’m so sorry. There’s a bunch from work too. And texts…”

“Yeah,” Phil says. “I was a little worried.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be. I was just glad you were here and safe.”

“How’d you get in?”

“I snuck in behind someone with a key and then kind of forced your flatmate to let me in.”

Dan raises his eyebrows. “Forced?”

“I mean, he wasn’t too pleased about it.”

“Phil, you’re like a literal fucking knight in shining armour.”

Phil huffs a little laugh. “You would’ve done the same for me, no?”

“Of course, but that’s different.”

“Why?”

Dan chooses not to answer Phil’s question in favour of asking another of his own. “So Mark didn’t want to let you in?”

“I didn’t ask his name, but no, he didn’t seem too keen to let me in.”

“Was he a dick?”

“Kind of yeah.”

“You’re my actual hero,” Dan says and the corners of his lips turn up slightly.

It’s the first time Phil’s seen Dan smile since he got here and he feels a weight lifted from his shoulders.

“I saw him again when I went to get your water and he wasn’t a dick then. Actually he was kind of
nice?”
“What, really?”
Phil nods. “He asked if you were ok.”
“No he didn’t.”
“He did! And he also apologized for being a dick. He said you never have people over and you never talk to your other flatmates.”
“He’s not wrong about that.”
Phil starts worrying the inside of his cheek between his teeth. He has something he thinks he might want to say, but now’s probably not the time for it.
Dan seems to catch on pretty quickly that Phil’s holding back. “What?” he asks.
“Nothing. It’s just…”
“Spit it out already Lester.”
“I just wonder if maybe… maybe they’re not actually that bad?”
Dan frowns. “They never talk to me. They act like I don’t even exist.”
“Yeah but… you don’t either, right?” Phil asks timidly. “Maybe they think you’re the one who hates them.”
Yet again, Dan doesn’t respond. He’s frowning, chewing his already cracked lip.
“Obviously I don’t know,” Phil says, shrugging. “All I know is that he was nice to me once he knew I was here to take care of you.”
“Really?” Dan asks.
Phil nods. “Also…” He wonders if he really wants to say the next thing, but decides to hell with it, he’s already dug himself this deep, might as well keep going. “He made a point of telling me he was going out and you and I would like… have the place to ourselves? And he didn’t say it like he thought it was something that shouldn’t happen?”
Dan actually laughs then. “Mark told you the place would be empty and we’d be free to have a loud hookup?”
Phil kind of wishes he could die in this moment. He has absolutely no idea how to respond to that. He’s relieved Dan’s laughing and the sound makes him feel warm, but still, he’s mortified.
“I mean, that’s what he was implying I think, yeah,” Phil mumbles.
“Too bad I was a zombie then, eh?” Dan winks.
Phil grabs Dan’s pillow out from under his head and smacks him right in the face. He can hear Dan laughing under it.
“I hate you.”
“Mhm,” comes Dan’s muffled voice.

“You should try talking to them once in a while is my point,” Phil says, flopping back down onto his own pillow. “Maybe it’s all been a misunderstanding.”

Dan removes the pillow from his face and shoves it back under his head. His cheeks are flushed and he looks a little more alive than he did a minute ago. “I have been accused of jumping to conclusions before. And dwelling on small negative details and ignoring positive ones.”

“I’m not accusing you of anything,” Phil says. “Just saying.”

“I know. You’re too sweet to accuse.”

“Shut up.”

Phil feels Dan’s foot run up his shin.

“Seriously though, Phil. Thank you. For everything.” His voice gets quiet. “You were just what I needed. It’s like… like you know me better than I even know myself sometimes.”

Phil feels his chest tighten. Dan’s staring into his eyes again and he’s not sure how much longer he’s going to be able to resist the magnetic pull between them when Dan looks at him like that.

But he still looks tired and a little broken and his hair still looks like it needs a wash and Phil remembers it’s probably been over twenty four hours since he’s eaten anything. He’s about to say something when Dan’s foot rubs against his leg again and he laughs.

“You’re not wearing trousers.”

Phil scrunches up his face. “I’m sorry! You were asleep and they were so uncomfortable!”

“Why would you be sorry you spork. Waking up next to a surprise half naked Phil Lester is the kind of thing that’s usually confined to the dream journal.”

Phil rolls onto his stomach and buries his face in the pillow. There’s just absolutely no way he can process a statement like that right now.

“Whoops, did I say that out loud?”

Phil keeps his face smushed into the pillow as he mumbles, “You’re the worst.”

“Yeah, sorry ‘bout that mate.”

Phil decides he needs to change the subject before things get any more weirdly tense. “You need to eat,” he says, turning his head to look at Dan. “Ok?”

Dan nods. “I’m starving.”

“So you are feeling better?”

“How could I not?”

Phil smiles. “Good. Let’s go then.”

“Where are we going?”
Phil shrugs. “My place? If you want?”

“Do you not work today?” He frowns. “I thought you did…”

“Actually,” Phil says, feeling suddenly embarrassed. “I kind of… texted in sick for the both of us.”

Dan stares at him without saying anything for what feels like far too long, his tired eyes boring into Phil’s. Then his chin quivers and his brows crumple and he squeezes his eyes shut. Phil sees a tear roll down Dan’s cheek before he turns away with a hand over his eyes.

Phil’s heart sinks and he doesn’t understand at first.

“Dan…”

Dan’s rolled over so his back is facing Phil and his shoulders start to shake. Phil can’t watch this a second longer. He sits up and puts his hand on one of those shoulders.

“Dan. C’mere.” He pulls on Dan’s shoulder, rolling him onto his back. Dan’s cheeks are splotchy and wet.

“C’mere,” Phil says again, pulling him up. Dan lets him, lets Phil pull him up and into his arms. He wraps them around Dan’s shoulders and squeezes so tight he thinks there’s no way it doesn’t hurt at least a little. He digs his chin into Dan’s back and pulls him in even closer.

He’s never held anyone like this. He’s never felt like he doesn’t even have enough strength in his body to physically express the depth and intensity of his feelings, but that’s how he feels now. He feels like he can’t squeeze hard enough, like he can’t pull Dan close enough to communicate how much he means to him.

Dan buries his damp face in Phil’s neck and fists his hands into the back of Phil’s black work polo. Phil feels the tears on his skin and Dan’s warm breath on his neck.

“Sorry,” Dan croaks. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Phil whispers. He doesn’t loosen his grip even a little bit. “You’re feeling something. That’s gotta be a good thing, right?”

Dan actually laughs then and nods.

“I’m sorry if I like… overstepped. I didn’t know what to--”

“Shut up, Phil. Please.” Dan pulls back, forcing Phil to drop his arms from his shoulders. Dan’s hands are still gripping the back of Phil’s shirt.

Phil realizes then that Dan is basically sat in his lap. Dan’s looking at him.

“No one’s ever done something like that for me.”

Phil needs to do something with his hands before they start acting of their own accord. He has the strongest urge to reach out and cup Dan’s face or thread his fingers through Dan’s hair. But now is really not the time.

So instead he tugs gently on the drawstrings of Dan’s soft pink hoodie.

“Come home with me,” he whispers.
“What?”

“Come to Manchester with me.”

“Really?”

Phil nods. “I want you to meet my mum.”

Dan smiles so wide it looks like his dimple is going to split his cheek in half. He nods. “Ok.”

Phil can’t stop his hands anymore from doing what they want to do. He reaches up and swipes his thumb gently across one of Dan’s cheeks and then the other, drying the moisture he finds there. “We’re going tomorrow. D’you wanna stay at mine tonight?”

Dan nods again, then looks away finally. He seems a little nervous all of a sudden. “I need a shower, bad.”

Dan gets up goes to have a shower. Phil puts his trousers back on and sits on Dan’s bed as he waits. He checks his phone. He’s got a message from Jimmy asking where he is and one from Rory asking how Dan’s doing. He answers them both before returning his phone to his pocket.

His stomach growls. He remembers again how long it’s been since either of them have eaten. Now that he’s alone and emotions aren’t running quite so high, he realizes he kind of feels like crap. He’s starving and stiff from being cramped in Dan’s tiny bed for like fifteen hours and his head hurts a little from oversleeping. He needs breakfast and a coffee and a shower.

Dan returns fairly quickly, towel wrapped around his hips and water dripping from his hair. Phil doesn’t pretend not to be looking anymore and Dan doesn’t seem to mind. He smiles timidly before delving into his messy closet for something to wear.

“I’ll probably have to go home Christmas eve to avoid being disowned by my own mum,” he says, slipping on a pair of black pants under his towel.

“If you must.”

“You’d want me to stay?” He drops the towel and Phil forces himself to keep his eyes on Dan’s face.

“Course.”

“Don’t say that or you’ll never be rid of me.”

“I don’t want to be,” Phil says quietly.

Dan gets dressed in a fuzzy black jumper and grey sweats and packs a small suitcase. They put on their coats and leave Dan’s room and on their way out of the flat they pass the same flatmate from last night in the kitchen clutching a steaming mug.

Dan doesn’t say anything. Phil smiles at him and nudges Dan in the side with his elbow.

“Morning,” Phil says. “I’m Phil by the way.”

“Mark.” He looks at Dan. “Alright, mate?”


“You lads off, then?”
Dan nods. “Going home for Christmas so I’ll be gone like a week.”

“Oh, right. Have fun then.”

“Thanks,” Dan says rather awkwardly.

“Ok, bye,” Phil says with forced cheer and Mark gives a little wave.

Once they’ve closed the front door behind them Dan laughs. “Maybe you were right. Maybe it’s me who’s been the asshole all along.”

They go straight to Phil’s flat and Dan makes coffee while Phil has a shower. They eat three quarters of a loaf of bread between them, toasted and spread with butter and jam and a few with chunky peanut butter for Dan.

They sit on either end of the sofa but Dan rests the flat of his feet against Phil’s thigh. He’s wearing purple socks and keeps wiggling his toes against Phil’s leg. At one point Phil wraps his hand around one of Dan’s feet and just doesn’t let go.

They watch anime and then Dan watches Phil play Zelda because he’s still feeling drained and a little off and he says again that it’s just nice to watch Phil doing something he likes. He lays his head on the arm of the sofa and drapes his legs across Phil’s lap which makes it harder to play the game but Phil doesn’t care. He’s only playing it because Dan needs a little time to tune out and rest.

Dan falls asleep and Phil takes the opportunity to make them something green and leafy for when he wakes up.

Dan looks better when he wakes up. The circles under his eyes are less dark and there’s more colour in his cheeks. Phil makes him drink two glasses of water and eat a big bowl of salad. Dan complains the whole time but he never stops smiling. He asks Phil if they can watch his uni videos again and Phil only keeps up the pretence of resistance for a minute before acquiescing.

“If you ever wanted to shoot something again I’d help you, you know,” Dan says casually after they’ve closed out the last one.

The idea strikes a strange mix of apprehension and genuine excitement into him. “If only I had a camera,” Phil says.

They go for a long meandering walk through the crowded London streets. It’s cold and wet but there are lights everywhere and festive decorations and sparkly trees and it feels nice. Dan tells Phil to get coffees for the two of them because he has something to do and he doesn’t want an audience.

“It won’t take long,” Dan says.

Phil thinks it’s a little weird considering all the things lately Dan hasn’t minded having an audience for, but he doesn’t say anything. They split up for twenty minutes and when they meet up again Dan has a bulge in the pocket of his coat and Phil has two hideously sweet gingerbread lattes.

They take their drinks back to Phil’s flat and Jimmy’s there with Gregg’s and Tom and a little Charlie Brown-esque Christmas tree that the four of them decorate with strings of coloured lights and cheap tinsel and tacky plastic baubles.

They all squeeze themselves together on the sofa that’s nowhere near big enough for four large men and watch A Christmas Story with all their legs tangled up together, elbows digging into sides and arms tucked under a couple fuzzy blankets.
Dan falls asleep with his head on Jimmy’s shoulder not long before the film is over. It’s late and Phil feels tired too. He whispers in Dan’s ear to wake up and come to bed with him. Dan yawns and nods and leans against Phil as they make their way down the hall and to Phil’s room.

They go to sleep in their clothes and this time it’s Phil who assumes the big spoon position. Dan falls asleep instantly and Phil’s not far behind.
Chapter 29

When Phil opens his eyes the next morning, the first thing he sees are Dan’s looking back at him.

“Morning,” Dan says softly.

“You’re awake.”

“I am.”

Phil yawns. “Why are you awake?”

Dan shrugs. “I’ve slept a lot since you showed up at my flat the other day. Plus it turns out you’re not just cute when you’re pretending to sleep. You’re just a cute sleeper in general.”

Phil pushes his face into his pillow again. It’s too early for all these feelings.

“Sorry.” Dan chuckles, rolling over onto his back. “So what’s the plan for today? Or have you come to your senses now that I’m not a blubbering mess.”

Phil closes his eyes again and stretches his arms above his head. “What d’you mean?”

“Do you still want me to come home with you?”

“Of course. And you weren’t a blubbering mess.”

“I was but that’s nice of you to say. I won’t hold it against you or anything if you want to just forget it.”

“Oh shut up.” He sits up and looks at Dan, who’s looking away now, chewing on his lip.

“Dan,” Phil says quietly.

“What?” He seems to be looking at something on the wall quite intently.

“Will you look at me please?”

Dan turns his head and looks up at Phil.

“Remember that thing we promised each other?”

Dan raises his eyebrows in question.

“That we’re not secretly trying to get rid of each other?”

Dan smiles.

Phil continues. “If anything, I’m being selfish. I don’t want to go a whole week without seeing these.” He reaches out and tugs on a fluffy curl.

Dan smiles even wider.

“Or this,” Phil says softly, sinking his finger gently into the deep dimple in Dan’s cheek. Mornings seem to make him bold. Or maybe it’s just Dan.
Instead of dropping his hand away quickly and laughing it off, he strokes his finger down and along Dan’s jaw. Slowly. Deliberately.

Dan’s not smiling anymore.

“Phil…”

Phil’s heart is pounding.

No, not pounding. Something fast, too fast to be as violent as pounding. Something like a hummingbird’s wings.

He’s forgotten how to breathe. His fingers are resting on Dan’s jaw.

And then Dan’s hand is on Phil’s hand and his fingers are threading between Phil’s.

Dan sits up and their hands fall from his face. But their fingers are still intertwined.

Dan’s eyes are burning holes into Phil’s.

And then there’s a knock on Phil’s door.

“Phil?”

It’s Jimmy. Of course it is. Of course he’d chosen this moment to knock on Phil’s door.

“You awake?”

Phil tries to answer, but all that comes out is a hoarse croak.

Dan lets go of Phil’s hand and scoots to the edge of the bed. “We’re up,” he calls out.

“Tom made pancakes,” Jimmy announces.

“Thanks, be right there.” Phil’s glad Dan’s still fully dressed. He couldn’t take the torture of Dan’s bare skin right now. He puts on his glasses and they go out to the kitchen and eat breakfast with Tom and Jimmy.

They take turns showering. Phil goes first and spends a lot longer than is strictly necessary stood beneath the hot water, trying to let the steam work the nervous knots out of the muscles in his back. It works until he steps out of the bathroom in his towels and catches a glimpse of Dan in the lounge, sat on the edge of the sofa with his elbows on his knees and his chin resting against fisted hands. He looks totally lost in thought and doesn’t notice Phil staring at him.

Yeah, Phil feels nervous again, especially since Jimmy and Tom have both left for work and now he and Dan have the place to themselves. And the thing is—he doesn’t even know what he’s hoping will or won’t happen.

That’s not really true, though. Not anymore. He’s definitely got a couple things he’s hoping for. He just doesn’t know if he’s ever going to be brave enough to let himself have them.

He calls down the hall to let Dan know the shower is free and hurries to his room to get dressed.

He’s stood in the kitchen drinking his second coffee of the day when Dan joins him, dressed in a red plaid shirt and small, thin gold hoops in his ears. His eyes are ringed very lightly with subtle black liner and he smells like Phil’s body wash. He leans back against the counter and Phil hands him a
“Thanks.” He takes a sip and asks, “When do we have to leave?”

“Mm, I was thinking like now-ish,” Phil murmurs against the rim of his mug.

“Really?”

“Yeah I was thinking we could walk to the station.”

“You're serious?” Dan asks incredulously.

“Yeah it'll be really good exercise.”

“I should’ve never told you about my list,” Dan says shaking his head. He’s smiling.

“My mum’s going to feed you from the moment we arrive to the moment you leave,” Phil explains. “We have to at least keep something on that list in check.”

Dan cocks a cheeky eyebrow. “What about sleeping?”

Phil shakes his head. “The Lesters are gamers. They’ll make you stay up late.”

“Like mario kart?”

“Like who wants to be a millionaire. The ps1 version. Or like, monopoly. Like five hours straight of monopoly.”

Dan laughs. “That sounds exactly like you.”

“I mean, what’s the point in starting a game if you’re not going to finish it, right?”

“Totally.” Dan takes a long sip of his coffee. “Anything else I need to be prepared for?”

“My brother’s gonna be there with his girlfriend. She’s much cooler than him. She’s from Sweden and she can sing.”

Dan smiles against the rim of his mug. “I can’t imagine another Phil.”

“He’s not like me at all. He’s the normal one.”

“Normal is boring, Phil, remember?” Dan says, stretching his leg out and resting his foot lightly on top of Phil’s.

Phil wiggles his toes under Dan’s. “Right,” he murmurs, recalling sitting on the floor in a tucked away room at Rory’s party—all the confessions and declarations they’d made that night. Really it hadn’t been that long ago, but in a many ways it feels like a whole lifetime has passed between then and now.

“Anything else I need to know?” Dan asks.

“My house is old and dark and most likely haunted.”

Dan’s smile falters a little then. “Are you joking?”

“Kind of but not really. It’s pretty creepy.”
“Where am I gonna be sleeping?” Dan asks, not even trying to hide his apprehension.

“Probably in the guest room?”

Dan’s hand travels up to his face, his thumb pressing to his lips, nail slotting between his teeth all in one fluid motion. It’s such a dead giveaway that he’s feeling anxious, but Phil’s not sure Dan even realizes he’s doing it.

He chews at his nail for a minute before asking quietly, “Would your family be weird about us sleeping together?” He’s looking very deliberately away from Phil.

Phil’s in the middle of taking a drink of his coffee, trying not read too much into what has suddenly become a strangely tense conversation. He swallows it down over a tight throat. “I… don’t know.”

“I don’t mean the pervy way, obviously.”

Phil tries to laugh, but all of a sudden he’s thinking about what it’ll look like, him bringing someone home he’s only known a few months, someone so much younger than him. Someone who wears eyeliner and earrings and nail polish and lip gloss and flowery jumpers. Someone who’s not a nice girl and whom Phil’s not sure he’ll be able to look at like he’s just a friend.

“Right,” Phil says weakly. “Of course not.”

“Sorry,” Dan says quietly. “I didn’t mean to make you feel weird.”

Phil looks up from his coffee to Dan’s frowning face. “You didn’t. I just… I don’t know if they would be. If you know what I mean?”

Dan nods. “Yeah. I know. It’s scary not knowing that.”

“Are your parents…?”

Dan shrugs. “Haven’t really brought it up with them yet.”

“So you’re not…?”

Finally, Dan makes eye contact again. “What, Phil? Out?”

Something in Dan’s tone makes Phil wish he’d just kept his mouth shut. He nods.

“I guess not,” Dan says, voice softening. “I feel like they probably know already, but we’ve never had a conversation about it. I told you, I don’t tell them the hard stuff.”

Phil nods.

“Are you?” Dan asks hesitantly. “Out? To your family?”

Phil laughs. “I wouldn’t have known what to be out about.”

“But you do now?”

Phil bites his lip but fights the urge to look away from Dan’s dark eyes. “No. I’m not putting myself in a box, remember?”

Dan smiles at that. “Right,” he says, tipping his head back and chugging the remains of his coffee. “I’ll sleep in the guest room then. It’ll be fun. Maybe I can record some EVP’s or something and put
them on youtube and get super rich. Start my new career as a ghost hunter.”

Phil still doesn’t feel like laughing. He kind of feels like shit all of a sudden actually. He feels like a bloody coward, just like he always has. Why can’t he just be honest? With Dan, with his family--with himself. He knows what he wants and he doesn’t want to wait anymore.

Dan deserves more. He deserves more than to be hidden away in the guest room when really, Phil wants him as close as possible at all times. He doesn’t want to sleep alone and he doesn’t want Dan to sleep alone. He doesn’t even ever want an inch of space between them at this point.

“Phil,” Dan says softly, and it’s only then that Phil realizes he’s stood there in the middle of his kitchen frowning to himself.

“Huh?”

“It’s fine, you know. I get it. Family stuff is hard. You’d probably have to sleep in the guest room at my house too. And by guest room I mean futon in the lounge because I’m not a rich kid like you. There’s definitely no guest room in my family home.” He smirks.

“Oi, I’m not a rich kid,” Phil protests.

Dan just gives him a look.

“Anymore.”

Dan rolls his eyes. “Right.”

“I mean, my parents are, I guess? I never really thought about it. But I’m obviously not now.”

“My point is,” Dan continues. “I think I know that if it were up to you, I wouldn’t be sleeping in the guest room. Right?”

Phil feels little butterflies in his stomach. Again. “Definitely not.”

Dan smiles, looking down at his feet. Phil thinks the fondness coiling around his heart might actually kill him for a second and wonders at what point it’ll be too much to resist. He doesn’t think he can go on much longer like this, but there’s still some ghostly remnants of fear holding him back.

Dan looks up. “You don’t owe your parents anything you don’t want to share, Phil. I probably understand that better than anyone.”

Phil nods. “Thanks.”

“I can’t wait to meet them, anyway. I can’t wait to meet the people who raised my favourite person.”

Phil watches the rolling hills out the train window as it makes its way North. Rain slides down the glass, and the occasional wet snowflake melts into the slow steady trickle. For once, Phil hopes it’ll get a little colder. There’s nothing quite like a white Christmas.

Dan’s head is leaned back against the headrest of the seat and angled towards Phil, though not actually touching him. They’re sharing a pair of earphones again and Phil thinks if they weren’t in such a public place right now Dan would definitely just let his head fall that extra couple centimeters to rest against Phil’s shoulder.
But they are in a very public place with eyes all around them, so Phil contents himself with pressing his knee into Dan’s thigh every now and again, with the way their arms brush up against one another’s on the armrest.

They’re listening to Dan’s weird music and Phil has no idea what it is but he likes it because he knows Dan likes it. He doesn’t really care too much about music himself, but watching Dan listen to it is fascinating, the way he closes his eyes and mouths along with the words, the way his fingers tap against his thigh in time with the beat.

Phil’s heart rate picks up a little when they finally pull into Manchester-Piccadilly. He knows his mum has driven into town to pick them up and will be somewhere out there on the platform waiting. It’s been a while since he’s seen her in person and he wonders if she’ll be able to see on his face how much has changed since then. Will the changes that have taken place inside his heart be as obvious to her as they are to him? Does he even want her to notice them?

“Ready?” Dan asks, no doubt wondering why Phil’s just sat there biting his lip with a far away look in his eyes.

Phil nods and stands. They sling their bags over their shoulders and zip up their coats and make their way off the train car.

“Any last minute words of advice on impressing your mum?” Dan asks as they step down onto the platform.

Phil laughs. “You’re trying to impress her? It’s not enough just for her to like you?”

“Definitely not. I want to be her new favourite.”

“In that case you’re on your own mate. I’m a mama’s boy for life, I’ll not help you steal Kath’s heart away.”

Phil scans the crowd and feels a surge of genuine excitement when he finally sees her. He nudges Dan with his elbow and starts walking towards her. When she spots him, her face lights up. She holds out her arms and Phil feels no shame running into them and wrapping his arms around her head. She squeezes hers around his middle and coos.

“Hello, love.” After a moment she pulls back cupping his face and looking up into his eyes. “I was right, you’re too skinny.”

He’s still grinning as he rolls his eyes.

“Is this Dan?”

Phil opens his mouth to introduce them but Dan beats him to it. He holds out his hand. “Hello Mrs. Lester, so nice to meet you.”

She laughs. “Goodness sake, call me Kath, please, I beg you.”

“Kath,” Dan says warmly as he shakes her hand. “I can see where Phil got his good looks.”

Phil feels a truly surreal mix of fondness and embarrassment and just a little bit of apprehension, but she just laughs again. “Thank you dear.”

This is going to be an interesting trip, Phil thinks.
“Come on children, let’s get home. It’s supposed to start snowing soon and I don’t want to be driving in a blizzard.”

“Really?” Phil asks excitedly.

Kath doesn’t stop asking them questions the whole drive home, most of them directed at Dan. Phil is sat in the back while Dan sits up front, a winning grin on his face all the while. He really is taking this whole ‘impress Phil’s mum’ thing seriously. She’s being nosy and sometimes a little too personal, but Dan answers every question with grace and diplomacy and even makes sure to ask questions of his own.

Phil hardly gets a word in edgewise but he really doesn’t mind. He leans his head against the window and watches fat wet snowflakes hit the ground and melt as the car makes its way out of Manchester toward Phil’s smallish hometown of Rawtenstall.

Phil tunes back in when he hears his mum ask, “Where did you go to school Dan?”

“Manchester, actually.”

She squeals and Phil kicks the back of Dan’s seat because he knows he’s just added another notch in the ‘winning Kath over’ belt. She asks him about his law degree and his own parents and his brother and what he plans to do now that he’s graduated.

“Surely someone as accomplished as a law school graduate doesn’t plan on working at a coffee shop any longer than he has to?” she asks.

Phil’s gut twists because she doesn’t even bother asking him that question anymore. It still hurts to hear the naked disdain in her voice at the word coffee shop. He knows it’s not exactly something she can brag about at her church group, but he wishes she didn’t view it as such a black mark on his personality.

“Honestly, I don’t have any other plans in the near future. It pays my bills and at the moment I’m focusing on some things I consider a lot more important. Plus, it’s where I met Phil, so it’s kind of like, one of my all time favourite places actually.”

Phil could cry at the beauty of Dan’s response. He hopes his mum isn’t looking at him through the rear-view as he knows beyond a shadow of a doubt his face is flushed and he’s grinning like an idiot. Dan must have known he’d take a hit to the respectable young man image he’d been building up and he’d said it anyway. He’d said it to make Phil feel a little better about himself, to communicate in so many words that he doesn’t think of any less of him and he doesn’t think his mum should either. That they’re in this together.

Phil’s not even wondering in this moment what Kath makes of this young man of questionable respectability being so openly flirty with her son. Maybe he will later, when he’s cold and alone in his bed, but right now his entire body is warm. He bites his lip to try to stifle the nervous giddiness that threatens to erupt in awkward giggles and goes back to watching the snow fall against a darkening sky.

His house smells the same as it always has, warm and old and just distinctly like growing up. His dad is sat in the lounge sketching and smiles when they come in. He’s never quite as excited about seeing his dad as he is about his mum but there’s something about this time of year that just makes him love his family so much he wonders how he’d ever managed to leave. He introduces Dan to Nigel and Dan keeps up the appearance that he’s an infallibly polite and wholesome young man.
“Do you boys want tea?”

Phil nods. “Yes please mum,” he says stiffly. He feels strangely formal, maybe because it feels so bloody strange to have Dan stood in the middle of the kitchen of his childhood home.

“You can show Dan to the guest room while the water boils, love. We’ll eat when Martyn and Cornelia get back, yeah?”

“Oh, right. Forgot about that guy,” Phil chuckles. He actually kind of had. His mind’s been so preoccupied lately. “When’d he get here?”

“They’ve been here a few days. They’re just out with some of Martyn’s old school friends at the moment.”

Phil nods, reminded again of the differences between him and his brother. Phil had had good friends when he was in school, but that doesn’t mean he’s keen on seeing any of them again. He can just imagine hearing them describe their lives as doctors or professors or marine biologists or whatever, introducing Phil to their spouses and maybe even children. Then he thinks about having to explain that he’s still single and works at Starbucks and still lives in a tiny flat with his mate from uni, and he’s ready to break out in a cold sweat.

He smiles and nods at his mum and motions for Dan to follow him. They carry their bags up the stairs wordlessly. Phil’s heart is beating quickly, his nerves buzzing as they have been since the moment they got off the train. Or maybe actually since they got on the train. In any case, it’s starting to get annoying. He doesn’t want to be nervous anymore.

“You weren’t kidding,” Dan mutters when they reach the top of the stairs. “This place is creepy as fuck.”

“Yeah, sorry,” Phil says, pointing down the hall. “You’re down here.”

Dan follows Phil down the hall and into the guest bedroom where he drops his bag on the bed and looks around. The walls are dark and everything looks just a little older than it should. It smells a little musty.

“It’s… nice,” Dan says unconvincingly.

Phil flops himself down onto the bed. “It’s fine, you don’t have to lie.”

Dan perches himself on the side of the mattress and looks over at Phil. “It’s better than anywhere else I could be right now.”

Phil smiles. “Yeah,” he says softly. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“I’m going to have some right sleepless nights in here. Your house literally looks like the hotel from The Shining. Which reminds me, we still have to finish that by the way.”

“Are you really going to have sleepless nights?” Phil asks, frowning.

Dan shrugs. “Probably.”

“Am I worth that?” Phil asks, taken aback by his own sudden surge of confidence.

Dan’s answer is sure and immediate. “Of course.”

Phil feels a stab of guilt. Dan doesn’t want to sleep alone. Phil doesn’t want to sleep alone. He
knows Dan will be scared and miserable in here tonight, and he knows he himself will also be lying awake, though not for the same reason.

He should just say fuck it and tell Dan to bring his stuff over to Phil’s room. He should. It’s what they both want. It’s just the tip of the iceberg of what Phil wants.

But then he pictures trying to explain that to his mum, and maybe even worse, his dad and his veins fill with ice. He sits up.

“Maybe we can just stay up all night playing bubble bobble in the basement and then take a nap tomorrow.”

Dan chuckles and looks away. “I mean, that sounds fun. But you don’t have to screw up your sleep schedule because I never grew out of fears most people get over by the time they’re ten.”

“Maybe we can just pretend we fell asleep down there watching a film or something. There’s a sofa that’s big enough to fit us both.”

“You really wanna sleep with me then, eh Lester?”

Phil doesn’t miss the double meaning in Dan’s words, and either way his answer is the same.

“Yeah.”

Dan grins. “Good, ‘cause me too.”
Introducing Dan to Martyn feels even weirder than introducing him to Kath and Nigel. Martyn doesn’t know everything about Phil like Jimmy does, but he knows enough and Phil hasn’t really told him about Dan. In fact he hasn’t spoken to Martyn much at all in the past couple months save for the odd text here and there.

Martyn gives Dan a firm handshake when Phil introduces them. He thinks he sees Martyn shoot a sideways glance to Cornelia, which Phil can’t really blame him for. He’d told his mum Dan was coming up north, but Martyn hadn’t been informed about the last minute addition to the Lester family Christmas celebrations.

Phil can’t help but notice how much taller Dan is than Martyn, how much bigger his hand is when they shake. He takes a strange satisfaction in watching Dan’s fingers wrap all the way around the back of Martyn’s palm. Phil’s always been not so secretly jealous of all the things Martyn is that he is not--strong, athletic, ‘manly’ in a way that matters when you grow up in a conservative northern town like they had.

Watching this strange wonderful man with his earrings and his eyeliner and his delicately glittering fingernails towering over his brother and dominating their handshake makes Phil’s heart beat just little bit faster. Not that Martyn had ever lorded anything over him--Martyn is and always has been a great brother and a good friend. But sometimes these trips home really highlight for Phil just how short he’s fallen from the life he knows his parents want for him. And how much Martyn hasn’t.

Cornelia helps shake Phil from his self pity by wrapping her arms around him for as big a hug as her tiny frame will allow. The top of her head doesn’t even clear his shoulders. He rests his cheek against her fiery red curls and smiles as he squeezes back.

“It’s good to see you little brother.” Even her speaking voice is soft and musical.

“You too Corn,” Phil replies happily. It is. It’s always nice to see her. She’s a little Swedish angel.

“This is my…” He stops. Friend just isn’t the right word anymore and he can’t bring himself to say it. His parents are in the kitchen and can’t hear them, and he doesn’t really care what assumptions Martyn makes. He just really doesn’t want Dan to hear himself introduced as Phil’s friend. “Dan,” he finishes awkwardly.

“Hello Phil’s Dan,” she says, beaming. “I’m so glad to meet you.”

Phil looks at Martyn, whose eyebrows are raised in question. Phil just gives a little shrug. Dan holds out his hand again but Cornelia ignores it and goes in for a hug. It’s even more ridiculous than her embrace with Phil.

“You’re huge,” she laughs.

“That’s what she said,” Martyn says.

“Not to you!” she shrieks and they all dissolve into a fit of giggles as Martyn shouts, “Oi!”

Dinner with his family is lovely as always, but strange. So strange to have Dan sat next to him at the dining table in his family home, their knees pressed together under the table. These little touches are quickly becoming ubiquitous and Phil’s pulse thrums with the knowledge that it means something. It
means something and it’s leading somewhere—somewhere new and scary and exciting and Phil’s so terrified he’s having trouble eating. But he wants it.

It’s just strange to think that it could happen under the same roof as his mum and his dad and his brother if he lets it. He knows that at this point, it’s up to him. He knows it probably would have happened by now if not for all his many fears and reservations.

He takes a long sip of his wine and tries not to think about any of that. His dad is asking Dan where he went to school and Phil hopes there won’t be a repeat of the awkward moment with his mum from earlier.

Kath answers for him and then quickly changes the subject by asking Cornelia when she and Martyn will be leaving to visit the rest of the Dahlgren clan. Phil gives her a warm smile and she shoots him a cheeky wink. He’s reminded again just how much he loves his mum.

Dan leans over and whispers, “I kind of love Kath.”

“Back off, you’ve got your own mum,” Phil whispers back playfully.

“I won’t rest til I’m her favourite.”

“You’re gonna be real tired then, Howell.”

“Oi, what are you two ladies whispering about?” Martyn says loudly. Sometimes Phil forgets that he’s actually a year and a half younger than this little shit.

“You mum,” he shoots back without thinking.

“What about me?” Kath asks without missing a beat and they all laugh, even Phil’s dad.

After they’ve had dinner and way too much dessert and their wine glasses are refilled for a third time, they migrate to the lounge. As Phil had promised, someone digs out who wants to be a millionaire and sets up the dusty old playstation. Martyn sits between Phil and Dan on the worn and weathered leather sofa, Cornelia sat on the floor and leaning back against his legs. Nigel is sat in his recliner and to Phil’s horror, Kath is sat in his lap.

At least he pretends to be horrified, as does Martyn. In reality it gives him a warm comforting feeling in his chest. He’s always known that love is real, even if it has been hard to define in his own life. He knows because his parents have always shown it—to him and for each other. Phil’s groaned in mortification over the years every time Kath had pinched Nigel’s bottom, every time he’d given her a big wet kiss at the breakfast table, but really, Phil likes never having to wonder how his parents feel about each other.

He’s more than a little tipsy at this point, and he knows he’s not the only one because there is very loud banter and good natured argument with every question Chris Tarrant reads out dramatically. Phil’s having so much fun that he almost doesn’t notice how bloody beautiful Dan looks tonight, cheeks rosy and wine warmed, long legs outstretched and crossed at the ankles. Almost. He definitely notices a little, and wishes Martyn hadn’t so rudely wedged himself between them.

Martyn’s hands are in Cornelia’s hair, fingers twisting in the tight ginger curls. She sighs and leans her head back against his knees. Phil’s father’s arms are wrapped around Kath’s waist and her head is resting against his shoulder. Phil sits in his corner of the sofa with his legs folded underneath him, wishing he was a little braver.

They’re actually doing well. They’ve played this game every Christmas for as long as Phil can
remember, and they very rarely make it as far as they have tonight. Surely between the six of them they should be able to make it to a million pounds, right?

They don’t. There is a loud chorus of groans as they lose with only one question left to go. Kath asks what game they’re going to play next.

Phil looks across Martyn and over at Dan. He’s chewing on his bottom lip as he so often is. Phil doesn’t want to play a game with his family.

He stands up. “Actually mum, I think Dan and I are going to go watch a film or something. We’re kind of knackered.”

“Oo, what are we watching?” Martyn asks, perking up from where he’d been slouched back against the sofa.

Phil feels a stab of annoyance before remembering that his brother really has no way of knowing that Phil might want some time alone with Dan. As far as he knows they’re just friends, after all. Phil does notice Cornelia elbow Martyn discreetly in the shin though. Apparently she’s a little more observant than her boyfriend. Martyn looks back at Phil then and Phil can practically see the lightbulb going off in his head.

Martyn opens his mouth, no doubt to retract his desire to join them, but Phil’s not ready for that kind of transparency. Not in front of his parents. His bravery quota has been exhausted for the day.

“Actually,” he says before Martyn has a chance to say anything, “I want to watch you and Dan play bubble bobble. I’d like to know which of you sucks worse.”

Martyn flips him off and Dan laughs.

“Be nice boys,” Cornelia scolds.

“I’m putting pjs on now,” Phil announces.

Dan stands up. “Me too.”

They go their separate ways at the top of the stairs, Dan to the guest room and Phil to his bedroom. They meet up again after a few minutes and Dan’s wearing his red plaid bottoms and a black t-shirt and Phil thinks it’s just simply unfair to look that good even when dressed for bed.

Dan looks unsure. “Are we still… doing that thing you said?”

Phil smiles. It would appear that Dan doesn’t want them to be apart anymore than he does, even in unconsciousness. He nods. “They won’t want to stay down there all night. We’ll just have to wait them out.”

“You don’t think they’ll think it’s weird?” Dan asks quietly.

Maybe Phil has a tiny bit of courage left after all. “I don’t care what they think. Come on.”

Dan beams and they make their way down to join Martyn and Cornelia in the ugly pink gaming room in the basement. Phil insists he wasn’t joking when he said he wanted to watch Dan and Martyn work together as two fruit-eating dragons on a quest to save their girlfriends. Dan graciously offers to give his place to Cornelia but she insists she’d really like to watch this too.

Phil sets up the game and hands Dan a controller. He tucks himself into the corner of the futon,
which is somehow big enough for the four of them to sit on together comfortably. Dan and Martyn are perched on the edge, but Cornelia snuggles in close to Phil, looping her arm around his and resting her head against his shoulder.

It’s nice. It’s not necessarily what he’d been hoping for, but actually, it feels just right. It feels easy and warm and nice to be with his family like this, to watch Dan slip himself into the Lester traditions so seamlessly. He and Martyn bark instructions and encouragement at each other in equal measure after only a few minutes of gameplay.

Cornelia plays with Phil’s hand absentmindedly, stroking her finger across his knuckles over and over. “Your hands are so soft, Phil,”’ she says quietly.

He gives her his standard reply. “I moisturize.”

“You should teach your brother how to do that. His hands are like sandpaper.”

Phil snorts. “You know better than anyone that man cannot be taught.”

“That’s true.” She flips his hand over and starts tracing over the lines in his palm with the tip of her finger. “How are you Phil?” Her voice is so soft and quiet he can barely hear her.

“Good. Really good,” he replies.

Then she digs her hand into her pocket and pulls out her phone. She opens up the notes app and types something out before handing it to him.

I’m sorry Martyn is such a clueless idiot

He looks at her. He could deny it, pretend not to know what she’s talking about, but her face is so lovely and kind and understanding that he doesn’t know why he would even bother. He types out a message of his own and hands the phone back to her.

it’s fine, this is fun too

She reads the message and looks up at him, smiling. He feels a sudden surge of fondness. She’s sat close enough to him that he can see the vibrancy of her pale green eyes in brilliant detail, and yet she still won’t risk speaking anything out loud that he may not want Martyn or Dan hearing. Not for the first time, Phil wonders how a div like his brother had managed to win the heart of such a wonderful, selfless person.

She throws a quick glance over her shoulder in the direction of Dan and Martyn. Once she confirms their complete obliviousness, she looks down at her phone and types another message.

i have so many questions but i don’t want to pry

Phil feels nerves fluttering in his chest. It’s one thing to talk about this stuff with Jimmy, or even Rory. It feels different now, with someone who is, for all intents and purposes, his family. Somehow the stakes feel higher, which makes no sense in this case because Cornelia is one of the loveliest people he’s ever known.

ask away, i think

She bites her painted rep lip in excitement and Phil can tell she’s suppressing a giggle. She’s known as a giggler. It’s very cute but also a dead giveaway that she’s enthusiastic about something, and it’s obvious she’s trying her very hardest to be discreet.
are you guys together?

Phil’s eyes drift over to Dan, who’s hunched over his knees on the edge of the sofa and frowning in concentration as he stares intently at the tv. He looks so at home next Martyn, in this garishly painted room on this ugly old futon. He looks like he belongs here.

not yet, Phil types

Her eyes snap up to meet his as soon as she’s read it. He feels like he can read all the questions in those eyes—eyes that look strangely like Jimmy’s, actually. Maybe that’s what makes him feel so safe now, so ready to tell her everything.

i like him. a lot

Her fingers fly as she types out her response. i could tell

That probably shouldn’t come as a surprise to him. is it that obvious?

well not to martyn, apparently.

it’s not his fault. i don’t tell him about this stuff ever, Phil types.

She looks over her shoulder again. Dan and Martyn are laughing about something, still completely ignorant of the secret conversation happening right beside them.

you could you know, she types. he cares about you. he worries about you.

Phil suppresses a sigh. He’s so tired of being pitied.

if i knew what to say i would. this is all new to me, i have no idea what i’m doing. He looks up at her for a second before adding, i’m terrified

you guys really aren’t together?

She looks at him and he shakes his head. why

She smiles down at her phone as she types. he already looks at you like he’s in love

The nervous butterflies in his stomach get a lot worse then. He has the urge to laugh, to try to shake them loose. At this point he’s starting to forget what it feels like not to be nervous.

i don’t think you have anything to be scared of phil, she continues. that boy likes you too.

Phil smiles wide and his tongue pokes out between his teeth before he can stop it. It’s not as if he hadn’t already known that, not as if he hasn’t had people telling him that for weeks. For some reason this time it really hits him. Cornelia’s just met Dan and they’ve only been sharing the same space for a few hours and she already knows what’s happening between the two of them. So surely it must be true?

Her eyes go wide. wait, were you going to… did we interrupt… ??

It’s Phil’s turn now to bite his lip to keep from laughing. i don’t know. i told you i have no idea what i’m doing.. i’ve never really done this before.

She puts her hand on his sympathetically.
tell me what to do, corn

i can’t, she types. but you don’t need me to. you seem to be doing just fine. you’ll do what feels right when it feels right and that’s how it should be.

Martyn’s voice interrupts them, making Phil jump before he can reply to Cornelia’s message.

“What are you lot up to over there?” he says, eyes narrowed in suspicion.

Cornelia saves the day by being as cool and collected as ever. “Wouldn’t you like to know,” she says, slipping her phone back into her pocket.

“I see how it is,” he grumbles, but he can’t hide the beginnings of a smile as the corners of his lips twitch. “Either of you want a go?” he asks, holding out his controller.

They both shake their heads.

“You’re doing so well,” Phil says, looking at his brother. “You’ve only died what, like twenty times?”

“Oh piss off,” Martyn laughs.

“Dan’s only played this game once before and he’s already better than you, mate.”

Martyn flips him off again before turning back to the screen. Dan’s smiling, wide and toothy with crinkly eyes. Once they’ve gone back to playing, Phil pulls out his phone and opens up his notes.

do you think martyn will be weird about it?

Cornelia frowns when she reads his message. not if he knows what’s good for him

Phil’s stomach sinks just a little bit. :(  

Her fingers fly. i’m kidding phil. of course he’s not. we talked about it a little bit while you were changing. he’s surprised, but can you blame him?

surprised that i brought someone home, or surprised that it’s a bloke?

both , she types.

what did he say exactly? He’s nervous again, but for a different reason now.

She looks at him and smiles and Phil thinks it’s a slightly melancholy smile. you should talk to him about that love, not me. he’s your brother and he loves you. he’s not going to be anything but happy for you

but he probably thinks it’s bloody weird. i wouldn’t even know what to say , Phil types.

you don’t have to say anything until you’re ready. i just don’t want you to think that it makes him see you any differently.

Phil thinks she’s probably right. Martyn’s a grown man now. He’s not the same twelve year old boy who’d call things queer or gay as an insult. After all, hadn’t Phil done that too? Not even really knowing what it meant or why it might not be ok?

He slides his phone into the pocket of his sweatpants. He doesn’t want to talk about this anymore.
Now he’s thinking about the kind of things people from this town might say about him if they knew. The looks his parents might give him if he told them that Dan is much more to him than a mate.

He hadn’t realized how much this still bothered him—because usually it doesn’t. He’s lived and been best friends with a gay man for ten years. He’s slept with men and mostly accepted a long time ago that whatever he is, it isn’t something his family would likely come to terms with quickly. Usually it’s easy not to think about these things when he’s home and his mum is constantly feeding him and suggesting new tv shows for them to watch together and hauling out board games from the shelf stacked full of wholesome family entertainment.

But now Dan’s here with him and he can’t stop thinking about it, not for a single moment. Dan has managed to work his way inside every corner of Phil’s mind. Phil feels the warmth of Dan tingling under his skin, even when they’re sat on opposite ends of the sofa with two people wedged between them. The sense memory of the way Dan smells lingers in Phil’s nose long after they’re far enough apart that it really shouldn’t.

It’s quite literally all he can think about, and it makes him realize just how afraid he is that his family will never fully accept him for it.

He feels Cornelia’s hand squeeze his thigh just above the knee. He’s not looking at her, but he knows she’s looking at him. He thinks she probably knows exactly how he feels. The Lesters are a lot to live up to. Even he knows that.

She leans her head against his shoulder again and he forces himself to look at the tv and make sense of the images it’s projecting and of the words that are being banted back and forth between Dan and Martyn.

Maybe he’ll talk to his brother before he goes back home to London. Maybe he won’t. Everything feels so hideously uncertain right now.

The next time Martyn dies in the game Phil declares that it’s his turn to play. Dan offers to bow out and let Phil take over so he can get maximum nostalgia by playing with his brother, but before Phil has a chance to say anything, Cornelia says, “Actually, Martyn and I are going to head up to bed.”

Phil could kiss her.

“Are we?” Martyn asks.

“Yep. Let’s go.” She stands up and runs her fingers through Phil’s fringe. The fringe he hasn’t bothered to straighten for days. “Goodnight, boys,” she says softly, looking right at Phil.

He just looks back and smiles.

“Night,” Dan says cheerfully.

Phil takes the controller that Martyn hands to him. He looks at Phil a beat too long, like there’s something he wants to say, but apparently he thinks better of it, because when he opens his mouth it’s just to say, “Night Philly.”

Phil puts the controller down the moment Martyn and Cornelia have disappeared up the stairs. He looks over at Dan.

Dan smiles. “Hi.”

“Hey,” Phil says. “I don’t really actually want to play.”
“Oh, alright. You tired?”

Phil nods.

“Should we just go to our rooms and go to sleep?”

Phil can tell Dan’s trying very hard to mask his disappointment. It shouldn’t make him feel so giddy and nervous, because Dan had already made it clear he wasn’t keen on sleeping alone tonight, but it still does. “No you nutter, you can’t get rid of me that easily. I just want to lie down and watch something.”

Dan grins. “Gaming too much work for you?”

“It’s been a long day. Don’t make fun of me.”

Dan puts down his controller too. “But it’s what I do best.”

Phil hauls himself up. “Any requests?” he asks, ignoring Dan’s teasing. “There aren’t a ton of options, all we have down here is vhs.”

Dan shrugs. “Doesn’t matter to me.”

Phil’s stomach flutters. It really doesn’t matter to him either. Not at all. He flips through the old tapes and settles on the first one that’s even remotely interesting.

“Have you seen this?” he asks, holding it up for Dan to see.

“My Neighbour Totoro? Of course.”

“Do you approve?”

Dan nods. Phil sets it up and presses play and sits back down on the mildly uncomfortable futon. He feels very awkward all of a sudden. Dan’s sitting a good distance away with his long legs crossed underneath him. Phil wants to move closer but for some reason he doesn’t know how. Everything feels so deliberate now, like there’s too much meaning in every word and every moment. Everything is loaded and he doesn’t know how to just be normal anymore.

Luckily Dan hasn’t forgotten.

“You’re too far away,” he whines. “I’m lonely over here.”

Phil smiles. It doesn’t have to be complicated and he doesn’t need to be slick. He doesn’t know why he keeps forgetting that.

“We need pillows and blankets if we’re gonna sleep down here.”

Dan cocks an eyebrow. “I think one will do.”

Phil’s skin feels hot. He forgets what’s supposed to happen next.

“Is there one down here already?” Dan asks.

“Um.” Is there? Phil honestly has no idea. He leans back and twists around, craning his neck to look behind the sofa and lo and behold, folded up neatly underneath a stack of old textbooks is a thick, wooly grey blanket his grandma had knitted for Martyn when he was a baby. He stretches out his arm and grabs it.
“It’s our lucky night,” Phil says, shaking it out. He crinkles his nose. “It doesn’t smell great, but it’s better than nothing?”

Dan laughs. “It’s perfect. Is it too much to hope for a pillow?”

Phil looks around. He doesn’t see a pillow, but he does see a pile of old toys and stuffed animals in the corner. He gets up again and rummages through it until he finds a comically large plush mickey mouse. He turns the lights off before flopping back onto the futon and plonking the toy in Dan’s lap.

“Bloody hell,” Dan murmurs.

“My dad bought it for us on a trip to Disney World in Florida when we were kids.”

Dan gives him a look. “Rich kid,” he says, laying mickey down across the end of the sofa.

Phil just rolls his eyes playfully. “Again, better than nothing, right?”

Dan lies down then, laying his head against mickey’s face, his back pressed up against the back of the futon. He smiles. “It’s perfect.” He pats the space in front of him. “Room for one more.”

Phil’s heart thuds and he lays down quickly before he has the chance to make things any more awkward. He’s fallen asleep in Dan’s arms enough times now that he shouldn’t be this nervous about it. He pulls the blanket up over them and sinks his head into mickey’s legs. It’s not great, but it’ll do.

“Can you even see the telly?” Phil asks. He feels Dan’s arm snake around his waist.

“Nope.” Dan moves his hand up and lays it flat against Phil’s chest.

There’s no way Dan could be missing how hard and fast Phil’s heart is beating.

“So do you want me to move?”

Phil feels the warmth of Dan’s breath on his ear when he whispers, “Definitely not.”

Phil lays his hand overtop of Dan’s, lets his fingers sink into the space between Dan’s fingers. Dan bends them, curls them around Phil’s palm and squeezes. Phil squeezes back.

“Phil?” Dan’s thumb strokes against Phil’s shirt, only inches away from his nipple.

“Yeah?”

“I’m really happy you invited me here.”

Phil closes his eyes and the light from the telly flickers against the backs of his lids. “Me too.”

Dan’s knees push into the backs of Phil’s knees. Their socked feet tangle together. Phil can feel Dan’s chin pressing into the slope between his neck and his shoulder. He can feel the rise and fall of Dan’s chest against his back.

In this moment, he’s not nervous. Everything feels simple and easy and right, like puzzle pieces fitting together.

He resolves right then and there to be brave. He resolves to let himself be happy, to have what he wants without worrying about what anyone else will think.
He resolves that he won’t let Dan leave the north without knowing the taste of his lips.
Chapter 31

Phil wakes up when he hears footsteps above him, moving back and forth. Probably his mum in the kitchen, making a ridiculously big breakfast for her house full of adult children.

He’s hot beneath the scratchy wool of his grandma’s blanket and with Dan’s body enveloping the back of his. The light coming in through the small window up near the ceiling isn’t bright, but hazy and white. It’s not sunny and yet it illuminates the whole room. He feels a thrill of excitement and can’t wait to go look out the window and see how much snow had fallen in the night.

But, actually. Maybe he can wait awhile, because Dan’s hand is pushed up underneath Phil’s t-shirt, his thumb tracing slow gentle circles around his navel. Phil’s own hands are shoved up underneath the mickey pillow beneath his head. He doesn’t want to move for fear of Dan pulling his hand away, but he thinks they’re past the point of trying to stop this thing that’s happening between them now. This soft, slow delicious thing.

Phil’s happy to realize he’s not nervous. His stomach flutters but it’s not nerves. It’s just happiness and excitement and contentment. Maybe a little of something else.

He thinks he can feel that Dan is feeling a little of something else as well, and the butterflies intensify.

“That tickles a bit,” Phil whispers.

“Should I stop?” Dan’s voice is soft right next to Phil’s ear.

“Never.”

Dan flattens his hand against Phil’s stomach and splays his fingers and Phil is bewildered by the sheer span of them. Dan slides his hand up a little further until it’s resting in the middle of Phil’s chest like it had been last night, fingers raking through the hair there.

“Morning, you,” Dan says softly.

“Morning. Did you sleep well?” Phil asks.

Dan giggles. “Eventually.”

Phil slides his own hand up to rest it overtop Dan’s. “Sorry, I know it’s not the most comfortable place to sleep.”

“I wouldn’t have wanted to be anywhere else.”

“Me neither,” Phil murmurs. He closes his eyes again, thinking about the promise he’d made to himself last night. Wondering if now might be the right time.

But, since he even has to wonder in the first place, maybe it’s not the right time? He curses Jimmy and Cornelia and everyone who’d ever told him he’d know what to do when the time was right. Didn’t they know him? Didn’t they understand he needed more than vague platitudes and meaningless encouragement? Didn’t they know he needed minute instruction with lots of detail, maybe even graphs or pie charts or a step by step how to?

“Phil?”
“Yeah?”

“Could you turn around for a sec?”

Phil wonders if Dan can feel the way his heart suddenly thuds against his chest. Dan pulls his hand away and Phil turns himself over before he can drown in the fear of uncertainty.

Dan looks as sleepy and adorable as he always does in the morning, but Phil’s never seen it quite this close up, the technicolour detail of his chocolate brown eyes and the little bit of makeup that’s smudged underneath them, the chapped pink lips and the blush in his cheeks.

He smiles and Phil smiles back.

“Hi,” Dan says.

“Hi.”

“I just wanted to look at you,” Dan says.

Phil doesn’t say anything. This definitely feels like the right time. His eyes drop from Dan’s eyes to his mouth.

But what is he supposed to do with his hands now? What if Dan’s not actually as ready for this as he seems to be? What if Phil’s morning breath is really bad and he just messes everything up because he didn’t wait for the right moment?

“You like looking at me?” Phil asks.

“I love looking at you.” Dan’s hand rests lightly on Phil’s hip. Their knees are pressed together.

Then, the sound of a door creaking open. Footsteps on the stairs.

Phil’s eyes go wide. “Mum?” He can’t see her yet. She’s still coming down the stairs.

“Phil? What are you doing down here, love?”

His heart is in his throat. He hates himself for it and still he can’t stop it. “We fell asleep watching a film.”

She’ll know he’s lying when she sees the blanket, the makeshift pillow, the way their bodies are pressed up against one another’s, their faces nearly close enough to touch.

“We?” she asks.

Phil’s fear is momentarily eclipsed by pure, blind irritation. Maybe she won’t know anything after all. Maybe the idea of her son falling for another man really is unfathomable to her.

“Me and Dan, mum.” He looks at Dan, who’s biting back a smile.

“Right, of course. I was just coming down to do some laundry but it can wait. You boys hungry?”

“I am!” Dan chimes cheerfully.

“Well come on up,” she says, matching Dan’s enthusiasm. “Breakfast will be ready soon.”

Phil hears her footsteps head back up the stairs. He looks at Dan.
“That was close, huh?” Dan teases.

Phil doesn’t really feel like laughing. He hates that he cares. He hates that he feels like there’s even anything to care about.

He realizes he’s frowning when Dan strokes the skin between his eyebrows.

“Whatever you’re worrying about, don’t, ok?” he says softly. “It’s fine. Everything’s fine.”

Phil nods. He wants things to be better than fine. He’s tired of fine. He remembers his late night resolution again and gathers up all his courage. “Can we talk later?”

Dan looks startled. “Yeah… Should I be worried?”

Phil bites the tip of his tongue and breathes out a little giggle. “Course not.” With his remaining courage, he leans in and presses the end of his nose into Dan’s.

Dan beams. “You’re such a strange person,” he says fondly.

That hazy white light falls over the kitchen when they get to the top of the stairs and Phil squeals like a child when he looks out the window. Everything outside is covered in a thick blanket of fluffy looking snow—thicker than Phil’s seen since he was a child. It makes him feel like a child and suddenly all he wants to do is throw on his coat and make angels in the cold, powdery drifts with Dan.

“Oh my god, it’s a christmas miracle!”

Kath scolds his blasphemy but she’s definitely smiling. “Go get dressed, children.” She waves them off before cracking an egg into the sizzling pan she’s got on the stove. “And wake up your brother, please.”

Phil knocks on Martyn’s door on the way down the hall to his own room. “Get up Martina!” he shouts. “You too, Cornelius! Breakfast time.”

After a moment Martyn grumbles back through the door, “Alright Philippa, we’re up already.”

Dan gives him a look. Phil laughs. “Don’t look at me like that, Danielle. He started it a long time ago. I’m actually the mature one.”

“Oh huh.”

They part ways and go to their respective rooms to get dressed. Phil takes a long time to decide what he wants to wear. Eventually he goes for style over comfort—it’s possible he just wants to look really good today. He looks in the mirror above his dresser, pleased to find his fringe waving in a way that looks casually tousled and not just hopelessly dishevelled like he’d been expecting.

He’s just doing up the last buttons on his dark blue corgi shirt when he hears a soft knock on the door.

“Yeah?”

“It’s me,” Dan says. “Can I come in?”

“Yep.”

Dan opens the door and walks over to the bed and sits down next to Phil.
“That shirt looks really good on you,” Dan says. He sounds nervous.

“Even though it has animals on it?” Phil asks, smiling.

Dan just nods.

“So does yours,” Phil says, tugging on the sleeve of Dan’s shirt, which also happens to be a button up, though his is white. It’s buttoned up all the way to the top and the collar hug’s his neck, accentuating its slender length. He’s wearing tight jeans as usual, but thes ones are burgundy, which is definitely different. “You look very christmassy.”

“I tried,” Dan says. He gives Phil a cheeky grin. “Think Kath’ll like it?”

Phil rolls his eyes. He gives Dan another look up and down before admitting begrudgingly, “Yes.”

It’s then that a strange smell hits Phil’s nose, something strong and chemical and it’s coming from Dan. Phil leans forward into Dan’s space and sniffs. “What is that?”

“What d’you mean?”

“That smell… smells like bleach or something?”

Dan’s head drops down, eyes cast into his lap at his wringing hands. “Nothing… just nail polish remover,” he says quietly.

Phil looks at Dan’s hands, at the nails that had been glittery not but twenty minutes ago. “Why’d you…”

Dan shrugs. “Not a big deal. Just don’t wanna make things weird.”

Phil’s chest feels tight. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“I don’t want to make things hard for you.” Dan speaks each word slowly and deliberately.

Phil knows what he means. He wishes he didn’t.

“You don’t have to do that. They’re fine,” Phil says, buttoning the top button on his shirt and reaching out for Dan’s hand. He lets his hand hang in the air above Dan’s lap, palm facing up, waiting.

Dan catches on, and places his palm against Phil’s. Phil pulls Dan’s hand towards him a bit and examines his nails. They’re bitten down slightly and a few stray bits of glitter remain clung to them, glinting in the dull white light that streams in through the window. Phil feels his heart breaking just a little in real time.

“Do you remember that first day we met?” Phil asks, voice low.

“Of course,” is all Dan says in reply.

“Your nails were pink.”

Dan nods.

Phil’s still cradling Dan’s palm with his. “You were ready to throw down when you thought I was gonna slag you off about it.”
Dan’s lip twitches. “Yeah.”

“You didn’t even know me yet then.”

Dan bites the inside of his cheek. “That makes it easier sometimes.”

“I love your sparkly nails,” Phil says.

“Do you?”

Phil nods.

“Our parents don’t though, right? They wouldn’t?”

“I don’t… know,” is all Phil can think to say, because he doesn’t. He’s just been making assumptions this whole time. He doesn’t know. And he realizes now he’s been projecting that uncertainty onto Dan this entire time.

“I don’t know and I really don’t care.” He drops Dan’s hand from his and stands up. “I don’t want you to either. Come on.” He moves for the door and motions for Dan to follow.

Dan looks perplexed, but he follows.

Phil opens the door and leads Dan back to stand outside Martyn’s bedroom. He knocks on the door again.

“We’re up Phil, god, just give us a sec,” Martyn says, clearly annoyed.

“Corn?” Phil asks, ignoring his brother.

“What’s up Philly?” comes her sweet sing-song voice from through the door.

“Do you happen to have any nail polish in there?” He doesn’t stutter. He doesn’t hesitate. He doesn’t try to make it sound like it’s weird or embarrassing or grasp at straws to come up with an excuse.

And to her eternal credit, Cornelia doesn’t try to make him feel weird or embarrassed either. “Yeah, what colour do you want?”

Phil looks at Dan, who shrugs. “What you got?”

“Uhh… green… blue… grey…”

“Can I borrow the green?”

Dan raises his eyebrows in question.

“To complete your christmas theme,” Phil whispers.

Dan smiles.

Cornelia opens the door and holds out a small bottle of deep forest green polish. She smiles and looks at Dan. “This’ll look good on you.”

“Thanks,” he replies warmly. It’s possible he’s a little embarrassed.

“Thanks Corndog,” Phil says. He leads Dan back to his bedroom and closes the door behind them.
“Sit,” he says.

“Phil, you don’t have to—"

“Sit.” He sits on the edge of the bed and pats the space beside him. “Please.”

Dan sits.

Phil pats his thigh above his knee. “Hand.”

Dan smiles widely then and Phil sees the tip of his tongue between his teeth. He puts his hand on Phil’s knee.

“You should probably put something down first,” Dan says. “Unless you want green jeans.”

“What are you implying?” Phil asks, twisting the cap off the bottle. The air fills with the acrid scent of the varnish.

“I’m not implying anything. I’m saying you’re a clumsy sod who’s gonna spill half that bottle on your trousers before this is done.”

“Shut up. Give me your thumb.”

Dan lays his thumb flat against Phil’s knee, giving him the best possible angle. “Seriously, Phil,” Dan’s voice has gone soft again. “It doesn’t matter to me. I want them to like me.”

Phil presses the brush to Dan’s thumbnail and drags it across. He gets more than a little paint on the skin all around the nail, but at least the colour is nice. “It matters to me,” Phil says, trying to scrape some of the excess off with his own nail and smudging it in the process. “And I want them to like you, too. But you, not a watered down version of you.”

Dan bites his lip, twisting his thumb around to get a better look at Phil’s handiwork. “That looks like shit.”

Phil sighs. “I know. Do you want to do the rest?”

“Nope.” Dan’s eyes flit up to Phil’s and Phil can see written in them all the things Dan wants to say but doesn’t need to.

They sit in comfortable silence for the next ten minutes while Phil paints the rest of Dan’s nails. He gets more than a little on his jeans. And on the skin of Dan’s fingers. And the skin of his own fingers. He even manages to get some on his nose, as Dan points out after it’s already dried.

Dan’s nails really do look rather awful.

“Maybe Cornelia can fix them later,” Phil says, dismayed.

Dan holds them up in front of himself to take stock of the state of himself. He grins. “They’re perfect.”

He holds them out in front of Phil’s face then. They’re really not perfect.

“Blow,” Dan says.

Kath calls up to them a few minutes later.
“These better be dry by now because I’m starving,” Dan says.

They hop off the bed and make their way out of Phil’s room, Phil following Dan. Just before Dan steps onto the stairs Phil puts his hand on his shoulder.

“Dan?”

Dan turns around.

“Don’t worry. They’re going to like you. I’m sure they already do.”

Dan frowns a little. “How do you know?”

“Because I do.”

The six of them sit down together for what could now generously be referred to as brunch as it’s nearly midday, and eat what feels like way, way too much food. They talk about the weather as always, but today it’s actually interesting because there’s a winter wonderland on the other side of the dining room window. Kath asks about Jimmy and Nigel only asks about work once. No one asks Phil when he’s going to start looking for a proper job and eventually the attention is focused on Martyn and Cornelia, allowing Phil to have his own private little conversation with Dan.

“I’ve eaten enough for the whole Christmas break in one meal,” Dan mutters. “And your mum’s coffee is just as shit as yours.” He whispers that last bit.

Phil smirks. “I did warn you. Kath loves instant coffee and feeding people.”

“I’m not actually complaining. It’s nice. My mum doesn’t cook that much. And you know there’s never any food in my flat.”

“And all I ever feed you is kale and quinoa?”

“Exactly.”

“Well don’t get used to it. This is just a temporary vacation from the rules.”

“Ok dad,” Dan giggles before his eyes go wide and shoot a look in Nigel’s direction. Luckily no one heard.

Phil closes his eyes and shakes his head almost imperceptibly.

“Sorry,” Dan whispers, but he’s still smiling.

“We need to go outside today, right?” Phil asks. “I know technically we’re on holiday and you probably don’t want to but--”

“Phil there’s like half a metre of snow on the ground, we’re definitely going outside.”

Phil grins and takes a sip of his now lukewarm coffee.

Dan leans a little closer into Phil’s space. “I have something for you first. If we’re going to be going on a snowy adventure.”

Phil gives him a questioning look.

“You know, like a christmas present.”
Phil could kick himself. “Shit. I hadn’t gotten you anything yet,” he hisses. “I was going to, and then…” And then all his thoughts and energy and emotions were eclipsed by the need to make sure Dan was ok. He really had been planning on getting Dan a gift.

“It doesn’t matter,” Dan says, voice quiet. “You’ve given me too much already.”

Phil risks a gentle caress of Dan’s lower thigh underneath the table. He just can’t stop himself from reaching out and touching Dan in this moment. “I’ll get you a new year’s gift instead,” he promises.

When the meal is finished, Dan’s the first to offer Kath help with the washing up. They all pitch in and get the kitchen tidied in no time at all. Phil follows Dan up the stairs and they go to the bathroom and brush their teeth next to each other, taking turns spitting minty foam into the sink and grinning in the mirror to ensure their work is done.

Phil heads for his room and Dan says, “Be right there.”

Phil settles himself down cross legged on his bed while he waits. Dan returns just a moment later with a small neatly wrapped box. He climbs up onto the bed and sits across from Phil before holding the box out for Phil to take.

“Who wrapped this?” Phil asks. He feels strangely nervous, like something important is about to happen.

Dan laughs. “Me, you spork.”

Phil turns it over in his hands. It’s heavier than it looks. “It’s so neat.”

“Why am I not surprised that you’re a bad gift wrapper?”

Phil can’t even argue. He’s a very bad gift wrapper. “It’s the thought that counts!”

“True,” Dan says, looking down at his lap. “Why don’t you open it so I can hear your thoughts.”

“Maybe we should wait.” It feels so wrong to open this in front of Dan with nothing to give in return. “I feel like a dickhead.”

Dan shakes his head. “This is the perfect day for it. I honestly don’t care, Phil. I have everything I could want right now.”

Phil’s heart skips. “So do I.”

Dan smiles. “You will after you open this. Come on.”

Phil resigns himself and tears the paper off quickly, feeling more than a little awkward knowing Dan’s eyes are fixed intently on his face, waiting for his reaction.

He’s not sure what he’s seeing is even real. “Dan,” he murmurs in disbelief. He really can’t believe it.

It’s a camera. An expensive one. The kind you only get if you’re a proper film student or a youtuber or something.

“Do you like it?” Dan asks softly.

Phil can’t find words. “Dan…” His throat is tight.
“Tell me you like it, Phil,” he laughs nervously.

Phil knows he’s supposed to say ‘thank you.’ He’s supposed to say ‘oh my god, it’s perfect, you’re so thoughtful’ and ‘you shouldn’t have.’ What comes out is something along the lines of the latter, only much less tactful.

“You can’t afford this.”

Dan laughs again. “I can because look, I did.”

“You bought me a camera.”

Dan nods. “I started saving up for it the day you showed me your uni videos.”

Phil swallows, once, twice, three times over the rapidly expanding lump in his throat. “It’s too much,” he manages to choke out.

“It’s not. Not even close. It’s the least I could think to do… To thank you for everything.” He leans forward and squeezes Phil’s knee. “Happy christmas, Phil.”

Phil reaches forward and wraps his arms around the back of Dan’s neck, burying his face in the crook. He takes a few deep breaths. He needs to calm down. He can’t cry right now.

“Thank you,” he mumbles against Dan’s skin. “You really shouldn’t have, but thank you. It’s amazing.”

Dan’s hands are rubbing Phil’s back, his chin digging into Phil’s shoulder. “Should we go test it out?”

“In a minute,” Phil says. “Wanna stay like this a little while longer.”
They stay sat there on Phil’s bed for quite a long time, Phil’s arms thrown around Dan’s broad shoulders. He’s overwhelmed, still.

Eventually Dan laughs and Phil pulls back.

“No, you have no excuse,” Dan says.

“You’re just trying to shame me into making films again?” Phil looks down at his new camera, because it’s sleek and pretty and he can’t believe it belongs to him, but also because he doesn’t want to look at Dan yet. He doesn’t want Dan to see how shiny his eyes are right now.

“Of course.” Dan rubs his hands on his knees with something of a restless, fidgety kind of energy. “You thought I was just trying to be nice?”

“Why would I ever think such a thing?” Phil asks softly. It’s not like he’d told Dan that making videos had been one of his true joys in life, that he’d been using the excuse of not having a decent camera for years to justify neglecting something he’d once been so passionate about.

“We need something cool to take pictures of.”

“The snow’s not cool enough?” Phil gives Dan some truly cringeworthy finger guns.

Dan smiles, shaking his head. “That’s terrible.”

Really? I thought it was an ice joke.”

“Phil, stop. Get out.”

Phil’s tongue gets trapped between his teeth as he laughs, like it always seems to when Dan’s around. “Ok, yeah, that was bad.”

Dan picks up the box and pulls out the instruction booklet. It turns out the camera needs to be fully charged before it’s used for the first time so they plug it in and go find Martyn and Cornelia for a game of monopoly. Kath doesn’t play, but brings them all tea and sits with them at the table. “For moral support,” she says, and no one argues. Phil loves these days with his family. It feels nice to be together like this, and Dan seems to fit in seamlessly.

At one point, Dan reaches out to move his thimble across the board and Kath tuts, “What happened to your fingers?”

Phil’s eyes flit to Dan’s messy green-tipped fingers, and then to Dan’s face. The rosy patch on his jaw gets a little rosier. “Phil tried to do my nails,” he says.

“Why?”

Out of the corner of his eyes, Phil sees Martyn and Cornelia exchange looks.

“Because he likes it.” Phil says sharply, careful not to make eye contact with Dan. It’s the shortest he can remember being with his mum in a long time.

Kath just picks up Dan’s hand and examines the carnage. “He didn’t do a very good job, did he?” she murmurs.
“Oi,” Phil says, even as relief floods through him.

Dan laughs. “He tried. That’s what matters.”

“Well I can fix them for you later if you like, love.”

“They’re a work of art, mum,” Phil protests. “They’re… abstract.”

Martyn gets lucky with his rolls more than once early on, and the game ends after a only few hours. It’s still a long time, but nothing compared to what the Lester family is capable of. Phil hates when Martyn beats him at anything, but today he’s actually glad. The longer he sits at this table with his family, the more he itches to get away. It’s starting to feel a little bit like torture having Dan sat next to him and not being able to do or say anything without second guessing how it looks at every turn.

“What are you boys up to now?” Kath asks as they return the game and all its little pieces to the box.

“Phil’s going to make a film,” Dan says excitedly.

Kath looks at Phil. “Are you?”

Phil’s in the middle of sorting all the denominations of bills back into their respective piles. “I mean, I guess so, maybe. Kind of.”

“With what?” Martyn asks. “Your phone?”

Dan grins.

Phil can’t help grinning back. “This one bought me a camera,” he says, jerking his head in Dan’s direction. “A really nice one.”

Kath looks over at Dan then and her expression changes into something Phil can’t really read. She looks like she’s noticing him for the first time.

“Like, for christmas,” Phil clarifies. Something about his mum’s expression makes him feel on edge.

“What a thoughtful gift,” she muses.

“I owe him,” Dan says, apparently oblivious to the shift in Kath’s demeanor. He’s looking down, sorting through the game cards, making sure they’re all facing right side up before stacking them and returning them to the box. “Phil has…” he pauses, thinking, looking like he’s lost in his own world. “He’s helped me a lot.”

Phil feels warmth in his chest. Dan’s looking down at his hands and smiling sweetly and **blushing** for god’s sake, while he talks about Phil. Right in front of Phil’s mum.

And Phil’s pretty sure she’s noticed.

She doesn’t say anything.

“We should all go to the hospital,” Martyn says. “That’d be a pretty ace place to test out your new camera.”

“Oh my god!” Phil says excitedly, temporarily forgetting about the quiet, unspoken drama playing out before him. “That’s actually a perfect idea.”

“A hospital?” Dan looks incredulous.
“An abandoned hospital,” Martyn clarifies.

Phil puts the stacks of brightly coloured monopoly money carefully into the box and looks at Dan. “It’s big and creepy and like, definitely probably haunted.”

Dan frowns. “Why is everything in the north haunted?”

Kath puts the lid on the box and stands up from the table. “You know you’re not actually allowed in there,” she says reproachfully.

“We won’t go inside, mama L,” Martyn says, slinging his arm across her shoulders and giving her a playful little jostle. “We’ll just show him the outside.”

“It’s not right to lie to your mother.” She’s trying very hard to mask her smile. “I’m leaving now. I don’t want to have to lie to the police later.”

Dan waits until she’s gone to look at Phil with a worried furrow in his brow. “Police?”

Martyn snorts. “We’re not going to get caught. We know what we’re doing.”

Phil puts his hand on Dan’s forearm. “Don’t worry. No one really cares. It’s basically a rite of passage now when you come to Rawtenstall to break into the hospital.”

“Break into?” Dan’s voice is adorably squeaky.

Cornelia comes over and ruffles Dan’s curls. “Seriously, don’t worry. I was scared the first time, too. But it’s just cool. It’s fun. And Phil will be able to take some really good photos.”

Phil nudges Dan very gently in the ribs with his elbow. “Plus it’ll be good exercise after all that definitely not healthy food.”

Dan rolls his eyes. “Alright, dad.”

Phil definitely doesn’t miss the look Martyn and Cornelia exchange then and he’s not even entirely sure he cares.

They go back upstairs to get the camera. Phil digs through his closet and finds them each a bobble hat. He doesn’t have to look that hard, as his aunt knits him at least a couple new ones every year. There’s a sizable stack of them piled up in the corner. He chooses a black one for himself and a pink one for Dan.

He plonks his own over his head and watches Dan do the same, fiddling with it and tugging his curls this way and that.

“Good?” Dan asks eventually.

Phil nods. It looks good. It looks really good. It’s almost annoying at this point, actually. Dan looks good all the bloody time and it’s exhausting.

They meet Cornelia and Martyn at the front door. Cornelia is the only one who looks properly dressed for the amount of snow they’re about to frolic through. She’s got a thick wool scarf wrapped around her neck and another signature Aunt Roz bobble hat on her head. She’s got thick mittens and a warm coat and even a pair of boots. She’s a lot more accustomed to snow than they are, after all.

Martyn grins and dangles a pair or car keys in the air. “Knicked these from mum.”
“No you didn’t,” Phil says, slipping his feet into his shoes. He hadn’t thought to bring boots and
neither had Dan. Their feet are going to be frozen by the time their adventure is over.

“Ok, fine, I didn’t. But she didn’t wanna give them to me, that’s for sure.”

They step outside and it’s as if they’re trapped in a snowglobe. Everything is hushed and fluffy and
white. Big fat flakes drift down slowly from the sky. With the thick blanket of snow comes a feeling
insulation, Phil thinks. The world looks a little smaller, a little more contained. It’s cold and quiet and
peaceful and dazzlingly beautiful.

So beautiful Phil almost feels bad making tracks in the pristine layer of sparkling white that covers
the walkway. Almost. He reaches down and grabs a handful of it, packing it tightly into a ball and
lobbing it at his brother’s head.

Martyn ducks out of the way easily. “You better watch it, mate. You know you can’t win a snowball
fight against the master.”

He says that--right before another snowball flies out of nowhere and hits him right on the side of the
neck.

“Oi!” he splutters, scooping snow out of the inside of his coat.

Cornelia laughs, a high, breathy sound, and brushes the powder off her mittens. “Don’t pick on my
little brother,” she scolds playfully.

“He started it!” Martyn protests.

They make their way through the snow and to the car.

“Can I drive?” Phil asks.

Martyn snorts. “The roads probably aren’t even plowed yet, Phil. I’m too young to die.”

Phil huffs but he doesn’t argue. He really is a shit driver and he can’t deny it.

Dan laughs. “I can’t picture you driving.”

“And you shouldn’t,” Martyn says, unlocking the doors. “It’s not a pretty sight.”

“Abuse,” Phil mutters, sliding into the backseat next to Dan.

The drive out to the hospital is slow--much slower than usual. It’s not all that far away but Martyn’s
right--the roads haven’t been plowed and they’re slippery and treacherous.

Phil’s ok with it though, because it gives him a chance to really take in the beauty that is Rossendale
covered in snow. He sometimes forgets how pretty his hometown actually is, all hills and fields and
trees and quaint little houses in the distance. Usually this view is very green. It almost looks like a
different place now, like mother nature took a paintbrush and blotted out all the colour and softened
every sharp edge. He pulls out his new camera and snaps a few blurry photos through the drizzled
lens of the snow-wet window.

Phil lets his hand rest on the seat beside him, in the empty space that separates him from Dan.
Eventually he feels something warm brush his pinky. He looks out of the corner of his eye and
smiles just a little. Dan’s hand is resting there just as awkwardly as Phil’s and slowly inching closer.
It’s not an accident, not on his part, and not on Dan’s either.
They park a good distance away since Kath is right, they’re not actually supposed to be here. Even from so far away, the hospital is an imposing spectacle, its walls high, windows boarded and roof starting to crumble. Not even the brilliance of the snow or the beauty of the rolling hills in the distance can soften the undeniable eeriness of this place.

Phil loves it. He’s always liked things that feel a little dark, a little weird, a little to the left of normal.

“We’re not actually going inside that thing are we?” Dan asks.

Phil bumps their shoulders together. “It’s not as scary as it looks.”

“Says you,” he murmurs.

Cornelia swoops in then, and loops her arm through Dan’s. Phil looks at them both, his heart nearly bursting with fondness. Something about their comical height difference, about the way her head doesn’t even clear his shoulders and the contrast her fiery red hair makes against the inky black of his coat has Phil falling back a little and pulling out his camera again.

He walks behind them a ways, capturing the moment through the lens. It feels right. It feels good. He watches them walk and feels nostalgic somehow, for a time before he’d known either of them. For a time that was somehow easier and harder all at once. For a time when capturing moments through the filter of a camera was sometimes the only thing that made him feel like himself.

Life is more complicated now, and he has other things. He’s older and starting to know himself better, starting to understand that sometimes it’s ok not to feel like yourself. Sometimes it’s good. Sometimes not feeling like yourself actually forces you to take chances, to be brave and learn new ways to define what it means to be yourself.

Like meeting a tall handsome man with curly hair and dimpled cheeks and glittering eyelids and allowing yourself to fall, even though it’s new and dizzying and heart-stoppingly scary and you don’t know if he really will be there to catch you at the bottom or not.

Phil’s feet are wet already and his hands prickle with the cold as his fingers wrap around the camera. He doesn’t put it away though, doesn’t slide his hands into his pockets and ball them up into fists against his sides. He doesn’t seek out that relief, because something inside tells him this is something he’s going to want to remember. Maybe for the rest of his life.

It’s a dramatic thought, one that leaves him breathless and for which he has no real proof or explanation, but it’s there and it’s taking root fast, spreading out from his heart through his whole body. Something about today feels different. It feels new and big and important. It’s nebulous but it’s there, as he watches Dan’s long legs slow their pace for Cornelia’s short ones. This moment is the start of a new way for Phil to define what it means to be who he is.

It’s been a long time since Phil was here. He’d forgotten it takes actual effort to get inside. The stone steps leading up the front entrance are long gone, the doors barricaded. They sneak around the side of the building and realize, to Dan’s vocal horror, that they actually have to do some climbing to get to the busted out window that now serves as the entrance to Rossendale General Hospital. Phil shuts the camera off and returns it to his pocket for now. He’s definitely going to need both his hands for this.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding, mate.” Dan says. He looks up with dismay, his neck craned and his eyes worried. “I’m a giraffe, not a monkey.”

Cornelia laughs. “If I can do it you can.” She looks at Martyn. “Gimme a boost.”
Martyn laces his fingers together, creating a stepping stool with his hands that she slides her foot into. He lifts as she pushes herself up against his interlocked fingers, reaching for the fence-enclosed landing beneath the broken second storey window. She grabs on and Martyn spots her, though it’s not necessary. She scrambles up and over the fence and onto the balcony quickly and with little struggle.

“Come on up, slowpokes,” she teases.

Martyn goes next with a boost from Phil. Once he’s up and over safely, Phil looks at Dan.

“You ready?” His voice is soft and low, hopefully a soothing cadence for Dan’s frayed nerves.

Dan shakes his head. “You first.”

“We don’t have to do this,” Phil says, and suddenly it feels like they’re talking about something else. “If you’re not ready…”

“I’m ready.” He sounds sure, so sure that Phil could never doubt it. “I just… I need you to go first, Phil. OK?”

Phil bites his lip and nods.

Dan laces his fingers together, as Martyn and Phil had done before him. “Ready?”

Phil’s heart is racing. He takes a deep breath in and blows it out slowly, watching it float from his lips and spread through the air in ghostly white tendrils. He can do this. He can.

He steps onto Dan’s palms. “You got me?” he asks. “You’re not gonna let me fall?”

Dan doesn’t smile, in fact he looks as serious as Phil’s ever seen him.

“Never.”

Phil puts his hands on Dan’s shoulders and Dan boosts him up. His stiff fingers grip the cold metal of the fence and cling. Martyn leans over and grabs Phil’s hand and helps him up and over.

“Your turn, mate,” Martyn says, looking down.

Phil looks down too. He expects to see Dan looking nervous and hesitant, but he’s got a huge smile on his face. He jumps and reaches his long arms up, grabbing at the fence and pulling himself up easily.

He grins at Phil, who realizes then that his mouth is hanging open a little.

“I thought you were scared!” Phil squawks.

“Nah.” Dan rubs his hands together and shoves them in his coat pockets. “Not scared. Just want to follow your lead.”

Phil’s stomach flutters. They’re definitely talking about something else.

“Are you guys coming in here sometime today?”

Phil turns around and there’s Cornelia beaming at them from the other side of the broken window. They somehow manage to climb through without splitting themselves open on the jagged glass. It’s
dark inside and smells musty and the floor is wet and covered with debris. Phil hears a skittering noise and sees some paper on the ground moving out of the corner of his eye. All of a sudden he wonders why he thought it’d be a good idea to bring Dan to a place like this, today, when the space between them feels charged and ready to spark. Why had he thought a crumbling old building in the middle of nowhere with rats hiding in every corner would be a good idea?

But then Dan looks at him and he’s got rosy cheeks and an excited look on his face and he’s a little breathless when he says, “Let’s go find some creepy shit to film.”

Phil laughs, pulling the camera back out of his pocket. “Pretty much everything in this place is creepy.”

He allows himself to fall back again so he can film the rest of them walking down the decrepit, dimly lit hallwary. He can’t deny how cool it looks, though the pom poms on their bobble hats do detract slightly from the atmospheric nature of the shot. Martyn ends up leading the way and Cornelia links arms with Dan again. Phil’s not sure it’s an accident—every now and then he can hear her high breathy giggles and his deeper ones. He’s far enough behind that he can’t hear what they’re saying, but he thinks he can probably guess.

It doesn’t bother him. If anything it gives him another warm feeling, a feeling of new beginnings and nostalgia all jumbled up together.

They move from room to room slowly, some of them brightly lit by the snow-filtered sunlight pouring in through large dirty windows, some of them dank and dingy with mossy floors and open-drawered filing cabinets, papers scattered everywhere. There are rooms that look untouched by time, with shiny wood floors and bright green wallpaper, and others with broken sinks and stained desk chairs with broken wheels.

Phil’s trying to keep his camera pointed at the many ominous, macabre tableaus before him, but he ends up taking just as many shots of his little team of urbex companions. A mug on an otherwise empty desk. Dan’s zippered black trainers leaving wet footprints on the dusty shag carpet in the hallway. Rusty old wheelchairs and overturned gurneys. The profile of Cornelia’s lovely face as she tries to see what lies beyond the frosted glass at the top of a crumbling staircase. Graffiti on the walls, broken glass ground into the floor, a bright yellow sign that says defibrillator station. Martyn crouching down and plucking a frozen wildflower from a crack in the floorboards and placing it into Cornelia’s small palm.

A long cluttered hallway, purple paint peeling from the walls and royal blue plush chairs covered in crumbled drywall. Dan’s long lean legs stepping over a neon-bright wet floor sign.

Faded bubblegum pink wallpaper and rows of painted white metal hospital beds. Syringes and tubes and rubber gloves scattered across the cement floor. Dan.

It’s slowly getting darker as they stumble into a long, narrow, mostly-empty room with boarded up windows and shiny floors. Each wall is a different colour and there’s a small round table in the corner. It’s an unremarkable room except for one thing—a curiously pristine wooden organ and a high-backed purple chair right in the centre of the floor.

Cornelia squeals delightedly and she and Dan rush over to it. Dan presses down on a key and the room fills with the sound of it.

“Oh holy shit, it works,” Dan mutters.

“Do you play?” she asks.
He shakes his head. “Piano. You?”

She shrugs. “How different could it be?”

Dan sits in the chair and Cornelia stands next to him and loud disjointed notes start emanating from the organ and Cornelia is laughing and Phil doesn’t hear anything that Dan says after that because Martyn is beside him, throwing his arm over Phil’s shoulder and saying, “Our lovers are bonding.”
Phil’s hands scramble to shut off the camera, which is a reaction he already hates having as his initial one, but he’s just so taken aback by his brother’s words.

“What?” he choke.

“Come on, let’s sit.” Martyn motions for Phil to follow him. He walks over to the wall and leans his back against it, sinking down to sit on the floor.

Phil does the same, pulse pounding in his ears. He shoves his hands in the pockets of his coat and digs his fingernails into his palms, hard, hoping the prickle of pain will help him redirect the slight panic that’s beginning to rise in his chest.

Why is he panicking? Had he not made it more or less clear to Martyn what was happening between he and Dan? Why was confirmation that he’d actually caught on giving Phil heart palpitations.

He doesn’t know what to say. Arguing would just be juvenile, even if his brother’s words aren’t technically true. Yet.

Martyn slaps his hand down on Phil’s knee, startling him from his inner torment. “Phil, Phil, Phil,” he muses.

Phil’s glad it’s getting darker. He feels like he can still hide, even though they’re sat right beside each other. The loud, slightly sinister sounds coming from the organ help too. It helps that he can’t hear Martyn breathing, waiting for him to think of something to say.

The floor is dirty and cold beneath them and Phil shivers. Maybe the nerves have something to do with it as well.

“They’re not very good, are they?” Martyn asks, letting his hand stay resting on Phil’s knee.

“No,” is all Phil can say.

“They seem to be really getting on.”

“Yeah,” Phil croaks. They do. Their faces are bright and flushed and happy as they try to make some sense of a melody out of their messy keystrokes. Even sat down in a chair, Dan is almost as tall as Cornelia.

Martyn gives Phil’s knee a little squeeze. “I haven’t seen you much lately.”

“Yeah.” Phil scrunches up his stiff toes against the dampness of his socks. The tension building up inside him is so stifling, he needs to find these little ways to let it leak out. “Sorry. Been busy I guess.”

“I can see that.”

Phil doesn’t say anything. The awkwardness is unbearable. He suddenly wishes he’d been more open with his brother all along. It wasn’t like they never spent time together. They live in the same city. They’re close in age and they genuinely like each other. There are lots of other aspects of his life that Phil feels more than comfortable sharing with Martyn.

Just not this. Never this. This was something he’d only ever shared with Jimmy.
And now Dan, of course.

And even Cornelia now, come to think of it, at least a little bit.

So maybe he should just get over himself. Hiding had never gotten him anywhere.

It’s still Martyn who ends up speaking first. “Why didn’t you tell me about him, Phil?” His voice is gentle and low. Not the voice of a mocking, teasing brother, but that of a caring friend.

“I dunno.” He leans his head back against the wall and looks up at the high, cracked ceiling. “Don’t know what to say yet.”

“What d’you mean? Is he not, like… your… boyfriend?”

Phil actually almost smiles then, because he can tell Martyn is trying, but the word ‘boyfriend’ still sounds incredibly unnatural coming from his mouth.

“No.”

“But you like him, yeah?”

Phil looks over at Dan, who’s frowning now, deep in concentration and hunched over the organ keys. He looks a little silly in his pink pompom-ed hat, a spot of brightness in this cold dank place.

Phil does smile then. “Yeah.”

“You could’ve told me,” Martyn says, pulling his hand from Phil’s knee. “I’m your blinkin’ brother after all.”

Phil looks at his brother’s face. Anger hadn’t been the emotion he expected. “Tell you what exactly? That I like someone? Or that I like blokes?”

“Either? Both. I dunno. Anything, really. You never tell me anything. I feel like I don’t even know you. I always thought…” He rubs his hand over his jaw.

Phil frowns. “What?”

“I dunno, I thought you were like… asexual, is it?”

Phil shrugs. “I dunno what it is. I don’t know anything. There was never anything to tell.”

“But now you practically have a boyfriend, Phil! That didn’t just come out of nowhere!”

“It did actually,” Phil says quietly. “It came completely out of nowhere.”

“How many boyfriends have you had and just never told me about?”

Phil bristles. “Why does it matter?”

“Shit,” Martyn mumbles. “Shit. This isn’t what I wanted to do.” He knocks his knee into Phil’s. “I’m sorry, Phil. I’m being a dick.”

“Yeah,” Phil says, trying to bite back his smirk. He’s already halfway to forgiving him. He can never stay mad at Martyn. “You are.”

“I just want you to talk to me sometimes. You’re my baby brother.”
“You’re barely a year older,” Phil says, rolling his eyes.

“Regardless.”

Phil looks at him. “What do you want me to say?”

“Whatever you want. I want you to know you can talk to me and I won’t be an asshole. I don’t know if people are shitty to you, but I won’t be.”

“Why would people be shitty to me?”

“Because you’re…” Martyn hesitates. “Gay?” His voice pitches up on the last word, and Phil can’t even be annoyed. He can see how hard his brother is trying.

“I don’t really know that I am,” Phil says, looking away because as much as he wants to be open and honest and progressive and accepting of himself, he still just feels so fucking awkward having this conversation. With anyone, but especially with his own family. “I mean, technically I’ve been with more girls than guys.”

It’s almost funny the look of shock on Martyn’s face then. “Oh,” he says, quite obviously lost for words. “I never knew.”

“Why would you?” Phil asks. “It was all a long time ago… and I honestly try not to think about it.”

Martyn frowns. “Did someone hurt you?”

“No, it’s not like that. It just never felt… right.”

“And now it does?”

Phil can’t help his smile. “I think so.”

Martyn throws his arm around Phil’s shoulders and jostles him affectionately. “I’m well happy for you, Phil.”

“Shut up,” Phil mumbles.

“Alright alright, I will, but just… don’t think you can’t ring me up whenever, ok? I may not always say the right thing like Corn does, but I’ll always try.”

Phil elbows Martyn gently in the side. “Thanks.” This much genuine, explicit affection is nearly unheard of between them and though it makes his heart ache a little with gratitude, it also feels just a little too much.

“Does mum know?” Martyn asks, pulling his arm back and blowing warm breath into his fisted hands.

“No. Definitely not. Don’t say anything,” Phil says quickly.

“I won’t. But you probably should.”

Phil’s heart kicks. “Why? She’s had no warning.”

“Neither had I,” Martyn points out.

Phil scowls. “That’s different and you know it.”
“She’d probably be happy for you.”

“Probably being the operative word there, mate,” Phil says darkly. “Though I think it’s more like a maybe.”

“You don’t know that, Phil.”

“No, I don’t. But I reckon I’m not really ready to find out. I wouldn’t know what to say anyway.”

“That’s what you said to me,” Martyn argues. “And it was ok, don’t you think?”

“Stop acting like it’s not different. And stop acting like you know what it’s like, because you don’t. You have a nice girlfriend you can bring home. You have a proper job and a nice flat and all that. It’s not the same for us.”

“I know, Phil--”

“I’ll tell her when I have something to say.” His voice is hard and there’s finality in his tone. He thinks he’s been pushed about as much as he can handle tonight. “And that’s not gonna be today.”

“Phil. I’m sorry, ok? I am.”

“I know,” Phil mumbles after only a few moments pause. “Let’s just drop it, ok? Please?”

Martyn nods.

Phil shivers again, shrugging his shoulders up almost involuntarily against the damp chill beginning to set in his muscles.

“Did Corn put you up to this?” Phil asks after a while.

“Can’t I just be a nice guy who’s concerned about his brother? Why does she always get the credit for my decency?”

Phil just tilts his head to the side and gives him a look.

“She may have mentioned something.”

“Uh huh,” Phil says smugly.

“Doesn’t change anything I said, you big wanker.”

“I know.” He pulls his camera back out and turns it on, pointing it right in his brother’s face.

“Thanks bro.”

“Love you Philly.” Martyn squeezes his eyes shut and gives Phil a big cheesy grin.

Phil laughs and turns to face Dan and Cornelia. He keeps the shot wide to capture the truly bizarre nature of it all—the big, mostly empty room, lit up by the yellow light of the setting sun, and the people in the middle of it, and the strange music they’re making together.

The music stops then and Cornelia says, “My fingers are officially frozen,” and everyone agrees they’re ready to go home and get warm. Phil pockets his camera again and Martyn pushes up off the wall and walks toward Cornelia. Phil’s about to follow suit when Dan appears before him, holding out his hand.
Phil takes it, letting Dan pull him up. Dan’s hand is cold but it doesn’t stop Phil feeling warm all over. Dan doesn’t let go and neither does Phil, not as they leave this room and weave their way through the cluttered hallways and back up the crumbling staircase. Their fingers aren’t linked but Dan’s big hand holds tight to Phil’s smaller one, rubbing his thumb along Phil’s cold knuckles.

Martyn and Cornelia are ahead away and their hands hold each other’s too and Phil’s so glad he had that talk with his brother, because it means he doesn’t have a single thing to worry about in this moment. He can let Dan hold his hand and just enjoy it.

Because he really does enjoy it. It feels right. It feels like it’s where his hand was meant to be. He presses his cold fingers into the back of Dan’s hand, feeling the bit of warmth there against the tips.

It takes them quite a while to find their broken window again and Phil doesn’t mind at all. If anything he’s a little disappointed when he has to let go of Dan’s hand and watch him drop down from the fence into the snow. They all make their way down safely and don’t waste much time lingering. By now they’re all half frozen and hungry and the sun is hanging low in the sky. Kath will definitely be wondering where they are.

Phil pulls out his camera one more time and falls back a little. This time he doesn’t hit record, instead choosing to capture the intense beauty before him in still frames. The heavy clouds that dot the sky are backlit by the sun, streaked with yellow and orange and pink near the bottom and dark blues and greys at the top. He snaps the silhouettes of Martyn and Cornelia hand in hand, and of Dan, trailing behind them. Maybe a few of Dan.

He stops when Dan turns around, smiling. “Come on, Lester.”

Phil puts the camera away and quickens his steps until he catches up and they walk beside each other with their hands shoved into their pockets.

They finally make it back to the car just as the last rays are disappearing on the horizon. Phil asks again if he can drive and again, Martyn treats the idea as completely ridiculous.

Dan’s sat next to him in the back seat again, his hands in his lap. Phil doesn’t even think twice about what he does next, which is to reach out and take one of those hands, sliding his frozen fingers in between Dan’s, pressing their palms together and squeezing.

It’s dark. He can’t see the expression on Dan’s face, but he knows it’s ok because Dan squeezes back. It’s another quiet little moment of intimacy between them that somehow feels familiar already. The feeling is addictive and Phil wants more. He needs more.

Dan leans over and whispers, “Do you still wanna talk later?”

Phil’s heart thuds against his ribcage. “Yeah,” he whispers back. He thinks he sees Dan smile, but he can’t be sure.

“What I know what you’re gonna say?”

Phil squeezes Dan’s hand a little tighter. “I think so.”

They don’t say anything else for the rest of the ride, but the air is so charged Phil wonders if Martyn and Cornelia can feel it too.

When they get back to the house they say a quick hello to Kath and tell her they’re going upstairs to change into warm dry clothes.
Because they are, Phil has to tell himself as they climb the stairs, to keep his heart from beating its way right out of his chest. That is what they’re doing. His feet are wet and his toes actually burn a little in the warmth of the house after being so cold for so long. The bottoms of his jeans are cold and wet too, and shivers run up his bare arms. He needs more than a t-shirt.

Again they part ways at the top of the stairs. Phil goes to his room and quickly pulls off his wet socks, replacing them with nice dry ones. He’s stood in front of his open suitcase, rummaging through the unfolded mess of fabric, trying to find a jumper. He moves a pair of his boxers out of the way when he sees something he hadn’t expected.

It’s a bright pink Hello Kitty sock. Dan’s sock, folded in amongst a sea of Phil’s clothes. He doesn’t know how it got there. He hadn’t put it in there and yet, there it is, nestled in as if it belongs.

Kind of exactly like the owner of that garish, ridiculous sock. Phil hadn’t expected him, but here he is, taking up space in Phil’s life as if he belongs--linking arms with Phil’s sister-in-law and playing bubble bobble with his brother and helping his mum do the washing up. The way Dan looks and smells and thinks and makes Phil feel are all nestled inside Phil’s brain and heart as if he’d always been there.

Phil feels a strange thrum under his skin and suddenly he realizes he’s not cold anymore. Suddenly he feels hot. He can still feel Dan’s fingers between his in the soft dark of the drive home, can still see the way the lights from passing cars travelled over Dan’s face. He can still feel Dan’s finger tracing slow circles on his stomach and hear Dan’s voice in his ear asking him to turn around.

He remembers the promise he made to himself last night and decides he doesn’t want to wait a second longer. Because he’s always going to be scared. He’ll always be able to point to some tiny little insignificant reason why any given moment may not be the right moment.

Like now. Maybe now isn’t the right moment, because they haven’t had that talk yet, and because Phil’s jeans are still wet and he’s fucking terrified. Maybe it’s not the right moment because he’s running on adrenaline and the high of coming out to his brother and holding hands in the car. Maybe it’s not the right moment because it’s not soft and warm and gentle and sweet. Maybe there are a million reasons why it’s not the right moment.

But then again, maybe it is. Maybe it is the right moment. Maybe the right moment can just be this moment because it happens to be the moment Phil’s finally worked up the courage to walk down the hall and open Dan’s door without knocking. To stare into Dan’s surprised eyes as he shuts the door behind him and leans against it, and allows what he wants to crash over him in waves.

Dan’s hands are gripping his shirt near the collar, the first two buttons undone. Phil hasn’t said anything, but Dan must know, because he doesn’t ask Phil what the hell he’s doing. He doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t smile. He just stares back with an intensity to match Phil’s and Phil knows now--this is definitely the right moment.
Chapter 34

Phil’s palms are pressing into the cold wood of the door behind his back, his eyes fixed on Dan’s. He waits. He can’t seem to get his feet to move.

Dan’s hands drop from his shirt. He takes a step forward.

“No,” Phil says, voice low. He wants to be the one to do this. It has to be him. “Stay.”

Dan smiles then and it’s exactly what Phil needs to close the distance between them. That smile, that dimple… they’ll be the fucking death of him for sure.

It only takes a few steps. Phil’s legs are long and they have a burning desire to get him where he needs to go as fast as they possibly can. They take him a little too far and his chest crashes into Dan’s, but he doesn’t care because he’s already got his hands on either side of Dan’s face.

He’s already got his lips on Dan’s.

It’s nothing like what he expected, nothing like what he pictured when he allowed himself to picture it. It’s not sweet. It’s not gentle. It’s not tentative or shy or slow.

It’s hot. It’s hot and needy and selfish but Phil can’t stop, and Dan doesn’t seem to mind, in fact he seems just as desperate as Phil. He’s clinging to either side of Phil’s shirt, squeezing handfuls of the fabric against Phil’s waist, pulling Phil in closer. They’re breathing hard against each other’s faces and Phil has the overwhelming need for more.

More of Dan’s lips, more tongue, more teeth. More of Dan’s hair between his fingers, more of Dan’s body pressed up against his. His nails scratch against Dan’s scalp and Dan makes a low noise against Phil’s lips. Phil’s stomach flips and he catches Dan’s bottom lip between his teeth and tugs. He just can’t help himself.

He’s never felt anything like this. Not even close. Not even that perfect, sweet kiss with Jimmy could ever compare to this. This doesn’t feel like a kiss. It feels like an explosion, like a million fireworks are going off inside his body. It feels like a lifetime of confusion erased in an instant, obliterated by the force of how incredibly right this moment is.

Then Dan’s hands are on Phil’s hips and he’s walking Phil backwards, slowly but with purpose. Phil feels the backs of his calves press into the shitty little guest bed and his knees buckle. He falls back onto the bed and Dan goes too, his mouth never coming away from Phil’s.

Phil’s long since stopped taking note of how hard and fast his heart is beating. He grabs the collar of Dan’s shirt roughly and pulls as he wriggles backwards until he’s leaning up against the headboard. Dan is sat in his lap and somehow, neither has pulled away for air the whole time. Phil’s lips are starting to feel a little raw and yet all he wants is more.

Now it’s Dan’s turn to grab Phil’s face and Phil can’t believe it, but his fingers are fumbling with the buttons on Dan’s shirt. He wants them undone so badly that he can’t seem to get a grip on them. He wants to see Dan’s broad chest, to feel that smooth skin against his own again. Dan’s knees bracket Phil’s hips and he’s sucking Phil’s bottom lip.

This can’t be real, Phil thinks. This can’t be Dan on top of him and this can’t be Phil trying desperately to get his clothes off.
It can’t be, but it is.

His fingers won’t work, won’t do what his brain is screaming at them to do, so he lowers his hands and slips them under Dan’s goddamn shirt and grabs at Dan’s skin. He doesn’t even know where, he just knows he feels the warmth and the softness and the leather of Dan’s belt.

Dan moans. He moans right into Phil’s mouth and grinds his hips down onto Phil’s and suddenly Phil is wrenched from this moment and tossed into another, so many years ago it might as well be another life. A moment when someone else was on top of him and grinding themselves down on him and he didn’t really want it and didn’t know how to say it. It wasn’t the first time he’d been paralyzed by a moment like that and it hadn’t been the last.

He really wishes he wasn’t thinking about that time now, because it’s not the same. Not at all. But he can’t help it. He is thinking about that time now and all the other times similar and his gut clenches and he pushes Dan away, flattening his palm against Dan’s chest and shoving him back.

He’s not ready for this, he should have known that. It’s too much and too fast and without even a single word about it spoken between them. He doesn’t want it to be like this with Dan. He knows that Dan is different, that the way he feels about Dan is completely and totally different from any of those other times… so why is he letting himself make all the same mistakes? Why is he jumping in head first with his eyes closed when he’s finally found something--someone--he wants to see.

He covers his suddenly bereft mouth with his hand and looks at Dan, whose eyes are wide.

“Fuck, Phil.” His hands rub roughly over his eyes, his face. “Shit. I’m so sorry, I don’t--”

“It’s fine. It’s fine.” Phil’s voice has an unmistakable edge of hysteria. “I just-- I don’t want--”

He doesn’t want to fuck it up. He hopes he hasn’t already. He hopes he hasn’t let the eruption of pent up longing ruin this beautiful thing before it’s even had a chance to begin.

“Phil--”

The panic in Dan’s voice is too much and Phil has to leave. He has to get away right now before Dan sees the angry, frustrated tears spill down onto Phil’s cheeks.

“I’m sorry Dan, I’ve got to--” He scrambles off the bed and out the door and into his own room. He sits in the middle of his old childhood bed and curls his knees up and wraps his arms around them and hugs himself into as tight a ball as he can. A tear falls but he’s angry enough to bite the rest back. He just rocks himself on his bed and takes deep breaths and tries not to think of all those other times, and how broken he’d felt afterwards, each and every single time. Those times are not this time. This man is not those men or those women.

He cares about this man and this man cares about him. Dan isn’t looking for a quick meaningless fuck in a dark bedroom. He knows that, without question. They don’t have to have a talk for Phil to know that. He knows that what Dan wants is everything. He wants Phil.

Phil’s phone buzzes in his pocket. He’s scared to check, but he he knows he has to. He’s already messed things up badly enough. He doesn’t want Dan to spend another second thinking he did anything wrong. He doesn’t want Dan to spend another second thinking Phil doesn’t want everything too.

He grabs his phone out with a cold, shaky hand.

*Dan: phil talk to me please im sorry*
Phil almost wants to laugh. As if Dan has anything to be sorry for. As if it hadn’t been Phil who’d jumped all over Dan with absolutely no warning.

*Phil: don’t be. please. it’s all my fault*

*Dan: what’s your fault? i don’t really know what happened. are you ok.*

*Phil: yeah. i think so. i just think we really need to have that talk*

Phil’s sees the three little dots that mean Dan’s typing something pop up in their little grey bubble. His eyes are glued to the bright screen in his dark room as he waits. The anticipation is agonizing.

Then he hears Martyn calling up the stairs loudly. “Phil! Dan! Come down already we need to eat!” and the text bubble disappears.

Phil waits. He doesn’t get another text.

There’s a soft knock on his door. “You coming?” It’s Dan, his voice quiet and unsure.

“Yeah,” Phil croaks. He walks over to the door and stands there a moment, afraid to open it. Afraid of what he’ll see on the other side.

He doesn’t give in to that fear though. He pulls the door open and feels his stomach drops. Dan’s not stood there waiting for him. He’s already halfway down the stairs.

Everyone’s already in the dining room when he gets there, setting the table and talking and laughing. His mum has cooked a ton of food yet again and it looks amazing. The thought of actually eating any of it is nearly unfathomable to Phil right now.

They all sit down and Phil tries to act normal, he really does. He puts food on his plate and forces himself to eat a bite of it every now and again. He joins in the excited conversation about all the snow and makes a joke about his parents’ stubborn refusal to redecorate any of the old, outdated decor in a single room in this old house.

He refuses the wine offered him and Martyn gives him a little look but Phil ignores it.

Dan does better. He smiles and laughs at Nigel’s dad jokes and compliments Kath every five minutes on her cooking and engages himself in a lively discussion with Cornelia about the genius of Björk. He’s sat right next to Phil but their legs don’t touch. Not once, though they’re there for over an hour.

Phil notices that Dan doesn’t drink any of his wine either. He also never makes eye contact with Phil.

He does jump up as soon as the meal’s over and offer to help with the washing up again. Phil’s desperate enough at this point to convince himself that Dan wouldn’t give a toss about impressing anyone if he was no longer interested in spending time with Phil.

Right?

Phil hadn’t fucked it up that badly, had he?

Dan’s stood beside Kath at the sink with his back to Phil when Cornelia comes up and tugs on Phil’s arm, pulling him out of the kitchen and into the lounge. It’s pretty in here at this time of year. They’ve got a real tree all dressed up in glass baubles and white lights and the air smells like pine and cranberry from the scented candle that burns on the coffee table. The Lesters don’t mess around when it comes to Christmas.
“What is going on?” she asks, soft but insistent.

“What d’you mean?” He absolutely does not want to talk about this. He doesn’t even really want to think about it

“Oh, cut the shit Phil, something obviously happened.”

He chews his lip and stares off into the corner of the room, at the neatly wrapped gifts beneath the tree. “I did what felt right when it felt right,” he whispers. “Just like you told me.”

She frowns. “Then why aren’t you happy?”

“I got scared.”

“Ok…” she sounds genuinely confused. “But why aren’t you and Dan talking?”

He looks at her. She’s frowning.

“How do you know we’re not?” he asks.

She rolls her eyes. “Because you two were all over each other today. Don’t think I didn’t see you holding hands in the car. Like a couple of teenagers.”

“I guess,” he murmurs, already nostalgic for the feeling of hopeful anticipation he’d felt just a few hours ago.

“And now you’re not even looking at each other.”

He doesn’t answer. She reaches out for his hand and squeezes.

“This stuff is hard for me,” he croaks. He thinks it’s as honest as he can be right now. “I let it go too far and now he thinks it’s his fault, but it’s not. It’s mine. I’m just a freak.”

“You’re not.” Her voice is stern. “Don’t ever say that.”

He pulls his hand away from hers. “You don’t know.”

She crosses her arms. “Yes I do, so don’t say that again, you hear me?”

Phil’s never heard her voice go all hard and commanding like that. She sounds like a mum. He nods.

“You just need to talk to him.”

He looks away again, hoping she’ll have mercy and just leave him alone.

“You will talk to him won’t you?”

Phil nods. He will. Of course he will. Dan is too important to him. He’s not going to let him get away this easily.

“You’ll have to be honest, though, Phil. Like properly. I know you struggle with that.”

His head snaps up. “What does that mean?”

She runs her hand up his bicep and squeezes his shoulder. “I wonder if you even notice…” she muses, trailing off.
“Notice what?”

“You never really tell anyone the truth. Like, the whole truth. Maybe it’s different with Dan, I don’t know, but with me, and with Martyn… Sometimes it feels like we don’t really know you at all. You tell us just enough to get by but… it always feels like you’re holding back the stuff that really matters.”

He frowns. He wants desperately to argue, to tell her that she’s got it all wrong and it’s everyone else’s fault for not understanding. But he can’t, because he realizes she’s right. As always. Maybe he comes close to telling Jimmy the whole truth about certain things, but even then… He’s always got a wall up. The less people know, the less they can judge. If he doesn’t try to explain, he doesn’t have to watch people get it wrong.

“You have to tell him the truth, Phil. You wanted me to tell you what to do last night, well, that’s what you have to do. You have to stop hiding the stuff that makes it hard.”

Phil doesn’t have a chance to say anything before everyone else suddenly comes in from the kitchen, completely oblivious. He just looks at her and nods. She squeezes his shoulder again and smiles.

The next few hours go by just as agonizingly slowly as the last. They play games and Phil tries even harder to go along with it. He avoids Dan’s eyes but makes sure their knees are touching when they’re sat next to each other on the sofa. Dan doesn’t pull his leg away and Phil feels the strings of anxiety coiled round his gut loosen just a little bit. Kath and Martyn get tipsy on spiked eggnog and demand that Cornelia sing for them.

She does it happily, and they all melt into their chairs listening to her soft angelic voice. Kath keeps requesting Christmas songs and Cornelia keeps obliging, to the point where Phil wonders how it’s possible that she knows the words to that many of them.

Nigel has somehow managed to fall asleep in his chair and Kath is on his lap again, head resting against his shoulder with her eyes closed. Dan’s head is leaned back against the sofa and his eyes are closed too. Martyn is staring adoringly at his girlfriend and definitely not paying attention to Phil and where he decides to place his hand then.

Dan lifts his head and opens his eyes and stares down at his thigh and the hand that Phil’s placed ever so tentatively atop it.

Finally, finally, Phil’s looking into those warm brown eyes again. They look so confused that it’s all Phil can do to resist pulling Dan up the stairs by the hand this very moment.

Phil decides it’s time to take a page or two out of Cornelia’s book and fishes his phone from his pocket, typing out a message for Dan in the notes with his free hand.

tell me what you’re thinking

He hands the phone to Dan. His long fingers type out his own message so quickly Phil’s scared all it’ll say is ‘fuck off.’

It doesn’t.

too many things to type

pick the most important one , Phil types.

did i fuck everything up already?
Phil tries to communicate the ridiculousness of that question with his eyes, but Dan won’t look up. He realizes at that moment that Dan’s just as scared as he is.

of course not. you didn’t do anything wrong. i was wondering if it was me that messed everything up

Phil hopes Dan will smile when he reads his message, but he doesn’t. The crease between his brows just gets deeper.

i must have done something. you were there so suddenly and it was so

He looks up at Phil. Phil takes the phone and finishes Dan’s thought.

it was amazing

Finally Phil gets the smile he’s been hoping for. it was amazing….. but then you pushed me away and you were gone

i’m sorry , Phil types, because he is. He wishes he was different. He wishes he was normal, because that kiss really had been amazing, and he hadn’t really wanted it to end. it wasn’t because i wasn’t into it

i let myself go too far , Dan types.

Phil shakes his head. i did

i didn’t really think

Dan pauses, chewing his lip and looking likes he’s really thinking about what he wants to say.

i didn’t think if we ever kissed it was going to be like that.

if? Phil types. He knows it’s not the part of the message he should be responding to, but the thought that Dan had had any room in his mind to believe that Phil might’ve never worked up the nerve to kiss him breaks his heart. Cornelia’s right, he needs to start being honest. He needs to start telling Dan what he’s thinking. He needs to stop being so bloody afraid and assuming that Dan will be able to fill in the missing pieces.

i know you said you don’t date

Phil’s hands tremble as he types, you’re different

Before Dan can respond, Cornelia stops singing and announces that her voice will give out if she’s made so sing another song. Phil slides his phone back into his pocket and doesn’t let Martyn or his mum suggest another game to play or film to watch before he says, “I think I’m gonna go up to bed early tonight.” He’s already waited way too long to talk to Dan properly.

“Are you feeling alright, love?” his mum asks, though she sounds rather tired herself, and Nigel is snoring a little beneath her.

“Yeah, just tired.”

“Me too,” Dan says. “It’s been a… long day.”

Phil bites his lip to contain the urge to giggle, at Dan struggling for a way to describe the admittedly bizarre day they’ve had, but also because he’s just so goddamn nervous.
“Alright, goodnight boys.”

“Yeah, goodnight lads, sleep well,” Martyn says with a cheeky look on his face.

Phil would definitely punch him if his mum wasn’t sat right there, but he sees Cornelia shoot him a death glare and he feels a little better. She gives him a wink. His mum seems oblivious to all of it.

“Night Kath,” Dan says cheerfully.

Phil feels almost unbearably awkward standing up from the sofa and walking towards the stairs, like everyone knows all his secrets and everything he and Dan are about to discuss. Dan follows him up the stairs silently until they get to the top.

“Gonna brush my teeth,” he mumbles and heads for the bathroom before Phil can respond.

Phil goes to his room and changes into pj bottoms and the first hoodie he can find. He grabs Dan’s sock from his bag and sits on the edge of his bed, nervously playing with the little piece of bright pink fabric as he waits. His mouth feels gross and he really wants to go brush his teeth as well, but it hadn’t seemed like Dan really wanted company.

So he waits, wrapping the sock absentmindedly around his thumb and trying desperately not to replay that kiss over and over in his mind.

Obviously this is impossible. It’s all he can see when he closes his eyes. He can still feel Dan’s hands grabbing at his waist and Dan’s tongue brushing against his. His heart jumps when he remembers how it felt to collapse backwards onto the bed with Dan’s body on top of him. It was too much and too fast, but he can’t deny that it was one of the best things he’s ever felt.

Unfortunately, he also can’t help remembering what had come next--Dan’s moan and his body grinding down onto Phil’s and the instant, blinding panic that had flooded his chest.

And that’s why they need to talk. He looks at his phone. It’s been at least fifteen minutes since Dan went to brush his teeth. At that precise moment, his phone buzzes in his hand with a text from Dan.

_Dan: this room is really fucking creepy mate_

Phil’s stomach drops. Dan’s in the guest room. Alone. Phil had been expecting a knock on his door, or at the very least a message asking him to join Dan in that fucking creepy room.

He stares at his phone. He doesn’t know what to say. His skin is crawling with the uncertainty of it all, so he gets up and tucks the sock back into his bag and goes to the bathroom to brush his teeth.

He spends a good five minutes obsessively scrubbing every inch of his mouth, staring at his phone where he’d placed it on the corner of the counter, praying it will go off again and Dan will put him out of his misery.

When he thinks his gums are probably about to bleed, he spits and rinses his mouth and splashes cold water on his face. He hears his phone buzz again while he’s rubbing himself dry on a hand towel and his heart jumps.

He shoves his glasses back on and opens the message.

_Dan: i guess ill let you sleep since youre tired if i get murdered by a demon in the night promise youll erase my browser history_
Phil sits down on the toilet and stares at his phone. Does Dan actually think Phil had wanted to come upstairs because he was tired? He types a couple words of his response before stopping. He doesn’t want to do this over the phone. He stands up and turns off the light and walks down the hall to the guest room.

He doesn’t knock. He opens the door and ignores Dan’s rather adorable yelp of fright as he closes it behind him.

“Phil? What the fuck you gave me a literal fucking heart attack you ass.”

Phil doesn’t say anything. He turns off the light and the room is plunged into darkness.

“What are you doing? I thought you were tired.”

Phil waits for his eyes to adjust to the pale light that filters in through the window, moonlight reflecting off the snow. Once he can see the way without tripping, he makes his way over to the side of the bed. He looks down at Dan and can just barely make out the look of startled confusion on his beautiful face.

“Why didn’t you come get me?” Phil asks quietly. “I thought we were going to talk.”

Dan props himself up on his elbow. Phil can’t tell if Dan’s looking at him or not.

“I didn’t know if that’s actually what you wanted.” His voice is even smaller than Phil’s. “I was trying to give you space.”

Phil lifts up the blanket and slips himself underneath it, next to the warmth of Dan’s body. He pulls Dan down and takes gentle hold of either side of his face. He leans in and presses his forehead into Dan’s.

“I never want space from you.”
Dan sighs and wraps a hand around Phil’s hip. Even a simple touch like that is enough to make Phil’s breath catch.

“I’m getting some pretty mixed messages here, Phil.”

“I’m sorry,” Phil whispers. He remembers Cornelia’s words and promises himself he won’t make Dan guess how he’s feeling tonight. “My feelings aren’t mixed.”

“What are your feelings?”

He chews the corner of his bottom lip. “Tell me yours first.” Maybe telling the truth is going to be harder than he thought. Cornelia was right, it’s not necessarily something that comes easily to him.

“Why, so you can change yours accordingly?” Dan asks.

Phil winces. “No. I’m just scared.”

Dan pulls his forehead from Phil’s. “Why? You already know mine.”

Phil doesn’t let go of Dan’s face. “Do I?” he asks.

“Yes, you idiot.”

Phil smiles, because he’s scared and this situation is ridiculous and he’s so bloody relieved he could cry. “Tell me,” he whispers.

“I’m crazy about you.”

Phil wishes there was no weirdness standing in the way of pressing his lips to Dan’s again.

“Now you tell me,” Dan says softly, placing his hands overtop of Phil’s.

Phil’s heart is racing. “You’re all I think about.”

Dan smiles and closes his eyes. He pulls Phil’s hands from his face and rolls over onto his back. He covers his face with his own hands and Phil finds himself wishing he hadn’t turned out the lights. He wants to see Dan’s blush. He wants to see that dimple.

“Sorry,” Phil mutters. “That was probably too much.”

“It wasn’t,” Dan mumbles from behind his palms. “Trust me.”

Phil rolls over onto his back too, and stares up at the ceiling. “It feels kind of daft to say something so obvious.”

“It’s not obvious, Phil,” Dan argues. “Nothing is obvious with you. Is that really how you feel?”

Phil turns his head on the pillow to look at Dan. “Of course.”

“Then... why are you scared? Why did you push me away?”

“I got... carried away. I didn’t meant to like, jump on you like that. That’s not what... that’s not what this is for me.”
“It’s not for me either, Phil. I hope you know that. I hope I didn’t make you feel like that. It was just so sudden and…” Now it’s Dan who turns his head to look over at Phil. “Hot. It was really fucking hot.”

Phil can feel his cheeks flush. “Yeah,” he murmurs, grinning and biting his lip. “It was.”

“Is that why you got scared? Because you thought I just wanted…?”

“No. God no. It just kind of…” his voice gets quiet. “Reminded me of people who did.”

“I thought… I thought you didn’t—”

“I don’t.” He doesn’t want to hear Dan say it. “Anymore.”

“Oh.” Dan quite clearly has no idea what to say. He probably has no idea what to think either.

“I… shit,” Phil mutters. He wants to tell Dan the whole truth, like he’d promised Cornelia he would. He wants to tell Dan why none of this is likely to come easily or quickly or smoothly.

Dan waits for Phil to finish his thought. When the silence has stretched on for what feels like too long, Dan says, “Did something happen? Like something bad?” His voice is so quiet and hesitant.

“Not like… that,” Phil replies, but a slew of memories flash past his eyelids now, memories of fingers roaming his body and mouths hot and intrusive on his skin. Memories of pushing himself in and being pushed into and never being able to do what was expected of him long enough to pretend it was all ok.

“Nothing horrible,” he says, though that’s exactly what it was. “But not good. It’s never been good with anyone else.”

Dan takes in a shaky breath. “I don’t want to push you—”

“You’re not. Trust me, you’re not. I told you, you’re different. It’s so different with you. You make me forget that I’m…” He looks at Dan. He doesn’t know how to say it. He doesn’t know what he is. What he was. All he knows is how different he feels when Dan is next to him. All he knows is the sparks that fly every time they touch.

“We can be friends. It doesn’t need to be more than that,” Dan says quietly.

Phil reaches out for Dan’s hand. The skin on the back is a little rough and his fingers are cold as they intertwine with Phil’s. “I want more,” Phil says. “If you do.”

Dan laughs. “Fuck, Phil. Of course I do. I reckon I’ve been pretty clear about that from the beginning, haven’t I?”

Phil smiles. It’s true—he has. And Phil knows it. But it still feels damn good to hear those words. “I’m not good at this stuff,” he mumbles. “I have no idea what I’m doing. I’ve never really felt like this before.”

“Neither have I, Phil.”

Phil bites his upturned lip and Dan squeezes his hand. It shouldn’t feel like a big deal to hear confirmation of something that’s been clear to the both of them for ages.

“Is that why you were scared?” Dan asks.
“That’s why I am scared,” Phil says.

“I wish you wouldn’t be. I’ll never do anything you don’t want me to.” Dan rolls onto his side.

Phil turns over as well, so he and Dan are facing each other. His eyes have adjusted enough to the darkness now that he can see the slope of Dan’s cheekbone in the soft moonlight.

“So,” Dan says softly. “I reckon we should take it super slow, then, yeah?”

Phil nods. “I think so. Sorry.”

“Don’t do that, Phil.”

“Do what?”

“Don’t apologize for how you feel. I care about you. I want to know what you’re feeling all the time. I want to know you. I want… I want this to work.”

“I do too.”

“I need to know these things,” Dan continues. “Because I can’t read your mind, as much as I wish I could.”

“I just… I’m sure it’s not really what you want. To be with someone who has no idea what they’re doing.”

Now it’s Dan’s turn to take Phil’s face in his hands, shuffling forward so their knees touch. “What I want is you. I hope you don’t think I give two shits about anything like waiting or going slow. It breaks my fucking heart to even hear you say that.”

“Sorry.”

Dan closes his eyes, releases his grip on either side of Phil’s face and shakes his head in exasperation. “Phil…”

“Sorry. Shit. I can’t stop now.”

“Just… tell me what you’re thinking.”

“I’m thinking…” Phil trails off. He’s thinking an inconceivable number of things, really, but most of them are centred around one overarching emotion, so he decides to just go ahead and be honest. Just like everyone has been telling him to do. “I’m thinking I’m really nervous.”

Dan just giggles. “Me too.”

“You are?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Why?”

Dan laughs again. “Because, Phil. It’s actually happening. I didn’t know if it ever would.”

“You could’ve… said something.” Phil pushes his knee up into Dan’s thigh playfully. “Or done something.”
“I didn’t want to push you. I mean, it’s not like being your friend wasn’t enough. I love being your friend. And you said you didn’t date.”


“Is it not true?”

“It is. It’s just…” Phil looks away. “An extreme oversimplification, I guess?”

“We don’t have to talk about it. If you don’t want to…”

It’s tempting, Phil thinks. It really is. He’s gotten very good over the years at avoiding this particular conversation, even with Jimmy. He doesn’t even know if he really knows how to have it. But looking at Dan’s lovely face, so close and so good, black and white and shades of grey in the dark of this bedroom, he knows he needs to try. Because Dan is different and Phil wants this to be different. He wants Dan to really know him, and not just the parts he thinks are likeable and easy to understand.

“You want to know me, right?” Phil asks quietly.

Dan nods. “More than anything.”

Phil takes a slow breath to calm the trembling of nerves just below the surface of his skin. “When I say I’ve never felt this way before, I mean it. Like literally.”

“I do too, Phil.”

“No, but it’s different for me. I’ve never… I never really felt anything, for anyone.”

There’s a crease between Dan’s brows. “You mean like, sexually?” He sounds undeniably nervous.

“Sexually, romantically, anything.” Phil thinks of Jimmy then, and knows he can’t pretend that never happened. “Well, maybe once, I could’ve. If I’d let myself.”

“Jimmy?”

Phil’s heart does a little stutter in his chest. “How’d you know?”

Dan shrugs. “I thought it seemed kind of obvious, to be honest. I assumed you guys had history.”

“Well, we don’t, really,” Phil says faintly. “But he was there for me through some real shit. He kind of helped me realize it was alright to just… not. To not try to be something I wasn’t.”

“I’m glad,” Dan whispers. “I’m glad you had him. Have him.”

“He really likes you,” Phil says, trying not to dwell in the sadness of the past any longer than he needs to.

Dan smiles and Phil can see the indent of his dimpled cheek.

“And I really like you,” Phil continues, his voice low. “That’s what I mean when I say it’s different with you. And that’s why I’m so bloody scared.”

Though he’s wearing pyjama bottoms and a hoodie, Phil might as well be stark naked for how exposed and vulnerable he feels in this moment.
“You don’t need to be scared, Phil. Honestly. Please don’t be scared. It’s just me.”

“That’s my point,” Phil whispers. “It’s you. It’s… you.”

“It’s me,” Dan agrees gently. “The guy who’s literally fucking enchanted by everything you do, Phil. Everything you are. You make me think it’s ok to say words like enchanted, that’s how goddamned into you I am. I watch you brush your teeth and spill coffee down your front and trip over your own feet and I just fall harder every time. You have nothing to be scared of, Phil. I’m already yours.”

Phil closes his eyes. It’s too much. It’s way too much. He’s grinning. He’s biting the tip of his tongue and his eyes are squinted because he’s smiling so widely and he doesn’t know what to do with this insane warmth in his chest and fluttering in his stomach. It’s too much, but in the best way. A way he’s truly never felt before.

He’d thought that kiss had been it, the ultimate feeling of yes, this is it, this is the feeling I’ve heard described a million times and never understood until now.

Now he realizes he was wrong. It had been a good feeling. A beautiful feeling. A feeling of heat and want and seizing a moment in a way he’d never have thought himself capable.

But it hadn’t been this. He can’t imagine anything ever feeling better than this.

“Was that too much?” Dan asks.

“No,” Phil says, bringing his hand up to cover his mouth. He can’t stop smiling. “No.”

“I can dial it back if I’m just making things worse—”

Phil’s index finger presses gently against Dan’s lips. “Stop. No dialing, please.”

Then Dan kisses Phil’s fingertip. Phil drags it down Dan’s bottom lip to rest on his chin. His skin feels hot suddenly and he wishes he wasn’t wearing quite so many layers.

“Tell me what you’re thinking, Phil,” Dan whispers.

“I’m thinking…” He slides his hand down further, down along the side of Dan’s long neck, across his collarbone and onto his chest. His bare chest. How had he not noticed before that Dan wasn’t wearing a shirt? “I’m wondering if you’re real.”

Dan leans his face forward and presses their foreheads together again. “I’m real.”

“This is happening?” Phil asks. He feels like an idiot, but it really does feel a little bit like a dream.

“If you want it to,” Dan answers.

Phil moves in even closer, so his nose bumps up gently alongside Dan’s. “I want it to.”

“You’re in?” Dan asks. Phil can feel Dan’s breath on his lips.

“I’m in.”

“We’ll go slow.” Dan’s voice is so breathy and soft that Phil can hardly hear it.

Phil leans in even closer, so close he can’t even really see Dan anymore. He closes his eyes and listens to Dan breathe. Feels the soft skin of Dan’s chest, the bump of Dan’s nipple as he drags his
hand down.

Dan gasps. It’s barely audible, but Phil still hears it. He stills his hand. Dan’s arm snakes around Phil’s waist and pulls so they’re as tightly pressed together as they could possibly be.

“So slow,” Phil agrees.

Dan slips his hand up under Phil’s hoodie. Phil shivers at the feeling of Dan’s cold fingertips dragging along his skin.

“Phil?”

“Yeah?” He can feel Dan’s heart beat against his palm.

“Can I kiss you?”

Phil doesn’t answer. He leans in and catches Dan’s lips between his own. Dan sighs and Phil can feel that warm air against his face. There’s no tongue, no teeth. Just wet lips and the intimate smacking sound they make as they pull apart and press together again.

This is what their first kiss should have been, Phil thinks, though he doesn’t know if he’d really want to go back and change anything. That first kiss, frantic and needy and way too much, had led to this one, and Phil could never bring himself to regret that.

This kiss is a promise. A promise to go slow and ask permission and share themselves with each other. This kiss is sweet and warm and unhurried. This is something like what he’d pictured when he’d allowed himself to picture it. Something like it, because he had never been able to imagine something so easy. He’d never imagined it could be so simple and so good.

Dan presses his palm flat against the small of Phil’s back and Phil feels a tingle run up his spine. He moves his hand back up to wrap gently around the back of Dan’s neck, pulling him in impossibly closer. He strokes his thumb across Dan’s cheek and Dan sighs again.

Phil had asked Dan to go slow, yes. He’s promised himself he’ll go slow, to allow himself to enjoy every moment without fear or pressure to push further. He still wants all that. He knows it’s what’s best for the both of them.

But he also wants to know the inside of Dan’s lovely perfect mouth. He wants to taste him again and feel the particular soft wetness of Dan’s tongue against his. He wants that, and he’s quickly falling out of the habit of denying himself the things he wants.

So he parts his lips and runs the tip of his tongue faintly against the inside of Dan’s bottom lip. Dan inhales a little more sharply through his nose and opens his mouth against Phil’s. Phil slips his tongue in just a little deeper and feels heat flush down his chest as Dan’s tongue brushes against his on its way up to the inside of Phil’s top lip.

The noises their mouths make get a little louder, a little wetter, and Phil is starting to lose himself. He’s gripping the base of Dan’s head, his thumb stroking over Dan’s studded earlobe. Dan’s pinkie has slipped just the tiniest bit under the elastic waistband of Phil’s boxers.

Phil frames Dan’s bottom lip and sucks and Dan’s hips push into his. Phil can’t stop the faint, low moan that rumbles in his throat.

Dan pulls back, just far enough to remove his lips from Phil’s, his eyes wide, cheeks flushed pink.
“We have to stop,” he says.

“I don’t want to,” Phil replies, without thinking. He bites his lip. He probably shouldn’t have said it, but it wasn’t a lie. He doesn’t want to stop.

Dan squeezes Phil’s waist and he drops his forehead against Phil’s again. “I don’t either.”

“Then why should we?”

“Because I want to be someone you can trust.” He leans in and presses his lips to Phil’s, closed and chaste and affectionate.

“I do trust you,” Phil whispers.

“And I want it to stay that way. I want you to be ready for every new step we take together.”

Phil bites his lip harder to keep from arguing. He shouldn’t be letting this overwhelming rush of hormones make a choice for him that he’s not really ready for.

“It’s not because I don’t want you, Phil,” Dan says, voice low. “That’s definitely not what’s happening here, trust me.”

“Oh yeah?”

Dan nods.

“Tell me,” Phil whispers.

“Tell you what?”

“Tell me how much you want me.”

Dan smiles. “I’ve wanted you all along, Phil. I think about you all the time. I…” he trails off.

“What?” Phil asks.

“S too much,” Dan mumbles.

“No,” Phil strokes Dan’s cheek again. “I want to hear it. Please.”

“I think about you…” He raises his eyebrows suggestively. “All the time.”

Phil closes his eyes and lets that visual wash over him. He’s still not quite used to all this. All these feelings… these sensations. He’s not used to finding this exciting and not stressful and uncomfortable.

But picturing Dan—doing that—with Phil’s face in his mind and name on his lips… It’s a lot.

“I told you it was too much,” Dan murmurs.

“It wasn’t. At all.”

“I don’t wanna make you feel uncom--”

“I think about you too,” Phil blurts. “Like that. Almost every day since the club.” He feels his cheeks flush violently, but the groan his confession elicits from Dan makes up for his embarrassment completely.
Dan rolls over onto his back then and pushes the heels of his palms into his eyes. “Fuck.”

“Sorry,” Phil giggles. He’s not. “Come back.”

“No. Can’t,” Dan grunts.

“Why not?”

“Because I’m trying to be good.” His knees are bent and his legs pulled up, creating a little blanket fort over his bottom half.

“You can be good over here,” Phil says.

“Nope.”

“Why?” Phil whines.

“You don’t want to know, Philip.”

“Can I come over there, then?”

“Has anyone ever told you you’re the worst?” Dan asks.

Phil ignores him and shuffles over, pressing himself into Dan’s side.

“That’s not going to help,” Dan mumbles, but he holds out his arm for Phil to tuck himself in.

Phil lays his head against Dan’s chest. “Sorry,” he whispers, dropping a kiss to Dan’s collarbone. “You’re just a little irresistible to me I guess.”

“For someone who’s never done anything like this before, you’re awfully good at it,” Dan says, wrapping his arm around Phil’s shoulders.

Phil frowns. His voice is quiet. “I’ve done stuff. I’ve just never actually liked it before.”

Dan tilts his head down to look into Phil’s eyes. The look on his face is one of distress, his mouth set in a hard line that’s practically bursting with unasked questions. “Phil…”

“It’s fine,” Phil says dismissively, already regretting his words. It’s not fair to put that on Dan, he thinks.

“It’s not. It’s not fine.”

“It was a long time ago.” Phil tries to sound breezy, but he’s quite sure he doesn’t even come close to pulling that off.

“Will you tell me about it?” Dan asks

Phil sighs. “Maybe someday.”

“Remember, Phil. I want to know you. And I want us to be honest with each other. You don’t have to tell me anything about your past that you don’t want to. I want to know everything, but I respect that some stuff isn’t my business. But you’re not allowed to say shit like that anymore.”

“Like what?”

“Like ‘it’s fine.’ I don’t ever want you to do anything you don’t want to do. Even if you think you
should want to. Even if you think it’s what I want. Never, ok?”

Phil’s throat is tight as he nods.

“I want you. This is all I’d ever need.” He squeezes around Phil’s shoulders. “Just this.”

“This is good,” Phil chokes.

Dan leans the side of his face against the top of Phil’s head and nods.

“This is just the beginning, though,” Phil whispers.

Dan doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t need to. They’ve said enough things for one night. Phil knows they’re on the same page.

Phil runs his fingers along Dan’s stomach and up, tracing the shape of Dan’s chest, his collarbone, and then slowly down his arm. He feels goosebumps forming on Dan’s skin. His eyes are closed and his face is nestled into Dan’s neck.

“I wish you didn’t have to leave,” Dan murmurs and Phil feels the vibration of his vocal cords against his cheek.

“What d’you mean?” Phil lets his arm rest against Dan’s stomach. He’s starting to feel the exhaustion of the day settle in now, the happiness and peace of this moment washing over him.

“You know… Go back to your own room so your parents don’t see.”

Phil pushes himself in even closer and squeezes Dan’s middle.

“I’m staying here.”
Chapter 36

Phil wakes up to the distinctive feeling of skin on skin. He must have pulled off his jumper sometime in the night, because he can feel every inch of Dan’s chest pressed up against his back. It doesn’t seem to matter what position they fall asleep in anymore—he always wakes up cradled by Dan’s improbably large, warm body.

He stretches out his legs. It’s freeing, knowing he can move in whatever way he wants—knowing it’s alright if he wakes Dan up, because they’re long past having to pretend they don’t want to stay snuggled up this close anymore.

Dan squeezes around Phil’s waist. “Morning, you.”

Phil giggles. “Why are you always awake before me?”

“Because you snore, mate.”

“Shut up, I do not.” He kicks back playfully at Dan’s foot.

Dan digs his chin into Phil’s shoulder. “You do a little. It’s cute.”

Phil huffs. “Well you…” He searches his brain frantically for something to accuse Dan of, but he comes up frustratingly empty. He can’t even pretend that sleeping next to Dan is anything but lovely. He places his arm on top of Dan’s, sloting their fingers together. “You’re too warm.”

“Too warm?”

“Apparently so,” Phil says. “I was wearing a hoodie when I fell asleep.”

“Well I’m glad I’m too warm then.” Dan’s voice is right next to Phil’s ear, deeper than usual and still gravelly from sleep.

“Me too.” Phil’s voice is even deeper, from sleep, yes, but probably something else as well.

“Phil?” Dan whispers.

“What?”

“I think we need to like… set some ground rules or something.”

Phil’s heart stutters and he tries to pull away a little, but Dan curls his fingers and grips Phil’s hand, holding him in place.

“What d’you mean?” Phil asks. “What did I do?”

“Nothing you spork,” Dan chuckles. “Nothing I didn’t like. Nothing I didn’t wish you’d do a whole lot more of.”

Phil smiles. “Yeah?”

“Shut up,” Dan murmurs. “You know I’m into you, Lester.”

“Yeah but I did kind of jump you with no warning yesterday.”
“I wasn’t complaining. I just…” Dan nuzzles his face into Phil’s hair, his nose pressing into the space behind Phil’s ear. “I need to know what I’m allowed.”

“What you’re allowed?”

“Yeah. I told you I never want to do anything you’re not ready for, but…” He sighs. “Holding you like this and not being sure how I’m allowed to touch you? It’s torture.”

Phil’s stomach swoops before he schools himself. “Stop saying ‘allowed’ like I’m the boss of you or something.”

“Are you not?” Dan murmurs into Phil’s hair. “I’d do whatever you told me to.”

Phil giggles, if nothing else but to hide any evidence of the rush of sensation that floods his body at those words. He lifts Dan’s hand up to his mouth and kisses his knuckles. “We’re in this together.”

“Tell me where I’m allowed to kiss you,” Dan whispers. “Tell me where I’m allowed to put my hands.”

Phil bites his lip. He’s glad Dan can’t see his face. He’s sure it’s beet red right now. He wants to say everywhere. He wants to say wherever the fuck you want, but he knows he can’t. He knows that as much as he thinks he wants that, he’s not nearly ready.

Dan untangles his fingers from Phil’s and drags them slowly up Phil’s arm, across his shoulder and very lightly up to his neck.

“Can I kiss you here?”

Phil nods. Neck kissing is probably ok. And he wants it desperately.

He feels Dan’s lips press into the thin, sensitive skin there so gently. The noise it makes when he pulls back reminds him of last night, that sound echoing in his ears as he remembers the way it felt to have Dan’s mouth on his. He feels goosebumps erupt down his arms and it’s honestly embarrassing. How will he ever be able to handle any of this if he can’t even handle Dan’s lips on his neck?

But then Dan hooks his arm under Phil’s and lays his palm against Phil’s chest and kisses his neck again, his lips parted and Phil can feel the tiniest hint of wetness. The shiver spreads from his arms to his whole body and he instantly gives up on trying to maintain any sense of indifference.

Dan opens his mouth properly and Phil can feel tongue on his neck and he’s never felt anything like it. Dan’s moving up slowly toward Phil’s ear and they’re not kisses anymore so much as gentle sucks and Phil doesn’t know what to do with his hands because they’re lying idle and itching to move down and dip under his pants, Dan’s mouth just feels so good.

But he can’t do that. He knows he can’t do that, because that’s not moving slow.

He bites his lip and balls his hands into fists. He only realizes he’s been holding his breath when Dan’s lips move to his earlobe and the air rushes out of him in a quiet gasp.

Dan unhooks his arm and rolls away. “Shit. Sorry, sorry.”

“What? Why? It’s fine,” Phil pants, the back of his body feeling suddenly cold and bereft now Dan’s not curled around him like a living blanket.

“It’s not. I’m pushing you.”
Phil turns around for the first time. He wants to see Dan’s face. “You’re not.”

Dan’s hands are digging into his eyes again. “We’re supposed to be going slow and I’m here sucking on your neck.”

“I said you could.”

Dan shakes his head. “I didn’t really make it easy for you to say no though, did I?”

Phil’s heart sinks a little then, realizing Dan is actually upset with himself. “I didn’t want to say no.” He reaches out and tugs on Dan’s wrist.

Dan lowers his hands and looks at Phil. “I’m scared.”

“You are?” Phil asks. “Why?”

“Because I’m just… I’m so bloody into you, I just want you so badly and I don’t want to mess it up by making you feel like you have to say yes to things you’re not ready for.”

“I won’t, I promise.”

“You have to tell me to fuck off the second anything is ever too much.”

“I will.”

“Promise,” Dan demands. “I never want to see you upset again like you were yesterday.”

“I promise, Dan.”

Dan nods. “Ok.”

“Ok,” Phil echoes. “Will you come back here now please?”

Dan shakes his head.

“Why not?”

“Because… I’m fucking hard Phil, ok?”

Phil bites his lip to keep from laughing. “I am too,” he mumbles.

Dan groans and rolls over onto his stomach, shoving his face into his pillow. “Fuck.” His voice is muffled by the fabric and just makes Phil giggle harder. “I hate you.”

“Sorry,” Phil says.

He’s not. He waits about thirty seconds to let himself calm down enough to stop snickering.

“Please come back.”

Dan lifts his head and looks at Phil with that adorable sleepy face Phil loves so much. “Not ready,” he croaks.

“Don’t care. I’m not either. We can just pretend.”

“Pretend I don’t have an absolutely raging boner?” Dan asks.
Phil starts laughing again. “If I can, you can.”

“Can you?”

“Why don’t you come over here and we’ll find out.”

Dan’s eyebrows raise in surprise, but to Phil’s delight he shuffles back into the space right next to him. They lie on their sides and look into each other’s eyes, careful not to actually touch each other.

“Ground rules,” Dan says.

Phil shuffles in a little closer, his knees pressing into the tops of Dan’s thighs. “You wanna know where you can kiss me, right?”

Dan closes his eyes. “Why are you trying to make this so hard for me?”

“I’m sorry. I’m not. I just… really kind of want to kiss you right now.”

Dan squeezes his eyes shut even tighter. “Rules first.”

“Ok fine.” Phil moves in closer. “You can kiss me anywhere on my face. Good?”

Dan nods, smiling. “Hands?”

“Uhh…” It’s hard not to let his mind wander. “Above the… belt, or whatever, I guess?”

Dan laughs. “K.”

“Does that work for you?” Phil asks, moving forward until their bodies are pressed together again.

“Course. Whatever you want.”

“What about me?” Phil asks. “Where can I kiss you? Where can I put my hands?”

“I told you, Phil. Whatever you want. Kiss me anywhere. Touch me anywhere.”

Now it’s Phil’s turn to close his eyes.

“But only if you want to,” Dan murmurs. “Only ever if you want to.”

Phil pushes his face closer to Dan’s, their noses brushing together. “How long do we have to follow these rules?”

“Until you’re ready for new ones,” Dan whispers.

Their faces are so close now that Phil can feel Dan’s lip brush his as he speaks. “Anything else?” Phil asks softly.

“I can’t do anything unless you say it’s ok first.”

Phil wraps his arm around Dan’s waist. “Kiss me.”

Dan doesn’t waste a second closing the millimeter of distance between them, pressing his lips to Phil’s gently, but with just enough heat to make it clear that Phil won’t be able to ‘pretend’ for very long.

He can feel the firmness of Dan’s groin pressed up against him. Dan’s not going to be able to pretend
Phil lets himself melt into Dan, every dip of his body filled in by Dan’s warm smooth skin. He runs his fingers up the curve of Dan’s back and Dan sighs.

They stay just like this, kissing wet and noisy in a way Phil knows should embarrass him but only makes the swelling between his legs grow more painful for every moment he leaves it untouched. He keeps stroking up and down Dan’s back to keep his hands occupied.

Then Phil bites down on Dan’s bottom lip without thinking and Dan rips his mouth from Phil’s and rolls away, leaving Phil panting and aching and alone, staring at Dan with wide, apologetic eyes.

“Fuck, Phil.”

“Sorry.”

“You’re going to be the death of me, mate.”

“Come back? I promise I’ll keep my teeth to myself?”

Dan shakes his head and sits up. “I need a cold shower.”

Phil bites his own lip then. He wants to argue and say he can behave, but he doesn’t actually believe that for a second, and he doesn’t want a repeat of last night’s dramatic flashback.

Also, if Dan leaves, he’ll be free to take care of the insane tension that’s been building up inside him since the moment he woke up to all this. To all of Dan. He nods. “K.”

Dan swings his legs over the side of the bed and looks back at Phil. “Or maybe I’ll take a hot shower.”

“And… think about me?” Phil surprises himself with his forwardness, but it’s worth it for the look on Dan’s face.

His rosy patch is out in full force and he ducks his head sheepishly. “Yes, you wanker.”

Phil grins. “That’ll be you actually.”

“Shut up.”

“All right I will,” Phil says, “but only because it’ll be me too.”

Dan closes his eyes as he turns back around and stands up. “Right, I’m off then. This won’t take long at all. You’re evil by the way.” He walks over to to his bag, grabs out a handful of random clothes as quickly as he can and heads for the door. “Have fun.”

Phil snickers. “You too.”

The second the door closes Phil has his thumbs hooked under his pants. He yanks them down and only spares an instant of hesitation before spitting into his hand and wrapping it around himself. He has lube in his bag but there’s not a chance in hell he can be arsed to go get it right now.

He’s very quickly become familiar with the pleasure of coming over his fingers to the thought of Dan’s lips, his neck, his chest. His fears the first time had been completely unfounded—it hadn’t been a one off, not by a long shot. In fact, every time since the first time has been better than the last.
This, though. This is anything but familiar, because now he knows what it feels like to have those lips moving against his. Now he knows what Dan’s mouth tastes like and how he likes to lick at the inside of Phil’s bottom lip and the noises he makes when Phil uses his teeth. Now he has a small taste off all the toe-curlingly amazing moments his future holds with Dan and he can’t force himself to slow his hand.

The wet squelching sound of Phil tugging mercilessly on his aching cock fills the dark little guest room. The rest of the house is so quiet that Phil would swear his whole family could hear it, but he can’t even bring himself to care. It’s dirty and feels a little wrong but somehow that just makes it hotter.

The memory of Dan’s tongue on his neck sends a jolt through his stomach and he instinctively stills his hand at the base and squeezes, hard. He can’t come yet. It’s only been one bloody minute. How will he ever be able to take any next steps with Dan if he can’t even handle his own spit-wet fist?

He manages to stave off his orgasm, but just barely. He keeps his hand firmly in place while he takes a deep breath. He’ll never say it out loud, but he’s scared. Scared of how good this feels and how much he wants it. He’s terrified that Dan will come to his senses and realize that actually, he’d rather not have to deal with a fully grown man who can’t even wank for thirty fucking seconds without feeling the overwhelming need to come. A man who can’t even handle being kissed on the neck.

Instead of letting that thought get him down, he’s determined to use it. He’s determined to at least try to control himself. He moves his hand again and keeps his strokes long and slow.

It works for about another thirty seconds. Then he remembers where Dan is right now and what he’s doing and fuck it, he thinks. If he’s going to come this quickly he might as well make the best of it. He squeezes his eyes shut tighter and pictures it--Dan’s long lean body, naked and wet, water rolling down his back as he braces himself with one hand against the wall of the shower, dripping curls falling into his eyes as he expertly takes himself apart.

Phil clenches his teeth hard as he comes, digging his heels into the mattress and using what little cognitive ability he has available to him in this moment to keep his vocalizations to himself. He learned that one the hard way. Jimmy is one thing--he might not be able to survive Martyn or, god forbid, his mum hearing something like that.

And now he’s a mess of warm stickiness and he’s thinking about his mum. Great.

Thinking of his mum reminds him that he’d spent the night in Dan’s room and he doesn’t know who knows that. He doesn’t know if she knows.

Does he care? He doesn’t even know that.

He’s pretty sure she knows something, and that means he has a choice to make. He wants to believe that the choice is easy, that he can tell her the truth and everything will be fine. But he doesn’t know that.

He can’t know that, and he’s not sure he’s ready to puncture the bubble of happiness surrounding him right now with the judgement of anyone who’ll be anything but happy and excited and supportive.

He reaches down onto the ground for his hoodie and uses it to clean himself up. He pulls his pants back up and lifts the blanket, fumbling his hands across the mattress in search of his phone. It’d been in his pocket last night so it must be here somewhere.
He needs to talk to Jimmy. Jimmy is the one person on this earth he knows will be nothing but elated by the news Phil has to share. He feels a little twinge in his chest and realizes that he misses him. He wishes he could see Jimmy’s eyes light up when he tells him, but Phil doesn’t want to wait another second. He’ll settle for hearing the excitement in Jimmy’s voice.

Finally he finds it. He wraps his hand around it and hauls himself up and out of bed. He grabs his hoodie gingerly and makes his way to the door. He winces when the floorboards creak. Everything sounds so loud right now. He opens the door and steps out into the hall. Dan’s still in the bathroom and Phil can hear voices downstairs. He tiptoes down the hall to his own room.

He sits cross-legged on his bed and wraps his duvet around his naked shoulders. He pulls out his phone and prays Jimmy is awake.

It rings and rings. Phil hears Jimmy’s voicemail greeting and ends the call, his stomach sinking in disappointment. He’s about to toss it onto his bed when it starts ringing.

“Hello James.”

Jimmy’s voice is gruff and annoyed. “What d’you want at this hour you twat, ‘m sleepin.”

“I miss you too,” Phil laughs. “It’s not even that early.”

“Yeah but I’m on holiday. Holidays are for lying in.”

“I wanted to talk to you, is that a crime?”

“Better be good,” Jimmy grumbles.

Phil can’t help the grin that spreads across his face. He’s giddy. “It is.”

Jimmy is silent for a moment. “Wait…” He suddenly sounds like he’s woken up quite a lot. “Holy fuck. Holy shit, Phil.”

“Yeah,” Phil says. It’s all he needs to say.

“Jesus christ.”

“Stop cursing,” Phil scolds, his words undercut by his nervous giggling.

“No, fuck you, mate,” Jimmy spits. “This is huge.”

Phil nods. “I know.”

“Tell me everything right now or I’m going to hop the first train up north and punch you in the goddamn face. Everything.”

“We kissed,” Phil blurs.

“And?”

“That’s pretty much it. I just kind of… jumped on him last night.”

“How was it?”

“It was… a lot, actually. It was kind of too much. I got carried away.”
“Are you ok?” Jimmy’s voice is low and soft with concern.

“Yeah. It was… I feel like you would’ve been proud.”

“I’m always proud of you, Phil. Now please tell me every single painstaking detail.”

“He pushed me onto the bed.” Phil feels his stomach swoop just thinking about it.

“Jesus…”

“Yeah. I tried to take his shirt off but my clumsy fingers stopped working.”

“I see what you mean about ‘a lot.’”

“Yeah… he was literally sat in my lap.”

“Jesus christ, Phil!”

“I had to push him off me.”

“Why?”

“I got… it reminded me of, you know… all that shit from back then. I got scared. I had like a weird flashback.”

“Phil… you told me this was good. You said you were ok.”

“I am. We talked later. And then we kissed more. A lot more.”

“Did you tell him everything?” Jimmy asks.

“I mean, I told him kinda. Not details, but like vaguely I explained.”

“What’d he say?”

“He was perfect. He was amazing. He said we could be friends if that’s what I needed.”

Jimmy snorts. “As if you would.”

“Yeah. It was sweet though. He’s so sweet, Jimmy. He’s bloody amazing.”

Phil can practically hear Jimmy’s eyes rolling. “Alright loverboy, I get it.”

“Shut up. You said you wanted details.”

“Hot ones, not disgusting sappy ones.”


“So are you guys like, together? Officially?”

“I think so. I assume so. He made me agree to ground rules before he’d kiss me again. We’re officially taking it slow.”

“Ok, maybe he is perfect. Perfect for you, anyway.”

“He is.”
“Is he as good a kisser as me?”

“Oh sod off.”

“So just kissing, then?” Jimmy asks.

“For now.”

“Can’t see that lasting long.”

“Oi,” Phil says, as if Jimmy hasn’t hit the nail on the bloody head there.

“What? I’m sorry Phil, but he’s hot as fuck. How can you resist all that?”

Phil shakes his head as if Jimmy’s sat next to him. “I don’t know, honestly. It’s already hard. But you know me.”

“Yeah, I do. And I know I’ve never seen you like this before. You don’t need to let yourself get stuck in the past.”

“It’s not like I’m doing it on purpose, mate. I’m new to all this. It’s terrifying.”

“Ok, I know, you’re right. Sorry. I’m sure you know what you’re doing.”

“I don’t. I just don’t want to mess this up. I really like him. I like him so much, Jimmy.”

Jimmy laughs. “I know, Phil. I’m so happy for you, babe. I wish you were here so I could squeeze you.”

“Me too,” Phil whispers. His eyes feel a little wetter than they should.

“Does your mum know?” Jimmy asks quietly.

“I don’t know what she knows. I’m trying not to think about it. Martyn and Corn know, kinda. I mean, they know how I feel about him.”

Jimmy voice gets even quieter. “You should tell her, Phil.”

“Have you been talking to Martyn?” Phil can’t quite hide his irritation.

“Did he say the same thing?”

“Yes, but he doesn’t know any better. You do.”

“All I know is how lovely she is and how much she loves you. And she loves me too, so I don’t see what you have to worry about.”

Phil sighs. “Yeah I know, but that’s different. You’re not her son.”

“You think that makes a difference?”

“I don’t know, Jimmy.” Phil can’t believe it. He can’t believe they’re arguing now. “I’m trying to just be happy now and not worry about that.”

“I don’t think there’s anything to worry about.”

“Well I wasn’t asking you.” His voice is cold and he hates himself for it, knows he’ll feel guilty
about it later, like he always does when he fights with anyone he cares about.

“I know. I’m sorry. I’ve just… you know we talk.”

Phil frowns. “Did you tell her?”

“No, fuck. Of course not. I’m just saying she misses you. She said she feels like you never tell her anything.”

Phil sighs again. Apparently being distant and vaguely dishonest is a common theme in his relationships with his family.

“I don’t want anything to ruin this… this feeling. I’ve never felt it and I just want some time to feel good and not shitty about it.”

“But… doesn’t it feel shitty having to hide it? Doesn’t it feel shitty not being able to tell your mum what you really are?”

“What am I?”

“You’re in love, Phil.”

Phil doesn’t say anything. He feels like he’s been punched in the gut. Jimmy’s right—it feels really shitty not being able to share this joy with her. It feels shitty having to pretend they’re sleeping in separate rooms. It felt shitty having to tell her that Dan is just a friend.

“I’ll think about,” he chokes.

“I didn’t mean to upset you,” Jimmy says softly.

“I know.”

“Will you tell me more about kissing Dan?”

Phil smiles and wipes his suddenly runny nose shamelessly on his old duvet. “It’s really fun.”

“Course it is,” Jimmy says. “More.”

“I couldn’t stop biting his lip.”


“He had to keep rolling away from me.”

“What? Why?”

“Because of the whole ‘going slow’ thing. We seem to keep… forgetting.”

“Fuck going slow.”

Phil laughs. “I wish.”

“Why not?” Jimmy whines.

“Because I have no idea what I’m doing! I can’t even kiss him without getting hard!” Phil shouts, then claps his hand over his mouth.
“You’re not supposed to!” Jimmy shouts right back.

“Really?” Phil asks.

“No you dummy. Why do you think he was rolling away?”

“Yeah I guess.”

“You think he gives a shit if you know what you’re doing?” Jimmy asks incredulously.

“Jimmy Hill, are you trying to peer pressure me into having sex?”

“Whoops, I guess I am. Sorry. Honestly, you’re surprisingly chill about this. I thought you’d be freaking out.”

“Well, I actually did just… relieve some stress.” Phil grins, knowing Jimmy will know exactly what he means.

“God, TMI, mate…”

“Oh now, it’s TMI?” Phil asks incredulously.

“I’m just taking the piss, Phil. So… did Dan help?”

“No! I told you we’re taking it slow!” Phil’s voice pitches up in indignation.

“Oh come on, what’s so fast about a little mutual wanking?”

“I hate you,” Phil mutters. “I am freaking out, though. Now. I wasn’t before. For some reason when I’m actually with him it feels so easy.”

There is silence on the other end of the line.

“Jimmy?”

“Sorry, sorry. I’m just… I’m so fucking happy for you Phil. You don’t need to freak out. You lot are going to be just fine.”
Phil’s fringe is damp across his forehead and his stomach flutters with nerves as he knocks on the guestroom door. He can hear his family downstairs and wonders why no one has called up to him and Dan yet. In the back of his mind he starts to wonder something else, like if his parents had noticed that his own bedroom had been unoccupied all night long, but he pushes it aside. He’s not going to let that thought in right now.

Right now he’s happy and he wants to stay that way.

“Yeah?” comes Dan’s muffled voice through the door.

“It’s me,” Phil says softly.

He hears the bed creak and Dan’s footsteps on the carpet and feels oddly formal as Dan opens the door for him. Dan’s hair is damp too, poofy and curling and pushed back from his face.

Dan smiles. “Fancy meeting you here.”

Phil smiles back, feeling strangely awkward after being separated for nearly an hour, especially knowing what they’d both been doing with that time. “Wanna go eat?”

Dan steps back and motions Phil in with his hand. “Come in for a sec first.”

Phil’s heart kicks but he tries not to let it show. He steps in and closes the door behind him, following Dan over to the bed.

“Everything ok?” Phil asks, unable to contain his anxiety for even a few seconds.

Dan crawls onto the bed, not unlike an overgrown child, and sits cross-legged in the middle. “Of course,” he says, patting the space next to him for Phil to sit. “I was going to ask you the same question.”

Phil sits, letting his knee press into Dan’s thigh. He’s wearing tight black trousers and a plain grey hoodie. No makeup, no bright colours, no earrings, just the smudged green-tipped fingers from yesterday and a pair of camo-patterned socks.

“I’m good,” Phil says quietly. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

Dan’s chewing on his lip. Phil has the urge to lean in and kiss him to stop him doing that any longer. It’s the kind of chewing Dan does when he’s thinking too hard, or thinking of not so nice things.

“I just know… this is a lot for you. It’s big.”

“It’s a lot,” Phil agrees. “A lot of good.”

The corners of Dan’s lips turn up, making an escape from the sharpness of his gnawing teeth. “Yeah?”

“Of course.” Phil bumps his shoulder into Dan’s. “You think I changed my mind in the last half hour?”

Dan looks down, shakes his curls down over his forehead before instantly reaching up to fiddle them back into place. “I feel like I’m already pushing you, Phil.” His voice is quiet and sweet, but
unmistakably nervous. Melancholy.

“You’re not,” Phil says. “Of course you’re not.”

“You said you wanted to go slow and I… I guess I’m scared.”

“Why?”

“I’ve never done that before. I’ve always gone fast, and that was with people I didn’t even really care about. Even the one time I did care, we didn’t go slow at all. Like, I know this is new for you, but it’s new for me too and I don’t wanna fuck it up. I just… I just like you so much.” He chuckles a high breathy little laugh, quite clearly embarrassed.

“It sounds like we’re kind of in the same boat,” Phil says softly, placing his hand on Dan’s knee and squeezing.

Dan looks up, into Phil’s eyes finally. He’s frowning. “I shouldn’t have joked about wanking.”

Phil laughs. Dan doesn’t.

“Oh,” Phil says, and he frowns too. “Were you joking?”

“I mean, no. Definitely not, but--”

“I wasn’t either,” Phil blurts.

Now Dan can’t seem to help smirking. “How was it?”

“You don’t even need to ask,” Phil mumbles.

Dan’s smile vanishes. “Sorry. Fuck. This is what I’m talking ab--”

“Dan.”

“What?”

“That’s not what I meant at all. Don’t do that.”

“Do what?” Dan asks.

“I don’t want you to second guess everything all the time. I shouldn’t have made you feel like you had to.”

“I promised we’d go slow,” Dan croaks. “And I’m already fucking that up.”

“You’re not.”

Phil gives Dan a look. A c’mon man look. “I can’t even kiss you without…”

Phil laughs. “I was just talking to Jimmy while you were in the shower, and I said those exact words.”

“That I can’t kiss you without getting hard?” Dan asks.

“That I can’t kiss you without getting hard,” Phil corrects.

Dan’s dimple makes a dramatic entrance then, denting his cheek and filling Phil’s chest with
butterflies.

“Really?” Dan asks.

Phil nods. “He said I’m not supposed to. He told me you probably can’t either.”

“He’s a smart man,” Dan murmurs.

“I like that,” Phil says quietly. “You don’t have to try to like, hide that kind of stuff from me.”

“I just… I didn’t want you to think that I expected you to do anything about it, you know? Like I’m just…”

“What?”

Dan sighs. “I’m just ridiculously into you and I’d do whatever you wanted to, even if that meant never touching you at all, in any way.”

“That’s not what I want,” Phil says. “Not at all. I’m happy with the rules we made. For now.”

“I reckon poking you with my boner and talking about wanking kind of breaks those rules though doesn’t it?”

Phil huffs a laugh. “No. Let’s just say right now that it doesn’t. I already told you I’d tell you if anything was ever too much. You have to trust me.”

Dan nods. “Ok.”

“Do you wanna know a secret?” Phil asks, feeling brave. He’s suddenly a little afraid Dan might not actually realize just how mutual Phil’s feelings are.

“Always,” Dan says.

“I never really wanked before I met you.”

Dan gives him a disbelieving look. “Really?”

Phil shakes his head. “Didn’t really feel good.”

“And now it does?”

Phil makes sure Dan’s eyes are looking into his before he says, “It does when I think about you.”

Dan just beams.

“So please don’t think I can’t handle you talking about it,” Phil says softly. “I could listen to you talk about it all day. It’s one of my new favourite things.”

“So,” Dan says, reaching out and pushing Phil’s nearly dry fringe back off his forehead. “You fancy me a bit then, huh?”

Phil summons up a little more bravery and leans into Dan’s space, tugging on the drawstrings of his hoodie and pulling him in close. He drops a kiss onto Dan’s pink mouth. “A bit.”

He’s about to lean in for another kiss, maybe a slower deeper one this time, when his phone vibrates against his leg. He fishes it out of his pocket and checks the message.
Martyn: you lot stop making out and come down here already or mum’s gonna come up and get you

Phil sighs. He’d nearly forgotten about everyone else.

“Our presence is requested downstairs.”

“Good, I’m starving,” Dan says. “But let’s continue this later, yeah?”

Phil gives him a smile, but it comes out clipped and he’s instantly quite sure Dan will notice.

He does, of course. When will Phil stop underestimating how in tune Dan is with how Phil is feeling?

Dan frowns. “We don’t have to, of course.”

“I want to,” Phil assures.

“Then what’s wrong?”

“Nothing, I just…” He doesn’t want to say it. He doesn’t even really want to think it. He looks at the door, mind racing for a way to say it without hurting Dan’s feelings.

“You worried about your family?” Dan asks.

Phil looks at him in astonishment. “I thought you couldn’t read my mind.”

Dan smiles. “Maybe I can a little bit.”

“Does it bother you?” Phil asks quietly.

“Of course not. I already told you it doesn’t, Phil. You don’t owe anyone anything you don’t want to share. It just makes me sad that it makes you sad.”

“I told Cornelia already,” Phil says smiling. “I’m guessing she’s told Martyn. But I kind of did tell him yesterday too.”

“Really? When?”

“At the hospital.”

“And it went well?” Dan asks.

Phil nods. “It was a bit weird but it was alright. Everyone I’ve told says I should tell my mum.”

“And you don’t want to?”

Phil bites his lip. Shakes his head.

“That’s fine then,” Dan says softly. “You don’t have to. Please don’t think you have to, ok? Not for me.”

Phil reaches out and slips his hand into Dan’s. “I will some day.”

Dan squeezes Phil’s palm. “I know.”

“I guess we have to go down now or it’s really going to look suspicious,” Phil murmurs. Dan’s hand is warm in his and now he really doesn’t want to leave this room. He wants to be with Dan and Dan
alone, all day, just talking and figuring things out and learning about each other.

And maybe just a little bit of kissing. Maybe.

“Plus, I need food, Phil. I’m a growing boy.”

Phil smiles. “Right. You’ve got to enjoy food with flavour while you can.” He pulls his hand back and scoots off the bed and walks toward the door.

Dan follows. Phil has a sudden realization and he turns around, hand on the knob. “Did you take your pill this morning?”

Dan laughs. “Yes, dad.”

“Look,” Phil says defensively. “It might be the only rule we actually follow today. I want you to have a good Christmas.”

Dan reaches out and grabs the front of Phil’s shirt, pulling him in close and kissing him with fervour. Phil’s about to cup Dan’s jaw and really get into it when Dan gasps and pulls away.

“Shit! I’m not supposed to do that.”

Phil frowns. “I don’t like that rule. Kiss me whenever you want.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure. Kissing I can definitely handle. Now let’s go eat.”

Luckily the kitchen is abustle when they make their way downstairs so Phil doesn’t have to worry about four sets of eyes staring at them, silently judging them for taking so long to make an appearance.

Just one set for now--Cornelia’s. She’s looking at Phil with her kind eyes full of questions, a smile on her face. He smiles back and gives her the tiniest of nods. Her smile widens and she looks back to make sure no one’s looking before clapping silently.

“Sleep well, boys?” Martyn asks when he sees them, and Phil’s feeling so good that he’s barely even annoyed.

He walks over to where Kath is stood at the counter, filling a row of mugs with coffee and tea and wraps his arms around her shoulders from behind.

“Oh!” She jumps a little in surprise before laughing and planting a kiss on his temple. “Morning, love.”

“Morning mum.”

“You feel better this morning? Get a good sleep?”

He nods. “Really good.”

He says good morning to his dad who’s stood at the stove flipping bacon. He helps his mum carry the mugs to the table and Dan asks her if there’s anything he can do. She says no but he follows her around anyway until she laughs and gives him a stack of plates to set on the table.

Phil’s heart feels full enough to burst in this moment, full enough that it hurts in a strange way. He’s
uncertain about so many things and yet, he’s already itching to tell his mum everything.

They all sit down together once the food is ready. Phil piles his plate high and can’t stop himself shovelling it down. He doesn’t even really like savoury breakfast, but he’d barely eaten anything since the previous morning and he and Dan have seemingly locked themselves into an unspoken competition to see who can eat the most.

Phil gives up when he starts to feel like he needs to unbutton his jeans. “You win,” he mutters and Dan grins, taking a piece of toast off Phil’s plate.

“So Dan,” Kath asks. “Are you staying for Christmas?”

“Oh, no actually, I have to head home tomorrow.”

“And where is home?” Nigel asks.

“Wokingham.”

“That’s a long way. Are you taking the train?”

Dan nods.

“Can I drive him to Manchester?” Phil asks excitedly.

Kath and Nigel just look at each other. Martyn snickers.

“Come on,” Phil complains. “I’m not that bad.”

“You kind of are Phil,” Cornelia says.

“This is abuse,” Phil mutters. He looks at Kath. “Please, mum? I’ll never get better without practice.”

“You could always buy your own car to practice on,” Nigel laughs.

Phil frowns. He can barely even afford rent and groceries.

Kath puts her hand on his arm. “You promise me you’ll be careful, love?”

“Of course,” he agrees quickly.

“I’ll make sure he is,” Dan says, kicking Phil’s foot under the table lightly.

Kath looks at Nigel again.

“Oh alright then,” Nigel says, throwing up his hands. “What the hell, it’s Christmastime, right? Besides, a man should know how to drive.”

Phil’s stomach sinks, but he smiles and thanks them, trying not to think about how good a driver Martyn just happens to be.

His heart doesn’t feel quite so full anymore. In fact it’s a little bitter now, a little hardened, and he’s glad he has a secret from them. An angry, defiant corner of his brain relishes how far he really is from the idea of him they have in their heads. Or at least their idea of what he could be if he just ‘applied himself’ as his father had once said.

He reaches out stealthily beneath the frilly white table cloth and cups his hand over the top of Dan’s
thigh, high up enough that he can feel the hardness of his phone in his pocket. Dan looks at him with a furrow in his brow and questioning eyes but Phil just looks away and squeezes his fingers against Dan’s leg. He leaves his hand there until Kath stands to do the washing up and Dan cheerfully offers help.

Phil doesn’t offer to help. He announces he needs the toilet and goes straight upstairs and to his room. He feels more than a little like an idiot, shutting his door firmly with anger in his heart for people who have no idea how he feels or just how much they’ve been quietly hurting him over the years.

He’s probably being dramatic. He’s probably overreacting. He’ll probably feel ridiculous later, when his dad says something funny or his mum does something thoughtful. But right now, he doesn’t feel like that. He feels like a stranger in his own house, and he kind of just wants to get away--to go back home to London and maybe crawl into Jimmy’s bed and wrap his arms around him, or drink coffee and play mario kart with Dan in his lounge.

He sits quietly stewing for a minute before pulling out his phone to distract himself. He turns it on and sees he’d gotten a message during breakfast.

Rory: hey mate how’s the holiday going?

He smiles. This is perfect, he thinks. Someone he can talk to who won’t make him feel shitty about who he is.

Phil: really good

Despite how he feels at this exact moment, he can’t deny that things are going well for him.

Phil: you?

Rory: no holiday for me, i’m working right through

Phil: oh shit and we left you all alone

Rory: we?

Phil: oh i meant me and dan

Rory: you’re a we, now?

Shit. He’d actually somehow managed to forget that she may not be as thrilled for him as Jimmy had been. He puts his thumb in his mouth, biting at the soft pad absentmindedly. How can he answer that without making it obvious? Is she actually going to be upset?

Eventually he caves to the inevitability of having to just tell the truth and types out his message quickly and nervously.

Phil: actually.. yeah

Rory: wow. i guess a lot changed in the last few days?

Phil: it’s been a crazy few days

Rory: are you up north?

Phil: yeah... he came with me
Rory: you took him up north? he’s meeting your folks already?

Phil’s heart is thudding against his sternum. When she says it like that it sounds crazy. Maybe he is crazy. It hadn’t felt that way at the time, though.

He types out a million excuses, but each sounds worse than the last, so he gives up and just tells it like it is.

Phil: yeah.

Phil: sorry

Rory: no! shit sorry, i guess i sound salty. i promise i’m not. just surprised

Phil: it’s been a good holiday

Rory: i’m well happy for you phil.

Phil: thanks. it’s nice, but weird hiding it from my parents

Rory: you’re hiding it? why?

Phil: they’d probably die of shock.

Rory: do they not know you’re into boys?

Phil: no

Rory: so him going up north with you wasn’t about meeting him

Phil: i mean it kind of was, but just as a mate

It’s a few minutes before she answers.

Rory: shit phil. i’m sorry. that must really suck

Phil: um

Phil: it does actually

Rory: family shit can be hard

Phil: yeah

Rory: sorry if i’m like bringing you down when you were feeling happy

Phil: i wasn’t actually. i was just sitting here thinking that exact thing.. family shit is hard

Rory: well i know how you feel. hence why i’ll be at the bux first thing christmas morning

He looks down at his phone sadly. His heart breaks a little picturing such a lovely vibrant person like Rory spending Christmas alone in a coffee shop, schilling lattes to people who’ll probably be rude to her.

Phil: maybe the three of us could hang out when we’re all back

There’s a knock on his door then.
“Phil, you in there?” It’s Dan.

“Yeah, come in.”

His phone buzzes.

*Rory: *I’d like that phil. say hi to dan for me. and make sure you remember everything that happens because i want to hear it all*

*Phil: k :)*

“Who’s making you smile like that?” Dan asks, sitting next to him on the bed. “Do I need to be jealous?”

“It’s Rory,” Phil replies, pocketing his phone. “And actually, we were talking about you.”

“Oh.” Dan smiles sheepishly. “All good things I hope.”

“Of course, stupid.” He stretches his legs out from under him and lies down, sinking his head into his pillow.

Dan lies down too. “What are you doing up here?” he asks quietly. “Are you hiding?”

Phil just nods.

“Is it ok that I’m in here?”

Phil turns his head on the pillow. “Of course.”

“Your mum asked if we wanted to go to the stops with her,” Dan says.

“Do you?” Phil asks.

Dan shrugs. “Do you?”

Their eyes haven’t left each other’s for a single moment since they laid down. “Definitely not. If today’s your last day here I don’t want to share you.”

“I wish I didn’t have to leave,” Dan says faintly.

“When are you going back to London?”

Dan shrugs again. “Probably as soon as I can get away with it. You?”

“I usually stay til like a day or two before new year’s,” Phil says sadly. Usually it’s great. Usually he gets to lie in every morning and eat food he didn’t have to make and he can pretend he’s a kid again without a care in the world.

Dan frowns. “That’s too long.”

“Way too long. I’ll come up with an excuse.”

“I don’t want to steal you from your family.”

Phil laughs, a bitter sound that only deepens Dan’s frown. “I’ve been here less than two days and I already kind of wish I could leave.”
“Maybe I shouldn’t have come,” Dan whispers. “I’m just making things hard for you.”

Phil allows himself to follow his instincts then, to go with his gut reaction, which is to roll over and hitch his leg over Dan’s hips, bracketing Dan’s head with his hands and hovering over him. For Dan to believe anything other than the truth right now is completely unacceptable to Phil. For Dan to think that his being here is anything but a dream for Phil is a thought that must be eradicated as quickly as possible, and words are too slow, too easy to get wrong.

Phil looks down at Dan’s perfect face and into his eyes. His eyes, which are wide in surprise but his hands find Phil’s thighs, slowly running up, stopping before they get too high and squeezing Phil’s pliant flesh.

“You’re breaking the rules,” Phil whispers, despite the fact that he’s nothing but glad for it.

Dan pulls his hands from Phil’s legs like he’s been burned. “Shit.”

Phil drops down to his elbows and his face is so close to Dan’s he can smell the coffee on his breath. He lifts one knee at a time and resettles himself so he’s laid flat on top of Dan. It feels like he should be crushing him, pushing all the air from his lungs, but he can feel Dan’s slow shaky breaths on his face.

“This ok?” he whispers.

Dan nods, slipping his hands up under Phil’s shirt and letting them rest on his waist.

“I’m glad you came,” Phil says, his voice low. “I’m glad you’re here. I wish you never had to leave. You’re only making things hard in one way, and it’s definitely not a bad thing.”

Dan doesn’t smile. He shuts his eyes and bites his lip and squeezes Phil’s skin. “I thought you’d never felt like this before,” Dan croaks.

“I haven’t.”

“Then why are you so bloody good at it?”

Phil lowers his face a little so their noses brush. “I think you make me feel like a different person. Like, in a good way. I forget to be afraid when you’re around.”

“Except for when… yesterday…”

“That was my fault, not yours,” Phil says. “I was going too fast. And now I’m not.”

Dan moves his hands up a little and spreads his fingers out over Phil’s ribcage. “This feels a little fast.”

“Do you want me to stop?”

“Fuck no. I’m just worried about you.”

Phil curses himself for letting things get away from him last night, for giving Dan any reason to think Phil’s not drunk on the way their bodies fit together, the way Dan’s fingers are cold on the warmth of his back.

“Don’t worry,” Phil says and he drops his face down so his lips press against Dan’s as he whispers, “I’ll kiss you nice and slow.”
And he does. He kisses Dan slowly, gently, shallow at first, just lips smacking and Phil smoothing Dan’s frizzy curls off his forehead.

When he parts his lips wider and brushes his tongue along the inside of Dan’s lip, he makes sure to do it slowly and he can tell Dan’s doing everything in his power not to speed anything up. He gives Phil complete and total control, though he gives himself away a little with just how firmly he’s digging his fingers against Phil’s shoulder blades.

Eventually Phil realizes he doesn’t want to go slow anymore. His body wants him to say fuck the rules and let’s do what we want. It wants him to bite Dan’s neck and rip off his hoodie and slip his hand under Dan’s pants, and it’s then that he finds the nerve to pull back.

“This makeout session has reached its capacity for slowness,” Phil says, his voice naught but a hoarse whisper. He lifts his head and rests his chin on Dan’s forehead, lining his throat up perfectly with Dan’s lips. “Sorry.”

“You’re not supposed to say that anymore,” Dan says, and he sounds just as wrecked as Phil. “But if you don’t move you’ll give me no choice but to kiss your neck since it’s not technically breaking the rules.”

Phil laughs and rolls off of Dan reluctantly. “We need to go out and do something or our whole day will just be this.”

Dan smirks. “What’s wrong with that?”
Phil forces them up. He agrees with Dan, there’s really nothing wrong with their whole day being this, but he wants stick to the rules they’d made together, and the more time they spend horizontal and alone, the harder it gets to be good.

He knows he’s not ready to let himself go, to do what his body thinks it’s ready for in the moment. He knows he still needs time and he wants to give himself that. He wants to give himself the gift of certainty. He wants to feel it in his bones that he’s ready every time they take a new step together.

Right now he feels it in his bones that they can kiss each other’s lips and touch each other’s faces and stroke each other’s arms and hold each other’s hands. Beyond that is a sea of uncertainty, exciting yes, but also a little scary and he doesn’t want to leave any room inside himself for fear. Not with Dan. Never again.

They end up going to the shops with Kath, at Dan’s insistence. “I’m not giving up on being her favourite.”

They help her buy groceries and she helps Dan pick a present for his own mum. They pass a display of nail polishes and Kath stops, studying them intently for a minute before plucking out a deep pink shade and handing it to Dan.

“This’ll look good with your skin tone.” She picks up his empty hand and examines his nails again. “We need to get these fixed up, love.”

Dan looks at Phil once Kath has carried on walking. He’s grinning as he mouths, “She loves me.”

Phil rolls his eyes but his whole body feels warm. Perhaps he needs to start taking some of the advice he’d given to Dan about his flatmates and actually talk to his mum. He should probably at least try to start giving her the benefit of the doubt. Sure, she may not understand him, but he hasn’t really made it easy for her. Half the time he doesn’t even understand himself.

Later they go for a walk in the snow with Martyn and Cornelia. Phil and Cornelia take turns chasing Martyn and pelting him with snowballs. Dan hangs back, laughing but unwilling to get himself involved.

Eventually Martyn’s got a face full of snow and is begging for mercy. Cornelia just laughs and stands on her tiptoes to kiss his red nose.

“You’d better run, woman,” he says with a grin, shaking snow out of the front of his jacket.

She squeals and runs back to where Phil and Dan are stood watching them and giggling. She grabs Dan’s hand and pulls him deeper into the snow. “He won’t attack me if I’m with his brother’s new boyfriend. Sorry, Philly, you’re on your own.”

Dan flashes Phil a look and Phil can tell he’s trying not to smile. Phil smirks a little and shrugs. “Guess I’ll see you later, then.”

He stands there reeling with his frozen feet in the snow and watches them run away hand in hand. The word boyfriend echoes in his ears.

It scares him. But he doesn’t hate it. In fact, it kind of gives him a thrill. He knows how Dan feels about boxes, but Phil thinks this one has a nice ring to it.
He watches them get further away, Cornelia’s hair and Dan’s pink hat getting smaller but still vibrant against the white of the snow covered world around them.

Phil hears Martyn’s footsteps crunching behind him, feels his brother’s arm sling across his shoulders.

“What’s up, Philip?”

Phil kicks some snow onto Martyn’s boot. “You guys planned this didn’t you?”

Martyn doesn’t bother beating around the bush. “Corn said you might have something to tell me.”

“That so?”

Martyn drops his arm and shoves his hands in his pockets. “I mean, I heard her call Dan your boyfriend just now…”

“She did do that,” Phil muses.

“So?”

Phil shrugs. “Dan doesn’t really do labels,” he says quietly.

“But something happened--something good?”

Phil chuckles nervously, kicking some more snow onto Martyn’s boot, just for something to do with his pent up awkwardness. “Something… yeah.” He smiles, looking down still. “Something good.”

“Hey, that’s ace, Phil.” Martyn pulls Phil in for an overly tight hug. A manly hug, Phil thinks, but nonetheless it makes him grin against Martyn’s coat.

“You still say ace?” Phil asks, because he’ll never miss an opportunity to make fun of his brother, even if they are kind of having a moment.

Martyn squeezes a little tighter and refuses to take the bait. “Only on very special occasions.” He releases his grip but keeps his hands on Phil’s shoulders and pulls his head back, making sure Phil’s looking at him when he says, “I’m proud of you.”

Phil’s instinct is to laugh, but he knows Martyn is being sincere. He knows his brother wouldn’t take the piss at a time like this. “Thanks,” he mumbles, his throat a little tighter than before.

Martyn drops his hands. “Come on, let’s go catch up. God knows how many of our secrets they’re telling each other.”

When they get back to the house, Kath is waiting for them with a smile and a bottle of nail polish remover. She pulls Dan into the kitchen and sits him down at the table.

Phil’s feet are cold and wet and so are Dan’s, so Phil is sent upstairs to get them both a change of socks. When he gets back to the bottom of the stairs, he hears laughter coming from the kitchen. He walks slowly towards the sound, stopping just outside the door frame to watch the occupants sat at that old round table together. Dan’s ankle rests on the knee of the other leg, his back facing Phil. His hand is laid out flat and his fingers spread against the painted white wood of the tabletop. Kath is hunched over his hand, painting his nails that deep pink colour with slow, practiced precision.

Phil leans his head against the wall and just watches, Dan’s socks balled up in his hands. He watches the care his mum puts into fixing the nails Phil had botched, the gentle way she holds each of Dan’s
long fingers in place as she drags the brush down slowly. A chill runs down Phil’s arms. It feels like another one of those moments, one he’ll keep locked away in the corner of his memory forever.

He shifts his body and the floor creaks and his mum looks up. “Oh, Phil. I didn’t hear you there, love. Come sit down here, watch me do this. Maybe you’ll be able to do it better next time.”

Dan turns around and looks at Phil and smiles. “Sorry, mate, they definitely look a lot better now.”

Phil feels so happy and full in this moment he can’t even bring himself to roll his eyes or playfully tell Dan to bugger off. He pulls up a chair beside his mum and pretends to watch her handiwork. Really he’s just fighting the urge to let a warm tear of relief fall from his eye.

He feels something cold and wet press against the front of his calf. Looking down under the table he sees it’s Dan’s foot and looks up at him with a cocked brow. It’s a bold move, even if it does seem like a basically unspoken truth at this point that Kath knows something is going on.

“Do me a favour?” Dan asks.

Phil’s voice comes out raspy and a bit garbled. “What?”

“Change my socks? My nails are wet and my feet are bloody freezing.”

Kath laughs.

“Am I just your servant now?” Phil asks, but he’s already motioning for Dan to put his foot up on his knee.

He does, and Phil curls his fingers round the elastic at Dan’s ankle and pulls the damp sock off his foot. His fingers brush the cold clammy skin there and Dan shudders.

Phil looks at Dan’s foot for a moment, pale and so cold it’s tinged with blue and he makes a very conscious decision to wrap his hands around it, allowing the warmth from his own skin to transfer to Dan’s.

Dan lets out a sigh that must be involuntary, because he gives Phil a panicked look the second it leaves his lips. Phil just gives him a little smile and squeezes harder. “I’m surprised your toes didn’t just fall right off,” Phil cuckles.

To her credit, Kath doesn’t look up from her little project. Phil decides in that moment that she deserves to hear something of the truth from him before he goes back home to London. His heart races, but he doesn’t let go of Dan’s foot. He moves a hand up to Dan’s toes and curls his fingers around them.

“I reckon they would’ve if we’d stayed out any longer,” Dan murmurs. “God, that feels good.”

Phil laughs nervously then and slips a dry sock over Dan’s big foot. “Next,” he says, patting his knee. He does the same for the other foot and then watches his mum finish up with Dan’s nails. They look about a thousand times better than the mess he’d made yesterday.

She stands up from the table when she’s done and warns Dan not to touch anything until they’re dry. He nods solemnly.

A little later they all go out to dinner and it feels like what Phil remembers Christmas feeling like. Soft and warm and safe, a plate full of food and a stomach that aches from laughing. The lights in the restaurant are dim and Christmas music plays in the background. His father doesn’t make anymore
careless comments about Phil’s masculine failings and Dan keeps his hand on Phil’s thigh under the table for nearly the whole time they’re sat there.

“You’re breaking the rules,” Phil leans in and whispers at one point.

“Should I stop?” Dan whispers back, squeezing.

Phil smiles. “Don’t be stupid.”

They stay sat at that little booth for hours. They order dessert even though none of them even remotely have room for it. The waitress keeps bringing refill after refill of mulled wine and Phil’s getting slowly drunker as the evening grows later. He thinks Dan is too--his face is flushed and his eyelids are heavy. His cheeks stay dimpled seemingly all night, and Phil finds it harder and harder not to just lean over and kiss that beautiful squishy face, questionably unapproving parents be damned.

He resists, somehow, promising himself he’ll make up for it later when they’re back home and under the covers, wrapped up in each other for one more night. He’s already decided he’s definitely not letting Dan sleep alone in that cold dark guest room tonight.

Nigel is unanimously voted the designated driver and sips ginger ale all night, his arm slung around the back of Kath’s seat and laughing at all his wife’s rather terrible jokes.

Phil’s definitely tipsy, but not enough not to notice the way his mum keeps looking at him when she thinks he can’t see. He notices, and decides to table it. He’s already decided he’ll try to talk to her, but not tonight. Tonight he belongs to Dan and he doesn’t want anything distracting him from enjoying this ridiculously sweet, gorgeous boy. This boy with his freaking curls and his long legs and his warm smile, this boy who saw Phil and decided he was worth knowing. Somehow, he’d decided Phil was worth waiting for, and Phil just wants to revel in that tonight, without the weight of opinion or judgement of anyone who may be anything less than ecstatic.

He’s definitely drunk. Drunk Phil is a little to soppy for his own good.

When they finally get back to the house, Kath insists they all sit down together and watch The Snowman. Phil rests his head on Dan’s shoulder the whole time because he’s too warm and tingly and blissed out to care. He laughs when Dan and Cornelia belt out the words to ‘Walking in the Air,’ because Corny’s voice is soft and high and sweet, and Dan’s is only one of those things. It’s high and loud and shrill and it makes Phil beam because Dan doesn’t seem to give a toss about being self-conscious of that fact, he just sings along and elbows Phil gently in the ribs for laughing.

His legs feel heavy as he drags his feet up the stairs after finally convincing Kath they couldn’t possibly play another game of Yahtzee. He misses a step near the top and bashes his knee on the way down. It hurts and he’ll definitely have a bruise when he wakes up, but right now he can’t stop laughing.

Dan steps over him before turning back round and hauling Phil up. “Come on, Lester, you’re almost there,” he says, throwing Phil’s arm around his shoulder and wrapping his own arm around Phil’s back.

Phil’s still laughing, leaning a considerable amount of his weight into Dan. “‘M fine.”

“I’m walking you to your room anyway.”

Phil frowns, feeling instantly less tipsy. “And then you’ll walk into it with me.”
“Will I?”

“Yes, you will.”

Dan just smiles

“But you have to take me to the loo first,” Phil says. “Gotta brush my teeth.”

They brush their teeth side by side, looking at each other in the mirror and giggling between spits. It’s honestly embarrassing but neither of them seem bothered about that at the moment.

Once their teeth are minty and sparkling, Dan turns in the direction of the guest room and says, “Just gonna go grab my pjs.”

Phil takes his hand and pulls him towards his own room. “You don’t need any.” Dan doesn’t argue.

Phil opens the door and heads straight for the bed, collapsing face first into the soft old mattress. He hears Dan shut the door and he groans as he turns himself over onto his back, letting his feet dangle off the edge.

Dan is stood leaning back against the door and looking unsure.

“What?” Phil asks, not bothering to beat around the bush.

“You’re drunk,” Dan says quietly.

“Only a little.” Phil reaches his arms back and grabs hold of his pillow, pulling it down and shoving it up under his head. “Aren’t you?”

Dan shakes his head.

“Oh, right. That’s on the list, yeah?”

Dan nods, smiles. “Thought I should try to follow at least one rule.”

Phil’s stomach drops a little. “I’m really sorry Da--”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Dan assures.

“Should we do some yoga right now or something?”

Dan laughs. “Phil, you couldn’t even walk up the stairs without tripping.”

“That’s because I’m clumsy, not because I’m drunk!” Phil protests, though he’s not entirely sure it’s the truth. In reality it’s probably a bit of both. “I’m fine,” he mumbles, patting the space next to him. “Starting to feel a little rejected, though.”

“I’m not rejecting you, idiot. I’m trying to make sure you stick to your rules, too.”

“I will,” Phil says softly. “I promise. Don’t make me sleep alone on our last night together.”

Dan chuckles. “You make it sound like I’m going off to war or something.”

“That’s what it feels like.”

Dan rolls his eyes. “I didn’t realize you were such a dramatic drunk.”
“I’m not drunk!”

“Uh huh.” Dan starts walking towards the bed.

“Wait,” Phil says.

Dan stops instantly. “Change your mind?”

Now it’s Phil’s turn to roll his eyes. “No, you div. Just… you can’t sleep in jeans.”

“These aren’t jeans.”

“Well you can’t sleep in trousers that look like jeans, then.”

“You didn’t let me get my pjs, Philip.”

“I didn’t,” Phil agrees.

Dan cocks his eyebrows.

Phil nods.

Dan puts a hand on his fly.

“Go on,” Phil says, voice low, propping himself up on his elbows to get a better view.

“Phil…”

“What?” Phil asks. “We’re not breaking any rules.”

“You sure?”

Phil nods again. Dan pops the button on his fly open. He takes hold of his zipper and pulls it down slowly.

Phil’s heart is pounding. It’s nothing he hasn’t seen Dan do before, but this time it feels different.

Dan bites his lip.

“Please don’t stop,” Phil whispers.

Dan laughs breathily. Nervously.

“I’ll return the favour if you want,” Phil says.

“You better,” Dan replies, hooking his thumbs under the waist of his trousers and pushing them down off his hips.

Phil watches intently, his head heavy as Dan pushes his trousers down off his thighs, down his calves, down to his ankles and steps out of them.

His pants are tight against his thighs and bright pink. He’s still wearing his socks and Phil wonders how someone can look so devastatingly sexy and strangely adorable all at once. Dan stands there for a while and just lets Phil look.

“You’re pretty,” Phil murmurs. Then, “Hoodie?”
Dan shakes his head. “Your turn.”

Phil had definitely lied to Dan earlier. He’s definitely still at least a little drunk, because otherwise he doubts he’d have the courage to do what he does next, which is lock eyes with Dan and say, “Do it for me.”

Dan closes his eyes but he doesn’t move.

“If you want,” Phil says quietly.

“It’s not about what I want,” Dan croaks.

“It’s about what I want, yeah?”

Dan looks into Phil’s eyes for a long moment before nodding.

“I want you to take my jeans off.”

Dan walks forward then, as if whatever last little bit of restraint had been undone by Phil’s sudden burst of confidence. Dan doesn’t know that Phil can feel his pulse pounding in his ears and is wondering where the hell that confidence actually came from, but it’s alright. He doesn’t need to know that.

Dan stands at the edge of the bed and sinks to his knees, reaching forward and placing his hands lightly on the buckle of Phil’s belt. Phil’s still propped up on his elbows, watching Dan’s long fingers pull the belt through the buckle slowly, unbuttoning the button, pushing lightly against Phil’s crotch as he takes hold of the zipper.

Phil’s holding his breath. The noise the zipper makes as Dan pulls it down sounds so much louder than Phil knows it could possibly, logically be. Dan’s eyes flit up then, looking into Phil’s in silent question.

Phil gives an almost imperceptible nod and Dan curls his fingers round the waist of his jeans. Phil lifts his hips up off the bed and Dan pulls the jeans down, the backs of his fingers brushing against Phil’s thighs, leaving behind little trails of warmth on Phil’s skin.

Dan shuffles back a bit as he pulls the jeans off completely and drops them to the floor. He stands up again and looks down at Phil. “You’re pretty too. Move over.”

Phil shuffles over, making enough room for Dan to climb up and lie perpendicular to him, resting the back of his head on Phil’s stomach.

Phil giggles, making Dan’s head bob. “That’s an interesting position.”

Dan pulls his legs up so they won’t hang off the bed. “I can’t look at you right now.”

“What, why not?” Phil asks.

“Rules.”

Phil risks reaching down and running his fingers through Dan’s curls, pushing the tips gently against Dan’s scalp. Dan sighs.

“You don’t think you can follow the rules if you look at me?” Phil murmurs.

“Actually,” Dan says, pushing his head further back into Phil’s abdomen, “I don’t think you can.”
Phil doesn’t even bother arguing. He knows Dan’s right.

“I can still see you though,” Phil says quietly, his eyes glued to Dan’s bare thighs.

“Just play with my hair and try to control yourself, Lester.”

Phil laughs again and twirls a fluffy curl around his finger. “I wish you didn’t have to go.”

“Me too.”

“Is it weird if I say like… I think I’m genuinely going to miss you?”

“I dunno if it is or not,” Dan says. “But either way I’m definitely going to miss you too.”

“Will you ring me?” Phil asks.

Dan turns his head then and looks up at Phil. “Of course. Every night if you let me.”

“You’re looking at me,” Phil says.

“I am.”

“You were right. I don’t want to follow the rules.”

Dan smiles. “I know. I don’t either.”

Phil tugs ever so gently on Dan’s hair. “Would you kiss me?”

Dan shakes his head. “You’re drunk. We could barely keep it together when we were both sober.”

Phil wants to whine, because there’s really nothing he’d like to do more right now than press his lips to Dan’s and let whatever happens, happen. But underneath that simmering want is something even deeper--gratitude. Trust. A warmth that comes from knowing just how much Dan truly cares about putting Phil first, about making sure they’re both ready for whatever comes next.

Phil moves his hand from Dan’s hair and strokes his thumb down along Dan’s jaw. “Next time we see each other, like once we’re both back home… let’s both be super sober, yeah?”
“Are you sure you don’t want me to come with you?”

The three of them are sat round the kitchen table, Phil, Dan and Kath, eating cereal and drinking tea and coffee. Everyone else is still sleeping soundly. It’s Christmas eve and Dan’s got a fairly early train back to Wokingham.

“Yes, mum. I’m sure. I’ll be fine. We’ll be fine.” His eyes physically hurt from trying not to roll them.

“Well what about Martyn? Or Cornelia?”

Phil bites down on the inside of his cheek to keep the irritation grating his nerves like cheese from escaping his lips. He knows she’s just being a mum. He’s not really given her reason in the past to trust his ability not to hit at least one thing on a trip as far as Manchester and back, but still. He’s a grown man now. It’s embarrassing.

“I promise I’ll be careful.”

“You’ll drive slow, yeah? The roads might still be a bit slippery from the snow.”

“I’ll drive slow.”

“You know the way?”

“I’ll use google maps on my phone.”

“You can’t look at your phone while you’re driving, Phil!”

Phil grits his teeth. He’s starting to wonder if this is even worth it. “I won’t be looking at it, mum, it’ll tell me where to go. Like gps.”

“Right, right,” she mutters, taking a sip of her tea.

Phil avoids Dan’s eyes, knowing he’s grinning beside him, enjoying this display of Phil’s utter humiliation just a little too much. “I’ll be fine, mum. I’m not the best driver, but I’m not that bad.”

She looks at him incredulously but doesn’t argue anymore. “If dad thinks it’s alright I’m sure it’ll be fine, love. Just watch the road and go slow.”

Phil nods, picking up his own mug and chugging back the remains of his coffee. It’s still hot and it burns his throat on the way down, but he’s ready to get away from this house for a little while. He’s ready to be alone with Dan again.

Even though it’s only been about an hour since the last time they’d been alone.

It’d been good time. He can’t even blame himself.

His cheeks feel a little warmer remembering their long slow kisses, remembering Dan’s thigh wedged in between Phil’s as they held each other under the duvet and memorized the shape and taste of each other’s mouths. Perhaps it’s a good thing they’d had a schedule to keep this morning. Dan’s guard had definitely seemed a lot lower this morning than it had last night.
Phil misses him already and he’s not even gone yet. He turns his head and looks at Dan in his rather ugly potato sack-looking jumper. Ugly yes, but also strangely… not. The colour brings out the warmth in his chocolate eyes, the wide neck shows off the considerable jut of his collarbones. The sleeves are too long and his fists bunch the material into sweater paws that are just too cute on a man Phil really kind of just wants to see naked at this point.

The thought hits him all at once and he can’t quite believe it’s been brought on by a strange looking jumper that Phil can’t seem to decide whether or not he even likes. Also with his mum sat right next to them.

“You ready?” he asks Dan, cringing internally at the gruffness of his voice. Hopefully they won’t be able to guess the reason for it.

Dan drains his own mug and nods. Phil carries Dan’s bag for him and the three of them make their way to the front door. They put on their coats and Kath hands Phil the keys.

“Be careful,” she says for the millionth time and brushes his waving fringe off his forehead. “You’ve got precious cargo.”

He smiles. He can’t be annoyed with her, not today. Not on Christmas eve when she just wants to make extra sure she’ll have both her boys with her to celebrate the birth of baby Jesus.

“I will, mum,” he assures her again. For the millionth time.

“Well, it was so good to meet you, Kath,” Dan says then. “Thanks so much for having me.”

She opens her arms and Dan gathers her up in his and squeezes. Phil can tell it’s a good, tight hug.

“Come back anytime, love. I’m so glad to have met you. Make sure my boy drives safe.”

Dan laughs. “I will.”

“Alright, alright,” Phil says, pulling on the hood of Dan’s coat. “Let’s go before she changes her mind.”

“Oh, Phil!” she calls just as they’re stepping outside. He turns back and looks at her expectantly. “Don’t forget, if you make it back, it’s Christmas eve.”

He smiles. “Cookies?” It’s a tradition that stretches back as far as Phil’s memory goes, he and Martyn helping her roll dough and cut shapes and artfully arrange sprinkles.

She winks.

“I’ll try really hard to make it back.”

It’s warmed up a little outside and the snow is starting to melt. Their feet are wet before they even make it into the car. Phil puts Dan’s bag in the trunk and then slides into the driver’s seat. He pulls on his seatbelt and just sits there for a moment, staring at the steering wheel. He hears Dan buckle his own seat belt.

“You’re not actually as bad as they’re all fussing about, are you?” Dan asks nervously. “Like, you’re not actually about to kill us both, right?”

“If I said yes, would you stay?”

Dan tilts his head to the side a little and gives him a smile, one Phil’s not sure he’s seen before. He
can’t say why, but he feels like it’s a brand new smile, one meant just for him.

“Should we just take the car and run away together?” Dan asks softly.

“Yes,” Phil answers immediately. “We should definitely do that.”

“Let’s go then.”

Phil takes a shaky breath and slides the key into the ignition. The engine starts and Phil grips the steering wheel. Was this a terrible idea after all?

“I wish you could come with me, Phil,” Dan says, and he sounds sad. “I’m not really fond of being away from you.”

Phil has to laugh, because suddenly he feels sad too, as if Dan’s going away a lot longer than the three or four days it’ll end up being. “What is happening to us?”

“I dunno,” Dan murmurs. “My heart feels funny.”

“Shut up,” Phil says, smiling. “Get out your phone, you need to help me navigate.”

Phil is true to his word. He drives slow. *Very* slow, slower than anyone else on the road. Slow enough that he actually gets honked at a few times. Dan laughs and laughs and Phil just grips the steering wheel harder, ten and two, and tries to steady the tremors in his fingers. He’s not good, but he’s not as bad as he remembered. He’s not as bad as everyone had been saying.

Eventually he relaxes a little. Dan tells him where to turn and when, and all Phil has to focus on is the lines on the road and the sound of Dan’s voice. They talk the whole way and the time goes by quicker than Phil could have thought possible.

He only mistakes left for right twice, which is probably some kind of personal record. It still takes them less than an hour, despite the wrong turns and the snail’s pace and roads slick with melting snow.

Phil feels the bittersweet burn of satisfaction and disappointment all at once when he finally finds a parking space at the train station. He’s proud of himself for making it this far and gutted that it’s time to send Dan off.

He turns the engine off and pockets the keys. “How long do we have?”

Dan looks at his phone. “A while, actually.”

“Do you want to go get a coffee or something?”

“Not really. I only have you for a little longer. I kinda just want to stay here with you. If that’s ok?”

Phil smiles. He doesn’t say anything, just turns around and crunches his long legs up and climbs awkwardly into the back seat. “C’mon,” he says to Dan.

Dan’s legs are even longer than Phil’s and it takes him a considerable amount of effort to contort his body in the right way to join Phil back there, but eventually he manages it. He sits beside the window, leaving a fair amount of space between them.

Phil knows Dan’s just trying to be good, but he doesn’t like the look of all that space. He doesn’t like the fact that Dan thinks he needs all that space.
He scoots in closer. “Do you think it would be breaking the rules if I climbed into your lap right now?”

Dan snorts. “Uh… I mean… I guess that’s up to you, mate.” He laughs. “You know that’s not what I meant when I said I wanted to stay here, right?”

“I know, I’m just… I’m already feeling like I’m going to miss having you next to me so much.” His voice gets quieter. “I’ll probably lie awake all night tonight wishing I’d done things differently.” It’s an embarrassing admission, but it feels like a step in the right direction that he can even admit to it out loud.

The smile fades from Dan’s face and he pats his thigh. “Head.”

Phil turns around and lies his back down against the grey fabric of the seat, letting his head rest in Dan’s lap. He has to pull his legs up tightly and his feet are crammed up against the door, but Dan’s hands find his hair and he smiles, closing his eyes and trying to let himself forget how soon Dan will be on a train headed in the opposite direction.

“We have all the time in the world, Phil,” Dan murmurs, pushing Phil’s fringe off his forehead. “There’s no rush.”

“I know.”

“I know I joke, but that’s all it is. I can wait.”

Phil just nods. He reaches up and gropes around until he finds the hand Dan’s not using to comb through Phil’s hair. He presses his palm to Dan’s and wraps his fingers around. Dan squeezes back and their hands lower to rest on top of Phil’s chest.

“It’s going to be so weird to sleep alone,” Phil says.

“It’s gonna suck.”

Phil giggles. “It is. But you’ll ring me, right?”

“Of course. So much you’ll be sick of me by the time we’re together again.” He pauses. “Or… maybe we could skype?”

Phil grins. “You gonna miss this face, Howell?”

Dan’s fingers are on Phil’s chin then, tilting his head back gently. Phil opens his eyes and Dan is looking down at him.

“I’m gonna miss your everything.” He leans down and presses their lips together gently. It’s soft and innocent, clearly not meant to lead anywhere but it still makes Phil’s heart jump.

He lets go of Dan’s hand and reaches up to grip the back of Dan’s neck, pulling him down further and kissing him again, deeper this time.

Dan cups the side of Phil’s face, stroking his thumb over Phil’s ear. They stay this way, kissing and holding onto each other and listening to the noises their lips and tongues make when they come together until Dan pulls back. Phil whines and opens his eyes and Dan’s teeth are sinking into his shiny red lip as he straightens himself up.

“Come back,” Phil whispers.
Dan shakes his head.

“Rules?” Phil asks.

Dan chuckles. “No, Phil. I have to go get my train.”

Phil fishes his phone out of his pocket and squints suspiciously at the time it displays, like it’s some sort of trick. He wishes it was. He shoves it back into his coat and looks up at Dan again. His throat actually tightens a little.

It honestly scares him a little, the intensity with which he wishes Dan could stay. Or with which Phil wishes he could get on the train too. Really he just wants Dan with him and he doesn’t particularly care where they are or what they’re doing or who else happens to be there. He wants to be with Dan right now. It feels like exactly the wrong time to be saying goodbye.

He stares at the window. He can’t see through it because the glass is all steamed up. It hadn’t felt like they’d been kissing long enough to do that, it really hadn’t. Obviously it had though. He watches a drop of condensation roll down, leaving a wet trail in the fog on the glass. “Do you feel as weird as I do right now?” he whispers.

Dan’s still got a hand on the side of Phil’s face. “I feel weird in a lot of ways right now.”

“Any bad ways?”

“Only that I wish we really could steal this car and run away. That’s probably bad, right? Like that’s probably way too intense for what is essentially our second day as… whatever we are?”

Phil ignores Dan’s first question completely. “What are we?”

Dan laughs, leaning his head back against the headrest. “There you go with your boxes again.”

Phil sits up then, his stomach twisting. “Sorr--”

“We’re together, right?”

Now it’s Phil’s turn to laugh. “Yeah. Definitely.” He leans in and kisses Dan’s forehead. “And I wish we could run away too.”

Phil still thinks it’s weird how his chest tightens as he watches Dan board his train, but he tells himself it’s ok because Dan had seemed to be feeling the exact same way. He’s only just turned away and started walking back to the parking lot when he feels his phone vibrate against his fingers.

Dan: i forgot to tell you to drive safe. so drive safe

Dan: your mum was right you have precious cargo

Dan: i’m lonely already

Phil’s grinning down at his phone. He can feel it, and he can feel that anyone looking at him right now would probably think he looks like an idiot. He’s so happy he feels jittery, like his nerves are all frayed, but in the best kind of way.

Phil: me too. come back

Dan: don’t tempt me the train hasn’t started moving yet i could theoretically jump out the emergency exit window or something probably
Phil: you’re ridiculous

Dan: we both are

Phil bites at the inside of his cheek.

Phil: is it always like this?

He doesn’t even know how he expects Dan to answer that. Probably he’ll have no idea what Phil’s even talking about. He just doesn’t know what to do with this—with all this happiness. All this excitement. He feels like he’s floating. Like every single thing is right with the world. Like nothing could ever touch him again.

He doesn’t expect Dan to understand, but apparently he does.

Dan: definitely not

He manages to make it home without incident, and he promises he’ll allow himself to be smug about that fact at dinner later. The house already smells like ginger when he steps through the front door.

“Phil?”

“Yeah,” he calls, kicking off his shoes. He’s still shrugging out of his coat when his mum comes padding out of the kitchen with flour on her face.

She smiles widely. “You made it.”

“Of course,” he says, secretly basking in the satisfaction he feels at having actually impressed her for once. “You didn’t actually think I couldn’t do it, did you?”

“Of course not, sweetheart. Come on.” She turns back towards the kitchen.

Phil follows. “You started without me?”

“I just… I wasn’t sure how long you’d be, love. You know we have church later… and Santa needs his cookies.”

Phil rolls his eyes. He can do that because he’s behind her and she can’t see him. “Is it really going to take us all day to make cookies, mum?”

She tuts. “It just might, young man. It’s just you and me today.”

“Really? Where’s Martyn?”

“He and Cornelia went… out.” She stumbles over the last word.

Phil narrows his eyes suspiciously at the back of her head. “Where?”

“Just out with friends, I think. I didn’t really ask.”

Phil’s stomach churns. Now he knows she’s lying. There’s no way she wouldn’t have asked. “What about dad?” They step into the kitchen and Phil sees that the table is already laid out with all the things they need to make enough batches of cookies to feed an army.

“He went down to pub with Keith and Andrew.”
Phil frowns. “It’s like 11 o’clock in the morning.”

She turns around and gives him a look. “It’s Christmas, Phil.” As if that’s all the explanation needed for casual day drinking. She’s stood at the sink, filling the kettle with water. She doesn’t even have to ask him if he wants coffee. Getting way over-caffeinated is part of the Christmas eve baking tradition.

“Right.” He sits down at the table, feeling uneasy. He can guess why she’s made sure to clear the house out today, and in truth he’s grateful. It’s the only way he’ll be able to do this.

But he’s still fucking terrified.

He flips through the worn old recipe book with its yellowed, watermarked pages, searching for a specific one. He likes to start with the easiest—shortbread. He finally finds it and smooths his hand over the page, laying it flat against the table.

Kath sits in the chair opposite him. Even that is unusual. Usually they’d sit side by side, Kath mixing the ingredients together, Phil rolling dough and shaping the cookies.

The silence stretches on uncomfortably. Phil skims the list of ingredients to make sure they have everything they need on the table, crossing his fingers he’ll have an excuse to get up and shake some of the nervous energy out of his legs. Unfortunately Kath is thorough, and it’s all arranged neatly in the center of the table.

“Shortbread first?” he asks quietly. He clears his throat when his words come out gravelly and stuttered.

She nods, pulling the recipe book and a large mixing bowl towards her. The kettle beeps then, and Phil springs up instantly.

“I’ll get it.” He’s giving himself away now, surely, he thinks as he walks towards the hissing steam on the countertop. She must notice how strange he’s acting. “You want coffee or tea?”

She’s slowly pouring sugar onto the scale, weighing it carefully. “Coffee please.”

As he’s reaching up into the cupboard for the coffee powder, he feels his phone buzz against his leg. He pulls it out with slightly shaky fingers and takes a look.

Dan: please tell me you made it back alive i can’t handle that kind of guilt on christmas eve

Phil grins. He can almost feel the warmth spread through his chest.

Phil: i’m alive. making cookies with kath

Dan: fine i’ll leave you alone then but don’t forget we have a skype date later mate

Phil: definitely not going to forget

“Is that Dan?”

Phil jumps. Kath is stood right next to him all of a sudden. He shoves his phone into his pocket harshly. Had she seen? Had she noticed the giant grin on his face?

“Uh, yeah. Yep. Just… making sure I got back ok. I guess he believed you all saying how terrible a driver I am.”
“Well that was nice of him.” She reaches across him to grab the can of coffee. “Will you pass me a spoon, please?”

He does, and he hopes she doesn’t notice the tremble in his hands. They stir their coffees, the only noise in the room the clinking of their spoons against their mugs.

They settle themselves opposite each other at the table again. His coffee is still borderline molten in temperature, but he takes a long sip anyway. His mum is looking at him and he still hasn’t worked out what to say or how to say it or what to do with his hands or how much to admit to or--

“He’s a lovely young man, Dan is,” she says gently, startling him from his internal spiral. “It was nice to finally meet another of your friends.”

Phil swallows the coffee, wincing as it burns all the way down his throat.

That’s it. She’s given him the perfect in. It’s up to him now if he’s going to be brave enough to take it. Had she done that on purpose, he wonders.

Probably. She’s a smart woman. Probably a lot smarter than Phil’s been giving her credit for all these years.

“Yeah, he is,” Phil says, voice strained. His heart is in his throat, threatening to choke him out if he doesn’t just spit the damn words out already. “He’s great. But he’s… he’s not really my friend, mum.”
Chapter 40

She frowns slightly. “What d’you mean?”

He feels the blood drain from his face. That’s not the answer he’d been expecting. He’d honestly
expected her to say ‘I know’ or at least ‘I suspected as much.’

He didn’t think he’d have to spell it out in painstaking detail.

He looks down at the caramel coloured liquid swirling around his Disney World mug. He’d never
noticed just how much Disney merch is floating around his family home.

He clutches it, ignoring the way it burns his skin. It helps. It helps block out a little bit of the fear.
“He’s… more… than that.” He doesn’t look up.

She hasn’t said anything. Not a single word. Phil’s heart sinks but he still can’t pry his eyes from his
coffee, and the tiny little brown bubbles that cling to the inside of the mug.

The silence that follows is excruciating. And then, finally, “Oh.”

It rips through him, that ‘oh.’ Tears him open and leaves him bleeding on the chipped white paint of
the tabletop.

This had been a stupid fucking idea. He’d known it and he’d allowed himself to forget for a moment.
He’d been blinded by pink nail polish and his mother’s inclination for being overly polite.

He stands up, his eyes stinging. He takes care not to let them land on her face. He’s angry. He’s
going to cry and he doesn’t want to do it in front of her.

“Phil, sit.”

He doesn’t look.

“Please. I’m sorry.”

He sits. Looks everywhere but at her.

“Look at me, Phil. Please.”

His chin quivers. He looks. He’s too injured to read the expression he finds there.

“I’m sorry, love. You surprised me, that’s all.” She stretches her arm out across the table, holding her
hand out for his.

He doesn’t want to touch her. He doesn’t want to be here anymore. He slips his hand into hers
anyway, because she’s his mum and that’s what he does. He does what his mum wants and hides the
things that would make her look at him like she is now.

Like he’s damaged. Like he’s broken.

He’s not either of those things, especially not because of what Dan is to him, but he still wishes he’d
kept it to himself. This feels even worse than hiding. This feels worse than he’d even allowed himself
to prepare for.
She squeezes his hand. “So. He’s more,” she says.

Phil nods. “I thought… it seemed like you understood. I thought maybe you knew.”

She shakes her head, but almost more like she’s deep in thought than necessarily disagreeing with what he’d said. “I could tell you were close. It felt like… more, I suppose. More than friendship. But then, it always felt that way with Jimmy as well.”

Phil looks up in time to see her eyes widen a little, a look of realization blanket her features. “Oh.”

“You and Jimmy…”

“No, mum. It wasn’t like that.” He bites his lip. It’s not the whole truth obviously, but he decides she doesn’t need to know the whole truth. He doesn’t need to change her view of his friendship with Jimmy. She loves Jimmy, and Phil can’t predict how she might view things differently if she knew her son actually had been slightly in love with him once, many years ago, or that Jimmy had shared those feelings too. “Jimmy is and always was just a mate.”

“But… he’s gay, Phil.”

Phil pulls his hand back. He almost wants to laugh, but he’s genuinely scared at what ignorance may fly from her lips now. “Yeah… You know not all gay people are in love with each other, right?”

“Yes, of course--”

“And I never said I was gay,” Phil interjects.

“Oh.”

There’s that fucking ‘oh’ again. Phil wants to scream. “Not that there’s anything wrong with being gay--”

“Of course n--”

“I just… Jimmy’s my friend and Dan isn’t. I mean he is but that’s not all.” He’s just babbling now, desperate to keep talking, because as long as he’s talking he doesn’t have to hear whatever she’s going to say next. “That’s all I’m saying. I thought you might want to know. Maybe I shouldn’t have sa--”

“Phil, Phil, stop.”

He snaps his jaw closed. This is definitely not how he envisioned this moment. He’d hoped she’d just… get it. He’d allowed himself to think she just might.

“I’m sorry, love, I know I’m not… I’m not saying the right things. I’m just surprised, and I just need a minute to… wrap my head around this. I want to talk about it and say the right things and I want you to feel like you can talk to me without getting upset.”

He looks away. He actually shifts his body in his chair, angles it away from her because he’d really like to just get up and leave but he knows he can’t. He knows that’ll just make him feel worse.

He knows she means what she says, that she cares and she wants to talk to him and be supportive, but it feels tarnished. Words like ‘surprised,’ phrases like ‘I need a minute’ and ‘wrap my head around this.’ They’re not right. They’re not the right words and phrases. They’re not things she’d be
saying if Dan was different. If Dan wasn’t Dan.

He doesn’t know why he’s this disappointed. She’s not saying anything hurtful, really. He knows it could be a lot worse. He knows for a lot of people it is. He should be grateful, probably. He should suck it up and tell her she’s wonderful and understanding and that he’ll give her all the time she needs to ‘wrap her head around this.’

But he’s not sure he can do that. He’s spent so many years confused and just… sad. He’s spent so long hiding certain things, certain parts of himself and now he’s finally happy and he wants to share that with her. He doesn’t want her to make him feel like it’s something that can only be accepted with time and contemplation.

“It’s fine,” he says quietly. He wants to say more. The words scream themselves at him, begging him to open his mouth and let them out. But he’s never been good at that--ever. He’s never been good at standing up for himself.

“So Dan is your…”

“It’s new, mum. It’s literally brand new. I don’t have like, labels and stuff for anything. I just… I’m happy and I wanted to tell you because you’re my mum and I thought you’d…” Fuck. His eyes are wet. His voice is wavering. “I thought you’d be happy too.” His voice breaks on the last word and he can’t believe it but he’s crying, full on, burying his face in his hands and turning around in his chair.

He feels her arms around his shoulders and her hair tickling his hands. He smells her perfume and she’s stroking his hair and cooing, “Baby boy, my baby boy.” He feels like a baby again. Somehow, even though it’s her reaction that set him off, being in her arms like this transports him to a time when anything could be made right by a cuddle from his mum.

Eventually he gives in and leans his head against her shoulder and takes a few deep breaths. Everything’s fine. His mum still loves him. Soon he’ll be making cookies and then later he’ll get to eat them. He’ll eat them until he feels sick and he’ll go to church and try not to fall asleep in the pew but at least the music will be pretty. Later still he’ll lie in bed and talk to Dan and even get to see that face he loves so much.

Nothing has changed. Nothing is worse, nothing is ruined. Everything is fine.

He wipes his nose on the back of his sleeve. Kath pulls back and pushes his fringe off his face. “You need a haircut, love. Your hair is always in your eyes.”

He laughs and pushes his glasses up and wipes under his eyes, too. “I like it like this.”

“Yes you do, don’t you,” she murmurs. “Have you forgiven me?”

He shrugs.

“Will you tell me more?”

“What more is there to say?”

She pulls up a chair and sets it next to him. “Have you… been with other men?” She sounds awkward and her words are stilted but he can tell she’s really trying. She’s not perfect, she’s probably never going to be perfect about this stuff, but she loves him enough to try and he knows he needs to cut her a considerable amount of slack right now. She needs him to talk her through it, even if he also kind of has no idea what to say.
He wants to shrivel up and die before talking to her about this but it’s too late now. “Uh, yeah, kind of I guess. This feels… different, though.”

“You do seem quite fond of each other, don’t you?”

He can’t help a little smile then. “Yeah,” he mutters.

“And did you lot spend the night together last night?”

He huffs a little laugh. “Yeah. And every other night. I didn’t think you’d noticed.”

“I may be a mum, Phil, but I’m not an idiot.”

“But you didn’t think that was like, weird? You didn’t wonder why we’d want to sleep together when there was a perfectly good bed for him in the guest room?”

Her hands are in her lap and wringing together. “I… I did. I wondered. I’d been… wondering. Ever since you boys got here I’ve been wondering.”

“Then why are you so surprised?” he whispers.

“I didn’t want to assume.”

Phil frowns. “What would be wrong with assuming? Did you not notice how happy I’ve been?”

“I did, of course I did. It’s been wonderful to see that. I just… you didn’t introduce him as anything other than a friend, so—”

“If Dan was a girl, would you have felt bad assuming?”

She presses her lips together, flattening them into a hard line of clear discomfort. She fiddles with her wedding ring, twisting it around on her finger. Phil actually feels guilt burn in his gut. He’s just being an ass now. He knows what he’s saying is valid, but he doesn’t have to say it like this. He doesn’t have to attack her like this.

“I suppose I wouldn’t,” she says, sounding defeated.

“Sorry.” Phil pushes his knee into hers. “I guess I’m feeling… defensive.”

“I am happy for you. I don’t think I said that yet, but I am. I’m really thrilled.”

Phil looks down at his own hands. “Are you?”

“Yes. Of course.”

“Ok.”

A rather tense silence settles between them again. Phil knows her mind is probably reeling right now, and he also knows he’s probably freaked her out to the point that she doesn’t feel like she can ask him any more questions.

To distract himself, he reaches for the mixing bowl and pulls it towards himself. “What else do we need in here?”

She stands up. “Just butter. I’ll get the mixer.”
“No, it’s alright. I’ll mix it by hand.” He’s kind of desperate to work some of these feelings out on this poor unsuspecting lump of fat. “Could you just get me a fork or something?”

He chugs the rest of his coffee as she gets the fork. She hands it to him wordlessly and walks around the table, back to where she’d been sat before. He keeps his head down and presses the fork into the butter, watching soft yellow ribbons rising up between the metal prongs. He feels an odd sense of satisfaction as he grinds the sugar and the butter together and tries not to dwell on the crushing heaviness of his mother’s silence.

Eventually he’s got a proper dough that he can roll in his hands. Kath slides him a baking sheet and he forms perfect circles of shortbread and places them down carefully, making sure they’re all equal in size and spaced out evenly. Neatness and organization are not things that come naturally to him, in fact quite the opposite, so it takes a long time.

Neither of them has spoken a word in a good ten minutes, maybe more--unprecedented behaviour between the two of them. If he still believed in god or jesus or whatever he’d be sending up a prayer for Martyn or Cornelia or hell, even his father to come home and break this unbearable tension.

Once the tray is full, he pushes down on each ball, flattening them with the same fork he’d used to mix the dough. He slides the tray back towards his mum.

“Sprinkles?” she asks.

He shakes his head. Sprinkles seem inappropriate right now, honestly. They’re fun and colourful and kind of silly and he can’t really bear the thought.

She picks it up and walks away and Phil hears the oven door creak as she opens it and slides the tray inside.

He flinches when he feels her hands on his shoulders.

“I’m sorry, love. I muffed this all up.”

He can’t help laughing, and it feels so good he thinks he might just start crying again. “I kind of did too.”

She leans down, wrapping her arms around his shoulders and pushing her lips against the side of his head. “I’m going to say the wrong things. I’m old and no one’s ever taught me the right way to deal with things like this.”

“You’re not old,” he says, reaching a hand up to wrap around her forearm. “Don’t say that.”

“I feel old right now. I feel old and ignorant,” her words come out mumbled as she speaks them directly into his hair.

“We can talk about it. I promise I won’t jump down your throat again.”

“I’m quite sure this is the wrong thing to say, but I just can’t help this feeling that I don’t… that I didn’t know the real you before. And everything feels different now and I don’t like that because you’re my child and I feel like I must have failed you somewhere along the line--”

“Mum.”

“Yes.”
He takes a deep breath. Her words sting, but he knows she means well. “You know me. I’m still the same. And you didn’t fail me. I’m not like, damaged just because I—”

“That’s not what I meant,” she says and her voice is firm. “I meant that you didn’t think you could talk to me sooner.”

“I didn’t really talk to anyone sooner. Except Jimmy.”

“But I’m your mother.”

Phil sighs, squeezing her arm a little tighter. “Sometimes that makes it harder, mum,” he whispers. “I’m… it makes me scared for you. I’m scared.” Her voice is a whisper as well, and it sounds pained. Anguished almost.

“Why?”

“The world can be so… unkind, to…”

His stomach twists. “People like me?”

“I’m sorry if that’s wrong,” she says. “But you know I talk to Jimmy, and I hear the kinds of things hateful people say.”

“You don’t have to worry about that, mum.”

She snorts. “You don’t know what it’s like to be a mum. All I do is worry about you boys, since the moment you were born and placed in my arms.”

He has to take a moment to swallow over the lump of emotion that burns thick in his throat before he answers. “I’ll be ok, I promise. I just wanted you to know… that I’m happy. For the first time in a long time. I didn’t tell you to make you feel guilty or worried or anything like that. I just wanted you to know… I’m so happy. And that’s because of Dan.”

“I wish you’d told me sooner. I wish I could give him a big hug. I wish I could thank him.”

Phil laughs breathily. “I’ll tell him.”

“I have to say something else. Just one more thing.”

“Ok…”

“You’ll be… careful. Yeah? You’ll be safe?”

Phil feels all the blood rushing back up to his face. “God, mum.”

“I’m sorry but that’s my job as your mother, Phil.”

Every cell in his body is cringing. “Didn’t we have this talk like ten years ago?”

“I thought you might need a refresher.”

“I don’t think it’s really changed much in that time, mum,” he mumbles, his words barely even discernible.

“Alright alright. Sorry love. I’m done.” She lets go of him and walks back to her chair. “Let’s get to
work, shall we? These cookies aren’t going to bake themselves.”

Phil nods, relief washing over him. He’s done it. He’s told his mum about Dan. It feels as though a weight really has been lifted from his shoulders.

“Are you going to tell dad?” She’s not looking at him, but flipping through the recipe book for whatever type of cookie they’re going to make next.

Phil frowns. He hadn’t actually given that much thought at all. “Um. I dunno.” He thinks about the words his father had said just yesterday. His ideas about what a ‘man’ should be. He looks at his mum. “Should I?”

She looks up from the book. “That’s up to you, Phil,” she says softly. “I can’t decide that for you.”

Phil’s heart sinks. That’s honestly answer enough, in his opinion. “I don’t want to ruin his Christmas,” he mumbles, looking down at the table.

“Your father loves you, Phil.”

He waits, but she doesn’t say anything else.

It’s fine, he tells himself. He’d never expected to tell anyone in the first place and now he’s told everyone. Everyone except his dad. “If I don’t tell him, would you be able to keep it from him?”

The look that crosses her face indicates that she hadn’t considered all the implications of having a secret of that magnitude from her husband. He seriously doubts she’d be able to resist saying something eventually.

“Maybe you could tell him for me,” he says quietly. “Like, after Christmas. After I’ve gone back home.”

“You are home.”

No, I’m not, he thinks. “Right. I meant back to London.”

“Is that what you want?” she asks.

Is it? If he’s honest with himself, it probably is. It may be a little cowardly, it may be the easy way out, but in this case, it feels like the only solution he’s prepared to accept. When he pictures it, imagines sitting his dad down and telling him about Dan, imagines the look on Nigel’s face when he learns exactly what kind of ‘man’ his son is… He can’t. He can’t even picture it. His brain rejects it instantly.

“Yeah. I think so.”

She nods. “I will then. If you’re sure.”

Phil pulls his legs up, resting his heels against the edge of the chair and wrapping his arms around his knees. He nods. “Will he… do you think he’ll…”

“I think… I think he’ll need some time.”

Phil digs his chin into his knee.

“I’m sorry, love. I know that’s not what you want to hear.”
“It’s fine.”

“He loves you. We both do. You’re happy and that’s all that really matters to us. If you’re happy, we’re happy.”

He nods. It’s a load of crap and he knows it, but it’s alright. It’s still nice of her to say. She’s really trying, and he loves her for that.

“What about Martyn?” she asks.

“I already told him.”

“Before me?!”

She sounds so indignant that Phil can’t help but laugh. It feels good, and he lets himself laugh harder than the situation really calls for, lets all the fear and stress and tension ebb away as his shoulders shake and his tongue gets caught between his teeth.

“You’re a strange child, Philip Michael.”

“Yeah,” he agrees once the giggles have finally stopped. “I know.”
Chapter 41

It’s late when Kath finally lets Phil go up to his room, after they’ve completed the seemingly endless list of Lester family Christmas eve traditions. He’d never really noticed just how many items there were on that list before. Usually he’s more than happy to spend all day with his family. Usually Christmas is a holiday from a life he enjoys being able to forget for a week or two at the end of every December.

Obviously this year is different. At least, now that Dan’s gone it is. Now he wants nothing more than to ditch his family and crawl into bed with his laptop. He’s just brushing his teeth when he gets a text.

Dan: you haven’t forgotten our skype date have you

Phil: course not. told you i wouldn’t

Dan: it’s kinda late though do you need to like go to bed in case you’re still awake when santa shows up

Phil: i baked him cookies all damn day, he can sod off. besides he doesn’t have what i want right now

He’s disgusting even himself with that one. He shakes his head and spits.

Dan: god you’re a sap

Phil: i’m allowed. it’s christmas and you’ve left me all alone

Dan: :'(

Phil closes his bedroom door behind him and strips off his jeans. He grabs his laptop and climbs into bed.

Phil: are we doing this now or..

Dan: i’m ready when you are. is it ok that i’m lying in bed like a slug? i can get up and make an effort if you want

Phil: definitely not. i’m in bed too, we can slug it up together

Dan: i wish we were actually together though

Phil smiles down at his phone before remembering that he could be looking at Dan’s actual face right now. He slips under the duvet and opens up his laptop. He shoves a pillow behind his back and leans back against the headboard. Pretty much the second he opens skype, he’s getting a call.

He accepts it and there’s Dan, all curls and teeth and crinkled eyes filling up his screen. The connection is so good that Phil can actually make out a few of the darker freckles that dot Dan’s nose.

“Hel-lo,” Dan says, as if Phil is the cutest thing in the world.

Phil feels ridiculous. He’s already grinning so hard his face hurts. “Hey.”
“You haven’t aged a day,” Dan says. He’s lying on his stomach, propped up on his elbow, hand cupping the side of his face. His head is tilted to the side and he’s looking at Phil with what can only be described as a dreamy expression. In the distance Phil can just make out that Dan’s feet are up in the air and crossed at the ankles.

He laughs. “I would hope not. It’s only been like twelve hours since I saw you last.”

“That feels like so much longer.”

Phil nods. “It actually really does. It’s been… a day.”

Dan sighs. “Yeah. Christmas is a lot.”

“Has it not been a good day for you?” Phil asks.

Dan shrugs. “It’s not bad or anything. It’s just kind of draining. Woke up early, as you know…”

Phil nods. “Soz.”

“You should be. It’s all your fault.”

“Continue,” Phil urges.

“Long-ish train ride, then just family stuff. All day. I’m not always great at family stuff.”

“I remember,” Phil says softly.

“Plus I had to leave my hot man friend behind in the north. So that’s like, shitty and stuff.”

Phil laughs. “Man friend?”

“Hot man friend.”

Phil pushes his glasses up on his nose and hopes his cheeks aren’t too pink. “You think I’m hot, Howell?”

Dan shakes his head. “We’re not doing this. You’re not gonna start making things harder before we’ve even been talking for two minutes.”

“Harder?”

“Harder.”

“I’m not doing anything!” Phil protests.

“You’re being all hot with your glasses and your face and your voice and shit, just cut that out.”

Phil sticks his tongue out between his teeth. “My voice?”

Dan nods. “You’ve got a sexy voice, Phil. Have I never told you that?”

Phil covers his smile with his hand, shaking his head sheepishly.

“It’s even sexier on the phone. And on skype apparently.”

“Shut up,” Phil mumbles against his fingers.
“Sorry, but it’s true.”

“You’re trying to change the subject.”

“What were we talking about again?” Dan asks.

“Your day.”

Dan shifts his weight so he’s lying on his side. He’s still propped up on one elbow and the side of his face rests against the flat of his palm. “Right. My day. It was alright. I shouldn’t complain.”

“I mean, you can if you want. If it really wasn’t good?”

Dan shakes his head. “It’s fine. I just… I don’t like coming back here. It reminds me of times that were…”

“Harder?”

Dan nods. “Before I had my shit together. I mean I still don’t but at least I’m not….” he trails off, biting his lip and looking away.

“Yeah,” Phil says softly. He knows what Dan means, and his heart aches for that Dan. The Dan of the past, the one who lived in darkness and couldn’t even begin to imagine a way out of it. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine, really. Just like, not my fave place to spend any extended periods of time anymore.”

“Did you… are you feeling alright today, though?” Phil asks tentatively. “Did you do anything on the list?”

Dan chuckles. “Uhh… actually, yeah, I guess technically I did. My brother’s vegan so I ate healthy.”

Phil crinkles his nose. “Vegan at Christmas?”

“Why do you think I ate so much of Kath’s cooking?”

“It all makes sense now.” Phil’s fringe starts to tickle his forehead, so he reaches up and shoves it back unceremoniously.

Dan raises his eyebrows. “Quiff it up, Lester.”

Phil schootches down a little further into his bed. “Shut up.”

“You know how I feel about the quiff.”

“Don’t even say--”

“Dad.”

Phil laughs. “I hate you. And stop trying to change the subject.”

Dan grins. “Sorry dad.”

Phil shakes his head, but he wouldn’t be able to stop smiling even if he wanted to.

“What were we talking about?”
“How many of your not supposed to’s you actually followed today.”

“Oh, right,” Dan says, still smiling. Phil notices he can actually make out Dan’s long toes wiggling underneath bright orange socks. “Uhh, I think that’s about it, mate, sorry.”

Phil frowns.

“I’m fine, Phil, I promise.”

“You have to promise me you’ll do some exercise tomorrow, yeah?”

Dan groans. “On Christmas day? Are you some kind of sadist?”

“We can do it together. We can do like, skype yoga.”

“I’m sure mama Lester will be keeping you far too busy for that.”

“Nothing she’d want me to do would keep me from helping my… you. From helping you stay healthy, Dan.”

Dan’s face nearly fills up Phil’s entire screen. He must be leaned in so close to his own laptop. Phil can see everything. He can see the length of Dan’s dark lashes as he closes his eyes and the tiny creases between his brows as he furrows them just slightly.

“You’re too good, Phil,” he whispers. “You’re just too good for me.”

“Shut up,” Phil murmurs, and for the first time today, he means it. “You’re not allowed to let yourself fall apart. Ok?” he tries to make his voice something resembling stern. “And you’re not allowed to say stuff like that.”

“Sorry, I’m just… I guess I’m still just not used to that.”

“Used to what?”

“Someone, like… caring so much? About me.”

Phil frowns. “I don’t want to believe that’s true.”

Dan shrugs. “I’ve learned a lot about myself in the past six months or so, but before that… before the therapy and the drugs and all that… I really was a mess, Phil. Like, I was a completely different person. I didn’t talk to anyone about my shit. I hardly talked to anyone at all about anything. So I can’t really blame anyone for not giving a shit about me.”

Dan’s words cut Phil like a knife. They’re harsh and ugly and he wants to negate them. He wants to go back in time and meet Dan sooner so he doesn’t have to ever hear Dan speak words as awful as these.

“What about your family?” he asks quietly.

“Yeah, I mean of course they love me, they’re my parents so they’re literally kind of obligated to at least pretend, but they were never really there the way I wanted them to be. It felt like they were always busy doing things they thought were more important.”

“What about your brother?”

Dan shrugs again. “He’s a lot younger so he wouldn’t have cared either, and we’ve never really
gotten on anyway.”

Phil can’t honestly think of anything to say. His frown deepens as he stares through the screen at Dan chewing absentmindedly on his thumbnail.

Dan notices eventually. “Hey, it’s fine, Phil. I’m fine now, mostly. You know that. And I’m not supposed to dwell on that shit anyway.”

“Do you talk to them now?” Phil asks. He knows he should probably let it go, but he can’t. Not just yet.

“Who, my parents?”

Phil nods.

“Uh… no. Not really. I mean I think they can see how much better I’m doing now, so there’s really no need?”

“No need to talk to your family?”

“Not everyone’s family is like yours, Phil.” He’s looking down now, away from Phil. His voice is quiet, but the sadness contained within it burns Phil’s ears.

“Maybe if you tried to talk to them, they’d surprise you,” Phil says, barely louder than a whisper now, because he’s honestly not sure how Dan will react. “Maybe they think it’s you who doesn’t care about them.”

Dan’s eyes flit back up. “Like my flatmates?”

Phil nods.

“I don’t know, Phil. It’s always been like this. There’s always been… distance. Too much space. Too much left unspoken.” He laughs then. “It’s been too many days since I wrote. I’m getting like dream journal levels of pretentious over here.”

Phil doesn’t laugh. “You’re not being pretentious. You’re being honest.”

“I guess I feel like I can do that with you.”

“You can. Always.” Phil’s throat burns. His chest is tight with the longing he feels to reach out and pull Dan in close to him. “I just wish you could with them too.”

“It’s not as dramatic as I’m making it sound. I’m catastrophizing. And I’m not supposed to do that. Or, well, I’m supposed to try to recognize when I’m doing it, and yeah, I guess this is me, recognizing that I’m doing that.”

“Are you?” Phil asks. “Or are you just being honest?”

Dan laughs again. “Are you my therapist now, Phil?”

“Sorry.”

Dan just shakes his head.

“I’ll stop,” Phil says. “It’s not my business. It just seems like… like maybe you felt you couldn’t trust people back then, or maybe you felt like you didn’t deserve whatever love and support they had to
give?” His voice wavers. When had this conversation taken such a turn?

Dan frowns. “Why would you…”

“That’s what you do sometimes,” Phil whispers. “Even to me. You say you don’t deserve it, that you’re not worth it. But you are.”

“Maybe I’ll…” He rolls back over onto his stomach. “Maybe I could try talking to them. Maybe my mum. I could probably put in a bit more effort with my mum.”

Phil nods.

“I won’t say you’re too good, because… like, you’re right, I say that, and it’s yet another thing I’m not supposed to say. But… you are. You’re so good to me it’s… I almost don’t know how to handle it sometimes.”

“You don’t need to handle it. Just let me be good to you, Dan. You deserve it. You’ve made my life so much better, in every way.”

Dan drops his face into his hands, shaking his head a little.

Phil laughs, at himself for being so incredibly sentimental, and at Dan, who apparently finds it endearing and not creepy, because he’s laughing too. The sound of it is breathy and muffled against his fingers.

“Sorry,” Phil says. “Too much. I told you it’s been a day.”

“Fuck, Phil, shit, sorry. You let me go on and on about my dumb shit and you were trying to tell me about yours.”

Phil laughs. “About my dumb shit?”

“About your shit. About your day, which maybe was shit?”

“Uh… well, no, not really. Not shit, really. Just…”

“Jesus, Phil. Weren’t you supposed to be making cookies all day?”

“Mhm. Cookies and conversation with Kath.”

Dan frowns. “Yeah… anything else?”

“She dragged me to church with her and I helped her make dinner and… I mean you saw what she’s like. You saw what it’s like to do Christmas with the Lesters.”

“I did.” Dan smiles. “I liked it a lot.”

“I’m glad.”

“I don’t get how that could have been anything close to shit.”

“I’m not saying shit, I just…” He takes a deep breath. “I told her.”

“Told her what?” Dan asks.

“About… us.”
Dan frowns again. “What, seriously?”

Phil’s heart rate spikes. He nods.

“You told your mum about me? You came out to your mum?”

Phil feels cold suddenly. “Yeah,” he croaks. “I hope that’s ok?”

“Of course it’s ok. Sorry, shit. Yeah, of course, of course it’s ok. I just can’t believe it. I had no idea you were-- you didn’t tell me.”

“I didn’t know if I was going to be brave enough to go through with it.”

“But you did?”

Phil nods. “I didn’t want to hide you. I wanted her to know the truth.”

“Phil,” Dan breathes. “That’s… How’d she take it?”

“About as well as I could have hoped for I think.”

“Does she hate me now?” Dan asks. “After all that work I did to get on her good side?”

Phil snorts. “Definitely not. Actually that reminds me, she wanted me to thank you.”

“For what?”

Phil bites his lip, wondering if Dan can handle another outburst of emotion directed his way.

“What?” Dan asks, sounding slightly desperate.

“I feel like I’m being too much tonight. Like, you’re gonna get annoyed with my sap.”

“I won’t, I promise,” Dan assures. “I never will, Phil. Tell me.”

“I told her I was happy. For the first time in a long time.”

Dan’s eyes widen a little, his voice pitching up. “Because of me?”

Phil nods.

Then Phil hears a creaking noise and Dan is rolling away, out of Phil’s view.

“You promised!” Phil yelps.

“Gimme a sec,” comes Dan’s voice, sounding far off.

Phil’s view on his laptop is plunged into darkness for a moment before he sees Dan’s room again, this time bathed in a dim yellow light. He comes back a minute later, picking up his laptop and slipping under his duvet. When Phil can see his face again it’s flushed and his eyes are shiny, reflecting that yellow light wetly.

“Where’d you go?”

“Sorry, I just… wasn’t expecting that. At all.”

“I’m sorry. I should have told you first. I should have asked.”
Dan shakes his head. “It’s fine. It’s good. It was really hard to act like I was just your friend.”

Phil laughs. “I reckon you didn’t do a great job at it anyway.”

“Well I did my best, Phil. I mean, look at you. Can you blame me?”

“Uh, yes, yes I can.”

“Shut up.”

“I mean, I didn’t do great either. Because look at you.”

Dan just shakes his head and looks away, smiling. “I didn’t know-- like, to be honest I wasn’t really sure you were that… sure?”

“About us?”

Dan chuckles breathily. “Us,” he murmurs. “Yeah. Like I just didn’t realize--”

“Oh god,” Phil interrupts. “I guess I just assumed-- Are we not--”

“No! We are! Of course we are. I mean, I am. I just didn’t exactly know, like for you, because I know this is all new to you, I didn’t know how… serious you were about it?”

“Was I not obvious?” Phil asks quietly.

“I’m not saying I didn’t think you were … into me. I’m not that falsely modest or whatever. I just… I had no idea you were sure enough to tell your mum.”

“Are you not that sure?”

“I am, Phil. I’ll go tell her right now if you want me to.”

“That’s not what I meant--”

“I know. But I will. Because I am. I’ve been sure for a long-ass time.”

Phil giggles.

“Sorry, that’s not… I’ve been sure about you for months, Phil. I can’t even believe how lucky I am.”

Phil’s stomach churns excitedly, but he can’t smile. Not yet. “You have to stop that.”

“Stop what? Professing my feelings? Sorry--”

“No, I mean, you have to stop doubting me. I’m in. I told you I’m in. I meant it. Like, I really meant it.”

“You told your mum,” Dan breathes.

“I did.”

“And she had no idea?”

“She said she was surprised. She said…” he trails off. Even remembering it stings a little. “She said she needs time to wrap her head around it.”
“Oh Phil--”

“It’s fine,” Phil interjects. He doesn’t want to feel sad right now. His talk with his mum had left him feeling mostly hopeful. He doesn’t want to wallow in what went wrong. “I wish she didn’t need time to love me unconditionally, but I know she’ll get it. She’ll be fine eventually. She’s mostly fine now. Just a little… confused, I guess.”

Dan nods. “Still sucks though. You’re allowed to say it sucks.”

“I just know that loads of people have it so much harder.”

“That doesn’t mean this wasn’t hard for you. You don’t always have to compare yourself. Just because someone else has it worse doesn’t mean you have to be grateful for being dealt only a mildly shitty hand. As my therapist always tells me, you’re entitled to your feelings.”

Phil nods, the word oh echoing in his ears. “It kind of sucked.”

“I wish I could hold your hand right now,” Dan says softly.

Phil nods. “Me too.”

“Did you tell your dad?”

“No. I’m not that brave.”

“Do you want me to tell my mum?” Dan asks.

“It doesn’t matter to me,” Phil says gently. “All that matters is that I have you and you’re just as in as I am.”

“I am. You’re stuck with me.”

“Good,” Phil says, and now he can smile.

“So… what’s it gonna be like at work?” Dan asks.

“What d’you mean?”

“Like… are we gonna act the same? Are we gonna tell anyone? Like, what about Rory?”

Phil grins sheepishly. “I already told her.” He sticks the tip of his tongue out between his teeth.

“Phil Lester! Is there anyone you haven’t told?”

“Are you angry?”

Dan smiles. “Course not, you div.”

“I guess I got tired of keeping secrets. I’ve been doing it so long and I just… didn’t want to anymore?”

Dan nods, stifling a yawn.

“You tired, Howell?”

“Maybe a little,” Dan says, somewhat reluctantly it seems.
“D’you want me to let you go?”

“Never. I’m not actually going to be able to fall asleep anyway. I mean, unless you want to sleep.”

“I don’t.” Phil frowns. “But why won’t you be able to sleep?”

Phil watches the little triangle of rosy skin on Dan’s jaw redden a little deeper. Dan looks away from his computer. “I don’t really sleep well usually.”

Phil’s frown deepens. He’s never seen Dan struggle to fall asleep any of the nights they’ve spent together.

“When I’m alone,” Dan adds quietly.

“You sleep better with people?”

“I sleep better with you, Phil.”

Phil suddenly wishes rather fervently that he could fast forward the next few days. “You should have stayed.”

“My nan would have been cross.”

Phil laughs. “You’re a good grandson.”

“I do try. She’s always the one who’s been there for me. I rang her from Tesco my first day at uni. I was in the cheese aisle and I started having a full-on existential crisis. I mean, she didn’t actually answer because she was at her sudoku club but she rang me later and let me blubber about how alone I felt for like two hours.”

Phil shuffles a little further down the wall. “I remember that feeling, actually. I had it before I’d even left. I was out with my mum buying stuff for moving away… I was looking at bins actually, and it just hit me that I was going to have to leave this place and live with strangers and look after myself and it just felt bloody terrifying.”

Dan nods. “It must have been even worse for you. You actually get along with your family. And at least I had Ella.”

“Ella?”

“Yeah… the girl I followed. I think I mentioned that at one point?”

Phil nods. “Were you together?”

“Yeah. We’d been together since I was fifteen. She was going to Manchester and I didn’t really have any reason not to come here so I figured fuck it. Pick a random degree and give it a go.”

“But it didn’t work out obviously.”

“Not in the end, no. She was too good for me.”

“Dan…”

“No, she was. At the time, she was. She always was. I was a fucking mess and she always deserved better. Eventually she figured that out.”
“You weren’t a mess… you needed help.”

“I was a mess. I needed help but I was a mess and she didn’t know how to deal with it. And she actually liked school, and made friends and like, joined clubs and stuff. She was definitely better off once she’d finally had enough of my shit.”

Phil doesn’t say anything. He’s trying not to keep frowning, but his chest hurts for how alone Dan must have felt back then. How abandoned.

“It’s ok, Phil. That part of my life is over now. I still talk to her every now and again and she’s doing well. Actually, I talked to her a few weeks ago. I even told her about you.”

Phil’s eyes widen. “You did?”

Dan nods. “She was really the only friend I ever had that actually cared about me. Everyone else was so temporary, just people from my uni hall or class who I’d say hi to or even go out drinking with on occasion, but like, no one else ever really bothered getting to know me.”

“I’m sorry, Dan.”

“It’s fine. It is what it is, and I’m not supposed to dwell on that shit anymore.” Dan’s laptop is moving again as Dan shuffles all the way down to lie the side of his head against the pillow. He puts his computer on the pillow next to his head. He looks so cozy and adorable Phil wishes he could reach through the screen and pinch his rosy cheek.

“I bet you didn’t have that problem, though. You probably had loads of friends.”

Phil scoffs. “Not really. I mean I met lots of nice people, but I was a mess too, just in a different way. No one really knew me either. Except Jimmy. As much as I’d let him know me anyway.”

“I can’t imagine anyone not wanting to know you,” Dan murmurs.

Phil smiles. “You’re just biased ‘cause you think I’m pretty.”

Dan smiles too, pressing his face deeper into the pillow. “Shut up.”

“It’s ok, I think you’re pretty too.”

“You do?”

“Oh shut up, you rat.”

Dan giggles. “So romantic.”

“You know I think you’re gorgeous.”

Dan’s smile is replaced by a sudden look of intensity. “Gorgeous?”

Phil nods. “The most gorgeous.”

“Well, fuck.”

“Surely you must have known that already,” Phil says, pushing his glasses back up his nose.

“It’s really nice to hear you say it though.”
“Shall I say more?” Phil asks.

Dan nods.

“I love your dark eyes and your ridiculous dimple and your curly hair. I love playing with your hair.”

Dan smiles. “I love it when you play with my hair. Can I tell you what I love?”

Phil nods.

“I love your glasses and your emo fringe, whether you straighten it or not. I love your big blue eyes and your stupidly soft skin.”

“I love your hands,” Phil blurts.

“My hands, really?”

Phil nods. “I liked your hands from the very beginning. That first day we did drink training, I couldn’t stop staring at them.”

“Like… in a sexy way? Is it because they’re so big?”

Phil shakes his head so his fringe falls down and skims his eyes. He really needs a haircut. “I don’t really think it was in a sexy way. Not that they aren’t sexy, but… I dunno. They’re just nice. I like them. I like looking at them and holding them. Do I have to have an explanation?”

Dan smiles. “No, you don’t. But… I hope it’ll be a sexy way someday.”

Phil feels a tiny jolt in his stomach. “It will,” he whispers.

“Yeah?” Dan whispers back.

Phil nods. “Maybe soon.”

Dan rolls his face into his pillow again. “That’s definitely breaking the rules, Phil.”

Phil grins. “Well… I think we might have to modify the rules when we get home.”
Chapter 42

Dan’s hand appears in the frame then and covers his mouth. Phil can see the shiny pink of his nails, his broad palm and his long thick fingers and he thinks, actually, maybe it had been a sexy thing all along. At least a little bit anyway.

“I don’t want you to say that just because you think it’s what I want, but… I can’t pretend it’s not what I want. I really want that.”

“I do too,” Phil says, and his heart is pounding but he knows it’s true. It hasn’t technically been more than a few days, but those days have felt packed full of weeks—or maybe even months—worth of important moments between the two of them.

“Are you trying to get me going right now, Phil?”

Phil feels too exposed now, so he takes hold of his laptop and shuffles down. He puts his computer on the pillow next to him and lays his head down just as Dan had done. “I’m not trying to, it’s just a nice little bonus.”

“Hiding your body is not going to make me forget about the image you just put in my head, Lester.”

Phil yawns. He’s really starting to feel all the emotions of this day catching up to him. “That reminds me,” he murmurs. “I had a thought today.”

“What was that?”

Phil closes his eyes and pulls his duvet up, up until he’s tucking it under his chin. He feels so comfortable—like he could say absolutely anything right now and it wouldn’t matter. “I want to see you naked.”

He hears Dan make a little noise. He opens one eye just a crack and sees Dan scrubbing both hands over his face.

“I hate you,” he mumbles.

Phil closes his eye again and smiles. “I know.”

“I feel like you’ve pretty much seen everything already.”

“I definitely haven’t.”

“Well I want to see you too, Phil. I probably shouldn’t even tell you how long I’ve been having dreams about it.”

Phil smirks. “Is that all that happens in those dreams? Am I just stood around in my birthday suit, twiddling my thumbs?”

“Uh… not your thumbs, no.”

Phil splutters. “Dan!”

“You asked, mate!”

He’s pretending to be horrified, but the swelling sensation growing in his groin tells him he’s more
than fine with it. “If you were here,” he says quietly, “would you let me change the rules?”

Dan groans. “Yes, Phil, fuck. Of course I would. If that’s what you wanted.”

“I wish you were here.”

“This is torture, Phil. You’re literally torturing me.”

“I’m feeling a little tortured right now too.”

“Are you?” Dan asks. “Like, are you…?” The implication in Dan’s tone is clear.

Even though he knows Dan can’t see, Phil reaches down under the covers andpalms himself over
his pj bottoms for confirmation. “Yeah,” he croaks. “I am.” He opens his eyes and looks at Dan,
who’s biting his lip and staring intently at Phil. “Are you?”

“You just told me you want to see me naked and you want my handsto touch you in a sexy way.
Yes, I’m fucking hard, Phil. I couldn’t be more hard.”

Perhaps for the first time ever, Phil doesn’t feel even a little bit sheepish or nervous about this
confession. He feels hot all over, and it doesn’t feel shameful or scary. He doesn’t feel the urge to
hide—in fact he wants to chase it. “I want to see you.”

“I want to see you too, Phil. God, you’ve no idea.”

Phil presses his hand down harder, his heart hammering against his chest. “I think I do.”

Dan is quiet, his heavy-lidded eyes boring into Phil’s. Phil can’t see anything but Dan’s face laid out
across his pillow, and he wonders if Dan’s hands are exploring himself in the same way Phil’s are
itching to.

“Would you show me?” he asks darkly.

Dan’s eyelids flutter shut, but he shakes his head.

Phil tries to swallow back the disappointment. “Why?”

“I want us to be together the first time we see each other, Phil. I want to…” He pauses. “I want us to
be able to touch each other. Like, if that’s what you wanted. I want that to be an option, y’know?”

Phil nods. “I want to touch you.”

“What about you?” Dan whispers. “This doesn’t feel slow, Phil. I’m still worried you think you have to
be ready—”

“I’m sure that I want to. I think it’s one of the few things in life I’m sure of right now.”

Dan smiles. “I want to touch you too.”

“I’ve never really wanted to touch anyone before.” He’s trying to keep his voice quiet, knowing his
parents are in the room next to his.

“I’ve never wanted to touch anyone as much as I want to touch you. And to be honest… I really
want you to touch me too.”

“It’s been a long time,” Phil says. “I might be a little rusty.”
“You know I don’t care, right?”

Phil doesn’t say anything. He can’t imagine that being true. It’d never been true of anyone who’d wanted him to touch them before. No one had ever told him that it didn’t matter if he didn’t really know what he was doing. Everyone had seemed to just assume he would. Luckily he’s a quick learner, and most of the time he’d been able to figure it out and hold himself together long enough to send the other person away at least reasonably satisfied.

“Is this too much, Phil? Did I push you too far?”

“No,” Phil whispers. “I just want to be good for you.”

“When it happens, it will be good. You wanna know how I know? Because it’s you. That’s literally all that’s required.”

Phil’s chewing on the inside of his cheek.

“It’s not about me, anyway. It’s about you,” Dan says gently. “It’s about us. Figuring stuff out together. You think you’re worried about being good?”

“Why would you worry?” Phil asks, frowning.

Dan huffs a laugh. “Because you said it’s never been good before.”

“Yeah…”

“And I want it to be so good for you, Phil. I want you to know how good it can be.”

Phil feels a shiver run down his arms, goosebumps forming all over his body. He closes his eyes. “I want you to make me feel good.”

“I’m going to, Phil. When you’re ready, I’m going to figure out every single way to make you feel good.”

Phil keeps his eyes closed and slips his hand under his pants. He takes hold of himself and lets a breathy noise fall from his lips.

“Shit, Phil. Are you…?”

“Yeah. That ok?”

“Yeah. God, yes. Do you mind if I…?”

Phil shakes his head. “I want you to.”

“You look so fucking good, Phil. This isn’t gonna last long for me probably.”

Phil would smile if he wasn’t just so obscenely turned on. “Me neither. Would you… can you keep talking to me? About what you’re going to do?”

“You want me to talk dirty to you, Lester?”

This time, Phil can’t contain his smirk, even as he thumbs across the head of his cock. It’s already a little wet and he makes another breathy sound. “Yeah, I do. It’s… it’s making me so hard, Dan. So hard for you.”
He almost can’t believe himself. He’s never said anything like that in his life, and now it’s rolling off his tongue like it’s the most natural thing in the world. Maybe because he hadn’t meant it to be dirty or titillating. It’s just the truth.

Dan moans then, and Phil cracks open an eye to see him sinking his teeth into the plush pink of his lip, his own eyes shut tight. “Fuck, Phil.”

“Sorry. Too much?”

“No you spork, shut up. You’re so fucking hot .”

Phil giggles. “You curse a lot when you’re…”

“Horny as fuck?” Dan offers. “Yeah. Sorry.”

“Don’t be. I kind of like it. I like the noises you make too. I wanna be the cause of them some day.”

“You are the cause of them, Phil. But I wanna be the cause of yours too.”

“You are, trust me.” Phil’s moving his hand slowly, keeping his grip loose. He can’t let himself unravel so quickly this time, not when he won’t be able to hide the evidence.

“Yeah, but I want to cause them with my hands,” Dan says. “I want to cause them with my mouth.”

Phil’s stomach flips, his whole body suddenly alight with nerves.

“I want to hear you making those noises right in my ear, Phil. I wanna feel your hands in my hair when you’re making those noises.”

“Keep going,” Phil groans. “Don’t stop.”

“What d’you want me to say, Phil? I don’t want to scare you off. I have some vivid fucking images in here.”

“You couldn’t scare me right now if you tried,” Phil pants, finding it harder by the second to keep from tugging fast and rough chasing the high he knows is inevitable. He doesn’t want this to be over yet, but the feeling is so all-consuming that he doesn’t know how much more he can take. “Tell me what you want to do to me.”

Dan breathes heavy through his nose, and if Phil listens very closely he can just make out the rhythmic sound of skin on skin coming from the speaker of his laptop. It definitely doesn’t help, and Phil has to give himself a firm squeeze to keep it under control.

“I wanna… kiss you… everywhere.” Dan’s obviously trying to give Phil what he wants, but at the same time he’s very obviously having trouble getting words out anymore, moaning quietly between each one. “I want to put my tongue… on every inch of your body.”

Phil’s eyes are squeezed shut as he strokes over himself, and he can’t help picturing it as he listens to Dan becoming less and less coherent. He pictures himself laid out on Dan’s tiny mattress, naked underneath him with the fairy lights twinkling above them. His mind floods with the image of Dan’s mouth hot and wet on his skin, tongue flicking teasingly over his nipple.

“More,” he grunts, unable to keep his rhythm any kind of slow or measured anymore.

“I’m getting close, Phil, I’m sorry.”
Relief washes over him--he’s not the only one. “I am too.”

“Yeah?”

Phil answers with a moan, louder than he’d let himself be so far. He bites down harshly on his lip to keep himself doing that again. Kath doesn’t need to hear this. This is only for him--for him and Dan.

“God, Phil. You’re gonna make me come.”

There isn’t enough breath in Phil’s lungs to respond--it’s all been punched out by the force of the pleasure that overtakes him then. He can’t even hear Dan’s little high pitched whines anymore over the rushing of the blood in his ears. His heels grind into the mattress and his teeth sink further into the thin skin of his bottom lip. He doesn’t have the wherewithal to muffle the sound that rumbles from the back of his throat beyond that. He can only hope it wasn’t loud enough to travel through the walls and into his parents’ ears.

It feels like an eternity before he’s able to uncurl his toes and inhale again. His head feels floaty as he opens his eyes and looks at Dan.

Dan looks like he’s experiencing something similar. His face is mostly pressed into his pillow and Phil can hear his long, heavy breaths. He doesn’t appear capable of communication yet, so Phil takes the opportunity to shimmy out of his pj bottoms and his pants, using them to clean himself up and dropping them off the side of the bed. He’s far too spent to even attempt to get up and find something else to wear, but it doesn’t matter. Sadly, it’s just him in this bed tonight.

“God,” Dan groans, rolling over onto his back and staring up at the ceiling. He reaches up and pushes his curly fringe back off his forehead, gripping either side of the top of his head like he’s wondering what just happened.

“You ok there, mate?” Phil smirks.

Dan turns his head towards the laptop. “I don’t know yet. I feel all wibbly wobbly.”

“Timey wimey?”

Dan chuckles. “You’re such a nerd, Phil.”

Phil scoffs. “You love me.” He regrets it the moment he’s said it but Dan just looks at him and smiles.

“Yeah.”

Phil has the urge to roll away and cover his face or giggle nervously but he fights it. This is a perfect moment and he knows it. It’s another moment to add to the rapidly growing list marked remember forever.

“Are you ok?” Dan asks softly. “That wasn’t too much was it?”

“It was a lot. Definitely not too much.”

Dan pulls his duvet up under his chin, smiling. “Can I tell you a secret?”

“Course.”

“You’re sexy.”
Phil laughs. “How dare you imply that’s a secret, Howell. I think it’s more like a universally accepted truth.”

“Oh shit, that’s true.”

“Can I tell you a secret?”

“You better,” Dan says.

“I’m sad about one thing.”

Dan’s smile vanishes. “What?”

“I came so hard I didn’t get to watch you finish.”

Relief floods Dan’s face. “Fuck you, Phil.”

Phil sticks his tongue out. “Sorry, yeah, that was a dick move. Still true, though. I kind of really wanted to see that.”

“I mean… I reckon we could do that again some time. You’ll definitely see it if you want to.”

“I want to,” Phil says quickly.

“You’ll have to let me finish first next time. Watching you come was probably the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen. I couldn’t even handle it.”

“I couldn’t even handle you talking,” Phil mumbles. “Sorry.”

“Why would you apologize? Why would you ever apologize, Phil? You did nothing wrong.”

“I was so… quick.”

“So was I, you twat. That’s what happens when you like someone.”

“Yeah, but… if you touch me—”

“When,” Dan interjects.

“When you touch me… it’s probably gonna be even worse.”

“It will be for me too. When will you accept that I like you, Phil? Like, you need to just accept that I don’t care about shit like that. You need to stop worrying.”

It’s a ridiculous thought, but he forces himself not to laugh. “I’ll try.”

They’re both laid on their sides, faces melting into their pillows and they’re looking at each other, just staring into each other’s eyes. Phil doesn’t feel any awkwardness, no desire to look away or fill the silence with idle words. His eyes take their time roaming all the curves of Dan’s face and cataloguing every freckle.

A deep feeling of contentment settles in him. His limbs feels heavy, sinking down into the mattress. Absolutely everything is right with the world in this moment. He yawns.

“Do you need to sleep?” Dan whispers.

Phil shakes his head. He could--he could probably fall asleep in a matter of seconds at this point, but
he doesn’t want that.

“Can I ask you something?”

Phil nods.

“Something about… before?”

Phil frowns. His mind is hazy and he really doesn’t know what Dan means.

“Like, what you said the other day… about it never being good before?”

“Oh,” Phil says.

“You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to, obviously. I just feel like maybe-- like I should probably have some sort of general idea-- I just--” He scrubs his hand over his face. “I wouldn’t mind knowing what happened so I can make sure it never happens again.”

“It won’t,” Phil whispers. “This is already so different.”

“Ok, Phil. That’s fine--”

“No. You can ask me whatever you want. You’re right.”

Dan nods.

“Can I ask you stuff too?” Phil asks.

“Of course. That’s a good idea.”

“Ok, you can go first.”

“It’s not going to upset you though, is it?” Dan asks.

Phil rolls onto his back. “I don’t… think so. I dunno to be honest. I don’t know.”

“You can tell me to fuck off if it’s too much?”

Phil nods, knowing already that he would never.

“So you said you were never sexually attracted to anyone right?”

Phil nods.

“So… are you like, a virgin?”

Phil closes his eyes. “No.” He wishes now that he could answer differently.

Dan frowns. “But… like, how. Why?”

“I got tired of being different. I was tired of feeling like a freak. I thought I just had to keep trying and eventually I’d figure it out.”

“And you never did,” Dan says.

“No. Never.”
“How did that… work? Sorry, fuck. That’s probably too much.”

Phil’s chest tightens, remembering. “It depended.”

“On what?”

“On who I was… with. Like girl or boy, or whatever.” He turns his head and looks at Dan again. “It was easier with boys.”

“Why?” Dan croaks quietly. He sounds pained.

Phil turns back onto his side and pulls his knees up, curling in on himself. “I could just, y’know… bottom. Didn’t even have to worry about trying to get hard.”

The line between Dan’s brows is deep. “Phil…”

“I know. It sounds bad.”

Dan’s absolutely gnawing on his lip now. Phil’s surprised it’s not bleeding already.

“Don’t do that,” he whispers. “You’re gonna break the skin.”

Dan stops, but almost instantly replaces lip with fingernail.

“It was a long time ago,” Phil assures. “And they were all nice people. I think I hid it well. I would just put all the focus on getting them off.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Dan whispers. “How could they not notice that you weren’t into it? That’s like, rule number one.”

Phil laughs darkly. “Usually there was drinking involved and like, fumbling around in the dark. I don’t know. I could usually force myself into it long enough for it not to be awkward. I got…” He trails off. He’s probably already said too much.

“What?” Dan chokes.

Phil looks at him with pleading eyes. “Don’t judge me.”

“Never. Tell me.”

“I got used to just using my fingers. And tongue. Usually I could actually just pretend I’d gotten myself off at the same time.”

Dan is quiet for a long time before he says, “No wonder you’re scared.”

“I’m not anymore.”

“Well I am.”

Phil’s heart sinks. “I’m sorry.”

“You wouldn’t do that with me, would you?” Dan asks. “You won’t?”

“Of course not.”

“You’ll tell me the truth? You promise you’ll never do anything you don’t want to?”
Phil nods. “I promise.”

“I changed my mind,” Dan says and Phil’s stomach drops. He feels sick.

“You’re never allowed to let me finish first.”

Phil’s breath is pushed from his mouth in a rush, laughing in shock and relief.

“You didn’t… you didn’t pretend tonight, did you?”

“No! Of course not!”

“I seriously meant what I said, Phil. I can wait. I can wait as long as you need. Even if that means forever.”

“It doesn’t. I don’t want to wait forever. I want to-- I just want you, Dan. I want to replace all those memories with new better ones.”

Dan nods. “When something happens… anything … it has to be up to you. I don’t want to modify that rule.”

“Dan--”

“No, Phil, I’m sorry but like… no. You have to be the one to tell me what to do. I’d be terrified otherwise. The thought of you ever feeling like that because of me…”


“You are never allowed to say that fucking word again, Phil.”

Phil’s gut has been clenched so long it’s really starting to hurt. “Ok.”

“Ok,” Dan repeats. “It’s your turn now.”

“Oh, right,” Phil says. “Uh… so you’ve been with a girl obviously.”

“Yeah.”

“And guys?”

Dan nods.

“And they were good experiences?”

Dan shrugs. “Better than yours,” he says softly. “But like, other than Ella it was always one time things. And I wasn’t in a good place ever.”

“Did you know you were into guys when you were with Ella?”

“Yeah. I always knew. It just took me a while to accept it, I guess.”

“Do you have a… preference?”

“No, I don’t think so. It’s just about the person for me. I don’t care what parts they have, which is all that really comes down to, y’know?”

Phil nods.
“Do you?” Dan asks.

“I… have no idea, actually. It’s kind of hard to tell.”

“Right, of course, sorry.”

“I guess I’ve only ever had real feelings for you and…”

“Jimmy,” Dan finishes.

“Yeah. Sorry, is that weird to hear?”

“No, Phil, of course not.”

“It was never anything,” Phil says. “I never let it be anything. I never let myself really feel it.”

“Did he feel it too?”

Phil’s heart gives a twinge. He’s been so focused on Dan that he’s not even sure he’s really processed the full extent of the loss he feels for the life he could have had with Jimmy. Or how much he may have hurt his friend in the end, without ever actually knowing it. His jaw clenches and he nods.

“He didn’t tell me until years later. Until recently actually.”

“Fuck,” Dan murmurs.

“Yeah.” Phil curls his knees up tighter. “We decided it was good, though. Tom is perfect for him and we work so well as friends. This way we never have to worry about a breakup or anything like that.”

Dan nods. “True.”

“Plus,” Phil says, smiling a little now, “this way I get you.”

Dan smiles too. “I can’t pretend I’m not really fucking happy about that.”

“Me neither.”

“I wish you were here with me right now, Phil,” Dan whispers. “I just want to hold you.”

“Me too. Let’s go home soon, yeah?”

Dan nods. And then he yawns, widely.

“It’s late,” Phil says quietly. “Santa’s probably been and gone.”

Dan smiles. “I love you,” he murmurs fondly. His eyes are closed.

Phil’s heart thumps against his ribs. He’s not sure Dan even knows what he’d just said.

“Dan?” he asks faintly.

“Mmm?”

“Are you awake?”

Dan hums sleepily. “Only a little.”
“Should we hang up?”

“No. I can’t sleep without you.”

Phil laughs breathily. “How will we ever sleep in our own flats once we’re home?”

“We won’t.” He sounds barely coherent.

“Is that right?” Phil asks, his own eyelids suddenly heavy.

“Mhm.”

“Dan? I’ll be right back, ok?” He hauls himself up to go turn off his bedroom light. He throws off the duvet and remembers with a start when the cold air hits his bare skin that he’s completely naked on the bottom. His eyes dart back to the screen in panic but Dan’s eyes are still closed. He scrambles off the bed quickly and grabs the first pair of pants he can find in his bag. He flicks off the light and slides back into bed.

He pulls the covers up over his shoulder and looks at Dan, whose features are blanketed in tranquil stillness. He’s quite obviously asleep, his hands tucked up under his cheek.

Phil watches Dan breathe for a good while and lets his lids lower over his eyes. When he can’t keep them open any longer he whispers, “Dan?”

He smiles at the complete lack of response. He should hang up the call. He knows that. But he doesn’t. It’s comforting just to know Dan’s there, even though Phil also knows he’ll be asleep in thirty seconds.

He slides his hand up under his pillow and closes his eyes. He’s not going to say the words out loud yet. He’s thinking them, every time he looks at Dan’s face. Every time he hears Dan’s laugh.

He’s thinking them now, as he slowly drifts to sleep, but he’s not going to say them. Not until Dan can chase them with a kiss.
Chapter 43

Phil takes three days to convince Kath he absolutely needs to get back to London, lying shamelessly and telling her that Rory is desperate and the shop will all but burn to the ground without him. He thinks Kath knows he’s lying, but there seems to be an unspoken thing between them now, something that hadn’t been there before. Maybe an admission on her part that her son really is a grown up now, a man who doesn’t really want to spend all his free time with his mother.

Besides, Phil bristles every time he hears his father’s voice. He knows it’s inevitable that Nigel learns the truth about him, and now that Dan is gone and Christmas is over he feels like he’s just biding his time. Every day that passes makes that static prickle of tension in the air more palpable and he just doesn’t want to deal with it.

He feels slightly guilty as Martyn and Cornelia have gone as well and this means Kath will be completely childless much sooner than she’d expected, but he just can’t force himself to split his attention anymore. His mind is somewhere else entirely, and he’s sure she can tell.

The morning of the twenty-ninth he has a quick breakfast and coffee with the both of them. He’s got a fairly early train back home and his leg is jiggling under the table restlessly as he drinks his coffee. He’s just so ready. He’s ready to see Jimmy again and sit on their sofa and sleep in his own bed. Technically the bed here is his bed, but it doesn’t really feel that way anymore. It feels like a bed from another life, as does everything else in this house, really.

He loves his parents and he’ll always have a place in his heart for this house, but it’s not home anymore. Home is London and his small white-walled flat and Starbucks and Jimmy. Home is sirens blaring at 2am and climbing four flights of stairs and playing Zelda for eight hours straight. Right now he feels in every corner of his heart that home is Dan, and he wants to get back to it as soon as he possibly can.

Kath offers to drive him to the station in Manchester and he thinks about saying no. It’s sure to be an awkward ride and he doesn’t know if he has it in him to survive another conversation as emotionally charged as the last one they’d had the other day. He’s about to say thanks but it’s alright, he’ll take the bus when she looks at him straight in the eyes, her expression pleading.

He nods and thanks her, goes upstairs to get his things, puts on his jacket, hugs his dad and steps out onto the porch. The snow is mostly melted now and he can’t help noticing how ugly it looks, the grass brown and dead, the ground soggy. The sky is grey and there’s rubbish on the side of the road. It’s a far cry from that brilliant white day, the day his life had changed forever.

He’s never been happy to leave this place before. It’s a strange feeling.

His mum steps out behind him and puts her hand on his shoulder. “Ready to go, love?”

He nods.

The first few minutes of the ride are admittedly tense. He stares out the window and tries to think of the kind of thing he’d normally say to her. Unsurprisingly, he can’t. And apparently she can’t either. All he can think is that he’s told her this rather huge secret and they’ve not spoken a word about it since. He knows they’re both thinking about it, and the silence is deafening.

He’s scratching the nail of his index finger against his jeans when she finally speaks.

“Anxious to get home, then?”
He feels the all too familiar clench of anxiety in his gut. It feels like a loaded question. “Uh, I mean it’ll be nice to see Jimmy again and like, be in my own space, y’know…”

She nods.

He turns back to the window, thinking that might be the end of it. She’s extended her olive branch, or maybe just a regular old branch and now it’s his turn—but he still doesn’t really have anything to say, especially if she’s going to pretend they’re not both thinking about the exact same thing.

He leans in and breathes against the glass. He runs his finger through the fog, tracing the shape of some unnameable four legged animal.

“I imagine you’re missing Dan.”

He turns to look at her, truthfully a little stunned. “It’s only been like four days,” he mumbles.

“It may have been a long time ago, but I remember what young love feels like, Phil.”

He huffs a laugh, nervous and giddy and relieved all at once.

“It’s only brand new, mum. I reckon it’s too soon to call it… that.” He doesn’t actually believe that, but it still feels weird to admit out loud.

He’s laughing about it, but she’s not. “I’ve been thinking about it a lot. Ever since you told me.”

He reaches for the zipper on his coat, just for something to do with his hand, an outlet for the nervous energy that courses through him. He’d thought not talking about it was bad—turns out talking about it is even worse. “Yeah?” he asks. He truly has no idea what she’s going to say.

She nods. “I realize I’ve been quite daft not to see what was going on.”

“It’s fine, mum,” he says quietly. He’s done making her feel guilty now. He just wants to fast forward this time, to skip to a point in the future where it’s normal and everyone knows and he doesn’t have to constantly wonder what they think of him.

“I’m not proud of my reaction. I’m not proud that it still… confuses me.”

Phil looks out the window again. This. This is what he didn’t want to do today. He wanted to pretend it was all fine.

“Don’t be upset with me Phil,” she says gently.

His answer is automatic and not particularly truthful. “I’m not.”

“Will you tell me about him?”

Phil sighs. “What do you want to know, mum? You met him already. You spent time with him.”

“I want to know what he means to you, Phil.”

He doesn’t honestly know if he’s ready for this. He doesn’t know if she’s really ready for this. He knows she’s trying and he also knows she has a long way to go.

He’s never had this kind of conversation with her before. He doesn’t know if he’s ready to put any more of his heart on her chopping block.
But that’s not really fair, he thinks. There had been no chopping. She’s not holding an axe. More like a butter knife. Or maybe even a spoon. Maybe he should just pull his head out of his ass and try to help her understand so he doesn’t have to have many more conversations like this.

“He means a lot, mum. I like him a lot.”

“Is he as lovely as he seems?”

Phil’s still twiddling with his zipper, pulling it down and zipping it back up again over and over. “Lovelier, actually.”

She nods. “I suppose that’s all that matters, innit?”

Phil looks at her. She turns her head and gives him a quick smile before turning her eyes back to the road.

“I think so, yeah,” he says. “What else even is there?”

She shakes her head. “I just want you to be happy.”

“I am.” He presses the tips of his fingers into the window, watching fog form around the shape of them, leaving perfect prints on the glass. “I never really… I’ve never really liked someone like this before.”

She smiles. “Ok baby.”

He hugs her tight before he boards the train, squeezing around her shoulders and burying his face in her hair. He doesn’t think any of her questions are answered, doesn’t even know if many of her concerns have been lessened. But he’s heard that time heals all, and he hopes she’ll continue to think about it, to ask herself why she feels the reservations she feels and maybe even come to grips with them.

“Are you going to tell Dad today?” Phil murmurs, not pulling away just yet. He doesn’t want to see her face when she answers.

“If it’s alright with you. I don’t like keeping things from him.”

“I don’t care,” Phil whispers. “Tell him when you want.”

“It’s going to be fine, love. We love you very much.”

He nods. It sounds more like a consolation than an assurance, but it hurts a little less knowing he’ll soon be speeding in the opposite direction, moving towards the people who don’t love him in spite of anything.

He plucks up some last little spot of courage and says, “If you have questions, mum, just ring me, ok? Dan is… he’s part of my life now. He’s a big part of my life now and I’m not going to hide it from you guys anymore. I want you to be ok with it.”

She nods. “I will. I will.”

He’s not convinced, but he tells her he loves her, slings his bag over his shoulder and boards his train anyway. He’s done all he can for now.

The train ride is long and boring. Dan’s at work and apparently Jimmy is still asleep, or else otherwise too busy to text his best friend, so Phil has to content himself with listening to music and
watching rain slide down the window.

It’s almost two hours before anyone responds to the many whiny, indignant messages he’s sent out.

Dan: it’s busy as fuck here today :( 

Phil: don’t worry, it’s always dead after new year’s. everyone is skint after the holidays and trying to follow their resolution to consume less sugar

Dan: for how long like a week?

Phil: yeah about that

Dan: at least you’ll be back by then

Phil: yeah. i’ll be home in a couple hours now actually. when are you done?

Dan: 7

Phil: you coming over after?

Dan: you think i’m gonna go home and be alone when i could be with you?

Phil: i hope not. i miss you

Dan: i miss you too phil. i gotta get back. rory’s cracking the whip today

Phil: i’ll be waiting for you when you’re done <3

He leans his head against the coolness of the window and manages to fall asleep for the remainder of the trip.

When he finally gets home he’s damp from the rain and already feeling like the day has been too long. He kicks his shoes off and dumps his coat and his bag on the floor.

All the lights are still off, but Jimmy’s shoes are on the mat. Tom’s are not.

Phil pads down the hall and knocks on Jimmy’s bedroom door. He hears a groan in response.

“Are you decent?” Phil asks.

“No,” Jimmy grumbles. “Get in here.”

Phil smiles and opens the door. Jimmy is just a big lump under his white blankets. Phil lifts them up and slides in next to him, shuddering at the warmth. He wraps his arms around Jimmy’s waist, snaking his hands under his t-shirt and pressing his cold fingers to Jimmy’s bare skin.

“Oi, fuck off!” Jimmy yelps. “Why the bloody hell are you so bloody freezing?”

“It’s almost January, James. It’s cold out.”

Jimmy turns around and wraps his own arms around Phil’s shoulders, pulling him in close so their chests are squashed together. “I missed you, Philly.”

“You too,” Phil murmurs. “It felt like too long this time.”

“Take me with you next time.”
“I think Tom might have a few things to say about that, no?”

“Tom abandoned me to go stay with his parents.”

“Didn’t you go home too?” Phil asks.

“Yes,” Jimmy admits begrudgingly. “I can’t believe you spent Christmas with your brand new boyfriend and I spent mine with my mum.”

“I spent mine with my mum too,” Phil says. He hitches a leg over Jimmy to rest on his hip and wrap around his lower back like a koala. “And Dan left on Christmas eve.”

“Still,” Jimmy says.

“Do you not think you and Tom will be living together by this time next year?” Phil asks softly.

“Are you trying to get rid of me, Phil?”

“Of course not. I want you to stay here forever. Tom can move in and we’ll all be one big happy family.”

“What about Dan?”

Phil smiles, his stomach fluttering a little just at the thought of him. “Yeah, he can come too.”

“I reckon this place is a bit small for four people,” Jimmy says quietly.

“Yeah, maybe.”

Phil sighs as the warmth of Jimmy’s body seeps into him. They’re quiet for a while, listening to each other breathe until Jimmy says, very gently, “I do think Tom and I will probably be living together by this time next year. I promised you I’d be honest, so… yeah.”

Phil can’t deny that the words hurt, though he knows he has no right to it. “I guess I knew that,” he says, squeezing Jimmy a little tighter.

“Are you upset?”

Phil takes the time to think before he answers. He doesn’t want to make this harder on Jimmy than it needs to be. Jimmy deserves to be happy. He deserves to live with the man he loves and not feel guilty about it.

“I’ll miss you,” Phil whispers.

“We’ll still see each other all the time, Phil. You’ll alway be my biffle. Besides, you have Dan now.”

He has Dan now. He doesn’t know how to feel about the fact that it actually does make him feel a little better. He’s not sure he likes it.

“You can’t be replaced,” Phil murmurs. “I love Dan but he isn’t you. No one can ever be you. It’s completely different.”

Jimmy pulls back so he can look Phil in the eye. He’s grinning. “You love him?”

“Shut up. That’s not what you were meant to focus on!”
Jimmy is laughing and it makes Phil want to punch him a little bit.

“I know, I know, I’m sorry but damn. Y’all move fast.”

“I hate you,” Phil mutters.

Jimmy brushes the fringe off Phil’s forehead and smiles, a more melancholy thing this time. “I know it’s different,” he says. “You know it is for me too, right? Tom was never a replacement.”

Phil nods. It may have taken him a while to understand that, but thinks he finally does now. He buries his face in Jimmy’s neck and clings to him for dear life. He decides he’s not going to think about Jimmy leaving right now. He’s not going to worry about that until the time comes.

He doesn’t really have anything new to report either, so they lie there in silence a while longer. They’d had a nearly three hour phone call on Christmas day as Phil recounted absolutely every detail of his coming out to Kath and his subsequent skype naughtiness with Dan. He’d never heard Jimmy so happy, honestly. So happy, in fact, that Phil wishes he could go back in time to show Jimmy the same enthusiasm and support when he’d first told Phil about Tom.

“Is Dan coming round today?” Jimmy asks.

Phil nods. “Tonight, when he’s done work.”

“Do you want me to clear out?”

“No, why would I?”

“Are you being intentionally thick, Phil?”

“It’s not like we’re going to instantly jump in the sack,” Phil says, rolling his eyes. “I told you a million times we’re taking it slow.”

“You had sex on skype. You literally had cyber sex.”

“Hardly. All we could see were each other’s faces.”

“You know you got lucky as fuck, right? Like, I’m sexually frustrated just hearing about this. I can’t imagine how bloody wrecked he is.”

“Good thing I’m dating him and not you then, isn’t it?” Phil jabs his knee into Jimmy’s thigh.

“God, it’s still so weird to hear you say words like ‘dating.’ I feel like a proud mother hen.”

“Thanks, weirdo. Can we get up, now? I need more coffee.”

Jimmy groans. “But I’m warm. And lazy.”

“You do know it’s like almost 2pm right?”

“Lazy,” Jimmy repeats. “I’m allowed. I have to go back to work in a few days and then you’ll be the one lounging in bed all day while I have to get up like a respectable adult.”

“So you’re finally admitting I’m not a respectable adult, then?” Phil asks.

“Shut up and go make me a coffee. We can drink it together in bed.”
Phil rolls his eyes again but he’s smiling. “Fine. You’re lucky I love you.”

“Mmm I know, Philly.”

Phil hauls himself up and throws together the coffees and a big stack of marmalade toast and brings it all back to Jimmy’s room. It’s possible he dribbles a significant trail of coffee all the way along the hallway, but that’s for future Phil to worry about. Or future Jimmy.

He gets settled under the duvet next to Jimmy with his second breakfast and takes a long sip of his slightly too-strong coffee.

Jimmy finds his glasses and puts them on, accepting the mug Phil hands to him. They sit in comfortable silence for a few blissful minutes before Jimmy says, “Are you really not going to do anything with him tonight?”

Phil laughs. “You’re such a bloody perv, Jim.”

“Yeah I know but like, come on Phil. The man is bloody gorgeous and I know for a fact he’s crazy about you.”

“I know it too. He literally said those words to me the first night we kissed.”

“I don’t understand how you resist that.”

“Well to be honest, it’s not that easy. When we’re together I always just want to go further but he knows about… everything. All the shit from before, I told him, and now I think he’s probably more scared than me.”

“But you don’t actually feel scared do you? When you’re with him? It’s only when you think about it later?”

Phil nods. “Basically.”

“And you want to do stuff?”

Phil bites his lip. “I mean… you’ve seen him.”

“Yeah,” Jimmy murmurs against the rim of his mug. “Fuck, I have. He’s hot.”

“He’s mine,” Phil says teasingly. “You’ve got your own.”

“Well I’m going to have live vicariously through you then, mate.”

Phil sighs. “I just don’t want a repeat of that first time we kissed.”

“It won’t be,” Jimmy says confidently.

“How do you know, though?”

“Because you’ve talked about it, and you know your own boundaries, and you know he’s going to respect them and do whatever you need to feel comfortable. And you know,” he says, his voice getting softer, “you know there’s nothing wrong about it, right? Like you don’t have to feel like, ashamed about anything?”

Phil turns to look into those sea green eyes. Sometimes he just loves this man so much it makes his chest physically ache. “Yeah. I think so.”
“And you know I’m not actually trying to pressure you, right?”

Phil nods.

“I just hate to see you stop yourself from doing the things you want to do because you’re afraid.”

“I know.”

“I should just shut up probably though, yeah? I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

Phil doesn’t say anything right away. He eats a piece of toast, drinks some more coffee, presses his leg against Jimmy’s under the sheets.

“I may be slightly afraid I’ll suck at it,” he whispers.

“You won’t.”

“How do you know?”

“Because it’s easy.”

Phil snorts. “That’s easy for you to say.”

“It’s easy for anyone to say, Phil. It’s easy to make a cock feel good.”

Phil laughs again. “Jesus.”

“I’m sorry, but it’s true. Especially one attached to a person who has it bad for you. Even if you **are** clumsy and awkward, he’s still going to love it. You’re still going to make a mess of your sheets.”

“You’re vile.”

“I’m not. I’m just honest. And anyway, it’s not like once you’re in bed all communication goes out the window, right? You lads talk about everything.”

“Yeah…”


“I don’t **know** what I want. I don’t **know** what I like.” He tries not to sound cross, but he feels like Jimmy should understand this by now.

“Then let him help you figure it out, Phil. I promise it’ll be fine.”

Phil nods.

“But also… don’t listen to me. Don’t do anything until you feel comfortable doing it. If he’s worth it he’ll wait.”

“He’s worth it,” Phil says without hesitation. “He’s definitely worth it.”

“If you ever need to… ask me anything, you can. Even if it’s super awkward. You know that right? Like, I can stop taking the piss now if you want me to.”

Phil smiles. “Never.”
“Do you want to ask me anything though?”

Phil’s already giggling a little before he even manages to get his words out. “Are you going to have your ear pressed to the wall all night?”

Jimmy pushes the glasses that have slowly slid down his nose back up. “Of course.”

Phil feels a burst of affection in his chest. Jimmy is and always has been a little shit, but he’s Phil’s little shit. “You know I love you right?” Phil asks. “You know you’ll always be my guy?”

Jimmy smiles and Phil tries not to notice the sadness behind it. So maybe they’re both a little sad about what the future holds, about how it may change things between them.

“Sure, Phil. I know.”
They manage to stay snuggled up in Jimmy’s bed all day just laughing and talking. Phil is startled by the time when he gets a message from Dan asking to be buzzed in.

“You didn’t get out of bed once today you lazy sod,” Phil says, throwing the blanket off of them both in one quick movement, like ripping off a plaster.

Jimmy whines. “I did. I went to the toilet twice.”

“Get up.”

“Do I have to?”

Phil smiles and lays the duvet back overtop of him. “No, I suppose you don’t, if you really don’t want to.”

“I don’t.”

“Don’t you want to say hi to Dan?”

Jimmy pulls the blanket up under his chin. “No. I want you two to have the maximum amount of alone time tonight.”

Phil rolls his eyes. “When is Tom coming back?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Thank god. You’re hopeless without him, aren’t you?”

Jimmy sticks his foot out from beneath the blanket, wiggling his toes in Phil’s direction like he’d give him a little kick if he was close enough. “You’re one to talk, Phil.”

“At least I brushed my teeth today, mate.”

“Oh, fuck,” Jimmy mumbles.

Phil laughs. “Yeah.”

“I guess I could get up for a while.”

“Great. Come out to the lounge when your breath isn’t so rank.” He runs away giggling before Jimmy can get to him.

His timing is perfect as he hears a soft knock at the door as soon as he leaves Jimmy’s room. His heart flutters nervously as he makes his way to the door. He wonders idly when his body will stop reacting this way to Dan.

He paws at his fringe and hopes it looks at least halfway decent before opening the door. Dan is stood there looking rosy and adorable dressed head to toe in black. It’s only been four days--how had Phil managed to forget just how hot Dan really is?

Dan smiles. “Hey.”
“Hey.” He just stands there and stares.

“Can I come in, or…?”

Phil steps back to let Dan in and closes the door behind him. Dan turns around to face Phil again, taking hold of the zipper of his coat. Phil pushes Dan’s hand away and unzips Dan’s coat for him. He reaches up and pushes it off Dan’s shoulders and lets it fall to the floor.

He takes a step closer and Dan put his hands on Phil’s waist.

“I guess you missed me just as much as I missed you then,” Dan murmurs.

Phil cups Dan’s jaw on either side and pulls him in. Dan goes easily and they kiss like no time has passed at all. Dan smells like coffee and Phil wants to get lost in it. He kind of wishes he’d let Jimmy stay holed up in his bed after all.

“Hi lads.” Speak of the devil.

Phil pulls back quickly and giggles. “Sorry, should’ve told you. Jimmy’s here.”

Dan leans down and picks up his coat. “Of course he is. He lives here.” He gives Jimmy a smile and a wave.

“My offer to clear out still stands,” Jimmy says, grinning cheekily.

“Oh, shut up.” Phil takes Dan’s coat and goes over to the closet to hang it up.

The three of them end up scrounging a dinner of crumpets from the back of the cupboard and peppermint hot chocolate that Phil got in his stocking. They sit around the kitchen table chatting about their holidays, all generally coming to the conclusion that now that they’re adults it’s just not the same.

Dan’s foot rests on Phil’s knee under the table. They keep stealing little glances at each other until Jimmy yawns and stands up.

“Well, I’ve been up a grand total of one hour. I’m ready to go back to bed. Night boys.”

Phil would argue if he wasn’t thrilled at the prospect of having Dan all to himself. “Night,” he says.

He’s almost around the corner when he says, “Oh,” and turns back around. “I forgot to tell you. We’re having a party here for New Year’s.”

“Ugh, really?” Phils whinges. “Do we have to?”

“It’ll just be small, Phil don’t worry. All it means is you’ll have a few extra people to force into playing boring board games with you.”

“Plus,” Dan adds with a smirk, “now you have someone to kiss at midnight.”

“And on that note, I’m off,” Jimmy says. “Have a good night you two.” He has the audacity to look at Phil and give him an exaggerated wink.

Phil just scrunches his nose up. “Goodbye, idiot.”

Jimmy laughs as he disappears down the hall.
As soon as they hear his bedroom door close, Phil looks at Dan. “What d’you wanna do?”

Dan moves his foot higher up Phil’s thigh. “Mmm, dunno. Can’t think of a single thing I want to do with my hot man friend after not seeing him for like five days.”

Phil scrunches up his nose again. “We need to think of a better thing for you to call me. Man friend is horrible.”

“You keep forgetting the hot part.”

“Why don’t you just call me your boyfriend then,” Phil blurts.

Dan smiles. “Yeah?”

Phil tries to act aloof. “I mean, if you want.”

Dan stands up and walks around the table to stand right beside Phil. Phil tilts his head up and Dan leans down and kisses him wetly, their lips smacking as he pulls away.

“Come on boyfriend, let’s go pretend to watch a film.”

Phil sucks his bottom lip into his mouth. “Pretend?”

“Well i know my mind is gonna be elsewhere.” He takes Phil’s hand in his and pulls him up. “And my mouth too, if you let me.”

Phil’s stomach flutters as he lets Dan lead him into the lounge. He flops down onto the sofa and lets Dan set up whatever they’re going to pretend to watch.

He doesn’t even know what’s on the screen as Dan comes back over to the couch. “Shove over,” he says gently.

Phil leans forward and Dan slides in between him and the armrest, pulling Phil back once he’s settled so Phil’s back is pressed into Dan’s chest.

“What are we watching?”

“Dunno,” Dan breathes against Phil’s neck, wrapping his arms around Phil’s waist. “Don’t care. Do you?”

Phil drops his head back against Dan’s shoulder. “No.”

“I really missed you, Phil. I’m so glad you’re back.”

“Me too.”

“I almost forgot what you smell like,” Dan murmurs.

Phil laughs breathily. “What I smell like?”

Dan nods against Phil’s neck.

“What do I smell like?”

Dan breathes him in. “I dunno. Just Phil. You just smell like you.”

Phil lifts his head up and true to Dan’s word, pretends to give a toss about whatever’s happening on
the tv. He gives up after about thirty seconds, distracted by the way Dan’s arm squeezes around his middle.

“You smell like coffee.”

Dan chuckles. “I wonder why.”

Phil closes his eyes and focuses on the feeling of Dan’s solid body behind him. It really shouldn’t feel so new. It shouldn’t feel like they’ve been apart for ages.

They’re quiet for awhile. Phil slides his hands down Dan’s jeans and cups his knees. He squeezes and Dan flinches.

“Oi. That tickles.”

“That’s the idea.”

Dan wedges his foot under Phil’s calf. His hands sit low on Phil’s stomach, fingers splayed against his shirt.

“Phil?” His voice is just a whisper in Phil’s ear.

“Yeah?”

“Remember what you said on skype?”

Phil chuckles. “I said a lot of things on skype.”

“About the rules, I mean. About… modifying them.”

Phil squeezes Dan’s knee again. “I remember.”

“Do you still want to do that?”

Phil nods. “To be honest I don’t even remember what they are anyway.”

“I’m only allowed to kiss your face I think. And hands stay above the belt.”

“Oh, right.”

“And you have to tell me what to do. Or at least I have to ask first.”

“Ok,” Phil says. “So what do you want to change? Or shall we just say stuff the rules and we’ll do what we want.”

Dan groans. “Phil. I’m trying to be good.”

“I know.” Phil sighs. “So what d’you want to change, then?”

Dan digs his chin into Phil’s shoulder, into the meaty bit just above the collarbone. “I want to kiss your neck.” He runs a finger faintly down Phil’s neck, leaving a tingling trail of warmth across his skin. “Can I?”

“Yes,” Phil answers instantly. “Please.”

Phil knows right away he’s not going to handle Dan’s lips on his neck any better than he did last time. Dan bites Phil’s earlobe gently and moves his mouth down to kiss Phil’s jaw and he can
already feel it in his whole body, a warmth that radiates all the way down to his toes.

“You ok?”

Phil nods. “Feels good.”

Dan presses his lips to Phil’s neck. “Do you know how much I like you, Phil?”

Phil nods again. “But you can tell me anyway.”

“I couldn’t stop thinking about you the whole time we were apart.” He kisses again, lower this time.

“Me neither,” Phil whispers.

“I wanted to tell my mum about you.” Dan pulls Phil’s shirt collar to the side, exposing Phil’s shoulder.

“You did?” Phil asks

“Yeah.” He kisses Phil’s shoulder. “I want her to meet you first though.”

“I’d love to meet her.”

Dan doesn’t say anything else, and Phil’s glad, because it means his mouth is free to explore Phil’s neck. And shoulder. And ear. And jaw. Phil can tell Dan is trying hard to restrain himself, to keep his kisses sweet and gentle. Exploratory and not suggestive.

But it doesn’t matter. Phil’s brain is still providing plenty of suggestions to his body. Chills run up and down his arms every time he feels the wetness of the inside of Dan’s lips on his skin.

“Dan?” he whispers.

“Mm?”

“You don’t have to be so careful with me.” Phil reaches back and wraps his hand gently around the back of Dan’s neck, pulling just a little, encouraging Dan’s lips to press down harder. He feels Dan’s teeth graze his neck and it’s electric. “I’m so into this. I’m not scared.” He moves his hand up, sliding his fingers into Dan’s hair. “I want you to show me how much you like me. It feels so fucking good.”

Dan’s hands push their way under the hem of Phil’s shirt then, warm fingers pressing into his stomach. Phil can already tell Dan’s losing his grip on the careful, gentle control he’s been exerting. He swirls a finger through the hair below Phil’s belly button and sucks on Phil’s earlobe. The way Dan breathes hot and heavy right into Phil’s ear is downright obscene for the reaction it elicits in his groin.

Dan’s jeans are thin and tight and he’s pressed up so closely to Phil that Phil can feel the hardness of him against his lower back. He grips Dan’s thighs as Dan slides a hand up Phil’s stomach, up through the hair on his chest. He strokes a thumb over Phil’s nipple and Phil sucks in a sharp breath through his nose.

Oh god, he thinks. Oh shit, oh fuck. He thinks these things but can’t say them out loud because he’s pretty sure he’s lost that ability. He’s been made mute by the force oh just how bloody good it feels as Dan continues to thumb over that hard little nub on his chest.

Eventually he finds a couple words, grunting them at Dan between gritted teeth. “More. Please.”
Dan still hasn’t said anything, but he’s sucking Phil’s neck with abandon now and pushing his dick against Phil’s back. He rolls Phil’s nipple between his thumb and index finger. Phil squirms when Dan pinches. It almost hurts a little, but it’s so good Phil clamps his teeth down hard on his tongue to keep from crying out. Jimmy is still home after all, probably standing on the other side of his bedroom door listening for evidence of exactly what’s happening out here.

Dan wraps his free arm—the one not attached to the hand bringing Phil indescribable pleasure to a body part Phil had never given a second thought to—around Phil’s waist and squashes him into Dan’s chest. He bites Phil’s jaw and asks, “Is this too much?”

Phil shakes his head. “It’s not enough.” He twists around in Dan’s arms, turning so he can see Dan’s face, lips red and puffy, cheeks flushed and hair a tousled mess.

He takes hold of that lovely perfect face, kissing him deep and wet as he turns his whole body, nudging Dan’s legs closed and settling himself down on Dan’s lap. Dan holds tight to Phil’s hips and kisses back with just as much fervour. Just as much tongue and teeth as that very first time, and it’s so hot and so similar but at the same time… so totally, completely different.

Phil still feels like his muscles are turning to jelly. He still feels like he’s losing control, giving himself over to the urges coursing through him, but this time it’s a choice. He’s giving himself permission—permission to give up that control and follow his impulses, knowing Dan’s right there with him, knowing they’re on the same page. He knows what’s in Dan’s head and Dan knows what’s in his and the trust that radiates between them is intoxicating.

They kiss until Phil’s lips go numb, and even then it’s not enough. He wants more.

“Let’s go to my room,” he murmurs against Dan’s mouth.

“Yeah? You tired?”

“No, idiot. I just don’t want to worry about Jimmy walking in on us.”

Dan grins. “Walking in on us doing what?”

Phil doesn’t answer. He climbs off Dan’s lap and stands up, holding his hand out for Dan to take. “Come on and I’ll show you.”

He leads Dan to his room and lets go of his hand. He goes to his bed and sits down on the edge of it, watching Dan shut the door behind him.

Dan leans back against the door and they just stare at each other for a while. He’s still wearing his work clothes, a black polo and black jeans but his socks are purple.

“You wore jeans to work,” Phil muses.

“What can I say, I like to break the rules.”

Phil cocks an eyebrow. “Do you?”

Dan frowns. “That’s not what I meant.”

“I know.” He lowers his voice. “I wish it was, though.”

“I’ll do whatever you want, Phil. You’re the one who decides what the rules are here. Just tell me what to do and I’ll do it.”
“Come here.”

Dan walks over to Phil slowly, stopping when he’s stood right in front of him. Phil tilts his head up to look into his big brown eyes. “I want to see you,” he says softly.

Dan just nods.

Phil pushes him back a little and stands up. He kisses the tip of Dan’s nose before curling his fingers under the bottom of Dan’s shirt and pulling up slowly. Dan lifts his arms and Phil pulls the shirt up and over his head, letting it drop to the floor.

Dan’s smooth flat chest is not a new sight to him, but right now it feels like it is and Phil’s going to savour it. He doesn’t touch, though he wants to. He looks, drinking it in, taking note of every little freckle and the shape and colour of Dan’s nipples. His eyes travel over Dan’s shoulders and down his lightly muscled arms, down to the big hands he loves so much. He follows the trail of sparse, dark hair that leads from his belly button and disappears beneath his jeans and knows he needs to see more. He needs to see exactly where that happy trail leads.

He sits back down and Dan makes a move to follow. Phil puts his hand out, pressing it against Dan’s stomach to stop him. He brings his other hand up as well and grips Dan’s belt buckle. He looks up to see Dan looking down, intensity burning in his eyes. Phil’s heart stutters and his breaths come out a little shaky, nervous but not afraid. Nothing has ever felt more right.

He pulls the belt from the loop and unhooks the prong, letting it hang open as he moves on to the fly of his jeans. Dan sucks in a breath as Phil slips the button through the hole and pulls down on the zipper. Phil doesn’t waste time now, curling his fingers over the waist of Dan’s jeans and tugging them down past his bum, down his thighs to his calves where they’re too tight for Phil to pull down any further. Dan giggles and uses his feet to pull them down the rest of the way and step out of them, kicking them to the side a little when he’s finally free.

Phil doesn’t giggle. Dan’s stood in front of him now in nothing but his pants, tight black ones that say Calvin Kleîn on the waistband and show of the shape of him underneath with maddening detail. Phil’s heartbeat thrums. Dan’s hands hang limp at his sides.

Phil breaks his self imposed no touch rule to reach out and run his fingers down the bumps of the scars on Dan’s leg.

“Phil…” He sounds pained.

“It’s ok,” Phil breathes. “You’re beautiful.”

“I wish I didn’t…”

“I know,” Phil whispers. “I do too. But they’re a part of your story. Remember what you told me. They’re proof of how far you’ve come.”

Dan nods.

Phil runs his hands up the sides of Dan’s legs, up over his hips to rest against the band of those black pants. He slips two trembling fingers of each hand underneath, rubbing against Dan’s skin.

“Can I?” he asks, though he already knows the answer.

Dan nods again.
Phil pulls them down slowly, over the bulge at the front and down his legs, all the way down to his ankles. Dan steps out of them and kicks them off and Phil’s pulse pounds as he looks. Marvels.

As is every other part of Dan, both inside and out, this part is gorgeous and Phil’s so glad they’d taken their time getting here. He’s glad he can look at this most intimate part of Dan’s body and feel nothing but happiness. No fear, no anxiety about what has to happen next. Because nothing has to happen next and Phil knows it. Dan doesn’t expect Phil to do a single goddamn thing he doesn’t want to do.

“You’re beautiful,” he whispers again.

He hadn’t expected the urge he feels next. He’d known Dan would be beautiful, that he’d feel a deepening in his desire to have and hold this man who means so much to him. He’d known he’d feel the magnitude of trusting each other with this kind of reveal, but he hadn’t truly anticipated just how much desire would still be wrapped up in the emotion of it all.

Dan is hard and full and that’s because of Phil. That knowledge burns hot in Phil’s gut and he can’t believe how lucky he is. How happy he is. How much he wants to express that to Dan, to show him without so many inadequate words that couldn’t possibly come close to being enough in this moment.

He traces his finger over the shape of Dan’s hip bone. He leans forward and chases that finger with his mouth, pressing his lips to the sharp jut.

Dan’s hand touches Phil’s shoulder gently.

He parts his lips and curls them around the hard curve of the side of Dan’s shaft, running his tongue over the hard pulse of him and Dan breathes a little heavier, squeezing Phil’s shoulder.

Phil’s no stranger to this. It’s been a long time, but he’s done it many times. He found in the past that he could even enjoy it, from the outside looking in, if he divorced himself from how little effect it had on his own arousal. He’s always liked making people happy, making them feel good. He’d never quite mastered the art of ensuring he felt good too, but tonight—tonight he finally understands the difference.

Because it’s wonderfully, completely different. His stomach is curled up in a tight knot of excitement as he drags his tongue up and runs it over Dan’s tip. The faint bitter taste of him lingers on his tongue as he pulls back and looks up into Dan’s eyes. His wide, rapt eyes.

“Are you ok?” Phil asks, unable to contain his smile.

“Are you?”
“Of course. Never been better.” He stands up so they can look at each other eye to eye.

Dan grips the bottom of Phil’s chin and pulls him in for a quick if forceful kiss. He pulls back and then kisses again. And again. Three wet kisses before he presses his forehead to Phil’s and releases a long shaky breath.

“You’re going to be the death of me, mate.”
Chapter 45

“Is it your turn?” Dan asks.

Phil looks down Dan’s long naked body. “You don’t want me to…?”

Dan shakes his head. “I wanna see you too. If that’s ok.”

Phil chuckles, his whole body very suddenly aflutter with nerves. Even with Dan stood in front of him in nothing but his purple socks, it feels scary to imagine himself laid bare for another person like that again.

“We don’t have to, Phil, if you don’t want to.”

All it takes is that one little reminder that Dan is completely and totally invested in supporting Phil and making every experience they have together a good one for Phil to shake off the apprehension and remember how much he’s been longing for this exact moment.

“Kiss me,” Phil says.

And Dan does. He kisses Phil, cupping his face gently on either side and stroking his cheeks with his thumbs. The longer they kiss, the more Dan’s tongue brushes against Phil’s, the less nervous Phil feels—and the more ridiculous it seems that Dan is stark naked and Phil is still fully clothed.

Phil moves his hands up to his collar and pushes the first button through its hole. Then Dan’s hands are on his, pulling them down.

“Do you mind if-- can I do that?” Dan asks, not bothering to pull his mouth off Phil’s.

Phil smiles against Dan’s lips and then Dan’s kissing Phil’s teeth and they’re both giggling and knocking their teeth together, but still they’re kissing, and still Phil can feel the hard line of Dan pressing into him as he pulls him in closer.

“We’re such nerds,” Phil laughs.

Dan smiles wider and puts his hands on Phil’s hips, pushing him back a little towards the bed. “Would you lie down for me please, nerd? I really want to take your clothes off.”

Phil’s still laughing as he flops himself backwards and lands heavy on the bed with a little bounce. Not exactly sexy, but that doesn’t seem to stop Dan from looking at him like it is.

“Get comfortable,” Dan says, his voice uncharacteristically deep. “This is probably going to take a while.”

Phil really hadn’t been prepared for that. Dan standing over him, naked, husky-voiced and authoritative makes his stomach swoop. He shuffles back until his head finds the pillow. His heart hammers as he watches Dan’s knees sink into the mattress as he crawls up Phil’s body, straddling his legs and sitting on top of Phil’s thighs.

Phil can’t decide where he wants to look. Dan is so bare and beautiful and it’s new and overwhelming, but his face is set with a kind of passion Phil’s never seen before. It’s really a testament to how much Phil loves staring into Dan’s eyes that he would even consider looking away from Dan’s cock, hard still, hanging between legs that bracket Phil’s.
It’s a little confusing for him, the rush of heat he feels every time he looks at that part of Dan. He doesn’t even know if it’s carnal interest or just the knowledge that Dan trusts him enough to be this open—this completely vulnerable, this exposed.

Aesthetically, Dan is gorgeous, and Phil had noticed it from the very start, but it definitely feels different now. It feels more profound, deepened by all the wonderful things Dan has shown himself to be: kind, patient, thoughtful, loving. Good. Dan is physically beautiful, but that’s not why Phil loves him. That’s not why he can’t decide where to look. Every inch of Dan’s body is made more beautiful by this bond they’ve forged. Dan is good, all the way down to his core and Phil feels himself falling faster every second.

Maybe he should stop trying to overanalyze this, he thinks. Maybe there really is no simple explanation for why the mere sight of a body part that’s never brought him any physical pleasure before should be making his blood rush between his own legs. He doesn’t need to understand it. All he really needs to do now is allow himself to enjoy it, to be present in this moment with Dan as he leans down and kisses Phil again, slow and sweet.

“Are you alright?” Dan asks.

“Yes,” Phil breathes.

“Tell me if you want me to stop.”

“I don’t. I won’t.”

Dan pulls back and gives him a look.

“I’ll tell you,” Phil whispers, knowing it’s not going to happen.

Dan kisses his chin before sitting up again, looking down at Phil like he’s never seen anything so beautiful. Like he’s a gift—a gift Dan gets to unwrap now as his hands find the buttons on Phil’s shirt, opening them up slowly, one by one until he gets to the last.

He pushes Phil’s shirt open, smoothing his hands out across Phil’s chest. He shuffles down Phil’s legs a little and leans forward, pressing a kiss to Phil’s collarbone.

“Breathe, Phil,” he whispers and Phil exhales heavily. God knows how long he’d been holding that air in.

Dan laughs breathily and shuffles down a little further. He kisses his way across the broad stretch of Phil’s chest slowly, lips soft and wet, hands braced against the mattress.

“Are we stuffing the rules?” Dan asks.


Dan smiles and plants a light kiss on Phil’s nipple. It elicits just as strong a reaction as earlier, and Phil’s hands fly up to clutch at Dan’s waist.

Phil half expects Dan to stop, to pull back and ask if it’s too much. He doesn’t and Phil’s never been more glad for anything, because Dan’s lips pressing against that little bit of skin feel almost incomprehensibly good.

Dan’s tongue darts out and licks over it and Phil squeezes against Dan’s skin, nails digging in gently.
Too soon Dan is shuffling back again, kissing down Phil’s stomach languidly, dragging his hands down Phil’s sides. His attention is so adoring and all consuming that Phil has no room in his mind for thoughts of self consciousness. He knows he’s not really the most fit, but it’s so obvious that Dan doesn’t care that he wouldn’t dare spend a second worrying about it.

Dan licks into Phil’s belly button and bites the bit of softness above it gently before sitting up. He’s sat on Phil’s shins, looking even longer than normal now he’s not obscured by a single article of clothing. He puts a hand on Phil’s belt buckle and waits.

Phil stares at Dan for a long time before realizing that Dan’s waiting for his permission. He gives Dan a little nod and props himself up on his elbows. He watches as those hands he loves so much undo his belt and then his fly, as slowly as Phil had done for him. Possibly even slower.

This time Dan doesn’t wait for permission before gripping the waist of Phil’s jeans and tugging. Phil flops down off his elbows and lifts his hips so Dan can pull the denim down over his ass.

Dan is a little less slow, a little less careful as he pulls them down Phil’s thighs, down his calves and off completely, chucking them off the bed without looking to see where they land. His eyes are only for Phil right now, and they rake up and down his body hungrily. He sits back down on Phil’s shins and bites his lip.

Phil can really feel Dan now, feel the softness and the shape of Dan’s ass against his bare legs. Dan puts his hands on Phil’s thighs, spreading his fingers out and dragging them lightly over Phil’s skin. A shiver runs through him and he has to close his eyes for a moment.

Phil feels a heavy weight on his chest and Dan’s lips are on his, the tip of Dan’s tongue licking against the inside of Phil’s top lip, their bare chests pressed together tightly. He feels Dan’s hardness pressing into him, separated by nothing but a thin layer of cotton. Phil wraps his hands around the back of Dan’s neck and kisses him back.

It’s perfect. It’s like Dan really can read him like a book, like he knows that what Phil needs in this moment is the grounding touch of mouth to mouth to remind him of what this is. To remind him that it’s new and overwhelming, but it’s still just them. It’s still just Dan and Phil, two overgrown nerds who happen to really like each other. Who happen to really want to see each other naked.

“You still good?”

Phil nods.

“Can I please take your pants off, Phil?”

Phil laughs. He opens his eyes and looks at Dan, who’s grinning as well.

This man is perfect, Phil thinks. Perfect for him. There couldn’t be someone more perfect for him if he’d been able to design them himself.

“Yeah,” Phil says, nudging the back of Dan’s thigh with his knee. “Get on with it, mate.”

He still feels nervous as Dan moves down his body, slipping his fingers beneath the band of his boxers. His stomach is still fluttering and there’s tension in his shoulders as Dan pulls his pants down the slightest bit and kisses Phil’s hip. He’s nervous, but not scared.

He plants his feet on the mattress and lifts his hips again and Dan makes quick work of removing the last bit of fabric keeping them apart, pulling them off his ankles and dropping them to the floor.
“You’re hard,” Dan says, wide-eyed like he hadn’t realized that was a possibility. As if they hadn’t been pressing against each other the whole time.

Phil huffs a laugh. “Yeah.”

Dan’s hands are on Phil’s hips, sliding up, spreading out over his stomach, curling around his waist. Stroking. Squeezing.

“Are you gonna say anything else?” Phil asks. It’s stupid. He knows Dan likes what he sees. It’s written all over his face. But he still wants to hear it.

“Sorry,” Dan murmurs. “I just kind of… can’t believe it.” He’s still stroking his hands up and down Phil’s sides like he’s trying to keep his hands occupied. Like they’d like to be somewhere else.

“Believe what?” He wonders how he could be possibly be this nervous and this hard at the same time.

“Any of it. Any of this. Like… I think I had a crush on you before I even saw you. When you called me for an interview? And we ended up waffling for like half an hour?”

Phil smiles. It’s only been three months, but that day feels like another life now. “Yeah.”

“You were so weird and awkward and your voice was so sexy and you just seemed… different. From anyone I’d ever met. And you are.” He walks his knees up a little so he’s sat on Phil’s thighs.

Phil is starting to ache. He’s been turned on since they first sat on the sofa. Not for the first time, and probably not for the last he wishes he was normal, that Dan could just touch him right now where he actually wants to without worrying about Phil’s reaction.

“And then I met you and you were different. And better. Just so much better than anyone else.”

Phil’s chest tightens. Dan’s describing how he feels about Phil, but honestly, Phil feels exactly the same way. He wants to ask Dan to shut up and kiss him, but he can’t find the words.

“And now we’re here. Like this. And I can’t believe it. It feels too good to be true.”

“For me too,” Phil says. “I didn’t think it was even possible for me to feel like this.”

Dan bites down on his upturned lip, shaking his head. “We’re gross.”

“Yeah,” Phil agrees. “I love it.”

“Also, like, I’m sorry but… you could have warned me.”

Phil frowns. “About what?”

Dan makes a show of lowering his eyes to stare at Phil’s groin. “Come on, Phil. Don’t pretend you don’t know.”

Phil’s face is hot. “Shut up.”

“I don’t hear you denying it, though.”

Phil very maturely sticks out his tongue and promptly hides his face in the crook of his arm.

“Like I said,” Dan laughs. “Too good to be true.”
“Don’t make me laugh right now!” Phil splutters.

“Why not?”

“Because we’re both naked and you’re on top of me!”

Phil’s arm is being pulled off his face then. He opens his eyes and looks up at Dan, who isn’t laughing anymore.

“It’s ok to laugh, Phil. Stuff like this-- it doesn’t have to be serious. It can be silly and fun. It’s still just us, y’know?” He strokes a thumb over Phil’s cheekbone. “I’m not trying to make fun of you or like, take away from the moment. I’m just happy. You make me happy.”

Phil nods, catching Dan’s hand in his and bringing it up to his mouth. He kisses over each knuckle individually and then the thumb. “Sorry,” he says. “It’s never been silly or fun for me before.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“I have no idea what I’m doing,” Phil whispers.

Dan smiles. “You’re just looking at your naked boyfriend, Phil. You don’t have to do anything.”

Phil’s stomach flutters. He props himself up on his elbows again, suddenly wanting a better view. If he’s going to look he wants to see everything. He wants to see every detail.

Maybe that was a mistake. The sight of them both stiff and so close is overwhelming.

“You lied by the way,” Dan muses. “You’re not naked.”

Phil chuckles, glad for the levity. Glad he’s with someone willing to crack as many jokes as he needs to feel comfortable, especially when their cocks are mere inches apart. “Close enough.”

Dan shakes his head. “Nope. C’mere.” He curls his fingers around Phil’s shoulders and pulls him forward. He pulls until Phil’s sat up and Dan is in his lap, pushing Phil’s open shirt off his shoulders.

When he’s completely, one hundred percent naked, Phil runs his hands up Dan’s back and leans into his chest, kissing the hard bumps of his ribcage. Now there’s no space between their cocks at all, and Phil has to focus on pressing his lips to Dan’s skin, the way Dan sighs as Phil drags his fingers up his spine and then back down.

It’s clear to Phil that the energy between them has shifted. They’re both breathing heavier, Phil gripping Dan’s back, Dan gripping Phil’s hair. Dan shifts his hips forward and his cock pushes against Phil’s.

Despite all his hopes that he’d be able to keep his cool, Phil gasps.

“Shit, sorry.” Dan tries to move back but Phil locks him in place with his arms. “No, no. Don’t. I’m ok, I promise.”

Dan leans down and kisses him, hard. Phil’s head swims with it. This feels more like their first kiss, a little wild, a little chaotic, all teeth and tongue and desperation. Dan pulls back at just the right time, just before Phil can begin to feel apprehensive.

“Phil?”

“Yeah?”
“Can I… can I kiss you too?”

Phil laughs. “You are kissing me.”

“No I mean-- like you did to me,” he says quietly. “Like before.”

Phil feels a surge of blood flowing south. He wouldn’t have thought it possible to be any more turned on than he was a moment ago.

Obviously he was wrong.

“Is that a euphemism?” he asks.

Dan smirks. “It can be.”

Phil can’t pretend he doesn’t want to know what it feels like—how it will differ from times before now that his body is coursing with arousal and the mouth that’ll envelop him is attached to one of the most incandescently wonderful people he’s ever known.

But it feels like a big step—too big. It feels like cheating, like skipping over the building blocks, and he doesn’t want that. He doesn’t want to be cheated of a single experience with Dan.

Dan tugs on Phil’s hair a little, tipping his head back so they can look into each other’s eyes. “Is that what you want, Phil?”

“It doesn’t matter what I want.”

Phil frowns. “Of course it does.”

“Not right now, Phil. Right now it’s about you.”

Phil sighs. “Will you do something for me?”

Dan nods.

“Pretend I’m normal.” He puts a finger to Dan’s mouth when he tries to speak, no doubt to negate the use of the word normal. “Pretend you didn’t have to worry about rules or the reasons for those rules. What would you want right now, if you weren’t worried about me getting scared, yeah?”

Dan nods, shifting his hips forward again. It feels so good Phil has to close his eyes and press his face into Dan’s chest again.

“What would you want to do then?” he murmurs.

“Fuck, Phil. That’s not fair.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re fucking hot as shit and you’re naked and your dick is touching mine right now and it’s taking everything in me not to—” He stops himself short.

“Yeah?” Phil asks. “Not to what?”

“I just want what we said,” Dan whispers. “I want to make you feel good.”
Phil lets himself fall backward onto the mattress again, keeping his hands on Dan’s back and bringing him along too. Dan’s still straddling Phil’s thighs but their chests are pressed together.

“Come here,” Phil whispers. “I just want to kiss you right now.”

Dan buries his face in Phil’s neck. “Do one thing for me.”

Phil just nods, instantly overwhelmed by Dan’s lips kissing under his jaw.

Dan doesn’t say anything, but he lifts his leg and nudges it gently between Phil’s, tentative enough that Phil knows it’s a question. A question to which the answer is yes, and Phil opens his legs for Dan to settle between.

“Ok?” Dan asks.

Phil takes hold of Dan’s face and brings their mouths together, trying to convey with the force of his kisses just how ok it really is.

The kissing helps. It helps a lot. It helps distract him from how hot he is with Dan’s body crushing into his, from how increasingly frustrating it feels to have Dan’s cock pressed against his own without the satisfaction of friction. He’s been hard so long and Dan’s just so beautiful and everything they’re doing feels so right.

So the kissing helps, but maybe not all that much. Not enough to keep Phil from eventually giving in to the urge to push his hips up and grind against Dan’s.

Dan goes rigid, pulling his lips from Phil’s and looking down at him with wide eyes.

“Too much?” Phil asks.

Dan doesn’t smile. “Isn’t that my line?”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“Do whatever the fuck you want to me, Phil. But only because you want it, not because--”

Phil surges forward and shuts Dan up with a kiss so rough it hurts his lips a little. Dan moans into it and Phil bucks up again.

He’s really really not scared anymore. He’s not even nervous. He just wants Dan to keep moving against him, grinding into him, kissing his lips and his jaw and his neck. He wants more of the slide that’s starting as their skin becomes damp with the sweat of exertion and excitement.

Phil drags his hands down Dan’s back and over the curves of his ass. He squeezes, pushing Dan forward further and groaning at the tingle that shoots up into his stomach as they rub and slide against each other.

Dan must be as far gone as Phil now, because he doesn’t stiffen or pull away to ask Phil if he’s still ok, and Phil’s grateful. He loves knowing Dan wants to keep things at a pace that’s comfortable for him, but at this point the thought of stopping even for a moment is painful.

Kneading Dan’s cheeks seems to be some sort of breaking point for Dan. He bites Phil’s earlobe and moans and it’s undoubtedly the hottest thing Phil’s ever experienced.

“Fuck, Phil, god, fuck,” he babbles. “More.” Phil would probably be babbling too if he could get more air in his lungs, if Dan’s weight wasn’t pressing down fully on his chest. His head starts to
swim. He can’t really recall Dan ever asking for something like that so directly—he’s usually so focused on making sure Phil is getting what he needs. Phil finds he likes Dan’s lustful assertion—he really really likes it. He answers by doing just as Dan asked, spreading his fingers apart and pressing the pads down into Dan’s surprisingly fleshy bottom.

Phil is instantly rewarded with another ridiculously pleasing noise being breathed into his ear and Dan pushing his hips forward with even more intent. Phil pushes right back, keeping his hands planted firmly on Dan’s ass now, grinding against him harder.

“Phil, Phil, Phil,” Dan grunts in quick succession, barely coherent but still so insistent.

“What?” Phil croaks, desperately afraid Dan’s going to ask him if he’s ok or tell him they need to stop.

He doesn’t. “Do you have lube?”

Phil’s heart leaps up into his throat. He’s far enough along that his guard is down, and truth be told he really wants to come, and soon. But… he’s not ready for that.

“Um… yeah,” he says, despite the sudden flutter of nerves. He doesn’t want to assume Dan would throw caution that much into the wind.

“Can you-- would you get it? I wanna do something.”

Phil nods, pushing Dan up off him enough to lean to the side and rifle through his bedside drawer. It takes forever because he’s a mess at this point and his hands are trembling, but eventually he finds the bottle and pushes it into Dan’s fist.

Dan wraps his fingers not just around the bottle but Phil’s hand as well. He must notice the slight tremor because he kisses Phil’s knuckles and says, “Sorry. I should’ve told you what I meant.”

Phil just shakes his head.

Dan continues. “Do you— like did you wanna… finish?”

A quick chuckle bursts from Phil’s throat. “Yeah. Of course.”

“Is it ok if I do too?”

“Fuck’s sake,” Phil says, leaning forward and biting the tip of Dan’s nose. “Of course it is you div.”

Dan uncaps the bottle with one hand and empties some of the oily liquid onto his palm. He tosses the bottle aside and lowers himself onto Phil again, brushing his lips against his ear.

He rolls his hips and Phil feels the head of Dan’s cock pushing against his. His mind clouds over instantly and he knows then he’ll be game for whatever Dan has in mind. He trusts him.

“Can I touch you?” Dan whispers.

Phil nods and seemingly instantly Dan’s slick hand wraps around his cock, coating it in lube. He doesn’t even have time to process how amazing it feels before Dan’s hand is gone and stroking over himself.

Phil whines without ever actually having given himself permission to do so. The loss of Dan’s hand prives the noise from the back of his throat—he hadn’t known how much he needed the relief of that warm slick pressure until it was gone.
Dan giggles against Phil’s neck. “You like that, Phil?”

“Come back,” Phil pants. All his inhibitions are officially gone now as he all but begs Dan for more. “Feels so good.”

Dan kisses him and braces himself with a hand tight on Phil’s hip. They slide against each other now with ease and the feeling is electric but it’s just not enough anymore.

“Please Dan—” His words are cut off abruptly as Dan wraps his hand around the both of them. Thank fuck for those big, beautiful hands, Phil thinks.

Their kisses get wetter and more sloppy with every stilted stroke. It’s messy and chaotic as Dan tries to jerk in rhythm with the thrusting of their hips. He doesn’t really succeed, but Phil couldn’t possibly care less. He breathes heavy through his nose against Dan’s face, hands buried in Dan’s curls. His lips have long since lost all feeling but he keeps kissing Dan anyway.

Phil’s got absolutely no concept of how much time passes before Dan says, “Phil I’m really close, are you?”

“Yeah.” He’s been close for ages, trying desperately to keep a hold on himself. He wants to keep feeling this for as long as he possibly can.

“Tell me, ok?” Dan whispers. “I wanna come together.”

“I don’t know how much more I can take,” Phil admits. Somehow, even with two cocks in his hand, Dan still manages to press his thumb against Phil’s head in just the right way. “I can’t hold it much longer.”

“Then don’t,” Dan growls, and that’s the last straw.

So he doesn’t. He wraps his hand around Dan’s and they stroke together, and it only takes another minute for him to reach that peak and tip over it.

They’re close, so physically close to each other as they both tense up and ride the waves together, Dan’s free hand braced against the mattress and holding himself up on an arm with tight flexed muscles, Phil’s free hand fisted in his hair and tugging as he squeezes his eyes shut and holds his breath.

Dan rolls off and flops down next to Phil when they’re both spent, his chest flushed red and glistening with sweat. Phil feels light and empty, instantly hating the loss of Dan’s heavy body atop his. He turns over on his side and pulls Dan in close. He’s not quite gentle about it and Dan laughs as he’s manhandled into Phil’s embrace.

“Tell me now, Phil, or I’m going to worry that was too m—”

“Thank you,” Phil blurts.

Shit. He’d been right about coherent thought, anyway.
Dan smiles. Wide. He bites his lip bashfully before covering his mouth with his hand. Phil fights the urge to ruin the moment by saying anything else.

“I love you too.”

“You do?”

Dan nods.

“Is it too soon for us to say that?” Phil asks. “I don’t know the rules.”

“There are no rules, Phil. We can do or say whatever feels right to us.”

Phil leans in for a soft kiss. “I love you.”

“I love you so much, Lester.”

Phil smiles, the kind of smile where his tongue peeks out between his teeth. “We just had sex, kinda.”

Dan snorts. “Kinda?”

Suddenly, Phil feels a tightening in his chest and a heat behind his eyes as the gravity of his words and this whole night hits him. “We had sex, Dan.”

Dan’s smiles disappears instantly. “Phil…”

“I liked it.” He takes Dan’s face in his hands and pulls it forward, kissing him again and again. Dan’s hand holds Phil’s and he kisses back, no doubt wondering if Phil is genuinely on the verge of some kind of nervous breakdown.

Eventually he pulls away and looks at Phil with concern etched into his features, his brow furrowed and eyes wide. “Phil.”

“Sorry, sorry.” He reaches up and swipes at a curiously damp eye. “Shit. I dunno what’s wrong with me.”

“It was a big step,” Dan says quietly. “Maybe too big.”

Phil shakes his head, his disagreement vehement. “No. It was perfect. It was just— I never thought it would be like this for me.”

Dan doesn’t say anything else. He wraps his arm around Phil’s shoulder and pulls him in, tucking Phil’s head underneath his chin and cradling him against his chest. Phil hates himself for the tears that fall then, knowing Dan can feel their wetness on his skin. Knowing Dan’s going to worry he’s done something wrong no matter how much Phil assures him he hasn’t.

Because he hasn’t. Nothing could be wrong about what just happened between them. It was intimate and beautiful and Phil honestly can’t wait to do it again. But still it had been a huge step, and his body seems to need time to come to terms with it.

Dan holds him, strong and silent and stoic until Phil calms down.

“Sorry.”

“You’re not allowed to say that, remember?”
“Oh right. I am though. I didn’t mean to freak you out.”

Dan smooths his hand over Phil’s hair. “Are you ok?”

“Yeah, I am, I promise.”

“I’m going to choose to believe you, because otherwise I’ll literally drown in guilt and I reckon I’m still a little too young to die.”

Phil laughs wetly and wipes his nose against the back of his arm. “And I’m too old to cry after sex.”

“You’re never too old to have feelings,” Dan says gently, planting a kiss on the top of Phil’s head.

Phil pulls himself free of Dan’s tight grip and tilts his head up to look into Dan’s eyes. “This was fun and all, but I’m kind of gross.”

Dan laughs. “Me too. And we made a right mess of your sheets.”

Phil shakes his head. “Just like Jimmy said we would. The bastard.”

“Jimmy’s well pervy, isn’t he?”

Phil nods. “He’s probably been listening to us the whole time.”

“Well I’m glad we gave him a show, then.”

Phil tucks himself up under Dan’s chin again, nuzzling his face into Dan’s neck not unlike a little kitten or something. Now the rush of adrenaline and the subsequent crash have passed and he’s leveled out, he feels rather like a blob of jello with limbs, sated and sleepy. He needs to get up and wash the stickiness from his body and change his ruined sheets, but he thinks maybe it can wait another minute or two. He closes his eyes and sighs and ignores the burn in his underused leg muscles as he shuffles in closer to Dan.

“I love you Phil,” Dan murmurs.

“I love you too.”
They lie curled up against each other for a long time before accepting that they need to clean themselves up. Dan asks if he can have a shower and Phil stays snuggled under the duvet, watching as Dan leans down and collects his scattered clothes up off the floor. It reminds him of the morning after the club, though this time there’s no tiny pair of red pants obscuring the view. He smiles to himself, because it really is a glorious view.

“I don’t wanna put my clothes back on right now,” Dan says, looking down at himself with his nose crinkled up. “I’m a mess.”

“Then don’t.” Phil gives him a lascivious grin.

“What if Jimmy comes out when I’m walking to the bathroom?”

Phil sits up in bed and reaches his arm back, knocking forcefully on the wall. “You listening?” he asks loudly.

Jimmy’s voice is small and quiet through the wall, dripping feigned innocence. “Course not.”

“Don’t come out of you room for a while, yeah?”

“Why not?”

“Dan’s naked.” He says it with something approaching pride. Dan, his boyfriend, is naked in his bedroom. It feels like some kind of weird fever dream.

“Phil,” Dan hisses, a huge smile on his face.

“That’s not exactly a good reason not to come out,” Jimmy shouts.

Phil doesn’t say anything. He’s too distracted by the lovely pink blush on Dan’s embarrassed cheeks.

“Ok fine, I won’t come out and stare at Dan’s ass,” Jimmy says grudgingly. “Are you happy?”

“Yep.” Phil smiles at Dan. “You better go before he changes his mind. He thinks you’re well fit so I wouldn’t trust him for a moment.”

Dan hurries out then and Phil enjoys the view as he goes. He gets up and fishes his phone out of the pocket of his jeans.

Phil: did you hear everything?

Jimmy: i definitely heard some shit. are you good?

Phil: yeah

Jimmy: it sounded like it ended well for you mate. you're loud when you come

Phil: i am not! you’re just paying too much attention!

Jimmy: can we talk about it later? i want to hear everything

Phil: course. are you gonna hide in there all night?
Phil rolls his eyes fondly.

“Night philly”

Still undressed and needing a shower himself, he strips his sheets from the bed, and puts them and Dan’s clothes in the wash. As he’s always maintained, he’s definitely not a functional adult, so he only has this one set. He’ll have to wash and dry them before he and Dan can get back into bed. He goes back to his room and wraps a slightly dirty towel around his waist and sits on his mattress as he waits for his turn in the bathroom.

When Dan comes back, warm and wet and smelling like Phil’s body wash, Phil finds him a hoodie and a pair of pants before leaving to get himself washed up. Dan catches his hand before he leaves and pulls him in close, cradling the back of his neck and kissing him. They don’t trade any words between them and it feels homey and familiar.

Phil showers quickly. He doesn’t want to be away from Dan a second longer than he has to, especially not after the experience they’d just shared. He feels the need to be close to him, to be cozy and cuddled. He wants Dan’s arms around him in a different way now. He feels strangely vulnerable and he wants Dan to fill up the empty space around his body.

Dan’s sat cross legged on the bed waiting for him when he comes back.

“All clean?” he smiles, looking painfully adorable with his wildly curling hair. It’s always so curly when it’s freshly washed.

Phil still feels a little self conscious when he drops his towels to step into his boxers. He knows Dan’s looking and he wonders how long it’ll take for it to feel like second nature to reveal himself like that. Probably longer than he’d like. Especially since Dan had seemed to be there already.

He’s just pulling the sleeve of his York hoodie right side out when Dan is behind him, wrapping his arms loosely around his waist. He presses a kiss to Phil’s shoulder blade. “You’re beautiful, you know that?”

Phil feels that particular tightness in his throat again, the one that says he’s too happy and overwhelmed to handle any of this. He hopes this hasn’t all been some kind of dream, because he thinks he could really get used to this. He’d really like it if this was his life now.

They make tea and tuck themselves under Phil’s duvet on the sofa. Phil flicks on some anime and promptly ignores it in favour of fitting his head under Dan’s chin again. He presses his cheek to Dan’s chest and Dan wraps his arms around Phil’s back.

“I might fall asleep right here,” Phil murmurs.

“Then I will too.”

“Sorry. I need to buy another set of sheets probably.”

Dan kisses the top of his head. “You definitely don’t need to be apologizing right now. I’ll probably sleep better tonight than I have all week.”

“Yeah but your back will be wrecked in the morning.”
“I guess you’ll just have to give me a massage then, won’t you?”

Phil squeezes around Dan’s waist, closing his eyes and humming. “That sounds fun.”

They’re quiet for a while, listening to the sounds of the television, basking in each other’s warmth. Phil’s head moves with Dan’s chest as he breathes. At some point Phil hears the washer beep to indicate the laundry is clean. There’s not a chance he’s getting up.

Dan’s shuffled down so he’s lying down now, his head against the armrest of the sofa. Phil’s cheek rests on the front of Dan’s shoulder, most of his body’s weight melting into Dan’s. It’s dark and it’s late and Phil’s had a long day. Amazing yes, but long and emotionally charged, and he’s tired. He feels a contentment so deep it’s hard to keep himself slipping into unconsciousness now.

“Phil?” Dan’s lips are pressed to Phil’s forehead. Phil can feel the warmth of his breath when he speaks.

“Yeah?”

“Are you sure you’re… ok? With what happened?”

“I’m sure. I wanna do it again.” Phil’s words are thick and a little slurred, but the truth of them isn’t. In fact he’s tired enough not to really be capable of telling Dan anything but the truth.

Dan breathes a laugh. “Right now?”

“I don’t think I have enough energy.”

“I’m kidding, Phil. I definitely don’t have enough energy. You wore me out.”

Phil nuzzles against the material of Dan’s hoodie—his hoodie. “You’re young, though. You should be ready to go at all times, right?”

“You’re young too, you spoon.”

“M not. Almost twenty seven. Bloody hell. That sounds so old. I’m only twenty six for another month.” He frowns. He really does kind of hate the sound of twenty seven.

“I think it’s hot,” Dan whispers.

“We’ll see how you feel when you’re the one turning twenty seven, mate.”

“You don’t think you’ll have gotten sick of me by then?”

Phil tilts his head up, looking at Dan indignantly. “Don’t be stupid.”

Dan shrugs. “It’s happened before.”

Phil just stretches up and kisses him. He doesn’t even know if words exist to properly express how ludicrous the idea is to him.

“You know you’ve literally changed my life, right?”

Dan nods and kisses him harder. When he pulls back he whispers, “Did you mean what you said?”

Even though he’s tired and Dan’s words are ambiguous, he knows exactly what he means. “Yes Dan. I love you. I’m not going anywhere.”
Phil wakes to the smell of coffee and the sound of feet shuffling in the kitchen. The fabric of the hoodie beneath him is wet where his mouth is open against it. He lifts his head and wipes at his mouth, checking to see if Dan’s awake yet.

He is, of course. He always is. “Morning, you.”

“I don’t snore,” Phil says preemptively.

“You do, but it’s ok. It’s an endearing thing.”

“Are you lot finally awake?” comes Jimmy’s voice, too loud and chipper for how not awake Phil actually feels.

“Barely,” he croaks.

Jimmy comes out carrying two mugs. He places them on the coffee table and sits on the edge of the couch, despite the fact that there really isn’t room for him.

He ruffles Phil’s hair and says, “I put the laundry in the dryer for you.”

“Oh crap, I forgot. Thanks.” He yawns, stretches his arms out above him before bringing them back under the duvet and tucking them under Dan’s hoodie. “Why are you awake, anyway?”

“Tom’s getting in soon.”

“Oh right.”

“So,” Jimmy says, looking at Dan. “You guys have a good night, then?”

Phil buries his face in Dan’s neck. Dan laughs, stroking Phil’s hair gently. “We did,” he says, voice soft.

Phil’s heart stutters. Dan’s not embarrassed—why should he be? Still, the easy happiness that colours his tone when he speaks makes Phil feel weak. It makes him feel loved.

Jimmy smiles. “I’m glad.” He sounds off, but in a way only Phil would ever be able to pick up on. He sounds happy yes, but far away, like he has to distance himself a little to speak the words truthfully. He leans forward then and kisses Phil’s temple. “I’m off. See you later, yeah?”

Phil looks at him and nods. He wishes he could pause time for a few minutes and pull Jimmy close without having to worry about what Dan might think. He wants to remind Jimmy again that he’ll always own half of Phil’s heart. “Say hi to Tom for me,” he says quietly.

When he’s gotten his coat on and the front door closes behind him, Phil sits up and takes one of the steaming mugs. He takes a long drink, the steam warming his face. His back is sore and the muscles in his legs are stiff.

“Was that… was that like, a little weird?” Dan asks as he sits up too.

“Uh…” Phil doesn’t want to lie to Dan. He really doesn’t. He settles on the simplest truth he can think of. “Maybe.”

Dan pulls his knees up tight to his chest. “Does he… is there still something there?”
Phil shakes his head. “Not like that.”

Dan reaches out for the other mug. He wraps his fingers around it and looks down into coffee made by a man he probably suspects still has a thing for Phil—Phil, the man Dan’s just given his heart to.

Phil’s stomach twists. He can’t let Dan think anything like that. Suddenly he realizes how important this moment is, how crucial it is for him to explain this in the right way. He can’t have the two most important people in his life wary of each other.

“I think-- I think he’s just… this is all so new, y’know? Like I’ve always been on my own and it’s-- he was always the one who had to be there for me.”

Dan nods, but he’s still not looking up from the mug.

“He doesn’t handle change well.”

“It’s fine, Phil, it’s not my business.”

“It is though, innit? You and I are together now, and he’s my best friend and I don’t want things to feel strange. It’s like… when he started dating, Tom, yeah? I was weird about it too.”

“But that was different, right?” Dan asks quietly.

“I guess. I dunno. I was so confused then.”

“Right.”

“He’s not confused. He’s just scared.”

Dan frowns slightly. “Does he think I’m going to like, steal you away and he’ll never see you anymore or something?”

Phil shakes his head faintly, like he’s just doing it for himself. “It’s just going to be different. And it’s not just because I’m with you now.” He puts his mug down and sticks his hand under the duvet, groping around until he finds Dan’s foot. He wraps his fingers around it and squeezes. “He has Tom and they’ll probably start looking for a place together soon. No matter what happens now, things’ll be different. And like… that’s scary. For me too.”

Dan looks up finally and into Phil’s eyes.

“We’ve been living together since we were eighteen,” he says softly. “We basically grew up together.”

“I never had someone like that,” Dan says sadly.

“You do now.”

A smile breaks out across Dan’s face. He wiggles his toes in Phil’s hand. “Yeah.”

They stay intertwined while they drink their coffee. They don’t talk much and Phil’s sure Dan’s not done thinking about Phil and Jimmy and himself and how it’s all going to fit together, because Phil’s not done thinking about it either. He can’t help the feeling that no matter what happens he’s going to have to sit with a sense of loss, of missing something crucial to the makeup of his heart and soul.

It’s a dramatic thought and he recognizes it, but it’s just a thought. It’s just a feeling and he can keep it internalized and hope that eventually everything will fall into place, into a new place that feels right
for everyone.

Things will never be the same as they were. He’ll never be twenty two again, first moving to London with nothing but the assurance that there was one person in the world who would be there. He and Jimmy will never cling to each other the way they did then. That love is still there, but it’s different now. They’ve grown up. Or at least they’re trying.

Maybe that’s what it means to grow up, Phil thinks. Maybe it means accepting that even the best things in your life can be a little bit sad too. Maybe it means coming to terms with seeing the world in a million different shades of grey.

When he finishes his coffee he puts his mug down and takes Dan’s from his hands gently as soon as he’s done as well. He lays himself down on top of Dan and kisses him deeply, chasing the bitter flavour in every corner of his mouth. He doesn’t want to think about anything except how good this feels and how happy he is to have not one but two people now. Two people in the world he knows will always be there.

He allows himself to get lost in it, and Dan doesn’t seem to mind at all. They kiss and Dan slides his hands under Phil’s pants and rests his hands against Phil’s ass. Dan’s never touched him there before and he doesn’t ask permission first.

Phil’s happiness is so intense it’s almost violent. It feels like another step. It feels like progress. Dan didn’t ask and Phil’s stomach doesn’t squirm with anxiety. Dan’s big warm hands and their long fingers feel like heaven as they cup Phil’s cheeks, squeezing gently.

“Do you have anywhere else you need to be right now?” Phil asks in between kisses. He doesn’t even know if Dan has work today.

Dan shakes his head, chasing Phil’s mouth.

Phil pulls up on the bottom of Dan’s hoodie and they both work together to get it off. The moment it’s been dropped to the floor Phil’s lips are on Dan’s neck, kissing down from his jaw wetly. Dan’s eyes squeeze shut tight, his face contorted in a way that might even suggest pain if not for the noise he makes when Phil latches on and starts sucking.

Phil can feel Dan’s pulse on his tongue. His neck is littered with red, mouth-shaped bruises by the time Dan starts tugging on his hoodie. The warmth of skin on skin as their chests press together again brings Phil right back to last night. He wants it again, desperately all of a sudden. He tugs at the band of Dan’s pants--his pants, technically, and Dan lifts his hips so Phil can pull them down. He gets them down to mid-thigh and that’s far enough. He’s still kissing at Dan’s mouth sloppily, unfocused but still revelling in the particular softness of his tongue and the occasional bite of teeth.

They haven’t stopped for a moment since they started. They still haven’t traded a single word between them and they don’t now, not even as Dan slips a hand beneath Phil’s boxers and cups his balls.

Phil pulls his head back just a little so he can look at Dan’s face. Dan stares back intently. It feels to Phil like a conscious choice on Dan’s part that he still doesn’t say anything. He’s not asking Phil if he’s alright--at least not with words. Phil reaches down with both hands and pulls his own pants down before leaning forward and kissing Dan again. It’s the plainest way he can think of to tell Dan he’s ok with what’s happening between them, that he wants very much for it to continue.

He kind of wants to let Dan take over again, to let him take them both in his hand and have a repeat of last night. But he also kind of wants to touch Dan himself. He hasn’t done that yet, and he wants
to know what Dan feels like in his hand. He wants to hear Dan’s noises in his ear and know that he’s the direct cause of them.

He wants to sit up lean back and watch as he takes a hold of Dan. He wants to be able to see the way Dan reacts to his touch, but the feeling of intimacy that radiates through him as they kiss, as their chests rub together is comforting and he doesn’t want to lose that. It’s a constant reminder that this is Dan and Dan loves him and this thing that’s happening is right and good.

So he slides his hand down Dan’s stomach, clumsy and fumbling as he kisses him harder. He can’t get a great angle but he manages to curl his fingers around Dan’s cock and it doesn’t seem to matter that it’s a little awkward. Dan still inhales sharply through his nose and shifts his hips to try to help Phil find a better position.

Phil doesn’t stroke right away. He holds Dan in his hand and squeezes lightly against the hardness of him. He strokes his thumb against the thin, silky skin and Dan sighs. Again he kind of wishes he could see what he’s doing, but he tells himself he’ll have plenty of time in the future for the perfect handjob. Right now he’s ok with unskilled and stilted.

Dan’s hand is still cradling Phil’s balls and it feels nice but he wants more. It seems Dan had been waiting for Phil to really go for it, because as soon as Phil starts moving his hand properly, Dan moves a finger--or maybe two, Phil can’t really be sure-- down lower and rubs against the skin underneath.

The sensitive skin underneath, apparently. He drops his forehead down onto Dan’s shoulder and groans. He really hadn’t been expecting that.

“That ok?” Dan whispers for the first time since they started any of this.

Phil just nods, trying to move his own hand faster. He can’t do it because of the angle and the way their arms knock against each other, squished between their bodies. He turns his head to the side and contents himself with helping Dan along by resuming his mission of covering Dan’s neck in hickies. He jerks awkwardly and tries to make sense of how Dan can be making him feel so good when he hasn’t even touched his dick yet.

When Phil starts pushing his hips forward, his body looking for the relief of friction almost involuntarily, Dan brings his hand up and wraps it around him. Phil shifts his weight to the side a little, trying to create enough space between their bodies for them to move their arms a little more freely. It doesn’t help much.

Dan turns his head and catches Phil’s mouth with his, giggling against Phil’s lips.

“Oi don’t laugh at me,” Phil mumbles happily.

“I’m laughing at us .”

Phil stills his hand. “I could always stop,” he teases.

“Ok ok, I’ll shut up.”

Just as last night, they never really find a rhythm. Their strokes remain clumsy and slower than they’re aiming for, but in the end, Phil’s rather pleased because it means the build takes longer. Their wrists knock together over and over and Dan smiles against Phil’s mouth seemingly the whole time. He seems equal parts turned on and genuinely amused at how amateurish the whole situation is.

It may be amateurish, but Phil still manages to wring a few noises out of Dan that coil the knot in the
pit of Phil’s stomach tighter every time. They’re sweaty under Phil’s duvet and Phil’s wrist burns with the overexertion of repetitive motion by the time Dan comes. Somehow, somehow, Phil has managed to last longer than Dan this time, but only by about thirty seconds. His orgasm isn’t as all consuming as last night’s, but in a way he’s grateful. When his body goes slack atop Dan’s afterward, he doesn’t feel a thick burn of emotion in his throat. He feels sated and content.

He kisses Dan on the cheek and wedges himself in between Dan’s prone body and the back of the couch. Dan reaches down onto the floor and grabs one of Phil’s hoodies, which he uses to clean them both up.

“We need to come up with a better system for aftercare,” Dan says.

Phil yawns. “I want pancakes.”

“Me too.”

“I don’t wanna get up though,” Phil mumbles.

“Me neither.” Dan tilts Phil’s face up under his chin and kisses him. “Let’s just stay right here and be hungry together for a little while longer.”
Phil sits cross legged on the counter, watching Dan rummage through the cupboards and fridge in search of pancake ingredients, hoping desperately that they have everything they need. His stomach keeps making rumbling, gurgling noises and he doesn’t want to be forced to resort to stale crumpets again. He misses waking up to giant breakfasts cooked by his mum.

“You could help me you know,” Dan teases, pulling out a carton of eggs from the fridge and searching for the expiry date.

Phil doesn’t say anything. He’s thinking about his mum now. He’s remembered the last conversation they’d had yesterday. He’s remembered the conversation she was planning to have with his dad.

Now his stomach is churning uncomfortably for a completely different reason. He looks at Dan and tries to force the smile he gives to look natural.

He fails.

“What’s wrong?” Dan asks softly, setting the eggs aside and coming to lean against the counter where Phil’s sat.

Phil just looks at him, marveling at how well they seem to understand each other already.

Dan puts a hand on Phil's bare knee, stroking over it with his thumb. Phil’s still in his pants. He’d snagged the clean hoodie and pulled it over his head, laughing at Dan’s protests. Dan stands there bare save for the bright blue boxers Phil had given him last night.

“You ok?”

Phil nods. “Just… cold. Want me to go grab you something to wear?”

Dan frowns, clearly disbelieving Phil’s weak attempt at deflection, but he doesn’t push it. “You not enjoying the view, Lester?”

“Course I am.” He nudges Dan out of the way gently and hops down from the counter. “My legs are freezing though, I’m gonna go grab some sweatpants or something. You want a jumper?”

Now it’s Dan’s turn to smile weakly. “I reckon I could just grab my own clothes out of the dryer. I have to leave pretty soon anyway.”

Phil frowns. “What, why?”

“Work.”

“Oh. Right. Do you still have time for pancakes?”

Dan smiles again, a little more genuine this time. “Yeah.”

“Ok, I’ll be right back.” He leans in and plants his lips on Dan’s a little more forcefully than the situation calls for.

He picks up his phone as soon as he gets to his room and his stomach drops the moment he checks it. He has a missed call from his mum.
And a text.

Kath: hello love. please ring me when you get a chance.

He sits on his unmade bed and stares at the message. This bloody message that tells him absolutely nothing. He doesn’t even know if he should be scared or not. He curses her for her ambiguity.

He’d told her he didn’t care. He’d told himself he didn’t care—he was going to live his truth and they could accept that or not. He still believes it, he’s still glad he had the nerve to do it, but he realizes now that he definitely cares. He’s definitely not keen to hear exactly how put out his father is right now.

“Phil?” Dan is stood in the doorway, looking worried.

Phil can’t pretend to be fine anymore. Why should he? Why should he keep things from Dan anyway?

“Yeah.”

Dan sits next to him. “What’s going on?”

Phil tosses his phone onto the pillow. “Remember when you asked me if I told my dad about us?”

“Yeah… you said you didn’t.”

Phil nods. “I didn’t. But I told my mum she could.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

Dan’s voice is soft. “And did she?”

“I assume.”

“So you don’t know how it went?”

Phil shakes his head. “She rang me earlier.” He looks down at his hands, and the shaky fingers that wring together.

“Are you going to call her back?”

He looks up into Dan’s eyes. “I’m scared.”

Dan puts his hand on Phil’s thigh. “Do you want me to be here… like for moral support or whatever?”

Phil thinks for a while. He shakes his head. “I don’t want to do it right now,” he whispers.

“That’s fine. You don’t have to.”

“But I’ll just be thinking about it and worrying about it all day. Do you reckon I should just get it over with?”

“Yeah, maybe it’s better—”

“But what if she puts him on? What if he’s like, proper angry?”
Dan snaps his mouth shut.

Phil hugs his knees. “Sorry. I just don’t know what to do.”

“Maybe for now we should just go have pancakes?” Dan asks gently.

Phil bites his lip. He already knows he’s going to be a wreck until faces up to this. He leans back and reaches out to grab his phone. He looks at Dan. “Stay.”

Dan squeezes Phil’s thigh and nods.

“Am I a coward if I text her first?”

“No, Phil. Even if you’d never told them anything you still wouldn’t be a coward. But you did. You told your mum and your brother and I haven’t told a single person yet. You’re anything but a coward.”

“You know I wasn’t trying to imply that you—”

“I know. I’m just trying to make you see how ridiculous that is.”

Phil nods. “I just wish, like… I dunno. I wish I didn’t care.”

Dan shuffles a little closer, his thigh slipping underneath Phil’s knee. “It’s nice you care. It’s nice you have that kind of relationship with them.”

Phil shrugs. “I guess.”

“I think it’ll be ok, Phil. Like maybe they won’t be perfect right away but I think it’s gonna be alright. They love you so much.”

Phil smiles weakly. “That’s what my mum said too.”

“She’s not wrong. Your family is closer than any I’ve ever seen.”

Phil turns his phone over and over in his hands. “Maybe that’s because they didn’t know who I really was, though. Maybe things will be different now.”

“Yeah, maybe. But that’s not necessarily a bad thing.”

Phil looks up at Dan, who gives him an encouraging smile. It helps. It reminds Phil why this matters so much to him in the first place. He opens his phone.

Phil: hey mum. did you tell dad about dan?

Dan loops his arm through Phil’s as they wait for Kath’s reply. Phil’s heart races when his phone buzzes in his hand a few minutes later.

Kath: yes i did

Phil: how’d he take it?

Kath: well he’d really like to talk to you phil. are you able to give us a ring?

Phil chews on his lip. It’s not the response he’d hoped for. Really, she hasn’t told him anything. If anything, he’s more nervous than he’d been before.
He decides to be completely, unflinchingly honest with her.

*Phil: i’m kind of scared mum, if i’m honest*

*Kath: don’t be silly love.*

*Phil: he’s not going to yell at me is he?*

*Kath: of course not*

He finds Dan’s hand and laces their fingers together. He squeezes, hard, and whispers again, “Stay with me please.”

Dan squeezes back. “Of course.”

He jabs his finger on his parents’ number in his contacts. He holds his phone up to his ear with a shaky hand. His hands are always shaky lately. His heart hammers as he listens to the ringing on the other end of the line.

“Child.”

“Hi mum.”

“How was the train ride home?”

He could scream. Mindless small talk is the last thing he wants right now. “Fine. Boring.”

It’s already awkward. He lets out a breath.

She clears her throat. “Your dad was hoping to speak with you.”

“Ok.”

“I’m going to hand the phone to him, ok?”

Phil’s skin is crawling. Why does she have to be so weird about it? It’s just making him worry even more. He hears rustling and muffled voices on the other end of the line. He looks at Dan and takes a slow deep breath.

“Hello?”

“Hi dad.”

“Hello Phil.”

Phil waits, hoping his father will take the lead on this.

He doesn’t, so Phil has no choice but to keep up the awkward pleasantries a little longer. “How are you?”

“Oh, well… actually I’m quite tired this morning. Your mother and I were up late.”

Phil’s stomach twists. Up late discussing where they’d went wrong in raising their younger son, no doubt. “Oh really?”

“Most of the night, in the end.”
“Talking about me?” His voice is much weaker than he’d meant for it to be.

“It was quite a shock to us, Phil.”

“A shock.” He doesn’t know why it stings quite as much as it does. His dad was probably even less ready to hear something like that than his mum was. All things considered, Phil thinks he should probably chalk it up to a win that his father is even talking to him at all right now.

“Yes. I wasn’t expecting it.”

Anger flares in his chest. It almost feels like he’s being asked to explain himself, maybe even to apologize for being the cause of such a shock.

“Did you have something you wanted to talk to me about, dad? Mum said you wanted to speak to me.”

Clearly Nigel hadn’t been expecting that. He splutters, “Well, I thought it was obvious—”

“I’m assuming mum told you I’m dating Dan?” He looks at Dan then, whose eyes are wide with surprise. Phil can’t blame him. He never really takes a tone like this with anyone, let alone his parents.

He’s just so tired of this. He wonders if outright disapproval would be easier. But this—this quiet, passive aggressive nonchalance in the face of something near and dear to Phil’s heart sparks an indignation in him that he can’t seem to quell.

“Yes…” Nigel says confusedly.

“So what? What would you like to know? What d’you wanna talk about?”

“I suppose I wanted to ask— to make sure you think this boy is good enough for you.”

Phil laughs, a short burst of surprise belting from his mouth.

“I never thought I’d have to worry about… something like that, not having any girls and all. I took it for granted that you boys would be… safe.”

“God, dad,” Phil says, shaking his head. “Just because Dan’s a bloke doesn’t mean he’s some kind of predator.”

“Well no, I know that, but I’ve only met the lad once, and I didn’t know he was anything but a mate. I didn’t get to speak to him as I would’ve if I’d known.”

“Is that really what you’re worried about, dad?”

“I remember what boys his age are like, Phil. I was one once, after all.”

“He’s definitely not like most boys.” He squeezes Dan’s hand. “Were you not a nice guy, dad?”

Nigel clears his throat awkwardly. “I know I only had pretty much one thing on my mind back then. I was thinking with my head, and not the one on my neck, if you know what I mean.”

Phil cringes, suddenly kind of wishing he could curl up and roll away, or maybe pour bleach into his ear or something. “Oh my god, dad.” He’d thought talking about sex with his mum was bad. This is definitely worse.
“We’re both adults here,” Nigel says gruffly, though he sounds about as mortified as Phil feels.

“Well, you don’t have to worry. Dan’s a good guy. His mind has room for loads of things.”

“I suppose he seemed nice enough, yeah?”

Phil laughs again, turning his head in Dan’s direction. Dan looks completely overwhelmed by the little snippets he’s getting of this conversation. “Yeah. The nicest,” Phil assures.

“Well that’s good then.”

“Yeah. It is.”

It’s clear neither of them know what to say now, as silences stretches out between them. Phil wonders if his dad had actually wanted to have this conversation at all or if Kath had forced his hand.

“Did you want to ask me anything else, dad?” Phil asks quietly. He’s really trying to be brave. He recognizes how hard his parents are trying, he really does. And Nigel is actually doing a pretty good job of controlling himself, of not giving away too much of that shock he’d spoken about earlier.

“Hold on a sec,” Nigel mutters.

Phil can hear his parents speaking to each other in hushed voices. He looks at Dan again to distract himself from the tension building in his muscles for every second that passes without a response. It always helps, looking At Dan. It reminds him why he’s doing this in the first place, why it matters so much to him that his family knows the truth.

“Your mother wants to know what we should say to nan and grandad.”

“Uh… I don’t-- I don’t know. You don’t have to say anything, do you?” He hadn’t thought about this. He hadn’t thought about needing to tell anyone beyond his parents.

“Should we not?” Nigel asks.

Phil starts biting his thumbnail, something he never does. It’s not enough relief, so he sticks his thumb a little further into his mouth and sinks his teeth into the flesh of it. “I don’t know, dad. I don’t have anything figured out yet.”

“Alright, I reckon we’ll just leave it for now, then,” Nigel says, and Phil’s not sure if he’s saying it to him or to Kath. Suddenly Phil realizes he’d really like to be done with this conversation.

“I have to go now, dad. Say bye to mum for me.”

“Oh, alright, bye then--”

Phil hangs up before he can say anything else.

“What happened?” Dan asks instantly

“He asked me what to tell my grandparents.”

“Oh,” Dan says quietly. “That’s kind of… strange. Isn’t it?”

Phil untangles his fingers from Dan’s and lays down flat on his back, looking up at the ceiling and threading his fingers through his hair, gripping at the root and pulling a little. “I dunno. I guess they were probably worried about having to tell them I’m gay.”
Dan lies down next to him. “Does it bother you what word they use?”

“No. I dunno. I guess not.”

“Do you want to tell your grandparents?”

Phil chews on his lip. He knows Dan’s looking at him, but he doesn’t feel ready to look back. He knows it’ll just make him emotional, and he’s getting a little tired of that. He needs a break from so much up and down. “Not really, I guess. If my parents don’t get it, their parents definitely won’t.”

“Do they not?”

Phil shakes his head. “Not like I’d hoped.”

“Did you expect them to?”

Phil turns his head. “Do you expect yours to? If you ever tell them?”

“I’m definitely going to tell them, Phil.” His voice is honey-sweet and warm and Phil was right, he’s definitely feeling emotional now.

“And what do you think they’ll say?” Phil whispers.

“I don’t really know. They probably won’t be surprised.”

“Really?”

Dan shrugs. “Everyone else assumes I’m some kind of gay, why would my parents be any different?”

“Do they?” Phil asks. “Why?”

“Makeup, nail polish, flowery shit, that kind of thing.”

“You never wanted to tell your parents before?”

Dan snorts. “I don’t talk to them like you talk to yours, Phil, you know that. Besides, I never had a reason to. What was I gonna say, ‘mum, dad, I met some guy at a party last night and we fucked in the dark in his dorm room?’”

Phil feels like he’s been slapped. He sits up quickly, trying not to picture it.

“Sorry. Fuck.” Dan sits up too, and pulls Phil’s hand into his lap. “Sorry, Phil. I have a lot of… anger. About that time in my life. But I shouldn’t talk like that in front of you. It has nothing to do with you, I’m sorry.”

“I didn’t mean to bring anything up for you. I know family stuff is… sensitive for you.”

Dan leans in and kisses him. “I’m gonna tell them. Next time I see them. I’m gonna bring you down with me and introduce you as my boyfriend. I can’t wait.” He kisses him again, deeper. He slings his arms around Phil’s neck and hitches his leg up and over Phil’s thighs, settling himself down into Phil’s lap.

Phil runs his hands up Dan’s sides. He’s still wearing nothing but his boxers and Phil wonders if it’s entirely normal that he wants Dan again, not half an hour since the last time he had him. Dan wraps his legs around Phil’s waist and Phil realizes he doesn’t give a toss about what’s normal.
He tilts his head back and looks up at Dan. “I can’t wait either.”

“I reckon it does bring up a good question though, doesn’t it?”

“What’s that?” Phil asks.

“Like… what to tell people. Or like, who we want to tell, I guess?”

“Oh.” He presses his forehead to Dan’s chest. “I hadn’t thought about it.”

“Me neither.”

“I guess we should.”

Dan kisses the top of his head. “Probably.”

“I’ve already told everyone I care about, anyway, so I guess beyond that it doesn’t really even matter?”

Dan takes Phil’s face in his hands. He leans down and kisses his lips gently. “But what about when you drag my lazy ass out for a walk? What about when we go out for coffee or dinner or like, to the cinema? Am I allowed to hold your hand?”

Phil kisses him again. Because Dan is gorgeous and kissable, but also because Phil wants to stall. He wants to say yes, of course, they can hold hands whenever the hell they damn well please.

But when he tries to picture it, tries to picture walking down the street with Dan’s hand in his… he’s not sure he can. He hates himself for the panic it spikes in his gut. He’s not ashamed of Dan. Nothing could be further from the truth. And he knows that plenty of people wouldn’t even give them a second look.

But he also knows that the world is full of Kyles—and worse. He’s heard Jimmy talk about it too many times, about having to keep a respectable distance between himself and Tom when they ride the tube or even go out on dates.

“I… I don’t— what do you want? It’s not just up to me.”

“Oh… I don’t think I really know either.”

Phil feels a twinge of disappointment as Dan flops off his lap.

“I’ve never had to think about it, I guess,” Dan mutters, to himself or to Phil, Phil’s not even sure. “It’s…” He trails off, his thumbnail finding its way between his teeth.

“It’s what?” Phil prompts.

“It’s just-- it’s such bullshit. Like, I never had to have this conversation with Ella, y’know?”

Phil nods. “Jimmy and Tom don’t,” he says quietly.

“Don’t what?” Dan is staring off, his legs crossed underneath him.

“They don’t do like, PDA. Unless they’re at a gay club, I guess.”

Dan just nods.
"I mean. We don’t have to decide now, right?” Phil asks. “We can think about it?”

"Yeah."

"Maybe for now we’ll just… keep it. Like keep it just for us?”

Dan laughs. “And your whole family.”

“Except my nan and grandad,” Phil points out.

“Right. But also Tom and Jimmy and Rory.”

Phil frowns a little. He looks at Dan and pulls his thumb away to save it from his gnawing. “Are you upset I told people?”

“No. Not at all.” He picks up Phil’s hand, turning it over in his lap so the palm is facing up. He pushes the sleeve of Phil’s hoodie up, exposing his pale wrist and tracing the dark blue of his veins with the tip of his middle finger. “It’s the opposite, really. It makes this all feel more real.”

“You feel like it’s not real?” His wrist tickles a little where Dan’s finger caresses it.

“Not like that. Not in a bad way.” Dan lifts Phil’s wrist then and kisses it. “Like, it almost feels so good I wonder if I just made the whole thing up.”

Phil smiles. “Me too. But my dad just told me to be careful because probably all you want from me is sex, so it must be real. My brain would never make something like that up. It would never want me to cringe that hard.”

“Jesus christ,” Dan breathes. “Did he really say that?”

Phil bites his tongue and giggles. “Yup.”

“You better tell him I’m a gentleman!”

“I did!”

“I mean…” Dan climbs back into Phil’s lap. “He’s not completely wrong, though…”

“Shut up Howell. I’m starving, I need pancakes. And didn’t you say you have to go to work?”

Dan crinkles his nose. “Oh yeah. Damnit.”

“Raincheck?”

“Definitely.” He hops off Phil’s lap again and holds out his hand to help him up. “Let’s go make pancakes.”
Phil has a few hours to kill between Dan leaving for work and the start of his own shift. He reluctantly tidies up the aftermath of the pancakes they’d made, loading the dishwasher and scrubbing dried batter off the countertop.

He’s still in his pants when Jimmy and Tom come home. He greets them happily, trying not to betray how much he wishes Jimmy were alone. He hates how often he feels this way as Tom truly is lovely and hasn’t done anything to earn Phil’s wariness beyond occupying the attention of his best friend.

It’s just that he’s had yet another rather emotional milestone today and he really wants to climb into Jimmy’s bed and tell him all about it. Maybe he wants to cry just a little bit, he’s not really sure. It’d gone better than he’d expected, the conversation with his father, but still he’s starting to feel a little shaky in the aftermath of it and he doesn’t want to be alone.

Jimmy notices. Of course he does. He pulls Phil into a tight hug and presses his lips to his temple. “You ok?” he whispers.

Phil nods. He can’t have Jimmy right now. It’d be selfish and he knows how much Jimmy has been missing Tom over the break. “Just tired.”

He pulls away and goes to give Tom a hug too. He’s shorter and it almost feels strange. Phil’s gotten so used to Dan’s height that it feels funny to be able to lay his cheek down on the top of Tom’s head as they embrace.

“What are you up to today, Philly?” Jimmy asks.

“Gotta work later.”

“You haven’t forgotten about tomorrow, right?”

He frowns. “Tomorrow?”

“New Year’s Eve.”

“Oh.” Shit. He had definitely forgotten. “Right.”

“You’re going to help me get this place ready, yeah?”

“If I have to.”

“You do,” Jimmy chimes, grinning.

Phil excuses himself to his room after a few minutes of small talk, knowing Jimmy and Tom must want some time alone. Anyway, he’s thought of the perfect way to pass the time before his shift starts. He needs to buy Dan a gift.

Unfortunately, he hasn’t actually come up with a great idea yet and he hasn’t been saving up for months like Dan had. Only a few days in and he’s already a shit boyfriend.

He gets dressed and goes out anyway, carrying a backpack with his work clothes, a change of underwear and his toothbrush. Dan’s getting off work before him and he wants to be prepared if Dan asks him to come back to his when his shift is over.
And that gets Phil thinking.

By the time he walks into Boots, he thinks he has a pretty good idea for the perfect gift.

It’s good to see Rory again. It’s a little strange at first actually, considering how much has changed in the time since they’d last seen each other, but still, it’s nice. She’s lovely as ever, and the shop isn’t all that busy today, so the three of them have lots of time to chat and sip coffee and eat lemon poppyseed loaf and get away with calling it work.

When Dan goes on his break, she looks at Phil a little differently, studying his face until he can feel himself blushing. It’s not like it used to be, when he could tell she was trying to endear herself to him. She doesn’t do that anymore.

No, now she’s just looking, with a little crease in the silky smooth skin between her eyebrows.

“What?” Phil finally has to say.

“What what?” she retorts, though she’s still not smiling the way he hoped she would.

“Why’re you staring at me, Ror?”

“Was I?”

Phil chuckles. “Yeah.”

She flicks her tongue out a tiny bit and Phil sees a small silver ball caught between her teeth.

“How’d you get to be assistant manager when you never follow any of the rules?”

“What you talking bout, mate?”

He sticks out his tongue.

Her frown deepens until she gets it. “Oh, shit. Forgot to take that out.”

Phil nods. “You also left the one in your nose too.”

Her hand flies up to touch the thin gold hoop in her nostril. “Shite.”

Phil just laughs.

“Whatever, Lester. I can do what I want. Besides, I didn’t say anything about your boyfriend’s nail polish, did I?”

Phil smiles. “I guess you didn’t.”

“He’s rocking it, so like, who am I to cramp his style.”

“You’re the best boss ever.”

She gives him a wink. “I know.”

“You’re still staring at me, though,” Phil says, leaning back against the counter.

“Sorry. I was just—you’re different now. I was just noticing it today I guess. Even more so than
“Am I?”

Rory nods.

“In a bad way?”

“No. Not at all. Definitely in a good way. You seem happy.”

He fights the urge to laugh or otherwise be awkward in any way. It’s just a defense mechanism, but there’s nothing to be defensive of right now. “I am.”

“Dan seems happy too.”

“He is, I think,” Phil says softly. “We are.”

She flicks a tight curl off her forehead. It falls right back, into almost the exact same spot but she doesn’t seem bothered. She sets her dark eyes on his. “I’m sorry I kissed you, Phil.”

His heart jumps. They haven’t really talked about this since that tense day out on the patio.

“I’m not,” he says, fighting another urge this time, the one to look away. “I think it kind of helped me figure some stuff out.”

“Yeah?”

He nods. “I should be the one apologizing—”

She shakes her head insistently. “We don’t have to do this again,” she says. “I’m just… It makes me really happy to see the way he brightens you. I could see it right away, from the first day he started. I knew there was something there and I kissed you anyway because it made me sad and it felt unfair because you barely knew him. But that was stupid and I feel bad about it now.”

He doesn’t say anything, just smiles and puts his hand on her shoulder. She smiles back, sadly at first, but then warm and sweet. It feels to Phil like an important moment. Like letting go and starting over, without ever having to actually say the words.

Phil has to knock on Dan’s door three times before someone opens it for him, which makes no sense as Dan knew full well Phil was on his way over.

It’s not even Dan who’s stood on the other side of the door when it opens.

“Hey Phil, come in mate.” He says Phil’s name with more familiarity than should be possible considering they’ve barely spoken more than a few words to each other.

“Uh, hi. Mark, right?”

Mark nods, waving Phil in. Dan’s sat on the couch, wedged between two men Phil’s never seen before, game controller in his hand and a big smile on his face.

“Phil!”

“Hey.” He tries to match Dan’s enthusiasm, but it’s just such a jarring visual, Dan in his rose jumper,
sat on his feet and laughing with people he once claimed to hate.

Dan introduces Phil to his other flatmates and makes room on the sofa. Phil slips in between Dan and one of the guys whose name Phil’s already forgotten.

Dan puts his hand on Phil’s knee. Phil raises his eyebrows and Dan squeezes reassuringly. This kind of action doesn’t seem to match the conversation they’d had earlier today, but maybe Dan really has had a change of heart about his flatmates. He seems to have decided that they’re safe here. Phil wants to kiss him, suddenly.

He doesn’t, because that definitely doesn’t fit with the decision they’d made to keep this just for them, but he promises himself he will the moment they’re alone again. Someone hands him a pint and he takes a long sip despite the fact that he kind of hates beer. He wants to catch up with the rest of them so this can be fun instead of slightly nerve wracking.

Dan’s cheeks are flushed and his laugh is loud and his smiles are easy and now Phil understands why—he’s tipsy. But also, he’s just happy, and Phil’s heart swells so much he thinks it might burst. Dan is so beautiful when he’s happy. Phil could cry for the relief he feels knowing Dan has made friends with these people from whom he used to hide.

They all drink beer and play mario kart and shout obscenities at each other for what feels to Phil like hours. And it’s fun, it really is, but Phil is still grateful when Dan leans over and whispers, “Wanna go to my room?”

He nods vigorously.

“Ok, we’re off lads,” Dan says loudly, clapping his hand down on Phil’s thigh and standing up clumsily.

Phil’s limbs feel a little heavier as he stands up from the sofa and waves goodbye to his new friends.

“Try to keep it down in there, yeah?” one of them says cheekily.

Dan just flips him off, grinning. “No promises, mate.”

Phil is glad he’s not sober--his cheeks are already red and he doesn’t have the full mental capacity to process just how embarrassed he suddenly is. He grabs his bag and heads for the bathroom to brush his teeth.

When their mouths are minty fresh they head back to Dan’s room. Phil shuts the door behind them and Dan flops down face first on the bed. Phil drops his bag and flops down too.

It’s nice to be here again, on Dan’s tiny mattress, low to the ground and haloed by the soft white of the fairy lights on the wall.

“You made friends,” Phil mumbles into the duvet.

“Proud?” Dan asks, rolling over onto his back.

Phil nods. He really is.

Dan scrubs a hand down over his face. “I’m a little bit drunk, I think.”

Phil sinks his teeth into the pad of his thumb. His fingers always go slightly numb when he’s been drinking, and for whatever reason it always gives him the overwhelming urge to bite them, which is
exactly what’s happening now. He feels lovely, heavy and somehow floaty all at once. “Me too.”

“You’re not very good at mario kart, Phil.”

Phil snorts. “Better than your flatmates though I reckon.”

Dan turns over onto his side and scoots in next to Phil, who’s lying on his back. “I missed you.”

Phil reaches up, tugs on Dan’s curly fringe. “It’s only been a couple hours since I saw you last.”

“You saying you didn’t miss me too?” Dan asks, propping himself up on his elbow so he’s looking down at Phil.

Phil shakes his head. “Not saying that. Just saying we’re ridiculous.”

“I don’t care. I like being ridiculous with you. You make me ridiculous.”

Phil hooks his ankle around Dan’s calf. “You say that to all the boys.”

“I don’t.” He puts a hand on Phil’s hip and leans down, pressing a kiss to Phil’s already puckered lips. “I really don’t.”

Phil sighs, rubbing his fingers against the short hair at the nape of Dan’s neck. “Is it always going to be like this?” he whispers. He’s tipsy enough that he doesn’t worry about whether or not his words make sense.

Dan seems to understand though. “I don’t know. I hope so.”

“You told your flatmates?”

Dan shakes his head. “They just assumed and I didn’t correct them. I hope that’s ok.”

“It’s ok.” Phil smiles. “They seem nice.”

“They’re alright.” Dan slips his hand up under Phil’s shirt.

Phil’s still wearing his work clothes and he honestly doesn’t feel the most attractive at the moment. He thinks he might even have some dried mocha on his arm.

“Let’s not talk about them, though,” Dan murmurs.

“What should we talk about?”

Dan leans down and kisses him once more before lying down on his back again. “Us? You? Everything?”

Phil chuckles. “That narrows it down.”

“I guess I want to make sure you’re ok with what happened this morning?”

Phil frowns. “This morning?”

“Oh. Right.” How could he forget? “Course I am. Did it seem like I wasn’t?”

“I just know I broke like, all the rules.”
“I thought we were done with rules,” Phil says, sitting up. He feels more in control sitting up, and he doesn’t want to let this conversation get away from him.

“Is that what you want?” Dan asks.

Phil nods. “I’m not going to get scared now. I trust you.”

“Do you reckon we should still try to go kind of slow though?” Dan asks quietly. “And like, talk about stuff?”

Phil smiles. He gets up on his knees and sits back on his heels, looking at Dan. “That sounds like the grown up, responsible thing to do, yeah.”

Dan wrinkles his nose. “It doesn’t sound sexy when you say it like that.”

“Everything you do is sexy,” Phil says, making sure his voice comes out low and deep.

Dan reaches his foot out and digs his toes into Phil’s thigh. “Shut up,” he says playfully.

Phil grabs Dan’s ankle, pulling that foot into his lap. He wraps his hands around it, massaging his thumbs into the sole. Dan groans.

“Everything about you is sexy,” Phil repeats. “These bloody feet are sexy.” He keeps working his thumbs in, rubbing firm circles and dragging them right up the center, all the way up to the toes.

“Do you have a foot thing?” Dan asks, but he’s not laughing. He’s not laughing at Phil—he’s not even smiling.

“Maybe,” Phil says and he pulls Dan’s foot up to his mouth, kissing his socked toe. “Maybe I just have a Dan thing.”

Now Dan smiles, but it’s still not a mocking smile. “I think maybe you have a foot thing, Phil.”

Phil doesn’t answer right away. He hooks two fingers under the elastic around Dan’s ankle and pulls the sock off slowly. He holds Dan’s bare foot in his hand, bringing it up to his face and kissing the arch of it.

“That tickles,” Dan says quietly, not trying to pull his foot away whatsoever.

Phil plants a little kiss on Dan’s big toe. *Fuck*. Maybe he does have a foot thing. He’s drunk and as such is feeling loose with the control of his teeth. He lets them sink into Dan’s toe shallowly. Dan sucks in a sharp breath through his nose and Phil stops himself from letting it get any farther than that, though his tongue suddenly aches to run itself along this strangely pretty foot.

“You’re a kinky fucker, Lester,” Dan chuckles breathily.

“I blame you entirely,” Phil replies. He returns the favour for Dan’s other foot, pulling the sock off and massaging the sole, though he skips the biting this time and resists the urge to lick and suck. He’s not ready to dive full on into something like that right now. Maybe it’s just because he’s a little drunk, he thinks. Maybe beer just makes him weird.

Probably not. Probably he’s just so gone for Dan that any part of him is irresistible at this point.

“What were we even talking about?” Phil asks.

“Being grown up and responsible about sex,” Dan says. “To put it bluntly.”
“Oh right.”

“So we’ll swap rules for just… general maturity?” Dan asks.

Phil nods. “It’s a plan.”

“Any hard nos, though?”

Phil bites his lip. When he’s half drunk and with Dan laid out beneath him like this it’s hard to conceive of anything he’d wouldn’t want to say yes to. But that’s not grown up. That’s not responsible, because he knows he’s not ready for everything. Not yet. And it has nothing to do with his desire for Dan. It has nothing to do with feeling uncertain or not having trust in Dan.

It’s just that thought he’d had last night, that thought of not wanting to skip any steps. He wants everything, but in time.

“I think… I think I’m not ready for, like, sex. Y’know?”

Dan sits up, nodding. “We don’t have to do that at all, Phil. If it’s— if the memories or whatever. If it’s too much.”

“I think I’m just saying not yet.” He puts a hand on Dan’s knee. “There’s so much before that anyway, yeah?”

Dan smiles and nods again. “Hey,” he says.

Phil raises his eyebrows in question.

Dan smirks. “How d’you feel about that raincheck?”

Phil rolls his eyes. “Maybe my dad was right.”

“Oi.”

“Kidding,” he chimes. “But I was actually wondering if I could have a quick shower before… anything?”

“Really?”

Phil nods. “I feel sticky and gross kinda.”

“But you smell like a latte,” Dan teases.

“Exactly.”

Dan grins. “You’re Latte Lester, remember?”

Phil cringes internally. “God. Could I have been any more awkward?”

“I thought you were cute as fuck.” He scoots forward so their knees press together. “Still do.”

“I was nervous,” Phil admits. “You made me so bloody nervous.”

“I was nervous too, Phil. Didn’t I call myself like… Hot Drink Howell or something?”

Phil laughs. They really have been a couple of dorks from the very beginning.
“God, at least yours sounds kind of catchy,” Dan says, shaking his head.

“Yours is accurate though. You’re definitely hot.”

Dan pretends to retch. “Alright, Lester, go have your shower.”

Phil’s laughing as he stands up. He’s got a hand on the door to open it when Dan says, “Phil?”

Phil turns, looking at Dan expectantly.

“Do you think I could join you?”

Phil’s just intoxicated enough for the idea not to make his heart jump.

“I won’t touch you if you don’t want.”

“What if I do want?” He holds out his hand.

“Whatever” He holds out his hand.

Dan takes it and they tiptoe down the hall, trying to be discreet, though Phil thinks neither of them really care all that much if Dan’s flatmates notice them or not.

Dan starts the shower and they undress each other as the water heats up. The air is thick with steam by the time they’re both naked. It’s taken them longer than it should have to shed all their clothes, their fingers thick with a few too many pints, their movements giggly and uncoordinated.

Despite their experiences together last night and then again this morning, this feels like a new level of exposure for Phil. There are no duvets to hide under here, no pillows to hide his face. It helps to look at Dan though. It helps to calm the slight tremor in Phil’s hands to look at Dan’s face and read in his expression just how much he likes what he sees.

They take turns washing each other’s hair. The whole room is full of the clean fruity scent of Dan’s body wash as he lathers it in his hands, hands he proceeds to run across Phil’s chest, across his shoulders and down his arms.

It’s not until Dan moves a soap-soft hand down and wraps it around Phil’s cock that Phil’s self consciousness is fully eclipsed. He takes Dan’s free hand and scoops the suds off Dan’s palm and into his own. He drops his forehead down onto Dan’s shoulder and returns the favour, stomach flipping as Dan groans.

It’s easier like this, easier than it’d been on the sofa. Phil touches Dan as he would touch himself, and it seems to work just fine. Phil kisses his way from Dan’s shoulder, up his neck and across his jaw to his mouth, and they press dripping wet lips together over and over.

They bring each other off slowly and sweetly as hot water streams down Phil’s back.

Afterwards, they creep back to Dan’s room as stealthily as they can, leaving a trail of wet footprints along the carpet the whole way. The air is cold against their skin, which Phil can’t pretend not to hate. Usually he wears at least two towels after a shower.

They get lucky and make it back to Dan’s room without being spotted.

Phil shivers as he closes the door behind him. “I’m bloody freezing mate, do you even have the heating on?”

Dan shrugs. “Even when it’s on it doesn’t work very well.”
Phil rummages through his bag and finds his pants. He wishes now that he’d brought pyjamas.

Dan tosses him something. “Here. I wanna see you in this anyway.” It’s the jumper Dan had just been wearing, black with pink and white roses.

It’s a little too big, but it’s soft and warm and it smells like Dan.

“Looks good on you,” Dan says softly.

Phil smirks. “Doesn’t everything?”

Not for the first time, Phil’s grateful for the size of Dan’s mattress, and how closely they have to press themselves together to fit. They lie on their sides facing each other, arms wrapped around each other tight. Phil’s almost sober now, but he’s tired and his eyes are so heavy they might as well be closed.

“See?” he mumbles sleepily. “That was grown up and…”

“Responsible?” Dan offers.

“Yeah, responsible, that’s it.”

“Except not really. Shower sex is actually pretty reckless, like it’s slippery as hell in there, we could’ve easily fallen and smashed our heads open…. but, carry on.”

Phil bites the tip of Dan’s nose. “What I’m trying to say is it was still sexy, you… you rat.”

Dan giggles, at the nickname or the way Phil’s words are slurred by exhaustion or just because he’s happy, Phil’s not sure. He laughs too, though. He laughs because he’s happy and Dan is so warm and their bare legs are all tangled up together like vines.

“You’re right,” Dan says softly. “Still sexy.”
Phil can hear his phone ringing. The sound of it is muffled and faint, but he can hear it. He thinks he’s been hearing it for a while too, unless it really is a coincidence that it’d been ringing in his dream as well. He knows it’s his because Dan quite literally never has the volume turned up on his.

He groans. He’s lying on his back, one leg thrown over Dan’s, who’s lying on his side and curled up against Phil’s body. He’s still asleep, though he’s starting to stir now too.

The ringing stops and Phil closes his eyes again. He’s definitely not ready to be awake, especially if Dan’s not. He turns over and fits his back against Dan’s front, pulling the duvet up higher over them both. Dan slings his arm around Phil’s waist sleepily. The motion is practiced and natural—Phil doesn’t think Dan even realizes he’s doing it, as he can hear tiny, breathy little snores next to his ear. It makes him feel warm all over, that familiarity, that ease, and he puts his arm on top of Dan’s.

He’s just drifting back to sleep when the ringing starts again.

This time Dan groans, slipping his hand up under Phil’s jumper. Under Dan’s jumper really. If he’s trying to convince Phil to get up and answer his phone, running his fingers along Phil’s bare skin and skimming the waistband of his boxers really isn’t the best way to do it.

“Someone really wants to speak with you,” Dan croaks.

“Someone needs to bugger off.”

Dan chuckles and Phil can feel him rolling away. He turns his head around to watch Dan leaning almost fully off the mattress, stretching his long arm out for Phil’s jeans. The ringing has stopped but Dan carries on until Phil’s phone is in his hand and he’s turning back towards Phil.

Phil turns over onto his side so he’s facing Dan. He checks his phone once Dan’s pressed it into his hand. He has five missed calls from Jimmy. It’s not even 9am.

“Better ring him back,” Dan says, smiling and pulling Phil in closer.

Phil rolls his eyes but swipes his finger against the missed call and puts the phone up to his ear. It doesn’t even ring once before Jimmy answers. “Fucking hell, Phil. I thought you were dead.”

“Surely you knew I was sleeping, you git.”

Jimmy just ignores him. “You have to come home soon.”

“Why?” Phil asks, voice muffled by a sizeable yawn.

“You said you’d help me get the place ready.”

Phil can practically hear Jimmy’s pout.

“Only because you literally gave me no other choice. Why can’t Tom do it?”

“Because I want you.”

“Tom’s busy, isn’t he?”
There’s a pause on the other end of the line before Jimmy says, “Maybe.”

“It’s too early,” Phil whinges. “We’re sleeping.”

Dan smiles. His cheeks seem extra dimpled in the mornings, his eyes adorably puffy and all Phil really wants to do is kiss him. He moves his head forward on the pillow, until the tip of his nose brushes into Dan’s

“Well wake up,” Jimmy says. “You can sleep tomorrow.”

“I’m awake. You made sure of that. Why are you even up so early?”

“You know Tom’s an early riser.”

He does. He does know that. He also knows what they do on those early mornings. He’s heard the evidence through the wall many times.

“Well I’m not,” Phil retorts. “And neither are you. Go back to sleep.”

“I tried and I can’t. I’m wide awake and I’m bo-ored.” Jimmy’s voice is a horrendous whine.

“You’re the worst person in the world,” Phil says, voice full of fondness.

“Yes. Now come home, please.”

“I’m gonna need like, at least an hour.”

“What, why?”

Phil smiles and shuffles forward a little more, nudging Dan with his knee and slipping a thigh in between Dan’s. “Because I want to make out with my boyfriend, mate.”

Dan grins and shoves his hand up the back of Phil’s jumper.

“Ugh. I forgot how ridiculous the honeymoon phase is,” Jimmy mutters. “I’ll allow it on one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“You have to tell me all about it later.”

Phil laughs. “Pervy as ever then, James.”

“Of course. Alright, I’ll let you go. Just be sure to make it saucy so I have a good story to listen to while we’re scrubbing the floors.”

“We?”

“Laters!” Jimmy sing-songs, and hangs up before Phil can protest.

He’s smiling as he mutes his phone and tosses it aside. He settles a hand on Dan’s side and pushes his leg up a little further between Dan’s thighs.

Dan’s voice is just a soft murmur. “Did I hear you say something about making out?”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about.” He tilts his head and presses his lips to Dan’s.
Dan responds instantly, pressing his hand into the bare skin of Phil’s back and pulling him closer. He feels the muscles in Dan’s thighs contracting, locking his own leg firmly in place.

Phil’s already half hard. He frames Dan’s top lip between his own, running his tongue along it slowly. Dan chuckles, but it only serves to make Phil feel tingly all over. He doesn’t even care that they both have morning breath and he can taste it. He wants to know every iteration of this man, even the kind of gross ones.

“You feeling some type of way, Phil?” Dan doesn’t pull his lips off Phil’s, so his words are breathed right into Phil’s mouth. Dan’s tongue slides up against Phil’s exaggeratedly. By all accounts it’s objectively unattractive, cartoonish even, but Phil feels himself growing harder by the second.

“Are you not?” he replies, slipping his hand under the back of Dan’s pants and squeezing the soft pliant flesh there.

Dan reaches back and takes hold of Phil’s wrist. He moves Phil’s hand round to the front and slips it between their bodies, pressing it against his groin.


He nibbles at Dan’s lip. “You’re so easy aren’t you?”

“Only for you.” Dan plunges his tongue back into Phil’s mouth.

Phil breathes out heavily through his nose, a wave of heat rolling over him. He kisses back. He keeps kissing back, letting Dan take the lead. He’s all tongue this morning, hot and wet and a little bit sloppy, but Phil couldn’t possibly love it any more. He keeps his hand on Dan’s clothed cock, cupping and squeezing and rubbing through the fabric of his pants.

Dan doesn’t touch Phil back. His hands are in Phil’s hair, gripping at the root and tugging when Phil rubs his thumb along the ridge of Dan’s head.

“Are you gonna touch me for real or do I have to do it myself?” Dan pants, pulling his mouth off of Phil’s for the first time.

Phil laughs, but it gets him thinking. Thinking it’s not actually a bad idea.

“Maybe I want you to do it. Maybe I want to watch.”

Dan grins. “Oh yeah?”

Phil doesn’t answer right away. He hooks his fingers under the band of Dan’s pants and pulls. He doesn’t pull slowly or carefully. He’s not trying to tease. He wants to see Dan right away. Dan’s hands leave Phil’s hair to help Phil get the pants off quickly. It seems they’re both as impatient as the other.

What Dan does next surprises Phil but he certainly isn’t complaining. He gets quite the view as Dan rolls away from him and stands up out of the bed. He walks over to his desk wordlessly and opens one of the drawers, rummaging around for a moment before he finds what he’s looking for.

He walks back over to the bed with the blue bottle gripped in his fist. He stands over Phil for a moment, naked and beautiful and looking down with a smirk.

“You’re pretty,” Phil murmurs. “C’mere.”
Dan slips under the duvet and immediately his lips are on Phil’s again. They kiss for about thirty
seconds before Phil’s hand finds Dan’s ass cheek again and squeezes and Dan moans.

“I know you wanted to watch me…”

Phil smiles. “Yeah…”

“But there’s something I want too. I don’t know if we can do both. You can say no if you want,
obviously—”

“Why would I say no? It's not what we talked about last night, is it?”

“No, Phil of course not. I would never— you only gave me one hard no, you think I would—? No.”

“Then why would I say no?”

“Because it’s… I don’t know. It’s not what you wanted.”

“I want what you want,” Phil whispers, moving his mouth down Dan’s jaw to his ear. “It’s not just
all about me all the time. I don’t care what we do really, just you said that— about doing it yourself
or whatever and it sounded good but like, it doesn’t matter to me. If you want something from me I
want to hear it. Just like you tell me to tell you, yeah?”

Dan just laughs and Phil can feel the deep vibration of it where he’s kissing Dan’s throat.

“I know I’m rambling, ok? Don’t take the piss.”

“I’m sorry,” Dan chuckles. “You’re just so fucking cute, Phil.”

“I’m not cute, I’m devastatingly handsome.”

“That too.” Dan pushes Phil onto his back then, rolling on top of him and crushing their lips together.
It reminds Phil of their first time, Dan’s weight pinning him to the bed and his stomach flips. He’s got
Dan on top of him, naked and writhing and he’s wasting time with words.

“So tell me already,” Phil growls, and his hands are on Dan’s ass once again. It’s just a good ass.

Dan bites Phil’s lip before he pulls back enough to look in Phil’s eyes. He doesn’t say anything, but
Phil hears the bottle lid pop and feels Dan opening up Phil’s palm before drizzling some of the cool
slippery liquid into it.

“Guess you’re not doing it yourself then, eh?” Phil smirks, closing his fingers over his palm to spread
the lube around.

Dan sits up for a moment and squirts some into his own hand before closing the lid and tossing the
bottle aside. He leans back down and kisses Phil again.

“Actually, I am.”

Phil feels Dan’s hand slide between their bodies, feels his hand moving up and down slowly. The
backs of Dan’s fingers and the the knobs of his knuckles brush against Phil’s cock through his pants
as Dan strokes himself. Phil can’t see anything, but he can feel everything.

Again, Dan doesn’t have a lot of space to move as their bodies are pressed together, so Phil imagines
it’s not the smoothest or easiest of wanks, but he appreciates the closeness so much he doesn’t try to
make it any easier for him. This must be what Dan wants, Phil thinks, because he’s not trying to
make it any easier either.

Phil’s still got one hand on Dan’s bottom, the other hovering in the air awkwardly, slick and unsure
of what to do with itself.

“What am I meant to do now, Dan?” he whispers.

“Tell me if you don’t want to, yeah?” Dan murmurs. “I promise I won’t be put out.”

Phil resists the urge to roll his eyes. “Just tell me.”

Instead of telling, Dan shows. He grips Phil’s wrist with his free hand and guides it back to join the
other on his ass. He doesn’t stop at the cheek, though—he keeps going until Phil’s finger brushes the
cleft and presses in just a little.

“You’ve done this before, yeah?” Dan whispers, his eyes boring into Phil’s, no doubt searching for
any trace of fear or uncertainty.

Phil bites his lip and nods. He knows how to do this.

“Is it ok?”

Phil answers by slipping his middle finger in between the cheeks and rubbing gently over Dan’s hole
and down, to the skin behind his balls where he presses in a little more firmly and rubs.

“Fuck,” Dan croaks, pressing his face into Phil’s neck. “Shit.”

“Good?” Phil whispers, his body tingling as if Dan were the one rubbing his taint.

Dan just nods quickly, emphatically, and opens his legs a little wider.

“Why would you think I’d say no to this?” He moves his finger back up and adds the index as well,
circling his rim gently, just barely grazing Dan’s skin.

Dan sucks in a sharp breath before he can answer. “God.” He kisses Phil’s neck. “I just—I don’t
know what you like, Phil. Not everyone wants to do that.”

“I told you,” Phil says softly. “I want everything with you. I want to suck your bloody toes, for
god’s sake.”

Dan barks a laugh. “I can’t believe you have a foot thing.”

“I don’t!”

“Uh huh,” Dan says sarcastically.

Phil runs the pad of his middle finger right over Dan’s hole, pushing it in teasingly, just a fraction.
Dan stops laughing then, just as Phil hoped he would. He pulls his hand back and waits for Dan to
protest.

“You’re evil.”

“Maybe I just like winding you up,” Phil says cheekily.

“Maybe? Come back. Please.”
Phil smiles and does as Dan’s asked.

“Keep going this time. Please.”

Phil doesn’t. He keeps rubbing and petting and delighting at the little noises Dan makes right next to his ear. He’s not ready for Dan to lose himself yet.

“You won’t think that anymore, right?”

“What?” Dan asks, sounding far away.

“That I’ll say to no to something you want.”

“Oh. Mmm.”

Dan’s obviously starting to have a harder time carrying on conversation. Phil can still feel his hand between them, trying to stroke himself but it feels like he’s not having all that much success. Doesn’t seem to be bothering him all that much, though, to be fair. He’s still mouthing at Phil’s neck, pushing his hips forward every once in a while.

“If I have to be honest about everything, so do you,” Phil says. “Ok?”

Dan nods. “Yeah, yeah,” he agrees. “I promise, Phil.” And then, “Please.”

“Is there anything you don’t want with me?” Phil asks.

“No. Definitely not. I want everything.”

“You want my fingers in you?” Phil surprises even himself. Dirty talk had never been something he even considered himself capable of.

“Fuck, Phil. That’s what I’ve been asking you for here.”

“Roll over,” Phil whispers. “Lie on your side.”

Dan does it instantly and Phil slots himself up against Dan’s back. He kisses Dan’s neck and returns his slick fingers to their teasing dance around Dan’s rim. He cranes his neck over Dan’s shoulder and thanks himself for suggesting the change in position because now he can actually watch the tip of Dan’s dick slipping in and out of the tunnel of his fist as he strokes himself.

“I can’t tell you what I like because I don’t know yet,” Phil whispers, because he’s quickly becoming addicted to how easy it is to talk to Dan, how good it feels to know he can be honest and it will never be met with anything less than complete understanding. “We’re supposed to be figuring it out together, yeah?”

Dan nods. “I’m sorry Phil.”

“What I do know is that if you like something, I want to give it to you. Or at least I don’t want you to be afraid to ask.”

“Phil?”

“Yeah?”

“Will you please finger me now?”
Phil laughs and then bites Dan’s neck is playful reproach. He doesn’t tease any longer though.

He goes slow, slower than he probably needs to, but Dan seems more than happy to accept whatever Phil gives. He babbles a steady stream of encouragements and praises the whole time and Phil has to bite his lip a time or two to keep from giggling. He can’t help feeling it should be the other way around. It should be Phil whispering in Dan’s ear, telling him how good he is, telling him what he wants to hear to help him get off.

But that’s just what Dan’s like. Even when Phil’s trying to make it all about Dan, Dan finds a way to be the generous one.

Phil’s worked his way up to two fingers by the time Dan comes, brushing firm strokes against his prostate and sucking a frankly obscene hickey just below Dan’s jaw. He’s grateful that Dan’s a talker, that he’d murmured “I’m gonna come, Phil, you’re gonna make me come,” before it happened so Phil could watch.

Phil pulls him around when he’s done so they’re facing each other. He’s learning about himself that he needs that closeness afterwards, apparently even when he hasn’t had an orgasm of his own. He craves the feeling of Dan’s body pushed up as close to his as he can get it. He needs Dan’s mouth on his and he needs to whisper “I love you” into his ear.

He doesn’t know if he needs Dan to whisper it back, but he doesn’t have to wonder because he gets it. He gets “I love you so much, Phil,” in fact, and his whole body feels warm and sated, even with a totally ignored hard on raging in his boxers.

“Is it your turn?” Dan asks.

Phil shakes his head. “I have to go or Jimmy will kill me.”

Dan pouts. “I could make it quick, probably.”

“I don’t want quick,” Phil says, smoothing Dan’s frizzy curls off his forehead.

“I don’t either, but I feel like a selfish asshole now.”

“Don’t. You’re not. I love making you feel good. It’s my favourite thing in the whole world.”

Dan pushes out his bottom lip even further. “I want a turn.”

Phil laughs. “Raincheck.”

“I hate rainchecks. Too many bloody rainchecks.”

“Tonight?” Phil asks.

Dan nods. “Maybe we’ll learn something. Maybe we can find another thing you like.”

Phil bites his lip, acutely aware of the swelling in his groin. “That’s not gonna help me calm down, mate.”

“Sorry.”

“You’re not.”

Dan smiles. “Not really.”
Phil forces himself to sit up. “I’m leaving now. Are you coming with me?”

Dan shakes his head. “I have therapy later.

“Oh.” Phil frowns ever so slightly. “Do you ever talk about… like… me?”

Dan picks up Phil’s still slightly slick hand and holds it in his. “Yeah. I talk to her about pretty much everything.”

“Right. That’s… good.”

“It is.”

“It feels weird to know there’s someone out there I’ve never met who knows stuff about me.”

“I wouldn’t be the person you deserve without it, Phil. Therapy has literally saved my life.”

“Sorry, yeah of course. Well— I mean no, that’s not—” He takes a breath in before trying again. “You are always the person I deserve because you’re Dan and I love you. And I shouldn’t have made you feel like I don’t support your therapy. I do. I guess I just— for some reason I hadn’t considered you’d be talking about me.”

Dan looks down at their hands. “You know… it might be good, I reckon. For you too, I mean.”

“Therapy?” Phil asks.

Dan looks up at him. “Yeah.”

“You reckon?”

“I’m not trying to imply you need it. But like, from what you’ve told me about that shit from uni and everything… It’s just something to think about, maybe.”

Phil nods. Maybe it is.

Dan continues. “I kind of feel like everyone should be in therapy. I hope you’re not taking it personally.”

“I’m not,” Phil insists. “You’re probably right. I’ve spent my whole life ignoring certain parts of myself and like… trying to change them, and then when I couldn’t, trying to just pretend I didn’t care.”

Dan nods sadly and it makes Phil chuckle. “Sorry. I do realize you’re not actually a therapist yourself.” Sometimes it really feels like he is.

“You can always talk to me though,” Dan says softly. “The thing is that I might not always say the right thing. And maybe they would, y’know? Maybe they’d know what to say to make some of it start to feel better. That’s what happened for me. I went in assuming it wouldn’t work and then…”

“It did,” Phil finishes.

“It does, most of the time.” Dan smiles. “Along with all the other stuff.”

Phil nods. “I know I didn’t know you back then, but still… I’m proud of you.”

Dan beams. “If I was a few years younger and not desperately trying to keep my cool around you all
the time I’d do this right now.” He lifts his hands up and puts them together into a heart shape.

Phil laughs, and leans forward to kiss him. “You’re cute when you’re uncool. I like it. You don’t have to try to be anything you’re not with me. I’m the least cool person on the planet anyway.” He kisses him again.

Dan kisses back in a way Phil can tell he’s trying to get Phil to stay. “Are you still hard, Phil?”

Phil groans. “Well I am now.”

“Are you seriously going to leave without letting me touch you?”

Phil frowns. “Why are you trying to make this harder?”

Dan smirks.

“Alright, Howell, I’m leaving.” He stands up and tries to ignore the way his pants are tented. “And I’m keeping the jumper. I like it and it looks good on me and it smells like you and I’m knicking it.”

Dan smiles and lies down. “It does look good on you.”

“I’ll see you tonight, yeah?”

“Definitely.”

“You’ll stay over?”

Dan smiles sleepily. “I don’t care where we sleep, as long as it’s together.”

Phil makes a face, pretending to be disgusted. “Jimmy’s right, the honeymoon phase really is ridiculous.”

“I believe I said something last night about that being completely your fault, Lester.”

Phil pulls on his jeans and winces a little as he does the zip. “Get some more sleep,” he says, kneeling down and leaning over to kiss Dan’s forehead. “You’re gonna be up late tonight.”
Chapter 50

Jimmy is sat on the sofa when Phil gets in, glasses on, hair a mess, wearing a York hoodie and eating cereal straight from the box.

“Is that mine?” Phil asks, kicking off his shoes and letting his coat fall in a crumpled heap on the floor.

“Do we claim ownership over packaged breakfast food now?”

Phil flops down next to him and takes the box out of his hands. “You don’t even like Shreddies.”

“Sure I do… when it’s all we have.”

Phil shoves a sizable handful in his mouth. “How are we meant to throw a party if we have no food?”

Jimmy shifts his body to the side and lifts up his legs, settling them down over Phil’s lap. “I was hoping you’d join me on a thrilling adventure this morning.”

“Big Sainsbury’s?” Phil asks, voice muffled by entirely too much cereal.

“You know me so well.”

Phil rolls his eyes. “Too well.”

“I’ll buy you a giant bag of Haribo.”

Phil just smiles. He knows Jimmy knows he’d go with him regardless of begging or sugary bribes.

“Where’s Dan?”

“Sleeping.” Phil leans forward and puts the box on the table. He needs coffee before his stomach can process any more food. “As we all should be.”

Jimmy smirks. “Did you tire him out, then?”

“A gentleman doesn’t kiss and tell!” he says indignantly. “Besides, I don’t see you scrubbing anything right now.”

“I may have been a little over ambitious in my goals for today. Our floors are clean enough don’t you think?”

“If it keeps me from having to scrub them then yes, they are plenty clean enough.”

“I still want to hear about your morning though.”

“Of course you do.”

“I know you think I’m just being pervy, but I also just genuinely want to know that things are good and ok and that you’re happy.”

“They are. I am.”

Jimmy’s voice goes quiet. “He’s not pushing you, right? Into anything you’re not ready for?”
If it were anyone else, Phil would probably be angry right now. But it’s not anyone else. It’s Jimmy, and Phil knows he’s just trying to look out for his mate—like he has done for nearly a decade, like he had done when Phil actually did need protecting.

Phil laughs, digging his elbow into Jimmy’s arm. “Weren’t you the one telling me he’s fit and into me and I should just go for it?”

Jimmy frowns. “I suppose… but you know I didn’t mean it like—”

“I know I know, I’m just being an ass.”

Jimmy looks away, chewing a little on the corner of his lip. “I just… I miss the days when you’d tell me everything, y’know?”

“It’s been so long since I even had anything to tell.”

“I know and I’m dying here, mate. I need to hear that juicy shit.”

“Well one thing I can tell you is he’s definitely not pushing me. If anything he goes a little too far the other way.”

Jimmy nods. “Good. I didn’t really think he’d do that I just had to make sure.”

“Well fuck,” Jimmy murmurs, his face gone rather intense. And then, “Is the sex that good?”

Phil pushes him in the shoulder forcefully, a proper shove. “Fuck off.” Maybe he’s not angry but it’s possible he’s a little annoyed now. “And you wonder why I don’t want to tell you all the details.”

“I’m sorry, Phil, I am, it’s just… bloody hell. That’s a lot.”

Phil pushes Jimmy’s legs off his lap gently and stands. He’s run out of patience for this conversation without the bolster of caffeine. “I thought I could be honest with you.”

Jimmy’s hand flies up to grip Phil’s wrist. “Wait, Phil. You can. You know you can.”

“I need coffee.”

“I do too,” Jimmy says quietly.

“Well come on then.”

Jimmy follows Phil to the kitchen and they set about making coffee, Jimmy filling the kettle, Phil fetching the tin and the mugs. The space between them is quiet and tense in a way it never really is. Phil hates it, feels his skin crawling with it. Jimmy is supposed to be his safe space. He doesn’t even understand how they got here.
Phil goes to sit at the table and wait. He sits with his back to Jimmy, who’s still stood at the counter, next to the sink.

It’s Jimmy who breaks the silence, and Phil is bloody grateful for it, even if the words he hears send a jolt of unhappiness through him.

“I think… I think I’m a little jealous,” Jimmy says weakly, like he really wishes he didn’t have to say it at all.

Phil turns around in his chair and their eyes connect. Just for a brief moment though, as Jimmy looks away quickly, off into the corner of the room where the bin is starting to overflow.

“That’s why you’ve been a bit weird lately, yeah?” Phil’s voice is hardly any more confident than Jimmy’s.

“Have I been?”

Phil nods.

“I’m sorry, Phil. You know I’m only happy for you.” He walks over to the table and sits in the chair opposite Phil. “Don’t you?”

Phil nods again. He does. He thinks he does anyway. He thinks they’re both really feeling the same things, they just haven’t been able to put them into words for each other yet. “Things are changing,” he murmurs.

Now Jimmy nods. “You know I’m shit at dealing with that.”

Phil chuckles. “Yeah.” He knows that too. He’d even told Dan.

“You’re like a different person almost.”

Phil frowns. “I’m not. I’m still me. I’m just… a happier version.”

“Exactly.” Jimmy runs his hand through the mess of tangled waves atop his head. “That’s very different.”

“It’s not like I was miserable,” Phil protests, though his voice is still soft and uncertain. He knows those words are mostly bullshit as soon as they leave his mouth.

“I guess to me it felt like you were.”

Irritation flares. “I didn’t get weird when you started seeing Tom.” Again, bullshit. Utterly.

“Yes you did, Phil, only you never talked to me about it at all.”

“Because I was happy for you. I didn’t want to like, cast a shadow on that. It wasn’t your fault I wanted you all to myself.” He bites down harshly on his lip, knowing instantly that had probably been a step too far. Too honest, even for them.

“Did you?” Jimmy whispers.

Phil looks away. He can’t keep blurting out the first thoughts that pop into his head. That’s not him. That’s not how he does things, and this is why. He ends up with his foot in his mouth and his problems getting worse.
“Maybe,” he croaks. “A little. I dunno, not really I guess. Maybe I just felt like… like I was scared of being replaced?”

Jimmy reaches across the table and holds out his hand for Phil’s. “You could never.”

Phil presses his palm to Jimmy’s and closes his fingers, squeezing. “You either.”

Jimmy nods. “I know. I know that. I know it’s not… I know it’s not rational.”

“I guess jealousy rarely is.”

Jimmy smiles. “That’s deep, Phil.”

Phil just smiles back. He waits a moment before saying, “I told you, you’re my guy. Always.”

Jimmy nods.

“And I’m yours?”

“Of course.”

“And when you move out I’m going to be a bloody mess, alright? I’ll text you at all hours and probably cry and it’ll seem like I’m not happy that you’re taking the next step with Tom but I will be. I’ll be happy for the both of you and devastated that things will be different.”

“Me too,” Jimmy says, and his voice is shaky. “That’s just exactly it.”

Phil squeezes Jimmy’s hand harder. “Dan feels perfect for me, but so are you, yeah?”

Jimmy nods.

“I have to stop now,” Phil says, swiping at the dampness forming in the corner of his eye. “I’m going to say some really sappy stuff if I don’t stop.”

Jimmy’s laugh bursts from his chest, and he swipes at his eyes too. “I don’t mind sappy.”

Phil shakes his head. “You’ve had enough. I’ve had enough for one day. I love you and you love me and things are changing and it’s scary but we’ll always be biffles.”

Jimmy puts his hand over his mouth and laughs against his fingers. “I feel like we’ve had this conversation so many times already.”

“Maybe we just need to stop pretending that we’re not a little sad? Even though we’re both actually like, the happiest we’ve ever been?”

“Fuck’s sake, Phil. You’re like a philosopher this morning.”

The kettle beeps. They both seem to trade a silent agreement between them that they’ve said what they needed to say, as they let go of each other’s hands and stand to make their coffees.

They carry their mugs back out to the lounge and settle themselves on the sofa once again. The relief is palpable and Phil feels a sense of overwhelming happiness wash over him. Elation, almost, like all the pieces in the game of tetris that is his life are finally falling into place.

“What are you wearing, by the way?” Jimmy asks, tugging at the slightly baggy fabric of the rose jumper. “Is that Dan’s?”
“Yeah. Thought it looked good on me so I knicked it.”

“It does looks good,” Jimmy muses. “You should wear pink more often.”

“Well maybe I will. Maybe I’ll just have to keep borrowing his stuff. Or maybe…”

Jimmy swallows a mouthful of coffee and looks at Phil with eyebrows raised impatiently. “What?”

“I just… You and Tom have been together awhile now.”

“Yeah…”

“And you’re still not living together.”

“This is true,” Jimmy says, putting his mug down on the coffee table. “What’s your point, Phil?”

“I’m wondering if that’s-- is that like, how it usually goes?”

Jimmy frowns. “I don’t know, I’ve never lived with anyone but you. Why?” He studies Phil’s face intently. “Are you--?”

Phil shrugs.

“Jesus christ, Phil. It’s been what, like a week?”

“Technically, I guess. Like, officially. But you know-- for me it’s different. It’s not like it came out of nowhere.”

“I know--”

“And I’m not even saying anything. I’m just asking you.”

“If you think it’s too soon to move in together,” Jimmy says with an undercurrent of disapproval.

“What usually happens,” Phil corrects.

“I mean… I guess it feels like, ridiculously too fast to me … but then, maybe I should try to see it from your perspective.”

Phil waits, but Jimmy doesn’t say anything else.

“Right.”

“Do you want to explain your perspective?” Jimmy asks finally.

Phil takes a drink before he answers. “For the record, I never said anything about moving in.”

“Ok, buddy,” Jimmy says playfully.

“My perspective is… I dunno, I just want to be with him all the time. He makes me better. And I think he feels the same way. And we’re together all the time anyway.”

“Everyone feels like that in the beginning,” Jimmy says quietly. “That’s what the honeymoon phase is. That’s why you’re not supposed to make big crazy decisions like moving in together when you’re still in that phase.”

“Does it not feel like that for you anymore?” Phil asks. “With Tom?”
“It does. It’s just different. There isn’t this like, burning desire to be together every second of every day. I don’t miss him when he’s gone for a day. Like I do but it doesn’t-- it doesn’t distract me from living my life.”

“Right,” Phil says, as if he gets it. He doesn’t really, because he doesn’t really like to imagine it ever feeling anything less than it feels now, but he tries to push that anxiety aside.

“And now we know we can do that, and it’s not based on like, the newness of each other or just wanting to fuck all the time or whatever. It’s real. We know each other and we know we work together. It’s not really that exciting or romantic I guess but it’s real.”

Phil nods, but he definitely doesn’t feel any less confused. He doesn’t think what he feels for Dan has anything to do with newness or sex or even a feeling of excitement. He feels all of those things to a certain extent, but they’re definitely not the basis of the emotion that Dan inspires in him.

He feels like he knows Dan, and he feels like Dan knows him. It’s true they’ve only been officially together a short time, but to Phil that means next to nothing. He’s spent months baring his soul to Dan a little more every day, to the point where now it feels like Dan has it. He has Phil’s heart and soul in the palm of his hand--and they feel like they’ve never been safer.

He’s letting his thoughts veer into the dramatic again. That just seems to be the effect Dan has on him. He thinks that must mean something. It must be some kind of sign, that Dan can make him feel dramatic, something he’s never really felt before. A sign that this is right, and maybe he should finally, for once in his life, trust in himself. Trust in what his body is trying to tell him--that he doesn’t need to follow rules, that he doesn’t need to do things like everyone else does.

He’s not like everyone else. And neither is Dan.

“Dan and I are real,” Phil says softly.

“I know. I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I think you did, but it’s ok. It’s not like I’m seriously going to ask him to move in. I just kind of… want to.”

Jimmy nods.

“And it’s not just about the sex,” Phil says cheekily.

Phil delights at the way Jimmy’s eyes bulge then.

“You better give me some details, Phil, I swear to god.”

Phil snickers into his mug. He definitely doesn’t know how to have this conversation but he can’t deny the warm fluttery feeling in his stomach at the prospect of having it.

“So it’s good?” Jimmy prompts, much to Phil’s relief.

He can feel his face growing warmer. Hot even. “What we’ve done so far has been…. yeah. It’s good.”

“What you’ve done… so you haven’t… made love ?”

Phil cringes, although in all honesty he knows when it does happen, making love will probably be the perfect description of it.
“We have, just not in the way you’re implying.”

“Throw me a bone here, mate,” Jimmy pleads. “No pun intended, although… actually yeah. Pun intended. Throw me all the bones.”

“I hate you.”

“You love me. You wanna tell me all about the hot sex you had with your boyfriend this morning.”

“I don’t.”

“But you will.”

“Will I?” Phil asks. He’s starting to have entirely too much fun with dragging this out. Jimmy deserves it anyway, for waking him up hardly before the sun had even risen.

“You will,” Jimmy insists. “Tell me how hard you came.”

Phil has to cover his mouth with his hand, to hide his mortified grin. He shakes his head. “God. If you must know, I actually didn’t.”

“Didn’t what?”

“Come.”

“You didn’t come? I thought you said what you’ve done has been good!”

“It has been! You didn’t ask me how hard he came.”

“He came and you didn’t?” Jimmy sounds outraged.

“I know I’m kind of new to all this stuff but I’m pretty sure it’s considered strange if you come without being touched at all.”

“Why wasn’t he touching you?”

“Because I was touching him! And he was touching himself too. All hands were on deck, so to speak.” Phil shakes his head, vowing he’ll find a way to make Jimmy pay for this humiliation.

“Oh shit,” Jimmy says, eyes widening in understanding. “He’s a lucky guy.”

“I didn’t hear any complaints.” Phil shakes his head at himself again. “And that’s all you’re getting from me. I meant what I said about kissing and telling.”

“You’re killing me,” Jimmy says, sounding defeated. “And why didn’t he return the favour?”

“Because you told me I had to come home right away!”

“You blue balled yourself for me?”

Phil gives him as cutting a look as he can muster, before saying simply, “Yes.”

“Shit, mate. My bad.”

“The second this party’s over…”

Jimmy laughs. “I can’t promise I won’t be listening through the wall again.”
“I’ll just have to tell Tom to keep you busy, then.”

Jimmy gives him a look of genuine, delighted surprise. “You’ve changed so much, Phil.”

Phil smiles and drops his head back against the sofa. “Yeah.”

They finish their coffees slowly and then make more. They lounge around for nearly an hour just talking and enjoying each other’s company. Jimmy manages to pry a few more details out of a reticent Phil. Phil pretends to hate it, but secretly he likes the look of pride on Jimmy’s face at how well things are going for his friend.

Eventually Phil has to point out that if they don’t get up and get to work their party is going to be a well shit one. They throw on their coats and make the pilgrimage to Big Sainsbury’s where they buy too much food and way too much alcohol. Their bags take up altogether too much space on the tube on the way home and they get more than a few incensed looks from fellow travelers.

Their fingers are frozen and aching by the time they drop those bags in the kitchen. All Phil really wants to do is go back to bed, but Jimmy cracks the whip, insisting they need to do at least the bare minimum of tidying up.

“You’re going to owe me so hard for this,” Phil grumbles as he sets about emptying all the bins in the flat, starting with the shamefully overfull one in the corner of the kitchen.

“I actually got you something already,” Jimmy says, expertly fitting dishes together in the washer.

“Is it the Haribo I was promised?”

“That’s in one of the bags. I got you something else. Ordered it, even. But don’t get excited, it’s not a big deal. Just something for tonight.”

Phil raises an eyebrow suspiciously.

“Just keep cleaning. You have to shower before you can have it anyway.”

They do a semi decent job of tidying the place up. Jimmy does anyway. Phil definitely doesn’t carry his weight, and ends up mostly just following Jimmy around and eating Tangfastics while Jimmy does all the work. Phil’s never been good at cleaning, and Jimmy always has been. It’s a wonder they work so well as flatmates, really.

Once Jimmy resigns himself to the fact that Phil is next to useless, he sends him off to have a shower. Phil takes his time with it, using gobs and gobs of vanilla scented body wash and even doing some extra careful grooming. It takes him a long time as he hasn’t really felt the need to do this in many many years, but it hasn’t gone unnoticed to him that Dan does it, and he wants to show him the same consideration.

When he’s towelled off he moisturizes his whole body and brushes his teeth. He runs a towel over his hair and pushes it back off his forehead. Maybe just for tonight he can give the people what they want and rock the quiff.

He shouts down the hall to Jimmy on his way to his bedroom. “What am I meant to wear tonight, James? What’s the dress code for this thing?”

“Just put on jeans and come see me,” Jimmy shouts back.

“With no shirt?”
“Yeah.”

So Phil puts on black jeans as always and the first two clean socks he can find and joins Jimmy in the lounge, where he’s cleaning the window.

Jimmy looks him up and down with a smirk. “Looking good, babe.”

“Why am I stood here topless?”

“Come on.”

Phil follows Jimmy to his bedroom and watches him pull something off a hanger in his closet.

“You got me a shirt?” Phil asks playfully. “Worried I’d embarrass you with a dinosaur jumper or something?”

“Actually…” Jimmy holds up the shirt so Phil can get a good look at it. “I thought this was something you might actually pick out for yourself if you’d seen it.”

When he sees it, his throat tightens a little, which he recognizes as completely ridiculous and definitely an overreaction, but he can’t help it. It’s just so perfectly Phil, a white button up with soft, almost watercolour-looking black birds. It’s definitely something he would pick out for himself, and it hits him just how well Jimmy knows him. He doesn’t even know what to say.

“C’mere,” Jimmy says softly, holding the shirt out and open for Phil to step into.

Phil does, slipping in one arm and then the other, and turning around to face Jimmy. His chest swims with warmth and fondness as Jimmy slowly does up the buttons. His hair is a mess and he smells a little like bleach and his forehead is creased adorably in concentration as he gets to the last button, his fingers brushing gently against Phil’s throat.

“Thanks, Jim,” Phil says softly, definitely failing to conceal his overly emotional reaction to his friend picking out a nice shirt for him.

Jimmy looks up then, into Phil’s eyes and smiles. He shrugs. “I just saw it and it made me think of you right away. And… I want you to have fun tonight. I know parties aren’t your thing, but I really do want you to have a good time. I think…” He reaches up and pushes a flyaway strand of hair back off Phil’s forehead. “I just think it means something, starting a new year. And it’s going to be such a big year for us both.”

Phil just nods. He’s clearly not the only one feeling overly emotional right now.

“I’m so proud of you and happy for you. I wanted to throw this party for you, Phil. To celebrate the beginning of your-- your new life. Your new life where you’re happy, properly, y’know? You deserve that.”

Phil’s trying to keep it together, he really is. He’s trying to listen, but there’s already a warm tear rolling down his cheek. He nods, feeling an intense wave of relief when Jimmy wraps him up in his arms and squeezes. They don’t say anything else, they just stand there in Jimmy’s bright white bedroom, holding each other and crying into each other’s shoulders.

It’s not the new year quite yet. They still have a party to throw and friends to see and food to eat and drinks to drink. They still have games to play and kisses at midnight. But this moment definitely feels like the end of an era. This moment is definitely the start of something new.
Chapter 51

Dan arrives to the flat before anyone else, much to Phil’s delight. He’s grateful to Jimmy for the gesture, but like he’d said himself, parties really aren’t his thing. The prospect of having Dan by his side all night gives him hope that it might actually be a fun night.

Phil is sat on the sofa munching pretzels and watching Jimmy struggle to attempt hanging a disco ball from the ceiling when he hears a soft knock on the door. He springs up to answer it, ignoring the way Jimmy laughs at his eagerness. It’s only been about ten hours since they’d seen each other last but it already feels like too long.

Phil opens the door and there Dan is, pink cheeked and curly haired and Phil wonders if the sight of him will ever fail to set his heart racing. He pulls him in by his coat and kisses him before the door is even closed. If Jimmy notices, he doesn’t say anything. Maybe he’s going to let Phil get away with being a smitten lovesick fool, just for tonight.

“Mmm,” Dan hums against Phil’s lips. “Hello you.”

Phil unzips Dan’s jacket and starts pushing it off his shoulders when he notices what Dan’s wearing. “God, you look bloody amazing.”

It shouldn’t still be a surprise that Dan knows how to put clothes together in a way that always looks good, but apparently it is, because Phil can’t stop staring. He pulls Dan’s coat off all the way so he can look at him properly. He’s wearing a soft charcoal grey jumper and it’s much more fitted than anything he normally chooses. Phil loves the look of Dan in his oversized tops, with his exposed collarbones and sweater paws, but he can’t deny that this is probably the best he’s ever seen Dan look. This jumper shows off the broadness of his shoulders and clings to his chest, and the understated colour of it is the perfect accent to the brightness of his trousers. His bright pink trousers, which are also maddeningly well-fitted and cuffed at the ankles.

“Why do you always have to look so amazing?”

Dan chuckles. “What about you?” He reaches out and tugs on the collar of Phil’s shirt. “Is this new?”

Phil nods. “Gift from Jimmy.”

“It’s so you.” He keeps a hold of the collar and leans in, pressing a gentle kiss to Phil’s lips. “I can’t wait to take it off you later,” he whispers.

Suddenly Phil wants nothing more than to fast forward the next few hours, to skip ahead to the part where he has Dan in his bed and nothing to do besides kiss him and feel the warmth of skin on skin.

“You know you can invite him in, right Phil?” Jimmy teases, apparently reaching the end of his resolve not to make Phil feel embarrassed. “He doesn’t have to stand in the doorway all night.”

“Oh piss off,” Phil says as he goes to hang up Dan’s coat. “When is Tom getting here to save me from your abuse?”

“Hi Dan,” Jimmy says cheerfully, completely ignoring Phil’s question.

“Need help there?” Dan asks.
Phil finds his way back into his sofa crease in no time and watches Dan help Jimmy get that damn discoball up.

“Am I going to be forced to dance at every bloody party I attend?” Phil grumbles.

“When was the last time you danced at a party?” Jimmy asks incredulously.

“Halloween.”

Dan gives him a look, soft, sympathetic. That night feels so long ago to Phil now. It hadn’t exactly been the best night for either of them, but in some ways, it had been the start. The start of the journey that led them here, with Phil about to ring in a new year and a whole new life he’d never even been able to imagine for himself.

“You don’t have to dance, Phil,” Jimmy assures. “You can do whatever you want tonight. I just want you to have fun.” He steps down from the chair he’s stood on once he finally succeeds and there is a large glittering orb hung in the middle of their lounge. “Alright lads, I’m off to shower. Behave yourselves.”

“How long til people start getting here?” Phil asks.

“Not too-- you don’t have time to…”

“Oi, shut up,” Phil says, feeling heat in his cheeks and wishing Jimmy was close enough to kick. “How long?”

“Tom should be here in like--” He pulls his phone out of his pocket to check the time. “Half an hour. He’s bringing some people with him.”

Phil nods. “Go have your shower then.”

Jimmy shoots him a look but Phil just waves him off. Once he’s gone, Phil stands and holds his hand out for Dan.

Dan takes it and smirks. “I thought you didn’t want a quickie.”

“I don’t!” He bumps his shoulder into Dan’s. “I want to give you something.”

Phil can tell Dan’s trying not to make another dumb sexual joke. “Not something like that. God, you’re just as pervy as Jimmy. Come on.” He leads Dan to his bedroom and tells him to sit on the bed while he goes to his closet and pulls out three badly wrapped gifts.

He sits next to Dan on the bed and hands him the first.

Dan turns it over in his hand and laughs. “Why am I not surprised.”

“Oh just shut up and open it.”

“I didn’t get you anything, though.”

Phil crosses his legs and sits on his feet. “You did. You bought me a bloody expensive camera, remember? This is just my belated christmas present.”

“You didn’t have to,” Dan says softly.

“I wanted to. Anyway don’t get too excited. I’m kind of shit at gift giving and I don’t have any
money. You made me look bad with your amazing gift.”

“I already have all I need,” Dan says.

Phil rolls his eyes but he’s beaming. “Just open it.”

His heart thumps against his chest as Dan tears the paper off the package--off the three pack of sushi underwear he’d ordered express on his break yesterday.

Dan laughs. “You got me pants.”

“I did. Don’t laugh, it’ll make sense in a minute.”

“Do I have to add food next to feet on the list of your weird fetishes, Phil?”

“I hate you.” He hands Dan the second package. “Shut up and open this, rat.”

He does, ripping the paper off a box of colourful generic brand toothbrushes. “You’re such a strange person, Phil,” Dan says, setting the box down on top of his new underwear. “I do love me a minty mouth though.”

Phil doesn’t say anything. He’s oddly nervous as he hands Dan the third package. This one is a little heavier, and ever so slightly neater in its wrapping.

Dan seems to sense Phil’s apprehension, as he scoots forward a little, pushing their knees together. He unwraps this one more slowly, carefully, revealing a simple blue notebook.

“It’s a new dream journal,” Phil blurts quickly, not giving Dan a chance to say anything. “The pants and the toothbrushes and the journal-- they’re for here. Like a starter pack of essentials for when you stay over here.” It’s not moving in. But it’s a start.

He looks at Dan, who’s looking down at the pitifully cheap looking notebook. “I want you to feel at home here,” Phil says faintly, suddenly second guessing himself rather intensely. “If you want. I— I also cleared a drawer in the dresser for you.”

Dan surges forward then, pushing Phil down until his back hits the mattress and Dan climbs on top of him, cupping Phil’s jaw on either side and pressing their lips together.

Phil puts his hands on Dan’s hips and laughs, relief flooding his gut. “It’s not a camera but—”

“It’s perfect.” Dan kisses him again and drops his weight down onto Phil’s chest.

Dan is heavier than he looks, but Phil loves the feeling, the sensation of being pinned down by this man he loves so much. It makes him feel strangely safe.

He is having a bit of trouble breathing though, so he grunts playfully and pushes against Dan’s chest a little, opening his legs for Dan to settle between. Dan lets go of Phil’s face and brackets Phil’s head with his hands.

He looks down at Phil and smiles. “Sorry.”

Phil just shakes his head. “So you actually like it? You don’t think it’s too fast?”

Dan snorts. “Don’t be daft. I’ll try to clear you some space in my closet too.”

Phil reaches up and coils one of Dan’s curls round his finger. “Or you could just let me keep wearing
your clothes. You have enough of them and they’re all nicer than mine.”

“But I don’t have anything with dogs or dinosaurs,” Dan teases.

“Maybe I just like the idea of wearing my boyfriend’s clothes.”

Dan leans down and kisses him again, gentler this time. He tries to pull back after one but Phil doesn’t let him. He holds Dan’s face, stroking his thumbs across Dan’s jaw and kisses him deeper.

They don’t stop kissing until they hear the doorbell ring.

“Guess we have to go do this party thing, huh?” Dan asks, rolling off of Phil and flopping down next to him on the bed.

“I guess.”

“Am I allowed to be all over you tonight or are we still keeping it for us?”

Phil turns over on his side and smiles. “You can do whatever you want.”

“But what do you want?”

Phil sighs. “I want to stay in here with you and not worry about rubbish like this, if I’m honest.”

“I know,” Dan says softly. “Me too.”

“It’ll be fine,” Phil assures, as much for himself as for Dan. “It’s all going to be Jimmy’s friends anyway. Jimmy only makes friends with people who are ace.” He grins cheekily, drawing in as exaggerated a Northern accent as he possibly can. “We can hide in a corner and eat crisps and watch everyone else get drunk and stupid.”

“Do you think Jimmy will let us get away with that?”

“Uh…” Phil bites his lip. “No. Probably not.”

“Didn’t think so.”

“Well, he told me he wants me to have fun tonight, so he can bugger off. If I want to play DDR and eat snacks all night I will.”

“Oh my god, you have a DDR pad?” Dan’s eyes are wide with excitement. “Why haven’t we ever done that before, Lester?”

“Because I’m rubbish at it, that’s why.”

“How is that different from literally any other game ever?”

Phil’s mouth drops open in outrage. He rolls on top of Dan, pinning him down with his full weight. “Shut up, rat. I’m good at scrabble.”

Dan is laughing, and Phil can feel the muscles in his stomach tensing with the force of it. “That’s true. You are good at scrabble. I’m going to annihilate you at DDR though.”

“I changed my mind, then. I’m just going to get super drunk and silly.”

Dan stretches his neck up and kisses Phil’s chin. “I’m not going to lie, I can’t wait to see that.”
“Oh wait,” Phil says, frowning. “You can’t really drink though, can you?”

“I can have a drink or two.”

Phil frowns deeper. “Maybe I’ll only have a few as well, then.”

“You should do whatever you want, Phil. You don’t have to stay sober just because I am. But…” he reaches up and drags his thumb across Phil’s bottom lip. “If you still want that raincheck…?”

Phil nods. He really does.

“Usually works better when no one is pissed,” Dan finishes.

“Definitely have to find other ways to have fun tonight then,” Phil murmurs, and he leans down and kisses Dan again, and again they both seem to lose themselves in it. They’d been meant to get up and go join the party after all.

They don’t do that, though. Not until Jimmy pounds on the door and says, “You can’t hide in there forever, lads. You better not be naked.”

Phil laughs as he sits up and pulls Dan with him. He hadn’t noticed when it had gotten so much louder in the flat, but now he can hear music playing and people talking and he wonders just how long they’d been lying there making out like teenagers. Or what he imagines was probably making out like teenagers, anyway.

Reluctantly he scoots off the bed and stands up, holding his hand out for Dan’s. “I don’t really want to keep it for us tonight, do you?”

Dan smiles and shakes his head, and slides his fingers in between Phil’s. “Not at all.”

Phil’s surprised by the reception he finds in the lounge. There’s music playing yes, but it’s not so loud that he can’t hear himself talk. There are people talking and laughing yes, but not nearly as many as he’d been expecting. He recognizes most of them from various nights Jimmy’s dragged him out for.

Even Rory is there. “Surprise!” She grins when she sees him and holds her arms out for a hug that Phil accepts enthusiastically. His arms tighten around her waist and he actually lifts her up off the floor a little as he squeezes happily. He feels giddy, almost drunk already without a single drop of alcohol in his system.

Dan’s hug for her is a little more conservative, but still warm and friendly.

“Surely you have a much cooler party to be at tonight, yeah?” Phil asks.

She shakes her head. “No one’s cooler than you, Phil. And don’t call me Shirley. Besides, I was promised a hang out with the three of us, remember?”

Jimmy must have meant what he said about wanting Phil to have fun tonight, because he doesn’t protest when Phil sets up shop on the sofa with snacks and a stack of board games, Rory and Dan sat on either side of him.

He thinks Jimmy must have had a word with the two of them beforehand about making this night more about Phil than about saying goodbye to the year, because he can’t imagine a party more suited to his rather antisocial ways. They sit there happily with him for hours, laughing and chatting and playing game after game. At one point it dawns on him that all the music playing in the background
is from the ‘90s and he smiles, remembering that night at the club, drunk and happy and pressed up against Dan in the darkness.

Phil fails rather spectacularly at staying sober. Rory had snagged a large bottle of red wine and poured them each a glass. Phil thinks Dan takes a sip of his every now and then, but he eventually loses track of how many times Rory refills his own glass.

It’s nice though. It’s a warm, happy kind of drunk, the kind that tingles in his fingers and warms his cheeks and brings his laughter out a little more easily. Dan keeps his hand on Phil’s knee and Rory smells nice and Jimmy comes over every now and then to check in.

Phil notices that Jimmy and Tom stay glued to each other all night and he feels nothing but profound relief. He’s glad he won’t ever have to worry whether or not Jimmy is content and taken care of. Jimmy’s already found his Dan, and Phil’s glad, because he doesn’t think he could lose him to anything less.

Eventually Rory says she’s too drunk to even remember the rules of the game they’re playing, and Phil has to agree. Dan gets up to use the toilet and Rory shuffles closer and lays her head down on his shoulder.

“Thanks for coming to my-- the party,” Phil says thickly.

She laughs. “You can call it your party, mate. That’s what it is.”

“Feels weird, though. It’s new year’s, not my birthday or summit.”

“Your flatmate is quite fond of you, I reckon.”

He rests his cheek on her curls. “How’d he even--?”

“It was Dan actually. He must’ve asked Dan to ask me. I guess that means you lot have talked about me at least once, yeah?”

Phil nods slowly. His head feels slightly too heavy for his neck. “You’re my best girlfriend. Best girl. Best friend who’s a girl.”

She lifts her head and looks at him. “If that’s true that’s sad.”

“S’not.” He reaches up and pets her hair, something he’s always been strangely compelled to do but never done before, because normally he’s not drunk and he understands that it crosses the boundaries of social acceptability. “You’re pretty, Ror. And nice and fun.”

“You know I’m drunk off my ass if I’m letting those paws get anywhere near my twist out. You’re lucky I like you, Philip.”

He knows he should stop. He even says, “Sorry,” but he still doesn’t pull his hand away. “Feels nice.”

She rolls her eyes and picks his hand up off her head. “You’re ridiculous,” she says, and he can tell she’s trying not to laugh at him.

“Yeah.” His hand is in hers, rested against her lap.

“You lot are really cute together.”

“Are we?” Phil murmurs, letting his heavy head fall back slowly against the sofa.
“Yeah. It’s almost annoying.”

“Sorry.”

She laughs. And then, “You should see the way he looks at you, Phil.”

He has a thought then. He pushes his hand against her thigh, using her as leverage to help himself up off the sofa. “Hold on, one sec.”

He leaves her sat there as he makes his way in the direction of his bedroom. Dan comes out of the bathroom and they nearly run into each other. Dan’s phone is in his hand and he slips in into his pocket and smiles. “Did you know it’s almost midnight?”

“Is it?” Phil leans his chest into Dan’s, using his weight to push Dan up against the wall.

Dan’s hands grip Phil’s waist and Phil’s fingers find their way into Dan’s hair.

“It is,” Dan croaks before opening his mouth to Phil’s. Phil licks along Dan’s lip and even in his inebriated state he knows it’s too much tongue. It’s too wet, too sloppy and anyone could walk by right now. He scratches his nails against Dan’s scalp and leans all his weight into Dan’s chest anyway because fuck it, he’s in his own house, he’ll do what he wants.

It’s Dan who pushes him back, pecking his lips and saying, “That’s our last kiss of 2013.”

“No,” Phil pouts. “Let me give you some more. We have time for more.”

Dan smiles, but he slips out from between Phil and the wall, gripping Phil’s hand firmly in his.

“You’re drunk, Phil.”

“Yeah… Sorry. I said I wouldn’t--”

“I’m not upset about it. I’m glad you’re having fun. I just don’t want to take advantage. I’d hate myself if you were upset later.”

Phil frowns. “You’re not. I’m kissing you.”

“Yeah, up against the wall, with intent. And I’m letting you, even though I know this stuff is sensitive for you.”

“You’re *not* letting me though,” Phil whines.

“I’ll let you, in…” He pulls out his phone again. “Seven minutes. In the lounge, where there’s loads of witnesses to keep you on your best behaviour.”

Phil just grumbles.

“What are you doing over here anyway?” Dan asks. “Did you come just to ambush me with your sexiness?”

“Oh yeah.” The sight of Dan in his pink trousers and his curly hair and his little gold triangle earrings had thoroughly distracted Phil from his mission. “Gotta get something from my room.” He lets go of Dan’s hand. “Meet you in the lounge in a sec.”

Dan raises an eyebrow suspiciously. He looks like he’s about to say more when someone turns the corner and comes walking down the hall towards the bathroom.
“Don’t take longer than six minutes,” Dan warns.

“Go back to your witnesses, I’ll be right there.”

He flops his heavy body onto the bed once he’s in his room, which he realizes instantly is definitely a mistake, as it feels incredible and there’s nothing he’d rather do now than peel off his jeans and shout for Dan to come join him and just stay there for the rest of the night. He forces himself to sit back up and think again about why he’s here in the first place.

He’d come in here to get something. When he finally remembers what it is he drags himself off the bed and fetches it, impressed with himself that he’d even remembered where it was at all.

He rejoins the party and finds his way back to the sofa where Dan and Rory are sat. He shoves his way clumsily between them and looks at Rory, pressing his camera into her hands.

Luckily Dan is distracted at the moment shoving crisps into his mouth and isn’t paying attention to Phil as he leans into her and whispers, “I’m not trying to be an asshole, but you didn’t bring someone to kiss tonight, did you?”

She laughs. “Not this time.”

“Well then maybe you could be my photographer, yeah?”

She picks up the camera and turns it over in her hands. “This is a really good one, innit? It looks expensive and shit.”

Phil nods. “Dan got it for me for christmas.”

“Bloody hell, that boy really does have it bad for you, doesn’t he?”

Dan looks over at that moment. “I do.”

Rory looks at Dan. “What’d he get you?”

Phil could die of mortification when Dan grins and says, “Toothbrushes.” Phil buries his face in his hands and feels Rory’s elbow digging into his arm.

“Phil!” she exclaims indignantly.

“There was more!” he protests, though he doesn’t actually want to share that that more had been equally as cheap and lame as the toothbrushes.

“Don’t worry,” Dan says warmly, pulling Phil’s hands from his face and holding him gently under the chin. “They were the best gifts I’ve ever gotten.” His warm brown eyes are staring into Phil’s and it’s all Phil can do to stop himself leaning forward and kissing him. How had he not noticed until now that Dan’s eyelids are glittery?

There’s a click and a flash then, and they both look at Rory, who’s got the camera in front of her face. She lowers it and shrugs. “I’m being your photographer.”

Someone shouts, “One minute!” and they all begin to count down in unison. Phil doesn’t understand why his heart is beating faster with every second closer to the turn of the year.

He’s kissed Dan a hundred times by now. It’s still exciting and lovely and wonderful, but it’s not really new anymore, and it doesn’t make him nervous the way it had in the beginning. He does feel something of that in this moment though, the butterflies, the pounding in his chest, the jitters in his
hands. He’s thinking about what Jimmy said, about this being the start of his new life, and it honestly scares him how much he wants that. It scares him suddenly realizing how much he has to lose now.

But he’s not going to lose Dan. Every cell in his body radiates warmth when he looks at Dan, every instinct he has tells him there’s nothing to fear. This is forever, and he’s drunk enough not to question it. He just wants to be happy. He wants to leave these kind of useless anxieties here in this year that’s about to end in 3, 2, 1…

The small flat is noisy with cheers and Phil’s stomach flips when Dan cups his jaw on either side and pulls him in. He holds Dan’s wrists and lets Dan kiss him, lets Dan set the pace because even wine drunk and over emotional he wants to respect that Dan has boundaries. Sure, they’re boundaries that are only there because of Phil, but still.

Though his eyes are closed and his senses are flooded with Dan, he still sees more than a couple flashes. Probably he’ll be embarrassed later when he goes through his camera and sees a litany of photos of him and Dan kissing each other with abandon, but it’s alright. For right now, everything feels just as it should be.

Dan doesn’t let himself get as carried away with the kissing as Phil would like, pulling away after about thirty seconds and smiling wide, toothy and dimpled and glittering. “Happy new year, Phil.”

Another series of flashes. Phil turns around and laughs as he snatches the camera from Rory’s hands, turning the lens on her and snapping away.

“Oi!” she protests, though she’s laughing almost hysterically. “I’m just doing what you asked!”

“I know,” Phil says, pulling her in and turning the camera around. “’Mere Dan.” The three of them huddle together and give their best squinty-eyed smiles for the camera that Phil hopes is at least centred enough to catch all of them in the photos. He looks at her and says, “I want to remember you too.”

She smiles. “You should go take some more. I’m sure Dan and I aren’t the only ones you want to remember.”

She’s right. He springs up and looks around the room frantically, hoping Jimmy and Tom are drunk and silly enough to still be kissing. He spots them by the window and smiles because they are, they are drunk and silly and still making out in a way that would’ve probably upset him a few months ago.

He sneaks over as quickly as he can and ambushes them with flash after flash, laughing as Jimmy lets go of Tom and lunges for him, wrapping his arms around Phil and squeezing and kissing his forehead. He splutters as he gets a mouthful of Phil’s hair and Phil’s laughing so hard he feels tears in his eyes.

He drapes his own arms around Jimmy’s waist and leans his cheek against his shoulder when the fit of giggles has finally subsided. “Thanks for the party, Jim. I love you, you know.”

“I know, Phil. I love you too.”
Rory leaves soon after midnight saying she has to open tomorrow and needs to at least pretend she’s going to try to get a couple hours of sleep. Phil offers to walk her home and she laughs at him, reminding him she lives on the other side of the city, but she appreciates the gesture.

Phil thinks it feels less fun being sat there on the sofa without her and he thinks Dan agrees. Their fingers are interlocked and their heads are leaned towards each other where they rest against the back of the sofa, but they’re quiet now, subdued. Phil’s eyelids are heavy and starting to droop, the booze flowing through him depressing his senses and making him feel sleepier than he’d like. He kind of just wants to crawl into bed, but the party appears to be raging on.

It’s not actually raging, but it’s still too loud to sleep. He’s not used to having to sleep--or even just exist--in a flat full of people.

“Hey Dan,” he mumbles, because he’s had an idea.

“Mmm?”

“Did you do any exercise today?”

“Technically it’s only been today for half an hour, so no."

“Are Mark and them home do you reckon?”

Dan turns his head to look at Phil. “No. Why?”

“I was thinking maybe we could go to yours again?“

“Why?"

“It’s too loud here and I want some fresh air and I don’t want to be woken up in the morning by the sound of Tom and Jimmy having sex.”

Dan chuckles. “Fair enough.”

Phil hauls himself up off the sofa, a considerable feat at this point and says, “Be right back.” He wanders around the flat until he finds Jimmy, who’s still drinking and somehow looking chipper.

“Will you be cross if I leave?” Phil asks

“What? Where will you go?”

“To Dan’s.”

“Why?”

Phil thinks for a moment before choosing the answer he thinks is the most likely to get Jimmy’s approval. “Privacy.”


Phil’s too tipsy to keep his guard up. “That’s me, saucy like a… bottle of ketchup.”
Jimmy shakes his head. “Just go, mate. And have fun.”

Phil goes to his room and grabs Dan’s rose jumper off the floor and a pair of clean pants. Somehow he has the wherewithal to pop into the bathroom and grab his toothbrush and shove that into his backpack too before rejoining Dan in the lounge. “Ready?”

Dan answers by holding out his hand lazily and letting Phil do all the work of pulling him up off the sofa. They put on their coats and leave without saying goodbye to anyone.

It’s cold outside, cold and wet and Phil feels instantly less drunk. He steps in a puddle not thirty seconds after stepping foot outside, wincing as the cold water seeps into his sock and between his toes. Again though, it helps ground him, chasing the heaviness of too many glasses of wine from his limbs.

Phil wants to reach out and take Dan’s hand, but there are people everywhere, most of whom seem at least some level of intoxicated. This is probably exactly the kind of situation that calls for ‘keeping it just for them.’

They come to Dan’s street quickly and Dan’s about to turn down it and head for home when Phil stops him with a hand on his arm.

“What?” Dan asks, and he flips his hood up over his head, shivering.

“Can we keep walking for a bit? Maybe we can find someplace open at this time that sells coffee?”

“Serious?” Dan looks almost pained.

Phil nods. “I want to sober up a bit. Also, I don’t plan on leaving your bed tomorrow, so we should get our exercise now.”

Dan smirks. “That right?”

Phil nods. “I wanna stay in bed all day with my boyfriend, got a problem, mate?”

Dan shoves his hands in his pockets and turns on his heels away from his own street. “Don’t think so. I owe you that raincheck after all, yeah?”

“So they keep walking. They don’t hold hands but they stay close, bumping their shoulders together, stepping away only to avoid puddles or drunken barhoppers. They duck into the first place they find open at this time that sells coffee and not beer, which just so happens to be a McDonald’s.

They order their drinks and slip into a booth in the corner of the store. Phil’s feet are wet and his toes are frozen, and he shudders with relief as he wraps his hands around the heat of the cup. They sit across from each other, sipping and not talking much, until the couple sat at the table next to them gets up and walks away. Dan smiles cheekily before scooting off his seat and standing up, walking around the table and slipping in right next to Phil. Not only does he sit beside him, but he throws his arm over Phil’s shoulder and presses his coffee-warmed mouth to Phil’s.

It feels risky, naughty like they’re breaking some kind of rule, but a rush of adrenaline courses through Phil’s still slightly tipsy body and he grips the back of Dan’s neck and kisses back eagerly.

“Can we go home now, please?” Dan whispers.
“I’m not-- I think I’m still a tiny bit drunk,” Phil admits reluctantly.

Dan nuzzles into Phil’s neck. “Don’t care. I want you.”

Phil feels the heat of Dan’s words in the pit of his stomach. “You won’t feel guilty about it later?”

Dan lifts his head and looks into Phil’s eyes. “Should I?”

Phil shakes his head.

“You’ll tell me anyway, right? If you don’t want to do something?”

Phil nods, pushing his nose into Dan’s. “I want to do something, though.”

“And that’s definitely not the wine talking, yeah?”

Phil shakes his head again. “I’m not like, drunk … just a little… buzzed. And I still have half this coffee to drink and the whole walk back.”

Dan leans in again, dragging his teeth over Phil’s earlobe and whispering, “Well what the fuck are we waiting for then?”

Suddenly they hear laughter, loud and close and they both jump, Dan pulling away from Phil with a jerk. A group of men round the corner and head for a table near them. Dan’s already sliding out of the booth and standing up before the men sit down.

Phil hates how hard and fast his heart pounds as one of them turns in his seat and eyes them suspiciously. Or at least, Phil’s mind is telling him it’s suspicious. Maybe it’s not, as the man doesn’t say anything before he turns back round, but Phil’s still more than ready to get out of here. He grabs his coffee and follows Dan back out into the cold.

He feels almost completely sober by the time they finally make it back to Dan’s building. There’s no one in the lift on the way up and Phil’s fingers find Dan’s as soon as the doors are closed.

“It’s late,” Phil murmurs.

“Yeah.”

For some reason Phil feels nervous now, like there’s been too much build up to whatever’s going to happen next. “Should we maybe just-- if you’re tired we can--”

Phil’s shoulders are being pushed against the wall of the lift before he can finish his thought. Dan’s lips are on his neck, hands unzipping Phil’s coat and pressing against his chest before he can finish his thought.

“Shut up, Phil,” Dan breathes into his ear. “I’m not tired, are you?”

Phil bites his lip and shakes his head. He’s already forgotten why he’d been doubting how much he wants this.

The doors of the lift open on Dan’s floor. Dan pulls back and grips Phil’s hand. “Good. C’mon.”

Once inside, they kick off their shoes and toss their coats on the sofa on their way to the bathroom. Phil loves this little tradition they’ve started of brushing their teeth together, stood side by side grinning at each other in the mirror and taking turns spitting.
Phil takes a little longer with the scrubbing tonight, takes his time looking at the reflection of them in the glass. Phil’s cheeks are pink and his quiff is messy and wind blown. Dan’s got glitter all over his face at this point and his lips are chapped as ever. Maybe from the cold or the wind or maybe just all the kissing, Phil’s not sure.

Neither of them are objectively looking their best, but Phil wouldn’t change a thing. He looks down at Dan’s tight pink trousers and the little peek of his ankles and smiles. Definitely wouldn’t change anything.

He can’t help it though, his heart starts to flutter nervously as they make their way down the hall and to Dan’s room. Maybe he should’ve just let himself stay drunk after all. He hadn’t been so nervous when he was drunk.

But he also hadn’t been fully himself, and as scary as this all still is sometimes, he wants to experience it all authentically, and he knows that’s what Dan wants too.

He flops backwards onto Dan’s mattress as soon as they’re there, reaching up for a pillow and pulling it down, sliding his hands underneath his head. Dan’s stood above him, looking down and smiling.

“You gonna come down here or what?”

Dan shakes his head. “Just wanna look at you for a minute.”

Phil fights the urge to cover his face or wriggle underneath Dan’s duvet to hide his body. Instead he lifts up his foot and rubs it against Dan’s thigh. “Take this off, will you?” he asks. His feet are cold and wet and it’s not exactly making him feel sexy.

Dan pulls off the sock and tosses it over his shoulder. Then he gets down on his knees and brings Phil’s foot up to his face and kisses the arch of it, just like Phil had done the other night.

And just like Dan had done, Phil giggles.

“Tickles, right?” Dan asks.

Phil nods.

“Gimme your other foot.”

Phil does and Dan pulls that sock off as well, wrapping his huge hands around Phil’s damp foot, warming it with his palms.

“Maybe we both have foot things,” he murmurs, leaning down and kissing that one too.

Phil doesn’t argue. He doesn’t have a foot thing, he knows he doesn’t. He just has a Dan thing, and he’s pretty sure Dan just has a Phil thing.

He wiggles his toes in Dan’s hands. “I’m getting a little lonely over here, mate.”

Dan chuckles. “What are we going to do about that?”

Phil leans up a little and reaches a hand out, grabbing a handful of Dan’s jumper and pulling so he falls forward and lands right on top of Phil. He may be nervous, but he also really doesn’t want to wait anymore. He’s been waiting all day.

They’re only kissing for a minute before Phil starts fumbling with the hem of Dan’s jumper, trying to
pull it up with clumsy fingers. Dan sits up and pulls it off in one achingly sexy, fluid motion.

Now he’s sat on Phil’s lap topless and beautiful, eyes boring into Phil’s with a longing that seems to mirror exactly what’s brewing in Phil’s gut.

Dan’s hands move to Phil’s collar and start to undo the buttons of his shirt. “I’ve been waiting all night to take this damn thing off.”

“It looks good on me though, don’t you think?”

Phil’s hands are shoved up under the pillow again, suggesting a breeziness he absolutely isn’t feeling in this moment but he hopes he’s pulling off successfully.

Dan nods. “It does. I can see your fucking nipples through it.” He thumbs over one of them through the thin fabric of the shirt, and even that simple a touch is an electric jolt to Phil’s system.

“Lucky you,” Phil croaks.

Dan chuckles, making quick work of the rest of the buttons. He pushes Phil’s shirt open and runs his hands over Phil’s chest before leaning down and returning his attention to Phil’s nipple. Phil sucks in a sharp breath as Dan runs his tongue over it slow and flat.

Phil fists his hands in the pillow beneath his head. He may not have a foot thing, but he definitely has a nipple thing.

Dan seems to understand that, because he closes his mouth around it and sucks, and Phil feels a distinct swelling sensation in his cock. His eyes flutter shut as Dan catches it in his teeth and rolls the other between his thumb and index finger.

He wants to put his hands on Dan’s hips and hold him down. He wants to thrust up into Dan and grind their bodies together, but he also kind of doesn’t want to move a muscle for fear Dan will stop licking his nipple like it’s an ice lolly or something.

Eventually though, he can’t stop himself from pushing his hips up into Dan’s. Dan just chuckles breathily against the hair on Phil’s chest and starts to shuffle back, much to Phil’s chagrin. He kisses his way down, past his belly button until he gets to Phil’s jeans.

He looks up at Phil. “You still want to?” he asks softly.

Phil definitely doesn’t need any time to think about it. “Take them off.”

Before he knows it, Dan’s got Phil’s belt open and his fly unzipped and he’s tugging at the waist of his jeans. Phil lifts his hips so Dan can get the denim over his ass and down his thighs. He’s not being slow or careful or gentle at all, and his urgency just makes Phil all the more eager. Once he’s pulled them off Phil’s feet, Dan flings the jeans backwards and Phil hears them hit the wall.

Dan is staring down at Phil’s pants and what Phil can only assume is an obscenely hard bulge beneath them. Dan’s fingers trace along the waistband of those pants, pulling them down a little and following the line of Phil’s hip. Now he’s being gentle. Now he’s being slow.

Dan flattens his hand against Phil’s skin, low on his stomach and spreads out his fingers. His thumb slips under Phil’s pants and Phil’s breath catches.

Phil pulls a hand out from under the pillow and curls his fingers under the waist of Dan’s trousers. “Your turn.”
“Actually,” Dan says softly, leaning forward and kissing the corner of Phil’s mouth. “I kinda wanted to do something just for you.”

“Oh,” Phil says, but Dan is already moving back down Phil’s body. He kisses Phil’s hipbone and presses his palm against Phil’s half hard cock. Half hard because he’s suddenly very, very nervous and trying desperately to pretend he’s not.

He’s not. He’s fine. It’s not a big deal. Dan wants to do something just for him, just like he’d done something just for Dan this morning. Or yesterday morning at this point. He closes his eyes and tries to focus on the feeling of Dan palming him through his pants.

And then it’s not his palm, it’s his mouth, molding to the shape of his dick and breathing hot against his skin through the thin fabric.

“Can I kiss you, Phil?” He sounds wrecked already.

“Is that a euphemism?”

“Definitely.” Dan pulls Phil’s pants down just enough to expose the head. “Can I?”

Phil answers before he can think better of it. “Yeah.”

Dan does kiss him then. He kisses Phil’s tip gently and Phil feels his shoulders tense up instinctually. He hopes Dan hasn’t noticed.

He hasn’t seemed to, as he uses both hands now to grip Phil’s pants and pull them down to mid thigh. Phil feels Dan’s hand cup his balls and his lips brush the base of his shaft and his stomach clenches up so tight that he knows it’s not fair for either of them to let this continue, no matter how much he wishes he could.

“Dan, stop.”

Dan’s head jerks up instantly, his hands pulling back. He sits up and looks at Phil with panic in his eyes. “What’s wrong? What’d I do?”

“Nothing, nothing I just-- I’m--” He pushes his glasses up onto his forehead and digs his fingers into his eyes.

“What Phil? Please.”

Phil flips his glasses back down and feels his heart sink as he reads the unadulterated fear on Dan’s face. “C’mere please. Kiss me.”

Dan looks reluctant, but he goes, leaning down and kissing him gently, tentatively. Phil tries to deepen the kiss, but Dan pulls back. “What happened? Did I-- did I hurt you?”

Phil shakes his head and realizes his teeth are sinking rather harshly into his bottom lip. He’s not sure how to explain. He’s still not quite used to having to put these complicated emotions into words for other people to understand.

“You have to talk to me, Phil,” Dan whispers. “That’s how this works remember?”

Phil nods. He knows that, and yet, his mouth isn’t forming the words.

“You got scared,” Dan says gently.
“Yeah,” Phil whispers. That’s a good start.

“Why?” Dan sits back, pulling Phil up with him so he’s sat in his lap. It’s almost like he knows that what Phil actually needs right now is to be as close to Dan as possible. Dan wraps his legs around Phil’s waist and cradles his face in his hands. “What’s different about tonight?”

Phil takes a deep breath. He at least has to try. “I think… I think maybe it’s just that this time-- this time it’s supposed to be only about me, right?”

Dan nods.

“And maybe… maybe that’s only ever gone badly for me. Like, before. Because then it was just-- it was so obvious that I wasn’t responding in the right ways, and there was nowhere to hide, and I couldn’t distract by just, like, making the other person feel good?”

Dan nods, pressing their foreheads together.

“And I couldn’t like-- I couldn’t really see your face. I guess the-- the surprise of it. It caught me off guard. Fuck, I’m sorry. I’m sorry Dan, I don’t-- I don’t even know. I don’t know.”

“It’s ok, Phil,” Dan murmurs. “It’s ok. It’s good. I wanted you to tell me if you were ever uncomfortable and you did. It’s ok. We can figure it out.”

Phil frowns, pulling his face out of Dan’s grip. “What if I can only have like, the most boring vanilla sex ever and you never get to be dirty or spontaneous and--”

“Phil, stop, please.”

Phil can tell Dan wants to reach out for him again, but that he’s doing his best to respect Phil and give him space. Even though space is the last thing Phil wants--or needs--right now.

“There’s no such thing as boring sex if it’s with you,” Dan says. “Vanilla isn’t boring. I love vanilla. I love you. We could do nothing but kiss each other’s feet and I’d be happy.”

Phil just frowns.

“I’m fucking serious, Phil, I swear to god. I’ve had enough dirty and spontaneous. That’s not what makes sex worth having, ok? That’s not what makes sex good.”

Phil nods, because his heart rate is starting to come down now and he knows he’s been overdramatic. He knows he’s projecting onto Dan and he recognizes how unfair that is.

“We said we’d figure this out together, what you like and what you don’t, and that’s what we’re doing.”

“Yeah.”

“So,” Dan continues. “Maybe you don’t like head. Maybe you don’t want me to do anything that’s just for you. That’s ok.”

Phil bites his lip. Is that true? Because it’s not like it hadn’t felt really fucking good when Dan pressed his lips to the tip of Phil’s cock. Just because he’d been scared doesn’t mean it hadn’t felt good.

“What if…” He picks up Dan’s hand and presses it to his dick, which is still exposed and somehow still a little hard. Dan smiles, wrapping his hand around it and squeezing.
“What if I said I wanted to try again?” Phil asks.

“You don’t have to say that for me, Phil.”

“I’m not. I’m saying it for me. I’m trying to be... selfish.”

Dan laughs. He’s still got Phil in his hand, and he’s still squeezing around him intermittently. “Trust me, you’re not.”

“What d’you mean?” Phil lets out the faintest little breathy moan, because even just dry squeezing from Dan feels good. “I’m trying to make it all about me.”

“I don’t want you to force anything,” Dan says quietly. “And you’re not being selfish. I--” He stops himself short.

“What?”

Dan shakes his head. “It’ll seem manipulative. It’ll make you feel pressured and I don’t want that.”

“I want to hear what you have to say, Dan. Just because I’m the messed up one here doesn’t mean I’m the only one with opinions. Your opinions are just as important to me as mine are to you.”

“You’re not messed up.”

Phil ignores him. “Tell me the thing.”

Dan laughs, and he unwraps his hand from around Phil’s dick. “If you wanted to try again, it wouldn’t be selfish because… it’s just something I really like doing.”

Phil frowns. “What?”

“You know… giving. Like that, especially.”

“Like specifically…?”

Dan nods, chuckling. “I like sucking dick, Phil, ok? You made me say it. I really want to blow you. If you want me to, and I swear to god, only if you want me to.”

“I want you to,” Phil says immediately.

“How can we make sure you don’t get scared again?” Dan asks.

Phil smiles. The fact that Dan’s even considering it must mean he really does want it, even though he’s trying to make sure it’s Phil’s decision. And that helps. It makes Phil feel safe and loved and wanted. It makes him want to try, because he knows if the situation were reversed, there’s no way Dan wouldn’t try for Phil.

Besides, it’s not exactly a hardship he’s being asked to endure. And it’s not like every experience they’ve had together so far hasn’t been absolutely amazing.

“Just kiss me,” Phil says and Dan does. He pushes Phil back down onto the bed gently and kisses him until Phil whispers, “I’m ready.”

Dan nods. “Just remember that it’s me and I love you and if you don’t like it… I’m still going to love you.”
Phil grins, because he really does feel better already. And he’s pretty sure he’s going to like it. “Kiss me,” he says again, and Dan smirks because he knows Phil doesn’t mean on the lips this time.

Dan does kiss him, down his neck and along his shoulder, down his chest and across his stomach. He pulls Phil’s pants off the rest of the way and drops them off the side of the bed. He sits up and takes Phil’s hand, guiding it to press against the zip of his trousers and Phil can feel the distinct shape and hardness of Dan underneath.

“Just remember that you’re not being selfish,” Dan says. “I won’t be upset if you want me to stop but… I really want to do this. I have for a long time.”

Phil cups Dan through his trousers and it helps. It helps to remind him for the millionth time that this is Dan and they’re in it together. He’s safe and he’s loved and they’re equals in this. Dan wants to make him feel good—it makes him feel good to make Phil feel good. His stomach churns excitedly at the thought of Dan hard in his pants with his mouth on Phil’s cock.

“Well go on then,” Phil says, voice low.

Dan bites his lip. “Just keep looking at me, yeah? It’s just me.”

Phil nods and watches as Dan shimmies back and pushes Phil’s legs open, settling down between them on his stomach. He looks so casual, with his ankles crossed in the air, propped up on his elbows with his face so close to that most intimate part of Phil’s body. Phil props himself up on his elbows too, to get a better view. He wants what Dan said—he wants to watch. He wants to be able to see Dan’s face.

Dan smiles at Phil one more time before dropping his face down and kissing Phil’s hipbone. Already Phil can feel himself hardening again, even as he technically remains untouched. It isn’t really but it already feels different than it had a few minutes ago. There’s not much room left for doubt that this is going to be a good experience for him.

Dan kisses down slowly against the newly trimmed hair until Phil feels his lips on the base. Just like Phil had done the first time they’d seen each other like this, Dan kisses all along the shaft until he gets to the head, running his tongue over the tip of it not still covered by the foreskin—skin that’s quickly being pulled tighter as Phil’s cock fills with blood.

Dan’s eyes flit up to meet Phil’s. “You good?”

Phil nods quickly. “Keep going.”

Dan grips the base, just with two fingers and his thumb, just enough to hold Phil in place. He looks down at it with desire so plain it erases Phil’s instinct for self consciousness.

“God, Phil. I don’t mean to be like-- whatever, but you have the nicest cock I’ve ever seen.”

Phil can’t help his giggle at that. “Shut up.”

“I’m serious.” He tilts his head and fits his mouth around the side of it, creating a wet seal against the curve and sliding up and down slowly. Phil’s toes are curling already, and it looks almost as good as it feels.

Dan breaks the seal, but doesn’t pull his lips off. “It’s so… big,” he murmurs against the now wet skin. “And soft.” He licks a stripe along the underside all the way up to the head, where he wraps his lips around loosely and drags the tip of his tongue over the slit and sucks.
Phil has to close his eyes, just for a second. The visual is too much with that kind of sensation. He absolutely refuses to let this be over before Dan even has a chance to really get going.

Dan notices, apparently. He pulls off and asks, “Too much?”

Phil opens his eyes and shakes his head. “Feels good. Really fucking good.”

Dan smiles. He knows Phil well enough to know how serious he is if he’s dropping f bombs. He keeps his eyes locked on Phil’s as he runs his tongue over the head again.

“Fuck,” Phil breathes. “You’re good at this aren’t you?”

Dan turns his head to the side and laughs. He wraps his whole fist around Phil now, stroking up once and then down so Phil’s foreskin is pulled back completely and the whole head is exposed, flushed red and glistening with Dan’s spit under the soft glow of the fairy lights.

“I reckon you’ll have to let me know,” he purrs, before parting his lips and sinking down on Phil without warning, enveloping half of Phil’s cock in hot wet suction in one go.

Phil’s fist flies to his mouth and he sinks his teeth in harshly, moaning against his fingers in spite of himself. He doesn’t know if it’s bad form to be this painfully turned on not one minute into a blowjob, but he is. He really is, but he doesn’t want the distraction of looking away from the way Dan’s lips stretch around him. He wants to keep watching, especially because Dan is still looking up and into Phil’s eyes, so he bites into his knuckles and tries to stifle the sounds his body is aching to make as Dan sucks him, properly now.

“Don’t do that,” Dan says, pulling back just enough to get the words out before dropping his mouth down again. He sinks down with ease, farther than Phil would have thought possible and sucks hard as he pulls back up, the seal so tight Phil can’t contain his moan this time.

Dan pulls off and smiles. “Yeah. Like that. I wanna hear you.”

Phil extricates his teeth from his abused knuckles reluctantly. “You’re gonna kill me.”

“Is it too much?”

Phil laughs. “Yeah. But in a good way.”

Dan’s replaced his mouth with his hand, stroking slowing and twisting when he gets to the top. “Yeah?” He’s smirking now.

“Oh shut up. You know you’re good.”

Dan’s still smiling as he shrugs. “I’m just glad you think so too.”

“Is it bad that I really hate thinking about other people telling you that in past?”

“Phil, Phil, shh. Don’t think about that. It’s all for you now.” He pulls Phil’s skin down tight and closes his lips around the ridge of Phil’s head. It’s just so wet and warm and soft and wonderful Phil can’t believe he was ever afraid of giving in to this.

Maybe he should feel guilty about the little pang of jealousy he feels imagining Dan doing this to anyone else. Maybe he should feel a little ashamed that he needs Dan to tell him there’s no one else.

He can’t focus on that now though. He’ll have to unpack those insecurities later, because right now his incredibly gorgeous boyfriend has his cock in his mouth and it’s the best thing he’s ever felt. So
good in fact that he drops down off his elbows, sinking the back of his head into the pillow and sliding his fingers into Dan’s hair. He closes his fist in the curls and tugs a little and Dan moans.

Dan’s mouth is dropped down far enough that Phil can feel that moan vibrating all the way through his dick and even into his balls. Without making a conscious decision to do so, he pushes down on Dan’s head and thrusts his hips up, chasing that moan and the feeling of sliding deeper into Dan’s throat.

Dan gags and pushes his hand against Phil’s hip, trying to pull off against the pressure of Phil’s hand on his head.

Phil snatches his hand away like he’s been burned. Dan pulls off with a cough. He’s actually laughing, but Phil feels like he’s definitely about to cry.

“Oh my god Dan, fuck, I’m—”

“It’s fine, I’m fine. You’re just so big and I wasn’t ready.” His voice is hoarse and Phil feels guilt wrack through his entire body.

“I didn’t mean to—”

“I know, Phil! It’s fine! I want you to do that! And now I’ll be ready. It’s a compliment to me really.” He pushes himself up higher on his elbows and reaches a hand up to stroke Phil’s cheek as best he can in his awkward position. “I’m fine, I promise.”

“Maybe we should stop,” Phil says quietly. “Maybe I can’t handle it.”

“Are you enjoying it?” Dan asks.

Phil nods.

“Do you want to stop? Because of course I’ll stop if you want me to.”

Phil bites his lip before shaking his head.

Dan smiles. “I’m ready now. You can do it again if you want.”

Phil doesn’t have time to tell Dan he’s definitely not going to do that before he’s halfway down Dan’s throat and already feeling the urge to thrust up again. His fingers itch to thread themselves into Dan’s hair but he resists, instead cupping Dan’s cheek, his fingers tracing Dan’s jaw, feeling it flex with the effort of sucking Phil harder.

He lets his fingers wander, trying to distract himself from how good this all feels. He rubs gently over Dan’s lip, feeling the way it’s stretched tight, feeling the hardness of his own cock. It feels unspeakably hot, unspeakably dirty and he spreads his index and middle finger apart and slides his dick in between, right above where Dan’s mouth is.

Dan pulls off with a pop and laughs. “Get those things out of my way, Lester.”

“I’m trying to keep my hands busy,” Phil mumbles almost incoherently, as Dan’s already moved on to making him feel good in a different way.

Dan’s hand is pushing Phil’s cock up against his stomach and holding it there, moving his mouth down to suck one of Phil’s balls inside. Warmth floods his gut and he can feel a knot forming low in his stomach.
“Your mouth,” he mutters. “God, your mouth.”

“Your cock, Phil. God, this cock.” He licks from the balls all the way back up to the head and takes it in again.

Phil gives in and slides his fingers into Dan’s hair again and tenses his thighs against the urge to fuck Dan’s mouth. He thinks Dan knows now how scared Phil is of hurting him, because he doesn’t go down nearly as far as he had before. Instead he wraps his hand around and strokes at a steady pace while keeping his mouth focused on the head now.

Phil lets his moans and sighs fall from his own mouth without temperance, cradling the back of Dan’s head without applying any pressure at all. He’s fully passive and quickly losing the battle against the tightening sensation in his groin, against the earth shattering orgasm he has no doubt is only a few minutes away at this point.

His heels dig into the mattress and the only noises he can hear are the filthy wet sounds of Dan’s skilled mouth on his cock and his own blissed out grunts.

The pit in his stomach coils tighter and he finds himself panting, “faster, faster,” despite feeling like that’s bossy and rude considering how insanely incredible Dan is at making him feel good. He doesn’t feel like himself right now. He doesn’t feel like Phil Lester, the guy who’ll swallow his own feelings down until he’s practically choking to make sure everyone else is happy and comfortable.

He feels like an animalistic version of himself, boiled down to all the baser instincts he didn’t even know he had. He wants to come, and he needs Dan to wank him faster and suck a little harder in order for that to happen as fast as he now wants it to.

He starts thrusting his hips in time with Dan’s hand. He still manages not to push down on his head, but just barely. “Ugh, fuck, faster, please,” he grunts and he can tell that Dan’s trying hard to please.

Another minute passes, or some passage of time that feels like it could have been a minute before his balls are pulled up tight and his stomach almost hurts from how ready he is for release. “Gonna come,” he grunts in warning, expecting Dan to pull back and finish him off with his hand.

What happens instead is that he pulls his hand away entirely and plunges forward, burying Phil all the way inside his throat. His nose brushes the closely trimmed hair at the base of Phil’s cock and Phil comes violently, with no warning whatsoever. His toes curl and his whole body twitches as he pumps come down Dan’s throat, but it feels way too good for him to possibly worry about that right now.

Dan seems alright with it, at least. He doesn’t try to pull off, not until Phil thinks he’s emptied his entire being into Dan’s mouth and slumps back against the mattress.

Apparently he hasn’t actually emptied everything, because Dan sits up and wraps his hand around Phil’s spit-wet dick and squeezes in an upward stroke. One more bead of pearly white bubbles up from Phil’s slit and Dan leans down to lick it off. Phil shudders and throws his arm across his eyes. He can’t form any words, though he doesn’t really know what he could say right now anyway.

Then he feels himself jostle on the bed and lifts his arm to look down at Dan walking his knees up either side of Phil’s torso. His hands are fumbling with his zip clumsily, eyes fixed intently on Phil’s face.

Through the haze of post-orgasm euphoria, it dawns on Phil that Dan must be painfully turned on at this point and hoping for some relief. Phil’s limbs feel like jelly but he croaks, “Do you want me
Dan shakes his head, pulling his cock out from those pink trousers and starting to wank himself, not even bothering to push his pants down. His chest is bare and flushed and Phil could cry for how amazing he looks. “Just want you to watch me, yeah?”

Somehow, despite coming literally thirty seconds ago, Phil’s body still finds a way to respond with interest. His stomach flips as he watches Dan’s leaking head fucking in and out of the tunnel of his fingers.

“You’re so hot, Phil, fuck,” Dan groans. He’s sitting on Phil’s lower chest, biting his lip and jerking hard and fast. “You taste so fucking good.”

Phil answers without thinking. “I love you.”

Shit. Not sexy, Phil thinks. Not the time. It’s just that weird urge of his, the one he gets after Dan makes him come, apparently. The one where he needs to be reminded of that love, to feel Dan’s body as he close to him as he can get it.

Dan doesn’t seem too bothered. He does slow his hand though. “I love you too, Phil. So much. Is this too much? Should I stop?”

Phil wants Dan’s arms around him, yes, but he also wants Dan to feel as good as he does right now.

“No, just— want you closer.”

Dan chuckles. “Closer than this?”

Phil nods. “C’mere. I’ll help you.”

Dan flops down on his side next to Phil, propping himself up on an elbow. Phil shuffles up against him, pressing the bare skin of their chests together and kissing him. He licks into Dan’s mouth and bites Dan’s lip because though he’s ready for a cuddle, he knows Dan is still at the height of want right now. He slides his hand down between their bodies and wraps it around Dan’s cock.

“Do you want me to—? Like I did yesterday?”

Dan shakes his head. “I’m already close. Just wanna come for you.”

Phil buries his face in Dan’s neck, kissing and sucking and breathing hot and heavy against the skin there, stroking Dan off as best he can.

Dan seems to be enjoying it just fine. He’s moaning high and loud and gripping the collar of Phil’s open shirt, pulling him ever closer though they’re already squashed up against one another.

Phil can tell Dan’s close when he starts thrusting to meet Phil’s strokes. Suddenly, he has another overwhelming urge to reaffirm their connection. It embarrasses him a little, but he knows down to his bones that Dan would want him to act on anything he wants this badly. “Tell me you love me,” he whispers.

“I love you,” Dan responds instantly. “I love you, I love you. I’m so in love with you I can’t— mmf, Phil, I’m gonna—”

Phil keeps moving his hand, working Dan through his orgasm as he clings to Phil’s waist. When he’s sure Dan’s done, he wipes his hand on Dan’s trousers and wraps his arms around him, pulling him in
tight and kissing his sweaty curls.

“Thank you,” he whispers. “That was amazing.”

Dan laughs. “Don’t thank me, you spork. It’s not like I was doing you a favour or something.”

“Weren’t you?”

“No. Not at all. Is that what it felt like when you did me? Like picking up milk or something?”

Phil swats at him. “Course not. But I’m still allowed to be grateful to you for making me feel… like that.”

“Well thank you too then, because I fucking loved it. You’ll let me do it again sometime?”

Phil laughs. “I think I could find it in me to let it happen again. Can I do it to you sometime?”

“Phil.” Dan gives him a look. “You can literally do anything you want to me. Whenever you bloody want.”

“Ok.” Phil smiles, nuzzling his face back into Dan’s neck, kissing him and tasting the salt on his skin. “I reckon maybe later.”

Dan snorts. “No shit. I’m exhausted, mate.”

“Should we clean up?” Phil asks. “Put on pyjamas?”

Dan shakes his head, trying to pull his trousers down. “Just help me get these stupid things off.”

Phil helps Dan get them off and Dan helps Phil’s arms out of the bird shirt. Phil puts back on the pants Dan had dropped onto the floor.

“I wanna be the big spoon tonight,” Phil murmurs, turning Dan over and pulling him in against his chest.

Dan giggles sleepily. “Mate, it’s not night anymore, look.” He points to the window, where the first rays of sunrise are starting to filter through.

“Oh shit,” Phil says. “Well I did tell you we weren’t going to be leaving your bed at all today.”

“A good plan.”

Dan is definitely half asle by now, so Phil just curls his legs up and presses his knees into the back of Dan’s thighs. He closes his eyes.

“Night,” he whispers.

All he gets in response is a happy little grunt.
Chapter 53

Phil wakes up first, and somehow they’ve contorted themselves so that the top of his head is nestled into Dan’s armpit. There must have been an uncharacteristic amount of moving around during the night. Phil’s foot hangs off the edge of the bed, his toes curled up against the cold air of Dan’s bedroom. He pulls his knee up and slips his foot back under the covers. He’s not sure if it’d been the cold or the noise that woke him up, because honestly, he doesn’t feel at all ready for consciousness yet.

The noise surprises him at first, and then it just makes him laugh. Dan’s snoring, like properly snoring, nothing breathy or cute about it. It still makes Phil’s heart burst with fondness though, and he vows never to let Dan live this down.

In fact he finds it so funny that he very slowly and carefully makes his way off the bed and across the room to fetch his phone out of his jeans. He stands over top of Dan for a solid minute, filming his adorable sleepy face and the deep rumbling snores that erupt from the back of his throat. His hands shake with stifled laughter and he curses himself internally for leaving his camera at home.

Eventually he has to acknowledge that to continue to film would be cruel. He tosses his phone onto the bed and rummages through his backpack for Dan’s rose jumper. It’s big and soft and pretty and he likes it and he doesn’t have anywhere to be right now but snuggled up in his boyfriend’s bed, watching the afternoon sun making its way slowly west. He should probably try to find something else to wear, something clean that hasn’t been worn multiple times by multiple people over a span of multiple days, but it smells like Dan and it also smells like him and there’s something intoxicating about the mingling of those scents—so different and yet somehow so perfectly suited to each other.

He hears people out in the lounge, but makes the bold decision that he doesn’t give a toss. He goes out and hears someone whistle at him as he makes his way to the bathroom for a wee and a quick tooth brushing. He giggles and waves a hand sheepishly in the air, not daring turn around and actually identify the culprit.

He thinks about stopping into the kitchen on the way back and making coffee for the both of them but he’s not quite that brave yet. Plus he still doesn’t know where anything is in this flat.

Dan’s flopped over onto his stomach now, not snoring but still deeply asleep, his arms folded up underneath his pillow. Again, Phil desperately wishes he had his camera, but he settles for the subpar image quality of his iphone. Dan looks too soft and sweet to resist. Phil wants to keep photographic proof of how perfect the first day of 2014 was for him.

He crawls back into bed and risks waking Dan up by tucking his face between Dan’s face and shoulder. Dan responds as instantly as someone who’s just been asleep can, lifting his arm and draping it across Phil’s shoulders. He lets out a long happy groan before falling asleep again.

Phil closes his own eyes and listens to Dan breathe for a long time before he falls back to sleep too.

When he wakes up for the second time, Dan’s fingers are combing through Phil’s hair and the scent of coffee warms his nose. Dan is sat up against his pillow with his knees drawn, using his free hand to scratch a pen across the paper of his open journal. He’s wearing a hoodie now and chewing the inside corner of his lip as he frowns in concentration at the writing on the page.

“Morning,” Phil murmurs, after staring adoringly for as long as he could while still pretending to be asleep.
Dan looks down and smiles, his frown disappearing instantly. He closes his journal and drops it and the pen on the ground before snuggling in next to Phil.

“It’s like 6pm, Phil.” They share three chaste but open mouthed kisses, slow and sweet and so achingly intimate that Phil feels for just a split second like he must be living someone else’s life.

“You don’t have to stop because of me,” Phil says, gesturing to the floor where Dan’s discarded his notebook.

“S’fine. I was just killing time anyway.”

“Did you-- do I smell coffee?”

“Oh, yeah.” Dan turns over and picks a mug up from the floor carefully.

Phil sits up and accepts it gratefully.

“Might be kinda cold now, I thought you’d wake up sooner.”

Phil takes a sip and Dan’s right, it’s definitely not hot. He smiles and says, “It’s perfect.” He yawns, feeling a little out of sorts. It’s dark in Dan’s room again, but his legs are stiff from being in bed for so long.

Dan looks at him then, head tilted. “You really like that jumper, don’t you?” He knocks their knees together playfully.

Phil knows Dan’s just teasing, but he’s honestly too content to take the bait. “It reminds me of the first time I saw you wear it. The first time I was here, and you played me a song on your keyboard and we watched Buffy.”

Dan smiles. “I remember.”

“Doesn’t that feel so long ago?”

Dan nods. “God, I already liked you so much then. I was a mess.”

“You really weren’t. I was though.”

“You weren’t.” Dan slips his hand under the duvet to squeeze Phil’s naked thigh. “You were adorable.”

“Dan, you were shirtless for half the night. Trust me, I was a mess.”

“You didn’t… you weren’t into me yet then, were you?”

“I… I was,” Phil says hesitantly. It still feels a little strange to talk to Dan about this part of him, this thing he always felt made him kind of broken. “I just don’t know if I’d like-- I don’t know if I really knew what that meant yet. Like I had all these feelings I’d never really felt before and I didn’t-- I don’t know. I told you, I was a mess.”

“But you did have feelings.” Dan’s fingers slip under the bottom of Phil’s boxers, grazing his skin lightly.

“Loads of feelings.”

Dan plucks Phil’s coffee out of his hands then and puts it back on the floor. He turns back around
and moves the duvet aside to climb right into Phil’s lap.

“I wish you’d have just talked to me,” Dan says.

Phil puts his hands on Dan’s hips and tilts his head up. “I wouldn’t have known what to say yet. I still needed more time. I wouldn’t have been any good for you then.”

Dan leans down and kisses him. “You’ve always been good for me. You’ve made me the happiest I’ve ever been in my life, Phil.”

Phil smiles against Dan’s lips. “You’re getting it confused. That’s what you’ve done for me.”

“Get your own line, mate.”

Phil chuckles. “How ‘bout you just kiss me instead?”

Phil goes to visit Martyn and Cornelia once they’re back from Christmas number two in Sweden. Dan’s not there as he has to work. They’ve become so inseparable that it already feels weird to be doing things like this without him.

Perhaps it’s for the better though, as he spends a large portion of his visit sat on the sofa with Cornelia gushing about what a perfect boyfriend he is. He shares as many details with her as he can within earshot of his brother—that still feels a little strange. Maybe Cornelia had prepped him beforehand though, as he makes a surprising few put upon faces as he listens to she and Phil giggling.

Eventually Cornelia has to go out for a little while and it’s just Phil and Martyn in the flat. The nice flat, much nicer than Phil and Jimmy’s, though for some reason that doesn’t bother Phil as much as it once did.

As soon as she’s gone they’re breaking out the video games, because when it comes down to it, they’re still just little boys at heart. They play for a while before Phil’s phone buzzes in pocket. Butterflies dance in his stomach before he even knows it’s Dan texting him. He pauses the game immediately and Martyn rolls his eyes.

It is Dan, texting Phil on his break just to tell him he’s missing him. Phil knows he gives himself away with the big cheesy grin that’s plastered across his face as he types his reply.

“You lads are well gone for each other aren’t you?”

“No, I hate him actually,” Phil says, sliding his phone back into his pocket.

“It’s only been like a few weeks, hasn’t it?”

“What are you trying to say?” Phil asks, somewhat on the defensive already.

Martyn shuffles down the sofa til they’re squashed in next to each other and throws his arm over Phil’s shoulders and squeezes. He’s just such a bloody older brother sometimes, honestly. “Nothing Philly. Just happy for ya.”

“Right.” Phil slithers out of his brother’s grip and stands up from the sofa. “You have any ribena?”

“Course.” Martyn leans back with arms spread out over the back of the couch. He throws an ankle across the knee of the other legs and says, “Get me one, yeah?”
Phil’s opening up all the cupboards in the kitchen searching for glasses. No matter how many times he visits this place he can never remember where they keep their damn glasses.

“I wonder if that’ll drive Dan as crazy as it drives Corn when I do it.”

Phil jumps. He hadn’t heard Martyn come in.

“What drives her crazy?” Phil asks. “And where are your freaking cups?”

Martyn opens one of the two cupboards Phil hadn’t gotten around to ravaging yet and there they are.

“This,” Martyn says, gesturing to the kitchen full of cupboard doors Phil had left open. “I do it too.”

Phil laughs. “Does dad do it? Maybe it’s a Lester thing.”

“I think it’s mum actually.”

Phil takes two glasses out and makes a point of shutting the door after. “It probably will. He’s much tidier than me.” After he says it, the realization hits that a lot of assumptions had just been made, very casually, and by both of them, possibly without even noticing. Martyn had assumed that Phil and Dan would be sharing space enough in the future for Dan to be annoyed with Phil for something as domestic as leaving the kitchen cupboard doors open, and Phil hadn’t even batted an eye. It makes him feel warm all over, that acceptance from his brother, and the knowledge that he truly can’t wait for that future with Dan.

“Have you talked to her?” Martyn asks quietly as Phil fills the glasses with water and rummages through the fridge for the ribena.

“Who?”

“Mum.”

“Bout what?” Phil mumbles. He’s not paying attention to Martyn at all as he tries to pour the ribena carefully. He has an unfortunate tendency to be a little heavy handed, sometimes dumping in half the bottle in one go.

“About Dan, you numpty.”

“Oh.” He hands Martyn his cup. “Yeah. I did. Did you not know that?”

“What the hell, Phil. How would I know that? You didn’t tell me.”

Phil shrugs. “I hadn’t really given it any thought, I guess. She didn’t tell you?”

“No.” Martyn walks halfway out of the kitchen before turning around again. “Look Phil, I know you’ve got this new relationship and you’re maybe a little distracted and stuff but… I’m your brother. I think—” He stops, rubs a chin over his jaw and takes a breath. “I thought you were going to start trusting me with stuff.”

“I do,” Phil says quietly. “I’ve just… I’ve been busy, I guess. I’ve been busy being happy and like, trying not to think about any of the reasons I shouldn’t feel happy about… you know.”

Martyn raises an eyebrow in question.

“Being with a bloke,” Phil finishes.
“So she didn’t take it well?”

Phil shrugs. “Not like you did.”

“Did you expect her to?”

Phil gives his brother a proper frown then. “You’re the one who bloody told me to tell her.”

“Yeah. I know.” His voice softens. “Sorry.”

Phil picks up his own cup and walks past Martyn and back out to the lounge. He’s annoyed now. Annoyed that people seem to think they have some sort of right to the personal details of his life, to the particular details of his suffering.

Martyn sits next to him. He doesn’t say anything. They sit there in silence for a good few minutes before Phil decides it’s not worth this.

“She was mostly fine. She just… she called it a shock.”

Martyn puts his hand on Phil’s shoulder. He doesn’t say anything, but Phil thinks he knows him so well he can fill in the blanks all on his own. He thinks Martyn probably wants to say that it had been a shock, not just for their mother but for him as well. Because he’s right, Phil hasn’t really trusted his family with anything like this in a long time.

“Anyway, it’s fine. She’s mum. She was pretty good about it, really. I just wasn’t really bursting to tell everyone the details of the conversation.”

Martyn nods. “Well I’m glad you told her. That was really brave, Phil.”

Phil bristles, but he hopes Martyn doesn’t see. He doesn’t want to be called brave for simply being who he is and loving who he loves, but he guesses that’s just the world they live in. Martyn doesn’t mean anything by it. He’s just trying to be supportive. Just as his mum was probably trying to be supportive. It’s not their faults that this is the reality of the world they live in.

“I told dad too,” Phil says quietly.

“Fuck off.”

Phil laughs. “Ok, I didn’t. But I told mum she could.”

“And she did?”

Phil nods.

“And?”

“It was… weird, actually. In some ways he kinda took it better than mum did?”

“Really?” Martyn asks. “Honestly wouldn’t have guessed that.”

“Yeah, well. I think he and mum stayed up literally all that night just talking about it, so if he freaked out he did it before he talked to me.”

“Well that’s… good. Right?”

“Yeah. I think so. I don’t think I could have handled whatever his reaction would have been if I’d sat
him down and told him like I did with mum.”

“So what’d he say?” Martyn asks, turning his body to face Phil and folding his legs up underneath himself.

“He-- he basically asked if I thought Dan was good enough for me.”

Martyn just snorts.


“And also just… like he wouldn’t have asked that if Dan was a bird.”

Phil pulls his knees up to his chest, resting his heels on the edge of the sofa. “I know. It’s kind of rubbish but I think I’ll take what I can get.”

Martyn nods and picks up his controller, signalling the end of this conversation, for which Phil is grateful. He doesn’t want to dwell on remembering the odd limbo he finds himself in with his parents right now. His mum has called him a few times since he’d talked with his dad, but he just can’t bring himself to answer yet. Right now he’s doing that thing where he just ignores it. If he doesn’t address it, if he doesn’t think about it, does it even exist?

He knows logically that it’s bullshit, but it still makes him feel better.

They play their game for an indeterminate amount of time, until Cornelia returns with dinner for all of them. She rolls her eyes fondly and scolds them for being lazy the whole time she’d been gone. Martyn gets up to help her plate the food and Phil stays where he’s started to melt into the cushions of his brother’s sofa when his phone rings. He’s excited until he pulls it out and sees that it’s not Dan. It’s his mum.

He doesn’t answer, silencing the ring and shoving it back into his pocket. Not today. Not right now. He vows he’ll answer next time, no matter what. He can’t avoid them forever. He doesn’t even really have a reason to.

About thirty seconds later he hears someone else’s phone ringing, and then Martyn’s voice. “Hi mum.”

Phil’s stomach drops just a little.

“Yeah, good. She’s well… Yeah, he’s actually here now, why?.... Really?”

Now Phil feels his stomach drop all the way down and out of his ass. Fuck.

Martyn comes back out to the lounge, his phone lodged between his ear and his shrugged up shoulder.

“Mum wants to know why you’re avoiding her.”

Phil glares at him. “M’not,” he mutters.

“He says he’s not,” Martyn says into the phone. He obviously listens to her say something before he pulls the phone away from his ear and jabs his finger on the screen.

Kath’s voice emerges then. “Philip Michael, you need to stop ignoring your mother.”

Phil almost laughs. She sounds even more northern over the phone.
“I’m not. I… had my phone off.”

“For a week?”

He flips his middle finger up at Martyn, who’s got a hand over his mouth, stifling his giggles. “Sorry mum. What’s up?”

“I wanted to know if you and Dan are coming back up for your birthday.”

He feels bowled over. *You and Dan*.

“Uh… I dunno. I hadn’t thought about it. I’ll ask him?” He hadn’t meant for that last bit to come out as a question but he’s honestly a little shaken. In a good way, but still.

“What kind of cake does he like?”

Phil has to laugh at that. “What kind of cake does he like? I thought we were talking about my birthday.”

Kath ignores him completely. “When is his birthday?”

The smirk drops from Phil’s face when he realizes he genuinely doesn’t know. “Uh… I think it’s… in June?”

“Phil! You need to know when your lover’s birthday is!”

Phil cringes at the word lover, but he shakes his head as if she can see him. Like he always does. “I know, I know. I’ll ask him as soon as he gets home tonight.”

“And ask him what kind of cake he likes,” she reminds him. “You can put me back on with Martyn now. And don’t screen my calls anymore, young man.”

“Alright mum, sorry. I won’t.”

“I love you child.”

“Love you too.”

Martyn takes her off speaker and goes back to the kitchen, leaving Phil to sit there and try to process what’d just happened.

*You and Dan*. So casual. So familiar. As if he were already a part of the family. Phil’s hands are shaky and he’s warm all over. He wishes so desperately that Dan were here.

She wants to know what kind of cake he likes and when his birthday is. His throat feels tight. He’s not actually going to start crying about this, is he?

Corn and Martyn come back out and Martyn hands him a plate full of food. They turn on a movie and eat while they watch. Phil doesn’t cry, but he doesn’t stop thinking about his mum’s words all night. He wouldn’t even be able to name the film they’re watching.

He leaves before it’s even over. He wants to make it to Starbucks before Dan gets off.

Phil holds Dan’s hand on the walk back to Phil’s flat. It’s late and it’s dark and there aren’t that many people around. Phil doesn’t ask Dan’s permission but Dan never moves to pull his fingers free of Phil’s.
As soon as they step into the flat and the door closes behind them, Phil takes Dan’s face in his hands and kisses him.

“What’s got into you?” Dan laughs, trying to match Phil’s enthusiasm.

“Nothing. Just like you a bit.” He cradles Dan’s cheeks, running his thumbs over his cheekbones and into the dips of his dimples. “Also, Kath wants to know what your favourite kind of cake is.”
They do go back up north together for Phil’s birthday. A few days before his birthday actually. It’s just for one day and one night, as Phil hadn’t been entirely sure what to expect and hadn’t particularly wanted to be stuck there for any real length of time if things were going to be tense and awkward.

They’re not tense, but they are a little awkward. Mostly just because Kath is trying so hard to prove her acceptance, Phil thinks. Nigel is much calmer, maybe because he’d rather just not think about it, which honestly is more than fine with Phil. They know now and they don’t hate him and they don’t hate Dan. They are kind and lovely and have welcomed Dan into the Lester circle with open arms and that’s all Phil really wants. He doesn’t expect them to be smooth or sophisticated about anything. That’s just not who they are.

They stay in Manchester for a while. They get coffees and ride the big wheel. Dan leans in and kisses Phil right on the mouth when Nigel and Kath aren’t looking. They go out for an early dinner and then back to the house to play card games and help Kath bake a cake.

So yeah, they’re not smooth and don’t always seem to know quite what to say, but the day is nothing but lovely and Phil’s never more content.

It doesn’t hurt that Dan is incandescently happy in the presence of Phil’s parents, especially Kath. He asks her to do his nails again while the cake bakes and laughs at her jokes like she’s the funniest person in the world. Phil used to think she was, when he was just a little thing, and he can’t help thinking that’s how Dan looks when he’s talking to Kath. Like a happy little boy with not a care in the world.

Phil’s parents get him a little potted cactus and an anthology of Stephen King short stories. Phil would’ve been happy just with that, but then later, when Dan and Nigel are sat in the lounge waiting to start another round of Who Wants To Be a Millionaire, Kath catches Phil in the hall on the way back from the toilet and hands him a small envelope. He opens it and cries.

“It’s our way of apologizing, love. And telling you we’re proud.”

Phil squeezes tight around her small shoulders and blubbers a laugh into her hair. “It’s too much, mum. Way too much.”

“It’s not. We got a discount and you boys deserve it. You only turn twenty seven once, yeah? And you only fall in love for the first time once.”

He doesn’t think hearing her say things like that will ever stop being just a little bit embarrassing, but he’s so overwhelmed with gratitude that all he can do is hug her tighter and murmur a hundred tiny thank yous.

They stay up late --very late-- watching movies and drinking red wine, the cheap kind Nigel likes.

They have chocolate cake because that’s Dan’s favourite.

When they lie in bed that night --or more accurately, that morning-- Phil can’t believe the words are true as he whispers them into Dan’s ear.

“We’re going to Portugal.”
A few days later, on Phil’s actual birthday, they have a mini party with Tom and Jimmy. More like a double date really. Tom takes them to a fancy sky bar with tiny portions of food and expensive drinks and pays for everything. Jimmy tells Phil this is his gift because he’s not made of money and experiences are worth more than things anyway. Phil laughs because it’s definitely something he’s said to Jimmy on multiple occasions in an attempt to stop him spending their rent money on houseplants and new clothes.

They watch through the giant window from their perch in the clouds as the sky over London grows slowly darker, the passersby below dotting the pavement like little lego people. Phil presses up tightly next to Dan with an arm thrown over his shoulder, drunk on drinks that taste like strawberry rum and sunshine.

Dan stays the night with Phil (of course). He sits on Phil’s bed and watches him open his gift, a bright yellow Adventure Time hoodie. Phil had made him promise he wouldn’t spend more than twenty pounds after forking over what must have been equivalent to his life savings on that camera.

“You’re taking me to Portugal and I’m giving you a fucking hoodie,” Dan says, sitting on the edge of the bed.

“You’ve given me everything. Anyway, I love Jake. And I didn’t have to pay for Portugal. My parents did.”

“You’ll always be a rich kid at heart, Lester.”

Phil pulls off his t-shirt and pulls on the hoodie. “You complaining?” He tosses his shirt right into Dan’s face and giggles.

Dan balls up the shirt and throws it over his shoulder and onto the floor. “Guess not.”

“C’mere,” Phil says, reaching one grabby hand out for Dan.

Dan crawls across the bed and into Phil’s lap. He leans down and kisses him gently. “Happy birthday old man. I love you.”

Phil answers with more kisses and a hand pushed up the back of Dan’s shirt. By the time Dan finally pulls back, Phil’s grinning, his hardness pressing into the ass of Dan’s jeans. He raises an eyebrow suggestively. “I thought of something else you could give me.”

Dan swats at his shoulder, but wastes no time climbing from his lap and pulling off Phil’s jeans and his pants in one go. He tells Phil to keep the hoodie on.

Dan’s so good at this Phil thinks he’ll never ask for any other gift ever again. He buries his fingers in Dan’s hair and lets himself enjoy it. There’s no fear here anymore, no caution, just pleasure and trust and love.

Maybe tonight’s the night he’ll return the favour. Dan deserves it after all and Phil’s never been good at taking more than he gives.

When Phil wakes up in the morning, Dan’s side of the bed is cold and empty and Phil can hear voices drifting down the hall. He’s a little disappointed as he’s becoming quite the fan of morning quickies (or not so quickies, he’s not picky), but he smells coffee and something sweet and someone
is laughing.

His interest piqued, he dons his glasses sleepily and shuffles down the hall, still wearing his bright new hoodie and Dan’s red plaid pyjama bottoms. It clashes horribly and he absolutely loves it.

Dan and Jimmy are sat at the table eating pancakes, so deep in conversation they don’t even see Phil come in. He pours himself a mug of coffee and Dan doesn’t turn around until Phil lets out an exaggerated yawn.

“Morning Philly,” Jimmy says cheerily. “How does it feel to be over the hill?”

Phil scrunches up his nose. “Was that a pun?”

“Wha…. oh, hill.” He laughs, apparently still too tired to even remember his own last name. “Nah mate. I’m just callin’ ya old.”

“Still younger than you,” Phil retorts.

“And to think I woke up early to make you breakfast.”

“You woke up early because Tom wanted a fuck and we all know it.”

Dan and Jimmy both give him a look, some mix between startled and impressed.

Phil shrugs, walking over to Dan and kissing the top of his head. “Sorry, filter doesn’t start working ’til 10am.” He slides into his seat and picks up a pancake with his bare hands.

Dan laughs and turns to face Jimmy again and they go right back to talking about whatever it was they’d been talking about.

Valentine’s day creeps up quickly. Dan says it’s fine, they don’t have to make a big deal out of it or anything and at first Phil feels relieved. He’s never done one of these before and he wouldn’t even know where to start. And truth be told they already seem to live their lives like every day is Valentine’s day. Jimmy has said these exact words, in a disgusted tone that does nothing to mask the affection in his teasing.

But there’s something Phil’s been wanting to give Dan anyway, and the romantic in him wants to make a big deal out of it. He’s never had a valentine’s day with anyone before and he wants to make this first one count.

Tom and Jimmy go out for the night and Dan and Phil have the place to themselves. Dan comes straight over after work, still dressed all in black and smelling like pike place roast. Phil’s dressed himself up slightly in a red button down, but always with the black jeans.

Dan cocks an eyebrow. “I thought we weren’t making a big deal.”

“Happy valentine’s day to you too.”

Dan lets Phil pull him in for a kiss, but only one. “You didn’t like, get me a gift or something did you?”

“I might’ve.”

Dan gives him a stern look. “Phil. We agreed.”
“Well I changed my mind, ok? Let me be cheesy today. It’s the holiday of love-- let me love you.”

Dan rolls his eyes. “Yeah but--”

“It’s fine,” Phil interrupts, taking Dan’s coat off and going to hang it up. “It’s just a little thing. It literally cost me two pounds.”

“But I didn’t get you anything.”

All Phil has to do is smirk now. It’s become a running joke between them ever since Phil’s birthday.

“You fucking perv.”

“Again I ask… complaining?”

Dan grins then, eyes crinkled, and shakes his head.

“Will you let me cook for you?” Phil asks.

“No. We’re ordering takeaway and making out on the couch until it comes, then I’m going to annihilate you at Mario Kart.”

“Sounds good to me.”

It’s late by the time Phil begs for video game mercy. His gift for Dan is burning a hole in his pocket and he doesn’t want to wait anymore. He takes Dan’s controller right out of his hands and tosses it aside.

“Oi.”

“I’m tired of losing.”

“I could pretend to let you win,” Dan teases.

Phil shakes his head. “Wanna give you the thing.” He turns to face Dan and tucks his legs up underneath himself.

Dan does the same and looks at him expectantly. “Do you have to go get it, or…?”

“Nah, it’s in my pocket.”

Dan chuckles. “Even less effort than the new year’s present then.”

“Oh shut up. Close your eyes and open your hand.”

Dan gives him an incredulous look. “If that’s the gift then at least let me look at it. That’s half the fun.”

Phil feels heat in his cheeks. He doesn’t know why talking about sex embarrasses him more than actually having sex at this point. “Shut up and do it, Howell.”

Dan laughs again as he closes his eyes and opens up his enormous palm. Phil’s hand trembles nervously as he pulls the key from his pocket and presses it to Dan’s skin.

His fingers curl over it and he frowns, opening his eyes and looking down.

“Is this…?”
“Yeah,” Phil says quietly. “If you think it’s stupid or it’s too soon or whatever, that’s fine I totally understand. I dunno, maybe it’s too soon, but I just-- I just want you here always and I don’t want to be without you ever--”

“Phil.”

He’s rambling. He always rambles when he’s nervous.

“Is it too soon?” Phil murmurs.

“Of course not.”

“I’m not saying like… I’m not saying you have to move all your stuff in or whatever, though you could-- if you wanted to you could. It’s just like… a continuation I guess? Of the starter pack, like the toothbrushes and stuff? It’s like a… medium pack.”

Dan laughs warmly and slips the key into his pocket. “I love it. I love you. You’re making a big mistake, but I love it.” He scoots forward and pushes Phil down gently, lying down on top of him and pressing a kiss to his lips.

Phil snakes his hands under Dan’s jeans, under his pants to rest on the soft skin of his ass. “Why a mistake?”

“You’ll never be able to get rid of me now.”

“Good. I don’t want to.”

Twenty minutes into their second makeout session of the night, Dan whispers in Phil’s ear, asks him if he can give Phil something he’s been wanting to give for a long time. Phil knows exactly what he means, and he nods yes though his heart is pounding.

“Only if you’re ready. Only if you want,” Dan whispers.

“I want to. I want you. I want all of you.”

They have a long hot shower and eventually Phil gives up trying to keep his hands from shaking. Dan takes them in his under the stream of water and kisses them. They wash each other’s hair and each other’s bodies and they’re both hard by the time they step out into the cool air of the hall.

Dan lays Phil down on the bed and they both still have droplets of water clinging to their skin.

“Can we turn off the light?” Phil asks.

Dan frowns a little. “You don’t want me to see you?”

“I want it to be…”

“Phil--”

“Romantic,” Phil blurts. “Cheesy. All that. I wanna turn off the lights and light candles and put on slow music. I want it to be embarrassingly romantic.”


The room is dark and smells like a blend of sugar and vanilla and spice from the scented candles they’ve lit on either side of the bed. Something slow and smooth plays quietly on Dan’s phone, but
Phil can still hear the soft noises Dan lets out every time he pulls his slick finger out and pushes it back in again.

He doesn’t have to ask when to add another. They’ve done this enough that he already knows. It’s a little different this time though, of course. He’s not trying to get Dan off— he’s trying to open him up. The thought pulls low in his stomach and his cock almost hurts for how hard and ready it is to feel Dan from the inside.

He’s nervous, but not as much as he thought he’d be. They’d talked about it many times before tonight. They’d already known how it would go the first time, who would do what and what kind of protection they’d use and even what position would probably be best.

“I’ve never topped,” Phil had admitted one night, after Dan had timidly asked what he thought he might prefer if they ever got to where they are now.

“Never?”

“Not with a bloke.”

“You’ve only bottomed.”

“Yes,” Phil had said, stomach churning even just remembering.

“And it was bad,” Dan had whispered.

“It certainly wasn’t ever good.”

“Maybe… maybe some day I could be your first.”

“Do you like that?” Phil had asked. “Would you want that?”

Dan had nodded. “Definitely.”

So this is where they find themselves, Phil pushing in two fingers and scissoring them gently. Dan moans and tightens his grip on Phil’s forearm.

“I should--” Phil croaks. He clears his throat. “I should probably do one more for a bit, d’you reckon?”

Dan reaches down and fumbles around between their bodies until he finds what he’s after. He wraps his fingers around Phil’s cock and tugs at his foreskin clumsily given the awkward angle. “I want you to stretch me open.”

Phil bites his lip, too far into it now to be shy. “Isn’t that what I’m doing now?”

“Don’t wanna hurt you.”

Phil’s stomach swoops. He’s really starting to run low on restraint.”Don’t wanna hurt you.”

“You won’t, I promise.” He lets go of Phil and props himself up on his elbows. “Please Phil. I want
you inside me.”

Phil twists his hand and curls his fingers up, keeps curling until he brushes that little hard spot inside of Dan. He wants to watch Dan’s face contort with pleasure one last time before plunging himself into something so new and terrifying.

But really, it’s not terrifying. It’s just new. Phil’s not always great with new, but he takes a deep breath and closes his eyes and reminds himself that this is Dan. This is the man he loves. And if he wants to stop, all he has to do is say it. This isn’t the only way for them to love each other, but it’s something they’ve never done and Phil doesn’t want any part of this beautiful thing between them to go unexplored.

He pulls his fingers out and sits back on his heels.

Dan sits up too and puts his hands on Phil’s thighs. “You ok?”

Phil nods.

“You nervous?”

Phil nods again.

“Do you still want to? ‘Cause we don’t have to.”

“I want to.”

Dan nods and reaches to the side to grab the condom he’d placed on the nightstand earlier. Phil sees the metallic looking packet reflecting the candlelight and shivers as he watches Dan tear it open with his teeth.

Dan leans forward and wraps his hand around Phil, stroking him slow and sweet and stretching his neck up in search of Phil’s mouth. Phil kisses him as he best he can, more than a little distracted by the sheer relief of the friction of Dan’s palm working him over.

“You’d better put that thing on me if you want to do this tonight,” Phil chuckles. “I’m definitely not gonna last forever.”

Dan doesn’t appear to need any more invitation than that. He pinches the tip of the condom and rolls it down over Phil’s cock. Then he grips Phil’s shoulders and pulls him down as he lays back against the bed. “You still wanna do it like this?”

Phil nods. He wants to be as close to Dan as possible, at least for this first time. He wants to be able to kiss his lips and look into his eyes and all that stuff he’d talked about earlier. He wants it to be cheesy. He wants it to be romantic.

He fumbles in the sheets until he finds the lube. Dan chuckles. “You don’t need any more of that, Phil, I swear.”

Phil ignores him, coating his whole hand and sliding it first over the latex of the condom and then into the line of Dan’s ass, all the way from the balls to the hole. He rubs against that skin for a while, remembering the time Dan had done it to him, and the electric sparks he’d felt shoot down his thighs. He circles Dan’s rim again and pushes his finger inside tentatively-- he wants to be sure Dan is still open and ready.

He is, but Phil still pushes in another finger and curls them just right, just once more. He loves what it
does to Dan’s face, how enthusiastically he responds. “Mmf, hey, that’s not—” He moans. “That’s not your cock.”

Phil pulls his fingers out and takes hold of himself. Dan spreads his legs open a little wider and Phil lines himself up, feels the head push in just the tiniest bit.

“It’s ok, Phil,” Dan whispers. He knows, he just knows that Phil needs that one last bit of encouragement. “It’s no different than anything else we’ve done. People make it into a big deal but it doesn’t mean more than anything else we do together, ok?”

Phil nods. “I love you.”

“Love you too. Now please f-- make love to me already.”

Phil laughs and starts to push in slowly.

“Oh fuck, ah, wait, shit.”

Phil freezes, trying not to panic. “Sorry.”

“It’s good it’s good, just-- damn. Go slow.”

Phil bites his lip. “I thought I was.”

“Slower. I’ve never had anything near as big as you in there.”

“I told you I should’ve done three fingers. Maybe we should--”

“No, Phil. It’s fine, I swear. Keep going.” Dan reaches down between their bodies and tugs on his own cock as Phil pushes in even slower. “Yeah. Like that. That’s really--” He speeds his hand a little.

Even before Phil’s bottomed out, the all consuming pressure of Dan’s warm tight walls around him threatens to tip him over the edge. Even with a condom and a belly full of butterflies and the not quite dissipated fear that he’s going to hurt Dan in some way, the pleasure is searing and intense.

One hand braced on the bed and the other gripping Dan’s hip for dear life, he presses in until his balls push against Dan’s ass cheeks.

“Stop there a sec,” Dan croaks. “Just wait.”

Phil drops himself down then, pressing his chest into Dan’s and kissing him wetly. He hasn’t even started moving yet and he feels himself starting to lose the tight grip on his self control. “God, Dan,” he murmurs against Dan’s lips. “You feel so fucking good. I’m gonna last like five seconds.”

Dan laughs. “We’ll have to do it again tomorrow if you do. I want you to--” He bites Phil’s lip, but doesn’t finish his thought. “You can move now. Start slow, yeah?”

Phil nods, pulling back and pushing back in again. The friction of it, the drag against the inside of Dan’s body is unlike anything he’s ever felt. Maybe he can hold out for longer than five seconds, but he’s definitely not going to last five minutes. After a few slow thrusts, Phil’s hips twitch with the desire to do it properly. His lips are on Dan’s neck, his arms wrapped under Dan’s shoulder blades.

Phil knows Dan’s starting to feel the same kind of primal urge he is when he groans and says, “Fuck me.” His hands are in Phil’s hair, pulling and scratching against his scalp and he’s saying, “Fuck me,” and all Phil’s noble goals of romance and sentimentality are quickly forgotten.
He’s not sure if he does it in a way that honours Dan’s request, but he moves his hips faster, pulling in and out and biting at Dan’s neck and grunting against his skin. Dan babbles a near constant stream of curse words and praises, moving his own hips in time to match Phil’s thrusts. Everytime Phil’s skin slaps against Dan’s, Dan moans. He’s never been all that quiet when they’re together, but this is something else entirely.

Phil loves it. He loves knowing exactly what Dan likes, and Dan really seems to like, well… whatever Phil’s able to give him right now. It doesn’t feel like he could really be doing anything that feels good for Dan. He feels like he’s being entirely selfish, humping rather erratically and crushing his weight into Dan’s chest, but he trusts Dan not to fake his noises, his whispered encouragements.

Dan shifts his hips then, and throws his legs around Phil’s waist. It seems to be a change in position that benefits them both greatly, with Phil’s cock driving in deeper.

Dan arches his head back against the pillow. “Fuck, fuck, right there,” he pants. “Don’t stop don’t stop, fuck.” Phil guesses he’s hitting Dan’s prostate but he can’t be sure and doesn’t want to break the spell by asking.

It’s not what he expected, this frantic sweaty grinding, the pounding in and out of Dan’s body. It’s not cheesy or romantic at all really, but it feels so good that he couldn’t possibly make any complaints.

“I love you,” he says, contrary to the level of caveman he feels he’s approaching as his balls draw up tighter. He just can’t help himself. He always has to bring these moments back to something more than the pressing together of their bodies.

His orgasm is imminent now though, and he knows it, closing in despite the fact it’s probably only been a few minutes and he wants to give Dan everything he deserves. “I’m sorry, I’m close, I think.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Dan says, and Phil’s not even sure he’s really heard what Phil’s said. His eyes are closed and his chest is flushed and he’s stroking himself rough and quick. “Me too.”

So maybe he had heard.

Phil forces himself to slow down a little, breathe some air into his lungs. He kisses Dan’s mouth and holds his face. This is the part where he absolutely needs to see Dan, to look into his eyes and feel that they’re connected, that they’re in it together.

“I love you and I’m gonna come,” Phil says.

Dan laughs. “Me too.”

“Which one?”

“Both, both. I love you and I’m gonna come.”

Phil picks up his pace again and keeps his eyes trained on Dan’s face. It only takes another thirty seconds. His orgasm hits him so hard he can’t even warn Dan it’s coming. He grinds himself into Dan, trying in vain to push himself deeper. He feels the condom fill up, his come warm and wet all around his tired cock.

He tries to pull out when he’s finally stopped twitching but Dan doesn’t let him. “Stay in. Wanna come with you inside me.”

Phil’s too tired to reach down and help Dan finish himself off, but he still enjoys watching. He feels
himself growing smaller and softer inside of Dan, though he’s still swollen enough to feel Dan’s ass clench around when his orgasm comes. Dan’s eyes squeeze shut and he shoots come up on both their stomachs.

Finally, finally, Phil can collapse. His arms are jelly, his brow dotted with sweat. He pulls the condom off with a shaky hand and tosses it on the floor.

“Phil, you messy tyke,” Dan scolds, laughing.


“I need to clean up. You may not care but I do.” Dan gets up off the bed and walks around to Phil’s side. He picks up the condom and shakes his head at Phil. “We sure Jimmy’s not here?”

Phil closes his eyes and nods. “Staying with Tom tonight.”

Dan leaves and comes back a few minutes later, wearing a pair of pants and holding a toilet roll. He cleans Phil up gently before climbing back into the bed and tucking them both up under the duvet.

“Blow out your candle, Phil,” he instructs.

Phil groans, but he does it, and the room is fully dark now. All he wants to do is sleep.

“Should we talk?” Dan asks.

Phil just pulls him closer, hitching his leg over Dan’s hip. Even when he feels practically catatonic, post-coitus Phil needs to be smothered in Dan’s body and his love.

“Maybe we should. I’m so tired though.”

“Are you alright though? Was it ok?”

Phil chuckles weakly. “Couldn’t you tell?”

“I still have to ask.”

Phil nods. “That’s why you’re the best.” He yawns. “I’m sorry I only lasted five seconds.”

“Oh shut up. That was at least seven minutes.”

“Was it?”

Now it’s Dan’s turn to yawn. “I dunno. Whatever it was it was fine.”

“It was a lot more than fine for me,” Phil murmurs.

“That’s not what I meant.”

Phil presses a kiss to Dan’s shoulder. “I know.”

“So Phil… you gave me a key to your place.”

“Oh yeah.” He’d forgotten everything else that had happened today, brain wiped clean by the sheer volume of endorphins rushing through his body. “That still ok?”

“Yeah, ’course. I could cry about it if you want.”
It seems they’re both equally as loopy and exhausted as the other.

“Why?”

“Because I’m really bloody happy right now.”

“Me too.” Phil nestles his head into crook of Dan’s neck. “Does your bum hurt? I hope it doesn’t.” Dan laughs, the sound low against Phil’s cheek. “No, you weirdo. My bum is just fine. You took good care of me.”

“Ok good. Dan?”

“What?”

“I think I need to sleep now.”

Dan rubs his hand up Phil’s arm. “Yeah. Me too.”

“I’m really glad I met you, you know. You’re the best.”

“Are you drunk, Lester?”

“Maybe. Kinda feels like it actually.”

“Sleep, Phil. Sleep. We’ll talk in the morning. I think sex has broken your brain for the night.”

“Why isn’t your brain broken?”

“It is. I’m just better at hiding it.”

Phil yawns again. He’s probably half asleep already. “Happy valentine’s day.” He feels Dan’s lips on his forehead.

“Sleep, Phil. I love you.”
Dan doesn’t move his stuff in right away. It happens gradually over the course of a few months -- a jumper here, a pair of jeans there, until ninety percent of his wardrobe is overflowing out of Phil’s dresser and strewn across his floor.

They stay at Dan’s flat very rarely, though Phil definitely has a place in his heart for the fairy lights and the microscopic mattress in the corner of the floor. Even the rowdy flatmates have won him over. He thinks he’ll be nostalgic for the grubby minimalism of it all some day.

They don’t spend a single night apart, haven’t since Christmas. Jimmy tries to talk to Phil about boundaries and going slow and all, but Phil dismisses him. If the past six months have taught him anything, it’s the importance of letting go of other people’s rules and expectations.

One day without any fanfare whatsoever, Dan knocks on Phil’s door holding his keyboard and his fairy lights saying he’s given Mark notice that he’s moving out. It won’t make a single bit of difference really, but Phil still insists on celebrating.

Jimmy and Tom take them to the club again, and Dan and Phil get proper drunk and spend the majority of the night making out against the wall. They’re both sweaty and covered in love bites by the time Jimmy tells them it’s time to go home.

Home, Phil thinks. Not Phil’s home, not Dan’s home, their home. The home they share.

“I’ve never lived with a boyfriend before,” Phil says once they’re tucked up in bed. Their bed.

Dan grins, “Me neither.”

Dan ends up leaving his mattress and the desk at the old place. The desk never really belonged to him and the mattress is just unnecessary. Phil’s bed is just the perfect size for the two of them. Besides, there’s no storage in this flat anyway. Phil says it doesn’t matter that Dan’s hardly got any stuff. They can get new stuff — together.

Phil had been wrong — living together officially makes a difference. It makes all the difference in the world. Nothing really changes, but everything feels different, warm and settled and deliciously permanent.

They have sex most mornings, in one way or another. Phil says he’s making up for lost time and Dan says he’s definitely not complaining. He learns Dan’s body inside and out and Dan learns his. They discover each other’s likes, but also their limits. Phil has more of them than Dan but Dan never makes him feel anything less than safe and supported.

It’s not perfect. They have small, mostly meaningless arguments often. Dan hates Phil’s slovenly tendencies, the way he leaves his socks everywhere and never closes cupboard doors. He hates that Phil leaves the kitchen covered in sugar spills and brown rings after he makes them coffees. He hates that Phil doesn’t seem to appreciate his obsessive need for symmetry.

Sometimes Phil goes too far in trying to ensure Dan follows his rules for recovery. Dan has to remind Phil sometimes that if he wants to eat a bag of crisps or stay up late or skip his afternoon jog that day, he can. They never quite see eye to eye on this, and Phil can’t promise they ever will. He feels the
need to protect Dan from himself too often, he knows. It burns in his gut every time Dan does something he knows he’s not ‘supposed’ to do. Sometimes Dan gets angry, tells Phil it’s not his job to be his therapist. He already has one of those.

Eventually Dan is able to convince Phil that he should see one too. He has to go through quite a few before he finds one he trusts, one he feels is actually listening and trying to understand without prejudice. But eventually he finds one, and it helps. At least, it’s starting to. He starts to learn about himself more, and they start to explore concepts like sexuality and identity, things he’s never really spoken about seriously with anyone. It’s a slow and painful process and he’s only at the beginning, but still, it’s helping.

Dan has bad days still. At least a few every month that are really bad, days he can’t get out of bed or force himself to eat or get in the shower. Days his eyes are dull and his voice is hoarse and emotionless. Those days are the ones Phil hates, because there’s nothing he can really do. He’ll check on Dan and remind he’s there, remind Dan he’s never alone and he’s always loved. He’ll bring Dan food he won’t eat and water he’ll sip every few hours after much encouragement. He’ll cover for him at work if he can, call in sick for him if he can’t.

On the days that are bad but not that bad, Phil will run bubble baths for the both of them to squeeze into together. He’ll play Zelda for hours with Dan’s head in his lap and make sandwiches and ribenas just like he did all those months ago, before he even really knew anything about Dan at all. He’ll go to bed early with him and put Buffy on the laptop and they’ll watch until they pass out. They cling to moments like these, to little snapshots of their beginnings. Dan says it’s comforting, that remembering how good it felt to fall in love helps take the edge off.

Dan has lots of good days too, days no one could ever guess he had a care in the world. Mostly though, Dan has moments. Most days aren’t bad, but almost every day has its moments, moments Phil will see Dan staring off and looking flat. Moments Dan will say something Phil knows isn’t really true, but a product of faulty thought processes and a lack of certain chemicals in his brain. Phil has to learn to navigate these moments, when to step in and correct Dan’s thoughts and when to let him have his feelings of sadness or anger or self-doubt. He doesn’t always get it right, but he always tries.

And Phil has his moments too. Every now and again he’ll have days where he just doesn’t want to be touched, days memories will hit him harder than others and he’ll need space, both physically and emotionally. Sometimes on those days what he’ll need is to go for a walk by himself, or take a nap or a shower or just anything as long as it’s alone.

But sometimes what he’ll need is Jimmy. Sometimes he needs the person who was there with him in the trenches, who helped put him back together every time he fell apart. Phil knows that hurts Dan at first. He hates it the first time he has to slip out from under Dan’s arm and tell him he needs to talk to Jimmy. He hates the look of confusion on Dan’s face.

One day Dan comes home from work to find Phil and Jimmy cuddled up on the sofa. He looks so caught off guard that Phil sits up right away. It’s not like Dan doesn’t know how deeply important Jimmy is to Phil, and it’s not like he hadn’t known that sometimes that affection is expressed physically. But for whatever reason, seeing it like that rattles him. He takes off his coat and says a quick hello to them before retreating to his and Phil’s room. Phil gives Jimmy a look and Jimmy says, “You should go talk to him.”

That night Dan and Phil have a very long and frank conversation about how exactly Jimmy takes up space in Phil’s life. Phil had already told Dan bits and pieces of everything, but this time he lays it all out bare. He tells him more about the feelings he had back in uni, feelings he ignored and repressed
until he was almost able to forget. He tells him about the nights he’d spent crying in Jimmy’s bed after yet another humiliating and painful hookup. He even tells him about the kiss. Phil tells Dan that Jimmy will always be important, but that he’s glad things worked out the way they did.

Dan is amazing. He listens without interrupting and he’s almost astonishing in his honesty. He tells Phil he understands but that it’ll take time to sort through the feelings of apprehension and jealousy. They talk for hours and they both cry and afterwards they have the most gentle loving sex they’ve ever had and they both cry again.

“Maybe we’re getting too much therapy,” Dan laughs, wiping his eyes. “Maybe we’re too in touch with our feelings now.”

“I only want to do this with you, you know,” Phil says. “I only ever want to do this with you, for the rest of my life.”

“Are you proposing to me?”

Phil smiles. “Too soon?”

“Probably.”

“Would you say yes anyway?” Phil asks.

Dan leans in and kisses him. “Yeah. You make me stupid.”

Phil nestles his head on Dan’s chest and they hold each other in peaceful stillness for ten minutes before Phil lifts his head back up and says, “We’re not actually engaged now, are we?”

“No Phil, you absolute bloody berk. I’m twenty two years old and we’ve been together less than a year.”

Phil laughs and settles back in and eventually falls asleep. When he wakes up the next morning Dan isn’t next to him and his side of the bed is cold.

He’s in the kitchen, sat at the table, wearing Phil’s yellow hoodie and writing in his journal.

“Good dream?” Phil asks.

Dan looks up and his eyes look tired still. “Not a dream this time,” he says quietly.

“Jimmy stuff?”

Dan nods.

“Did you sleep?” Phil asks.

Dan closes the journal. “A little.”

“D’you wanna talk about it?”

Dan shakes his head. He stands up and kisses Phil and his mouth is minty. They make coffee and have cereal and go about their day and everything is fine. Phil has to accept that Dan has things to process, that the time for talking has passed and now he needs to give Dan space.

Luckily the trust between them is absolute and eventually Dan comes to understand that Jimmy is and always will be a certain type of rock for Phil that no one else will ever be. He is Phil’s past, the
only lifeline Phil had back when things were dark, and every so often Phil finds himself needing that.

Phil notices a shift after that. If he and Dan order takeaway or sit down to watch a movie or even sometimes if they’re not really doing anything at all other than just lounging around on their laptops, Dan will always ask if Jimmy is home and if he is, Dan will always ask him if he wants to join.

Oftentimes Jimmy bows out gracefully, and Phil knows it’s because he doesn’t want to get in the way. When Tom is round they’ll all hang out together and it doesn’t feel like a big deal, but there still seems to be some sort of uneasiness when it’s the three of them. It’s not jealousy or anger or anything as negative as that, just an atmosphere of not being exactly sure where the boundaries lie.

Phil texts Jimmy one night after Dan has fallen asleep.

Phil: he’s trying. you should too
Jimmy: i don’t want to make things weird.
Phil: you won’t. i already told him everything about everything.
Jimmy: everything?
Phil: yeah
Jimmy: and he’s not upset?
Phil: no. we trust each other. he understands me
Jimmy: wanna trade boyfriends?
Phil: shut up, tom’s great.
Jimmy: yeah
Phil: so you’ll try?
Jimmy: of course. anything for you philly

A few days later, Phil works the closing shift and comes home late. It’s nearly midnight when he turns the key in the lock and opens the door to Dan and Jimmy sat on the sofa playing Rock Band together. They don’t even look up or say hello to Phil until the song is over.

“You’re home,” Dan says.

Phil smiles but he looks at Jimmy. “You’re playing a video game.”

“I am.”

“He’s really good,” Dan says, putting his guitar down and walking over to kiss Phil on the cheek.

“That’s because he plays the actual guitar.” Phil wraps one arm around Dan’s lower back and pulls him in tight. It’s just a small thing but watching these two spend time together without him fills him with all these feelings of joy and hope.

“What a bloody snek,” Dan says, twisting around to glare playfully at Jimmy. “You failed to mention that little detail, didn’t you mate?”
Jimmy just laughs. He stands up too and says, “I should go to bed. Got work in the morning.”

Later, when they’re in bed and the time for talking and touching has passed and they’re half asleep in each other’s arms, Phil thinks about saying something about it. He wants to ask Dan if they talked and what was said. He doesn’t, though.

He knows they like each other well enough. He’s shuffled out of bed and into the kitchen to find them chatting enough times to know they get along, but that had been before the big talk with Dan, before Dan had opened his front door to see his boyfriend’s head snuggled up against someone else’s chest.

If Dan and Jimmy really are at the beginning stages of forming a genuine friendship of their own, something completely separate from Phil, he’s not going to get in the way. Quite literally nothing in the world would make him happier.

It turns out, a genuine friendship is exactly what has begun to form. The next morning Dan is up early because he has to work, and Phil gets up early with him because he still can’t pass up any opportunity to be with him, even after all these months, even though they live together and work together and even brush their goddamn teeth together.

Phil sits at the table groggily eating a bowl of cereal while Dan makes them coffee.

“What time does Jimmy usually get up for work?” Dan asks.

“Like, now,” Phil croaks.

Dan doesn’t say anything, but Phil sees him add some more water to the kettle.

Jimmy comes into the kitchen ten minutes later and Dan hands him a mug of tea.

“Black, right?” he asks.

Jimmy smiles, nods, and takes the mug from Dan’s hands. “Thanks mate.”

One evening, Phil comes home from work to an empty lounge, two plates and two cups left dirty on the coffee table. He can hear the sound of Dan’s keyboard, the ever so slightly stuttered but sweet notes drifting down the hall from from their bedroom. When he opens the door Jimmy is there, lying on Phil’s bed with his hands behind his head and his eyes closed. Dan turns his head and gives Phil a smile, but he doesn’t say anything.

“Room for one more?” Phil asks, nudging Jimmy over with his knee.

Jimmy moves over and stretches one arm out. Phil lies down over it and Jimmy curls his hand around Phil’s shoulder. They lie there and listen to Dan play until the doorbell rings.

“That’s Tom,” Jimmy murmurs and Phil lets him up.

When he’s gone Phil pulls Dan into bed with him, slowly stripping off his clothes and kissing him everywhere, taking him with his mouth and swallowing him down while Dan rakes his fingers through Phil’s hair and sighs his name.

Phil doesn’t understand how it’s possible that he got this lucky. Surely it must be some kind of mistake. He keeps waiting for the other shoe to drop, but things just keep getting better. In a way it’s terrifying, but he’s already decided to lean in. He can’t hide from this kind of happiness.
The lease on Tom’s flat is up in the spring. He and Jimmy haven’t started looking for a new place yet, so Tom moves in with the three of them. In a way it’s fun, but it doesn’t take long to become clear that this humble apartment Jimmy and Phil had snatched up when they first moved to London is really too small for four adult men. Tom brings a lot more stuff with him than Dan did, and the place is made even smaller with extra sofas and tables and all manner of furnishings and knick knacks.

A few weeks after Tom moves in, Jimmy pulls Phil into his room and sits him on his bed. Phil already knows what’s coming.

“We’re gonna start looking,” Jimmy says.

Phil nods. “It’s probably for the best.”

“I wish there was some way I didn’t have to.”

Phil forces himself to smile. “Me too.”

Phil doesn’t cry that night. Things have already changed enough in the past few months that this doesn’t come as a shock. He never spends the night in Jimmy’s bed anymore. He has Dan and Jimmy has Tom and that’s the way it should be, but there have been enough changes that he can handle another. At least for now.

He does tell Dan later though, and he does admit to Dan how sad it makes him, how scary it is to think about a life without Jimmy as his flatmate. Dan holds him and listens and tells him it’ll be alright. They’ll make time to see Jimmy, no matter what. He’ll remain a part of their lives no matter what.

Phil knows all this, has been assuring himself of these facts for months, but it still feels indescribably comforting to hear Dan say them too.

It doesn’t take them long to find a place. Luckily, it’s not all that far away, just ten minutes on the tube. It’s a nicer area and a bigger place and Phil feels genuinely thrilled for Jimmy when he sees it. It’s perfect really, and Phil can already see the ways Jimmy will brighten it, the way he’ll make it his own with his brilliant paint on the walls and his houseplants. Just like he had done with this place.

Their place. In Phil’s heart, this will always be their place as much as it is his place with Dan. Maybe someday he and Dan will get a different place, and that will be his and Dan’s alone, but Phil knows he’ll never be able to erase the years of life he lived with Jimmy in this place, nor would he ever want to.

On moving day he tells Jimmy his room will always be there. Jimmy leaves his mattress in its frame and Phil tells him that’s where it will stay. Dan holds Phil’s hand and squeezes it tight and agrees, this will always be a place Jimmy is welcome, no questions asked.

“If this one ever leaves me, you’ll have to make room again,” Jimmy jokes. He’s standing in the doorway in the foyer of their building, Tom waiting for him in the car. The moving van has already taken away all his things.

Dan had hugged Jimmy and then quietly turned and headed back upstairs, leaving Phil and Jimmy to their last goodbye.

For now, Phil reminds himself. Just for now. Just until the next time they see each other, which they’ve both promised will be soon.

“I have to go, Phil,” Jimmy whispers. He’s wearing his black Libertine’s t-shirt, the one he was
wearing that night Phil kissed him.

Phil’s heart hurts. This feels worse than he’d thought, and he’d thought it’d be bad.

“I don’t want you to.”

“I don’t want to either.”

Phil looks into Jimmy’s eyes, and they’re so bright and blue with a hint of green, vibrant in the midday sun that pours through the glass of the building doors. He doesn’t know what to say. There’s too much to say in the time they have left, but really it’s nothing he hasn’t said a thousand times before.

So instead he pulls him in tight and hugs him fiercely and tells him he loves him and he’ll miss him.

Jimmy squeezes him and tells him the same. “I’ll ring you later,” he promises, and Phil has to let him go.

He cries all night. Dan holds him, letting him stain his shirt with tears and snot and rubbing his back, never once telling him he’s overreacting.

In the morning Dan takes him out to a fancy coffee shop and they sit on the patio and drink cappuccinos and eat red velvet cupcakes.

It hurts for what feels like a long time, but every day it gets just a little bit easier. And Phil hates to even admit it to himself, but having the place to themselves really is glorious.

Dan takes to walking around the flat in jumpers and pants -- and sometimes not even the pants. They have sex in every room, and they can make as much noise as they want.

They never have to wake up to the sound of Jimmy fucking Tom so hard the headboard bangs into the wall. That’s one thing Phil really doesn’t miss.

Every once in a while, after Dan’s fallen asleep or if he’s working late and Phil’s alone, he’ll creep into Jimmy’s room and slip into his bed. The sheets still smelled like him for a while, and the scent would flood Phil’s head with memories and make his eyes wet.

They don’t smell like him anymore, but they still feel like him, and sometimes Phil needs that.

But he never stays. He never spends the night there. He always crawls back to Dan, and it always feels right. It never feels like less.

“Tall mocha for… Sam?” Phil scans the shop. There are only two people waiting for drinks. They’re both looking at him and neither is responding to that name. He pushes his glasses up onto his forehead and squints at the fat black scribbles on the side of the cup.

Nope, still looks like Sam.

“Tall mocha,” Phil calls out again. One of the people steps forward, a young-ish looking man Phil might even say is cute if he didn’t already have the cutest boy in the world waiting for him at home.

“Sean?” the cute boy asks.

“Ohh Sean, of course. Yeah. Tall mocha for Sean. Here you go, mate. Have a good one.”
Cute guy actually smiles a little. “Cheers.”

He makes the next drink for the next person and doesn’t even bother calling it out, just puts it up and smiles at the customer until they’ve taken it and walked away.

Phil turns around and glares at her until she stops pretending she can’t see him.

“What?” Rory asks innocently, barely containing her smirk.

“Is this game ever going to get old for you?”

“I reckon definitely not.”

Phil walks around the bar and over to the cashes where she’s stood, scooping coffee into the filter and shoving it above the urn. He actually jumps up on the counter in between the registers, letting his legs dangle and giving her a look, daring her to tell him to get down.

Of course she doesn’t. It’s just the two of them, forced to be there late though not many people really want coffee at 10pm.

He rests his elbows on his knees and holds his chin in his hands, watching her work, giving her exaggerated smiles whenever she deigns to look his way.

“What are you so bloody happy for, then?”

“Who says I’m happy?”

“Your face, that’s who.”

Phil just laughs. He’s definitely happy. “I’m alway happy.”

She rolls her eyes. “That’s true, innit?”

He nods.

“You’re extra happy today, though.”

“Because after tonight I’m off for a week, remember?”

“Oh bollocks, I forgot. You’re leaving me for a whole week?”

He nods, jumping down from the counter and walking over to the pastry case. “What’s going out tonight?” he asks. “Any cookies?”

“G-mo,” she says, not batting an eye as he takes one out and bites into it.

“Mmm so gingery,” Phil hums delightedly. “So molasses-y.” He may have slightly adopted Dan’s tendency to moan obscenely when ingesting anything sweet.

“It should be illegal to be that happy. Save some for the rest of us, mate.”

“You should try it,” Phil says, holding the cookie in front of her face.

She takes a giant bite. “I meant the happy, not the cookie.”

“I know. But at least the cookie I can share.”
Her face softens then and she smiles at him for real. “Really though, what’s up? Did something extra good happen? And where are going for a week?”

“Wokingham.”

She frowns. “Like… near Reading?”

He nods. “Dan’s from there. We’re going down for his birthday.”

Her frown flips, her eyebrows raising high on her forehead. “Meeting the parents?”

Phil nods.

“Do they know…?”

“That their son is living in sin with me?” Phil laughs. “Not yet.”

“Is he gonna tell them?”

“Yes.”

She shifts her weight, jutting out her hip, crossing her arms one over the other nervously. “Shit.”

“You know,” Phil replies, smiling.

“And you’re not… worried?”

“I guess I am a little bit, for him. But honestly, it doesn’t really matter what they say. I’m just so proud of him.”

She smiles. “He must really love you a lot, Phil. He told me he doesn’t even talk to his family that often.”

“I think he does,” Phil says softly. “He says he does.”

“I hope in fifty years when you’re telling your grandchildren the story of how you lot met you’ll remember to give me the credit I deserve.”

“What d’you mean?” Phil asks, while the thought of fifty or more years and having a family with Dan makes his heart skip a beat.

“I told you to go through the applications that day,” she reminds him. “I told you to ring whoever you wanted.”

“Oh yeah.”

“And then I hired Dan even though he was late for his interview. Because you saw something in him. You never would have met if it weren’t for me.”

“Shit, I guess you’re right. How can I ever repay you, Ror?” He’s only half joking.

“I wanna be best man at your wedding,” she says without missing a beat.

She grins, clearly joking but Phil says, “I think Jimmy would murder the entire universe if I gave up his spot.”

“I’ll be Dan’s, then.”
“Perfect.”

She laughs and plucks the rest of the cookie out of his hand. “Until then, I’ll take this as payment.”

He lets her take it, smiling as he goes back to work. After they close up the shop and she’s locked the doors behind them, he attacks her with a hug as soon as she’s turned around.

“I hope you know how grateful I am for you, Ror. Even if a wedding never happens and I can’t give you the payment you deserve, I hope you know what you mean to me. You saved my life. And it’s not just about Dan.”

She laughs, hugging back. “I know, Phil. I’m awesome. Don’t worry, I know.” She pulls back and punches him lightly in the shoulder. “And I’m happy for you. Now go home to your man.”

Phil nods. That he can do.

the end

(for now)

Chapter End Notes

thanks for sticking with me through this, y'all. i love you guys.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!